Gender and Jihad: Women from the Caucasus in the Syrian Conflict

by Aleksandre Kvakhadze

Abstract

According to media reports, hundreds of women from the North Caucasian republics, Georgia and Azerbaijan have migrated to jihadi-controlled territories. This article has a threefold aim: to discuss the motivational features of female volunteers from the Caucasus region, to describe their functional role, and to explain their limited involvement in the hostilities. The findings indicate that the motivation for most women volunteers from the Caucasus has involved family relationships; further, rather than participating in combat, they have served in various supportive positions.

Keywords: Women, Syria, jihad, foreign fighters

Introduction

In 2013, Seda Dudurkaeva, the daughter of Asu Dudurkaev, the director of the Federal Migration Services of the Chechen Republic, left her family and went to Syria, along with her fiancé, a Georgian-born ethnic Chechen militant. This was shocking news in Chechnya and led to her father's resignation after a fiery speech by Ramzan Kadyrov. Nor is Dudurkaeva the sole example of a Caucasian female participant in the Syria–Iraq conflict. Hundreds of women from the Caucasus region were reported to have joined the insurgency in the Middle East.[1]

Although the Syrian conflict has led to a considerable migration wave of women volunteers from other countries, Caucasian female volunteering to Syria is a relatively new and understudied phenomenon. Uncertainty surrounds the causal mechanisms of such mobilization and the functional role of these women in the conflict.

This article is intended as a first endeavour in the academic examination of the role of female members of the Caucasian foreign fighter groups. The first section of this article reviews the literature and presents the conceptual parameters related to women's involvement in Jihad as foreign fighters. The second section explains the methodology used in data collection and the third offers a historical overview of women's involvement in North Caucasian militant groups. The next section draws together key findings of the author's field research on the living conditions of insurgent families in the conflict zone, also discussing the activities of female volunteers, the root causes of their mobilization and the degree of their involvement in jihad. In the final section, the author analyses the material and describes gender-specific constraints among Russian-speaking militant groups fighting in Syria and Iraq. Although compared to Western female militants, the overall share of Caucasian women was higher, the degree of their involvement in jihadi activities was lower.

Perspectives on Jihad and Women

Jihad (from the Arabic verb *jahada* 'struggle', 'labour', 'exert effort') is a multi-faceted, abstract concept with military as well as non-military components. The military component draws on what is seen as a legitimate form of waging warfare in accordance with four main schools of Islamic Sharia law.[2] According to some ideologists, jihad as a tool of 'repulsion of the enemy aggressor' is the personal obligation of every individual Muslim (Arab. *fardh al-ayn*).[3] Contemporary jihad is a multidimensional and complex social movement, involving a huge variety of actors, ranging from combatants to ideologists, recruiters, propagandists and support personnel. All these actors are referred to collectively as *mujahedeen*—a term also covering female jihad participants. Although women have been an integral component of all jihadi movements, they have

been either almost entirely ignored by jihadi authors or noted only in passing. For instance, the ideologists of global jihad such as Abdullah Azzam, Dr. Fadl, Yusuf al-Uyayri and Anwar al Awlaqi permitted women to participate in supportive positions.[4] Further, despite a lack of consensus on female combat activities among Islamic scholars, some jihadi-oriented authors have attempted to find a Sharia justification for female suicide bombing operations.[5]

Similar to Jihadi authors, the conceptual framework of women in jihad has not been widely discussed in academia. From a sociological perspective jihad is understood both as collective action and a classic example of transnational activism, where individuals join the war theatre regardless of its geographic location or their own ethnic and national origin. Transnational actors, according to Sidney Tarrow, are defined as 'corporate bodies other than a state with which people across national bodies identify themselves'.[6] The theory of transnational activism has been successfully applied to the study of foreign fighters.[7] Female participants of jihad have been named "female foreign fighters" in Western academic literature as well as in the media. The definitional parameters of the term "foreign fighter" have been widely debated in academic publications. [8] One widely accepted definition is 'non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants, who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities'.[9] Nevertheless, as noted above, entering the theatre of war does not necessarily involve actual combat participation, as volunteers may serve in non-combatant positions. Women in jihad insurgency can be understood as part of the broader jihadi phenomenon, which is a form of transnational activism.[10]

