



# RUSSIAN-SPEAKING FOREIGN FIGHTERS *IN IRAQ AND SYRIA*

*Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION & OBSERVATIONS

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TOGETHER, RUSSIA AND THE COUNTRIES OF POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA have seen more of their citizens and residents travel to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters than have any other parts of the world. Although numbers vary from source to source, it is reasonable to estimate that at least 8,500 individuals from these six countries<sup>1</sup> have traveled to join a host of Salafi-jihadi factions—most predominantly the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS).<sup>2</sup> Among these individuals are many militants from Russia’s north Caucasus, some of whom bring with them experience in asymmetric and insurgent warfare learned from their involvement in the first and second Chechen wars of independence and the insurgency that has torn apart the North Caucasus region since those wars. These battle-hardened and competent fighters serve important roles within ISIS and Al Qaeda as bombmakers, propagandists, and field commanders. They are joined by Russian speakers who quickly build that experience in combat in Syria, sometimes in groups dominated by North Caucasian and Central Asian leaders and members.<sup>3</sup>

A team composed of CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program (REP) and CSIS Transnational Threats Project (TNT) research staff traveled to Russia and Turkey to investigate Russian-speaking foreign fighters. In these countries, REP and TNT staff interviewed members of host-nation security services, family and community members of Russian-speaking foreign fighters, nongovernmental agencies, political officers,

clergy, academia, and private business owners to gain a better perspective of Russian-speaking foreign fighters. Having carried out roughly 30 interviews, supplemented by a review of the existing literature, CSIS identified the following key takeaways:

1. The recent history of state-sponsored repression of Muslims in Central Asia left a small but possibly significant number of individuals susceptible to radicalization, including recruitment by ISIS and Al Qaeda (AQ);
2. Some Central Asian migrants living in Russia have also proven susceptible to radicalization, and have gone on to fight in Syria;
3. From 2011–2016, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and local officials facilitated the movement of highly radicalized Russian-speaking foreign fighters from the North Caucasus to Turkey, and eventually Syria;
4. Large Russian-speaking diaspora communities in Turkey have both facilitated movement for fighters to the battlefield and discouraged individuals from joining the fight against Bashar Assad;
5. In the early years of the Syrian civil war, Turkish intelligence services facilitated the movement of Russian-speaking foreign fighters, from both preexisting radicalized diaspora populations and new immigrant pools, to Syria to use them as a pro-Sunni fighting force capable of removing Assad;

1 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.

2 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, October 2017, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>.

3 Joanna Paraszczuk’s blog, “From Chechnya to Syria,” [www.chechensinsyria.com](http://www.chechensinsyria.com), tracks data regarding North Caucasus fighters in Syria and Iraq and is the best source of regularly updated information regarding this topic.



*Hazret Hüseyin, a mosque in Kayasehir, a district on the outskirts of Istanbul, also known as "Takfir Yurt." (Tom Sanderson)*

6. As a result of domestic terror attacks and increasing international pressure, Turkey has transitioned toward a policy of detaining and facilitating the unofficial “deportation” of Russian-speaking foreign fighters (and Russian speakers suspected of radical ties and interests). Many have left for Ukraine, not Russia, and the movement to new countries, such as Egypt, is on the rise;
  7. Foreign fighters from the North Caucasus have played an outsized role on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, serving in leadership positions for both ISIS and AQ.
- Russian-speaking militants that have gained skills and credibility in the battlespace, many of whom may seek refuge in large Russian-speaking diasporas in Turkey’s Istanbul, Ukraine, and across Europe. Some are also finding themselves in Egypt, among other destinations. As the physical caliphate comes to an end, these countries must now address this security concern and prepare to deal with an outflow of individuals that can easily blend into, influence, and potentially launch attacks from these communities.

Out of the estimated thousands individuals who have traveled from Russia and Central Asia to the battlespace, roughly 900 have returned to their countries of origin.<sup>4</sup> However, among the rest are an unknown number of

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*.

# TRIP AGENDA

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## APRIL 25, 2017: **MOSCOW**

TNT Director Tom Sanderson and REP Director Olga Olikier attended the Moscow Security Conference.

