

Explaining Foreign Fighter Mobilization from the North Caucasus to Syria: Historical Legacy, Existing Networks, and Radicalized Identity

Kuzey Kafkasya'dan Suriye'ye Yabancı Savaşçı Mobilizasyonunu Açıklamak: Tarihsel Miras, Mevcut Ağlar ve Radikalleşmiş Kimlik

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Abstract

This paper focuses on foreign fighter mobilization in the North Caucasus within the context of the similar motivations stemming from the Russian-Chechen wars and the Syrian Civil War. This paper seeks answers to the questions of what the conditions that facilitate the flow of the North Caucasian foreign fighters into Syria are and what the role of Russian-Chechen wars and other historical and social factors in this process is. This study proposes and applies an analytical framework of historical legacy, existing networks, and radicalized identity on the North Caucasian case. The empirical analysis is based on the examination of the expressions made by three North Caucasian fighters in Syria: Abdulkhakim Shishani, Muslim Shishani, Salakhuddin Shishani. This study concludes that there is a historical continuity in the codes of radicalization and insurgency in the region from the past to present and same motivations may prompt foreign fighter mobilization in future conflicts.

Keywords: Foreign Fighters, Syrian Civil War, Russian-Chechen Wars, North Caucasus, Radicalization.

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Öz

Bu makale, Rus-Çeçen Savaşları ve Suriye İç Savaşı'ndan kaynaklanan Kuzey Kafkasya'daki yabancı savaşçı mobilizasyonunun benzer motivasyonlarla hareket ettiğine odaklanmaktadır. Bu makale, Kuzey Kafkasyalı yabancı savaşçıların Suriye'ye akışını kolaylaştıran koşulların neler olduğu ve bu süreçte Rus-Çeçen Savaşları'nın ve diğer tarihi ve sosyal faktörlerin rolünün ne olduğu sorularına yanıt aramaktadır. Bu çalışma, Kuzey Kafkasya'daki yabancı savaşçılara ilişkin tarihsel mirasın, mevcut ağların ve radikalleşmiş kimliğin analitik bir çerçevesini sunmakta ve uygulamaktadır. Çalışmanın ampirik analizi, Suriye'de üç Kuzey Kafkas savaşçısı tarafından yapılan ifadelerin incelenmesine dayanmaktadır: Abdülhakim Şişani, Müslim Şişani, Selahaddin Şişani. Bu çalışma, geçmişten günümüze bölgedeki radikalleşme ve isyan kodlarında tarihsel bir süreklilik olduğu ve aynı motivasyonların gelecekteki çatışmalarda da yabancı savaşçı mobilizasyonunu tetikleyebileceği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yabancı Savaşçılar, Suriye İç Savaşı, Rus-Çeçen Savaşları, Kuzey Kafkasya, Radikalleşme.*

Introduction

Albeit an old phenomenon, the notion of foreign fighters has again become a highly debated term mostly due to the prolonged civil war in Syria. Foreign fighters seeking new 'jihad fields' after the Afghanistan War, joined the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Chechnya, respectively between 1992-1995 and 1994-1999. During the post-war period, some of these groups remained in these protracted conflict countries and established networks there. The same trend has been witnessed during the Syrian Civil War and since the war on the ISIS and the fall of Raqqa, there has been a new debate about the return of these foreign fighters. Indeed, foreign fighters phenomenon has almost become associated with the ISIS due to the fact that there has been a huge flow of fighters from all around the world into the Syrian soil to fight within the cadres of the ISIS and other violent non-state groups. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, international conflict and terrorism scholars have examined the various

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aspects of the foreign fighters phenomenon ranging from the motivations of these fighters to the networks and from the strategies and tactics to the return of them.

However, despite the increasing interest in various aspects of foreign fighters, there remain significant research gaps both related to the theory and empirical analysis. The most important empirical gap in the literature seems to be the limited focus on Europe, Balkans, and Africa leaving the North Caucasian foreign fighters a relatively untouched topic. If the already existing jihadist threat to the Russian Federation is taken into account, the significance of the study of the North Caucasian foreign fighters increases. It is also an acknowledged fact that the returnees from Syria and Iraq have become involved in the rebels and quagmires in Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino Balkaria since 2015.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the North Caucasus region within the context of the similar motivations stemming from the Russian-Chechen wars and the Syrian Civil War to understand the foreign fighter mobilization in the region. This paper argues that the North Caucasus as a region is favorable to foreign fighter mobilization since i) there has already been a historical mobility in times of the Russian-Chechen wars, ii) foreign fighters from the region have the ability to go and come back because of their established networks there, iii) the identity of both the people in the region and the state constructions are vulnerable to radicalization. From this perspective, this study is based on these research questions: What are the conditions that facilitate the flow of the North Caucasian foreign fighters into Syria and what is the role of Russian-Chechen wars and other historical and social factors in this process? How do the North Caucasian foreign fighters and group leaders in Syria explain their motivations and aims in going to Syria? Why the North Caucasian region is more vulnerable to the return of foreign fighters from Syria?

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To explain these, this paper adopts a historical perspective to analyze the security concerns about the foreign fighters in the region. A descriptive method based on the expression of historical events will be used. The empirical part of this paper is based on the analysis of the statements made by and interviews made with North Caucasian leaders in Syria. Overall, this paper proposes a three-layered analytical framework to understand foreign fighter mobilization and applies it on the North Caucasian case. In this regard, this study attempts to contribute to the ongoing literature about foreign fighters by putting a social-historical analysis at the core of its narrative and by delving into the relatively untouched North Caucasian case.

This paper is structured as follows: The first section will give a bird's eye view of the literature on the foreign fighters phenomena and will provide the details of the proposed three-layered analytical framework to be used in this study. The second section will apply this analytical framework on the North Caucasus to understand the background of the foreign fighters mobility within the framework of Russian-Chechen Wars. The third section will look at the flow of North Caucasian foreign fighters with a specific focus on the Syrian Civil War through the lens of the three-layered analytical framework by drawing on the expressions of the North Caucasians on the field in Syria.

