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Daesh and Challenges Facing Georgia

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Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)
Policy Document

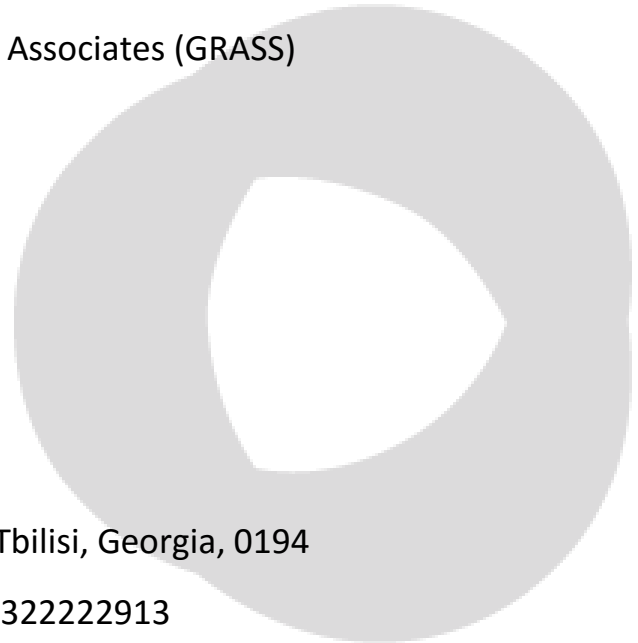
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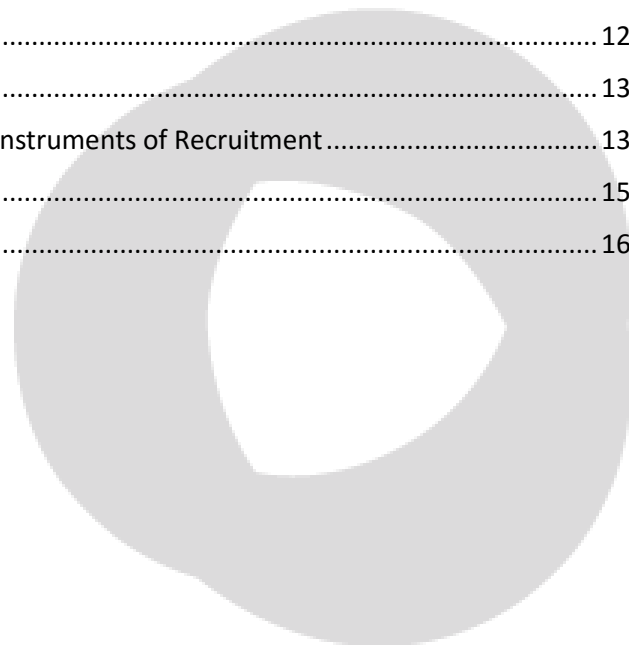
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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or simply the Islamic State (hereafter referred to as Daesh) has been a considerable and complex threat to the modern world since June 2014.¹

Daesh controls some critical infrastructure on both Syrian and Iraqi territories. The organization has a strict hierarchical rule under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Currently, Daesh unites more than 30,000 “soldiers,” while the main corps of officers and field commanders is composed of veterans and militaries of Saddam Hussein’s army.²

The main purpose of this research is to identify how serious and real is the threat of Daesh to Georgia.

Until 2014, in Georgia the fight against terrorism was perceived to be the United States’ and the West’s war, in which Georgia played the role of a strong ally. Nevertheless, Georgia has not faced a direct Islamist terrorism threat, not mentioning the terrorism threats coming from the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the framework of this research, we will discuss the Islamic State’s policy and scope regarding the Caucasus and Georgia. Special attention will be paid to the newly created Caucasus Wilayat (*Wilayat al-Qawqaz*), a Daesh province in the Caucasus. We identify the causes that facilitate the recruitment and radicalization of Georgian citizens to join Daesh or other radical groups, and describe and specify the region in Georgia that are vulnerable to radicalization.

The second part of this research is an assessment of Georgia’s readiness for neutralizing this threat.

The last part of this research includes policy recommendations for the Georgian government, with the ultimate aim of neutralizing the threat stemming from the Islamic State in a timely and efficient manner. The recommendations concern the following issues:

- Improving the legal framework and adapting it to modern threats;
- Revising the strategic security documents and adapt the state view and readiness to modern challenges;
- The transparency of state structures and increasing their efficiency;
- The necessity for a complex study of the vulnerable regions;
- Georgia’s active engagement in the international coalition against Daesh and deepening cooperation with Turkey and other important members of the coalition;
- Sharing international experience in the fight against terrorism.

The research uses several methodological directions.

In-depth interviews are the most frequent qualitative research method. Face to face interviews were conducted with public employees of the Security Council of Georgia, the Analytical Department of the

¹ Yasmine Hafiz, What Is A Caliphate? ISIS Declaration Raises Questions, Huffington Post. 30 June 2014

See more at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/30/what-is-a-caliphate-meaning_n_5543538.html

² Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford and Chelsea J. Carter, ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says, CNN. September 12 2014. see more at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>

Ministry of Defense of Georgia, the Informational-Analytical Department of the State Security Service, as well as the committees of Defense and Security of the Parliament of Georgia. The information from these interviews appears in several chapters and sub-chapters of this document.

For this research there were two focus group meetings held in the district of Akhmeta, in the village of Duisi, in the Pankisi Gorge.

The first focus group was of youth from Akhmeta, from four villages of Pankisi Gorge: Jokolo, Birkiani, Jibakhevi, and Duisi. Ten people were in the focus group, with an average age of 22-23 years old. In terms of gender distribution, half were men and half were women. The focus group included both ethnically Georgian and ethnically Kist people. As for religious identity, followers of Christianity, traditional Islam, and Wahhabism were represented. The focus group was conducted using a pre-prepared questionnaire and lasted 1.5 hours.

