

The Impact of Sunni Projects on Georgia: The Case of ISIS

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The Islamic State is an example of one of the fiercest and most brutal project for Sunni globalization. Currently the Islamic State has managed to become the number one threat almost all over the world. Residents of various countries have shown the willingness to join the Islamic State and those people who manage to survive after joining will end up bringing back home not only an extensive experience of fighting but new political and social ideas as well. All of these factors threaten the security of other countries, endangering peace and civic order.

The end of the Cold War and the bipolar global order led to a reactivation of missionary activities and the emergence of various globalization projects. The Islamic State is one among these projects. The establishment of a Caliphate by this certain group of jihadists, who are obviously not known for their high intellectual and educational level, can have certain repercussions. There is an objection whether Quran or the religion of Islam itself presupposes the establishment of Caliphate, however, the activities of Islamic State may reduce the number of Sunni globalization projects. In addition to this, the caliphate may aim at destabilizing the countries of the region. The supporters of Islamic State may stimulate similar actions in other countries. The instability caused by Islamic State¹ may result in reshaping the map of the region¹.

¹ Hovhannisyan D., *Sunni Radicalism: the "Present" and the "Future"* // Center for Civilization and Cultural Studies, Yerevan, 2015, v. 7, pp. 8-29.

The territory of the South Caucasus, located not far from the Islamic State's de-facto capital Al-Raqqah is also endangered. Although it takes only eighteen hours to reach Tbilisi from Al-Raqqah by car, the internet has served as the main medium for recruiters. Georgia and Azerbaijan have turned out to be the two countries most targeted by Islamic State recruiters². The activities of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq endanger the security of all the South Caucasian states. In Russia, the North Caucasus is the most vulnerable region in this regard. In turn, the vulnerability of the North Caucasus threatens the security of the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. Only two years ago, the security forces of Georgia fought against armed militants in Lapankuri around the Pankisi Gorge. Azerbaijan has also voiced fear of the infiltration of the Islamic State into the region. Armenia, in this case, has to deal with the influx of Armenian refugees from Syria and Iraq, as they flee to escape the fighting and the rule of the Islamic State³

The Muslim Community of Georgia

Since 2004, Georgia's state policy regarding the Muslim community has undergone changes. Before then, the Muslim community of Georgia did not face any obstacles for the procurement and management of its resources. Additionally, the Muslim community of Georgia did not have the status of a legal entity, and gained its influence through the authority of its leaders. In 2004, the Muslim community of Georgia gained legal status. From then on, the laws of Georgia have regulated the activities undertaken by this community. The 2004 law has given minorities the right to register their communities as legal entities⁴.

The level of integration of the Muslim community of Georgia remains poor. Underrepresentation in the Georgian state system, and a low

² Ge.boell.org/en.ge, Web-dossier: a glance at the islamic state from afar: Islam and politics in the South Caucasus, <http://ge.boell.org/en/web-dossier-glance-islamic-state-afar-islam-and-politics-south-caucasus> (accessed on June 17, 2015).

³ Palonkorpi M., *The South Caucasus beyond Borders, Boundaries and Division Lines Conflicts, Cooperation and Development*, 2015.

⁴ Baramidze R., *Islamic State and Georgia's Muslim community*, <http://ge.boell.org/en/2015/06/17/islamic-state-and-georgias-muslim-community> (accessed on June 17, 2015).

degree of socialization constitute the core problems hindering the integration processes of Muslims into Georgia's social and political life. In addition, the lack of any specific measures promoting integration results in their further alienation from Georgian society.

There are no specific schools for Muslims in Georgia to receive higher religious education within the country. The only way to receive a theological education in the country is through the *madrassas* in the mosques, which serve as parochial schools covering the basics of religious education⁵. However, the *madrassas* functioning in Georgia do not have legal status and the documents provided by them cannot serve as legal documents certifying any theological education attained. Therefore, the Muslims of Georgia have to travel to Muslim countries to receive religious education, and the choice of country varies depending on religious considerations. The Muslim population of Ajaria travels mainly to Turkey for their theological education. The Muslims of the Pankisi Gorge travel to Saudi Arabia. The Azerbaijani population of Georgia leaves for Iran or Azerbaijan when pursuing a religious education⁶.

