



Feature Article
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Kadyrov and the Middle East: Threats to Russia's Strategy

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Ramzan Kadyrov's transformation from a stalwart defender of Russia's policy of support for traditional Islam in the North Caucasus to an increasingly independent actor with divided loyalties represents a significant threat to Russia's regional security strategy. This shift, marked by his growing ties to Gulf monarchies and subtle adoption of the very religious practices he once opposed, signals a critical juncture in Russia's decades-long approach to managing Islamic influence in its southern territories.

Understanding the transformation in Chechnya requires looking beyond the surface of political appearances, a particularly challenging task in our era of information abundance. Political analyses often arrive filtered through the lens of subjectivity and the interests of their authors. The currents of media streams carry facts, tinted in hues conveniently aligned with



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the political palette of their creators, distorting them to fit specific agendas. This practice is often hidden, even from the authors themselves, as the deep undercurrents of the subconscious are beyond the control of rational will; they flow like underground rivers, undeterred by our efforts to direct them. To confront the future, we must delve into the essence of functional narratives tied to particular political figures. All too often, our attention is

monopolized by the personal characteristics and ambitions of these individuals, while we neglect to consider that in the chess game of state politics, every piece plays its unique, predetermined role. The tasks and actions of each political actor must be evaluated through the lens of the strategies and political objectives set by the state, rather than solely through their individual desires and motivations. When discussing the roles of various officials in Russia's North Caucasus, it is crucial to analyze their functions and significance within the framework of the Russian state's policies in the region. A politician's influence is defined by how uniquely and effectively they fulfill the state's objectives assigned to them and how consistently they maintain this performance over time.

If an official fails to meet the state's expectations and does not address the assigned tasks, their proximity to the leadership in Russia becomes irrelevant. In such cases, the state apparatus will insist on replacing them with someone capable of effectively performing these duties. After all, the failure to accomplish key tasks threatens not only the state itself but also the political elite, whose security and stability remain a priority.

The religious landscape of the North Caucasus represents a complex mosaic shaped by centuries of interaction between local Sufi traditions and periodic waves of reformist Islamic movements. Since the late 1990s, Russia has strategically positioned itself as a protector

of 'traditional Islam'—primarily Sufi-oriented practices with deep historical roots in the region—against the encroachment of Saudi-backed Salafist interpretations that gained traction during the Chechen wars. The Kadyrov family, first Akhmad and later his son Ramzan, became the primary instruments of this policy, implementing a strictly controlled version of Islam that was both sufficiently orthodox to satisfy local believers while remaining subordinate to Russian state interests.

The Kadyrov Legacy and Mission

Akhmad Kadyrov played a pivotal role in modern Russian history by solidifying the position of "traditional Islam" in the North Caucasus. His primary task was to prevent the spread of Middle Eastern influence through religious channels, not only in the Chechen Republic but across the entire North Caucasus. Akhmad Kadyrov successfully fulfilled this mission, and it is now up to his son Ramzan Kadyrov, as Ramzan has often declared, to continue and strengthen this course. Notably, Ramzan Kadyrov has responded harshly to any signs of influence from Islamic preachers originating in the Middle East among the republic's residents.

Ramzan Kadyrov has regulated many aspects of daily life, including dress codes, the rules for wearing beards and mustaches, as well as the specific details of religious rituals, such as how

prayers should be performed and how many times blessings should be pronounced in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. He has claimed that distinguishing a Wahhabi beard from that of a regular official is quite simple: Wahhabi adherents typically shave their mustaches. According to him, this is a clear indicator of affiliation with radical Islamist movements such as Wahhabism. He has repeatedly described Wahhabis as "children of the devil" who must be eliminated—a goal he has pursued with exceptional determination

In this context, the logic behind Russia's state policy, which turned a blind eye to Kadyrov's numerous crimes, becomes clear—it aligned with the country's strategic interests. Through the so-called soft power of Islam and its preachers, foreign states and intelligence agencies exert influence, something Russia seeks to prevent. In this, Russia is hardly unique: it is not the only power to use religious divisions as a tool for safeguarding its interests.

Shifts in Kadyrov's Approach

Active advocacy for Russia's interests and the defense of traditional Islamic values against the Salafist movement have become distinguishing features of Ramzan Kadyrov's activities. He has made it his professional creed to engage in confrontation with radical ideologies and show a readiness to take extreme measures against them. However, questions arise about whether there have been changes in his approach today.

A turning point in understanding his policies may have occurred in 2016, when Kadyrov organized the Grozny Islamic Conference with the central theme: "Who are the followers of the Sunnah?" This event may serve as an important indicator of his current views and strategies regarding Islam in the North Caucasus, potentially reflecting shifts in his perception of religious policy and state interests.

