

Strategic Balancing and Power Play in the North Caucasus - International Implications of the Rise of Chechnya Under Kadyrov

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Introduction

The recent attacks in Boston have thrust Chechnya into the limelight as the two assailants were of Chechen ethnicity. While Chechnya has previously had problems with violent extremism, under the rule of Ramzan Kadyrov, Islamic militancy in the Chechen republic has dramatically declined. Following the two Chechen wars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Chechnya is undergoing a rapid period of reconstruction and development, largely thanks to funds from Moscow. However according to reports emanating from the Russian and Chechen press, the Russian Duma has agreed to lower financial contributions to the Chechen republic leaving Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov in a vulnerable position. The initial subsidiary budget from 2008-2012 totaled \$3 billion per annum and the Kremlin is looking to substantially lower contributions to \$350 million per year.

Kadyrov's priority is to find investment and to rectify the impeding budget crunch. His perceived focus is on the energy sector and foreign investment from the Middle East. Kadyrov's turbulent relationship with the Russian political spectrum is difficult, at best, yet his stabilization of the North Caucasus republic attracts a degree of praise in Moscow. The balancing act Kadyrov is performing makes him vulnerable, yet he is creating space for Chechnya and his own vision to plot their own course.

The Evolution of Chechnya

Chechnya is a North Caucasus republic that borders Georgia (Islamic militants often used the Pankisi gorge as an escape route into Georgia) and the Russia North Caucasus republics of Dagestan, Stavropol Krai, North Ossetia and Ingushetia. Throughout history Chechnya has often been a pawn between the two great powers of Turkey (formerly the Ottoman Empire) and Russia. Numerous insurgencies fought against the Russians have been by prominent religious-military leaders. The most famous of these are Sheikh Mansur (Chechen Leader against the Russians) and Imam Shamil (Imam of Dagestan). Quasi-religious political leaders are a fundamental trait of Chechen opposition figures. Following the great Caucasian war of the 18th and 19th centuries, Chechnya was assimilated into the Russian Empire. Stalin's paranoia led him to deport en masse whole ethnicities in the purges of World War II. The entire Chechen nation was deported to what is modern day Central Asia where hundreds of thousands of Chechens still reside.

Following the two Russian-Chechen wars, the Kremlin invested heavily in Chechnya. The First Chechen War occurred following the collapse of the USSR between December 11, 1994 and August 31, 1996. After Chechnya claimed independence Russia feared further dismantlement of the USSR and Moscow took measures to claim back territory under the pretext of the defense from criminality emanating from Chechnya. The Second Chechen War commenced on August 26, 1999 when Russian troops engaged Islamic militants who invaded the neighboring republic of Dagestan. Full-scale military operations continued

until May 2000. Russian counter-insurgency forces engaged Islamic extremists in the republic through April 16, 2009, nearly a decade later. Russia quickly learnt that their approach to fighting in Chechnya was drastically wrong and paid close attention to their soft approach trying to enlist support from Chechen tribesmen.

Kadyrov Regime

The current Chechen President is Ramzan Kadyrov, the son to the late Akhmed



Figure 1 - Former Chechen President Akhmed Kadyrov

Kadyrov, the former Chief Mufti of Chechnya and first President of Chechnya. Akhmed Kadyrov participated in the first Russian-Chechen war (as a militia commander) and was a firm advocate for Chechen independence. Akhmed Kadyrov was a key independence figure alongside the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and Soviet Air Force General Dzhokhar Dudayev. Akhmed Kadyrov was a Sufi as per traditional Chechen tradition and as a result collided with the *Wahhabi* fighters present in Chechnya. Akhmed Kadyrov fought against the Russians in the first Chechen war while the second Chechen war saw him ideologically opposed to the Islamic extremists that Russia was fighting. This gave him an opportunity to formalize power and resulted with

Kadyrov forming an alliance with the Russians. Vladimir Putin appointed Akhmed Kadyrov President of Chechnya on October 5, 2003. Moscow quickly began transferring combat, administrative and reconstruction responsibilities to Grozny. Akhmed Kadyrov fortified his position not only in Moscow but also in Chechnya by offering amnesties to Chechen militants while increasing aggressive Counter Terrorism (CT) operations. The majority of the turned militants joined the *Kadyrovtsy*. Akhmed Kadyrov utilized his relationship with Putin for greater self-autonomy and leveraged domestically to strengthen his reign in Chechnya.

