



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY ABKHAZIA: WHY DOES MOSCOW NOT WELCOME ISLAMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE BREAKAWAY REGION?

ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE

105

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE

**ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY ABKHAZIA: WHY DOES MOSCOW NOT
WELCOME ISLAMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE BREAKAWAY REGION?**

105

2018



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2018 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN 978-9941-8-0372-7

Abkhaz Islamic activist, Ismail as-Sufi (Ruslan Enik), released a video in October 2017 with his criticism of the de facto Abkhaz government and local society because of their anti-Islamic sentiments. This video rapidly became the subject of debate within Abkhaz society and the regional media. According to As-Sufi, Russia (in his words, ‘the drunken beast’) as well as the local de facto government are ‘preventing the building of a Sufi Islamic Educational Center envisioned to be a barrier against the harmful influence of pseudo-Islamic sectarian ideologies.’¹ Although Islam has a minimal impact on Abkhaz domestic politics, historical ties with the Islamic actors of the Caucasus and the Black Sea region often raise the issue of Islam in breakaway Abkhazia.

Historical Background

The number of Muslims in Abkhazia is unclear as a result of the absence of reliable demographic statistics in the region. According to a sociological survey conducted in Abkhazia in 2003 by Kavkazskiy Uzel, Memorial and the Open Society, 16% of respondents identified themselves as Muslims. However, only 488 individuals were questioned as a part of the survey and so this does not reflect the real statistics.² The majority of Abkhaz Muslims reside in the Gudauta and Gagra districts.³ Due to prevailing pre-Christian pagan ethno-religious traditions in the region, however, Islam among the Abkhaz is in most cases superficial and the majority of Abkhaz Muslims are not practicing Islam.⁴

The origins of Islam in Abkhazia date back to Ottoman rule. Islam spread in the areas surrounding Suhum-Kale, the stronghold of the Ottoman Navy on the Black Sea.⁵ In the 19th century, during Russia’s conquest of the Caucasus, the Tsarist rule perceived Islam in Abkhazia as the base of Ottoman society. The Islamization of the Abkhaz people accelerated in the second half of the 19th century during the Russian-Ottoman rivalry over the Western Caucasus region. In the meantime, the Russian military command skillfully used this process as an excuse to expel the majority of Abkhaz people from their homeland. This mass exodus is known as *makhajirstvo* (in Arabic *muhajeer*, a religiously motivated refugee). The majority of Abkhaz then resettled in the Ottoman Empire and formed the core of the Abkhaz diaspora which exists nowadays in Turkey. In the following decades, the Abkhaz diaspora not only attempted repatriation to their historical homeland but also introduced Islam to their compatriots in Abkhazia.

During the war in Abkhazia of 1992-1993, the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey showed an unprecedented mobilization by supplying Abkhaz militants with support in terms of material resources and manpower. Turkish Abkhaz as well as other Caucasians from Turkey were active members of this Abkhaz insurgency.⁶ The de facto leader of Abkhaz rebels during those years, Vladislav Ardzinba, appreciated the support from the Muslim Abkhaz diaspora while at the same time considering Islam as an integral element of Abkhaz history.⁷ Although the war in Abkhazia did not have the attributes of an Islamic jihad, it was the first mass contact between the Islamic world and the Abkhaz people since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Notably, Russian authorities did not prevent the influx of Muslim foreign fighters to Abkhazia during this conflict.

Abkhazia and the North Caucasian Insurgency

Aside from the Turkish Caucasian diaspora, North Caucasian militants were actively involved in the Abkhaz conflict. For instance, the prominent Chechen jihadi rebel leader, Shamil Basayev, began his militant journey in the Abkhaz war and even married a local Abkhaz woman there, Indira Djenia.⁸ A few years later, during the outbreak of the Russian-Chechen war in 1996, the group led by the Turkish Abkhaz militant, Mohammed Tokcan (Gabliya), managed to hijack the Avrasya ferryboat near Trabzon and capture the Russian passengers. Among the hijackers arrested by Turkish law enforcement was the brother-in-law of Shamil Basayev, Hamzat (Rocky) Gitsba. After his escape from Turkish prison, Gitsba resettled and became the leader of the Abkhaz Salafi community. Finally, however, Gitsba was assassinated in 2007 during the assault in Gudauta.⁹