The shortcomings in the reforms and policies addressing the issues of Muslim minorities impede their integration into the social and political life of Georgia. Georgia's religious policy has mainly been concentrating on resolving the issues of immediate concern and has often lacked farsightedness. This type of approach is visible through the analysis of the activities of the Muslim Board, the State Agency for Religious Issues and other organizations. Moreover, the officials involved in the decision-making process lack knowledge regarding the concerns of the Muslim community. The agencies involved in the settlement of issues have failed to present all

⁵ Menagarishvili I., Lobjanidze G., Sakhokia N. and Gvimradze G., *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013

⁶ Menagarishvili I., Lobjanidze G., Sakhokia N. and Gvimradze G., *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013; Liles T., *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara* // ECMI Working Paper, February, 2012.

the problems faced by the community and find appropriate ways for the resolution of those issues⁷.

The so called followers of “pure Islam” and the adherents of Salafi Islam have conflicts among each other in the Pankisi Gorge region. Generally, the elderly Muslim population constitutes the adherents of traditional Islam while the younger generation consists of the followers of Salafi Islam. Although there is currently not much confrontation, some steps must be taken in order to avoid further clashes and hostility. According to Menagarishvili, the number of adherents of Salafi Islam is increasing. However, the author does not provide any information on specific numbers. Nevertheless, Menagarishvili states that it is of the utmost importance for the Georgian government to pay attention to the fact that “national, traditional, and blood ties, and, most importantly, civic duties and responsibilities are rejected by Salafi Islam, hindering the prospects of its followers’ civil integration into a broader Georgian social polity”⁸.

There are a number of scholars who argue that graduates of religious schools in Muslim countries willingly or unwillingly tend to be influenced by one of the branches of Islam, depending on the type of confession prevalent in the given country (Sunni, Shia). Therefore, some scholars argue that the complete depoliticization of Islam is not possible⁹. The graduates of religious schools are frequently guided by the values construed in accordance with the national interests of the respective countries- where they received their religious education. Consequently, it is necessary to take into consideration that those who received a religious education abroad may

⁷ Baramidze R., Islamic State and Georgia's Muslim community, <http://ge.boell.org/en/2015/06/17/islamic-state-and-georgias-muslim-community> (accessed on June 17, 2015).

⁸ Menagarishvili I., Lobjanidze G., Sakhokia N. and Gvimradze G., Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013, p 79.

⁹ Sanikidze G., Walker E., *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia* // Berkeley Program in Eurasian and East European Studies <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7149d486>, 2012; Menagarishvili I., Lobjanidze G., Sakhokia N. and Gvimradze G., Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013.

possibly work with other countries' interests at heart, rather than considering Georgia's interests¹⁰.

A piece of evidence in this regard might be seen in the obligation put by the Turkish State on the graduates of religious education attained in Arab countries. Turkey obliges them to take retraining courses lasting from one to two years in the theological schools of Turkey, in order to ensure their adaptation to particular features typical for Turkey. Thus, this example serves to disclose the view on Islam from the perspective of the peculiar national interests of the country. However, the Georgian State does not implement any policies of this kind. Consequently, it is difficult to assess whether the graduates of religious schools abroad are able to serve the national interests of Georgia¹¹.

The absence of any control systems over the activities of religious and educational organizations makes it difficult to understand the primary goals of those organizations. Various Muslim organizations' involvement is visible through the increase in number of mosques, *madrassas*, Islamic educational organizations, the main objectives of which lie in boosting the interest towards Islam- and religious literature. The issue of concern is that there is no official data regarding the number of mosques, Islamic educational organizations, and *madrassas*. The majority of them do not have any legal basis and their activities are not controlled and regulated. In his study conducted during 2003-2008, Ruslan Baramidze found that there were over 150 buildings adapted for religious purposes functioning in Georgia. Among these 150 buildings, 95 were mosque-schools, 41 were mosques, 18 were Islamic educational organizations and 2 consisted of other buildings¹².

Year by year, the number of students travelling from Georgia to Muslim countries to receive higher religious education is increasing due to the absence of institutions providing higher religious educations for the

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ivanov V., *Religious Dimension of Turkey's Policy in Ajaria and the Georgian Orthodox Church* // Central Asia and the Caucasus, 2011, 12 (3), pp. 79-90.

