

Jihad at Home or Leaving for Syria and Iraq: Understanding the Motivations of Dagestani Salafists

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Abstract

Drawing on a case study of the Dagestan contingent of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and based on a series of interviews with local jihadists, Salafists, and foreign fighters, this article investigates why law-abiding Salafists have mobilized only minimally to support the local Salafi-jihadi insurgency in Russia, but have massively joined the Syrian jihad and the Islamic State. This article shows that religiosity and socio-cultural codes help explain why the Islamic State's message has resonated amongst law-abiding Salafists in Dagestan. Socio-cultural codes and highland traditions in the Caucasus have acted as powerful reinforcing factors for the foreign fighter contingent. Challenging the homogeneous depiction of Salafists in Dagestan, it is shown that calls for jihad and hijra issued by the Islamic State have resonated differently with urban and rural Salafists. The former have focused on showing solidarity with Sunni Muslims under attack in Syria, whereas the latter have seen the jihad in Syria as an opportunity to enhance their devotion to Islam in line with local socio-cultural codes. Fighting in Syria has offered an acceptable alternative to the socio-cultural limitations otherwise imposed on jihad in the North Caucasus.

Keywords: Islamic State, Syria, Dagestan, Russia, religiosity, socio-cultural codes.

Introduction

The massive outflow of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq has transformed the landscape of violent extremism in Europe, with many long-term non-violent religious extremists deciding to leave European countries to join the Syrian jihad. For years, those individuals were perceived by the security services as potential security risks for homegrown terrorism and other extremist activities. However, their engagement in jihadist activities has brought them mainly into foreign fighting, not terrorism in their home countries.[1] European extremist communities have supplied thousands of fighters and other extremist actors to the Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Police reports and academic research have often amalgamated these individuals into one grouping: the 'European foreign fighter contingent'. However, their pathways toward extremism differ significantly. Some have held radical religious views for years without engaging in terrorist activities in Western Europe or in jihadist activities in conflict-ridden societies such as Russia's North Caucasus. Even if the literature on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq has blossomed in recent years—focusing on regional trends, individual motivations, characteristics and roles, the logistical support required for mobilization, as well the dangers posed by returnees—relatively few studies have asked why these non-violent extremists should suddenly decide to join a foreign jihad after years of non-violent activism in their home countries.[2]

Some authors have investigated the strategic dilemma facing violent extremists in general, seeking to understand the conditions under which one would choose to fight at home or to wage jihad abroad.[3] Focusing on extremist activities in the West, Hegghammer has shown that Western jihadists often choose foreign fighting over domestic terrorism mainly because of the legitimacy of the former amongst religious clerics and the level of security constraints in Western countries. Combining this with the scholarship focusing on IS propaganda and its appeal for *hijra* (emigration) can provide a plausible explanation for the outflow of Western European religious extremists to Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, why would individuals who could fight a legitimate jihad sanctioned by religious rulings in their own country choose to travel abroad to do so?[4] After all, local insurgencies can offer significant strategic advantages: potential support from the local population, knowledge of the language and the local culture,

the possibility of gradually engaging in jihadist activities by focusing on propaganda or logistical activities, and drawing on familiarity with the conflict and its main actors.[5] It is posited here that a more complex understanding of the concept of religiosity is needed to better understand jihadist decision-making in the context of the Islamic State and the war in Syria. In traditional societies like the North Caucasus, the focus on religiosity as a pull factor to violent extremism requires an understanding of the influence of socio-cultural norms on jihadist activities. Not only did the Islamic State provide foreign fighters with an attractive jihadist ideological model based on a unique propaganda approach, but, more importantly, it did so by creating a way for wannabe jihadists to fight for Islam without the social and cultural restrictions found in their home countries. In other words, it created a space where jihadists could fulfill a religious commitment in a legitimate jihad without transgressing local, ethnic, and kinship traditional norms that prevented them from joining the local jihad.

In order to test this assumption, Russia's North Caucasus, and particularly Dagestan, offer a relevant empirical setting providing several analytical advantages. Firstly, along with other important jihadist fronts such as those in Afghanistan, Yemen and Nigeria, the North Caucasus represent an existing, long-lasting Salafi-jihadi insurgency. At the same time, the local jihadist insurgency (*Imarat Kavkaz*) struggled to fully mobilize the large Salafi population in the region even if they faced a high level of religious repression coupled with the lawlessness of Russian security forces. Rather than fighting at home, Salafists have joined the Islamic State in large numbers. One key example of this trend can be witnessed with young Salafist preachers in the North Caucasus, many of whom left for Syria between 2013 and 2015, after actively recruiting followers and building religious communities in the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan.[6] Despite providing and disseminating what can be considered as extremist material to potential recruits, none of those preachers joined the local insurgency or sought to create their own jihadist factions.

