



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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IRAQ- FACTORS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM
AND RECRUITMENT**

BENNETT CLIFFORD

EXPERT OPINION



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Introduction*

In recent months, popular media sources have reported extensively on the issue of foreign fighter recruitment in the Republic of Georgia, especially concerning Georgian citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. This uptick in media activity closely follows the rise of Georgian citizens to significant leadership positions within a variety of jihadist groups, exemplified by the story of Tarkhan Batirashvili (*nom du guerre* Abu Umar al-Shishani). Batirashvili is a former Georgian Armed Forces member who gained notoriety as an effective military commander in several Syrian campaigns on behalf of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).¹ Unfortunately, reports on Batirashvili have promoted a wide array of erroneous generalizations about foreign fighter recruitment within Georgia. Sensationalized media accounts ultimately fail to assess the underlying causes of foreign fighter recruitment in several, widely diverse Georgian Muslim communities, focusing instead on a few test cases to make sweeping assumptions. While the situation in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge is often used as a test case, foreign fighter recruitment also exists in other, even less understood Muslim-majority areas of Georgia, such as the southwestern province of Ajara and the Azeri villages in Kakheti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Kvemo Kartli regions.² Despite being painted under one broad stroke by the media and the Georgian government alike, each region has a widely different sociopolitical situation than Pankisi, which can promote unique causal factors of recruitment.

This working paper assesses factors driving foreign fighter recruitment throughout the highly diverse Muslim-majority areas of the Republic of Georgia. It begins with an assessment of the demographics and political dynamics within Georgia's diverse Muslim populations, as well as the complex affiliations of Georgian Muslim foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. In addition, the paper compares several factors (economic, ideological, sociopolitical) that create incentives for Georgian Muslims to fight abroad. While many scholarly assessments view each factor in a vacuum, this analysis seeks to compare how these different underlying causes interact with one another to create a highly potent narrative that drives violent extremism within Georgia's Muslim populations. Ultimately, only a concrete understanding of how each factor functions on its own merits can contribute to a comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism within the Republic of Georgia.

* The article was elaborated in July 2015

Background: Georgia's Muslim Populations and the Foreign Fighter Issue

The Republic of Georgia's 2002 census records around 500,000 people (9.9% of Georgia's total estimated population of 4.3 million) identifying as "Muslim".³ However, Muslim religious leaders and Georgian politicians are adamant that this is an underestimation; some have speculated that there are up to 800,000 Muslims in Georgia.⁴ While data from the 2014 census has not yet been cross-listed to account for religion, it is assumed that while the total population of Georgia declined by 14.7%, the Muslim population stayed stable or increased.⁵

Georgia's Muslims represent a variety of ethnic groups, nationalities, and religious sub-affiliations, and inhabit different regions within Georgia. The largest contingent comes from Georgia's ethnic Azeri community, who number around 300,000 and live mostly in the south and southwest of Georgia in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti.⁶ Like their co-ethnics in Azerbaijan, Georgian Azeris are majority Shia Muslims, with small Sunni (Hanafi *madhab*) and Salafi minorities.⁷ The second largest group are ethnically Georgian Muslims, the majority of whom (around 100,000) live in the southeastern Autonomous Region of Adjara and follow Sunni Islam.⁸ Finally, there are several smaller (under 10,000 each) Muslim groups in the north-eastern mountainous regions of Georgia, including Dagestani Avars in the town of Chantlisquire and the Kists of the Pankisi Gorge.⁹ The Kists, descendants of Chechen mountaineers who fled the 19th century Russo-Caucasian War and settled in Georgia, are historically unique amongst Georgian Muslims in their practice of *tawwasuf*: a local blend of Islamic mysticism with Chechen pre-Islamic laws and traditions.¹⁰

Due to longstanding Soviet rule, Islamic belief and sentiment were heavily controlled by state authorities until Georgia's independence in 1991. Contrary to popular belief, the Soviet system did not forbid private practice of Islam, but instead heavily restricted outward public expression, institutional development and Islamic education.¹¹ Islam was relegated to a "national" identity as opposed to a religious one, and as the Soviet system collapsed, many Muslim groups within Georgia looked to develop a distinct religious identity.¹² This phenomena has been frequently mischaracterized as a "re-awakening" or "revival"; in reality, Muslim groups in Georgia maintained their Islamic identities throughout the Soviet period. However, in the post-Soviet system, Georgian Muslims began to de-

couple an independent Muslim identity from their national affiliations.¹³ Especially given the backdrop of national/religious co-development in Christian Georgia, where concepts of Georgian nationality are usually coterminous with Georgian Orthodoxy, Muslims in Georgia were left outside the boundaries of Georgian national identity. As a result, movements that promote subsuming national identity in favor of a pan-Islamic framework have increased in popularity amongst Muslims in Georgia and throughout the post-Soviet world.¹⁴