Understanding and Framing the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Literature: A Three-Layered Framework For Analysis

The study of foreign fighters is not new however the academic interest in the topic has witnessed a boom with the 2000s, mostly due to the emergence of the idea of global jihad. Among these studies, it is possible to identify three main trends: i) studies dealing with the conceptualization and the legal aspect of foreign fighters, ii) studies looking at the recruitment

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and effectiveness of foreign fighters, iii) studies looking at the return of foreign fighters to their countries.

Putting the term into a meaningful ground seems to be the most difficult task and that's why a bundle of works has attempted to delve into the history and the conceptualization of foreign fighters from an interdisciplinary lens. Among them David Malet's works are significant since his book¹ appears to be the most comprehensive work on foreign fighters historicizing the emergence of it by looking at the Texas Revolution, Spanish Civil War, Israeli War of Independence, and Afghanistan and by approaching to the concept from civil wars perspective. Malet's article² is also important in this sense since it provides a transnational approach for the conceptualization of foreign fighters. Again, Malet's article³ attempts to differentiate the Islamic foreign fighters and other ones on the basis of persistence, i.e. he argues that as opposed to other peers, the distinguishing factors of the Islamic foreign fighters is that they continue to be mobile even after the conflicts. Mendelsohn's article⁴ is an important contribution in this category with its attempt to overview the latest trends in defining foreign fighters and outlining the new generation of foreign fighters even before its popularization with the ISIS. Beyond these conceptual works,

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¹ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis: FPRI's Journal of World Affairs* 54, no.1 (2010): 97–114, <https://doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2009.10.007>

³ David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no.3, (2015): 454–73. <https://doi:10.1080/09546553.2015.1032151>

⁴ Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters-Recent Trends," *Orbis: FPRI's Journal of World Affairs* 55, no.2 (2011):189–202, <https://doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2011.01.002>

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Geneva Academy's briefing⁵ provides one of the most comprehensive legal approach to the study of foreign fighters delving into the concept from international law perspective.

The second trend includes researches on foreign fighters with regards to their recruitment, mobility, and effectiveness. In this category, first bundle of works analyzes the phenomenon from a wider perspective and looks at their roots and effectiveness. For instance, Hegghammer⁶ looks at the rise of the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon and presents novel empirical evidence about them. Bakke's article ⁷ looks at the concept from a more domestic perspective and demonstrates how they can affect domestic insurgencies. Duyvesteyn & Peeterson⁸ presents a broader perspective by analyzing conflicts in the past 35 years and looks at the question of which conflicts are more attractive for foreign fighters. A more practical perspective is presented by Bie et al.⁹ and they analyze

⁵ "Foreign Fighters under International Law," (Academic Briefing No.7, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014), accessed 8 July 2018, <http://www.geneva-academy.ch/docs/publications/Briefings%20and%20In%20briefs/Foreign%20Fighters%20Under%20International%20Law%20Briefing%20no7.pdf>

⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no.3, (2010): 53–94.

⁷ Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no.4 (2014): 150–87. https://doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00156

⁸ Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)," no. 8, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague* 6, (2015), accessed 3 July 2018, <https://icct.nl/publication/fickle-foreign-fighters-a-cross-case-analysis-of-seven-muslim-foreign-fighter-mobilisations-1980-2015/>

⁹ Jasper L. De Bie, Christianne J. de Poot, and Joanne P. van der Leun, "Shifting Modus Operandi of Jihadist Foreign Fighters From the Netherlands Between 2000 and 2013: A Crime Script Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no.3 (2015): 416–40, <https://doi:10.1080/09546553.2015.1021038>

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police investigations and interviews to understand the changing operative structure of foreign fighters by looking at these criteria: “geopolitical changes, social opportunity structures, and technological developments”. Another important contribution is made by Dawson & Amarasingam¹⁰ in the sense that they draw attention to the “existential concerns and the role of religiosity” rather than more practical concerns with regards to foreign fighters’ motivation. A recent study by Pokalova¹¹ presents one of the broadest accounts of foreign fighter mobilization and analyzes different socio-economic parameters to understand their motivation to go to Syria and Iraq. Another trend in this category is to analyze country-cases, mostly European. For instance, Nilsson’s article¹² focuses on Swedish foreign fighters through interviews and presents three trends about Swedish jihadists: “socialization to global jihad, normalization of jihad, and an increasing use of the doctrine of takfir”. Bakker & Grol¹³ looks at the Netherlands case and make use of six interviews to understand and present recommendations for preventing foreign fighter mobilization. Sheikh’s article¹⁴ delves into the Danish case and argues that pull-factors

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¹⁰ Lorne L. Dawson, and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for *Hijrah* to Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no.3 (2017): 191–210. <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216>

¹¹ Elena Pokalova, “Driving Factors behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2018): 1-21, <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2018.1427842>

¹² Marco Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no.5 (2015): 343–58. <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2015.1005459>

¹³ Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands,” Policy Brief no.3, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague*, (July 2015), accessed 20 June 2018, <https://icct.nl/publication/motives-and-considerations-of-potential-foreign-fighters-from-the-netherlands/>

¹⁴ Jakob Sheikh, “I Just Said It. The State”: Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no.6 (2016): 59–67. <http://www.jstor>.

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are more important to understand foreign fighter mobilization. Bakker & de Bont¹⁵ presents a comparative perspective on the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters and compares them through different socio-economic factors. Similarly, Reynolds & Hafez¹⁶ analyzes German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and looks at the roles of three criteria: “socioeconomic integration, online radicalization, and social network mobilization”. A recent study by Haner et. al¹⁷ presents an important account on Turkish foreign fighters and argues that “peer pressure coming from preexisting networks” plays a greater role. Another recent work by Mishali-Ram¹⁸ looks at Tunisian, Saudi Arabian and Egyptian cases and argues that Islamists turn into the transnational arena if their relation with the state is problematic.