Syria was the first foreign jihadist front that massively attracted young North Caucasians and members of the Salafi communities. Over 1.800 persons from the region left to join the Islamic State and other jihadist groups, including 1.200 from Dagestan.[7] According to official Russian sources, roughly 85% of those foreign fighters left Russia after mid-2013 to join the Islamic State.[8] Finally, the North Caucasus offers a case study for which socio-economic and structural factors, as well as root causes associated with extremist activities (lack of rule of law, religious repression and socio-economic factors), remained stable for a long period which allows focusing on other analytical factors such as ideology and religiosity.

In order to explain this counter-intuitive research puzzle where North Caucasian and Dagestani Salafists have refused to join a local jihad that shares their ideology as well as long-term objectives, yet have massively agreed to travel to a foreign jihad to join the Islamic State, the article begins by detailing its research methodology and how the primary data were obtained. This is followed by a brief review of the literature about foreign fighters in Russia, asking how religiosity and social-cultural norms have impacted mobilization to violent extremism. Finally, based on interviews with law-abiding Salafists and fighters in Dagestan, the article looks at the concept of religiosity as a hybrid process intertwining religious and ethno-traditional factors, mainly focusing on the theological foundations of jihadist activities and the relationship between ethno-cultural markers and religiosity.

Methods, Data, and Concepts

This article is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in the North Caucasus and in North Caucasian diasporas in Europe between 2009 and 2019: altogether roughly nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Chechnya in four different journeys, as well as five research field trips in Europe. The author has conducted over 200 extensive qualitative semi-structured interviews with jihadists, Salafists, Sufists, human-rights workers, journalists, imams, government officials, *siloviki* (FSB, GRU and MVD), friends and relatives of fighters as well as individuals who travelled to Syria. For security reasons, the interviews, which lasted between twenty minutes and two hours, were never audio-recorded but documented as field notes.

Interviews were obtained through snowball sampling based on various independent networks throughout the North Caucasus, during several rounds of fieldwork starting in 2009. Due to the clandestine nature of extremist activities as well as the stigma associated with Salafists in the North Caucasus, all interviews have been anonymized and the names of informants have been replaced with pseudonyms in this article.

Given the limited number of interviews with foreign fighters (two), former jihadists (six) as well as their relatives and friends (twenty), the author has drawn also on the perceptions of ordinary Muslims, local Salafists, imams, government elites, and security officials, in order to provide a general assessment of the foreign fighters from the North Caucasus. Furthermore, over 30 interviews with North Caucasus Salafists were conducted between 2010 and 2016. Following Bartlett and Miller's methodological approach, I compare and contrast three types of actors: ordinary Muslims (pious and non-pious), law-abiding Salafists, and Salafi-jihadists.[9] 'Law-abiding Salafists' include individuals who seek to emulate the practices of the first companions of the Prophet and reject other non-puritanical forms of Islam. They can be politically active or not, but they remain opposed to the use of political violence and focus on their own religious practices, often challenging concepts associated with democracy or late modernity.[10] 'Salafi-jihadists' follow a similar theological approach; however, they also advocate the overthrow of governments that do not rule by using Sharia law. 'Ordinary Muslims' are religiously inclined individuals without a strict orthodox understanding of Islam, or non-pious Muslims who choose to define themselves as Muslims. They often adopt certain religious practices connected to Sufism, as well as various political stances regarding political Islam, and they disapprove of the use of violence. Many advocate tolerance and peaceful methods for political change, and hold mixed views with regard to democracy, late modernity, and liberal values.

Such categories are not mutually exclusive and are permeable, but they help to narrow down individual preferences and offer a better understanding of the situation within Islam. This approach seeks to provide a better analysis of the strategic dilemma facing Salafists and a better grasp of their socio-psychological state of mind.

Religiosity and Violent Jihadist Mobilization in the North Caucasus

Several studies focusing on violent mobilization in the North Caucasus have indicated that factors such as personal well-being, lack of socio-political opportunities, the absence of the rule of law, religious repression, and retaliation against security forces may help to explain jihadist mobilization and the foreign fighter phenomenon more broadly.[11] However, most of those factors remained stable in the North Caucasus throughout the period under study here (2009–2015). Variation in mobilization amongst Salafists occurred only after the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (the Levant) [ISIS] in 2013 and the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014 by the Islamic State, ordering all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Caliph and making *hijra* to Syria and Iraq. Previously, only a handful of people from the North Caucasus had travelled to Afghanistan to train and fight alongside the Taliban or al-Qaeda, or had gone to Iraq after the US invasion.[12] Local fighters and their supporters have always privileged local jihad over transnational jihad.

This led some scholars to postulate a possible causal link between foreign fighting mobilization in Russia and IS ideology and propaganda.[13] Similarly, scholars have underlined that violent repression just prior to the Sochi Olympics could have contributed to the increasing wave of departures. The success of the Islamic State in recruiting in the law-abiding North Caucasian Salafi population was in part the result of its propaganda, shaped to resonate with local struggles and grievances. However, this article seeks to take this analysis a step further by using the concept of *religiosity* to explain how the IS message resonated amongst law-abiding Salafists in the North Caucasus. Rather than focusing strictly on the role of religious ideology and propaganda, the article investigates what religious commitment means for North Caucasus Salafists and how it has affected their decisions with regards to the Syrian jihad.