The second focus group was composed of elders from four villages of Pankisi Gorge and from Akhmeta. There were 12 participants, including the teachers, heads, and directors of municipal schools and kindergartens. In terms of gender balance, there were more women. The average age of the group was 47, with an age range of 19 years. From the point of view of ethnicity and religion, the group consisted of ethnically Georgians, Kist people, Orthodox Christians, as well as the followers of traditional Islam and so-called Wahhabism. The focus group was conducted using a pre-prepared questionnaire and lasted 1 hour.

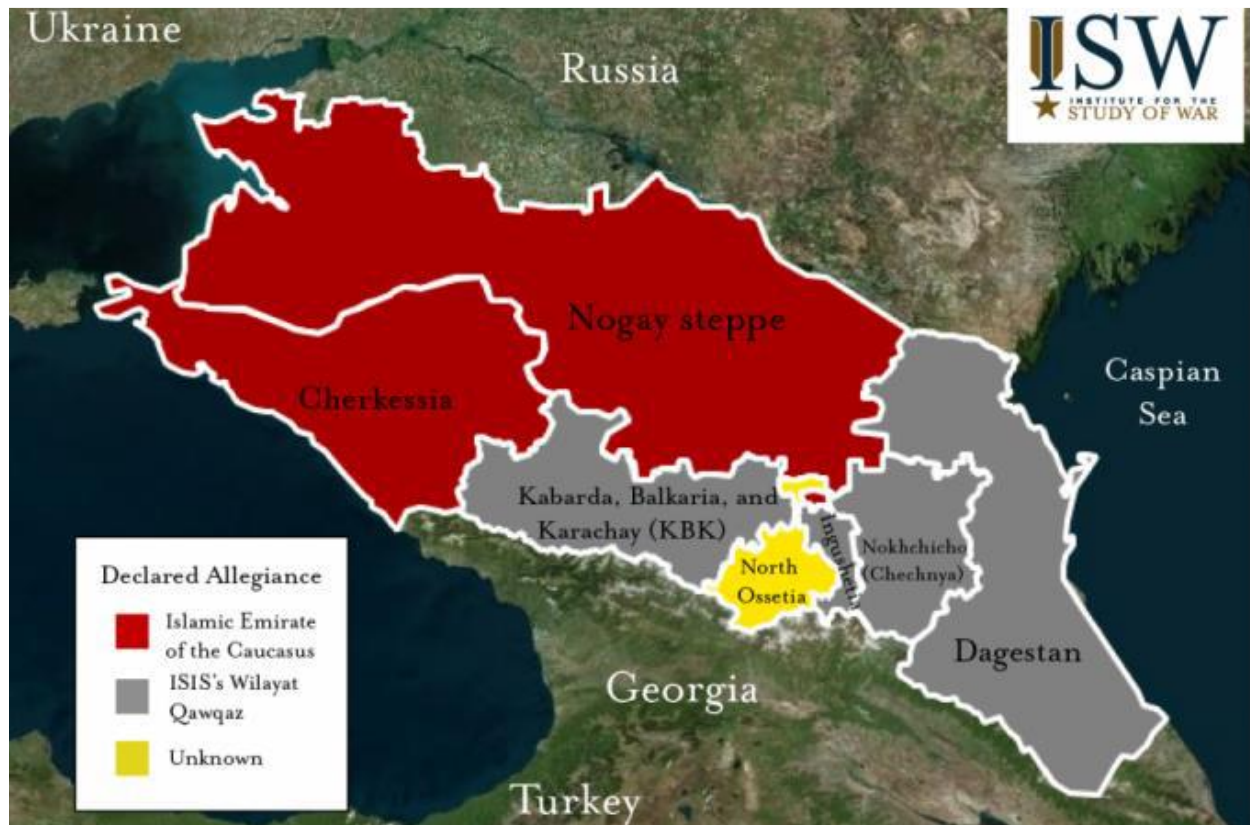
There was an informational meeting with a local non-governmental organization working on the civic integration of Pankisi Gorge, held in Akhmeta.

There is strict confidentiality concerning the people who participated in the interviews, focus groups, and informational meetings conducted in the framework of this research.

Challenges Facing Georgia from Daesh

Georgia faces several important threats from Daesh. The majority of Georgian security experts and public officers exclude the existence of a direct threat to Georgia. They find it difficult to imagine a scenario or possibility where the frontlines of the Daesh war are moved towards the borders of Georgia or even into the country. The Islamic State, like other fundamentalist terrorist organizations, has surrealistic, exaggerated, and apocalyptic plans and ideas, and in the case of Daesh it has exaggerated plans for the territorial expanse of the Caliphate. However, this does not mean that we should not pay attention to their action strategy.

One of the biggest threats is the Caucasus Wilayat³ that was created on June 24, 2015, that contains the operational territory of the Caucasus Emirate – the territories of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, in



Source : <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20QAWQAZ%20MAP.png>

Russia's North Caucasus. The former commander-in-chief of the Dagestan branch of the Emirate – Abu Mahmoud al-Kadari, became the ruler of the Wilayat. The creation of the Wilayat is interesting due to several factors:

- 1) The Caucasus Emirate is now irrelevant; nearly all remaining field commanders and fighters have subsequently pledged allegiance to Daesh. The Caucasus Emirate was conducting active military-terroristic activities from 2007 in the North Caucasus. It was mainly based on fundamentalist and Salafi jihad ideology and aimed to expel Russians from the North Caucasus and creating an Islamic Emirate.⁴
- 2) Historical experience shows that a newly formed terrorist organization, or its comparatively autonomous branch, will necessarily make active steps in the near future after it is created, in order to not lose its relevance and to stay in the center of attention.