Muslims of Georgia. Upon completion of their studies, the majority of them return to Georgia to work in local mosques and/or *madrassas*. More and more Muslims of Georgia are making the pilgrimage to Mecca and visiting various places of worship in Muslim countries with the assistance of Muslim organizations functioning in Georgia. All of these facts suggest an increase in the level of religiosity in the Muslim communities of Georgia.

Islamic State Supporters Recruited from Georgia

The residents of the Pankisi Gorge region of Georgia have become the targets of Islamic State recruiters. Ramzan Alkhanashvili was 18 years-old when he disappeared from Dumasturi, a small village in the Pankisi Gorge on April 2. According to an investigation by the Georgian Police, Ramzan and his schoolmate Muslim Kushtanashvili, who was only 16 years-old, went to the airport in Tbilisi and left for Turkey. The next day, the boys sent their families a short audio message via Whats-App telling them that everything is all right with them and that they were in Turkey. They did not explain their sudden decision to leave, but, they said that they plan to leave for Syria and that the decision had been their own. Afterwards, the families of the two boys no longer received any information directly from them. However, a few days later, the Islamic State published a photo of these two boys. They were dressed in field uniforms with rifles on their knees and the flag of the Islamic State was behind them. They were not wearing masks,- they were looking into the camera, and pointing fingers towards the sky¹³.

One of the well-known commanders of the Islamic State, Tarkhan Batirashvili aka Abu Omar al Shishani, is also from a village in the Pankisi Gorge region. It is noteworthy that Batirashvili used to be Christian, his father is Georgian and mother is Kist. He served in the Georgian Armed Forces as a non-commissioned officer and even took part in the clashes with Russian forces in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. However, in 2010, Batirashvili was discharged from the army, after he was diagnosed with

¹³ Mamon M., The Mujahedeen's Valley A Remote Region of Georgia Loses Its Children to ISIS, <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/07/09/mujahedeensvalley/> (accessed on July 9, 2015).

tuberculosis. Later, he was imprisoned for illegal gun possession charges. After leaving jail, he headed to Syria. Currently, Tarkhan Batirashvili serves as a senior commander of the Islamic State with jurisdiction over the Aleppo, Latakia, Raqqa and Northern provinces of Idlib in Syria. In the interview to the BBC Russian Service, the father of Tarkhan Batirashvili said that his son told him during a phone call in 2012: “Papa, it seems nobody in this country needs me.”¹⁴.

Dumasturi, the homeland of Ramzan and his friend Muslim, is an impoverished village on the left bank of the Alazani river. In general, Muslims comprise the majority of the village population, primarily Kists who left Chechnya five generations ago.

There is not much to do for young people in this region, except going to school and then coming back home. The only available entertainment is the Internet, where the youth can connect to others communities and people, like, for instance the Islamic State. On several occasions, the residents of the Pankisi Gorge have told the police that their villages have become targets for recruiters of the Islamic State. Local journalist, - Gela Mtvlishvili has stated that he possesses information on who organizes and recruits young people from the Pankisi Gorge to leave for Syria. Mtvlishvili claimed that the group was operating in the village of Jokola. He has presented his evidence to the Counterterrorism Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Tbilisi¹⁵.

The numbers regarding the people fighting from the Pankisi Gorge in Syria varies according to different sources. According to the officials in Tbilisi, approximately fifty people have left for Syria from the Pankisi Gorge. However, back in November 2013, a representative of the NGO Integration Foundation of Caucasus People stated that around 200 people

¹⁴ Coffey L., Recruiting Georgia in the fight against ISIL, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/05/recruiting-georgia-fight-isil-150509063258263.html> (accessed on May 14, 2015).

¹⁵ According to Gela Mtvlishvili, Interior Ministry Had Information Minors Going to Syria <http://rustavi2.com/en/news/20925> (accessed on July 9, 2015).

from the Pankisi Gorge region are fighting in Syria¹⁶. A representative of Chechen Diaspora, Meka Khangoshvili claims that there are people recruiting fighters for Syria in the Pankisi Gorge region.

