According to sources from the Pankisi Gorge, at least 100 natives of the valley joined IS detachments. Nearly 15 people have already died during the hostilities. A total of over 200 people from Georgia are believed to be fighting in the East.

"Georgian citizens are recruited for the IS by the Pankisi followers of radical Islam," says Meka Khangoshvili, a representative of the Chechen diaspora, who sees the situation as a threat to this particular region and to all of Georgia. "If this situation persists and the state fails to take appropriate measures, there will be no young people left in the valley, which poses a potential threat for the gene pool. And if we do not put an end to the outflow of young, Russia will use these facts in its favor, while continuing to accuse Georgia of favoring terrorists and extremists," said Meka Hangoshvili.

However, judging from the comments of Georgian officials, there will be no barriers to stop the young people from the Pankisi heading to the war. To illustrate this, the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Vakhtang Gomelauri, acknowledged in his comments on the disturbing trend that the Ministry of Internal Affairs is unable either to prevent adult citizens from going to Turkey or any other country about their business or to control where they are going from there.

"In some cases, officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have managed to prevent the departure of young people to the war-torn area. However, notably, not everyone who is leaving, for example, for Turkey, can be proved to be intending to go to Syria and fight. This problem did not arise yesterday and not today, but has been developing for a whole decade. It is regrettable, but in most cases we can do nothing to prevent them from going," said Vakhtang Gomelauri. Deputy Minister also said in this regard that the specific case of the most recent flight of the 16 and 18-year-old Pankisi boys had been investigated and that it had been found that the police officer who conducted the examination at the Tbilisi airport made an error by letting them board the plane, for which he was punished administratively.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili urged not to dramatize the situation. "The whole world is trying to prevent radical Islamist groups in the East from attracting new members, all in vain, and Georgia is no exception. The government has nothing to do with it. Let me remind you that over a hundred residents of the Pankisi Gorge went to war in Syria back under President Saakashvili. And it has been at most 4-5 people under the current government," said Irakli Garibashvili to journalists. According to him, the "Islamic State" is a headache for the whole world, world leaders do not seem to be finding a way out of this situation and this issue cannot be solved in one fell swoop. "No one knows what preventive action should be taken and how. We are worried about every Georgian resident who went to fight in Syria, but we are unable to solve the problem which is distressing the entire world," said Mr. Garibashvili calling for the Georgian media immediately to stop publishing speculations on Syria and
disturbing the Georgian society.

Earlier this year, the Georgian parliament adopted a special amendment to the law, according to which joining and participating in illegal groups operating in a foreign state, or taking part in exercises organized by such groups is punishable by imprisonment for a term of 5 to 10 years. The parliament also tightened the anti-terrorism legislation which provides for a sentence of 6 to 9 years in prison for visiting a foreign country to take part in terrorist activities, their preparation or similar activities, as well as illegal paramilitary exercises. However, not many seem to have been frightened by the more severe measures. And, most importantly, the low socio-economic level of development, the unemployment which leads young people to seek at least some income, which is successfully used by all kinds of envoys.

Today, three Georgian regions can be considered as suppliers of manpower in the IS units. These include the already mentioned Pankisi Gorge, Kvemo Kartli, a region densely populated by Azerbaijanis, as well as the Autonomous Republic of Adjara with a large Muslim population, and which, according to some experts, has been under the irreversible influence of Turkey.

The troubling situation unfolding in Georgia is so alarming that it has raised comments from the US Ambassador Richard Norland. “The U.S. and every country in Europe are facing the same problem of young people succumbing to appeals for radicalization from certain elements. We all have a challenge to unite economic, social, political and security measures to deal with the outflow of both young and older people to the world’s hot spots. Georgia’s situation is not unique. We greatly appreciate our cooperation with the Georgian government in dealing with this common problem,” said the Ambassador.

In the meantime, experts are already talking about a period when young people who have had enough to war, have been trained in camps and have been out of work for one reason or another will begin to return home, where they are still not going to find a job or a better quality of life. And, of course, there’s no particular need to describe alarmist scenarios.

*Yuri Simonyan, columnist of “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, exclusively for the online-magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*