³ Interview with Mamuka Areshidze. "ISIS' Caucasus Wilayat is fairly dangerous, as fighters that previously went to Syria will stay here and operate in situ." *Kviris Palitra*. 25 June 2015. See full interview:

<http://www.kvirispalitra.ge/politic/25595-qisis-is-kavkasiis-vilaiethi-metad-sakhifathoa-mebrdzolebi-romlebic-adre-siriashi-midiodnen-ag-darchebian-da-adgilze-daitsyeben-mogmedebasq.html>

⁴ Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Karachaevo-Cherkessia Faces Renewed Militant Activity." *The Jamestown Foundation*. September 26, 2008. See more at :

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=5189#.VISp5nYrKUK

The activation of the Islamic State's international fronts indirectly creates several threats to Georgia's security. Mainly, for Georgia, it is important to account for the Russian factor, as demonstrated by a number of recent events:

1) Since September 2015, the Syrian conflict has become even less predictable. Peace prospects became doubtful following the approval from the Duma to the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, to send military help to his ally Bashar al-Assad. We consider this was in Russia's interests, and not just an aid to an ally. Apart from regional interests, Russia's interference in the conflict is to relieve international pressure on it from the Ukraine crisis, by creating an image that it is a state that is in the fight against terrorism.⁵

The massive terrorist attack carried out by the Islamic State on November 13 in Paris that killed more than 100 people became one of the most tragic events for Western civilization since 9/11. This event provoked important geopolitical changes.

A big component of Russia's foreign policy was directed to creating an image of a state fighting against Daesh. During the G20 summit in Turkey soon after the Paris attacks, Russia managed to increase its role and function in an anti-Daesh campaign. As a result, given the current state of affairs, Russia may become an active and close ally of an anti-Daesh coalition and of the US, with the aim of neutralizing the terrorist organization. This, in turn, can make the disagreements between the West and Russia over Ukraine and Georgia disappear from the agenda.

2) The vulnerability of Georgia's Muslim communities of Pankisi Gorge, Adjara, and Kvemo Kartli creates a threat coming from the Russian Federation. Russia's declared policy of fighting terrorists at their creation, radicalization, and recruitment sites makes Pankisi and the entire Georgia vulnerable to an intervention. This may seem like an exaggeration, but the Russian Federation will undoubtedly use this weakness of Georgia's to intervene in Pankisi whenever it feels suitable. Russia has potential arguments for an incursion: a) the Pankisi Gorge may represent an active and potential source of recruitment for the Islamic State; b) the Pankisi Gorge may represent a safe haven for North Caucasus terrorist groups (in this case, the emphasis will be made on the *Caucasus Wilayat*).

Considering the hatred the leader of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, has towards the Pankisi inhabitants and Wahhabism in general, it should not be difficult for Moscow to find a reason for intervention. What is especially noteworthy is a recent statement by Kadyrov in October 2015 during a visit at the border with Georgia, where he openly threatened that terrorists will not cross the border from Georgia into Chechnya.⁶

3) Russia's violation of Turkey's airspace on November 24, and Turkey's subsequent downing of a Russian jet, increased the chances of a confrontation between the two big powers in the region – Russia and Turkey. These are new incidents and the threats caused by them are still being

⁵ Shaun Walker, "Russian parliament grants Vladimir Putin right to deploy military in Syria." *The Guardian*. 30 September 2015. See more at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russian-parliament-grants-vladimir-putin-right-to-deploy-military-in-syria>

⁶ "Across the border with Georgia, the terrorists in Chechnya will not be held, Kadyrov said." *freeneews.xyz*. 20 October 2015. See more at: <http://freeneews.xyz/2015/10/20/across-the-border-with-georgia-the-terrorists-in-chechnya-will-not-be-held-kadyrov-said/>

forming and being analyzed; nevertheless it is an intensification of a conflict in Georgia's neighborhood and will be a serious political and economic challenge to Georgia's security.

- 4) The video message published on November 23 that showed four young Georgian citizens who had travelled to Syria from Georgia, addressing the Georgian population and threatening them with bloodshed, beheadings of kafirs, and jihad. This threatening video was the first of its kind aimed at Georgia, and it obviously should have worried the respective security bodies and the population in general. Despite our belief that a terrorist threat is not high for Georgia, there is a possibility for terrorist attacks if there is insufficient attention from law enforcement bodies. The probability is further increased due to a lack of experience fighting terrorists inside the country, and specifically in protecting public places.

Daesh has resorted to an interesting strategy. In several recent statements. While the continuous recruitment of foreign fighters represents one of its strengths, it cannot physically receive and sustain many soldiers. Therefore, Daesh leaders recently stated that everyone can fight for the idea of creating the Caliphate where they already are. In doing so, the Islamic State tries to achieve two goals:

- 1) To maintain its strength in the eyes of its allies;
- 2) Activate local supporters and make the war more total and dispersed (this method has been used by other organizations, and, most successfully, by al-Qaeda).

As a result, those fighters that had to travel to Syria or Iraq to fight for the idea of creating a Caliphate can now do the same in their own regions.

Recruitment and Outflow of Georgian Citizens

The U.S. State Department report on terrorism says there are between 50-100 Georgian citizens who left Pankisi Gorge and the Adjara highlands and who are now fighting for Daesh.⁷ Other researchers in the field indicate a similar number, whereas Georgian public institutions lower the number.

