



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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WOMEN FROM GEORGIA IN THE SYRIAN AND IRAQI CONFLICTS

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Introduction

Since its beginning, tens of Georgian citizens have participated in the Syrian conflict. A vast body of academic studies and policy papers has been published on the issue of foreign fighters from Georgia. However, the particular issue of women participants in the Syrian conflict has been less discussed. Information on women from Georgia in the Syrian conflict is extremely scarce. The aim of this article is to shed some light on the issue of women participants from Georgia in the Syrian conflict.

Methodology and Data Gathering

Throughout the research process, the author visited the Pankisi Gorge and Azerbaijani-populated villages in Georgia with the aim of conducting interviews with family members of women foreign fighters from Georgia. In order to overcome gender-related cultural barriers, some of the interviews were conducted by the author's assistant, the local secondary school teacher, Luisa Mutoshvili, without whom this research would not have been successful. The major questions asked of respondents were: What motivated women to move to Syria? What was their actual role in the conflict zone? What happened to them after the fall of the Islamic State (hereafter mentioned as IS)? Are there returnees and if so, are they engaged in any jihadi activities?

Problem of Definition

The definitional parameters of the term 'foreign fighter' have been actively debated in academic publications. The widely accepted definition of a foreign fighter is a 'non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatant who, motivated by religion, kinship and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enters a conflict zone to participate in hostilities.'¹ Nevertheless, this definitional framework cannot be applied to women in a jihadi conflict who are neither 'combatants' nor 'participate in hostilities.' The non-combatancy automatically raises the issue of a conceptual dichotomy between a 'civilian' and a 'non-combatant.' Although both concepts share a non-engagement in violent activities, there is also a significant distinction between them. The widely used definition of a civilian is a 'person following the pursuits of civil life, especially one who is not an active member of the military, police or a belligerent group' whereas a non-combatant can be defined as a 'person who is not directly involved in combat.'² A more detailed definition of a combatant exists in the Hague Convention according to which a person can be considered as a combatant if he : 1. Is commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates, 2. Has a fixed distinctive emblem recognizable at a distance, 3. Openly carries arms and 4. Conducts his operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.³

The dilemma related to women jihadis is that despite their non-combatancy, they also cannot be defined as civilians due to their full or partial affiliation to various jihadi groups.

The existing literature on the terrorist activities of women is not extensive and focuses particularly on case studies. The greater part of scholars shares the consensus that women have a predominantly supportive role in rebel or terrorist groups.⁴ Margaret Gonzalez Perez, in her comparative studies, concludes that women members of international terrorist groups are less likely to participate in combat and 'are rarely found in leadership or policymaking positions' in transnational terrorist organizations. Gender control from the male members of the organization is also a crucial factor which limits the function of women in the group.⁵

Charles A. Russell and Bowman H. Miller emphasize the effectiveness of women in maintaining supportive functions such as 'operating a safe-house, storing weapons or forging documents.'⁶ Katharina Von Knop, however, throughout her analysis of the role of women in Al-Qaeda, draws our attention to the potential tactical advantages of the active inclusion of women in a jihad:

First, they provide a tactical advantage: stealthier attacks, an element of surprise, the hesitancy to search for women and the stereotype of women perceived as non-violent. Second, the inclusion of women as suicide bombers would increase the number of combatants. Third, this would raise the publicity of an attack and the psychological effect would be much higher.⁷

A recent study by Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State*, focuses on the functional role of women in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The author enlists several functional positions of women in the IS. First, there is the provision of women fighters with the sense of family and other housekeeping issues. Davis believes that women are encouraged to marry quickly upon arrival in the territories controlled by the IS. Secondly, women could also have been employed as enforcers and regulators of IS regulations and laws. By way of illustration, she shows the all-female Al-Khansaa brigade which was reportedly patrolling the streets of the city of Raqqa and regulating the dress code of women in their controlled territories. Thirdly, IS supporter women, especially outside, have been involved in the logistical and material support for IS militants, the recruitment of other women for marriage with IS fighters and propaganda activities in social media.⁸

