

The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters:

Opportunities for Chechnya and Dagestan to Quell Local Insurgencies

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ABSTRACT

The Russian republics of Chechnya and Dagestan were two of the largest contributors of foreign terrorist fighters to the Islamic State (IS). Now, after IS has largely been defeated, these two republics must deal with the return of men, women, and children who fought for IS. Both republics are concerned that the influx of experienced fighters from Syria will bolster local insurgent groups and increase violence. By creating opportunities for the deradicalization and demobilization of returning fighters, local governments will have a chance to correct the underlying causes of local insurgencies and offer alternative incentives to insurgents.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A FOREIGN FIGHTER?

Foreign fighters are not a phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Modern history is teeming with examples of people volunteering to fight in foreign wars: the Lafayette Escadrille in the First World War, the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, and the Crippled Eagles in the Rhodesian Bush War. Even Lord Byron, a famous British poet and leading figure of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement, could be considered a foreign fighter for fighting alongside the Greeks during their War of Independence.

Since the September 11 attacks in the United States of America however, governments and international bodies have actively differentiated between persons fighting wars in which their government is not involved, e.g. mercenaries and private military contractors, and those fighting for terrorist organizations. A new term has emerged to describe the latter group: 'foreign terrorist fighter.' According to the United Nations, a foreign terrorist fighter is someone "who travel(s) to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, preparation of, or participation in, terrorists acts or the providing or reviewing of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."¹

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

In 2017, official estimates placed the number of foreign terrorist fighters employed by the Islamic State between 25,000² and 42,000.³ These numbers vastly exceed the number of foreign fighters participating in other conflicts such as the Russo-Afghan War or the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴

Several studies have examined foreign terrorist fighters and their motivations for joining the Islamic State. Broadly, these studies found most foreign terrorist fighters to be single and economically disadvantaged men from large families, between the ages of 18-29, with low education levels, and a limited understanding of Islam.⁵ Their motivations for leaving home and joining the Islamic State vary widely. Some sought self-respect, guidance, or identity. Others received encouragement to travel to Syria from social networks and friends. Still others were convinced by IS propaganda of the need to defend their fellow Sunnis.⁶

RUSSIAN FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

Between 5,000 and 7,000 Russian nationals joined the Islamic State, the majority of which came from the North Caucasus, specifically Chechnya and Dagestan.⁷ Roughly 1,200 were Dagestani and 3,000 Chechen. Of these 3,000 Chechen foreign fighters, approximately 600 came from geographic Chechnya and 2,400 from the diaspora community.⁸ Fighters from other areas in the North Caucasus also traveled to Syria such as the approximately 100 Ingush, 50 Georgian Kists and 175 Kabardino-Balkarians.⁹ The large proportion of Russian speakers in IS is reflected in the Islamic State's move to create a Russian language magazine (Istok) and media platform (Furat Media).¹⁰ Fighters from the North Caucasus played a disproportionately large role in the Syrian conflict. They were highly valued for their combat experience during the First and Second Chechen Wars. Former IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi actively sought to integrate Chechens into IS ranks as a result of their discipline and

abilities.¹¹ Chechens also served as the main IS recruiters in Syria and as the IS Minister of War.

Though many Chechens and Dagestanis had motivations similar to other foreign terrorist fighters, they were driven by additional push factors. By the end of the Second Chechen War in 2011, Ramzan Kadyrov – a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin – was head of the Chechen Republic and Russia was firmly in control of the region for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia successfully cracked down on separatist and radical Islamist groups. The resulting inability of these groups to wage their war against Russia in the North Caucasus forced many to look for alternative methods to retaliate. Syria was a logical choice: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was an ally of Putin and an important recipient of Russian military aid. For younger fighters, the Syrian war constituted an opportunity to gain combat experience and establish a name for themselves before returning home to continue their separatist struggle. The increasingly severe crackdown in the North Caucasus also required certain fighters to flee for their safety, often aided by the state itself.¹² Prior to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) eased and even aided the travel of militant Islamists to Syria. According to reports, the FSB provided passports, travel documents, new identities, and one-way tickets to Turkey.¹³

THE CHALLENGES OF RETURNING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

With the establishment of the IS Caliphate in 2014, an Islamic state under the leadership of religious successors to the prophet Muhammed,¹⁴ came a call for doctors, teachers, engineers, accountants and people with the different necessary backgrounds to create and maintain a functional state. Around 40,000 people representing 110 different countries, including women and children, answered the call.¹⁵ Ever since the international coalition began recapturing IS territory, there remains a major concern on how to address and reintegrate foreign nationals. Many foreign fighters were not active combatants and instead played civilian roles as part of the Caliphate.