In the scholarship on violent extremism, research seeking to understand the link between religious views or

religiosity and engagement in violence has remained rather limited. For fear of stigmatising an entire faith-based community, researchers have avoided linking radical religious views with terrorist or insurgent activities. After all, the majority of religious extremists never engage in terrorism or other extremist activities. As underlined in the literature on violent extremism, extremist ideas are poor predictors of extremist behaviour.[14]

In examining the role of religious ideology, it is essential to differentiate between religiosity, religious ideology, and religious knowledge. Dawson and Amarasingam define religiosity as the sincere “religious commitment to religion, no matter how ill-informed or unorthodox”.[15] Religiosity may be reinforced through propaganda but is not connected to knowledge of the scriptures themselves. Rather than using religious knowledge as a proxy for religiosity, we need to understand what ‘religion’ means in terms of commitments and duties for individuals.

In order to better theorize religiosity within violent extremism, researchers need to take seriously what religious extremists say about their own decisional process and their state of mind. As Emil Souleimanov has pointed out, religiosity varies according to ethnicity and kinship: the Salafi brotherhood should not be viewed as a homogeneous community.[16] Ethnic allegiances and local traditions inform how Salafi and Salafi-jihadist ideologies are lived and understood, in turn impacting on the link between religiosity and violent extremism.

Jihad and its Legitimacy amongst Dagestani Salafists: ‘Something Greater is Waiting for Us Abroad’

The first factor explaining the departure of Dagestani Salafists to Syria and Iraq focuses on the legitimacy of the Islamic State jihad in opposition to the unfulfilled promises made by the local insurgency with regards to the establishment of Sharia law in the North Caucasus. For example, recent research has held that North Caucasus Salafists have been attracted by the religious narrative put forward by the Islamic State, with its insistence on religious duties (such as *hijra*), the importance of the Sham in the Koran, and IS’s apocalyptic and eschatological message.[17] In other words, Salafists assess *hijra* and jihad in Syria as being more legitimate than local jihad or other jihadist fronts. At the same time, it is important to better understand what made Syria more attractive for them.

Although jihadists and clerics in the North Caucasus have prioritized jihad in their homeland, the appeal from the Islamic State is to place *hijra* above any local jihads. Unlike the message put forward by the *Imarat Kavkaz*, the Islamic State’s message focuses on a hierarchical approach to jihad and the tangible opportunity to live under Sharia law.[18] Many Caucasian Salafists had lost faith that the *Imarat Kavkaz* would be able to impose a religious caliphate in the future. Such an approach parallels Hegghammer’s argument that Western jihadists choose to fight abroad rather than engaging in homegrown terrorist activities because the former is perceived as more legitimate according to Islamic tradition.[19] Nevertheless, it is extremely uncommon for Russian jihadists and Salafists to travel to a foreign jihad theatre. For more than ten years, North Caucasian Salafists have mostly avoided foreign jihadist fronts in the Middle East. Some reports have noted the presence of North Caucasus foreign fighters in Afghanistan, but very few actual cases have been documented.[20]

In the author’s interviews in 2010 and 2011, when IK militants and Salafists in Dagestan, Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria were asked about foreign jihadist fronts, they would argue that the real enemy of Islam in the North Caucasus was Russia, not Israel or the West. For example, Akhmed explained in 2010 ‘Why would Dagestani brothers fight other people’s jihad when we struggle with our own problems? FSB agents and Putin’s other pigs are all over. You want to fight—just grab a weapon. Why would Iraq or Afghanistan matter? Our duty is to our people.’[21] In many discussions in 2010 and 2011, young people told me that the struggle of a good Caucasian Muslim is mainly at home to protect his family—not abroad, fighting foreign non-believers. ‘*Haram* behaviours are all around us, why would you need to go abroad for Islam? Dagestan is an Islamic land. We will take care of our brothers.’[22]

In 2010 and 2011, interviewees depicted jihad in Iraq and Afghanistan as foreign struggles. Even at the beginning of the Syrian civil war or after the death of Osama bin Laden, foreign jihad rarely featured markedly in discussions with local Salafists. ‘Yes, bin Laden was killed last week and it is tragic, but my duty is to transform Dagestan, not to hunt Americans or other infidels across the world. (...) What about Syria? You think our brothers are not oppressed here. You saw yourself what is happening with the prophylactic list.’[23] As shown by Mark Youngman, the concept of the ‘far enemy’ has remained murky at best for North Caucasus jihadists.