Islamic extremists assassinated Akhmed Kadyrov on May 9, 2004 during the Soviet Victory Day parade that celebrated the defeat of the Axis powers.



Figure 2 - Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov

Ramzan Kadyrov like his father before him is seen to be close to the Russian presidency and has been given a large degree of control within the Chechen Republic. During his father's presidential reign Ramzan Kadyrov took charge of the family's militia, the *Kadyrovtsy* and later became Head of the Chechen Presidential Security Service. After his father's assassination, Ramzan Kadyrov became Deputy Prime Minister. In December 2005

the Chechen Prime Minister Sergey Abramov was involved in a car accident and Kadyrov became acting Prime Minister later taking the role on full time. In the last year of his second Presidential term, President Putin replaced Alu Alkhanov

with Prime Minister Kadyrov. Kadyrov and Alkhanov were involved in a power struggle and Putin was forced to intervene. Putin went in favor of Kadyrov because of the personality cult that follows his *taips* (Chechen Clans) and drives support in Chechnya, as well as his capability to maintain effective security enforcement as leader of the *Kadyrovtsy*. It cannot be understated how central President Putin was, and continues to be, to the rise of Ramzan Kadyrov.

Ramzan Kadyrov's clinical management of the Chechen *taips* permits a degree of political freedom while manipulating the Chechen virtue system (*adat*) to reduce political opposition. Chechnya has experienced a considerably lower number of attacks from Islamic extremists and has seen huge infrastructure projects undertaken. This has occurred thanks to the responsibilities delegated to the Kadyrov regime allowing Chechnya to dictate its own reconstruction program. Kadyrov has also used funds granted to Grozny to send the brightest Chechen students to European universities where upon graduation they work for the Chechen government. Kadyrov is wisely allocating finances within Chechnya to win support and show how central he is to the rise of the modern day republic.

Ramzan Kadyrov's Power Grab

Following the successful CT operations in Chechnya, President Medvedev transformed the Russian security apparatus, creating an opportunity for Kadyrov to shore up greater control in Chechnya. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) had long been established as the authority charged with maintaining security in the Chechen Republic, along with the rest of Russian territory. The relationship between Kadyrov and the MVD had long been a point of friction between Moscow and Grozny. By presidential decree, Medvedev transferred the internal security responsibility from the MVD to the Federal Security Service (FSB). This shift not only dissolved the presence of an authority that openly challenged Kadyrov's rule but also gave Grozny the opportunity to consolidate power within the republic by appointing pro-Kadyrov figures within the FSB. Specifically, Colonel Apty Alaudinov was appointed Chief of the Chechen Police and Lt. Gen. Ruslan Alkhanov was appointed Chechen Minister of Interior, both seen to be part of the evolved *Kadyrovtsy* made up of more politically savvy members.

Kadyrov's strict political enforcement in Chechnya quietly wins support in Moscow as it ensures security in the once war torn republic. Kadyrov's traditional Chechen *Sufi's* beliefs are a key point as it is an ideological opponent to the *Wahabbi* creed that Islamic extremists in the region abide to. It is important to note that while Chechnya was once the hotbed of Islamic extremism in the Russian Federation, Islamic extremism has spread to neighboring republics such as: Dagestan, Karbadino-Balkaria, Tatarstan and more recently and disturbingly in Bashkortostan. The rising trend of extremism in Russia is being watched closely by Moscow. This contrast of secure republics in the North Caucasus highlights Kadyrov's success in Chechnya.