Hamzat Gitsba's assassination was not a singular fact. There was a series of violent acts against Abkhaz Muslim leaders. In 2010, there was the assassination of a member of the Abkhaz Muslim Spiritual Directorate, Emik Chakmach-Ogli, the assassination of Muslim activist, Rasul Pilia, and the heavy wounding of his colleagues, Rustan and Raul Gitsba, as well as the attempted assassination of the leader of the Abkhaz Muslim Spiritual Directorate, Salikh Kvaratskhelia.¹⁰ Although all of these incidents remain unsolved, it is clear that the Russian authorities were concerned about the growing Islamic factor in Abkhazia. The existence of Islamist militants in the North Caucasus, combined with the context of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games 2014, was perceived as a risk factor in Abkhazia.

Russian authorities have mentioned the presence of Imarat Kavkaz cells in Abkhazia several times. For instance, prior to the beginning of the Olympic Games in 2014, the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee made numerous claims that Imarat Kavkaz militants had established Abkhaz Jamaat which was seeking to wage terrorist attacks against the Olympic infrastructure and target international tourists in Sochi. In May 2012, the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) along with the de facto Abkhaz police apprehended the alleged leader of Abkhaz Jamaat, Rustan Gitsba, and confiscated a large amount of weapons and explosives.¹¹ It still remains unclear whether or not Abkhaz Jamaat posed a real threat. The fact is that Russian security services increased their presence in Abkhazia with the crackdown on Abkhaz Jamaat, especially in the Gudauta and Gagra districts.

Soft Power

Aside from Islamist militancy, there are other regional actors using soft power to influence Abkhaz Muslims. The most well-known case is the Turkish private school, Basharan College, near Gagra, allegedly linked to Fethullah Gulen's religious-political network and operating since 1995.¹² However, in August 2010 Basharan College was deprived of its license by the de facto authorities.¹³ In order to avoid violating Georgia's territorial integrity, Turkey's Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs) avoids implementing any religious projects in Abkhazia. This notwithstanding, the Turkish Abkhaz diaspora has been actively involved in various Islamic projects in Abkhazia. For instance, Adil Gabliya, who was repatriated from Turkey as the leader of the Abkhaz Muslims, established personal contacts with Turkish religious and political circles in the period of 1995 to 2011.¹⁴ Apart from Turkey, North Caucasian local leaders have also expressed their concerns regarding the status of Abkhaz Muslims. For example, Ramzan Kadirov, the Chechen leader, openly endorsed the idea of building a new mosque in Sokhumi in 2008.¹⁵ Additionally, the Russian Muslims Union has had its representative in Abkhazia since 2006 and even funded a pilgrimage of five Abkhaz to Mecca in 2009.¹⁶

Repatriated Abkhaz from Syria

The active phase of the Syrian conflict led to the migration of Syrian Abkhaz to their historical homeland. According to the de facto government, the

number of returnees from Syria reached 552¹⁷ while the total number of Syrian Abkhaz reaches several thousands.¹⁸ The de facto government has implemented projects for their adaptation and integration.¹⁹ Currently, there are no reports on any Islamic activities among Syrian repatriates. Even though Syrian Abkhaz grew up in an Arabic country with different religious and social traditions, they could still come to play a more active role in religious life in Abkhazia in the future. The Syrian diaspora could also serve as a bridge between the de facto Abkhaz leaders and the Assad regime in Syria, especially after the recognition of Abkhazia's independence by the Syrian Arab Republic.

Islam in Abkhazia and Russia's Concern

Compared to the neighboring North Caucasus, Abkhazia has managed to avoid any emergence of jihadi militancy. At the same time, there are no reported cases of Abkhaz participation among Syrian rebel groups. However, Russia has its concerns regarding Islam in Abkhazia for a number of reasons.