The situation had changed radically by the time my most recent fieldwork in Dagestan commenced in the summer of 2016. The narrative surrounding ISIS, and subsequently IS as well as the Syrian civil war, had now evolved toward an internationalist agenda. It was more common to meet people who would openly discuss the importance of the struggle against the Syrian regime, of protecting fellow Muslims against Assad rather than Russian forces, people openly advocating *hijra* to Syria, as well as some Salafists praising the Islamic state in opposition to Russian law.[24]

In one informal discussion, a long-term Salafist in Dagestan started by comparing the situation in Syria with the jihad in Chechnya, linking how foreign fighters defended the Chechen people. ‘Now it’s our turn to fight. That is the duty of a good Muslim.’ When asked about other jihads, like Afghanistan and post-invasion Iraq, he replied: ‘Syria is different, IGIL [ISIS] is different, and it is not about fighting with locals, it is about fighting for Islam, for something bigger!’.[25] Another Salafi adds ‘Our duty goes beyond our border. Islam is calling us for a broader duty’.[26] In the mind of Dagestani Salafists, Syria was perceived as a unique life opportunity, but the decision to travel abroad was also made easier by the failure of the *Imarat Kavkaz* to provide an alternative jihadist plan.

An Islamic Theocracy in the Caucasus: ‘Not Now, Not Here’

The second factor explaining this massive mobilization turns toward the lack of existing alternatives to the Syrian jihad in the North Caucasus. The legitimacy of a foreign jihad would generally not be enough to attract locals abroad, as is evidenced by Afghanistan and Iraq. Dagestanis are North Caucasian people who tend to have a particular attachment to their homeland. However, in this specific situation, local jihadist organizations in the North Caucasus were not perceived as a valid means of achieving the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in the Caucasus or living under Sharia.

Many young Salafists have refused to join the insurgency, without ever opposing it openly. In informal discussions with Salafists, those with deeper religious knowledge and schooling were often critical of their fellow ‘forest brothers’, even during the peak of insurgent violence in the North Caucasus. As underlined by Islam Abdullaev in Chernovik, young Salafists often feel disdain for the government and its religious repression, but they are also generally opposed to the insurgency.[27] Although they understood why some might join the jihad against the Russian forces, they rarely join themselves. As Rasul explained in a lengthy interview:

“The Dagestan government is un-Islamic, driven by corruption and money. What they do to our brothers (fellow Salafi Muslims in Dagestan) is despicable and should be punished. I understand all those brothers who go to the forest (‘лесные боевики’). They insult them, they arrest them, they beat them, and they torture them. As real men, real Dagestanis, real Muslims, our brothers should retaliate (...) But fighting for an Islamic State—that is not now and not here. If they come and fight us in the village, I will retaliate and join my brothers, but nothing will change here. The people in Makhachkala, they drink, gamble, and are real prostitutes. Look how they dress! I am disgusted by them, they are not real Dagestanis. Certainly not Muslims(...) Do you think we can build an Islamic state on that? (...) In the villages, it is different. There we know each other and we can keep an eye on those apostates (*murtadd*), but in the cities what can you do? Bomb and burn Makhachkala?”[28]

During conversations about Islamic values and living under Sharia, it was not uncommon to hear interviewees refer to the Islamic *jamaat* of Kadar, Karamakhi, and Chabamakhi. They describe this period of Dagestan's recent history using concepts like 'an independent Islamic territory' and a region of 'pure Islam'. From this narrative and informal discussions, local villagers and Salafists seem more prone to defend Islam, rather than fighting to impose strictures on apostates even in Dagestan. Dagestani Salafists explained that IS represents a functioning Islamic state rather than the unachievable and crumbling IK.[29] Of course, such a view has shifted with time, as the abuses perpetrated by the Islamic State as well as its territorial collapse have challenged its propaganda. Furthermore, many potential recruits among the law-abiding Salafists support the ideology behind the insurgency in the North Caucasus, but complain of ethnic favouritism and non-Islamic behaviours in jihadist groups.[30] Syria and Iraq represent better options, a fresh start towards Salafi-jihadism compared to what is available in Dagestan and the North Caucasus.

Because of perceived feelings of treason associated with *haram* behaviours in urban areas in the North Caucasus, including actions deemed to be against Dagestani ethical codes, establishing an Islamic State in the Caucasus is seen as a utopian dream to be achieved in the future. 'Local villagers explain how a Salafi-type of Islam is possible only in small villages where neighbours police themselves and enforce unwritten and informal rules, mixing a strict understanding of Islam with Dagestani highland traditions like courage, honour and self-respect. Don't be naive! You will never have an Islamic State in Dagestan or in the Caucasus. The Soviet Union has corrupted people's minds. Your Islamic State—you will have it at home with your family. Pure Islam is a personal struggle, not something you will see here.'[31]

This narrative was repeated in very similar ways throughout my fieldwork in Dagestan and in Kabardino-Balkaria between 2009 and 2011. 'Apostasy' is often loosely defined in general conversations with North Caucasian Salafists. For example, in Dagestan, many interviewees saw unethical and non-traditional social behaviours as a form of apostasy, and as a result of the conflation between traditional kinship values and Islam. One cannot be a good Muslim in Dagestan without being a 'real' Dagestani. 'Being a good Muslim and living by Pure Islam also means following Dagestani values including honesty, courage, and respecting your elders. A good Dagestani is a good Muslim, and vice versa.'[32]

This underscores the importance of studying socio-cultural codes and traditional values in order to understand how religiosity can explain the mobilization of Dagestani Salafists into the Syrian jihad. It is as much about the Syrian jihad being a lifetime opportunity, but also how the message resonated with powerful ethnic and traditional incentives that favoured foreign jihad rather than fighting at home.