## APRIL 26, 2017: **MOSCOW**

Sanderson and Olikier met with the father of a Dagestani fighter who had left his home to fight for ISIS in Syria. On the same day, Sanderson and Olikier also met with former members of the Dagestani security services (both of whom remain active on these issues in other roles) to discuss the issue of foreign-fighter outflow from the Caucasus to Iraq and Syria.

## MAY 1, 2017: **ANKARA, TURKEY**

TNT and REP arrived in Ankara on April 30. May 1 meetings included: pol-mil staff from U.S. Embassy in Ankara, local academics, and policy agenda experts from a variety of Turkish think tanks and media outlets. Following this, the research team flew to Gaziantep.

## MAY 2, 2017: **GAZIANTEP, TURKEY**

TNT and REP met with nongovernmental organization (NGO) teams operating in Gaziantep as well as individuals tasked with providing security for various NGOs working along the Syrian-Turkish border.

## MAY 3, 2017: **GAZIANTEP, TURKEY**

The TNT and REP team met with all-purpose sources involved in NGOs and private enterprises. The team members later flew to Istanbul.

## MAY 4, 2017: **ISTANBUL, TURKEY**

On the morning of May 4, TNT and REP engaged two former Turkish ambassadors who provided insights on the issue of foreign-fighter flows across the Turkish-Syrian border. Later that day, the team traveled to the outskirts of Istanbul to meet with local Russian-speaking clergy, and the imam of one of the most conservative mosques in Turkey. TNT and REP also engaged journalists from the media outlet “Caucasian Knot,” Russian bloggers, pro-Erdoğan Islamists, NGOs, and a Wall Street Journal reporter.

## MAY 5, 2017: **ISTANBUL, TURKEY**

TNT Director Tom Sanderson attended morning prayers at Hazret Hüseyin, a hardline mosque in Kayasehir, a district on the outskirts of Istanbul, also known as “Takfir Yurt.” After morning prayers, the TNT and REP team met with individuals who regularly attended prayers at the mosque as well as local businessmen.

## MAY 6, 2017: **ISTANBUL, TURKEY**

TNT and REP traveled to Yalova to meet with a member of the Russian-speaking diaspora from Gimry (in Dagestan), living in Turkey. In Istanbul, they also met with other members of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Turkey.

## MAY 7, 2017: **ANTALYA**

TNT and REP met with more members of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Turkey, including a leader of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an immigration attorney who works with Russian speakers facing immigration problems, Russian diaspora members who have faced difficulty with Turkish immigration authorities, and others.



## 1

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**The recent history of state-sponsored repression of Muslims in Central Asia left a small but possibly significant number of individuals susceptible to radicalization, including recruitment by ISIS and AQ.**

In 1996, the first modern radical religious organization appeared in Central Asia. This was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which followed the ideology of early Salafism, and originated in the Fergana Valley at the junction of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The IMU saw itself as a response in part to authoritarianism and limitations on both political and religious pluralism in Central Asia, which led, among other things, to politicization of Islam. The IMU positioned itself as a defender of Islamic values, challenging political and religious authorities in the region. Other groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which advocates for a caliphate but claims not to support violent political action, also gained adherents.

The governments of Central Asia have pursued a repressive policy against such groups and political Islam more generally, equating fundamentalism and violent extremism. The exception was Tajikistan, which allowed the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan to function (and, indeed, participate in governance) until 2015, when it was banned and declared a terrorist group. Since that time, Tajikistan's government has cracked down extensively on Islamic fundamentalism. This crackdown, combined with broader repression of religious fundamentalists and political activists, likely contributed to the radicalization of some local Muslims.

While it does appear that both ISIS and AQ recruit in Central Asian cities—as do other violent radical groups—there is little evidence that large numbers of Central Asians have sought to join the fight in Syria and Iraq as a result of their efforts in the region. Small numbers, however, may have done so.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONTINUED)



*In a July 2015 propaganda video titled “A Missive To The People Of Kyrgyzstan,” an unidentified ISIS militant speaks in unaccented Kyrgyz with a subtitled translation of his words in Russian. Screenshot taken from ISIS’s Russian-speaking propaganda outlet. (YouTube/Al Furat).*

## 2

### **Some Central Asian migrants living in Russia have also proven susceptible to radicalization, and have gone on to fight in Syria.**

