

RESEARCH REPORT

UNDERSTANDING WHY YOUTH FIGHT IN THE MIDDLE EAST THE CASE OF PANKISI



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**PEACE AND SECURITY SECTION
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report by the Center for Social Sciences (CSS) presents findings of a study conducted in Pankisi Gorge, Georgia in 2017 and 2018. The research was to respond to the active movement of young Pankisi residents to the Middle East to become foreign fighters in extremist organizations during 2014-2016, which had become a major concern for Gorge inhabitants (ethnic minority of North Caucasian origin) and the general Georgian public. According to different sources, it was mostly young men who traveled from Pankisi to Syria and Iraq; substantially less is known about how many young women may have also travelled, and why.

The CSS research examines possible factors encouraging young Pankisi natives to join extremist organizations and become foreign fighters in the Middle East. The main research objectives included studying young Kists' (both, women and men) understanding of Islam, their religious preferences and the markers shaping their Muslim identity; exploring their perceptions of radicalization and extremism; and identifying possible triggering push/pull factors. Importantly, the research seeks to better understand local women's perspectives on the phenomenon, and to possibly identify entry points for the prevention of young Pankisi residents from joining the ranks of terrorist fighters in the first place.

The analysis is based on survey results with a sample size of 403 respondents as well as findings from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted with young Kist women and men aged 18-30. Considering the fact that there were no empirical data on women's perspectives on possible youth radicalization and preventive measures practiced within the local community at the time of our research (the data are collected between December 2017 and April 2018), we invited representatives of the local Women's Council as the most well-known female organization in the region to participate in group discussions. In addition, other local women selected primarily based on their role as mothers and main caregivers in local households to participate in the focus groups. Finally, we reviewed secondary data and media sources, which also informed our analysis.

Limitations of the study are mostly low levels of trust between religious communities and of 'outsiders', including researchers, related in part to religious specificities present in the Gorge, namely, the two branches of Islam practiced in Pankisi – Salafi ("new") Islam and Sufi ("traditional") Islam, but also to tensions that arose following the death of 19-year-old Temirlan Machalikashvili, a native of Pankisi, who was killed by security officials in a counter-terrorism operation in the Gorge (described further below). As a result, the CSS research team was unable to access to the leaders of the Pankisi Salafi community, as their trust of 'outsider' organizations is rather low. Therefore, the perspectives of Salafi community leaders are represented in the report mostly based on media sources. The same problem occurred in relation to older Salafi women as all the female respondents who agreed to participate in discussions are practicing Sufi Islam (i.e. Women's Council and other Kist women). However, this was not the case with younger Salafi women and men, who were willing to participate in the research. It should be noted, however, that their responses may be influenced by the tensions in the region following Machalikashvili's death. Therefore, to encompass the viewpoints and attitudes of the older generations of Salafis, more time should be allocated in the study timeline and effort made to gain their trust to participate in future studies. Furthermore, additional research to gather perspectives from younger Salafis should be conducted to understand the extent to which recent events had influenced their responses, particularly reflecting on identity markers and gender.

In addition, this research does not include responses from anyone from Pankisi who had either already been recruited or who had served as former foreign fighters, due to lack of access. Finally, in the period since the research was completed and just prior to being published, the government of Georgia adopted a new “National Strategy of Georgia of 2019-2021 on Fight against Terrorism,”¹ it was beyond the scope of this research initiative to analyze the potential impact of the National Strategy on the inhabitants of the Pankisi Gorge or its gender dimensions, however analyzing the National Strategy, including its impacts on local women and religious and ethnic minorities, would be an important area of research in future.

Regarding further research, the CSS team believes that conducting a large-scale needs assessment of Pankisi women and girls (both Salafis and Sufis) and studying thoroughly reasons why and how the local women radicalize and engage in violent extremism, would provide valuable insights, as the knowledge in this respect is still very limited.

