What Drove Young Dagestani Muslims to Join ISIS? A Study Based on Social Movement Theory and Collective Framing

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Abstract

This article analyses the mechanisms and the logic behind the large flow of young Dagestani Muslims to the Middle East, to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq—either to fight jihad or simply to live under Shari'a law. It examines the reasons behind the decision taken by many Dagestanis to fight jihad in Syria and Iraq, rather than at home in the North Caucasus, in support of the Caucasus Emirate insurgency. The article addresses this conundrum through the powerful lenses of Social Movement and Collective Framing Theories. It argues that an aggressive ISIS online propaganda campaign framed around effective messages of Muslim victimhood, the glories of the Islamic State, and the duty to carry out jihad—as well as very effective personal face-to-face recruitment efforts carried out by adherents of the Islamic State in Dagestan—played a key role in mobilising young Dagestani Muslims to emigrate to Syria and Iraq. These elements, together with the territorial successes of the Islamic State on the ground seem to account for the significant flow of North Caucasus Muslims, Dagestanis in particular, to the Middle East. Furthermore, for those willing to fight jihad against Russia's 'infidel' regime, cost-benefit analysis argued in favour of joining the fight in Syria and Iraq over fighting at home in Dagestan.

Keywords: Dagestan, ISIS, Islam, jihad, propaganda, Social Movement Theory, Collective Framing

Introduction

The outbreak of war in Syria and the plight of Sunni Muslims at the hands of Bashir al-Assad's military machine touched a sensitive chord among Muslims worldwide, including in the Russian North Caucasus, many of whom felt the need to travel to the region and fight *jihad* in support of their co-religionaries. According to official statistics between 2,200 and 2,400 Russian Muslims went to the Middle Eastern regions of Syria and Iraq during 2011 and 2015, mostly from the North Caucasus.[1] Estimates collected by independent researchers provide an even higher figure—they suggest that around 10,000 Muslims inhabiting Russia emigrated to Turkey between 2011 and 2014, and from there about 6,000 continued to Syria and Iraq.[2] Within the Russian North Caucasus, the eastern Republic of Dagestan saw one of the highest numbers of its young Muslim citizens moving to the Middle Eastern region—the figure is altogether estimated at about roughly 5,000.[3] While the vast majority of 'Russian' Muslims, including Russian Dagestanis, travelling to Syria and Iraq intended to fight *jihad* against Assad's forces and support ISIS, a significant number of North Caucasus Muslims also emigrated to the Middle Eastern region simply to raise their families in an Islamic state and live under *Shari'a* law.[4] This was especially the case after Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the 'Caliphate' in June 2014—a clear indication of the growing popularity of Salafi ideologies among 'Russian' Muslims, especially in the North Caucasus. This phenomenon raises two interesting questions. Firstly, what motivated young Dagestani Muslims in the Caucasus to travel to Syria and Iraq and join the Islamic State—either to fight jihad or simply to live under *Shari'a* law? Secondly, why did those willing to fight *jihad* choose to do so in Syria—engaging against al-Assad's forces—rather than at home in the North Caucasus in support of the Caucasus Emirate, the North Caucasus Insurgency?

This article attempts to find an answer to these two key questions through the lens of Social Movement and Collective Framing Theories. It argues that an aggressive ISIS online propaganda campaign framed around effective messages of Muslim victimhood, the glories of the Islamic State, and the duty to carry out *jihad*—as well as very effective personal face-to-face recruitment efforts carried out by adherents of the Islamic State among North Caucasus *Salafis* and Caucasus Emirate fighters—played a key role in mobilising young Dagestani Muslims to emigrate to Syria and Iraq. These elements, together with the territorial successes of the

Islamic State on the ground seem to account for the significant flow of North Caucasus Muslims, Dagestanis in particular, to the Middle East. In the Islamic State, young Dagestani Muslims saw a Sunni-Muslim controlled territory, run by hardened Salafis intent on enforcing a very strict interpretation of Islamic law. They, therefore, found an opportunity to realise their dream of living in a society regulated by *Shari'a* law.[5] This resonated strongly among many in Dagestan, a republic characterised by a strong Islamic tradition and high levels of religiosity—especially among the young. Furthermore, for those willing to fight *jihad* against Russia's 'infidel' regime and its local or foreign allies, cost-benefit analysis argued in favour of joining the Islamic State, or other jihadists groups—such as *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar*, or *Junud al-Sham*—over fighting at home in Dagestan. The difficulties of engaging in *jihad* in Dagestan—together with the repressive measures carried out also against non-violent Salafis—when compared to the easiness with which *jihadists* and non-violent Salafis, at least initially, could travel to the Islamic State, all argued in favour of moving to Syria and Iraq to fight *jihad*, rather than joining—or continue fighting—for the 'crumbling' Caucasus Emirate.