Despite various academic publications and media reports on Russian-speaking male jihadi militants, there has been little examination of the gender aspects related to transnational insurgents from the Caucasus region. Case studies of Western and Middle Eastern female volunteers in Syria and Iraq provide some statistics and insights regarding the motivational features of female jihadis.[11][12] The vast majority of these authors agree that despite some regional-specific differences, Western women in Syria and Iraq have been involved in non-combatant activities and have had a complex set of motivational drivers whereby religious conviction played a central role. However, there has been almost no discussion of the role of women in the Russian context, except in connection with suicide attacks. Some policy-oriented reports describe certain aspects of female jihadi volunteerism from Georgia and the North Caucasus.[13]

Methodology and Data Collection

This article draws on intensive and highly focused qualitative case-study research. The case- study approach was chosen to obtain in-depth information on female voluntarism from the Caucasus region, studying female foreign fighters from the Caucasus region (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Southern Russia) as a single unit.

Throughout the research process, the author encountered three major obstacles. Firstly, there is a scarcity of available reliable textual sources on female voluntarism from the region. Very few women with some degree of involvement in the insurgency have been approached by either media or researchers. However, the author has been able to analyse the existing media outputs and policy-oriented reports concerning Russian-speaking women in Syria. Secondly, the author was constrained by space and security considerations and was unable to conduct fieldwork in the North Caucasus, Syria, and Azerbaijan. The disadvantage here is the absence of narratives from the female volunteers themselves. Thirdly—perhaps the most striking limitation—was the unwillingness of female foreign fighters to be interviewed or contacted by outsiders.

In all, the author managed to conduct 10 qualitative semi-structured interviews. Respondents were selected on the basis of their relation to female foreign fighters (as family members, relatives, neighbours, friends) and/or their involvement in jihadi groups (as former foreign fighters, members or supporters of jihadi groups, or local Salafi activists). Further, two female respondents who had visited Syria (Aleppo and Raqqa, respectively) provided invaluable information regarding the living conditions and functional role of women in Syrian militant groups. The interviews were recorded during the author's fieldwork in the Pankisi Gorge and in the Gardabani municipality in Georgia. Respondents were asked for details about female foreign fight-

ers (age, previous occupation, marital status, religiousness, education, role in Syria), and for their own narrative on the female jihadi volunteerism (Why did they go to Syria? What was the key motivating feature?). Some female respondents were unwilling to communicate with a male researcher, so the author employed as research assistant Luiza Mutoshvili, a secondary school teacher and activist from the Pankisi Gorge. She recorded two interviews alone, and one together with the author.

Female Militancy in the Caucasus

The civil war in Syria and Iraq was the first case of massive volunteerism of Caucasian insurgents beyond the Caucasus region since the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite establishing linkages with Middle Eastern jihadi foreign fighters during the First and Second Chechen Wars, militants from North Caucasus were few in the jihadi insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s. The Syrian conflict led to a decline in the local insurgency in the North Caucasus, linked to the mass migration of jihadi militants and their supporters to the Middle East. According to official estimates, thousands of residents of the Caucasus region volunteered to join the Syrian conflict and some of them held leadership positions within larger transnational jihadi groups.[14] This volunteerism has been accompanied by an increasing mobilization of women.

The migration of women from the Caucasus to Syria was preceded by two periods of activism among female militants. The first period was related to the First Chechen War (1994–1996). According to the former leader of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, at that time local women served as nurses, surgeons, or other medical and supportive personnel. He mentioned tens of female combatants, including Aset from village Yandi, who had taken part defeating Russian special forces.[15][16] Chechen women also have been reported as snipers, sappers, and radio operators.[17]

The second phase begun with the Second Chechen War, as the character of Chechen armed resistance gradually drifted from the ethnic-nationalistic towards the jihadi agenda.[18] Women became more actively involved in the conflict. Instead of serving as active combatants, some women were employed as suicide bombers, and were labelled by Russian media as *cherniye vdovy* ("black widows"). In the early 2000s, the suicide attacks perpetrated by Chechen women targeted the Russian federal forces inside Chechnya, gradually assuming a strategic character and mostly launched outside Chechnya.[19] Inside Chechnya the suicide attacks were usually perpetrated by military lorries loaded with explosives targeting Russian military personnel, while outside Chechnya civilians were equally targeted, mostly by carrying explosive material.[20] On the individual level these operations represent the combination of religious conviction with acts of revenge and responses to the atrocities perpetrated by the federal authorities; on the strategic level, the function of suicide bombing operations was twofold: psychological operations against the enemy, and boosting the morale of Chechen fighters.[21] For example, the prominent Chechen war-song performer of the late 1990s, Timur Mutsurayev, dedicated one of his compositions to the suicide bomber Hava Barayeva, portraying her as a martyr and hero:

> *"The lorry is headed towards the commandant office*
> *It is loaded by the plastic explosive and [her] destiny,*
> *And the lovely face is seen from its cabin*
> *The face of Hava, who decided to sacrifice herself."*[22]

Nevertheless, contrary to the cases of Sri Lanka, Lebanon, and Palestine, there was not strong societal support for the practice of female suicide bombing. Even the videos of martyrdom were primarily designed for external audiences and potential sponsors.[23]

Since the declaration of Imarat Kavkaz (the Caucasus Emirate) by Dokku Umarov in 2007, no cases of women combatants in the North Caucasus have been reported in open sources.[24] However, several suicide

attacks perpetrated by women took place in the North Caucasus and other regions of the Russian Federation. In its communiqué, the Imarat Kavkaz leadership ignored the issue of women as the participants of jihad. Dokku Umarov's successor Aliaskhab Kebekov challenged the legitimacy of female suicide attacks and even forbade the use of female suicide bombers.[25]

Caucasian Women in Syria: Why Did They Go?

The principal limitation of the current research is the lack of reliable statistics on women who have moved to Syria and Iraq. According to data gathered by Joana Cook and Gina Vale, 23% of Eastern European (Caucasus and Balkans) Islamic State (hereafter: IS) affiliates were mature women, which is the second largest share figure next only to Eastern Asia.[26] Given the fact that the overall percentage of female IS-associates is 13%, the data indicates an unprecedented mobilization of women from the Caucasus.[27] In the fall of 2017, the International Committee of the Red Cross received a list of 231 Russian citizens, predominantly family members of militants, captured by Iraqi forces.[28] According to official estimates, approximately 300 Azerbaijani women and children had been arrested by the Iraqi forces.[29] The representative of the Chechen human rights Ombudsman Kheda Saratova noted that 338 women and 643 children from Russia were captured in Syria and Iraq.[30] Milton and Dodwell, on the other hand, provided data on the ethnicity and numbers of residents of IS-controlled female guesthouses in Raqqa: Dagestan: 200, Azerbaijan: 61, Chechnya: 50, Kabardino-Balkaria: 10, Ingushetia: 7, Georgia: 6 (including one woman from breakaway Abkhazia), and Karachayevo-Cherkesia: 4.[31] These figures suggest a low degree of mobilisation from North West Caucasus, compared to other regions.

Through interviews and monitoring of media reports, a set of root causes contributing to recruitment emerged. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed by this author felt that the main motivations for migrating to the conflict zone were marriage and family relationships, with women moving to the Middle East along with their husbands. The examination of the marital status of women from Syrian IS female guesthouse suggests that only 10% of women were single, whereas 77% were married, 5% widowed, and 8% divorced.[32] According to Mia Bloom, community relations and respect are major motivational features for women to join the clandestine armed group.[33] As the mother-in-law of one woman who had visited her son in Syria explained:

> "They [women] were alongside their husbands. The traditions of the Kists [34] strictly forbade sending women to the front line. Women were restricted as regards communicating with other men except their husbands. Women and children stayed in private houses in Raqqa, but they would shift their place of residence in accordance to the battle plan. They even did not have contact with their neighbours. Their primary function was housekeeping, for example, doing the cooking."[35]

Some informants emphasized cases where husbands had coerced their wives into going. One of them mentioned a Georgian militant who had forced his mother, who had visited him in the conflict zone, to remain in Syria.[36] On the other hand, there were also cases where love led women to leave for Syria. One well-known case is Seda Dudurkaeva, who met her future husband, Khamzat al-Shishani, via the internet. She eventually left her family and arrived in Syria in 2013 to marry Khamzat.[37]

A second motivating factor was the prestige jihad enjoyed in local communities. Marrying an active mujahedeen or being a *shaheed* widow was prestigious among the female supporters of jihad. According to one interviewee, key motivations included the large rebel-controlled territories, the possibility of pursuing a Sharia lifestyle, the perspective of financial support, and the opportunity of maintaining family life.[38] The story of 18-year-old Dagestani Victoria Budaikhanova, previously a waitress at McDonald's, who fled to Syria along with two female friends, might have been an example of the prestige of jihad. According to Budaikhanova's family and testimonies in the court, none of the girls had held radical views prior to leaving for Syria.[39] In

an interview, a secondary school teacher from the Pankisi Gorge disclosed one notable detail:

> "I had girl pupils at higher grades. In our community, it's common to marry early. When the matchmakers were sent to some of my girl pupils, the majority of girls told them 'If this man doesn't intend to travel to Syria I'm not interested in marrying him.'"[40]

Similar views featured in Sokirianskaia's report: "It's better to be the widow of a *shaheed* [martyr] than the wife of a coward."[41]

The third motivating factor seems to have been religious conviction. Women left for the conflict zone owing to a sense of religious duty to participate in jihad. A sizable number of volunteers to Syria, both male and female, initially viewed the Islamic project in the Syrian war as a realization of an ideal Islamic society governed by Sharia law.[42] One well-known case involved two Azerbaijani women, Irada Garibova and Ana Suleimanova, from the village of Karajala in Eastern Georgia, who escaped from their husbands and travelled to Syria. Reportedly, their motivation was the non-religiousness of the husbands, who were more interested in their business than caring about jihad.[43]

Family problems and domestic violence are the fourth motivating factor. This author came across a case where domestic violence was the main driver. According to an informant from Azerbaijani-populated Gardabani municipality:

> "One woman from our village married an Azerbaijani man and they moved to Petrozavodsk, Russia together. The husband had alcohol problems. He would systematically assault his wife and humiliate her. Meanwhile, the woman met the local Wahhabis and they introduced her to their doctrine. She realized that leaving for Syria was the only way to get away from her abusive husband. Eventually, she managed to escape and married in Syria."[44]

These four motivational features should not be understood as mutually exclusive. Women travelling to Syria and Iraq along with their husbands could potentially have been simultaneously driven by religious conviction. This author found some key differences between the mobilization of Caucasian and Western female recruits in the Syrian conflict. Compared to women from the Caucasus, the majority of the Western female recruits were young, aged between 16 and 24 and most of them left for Syria and Iraq from their childhood homes.[45] The motivational patterns identified for the Western female recruits were, as previously noted, willingness to participate in the state-building process of the Caliphate, escape from the "decadent and morally corrupt Western society", desire to become the wife of an active *mujahedeen*, and growing Islamophobia in the West.[46] The prospect of marrying a jihadi fighter was also a common motivation for the Middle Eastern female recruits.[47] In contrast, the majority of women from the Caucasus had already been married prior to their departure to Syria and Iraq and a desire to marry active male foreign fighters did not play a major role in their mobilisation. Additionally, as long as the majority of recruits from the Caucasus came from Muslim-majority and highly conservative regions, escaping from Westernised society and Islamophobia was unlikely to be a push factor for migration. However, the urge to pursue Sharia lifestyle can be considered as a similarity between the Western and Caucasian female recruits.

Studies of female foreign fighters from other countries have indicated that mobilization was driven by the urge to support the Muslim population of Syria which was suffering from the brutalities of an unjust regime. Thomas Hegghammer, in his case study of jihad in Saudi Arabia, noted that the volunteerism of young Saudis was determined by the love for fellow Muslims and the willingness to support Afghans, rather than hatred of the enemy.[48] However, none of our respondents mentioned this as a motivational feature—perhaps because the interviews were not obtained from women who volunteered themselves. This indicates that establishing motivation is a complex and multilayered process.

The Functional Role of Caucasian Women

Available media material, as well as this author's fieldwork, indicate four main areas where Caucasian women have been employed by jihadi militants.

First, in supportive roles. According to Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, female members of terrorist groups are usually employed in supportive positions.[49] This author's interviewees mentioned work such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of the children. All respondents noted that women spent most of their time with the children. Due to the armed conflict, there was no opportunity to give children elementary school education, which in turn meant an important role for the women. One respondent, however, did mention female doctors and nurses among Caucasian women in Syria.[50]

The second sphere where women from the Caucasus participated involved propaganda and information warfare. In spring 2016, IS online resources issued a video with the well-known Chechen pop-singer Azza Bataeva. Wearing a niqab, Bataeva tears up her Russian passport and her official awards, including the People's Artist award. According to the subtitles, 'Awards should be taken only on the path of Allah'. The video aimed to demonstrate the metamorphosis of Bataeva, from a provocatively dressed singer to a religious Muslim woman.[51] Although this video is a unique case, it demonstrates the possibility of involving women in jihadi propaganda.