The final category involves studies on the impact of the returning foreign terrorist fighters from their fighting fields to their homelands. This category is much more focused on the practical dimensions of the foreign fighter threat and looks into the deradicalization efforts to be performed by the governments both on the legal and psychological/social

org/stable/26297706

¹⁵ Edwin Bakker, and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no.5 (2016): 837–57. <https://doi:10.1080/09592318.2016.1209806>

¹⁶ Sean C. Reynolds, and Mohammed M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1–26, <https://doi:10.1080/09546553.2016.1272456a>

¹⁷ Murat Haner, Ashley Wichern, and Marissa Fleenor, “The Turkish Foreign Fighters and the Dynamics behind Their Flow into Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2018): 1–19. <https://doi:10.1080/09546553.2018.1471398>

¹⁸ Meirav Mishali-Ram, “Foreign Fighters and Transnational Jihad in Syria,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no.3 (2018): 169–90, <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2017.1283198>

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level. Among these, Byman's study on the Arab foreign fighters¹⁹ outlines an analytical framework and assesses their impact on the Arab world by looking at five factors: large numbers of volunteers per capita; weak security services; existing wars; sectarian issues; and the level of interest the Islamic State has for the respective country. Holmer and Shtuni's report²⁰ is a good overview of the deradicalization and reintegration efforts of foreign fighters and the authors conclude that the affective, pragmatic and ideological aspects of the phenomenon should be addressed together in deradicalization efforts and moreover it would only be possible to solve the problem by understanding the facilitating effects of radicalization. A more specific attempt has been made by Gurski in with his book²¹ on Western foreign fighters analyzing not only their motivations but more importantly the threat posed by them to their home countries.

Although a rich debate is going on about the foreign fighters both on theoretical and empirical levels, the North Caucasian case still stands as an untouched topic except from few studies. Campana and Ratelle's²² article is important in this sense since it looks to the diffusion of conflict among the North Caucasian countries among themselves. Again, Ratelle's

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¹⁹ Daniel Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no.8, (2015): 581–602, <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2015.1031556>

²⁰ Georgia Holmer and Adrian Shtuni, "Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative," (Special Report no.402, United States of Institute of Peace, March 2017), accessed 16 June 2018, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/sr402-returning-foreign-fighters-and-the-reintegration-imperative.pdf>

²¹ Phil Gurski, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield. 2017).

²² Aurélie Campana and Jean-François Ratelle, "A Political Sociology Approach to the Diffusion of Conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no.2 (2014): 115–34, <https://doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.862901>

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article²³ is particularly devoted to analyze the threat of North Caucasian foreign fighters to the Russian Federation when they return.

Based on an overview of the existing literature on foreign fighters, this study argues that an overarching approach on the root causes and return of foreign fighters should consider these three criteria: *historical legacy*, *existing networks*, and *radicalized identity*. Such an approach would not only examine push factors but also embrace pull factors as well.

Table 1. A Summary of the Three-Layered Analytical Framework for Foreign Fighter Mobilization

Historical Legacy	Existing Networks	Radicalized Identity
- Existence of a Conflictual Behavior - Utopic and Ideological Aspirations - Old Traumas and Revenge	- Logistical Issues - Military Experiences - The Role of Veterans - Fighter Cells	- Feeling of Otherness/ Ethnic Diversity - Effective Propaganda/ Social Media - Role of Immigrants

Source: Author's compilation

Historical legacy refers to the historical background of a given country or region that is related to its conflictual environment. It is to say that the more a country or a region has had wars and conflicts in recent years, the more this legacy facilitates new conflicts or groups and individuals that have conflictual behavior. Thus, with regards to foreign fighters phenomenon, it is possible to argue that there is a correlation between the conflictual history of a country or a region and foreign fighter mobilization. However, it is important to note here that the notion of historical legacy is not only

²³ Jean-François Ratelle, "North Caucasian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessing the Threat of Returnees to the Russian Federation," *Caucasus Survey* 4, no.3 (2016): 218–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2016.1234096>

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about practical issues that facilitate foreign fighter mobilization, but rather the psychological and ideological aspects are significant. For instance, if a country or a region has more conflictual historical legacy, it could be argued that it is easier in these places to find utopic and ideological aspirations that lead to extremist mobilization. Furthermore, conflictual historical legacy may lay a traumatic psychological environment in which new generation of youth exists flaming with vengeance. Emotions such as restoring the lost dignity, fighting for the name of the previous losses, and rechallenging the old enemies in new fields are among those traumatic feelings that enable the flow of foreign fighters in and out stemming from conflictual historical legacy.

Existing networks is the second important factor that facilitates foreign fighter mobilization and that makes a country or a region more prone to the return of foreign fighters. This factor is more related to the logistical aspect of conflicts and involves practical issues that enable the training and transfer of foreign fighters in and out of a given country or a region. Existing networks are also related to the category of historical legacy since it refers to the logistical aspects of previous conflicts that still remain to be valid. However, a separate category focusing solely on these practical issues is important to understand the role of military experiences, the impact of veterans, and remaining fighter groups or cells. For instance, the existence of a militarily experienced population can be regarded as a triggering effect in the mobilization of foreign fighters and moreover the return of foreign fighters may also impact the local insurgencies with these fighters that have had severe conflicts in various fields. Likewise, the existence of a local culture that embraces the fighting groups may also enable the continuation of groups and cells that feed the mobilization of foreign fighters.