The Grozny Islamic Conference, held on August 27, 2016, culminated in the adoption of the Grozny Fatwa. This document proclaimed that true Muslims are adherents of the schools of Kalam (Ashari and Maturidi) and one of the four recognized madhhabs (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, or Hanbali), as well as practitioners of Sufism. Salafists, in turn, were declared dangerous deviations from the true faith. This definition, which effectively excludes Salafists from the Islamic community, clearly aligned with Russia's state policy in the religious sphere, emphasizing an effort to unify religious practices in line with the state's ideology and regional needs. The fatwa's assertion that its provisions are binding for all Muslims in Russia underscores a monolithic and regulated approach to religious life, aimed at reinforcing the traditional forms of Islam in the North Caucasus and preventing the spread of radical influences from abroad.

Unexpected Consequences

For Kadyrov, the consequences of the Grozny Fatwa were unexpected. The document sparked widespread criticism both within Russia and beyond its borders. Notably, the Moscow Islamic Forum held from October 18 to 20, 2016 featured participants who voiced their disagreement with the fatwa. Additionally, two Arab theologians who participated in the Grozny conference—Ahmad Muhammad al-Tayyeb, the rector of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, and Sufi leader Habib Ali al-Jifri—later disavowed the fatwa. The Council of Muftis of Russia emphasized that the fatwa reflects only the specificity of certain regions in the North Caucasus and cannot be accepted without broader nationwide discussion.

This highlights that Kadyrov's authority was granted solely within the confines of the North Caucasus, and his attempts to extend his influence across the entire country faced significant obstacles. The response not only from the Arab world, but also from Russia's primary state body responsible for Islamic policy, was decisive, curtailing Kadyrov's ambitions. Despite Kadyrov's close ties with President Putin, Russia's state system upheld the exclusive right of the Council of Muftis to serve as the primary body governing the lives of Muslims in the country. Kadyrov's ambitions seemingly failed to account for the influential position of systemic generals and

"Heroes of Russia" within the Council of Muftis, who also play a significant role in national security, even if their activities are less public than Kadyrov's.

Furthermore, prominent Salafist theologian Muhammad al-Arifi from Saudi Arabia denounced Kadyrov on Twitter, labeling him an unbeliever and even calling for his assassination. Kadyrov appeared to have hoped for expanded influence in the Islamic world but encountered resolute resistance from competitors he sought to surpass.

The Saudi Connection and Shifting Alliances

In this context, the visit of former Ingush leader Yunus-Bek Yevkurov to Saudi Arabia becomes a particularly interesting event for analysis. Yevkurov, who previously displayed little foreign policy activity and lacked the extensive Middle Eastern connections of Ramzan Kadyrov, suddenly found himself at the center of attention from the Saudi royal family. This situation is even more remarkable given that Chechnya traditionally held a more prominent position in relations with the Middle East compared to Ingushetia. However, following the Grozny Fatwa, which provoked sharp criticism from Saudi Arabia, the Saudis appear to change their approach. Instead of their usual support for Kadyrov, they opted to establish ties with Yevkurov. This move by the Saudi kingdom has been interpreted as a gesture to express their dissatisfaction with Kadyrov's stance.

For Ramzan Kadyrov, a moment of truth had arrived—he was faced with a complex choice. On one hand, he could continue to fulfill his role within Russia's state policy in the North Caucasus, combating Wahhabism and strengthening the position of "traditional Islam." On the other hand, he sought to maintain friendly ties with leaders of the Gulf States, including the royal family of Saudi Arabia, which, despite recent moderation, remains the stronghold of Wahhabism—the official state ideology of the kingdom. Now, Kadyrov faced a difficult dilemma: remain true to his earlier promises and principles, protecting Russia's interests, or seek reconciliation and cooperation with key Arab players, which might require him to apologize to those he had previously regarded as adversaries.

Saudi Arabia, like any other nation, pursues its own interests and strategies on the global stage, demonstrating a skillful ability to maneuver in political relations. In this context, the kingdom's efforts to position Ramzan Kadyrov as an ally within Russia reflected its aspiration for diplomatic preeminence. An example of such a policy was the hospitality extended to Kadyrov by Saudi King Abdullah II in 2007. Kadyrov was personally invited to the sacred territory of the Kaaba and was honored with participating in the ritual washing of the Black Stone. During this event, Kadyrov received valuable gifts from the king, symbolizing his connection to Islamic holy

sites. Further interactions between Kadyrov and the Saudi royal family, including his 2015 meeting with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, underscored the strengthening of "brotherly" relations, as portrayed in international media.

