



HOW EXTREME ARE THE EXTREMISTS? PANKISI GORGE AS A CASE STUDY

By Michael Cecire



Michael Hikari Cecire is an associate scholar at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Project on Democratic Transitions.

It's known as Georgia's highland petri dish for extremism and a microcosm of Islamist militant recruitment, but Georgia's Pankisi Gorge appears to be an example of steady foreign fighter flow in the absence of significant domestic radicalization. Instead, certain factors – Pankisi's improbably high militant production, small population, limited Salafist penetration, intense rural poverty, the international demand for "Chechen" fighters, and the prominent role of third countries in recruitment – point to a variety of motivations. Local radicalization is one, as are mercenary activity and third-country radicalization. These have potential implications for CVE (Countering

Violent Extremism) and anti-foreign fighter programming in the region and even worldwide.

Georgia's Pankisi Gorge region, home to less than 10,000 ethnic [Vainakhs](#), known locally as Kists, has been described over the years as a terrorism "hub," "safe haven," and a Jihadist "hotbed." The recent flow of Kist fighters to Syria and Iraq – and especially the infamy of the Pankisi-bred Tarkhan Batirashvili (AKA Omar al Shishani), a leading Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) commander – has done little to dispel this reputation, built largely in the aftermath of the destructive Second Chechen War.

Pankisi's rough reputation is not unfairly earned. Chechen rebels, fleeing Russian reprisals during the Second Chechen War, found refuge in the rugged Georgian valley region along with foreign Islamist militants that had flocked to their cause. By the early 2000s, there were reportedly hundreds of Chechen partisans hiding among their Kist kinfolk in Pankisi. Many of the Kists aligned with Islamist formations that included some dozens of [Arab and other foreign jihadis](#). Abu Hafis al-Urdani, an Al Qaeda representative, was even said to be operating training camps in Pankisi in 2003 on the orders of [Osama Bin Laden](#).

Chechen irregulars, increasingly reorganized under militant Islamist groups, used Pankisi as a staging area to hit Russian targets across the borders in Chechnya and Dagestan, prompting Russian forces to periodically cross into Georgia to [launch strikes](#). In fact, it was the lawlessness and militant saturation in Pankisi that prompted the first U.S.-Georgian military aid program, the [Georgia Train and Equip Program](#), which saw U.S. military trainers and advisers help Georgian forces clear and re-establish control over the valley (ironically, [backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin](#)). But Pankisi's radicalism problem in the early 2000s was largely imported, from the Chechen guerrillas-turned-Islamists to the foreign fighters that fought with them against Russian troops.

Pankisi Extremism Today

That Pankisi today has a militant problem is undeniable. A number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, some quite prominent, have known or well-evidenced links to the valley. But what is less clear is to what degree there is an *extremism* problem in the Pankisi Gorge. Instead, much of the radicalization tied to Pankisi appears to be metastasizing primarily elsewhere. On the ground, radicalization is clearly occurring to some degree, but appears tethered to factors that do not necessarily involve local

actors. Even the Georgian Interior Ministry has noted finding [little evidence](#) of robust, ground-level networks. Additional factors are clearly at play.

The most credible estimates of Pankisi-sourced fighters in Syria and Iraq are in the 30-50 range – far less than [many media reports](#). However, Pankisi is only home to some 8,000 to 9,000 Kists (most Chechen refugees have long since left), which would make even 50 fighters an extraordinary rate of radicalization. By comparison, there are an estimated 150-200 militants from Kosovo – considered a particularly high ratio of fighters to country population – a country with a population of just under two million.

But while the raw volume of fighters from Pankisi is not extraordinary, it has certainly produced a disproportionate number of Syrian Islamist rebel commanders (five, and maybe six, by my count). Batirashvili, born in the Pankisi hamlet of Jokolo, enjoys particular notoriety and was [credited as the driving force](#) behind the group's advances in Iraq last summer. Yet, Batirashvili appears to be the only Georgian commander of significant prominence in ISIS. Instead, Georgian Islamist militant commanders tend to lead Caucasus Emirate-sworn factions. This is very much attributable to Pankisi's position as an exclave of the greater Chechen cultural space and, relatedly, Kist interactions (or participation) in Chechen conflicts with the Russian government.