The private militia, the *Kadyrovtsy* are a perceived surplus to security requirements that is aimed more at self-survival for the Kadyrov *Taip* than national security. Following the rise to Presidency of Akhmed Kadyrov,



Figure 3 - *Kadyrovtsy*

hundreds of former Islamists joined its ranks and it has continued to grow in line with the rise of Ramzan Kadyrov. Rough estimates place the *Kadyrovtsy* at around 7,000 and they have a vast inventory of arms and vehicles. President Putin's reliance on Kadyrov for stability in the North Caucasus during his first term as president highlighted the role of Kadyrov and his *Kadyrovtsy*. This left many potential rivals jealous because

of the growing influence and power of Kadyrov. However Moscow's reliance on the Kadyrovs could potentially prove ephemeral and it is important to note that the former Commander of the Russian Forces in the second Chechen war, General Valery Gerasimov has been promoted to Russian Army Chief of Staff.

During Vladimir Putin's first tenure as Russian President, he looked to utilize Kadyrov as a calming force in the North Caucasus by allowing a certain degree of freedom while still effectively holding the reins through generous funding directed through Kadyrov. The Chechen president has however clashed with numerous regional governors, mainly Ingushetian President Yanus-Bek Yevkurov and the Russian Presidential Envoy to the North Caucasus Federal District, Aleksandr Khloponin.



Figure 4 - Aleksander Khloponin

Khloponin's role in the North Caucasus cannot be underestimated. Many claim he is a future potential leader in the Russian political system. Khloponin's opposition to Kadyrov is also seen in light of the power struggle between the MVD and FSB within the North Caucasus. Khloponin's long time ally, Lt. Gen. Alexander Gorovoy was made First Deputy Interior Minister in 2012 and reestablished some security control to Moscow through Khloponin and his allies.

The antagonistic relationship between the MVD, FSB, and Chechens within these organizations creates a tense security environment for Kadyrov to manage. Kadyrov is rising above this power struggle and utilizes his *Kadyrovtsy* to maintain leverage and influence in Chechnya, Russia and the wider region. This effective security management benefits Putin now but Kadyrov is a powerful figure and is looking for ways to increase his influence both nationally and internationally. This has the potential to create a situation that would pit Kadyrov against Moscow.

Middle Eastern Investment in Chechnya

Moscow's is reducing its subsidies to Chechnya due to fiscal considerations. Moscow is using this as an opportunity to coerce Kadyrov into toeing the Kremlin line. Ramzan Kadyrov is a very pragmatic leader and is trying to find ways to replenish the budget deficit created by Moscow, allowing him to continue his own course of management and is looking to utilize his relationship with numerous Middle Eastern nations for financial assistance.

Kadyrov's ambition for the development of Chechnya has driven mega projects



Figure 5 - Modern Day Grozny

that are comparable to those undertaken in the Arabian Gulf. International hotels, apartment complexes, critical infrastructure facilities and a modern day ski resort are all projects that have commenced in Chechnya. Given the potential break in Russian financing, Kadyrov may seek to strengthen foreign investment to Chechnya, particularly from Gulf States. This scenario has the potential to increase

relations between Chechnya and the Middle Eastern states. Chechnya's growth in foreign relations with Middle Eastern states is particularly interesting when seen in contrast to Russia's, especially in light of the effect the Syrian crisis

United Arab Emirates (UAE)



Figure 6 - President Kadyrov and Sheikh Nahyan al Nahyan

Of all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that Chechnya has approached for investment, the UAE is being more vocal than others in regard to its portfolio in Chechnya. Chechen-UAE relations are relatively warm and in 2010 Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov met HH General Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces.

In 2011, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research at the time, travelled to Chechnya and inaugurated the Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan Centre for Holy Quran Memorization. The following year Kadyrov received a cup belonging to the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) from a UAE delegation in August 2012. The head of religious affairs in the UAE reportedly wrote a letter asking for Kadyrov to be permanent custodian of the relic. Kadyrov has reportedly described ties with the UAE as "brotherly".

