An Interview with Mustafa Jemilev

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Question: We understand that the most important issues currently faced by Crimean Tatars include land, citizenship/registration, socio-economic improvement, language acceptance, and political representation. How have Crimean Tatars worked to achieve these demands? What strategies have been employed?

Mustafa Jemilev:
The Mejlis is the continuation of a movement that came into existence a long time ago. Our national movement emerged in the mid-1950s, in the post-war period. At the onset, it existed in the form of initiative groups. Then, in 1989, it became the OKND [Crimean Tatar National Movement Organization]. The movement established a stronghold in Crimea, when 40,000 to 50,000 Tatars living in Uzbekistan returned to their native land. We decided to hold elections, with one representative elected for every 1,000 Tatars, and thus the Kurultay was created. The Kurultay is elected every 5 years, while the Mejlis is the organization which represents Crimean Tatars in all of Crimea. As an institution, the Mejlis has no military or police force; instead its effectiveness is based entirely on its reputation.

Although there are small groups of Tatars who do not acknowledge the Mejlis as their legitimate representative body, the majority of the community is united by the Mejlis. As such, the Mejlis is the sole organ that negotiates with political forces to represent Tatar interests. In cases when interests or basic rights are ignored on the part of the political authorities, we respond by organizing demonstrations and other peaceful acts of protest. Non-violence is and has always been a guiding doctrine in our movement's philosophy. Due to our emphasis on non-violence, Crimean and Ukrainian officials have come to acknowledge that we are a strong and unified political force. In short, since the OKND's inception we've continuously highlighted two principles: tolerance and non-violence. In addition, we refuse to remain silent when our rights, and those of other indigenous groups in Crimea, are violated.

The Crimean Tatar movement was very popular in the former CIS countries during Soviet times. We have always abided by the laws of the country. When our rights are violated we turn to international courts to plead our case and present our grievances. The constitution of the Soviet Union stipulated that Soviet citizens have the right to publicly demonstrate only if public mobilizations strengthen socialism. We, however, were against this convention- we wanted citizens to have the right to demonstrate and ask for a better life. This is one of the key principles enumerated in the UN Declaration for Human Rights.

As the Mejlis was founded in 1991, during the last few months of Soviet dominance over Ukraine, it was declared an illegal organization. However, because the Soviet government was on the verge of collapsing, it only had the capacity to declare the Mejlis illegal but was
not able implement a ban on its activities. Crimean Tatars hoped that the new Ukrainian government following independence would admit the Mejlis as a legal organization representing Tatar interests. However, the nascent Ukrainian government was too afraid of provoking a conflict with the majority of the Russian population of Crimea. Difficulties began early on, when the police started attacking Tatars and demolishing their homes. In such extreme cases, the Mejlis recognizes the right to self defense.

For instance, in 1992, a police round-up captured 23 Crimean Tatars and destroyed their houses. The Mejlis immediately organized a demonstration on Simferopol's public square. When the Mejlis demanded that the government bring the perpetrators to justice, the authorities remained silent. Thus, we began mobilizing Tatars into self-defense groups. All Crimean Tatars under the age of 50 registered with their regional Mejlises to partake in a self defense initiative. In addition, all Tatars were asked to mobilize and those that remained in Central Asia were encouraged to return to Crimea. After the Ukrainian government learned of the illegal arrests made by the Crimean police, it immediately ordered the release of all 23 Crimean Tatars. The central administration promised to conduct an investigation to identify the perpetrators of the illegal arrests.

In 1999, former President Leonid Kuchma sought to institutionalize Crimean Tatar issues and created a Council of Advisors as a governmental advisory body which was made up solely of the Mejlis leadership. Some consider this act to constitute a partial recognition of the Mejlis. After the establishment of the central Council of Advisors, similar additional councils were established for every region in Crimea.

With respect to the multiple problems currently faced by Crimean Tatars, the issues of citizenship and registration are not as acute as they were before. Thanks to the participation of international organizations, particularly UNHCR, a bi-lateral treaty was negotiated between the governments of Uzbekistan and Ukraine to facilitate the citizenship process for repatriated Tatars.

The land issue remains essential because Ukrainian legal codes governing the return of land do not provide for the returning Crimean Tatars. The land law restricted the distribution of land only to collective farm members, not accounting for the current situation of returning Crimean Tatars. We worked out a draft law to correct the situation, stipulating that Crimean Tatars should have equal rights as the collective farmers. The proposed law was vetoed by President Kuchma. We attempted to renegotiate the decision but to no avail.

The central problem is that the main plots of land in Crimea have already been distributed. Even if new provisions would be signed into law, the problem of redistribution can not be resolved. Southern Crimea is of course the biggest problem area. The price of land has become too high for Tatars to afford -- prior to their deportation 70% of the Tatar population was living on the southern coast. Today, Crimean Tatars only make up 1% of the southern coast's population. The majority of conflicts between Tatars and ethnic Russians are related to land on the southern coast. Similarly, the situation in Simferopol is equally difficult as the government does not wish to distribute land plots but would rather sell them at high prices. The response on the part of Crimean Tatars has been twofold: some have organized major acts of protest, like the recent erection of a tent city in front of the Crimean Parliament in Simferopol, while others have resorted to land-grabbing, usually in response to the most extreme cases of discrimination.
Question: On a side note, we noticed yesterday that demonstrators had set up tents outside the Crimean parliament, however, this morning, they are no longer there. Do you know what happened?