Socio-cultural Codes, Ethnicity, and Traditions in Dagestan: The Missing Link

The previous section underlined the necessary role played by the Islamic State's jihadist propaganda and the collapse of the *Imarat Kavkaz* in order to explain this massive mobilization. At the same time, in order to understand how the Islamic State's message has resonated with Salafists in Dagestan, one has to better understand the complex intertwined relationship between what it means to be a Dagestani and what being a Muslim means for Dagestanis. Those two identities are often conflated by Dagestanis forging a unique identity where socio-cultural codes, traditions, and ethnic factors inform religious behaviours. Being a 'real' Dagestani, and by association a proper Muslim by Dagestani standards, entails following a code of conduct based on honour, traditions, and social duty. Such a code is understood differently by urban and rural Salafists in Dagestan, leading to different patterns of support for jihadist activities in the North Caucasus. However, in the case of the Islamic State and its call for jihad and hijra, the message resonated with both urban and rural Salafists, explaining why the Islamic State appeared to have held a greater appeal than the *Imarat Kavkaz*. Although ideology always matters, socio-cultural codes and kinship factors are the social mechanisms that can better explain the foreign fighting phenomenon in Dagestan.

Urban Salafists in Dagestan: A Duty to the Ummah

In interviews conducted with urban law-abiding Salafists, this sense of duty was increasingly expressed in relation to the *Ummah* in Syria and the duty to defend fellow Muslims against the Assad regime. Such a sense of duty had remained almost non-existent among local Salafists until the Syrian jihad, and was never really extended to the North Caucasus. Before the Islamic State, Zapir would explain ‘My duty is to my family, my brothers, and my relatives. Not fighting Russians or killing fellow Dagestanis.’[33] Many Salafists were not really willing to fight along the insurgency and did not perceive that it was their ethno-religious duty to do so. However, after 2013, the sense of duty has rapidly become integrated in the discourse, with Syria becoming a common goal uniting Salafists. Some scholars hold that Salafists across the world became mobilized by feelings of solidarity with Sunni Muslims under attack in Syria, particularly in the context of the rise of established jihadist groups like the Islamic State.[34] As noted by Dawson and Amarasingam, it is ‘not so much that they had any life prospects, but rather that they were needed elsewhere, in the face of the injustices happening to Sunni Muslims in Syria.’[35]

Research has also underlined that people in communities that witnessed civil wars or counter-insurgencies in recent years seem more eager to travel to defend fellow Muslims abroad.[36] Starting around the end of 2012, defending Sunni Syrians was deemed more important than defending local Salafists in the North Caucasus: religious identity (the *Ummah*) was beginning to trump ethno-religious identity, such as that of Dagestani Sunni Muslims. It would appear that urban Salafists have assessed the value of jihad based on the level of suffering within the *Ummah*, without considering territorial factors (see Wilhelmsen in this special issue). In 2016, the same Zapir would explain to the author in another interview ‘how can the world sit and watch Syria burning like that. We saw what the Russian army have done in Chechnya, what are we waiting for to protect Syrians. I support my neighbours that left for Syria. I am not healthy and I cannot travel, but it is the duty of every Dagestani to protect Islam across the world.’[37] These two interviews with one Salafist show how the sense of duty associated with Dagestani identity evolved from a local duty to an *Ummah*-based one with Syria—but it was not directly connected with the Islamic State’s propaganda.

Rural Salafists in Dagestan: A Different Sense of Duty, Masculinity, and Heroism

Other Salafists, especially in rural areas of Dagestan, expressed this religious duty in terms of a code of conduct originating in Caucasian ethnic and traditional factors. In discussions with rural Salafists, the conflation between Caucasian identity (e.g. Avars, Chechens, Dargins) and Islamic identity produce a hybrid social identity where Islamic values are intertwined with ethnic markers. As Souleimanov pointed out, ‘...many former rural jihadists self-identified as proud members of their ethnic communities while simultaneously considering themselves to be adherents of Salafism.’[38] With this hybrid social identity and its effect on religiosity, many law-abiding Salafists have seen the jihad in Syria as an opportunity to enhance their devotion to Salafism while remaining in line with their own local socio-cultural norms.

Fighting in Syria was described by rural Salafists as a pious and religiously binding engagement requiring a unique sense of courage and devotion—for which fearless highlanders like themselves were ideally suited. Moreover, people often seek to increase their own social status within their community, through courageous deeds or religious devotion. Syria offered a unique opportunity to combine both, while challenging what was seen as limited social mobility in rural Dagestan and an artificial ‘glass ceiling’. As youth in rural Dagestan cannot find proper employment, social mobility is often achieved through criminal activities, migration or religious devotion. Syria was depicted as a unique opportunity for religious devotion, new opportunities, and escaping Russia and its limitations.