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Radicalized identity is another important category to examine the reasons and impact of foreign fighter mobilization and it focuses on the socio-economic conditions in which certain people become radicalized leading the way to fight alongside with terror groups. In this category, the role of effective propaganda particularly the effective use of social media is important to understand the way by which groups trigger the radicalization of young people. The promotion of heroism through these propaganda channels remains to be one of the most important tactics to radicalize supporters. In addition to this, the feeling of otherness and exemption from social life is also an important triggering factor for radicalization. This is mostly observed in places where there is ethnic diversity and the social life is organized alongside the hierarchical relations between these ethnicities. Thus, when an ethnic group is under pressure or feels itself as the other in society, it is much easier to find radicalized people in these groups. It is also important to note here that the second and consequent generations of immigrants may be more prone to radicalization since in most places they face with problems related to their identity and feel themselves in-between.

Russian-Chechen Wars and The Emergence of Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the North Caucasus

This section is designed to explain the background of the flow of foreign fighters from North Caucasus to Syria and the reasons of the existing fragile structure of the region in face of the return of foreign fighters. The Russian-Chechen wars (1556-1999) are important since this background is directly related to the reasons and consequences of the current flow of foreign fighters from North Caucasus. This part will apply the three-layered analytical framework consisting of *historical legacy*, *existing networks*, and *radicalized identity* to the pre-Syrian Civil War period in the

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North Caucasus and will explain how the region became prone to the flow of foreign fighters.

Historical Legacy

It is evident that an intense *conflictual behavior* has long been existed in the region, particularly about the Chechen case. There has long been a spirit of resistance in the region, especially among the Chechens since the 19th century against the Russian rule. In fact, the Russian authority had forced the Chechens to leave behind their differences and come together despite the existence of a strong tribal characteristics among the society.²⁴ The conflictual behavior in the region has acquired a religious dimension and has been revealed through religious tools. For instance, the Chechens had scrambled to implement sharia as opposed to the Russian rules and the traditional customary law for years.²⁵ The war between 1994 and 1999 had build this conflictual behavior and the radicalization process in the region on a more solid ground. Furthermore, the creation of a Moscow-sponsored Chechen state in the region have affected the social movements as well and most of these movements had come under the influence of salafi movement.²⁶

This conflictual behavior has brought along *utopic and ideological aspirations* in the region and this again has been shaped through religious channels. However, it is important to note that Islamic tradition has long been existed in the region and this was in the form of either regular Islamic

²⁴ Beyza Gülin Güney, *Rus Çeçen İlişkileri Bağlamında Çatışma ve İşbirliği Dinamikleri* (İstanbul: Cinius Yayınları, 2017).

²⁵ Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no.5 (2008): 412–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100801993347>.

²⁶ Emil Souleimanov, "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency," *Middle East Policy* 18, no.4 (2011): 162 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00517.x>.

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traditions or harmless movements. Furthermore, the existence of different Islamic traditions in the region, Sufis, Shafis, Hanefites ... , had prevented the creation of a common utopic and ideologic aspiration in the region. Nevertheless, Imam Mansur was one of the first examples who was able to carry into effect these religious utopic and ideological aspirations against the Russians between 1785-1791. It is noteworthy to mention Shaykh Imam Shamil and its Islamic state between 1824-1859. Of course, similar utopic and ideological aspirations and movements were active during the Soviet period, but they could not find a living space due to the strict Soviet rule. Beyond these historical examples, the most important and recent reflection of these utopic and ideological aspirations in the region is the idea of the Caucasus Emirate. Declared in 2007 by Umarov, this Islamic state has sought the idea of unifying different national and ethnic units under the ideal of ummah and it was consisted of six vilayets.²⁷ Thus, the existing and relatively limited Chechen resistance has been spreaded throughout the region via the Caucasus Emirate. It should also be noted that Umarov has also associated the Caucasus Emirate with the global jihad movement.²⁸

The historical legacy of the region contains *old traumas and revenge* as well. Among these the long-standing Russian hegemony over the region and the Russian practices come to the fore. The North Caucasian people and especially the Chechens had always been struggling to continue their national and religious identities under the strict Russian rule. The

²⁷ Sefa Sole, "Kafkasya'da Rus Emperyalizmi ve Kafkas Direnişi," last modified 25 June 2016, accessed 20 July 2018, <https://www.stratejikortak.com/2016/06/kafkasya-rusya-kafkas-direnisi.html>

²⁸ Caleb Weiss, "Transformative Networks: The Case of North Caucasian and Central Asian Jihadist Networks," *Illini Journal of International Security* 3, no.1 (2017): 37-74, https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/96239/weiss_caleb.pdf?sequence=2.

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Sovietization practices and particularly the pressure on the religious groups had left strong traumatic feelings over the region. Two significant events 1864 and 1944 deportations are of great importance to understand the background of the traumas and feeling of revenge among the North Caucasian society.

Existing Networks

In terms of *logistical issues*, it should be noted that the North Caucasus has always had strong ties with the Middle East and particularly Turkey. These ties were not only established as a result of the exiles and migration but rather through Islamist political parties/groups and various financial channels. Hattab appears to be an important figure in terms of logistics that rendered the region to a transnational hub for fighting. It is a well-known fact that Hattab led Afghan-Arab fighters to come to Chechnya.²⁹ What is more is the fact that Al Qaeda leaders had also raised funds for the North Caucasus. Apart from the financial issues, the flow of fighters is also important in terms of the logistical background of the region. For instance, Pankisi valley had become a transit point for the volunteers coming to the region.³⁰

It should also be noted that in terms of *military experience*, the North Caucasus has a strong background. The role of Islamic foundations is important in this sense since the people they transferred from the region to the Islamic countries have not only had Islamic education but also undergone through military training as well. It is also evident that they

²⁹ Julie Wilhelmsen, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no.1 (2005): 35-59, 41-42, https://econpapers.repec.org/article/tafceasxx/v_3a57_3ay_3a2005_3ai_3a1_3ap_3a35-59.htm

³⁰ Ali Soufan, and Daniel Schoenfeld, "Regional Hotbeds as Drivers of Radicalization," *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, ed. by Arturo Varvelli, et al, (Milano : Novi Ligure (AL): ISPI, 2016), 27.

