

U.S. training helped mold top Islamic State military commander

A Chechen rebel trained in Georgia. Mitchell Prothro writes in [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#).

Batirashvili's battlefield successes, including orchestrating the capture of Syria's Menagh Air Base after two years of failed attempts, "helped to legitimize ISIS in militant circles, including in the North Caucasus," Cecire said.

"Batirashvili's ability to demonstrate ISIS' tactical prowess attracted fighters in droves from other factions and tipped the scales in foreign fighter flow and recruitment," Cecire said. "In the North Caucasus, young people no longer wanted to fight in Syria with the increasingly marginalized Caucasus Emirate (groups), but wanted to fight with the winners – ISIS."

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Batirashvili's story also was compelling, Cecire said: "A man with a modest background, sickly and impoverished before he went to Syria," becomes "a great battlefield commander defying the world" . . . a "seemingly emulable, rags-to-riches story."?

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Those seeking an explanation for Russian President Vladimir Putin's insistence on sending military supplies and manpower to Syria to bolster the government of President Bashar Assad would do well to consider Batirashvili. Putin

not only personally oversaw the Russian push into Georgia, but he has twice waged war against Islamist-led factions in Chechnya whose cause Batirashvili has supported since he was a teenager. Ethnic Chechens are thought to be one of the largest groups of foreign fighters in the Islamic State.

Now 30, Batirashvili is a key figure, reportedly a member of the group's governing council, is said to be the Islamic State's supreme military leader in northern Syria and Aleppo, and is perhaps the group's most fearsome ground commander. His current status is an irony for a man once considered a Georgian soldier with a bright future.

"We trained him well, and we had lots of help from America," said a former Georgian defense official who asked to not be identified because of the sensitivity of Batirashvili's role in the Islamic State. "In fact, the only reason he didn't go to Iraq to fight alongside America was that we needed his skills here in Georgia."

Even before Georgia and Russia came to blows in 2008, Batirashvili had earned a reputation for fighting Russians. While a part of Georgia, the Pankisi Valley's northern end abuts Chechnya, where separatists fought a brutal war for independence from Russia in the 1990s. Batirashvili's mother was Chechen, and his father has told local journalists that young Batirashvili had seen a handful of military operations as a rebel in Chechnya before joining Georgia's military in 2006 at age 20.

The choice of a military career was natural, say Georgian officials and journalists who knew him and his community. Pankisi is a tiny and isolated sliver of Georgia with little economic activity, and the choices for its youth are narrow: leave home to fight the Russians, become a subsistence farmer, join one of the legendarily nasty Chechen criminal gangs, or join the military.

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According to Batirashvili's ex-comrades in the Georgian military, Batirashvili was tapped immediately upon his enlistment to join Georgia's U.S.-trained special forces.

"He was a perfect soldier from his first days, and everyone knew he was a star," said one former comrade, who asked not to be identified because he remains on active duty and has been ordered not to give media interviews about his former colleague. "We were well trained by American special forces units, and he was the star pupil."