Just as motivations for joining the Islamic State varied, so did the reasons for leaving. For many, the reality of living in Syria and under the Islamic State did not match the promises made by recruiters and propaganda. Extensive corruption and hypocrisy among IS leaders also pushed people away. Some were disgusted by the levels of brutality they witnessed and by the ongoing slave trade.¹⁶ None of these ex-Caliphate citizens pose a major threat upon returning to their native country. However, some returnees remain loyal to the Caliphate and seek to radicalize others or to continue attacks outside of Syria. As the Caliphate continues to lose ground, how do states deal with their own

citizens who joined IS and now wish to return to their native country? How do states determine which returnees are disillusioned with IS, and which intend to continue the Caliphate's fight at home?

The Soufan Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to global security issues, divides returnees into five categories based on risk:¹⁷

- 1. Those who left early or after only a short stay and were never fully integrated with IS;*
- 2. Those who stayed longer, but did not agree with everything IS was doing;*
- 3. Those who had qualms about their role or IS tactics, but decided to move on;*
- 4. Those who were fully committed to IS but forced out by circumstances -such as loss of territory- or were captured and sent to their home countries; and*
- 5. Those who were sent abroad to fight for the caliphate elsewhere.*

It is important to note each category poses a different level of risk, and that none are risk-free. Those who chose to join IS did so for a reason. Even if returning disillusioned, the underlying circumstances that drove them to join IS in the first place means they remain susceptible to extremist propaganda. All returnees thus present a certain risk, especially if the original causes of their recruitment remain unaddressed and unchanged.¹⁸ It is vital to evaluate each individual returnee and determine the risk they pose, as well as to tailor deradicalization programs to their specific situation. Most importantly, it is imperative to address the push factors that drove people to radicalize.

A lot of states fear the return of their citizens from Syria. They are concerned that those who lived with IS have been indoctrinated into extremist ideology, or that they might have received combat training. In addition, fears persist that transnational terrorist cells might grow from the friendships and networks forged in Syria.¹⁹ These concerns are especially true in the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, which already face long-lasting insurgencies. Attacks in recent years have only reinforced Chechen and Dagestan fears about returning fighters. In 2016 the Islamic State declared a jihad in Russia, and several insurgent groups in Chechnya and Dagestan pledged allegiance to IS. That same year, six attacks were linked to the Islamic State: five in Dagestan and one in Chechnya. In the first four months of April 2017, at least four attacks had connections to IS. A video of one of the attacks purportedly depicts

several fighters who had returned from Syria. Returning fighters could grow the ranks of domestic insurgents, increase the levels of insurgent activity through their Syrian connections and bring additional combat experience as well as new tactics and strategies.

CHECHEN RESPONSE

The Chechen state's approach to counterinsurgency has been brutal. Reports of torture, executions, hostage-taking, illegal detention, falsification of criminal cases and unfair trials are common.²⁰ A major component of Ramzan Kadyrov's counterinsurgency policy is collective responsibility. Under this policy, the relatives and family members of insurgents are considered responsible for the insurgent's actions. Human rights groups have reported "a practice of taking insurgents' relatives as hostages, subjecting them to torture or summary execution and burning their homes."²¹ The European Court of Human Rights has held Chechen security forces responsible for the abduction and death of the brother of an insurgent. Security forces tortured the father of another insurgent and fined him three million rubles (nearly 75,000 U.S. dollars). In December 2014 alone, security forces burned down fifteen houses belonging to family members of known insurgents.²² Such retaliatory efforts on behalf of the Russian government will only serve to push insurgents, and those already on the brink of radicalization, towards further acts against the state.