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returned back with radical Islamic groups to fight in the First Chechen War.³¹ Furthermore, there were also Chechen units brought up in the Soviet army and got real military experience on the ground in Afghanistan, Karabakh, and Abkhazia. Most of the local commanders in the First Chechen War were trained and got experience in the Soviet Army before such as Basayev and Mashadov.³² Linked to this, the *role of veterans* is of great importance to understand the relevant background for the flow of foreign fighters in and out of the region. The units, groups, brigades and similar gatherings formed by former veterans were significant in terms of transnational fighter mobility and the remaining ties of them still continue to play important roles. For instance, figures such as Ibn Hattab, Shamil Basayev and their Islamic International Brigade; Gelayev's Special Purpose Islamic Regiment; Basayev's Riyad-us Saliheen Brigade of Martyrs are among the important examples in the region.³³

Radicalized Identity

Feeling of otherness and ethnic diversity have played significant role in the construction of a radicalized identity in the North Caucasus. First of all, although a relatively small area, the North Caucasus region harbors variety of ethnic groups: Adyghes, Circassian, Kabardians, Abazans, Ingushes, Chechens, Avars, Lezgins, Laks, Aguls, Dargins, Rutuls,

³¹ Domitilla Sagrasso, "Violence and Conflict in the Russian North Caucasus," *International Affairs* 83, no.4 (2007): 681-705. <http://doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2007.00647.x>.

³² Seiichi Kitagawa, "Çeçenistan'da Savaş Komutanlarından Cemaat Emirlerine Dönüşüm." *Kafkasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, last modified 8 February 2017, accessed 8 August 2018, <https://kafkassam.com/cecenistanda-savas-komutanlarindan-cemaat-emirlerine-donusum.html>

³³ Caleb Weiss, "Transformative Networks: The Case of North Caucasian and Central Asian Jihadist Networks," 14.

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Tabasarans, Tsakhurs³⁴ with a population of approximately 9.775.000 people.³⁵ Against this backdrop, It should be noted that people of the North Caucasus have always had the feeling of otherness and sought for their religious and cultural identities under the Soviet rule. Most notably, it is possible to argue that the Chechens have constructed their identity on Islam and their conflicts with the Russians. This ethnic diversity has been exposed to Russification policies and combined with socio-economic problems, alternative ideologies such as salafism have attracted significant attention among the people in the region. This recent trend towards salafism has not only incrementalized the process of radicalization but also deepen the existing cleavages.

In an attempt to bring more people into the fold of the fighting groups, *effective propaganda and media* has been widely used in the region. In fact, there have been filmed many videos and movies to support jihad in Chechnya in 1990s. Furthermore, Hattab is the most important figure to utilize media for jihadi propaganda in the region. For instance, Hattab and Movladi Udugov's media facilities through Azzam Publications are very important and they reached large masses in the North Caucasus.³⁶

Here, it should also be noted that the *role of immigration* is important to understand the construction of a radicalized North Caucasian identity. Indeed, there emerged North Caucasian diasporas in Europe and in the

³⁴ "Russia and the Former Soviet Republics Maps - Perry-Castañeda Map Collection - UT Library Online," accessed 2 September 2018, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth.html>.

³⁵ "North Caucasian Federal District, Russia Guide," Russia Trek, accessed 2 September 2018, http://russiatrek.org/north_caucasus-district

³⁶ Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (5): (2018): 412–33, 417, <http://doi:10.1080/10576100801993347>.

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Middle East. The Chechen case is important in this sense since the number of Chechens living in different countries such as in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Georgia, Armenia and European countries are remarkable. However, it is not possible to argue that the diaspora as a whole has a radicalized characteristic but rather their stances differ due to the political conditions of the countries they live in. For instance, particularly the diaspora living in Europe had the possibility of keeping their nationalist identity alive.

Syrian Civil War, North Caucasian Foreign Fighters and the Problem of their Return

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the North Caucasian territories have also witnessed a remarkable mobility in terms of flow of fighters to the Syrian soil through various channels. Soufan Group's latest report indicates that there are 8717 fighters in Syria coming from former Soviet territories.³⁷ According to Russian President Vladimir Putin's remarks, there are approximately 4000 individuals in Syria coming from Russian territories.³⁸ It should be noted that the North Caucasians constitute a large amount in this figure with various military commanders and groups on the ground in Syria. Particularly, Chechens and Dagestanis are in the front lines among those coming from the North Caucasus to Syria.

Five important names come to the fore that gathered and commanded the North Caucasian groups and battalions in the course of the Syrian Civil

³⁷ Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," The Soufan Center. (2017).

³⁸ Rwa Faisal, "4,000 Russians Now Fighting in Syrian Insurgency, Says Putin," The Moscow Times, accessed 23 February 2017, <http://themoscowtimes.com/news/4000-russians-now-fighting-in-syrian-insurgency-says-putin-57259>.

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War: Umar Shishani, Muslim Shishani, Salakhuddin Shishani, Abdulhakim Shishani, and Tarkhan Gaziev. These and other North Caucasian commanders have formed and commanded various groups in Syria such as Jund al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ustro, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Katibat Abd al-Rahman/Tarkhan's Jamaat, and Katibat al-Muhajireen. Although overwhelmingly they fought along with the ISIS, some of them pledged allegiance to the Nusra front and some of them have been more autonomous. Remarkably, the North Caucasians have not only fought alongside with the jihadists or the regime opponents but even Russia has utilized them on the Syrian soil. According to Neil Hauer's report³⁹ there are approximately 1000 North Caucasians deployed by Russia to support the Syrian regime.