The recruitment of Georgian citizens to join Daesh carries the following threats:

- 1) The recruitment of Georgian citizens seriously damages the country's international image and destroys its hard-earned reputation as an ally of the West and a fighter against terrorism. Moreover, being a source of Daesh fighters decreases our chances regarding integration with the EU and NATO, also with regards to particular benefits such as being granted a visa-free regime with the EU. The negative consequences for a visa-free regime may become even more actual after the Paris

Tarkhan Batirashvili (Omar al-Shishani) was born in the village Birkiani in Pankisi Gorge in 1986. Batirashvili has a Christian father and Muslim mother. After graduating school, he joined the Georgian Army and worked as an intelligence sergeant. He participated in the Second Chechen War and in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, where he fought against Russia.

Known as the "ginger general," al-Shishani is the commander of radical Islamists fighting in Iraq and Syria, in northern parts of the Islamic State.

There have been several times where he was reported killed, however, it has yet to be confirmed.

⁷ Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism*, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/239631.pdf>

attacks and the fear that terrorists will enter Europe under a guise as migrants.

2) The radicalization of Georgian recruits creates a real possibility of terrorist attacks inside the country. The main problem comes after their return to their homeland, as they represent a potential source of further radicalization. Locals from Pankisi Gorge have noted⁸ at least five fighters returned to their families and currently live in their villages in Pankisi Gorge.⁹ One of those who returned from Syria, Davit Borchashvili, was arrested on November 22, 2015 by law enforcement bodies upon his return to Tbilisi.¹⁰ He is under investigation by the counter-terrorism department. The threat of terrorist attacks inside the country increased especially following the November 23 video by four young Georgian Daesh members that openly threatened the non-Muslim population of Georgia.

3) The civic resocialization and integration of the returned fighters is a very complex process, especially in the compact communities in which Georgian Muslims live. Unlike big European countries, from which thousands of recruits leave for Syria, the Georgian case is different because of the small and close-knit Muslim communities. In Pankisi Gorge, villages are relatively densely populated into a small geographical area, people know each other very well and it is a single social community. Therefore, youth in Pankisi Gorge are well aware of their peers who left for Syria, excluding some rare exceptions. Those who leave to fight -- and succeed -- become role models for their friends and peers.

Ruslan Machalikhshvili (Saifullah al-Shishani) is a Georgian citizen born in the village of Duisi, Pankisi Gorge.

In 2001-2001, Machalikhshvili was actively engaged in kidnappings and drug trafficking in the gorge. After an anti-crime operation, he left Georgia and fled to Turkey, where he continued his criminal activities.

In 2011-2014, together with three other Kist people, Machalikhshvili was the one of the heads of emigrant Mujahedeen brigades.

Several people who left Pankisi can be considered as influence agents. Let us examine the case of Tarkhan Batirashvili. Batirashvili is on the U.S. Black List of terrorists and is known as the 'Defense Minister' of Daesh – and he is very popular amongst youth in Pankisi. An absolute majority of the participants of the focus group we conducted described Batirashvili as a “hero,” “fighter,” “best friend,” “strong person,” “role model,” etc. Even this short list is enough to evaluate the attitude. It is noteworthy that the young people participating in the focus group did not have a positive attitude towards the Islamic State, however they greatly empathized with Batirashvili.¹¹ Therefore, while analyzing the recruitment process for Daesh, one should also account for the

⁸ Reportage from Pankisi Gorge: “How Protected is Georgian Security, Do We Face the Threat of Terrorist Attacks and What is the Solution According to Pankisi Gorge Inhabitants.” *PolitCommersant*. 10 October 2015. <http://politcommersant.ge/detalpage?newsid=1677#sthash.7YDofklu.dpuf>

⁹ Interview with inhabitants of the village Duisi in Pankisi Gorge. September 2015.

¹⁰ *Davit Borchashvili Arrested on Terrorist Charges*. Informational Program of TV Rustavi 2. 22 November 2015 – 21:08. See full version: <http://rustavi2.com/ka/video/10748?v=2>

¹¹ Focus group conducted in the village of Duisi in Pankisi Gorge in September 2015.

role of mirroring in Pankisi and most likely in other Muslim communities as well. The problem becomes more complex when there are several role models in small, insufficiently integrated, and vulnerable regions. In Iraq and Syria, in terms of Daesh leaders from Georgia there's not only Batirashvili, but also Murad Margoshvili and Ruslan Machalikashvili, who enjoy a high level of authority. The latter even became a sort of mythological "hero" after his death.

The majority of the Georgian citizens who travel to Syria and Iraq go through Turkey. According to Pankisi locals, border control became stricter in recent months. Border police officers try to specify the purpose of travel to Turkey when it's a person crossing the border with their families. According to locals, the main process of recruitment is completed while the youth are still in

Pankisi, and after crossing the border, the recruits are gathered in Istanbul's Aksaray Station and are taken to Syria.¹²

Murad Margoshvili (Abu Walid al-Shishani/Muslim al-Shishani) According to reports, he served in Moldova during Soviet times and fought alongside Chechen rebels for ten years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In 2003, Margoshvili was arrested by Russian Special Forces; however, he was acquitted after two years, for no apparent reason. Therefore affiliating him with the Russian Security Forces is rather logical.

Margoshvili commands the "Junud al-Sham" legion of the al-Nusra front. The U.S. Treasury department added him to their blacklist as well.

Georgia's Vulnerable Regions: The Case of Pankisi Gorge

It is important to study the Pankisi Gorge in-depth and clearly analyze what is going on there, as most of the youth leaving for Syria and Iraq are from Pankisi Gorge. Nevertheless, Pankisi Gorge is not the sole place in Georgia from where recruits leave for Syria. The Daesh-affiliated video published on November 23 shows young men from the town of Nasakirali in the Ozurgeti municipality, from the village of Zoti in Chokhatauri municipality, and from Batumi. For this research we specially focus on the Pankisi Gorge, as Daesh's high-level fighters are from this region.¹³

Pankisi Gorge is located in the valley of the Alazani river, in the Akhmeta municipality of Kakheti. It is surrounded by the southern branch of the Main Caucasus Ridge. To the west of Pankisi is the Tianeti plateau, which is inhabited mainly by Khevsurians, while to the east is the Tusheti Basin, which is inhabited by Tushetians.

