



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
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PROPAGANDA OF THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE AND THE METHODS OF RECRUITMENT OF GEORGIAN CITIZENS

GIORGI GOGUADZE

87

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

The Islamic State (ISIS) can be considered the most famous and wide-scale terrorist organization of today. Since June 2014, it has been officially one of the most important and complex threats for the modern world. The strength and awareness of the organization has been shaped by the qualitatively new methodology of recruitment and radicalization of group members, the clockwork propagandist machine that allowed the hierarchically structured organization to gain followers and supporters in nearly each part of the world. Even though the organization is currently in a critical condition as it loses influence in Syria and Iraq, it remains one of the main challenges for developed civilization.¹

Reports published by the State Department of the United States about terrorism note that the Islamic State managed to recruit international warriors to their side in different periods. Thousands joined the organization from more than 100 countries, with the majority of warriors falling on Europe and Africa.²

Citizens of Georgia have also ended up in the ranks of the Caliphate. There are no precise figures, however, according to various statistical data, their number stands at 100-200. Twenty-six citizens of Georgia have already died in Syria and Iraq, including Tarkhan Batirashvili (Omar al-Shishani), one of the field commanders of ISIS, who was included among the top 12 most dangerous and wanted terrorists by the USA in 2014.³

Until 2014, the war against terrorism was perceived in Georgia as a war of the USA/the West in which Georgia should play its role as a strong ally. Nevertheless, Georgia has not faced a direct terrorist threat, excluding the terrorist threats coming from the occupied territories.

The video clip disseminated on November 23, 2015, in which four young people who went to Syria from Georgia address the population of Georgia and threaten them with bloodbaths, beheadings of Kafirs (unbelievers) and Jihad, was uncomfortable to watch.⁴ This was the first threat of its kind which undoubtedly raised concerns in the respective agencies and among the general population. Even though we suppose that Georgia does not face a very high threat of terrorism, there exists a probability that under favorable circumstances and insufficient attention from the law enforcement agencies, the carrying out of terrorist attacks is possible on the territory of Georgia. The fact that Georgia lacks experience in fighting

terrorists on its territory, especially protecting mass gatherings, reinforces the possibility.

The given document aims to analyze the ways and forms the Islamic State used to radicalize and recruit citizens of Georgia. In this regard, we assume that, apart from ideological, religious, social and economic factors, the propaganda efficiently conducted by ISIS played an important role in the recruitment and radicalization of those citizens.

The document is based on the information that the author has received since 2015 from the inhabitants of Pankisi Gorge, via communication with local non-governmental or public agencies. In 2015, the author conducted a study which included face-to-face interviews with competent public officials from the Security Council of Georgia, the Analytical Department of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, and the Defense and Security Committee of the Parliament of Georgia. The author also conducted two focus-groups in Akhmeta municipality, more precisely, in the village Duisi of Pankisi Gorge (with young people and the elders).⁵ In April 2017, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with primary sources in Pankisi Gorge- with members of the families of people who had left Georgia to join the Islamic Caliphate to fight in Syria or Iraq. The confidentiality of the respondents is protected and identity information has been removed from the document.

In the conclusion, the author offers recommendations to readers and respective public agencies that could prove efficient in the process of planning the policy of fighting radicalization and violent extremism.

Global Propaganda Conducted by the Islamic Caliphate

On June 29, 2014, following the fall of the second largest city of Iraq, Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, while giving an address in a mosque, made a statement about the Islamic Caliphate and proclaimed himself the Caliph. This laid ground for a sort of “renaissance” of the Islamic Caliphate.⁶

From the very beginning, each step of the leader of the Caliphate had a symbolic meaning and a well-defined goal. 1) Who is the Caliph? – The Caliph is a messenger of the prophet Muhammad, spiritual leader of all Muslims, protector and executor of divine laws on Earth. Therefore, by proclaiming himself the Caliph, al-Baghdadi tried to underline the legitimacy of himself and his activities in the eyes of international supporters and opponents; 2) The name he chose for himself bears great

importance in the Islamic world. Abu Bakr was the first Caliph in the years 632-634, who was also Muhammad's relative and the first counsellor. According to Sunni tradition, the first four Caliphs, considered symbols of ideal Muslim rulers, were Muhammad's brothers-in-arms and did not inherit the power.⁷ As for Baghdad – it bears great importance in the Islamic world as a cultural center and, moreover, the capital of Iraq was also the capital of the Arab Caliphate. In this way, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (aka Ibrahim al-Badri) started to position himself on the global level by symbolic means, indicating that he is Muhammad's relative, Caliph and a lawful warrior for Baghdad; 3) Al-Baghdadi chose a stay-in-the-shadows strategy from the very beginning and, in this way, he managed to reap greater support than leaders who were disseminating long video addresses on a weekly basis (i.e. Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden). Al-Baghdadi even received a nickname⁸ – “the invisible Sheikh” – a sort of iconizing symbol which resulted in obedience and admiration among group members.⁹