Evidence suggests that a large proportion of the Central Asians fighting on behalf of ISIS or AQ in Syria and Iraq (or seeking to live under the Islamic State) made the decision to join that jihad while in Russia.<sup>5</sup> While data is scant, one study of Tajik fighters found that 80 percent of its sample set were recruited in Russia. Large numbers of Central Asians travel to Russia to work every year, a total migrant population of up to 7 million. There, they face a concerted recruitment effort by ISIS, which is far less active in their home countries. The approach is similar to that which targets native Russian Muslims—it emphasizes religious fundamentalism first and targets those with relatively little prior religious education (although many have substantial secular education). It also seeks to exploit the resentment and frustration of alienated young people far from home and in a hostile environment. Substantial use of social media and internet resources increases its reach.<sup>6</sup>

5 Edward Lemon, “The Varied Roads from Central Asia to the Islamic State,” *Impakter*, February 28, 2017, <http://impakter.com/varied-roads-central-asia-islamic-state/>.

6 Noah Tucker, “Islamic State Messaging to Central Asians Migrant Workers in Russia,” CERIA Brief No. 6, February 2015, <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CE-RIA-brief-6-February-2015.pdf>.



# 3

## **From 2011–2016, Russian FSB and local officials facilitated the movement of highly radicalized Russian-speaking foreign fighters from the North Caucasus to Turkey, and eventually Syria.**

In the years leading up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics in southern Russia, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and local affiliates and police facilitated the exodus of Dagestani individuals, predominantly from moderate Islamist groups, through the so-called “green corridor.” While reliable data is conspicuously absent, estimates collected from TNT and REP field research in Turkey suggest that between 2011–2014, up to 10,000 individuals emigrated from Russia, an estimated 4,000 of whom found haven in Turkey while perhaps 6,000 continued to Syria.<sup>7</sup> Some proportion of these individuals, and those who followed after 2014, went to Syria not to fight, but to live and raise families under Sharia law, particularly after the declaration of a caliphate in 2014.



*Russian police officers check ID papers of a passenger at the entrance to Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station on April 5, 2017 in Moscow, as security measures are tightened following the blast in the Saint Petersburg metro. (NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AFP/Getty Images)*

7 TNT and REP interview with an academic in Ankara, Turkey. May 1, 2017

# KEY TAKEAWAYS *(CONTINUED)*

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## 4

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**Large Russian-speaking diaspora communities in Turkey have both facilitated movement for fighters to the battlefield and discouraged individuals from joining the fight against Assad.**

Russian-speaking diaspora communities have been prevalent in Turkey for hundreds of years, with major waves of migration arriving in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with more following in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These communities, the Turkish government, and NGOs operating within the country have also had a long history of providing substantial support to persecuted Muslims in former Soviet states, playing a heavy role in providing medical aid, transportation, and material support for both refugees and fighters during both Chechen wars for independence.

Successive waves of individuals fleeing former Soviet states seeking refuge in Turkey further bolstered these communities, although there are substantial divides between the descendants of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century immigrants and more recent arrivals. Today, the largest Russian-speaking Muslim communities in Turkey reside in Kayasehir, Basaksehir, and Yalova. The vast majority of these families and individuals are peaceful and uninterested in violent jihad. However, more recent immigrants from Russia have facilitated paths for radicalized Russian speakers into Turkey, and successive movements of these individuals into Syria. This has included some individuals intending to fight in Syria and Iraq.

TNT and REP also met with sources in Russian-speaking communities in Turkey who engaged potential foreign fighters and attempted to prevent them from traveling to Syria, including an imam based in Istanbul, and several Russian Caucasian journalists, who had attempted to stop transiting foreign fighters from traveling to the battlefield. (See “Key Quotes” below).

# 5

**In the early years of the Syrian civil war, Turkish intelligence services facilitated the movement of Russian-speaking foreign fighters, from both preexisting radicalized diaspora populations and new immigrant pools, to Syria to use them as a pro-Sunni fighting force capable of removing Assad.**

As a result of their usefulness against the Assad regime and Syria's Kurdish population, Turkey largely turned a blind eye toward the migration of Russian speakers to and from the battlefield, and even supported the flow of radicalized Russian-speaking and Central Asian militants across its border. A TNT source asserted that the pro-Erdoğan Islamist group, İHH, has provided support for hardline Russian-speaking Muslims in Turkey and even facilitated their movement into Syria. TNT's source also affirmed that Turkish border guards were well known for enabling passage into Syria for Russian-speaking foreign fighters and others.