Aside from the academic debate, equally important is the view of the key advocates of jihad on the functional role of women. Nelly Lahoud overviews and analyzes the opinions of leading Al-Qaeda ideologists. The founder of Al-Qaeda Abdallah Azzam allowed women to participate in the jihad by cooking, nursing or similar activities. Another influential 'Afghan Arab,' Dr. Fadl, on the other hand, believes that women had the right to protect themselves in the case of an attack on their city. One of the leaders of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Yusuf al-Uyayri, believes that women are necessary for the moral but not the physical side of the jihad. He is of the opinion that the primary role of women must be to encourage men to fight the jihad. Prominent Al-Qaeda ideologist, Anwar al-Awlaqi, emphasizes the importance of female support during warfare and encourages the inclusion of women in the jihad:

Even though the physical Jihad is primarily within the men's domain, our sister still needs to live the "life of mujahid" which her husband lives. She needs to be supportive of him if he goes for Jihad, content if he is a shaheed (martyr) and patient if he is taken as a POW [sic].⁹

Although classic Islamic sources do not encourage the participation of women on the battlefield beside the men, some contemporary jihadi writers are trying to find a sharia justification for the inclusion of women in the jihad, especially in terms of suicide operations.¹⁰

Concerning Caucasian jihadis, the only existing text related to the activities of women in the jihad is the publication of Abdul-Halim al-Shishani, a member of the sharia committee of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, released in 2014 by the Kavkazcenter. At the beginning of the text, Abdul-Halim expresses concern that many Russian-speaking women had travelled to Syria without a mahram and the permission of their relatives. He notes that “Syria is not the right place for a pilgrimage; therefore, we cannot encourage or force all Muslims, especially our sisters, to make it. While we have not liberated even one-fourth of its territories, it is too early to make a reference on the hadiths on the Hijrah to Sham.”¹¹ He only justifies the circumstance as “our sister is religiously oppressed and cannot freely follow the norms of Islam, instead of making a decision on safar (travel) somewhere, she should marry the brother follower of Quran and Sunnah from her region who has the intention to participate in jihad and make a Hijrah. Thank God, there are a lot of them, both in the Caucasus and Central Asia.”¹²

Georgian Women in Syria

Through our research, 17 Georgian women were found in Syria or Iraq. The majority of them, 12 citizens, are ethnic Kists from the Pankisi Gorge. Additionally, four Azerbaijani women from the Kakheti (two from Karajala, Telavi Municipality, and one from Kabali, Lagodekhi Municipality) and Kvemo Kartli (Agtakla, Gardabani Municipality) regions and one ethnic Georgian woman converted to Islam. Women from Adjara or eco-migrant Adjarian communities have not been found. The average age of the women who moved to Syria is 26 years. The vast majority of them had a secondary education and one even had a higher education.

The question of the motivation is extremely significant. According to Mia Bloom, there are five main motivational features such as revenge, redemption, relationship, respect and rape which could drive women to join terrorist organizations.¹³ The overwhelming majority of the author’s interviewees felt that the radicalization of women was not the main reason for their migration to the conflict zone. The major motivational feature was named as marriage and family relationships. The vast majority of women moved to the Middle East along with their husbands. The mother-in-law of one woman who had visited her son in Syria said that:

They [women] were alongside their husbands. Kist traditions strictly forbade sending women to the frontline. Women were restricted from communicating with other men except for their husbands. Women and children were residing in private houses in Raqqa but they were changing their places of residence in accordance to the battle plan. They did not even have contact with their neighbors. Their primary function was housekeeping issues; for example, cooking.¹⁴

Some of the informants emphasized that women were forced to travel alongside their husbands. One of them reported that a foreign fighter from Georgia attempted to leave his mother in Syria who visited him in order to convince him to return.

Respondents in the Pankisi Gorge also offered an explanation for the motivational factors. According to them, these included large rebel-held territories as well as the perspective of financial support. One informant expressed concern that many secondary school student girls had romantic feelings and sympathy for those boys who were fighting in Syria during the active phase of the conflict.