“Fighting in Syria is not only about IGIL [ISIS], the Caliphate, and the Sharia, it’s about the duty of being a courageous Muslim. Dagestanis fight, we are not cowards! Real Muslims are dying in Syria! I support my fellow brothers in going to help. They are not

brainwashed and uneducated; they have made a courageous choice!”[39]

Similarly to what Dawson and Amarasingam observed in their foreign fighter research sample, families of foreign fighters and Salafists rarely speak of their choice to travel to Syria in terms of their previous lives being meaningless, but rather as an act of selfless devotion.[40] It was a question of choosing something more important, in religious as well as cultural terms. Unlike the impression given by much of the literature, not all foreign fighters are seeking to compensate for something missing in their life or to look for adventure in travelling to Syria.[41] Rural Salafists saw *hijra* and jihad as courageous deeds connecting both with the duty of being a good Muslim and the values of the courageous highlanders of the Caucasus. Moreover, Syria was not chosen because it was perceived as a ‘safer’ jihad or a ‘five-star’ jihad with opportunities for training and networking with international jihad, but mainly because the humiliation and suffering experienced by Syrians appeared intertwined with traditional and religious values.

Socio-cultural Codes and Local Traditions in Jihadist Ideology: Social Status, Reputation, and Honour

The concept of a ‘five-star jihad’ was far more prevalent among local jihadists and exiled combatants than with ordinary Salafists in Dagestan. In many discussions with friends and families of foreign fighters as well as in interviews with two returnees (rural Salafists) in Dagestan, what was stressed was the religious importance of the Syrian jihad, not its geographical proximity or it being safer. Although family members often saw the radicalization process as the result of brainwashing and online recruitment, they regularly pointed out how young people show courage and determination in travelling to Syria. Their families may have perceived their actions negatively, but their overall behaviour was seen through the lens of Caucasian traditional values and fearlessness when confronted by the enemy. ‘I am sad for my neighbour. He was brainwashed by IGIL [ISIS] and their propaganda. He did not know better, but I will tell you he fought like a real Dagestani over there. I talked to him on Whatsapp and I was proud of him.’[42] Such a narrative differs from what this author had observed back in 2010 when families and friends talked about youth who had left to participate in the local insurgency. “My relative left to fight with the insurgency and died last year. I tell you, it is senseless. What did he want to achieve? What did it bring to his family? More problems! You should never put your family in that situation”.[43]

In discussing traditional values, Syria, and religiosity with Salafists, a common argument was observable in interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 as well as in 2016. The permissibility of jihad in the North Caucasus is strictly limited by socio-cultural norms and religious rulings. The religious arguments connected to jihad in the North Caucasus and later in Syria extend to the negative perceptions associated with targeting other Sunni Muslims in the North Caucasus, particularly co-ethnics, kinship members, and members of one’s clan.

As Souleimanov and Aliyev explained, “in honor cultures [such as in Dagestan], individuals conceive themselves and are conceived by outsiders not as atomized individuals per se, but primarily as members of a patrilineally delineated in-group”.[44] Those norms may act as an enabler of violence in the case of revenge killings when responding to an insult or when one’s clan is harmed, but they can also act as a deterrent to violent mobilization.

Honorific socio-cultural codes and values include honour, reputation, revenge killing, code of hospitality, and silence. Members of an honour-based society will often reconsider engaging in violent activities if that might inadvertently harm fellow members of their given in-group, be it clan, tribe or ethnic group. Souleimanov explained how target selection has created tensions inside jihadist groups in Dagestan and weakened cohesion inside jihadist factions.[45] In multi-ethnic urban centres like Makhachkala or Derbent, fellow clan-members are often members of police forces or government structures and run the risk of being injured by jihadists. Therefore, many law-abiding Salafists saw a foreign jihad, blessed by a religious ruling as in the case of Syria, as a better alternative to running the risk of targeting fellow kinship members at home. As one Salafist explained:

“I wanted to fight against the Russians and their puppets, but I would not jeopardize my entire family for that. But in Syria, you can fight your jihad, you can behave like a real man (a Dagestani), and you can even kill Russian soldiers”.[46]

As shown by Ratelle and Souleimanov, the insurgency in Dagestan 2008–2013 mainly attracted revenge-seeking individuals willing to retaliate against police forces who had committed atrocities against them.[47] Ideological commitment came much later in the radicalization process, as many could not return to ordinary life after killing policemen. During this time, Salafists remained uninterested in the local insurgency and its activities. They understood why fellow Muslims and Caucasians would want to avenge what was done to them, but this did not represent a powerful incentive to join the insurgency. While doubting the viability of an Islamic State in Dagestan, a common narrative about their non-engagement remained centred on socio-cultural codes.