¹² Bako Kheladze. *Shaheeds of Syrian Slaughterhouse from Pankisi and Adjara*. "Special tutors are preparing them in Istanbul, Aksaray Station." *Postalioni.ge*. 20 October 2014. See the article: <http://goo.gl/r57rsR>
Also see Nino Burchuladze. "Deadly Route of Pankisi-Syria." *Kviris Palitra*. 4 April 2015. See the article: <http://www.kvirispalitra.ge/versia/24801-pankisi-siriis-sasikvdilo-marshruti-qamboben-is-khalkhi-ushishroebasthan-aris-shekrulioq.html>

¹³ Misha Meparishvili. "One of the Persons Threatening Georgia in the Name of ISIS is Khvicha Gobadze." *Nergazeti.ge*. 23 November 2015. See the full version: <http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/52655/>



Geographical Map of Pankisi Gorge, Taken with Google Maps Application

The first village of the gorge is Matani, which is mainly inhabited by mountainous Georgians, Ossetians, and Pshavians. Matani is followed by villages inhabited by ethnic Georgians and Ossetians – Bakhloveri, Koreti, Sakobiano, Tsinubani, and Kvareltskali. Before the Kist villages, there is a geographically divisive and characteristic bridge over the Alazani river.

The first village inhabited by Kists is Duisi, which is also the administrative center of Pankisi.

Duisi can be considered as a settlement built along a single long road that leads to other Kist villages – Jokolo, Birkiani, and Jibakhevi.

Georgians are the leading ethnic group in 35 villages of Akhmeta municipality, Ossetians – in 13, and Kists – in eight villages.

The total population of Akhmeta municipality is 33,000, according to the 2002 national survey. 69.7% of them are Georgian, while 20.9% are Kist.¹⁴

Settlement	Permanent Population	Quantitatively Predominant Ethnic Group	Percentage (%) of Predominant Ethnic Group in Settlement
Assembly of Duisi Community	4,367	Kists	78

¹⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia. *Population of Georgian Villages*. Vol 2. See data: http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/georgian/census/2002/II%20tomi%20.pdf

Tsinubani	264	Kists	77
Jokolo	1,228	Kists	79
Birkiani	910	Kists	93
Omalo	1,221	Kists	97

Source: ¹ National Statistics Office of Georgia. *Population of Georgian Villages*. Vol 2.¹⁵

The Kists in Pankisi Gorge are mainly adherents of Sunni Islam. In the 1990s, a Wahhabi movement emerged that is today gaining strength in the gorge and can be considered as one of the sources for the radicalization, facilitated recruitment, and ideological schism between elders and youth.

Wahhabism is a relatively new trend that opposes traditional Islam (both Sunni and Shia). It emerged in the mid-18th century in Saudi Arabia. Its founder, Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhabi, referred to his teachings and religious practice as a “pure Islam,” and considered the Quran as the sole source of faith. Wahhabism opposes traditional Islam, which contains elements that are not given in the Quran. Wahhabism also preaches the idea of Islamization throughout the world, an idea that its followers liked and introduced in neighboring countries.

Jihad holds a leading place in the minds of the Wahhabi. The Wahhabis create communities of allies -- *jamaats* -- that have strict rules regulating lifestyle. Jamaats oppose the parts of Islamic communities that participate in secular culture, general education, art, and sport. Obedience of faith and military readiness is required from members of the jamaat.¹⁶

Challenges in Pankisi Gorge

This subchapter is based on information acquired from research, focus groups, and interviews collected in Pankisi Gorge. We indicate several fundamental challenges in Pankisi Gorge that promote the radicalization of youth and facilitate the recruitment process:

1) Education

There are four schools and kindergartens in Pankisi Gorge. The quality of the education, however, is very low. The principals and teachers of several schools noted that the majority of the senior pupils, mostly boys, have a negative attitude regarding continuing their studies in Higher Education Institutions.¹⁷ In recent years, there are many cases of pupils skipping school on Fridays, excusing it that they are at the mosque and participating in long prayers. The lack of educational programs and activities allows for the spread of fundamentalist-radical ideas; there are many cases of Arab countries funding Pankisi youth to participate in programs that promote Wahhabism. The Georgian education system and the state in general have not addressed this issue.

¹⁵ Ibid. 15.

¹⁶ Library of the Public Ombudsman of Georgia. *Religions in Georgia*. Tbilisi. 2008. See: http://dSPACE.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/8483/1/Religiebi_Saqartveloshi.pdf

¹⁷ Interview with Teachers and Directors of the School in Duisi Village. September 2015.

2) Economic Situation

As for information on the economic situation in Pankisi, not only does the Akhmeta municipality not collect data on employment, income levels, and source data, but neither does the National Statistics Office of Georgia. The National Statistics Office explained it would require excessive funds to conduct research with such parameters. Locals and the focus groups can be considered the sole source for assessing the economic environment in Pankisi Gorge.

Pankisi locals say that the economic situation and unemployment rate is a very acute problem. This greatly affects the outflow of Pankisi youth. The families of those fighting for the Islamic State are in better economic conditions than other families in the gorge. Moreover, there is economic segregation along religious lines. With foreign financing, the Wahhabis are in a better economic condition than their Christian neighbors or followers of traditional Sunni Islam.

