

Islamic State's New Threats in Northern Azerbaijan

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Executive Summary:

Islamic State (IS) is actively expanding into northern Azerbaijan after officially establishing a new branch there in 2024. Authorities have recently thwarted multiple plots by Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) to attack diplomatic and religious targets in Baku.

IS militants have directly engaged Azerbaijani security forces, notably during deadly clashes in the Qusar forests. The group leveraged these encounters to achieve propaganda successes despite strict government information bans.

Azerbaijani extremist cells are integrated into a broader jihadist network managed by IS from Syria and Afghanistan, which signifies a continuously evolving and growing terrorist threat throughout the South Caucasus.

The persistent nature of jihadist influence in Azerbaijan was confirmed yet again in late January, after Azerbaijani authorities arrested three individuals preparing to attack the Israeli embassy in Baku at the behest of Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) ([Reuters](#), January 27, 2026). In subsequent weeks, ISKP and their affiliates in Pakistan used two suicide bombers to attack a Chinese restaurant in Kabul and a Shia mosque in Islamabad, suggesting that the failed bombing in Baku may have been a part of this broader campaign ([X/@Saladinaldronni](#), February 6). Azerbaijani authorities additionally arrested an 18-year-old ISKP operative in Baku in July 2025 for preparing an attack on the “Mountain Jews” synagogue in northern Azerbaijan ([APA](#), October 27, 2025).

ISKP's efforts to expand into Azerbaijan began in earnest in 2024. In the 461st issue of the Islamic State (IS)'s weekly newsletter, al-Naba, published on September 19, 2024, the organization revealed its newest branch located in northern Azerbaijan. In the

newsletter, two pictures were released of jihadists, who were fully equipped with rifles and wore camouflaged military fatigues and supposedly pledged loyalty (baya') to the IS Caliph, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi. The uncovered faces of the two militants, which are rare for IS due to security concerns, suggest they had already died, and IS had little concern about their identities being known to the public ([X/@saladinaldronni](#), September 20, 2024). The emergence of a northern Azerbaijan branch points to a continuously evolving terrorist threat in the South Caucasus. IS is evidently finding new vacuums to exploit amid military and intelligence pressure and an unstable global geopolitical situation.

Conflict in Qusar

The al-Naba newsletter also described a battle that the two militants' cell had allegedly orchestrated in the forests of Qusar, Azerbaijan. According to the newsletter, the battle had begun when the militants killed a policeman who approached their location. Later, Azerbaijani security forces brought reinforcements and imposed a siege in the region, resulting in clashes that allegedly left seven soldiers, including an officer, dead or wounded. IS accused the Azerbaijani government of implementing an information ban on the battle, with only a few local media services reporting that the event even took place ([Al-Naba](#), September 19, 2024).

Media reporting was indeed scarce, with one researcher alleging that rumors of incidents in Qusar had been spreading since late August 2024. Videos did later surface, however, recorded by locals speaking the Lejini language. They showed military vehicles confronting unknown militants, who were initially believed to be the "Forest Brothers" (Derbent Jamaat). This salafi-jihadi group had been known for its presence in Azerbaijan, but was thought to have been largely destroyed ([X/@chambersharold8](#), September 23, 2024).

Another media site reported a shootout in Qusar on September 5, 2024, with a timeline of events going back as far as mid-August, when a former employee of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, Akhmedov Ramik Radikoglu, went out hunting with his dog. He is believed to have been killed after discovering a cache of ammunition, which resembles what IS has described in al-Naba ([Moderator](#), September 5, 2024). The timelines, however, do not seem to match. IS placed the battle date on September 15, suggesting either a significant delay in the news reaching IS's media apparatus or a convenient tweak by IS to fit its narratives and have that issue of al-Naba lead with a propaganda success. With the government's suppression of the media, however, only IS provided credible information on September 19, with no visible follow-up from official government sources ([X/@SimNasr](#), September 19, 2024).

Information released months later sheds more light on IS's presence in Azerbaijan. In February 2025, official YouTube channels of the Azerbaijani security forces uploaded a video from another operation against militants in Qusar. The video displays materials

found at the site, such as recordings and pictures, including the exact same baya' screenshot taken from the video that IS had presented of the two militants after the first Qusar battle ([Azernews](#), February 11, 2025). Simultaneously, Azerbaijan and Russia announced the start of a new joint one-week-long border-clearing operation called "Border Shield," aimed at securing the northern Azerbaijani regions and dismantling terrorist and transnational organized crime organizations ([Armenia News](#), February 3, 2025).