There are no signs that Kadyrov will rescind the policy of collective responsibility for existing insurgents, but alternative and softer approaches have emerged towards the issue posed by returning foreign fighters. Heda Saratova, a member of the Chechnya's Human Rights Council, is trying to build a rehabilitation center in Grozny for women and children returning from Syria. In addition to Saratova's efforts, Kadyrov proclaimed a 'safe corridor' for women returning to Syria.²³

DAGESTANI RESPONSE

Dagestan has been more nuanced in its approach to homegrown insurgencies than Chechnya. After violence peaked in 2011, then Head of the Republic of Dagestan, Magomedshah Magomedov, instituted a new set of policies aimed at defeating the insurgency. Magomedov created a commission that offered insurgents a way to surrender. The commission operated transparently and offered numerous services to insurgents and their families, including legal and medical counseling, solutions to housing and employment problems and relocation assistance.²⁴ Magomedov then launched efforts to encourage intra-religious reconciliation between the Sufi and Salafi Islamic communities. These efforts were largely successful. The commission demobilized dozens of

insurgents, while non-violent Salafis saw an improvement in their social and legal status. Most importantly support for the insurgency among young Salafis, the group most susceptible to recruitment, collapsed.²⁵

However in 2013, the new Head of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, reverted to the old policies of heavy-handedness and violence. He closed the commission established by Magomedov and curtailed efforts to reach out to the Salafi populations. Allegations of abductions, executions, planted evidence, and torture soon proliferated.²⁶ Repression of Salafis increased, as did state harassment. The Ministry of Interior created the profuchet, a list of suspected extremists that could be detained and questioned. This list can be cited as evidence during trials against insurgents.²⁷

The last few years have seen a slight shift in policy towards a more nuanced counter-insurgency approach. The Commission on Reconciliation opened in 2016, but its operations are not transparent and are more focused on Dagestanis returning from Syria than domestic insurgents. Additionally Sevil Navruzova, a private citizen, opened the Center for Countering Extremism to help local communities locate and bring back family members that joined IS. The Center is independent but works closely with local officials. Local courts ruled the profuchet illegal but it is reportedly still in use. Salafis also continue to face acts of repression, such as the closure of mosques and the arrest of Salafi imams.²⁸

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

CHECHNYA

1. Reinforce Russian Regulations

Dealing with foreign terrorist fighters returning from Syria also means dealing with the underlying causes of insurgency in Chechnya. Even after the Second Chechen War, the Chechen Republic still retains a large degree of autonomy from the Russian Federation. While Ramzan Kadyrov is loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin, he rules Chechnya as a personal fiefdom. Chechen laws and practices can run counter to Russian state law. For instance, collective responsibility is illegal under Russian law and Vladimir Putin had stated that “no one, including the head of Chechnya, had the right to impose extrajudicial punishments.”²⁹ Despite this, the policy of collective responsibility in Chechnya continues. In the previously mentioned example of Chechen security forces burning down fifteen houses belonging to families of insurgent members, two of those fifteen houses were burned down after Putin’s statement condemning extrajudicial reprisals.

According to an expert on Chechen governance: “None of the [Chechen] rule-of-law institutions work in compliance with the Russian law, not only

in law enforcement, but also in civil law. Land code, social and commercial law function through administrative management by local officials who have turned it into a tool for extortion and a source of self-enrichment.”³⁰ This must change. Unfortunately, it will require opening investigations into abducted and missing persons, necessitate reinvestigating cases with falsified evidence, and require investigating acts of malfeasance by the Chechen security forces – all actions that Kadyrov is unlikely to take.

However, if Putin begins to reassert Russia’s control over Chechnya, reestablishing the rule of law will be paramount to his success. The Russian *Politsiya* (federal police) and Investigative Committee must liaise and operate jointly with the Chechen police force to ensure Russian criminal and civil laws are being followed. The *Politsiya* can and should not replace or otherwise take over the Chechen police service because this would stir up discontent among the Chechen population at large. The *Politsiya* will work alongside the Chechen police service to guarantee compliance with Russian law. The Investigative Committee will act in its role as Russia’s anti-corruption agency to investigate and punish members of the Chechen police who are abusing their power or using their position for self-enrichment. By working with the Chechen police (instead of directly enforcing the law themselves) and by combating corruption within the Chechen police, the *Politsiya* will be a positive force and not be seen as another Russian attack on the Chechen people.