Another important issue is widows in Syria. Two of our respondents have visited the widow houses in Raqqa and Aleppo. One of the respondents provided the following description:

My daughter-in-law was staying at the widow house in Raqqa. Women and children were living there. The house had elementary conditions but the main discomfort was the crying of children which made it difficult to sleep. Soon after the death of their husbands, women were marrying other militants because they could provide for them materially. There was no pressure in terms of marriage.¹⁵

Widows were encouraged to marry other militants. However, one of the respondents mentioned the case of a fictitious sharia marriage of one Kist militant to another Kist widow in order to prevent her marriage to another militant.

Although the majority of women from Georgia were convinced to move to Syria by their husbands, several media reports have shown that ideological indoctrination was the key driver in some circumstances which inspired women to travel to Syria. One well-known case was the escape of two ethnic Azerbaijani women, Irada Garibova and Ana Suleimanova, from the village of Karajala in Eastern Georgia who left their husbands and went to Syria. Their motivation was that their husbands were not religious Muslims and were more concerned about their business than the jihad.¹⁶ Our research also revealed a case where domestic violence was the main driver. According to the informant from the Azerbaijani-populated Gardabani Municipality:

A woman from our village married one Azerbaijani man and they moved to Petrozavodsk, Russia. The husband has problems with alcohol. He was systematically beating and humiliating his wife. Meanwhile, the woman met the local Wahabis and they started to teach her their doctrine. She realized that moving to Syria was only one way to escape from her abusive husband. Eventually, she managed to escape and got married to militants in Syria several times.¹⁷

The existing media material, as well as the author's fieldwork, suggest that Georgian citizen women have been employed by jihadi militants in supportive roles. One of our interviewees mentioned functions such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and taking care of the children. All of the respondents mentioned that women spent most of their time with the children. Due to the armed conflict, there was no opportunity

to give children an elementary school education and so the role of women in this regard was high. One of the respondents, however, mentioned women doctors or nurses among Caucasian women in Syria.

Functional Role of Women

Our research has revealed several important details related to Georgian women foreign fighters. The number of women from Georgia in Syria was lower than the number of male foreign fighters. A possible explanation for this can be the high gender control and high dependence on male foreign fighters. Georgian women have not been represented in the decision-making positions in the armed structures of the militant groups. The function of women migrants was determined by the jihadi interpretation of sharia law. Unlike women jihadis from other states, none of the Georgian women in Syria was involved in writing propagandist poems or novels. Due to the total gender control, women were constrained in communication with other individuals which makes the establishment of links with other jihadis almost impossible. The extreme dependence on male foreign fighters can be seen when Georgian women were incapable of existing in Syria and Iraq without favorable living conditions or the so-called 'five-star jihad.' After the loss of territories and the withdrawal of jihadi groups, tens of Caucasian women were captured.

Contrary to the expectations, radicalization and ideological indoctrination did not comprise a major motivational feature. Apart from several outstanding cases, the vast majority of women followed their spouses to Syria.

An important question is the degree to which Georgian women were involved in the Syrian conflict. Due to an absence of a commonly accepted methodology and theory vis-à-vis the definition of a 'fighter' or a 'combatant,' we have taken the definition from the Hague Convention; namely: being commanded by military groups, having a distinctive uniform, carrying arms and participating in hostilities.

Being commanded by militants - Georgian women in Syria have been under the absolute control of the leadership of various jihadi groups. Their immediate control was carried out by their husbands who regulated their movement and behavior. Women were also moving from one settlement to another according to the will of their male partners. Supportive functions were also provided by women for the male fighters. Even in the case of their husband's death, women lived in the widow house which was also protected by male militants. However, gender control did not include utilizing women in military operations. This all said, Georgian women indeed fully fulfill these criteria.

Having a distinctive uniform - According to our interviewees as well as media reports, all women residents of jihadi-controlled territories were obliged to wear a Muslim headscarf (hijab). The wearing of the hijab is considered by an Al-Qaeda ideologist's wife, Umayma Az-Zawahiri, as one of the key functions of women in the jihad.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the hijab cannot be treated as a military uniform. The dress code of Georgian and other non-indigenous women in Syria and Iraq was not different from the local residents of jihadi-captured territories. Therefore, Georgian women only partly fulfill this criterion.