Kadyrov previously owned a number of racehorses stabled in the Emirate of Dubai in stables owned by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai. Three days before the prestigious Dubai World Cup in 2013, Kadyrov bought the racehorse Meandre in order to own a horse running in the race.



Figure 7 - Kadyrov at the 2013 Dubai World Cup

It is reported that in 2011 President Kadyrov requested foreign investment from the UAE. The UAE responded by sending a delegation to hear details of the proposed investment plans. According to the Grozny press, Kadyrov proposed 17 investment projects for the region of just over one million people, totaling 68.89 billion roubles (\$2.35bn). It was later reported that the UAE holding company, Royal Group confirmed it was to invest in Chechnya. Royal Group's priority for investment will be in the property and agricultural sectors.



Figure 8 - HH General Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan and Ramzan Kadyrov

Ramzan Kadyrov met the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, HH General Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan on April 1, 2013 (two days after the Dubai World Cup) in Abu Dhabi and discussed bilateral ties and potential foreign investment. In Kadyrov's delegation that visited the UAE was business tycoon Ruslan Baysarov (who had recently started construction on the 19 slope Veduchi ski resort in Southern Chechnya), Ziad Sabsabi and Said-Hussein

Shaptukaevym. It was noted that at an unspecified time in April 2013, the UAE would receive a delegation of Chechen ministers and businessmen.

Kadyrov has a certain affinity for the UAE and the accompanying photo (taken from Kadyrov's Instagram account) shows Kadyrov and children from the Al-Hifaith school thanking Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan for his contributions to the North Caucasus republic.



Figure 9 - President Kadyrov with students outside the H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan Centre for the Holy Qur'an Teaching and Memorization

Saudi Arabia

Kadyrov and Chechen connections with Saudi Arabia have been under increasing observation. The Islamist terrorist campaign that has plagued the North Caucasus has its roots in Saudi Arabia. Financing operations and combat personnel including terrorist leader, Ibn al-Khattab have been heavily involved in this insurgency campaign in the North caucuses. In 2011 Russian authorities reported they had killed a Saudi al-Qaeda envoy that was responsible for considerable financing operations. It is important to note that in 2009 when the Grozny Airport was given certification to allow international flights, Chechen authorities took responsibility for immigration services. This in turn allowed finances and goods to enter the republic without the knowledge of Russian authorities. International flights have been dramatically reduced yet flights had previously embarked to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kazakhstan.



Figure 11 - President Kadyrov at Mecca and Prince Khaled al-Faisal

Kadyrov has dramatically enforced a 'Chechen' version of Islam as a counter to *wahabbi* traditions imported from Saudi Arabia. A recent report suggested a trend amongst women in Chechnya were wearing black veils (*burqa* and *niqab*) similar to those worn by women in Saudi Arabia, but Kadyrov demanded a halt to this practice. Kadyrov has paid for trips by Chechens to visit Saudi Arabia and participate in the *Haji*. Kadyrov

was invited to the Saudi kingdom in 2007 at the behest of King Abdullah and after a meeting with the Saudi

King preceded, along with the Chechen entourage, including the leading Chechen Supreme Mufti Sultan Mirzaev, to the *Kaaba* in Mecca. It is important to note that at the time, Kadyrov was only the second leader from an Islamic republic of the Russian Federation to visit the *Kaaba* in Mecca.

During Kadyrov's trip to Saudi Arabia in 2007 it was reported that Kadyrov delivered a message to the Saudi monarch from Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ziyad Sabsabi was part of Kadyrov's delegation and released a statement on behalf of the Chechen President. It is important to note that Ziyad Sabsabi, an ethnic Syrian is a member of the Russian Federal Council who often visits Chechnya and interacts closely with Kadyrov on international affairs. Sabsabi has close ties to the United Russia political party and has often been seconded by them to numerous North Caucasus regimes. Kadyrov's trips to



Figure 12 -King Abdullah bin Saud and Ramzan Kadyrov (N.B Ziyad Sabsabi behind Kadyrov)

Saudi Arabia are an effort to highlight the official and traditional Chechen Islamic creed. Kadyrov's meetings with King Abdullah and the religious authority in Mecca further justify this point.