Given the study’s empirical character and comprehensive multi-faceted data, we hope that it complements previous studies and contributes to future work by other scholars, policymakers and the Pankisi community itself. Below are presented the key research findings and recommendations for policy makers based on the context at the time of research data were collected and analyzed (August, 2018).

Key Research Findings

- Of those surveyed in Pankisi villages for this study, 51 per cent Kist women and 47 per cent men (aged 18-30).
- The number of young Kists with tertiary and vocational education is low. Secondary school education is the highest level attained by most survey participants (67 per cent). Females outpace males in obtaining higher education degrees and VET education certificates (63 per cent and 37 per cent respectively).
- Out of those who are married (per cent), 65 per cent are women, 35 per cent are men.
- The unemployment rate is high among Pankisi youth: 83 per cent of survey participants report that

they are jobless. Out of those in paid employment 54 per cent are women and 46 per cent are men. However, more males fall under category of unemployed job-seekers (64 per cent men, 36 per cent women), whereas females dominate the category of unemployed and not seeking a job (65 per cent women, 35 per cent men).

- Level of formal education was a statistically significant factor in relation to the female respondents’ employment status, in contrast to the male survey participants.
- Among those surveyed, 60 per cent practice Sufi (“traditional”) Islam and 40 per cent follow Salafi Islam.
- Traditional Islam, practised mostly by older Kists, is perceived by Kist youth (both women and men) as “ancestral” and not the “rightful” form of Islam. Older Kists, however, regard Salafi Islam as a form of “radical” and “backward” piety, pushing the youth “too much into religion”.
- Kist youth (women and men) have stronger religious identities than their elders. Religious-based discrimination directed towards them is a powerful sentiment among youth. In contrast, older generations, socialized during the Soviet period, lead more secular lifestyles. Their personal identities are shaped mostly by ethnic and cultural markers; they have fewer grievances related to religion.
- Young study participants (women and men) tend to romanticize militarism. They regard their “love for arms” and “fighting spirit” as a significant part of their North Caucasian national identity.
- Kist youth narratives (women’s as well as men’s) feature issues concerning injustice, marginalization, provocation and religion-based discrimination of Muslims.
- Young study participants (women and men) do not perceive Kist foreign fighters in combat alongside Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh²) as either criminals or terrorists; rather, they are viewed as “true Muslims”, if somewhat naïve, who left to support other Muslims in the Syrian conflict.
- There is a tendency among young Kist women and men to interpret terrorist attacks as a response and counter-action to provocations Muslims are exposed to worldwide. Youth are inclined to place crime, war, and terrorism on the same plane.

- Young Kists (both, women and men) tend to be less tolerant of certain groups of people (e.g. those who are HIV-positive, individuals struggling with alcohol and/or drug abuse, LGBTI persons) and hold quite stereotypical gender attitudes and perceptions.
- Trust in the government and state agencies among Kist youth is significantly low. Trust between respective Sufi and Salafi community leaders is likewise strained.
- For decades the primary mechanism employed by the government to counter radicalization to violent extremism has been the criminalization of people who are directly or indirectly involved in violent extremism and terrorism. Community-based prevention activities are fragmented and ineffective.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Support legal reforms and reintegration:** Critically, the Georgian government needs to introduce legal reforms and permit Kist fighters and their families to return to Georgia. It is also crucial to provide rehabilitation facilities for the returnees and their family members. Such an initiative would engender trust among Pankisi residents and other Georgian ethnic minorities. Furthermore, returnees can be actively engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism (C/PVE) programmes. Crucially, these efforts need to be undertaken in a gender-responsive manner, to ensure that women and girls receive necessary services and protections.
- 2. Enhance local government capacity:** Awareness-raising programmes on C/PVE and gender, human rights and social cohesion should be provided to the local government. The provision of well-trained staff able to support cultural diversity and tolerance is necessary to build trust between local communities and government officials and offer high quality services to citizens, including special programmes targeting social and economic empowerment for young women and young men.
- 3. Work with media using trainings aimed at the provision of balanced news:** Media trainings aimed at providing balanced news, using gender-, religious- and culturally-neutral language, and promoting diversity would support the Kist population in reducing the

stigma of terrorism. This is particularly the case for women and girls who may be returning, or who may be seen as supporting family members who travelled. Care should be taken to strengthen regional media capacities.