Perhaps the most well known of these other commanders is Muslim al Shishani, AKA Murad Margoshvili, another *Pankiseli* who leads the relatively small Jund al Sham faction based in Latakia. Another well-known figure was Seyfullah al Shishani, born Ruslan Machalikashvili, who led the pro-Nusra Jaish Khalifatul Islamiya faction, which was formed after Machalikashvili refused to follow Batirashvili's Caucasus Emirate-aligned Jaish al Mujahirin wal Ansar (JMA) into ISIS. Considered a rising star among militant Salafis, Machalikashvili was reported killed leading an attack against the Aleppo Central Prison in early 2014. Salahuddin al Shishani, AKA Feyzullah Margoshvili/Giorgi Kushtanashvili (no known relation to Murad Margoshvili), took over a reconstituted JMA after Batirashvili's departure, and appears to have been [recently deposed](#), only to head up a new, rump Caucasus Emirate-sworn group. Ansar al Sham's secretive Abu Musa Shishani, real name unknown, is yet another emir with reported roots in the Pankisi Gorge.

Mercenary Activity

According to the most reliable data, Salafis comprise a relatively small community in the valley. In a 2012 report, the European Centre for Minority Issues estimated only about [400 "committed" Salafis](#) in the Pankisi Gorge region. While the Salafi religious community will not necessarily be the only source of fighters, the size and vitality of the community certainly helps, and can serve as a useful (if imperfect) measure of radical penetration.

However, the predominant form of Islam in the valley is [commonly described as Sufi](#), owing to the legacies of the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya brotherhoods. Yet even this is likely an oversimplification of religious practices in Pankisi, as the local population, like many other highland Caucasian peoples, practice folk variations of religion (in this case, Islam) heavily influenced by [antecedent and proximate](#) belief systems. Pankisi folk Islam, with its heavy emphasis on customary law (*adat*) and Sufi mysticism, also reportedly draws on Christian and pre-Islamic traditions. While Sufism does not necessarily preclude militarism – famed 19th century North Caucasian insurgent leader Imam Shamil led a Sufi rebellion – it does rule out active cooperation with Salafis, who regard Sufism as heretical.

Based on local media sources and social media, since 2013, I have counted a total of at least 30 Georgians fighting in the Syria/Iraq theater (and two noncombatants), of which 26 are likely Kists from the Pankisi Gorge. Of those 26, at least 17 are reported to have been killed in action. Based on local testimonies, it is common to hear Pankisi residents blame foreign fighter flow on poverty and young locals' quests for opportunity. More broadly, Chechens (to which Kists are culturally and linguistically tied) are widely regarded throughout the region for being fierce, effective fighters. This may be due to the fact that Chechens, not unlike other Caucasian highland peoples, are often described as raised in an environment [valorizing martial prowess](#). This is not an especially novel observation; the cultural ecologies of many highland communities – from the Caucasus to the Scottish highlands to Appalachia – are often observed as incubating social emphases on skill and fearlessness in battle.

At least by reputation, the Chechen peoples very much live up to this narrative. Chechens and other highland Caucasian tribes have been prized as mercenaries for centuries, serving in large numbers in elite Egyptian Mamluk and Ottoman Janissary units. More recently, Chechen mercenaries took part in the 1988-1994 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war, the 2008 South Ossetia war, and in ongoing conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. Tellingly, Chechens were known to have

participated on both sides of several of these conflicts.

For example, while Abkhazian forces were bolstered in their war against Tbilisi by thousands of North Caucasian “volunteers,” including famed Chechen guerrilla commander Shamil Basayev (who also reportedly fought with Azerbaijani units in the Karabakh war), Georgian forces deployed their own Chechens in a bid to regain Abkhazia’s highland Kodori region in 2001. Those men were led by Chechen commander Ruslan “Hamzat” Gelayev, who had been using Pankisi as a safe haven (incidentally, his son, Rustam Gelayev, was one of the first Georgian-Chechen [casualties in Syria](#)). And while Chechen irregulars loyal to Moscow-anointed strongman Ramzan Kadyrov marched with Russian troops into Georgia in 2008, a persistent rumor in Pankisi was that the beleaguered Georgian government was rushing to form their own force [composed of Pankisi Chechens](#). Chechens are well-known to be fighting for [pro-Russian separatists](#) in eastern Ukraine, but there are also [pro-Kiev Chechen formations](#) as well. Chechens, it would seem, are everywhere.