“I know many ‘forest brothers’ and I help them when I can. After all, we’re related and it is the right thing to do. I understand how they want to avenge themselves and retaliate against policemen, but that’s not for me. I live in a small village; everybody is the brother or the father of someone. And to what purpose in the end? I believe in Pure Islam and I am a devoted Muslim, as you can see, but I am also part of this community”.[48]

The same day that this conversation took place; another villager in the same Salafi-village was caught drinking vodka after a long day of work. Moreover, he offered me, the village guest, a glass as a sign of hospitality and friendship. This faux-pas would have usually led to a violent confrontation, but Salafists around the table remained quiet even if an obvious sign of disdain and potential anger appeared on their faces. Later on, one of them came over to me and explained:

“Listen carefully, we deeply disapprove [of] his behaviour and cannot tolerate vodka in our homes. It is a Russian drink and only for Russians and unbelievers, but he is one of us and you must understand our customs. God will punish him, but we will not. Life here is complex, but that does not mean we are not Pure Muslim. Do you understand that?”[49]

Salafists in Dagestan often prefer non-violent methods of dealing with local sinners rather than transgressing socio-cultural codes. Even pious individuals adapt their religion-driven behaviours to accommodate these codes. This affects individual violent mobilization as well as insurgent tactics such as civilian victimization, terrorism, and violence in punishing offenders. Salafists often told me that such methods were seen as un-Islamic and against the highlander (Dagestani) code.

For all the reasons above, fighting in Syria provided an acceptable alternative to the socio-cultural limitations imposed on jihad in the North Caucasus. It was not only that the foreign jihad in Syria was seen as holier than the one in the North Caucasus and filled with heroism: choosing Syria also helped to mitigate the dilemma between religious and ethno-traditional identities in the North Caucasus. Thus, reducing the wave of mobilization to religious ideology and propaganda obscures the complexity of identity and greatly oversimplifies the meaning of religiosity among Salafists in the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan.

In a way, the choice made by Dagestani Salafists to engage in *hijra* to the Islamic State represents a perfect solution for combining the right message (the Islamic State’s propaganda), in the right context (the collapse of the *Imarat Kavkaz*) driven by powerful socio-cultural incentives (sense of duty and masculinity), but without the social and cultural restrictions imposed by traditional norms.

Conclusion

This article examined the reasons why Dagestani Salafists have mobilized only minimally to support the local Salafi-jihadi insurgency in Russia, but have joined the Syrian jihad and the Islamic State in large numbers. The author’s interviews with Salafists and their families have shown that Salafists value the religious rulings behind

jihad and rank jihad on the basis of a pragmatic perspective involving religious duty as well as socio-cultural codes. The decision to fight abroad was often chosen to limit the backlash on one's family and clan while fulfilling religious duties. This also shows how religious duty and religiosity are often understood differently by rural and urban Salafists, which, in turn, calls for greater attention to social identities in the study of violent mobilization.

At the same time, this does not deny the key role played by such facilitating factors as IS propaganda and its recruitment approach, Russian policies that facilitated the emigration of Salafists prior to the Sochi Winter Olympics, as well as logistical support from inside Turkey, including, but not limited to, existing ethnic networks and ease of travel. It rather makes the case for a local and ethnographic understanding of root causes and facilitating factors associated with violent mobilization. The study of violent extremism requires further work that takes seriously what combatants have to say about their own participation in jihadist activities.

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Notes

[1] Not all extremist travellers have fought in Syria. Many came in order to take part in life in the Caliphate.

[2] Elena Pokalova, (2019) "Driving Factors Behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42:9, pp. 798–818; Jean-François Ratelle, (2016) «North Caucasian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessing the Threat of Returnees to the Russian Federation,» *Caucasus Survey* 4:3, pp. 218–38; Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, (2017) "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40:3, pp. 191–210; Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, (2015) "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," *ICCT Policy Brief*. URL: <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ICCT-Bakker-Grol-Motives-and-Considerations-of-Potential-ForeignFighters-from-the-Netherlands-July2015.pdf>; Rik Coolsaet, (2016) "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave. What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State?: Insights from the Belgian Case," *Egmont Paper* 81. URL: http://www.egmontinstitute.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/egmont_papers.81_onlineversie.pdf; Olivier Roy, (2017) "Jihad and Death: the Global Appeal of Islamic State", New York: Oxford University Press; Timothy Holman, (2016) "'Gonna Get Myself Connected': The Role of Facilitation in Foreign Fighter Mobilizations." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10:2, pp. 2–23; Daniel Byman, (2015) "The Homecomings: What Happens when Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:8, pp. 581–602; Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, (2015) "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9; Thomas Hegghammer (2013) "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadist's Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107:1, pp. 1–15.

[3] Thomas Hegghammer, (2013), op.cit.

[4] For religious rulings and jihadist discourses supporting insurgent mobilization, see: Mark Youngman, (2019) "Broader, Vaguer, Weaker: The Evolving Ideology of the Caucasus Emirate Leadership." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31:2 (March 4), 367–89. Youngman describes in detail the ideological evolution of the Caucasus Emirate.

[5] Jean-Francois Ratelle, (2016), op.cit; Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, (2017) *How Socio-Cultural Codes Shaped Violent Mobilization and Pro-Insurgent Support in the Chechen Wars*. New York Palgrave Macmillan.