Methodology and Literature Review

This article is part of an almost decade-long research project conducted by the authors on the drivers of violence in the Russian North Caucasus, with a particular focus on the republic of Dagestan. The article adopts a qualitative methodology in its approach, with evidence based on a vast array of primary and secondary sources. The researchers have carried out extensive fieldwork, including several trips to the republic of Dagestan in the period September 2011–September 2019. During these visits, individual informal, non-structured interviews were held with a variety of local individuals who were relevant to the topic under study. Interviewees belonged to four broad categories—firstly, law enforcement and intelligence officials in charge of countering radicalisation and recruitment by ISIS and the Caucasus Emirate in Dagestan. This group also included individuals taking part in the commission set up to help former Caucasus Emirate *jihadist* fighters integrate into civilian life. The second category involved Muslim 'community leaders', such as imams and youth workers, as well as human rights' advocates and Dagestani lawyers responsible for defending individuals accused of participating in an insurgency group. A third group was composed of young businessmen, farmers, students and teachers, some of whom had been approached by ISIS recruiters. A last group involved relatives of those young individuals who had travelled to Syria and Iraq, as well as 'former radicals' who were close to groups which engaged in insurgent activities in the North Caucasus and/or in Syria and Iraq.

Due to immense security concerns for both those interviewed and the interviewers, and the unwillingness of potential interlocutors to share sensitive information, many of those interviewed cannot be identified, even as a category. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the codes on ethical conduct governing research involving human beings, as stipulated by the researchers' respective institutions. Altogether, the authors gathered information from more than 70 individuals in the Dagestani region. This multi-tiered approach allowed the authors to gain first-hand knowledge and insight into the recruitment and mobilisation processes occurring in Dagestan throughout the past decade, from a variety of different sources and perspectives. Yet, the authors are aware of the limitations of their sampling. No direct interviews could be conducted with young Dagestani Muslims who joined ISIS. Their views were conveyed to us through either their friends or family members, and this may have resulted in biased and not entirely accurate answers. This first-hand material was complemented with an analysis by the authors of relevant oral and written primary and secondary sources. The authors examined reports produced by government institutions and independent researchers in Dagestan, as well as articles published in local and national newspapers and magazines. The authors also met with young Dagestani Muslims who emigrated to other parts of Russia, including Moscow and the Tyumen region (Novy Urengoi) in the north of the country, which further enriched the research.

The topic of Muslim 'foreign fighters' has been researched quite thoroughly not only with reference to the Islamic state, but also within the context of the earlier wars in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iraq in the 2000s.[6] In his analysis of Arab volunteers joining the Afghan/Soviet war, Thomas Hegghammer defined *Foreign fighters* as 'unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict [itself] other than religious affinity with the

Muslim side'.[7] Such an understanding of foreign fighters can also be helpful when describing those North Caucasus Muslim combatants who joined the fight in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s, including those travelling from Dagestan. While these Russian-speaking Muslims shared a religious affinity with Sunni *jihadists* in Syria and Iraq, there were no additional strong links between the North Caucasian fighters and the conflict itself. Jean-Francois Ratelle and Cerwyn Moore have correctly pointed out that a significant Chechen and North Caucasian diaspora did exist in regions of the former Ottoman Empire, namely in Turkey, and to lesser extent in Syria and Jordan, which facilitated the process of recruitment and transfer of North Caucasian fighters to Syria.[8] Yet, religious affinity, which was manifested in a concern over the plight of Sunni Muslims and a readiness to fight *jihad* against the Russian 'infidel' state and its Alawite ally Bashar al-Assad, rather than ethnic affiliation seems to have been the determinant factor pushing North Caucasians and, more specifically, Dagestanis to join the insurgencies in Syria and Iraq. While ethnic ties may have also helped to facilitate the flow of North Caucasus *jihadists*—especially Chechens—to Syria and Iraq, mobilisation and framing occurred primarily, if not exclusively, along religious *jihadist* lines.[9]

The topic of foreign fighters within the North Caucasus context has traditionally been examined from a different angle—from the perspective of Arab or Al-Qaeda-linked foreign fighters travelling to the North Caucasus to combat jihad in Chechnya.[10] More recently, however, in response to a significant increase in the number of former USSR Muslims travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight against Bashar al-Assad, there has been an effort to analyse both the mechanism behind the mobilisation of foreign fighters from the North Caucasus to the Middle East, as well as the dynamics and the allegiances of these Russian-speaking fighters once they arrived in Syria/Iraq, as shown in the works of Moore, Ratelle and Emil A. Souleimanov.[11] Scholars such as Mark Youngman and Moore, as well as Ratelle, have also looked at the potential risks posed by these Russian Muslim fighters to the security and stability of Russia, if they ever decided to return home in great numbers.[12] Mark Youngman, in turn, has utilised the concept of framing as devised by Social Movement Theory to interpret the responses made by leaders of the Caucasus Emirate to the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS.[13] While these publications have provided a very useful starting point for our research, this article moves a step further. Building on the existing scholarly work, our analysis tries to explain the drivers and the dynamics behind the phenomenon of Dagestani 'foreign fighters' in Syria and Iraq, and it does so within the framework of Social Movement Theory and Collective Framing.