Although residents of the Pankisi Gorge claim that people recruiting Pankisi youth for fighting in Syria reside in the Pankisi, Levan Izoria, the Deputy Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of Georgia denies this information. According to the Deputy Minister, there are no representatives of the Islamic State on the territory of Georgia¹⁷. However, following Mtvlishvili's claims, on June 14 the Ministry of Internal Affairs launched an operation, during the course of which a former imam, Ayub Borchashvili, was detained and accused of assisting Ramzan Alkhanashvili and Muslim Kushtanashvili to leave for Syria to join the fighting. The investigation revealed that Ayub Borchishvili had been a representative of the Islamic State in Georgia. Along with Ayub the Police arrested three more people suspected of being involved in the recruitment of young people from Georgia to join fighting in Syria. Among the arrested people was the cousin of Tarkhan Batirashvili aka Omar al Shishani. However, all three suspects were released, leaving only Ayub Borchashvili¹⁸. According to the Kakheti Information Center, ten residents of Georgia have been killed during the fighting in Syria. All of them were from the Pankisi Gorge¹⁹.

As we can see, the claims of the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia are disputable and not sufficiently convincing. Although eighteen year-old Ramzan Alkhanashvili had a passport and was able to leave the country, sixteen year-old Muslim Kushtanashvili could not leave Georgia without his parents' consent. The mother of Muslim claims that she could not afford to send his son on a plane trip and someone else had organized everything.

¹⁶ Mamon M., The Mujahedeen's Valley A Remote Region of Georgia Loses Its Children to ISIS, <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/07/09/mujahedeensvalley/> (accessed on July 9, 2015).

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ According to Gela Mtvlishvili, Interior Ministry Had Information Minors Going to Syria <http://rustavi2.com/en/news/20925> (accessed on July 9, 2015).

¹⁹ Кавказский Узел, Выходцы с Кавказа в Рядях ИГ (ИГИЛ) <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251513> (accessed on June 23, 2015).

On April 16, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a law, according to which the creation of and participation in an illegal armed group is punishable as is the aiding and abetting of terrorism within the territory of the country and abroad. Although, - the law can be considered a step forward in the fight against the Islamic State, it nevertheless is reactive in nature rather than preventive. When modern communications and social networks create virtually unlimited possibilities for recruiting people who want to fight and die for ideas, it is very difficult to find specific individuals, or decision-making centers involved in the distribution of information²⁰. The government of Georgia should increase cyber security and combat cybercrime in order to prevent an increase in the number of supporters of the Islamic State.

It is likely that the current situation in the region will inevitably affect Armenia as well. According to Seyran Ohanyan's speech during the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Rose-Roth Seminar in Yerevan: "There are confirmed data that a large number of Azerbaijanis and some quantity of guerrillas from Caucasian countries and other nationalities are also fighting in the Islamic State group". The return of the militants will endanger the security of those countries and then Armenia²¹.

According to one of the members of the Islamic State, a resident of Pankisi Gorge, who recently returned to Georgia, the Islamic State aims to liberate Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan and other Muslim countries in the region. Moreover, he added that Georgia is also included together with the aforementioned countries, since it used to be a part of ancient caliphate territory. The Islamic State called Georgia "Vilayat Gurjistan"- inferring that Georgia is a part of the caliphate and that it is their duty to spread Islam

²⁰ Гамцемлидзе Д., Как Грузия Оказалась Одним из Крупнейших Поставщиков Боевиков в ИГИЛ, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/06/17/ru-60430/iar6> (accessed on June 17, 2015).

²¹ National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, NATO PA 89th Rose-Roth Seminar Begins the Work in Yerevan, http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=7641&year=2015&month=06&day=18&lang=eng_ (accessed on June 18, 2015).

in Georgia. As for Armenia, he stated that Islam will eventually spread in Armenia as well²².

Such steps taken by the Islamic State can lead to certain consequences. A reshaping of the map of the region will take place if the Islamic State strengthens its activities around the South Caucasus. The presence of national borders is a very relative concept for an extremist organization, like the Islamic State. The spread of its influence in different territories is its source for recruiting new volunteer groups to fight in the main battlefield- in the Middle East.

