

North Caucasus: between Russia, an emirate and a caliphate

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On 23 June the spokesman for Islamic State (IS) Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, announced that the organisation's leader – the self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had taken an oath from Islamic militants from the North Caucasus. He also declared the establishment of the Vilayat (a territorial unit) Caucasus which covers the region of the North Caucasus belonging to Russia. One of the leaders of Dagestan's armed underground Rustam Asildarov (Abu Muhammad al-Qadari) was appointed the leader of the vilayat. The fact that IS took the oath and established a vilayat is its response to a series of announcement which have been made since November 2014 by many leaders of armed groups in the North Caucasus. They have withdrawn their allegiance to their initial organisation, the Caucasus Emirate, and declared loyalty to IS (on 13 June the leader of Chechen militants Aslan Byutukayev was among those who pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi).

Commentary

- In the North Caucasus (mainly in Dagestan) there remain small armed groups loyal to the Caucasus Emirate and its present leader Magomed Suleymanov from Dagestan. Nevertheless, recent events in the region indicate that the end of the Caucasus Emirate as an armed terrorist organisation and a political project (an independent Islamic state covering the entire North Caucasus) is approaching. It is being gradually supplanted by the idea of a caliphate which is popular with militants from the Caucasus and a section of young people from the region. This idea is embodied by Islamic State which is sustaining military successes.
- The fact that IS has taken patronage over the Caucasian military underground and challenged Russia will not necessarily lead to a destabilisation of the situation in the Caucasus and an increased threat of terrorism in Russia. It is not likely to be in the interests of IS, whose priority is the Middle East front (Syria, Iraq, Yemen etc.), to openly antagonise Russia. Furthermore, the military underground in the Caucasus is weak, fragmented and rather lacking wide support in society. The objective behind the establishment of the *vilayat* is to motivate militants from the Caucasus fighting in the ranks of IS to strengthen their military engagement but above all to draw even more recruits from the region who are going to jihad in Syria and Iraq en masse (at present there are approximately 2,000-3,000 people from the Caucasus fighting in IS ranks). In consequence the situation in the region may paradoxically become more stabilised in the short term.

- Following on from previous policy, Russia (politicians, the media, analysts) is likely to exaggerate the threat from IS for both Russia and the post-Soviet area (the South Caucasus, Central Asia). This rhetoric will be aimed at the West and former USSR states. Moscow wishes to be perceived by its Western partners as a partner in the fight against international terrorism with whom one should co-operate and reach compromises in other areas which are key to Russia (e.g. the Ukrainian issue). The objective of this exaggeration towards former USSR countries is to persuade them to develop closer relations with Moscow with regard to political issues and security.