The Relevance of Social Movement Theory and Collective Framing

When studying the dynamics behind the rise of Muslim foreign fighters, Hegghammer reached the conclusion that a global network of Islamist charities which had been established by marginalised elites from the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia, had been utilised by Arab activists located in Afghanistan in the 1980s 'to recruit foreign fighters in the name of inter-Muslim solidarity'.[14] In the 1970s, these Hijazi elites had promoted a subcurrent of Islamism—populist pan-Islamism—which stressed the 'external threats to the Muslim nation', and emphasised the notion of Muslims suffering. In order to address the plight of Muslims, these groups had established a global network of charities to provide inter-Muslim aid, which was then utilised to promote the recruitment of Arab fighters to Afghanistan.[15] More importantly, this Hijazi pan-Islamist community was replenished with Muslims Brotherhood exiles from Egypt, Iraq and Syria, who joined many of the new universities established in Saudi Arabia and engaged in 'transnational activism' from their bases in Hijaz.[16] When the Afghan-Soviet war broke out in the late 1970s–early 1980s, their transnational activism and the network of contacts and Saudi charities established throughout the Muslim world became the mechanisms through which the recruitment of Saudi and other Muslim fighters to the Afghan cause occurred. In other words, a powerful Islamist ideology framed around the notion of Muslim victimhood and solidarity, as well as around the individual duty of fighting *jihad*, together with a well-developed network of Saudi Muslim charities, supported by transnational activists, facilitated the flow of fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s. This seems to fit quite adequately with Social Movement Theory.

The relevance of religious mobilisation frames, within Social Movement Theory, seems also to explain the more recent phenomenon of Muslim foreign fighters in the 2000s. In his later analysis of 'Western' foreign fighters travelling and combating in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia or Yemen during the decade after 9/11, Hegghammer stressed the relevance of normative aspects—in this case, the need to fulfil the moral duty of *jihad*—when trying to explain the decision by *jihadist* to fight abroad rather than at home in the West.[17] Foreign fighting is viewed as more *legitimate* among young Muslims in the West than waging terrorism at home, especially when a Muslim rebel group is engaged in an insurgency or war against a non-Muslim army. Similarly, Daniel Byman highlights the relevance of the new narrative of the Islamic State, in pushing many foreign fighters to Syria once the Islamic State had declared a Caliphate 'because they wanted to live in a land ruled according to God's law'.[18] He adds the importance of networks, the ease of travel and the expanded technological reach as elements sustaining the flow of foreign fighters to Syria.[19] Aaron Zelin, in turn, shows how *Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia* transformed from a terrorist group or insurgent force into a social movement engaged primarily in *dawa* (preaching). This *dawa*-first approach, he noted, broadened the pool of foreign fighter recruits who then travelled to Iraq, Libya and Syria, joining ISIS in particular.[20] Finally, Joseph A. Carter, Peter R. Neumann and Shiraz Maher, in their comprehensive study of Syria's foreign fighter network, have emphasised the relevance for foreign fighter mobilisation of social media, disseminators ('unaffiliated, but broadly sympathetic individuals who offer moral and intellectual support to jihadists groups') and new high clerical authorities who influence and inspire the actions on young Muslims in the West.[21]

According to Social Movement Theory, social violent and non-violent movements utilise formal structures and informal social networks, as well as various communication channels to promote their goals, while also adapting and responding to external constraints and limitations.[22] In particular, social movement theorists emphasise the relevance of framing—the mechanisms through which messages are delivered to mobilise potential supporters. Frames help to explain how individuals move from agreeing on issues of concern to *acting on them*. Collective action frames, as explained by Benford and Snow, are 'innovative amplifications and extensions of, antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them.'[23] They are intended to mobilise potential adherents, including fighters, by providing meaningful—often simplified—explanations and guides to action, in order to introduce change.[24] Benford and Snow describe the existence of three core 'framing' tasks within the framework of contested collective action. Diagnostic framings identify problems and attribute victimhood—generally through 'injustice frames'—while also finding sources of blame.[25] Prognostic framings provide the articulation of solutions and the promotion of strategies to achieve the intended goals, while motivational framing, 'provides a "call for arms" or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive.'[26] A particularly relevant aspect of collective framing theory refers to the degree to which the promoted frames 'resonate' with the concerns of those societies whose members mobilising actors are trying to recruit. In this respect, Benford and Snow stress the notion of 'centrality', understood as the extent to which 'the beliefs, values, and ideas' are relevant to the lives of those targeted by mobilisers.[27] Neumann and Rogers similarly refer to 'frame alignment', described as 'the convergence between the movement's narrative and the views of their recruits.'[28] These three collective action frames remain crucial when trying to explain the dynamics behind—and the successes of—ISIS mobilisation in the North Caucasus, and in Dagestan in particular. Social Movement Theory, therefore, provides us with a very valid theoretical paradigm for analysis.

Traditionally, social movement theory had focused on the structural and psychological factors behind mass mobilisation. It argued that there existed a linear causal link between structural strains in society—which produced psychological discomfort—and the development of contested collective action.[29] A series of societal tensions were identified, ranging from rapid industrialisation to processes of modernisation and secularisation, economic crisis, as well as disruptions to social life, which were seen as creating 'social and normative ambiguity' regarding how 'to respond to changing conditions.'[30] Psychological feelings of isolation and impotence were seen as pushing young individuals to join social movements and, if considered necessary, engage in political violent action. In other words, structural and psychological factors were identified as being the key drivers behind violent and non-violent activities of socio-political contestation. However, these theories suffered from several shortcomings, most importantly, they were not able to explain why societies

sharing similar socio-economic, political and cultural realities were not experiencing the same level of societal mobilisation and violent political activity.[31] In response, Resource Mobilisation Theory emerged which viewed social movements as 'rational organised manifestations of collective action' which conducted cost/benefit analysis when deciding to engage in contested action.[32] In other words, these theories emphasised 'the rational and strategic dimensions' of movements engaged in socio-political contestation.[33]