Jordan and Lebanon

In regards to other trips made by Kadyrov to the Middle East he has normally



Figure 13 - Ramzan Kadyrov and King Abdullah of Jordan

made it a priority to visit high-density Chechen diaspora communities, specifically in Jordan. Jordan is of specific interest to Kadyrov because the Chechen diaspora community has fully assimilated into their host country. In Jordan the Chechen diaspora has been heavily influential in matters of national security. Chechens in Jordan are well represented in the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), Jordanian Armed Forces (specifically Special

Operations Forces) and the Jordanian Royal court. Kadyrov's trip to Jordan in 2011 was not entirely welcomed by Jordanian Chechens. That being said, a street in Amman was renamed after the Chechen President. It was reported that on April 17, 2013, Kadyrov met with King Abdullah's special representative, Al-Sharif Muhammad al-Luhaymak and a message was passed to Kadyrov from King Abdullah inviting him to Amman.

Following the 2006 war between the Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel, Russia sent engineers to assist Lebanese authorities in their reconstruction efforts. Russia sought protection of these engineers from *Spetznaz* (Russian special forces) units based in Chechnya and whose ethnic make up is predominantly Chechen. This is an example of Moscow utilizing its warm ties with pro-Russian Chechens for foreign policy objectives. It should be noted that there are many Turks of Chechen descent and investment does enter Chechnya from Turkey but reports are scarce.

It is important to note that Kadyrov faces fierce opposition from Khloponin over his interaction with Middle Eastern states as he has routinely avoided the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs when embarking on foreign visits. Clearly, Kadyrov is pursuing a Chechen agenda that may ultimately conflict with Russia's foreign policy.

Investment Opportunities in the Energy Sector

Middle Eastern investment, primarily from the Arabian Gulf is an attractive opportunity, for both recipient and investor. The lack of infrastructure and its strong position in comparison to the rest of the North Caucasus holds investment potential. The oil refinery and pipeline junction connecting Russia, Europe and the Middle East is a key transit point, especially when you consider possible conflict with Iran and redevelopment opportunities that may arise as a result. This is in direct comparison with the Silk Wind Project that aims to develop a freight transportation system from Kazakhstan to Turkey passing through the South Caucasus. If Chechnya were to gain greater leverage over its

natural resources, a route through Azerbaijan to the European markets would ultimately create greater revenues for the North Caucasus Republic.

Russia's State owned oil company Rosneft's contract expires in Chechnya soon and Chechnya has been looking for alternatives for the rights to its oil, due to a lack of investment in the republic from Rosneft. The Chechens view the construction of an oil refinery within the Chechen republic as key to its oil exportation rights, especially considering the fact that Russia seemed so eager to construct such a facility in the neighboring republic of Karbadino-Balkaria. Kadyrov is however playing a dangerous game between Rosneft and potential investors as Rosneft President and Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin is a close ally of Putin. If Rosneft does regain the license to oil rights in Chechnya, you can expect financial contributions to increase from the Russian government. This is for the mean time off the table and contributes to the decision to lower financial contributions from Moscow.

Azerbaijan-Chechen relations have been historically warm but not totally calm. Azerbaijan has felt the consequences of the Islamic insurgency that has shaken the North Caucasus more recently spreading into the border republic of Dagestan. Azerbaijan has housed Chechen refugees but has extradited Chechens wanted in Moscow as well as closing a school that educated mostly Chechen refugees following the kidnapping and murder of Azeri citizens. Former Chechen Presidential leader (Former President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and resistance leader) Aslan Maskhadov and Former Azerbaijan President were close and this has been resurrected to include Chechen President Kadyrov and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev. Kadyrov visited Azerbaijan most recently on November 15, 2012 when President Aliyev greeted him and the two signed a cooperation deal to invest in Chechnya, specifically in the construction, education and culture sectors. Azerbaijan has been pursuing a course of close interaction with a number of Russian republics as a way of gaining influence in the North Caucasus region.

