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# Experts Downplay Trend of Russians Joining Islamic State

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Scholars studying terrorism in Russia have warned that the recruitment of Russian nationals by foreign terrorist groups did not begin with the Islamic State.

Reports of Russian citizens taking up arms for the Islamic State terrorist group have dominated headlines in recent days, sparking debate about the cause of the apparent trend.

Andrei Novikov, head of the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) Anti-Terrorism Center, told the Interfax news agency Wednesday that according to certain estimates, as many as 5,000 Russian nationals may be among the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, a number significantly larger than most official figures.

"According to intelligence agencies, there are about 2,000 Russian citizens fighting for the Islamic State but certain expert estimates have put that number closer to 5,000," Interfax quoted Novikov as saying.

The new estimate comes on the heels of the high-profile case of 19-year-old Varvara Karaulova, a Moscow State University student who returned to Moscow last week after a failed attempt to cross Turkey's border with Syria, where she allegedly planned to join the Islamic State.

Scholars studying terrorism in Russia have warned that the recruitment of Russian nationals by foreign terrorist groups did not begin with the Islamic State, and noted that isolated incidents are not necessarily indicative of a nationwide trend.

### Divergent Estimates

Russian and foreign officials have presented divergent estimates in recent years of Russians having joined the Islamic State.

Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the Federal Security Service, said last May that some 200 Russians had joined armed groups in Syria.

Bortnikov's assessment was much lower than that of Syria's ambassador to Moscow, Riad Haddad, who said in December 2013 that some 1,700 Russian nationals from the North Caucasian republic of Chechnya were fighting in his country, the Kavkazsky Uzel (Caucasian Knot) news site reported.

Sergei Melikov, the Kremlin's envoy for the North Caucasus, said in March of this year that about 1,500 people from the volatile region were fighting alongside militant groups in Syria and Iraq.

Alexander Shumilin, a scholar specializing in Middle Eastern studies, told The Moscow Times that Russian nationals joining the Islamic State originate largely from the North Caucasus, which has been ravaged in recent decades by war and insurgency. This phenomenon is often rooted in disenchantment with the authoritarian rule in these recruits' native republics, he explained.

"Cases of Western Muslims joining the Islamic states are often linked to their incomplete assimilation into society," Shumilin said. "But among many Russian Muslims, the desire to join the organization stems from the desire to seek out new opportunities in life, something they are often unable to do at home. This is a common theme in authoritarian regimes with large Muslim populations. The Islamic State provides them with a way to align themselves with what they see as the Islamic spirit."

Experts suggested that money may also serve as a strong impetus for would-be recruits. The dire socio-economic conditions in Russia's Caucasus republics may have prompted the decisions of many of those that have joined the Islamic State. In January, Chechnya's unemployment rate rose to 17.8 percent, the highest figure of any region in the country, according to the Federal State Statistics Service. The republic of Ingushetia's unemployment rate also rose to 16.1 percent, towering above the national regional average of 5.3 percent.

But recruitment has not been limited to the North Caucasus. Bortnikov said Tuesday that more than 200 residents of Russia's Volga Federal District — which includes the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkiria — had joined the Islamic State.

## Media Frenzy

Akhmet Yarlykapov, a researcher at the Caucasus department of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said it was virtually impossible to come up with a precise figure for the number of foreign fighters in Syria. The figure cited by the CIS Anti-Terrorism Center, he said, could reflect the total number of Russians who presumably left the country to join the Islamic State but never succeeded in doing so.

The CIS Anti-Terrorism Center could not be reached to elaborate on the figure it cited.

Other Russian terrorism experts agreed that the figure appears to be exaggerated. Alexander Krylov, a senior researcher at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, said that the latest estimate could have been made in the wake of a media frenzy surrounding recent high profile terrorist recruitment case.

"I wouldn't say that recruitment for the Islamic State has become a mass phenomenon in Russia," Krylov told The Moscow Times. "Most of the Russian members of the Islamic State are of Muslim background and the other isolated individuals are often adventure-seekers who have decided to join the organization for mercenary purposes. We had one high-profile case [that of Karaulova] and the media immediately spun it as part of a growing trend. And the media reaction has forced officials to react as well."

Although scholars dismissed the notion that increasing numbers of Russians were flocking to join the terrorist group, they agreed the country will need to devise a plan of action regarding Russian recruits wishing to return to their homeland after having been trained by the Islamic State.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed this concern in April during an interview with three Russian media outlets.

"The Islamic State is our biggest enemy at the moment, if only for one simple reason: Hundreds of Russians, hundreds of Europeans, hundreds of Americans are fighting with the Islamic State," Lavrov said. "They are already coming back ... and for their own entertainment could perpetrate horrible acts at home."

## High-Profile Cases

Russian law enforcement officers are investigating reports that Mariam Ismailova, a second-year student at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow, has fled the country to join an armed terrorist group.
An unidentified source told Interfax on Wednesday that Ismailova was currently in Turkey, and that her father had flown to the country to search for her.

A television crew followed Karaulova, a student of philosophy at Moscow State University who had left Russia in an apparent bid to join the terrorist group last month, on her flight back to Moscow last week. Karaulova, in traditional Islamic dress, lowered her gaze in a bid to evade the media firestorm.

Sensationalist television channel LifeNews reported Wednesday that Karaulova had been

recruited by a native of the Tatarstan republic's capital city of Kazan over popular social media website VKontakte and smartphone chat applications. The recruiter reportedly vowed he would marry Karaulova and convinced her to join the terrorist organization in Syria.

The recruiter is currently based in Syria and is thought to have attempted to lure other women to join the terrorist organization, LifeNews reported.

Individuals found guilty of participating in foreign armed conflicts face up to 10 years behind bars under Russian law.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday that the recruitment of Russian students by foreign terrorist organizations was a "very dangerous process," RIA Novosti reported.

"It's still too earlier to call this a trend and sound the alarm bells," said Alexei Malashenko, chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's religion, society and security program. "If we start seeing dozens of such cases in coming weeks, then we can reopen this discussion."

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