Yet, as rightly pointed out by Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, leaders of insurgent social movements are able to mobilise recruits by tapping on people's *emotions*—what Robert Benford and David Snow have described as 'motivational framing'.[34][35] In other words, psychological factors are also very relevant when explaining socio-political non-violent and violent mobilisation. Individuals may join an insurgency in response to 'a perceived moral duty or obligation whether driven by 'moral shock' or by deeply held values and beliefs, irrespective of the costs and benefits.'[36] The concept of framing, in this respect, becomes particularly relevant as it allows scholars to 'bridge the instrumental-interpretative divide', as rightly noted by Marie-Eve Desrosiers.[37] Instrumentalist approaches to conflict studies, such as Resource Mobilisation Theory, are those which emphasise the centrality of rational choice theory, namely those who see violent political mobilisation occurring as a result of 'conscious choices made by actors pursuing goals' which can range from material resources such as economic gain, security and power, to immaterial resources 'such as group recognition, autonomy and independence'.[38] Interpretative or socio-psychological approaches, instead, stress the social and psychological dynamics of mobilisation and conflict. Within this framework, 'symbolic politics', in particular, places emphasis on the 'emotional connections' and highlights the power and the relevance of social structures such as 'identity, myths and symbols' to political and violent mobilisation.[39] Framing—within Social Movement Theory—thus allows us to bring these two dimensions (the rational and the emotional) together and provides us with a useful explanatory paradigm when trying to understand how violent *jihadist* mobilisation occurs in the Muslim world.

Social Movement Theory and Framing Applied to ISIS in Dagestan

When analysing the drivers behind the significant outflow of fighters to Syria and Iraq, collective action framing provides a very useful analytical framework. As noted above, the Islamic State carried out a very active and persuasive online and face-to-face propaganda effort among Dagestani Muslim youth. It encompassed the three core framing tasks, as developed by Benford and Snow—tasks which strongly resonated with local Dagestanis. ISIS diagnostic frames of 'victimhood' centred around two powerful aspects—on the one hand, the outbreak of the war in Syria and the suffering of Muslims at the hands of the al-Assad regime, and on the other, the repressions carried against Islam and Muslims in Russia and worldwide. For example, ISIS' widely circulated Russian-language online magazine *Istok* claimed that the Muslim *Umma* was living in slavery and humiliation, citing the words of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the official spokesman of the Islamic State.[40] The article noted:

> "And those who look at the situation of Muslims today in different countries will see to what extent [Muslim] humiliation has come at the hands of Jews, Christians and their helpers among a number of rulers in the Arab and non-Arab [world]. This [will help them] realize the importance and necessity of the existence of the Islamic States: its strengthening, recognition and expansion."[41]

Both the West and Russia were accused of conducting a 'war of aggression against Muslims,' in their attempts to destroy the Islamic State.[42] An article published in *Istok* in November 2015 noted:

> "On 30th September, Russia—which had already been helping the Nusayri taghuts [Assad's Alawi sect] in their war against the Muslims of Sham [Syria] for several years—showed its readiness to become directly engaged in this war with its own Air Forces…. Russia thought that its war and its aggression against Muslims in the Caucasus [was not] sufficient. As if the evil that it had already caused on Muslims in Chechnya was not enough".[43]

ISIS recruiters in the North Caucasus, in turn, clearly expressed concerns over the persecution of Muslims by

'non-believers' and their efforts to prevent the spread of Islam. Recruiters pointed out that Russian courts were prohibiting the publication of the *hadiths* as well as certain translations of the *Qur'an*. Reference was made to the fact that in many regions of Russia, mosques were being demolished while the building of new ones was becoming increasingly difficult.[44] For example, a father whose son had joined ISIS in 2014 told the authors:

> "My wife and I were distraught when we heard that our son had gone to Syria…. Recruiters 'brain-washed' him and convinced him [to join ISIS], by telling him that in Russia Muslims found themselves in a depressed [and terrible] situation. [They told him that] courts in Russia were prohibiting the translation of the *Qu'ran* and the publication of the hadiths. [They said to him] that the authorities in the Stavropol Territory were even destroying mosques, and that it was generally difficult to obtain permissions to build new mosques. This was all because the authorities in Russia were 'Godless', [they said]. "We must leave Russia and join the real Islamic state," they insisted. And he, naively, believed their words that supposedly a real Islamic state [was being established] in Syria and Iraq. Then, when he went there, he saw that this was not the case, but it was already too late".[45]

The prognosis frameworks promoted by ISIS—the solution to Muslim suffering and humiliation—lay in the establishment of an Islamic state, where Muslims could live their faith to the full extent without 'violence and repressions'. The online propaganda, in this respect, placed emphasis on the purpose and the necessity for Muslims to create an Islamic state, as the latter 'would revive the duty [of Muslims] to establish an authority that would protect Muslims, by uniting them under a single banner, and in this way, fulfil Allah's words, "Hold on to Allah's faith and do not get divided".[46] It was in the Islamic state that Muslims would finally be able to live according to their faith and their *Shari'a*. As expressed in the *Istok* magazine, 'The Islamic State is fighting to ensure the supremacy of the word of Allah. And there is no supremacy of the word of Allah until we establish Sharia [law]'.[47]. Within the Islamic States, Muslims would feel safe and would no longer be persecuted. All other lands were Muslims lived, or even lands ruled at the time by Muslim rulers, were not considered truly Muslim, as no Muslim laws were properly enforced.[48] The existence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria reinforced this paradigm even further and proved to be a particularly powerful recruitment frame. In the Middle East, young Muslims from the North Caucasus saw a controlled territory and a chance to realize their dreams of living in a society regulated by *Shari'a* law.[49]

