Tatars: Kiev's Anti-Russian Allies

A Tatar nationalist in front of flag in Simferopol, Crimea (Ukraine) in July 2009

In Ukraine’s ethnic-Russian Crimea, Kiev finds an ally in the Tartars, the country’s only Muslim population, who are taking a strong stance against talk of a return to Russian sovereignty, Ben Judah writes for ISN Security Watch.

By Ben Judah in Simferopol for ISN Security Watch

All is calm in Crimea, except for the future: In this ethnically Russian province, home to Moscow’s Black Sea Fleet and notorious gangs of Russian chauvinists, Kiev finds few allies. First among these are the 250,000 Crimean Tatars, Ukraine’s only Muslim people. Having returned to the peninsula from Stalinist-imposed exile in the early 1990s - they now form roughly 14 percent of the Crimean population and have starkly chosen not to return to Russian sovereignty.

Mustafa Jemilev is scarcely five foot tall, sports a small moustache and some slightly shabby clothes. His office is lined with books both in Turkish and about other Turkic peoples. “Us Crimean Tatars have never been to the moon, or anything like that,” he croaks from the stress of a 40-cigarette-a-day habit, “but we do know how to make great coffee.” He is the leader of his roughly 250,000-strong people. As chairman of the Mejilis, the de facto autonomous assembly of the Crimean Tatars and a member of the Ukrainian parliament, his personality has been the driving force behind this small nation’s painful odyssey for the past few decades.

“Our people were the victims of genocide. At the end of World War II we were deported to Central Asia on Stalin’s orders. Over half our people died in the cattle trucks or in the months following arrival,” he tells ISN Security Watch.

Over tea, Jemilev speaks slowly, with the glazed eyes of a man imprisoned seven times by Soviet authorities.

“When I was a child, at night all my parents would whisper of was Crimea. That is where we first learned of our homeland. Following the fall of the Soviet Empire, we began our return to the peninsula, now part of an independent Ukraine.”

Undoing ethnic cleansing

The Crimean Tatars were not the only punished people of the Soviet Union; many other nationalities such as the Ingush and the Chechens were also sent into exile.
"The most remarkable thing about this national movement has been its commitment to pragmatic non-violence since the mid-1980s," Natalya Belitzer, an expert on the Crimean Tatar people, tells ISN Security Watch.

"Despite being the victims of stereotypes and discrimination, their return to the Crimea has been undertaken peacefully. Crimean Slavs now look back and laugh at the intense fear they felt in the early 1990s when they heard of their imminent return."

Under the direction of a UN displaced persons program, the Tatars were re-settled across Crimea, but not according to their previous locations. They form the majority nowhere apart from a few villages and live mostly in the outskirts of the peninsula’s main cities.

Jemilev explained to ISN Security Watch: “We were never acknowledged as an indigenous people of the Ukraine, [we] suffer from discrimination and poor socio-economic conditions. Above all, the issue is land. It was not returned to us according to the way things were before World War II.”

Unlike the Caucasian Chechens or the Ingush, the Tatars formed the majority in a stretch of land between Yalta and Simferopol, widely acknowledged as the best lands in the whole of the Ukraine. Today it is studded with oligarchs’ villas and hotels, not the mosques and small farming hamlets of its past.

Protest and divisions

This is why the Tatars are demonstrating outside the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada, with placards that are simple and to the point: “Give us back our land.”

At the demonstrations, Guzel, in her tightly wrapped headscarf and her standoffish attitude, appears to be in charge of the sit-in. “We have been here for over two months. We have staged hunger-strikes. The reasons are simple. We do not have enough land and our constitutional rights have been violated. But still things are better than had we been part of Russia. Things are very bad there for Muslims,” she told ISN Security Watch.

The other protesters are languishing in the heat. They seem mostly young and unemployed.

“They’ll bring some more in a few days, Insh’allah. And then we can go home,” Guzel adds.

Further up the street there are more Tatars protesting. Outside the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, there are around 30 people waving placards and banners, shouting slogans that presumably the Chinese Ambassador would be horrified by: “Save the Uyghur nation! Shame on the Chinese Communist Totalitarians!”

