REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE AL QAEDA-ISIL STRUGGLE

The competition between Al Qaeda and ISIL over the leadership of the global jihadist movement has already changed security parameters for the Middle East. Moreover, the presence of Al Qaeda and ISIL affiliates in the North Caucasus and Georgia's Pankisi Gorge may pose a threat to the Caucasian states and Russia if worsening economic and social conditions ease the recruitment process of radical militants. This article focuses on the competitive struggle over resources and dominance between Al Qaeda and ISIL, and the implications for regional security in the Middle East and the Caucasus.

Kristine Margvelashvili & Z. Aslı Elitsoy*

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* Kristine Margvelashvili is a Research Fellow at the Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi, Georgia. Z. Aslı Elitsoy is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.

Until the 1980s, the jihadist movement was dominated by local power struggles between jihadist groups and the local "infidel governments" – as in the cases of *Jama'at al-Muslimin* (Society of Muslims) founded by Shukri Ahmad Mustafa in Egypt and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad founded by Fathi Shaqaqi in 1979. However, by the end of the 1990s, a paradigmatic shift occurred and a group of jihadists led by Al Qaeda developed a new trend away from localism to globalism. The withdrawal of the Russian troops in Afghanistan and the deployment of US forces in Saudi Arabia were two important factors contributing to this shift. The primary goal of this strategic change was to expel the American influence and its Western allies from Muslim territories.[1] Moreover, the sense of victory against the Soviets in Afghanistan left behind self-confident jihadists and boosted the idea that defeating the "infidels" was possible.

In 1988, Al Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Peshawar as a global non-territorial organization. Inspired by the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, a prominent mid-20th-century Egyptian thinker, bin Laden viewed the world as simply divided between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*, namely "the home of Islam" and "the home of war." For bin Laden, jihad was not restricted to the idea of self-defense. He characterized his struggle as "a cosmic war between good and evil" that required an unconditional jihad in which every true believer had an obligation to participate.

Bin Laden's charismatic image and narrative inspired jihadists from different parts of the Islamic world and became the focus of their ambitions. In a relatively short time, local jihadist groups discovered the idea that the alliance with bin Laden could bring symbolic and material advantages such as new recruits, money, and prestige.[2] Although it had been formed as a hierarchical organization, following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Al Qaeda developed a decentralized regional structure. With this new strategy and organizational structure, local affiliations gradually began to formally align with the organization. As a global multi-national organization, Al Qaeda started to "franchise" militant groups in various ethnic and geographic regions. According to US officials, Al Qaeda cells and associates are currently located in over 70 countries.[3]

The fall of the Sunni-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the establishment of a Shiite-led government in Iraq paved the way for Al Qaeda to find enough financial and human resources not only to sustain itself but also to increase

[1] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 181.

[3] John Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates," *Congressional Research Center*, CRS Report for Congress, January 2011, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41070.pdf

its margin of maneuver in the Middle East. In 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the Salafi-jihadist militant group Tawhid wal Jihad, pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda to form an umbrella organization called Al Qaeda in Iraq. Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, the name of the organization was changed to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI); in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi jihadist from Samarra, assumed its leadership.

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When the Syrian civil war broke out in March 2011, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who was a close associate of Zarqawi in Iraq, formed the Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria with the purpose of establishing an Islamist state. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced in an audio statement that al-Nusra was ISI's front in Syria and that the two organizations would henceforth be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).[4] However, al-Nusra and Al Qaeda leaders promptly rejected Baghdadi's declaration and al-Nusra maintained its independence, leaving ISIL to gradually emerge as an autonomous component within the Syrian conflict. This split rapidly evolved into a power struggle between al-Nusra and ISIL; the former was far from sharing power and governance, while the latter demanded complete control over society and territory.[5] Meanwhile, ISIL expanded its presence and control of areas in Syria mainly by seizing territory and resources from rival groups such as al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam. Thus, the expansion of ISIL influence in Syria and Iraq resulted in a permanent split between ISIL and Al Qaeda. In February 2014, Al Qaeda's general command declared in an Internet statement that the organization cut ISIL off from its network after it disobeyed orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had taken over the leadership of Al Qaeda following the death of bin Laden.

In June 2014, ISIL captured the Iraqi city of Mosul and seized control of city's oil fields. The fall of Mosul was a turning point and important strategic gain for ISIL as it expanded its financial resources by establishing smuggling networks. In the same month, the group declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State to signify that its ambitions and sovereignty were not limited to the boundaries of Iraq and Syria, and that it rejected the borders imposed on the Muslim world by the colonial powers.[6] Moreover, the number of

[4] Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard, *Eurojihad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 133.

[5] Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

[6] Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 164.

ISIL-supporters and operatives coming from all over the world grew very rapidly. Although it is not clear precisely how many fighters ISIL has, according to various calculations the estimated number is close to 100,000.[7]

With the rise of ISIL as an extremist group contending for the leadership of global jihad, the competition and outright hostility between Al Qaeda and ISIL became apparent. First and foremost, both groups are part of the same global movement promoting Sunni jihadist ideology. Their anti-Western agendas are similar. They both seek the same religious and political ends such as toppling local regimes and replacing them with ones based on Sharia (Islamic law). Both Al Qaeda and ISIL are multinational organizations that have global franchises. They both evolved amidst tensions between regional actors and local insurgencies, combined with their efforts against foreign intervention.[8] Lastly, both of them recruit potential members through a powerful propaganda apparatus and use social media in order to advance a coherent narrative.

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Besides the similarities, there are obviously a great number of differences between the two groups. One key difference involves the fact that ISIL has gained strength from the territory in which it occupied and established a de facto state. Although Al Qaeda has bases and cells in many countries, it exists without controlling a state-like territory. Moreover, Al Qaeda often finds it difficult to control its affiliates. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups spreading over a vast geographical area are not necessarily under the operational control of the central command. This fact may strengthen ISIL's hand against Al Qaeda in annexing significant territorial gains in the future and in maintaining control over its followers. In addition to its territorial advantage, ISIL has established institutions corresponding to government departments and ministries within the borders of its so-called state. These institutions provide social services such as repairing roads and maintaining the electricity supply. ISIL also provides welfare services and collects taxes, which creates an interaction between the organization and its "citizens." While ISIL has a self-sufficient economy dominated by the revenues from oil fields and power plants, Al Qaeda depends mostly on donations from the Gulf States.

[7] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?," *War on the Rocks*, 9 February 2015, http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have

[8] Yonah Alexander and Dean Alexander, *The Islamic State: Combating the Caliphate without Borders* (Lanham, Boulder, New York: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 39.

ISIL's strategic gains and effective use of social media to spread its message seem to attract Muslim – and even non-Muslim – youth across the world, including the Caucasus. It is estimated that more than 1,500 young recruits from Russia's North Caucasus region and more than 200 from the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Georgia) have fought in Syria and Iraq within the ranks of ISIL.[9] Both Al Qaeda and ISIL currently compete to increase the number of their affiliates and followers from the Caucasus as well to expand their size and influence overall. They are largely concerned with the Caucasus because of the presence of a marginalized Sunni population and locals' interest in the possibility of confronting Russia.

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The Islamic Insurgency in the Caucasus

The first holy war against Russia in the North Caucasus was declared in 1785 by a Chechen religious leader, Sheikh Mansur Ushurma, who called for participation in *ghazawat* or jihad against Russians. In 1829, the second jihad against Russians was declared by Ghazi Muhammad, Imam of Dagestan. Islam served as an identity for the North Caucasian people and their daily life, and was based on *adat*, which is different from Sharia and includes the notion of collective responsibility.[10] After the October Revolution in 1917, the suppressed and economically weak North Caucasus found itself under Soviet rule that preached religious nihilism and atheism. However, Islam remained a part of the local identity. Consequently, the rise of Islam after the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in increasing activity of radical Islamist groups fighting for global jihad throughout the Caucasus.

There is nothing inherently new in the Caucasus regarding the presence of ISIL and its followers; however, the form of combat has changed and so did the deadliness of the jihadist movement. We have to remember that in the early 1990s, Ibn-al Khattab, a jihadist of Saudi Arabian origin, opened a training camp in Chechnya to teach jihadists principles of Salafi Islam and handling weaponry. In August 1999, Chechen Shamil Basayev, leader of the short-lived Chechen Republic of Ichkeria,

[9] Mark Kramer, "The Return of Islamic State Fighters: The Impact on the Caucasus and Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia*, August 2015, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/return-islamic-state-fighters-impact-caucasus-and-central-asia

10 Rebecca Gould, "Secularism and Belief in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2011) pp. 339-73.

joined Khattab. Together, they invaded Dagestan to establish an Islamic state and eliminate Russian influence. This invasion triggered the second Chechen War, which Chechnya subsequently lost. Later they would form the Islamic International Brigade, affiliated with Al Qaeda, and organize numerous attacks on Russia including the theater siege in Moscow and the bombing of a government building in Grozny in 2002, as well as the Beslan school siege in 2004. It is also believed that Khattab and Basayev were both trained by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.[11]

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Al Qaeda's involvement in the Caucasus in 2002 gained momentum when Al Qaeda affiliated forces headed by Ruslan Gelayev took refuge in Pankisi Gorge in Georgia and Russians carried out bombing raids against them. Even though a full-scale military escalation did not occur, the incident seriously damaged Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze's relations with Moscow. Pankisi Gorge was an uncontrolled territory in Georgia, and it was believed that Al Qaeda's leader was sheltered there after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.[12] This caused concern for both Russia and the US. In the subsequent military escalation, Russia relied on Article 51 of the UN Charter, which asserted the right of self-defense, and accused Georgia of supporting terrorists.[13] Georgia also accused Russia of initiating insurgent fighting in Chechnya and supporting those who fled to Georgia. In the end, the situation was appeased but Pankisi Gorge remained a safe haven for criminal gangs and insurgents.[14]

The first and second Chechnya Wars created refugee waves moving mostly to Europe and neighboring states. In the wake of the second war, for instance, the Georgian government accepted 8,000 Chechen refugees and located most of them in Pankisi Gorge, which was initially inhabited by Kists, mountainous people from the Caucasus who are ethnically close to Chechen and Ingush people (Wainakh Tribes).[15] According to different sources, there are approximately 100 Georgian nationals

[11] Bodansky Yossef, *Chechen Jihad. Al Qaeda's training ground and next wave of terror* (Harper Collins e-books, 2007), p. 40.

[12] McGregor Andrew, "Ricin Fever: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the Pankisi Gorge," Terrorism Monitor: Vol. 2, Issue 24, *The Jamestown Foundation*, 5 May 2005, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=330#.VlLoHV5c7IU

[13] "Charter of United Nations," *United Nations*, http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter7.shtml

[14] Theresa Reinold, "State Weakness, Irregular Warfare, and the right to self-defense post -9/11," *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 242-57.

[15] Brian Sells and Jack Ziebell, "Silence Kills: Abuse of Chechen Refugees in Georgia," *The Human Rights Information and Documentation Centre*, http://humanrights.ge/files/Chehen_report_eng-Silence_kills.pdf

involved in the Syrian conflict, most of them from Pankisi Gorge. Further, 200-300 fighters from Azerbaijan have traveled to Syria, while Russian citizens are believed to number 1,500. The largest numbers of "Caucasians" in Syria, however, are coming from EU member states, effectively using EU passports. In May 2015, ISIL has started publishing Russian magazines *Istok* and *Front Media* in order to reach Russian audiences and recruit new fighters from the Caucasus. Additionally, several websites and various social media accounts have been created to ease the process of recruitment.[16] There is a widespread opinion that economic difficulties pressure youth in the region to join militants; the relative marginalization and lack of integration into society among youth in the Caucasus, combined with the accessibility of social media and modern forms of communication, makes them particularly vulnerable to the powerful ideological narrative of ISIL.

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The Shift of Power from Al Qaeda to ISIL

As the socio-economic and political degradation of Muslims in the Caucasus gradually occurred, the shift from support for Al Qaeda to ISIL in the North Caucasian insurgency became apparent.[17] The explanation for such a shift lies in the weakening of the Caucasus Emirate created by Doku Umarov in 2007 and generally Al Qaeda's position in the region and in the Middle East as a whole. ISIL is financially strong and ideologically more influential than Al Qaeda; although Al Qaeda is still present in Syria, it is substantially weaker than ISIL.

In the Caucasus, Al Qaeda is present in Nogai Steppe and Cherkessia whilst ISIL is affiliated with Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay, and Ingushetia subdivisions.[18] Chechens and North Caucasian insurgents in general are set to choose between various military groups involved in the Syrian civil war. These include: The Army of Emigrants and Helpers *(Jaish al–Muhajirin wa-l-ansar*) affiliated with ISIL and led by Tarkhan Batirashvili, the Islamic Emirate of Caucasus led by Salahhudin al Shishani aka Feyzulla Margoshvili from Georgia. Additionally, the Saifulla Group in al-Nusra led by Saifulla al Shishani (Ruslan Machalikasvhli) affiliated with Al Qaeda, and the Soldiers of Syria (*Junud al-Sham*) led by Abu Walid

[16] Yoram Schweitzer and Zvi Magen, "The Islamic State, the Caucasus, and the Russian Response," *Institute for National Security Studies*, INSS Insight No. 725, 28 July 2015.

[17] Regis Gente, "Is this the end of Caucasus Emirate?," *Open Democracy*, 25 June 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/regis-gente/is-this-end-of-caucasus-emirate

[18] "ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Caucasus: June 2015," *Institute for the Sturdy of War*, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus%20org%20chart.png

(Muslim Margoshvili), cooperating with both al-Nusra and ISIL.[19] It has not yet been studied in detail how those 100 soldiers from Pankisi Gorge and numerous others from the North Caucasus have been disseminated amongst the military groups, but it is apparent that Georgia-born Chechens and Kists from Pankisi Gorge hold leading positions within ISIL's ranks. This is not a favorable situation for Georgia, which deliberately tries to control its border in order to hinder the flow of militants intending to participate in jihadist movements in Syria.

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The Georgian government has been consequently criticized for its weak security measures. In order to prove the opposite, however, the government conducted a special military operation in Pankisi Gorge in the summer of 2015.[20] Moreover, in May 2015, Georgian lawmakers passed legislation to punish those who join "illegal armed groups" and travel abroad to participate in "terrorism" with up to nine years in jail.[21] All these steps have proven to be ineffective, however. In his recent piece written for Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Bennett Clifford assumes that the Georgian government can avoid radicalization, international terrorist migration, and the risk of a spillover of political violence from the North Caucasus to Georgia by improving regional cooperation, society-to-society initiatives, and educational activities between North Caucasian and Georgian people.[22] At this point, it has to be added that the estrangement of its own citizens in Pankisi Gorge is a ticking time-bomb for Georgia and must be solved as soon as possible. Regarding the possibility of cooperation between Russia and Georgia, there have been cases in the past when Georgian and Russian intelligence services cooperated during the Sochi Winter Olympics in order to eliminate possible terrorist attacks by strengthening border control; alas, for the most part intelligence information has been consequently hidden from each party. The complexity of the current situation requires further systematic dialogue on border security and intelligence sharing.

[19] Guido Steinberg, "A Chechen Al-Qaida?," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, SWO Comments 31, June 2014.

[20] Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Georgia Arrests Pankisi Gorge Residents Who Allegedly Recruited for Islamic State," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 119, 25 June 2015. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44078&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=228#.Vh0kURGeDGc

[21] Paul Rimple, "Georgia: Tbilisi Tries to Prevent "Jihad Travel," *Eurasianet.org*, 9 June 2015, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73786

[22] Bennett Clifford, "Reassessment of Geostrategic threats from the North Caucasus for the Republic of Georgia's Foreign Policy," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS)*, Expert opinion 46, 2015.

The chain of events outlined above facilitated the rise of ISIL-led activities in the Caucasus. In June 2015, ISIL declared the *Wilayat Qawqaz* (Caucasus Province); soon afterwards, in September 2015, Russia initiated military operations to support the Assad regime and fight against ISIL in Syria. A few weeks later, ISIL declared a "holy war" against Russians and Americans. The new ISIL governorate in the Caucasus includes Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia.[23] Abu Muhammad al-Qadari, aka Rustam Asildarov, was named as the head of the province. Soon afterwards al-Qadari was added to the US Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT) list.[24] Although ISIL is interested in recruiting from the Caucasus rather than entering into the domestic conflict of the area, ISIL affiliates in the Caucasus are united and may attack Russian urban centers.[25] As the threat is imminent and rising, regional leaders should immediately address security complications posed by ISIL.

Concluding Remarks

The threat that radical Islamist organizations pose to global security is rising and is more than a religious phenomenon. ISIL and Al Qaeda are the current centers of attraction for jihadists across the world, competing with each other for political and strategic position.

The Caucasus is one of the territories ISIL currently declares as part of their Islamic State. This poses threats to countries in the region such as Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Since several hundred militants have been recruited by ISIL to fight in Syria from Chechnya and Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, it is important that Georgian and Russian governments, together with Turkey, cooperate in order to diminish the threat those fighters pose to regional security. Since Russia and Georgia do not have diplomatic relations, and Turkey criticizes Russia over its involvement in Syria, the possibility of trilateral dialogue over the region's problems is very low. Global and local political elites have to bear in mind that, in the short-term, ISIL empowerment in the Caucasus may threaten global security: the majority of issues threatening security in the Middle East are linked with the situation in the Caucasus. In this context, the implementation of transnational security measures in the Caucasus may also have implications on the greater security and stability of the Middle East.

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[23] Harleen Gamhir, *ISIS Declares Governorate in Russia's North Caucasus Region;* Institute for the Study of War, 23 June 2015, http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-declares-governorate-russia%E2%80%99s-north-caucasus-region#sthash.EbnSRMNb.dpuf

[24] "Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators," *US Department of Treasury*, 24 September 2014, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx

[25] Harleen Gambhir, "ISIS Global Intelligence Summary," *Institute for the Study of War*, 1 March -7 May 2015.

Regional cooperation is necessary to prevent the flow of jihadists from the Caucasus to the Middle East, and the other way round. The most important step that regional powers should take is border security. Security measures should be immediately tightened. Intelligence sharing and cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the countries affected by the ISIL threat in the region are essential for a stable and peaceful future in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and beyond.