These same prognosis frames were also strongly promoted by individual recruiters. As noted by a Dagestani citizen who had met an ISIS recruiter: 'He [the recruiter] praised the Islamic state. He stated that the Islamic State was an authentic state for Muslims, a real Caliphate. If you are a true Muslim, he added, you must travel to the Islamic State and help them build a strong Islamic state. You cannot live and serve in a non-Muslim state'.[50] This promising view of the Islamic caliphate was similarly publicised by those North Caucasians who were already in Syria and Iraq and were trying to recruit their own relatives. For example, the father of a Dagestani Muslim who moved to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria told the authors, 'My son and I were constantly in touch through *WhatsApp*… he wrote to me from there: come here, we have a real Islamic government here, we are our own masters and we ourselves can build a real Islamic state! He regularly wrote about this to us and called us to join him there'.[51]

In addition to these diagnostic and prognostic frameworks, powerful motivational frameworks were also introduced. Calls for *jihad* became the rallying cry. It was made clear that the duty of every Muslim was to join the *jihad* in Syria and the Levant on the side of the Islamic State.[52] Appeals were made by ISIS Russian-language online propaganda on Muslims in the North Caucasus (and elsewhere in Russia) to join the fight or *jihad* against the Crusaders, from 'both the West [France, the United States and other European countries] and the East [i.e. Russia],' who were conducting a 'war of aggression against Muslims,' in their attempts to destroy the Islamic State.[53] Muslims were encouraged to attack Russia and the West through terrorist acts, which would ensure that 'the Crusaders would taste a [kind of] suffering they had not expected'.[54] Those ISIS 'martyrs' who had perished in their attempts to hit at the West (during the Paris 2015 attacks, for example) were to be revered as 'heroes of monotheism and *jihad*,' who 'had given their souls to the noblest of causes'.[55] Relieving the pain of Muslims and struggling against the 'infidels' and the 'takfirs' in Syria was considered an individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) for all Muslims. Violent actions against 'infidels' were justified on the grounds that

they had committed crimes against Islam. 'There is little doubt that these two countries [France and Russia] destroyed their homes with their own hands, having started a war against Islam, against Muslims and against the Caliphate,' the *Istok* magazine noted.[56]

Furthermore, within this specific context, ISIS recruiters regularly mentioned the 'imminent onset of the End of the World,' and this proved particularly significant as it attracted a high number of followers to join ISIS and fight 'on the side of Islam'.[57] In an interview with an individual who had met ISIS recruiters, one of this article's authors was told: 'This recruiter told us that it was imperative to travel to Syria, because that is where 'real *jihad*' is currently taking place. Soon the Day of Judgement will come, and Muslims have to take the right side'.[58] ISIS online propaganda also regularly emphasized that all over the world events were taking place which indicated the approach of the Day of Judgment, especially in view of some defining traits of the West's way of life—tolerance towards homosexuality, the emancipation of women, and the embrace of a secularized society—which did not place Islam at the heart of its essence. These points were also raised by ISIS recruiters, who contacted local young Dagestani Muslims, as noted by one individual interviewed by the authors: 'The recruiter said that we live in a completely sinful society. We responded by saying that we are not behaving badly, we do not sin and [instead] strive to do everything which is required from Muslims: we regularly pray and fast. The recruiter responded by telling us that even if we did not do anything wrong, we nevertheless lived in a sinful society. Look, he added, they are already allowing two men to marry. This is abominable, and you live next to this abomination'. [59]

These Western lifestyles and political arrangements were seen as contradicting the main tenets of Islam, in particular the notion of *tawhid* or monotheism. They presaged the arrival of the end of time and the imminent outbreak of the 'final battle' between good and evil. In order to strengthen the eschatological argument, and make it sound convincing, ISIS recruiters extensively used a specific hadith which refers to the towns of Dabiq and Amak. This hadith stated that the 'last battle', between 'Romans' (Christians) and Muslims, in eschatological terms, would take place exactly in Syria and in the Levant, near the town of Dabiq.[60] Many foreign fighters who travelled to Syria took this hadith very seriously, including Dagestani *jihadists*.[61] Dabiq became to them the most important point on earth, surpassing even the significance of the Kaaba in Mecca.[62] This crucial eschatological element seems to explain, according to many of our informants, why so many Muslims in Russia and elsewhere migrated or fulfilled *hijra* to the sacred land of 'Sham'—Syria and the Levant. Many North Caucasus Muslims went to Syria not only to find social justice, but more importantly to take part in the 'final battle' before the arrival of Isa (Jesus), and the Messiah—the Mahdi—who many saw as embodied in ISIS's new 'caliph', Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Their local difficulties and personal grievances were all placed and shaped by this global 'eschatological' context.[63]

