

RUSSIA / UKRAINE: CRIMEA AS A NEW HOTBED OF RADICAL ISLAM IN POST-SOVIET SPACE

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In a video that was recently posted on Youtube and on Russian jihadist websites emir of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA), Battalion of foreign fighters in Syria, Salahuddin Shishani, and his naib Abdul-Kerim Krinsky (Crimean) addressed to Muslims.

The video mentions the latest developments in jihad of Northern Caucasian fighters against governmental troops in Syria. The last part of the video is of a particular interest as it calls for jihad in Crimea.

Abdul-Kerim and Shishani urged for jihad in Crimea, meanwhile mentioning that Northern Caucasian jihadists will not go to Crimea, but they “leave the honor” of waging jihad to Tatars in Crimea.

Abdul Karim al-Ukraini (“the Ukrainian”) aka Abdul Karim Krinsky, is the second-in-command of the independent Chechen-led faction Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) and the leader of its Crimean battalion. It should be mentioned that security experts express increasing concerns about the long-term influence of Crimean Tatar jihadists who went for jihad in Syria on the security situation in the Crimean peninsula. According to Crimean sources, in 2013 at least 50 Crimean Muslims joined jihad in Syria and 2 of them were killed.

The exact number of Crimean jihadists in Syria and their fate is difficult to ascertain. So far, Ukrainian and Russian media reported about several Crimean Muslims, who joined jihad in Syria:

- Abdulla Jepparov, 20, from the town of Belogorsk, member of Hizb ut-Tahrir along with 6 other Muslims from Crimea went to Syria in the beginning of 2013 and was reportedly killed in April 2013 while fighting alongside Islamist rebels.

- Usein Mambetaliev, from Kolchugino village, went to Syria in 2013 together with his brother and wife and was allegedly killed in clashes with governmental troops.
- A Muslim man 'Edem' from Simferopol posted photos with weapons and Islamist flags in Syria on his page in social networks. Edem was later injured and in the beginning of 2014 he came back to Crimea.

The actual number of followers of radical Islam in Crimea is not clear. According to the estimation of local security authorities in 2009, the number of members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the peninsula was between 7000-10000, while Crimean Tatar Mejlis claimed that there are no more than 600 active members of the group.

Some Russian security experts consider that radicalization of Crimean Muslims started during Chechen military campaigns as many Chechen Islamists, injured in clashes with Russian troops, went to Crimean sanatoriums for medical treatment.

The next period of radicalization started in 2003 after the ban of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Russia, which forced numerous HuT clerics to move to Ukraine. On March 1, 2013, members of Hizb ut Tahrir organized an action 'One Umma, one flag, one war' in front of the Han's Castle in Bakhchisarai, calling Muslims to support jihadists in Syria.

Alarming radicalization of Muslims in Crimea started long time before the accession of Crimean peninsula by Russia. Meanwhile, the latest developments highlight that increasing tensions between Russian authorities and religious leaders of Crimean Tatars create a fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamist networks in the peninsula. It should be mentioned that since the beginning of unrest in Ukraine, Mejlis of Crimean Tatars and, namely, its former leader, politician Mustafa Dzhemilev actively criticized the Russian position in the conflict and organized a series of meetings with European authorities where he urged not to recognize the results of the Crimean referendum. Many Crimean Tatars also took an active role in Maidan protests in Kiev.

Following the accession of Crimean peninsula to Russia, Russian authorities banned Dzhemilev from entering Crimea. On February 23, during a meeting of the Crimean Tatars in Simferopol, the current leader of the Mejlis Refat Chubarov demanded the local authorities to dissolve the parliament and to include representatives of Crimean Tatars in the decision making process "of the new Constitution of Crimea on the basis of rights of the Crimean Tatar people to self-determination in their historical territory as part of independent Ukraine."

On April 27 the Supreme Prosecutor of Crimea, Natalya Poklonskaya, issued a series of warnings against extremist activities to the Mejlis and its actual leader Refat Chubarov and threatened to 'liquidate' the Mejlis. These actions triggered a series of

protest rallies, organized by Crimean Tatars, namely the blockage of Simpheropol-Armyansk autoroad on May 3. It should be mentioned that in the past Tatar Muslim leaders in Crimea and, namely, Dzhemilev had publically warned about the alarming growth of radical Islam in Crimea, first of all, due to the increasing presence of Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Takfir wal-Hijra Islamist movements.

In 2009, Dzhemilev was targeted by assassination plot, planned by three members of al-Takfir wal-Hijra islamist movement. They were arrested on October 26 during a special operation. Explosives and assault rifles as well as radical Islamist literature were seized during the searches in the suspects' apartments. Investigation also indicated the links between the suspects and Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Recent crackdown of Russian authorities on Mejlis of Crimean Tatars in Crimea and their labeling all pro-Ukrainian protests as 'extremism', will inevitably contribute to the further radicalization of Muslims in the peninsula. According to Dzhemilev, nearly 5000 Crimean Tatars fled to Lviv since the accession of Crimea by Russia, due to fears of a crackdown for their support of Euromaidan protests in Kiev. However, these data can not be independently verified.

Crimean Tatars count nearly 250.000, that is approximately 12 percent of Crimean population. It should be mentioned that they have very uneasy relations with Russian state authorities. In 1944 tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars were deported by Stalin for alleged collaboration with Fascists, but unlike other deported people as Volga Germans, and North Caucasian Chechens, Ingush and Balkars, Crimean Tatars were not allowed to return to their homes in 1957 and received this right only in 1989.

Latest developments highlight that radicalization of Muslim population is not a new trend in Crimea, meanwhile accession of the region by Russian Federation, the return of Crimean jihadists from Syria and the crackdown of Russian authorities on protests of moderate Muslims create a fertile ground for the development of radical Islam in the peninsula.

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