Apart from the North Caucasian presence in the Syrian soil, it is important to note that these established links enabled jihadist groups to engage in terrorist activities in the North Caucasus and Russian Federation, particularly in 2015 and 2016. For instance, in 30 December 2015, September 2015, and February 2016 ISIS claimed terrorist attacks in Dagestan killing and wounding people.⁴⁰ In December 2016, a group of terrorists from an ISIS cell in Grozny have attacked Chechen police and killed three policemen.⁴¹ In February 2018, ISIS claimed the responsibility of a terrorist attack against an Orthodox church in Dagestan killing at least

³⁹ Neil Hauer, "Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens," Foreign Policy, accessed 4 May 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/04/putin-has-a-new-secret-weapon-in-syria-chechens/>

⁴⁰ "IS Claims Responsibility for Explosion in Dagestan," Caucasian Knot, 15 February 2016, <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/34616/>

⁴¹ Anna Arutunyan, "ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya." Commentary: Europe & Central Asia, "International Crisis Group," accessed 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/chechnya-russia/isis-returnees-bring-both-hope-and-fear-chechnya>

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five people.⁴² Again recently in August 2018, ISIS claimed responsibility of an attack against police officers in Chechnya.⁴³

When it comes to the North Caucasian returnees, it is very difficult to identify concrete information. For instance, Soufan Group's latest report indicates that there are 5600 returnees in total and 400 of them are from Russian Federation.⁴⁴ According to Anna Arutunyan's report: "The Dagestan government places the exact number of Dagestani returnees from jihad in Syria or Iraq at 108 since 2014, with 86 under criminal investigation. Chechen officials said in December 2017 that 93 women and children had been returned to Russia, but it is unclear how many of these were ethnically Chechen or resident in Chechnya."⁴⁵ Another report also indicates that "from January to March 2018, Chechen authorities returned 150 Russian citizens from Syria and Iraq."⁴⁶ There have been ongoing de-radicalization and rehabilitation facilities in the region as well. For instance, rather than long-term imprisonment, Chechen authorities

⁴² Andrew E. Kramer, and Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Claims Deadly Attack on Church in Russian Region of Dagestan," *The New York Times*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-dagestan-attack.html>

⁴³ Nechepurenko, Ivan. 2018. "Police Are Attacked in Chechnya; ISIS Claims Responsibility," *The New York Times*, 21 August 2018, World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/world/europe/militants-attack-police-chechnya-isis-kadyrov.html>

⁴⁴ Barrett, Richard, 2017. "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Center*, accessed 2017, 13.

⁴⁵ Anna Arutunyan, "ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya," *Commentary: Europe & Central Asia*, International Crisis Group, accessed 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/chechnya-russia/isis-returnees-bring-both-hope-and-fear-chechnya>.

⁴⁶ Huseyn Aliyev, "Families of ISIS Fighters Return to North Caucasus," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies*, accessed 23 May 2018, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13519-families-of-isis-fighters-return-to-north-caucasus.html>.

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started to appeal to social integration programs and even established a Rehabilitation Center for the returnees.⁴⁷

The following section aims to apply the three-layered analytical framework on the North Caucasian leaders and foreign fighters operating in Syria through interviews conducted with them and through their statements. This section heavily draws on the material in Joanna Paraszczuk's website⁴⁸ that includes almost all of the transcriptions and translations of the news, interviews, statements by the Chechens in Syria. In doing so, expressions of three important figures were chosen: Abdulhakim Shishani, Muslim Shishani, and Salakhuddin Shishani. Abdulhakim Shishani is the leader of Ajnad al Kavkaz group in Syria. Muslim Shishani is the leader of Junud al Sham, composed mostly of Chechen fighters and he previously fought with Hattab in Chechnya and in Dagestan. Salakhuddin Shishani was the leader of Caucasus Emirate in Syria and fought in North Caucasus and Georgia before and he was killed on December 2017 by Russian air strikes.

Historical Legacy

The statements of the leading North Caucasian fighters in Syria demonstrate well that the historical legacy explained in the previous section continues to play an important role in the mobilization of fighters between Caucasus and Syria. For instance, after cut loosed from Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar, Salakhuddin Shishani recorded a video and declared himself as the leader of the Caucasus Emirate in Syria in

⁴⁷ Anna Arutunyan, "ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya," Commentary: Europe & Central Asia, accessed 2018, International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/chechnya-russia/isis-returnees-bring-both-hope-and-fear-chechnya>.

⁴⁸ From Chechnya to Syria, accessed 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com>

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August 2015 just to indicate that his jihad continues.⁴⁹ In the same year in September, Salakhuddin released another video again indicating that he continues to fight for jihad and his position remains.⁵⁰ Similarly, Abdulhakim Shishani portrays jihad as a continuity and dates back his journey to 2000 and refers to historical figures such as Imam Mansour and Imam Shamil in his statement. These clearly demonstrates the historical connection of *the existence of a conflictual behavior* among the Caucasian leaders in Syria.

Old traumas and revenge continues to be an important element in the mentalities of the Chechen leaders in Syria. For instance, Muslim Shishani in an interview given to Al Jazeera Turkish explains that the Chechens had similar sufferings with the Syrians and the Chechens are those who can best understand the problems of the Syrians. Muslim adds that they have an incomplete encounter with the Russians and the Russian interference in Syria gave the Caucasians an important opportunity to complete this.⁵¹ Abdulhakim Shishani also refers to *old traumas and revenge* in a letter he published on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1944 deportation made by Stalin. In his letter he makes resemblance with those days and the “mujahideen” in Syria. In the same letter, he further shows support for the rallies organized by Caucasians in Europe to commemorate 1944

⁴⁹ Joanna Paraszcuk, “Salakhuddin Shishani Makes First Video Address Since Ouster From JMA,” From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 23 August 2015, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24097>

⁵⁰ Joanna Paraszcuk, “Salakhuddin Shishani In New Video Address: ‘Our Position Will Remain As Before,’” From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, accessed 1 September 2018, filmed and last modified 26 September 2015, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24157>