TNT also engaged a source on the Turkish-Syrian border who asserted that Turkey provided medical attention to members of the opposition, both Salafi-jihadi and moderate, many of which were Russian speaking and Central Asian. TNT obtained hospital records that corroborate this allegation. These individuals were treated in hospitals in Gaziantep, Akcakale, Urfa, and Antakya.



*Ethnic Chechen women holding anti-Russian placards rally near the Russian consulate during a demonstration in Istanbul, on September 24, 2011. (MUSTAFA OZER/AFP/Getty Images)*

# KEY TAKEAWAYS *(CONTINUED)*

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## 6

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**As a result of domestic terror attacks and increasing international pressure, Turkey has transitioned toward a policy of detaining and facilitating the unofficial “deportation” of Russian-speaking foreign fighters (and Russian speakers suspected of radical ties and interests). Many have left for Ukraine, not Russia, and the movement to new countries, such as Egypt, is on the rise.**

Turkey has already experienced severe blowback from Russian-speaking foreign fighters, as both the Istanbul Atatürk Airport and Reina nightclub attacks were perpetrated by Russian-speaking members of ISIS. As a result, Turkey cracked down on the historical haven that Russian-speaking Muslims have enjoyed in the country and began detaining large numbers of Russian-speaking Muslims, subsequently placing them in deportation jails.

A former high-level Turkish diplomat familiar with the issue told TNT and REP that the brutal conditions and unsanitary nature of these jails usually causes detainees, to Turkey’s liking, to “self-deport” to areas of their choosing. By facilitating this process, Turkey does not have to alert host-nation security services and involve itself in elongated formal processes of extradition.

The confluence of the conditions in Turkish deportation prisons, Russia’s “death or detention” policy upon arrival home, and Turkey’s cost of living has encouraged vast numbers of Russian-speaking individuals to self-deport—akin to normal travel—to Georgia, Egypt, and Ukraine, although most then find that they are unable to reenter Turkey. An expert with whom TNT and REP consulted asserted that in Ukraine, Russian-speaking Islamists have largely settled in the country’s west, away from the Russian FSB’s arm in eastern Ukraine. A small number of Russian-speaking Islamists that have left Turkey have reportedly joined militias fighting alongside nationalist Ukrainian groups battling Russian separatists. It is difficult to assess numbers and veracity, however. We do know that Muslims, Christians, and others have left Russia to fight in Ukraine, both alongside the separatists and in support of the Kyiv government (creating an additional foreign-fighter problem for Russia, particularly when they return). Moreover, the government of Ukraine has not been consistent in its policies toward Russian-speaking Muslims coming from Turkey under duress (or those seeking asylum who arrived by other means). While some have found safe haven, others have been turned away, deported to Russia, or detained.



# 7

## Foreign fighters from the North Caucasus have played an outsized role on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, serving primarily in leadership positions for both ISIS and AQ.

Largely as a result of their reputation as battle-hardened jihadis, Russian-speaking foreign fighters from the North Caucasus have played substantial roles within both ISIS and AQ. On the outskirts of Istanbul, TNT and REP engaged a Dagestani imam familiar with the recruiting networks of Russian-speaking fighters inside Syria, and he asserted that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had made a concerted effort to recruit Chechens into ISIS's ranks as a result of their discipline, competency, and experience fighting Russia security forces. According to the same source, Russia's Caucasus Emirate—a militant jihadist organization that had been predominant in the Russian Caucasus prior to its replacement by ISIS—played a major role in facilitating the travel of Russian-speaking foreign fighters into Syria, with cross-border flows rampant from Russia to Turkey and then to Syria until 2013. However, we note that the Caucasus Emirate had been an Al Qaeda affiliate for some years. Although it was supplanted by ISIS among Russian jihadis in recent years, and remaining Emirate leaders then shifted their affiliation to the Islamic State, prior to that, they had sought to discourage Russians from joining ISIS forces in Syria.

