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The Islamic State, the Caucasus, and the Russian Response

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On June 23, 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesman for the Islamic State, announced the establishment of Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus Province). The addition of the new subject province into the Islamic State thus joined the series of alliances made by the organization over the last year, since it announced the establishment of an Islamic caliphate headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. Two days prior to al-Adnani's announcement, a group of militants from a number of regions in the northern Caucasus swore allegiance to Baghdadi, and after the union was announced, Abu Muhammad Kadarsky (whose original name was apparently Rustam Asildarov) was appointed leader of the emirate. Kadarsky had already pledged allegiance to the Islamic State back in December 2014 – in opposition to the public stance at the time of the Caucasus Emirate, which since its founding in 2007 was at times identified with al-Qaeda. Indeed, the previous leader of the emirate, Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani, who was killed by Russian security forces in April 2015, issued a video in the summer of 2014 declaring the Caucasus Emirate subject to al-Qaeda.

The internal struggle among terror elements in the Caucasus is another expression of the intense competition throughout the world among various groups in the global jihad camp. At present, such groups are forced to decide between their traditional allegiance to al-Qaeda and loyalty to the new rising power of the Islamic State. The Caucasus Emirate thus joined groups in Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan that preferred to identify with and join the Islamic State, while abandoning their affiliation with al-Qaeda.

The Islamic State seeks to expand its influence over youth in Russia and the Caucasus. As part of this effort, in late May 2015 Islamic State's propaganda arm, al-Hayat, published the first issue of the Russian-language magazine *Istok*, which aims to recruit militants from the former Soviet states. It was also recently reported that the Islamic State

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has established a new Russian-language media organ named Forat Media, which has Twitter and Facebook accounts as well as a website. Forat's purpose is to disseminate Islamic State ideology to its Russian-speaking militants in their native language, while also recruiting new fighters to its ranks.

The activity of global jihad elements in Russia and the Caucasus is not a new threat, but the penetration of the Islamic State into the region, through an alliance with the local Salafist jihadi terror elements, bodes ill for the region. It is thus understandable why over the last few months the tone of the Russian attitude to the Islamic State in general has changed. In the past, Russia's policy was to trivialize the threat posed by the Islamic State both to the regional order in the Middle East and to Russia itself. The Islamic State was described as a temporary phenomenon and as part of al-Qaeda, backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the purpose of fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime, Iran, and the Shiites. Now, however, growing concern is noticeable in Russian statements, with the Islamic State presented as a real threat. Accordingly, the Islamic State was outlawed by Russia as a terror group six months ago. Last April Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even defined the Islamic State as a principal enemy of Russia.

A series of developments in Russia itself, in the Middle East, and in the international sphere have served as a backdrop for the growth of the threat and for Russia's heightened concern. There has recently been a noticeable improvement in relations between Russia's Muslim population and the Russian establishment. A prominent sign was the broad support among Chechens and other Caucasians for the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov, president of Chechnya, who is backed by the Russian regime. It even appears that the rest of the Muslim elements, backed by the religious establishment, support this trend. On the other hand, there is continued and even increasing opposition to this development among Chechens and Muslims from other areas, mainly in the Caucasus, and this opposition is flocking to the rival powers. A number of Islamic militant battalions are fighting the Russians in Ukraine; others are operating in the framework of various Islamic militant organizations, such as the Caucasus Emirate.

Of special concern are Islamic State activities within Russia itself, and a growing worry stems from the expected return to Russia of thousands of fighters with Russian citizenship from the war regions of the Middle East. In July, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Siromolotov estimated that the number of fighters in Syria and Iraq from Russia and the Caucasus is approximately 2,200, and he expressed concern regarding the implications of such a broad presence of Russian citizens in this war region. Even President Vladimir Putin related to the threat. Despite the claim that the Russian security services encouraged subversive and problematic elements that identify with Salafi jihadism to leave Russia and the Caucasus, it is clear that the large number of such militants in Syria and their role in its civil war engender a fear regarding their return

home and the role they may play in fomenting activities in the terror and guerilla organizations in their home regions.

This is the backdrop to the change in the Russian attitude toward the Islamic State challenge in the Middle East. From its inception until recently, the Islamic State has been presented in Russia as a negligible factor, and as simply one of the many opposition organizations fighting Assad. As such, it was not justified, in Russia's opinion, to declare war on it, certainly not in the format of a broad international coalition. Russia refused to take an active part in fighting the Islamic State, despite the threat it posed to the Assad regime, which it sponsors. Various parties in Russia still maintain this approach, but recently the Islamic State has been called not only a main enemy of Russia, but also an overall regional threat, and it can be assumed that there will be a reassessment of the policy of avoiding involvement in the war.

At the same time, the Islamic State phenomenon also creates certain advantages for Russia. The threat posed by the Islamic State may help Russia explain its support of the Assad regime and the Shiite axis in general, as they are fighting radical Islam and international terror. On the other hand, the common interest in the suppression of the Islamic State may represent an opportunity for Russia to move closer to the West and cooperate with it. Thus, it is within the realm of possibility that Russia may display a willingness to curtail its support of the Assad regime and even to cooperate in the struggle against the Islamic State, in return for concessions in the economic sanctions imposed by the West in response to Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis. In fact, Russian attempts to create a context in this direction can already be discerned. Russia has recently increased its willingness to cooperate with the coalition fighting the Islamic State – while continuing to cause friction in other arenas, especially Ukraine – in order to block its spread in the Middle East and toward Russian territories in the northern Caucasus and other regions.

Russia is facing a complex challenge at home and in the Middle East. It is expected that soon the Islamic State and its partners in Russia and the Caucasus will aim to show the power of their new alliance and pose a greater challenge for the Russian government. Thus, Russia is working hard to contain the threat in its territory and, in coordination with the West, find solutions to the threat in Syria. In this context, stronger Russian support of the international coalition fighting the Islamic State is expected.