3) Communities and Religious Environment

There are no exact statistics on the number of followers of various movements of Islam in Pankisi. However, the locals (both the young and the elderly) say that the number of adherents to Wahhabism has been increasing annually. Wahhabism plays an important role in the ideological formation of the youth and ultimately leads to an opposition to followers of traditional Islam. There are currently five mosques in Pankisi Gorge. The majority of imams received their education in Saudi Arabia. According to unconfirmed information provided by locals, Saudi Arabia funds their education.¹⁸

Some of the locals linked the outflow of youth to join the Islamic State to the dissemination of Wahhabism, saying that the young people that don't pay attention to school and have no bright prospects are easily influenced by radical ideas.

4) The Generational Gap

During the focus group meetings, it was evident that there were radical differences between the attitudes of the youths and the elderly regarding Daesh. As mentioned earlier, some of the youths positively evaluated their fellow villagers leaving to Syria and Iraq. Their main argument for why people go to Syria is the indifference of the Georgian state, the lack of opportunities for development and the lack of economic prospects in general. In the cases of Wahhabism, there are ideological and religious arguments added to those factors.

Unlike the youths, the elderly (including the Wahhabi) clearly understood the crimes committed by their fellow villagers when they go to Syria. They did not propose a single hypothetical argument justifying why fighters left to join the Islamic State.

The young people's views were formed by the influence agents we discussed. According to information spread in the gorge, there are several people who returned from Syria and continue to live in Pankisi as they did before. It is logical that such people might have become influence agents.

¹⁸ The information is based on interviews with Pankisi locals.

State Policy Concerning the Gorge

The state policy towards Pankisi Gorge is one of indifference, despite numerous problems there. We believe the reason for this is the absence of a common security vision. The Prime Minister of Georgia's visit to Pankisi in 2014, and various promises regarding opening factories in Pankisi, were not followed up on and did not develop. However there have been several infrastructural projects carried out in the gorge, notably a 6.31km-long road, costing a total of GEL 116,836.¹⁹ It is evident that the government does not have a complex strategy for solving the problems in Pankisi Gorge. According to the locals, the government is reluctant to carry out informational campaigns for increasing civic engagement or improving the education system. Different sets of parameters, such as statistics for assessing the economic condition in the Gorge or for the number of the young people who left for Syria, are necessary in order to have a fundamental analysis of the problem. In our case, such parameters simply do not exist.

In terms of security, the most recent special operation conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs was in June 2015. During this operation, without opening fire, up to 100 commandoes arrested Ayuf Borchashvili, a relative of Tarkhan Batirashvili, and he was charged for the recruitment of young people in the gorge and their transfer to Syria.²⁰ In parallel, Giorgi Kuprava was arrested in Tbilisi facing the same charges.²¹

Even though such arrests are necessary for national security interests, it is noteworthy that they negatively affected the attitudes of the population of Pankisi Gorge. Distrust in the law enforcement bodies is especially high after the 2012 Lapankuri special operation. While speaking with the local Kists, their discontent with the issues surrounding with Lapankuri operation was clear. The fact that the commission still has not published the final reports irritates them. The operation was launched late at night on August 28, 2012. The special operation followed the kidnapping of five young people from the Lapankuri forest. According to the existing information, the young people were killed on August 26. The MIA published information that during the operation, two MIA employees and a military doctor were killed, five Georgian commandoes were wounded, 11 saboteurs were killed and six were under siege. It eventually became known that from the armed group, seven were killed, including two Georgian citizens.

The Activation of Daesh Supporters in Georgia and Instruments of Recruitment

The number of Daesh supporters is growing. Apart from the ideological reasons and Daesh's active recruitment strategy in general, Daesh supporters are taking advantage of several tools.

Internet Resources:

¹⁹ Establishing the Truthfulness of the PM's Statement. FactCheck.ge. 21 November 2014.

<http://factcheck.ge/article/pankisis-kheobashi-mnishvnelovani-inphrastrukturuli-proeqtebi-gankhortsielda/>

²⁰ *Special Operation in Pankisi Gorge – Imam of Jokolo has been Arrested*. Information Centre Kakheti. 15 June 2015. See: <http://ick.ge/articles/22271-i.html>

²¹ *Fight against ISIS – Arrested Georgians and Alleged Facts of Intimidation over their Relatives*. Information Program of TV Rustavi 2. 19 October 2015 - 21:41. See: <http://rustavi2.com/ka/news/29294>

Daesh representatives actively use web resources. There is a Georgian informational webpage of the Caliphate (<http://xalifati.wordpress.com>) that contains violent messages, news, photos, and video materials. The webpage has been running for quite a long time already.

Based on our observation, the information on the webpage is updated on a daily basis. That the state security services only became interested in the webpage recently raises some questions. Their argument was that allowing the webpage to stay up was in the interests of the security service because they could identify site visitors and collect operative data. However, after the existence of the webpage was broadly disseminated in the media, and the Deputy Head of the State Security Service Levan Izoria announced that an investigation had been launched and the webpage might be closed, the website was still operational for several weeks, creating grounds for questions. Moreover, the infamous message from the Georgian jihadists was then published by this source on November 23.

