

Experts Say Conflict in North Caucasus Waning – But Far From Over

By [Allison Quinn](#)

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Mountains in the North Caucasus.

Though the security situation has improved in Russia's turbulent North Caucasus, which for years has been plagued by almost daily battles between police and Islamic insurgents, the reduced number of fatalities seen in 2014 may just be the calm before the storm, analysts said Tuesday.

"This may be the end of the Caucasus Emirate [a militant jihadist organization], but that doesn't please me. Because I know that instead of them, someone else will come along to fill that void, maybe the Islamic State, maybe some other group that's even worse," said Grigory Shvedov, a human rights activist and the editor of news site Kavkazky Uzel, speaking at a seminar on the North Caucasus insurgency in Moscow.

Since 2007, the Caucasus Emirate has waged a series of suicide bombings and fatal attacks in Russia in a bid to establish a caliphate in the North Caucasus. But the group's influence

and its capacity to launch large-scale attacks is believed to have declined significantly in the past year.

In all regions of the North Caucasus except for Chechnya, the overall number of injuries and fatalities plunged in 2014, according to data compiled by Kavkazky Uzel, which monitors the situation in the North Caucasus and provides daily and annual reports. In 2014, there were 525 victims of the conflict — compared to 986 a year earlier.

Yet Shvedov warned that the figures were deceptive.

"Despite the substantial reduction in the number of fatalities and the successes of Russian law enforcement, we believe that what is more important is the nature of the conflict ... and that hasn't changed," Shvedov said, noting that security services had continued to exercise a heavy hand, especially in Chechnya.

Chechnya was singled out in the report as the only region where the number of victims grew in 2014. Fifty-two people were killed in Chechnya in 2014, and another 65 were injured, according to the report. Those figures represent a 15.8 percent increase over 2013, when 39 people were killed and 62 were injured.

The surge can largely be attributed to a Dec. 4 terrorist attack on Grozny, which saw 14 policemen killed and dozens injured after militants seized the city's main printing facility in a guerrilla-style attack.

The Caucasus Emirate claimed responsibility for the attack.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov responded by publicly calling for the relatives of suspected militants to be expelled from the republic and their homes to be burned down, a remark which activists say triggered nearly a dozen arson attacks.

"Chechnya has become a trend starter; they created a new trend ... and we can see that fear works there," Shvedov said, noting that Kadyrov's harsh methods threaten to spread to other regions in the North Caucasus.

Alexei Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Center said the atmosphere of fear that Kadyrov has fostered could backfire in the long run.

"The Chechen people haven't forgotten the things Kadyrov has done. And in that sense, it will be interesting to see how the grandchildren and children of insurgents in Chechnya today will behave down the line," Malashenko said.

The deteriorating economic situation could also push more young men to join the insurgency, he said, noting that layoffs across the country could send many natives of the North Caucasus back home, where they may have an equally hard time finding work.

"If the economic crisis will continue at this pace, it will hit the Caucasus really hard. And then these guys might end up doing a lot of bad things," Malashenko said.

Both Shvedov and Malashenko agreed that the decreased activity of the insurgency didn't mean an end to the conflict, but rather a transition period before another militant group

emerges.

"The fact that some leaders of the Caucasus Emirate in Dagestan have pledged loyalty to the IS shows not only that the Caucasus Emirate has been weakened, but that there is room for another group to take over," Shvedov said, adding that men returning from Syria could easily fill that void.

"We know of about 115-120 cases of men [who've come back from Syria] and faced criminal charges. But these are just the ones who were caught. ... The police aren't aware of all of those returning, I don't think," Shvedov said.

Georgi Engelhardt, an independent expert on the North Caucasus insurgency, told The Moscow Times that the decreased activity of insurgents in 2014 had likely stemmed from the authorities' crackdown ahead of the Olympics.

"The surge in activity by law enforcement ahead of the Olympics drove dozens of jihadist field commanders out of action, as well as many more ordinary militants," Engelhardt said, adding that the conflict in Syria had also drained the North Caucasus insurgency of manpower.

Yet all three experts agreed that not only could the return of fighters from Syria reinvigorate the region's underground insurgency, it could also thrust a new militant group into the spotlight.

The atmosphere of fear perpetuated by Kadyrov's tactics, the economic recession and the return of fighters from Syria could prove to be the perfect storm for the next generation of young men in the North Caucasus, Shvedov said.

"They will become the new leaders, they will come to the foreground and they may organize new bombings, ... and from this group of people we may see a new insurgent leader in the North Caucasus," he said.

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