Consequences

In summary, it is obvious that the infiltration of the Islamic State into the South Caucasus region is possible and may lead to certain negative repercussions. Although Georgia is taking steps to reduce the risk, the measures are more reactive than preventive. Consequently, if the decisions do not have long-term strategies, it will be difficult to control the situation further. Their low level of integrity into social and political life of the country is alienating the population of the Pankisi Gorge and helping the extremists recruit as many people as possible. The youth from the Pankisi Gorge can easily be tempted to leave the region since they have nothing to lose. Moreover, the situation in Georgia can have negative consequences for the whole South Caucasus region. The announcements on the establishment of a Vilayat may lead to certain consequences, like reshaping the map of the region.

Taking into consideration all of these factors, Georgia should first of all strengthen its border control capacity,- in cooperation with its neighbors, including Russia. Second, Georgia should pay more attention to reforms preventing radicalization, improving education and integration of Muslim youth into the social and political life of the country.

²² Eadaily.com, Со Временем Ислам Распространится и на Армению: Интервью с Членом т.н. «Исламского государства», <https://eadaily.com/news/2015/07/27/so-vremenem-islam-rasprostranitsya-i-na-armeniyu-intervyu-s-chlenom-tn-islamского-gosudarstva>_(accessed on July 27, 2015).

The situation with the residents of Georgia fighting in Syria can lead to certain implications and have great risks. What are the possible consequences and risks? One of them is the issue of reputation. Due to people, - like Tarkhan Batirashvili from the Pankisi Gorge region, Georgia may be viewed as a country giving rise to religiously driven terrorists.

Another matter of concern is geopolitical. For many years Russia has been accusing Georgia of lodging terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge. A large number of Muslims from the Pankisi Gorge fighting in Syria may give credibility to Russia's claims, even among Georgia's allies, and can be used as a *casus belli* for military actions.

Having become a target for Islamic State recruiters, Georgia allied with NATO and participated in NATO deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Georgia has never been a target for Western terrorist groups, but, with the growing numbers of Georgians entering the Islamic State, the situation may change.

Besides all of the aforementioned facts, there is still one more significant issue to be considered. What will Georgia do with those people who survive the battle and try to come back home after some time? It is a very important question for several reasons. First of all, unlike all of the above-mentioned issues, this question is probably one Georgia can directly address. Secondly, the steps taken regarding this issue will have long-term results. The options can vary, - for instance one can consider the option of confiscating their passports or refusing their rights to return. Another option may be their imprisonment for taking part in war crimes on foreign soil.

In summary, the threat of the Islamic State may end up being disastrous for the South Caucasus region. A number of issues need to be taken into consideration while fighting against the Islamic State. The measures undertaken should have long-term strategies in order to prevent greater risks.

**Սուննիական նախագծերի ազդեցությունը Վրաստանի վրա.
«Իսլամական պետության» օրինակը**

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Սույն հոդվածը քննարկում է ԻՊ-ի Հարավային Կովկասի տարածաշրջան ներթափանցելու խնդիրը՝ մասնավորապես կենտրոնանալով Վրաստանի վրա: Հոդվածում ներկայացվում է Վրաստանի մուսուլմանական համայնքը՝ նկարագրելով վերջինիս ինտեգրման ցածր մակարդակն ու հասարակայնացման ցածր աստիճանը: Հոդվածը քննարկում է այն բարդությունները, որոնց առնչվել է Վրաստանի մուսուլմանական համայնքը կրոնական կրթության ոլորտում, ինչպես նաև Վրաստանում գործող մուսուլմանական կազմակերպությունների գործունեությունը կարգավորող վերահսկողական համակարգերի բացակայությունը: Այնուհետև, հոդվածում ներկայացվում են ԻՊ-ի աջակիցները՝ հավաքագրված Վրաստանում: Ի հավելումն, հոդվածում քննարկվում է նաև ԻՊ-ի Հարավային Կովկասի տարածաշրջան ներթափանցումն ու դրանից բխող հավանական հետևանքներն ու բացասական արձագանքները: Հոդվածի վերջում առաջ են քաշվում խորհուրդներ, ինչպես նաև հնարավոր քայլեր, որոնք կարող են նվազեցնել ԻՊ-ի Վրաստան ներթափանցման ռիսկերն ու դրանցից բխող բացասական հետևանքները: