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ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya

The return of ISIS fighters to Chechnya could pose a security challenge for the war-torn Russian republic. The authorities may respond true to form, with repression, but efforts to repatriate women and children stranded in Syria and, in some cases, to reintegrate foreign fighters should not be discounted.

The victories over ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa pose a dilemma for states whose citizens travelled to join the Islamic State's (ISIS) ranks and who may now seek to return home. These states include Russia, and in particular its republic of Chechnya.

On the one hand, Chechen authorities fear the return of insurgents who fought for ISIS. They worry those militants, most of whom are mortal enemies of Ramzan Kadyrov's heavy-handed regime, will renew the attacks they mounted some years ago in Chechnya. As has been the case in the past, authorities might not stop at jailing returnees, and might also go after their families, friends or associates, potentially hardening hatred of the regime among a wider circle of people.

On the other hand, some officials and activists in Chechnya are spearheading efforts to bring back women and children stranded in the Middle East after the death or imprisonment of their insurgent husbands and fathers. Those efforts, alongside limited attempts to rehabilitate some former fighters, offer a ray of hope that at least some returnees who renounce ISIS can be reintegrated into Chechen society.

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Chechans in Syria

Chechens are fighting on both sides of the war in Syria, due in part to the assertive role of Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen republic, in the Russian Federation's foreign policy. In 2015, as Russia launched an air campaign to bolster Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime, Kadyrov professed his enthusiasm for sending ground forces from Chechnya to fight ISIS.

His motives for doing so partly related to the particular threat ISIS posed in Chechnya. The republic had been ravaged by two separatist wars in the 1990s and 2000s, the second of which pitted the government against an insurrection increasingly dominated by jihadists. By the mid-2000s, Kadyrov's ruthless counter-insurgency campaign had shifted much of the violence to other North Caucasus republics. But when, in June 2015, ISIS declared its Vilayat Kavkaz (Caucasus province), it proclaimed Chechnya part of that province. The declaration, while largely symbolic, suggested a growing affinity for ISIS among North Caucasus insurgents, some of

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whom, by 2016, were nominally fighting under ISIS's banner. Russian officials estimate that as of 2016 some 3,500 Russian citizens had gone to Syria or Iraq to fight for ISIS, though the numbers cited vary, with some sources suggesting the actual figure exceeds 5,000. Reports vary as to how many of those citizens are ethnic Chechens, though figures sourced to Chechen law enforcement agencies run as high as 4,000. These may include non-Russian citizens, as some appear to be members of the Chechen diaspora who embarked from other countries, not Chechnya itself. Some Chechens served in ISIS's top ranks.

Kadyrov saw a chance to eliminate potentially dangerous opponents in Syria, while at the same time demonstrating his loyalty to the Kremlin, which has lavished subsidies upon the republic he leads. He told President Vladimir Putin he would lead men into battle himself to "wipe out ISIS". For most intents it was a boast – and in fact Kadyrov's forces mostly ended up not fighting ISIS but policing areas recaptured from rebels by the Syrian regime. But the idea of deploying Chechens was an opportunity for Moscow, which was cautious about sending large numbers of Russian soldiers to Syria due to public relations concerns, and the Kremlin saw "outsourcing" the work to Kadyrovites as an attractive option.

The Kremlin and Kadyrov still needed to manage the optics of a regional leader getting embroiled in a conflict abroad. Hence the official line has varied as to who from Chechnya is serving in Syria and in what capacity. Kadyrov first denied media reports that some 500 Chechens were fighting for Assad, but in January 2017 he acknowledged that "young men from Chechnya are serving" in the Russian Defense Ministry's military police battalion in Syria. As is often the case with Kadyrov, he made the admission over Instagram, just after two Chechen parliamentarians met with Bashar's brother, Maher al-Assad, the powerful commander of the Republican Guard, and visited the battalion in question. The "young men" were likely members of the Chechen National Guard "on loan" to Moscow and under federal command. Putin may have urged Kadyrov to use his loyalists to back Russia's military campaign.

The degree of Kadyrov's involvement is significant. Chechen authorities now have connections in Syria, which appear in some cases to have enabled them to use novel approaches in dealing with the threat of returning ISIS fighters and in facilitating the return of women and children that joined ISIS.

The first quandary authorities face is what to do with insurgents who do return: apply the indiscriminate long-term incarceration that in the past has shown short-term results but risks feeding anger at the authorities over time; or take a more nuanced approach, filtering out militants who could potentially be pulled away from ISIS and jihadism, monitoring them closely, giving them shorter sentences and attempting to reintegrate them into society.