⁵¹ “Ruslar gücünü ve sahayı sınıyor,” Al Jazeera Turk, accessed 1 September 2018, last modified October 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/ruslar-gucunu-ve-sahayi-siniyor>

deportation.⁵² In another statement, Abdulhakim also refers to Russia and argues that because of the historical problems they first aim to get rid of Russian occupation.⁵³

Existing Networks

The expressions of the Chechen leaders and militants in Syria point to the fact that the *existing networks* are of great importance in the mobilization of the North Caucasian fighters. As back as 2015, an ISIS militant in Iraq, Akhmad Medinsky directly calls out to the North Caucasians and explains that they are looked up to as an example in Syria and Iraq. Thus, Medinsky emphasizes the existing links between those in the North Caucasus and those fighting in Iraq and Syria and encourages the fighters in both sides.⁵⁴ Again, another ISIS militant Musa Abu Yusuf Shishani in a video released on August 2015 explains that the Caucasus Emirate was also established for jihad.⁵⁵ With regards to the role of *military experiences*, Muslim Shishani's words are important. He argues that those who come from Chechnya had a positive impact on the ongoing civil

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⁵² Joanna Paraszczuk, "Interview & Letter from Ajnad al-Kavkaz Amir Abdul Hakim Shishani," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 24 February 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensyria.com/?p=25309>

⁵³ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Interview & Letter from Ajnad al-Kavkaz Amir Abdul Hakim Shishani," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 24 February 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensyria.com/?p=25309>

⁵⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Akhmad Medinsky Addresses 'Vilayat Kavkaz' From Baiji," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 20 July 2015, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensyria.com/?p=23950>

⁵⁵ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Musa Abu Yusuf Shishani Criticizes Imerat Kavkaz In New Furat Media Video," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 10 August 2015, accessed 1 September 2018 <http://www.chechensyria.com/?p=24047>

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war thanks to their existing military experience.⁵⁶ In another interview, Muslim argues that no other group can know better the tactics of Russians than the Chechen groups, but he complains that their experience has not been consulted sufficiently in the course of the conflict. According to his own experience against the Russians, he proposes that the military tactics should focus on mobility and surprise without giving any chance to the Russian strikes. Abdulkhakim Shishani also points to the same fact and argues that the Russians use similar tactics as they used in Chechnya and argues that the Chechens in Syria know how to tackle with them.⁵⁷

With regards to the *logistical issues* Muslim Shishani feels shame for the absence of a proper system for the new recruits out of Syria.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Abdul Hakim Shishani argues that although they came to Syria to help the Muslim brothers and sisters, they could also help those in the North Caucasus by aiding the families of the detainees there.⁵⁹ In another interview Abdulkhakim focuses on the insurgent potential in the North Caucasus and argues that although the struggle has diminished in the region, the existing potential is still important.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Al Jazeera Turk, "Ruslar gücünü ve sahayı sınıyor."

⁵⁷ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Exclusive: Interview with Abdulkhakim Shishani, Amir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 14 July 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25394>

⁵⁸ Muslim Shishani, "Full interview of Muslim Shishani with Muhammad Jazira," Interview by Muhammad Jazira, *From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria*, November 2017, trans. Joanna Paraszczuk, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com>, 31-34, 54.

⁵⁹ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Interview & Letter from Ajnad al-Kavkaz Amir Abdul Hakim Shishani," last modified 24 February 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25309>

⁶⁰ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Exclusive: Interview with Abdulkhakim Shishani, Amir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria,

Radicalized Identity

The expressions of the North Caucasian leaders depict that the factor of *radicalized identity* is an ongoing process so that these figures still try to trigger radicalization not only in Syria but also in their home countries. For instance, in terms of recruitment, it is evident that Chechen leaders have appealed to *effective propaganda/social media* strategies. In an interview a Dagestani fighter explains that Saifullah Shishani, a Chechen fighter and commander of a group in Syria, was continuously releasing videos and he was seen almost as a movie star.⁶¹ To explain the role of *effective propaganda*, Muslim Shishani also explains that ISIS propaganda has been very effective in the Caucasus and attracted many people by the appeal of concepts such as caliphate, Islamic state and so on and he adds that a more scholarly development is needed to turn back this trend.⁶²

The *feeling of otherness* also finds itself an important place in the expressions of the North Caucasian leaders in Syria, both in terms of their radicalization process and also about their role in the Syrian Civil War. For instance, Muslim Shishani refers to the historical process of Western dominance in world politics and argues that the Western system did not allow the Muslims to apply their own system, particularly in terms of education.⁶³ In October 2017, Muslim further argues that he fought in Chechnya against those who have oppressed his people and he continues

14 July 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25394>.

⁶¹ Joanna Paraszczuk, "From Seyfullakh to Sabri: How the Nephew of the Head of Ingushetia Went To Syria & Didn't Come Home," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 5 July 2018, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=26069>.

⁶² Al Jazeera Turk, "Ruslar gücünü ve sahayı sınıyor."

⁶³ Joanna Paraszczuk, " 'Clash of Civilizations' – Muslim Shishani criticizes Western imperialism, Capitalism," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 14 September 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25480>

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to do the same in Syria, refusing to be labelled as a terrorist.⁶⁴ Interestingly, it is possible to trace the ideological differences between Caucasian leaders in Syria and how they exclude each other in the field. In this regard, Abdul Hakim Shishani speaks of the cleavages between the Chechen leaders in Syria. He argues that he called for various commanders in Syria such as Tarkhan and Aslanbek to come together and show unity however since he did not receive positive responses, he set out on his own way.⁶⁵ Similarly, Muslim Shishani also emphasizes the exclusion of non-ISIS groups and argues in January 2016 that his group did not receive enough financial support so that many of his fighters drew apart and probably joined ISIS.⁶⁶ As of 2017, it is possible to deduce that the Chechen leaders in Syria closed up to each other due to the deepening cleavages on the ground in Syria. However, in a joint declaration in August 2017 made by Abdul Hakim, Muslim, and Salahuddin Shishani they stated that the Chechens came to the Syrian soil to help the mujahideen there and they will continue to do so; and they will not be a party to the internal cleavages among other fighting groups in Syria.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Muslim Shishani: 'I was never a terrorist & I've always hated terrorists,'" From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 20 October 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25526>