The Resonance of ISIS Collective Frames in Dagestan

These frames resonated strongly within Dagestani society, primarily because the level of religiosity among Muslims in this republic is particularly high when compared to the Muslim republics of the Western North Caucasus. A large-scale sociological survey conducted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan is, in this respect, particularly revealing. It brought to light the increased support for religious answers to public issues in Dagestan, especially among the young, thus reflecting the growing Islamisation of the republic, which in turn, partly explains why support for ISIS grew locally among the youth.[64] To the question as to 'how should society address its problems?', 47.6 percent of those interviewed among the Dagestani youth indicated a preference for religious norms and *Shari'a* law, as opposed to 'science and secular laws', a response which was supported by only 30,1 percent of the respondents.[65] The same survey showed that 68,9 percent of those young Dagestanis interviewed considered that Muslim believers should observe the law only if the latter did not contradict their Muslim faith, whereas only 15,4 percent considered that laws had to be observed in all cases, 'because all power comes from God'.[66] Finally, 52 percent of young Dagestanis, considered that Muslims should not, in any way, engage in any activity that contradicted *Shari'a* law in the conduct of their official duties, while only 6,6 percent of those interviewed noted that Dagestanis should fulfil their duties regardless, even if they contradicted *Shari'a* law. Furthermore, 19,8 percent of young Muslims

interviewed said that they could not be patriots of a non-*Shari'a* state.[67] These surveys clearly indicate that firstly, a significant number of Muslims in Dagestan wished to live in an Islamic state (even if they were not entirely familiar with *Shari'a* law) and second, that their first identity and attachment was towards the Muslim *umma*—rather than towards the Russian state or towards their own ethnic nationality.

This perception by Muslim Dagestanis of belonging to a broader Islamic community was reinforced in the period 2000–2010 as a result of the strengthening of Islamist traditions and Islamic education inside Dagestan. For example, in a number of Dagestani localities, in particular in Gymry, Balakhani, Gubden and Gurbuki, children no longer attend secular comprehensive schools and instead join Islamic schools, while in some localities, such as Gubden, it was found that several hundred girls no longer go to school for religious reasons.[68] On Fridays, university students have been allowed to leave class to attend prayers at the Mosque, while institutes of Islamic learning have been able to exist outside the control of the local Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan and the Russian educational system.[69] Furthermore, in several mountainous villages, disputes are increasingly resolved according to *Shari'a* law, indicating a growing Islamisation of the republic.[70] Researchers have also observed the destruction of monuments and burial sites that do not correspond to Islam.[71] Moreover, almost every newspaper in Dagestan contains a section devoted to the discussion of Islamic topics—Islamic theology, jurisprudence and Muslim world affairs. Similarly, regional radio stations and television channels provide ample airtime to programs of an Islamic nature. In other words, Islam and religion have penetrated many dimensions of Dagestani society, increasing the ties between local Muslims and the broader Muslims *umma*.

Considering themselves part of a broader Muslim *umma*, many young individuals in the Dagestan—as well as elsewhere—felt the need to support their Muslims brothers in Syria who were suffering at the hands of Bashir al-Assad. Relieving the pain of Muslims and struggling against the 'infidels' and the 'takfirs' in Syria was considered an individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) for all Muslims. As was noted in 1998 by Abdullah Azzam, the main ideologue of the Arabs fighting against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, *military jihad* was considered *compulsory*, 'until the liberation of the last piece of land which was in the hands of Muslims but has been occupied by Disbelievers'.[72] During his stay in Afghanistan, Azzam had raised the position of *jihad* to make it the most important obligation after belief in Islam itself.[73] Protecting Muslim lands was considered *'the First obligation after īmān, (faith)'*, as the title of his book notes.[74] Azzam's understanding of *jihad* was then incorporated by *Al Qaeda*, and by its branches and affiliates, including the Islamic State—originally *Al Qaeda in Iraq*, and then renamed *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*.

This explains why ISIS framing resonated with many young Muslims in Dagestan, and why many highly educated Muslims decided to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight *jihad* and live in an Islamic state. The strength of Islamic beliefs among many Dagestanis is perhaps best exemplified in the words of a Dagestani ISIS preacher (and recruiter) Murad Atayev, who was based in a Berlin Mosque, and who noted, 'People who have beliefs are willing to sacrifice their lives for their realisation. Especially if they are convinced that their struggle or their actions will be rewarded with paradise'.[75] As reported by Elena Milashina, who travelled to the village of Novosasitli in the Khasavyurt region of Dagestan—from where 22 villagers left for Syria—'if you ask [the] question [as to why people left], the most common answer [you will receive] is a quote from the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad about holy war in Sham (Syria). The *hadith* stated essentially, that if a faithful Muslim does not engage in *jihad*, in order to create the Caliphate, he will not be able to go to heaven'.[76] This *hadith* was widely circulated in the internet after the outbreak of war in Syria.