A middle-aged man holding a portrait of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, his face obscured by a swastika, tells ISN Security Watch: “I have come to defend my fellow
Muslims. The Uyghur situation is just like our own was and I am obliged to stick up for fellow Turkic peoples,” he says.

Later that afternoon, ISN Security Watch joined the Tatars on their battle bus back to Crimea. Safely outside Kiev, vodka began to be poured and beers consumed; but the conviviality was short-lived. At the back of the bus an argument began to escalate amongst the drinkers over whether or not to be “more militant” or to continue to follow the “path of diplomacy.” Insults were exchanged. Eventually, a young man, topless and drunk, had to be restrained by the elder Tatars. He was in the “radical camp.”

Several hours later, the atmosphere on the battle bus was sufficiently calm again for the older Tatars to begin singing. A bald man belted out ancient war songs - a Turkic melody, faintly redolent of Central Asia.

The atmosphere on the battle bus seemed to confirm what Paul Goble, ex-CIA analyst and expert on former Soviet and Russian ethnic minorities, told ISN Security Watch: “There is really a lot of anger among the Tatars, over land and rights. There is not a considerable amount of Islamism, but it is there.”

Refusing to be Russian

Jemilev is adamant that the Kremlin is attempting to discredit his people. “Russia is spreading rumors that there is jihadism in the peninsula in order to disgrace us. They have spent a lot of money in the Crimea and enlisted a few very small groups that support them,” he says.

One of those alleged groups, Jemilev says, is Mili Farqa. “This group [...] has only 20 members, but it issued an appeal to the president of the Russian Federation and the president of Tatarstan, calling to [action against] an ongoing ‘genocide’ undertaken by Kiev. I very wittily said that every nation has its portion of idiots.”

Jemilev is also adamant that a campaign against him personally is being undertaken by the Kremlin. He explains that he no longer gives interviews to Russian state-controlled news channels as his words are being edited into propaganda. “Reporters from Russia’s Channel One came to me and asked if it was true that I was conniving with [Ukrainian President Viktor] Yushchenko to bring about a state of emergency in the Crimea in order to cancel the forthcoming elections. I replied that I knew who was spreading these rumors, but when I watched the Russian news I saw myself going ‘I know about this’ as if I was in on a conspiracy,” he says.

The leader of the Crimean Tatars is adamant that his population will not be returned to Russian sovereignty. He told ISN Security Watch that “If the Crimea was to be annexed by Russia, in a replay of the South Ossetia situation, there would be civil war and we would fight on the side of Ukraine.”

Dr Viktor Chumak, a political observer at the International Centre for Policy Studies shares the sentiment that the future of Crimea is uncertain. “Nothing is assured, but from my perspective the Crimea forms an asset for the Kremlin when being part of the Ukraine. Pressure can be placed on it and tensions exploited. However, if
Moscow was to attempt to incorporate the Crimea, this would turn an asset into a liability."

On Yalta beach, the mood is much the same.

Denis, in his early thirties, thinks the place “will eventually be like Chechnya in reverse. The people want to be part of Russia and she wants them back too.”

However Alex, in his early twenties, was more skeptical. “People really don’t care about frivolities like who runs the place. The issue is the economy and now that’s in a real crisis. This place is going to stay Ukrainian. It just turned out that way.”

Both however shared nuanced if generally hostile attitudes to the Crimean Tatars, largely based on irremediable cultural differences.

The Crimean Tatars find themselves in the peculiar position of being a watermark for Ukraine’s future. If their ultimate destiny is to experience greater tolerance, respect and land rights, it will be a testament to the gradual Europeanization of the country. However, a deteriorating condition for Ukraine’s Muslims would be suggestive not only of socio-economic and political devolution but a creeping Kremlinization.

Ben Judah is a senior correspondent for ISN Security Watch, currently reporting from Russia and the Caucasus. He has reported for the Associated Press; and his work has also featured in the Economist Online, the New Republic Online and in Standpoint Magazine.