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Georgia's ISIS Problem: How to Stop Would-Be Jihadists?

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An Islamic State flag is seen near a barricade in Syria.

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The continued departure of young men for jihad in Syria is raising alarm in Georgia's Pankisi Valley, a Sunni Muslim area that allegedly has seen scores of men leave for the war over the past few years.

Parents from Pankisi have asked for the government's help to stop the trend. A photo that shows two Pankisi high schoolers armed and posing before the Islamic State flag in a jihadist training camp has added to the sense of urgency. Police had been searching for the duo since April 2, when they vanished after being seen entering the public school they attended.

Now, attention has begun to focus on Georgian border officers as well. One of the two, 16-year-old Muslim Kushtanashvili, allegedly used his father's passport to slip through the

Georgian-Turkish border. (Georgian citizens can enter Turkey visa-free.)

Angry members of Pankisi's council of elders have demanded that the government take greater responsibility for blocking such departures at the border. The Interior Ministry has started an investigation.

"It is a tragedy for an entire nation when kids are taken to war straight from their school desks," said Meka Khangoshvili, a Pankisi activist and adviser for the Georgian Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, in an interview with the Kakheti Information Center. She called on the government to step up efforts to integrate the secluded area into Georgian society.

At the same time, according to local media, parents blame individuals they term Wahhabis, who reportedly deny involvement, for the boys' departure to Syria, and also Abu Omar al-Shishani (born Tarkhan Batirashvili), a Pankisi-born commander with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Exasperation also appears targeted at the young jihadists themselves.

"This isn't our war. This also isn't Georgia's war, and what do our children want there?" Rustavi-2 cited members of Pankisi's council of elders as saying.

Another young runaway to Syria, Beslan Margoshvili, returned to his Pankisi home after allegedly briefly joining the Islamic rebel army, his father told Georgian media.

Pankisi resident Leila Achishvili, who lost two of her sons to the war in Syria, told the Kakheti Information Center that the area's scarce employment opportunities make Pankisi youth easy targets for recruitment.

"What can the young men do when there are no jobs, when they have nothing to do?" she asked. "Religion tells us that if you are a man, you have to provide for your family. It is also a matter of pride."

Last summer, EurasiaNet.org reported that some Pankisi residents downplayed claims of an outward-bound stream of Pankisi jihadists. One woman estimated that roughly 50 to 60 had left the gorge, but not recently.

Local media estimates that nine Pankisi residents, to date, have been killed in the fighting in Syria.

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