ISIS Recruitment Network and the Opportunity Costs to Join ISIS

Powerful collective frames are, however, not enough in explaining the mobilisation of Dagestanis to Syria and Iraq. It does not allow us fully to respond to the question as to why some Dagestanis joined the jihad while others did not. A second, very important, element facilitating the flow of North Caucasus jihadists to Syria—as highlighted by Social Movement and Resource Mobilisation Theory—centred around the mechanism of ISIS recruitment and mobilisation. Contrary to the widespread view regarding the Internet's exceptional role

in recruiting ISIS supporters, personal recruiters also played an extremely relevant part in mobilizing young Dagestanis to join ISIS. They became responsible for completing what had initially begun as online agitation. Real individuals supplied youngsters with instructions on how to drive to the territory of the Islamic State, whom to contact and how to cross the border.[77] Networks of support and structures of recruitment based primarily in Turkey also became particularly active, organising and helping with the movement of volunteers from the North Caucasus to Syria and Iraq.[78] These also included high-profile operatives and ideologues belonging to the Caucasus Emirate, who aided in the mobilisation effort through their own personal networks and contacts.[79]

Research conducted by the authors showed that Dagestani recruiters also operated quite actively locally, in Dagestan, in a similar fashion as Chechens did among Muslim migrant communities in Moscow and other Russian cities.[80] Personal ties and social connections—as well as previous membership of the Caucasus Emirate—proved to be particularly relevant in pushing many young Dagestanis to join the Islamic State. Many Caucasus Emirate leaders in Dagestan even swore allegiance to ISIS inside Dagestan without leaving the republic, such as Rustam Asilderov (Abu Muhammad al-Kadari) who had been the head of the Caucasus Emirate Dagestani Wilayah and then became the emir of the Caucasus Province of ISIS or the *Wilayah al-Qawqaz*, and Suleiman Zailanabidov, emir of the Dagestani Aukhov *jamaat*. More importantly, charismatic Muslims preachers from Dagestan such as Nadir Abu Khalid (Nadir Medetov) and Akhmad Medinsky joined ISIS in Syria and called on Muslims to make *hijra* (emigrate) to Syria and Iraq and fight for the Caliphate, claiming that such actions were an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) for each Muslim.[81] References were made to the notion of *zulm* (the subjugation and suffering of the oppressed), and to the obligation of Muslims to assist Syrians in their plight.[82]

Analysis of the recruiting efforts of the Islamic State in the territory of Russia, including Dagestan, also suggests that this was not a chaotic enterprise, but instead a well-organized activity that had its own strategy. ISIS recruiters had instructions as to who should be recruited first. Much attention was paid, for example, to information technology specialists, oil workers, doctors and nurses, not just fighters, and this explains also how many non-fighters were recruited. Field studies also showed that all of those who left for the Middle East kept their ties with relatives and friends. The preservation of these ties was encouraged since it was considered one of the channels through which it was possible to carry out further recruitment. Those who were already based in the Islamic State purposefully created a picture of paradisal life under Islamic law, so that the *hijra* would become attractive to ever more people.[83] To summarise, social and personal networks became powerful instruments of recruitment and mobilisation of young Dagestani Muslims to ISIS.

A third element which weighed in favour of joining the Islamic state (or indeed any other *jihadist* group in Syria) related to the opportunity costs involved in travelling to Syria—as opposed to staying in, or returning to, the North Caucasus—for those North Caucasians willing to fight *jihad* against Russia and its allies in the Middle East. In months and year preceding the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Russian Federal authorities engaged in an extremely active and effective counter-insurgency campaign together with the local North Caucasus authorities which decapitated most of the Caucasus Emirate's leadership and significantly weakened the movement. Caucasus Emirate Dagestanis were particularly hard hit—the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, Aliaskhab Kebekov (Ali Abu Muhammad) and Magomed Suleymanov (Abu Usman Gimrisnky) were killed and so was Said Kamilov (Said Arakhansky), who had replaced Aseldirov as Dagestani emir, as well as the Dagestani Mountain sector emir Gadzhi Abdulayev (Abu Dudzhana Gimrinsky).[84] In this respect, the strong repressive measures carried out by the Russian Federal and local authorities in the North Caucasus against violent and non-violent Salafi activity, including closure of mosques and prayer houses, *halal* cafes as well as mass arrests of believers at mosques, undoubtedly pushed many North Caucasus, primarily—but not only—in Dagestan, to emigrate to Syria.[85]

In Dagestan, in particular, the security forces launched a heavy-handed counter-insurgency campaign when Ramazan Abdulatipov replaced Magomedsalam Magomedov as President of Dagestan in January 2013. Most Salafi madrasas, children's kindergarten and sports clubs, were closed, while all efforts at reconciliation between Sufis and moderate *Salafis*—which had been initiated by President Magomedov in 2010—were halted. The

commission on the rehabilitation of fighters which had been set up by Magomedov to ease the transition of former Caucasus Emirate fighters into civilian life was shut down, and in its place a much less effective commission on 'Reconciliation and Harmony' was set up. Mass arrests and other acts of repression were carried out against relatives of insurgents, leading to a significant number of deaths and compelling many Salafis to abandon the republic [86]. While Dagestani politicians showed their allegiance to Islam, in order to gain the support of local people, by for example encouraging the opening of prayer rooms in government buildings, constraints on the full development of an Islamic life in Dagestan remained in place. Restrictions were imposed on the publication of certain versions of the *Qu'ran* while the implementation of *Shari'a* law—although sometimes tolerated—was considered illegal by the Federal authorities.[87] Furthermore, many Salafi Mosques were closed, to the chagrin of their followers who considered officially sanctioned Islamic institutions as being compromised by the authorities and as promoting a kind of 'traditional' Islam which clashed with the 'purist' versions of Salafi Islam. Sufi practices, which were embraced by the official authorities, were considered by Salafis as a form of polytheism or *shrik*, and therefore incompatible with the principle of *tawhid* or monotheism—a key tenet of Salafi Islam.[88]