2. End the policy of collective responsibility

Many people in Chechnya attribute the reduction of insurgent activity to the collective responsibility policy. Despite the claimed success of this policy, it is not a long-term solution. Burning down houses, torturing family members and issuing large fines only breeds further resentment of the government. In addition, enforcing collective responsibility can drive previously neutral family members into joining the insurgency, as a result of the suffering incurred by collective responsibility policies. Ending collective responsibility must be one of the major duties of the *Politsiya* working with Chechen law enforcement. Further punitive measures, like punishing the families of returning fighters, only reinforce the belief that IS beliefs were just and appropriate.

3. Allocate funding to Saratova’s rehabilitation center

Heda Saratova is an established human rights activist and already sits on the Chechen Human Rights Council. She is currently trying to establish a center in Grozny to rehabilitate women returning from Syria. These efforts must be funded and expanded to cover both returnees as well as insurgents within Chechnya. Fighters who want to break with the insurgency need a chance to

do so. A hardline approach with no possibility of reconciliation gives insurgents no other option than to continue fighting. Reassurance that their family will not be punished for their actions increases the incentive of returning fighters to end insurgent activity.

DAGESTAN

1. Make the Commission on Reconciliation more transparent and formalize demobilization steps

In its original iteration under Magomedov, the demobilization process was clearly laid out, publicized, and understood by all parties. In its current form as the Commission on Reconciliation, it is not as transparent. The Commission must also offer clear alternatives to extremist activity for foreign terrorist fighters returning from Syria and the insurgents who never left Dagestan. To continue the record of success already seen by the demobilization program,³¹ the Commission on Reconciliation must make its decision-making more transparent and open to the public. It must formalize the demobilization process and assume control over local commissions. Lastly, it must better publicize this process within Dagestan and to the foreign terrorist fighters returning from Syria.

2. Expand the Center for Countering Extremism (CCE)

Currently, the Center for Countering Extremism is only located in Derbent, Dagestan's third largest city. To make the Center more effective, the Dagestani government needs to provide funding so the CCE can open additional locations in the country's two largest cities, Makhachkala and Khasavyurt. Since these two cities are located roughly in the center of Dagestan, and Derbent is located in the south, officials should also consider opening a fourth center in Kizlyar to provide easier access to civilians in the northern half of the country.

3. Promote reconciliation with the Salafi community

The Sufi majority in Dagestan must reconcile with its Salafi minority. Reconciliation will require two major steps. First, the government must permanently delete the *profuchet*. It has already been ruled illegal by several courts. Yet, reports state that authorities continue to use the records despite having changed the name of the system to comply with local laws. Salafis will never trust the government if they are continuously harassed at border crossings and checkpoints. Second, Salafis must be allowed to openly practice their religion. The Dagestani government must reopen closed mosques and

release imprisoned imams. Punitive measures targeting the Salafi community only alienates its members, which in turn aids insurgent propaganda and recruitment efforts.

CONCLUSION

The Chechen and Dagestani governments should be concerned about returning foreign IS terrorist fighters. These people voluntarily left their homes, traveled to a war zone, and worked with a terrorist organization. While the Islamic State has lost most of its territory in Syria and Iraq and its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi has been killed, it continues to inspire lone-wolf attacks and has numerous chapters and cells around the world. Its ideology remains dangerous and its adherents constitute a potential terrorist threat.

The return of these fighters present Chechnya and Dagestan with an opportunity to quell their own local insurgencies. It is imperative that foreign terrorist fighters return to opportunities for work, education, and deradicalization. Fighters who return to an unchanged homeland, where they are still faced with the same problems and conditions that helped drive them to join the Islamic State, could remain radicalized, join local insurgent groups, and continue their jihad. The Republics of Chechnya and Dagestan have an opportunity to enact policies that will not only address foreign terrorist fighters returning from Syria, but also mitigate their ongoing insurgencies.

ENDNOTES

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 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 *Chechnya, the Inner Abroad*, 10
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 - 31 Ibid.
 - 32 Ibid.