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The Islamic State and Salafism Gained Ground in North Caucasus Last Year

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Events in the North Caucasus in 2015 showed that the insurgency in the region continued to decline—a trend first noted in 2011. No official figures on insurgent violence are yet available, but they are likely to be about 50 percent lower than in 2014. For example, in 2014, there were 525 victims of the armed conflict in the North Caucasus—341 killed and 184 wounded (Kavkazsky Uzel, January 31, 2015). The figures for 2015 are likely to be around 260 victims—about 200 killed and 50 wounded. The first thing worth noting is that in 2014 the ratio of the killed to the wounded was about 2 to 1. In 2015, the ratio of killed to wounded is likely to be about 4 to 1. Thus, government forces were more likely to kill militants instead of arresting them in 2015 than during the previous year. According to the Federal Security Service (FSB), government forces killed 156 militants across Russia, including 36 leaders of the criminal groups, in 2015. Among them were leaders of the so-called Caucasus Emirate. Russian government forces killed 20 out of the 26 insurgent leaders who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) (Kavtoday.ru, December 20, 2015).

The distribution of the casualties across the North Caucasus was about the same in 2015 as in previous years. Dagestan had the greatest number of insurgency-related deaths, followed by Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya and Ingushetia. Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea and Stavropol experienced some violence, but those isolated incidents had little effect on the situation in the region. There was a significant slump in the activities of the armed Islamic militancy in the North Caucasus in 2015 compared to previous years. Government forces scored significant wins, killing two former amirs of the Caucasus Emirate—Ali Abu-Muhammad (Aliaskhab Kebekov) and Abu Usman Gimrinsky (Magomed Suleimanov). The security services also managed to kill the leader of the insurgency in Ingushetia, Amir Muhammad (Beslan Makhauri), and the leader of the insurgency in Kabardino-Balkaria, Abdulla (Robert Zankishiev), who was the amir of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay.

Another important development in the North Caucasus in 2015 was the change that took place within the armed Islamist underground movement. The process of switching sides from the Caucasus Emirate to the

Islamic State among the jamaats of the region was practically completed by the summer of 2015, when the amir of the Chechen jamaat, Khamzat (Aslan Byutukaev), and the amir of Ingushetia, Muhammad (Beslan Makhauri), pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Kavkazsky Uzel, June 23, 2015).

The jamaats of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria switched to the Islamic State even earlier than those of Chechnya and Ingushetia. The Islamic State's recognition of affiliates within the Islamic underground movement in the North Caucasus is an important development, because the North Caucasian rebels have for the first time become part of an international terrorist organization. These changes, however, have not yet had an impact on the situation in the region, with the exception of several shootings in Dagestan that the Islamic State claimed responsibility for (Lifenews.ru, December 31, 2015).

Indeed, the Islamic State's presence in the North Caucasus was hardly noticeable in 2015. At the same time, Russian authorities are concerned about the outflow of Russian citizens traveling to the Middle East to join the Islamic State. Officials in Moscow realize that the situation in the North Caucasus could deteriorate after Russians who joined the Islamic State return home. Vladimir Putin announced large military exercises in the North Caucasus in 2016 that will drill Russian troops on how to defend the Russian border from a possible invasion by radicals from the south (Gazeta.ru, January 1, 2016).

Yet another important development in 2015 was the government's assault on human rights organizations across Russia and in the North Caucasus. The office of the joint mobile group of the Committee against Torture in Grozny was the target of an arson attack, while rights activists themselves, including Taita Yunusova, Yelena Milashina and others, were the targets of pressure and threats. The government tried to discredit the rights activist Magomed Mutsolgov in Ingushetia. The authorities declared certain organizations that received foreign funding to be "foreign agents," including Mashr, Fond Mira na Yuge i Severnom Kavkaze, Pravozashchitny Tsentr Chechenskoy Respubliki, and the Memorial organization along with its branches in the republics of the North Caucasus. The Chechen authorities openly engaged in surveillance of the Internet and threatened their critics. Kadyrov's government has used intimidation and humiliation to shield itself and the Russian government from growing criticism (Kavkazsky Uzel, January 1, 2016).

Multiple indicators that Salafists in the region are growing stronger suggest the situation there is worsening. The Islamic State's ideology is finding support among students and intelligentsia unhappy about the government's crude pressure on believers who do not adhere to Sufism, the traditional brand of Islam in the North Caucasus. Government attempts to take over mosques that are under Salafist control could provoke clashes between the Salafists and the majority Sufi population in the northeastern Caucasus. The modest attempts by radicals to form new cells in Karachaevo-Cherkessia could eventually result in the resumption of the armed Islamist underground movement in the republic (Kavkazsky Uzel, December 24, 2015). The insurgency in Karachaevo-Cherkessia was quite strong prior to 2007, and the republic still has a strong Salafist tradition.

Thus, the two main developments in the North Caucasus last year included the replacement of the Caucasus Emirate's radical ideology with the even more radical ideology of the Islamic State as well as a campaign of intimidation by the government against human rights activists. Still, it is hard to tell how the situation in the North Caucasus will unfold, given that external developments will have a great impact on the region.

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