Russian-speaking foreign fighters have also taken on various high-profile leadership roles within the Syrian conflict. Two of the most well-known and experienced Russian-speaking foreign fighters inside Syria have been Akhmad Chatayev and Omar Shishani. An ethnic Chechen from Russia and head of ISIS's Katibr Badr group, Chatayev served as the main recruiter for ISIS in Syria and was also the supposed ringleader of the Istanbul Ataturk Airport attack.<sup>8</sup> Following his time as the Emir of Jaish al Mihajireen wal Ansar, Omar Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia with ties to fighters in Russia, served as ISIS's minister of war before being killed by a U.S. airstrike. Additionally, an ethnic Karachay from Russia, Islam Atabiev, also known as Abu Jihad, has served as the leader of ISIS's Furat Media Center and Russian-language propaganda machine.<sup>9</sup>

8 Anna Nemtsova, "Mastermind of Istanbul Airport Attack Had Been Georgian Informant, Official Says," *Daily Beast*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/mastermind-of-istanbul-airport-attack-had-been-georgian-informant-official-says>.

9 Islamic State Kyrgyz recruitment video, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-kyrgyz-recruitment-video/27155247>.



# QUICK BRIEF



*Afnad al-Kavkaz fighters in Syria taken from a February 2017 propaganda video, "Training of the Mujahidin" (YouTube/ Afnad Media Group)*

## RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN THE CALIPHATE

RUSSIAN-SPEAKING FOREIGN FIGHTERS ARE ONE OF THE LARGEST and most enduring cohorts of fighters who mobilize to fight jihad abroad. In Syria in particular, thousands of Russian-speaking fighters played an outsize role, working as field commanders, emirs, and in other leadership roles. Perceptions of North Caucasians as hardened jihadis burnished their jihadi credentials and allowed them to take these positions.

According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, 5,000–7,000 people from Russia and Central Asia are fighting on the side of ISIS.<sup>10</sup> While this estimate refers to individuals from Russia and Central Asia more broadly, Putin has refined this estimate to around 4,000–5,000 Russian nationals who have joined ISIS.<sup>11</sup> As already noted, other estimates also exist. Regardless of exact numbers, most of these individuals and families left Russia's North Caucasus and traveled to Turkey to join anti-Assad movements, including groups in the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al Nusra and its affiliates, and ISIS. While other Russian-speaking individuals left to fight on behalf of the Assad regime<sup>12</sup>, they are far fewer than those who opposed him.

According to the Syrian opposition, Chechens were the second-largest foreign ethnic group fighting Assad.<sup>13</sup> This estimate, however, likely also includes individuals representing ethnic groups from other parts of the North Caucasus, such as Dagestan, as well as individuals, Chechen and otherwise, from Europe. The Caucasus Emirate, once the largest insurgent movement in the North Caucasus, lost significant membership to ISIS between 2013 and 2015, as old commanders were killed and their replacements swore allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup>

Russian-speaking fighters arriving in Syria could also join independent brigades of compatriots that fought alongside larger rebel coalitions. Militants with ties to the Caucasus Emirate were known to have joined Jaish al Mujahireen wal Ansar (JMA). Past Caucasus Emirate ties to AQ helped facilitate alliances between the Russian-speaking fighters and Islamist rebel fighters. However, after Omar Shishani, discussed above, publicly pledged bayat to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and joined ISIS, some of the Caucasus Emirate fighters who had followed him left Syria, mainly for Turkey. Others refused to follow him and continued to fight alongside Jabhat al Nusra.

10 "Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the CIS," *The Kremlin-Transcripts*, December 7, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50515>.

11 John C.K. Daly, "Syria's peacekeeping force may include Kazakh, Kyrgyz contingents," *The Arab Weekly*, July 16, 2017, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/Levant/8871/Syria-s-peacekeeping-force-may-include-Kazakh%2C-Kyrgyz-contingents>

12 This refers only to nongovernmental fighters. The Russian armed forces and support organizations are, of course, active in Syria and include Muslim personnel and predominantly Muslim units from the North Caucasus.

13 "Caucasians in the Ranks of IS (ISIL)," *Caucasian Knot*, <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/30056/>.

