

# 'Russian-Speaking' Fighters in Syria, Iraq and at Home: Consequences and Context

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## POLICY BRIEF

The conflict in Syria and Iraq, now in its sixth year, has generated considerable interest and concern for its potential impact on regional and international stability. Despite this interest, however, significant aspects of the conflict remain understudied and poorly understood. This brief addresses one of these neglected areas by examining and contextualising the involvement of people from Russia and the former Soviet Union.

### ASSESSING THE 'RUSSIAN-SPEAKING' CONTINGENT IN SYRIA & IRAQ:

It is impossible to estimate exact numbers using open-source information, but evidence points to the large-scale mobilisation of 'Russian-speaking' fighters, particularly from the North Caucasus. They are present across groups – the boundaries between which are often fluid – that are mutually hostile to Russia but divided over the legitimacy of targeting civilians.

### THE EXTENT AND LIMITS OF RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC TERRORISM THREAT:

The North Caucasus insurgency is now allied to the Islamic State (IS) but is in long-term decline, and IS has to date demonstrated limited capacity in Russia. However, Russia's domestic terrorism threat extends beyond both IS and returnees from Syria and Iraq, with domestic recruits and Turkic and Central Asian networks adding to a complex security picture.



### LEARNING FROM FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS:

The North Caucasus conflict highlights how ideologies, personal ties, and trust are crucial to the development of foreign fighter networks. Foreign fighters left a lasting legacy in the region, but ultimately failed to adapt to changing circumstances.

### INTERPRETING THE EVOLUTION AND DECLINE OF AN INSURGENCY:

The North Caucasus insurgency illustrates how rebel leaders need to balance competing agendas to be successful, and how succession is a negotiated process that becomes increasingly difficult. Weakness and state pressure played a key role in driving ideological change, and the loss of ideological leaders and low levels of trust and morale undermined the insurgency's appeal.

**An executive summary and full report is available from the CREST website at:**

[www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/reports/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/reports/)

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