**Mustafa Jemilev:**
Regarding the removal of the tents, we have been negotiating with the Verkhovna Rada of Crimea, and yesterday struck a deal regarding Tatar demands. Our part of the deal was the removal of the tents. However, if the authorities do not fulfill their promises, the tents will be reinstated.

To return to the earlier question, the language problem is very central. After deportation in 1944, the Tatar language was entirely prohibited. All books in the Tatar language were destroyed, even books by Lenin and Stalin translated into Tatar. Everything that had any connection to Tatars was destroyed, including cemeteries and architectural monuments. Tombstones were used to build roads; names of ancient villages were changed, street names and settlements were renamed to honor the Soviet leadership or important Soviet cultural figures. Only Bakhchisaray retained its name because of Pushkin's popular poem *Bakhchisaray Fountain*. Initially, the Soviets planned to rename Bakhchisaray "Red Army City," but scientists, literary figures, and politicians protested the move. As part of our struggle today, we are actively reviving ancient Crimean Tatar city names and modes of dress. We have so far only managed to set up 15 Tatar language schools, as the government has set aside an insufficient sum of US$10 million for education expenditures for all Crimean deported peoples. EU estimates show that the cost of setting up a single school often exceeds US$3 million.

**Question:** What is the relationship between the Tatar Mejlis leadership (OKND) and the Rukh movement, both historically and currently?

**Mustafa Jemilev:**
We are trying to cooperate with all democratic political forces in Ukraine. Among all the parties, our relationship with Rukh is the closest. Rukh, like our movement, was created by anti-Soviet dissidents. The former head of Rukh, Chernovol, was a close friend of mine, as we were both exiled and spent many years in Soviet prisons together. Rukh is the only party which actively tries to solve Crimean Tatar problems. It is in favor of national autonomy being restored in Crimea, and giving the Tatar language an equal standing with Ukrainian. We have worked together as a coalition in every Ukrainian national election since independence.

**Question:** What is your view on the recent (August 2006) Bakhchisaray conflict? Do you see a potential for escalation?

**Mustafa Jemilev:**
The conflict arose because of the government's ignorance with respect to Crimean Tatar issues. Tatars have lobbied the ethnic-Russian dominated Crimean parliament to remove a Soviet-era market place from a historical Muslim shrine. In 2004 the Tatars and the government reached an agreement, in which the market would be removed and rebuilt nearby. While a new market was built just a few meters away, the existing one was never removed, and Russians began threatening the removal of the shrine, which happens to be Crimea's holiest site. In response, Crimean Tatars organized a protest in August 2006 which escalated into a large-scale conflict after Russians attacked the peaceful protesters. Even my car was destroyed by the agitators.
I reminded the Tatar protesters not to retaliate violently, particularly as many women and children were present at the market place, and violence would be against Mejlis principles of tolerance. I continued calling various individuals that I knew who were partaking in the protest. Throughout the day, Tatars were coming from surrounding areas to join the protest in Bakhchisaray, but the police already had blocked off the city, stopping additional protesters from entering. In essence, Bakhchisaray was surrounded by Tatars during the conflict. We reached an agreement with Crimean authorities a day after the conflict broke out and fighting had ceased. However, we are still faced with the issue of the investigation of those who instigated the conflict. If Crimean authorities do not follow through with their investigation, we will reinitiate the protest in Bakhchisaray.

*Question: What lessons can be learned by other minority groups world-wide from your political activism, participation and success?*

**Mustafa Jemilev:**

In 1998, I received the Nansen Medal, the highest UNHCR prize for refugee activism. During the ceremony in Geneva, Kofi Annan, who presented the medal, talked about ethnic conflict and praised the Crimean Tatars and Mejlis leadership for being the only ethnic minority who has led a struggle based on UN principles of non-violence and tolerance.

Nonetheless, there are many political figures and forces in Crimean who continuously ignore the rights of Crimean Tatars. Yet, these figures do not take into account that Crimean Tatars are, for instance, not requesting the return of their historical land but are willing to settle elsewhere in the peninsula. Another problem is that Tatars are still considered a minority group. With the support of the Ukrainian government and the international community, we hope that Tatars will be fully integrated into Ukrainian socio-political and cultural landscape and seen as a valuable part of it. Finally, the media coverage of Crimean Tatar issues has been nothing but unbalanced, mainly reported from pro-Russian perspectives. During the clashes in Bakhchisaray, for instance, ethnic Russians were interviewed claiming that Tatars instigated the conflict and that ethnic conflict is inevitable in Crimea.

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