⁶⁵ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Interview & Letter from Ajnad al-Kavkaz Amir Abdul Hakim Shishani," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 24 February 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25309>

⁶⁶ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Muslim Shishani Makes Video Address About Situation In Latakia," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 12 January 2016, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24635>

⁶⁷ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Translation: Abdulhakim, Salakhuddin & Muslim Shishani Address the Syrian People," From Chechnya To Syria: Tracking Russian-speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria, last modified 7 August 2017, accessed 1 September 2018, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25414>

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Table 2. Comparative Analysis of the Foreign Fighter Mobilization in the North Caucasus during the Russian-Chechen Wars and the Syrian Civil War

Russian-Chechen Wars			Syrian Civil War		
<i>Historical Legacy</i>	<i>Existing Networks</i>	<i>Radicalized Identity</i>	<i>Historical Legacy</i>	<i>Existing Networks</i>	<i>Radicalized Identity</i>
Russian dominance in the region	Strong ties with the Middle East	Variety of ethnic groups	Portrayal of jihad as a continuity between Chechnya and Syria	Glorification of the insurgency in North Caucasus	Media and propaganda for recruitment
Insurgency through religious means	Hattab his financial system, and his Afghan-Arab fighters	The feeling of otherness under the Soviet rule	Referrals to Imam Mansour and Imam Shamil	Unity of jihad between Syria and the North Caucasus	Appeal of the concepts such as Caliphate and Islamic State
Heroic leaders such as Imam Mansur and Imam Shamil	Pankisi Valley	Russification policies	Similar sufferings between the Chechens and the Syrians	Positive impact of the militarily experienced Chechen fighters in Syria	Accusation of the West of dominance and oppression
The idea of Caucasus Emirate by Umarov	Military experience in Afghanistan, Karabakh, Abkhazia	Khattab and Udugov's Azzam Publications for jihadi propaganda	Similar experience of Russian occupation	Familiarity with the Russian military tactics	Absence of unity among the Chechen leaders in Syria
1864 and 1944 deportations	Experience in the Soviet Army	Chechen diaspora around the world	Utilization of the commemoration of the 1944 deportation	Referrals to the situation of the insurgency in North Caucasus	Impact of the cleavages in Syria on the rapprochement between Chechen leaders

Source: Author's compilation

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Table 2 gives an overview of the results of the three-layered analytical framework applied to the North Caucasian case with a special focus on the Russian-Chechen wars and the Syrian Civil War. The first and most important conclusion drawn from Table 2 is that there is an important similarity with regards to radicalization paths both in the context of the Russian-Chechen wars and the Syrian Civil War. Thus, an overall look at the results of Table 2 suggests that a similar radicalization pattern exists in the North Caucasus and this pattern does not only include socio-economic factors but also ideological pull factors as well. As explained in the previous two sections, the North Caucasus is a vulnerable region to radicalization since it almost embraces all the push and pull factors that lead to foreign fighter mobilization. Moreover, added to the *historical legacy* of the Russian domination over the region and the Russian-Chechen wars, the Syrian Civil War and the presence of the North Caucasians and their confrontation with Russia there have also become another source of historical grievance that would further radicalize people for the possible conflicts in near future.

Another important point to be noted is that with the flow of North Caucasian fighters to the Syrian soil, the existing network of fighter mobilization has grown and widened. Then during the Russian-Chechen wars, it was the relation between Al Qaeda and Hattab and during the Syrian Civil War a similar relation is formed between the Caucasus Emirate and the ISIS. Thus, such a relation between the local agenda of insurgency in the North Caucasus and the global jihad in general has been formed.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explain the problem of foreign fighter mobilization in the North Caucasus from a socio-historical perspective with a specific focus on the Russia-Chechen wars and the Syrian Civil War. In doing so, this paper has tried to accomplish analytical and empirical aims. From an analytical point of view, by drawing on the existing

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literature, this paper has proposed a three-layered framework of historical legacy, existing networks, and radicalized identity in order to understand the foreign fighter phenomenon from a wider historical perspective. Such an approach helps to examine push and pull factors together in decoding foreign fighter mobilization and would be applied in further studies.

In terms of empirical contribution, this study has tried to deal with a relatively untouched topic: the North Caucasus. Indeed, despite the popularity of the topic, the literature on the North Caucasus from a foreign fighter's perspective is still scarce. In this regard, this study located the radicalization phenomenon in the North Caucasus and showed that it has a historical presence in the region affected by various factors, most notably by the previous wars and conflicts. It should be reminded that the roles, aims, and accomplishments of the North Caucasian groups in Syria were not in the scope of this research but rather it tried to show the principal motivations of mobilization of their leaders through their expressions.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the expressions of the North Caucasian leaders and fighters in Syria point to the fact that there is a continuity in the codes of radicalization and insurgency in the North Caucasus from the past to present. Thus, it is possible to argue that another possible war or a conflict around the world would potentially attract North Caucasian fighters due to the same motivations and factors. For this very reason, preventive attempts against radicalization in the North Caucasus should focus on these factors. Here, it should also be mentioned that the Syrian Civil War has added further cleavages between the North Caucasians and galvanized the hostilities among them. In other words, as opposed to Europe, the existing ethnic conflicts in the region render the North Caucasus more vulnerable to the return of foreign fighters. Last, this study demonstrates that in North Caucasus a general trend of articulating local insurgencies to the agenda of the global insurgency/jihad exists. Thus, it is not only the local agenda anymore that defines amity and

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enmity in the region but rather the global agenda plays an important role in the North Caucasus.

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