The Islamic Caliphate managed to formulate complex, multilateral and wide-scale propaganda to recruit supporters outside Syria and Iraq. As Ross and Moreng note, the organization's propaganda has four main characteristics and messages: 1) The Islamic Caliphate managed to restore the Caliphate which functions efficiently and is based on Sharia Law and is the sole Islamic state on Earth; 2) Theologically, legally and politically, it surpasses all other countries and Islamist groups in the region; 3) It is constantly getting stronger economically, socially, ideologically, territorially and no-one can stop it; 4) Its activities are moral and justified, and are directed towards the liberation of the Sunni people from Western and Shia oppression.¹⁰

The Caliphate's communication strategy has three target groups: 1) The group's immediate members; 2) Potential members; 3) The opponent, namely the West. The organization has a different message and methodological approach to each group. Only the second group concerns this study, though we will also briefly review the first and the third groups.

With the aim of raising the motivation and fighting efficiency of the group members, the Islamic Caliphate, using various communication channels (mainly social media), persuades the group members of its imperative nature and its advantage in comparison with others. In addition, the factor of fighting in Jihad plays an important role in processing the messages (the guarantee of a place in heaven, the opportunity to take 64 relatives to heaven, etc.). On the other hand, abandoning the organization in Jihad and

breaking the oath will cost a person their life. In relation to its members, the Islamic Caliphate uses the “stick and carrot” strategy. With respect to the opposing side, the Islamic Caliphate positions itself as the winning team both by physical/material and moral means.¹¹

The main goal of conducting propaganda is recruitment of international supporters and in order to fill the ranks. Based on strategic goals, recruitment of foreigners gives the following benefits to the organization: 1) First, in 2014 – 2015, approximately 30% of all the fighters of the Islamic Caliphate were foreigners, therefore, judging from a purely operational point of view, activities and work regarding the given target group is of vital importance for the organization’s survival; 2) Recruitment of foreigners provides the organization with moral superiority and a means for strengthening the legitimacy of its activities. A person living in a comfortable home in Europe leaves the country, travels to the semi-desert and starts to fight against his/her own country and society together with unknown people. This has a great psychological and, during war times, tactical effect; 3) After the foreigners return to their homeland, the Islamic Caliphate will be able to carry out local attacks and make the war more global via so-called sleeper terrorists.¹²

In order to allure foreigners, the terrorist organization uses several main messages. The most important being:

1. The existence of a utopian, ideal Islamic State. In April and May 2017, the author conducted in-depth interviews in Pankisi Gorge with the parents of the people who had gone to Syria and Iraq. The interviews were conducted in the framework of a thesis – *Radicalization and Recruitment of the Citizens of Georgia* – which will be available in July of this year. The in-depth interviews showed that living in an ideal Islamic State and contributing to it was one of the most important issues for our citizens. The idea of public life, where everything is harmonious and which is tailored to the teachings of the prophet Muhammad and the Sharia Law, is the main part of the propaganda of the Islamic State, which invested lot of resources in order to create an illusion of a heavenly life on the territory subject to the organization’s control. Numerous videos of high quality and effect, have been disseminated on social media showing the high efficiency of the public agencies, the abundance of food in the Caliphate and the volume of economic growth. The videos describe the Caliphate as a divine and harmonious living space for Muslims.

- 2. Religious duty of membership of the Caliphate.** One of the respondents noted that religion and Wahhabism teachings played the most important role in the radicalization and recruitment of their son. So-called Wahhabism, which appeared here in the 1990s, is growing stronger in the gorge today and can be counted as one of the reasons for the radicalization, facilitated recruitment and ideological discord. First established in mid-18th century Saudi Arabia, it was created by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who called his teaching and religious practice “pure Islam” and considered the Quran as the sole source of faith. Wahhabism opposes traditional Islam which contains elements that are not given in the Quran. Wahhabism also teaches the world Islamization idea, which has been adopted by its followers and introduced to neighboring countries. Jihad has the leading position in the minds of the Wahhabis. The Wahhabis create groups of like-minded people – Jamaats – which have a strict lifestyle guideline. The Jamaat opposes the Islamic society that does not reject civic culture, general knowledge, art and sport. The members of the Jamaats are required to totally obey the faith and be in constant military readiness.¹³ A spokesperson for the Islamic State said in 2014 that all true Muslims were required to plead their loyalty to the Caliphate and its ideas. Moreover, in 2015, the organization prepared several video clips where the speaker explained how big is the sin of abandoning the Hijrah (the road leading to Jihad) and brought an example of two deaf foreign fighters, implicating that if the people with restricted abilities are eager to participate in the holy war, then completely healthy ones do not deserve mercy for passiveness and neutrality.¹⁴
- 3. Jihadist adventure and spirit.** Most of the foreign fighters (as in the case of Georgia) are young people with an average age of 20-30. Therefore, the process of recruitment and radicalization of these people, apart from the religious, utopian and ideal world motivations, should include adventurous and common spirit elements. In this regard, the Islamic State propaganda truly meets the requirements of the prospective terrorists. Starting from video games and ending with the songs aimed at raising spirit and motivation, the organization tries to transfer the fantasies of the young people to real life. One of the propaganda videos shared on Youtube and watched by more than 100,000 people, describes the way both foreign and local Jihadists enjoy themselves in a pool and how good it is to be a member of the brotherhood. The sense of belonging to the group can be attributed as one of the variables and parameters in the process of radicalization of people.¹⁵