It is difficult to assess how many Chechen militants survived in Syria and, of those who did survive, how many will return to the North Caucasus, rather than remain in the Iraqi or Syrian desert with other ISIS remnants or move on to other war zones. According

to Russian sources, at least several hundred Russian citizens have returned from Syria. The Dagestan government places the exact number of Dagestani returnees from jihad in Syria or Iraq at 108 since 2014, with 86 under criminal investigation. Chechen officials said in December 2017 that 93 women and children had been returned to Russia, but it is unclear how many of these were ethnically Chechen or resident in Chechnya. Kadyrov's government, meanwhile, in contrast to neighbouring Dagestan, has proclaimed a "safe corridor" for women returning from Syria. That, of course, is not the case for male insurgents, and there are no official figures for male returnees. Jean-Francois Ratelle, a Canadian scholar who has studied the North Caucasus insurgency on the ground, estimates that several dozen Chechens have returned, while Akhmet Yarlykapov, a Caucasus specialist at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) cited by the Kommersant newspaper, gave an estimate of 40-50. But Ratelle believes that more are likely to return to Russian republics via Turkey and countries of the South Caucasus.

Russian federal and North Caucasian authorities worry that as fighters return, they could resume their jihad in Chechnya and other republics. In 2015, Russian Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev outlined the threat and urged preventive measures.

In Chechnya's case, the Kadyrov regime's heavy-handed response is a particularly complicating factor. An illustration is the sequence of alleged events reported in August 2017 by the independent Moscow-based daily Novaya Gazeta: in December 2016, Chechen authorities claimed they liquidated a suspected ISIS cell in Grozny. Ramzan Kadyrov said that a group of militants who had joined an ISIS cell attacked police in Grozny on 17 December 2016, and as a result of a special operation that he headed seven were killed and four arrested. Three policemen had been killed in the attack, according to state media. Novaya Gazeta disputed the official version and alleged that over the next month, authorities swept up some 200 other people, including friends and relatives of the alleged ISIS members. At least 27 of these people, according to Novaya Gazeta's sources, were executed on the night of 25 January 2017. Survivors reportedly said they were tortured to extract false confessions. Chechnya's Minister for National Policy, External Relations and the Press Dzhambulat Umarov called Novaya Gazeta's earlier report of 27 executions "lies" and claimed the paper's journalists had no basis or proof for the allegations.

According to Novaya Gazeta's report, following the raids dozens residing in Krasnaya Turbina, a Chechen town outside the capital Grozny, reportedly sent a letter to Russia's federal Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika alleging mass raids and the torture of two men suspected of planning to go to Syria. Novaya Gazeta alleged in August 2017 that residents who appealed to Chaika were being pressured and beaten by police, but Chechen authorities denied this claiming the signatories said they had signed the letter by mistake and were remorseful. The remorse, however, may be indicative of a climate of fear: public apologies from Kadyrov's critics after going public with allegations of abuse are common. Such indiscriminate counter-insurgency tactics may have quelled jihadist violence in the 2000s, but over time, they risk inspiring further animosity toward the regime that local activists believe could be exploited by ISIS or local insurgents.

The question of what to do with returning militants is clearly a complex one. Some may be impervious to efforts to persuade them to abandon ISIS and violence. But others, given the opportunity, might reintegrate into society and pose no further danger. This would require a more individual approach with regular assessment to establish whether former militants genuinely renounce violence. In some cases, their families might encourage them to do so and play positive supporting roles, according to local activists. Of course,

such steps are far easier said than done, especially in Chechnya, which is notorious for indiscriminate repression and whose law enforcement authorities are not well equipped for a more selective approach. But efforts by Kadyrov's human rights body suggest his government may be open to trying out newer, less repressive measures – at least in some cases.

Repatriating Women and Children

Alongside the worries above, Chechnya has tried to bring back relatives of fighters from Syria. Heda Saratova, a member of Kadyrov's official Human Rights Council, has been involved both in repatriating women and children and, to a limited extent, in efforts to rehabilitate some returning militants. Saratova, with tentative support from local authorities, is working to build a rehabilitation centre in Grozny to apply a more individual approach to returning women from Syria that she hopes could later be applied to men as well.

According to Chechens who have worked to bring these families home, some women were brought to Syria by their husbands, while others followed of their own free will and still others were themselves ISIS recruits. Grozny relatives of stranded women told Crisis Group they were "deceived" into travelling to Syria, though, given the aura of fear and taboo surrounding possible links with ISIS, the relatives declined to elaborate as to how. Some women took children with them, but in many cases, the children were born in Syria.

Rights activists estimate that over 700 women and children of Chechen background are stuck in Syria and Iraq. There are likely many more from other Russian republics – some reports suggest camps full of stranded wives, sons and daughters of dead, incarcerated or escaped ISIS fighters.

As of December 2017, Saratova's group, Objective, reports having helped, together with Chechen authorities, bring back 93 women and children.

This limited success illustrates the ties that Kadyrov and his coterie have in Syria. Ziyad Sabsabi, a senator from Chechnya in Russia's Federation Council and Kadyrov's official representative in the Middle East, appears to be the main broker of repatriations of women and children from Chechnya and other parts of Russia. Women and children are also being evacuated with the help of the Chechen Republic's Friends Association in Jordan, headed by Samih Beno, an ethnic Chechen and a Jordanian politician.