“Conservative” movements that are gaining prevalence in several disparate Muslim regions of Georgia fall mainly under the auspices of Salafi Islam.¹⁵ *Salaf* in Arabic literally means “ancestor”, and Salafi Islam promotes the practice and belief of Islam according to the traditions of the prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his original followers (*al-salaf al salih*).¹⁶ It rejects the scholarly interpretations of the Q’uran and *hadith* which emerged after the Caliphate period, and supports the implementation of strict *shari’a* law in all matters of life and governance. Salafi Islam, in most of its iterations, is a politically active Islamic movement that seeks to eliminate divisions (nationality, ethnicity, language) between different Muslim groups.¹⁷ A majority of the adherents of Salafi Islam mostly do not advocate violent *jihād*, although most jihadists (including Al Qaeda and ISIL) follow a single extreme interpretation of Salafi jurisprudence.¹⁸ In Georgian Muslim communities, adherents of conservative movements of Islam are usually referred to by locals as “Wahhabists” or “Wahhabis”, loaded terminology that does not capture either their belief system or their methodology of practice (*da’wa*).¹⁹

In many of Georgia’s Muslim communities, there is an active dispute between “traditionalists” and “conservatives” for social and political capital. Salafi Islam tends towards hostile criticism of Shia Muslims (referred to as *rafidha*, or apostates) and Sufi Muslims (referred to as *mushrikeen*, or polytheists), which often creates tension in communities where Shia or Sufi Muslims have control of formal Muslim institutions.²⁰ However, even in Georgia’s Sunni communities, Salafi Muslims are in direct competition with the traditional Hanafi *madhab*, which usually has a far looser interpretation of *shari’a* and scholarly innovation than Salafist thought. The groups within Georgia’s Muslim communities that are more attuned to conservative movements over traditional establishments are the youth and those without formal Islamic educational opportunities, as Salafi Islam

offers potent critiques of the Georgian Muslim “establishment”, its leaders, and its scholars.²¹ Additional, Salafi Islam offers a political methodology to address the problem of living as a Muslim in a strongly Christian environment.²²

Following Salafi ideology is not a guarantee that an individual will choose to take up violent *jihad* or fight overseas on behalf of Muslims, but especially among vulnerable populations it can be a critical independent variable. So far, Georgian Salafis from all Georgian Muslim populations within Georgia have been reported to be fighting in Syria and Iraq- in total, estimated around 50-100 fighters.²³ While Pankisi-based Kists have garnered the most media attention, several fighters (and female brides) have been reported to have joined the Syrian conflict from ethnic Azeri villages in Kvemo Kartli and the town of Qarajala in Kakheti.²⁴ A handful of Georgian Muslims from Ajara are also fighting on behalf of ISIL.²⁵ And, most notably, several Kist fighters from the Pankisi Gorge not only have joined the conflict, but now hold senior leadership positions in jihadist organizations.

Factors of Foreign Fighter Recruitment

For Georgian Muslims, the decision to fight abroad in Syria or Iraq is a highly personal decision, and no single factor conclusively determines participation. Like other migration processes, the dynamics of foreign fighter recruitment require two processes: a “push” factor motivating the initial exit from the Republic of Georgia, and a “pull” factor drawing individuals to fight in Syria and Iraq as opposed to other venues.²⁶ However, even this division is a simplification- the process of recruitment is usually gradual and is motivated by a succession of intermediate variables that effect both “push” and “pull” factors.