IS in Azerbaijan in Context

Azerbaijan, a majority Shia nation, has long been a subject of confrontation between various criminal and jihadi groups. The Forest Brothers, originating in Dagestan, were a separate unit nominally under the al-Qaeda-linked Imarat Kavkaz. In the last decade, however, these groups have been depleted of new recruits, mostly owing to IS's demise in Syria, defections, and counter-terrorism operations. Following the joining of IS by part of Doku Umarov's circles after his death in 2013, and the creation of IS's Wilayat Kavkaz that encompassed the region of the Caucasus, the Forest Brothers largely collapsed. [1] Investigations have revealed, however, that some jihadists had been long-term members of the group, and IS is now reviving their networks to conduct new operations ([JAM news](#), February 2, 2025).

Azerbaijan itself had seen a few thousand Sunni jihadists leave the country for Syria during the peak of the civil war and the international coalition's war against IS. Following the group's loss of territory, many returned and were subsequently arrested. The first clear mention of IS's presence in Azerbaijan was in a 2019 publication after the death of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, when a jihadist cell pledged allegiance to his successor, Caliph Ibrahim ([X/@azelin](#), November 30, 2019). More recently, the country has been mentioned alongside Türkiye and Georgia as part of the same structures running IS operations.

In 2021, Turkish authorities busted the al-Faruq office, which was one of the key administrative wings of IS. The office was one of the nine components of global IS that, at the time, was responsible for managing finances, operations, and the movement of people in Türkiye, the Caucasus, and eastern Europe. After its dismantling, more IS branches were tasked with guiding the region, with the General Directorate of Provinces clearly experimenting amid rapid changes in Syria and Afghanistan, and ongoing global power competition, which lowered the priority of counterterrorism operations. Al-Faruq, for its part, was replaced by Syria-based operatives, only to be merged with the ISKP-based al-Siddiq office (UN, [July 15](#), 2022; [February 6](#), 2025). Al-Siddiq, as a result, encompasses networks from Southeast, Central, and South Asia, as well as Russia and the Caucasus, all integrated with other branches through Türkiye, the middleman location.

ISKP and Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani cells continue to closely follow IS operatives from Türkiye and Georgia in addition to receiving direct orders from ISKP. In 2023, Türkiye announced the arrest of a smuggling network connected to an IS military camp, further revealing a structure encompassing Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan ([Sakartvelos Ambebi](#), July 26, 2023). The Public Prosecutor's office stated that the network was part of IS's Damascus province, working undercover in the bookstore "Journal of Morality and Sunnah" and likely connecting the organization's wings from Mali, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Chechnya, Uganda, and Sudan ([Artigercek](#), August 25, 2023). Arrests in Tbilisi of foreigners of Azeri and Russian origin, and a high-level Azeri ISKP operative responsible for a Shiraz attack in 2022—nabbed in Iran while moving from Baku international airport, signal the interconnection of a deeply networked jihadist web jointly managed by IS from Syria and Afghanistan ([Tehran Times](#), November 7, 2022; [News Am](#), November 11, 2023).

In 2024, the United States and Türkiye announced terror designations against IS structures cooperating on sending recruits, weapons, and illegal cash flows to the Caucasus, Türkiye, and Central Asia. The designations notably included Wilayat Georgia, whose head was known for organizing operations abroad ([US Department of the Treasury](#), June 14, 2024). Pakistan also conducted a series of arrests in 2024, targeting Azeri recruits hiding on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and who were likely instructed to return to Azerbaijan ([X/@AfghanAnalyst2](#), May 24, 2025). In 2025, Pakistan again caught ISKP operatives frequently travelling back and forth between Pakistan and Turkey and having senior roles within the organization (AA, [June 1](#); [December 22](#), 2025).

Conclusion

The relative ease with which jihadists have access to weapons in the Caucasus will ensure the steady supply of recruits in Azerbaijan. Recent events in the wider region—including the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the decline of Hezbollah, and the intensifying conflicts in Pakistan and Iran—further affect the jihadist landscape in Azerbaijan. The recent transfers of IS members from Syrian prisons to Iraqi ones included many of Caucasian and Central Asian descent, with 55 Azeris among them ([X/@BaxtiyarGoran](#), February 16). IS's seemingly successful expansion into the post-Soviet space signals it may not simply be Africa that is the main focus of the IS operations in the near future, but also Azerbaijan and the Caucasus ([United Nations](#), July 24, 2025).

Notes:

[1] Cohen, Ronen A., and Dina Lisnyansky. "Salafism in Azerbaijan: Changing the Sunni-Shiite Balance from Within", *Iran and the Caucasus* 23, 4 (2019): 407-418, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1573384X-20190410>