14 Field interview conducted by CSIS's Transnational Threats Project and Russia Eurasia Program in May 2017.

## CENTRAL ASIANS IN ISIS AND AL QAEDA

WHILE THERE IS ALSO DEBATE OVER the actual number of Central Asian foreign fighters, based on a variety of sources, TNT and REP can calculate one possible estimate of the total to be around 2,500 individuals, broken down as follows:

1. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 360 Turkmen citizens are fighting for ISIS.<sup>15</sup>
2. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kyrgyzstan has confirmed that more than 500 of its citizens are in Syria and Iraq fighting on behalf of ISIS.<sup>16</sup>
3. According to the intelligence services of Kazakhstan, about 400 Kazakhs take part on the side of ISIS in armed conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>
4. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon said that his government has knowledge of the participation of more than 1,000 citizens of the republic in combat actions in Syria.<sup>18</sup>

5. There is conflicting data regarding citizens of Uzbekistan who have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. According to the Office of Muslims of Uzbekistan, about 200 Uzbeks are fighting in the ranks of ISIS,<sup>19</sup> while the ICSR estimates approximately 500 Uzbeks in Iraq and Syria.<sup>20</sup>

A substantial proportion of these people were recruited in Russia. While there is little or no reliable data on specific numbers, REP interviews throughout Russia and in Turkey support other accounts that indicate that while very few of the millions of Central Asians who work and study in Russia choose to join violent jihad, of the Central Asians who make that decision, most do so while in the Russian Federation. Of those, many are described as not radical—or perhaps not even religious—prior to their travel to Russia, suggesting that their “radicalization” and intent to fight in Syria emerged while they were living

15 Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

16 Aizada Kasmaliev, “Children—Victims of Radicals and Extremists,” Radio Azattyk, March 30, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27643417.html>.

17 “KNB: 150 Kazakhstanis Are Fighting in Syria and Iraq,” *Tengrin News*, June 29, 2015, <http://tengrinews.kz/tv/novosti/obschestvo/4278/>.

18 “Rakhmon: More than 1,000 Tajiks are at war in Syria and Iraq,” Radio Azattyk, January 25, 2016, <http://rus.azattyk.org/content/tajikistan-more-than-thousand-fighters-syria-iraq/27508035.html>.

19 “About 200 citizens of Uzbekistan are fighting in the ranks of IGIL,” *Regnum*, March 26, 2015, <http://regnum.ru/news/1908975.html>.

20 Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s.”

# QUICK BRIEF (CONTINUED)

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in Russia. More research is required to better understand this phenomenon and its implications.

According to a study by The International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), jihadists from Central Asia have been a disproportionate share of suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria, with Tajik nationals topping the list.<sup>21</sup> According to ICCT, when considered on a per capita basis, this figure may suggest that Tajiks were being singled out for use in suicide attacks at least in part because of their nationality. This was corroborated by an independent analyst with whom TNT spoke, who stated that Tajik, Uzbek, and Uygur jihadists were frequently used as suicide bombers during the battles in Mosul and Raqqa.

The readily available data above is an estimate of the number of foreign fighters who joined ISIS. Conversely, data on Central Asian foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria to fight for Al Qaeda and its affiliate organizations is very hard to determine. This is due, in part, to the fact that reporting on individuals joining ISIS has been prioritized over reporting on individuals joining AQ. This said, it is likely that more Central Asians have joined ISIS, despite continuing competition between ISIS and AQ for recruits. For one thing, Al Qaeda's recruiting strategy is more selective than ISIS's "come-one, come-all" approach, accepting only ideologically "verified" individuals.

While the ISIS strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa have fallen, and many Central Asians in ISIS have been killed, the jihadists of Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad or Katibat al-Imam Bukhari, Central Asian brigades affiliated with Al Qaeda, have survived and maintained their combat effectiveness. To this end, AQ may become an attractive option for Central Asians seeking to join the Salafi-jihadi movement, and may see an increase in Central Asians joining AQ.

21 Charlie Winter, *War by Suicide: A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State's Martyrdom Industry*, International Center for Counter-Terrorism, February 2017, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICCT-Winter-War-by-Suicide-Feb2017.pdf>.