The most commonly cited “push” factor is economics. The Muslim majority areas of Georgia, similar to other Georgian villages, have suffered economically as a result of ongoing industrialization and globalization. Unlike during the Soviet period, when the state provided universal employment in agriculture or industry, there is now a dearth of jobs available for residents of rural Georgia.²⁷ Many analysts suggest that poor economic conditions are an excellent breeding ground for extremism and radicalization.²⁸ However, in the Georgian Muslim case, there are a few problems with viewing economic malaise as the *sine qua non* of foreign fighter recruitment. First, on average, most Muslim villages in Georgia are com-

paratively equal to (or even better off than) their Christian counterparts in terms of local economic potential, employment, and job growth.²⁹ The economic difficulties cited as “push” factors for jihadist foreign fighters are not only issues in Muslim areas, but instead throughout all of Georgia.³⁰ Secondly, economic analysis can only explain why Georgian Muslims migrate from villages to cities, or out of the country. It does not answer the specific question of why some choose fighting in Syria or Iraq as their eventual destinations; in fact, many Muslims migrating outside of Georgia due to economic factors are instead settling and working in Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, or Europe.³¹ Finally, the solution that naturally follows from an economic outlook- more jobs- fails to address the problem of foreign fighter recruitment. Due to limited potential economic productivity, many regions in Georgia are only suitable for employment opportunities that cannot compete with the prestige of working or fighting abroad.³²

On the other end, ideology and the growth of Salafi Islam are often considered the largest “pull factor” drawing Georgian Muslims to Syria and Iraq. Within every decade, a new foreign conflict emerges as a major source for foreign Salafi-jihadist fighters from abroad. The phenomenon was pre-eminent during the Soviet-Afghan conflict of the late 1980s, the civil wars in Bosnia and Chechnya during the 1990s, the wars in Yemen and Somalia during the early 2000s, and now Syria and Iraq have taken their place as the “five-star” jihad for foreign combatants.³³ With unprecedented access to recruitment material from abroad via the internet and social media, more Georgian Salafi-jihadists are choosing the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars as a potential combat destination. However, to place the blame solely on Salafi ideology is to mistake the content of recruitment material for the driving factor itself. Many Georgian Salafists, while sympathetic to the methods and goals of groups like the Islamic State, do not join the conflict themselves.³⁴ Fundamentally, these messages are not persuasive without some baseline conditions that are necessary for individuals to conclude that participation violent jihad is the only appropriate remedy. Thus, a turn to intermediary factors is critical to understand the context of foreign fighter recruitment.

The relationship between each distinct Muslim community and Georgian society is highly different, which effects both the nature of violent extremist recruitment and the usual sociopolitical driving factors. Pankisi’s Kist population lives in an isolated mountain gorge, distant from the closest

Georgian Christian village. Their major means of interaction with Georgian society is unfortunately through the central government's obtrusive policing and counterterrorism efforts, which habitually send large forces into Pankisi to look for potential extremists. General perceptions of the Pankisi area as "a hotbed for extremists" or "filled with bandits" create even more tension between the local population and the Georgian government, and sensationalized media reports of Kist commanders in Iraq and Syria only create aspirations for disenfranchised youth.³⁵ The Georgian government fails to interact with Pankisi's residents via other means; Islamic education, social programs, and political integration opportunities are all absent.³⁶ In total, the lack of socioeconomic opportunity drives residents towards Tbilisi or abroad, the securitization of the area creates a fracture in relations between Pankisi and Georgian civil society, and both aspects create a fertile haven for Salafi-jihadist ideology.³⁷ Especially amongst already disenfranchised populations in Pankisi, the allure of fighting abroad outweighs any opportunity in Georgia.

Since Georgian Muslims in Ajara live in an autonomous region of Georgia, and oftentimes share villages and towns with Georgian Christians, their interaction with the rest of Georgian society mainly occurs on a local level.³⁸ Unlike Kists, they do not receive the same special attention from the central government. However, there are large tensions between Georgian Muslims and Georgian Christians in Ajara, and numerous reports have cited violations of religious liberty committed by Georgian Christian institutions against local Muslims. First, Christianization has occurred at a rapid pace since the end of the Soviet Union: much of Ajara's Muslim population has converted to Christianity.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Georgian Orthodox Church and local organizations pressure other Muslims to convert via protesting the development of local Muslim institutions, violating Muslim sacred spaces, and in some cases, committing hate crimes.⁴⁰ These pressures create space for extremist ideology amongst a previously quietist Muslim population. While only a few Ajaran Muslims have elected to fight abroad, current tensions between Christians and Muslims in Ajara could easily prompt more to join.⁴¹