The harassment of North Caucasus Muslims contrasted with the relative easiness with which not only North Caucasus jihadists based in Turkey but also in the North Caucasus were able to move into Syria and Iraq during the first years of the conflict—up until 2015. As noted by Murad Atayev, 'No contacts are needed, everyone knows the way you need to go to reach Turkey, then cross the border, and be in Syria. Transitions there are free. Turkey turns a blind eye to everything, it has no other option, it will not enter into conflict with the Islamic State'.[89] Furthermore, the flow of *jihadists* to Syria and Iraq was facilitated by the unofficial and hidden efforts conducted by the Russian authorities to squeeze *Salafis* beyond the boundaries of the North Caucasus and Russia as a whole on the eve of the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014—a policy which continued for a while even after the Games' completion.[90] According to a *Reuters* report, militant *Salafis* were approached by the Russian authorities and provided with new passports, new names and a one-way ticket to Istanbul in order to entice them to leave the region.[91] Many of these individuals, six of whom were identified by Reuters, ended up in Syria. Returning home and fighting *jihad* in the North Caucasus, instead, became increasingly difficult in view of the robust counter-insurgency efforts launched by Russia in the North Caucasus ahead of the 2014 Sochi Olympics.[92]

Last but not least, the challenging structural socio-economic realities of Dagestan, which were characterised by the absence of opportunities to climb the social ladder and a lack of promising economic prospects, pushed many young individuals into joining ISIS.[93] Evidence shows that several young Dagestanis who outwardly appeared well off nevertheless became radicalized and decided to join ISIS, despite having good jobs and rather good prospects for individual professional advancement. These individuals felt the injustices of the existing rules in their local communities, which prevented them from achieving positions of relevance in society. Joining the Islamic State became an appealing alternative, both rationally and emotionally. ISIS' Salafi Islamist ideologies, with their spiritual egalitarianism, proved particularly appealing also to those young individuals in Dagestan who were particularly frustrated with their existing socio-economic conditions. The condemnation by Salafis of traditional forms of social organisation and local customs struck a chord with those young individuals in search of a remedy for their socio-economic distress.[94] These same structural factors and socio-economic deficiencies which had pushed many to join the Caucasus Emirate in the 2000s again influenced many young Muslims in Dagestan to abandon the region and travel to the Middle East to live an Islamic life once ISIS established itself in 2014, as was reported in many of the interviews conducted with relatives of ISIS fighters.[95]

Conclusion

As this article has shown, a combination of powerful ISIS collective frames and effective recruitment methods, together with the challenges of conducting *jihad* in the North Caucasus explain why such a large number of Dagestanis travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State, as well as other jihadist groups. As postulated by Social Movement and Resource Mobilisation Theories, ISIS utilised informal networks and a variety of

effective communication channels to promote their messages and achieve their goal of recruiting Muslims from Dagestan to their cause. Online propaganda outlets and social networks became powerful instruments of ISIS recruitment and mobilisation among young Dagestani Muslims. They allowed ISIS apologists to propagate effectively their strong and appealing messages and attract many followers to their call in Dagestan. ISIS' convincing frames centred around the plight of Muslims both in Syria/Iraq and in Russia (diagnostic frame), the righteousness of the Islamic State (prognosis frame) and the duty of all Muslims to engage in *jihad* in order to establish, protect and strengthen the Islamic State (motivational frame).

The call for *jihad* 'resonated' particularly strongly in Dagestan, a region with a long Islamic tradition not only in the field of education and scholarship, but also in terms of social habits and the local administration of justice. It clearly tapped on young Muslims' sensibilities, and their perceptions of belonging to the broader Muslim *umma*, motivating them to act. In this respect, the social and psychological dynamics of mobilisation—Dagestanis' feelings of distress and rage in the face of Syrian Muslims' suffering—combined with more rational cost-benefit analysis—the better chances of fighting *jihad* in Syria—helped to push Dagestanis to leave the republic.

The materialisation of an Islamic State—albeit with clear inherent weaknesses—in the territory of Syria and the Levant appealed to many Dagestanis eager to live in a state where *Shari'a* law was fully implemented and where *Salafi* Muslims would feel safe. This contrasted sharply with the challenges of fulfilling an Islamic *Salafi* life in Dagestan, especially after Abdulatipov came to power in 2013, when an aggressive campaign against any expression of 'non-traditional' Islamic manifestations was forcefully carried out. Furthermore, for those more committed Dagestani Muslims ready to fight *jihad* in order to establish an Islamic state ruled by *Shari'a* law, staying in the North Caucasus no longer became a viable option. The very effective counter-terrorism operations of the Russian government and the Dagestani authorities during 2013 and 2015 eliminated almost the entire Caucasus leadership, as well as many lower rank emirs. Fighting against Russia and its allies in Syria emerged as a much more attractive—and potentially successful—alternative. In other words, a rational cost/benefit analysis and an emotional sense of duty motivated young and committed Dagestani Muslims to join the Islamic State.

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