Firstly, unlike the other North Caucasian republics, Abkhazia has access to the Black Sea and so it has the capacity to improve contacts with different state or non-state actors in the Middle East. For example, there was a direct maritime connectivity between Sokhumi and Trabzon until the embargo in 1995 which significantly facilitated Turkish-Abkhaz economic relationships.²⁰ Moreover, among the subjects recognizing the independence of Abkhazia is the de facto governing authority of the Gaza Strip, the Islamist-Political movement, Hamas.²¹

Secondly, the factor of the Turkish Abkhaz diaspora is crucial. According to the ethnolinguistic data, the estimated number of Abkhaz in Turkey is 200,000 which is much higher than the number of ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia.²² Therefore, massive repatriation could lead to a rapid demographic shift in the breakaway region and make Islam one of the main domestic socio-political factors. On the other hand, the wave of returnees from Turkey can increase Turkish influence in Abkhazia. As far as statistics are concerned, even nowadays Turkish capital has been notably represented in the Abkhaz economy and Turkey is the second trade partner of Abkhazia next to Russia.²³ Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that Turkish Abkhaz are citizens of a NATO member state which

is an additional security concern for official Moscow. During the jet crisis between Turkey and Russia, the de facto Abkhaz leadership perhaps even imposed an embargo on Turkish products.²⁴

Thirdly, Russia does not welcome the process of repatriation from Syria. Taking into consideration the ongoing sectarian conflict in Syria and Iraq, official Moscow is concerned about further contacts between Abkhaz and the diaspora in Syria due to the potential proliferation of the jihadi ideology, not only in Abkhazia but among the Muslim population of the Krasnodar region.

Finally, there is a high risk of merging local Abkhaz Muslim activists with North Caucasian Salafi movements. Russian authorities are trying to prevent the establishment of intensive people-to-people contacts between Abkhaz and North Caucasian Muslim peoples. This further implies blocking intensive contact between Abkhazia and the North Caucasian republics in general. At the same time, they are putting efforts toward integrating Abkhazia into the Russian-majority Krasnodar region. It is noteworthy that Abkhazia is connected with Russia only through its border with the Krasnodar region and the building of a proposed motorway which would connect Abkhazia with the Karachay-Cherkessia republic through the Kodori Gorge but which has been put on hold.

It is important to note that Abkhaz nationalists, including the current ruling elite, share anti-Islamic grievances and see the activation of Islam as a vital threat to the ethno-religious balance in Abkhazia. For instance, owing to the bureaucratic barriers imposed by the de facto authorities, Abkhaz Muslims are unable to build a mosque in Abkhazia. Furthermore, the length of an Islamic television program on the de facto Abkhaz state TV channel decreased from 15 to five minutes.²⁵

Conclusions

Nowadays, Islam has a marginal role in the socio-political life of Abkhazia. Neither Turkish Abkhaz nor foreign Islamic actors have been able to enhance their influence on the Muslim population of Abkhazia. Nevertheless, official Moscow sees the growth of the Islamic factor as a potential challenge to its rule over the breakaway region which eventually can create a new conflict zone in Russia's backyard.

References:

1. *Islam v Abkhazii: Politika Protiv Mechetey* [Islam in Abkhazia: Policy against the Mosques]. www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28815823.html
2. *Yedinnaya Vera Abkhazskikh Khristian i Musulman* [The Common Faith of Abkhaz Christians and Muslims] www.portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=fresh&id=188
3. *Musulmanskaya Obshina Abkhazii v Ozhidanii Novogo Muftiya* [Abkhaz Muslim Community is Awaiting a New Mufti] www.islamnews.ru/news-Musulmanskaja-obshhina-Abhazii-v-ozhidanii-novogo-muftija/
4. G. Sanikidze and E. W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." UC Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. Retrieved from www.escholarship.org/uc/item/7149d486, p. 21
5. Ibid., p. 20
6. *Dobrovoltsy Otechestvennoy Voini Naroda Abkhazii* [Volunteers of the Patriotic War of the Abkhaz People] [www.apsnypress.info/apsny/aiaaira/dobrovoltsy-otechestvennoy-voyny-naroda-abkhazii-avgust-1992-sentyabr-1993-gg-/](http://www.apsnypress.info/apsny/aiaaira/dobrovoltsy-otechestvennoy-voyny-naroda-abkhazii-avgust-1992-sentyabr-1993-gg/)
7. K. Matsuzato. "Transnational Minorities Challenging the Interstate System: Mingrelians, Armenians and Muslims in and Around Abkhazia," Nationalities Papers, 39:5, 2011. p. 824
8. *Zamuzhem za Dyavolom* [Married to the Devil] www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2006/07/25/179763-zamuzhem-za-dyavolom.html
9. *Rasstrelyan Glavniy Vahabit Abkhazii* [The Main Abkhaz Wahhabi has been Shot] www.gazeta.ru/politics/2007/08/17_kz_2051668.shtml
10. *Traditsionniy Islam i Perspektivi Islamskogo Radikalizma v Abkhazii* [Traditional Islam and the Perspectives of Islamic Radicalism in Abkhazia] www.kavkazoved.info/news/2016/05/20/tradicionnyj-islam-i-perspektivy-islamskogo-radikalizma-v-abhazii.html
11. *Abkhazskiy Gambit Doku Umarova* [Abkhaz Gambit of Doku Umarov] www.mk.ru/politics/2012/05/11/702470-abhazskiy-gambit-doku-umarova.html
12. "Basharan Kollej" Turetskaya Obrazovatel'naya Ekspansiya v Abkhaziyu ["Basharan College:" Turkish Educational Expansion in Abkhazia] www.abkhaznews.ru/2016/basharan-kolledzh-turetskaya-obrazovatel'naya-ekspansiya-v-abhaziyu/
13. *Sumatokha Vokrug Sukhumskogo Elitnogo Kolleja* [The Turmoil Around Elite College in Sukhumij] www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/2119954.html
14. *Repatriatsiya Abkhazov i Islamskiy Vopros v Abkhazii* [Repatriation of Abkhaz and the Islamic Issue in Abkhazia] www.inosmi.ru/sngbaltia/20140711/221603977.html
15. *Kadirov Khochet Postroit Mechet v Abkhazii* [Kadyrov is Willing to Build a Mosque in Abkhazia] www.regnum.ru/news/1057596.html
16. *Islamskiy Faktor v Sovremennoy Abkhazii* [Islamic Factor in Contemporary Abkhazia] www.caucasustimes.com/ru/islamskiy-faktor-v-sovremennoj-abh-2/

17. *Siriyskiye Repatrianty – Integratsiya i Adaptatsiya [Syrian Repatriates: Integration and Adaptation]* www.international-alert.org/ru/blog/syrian-repatriates-adaptation-and-integration-ru
18. *Abkhazia Welcoming Syrian Refugees* www.unpo.org/article/15849
19. *Kak Stat Repatriantom i ne Poteryatsya v Abkhazii [How to Become Repatriate without Getting Lost in Abkhazia]* www.sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20180502/1023814316/kak-stat-repatriantom-ne-poteryatsya-v-abkazii.html
20. *Abhazya Ambargosuna Karşı İmza Kampanyası [Campaign Against the Embargo of Abkhazia]* www.haberler.com/abhazya-ambargosuna-karsi-imza-kampanyasi-2-haberi/
21. *Priznaniye Abkhazii i UO Otkryto Podderzhalo Lish Dvizheniye Hamas [Only Movement Hamas Openly Supported Recognition of Abkhazia and SO by Russia]* www.korrespondent.net/world/566192-priznanie-rossiej-abhazii-i-yuo-otkryto-podderzhalo-lish-dvizhenie-hamas
22. V. Chirikba. “*Rasseleniye Abkhazov v Turtsii*” [“*Abkhaz Settlements in Turkey*”] in *Djigetskiy Sbornik: Voprosy Etno-Kulturnoy Istorii Zapadnoy Abkhazii* [Jugetian Papers: The Ethno Cultural Issues of the History of Western Abkhazia], 2012, p. 22
23. *Abkhazia Zapretila Turetskiye Tovary [Abkhazia Has Banned Turkish Goods]* www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2709914
24. Ibid.
25. *Islamizatsiya Abkhazii Dutaya Sensatsiya [Islamization of Abkhazia is an Exaggerated Sensation]* www.osinform.org/11960-islamizacija-abkhazii-dutaja-sensacija.html