[6] For example, see the case studies of Nadir Abu Khalid (Nadir Medetov), Akhmed Medinsky and Kamil Abu Sultan al-Daghestan (Europol, 2015), North Caucasian fighters in Syria and Iraq & IS propaganda in Russian language, 041 Counter Terrorism & 047 EU Internet Referral Unit, The Hague. URL: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/redacted-north-caucasian-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-and-russian-language-propaganda-edoc-801733>, accessed 02/11/2016.

[7] Jean-Francois Ratelle (2016), op.cit.

[8] Figures collected by the author from online sources and interviews in Dagestan and Moscow, Summer 2016.

[9] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, (2012) "The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference between Violent and Non-Violent

Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24.1, pp. 1–21.

[10] Hizbut-Tahrir and Tabligh Jamaat are other groups that can be identified as non-violent extremists in the North Caucasus.

[11] Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, (2017) “Retaliation in Rebellion: The Missing Link to Explaining Insurgent Violence in Dagestan,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29:4, pp. 573–92; Adrián Tarín-Sanz and Marta Ter-Ferrer, (2018) «Lack of Rule of Law as a Push Factor Leading to Violent Radicalization in the North Caucasus (2002–2015),» *Caucasus Survey* 6:3, pp. 203–23; Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov, (2013) “Caucasian Crescent: Russia’s Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization”; in: *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, edited by Robert B. Ware. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 51–94; Marat Shterin and Akhmet Yarlykapov, (2011) “Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: The New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and Its Path to Violence,” *Religion, State and Society* 39:2–3, pp. 303–32.

[12] Brian Glyn Williams, (2004) “From ‘Secessionist Rebels’ to ‘Al-Qaeda Shock Brigades’: Assessing Russia’s Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24:1, pp. 197–209.

[13] Jean-François Ratelle (2016), op.cit; International Crisis Group (2016), *The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?* Europe Report N°238, 16 March. Brussels; Jean-François Ratelle & Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, (2018) “Online militant jihadist propaganda targeting Russian-speaking audiences and Russia’s response”; in: Olga Oliker, (Ed). *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; International Crisis Group op.cit; see also Sagramoso and Yarlykapov in this special issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

[14] Bartlett and Miller. op.cit; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, (2014) “Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:1, pp. 69–85.

[15] Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, (2017), op.cit, p. 192.

[16] Emil A. Souleimanov, (2018) “A Perfect Umma? How Ethnicity Shapes the Organization and Operation of Dagestan’s Jihadist Groups,” *Ethnicities* 18:3, pp. 434–53.

[17] Jean-François Ratelle (2016), op.cit.; International Crisis Group op.cit.

[18] Mark Youngman, (2019) *Interpreting the ideological evolution of an insurgency: lessons from the North Caucasus, 2007-2015*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Birmingham.

[19] Thomas Hegghammer, (2013), op.cit.

[20] Lorenzo Vidino, (2005) “How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror,” *The Middle East Quarterly* 12:3, pp. 57–66; Brian Glyn Williams (2004), op.cit.

[21] Interview with Akhmed, Dagestan, November 2010.

[22] Interview with Musa, Dagestan, October 2010.

[23] Interview with Abdul, Dagestan, May 2011.

[24] This remains a small portion of the population and should not be seen as a general trend. However, the change should be noted in connection with the resonance of IS ideology in the North Caucasus in the near future.

[25] Interview with Akhmed, June 2016

[26] Interview with Abu, Dagestan, June 2016.

[27] Jamestown Foundation, (2016) “Experts Warn Dagestani Authorities’ Crackdown on Salafists Could Backfire,” (20 April). *North Caucasus Analysis* 17:8.

[28] Interview with Rasul, Dagestan, 2010.

[29] Interview with Magomed, Dagestan, 2016.

[30] Emil A Souleimanov (2018), op.cit.

[31] Interview with Akhmed, Dagestan, November 2010.

[32] Interview with Hadji Murat, Dagestan, October 2010 and June 2011.

[33] Interview with Zapir, Dagestan, November 2010.

[34] Randy Borum and Robert Fein, (2017) “The Psychology of Foreign Fighters,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40:3, pp. 251.

[35] Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, (2017), op.cit, p. 199.

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- [36] Adrian Shtuni, (2015) "Breaking Down the Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters Phenomenon." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 98:4, pp. 460–77.
- [37] Interview with Zapir, Dagestan, June 2016.
- [38] Emil A Souleimanov, (2018), op.cit., p. 446.
- [39] Interview with Rasul, 2016.
- [40] Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, (2017), op.cit.
- [41] Randy Borum and Robert Fein (2017), op.cit.
- [42] Interview with Enver, July 2016.
- [43] Interview with Shapi, October 2010.
- [44] Emil A. Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliev, (2017) *How Socio-Cultural Codes Shaped Violent Mobilization and Pro-Insurgent Support in the Chechen Wars*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 18.
- [45] Emil A Souleimanov (2018), op.cit.
- [46] Interview with Zabit, July 2016.
- [47] Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov (2017), op.cit.
- [48] Interview with Ramazan, Dagestan, October 2010.
- [49] Ibid.