Georgia's Azeri population has two sociopolitical benefits that other Georgian Muslims do not have: strength in numbers and well-established local Muslim institutions.⁴² These factors are important because while a higher level of economic problems and unemployment is prevalent in the

Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions (especially in the towns of Marneuli and Bolnisi), foreign fighter recruitment has not taken the same foothold amongst Georgian Azeris as it has in Pankisi or Ajara.⁴³ While young Georgian-born Azeris are increasingly turning to Salafi Islam or migrating outside of the country for work purposes, proportional to their significantly larger population only a few Georgian Azeris are reported to be fighting in Syria and Iraq. There are still problems regarding integration into broader Georgian society- many of Georgia's Azeri residents do not speak Georgian, live in areas with low employment potential, and have tensions with local Christian residents.⁴⁴ However, the Georgian Azeri case also shows that just because both "push" and "pull" factors are extant in a Muslim community does not necessarily guarantee that foreign fighter recruitment will be widespread. The long-term establishment of local Shia and Sunni Muslim institutions in Azeri regions, as well as quietist influence from abroad (Azerbaijan and Iran) have somewhat quelled the tide of Salafi-jihadism.⁴⁵ Still, the Georgian government must take steps to improve the sociopolitical standing of the Azeri community within Georgia, and not resort to securitization as a response to the rise of violent extremism elsewhere.

Conclusion

The sociopolitical situations for Georgia's Muslim communities vary based on region, ethnicity, geographical factors, and politics. While traditional factors contributing to violent extremism (economic and ideological) are present in each community, sociopolitical intermediary factors are the major determinant of both the impact of ideology within a community and eventually, how many residents choose to fight in Syria and Iraq. In communities where a higher degree of tension with the central government or local Christians are present, foreign fighter recruitment is likely to be exacerbated. Understanding these factors is necessary to minimize the degree of distrust between Georgian Muslim communities and the rest of Georgian society, and ultimately to limit the number of Georgian citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. In so doing, the government and local institutions must be careful to avoid prescribing "one size fits all" solutions for violent extremism, which ignore crucial sociopolitical differences between Georgian Muslim populations and can encourage backlash.

Endnotes

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17. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-228
19. “Wahhabism” refers to an earlier conservative movement in Islam espoused by the 18th century Arab preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab. While modern Salafi Islam borrows many of al-Wahhab’s concepts, “Wahhabism” now more accurately describes the official religion of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Opponents of Salafi Islam’s influence, particularly in Muslim-minority countries, use the term to connote that foreign influence is responsible for the growth of Salafi Islam.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209
21. Baramidze, ‘Islamic State and Georgia’s Muslim community’.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Precise calculation of Georgian citizens fighting in Syria/Iraq is difficult. Reports are mainly based on word of mouth. Usually, it is impossible to determine whether an individual was fighting there until they are reported dead. 50-100 Georgian fighters is a conservative estimate by most security analysts, but Muslim residents of Georgia and Georgian politicians often inflate or underestimate foreign fighter statistics. E. Janashia, ‘Islamic State Reaches Out to Georgia’. Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, (2015) www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13185-islamic-state-reaches-out-to-georgia.html, consulted 7.22.2015
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38. T. Liles. 'Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara', ECMI Working Paper No. 57 (2012). pp. 7-10
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15
40. *Ibid.* pp. 18-20; 'In Kobuleti, locals protest against opening medrese'. *Kavkazky Uzel* (Caucasian Knot). 17 September, 2014. www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/29373/, consulted 7.22.2015; B. Kmuzov, 'Rights defenders state pressure on staff of Muslim boarding house in Kobuleti'. *Kavkazky Uzel* (Caucasian Knot). 12 July, 2015. www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/32328/, consulted 7.22.2015
41. Rukhadze, 'More of Georgia's Muslims Try to Join Islamic State'.
42. Prasad, 'Georgia's Muslim Community: a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?', pp. 7-11
43. *Ibid*, pp. 10-11
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19
45. For example, the new government Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) is headed by three ethnic Azeris from Kvemo Kartli. Local Muslim institutions, such as Ahl ul-Bayt, have been in existence since Georgia's independence. Furthermore, when Georgian Azeri Muslims travel abroad to receive Islamic education and return to Azeri regions, they usually study in quietist Shia *madrassas* in Azerbaijan or Iran. *Ibid.*, 19-22.