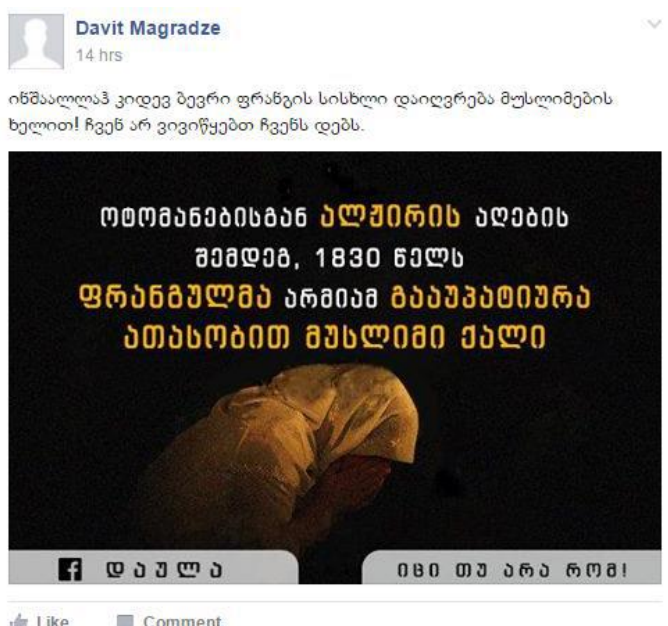
The same webpage indicated several internet resources where readers could find more information on Daesh. This included a Facebook group called Dawla with 2,000 members. Even though 95% of the group members do not represent even a potential threat, it is still a source for spreading information and ideas.

Public Places:

Even though there is no proven information on where and how the young people are recruited, based on various sources it is still possible to conclude what kind of activities are used for recruitment. Several people that we interviewed confirmed that the young followers of the fundamentalist Islam are “processed” in Muslim facilities in highland Adjara as well as in Pankisi Gorge. It is noteworthy that there is a very big opposition between the traditional Muslim leadership (Muftis and Mullas) and the followers of fundamentalist Islam. For instance, in a recent interview, a relative of one of the fundamentalists said that the followers of the fundamentalist Islam gather separately and do not visit the places where the followers of traditional Islam pray or gather.²² Therefore, traditional Muslim religious facilities, such as mosques, are not used for recruitment and pro-Daesh meetings.

Recruitment Abroad:

²² Interview with Ilia Gobadze. *Palitra TV*. 23 November 2015. <http://www.palitravt.ge/akhali-ambebi/sazogadoeba/65569-ras-hyveba-shvilze-qislamuri-sakhelmtsifosq-sakhelith-gavrcelebuli-muqaris-avtoris-mama.html>



The photograph with this text, in Georgia, was shared in the Facebook group Dawla after the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris.

Caption: Insha’Allah even more blood of the French will be spilled by the hands of the Muslims! We do not forget our sisters.

Picture: After the seizure of Algiers in 1830, the French Army raped thousands of Muslim women. (On the bottom of the page: Dawla; Did you know that...)

According to various reports, there are dozens of cases when young Muslims from Adjara, Kvemo Kartli, or Pankisi Gorge travelled to various Muslim educational institutions in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Syria, for the purpose of broadening their religious knowledge.²³ They are usually easily radicalized in these educational institutions. This does not mean that all such educational institutions are problematic, but the facts show that some of the young people who travelled to Syria to join Daesh had previously studied Islam in one of these countries.

Steps Taken by the State Against Daesh

Naturally, the main struggle against Daesh conducted by the state is done covertly, and it is impossible to determine how efficient it is based on open sources and without any operative information. Nevertheless, the state took several evident steps to fight against Daesh.

First, there were several arrests for connections with terrorism. The first widely reported arrest was on June 14, 2015. The State Security Service arrested and charged Giorgi Kuprava for joining a foreign terrorist organization and for assisting in terrorist activities. He was especially active in social groups and webpages revolving around propaganda and popularizing the idea of the creation of a Caliphate.

Kuprava was arrested together with two young people at the Tbilisi International Airport. Ayuf Borchashvili, who recruited young people and served as a mediator, was arrested with him and faces charges for promoting terrorism. Borchashvili has been also accused of recruiting a minor, Muslim Kushtanashvili, and 19-year old Ramzan Baghakashvili, and sending them to fight in Syria in April 2015.

The second widely known arrest was on November 22, 2015, when Davit Borchashvili was arrested by the State Security Service for terrorism charges and for the crime under article 328th of the Criminal Code of Georgia, implying joining a terrorist organization of a foreign state or a terrorist organization controlled by a foreign state or assisting it in terrorist activities. A video on youtube was published soon after his arrest, showing an armed Borchashvili in a vehicle, allegedly with other members of Daesh. According to his lawyer, Borchashvili does not deny having been in Syria, but excludes cooperation with Daesh. He says that in Syria he was with other rebel group that opposed both the Assad government, and Daesh.²⁴

The next step that is expected from the state is to shut down the Georgian pro-Daesh websites. Nevertheless, these web resources, even after information about them has been widely disseminated in Georgian media, are still open and access is not denied. As mentioned, surely allowing these resources to operate allows the security services to identify site visitors. However, after the video message calling for violence against Georgians, many outsiders visited the webpage to see the video, which largely reduces the operational purpose of keeping the site up. Therefore, it is expected that these web resources will be closed in the near future.

A noteworthy step was the Ministry of Internal Affairs' statement asking Georgian media outlets not to disseminate the information involving violence or calls for violence. This is very important, as incorrect

²³ Interview with inhabitants of the village Duisi in Pankisi Gorge. September 2015.

²⁴ "Davit Borchashvili Arrested on Terrorism Charges." *Inter Press News*. 22 November 2015. See information: <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/samartali/355337-terorizmis-braldebith-davith-borchashvili-daakaves.html?ar=A>

airing of information and/or inadvertently inciting religious hatred may have an adverse effect and work in favor of the goals set by the terrorists.