The ways used by the Islamic Caliphate to send its messages and propaganda materials to the audience are diverse. The author has observed Telegram groups in which the organization shares information about its activities with other group members over several months. The author managed to access the group with the help of the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC), where the author works as a researcher. Apart from Telegram, they also use Whatsapp to communicate, while using the largely unknown Pidgin, which has a high level of protection and supports encrypted messaging, in Europe and other regions.

Radicalization and Recruitment of the Citizens of Georgia

Since 2011, based on various sources, up to 27,000 foreign fighters have passed through the Islamic State's ranks. In this regard, ISIS is definitely "the champion" as compared to other terrorist organizations. The given figure even exceeds the number of Mujahedeen fighting against the Soviet Union during the War in Afghanistan.

Citizens from the following countries lead by filling the ranks of the Islamic Caliphate: Tunisia – up to 6,000 citizens; Saudi Arabia – 2,500; Russian Federation – minimum 3,500; Turkey- 2,100; Jordan – 2,000. As for the involvement of European citizens, in this regard, France leads with up to 1,600 fighters, UK – 800, Germany – 600, Sweden – 300, Belgium – 500, Denmark – 150, Bosnia and Herzegovina – 500.¹⁶

There are no exact numbers on Georgian fighters in ISIS. A report by the US Department of State on terrorism indicates that around 50-100 Georgian citizens from Pankisi Gorge and highland Adjara are fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State. Researchers of this field in Georgia agree with that approximate figure, while public officials suggest lower numbers. Twenty-six citizens of Georgia have already died in Syria and Iraq, including Tarkhan Batirashvili (Omar al-Shishani), a field commander of ISIS, who was included by the USA among the top 12 most dangerous and wanted terrorists. Of the 26 Georgian citizens killed in action on the territory of Syria and Iraq, 22 were from Pankisi. Dozens of inhabitants of the gorge, according to unofficial information, are still fighting under the flag of the Islamic State. The average age of the fighters is 25. The youngest victim was 18-year-old Besik Kushtanashvil who died in 2014. Umar Margoshvili, 39, was the oldest (died in June 2016).¹⁷

Following conversations with respondents, several important discoveries were made in the process of recruitment and radicalization of the citizens of Georgia:

- The majority of the young people received information about the Islamic State from the internet. Communication and propaganda efficiently planned by the organization achieved their goal. The mother of one of those killed said that her son would “cry with his phone in his hand, while watching children and women die” in Syria and Iraq. The terrorist organization often uses a synthesis of irrationality and rationality of propaganda when it addresses an individual (prospective fighter)-using pathos, rich with emotions and feelings, and voices causal links, facts, motives and goals in the messages that assure the receiver of the rationality of the message. In the case of the Georgian citizens, this had the form of opinion that everything that takes place in Syria and Iraq is because of the West, its supporters and the enemies of Islam. Therefore, the duty of the true Muslim is to join this fight on the side of “the truth”. ISIS has also been using web-resources quite actively. There was an informational webpage about the Caliphate in Georgian (www.xalifati.wordpress.com) which included violent statements, news, and photo and video materials. It is noteworthy that this webpage had existed for a lengthy time before the Georgian security services blocked it. On June 14, 2015, the State Security Service arrested Giorgi Kuprava with accusations of membership of a foreign terrorist organization and for supporting terrorist activities. Kuprava was especially active in various social network groups and webpages serving for propaganda and popularization of the creation of the Caliphate.
- Our citizens managed to travel from Georgia to Syria indirectly, via mediators. The initial contact person was in Georgia, while the second one was usually in Turkey. One of the respondents travelled to Syria on his/her own (to no avail) and passed all the “checkpoints” that lead to the Islamic State. Ayuf Borchashvili was one of those who helped the young people to get to Syria and Iraq. He was arrested on November 22, 2015, by law enforcement agencies. The majority of respondents noted that they did not have enough funds to travel to Turkey and they received the necessary resources in Georgia. After arriving in Turkey, the contact persons gathered the fighters in Gaziantep or Suruç and accompanied them until the Syrian border, where the representatives of the Islamic State took responsibility for them on the other side of the border.