# KEY QUOTES FROM THE FIELD

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“As far as I know, there are no demobilization or reintegration programs in southern Turkey. Furthermore, I am not aware of any community groups providing this kind of service to returned foreign fighters in Turkey. The local NGOs are too afraid of being associated with foreign terrorist organizations.”

— Russian-speaking journalist in Ankara

“There are many Russian speakers in Turkey who have been there for a long time. Some are seasonal workers, nannies, and domestic help from the Caucasus, but the majority of Russian speakers have lived in Turkey since before the former Soviet Union. For example, the persecuted Circassians fled to Turkey from the Caucasus during the Caucasus War, and World War I. These Russian-speaking families have been Turkish nationals for over a century, but they are sympathetic to the new arrivals of persecuted Russian Muslims.”

— Russian-speaking Imam in Istanbul

“The Turkish police are now immediately grabbing foreign fighters trying to get into Syria, and are putting them into detention camps. So the [foreign fighter] guys are now going through the mountains [between Antakya and Idlib].”

— Member of Russian-speaking diaspora

## KEY QUOTES (CONTINUED)



*Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan speak during a press conference after their meeting to discuss differences on Syria as UN Security Council prepared to vote on the conflict, in Moscow's Kremlin on July 18, 2012. Russia said today a decisive battle was in progress in Syria and rejected a Western-backed UN resolution on the crisis as it would mean taking sides with a revolutionary movement. (KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP/GettyImages)*

**“We are trying to educate Muslims, to help them learn about the violent reality [of ISIS] in Syria. A friend told me about a man who was getting ready to go to Syria with his pregnant wife. I met him at a café, and tried to convince him otherwise, telling him that he would die there. But he refused to listen, and told me ‘I will go there to live, and no longer be persecuted.’ His eyes were shining with tears of excitement. Last I heard, when he had arrived in Syria, ISIS forcibly split up him from his wife, and her baby died prematurely.”**

*—Russian-speaking Imam*



“The flow of Russian speakers to Syria was at its peak in the second half of 2014. But it’s much slower now. People are disappointed by setbacks, loss of Aleppo, splits [between movements], in-fighting, and politics. The people who are going now are ‘people who just want to fight.’” **Before it was people who wanted to do more than fight. But it’s impossible to change the mind of recent foreign fighters.”**

—Member of Russian-speaking diaspora

“When we started our mosque [in Russia] there were only three people. We wanted to clean up the town, which was full of immoral drunks. After eight years, we had over a thousand members. But **the police got nervous.** Islam faces opposition in Russia, not because of religion, but because Islamic organizations are well-organized, funded, and are not controllable by the state. So the state pushes back, including widespread harassment of mosque supporters. **When the FSB brought our Imam in for questioning, they told him not to go back to the mosque. But he did, and he was gunned down. The press claimed that a radical terrorist was killed.”**

—Russian-speaking Imam, son of the previous Imam of his former mosque in Russia

## KEY QUOTES (CONTINUED)

“Many fighters who are returning from Syria are just living in Russian-speaking communities in Turkey. They have different reasons for leaving the battlefield. Some former members of [Omar Shishani’s] JMA were disappointed in how they were led. Some don’t want to fight any more. Some were disappointed in [the reality of] ISIS.”

—Member of Russian-speaking diaspora

“ISIS saw that Chechens could unite, that they were disciplined, and competent—much better than Arabs. More stable as a unit. [Chechens] commanded respect among European Muslims, for the Chechen fight against the Russians. Baghdadi made a big effort to entice Caucasians to join—they are a magnet—and they brought in Europeans, and others. This is why Omar Shishani was ISIS’s minister of war. [Former Tajik Lt. Col. Gulmurod]

Kalimov is now ISIS’s minister of war because he has real combat leadership experience.”