A third function was suicide bombing, where there is only one such instance from the Caucasus. Dagestani Diana Ramazanova, the widow of Chechen IS militant Abu Edelbijev, detonated an explosive in Istanbul, near the Sultan Ahmet mosque.[52] There are no other reported cases of Caucasian female suicide bombers, nor did this author's respondents mention other cases. However, one informant who had visited Syria said that in some cases wives of Caucasian field commanders would always wear suicide belts in order to avoid the humiliation of capture.[53]

A fourth possible occupation was recruitment. After the Second Chechen War, occasional reports have been released regarding the arrests of Chechen or other North Caucasian women who were recruiting future female suicide bombers. Aside from media reports about a woman from the Caucasus who was apprehended on allegations of recruiting militants, transporting and accompanying them on their way to Syria, other information about female recruiters from the Caucasus is unavailable.[54]

The fifth potential function of female jihadis was involvement in combat or security issues. However, no cases of female combatants from the Caucasus region have been reported, or emerged from this author's field research. Overall, female jihadis, regardless of their ethnic origin, were not allowed to be soldiers of IS.[55] According to Jessica Davis, one example of women's security activity was the Al-Khansaa brigade which was responsible for patrolling the streets and regulating women's dress code in IS-captured areas.[56] In one of the interviews this author conducted it was suggested that the Al-Khansaa brigade used to be made up of local women; none of them were from the Caucasus.[57] Women in the Russian-speaking jihadi groups have never had an impact on the decision-making process but have been under the absolute control of the militant leadership. Female movement, behaviour, and the dress code were all restricted by the husbands. In this regard, there is a lack of significant difference between Caucasian and Western recruits.

In contrast to women from Caucasus, many IS-associated Western and the Middle Eastern women were publicly active in the blogosphere. Some of them were involved in jihadi propaganda through their Twitter profiles and wrote jihadi poems.[58] In the interviews, this author did not find any significant differences between the daily life and functions of Russian-speaking women in IS- and non-IS-controlled territories. As mentioned, two respondents had visited territories controlled by IS and *Jeish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar* (hereafter: JMA) respectively; their descriptions of women's functional roles in these territories were quite similar. Another important issue concerns the widows in Syria. Reportedly, widows or unmarried women were placed in widows' houses called *makkar*.[59][60] Two respondents had visited the widows' houses, in Raqqa and Aleppo, respectively. One respondent described the widows' house:

> "My daughter-in-law was staying in the widows' house in Raqqa. Women and children were living there. The conditions were basic. But the main discomfort was the crying of the children and it was difficult to sleep. Soon after the deaths of their husbands, women would marry other militants, who could provide for them materially, but there were no pressures in terms of marriage".[61]

Widows were encouraged to marry other militants. However, ethnic Caucasians, especially Chechen militants, usually tried to avoid marriages between Caucasian women and non-Russian speaking militants, especially local Arabs. For instance, one respondent mentioned the case of a pro forma Sharia marriage of a Georgian Chechen militant to a Chechen widow, in order to prevent her marriage with another militant.[62] That indicates the strong influence of ethnic kinship among Russian-speaking militants, regardless of the trans-ethnic nature of jihadi movements.

Explaining the Limited Role of Caucasian Female Foreign Fighters

Historically, women have been less likely to take part in combat or be appointed to policy-making and leadership positions in terrorist groups.[63] Instead, women in rebel groups have been used for managing a safe house, storing weapons, and counterfeiting documents.[64] Compared to Western and Middle Eastern women, some of whom were involved in writing social media contributions, Caucasian women were more restricted.[65] Interviews and analysis of sources have shown that Russian-speaking female foreign fighters were constrained by several factors.

Firstly, a noticeable feature is gender control and dependency on the spouses, diminishing the participation of female members of the groups. This extreme dependence on male rebels became evident when women were deprived of decent living conditions in the captured cities of Syria and Iraq. Following the loss of control over large settlements and the subsequent withdrawal of jihadi groups, hundreds of women from the Caucasus, along with other non-indigenous female volunteers, were unable to protect themselves or act independently from their husbands. This led to captivity by Kurdish militia, Iraqi or Syrian armed forces.[66]