The Chechen invitation to Azerbaijan's State Oil Company (SOCAR) to explore oil fields in the republic could help strengthen this relationship and increase revenue for the republic through the silk wind project, directly into Europe avoiding any levies from Russia. The Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline intersects Chechen territory and could serve as the vessel for Chechen oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Stagnant oil flows on the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline during the last 12 months highlight the need for an impetus to increase the flow of crude oil. Azeri involvement in Chechnya could provide this impetus and further strengthen their position in the Caucasus.

Security Situation in Modern Day Chechnya

Chechnya rose from the ruins of the Second Russian-Chechen war under the partnership and guidance of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kadyrov. Chechnya seems likely to expand its process of redevelopment while Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov will continue to exploit the Chechen authorities crackdown on Islamist terrorists for greater power and influence in Russia. This point is especially poignant when one considers the 2014 Winter Olympics will

take place in Sochi (640km between Sochi and Grozny) and Russian President Putin will take every measure to make sure the winter 2014 Olympic Games will go smoothly. It should be noted that in 2012, Russian FSB arrested Chechen terrorists preparing an attack on the 2014 Winter Olympics and found surface to air missiles, TNT and grenade launchers.

Kadyrov's response to the increasing conservatism of the North Caucasus Republic is an attractive policy for Russia and numerous Middle Eastern states. On one hand Kadyrov is an ideological opponent of the *wahabbi* extremists but also acts as a counter weight to any potential influence Azerbaijan and Iran may try to leverage within the region. How Putin manages the North Caucasus Republic beyond the 2014 Winter Olympics will ultimately define Moscow's relationship with Kadyrov. It is of fundamental interest to both parties to keep warm relations beyond 2014 due to diasporic tension from the Syrian crisis.

Kadyrov's autocratic leadership cannot be underestimated in the crackdown of Islamic terrorism, however the future will decide if he is also an effective developer of Chechnya or just an efficient policeman of the Chechen state. Kadyrov did once fight alongside the Islamists against the Russians and another scenario like this can't be ruled out if Russia was deemed the aggressor against Chechnya. Kadyrov's determination to plot an independent Chechen course of action disturbs Moscow as they have little influence and control over this process. The budget reduction is a clear sign to get Grozny back on board but having tasted independent thought and action, Kadyrov is looking for continued investment to continue self-governing rule. If there were attempts by Russia to de-stabilize Kadyrov, a scenario involving Kadyrov's private militia and Islamic militants combining to attack Russian forces would not be too far fetched. The consequences of this event would be epic in scale.

Conclusion

Overall, Kadyrov has largely overcome political opposition yet, as Chechnya is vulnerable to foreign interference and influence this situation could quickly evolve. The lack of funding from the Russian Duma could ultimately define the leadership of Kadyrov and his possible demise, however foreign investment may rescue Kadyrov. Kadyrov will inevitably lean towards the Gulf region and the Levant for more investment. His international alliances and meetings with state rulers from powerful countries help to promote his leadership of Chechnya to the global diaspora. This also helps Kadyrov in regards to his bargaining position with Russia. The GCC's (Qatar and Kuwait have interests in Chechnya but for the mean time are not playing such an active role) foreign policy objectives are intertwined with business opportunity, further explaining its relationship with Chechnya by disclosure and growth of investment portfolios. The evolving menace of Islamist insurgencies within the Russian Federation will continue to empower Kadyrov while he maintains relative safety within Chechnya. Without the appropriate investment and development of the North Caucasus Republic, Kadyrov will have to toe Moscow's line, further restricting his autonomy. Ramzan Kadyrov is playing all sides, utilizing his relationship with the GCC monarchies and close relationship with President Putin to gain the optimum level of self-autonomy.

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