- Getting to Syria and Iraq for those who want it is not difficult. Those wanting to access the Islamic Caliphate often visit internet forums to connect with engaged individuals and get information how to become a member of the organization. In order to get to the Islamic State, the prospective fighters use methods and programs that are often unknown to the wider public. For instance, they use the webpage ask.fm where a lot of questions were asked on how to get to the organization, whom to connect with, etc.¹⁸
- Civic re-socialization and integration of returned fighters is a complicated process, especially in compact communities, such as the Muslims living in Georgia. Unlike the big European countries, which hundreds and thousands of recruits leave for Syria, the Georgian case is specific due to the small size and cohesion of the Muslim community. In the case of Pankisi Gorge, the population of geographically densely populated villages knows each other well and has formed a single community. Therefore, the youth in Pankisi Gorge, excluding a few exceptions, are well-aware about their peers who went to Syria. In case of success, the fighters become role models among their friends and peers.
- A well-embellished ideology has played a great role in the process of recruitment and radicalization. The ideology of the Islamic State is based on the following postulates: 1) Building of the State based on Sharia Law; 2) Uniting all true Muslims; 3) Clearing the Caliphate from unbelievers; 4) Getting rid of the West and the enemies of Islam.
- The respondents noted that their children and the people that went to Syria and Iraq were not in such poor economic conditions so as to choose war as a source of income. Their families have seen no economic benefit whatsoever. However, the propagandist message that the fighters live well there (myths about Tarkhan Batirashvili living in a castle with his personal guard, etc.) may have affected the decision of the Georgian citizens. Interestingly enough with regards to the evaluation of economic conditions, neither Akhmeta municipality administration nor the National Statistics Office of Georgia have gathered data on unemployment, average income level, source of income or any related information. The National Statistics Office named excessive financial expenses as the reason behind the existing situation. The local population remains the sole source of evaluation of the economic environment.

Conclusion and recommendations

Radicalization and violent extremism are among the main challenges of the modern world. Even though none of the age, religious or ethnically populated group is safe from recruitment from terrorist organizations and inclusion of people in violent extremism, young people, whose emotions and attitudes are easier to manipulate, are more vulnerable to radicalization.

Hence, protecting the young people from violent extremism is one of the most salient tasks facing the public and the state. This process requires an in-depth analysis of the issue and formulation of efficient mechanisms. Lately, the outflow of Georgian citizens to the Islamic State has stalled, which is mostly due to the loss of influence and power by the Islamic State following the final fall of Mosul. The Islamic State will ultimately lose territories in Iraq. However, this does not mean that we will not face facts of radicalization and recruitment of the citizens of Georgia in the future.

In order to avoid the potential threats in the future, it is necessary to:

- Raise the level of education among the vulnerable groups. It is harder to manipulate informed young people with distorted, radical and propaganda messages. In this regard, activities aimed at providing both formal and informal education should be strengthened both in Pankisi Gorge and highland Adjara, including the correct interpretation of Islam and the Quran. Filling their spare time by increasing civil and public integration is no less important.
- Civil society plays the main role in the fight against radicalization. In this regard, the situation is far from ideal in Georgia. Only a handful of NGOs and endowments try to study the issue, even superficially. Qualification and awareness within civil society must be raised in this direction on issues such as: 1) Terrorism, its causes and history; 2) Radicalization, de-radicalization, rehabilitation of recruited citizens, etc. Efficiently planned training-courses and respectively created literature will make filling the knowledge gap possible.
- The State is the main actor against radicalization and extremism. Hence, it is necessary to prepare an inter-agency strategy or a working document that would formulate the view and the State's approach with regards to the fight against terrorism, in general, and de-radicalization, considering international practice and experience.

- In the process of the fight against radicalization, it is necessary to create agents of positive influence, role models for young people. Nowadays, unfortunately, a negative agent, namely Tarkhan Batirashvili (despite being dead, he remains a stimuli of radicalization) holds sway. The absolute majority of the participants of a focus group conducted in 2015, described Batirashvili as a “hero”, “fighter”, “best friend”, “strong individual”, “role model”, etc. Even this small list is enough to evaluate the attitudes. It is noteworthy that the young people participating in the focus group did not have a positive attitude towards the Islamic State, yet they felt a connection with Tarkhan Batirashvili.

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