—Member of Russian-speaking diaspora



Gulmurod Khalimov, a former police special forces commander in Tajikistan, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a 10-minute propaganda video in May 2015. Screenshot taken from ISIS’s Russian-language propaganda outlet, Al Furat. (YouTube/Al Furat)

# KEY QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

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## ***HOW ARE REGIONAL POWERS DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY FOREIGN FIGHTERS?***

- How, if at all, have the Russian and Central Asian governments changed their domestic policies toward political Islam and with what effects?
- What lessons can we learn about radicalization and deradicalization from the experience of Russia and the Central Asian countries?
- What lessons can we learn about radicalization and deradicalization from the experience of Russian-speaking diaspora and local communities that have sought to engage vulnerable individuals and groups?
- Why are Central Asians more susceptible to recruitment by violent jihadists in Russia than in their home countries?
- What level of cooperation has occurred on the foreign-fighter issue between the Russian and Turkish governments?
- Has Turkey or Ukraine set up any "off-ramping" or demobilization programming, specifically addressing Russian-speaking foreign fighters?

## ***WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE CALIPHATE?***

- What happens to Russian-speaking foreign fighters who were part of ISIS? Will they assimilate with organizations in Syria tied to AQ?
- Will Russian-speaking foreign fighters with experience in Syria and Iraq or inspired by that conflict form a cohesive group or groups?
- Are there remaining Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham? If so, what does Turkish support for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham mean for them?
- With conflict in the Syrian theater winding down, will radicalized individuals be redirected to engage with indigenous jihadi movements in Russia and Central Asia?

## ***WHERE WILL RUSSIAN-SPEAKING FOREIGN FIGHTERS GO NEXT?***

- What are the future intentions and goals of Russian-speaking foreign fighters now in Ukraine?

# KEY QUESTIONS *(CONTINUED)*

- How is Ukraine's government policy toward suspected radicals and foreign fighters forced out of Turkey evolving? With what implications?
- What implications, if any, are posed by the presence of Muslim fighters on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine?
- To where are foreign fighters now in Ukraine likely to migrate, and what dangers might that pose to Russia, European states to the West of Ukraine, and others?
- To what other countries are Russian-speaking foreign fighters going, in what numbers, and with what implications?
- What might facilitate or prevent the movement of Russian-speaking foreign fighters into European countries? Are these factors in evidence?
- What policy steps would be advisable for Ukraine? Russia? Other European countries?
- How are Russian-speaking Muslim diaspora communities in Europe responding to this evolving situation?



*A Pro-Russian fighter from the Vostok battalion, comprising irregular soldiers from Chechnya and other Russian regions, dismantles a barricade put in place by activists from the People's Republic of Donetsk, outside the regional administration offices in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, on May 30, 2014. (VIKTOR DRACHEV/AFP/Getty Images)*

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# ABOUT TNT

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TERROR, INSURGENT, AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS are the focus of the Transnational Threats Project (TNT). Led by Director and Senior Fellow Thomas Sanderson TNT assesses these threats and the impact of government responses to them through targeted fieldwork and an extensive network of specialists from government, academia, NGOs, and the private sector. TNT's work is highly valued by intelligence analysts, policymakers, and leaders seeking to understand, prevent, and thwart transnational threats. TNT regularly briefs major media outlets, NGOs, the public, policymakers, intelligence analysts, warfighters, foreign governments, and corporations.

## LEADERSHIP

William Webster, former director of the CIA and FBI, chairs TNT's senior steering committee, which consists of two dozen advisers who held senior positions across government and the private sector. Thomas Sanderson directs the TNT Project, Max Markusen serves as the associate director, and Charles Vallee is the program coordinator and research assistant. Deborah Stroman is TNT's executive assistant.

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# ABOUT REP

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THE RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM CONDUCTS RESEARCH and provides analysis, assessment, and recommendations to governments, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, and the public. The program's geographic focus is Eurasia. With a focus centered on Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors, the program also looks beyond these borders, from Lisbon to Vladivostok and the Arctic to the Indian Ocean to understand how the Soviet successor states are affected by and interact with the world around them.

REP's major areas of focus include regional security, domestic politics, economic development, trade and transit, defense and high technology, and energy, among others. The program also analyzes the political and economic relationships between the states of the former Soviet Union and other critical geopolitical actors, including the United States, the European Union, and the states of Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Greater Middle East.

Through its publications, public and private conferences, meetings, and seminars, the program investigates the causes, nature, and local and international consequences of issues in its substantive area of focus, and proposes pragmatic solutions.

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COVER PHOTO *Ajnad Kavkaz militants pose for a photo. (Neil Hauer/Twitter)*