Secondly, the low level of engagement in hostilities by the female volunteers was determined by the jihadis' interpretation of Sharia law. Key ideologists of contemporary jihad do not encourage the active involvement of women in jihad.[67] One male respondent, who participated in the Syrian conflict, explained the non-combat role of women as follows: 'the real Mujahideen would never allow women to participate in warfare'.[68] IS-owned web resources describe female members of the group as *munasirat* (supporters), not as *jundiyyat* (female combatants).[69] Regarding Caucasian jihadis, the single available text on female activities in jihad is a letter by Abdul-Halim al-Shishani, member the Sharia committee of JMA, released in 2014 on Kavkazcenter. Abdul-Halim first noted his concerns about the influx of many Russian-speaking women to Syria without a *mahram* (suitable male escort) or permission from their relatives. He added: 'Syria is not the right place for a pilgrimage, therefore we cannot encourage or force all Muslims, especially our sisters, to make it'. Furthermore, if 'our sister is subject to religious oppression and cannot freely follow the norms of Islam, instead of deciding to *safar* (travel) somewhere, she should marry a brother-follower of the Quran and Sunnah from her region, who has the intention to participate in jihad and make a Hijrah'.[70]

Thirdly, the patriarchal social norms widespread in the Caucasus region have significantly contributed to the limited role of female foreign fighters. According to Saida Sirazhudinova, the combination of Islamic practices and cultural-traditional norms determines gender roles in North Caucasian republics, which in some regions remain unchanged even after the arrival of modern technologies.[71] Two respondents from the Pankisi Gorge explained the restricted role of female volunteers in terms of the local tradition of obedience to one's husband.[72] These patriarchal norms are also evident in the repatriation of volunteer women to Chechnya, where the authorities have a more tolerant policy towards female members of the jihadi groups than towards males, as well as in the existence of so-called *legal pluralism*—the coexistence of Russian state law, Sharia, and customary law in North Caucasus, especially in Chechnya.[73][74]

Finally, as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have unfolded in foreign territories, women in the Caucasus have been less motivated to participate in hostilities. By contrast, the wave of female suicide-bomber attacks during the Second Chechen War was a response to the harsh counter-insurgency measures of the Russian troops, the practices of *zachistka* (cleansing operations) collective punishment, often accompanied by rape and physical or psychological torture.[75] In many cases, suicide bombers were driven by an urge for direct revenge.[76] The high-scale violence and atrocities in Chechnya substantially contributed to violent mobilization in the region.[77] Even the sole case of suicide bombing in the Syrian conflict, Diana Ramazanova, was probably motivated by the death of her husband. Unlike during the wars in Chechnya, the Syrian conflict has—at least for women from the North Caucasus travelling to Syria and Iraq—not produced the same deep psychological trauma that the atrocities committed against civilians in the Caucasus; therefore there was less need for revenge among women.

Conclusion

Female jihadi activism in foreign lands is a new phenomenon in the Caucasus region. Yet, existing data suggest that Dagestan, Azerbaijan and Chechnya had the highest mobilisation of the female volunteers. This article has sought to contribute to the debate on the phenomenon of female foreign fighters by investigating the motivation and role of Caucasian female foreign fighters. It has identified the key phases in female participation in the North Caucasian insurgency since the 1994 Russo–Chechen war and analysed the practical functions of female foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Similar to their counterparts from Europe and the Middle East, the vast majority of Caucasian female foreign fighters have served in supportive functions: only a few were reported to have been involved in propaganda, recruitment and suicide bombing. Unlike women from other regions, they have not been involved in writing jihadi poetry or producing propaganda in social media. It was found that key motivating factors were relationships, religious conviction, problems in the family, and domestic violence. The overwhelming majority of Caucasian women were married and followed their husbands, while women from Europe were mostly unmarried when they departed. However, these Caucasian women could well have been driven also by religious conviction, a sense of religious duty, or the social prestige attached to jihad. In this regard, they did not differ much from their European sisters.

In explaining the limited role of women within Caucasian jihadi groups in the Middle East, four key factors emerged: strong gender control, the jihadi Sharia narrative, the patriarchal culture in the Caucasus, and the absence of a strong local root cause. Indeed, the role of women in Russian-speaking foreign militant groups cannot be solely explained by the doctrine of jihad. The role of social dynamics and cultural practices widespread among Caucasian peoples needs to be taken into account.

Many unanswered questions remain regarding female jihadi activism in the Caucasus. Further studies should focus on the women repatriated to Chechnya and Dagestan, on female Caucasian prisoners in Syria and Iraq, on Caucasian children growing up in the conflict zone, and on region-specific trends in female volunteerism.

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Notes

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