"These women were taken there by force, by their husbands. The men went there to fight. [There was an online campaign] to recruit them. They became cannon fodder", Saratova told Crisis Group in September in Grozny. "There were women whose husbands had died, and they had become hostages. They were in prison, and they had nothing to eat. And now these poor mothers [pointing to women in her office] are visiting various officials to at least try to bring back their grandchildren. Ramzan Akhmatovich [Kadyrov] said in his interview that he got an order from Vladimir Putin to use all his connections, all his resources, to get these children back".

The reality is more complex than simply men forcing women to travel, Saratova concedes. In some cases, women themselves chose to go. Some may return disillusioned by their experience with ISIS, but others may still share some of its beliefs and will need their own rehabilitation programs, even if not always quite the same as those of former fighters. According to Saratova, women would need to be monitored for several months after their return.

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clash in policies between Chechnya, which had pledged a safe corridor for returning women, and Dagestan. In the past, Dagestan has made efforts to reintegrate insurgents, but this time showed little leniency to returning women. If such measures are to work, it will require coordination and compromise between the authorities of the various North Caucasus republics.

A More Disaggregated Approach for Insurgents

Saratova's work in repatriating women and children from Syria, and closely working with their families, has equipped her with connections and skills that could be applied in reintegrating militants as well.

In 2014, her organisation helped bring back Said Mazhaev, a Chechen insurgent, who was seeking to return home from Syria. After Mazhaev served a short prison term, he renounced ISIS, and Saratova, together with Chechen Deputy Interior Minister Apti Alaudinov, began involving him in meetings with Chechen youth to disabuse them of any allure the movement might hold.

In a 2017 conversation with Crisis Group, Saratova described the effect of these meetings:

"The reaction of young people to his words was very interesting. When officials come out and say, 'don't go to Syria, it's bad', they are bored. They slept at those events. Said Mazhaev came out and said: 'Guys, I've been there, and I understood it was all a lie – and I came back. Don't let them lie to you'. The reaction was amazing. These young people followed him. They asked him questions. The whole auditorium came alive. I always say, 'these guys that come back, why give them 10-15 years in prison? Who are they going to be when they come back?' I always say, 'let's use these people. They have information. They can show that the ideology of ISIS is a lie'. You need rehabilitation. Of course, not all of them have reconsidered. It's a lot of work. But there are tons of people coming back and we need to be ready to [rehabilitate]. We need to be ready to work with these people."

To be sure, Kadyrov may hope that people like Saratova will help build his own domestic and international reputation. Some of her work is public relations, an effort to put a kinder, gentler face on a regime known for systematic abuses. Nevertheless, a more differentiated approach for dealing with militants, with opportunities to reintegrate into society, has proven effective in other North Caucasus republics, such as Ingushetia and Dagestan, and should not be discounted in Chechnya.

A Crack of Light in a Very Dark Tunnel

Kadyrov has been harsher than any of his North Caucasus counterparts in dealing with the jihadist threat, and a major course correction seems unlikely any time soon. Indeed, in many ways it is a paradox that leniency and more nuanced measures may be tentatively tested in one of Russia's most brutal regions. Saratova was once widely seen as independent, a regular interlocutor of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. But since she joined Kadyrov's Human Rights Council, she is has been criticised for speaking in defence of a regime with an egregious human rights record. In the spring of 2017, she drew fire from human rights activists by claiming that she had not heard of gays in Chechnya, echoing remarks by Kadyrov, who said gays did not exist in his republic. (Kadyrov had said this by way of denying a reported purge of gay men in which over a hundred were jailed and allegedly tortured and several reportedly killed. Authorities have not confirmed the purge, but Crisis Group has spoken to a victim who claimed he had been imprisoned and tortured with electric shock.) When asked about her claim, Saratova said it had been taken out of context and that she meant that social norms in Chechnya were such that it was impossible for homosexuals to exist there. Saratova is often criticised and dismissed by activists who continue to risk their lives and freedom to work in Chechnya without

government support, and some of whom fear Kadyrov's approach may be an empty imitation of a genuine reintegration process. Moreover, Kadyrov's leniency toward returning women could be seen as an extension of the republic's often forceful promotion of rigid gender roles and patriarchal family values – which has, for instance, included government measures to persuade divorced couples to get back together.

But as difficult as it may be, and without excusing the abusive actions of Kadyrov's regime, efforts such as Saratova's should be noted, closely watched and encouraged, in the hope that over time they could offer alternatives to the republic's traditional repressive methods.

Realistically, authorities in Chechnya will likely continue with indiscriminate crackdowns. But either way, they would be better off trying to reintegrate at least some returning insurgents and using those who have abandoned jihadism to deter others, as Saratova has described, from violence. Moscow could even consider assisting such efforts and sharing experiences in dealing with a problem that, in one way or another, will affect other regions of Russia and other countries. Recognising even small positive signs from official Chechen organs could eventually help move them in a more positive direction and shine a light on what is otherwise one of the most obscure and repressive corners of Russia.