

**RUSSIA: ISLAMIC STATE VS AL QAEDA;
DEEPENING CRISIS IN IMARAT KAVKAZ CONTRIBUTES TO
THE REINFORCEMENT OF IS POSITIONS
IN POST-SOCIET SPACE**

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The security developments of the past months in Northern Caucasus indicate two main trends: 1. The clear weakening of the positions of Al-Qaeda-linked Imarat Kavkaz and 2. The reinforcing positions of the Islamic State. Indeed, a recent string of counter-terrorism operations in Northern Caucasus, that resulted in the killing of numerous senior terrorist members of Imarat Kavkaz including the Emir Mukhammad, who succeeded Doku Umarov after his death, put the group in situation of harsh competition with the Islamic State who is increasing its presence in Russia.

The murder of the group's supreme leader Aliaskhab Kebekov aka Ali Abu Mukhammad ad-Dagestani, along with two senior members Shamil Gajiyev and Omar Magomedov, during a special operation on April 19 in the village of Gerei-Avlak in Dagestan, de-facto beheaded the terrorist group. One month since the death of Emir Mukhammad, no leader has been appointed, confirming concerns over the deepening internal crisis that Imarat Kavkaz suffers since the death of its founder, Emir Doku Umarov.

While Imarat Kavkaz still remains de-facto without central leadership, the group is dramatically loosing its influence among the jihadists in North Caucasus. Since the death of Doku Umarov, there are almost no signs of presence of Imarat Kavkaz in

Russia beyond the borders of Northern Caucasian region, while active propaganda campaign of Islamic State in Russian language further undermines positions of Imarat Kavkaz, triggering an outflow of jihadists to the IS cells in Russia and in Syria.

Ongoing opposition of Imarat Kavkaz and IS cells in Russia reflects the global competition between Islamic State and Al Qaeda. To recall, for more than 8 years, despite a series of internal fitnas (disagreements), Imarat remained the only jihadist umbrella organization in Northern Caucasus. Today, local jihadist groups in the republics of Northern Caucasus, that so far have maintained their allegiance to the Imarat Kavkaz, represent an important recruitment pool for both international terrorist organizations.

The split within the main Northern Caucasian umbrella terrorist network, Imarat Kavkaz, initially emerged several years ago, yet under the rule of the previous emir, charismatic Doku Umarov. The secession trend intensified dramatically in 2014, when after several months of rumors and contradictory reports, the leadership of Imarat Kavkaz officially recognized his death and appointed the former Sharia judge of the terrorist network, Abu Muhammad, as new supreme Emir.

The “moderate” position of Abu Mukhammad - in comparison to his predecessor -, notably the ban he imposed on female suicide attacks and the numerous calls he issued to discourage attacks that may provoke losses among civilians, as well as the position he took vis-a-vis Islamic State, actively supporting the ideology of Al-Qaeda, diverted many jihadists from the organization and sharpened tensions with some jihadist factions that supported Islamic State and its jihad in Syria. Abu Ali Mukhammad urged numerous times its fighters not to join jihad in Syria and Iraq due to the ongoing fitna between rival networks of Caucasian jihadists who joined IS and Al-Nusra Front.

The split within Imarat Kavkaz that for several years had remained latent, became evident in December 2014 when some senior members of the terrorist network, including several emirs of Daghestani branches (wilayats), pledged allegiance to the emir of Islamic State Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Long hesitations within the leadership of

Imarat Kavkaz after the death of Doku Umarov and the appointment of Abu Mukhammad, clearly a compromise candidature, demonstrated that the North Caucasian terrorist network was seriously challenged by the lack of charismatic candidates for the leadership.

The de-facto beheading of Northern Caucasian terrorist structure following the death of its Emir Abu Muhammad risks to trigger competition for power not only within the group but also with Islamic State and almost inevitably will cause a new wave of insurgency in Northern Caucasus. It should be mentioned that so far, despite the presence of numerous Caucasian fighters within the ranks of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and despite the pledge of allegiance of several Dagestani jihadist leaders to Abu Bakr al-Bahdadi, the terrorist group made no statement clarifying its position in Russia and none of the pledges of allegiance were accepted by the IS leadership.

Meanwhile, series of declarations, issued by Russian security authorities since the beginning of the year, demonstrate a clear shift in estimations of the security risks from traditional Northern Caucasian jihadist networks toward the Islamic State. On February 27, the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) included the IS group into its list of terrorist organizations. This inclusion came after the Russian Supreme Court ruled in December 2014 to designate the group as a terrorist organization, along with Al-Nusra Front. The list, published on the website of FSB, contains 22 groups, including foreign and international organizations that have been recognized as terrorist groups by Russian law.

According to the recent estimates by Kremlin envoy to North Caucasus, Sergei Melikov, the number of Russian citizens fighting alongside the IS in Syria and Iraq has doubled since last year, reaching nearly 1,800 people. According to Russian analysts, around 1,000 Russian-speaking fighters took part in the IS assault in October 2014 on Iraq's Anbar province that was led by the IS commander Abu Omar al-Shishani, known by his nom de guerre as "Omar the Chechen".

Meanwhile such estimations should be accepted cautiously due to permanent confusion between Russian nationals and Russian-speaking jihadist fighters (who can also be from CIS Countries or Europeans of Russian descent).

At the same time, reports confirm that the number of Russian nationals fighting alongside the IS and returning back to Russia is constantly growing, increasing the domestic terrorism threat and rising concerns over the radicalization of Muslims and creation of IS sleeper cells within Russia.

In response to the increasing IS propaganda in Russian language, AQAP intensified its attention notably by issuing a video praising the terrorists of Imarat Kavkaz and urging to support them logistically and financially.

At the present moment, there are no reports confirming the presence of any cells affiliated to the Islamic State on Russian soil. Meanwhile, growing disappointment among Northern Caucasian jihadists, absence of charismatic leader and the fact that today Islamic State is the only jihadist group that proposes to radical Islamists in Russia real opportunities to join international jihad zones, will further contribute to the growth of popularity of the Islamic State on post-Soviet space.

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