Poverty is an insufficient condition on its own for radicalization, but the attraction of mercenary life to Pankisi Kists is not hard to imagine. The valley is famous for its hospitality and bareback horse races, but is also suffers from few employment opportunities beyond smallholder cultivation or low-level trading. By contrast, the prospect of mercenary life carries the vague promises of adventure, wealth, and fame. Young men of the valley may have limited prospects, but they can always look to cash in on the international reputation of the Chechen warrior. Indeed, Tarkhan Batirashvili’s rise from modest beginnings to one of the leading faces of ISIS – along with his rumored harem and constellations of villas – has surely done little to dissuade Pankisi men from this path.

Third Countries

Hamzat Borchashvili may be the most famous Kist rank-and-file ISIS fighter. Profiled in the Georgian broadsheet [Kviris Palitra](#) and in a [high-profile exposé](#) in the *Daily Beast*, the account of Borchashvili’s descent – and that of his brother Khalid – into ISIS clutches is offered as evidence of extremists’ growing sway in the valley. But the story of Borchashvili, who allegedly rose to being trusted member of Batirashvili’s personal jamaat, also appears to show the outsized role that third countries appear to play in facilitating Kist fighter flow to Syria.

In the case of the Borchashvili brothers, it was time spent in Austria’s Chechen diaspora community – deemed the largest outside Chechnya – that their mother Leila claims helped push her sons from piety to extremism. The Borchashvili brothers are hardly alone. In fact, most known Pankisi fighters have links to a third country that appear to play a role in facilitating their journey into militant ranks. For example, Rustam Gelayev, the son of the Chechen commander, had reportedly first [made his way to Egypt](#) for religious studies before appearing in Syria, where he was later killed in fighting.

By far, the most common third country cited is Turkey. A persistent theme in accounts by Kist fighters’ families is the belief that their relatives had [gone to Turkey to work](#). It is only later, usually after news of a fighter’s death, that relatives become aware of militant ties. Turkey is also significant in both Batirashvili and late Jabhat al Nusra emir Ruslan Machalikashvili’s journeys to Syria; Machalikashvili had moved to Turkey with his family for work, only to be recruited in Istanbul. Batirashvili, meanwhile, had returned from Turkey ferrying merchandise to sell in Georgia when, [his father claims](#), Georgian police raided their home, confiscated their property, and planted a weapon that led to Batirashvili’s pre-ISIS imprisonment.

While the role of third countries is not uniform across every account, they do seem to play an outsized role in either radicalization or, at least, as a recruitment node for would-be Kist fighters. This may suggest that ground-level recruitment in Pankisi, while almost certainly a factor, plays only a partial role in transforming Pankisi men into foreign fighters.

Policy Considerations

While the Pankisi foreign fighter problem set is a narrow case, it has potentially wider implications for countering violent extremism (CVE) programming and disrupting extremist recruitment. A common baseline assumption for foreign fighter flow is the role of local radicalization. Accordingly, foreign fighter volume is regarded as a proxy for extremist penetration and, by extension, arresting foreign fighter recruitment and CVE are often perceived as one and the same.

In Pankisi, there is [clearly some overlap](#) between radicalization and foreign fighter recruitment. But there is also sufficient evidence to believe that a considerable number of would-be fighters, and perhaps even most, are not effectively indoctrinated until they have left for a third country or the Syria/Iraq theater – to the extent we can assume they are “fully” radicalized at all.

Though Pankisi is unique in many respects, it is safe to assume that these trends are likely evident elsewhere to varying degrees. This would mean CVE and anti-radicalization policies may be in many cases missing the mark. At least some (and maybe more) prospective recruits would be unswayed by anti-radicalism messaging if they are not necessarily being radicalized – at least not in their home countries. Different fighters join for different reasons, and policies need to be adapted to the diversity of those circumstances.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 103, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org