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Islamic State Commander Phones Dad to Warn 'Russia Is Next'

By Allison Quinn

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The Islamic State's infamous red-bearded commander known as Omar the Chechen has phoned his father to vow his impending "revenge against Russia," Bloomberg reported Thursday.

"I have many thousands following me now, and I'll get more," the commander, whose real name is Tarkhan Batirashvili, was quoted as telling his father. He then promised to come home and "show the Russians."

The ominous warning follows months of speculation that jihadists could use Batirashvili's native Pankisi Gorge — a Georgian hotbed of extremist activity — to penetrate Russia.

The Islamic State has put Russia high on its list of targets for the Kremlin's support of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The extremist group released a video on YouTube in early September personally threatening President Vladimir Putin and vowing to attack Russia.

"We will with the consent of Allah free Chechnya and all of the Caucasus! The Islamic State is here and will stay here, and it will spread with the grace of Allah!" a fighter was shown saying in the video.

Batirashvili has gained a fearsome reputation throughout the conflict in Syria, with analysts attributing many of the Islamic State's military gains to his leadership. He was blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury on Sept. 25 for his role in the conflict.

On Wednesday, in the aftermath of airstrikes led by U.S. and Kurdish forces in Kobane — a joint effort to keep the Islamic State from penetrating Turkey — a video went viral among Kurdish Internet users purporting to show Batirashvili amid major bloodshed.

The video, titled "A Chechen Dog of Abu Omar al-Shishani Dies at the Hands of Kurdish YPG," was still available on YouTube by the time of publication, and making the rounds on social media.

A man resembling Batirashvili can be seen kissing the forehead of a fighter who had apparently just bled to death in his arms. It was unclear where the video came from, but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights issued a statement Thursday confirming that dozens of Islamic State fighters had been killed in the airstrikes.

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