The fourth step concerns several legal changes made in April 2014. After an initiative of the President of Georgia, the Criminal Code was amended and several important articles were added,²⁵ such as article 323² on participation in international terrorism. This article implies incarceration from 12 to 17 years as punishment for participation in international terrorism and/or providing military aid to a group of individuals of a foreign country or a related body for terrorism purposes. The new edition of the Criminal Code also included article 327¹ -- recruitment for a terrorist organization, punishable with five to ten years of imprisonment. And, article 328 implies that joining a terrorist organization of a foreign state or to such organization controlled by a foreign state or assisting it in terrorist activities shall carry legal consequences of imprisonment ranging from ten to seventeen years. Lastly, there is article 330¹ on nationwide calls for terrorism. The article says that nationwide dissemination of information or otherwise nationwide calls with the aim of conducting a terrorist activity, if this action creates a threat for such an activity, it shall carry a punishment of imprisonment ranging from three to six years.²⁶

Recommendations

Broadly speaking, we consider the steps taken by the state towards the threats that emerged from Daesh in the recent period to be adequate. Nevertheless, we believe that the state should not only be capable of reacting to the incidents and terrorist threats, but should carry out a pro-active strategic policy that aims to eradicate the causes for radicalization.

GRASS offers the following recommendation to the government.

1. The government should conduct a more active anti-terrorist foreign policy. We understand that under such sensitive conditions, the government's primary instinct might be to conduct a "have it both ways" policy. Georgia's interest is to reduce the terrorism threat on its territory and to maintain its international prestige and image as an actor in international affairs in its region. Excess anti-terrorism activity will cause concern for the terrorists, but it also brings increased attention from our international partners, and Georgia does not want to appear unstable or unable to control the threat. Georgia can offer its territory as a foothold for anti-terrorist infrastructure to its Western partners. If in 2014 the planned anti-terrorist training center idea had not failed -- because of lack of communication and coordination on strategic issues between the Georgian and U.S. governmental bodies and the Georgian Embassy in the United States -- our role in the anti-terrorist coalition could have been much bigger today.
2. Increase the activity of the relevant special forces, including increasing their resources. Terrorist threats are new to Georgia and the country does not have experience countering such threats, therefore it is important that the relevant resources are spent with the aim of fighting terrorism. GRASS agrees with the initiative voiced by the Free Democrats party on November 24 to increase funding of the counter-terrorist department of the State Security Service. We believe

²⁵ Legislative Herald of Georgia. №41 (48). 1999. Article 209.

²⁶ *Law of Georgia, On the Amendments in the Criminal Code of Georgia*. Accession Date 04/04/2014. See information: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2319468>

that providing financial and human resources to the special services of the foreign intelligence and respective security services should be the central element of the state's security policy under these current circumstances. Even though Georgia's intelligence budget has increased in the last five years, we do not think it is enough. The 2015 budget increased by 100% compared to the 2011 budget, and equals GEL 12,400,000. That is not enough for a complete and complex operation of the service.

3. Intensify cooperation with foreign special services. Surely this direction will be undisclosed to the public due to its sensitivity and specific nature. We hope that the Government of Georgia will activate cooperation with the relevant special services of Turkey to identify routes leading to Syria, as well as identify and arrest all mediators who facilitate the recruitment of Georgian citizens by Daesh. In a separate direction there should be an activated operation of border services so that the people accused by Turkey of fighting in Syria (according to various sources, there may be up to 1,000 of them) do not enter the territory of Georgia. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the education facilities on the territory of Turkey that promote the radicalization of the Georgian youth. We believe that full transparency and deepened cooperation with the special services of our partner countries, including the NATO Security Office, will contribute to our security.
4. Revise the Criminal Code and aggravate punishments for individuals participating in terrorism, including the introducing of confiscation of property and longer prison terms. Terrorism has no justification. The persons that get involved in terrorism should fully understand that they face strict punishment, including the full loss of their property.
5. Take decisive actions against the individuals who deliberately incite hatred between ethnic and religious groups. One of the arguments of those fighting on the side of Daesh is that Georgia "fights Islam." It is an absurd statement. However, in recent years there have been anti-Muslim actions by certain groups (such as regarding the Chela minaret, the pig's head hung on the door of a Muslim school in Kobuleti, the story of the shrine in the Mokhe village, etc.) that have not been adequately evaluated and the culprits have not been punished by the government. This might have aggravated the feeling of alienation among the Muslim community. Such failure of religious policy is directly reflected to the radicalization of particular individuals.
6. The communities with a higher vulnerability to radicalization live in difficult socio-economic conditions. Education is a major problem. Our research showed that many of the young people prefer to stay at home after graduating from school or receive a broader religious knowledge. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to integrate into Georgian society, to seek jobs and to have a salary. In these regions, many people have a sense of fatalism that no matter what they do, the best option for them is to fight to defend Islam. Our recommendation is that the relevant institutions form specific programs for improving the economic conditions of the young people living in these regions to continue with their education and create jobs for them. However, it is first necessary that the state, including the National Statistics Office, has more precise statistical data on the people living in the vulnerable regions, their social and economic conditions and labor conditions.
7. There should be maximal transparency and openness with the large media outlets, including explaining the dangers associated with airing reportages on terrorism and "unintentional" dissemination of terrorist or extremist propaganda. It is especially important that the government, political forces, civil society, and mass media outlets work together with the aim of

avoiding the incitement of religious hatred in the country as well as the popularization of terrorist propaganda and their ideas.

8. There should be a timely reaction from the National Security Council as well as the Security and Crisis Management Council for every incident. There might not be a need for high-level reactions for every particular incident; however, scheduling a high-level meeting to discuss an incident two weeks later gives the impression that there is an inadequate or delayed reaction.
9. Revise the Strategic Document(s) and indicate the increased terrorism threats in it. Neither the Threats Assessment Document, nor the National Security Concept are tailored to the new reality created by Daesh being active in recruiting in Georgia. It is necessary that the state institutions of the country are more attuned to the threats emanating from terrorism in a more pro-active and strategic way.

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