Carrying arms - Only a limited category of women were allowed to carry weapons or explosives. However, this was determined by the desire to avoid humiliation in captivity and not by their involvement in military operations. Our research did not uncover any Georgian women dealing with arms which means that this criterion is not fulfilled.

Participation in hostilities - Aside from the case of the suicide bomber, Diana Ramazanova, none of the other women from the Caucasus region has been reported to be involved in hostilities. Only a limited number of women were concerned with recruitment and propaganda. The participation of Caucasian women in hostilities is not significant which means that Georgian women do not fulfill this criterion either.

Georgian Women after the Fall of IS

Since the IS lost its territories, the future of many Georgian women foreign fighters has become uncertain. This is especially the case for women after the death of their husbands or other protectors which made them extremely vulnerable. There are reported cases of Caucasian women captured by Iraqi or Kurdish forces.¹⁹ For instance, there is the Iraqi court verdict on the life sentence for 19 Russian-speaking women, a part of whom was most likely from the Caucasus.²⁰ One woman from Georgia from among them was sentenced in Iraq along with her children.²¹ Admittedly, the leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, organized the repatriation of tens of North Caucasian women from Syria and Iraq.²² However, unlike Chechnya, Dagestani authorities have arrested women returnees upon their arrival.²³ Several respondents mentioned that some women have been residing in third countries since leaving Syria but they cannot return to Georgia because of the risk of possible arrest. Both fieldwork and media reports suggest that the returnees are disengaged from jihadi activities. Several interviewees mentioned the case of two women returnees to Georgia and said that they spend all of their days at home with their children. The idea about the disengagement of North Caucasian women returnees from Syria was also confirmed by an expert on the North Caucasus, Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, in her private conversation with the author.

The question now arises as to the policy of Georgia vis-à-vis the women who are seeking to return. There are two different approaches as to the state policy towards returnees; namely, the cases of Chechnya and Dagestan.

The case of Chechnya - Although the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, is known for his hardline policy towards jihadis and Salafis, his policy has been extremely soft in the case of women returnees. As Kadyrov noted: "Day and night I work to return women and children from Syria and Iraq. Our women and children, who are currently in Afghanistan, have contacted me. They have lost their husbands and do not know where to ask for help. They are afraid for the lives of their children."²⁴ Kadyrov organized the transportation of Chechen women from Syria and Iraq to Chechnya. Aside from Chechen women, he was also involved in the return of Dagestani and other Russian women.²⁵ After the return, Chechen authorities do not bring the returnees to prosecution. Instead, they are facilitating their

reintegration into society.²⁶ Kadyrov's policy could be explained by his willingness to paint a dovish image of himself for other North Caucasians.

The case of Dagestan - In contrast to neighboring Chechnya, Dagestani authorities have implemented a policy based on the persecution of women returnees. According to media reports, several Dagestani women were arrested and sentenced upon arrival.²⁷ Admittedly, some of the detained Dagestani women were returned to Dagestan by Kadyrov.²⁸ Such a policy might be efficient in the short term but could lead to more grievances and radicalization in the long run.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research has shown that Georgian women had limited functions in Syria and that women from Georgia in the Middle Eastern conflict have not been employed as combatants. This can be owing to their small numbers and their dependence on their husbands. The vast majority of them were married to militants which also comprised a key motivational issue.

As mentioned earlier, several women managed to return to Georgia and several others are attempting return. The following is a list of recommendations to Georgian authorities in order to deal with the issue of women returnees.

- The number of women willing to return is extremely low. Owing to their limited functions in an insurgency, they are incapable of affecting their community. Hence, Georgian authorities should allow them to return to their families. This act can facilitate the process of reconciliation and restoring trust in ethnic minorities, especially in the Pankisi Gorge.
- The children of women, who have been taken by them to Syria, also should be returned to Georgia to their closest relatives. In addition, Georgian authorities should establish psychological and educational rehabilitation for these children in order to facilitate their reintegration into the local community.
- Georgian authorities can use returned women as a tool for preventing future radicalization. More precisely, they can tell their story to other women which will discourage them from participation in similar conflicts.

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