- 4. Ensure community-based prevention:** C/PVE trainings and guidelines should be provided to all the main stakeholders in Pankisi including administrators and teachers in local schools, local media facilities, civic organizations, religious leaders, and parents.
 - 4.1. A network of well-equipped, non-formal learning facilities should be established in Pankisi Gorge, targeting local youth. These facilities should serve as an alternative social space for youth education, interaction and personal development.
 - 4.2. Fast-track projects should be initiated to address/challenge various attitudes held by young Kists that put them at risk of alienation (such as identity-driven and ideologically-based assumptions).
- 5. Strengthening gender equality and women's rights:** Awareness-raising campaigns should be launched to provide reliable and accessible information for building a better understanding of gender equality and human rights among Kist youth.
 - 5.1. A large-scale needs assessment of Pankisi women and girls should be implemented to evaluate gender-specific social and economic conditions/barriers hindering local women's empowerment and overall well-being (e.g. early marriages, domestic violence, formal and religious education, access to job market, property ownership, etc.).
 - 5.2. A separate research should be conducted on reasons women get engaged in violent extremism.
 - 5.3. Engage women and girls in C/PVE in order to recognize early signs of radicalization and mitigate the impending conflict and violence, and advance the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and UN Security Council resolution 2242, respectively.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL CONTEXT

The research report focuses on young residents of the Pankisi Gorge who became foreign fighters in the military conflicts of Syria and Iraq. The movement of youth to the Middle East is one of the main challenges for Gorge inhabitants (the Kist ethnic minority) and the general Georgian public especially in the period from 2014 to 2016. “Kist” is a Georgian name to identify an ethnic group originating from the North Caucuses – mostly Chechens and Ingush people who share the collective ethnonym “Vainakh” and who have lived in Georgia for around two centuries. Kists officially became citizens of Georgia during the establishment of the first independent Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921). Today, most Kists have Georgian or Chechen surnames and speak fluent Georgian (Zviadadze, 2016). According to the 2014 Georgia Census, up to 6,000 Kists live in villages in Pankisi, including: Duisi, Dzibakhevi, Jokolo, Shua Khalatsani, Omalo, and Birkiani.

The Pankisi Gorge (also known as Pankisi Valley) is in the Northeastern part of Georgia in the region of Kakheti (Akhmeta municipality). This region Georgia shares a border with the Chechen Republic and the Republic of Ingushetia, which are federal republics of Russia. In the early 19th century, Vainakhs began to migrate to the high mountainous regions of Georgia such as Tusheti, Pshavi, Khevsureti and Khevi (Siprashvili, 2014). Historical sources refer to the following factors that forced the North Caucasian people to seek refuge in Georgian lands: Caucasian Wars held during the Tsarist regime; traditional blood feuds (the blood-for-blood revenge custom of the Caucasian highlanders); avoiding the *baytalvaakkhar* custom of confiscating surplus property (if it exceeds a certain

Later, under Soviet rule, when power shifted from religion and religious institutions to the state, the secular policy of the Soviets intensified the assimilation of Kists into the Georgian population. Despite ethnic differences, all people had equal access to education and jobs; Kists worked side-by-side with Georgians on local farms producing collective goods and they shared some Georgian traditions. It is also noteworthy that during the Soviet period, Kists did not have much contact with Chechens (Siprashvili, 2014). In the period of economic hardship and political instability following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Kist families went back to Chechnya in the early 1990s and stayed there until the first Russian-Chechen war in 1994. Afterwards, many

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