A Strategic Pivot

The success of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategy became evident when, after the widely discussed Grozny Conference of 2016 and the subsequent criticism from Saudi scholars and clergy, Kadyrov expressed willingness to apologize for the fatwa adopted at the conference. This indicated a shift in his position. Public apologies reportedly made by Kadyrov during his meeting with Mohammed bin Salman, as noted in the press, marked an important moment in his foreign policy activities. By 2016, Kadyrov had achieved significant political stature, allowing him to step beyond the traditional role assigned to him within the context of Russia's state policy in the North Caucasus.

Kadyrov's decision to pursue a path seemingly at odds with his duties—from a fierce defender of "traditional Islam" to a potential satellite of Gulf leaders exporting alternative Islamic currents—raises questions about his loyalty to his original mission. This shift suggests Kadyrov's willingness to adapt to changing political realities and forge new alliances,

which he likely perceives as beneficial both domestically and internationally.

Kadyrov's representatives have failed to confirm any apologies, perhaps indicating a strategy of playing a double game. It is clear that Kadyrov is striving to enter the elite circle of influential Gulf leaders, which entails closer engagement with Middle Eastern states. At the same time, he continues to formally adhere to his role within Russia's state policy of combating radical religious movements. This indicates that the overarching strategy remains intact and has not been revised by the Russian state.

The statement from the Chechen Spiritual Administration of Muslims, denying reports of an apology but simultaneously confirming that Kadyrov clarified misunderstandings surrounding the Grozny Fatwa, points to his attempt to maintain a delicate balance. This dual approach reflects Kadyrov's effort to navigate between the demands of his domestic responsibilities and his ambitions to build ties with influential players on the global stage.

Contradictions and Implications

Struggling against external influence and simultaneously acting as its conduit are fundamentally contradictory tasks. The status of a defender of "traditional Islam" and the role of an unofficial envoy of Russia's political elite in the Middle East differ significantly in importance and influence. By assuming the

position of defending "traditional Islam," Kadyrov was entrusted with unique responsibilities requiring substantial influence and authority, cultivated by the state over many years. Significant resources were invested in this process—financial, administrative, and intelligence efforts. Russia has focused the work of its influence agents in the Muslim world, both domestically and abroad, on supporting Kadyrov's image. This reflects the extensive work carried out by Russian state structures. On the other hand, the role of an unofficial envoy, while important, does not require unique qualities and could be assigned to any trusted representative. Middle Eastern leaders are prepared to engage in dialogue with any emissary appointed by Putin. Here, one could paraphrase Emperor Paul I in the context of modern politics: "In the Middle East, dialogue will only be conducted with those I (Putin) designate and only for as long as I deem necessary."

Regardless of the new roles Kadyrov might assume or how he tries to justify his actions by citing state interests, two key conclusions can be drawn. The first is that Kadyrov appears to have ceased aligning with Russia's strategic interests in the North Caucasus. The second is that Kadyrov's vast ambitions and his desire to join the Middle Eastern elite have influenced his decisions, which turned out to be at odds with Russia's strategic position. Here, it is also worth recalling the subconscious influences on decision-making mentioned earlier in this

analysis. Subconscious desires can lead to choices fraught with potential risks and unforeseen problems that the individual might not even be aware of. Changes in Kadyrov's appearance and that of his close circle signal significant shifts. Previously, he pursued those who wore long beards without mustaches; today, he and his entourage ostentatiously display this very style. This involuntary imitation of a lifestyle and models he seeks to emulate and with which he desires to associate himself presents a challenge to national security. His previous unique role as a defender of "traditional Islam" in the North Caucasus provided him with a powerful political position in Russia. Now, the shift in his role within state policy makes him a liability, and the state will have to respond to this new situation. Considering the concentration of his personal fortune in the Gulf States, his dependence on the monarchs of these nations is growing, further exacerbating the potential threat to Russia's security.

Russia's Strategic Continuity

Russia's political rapprochement with the Gulf States against the backdrop of the escalating conflict in the Middle East does not alter the fundamental principles of Russian strategy. Political alliances may be ephemeral and shaped by current circumstances, but this does not imply that Russia is willing to weaken the position of "traditional Islam" in the North

Caucasus or deviate from its centuries-old strategy in favor of advancing other Islamic movements backed by foreign state interests.

Regarding Kadyrov's participation in the war in Ukraine, it has not strengthened but rather weakened his status. Previously, his brutal image and that of his circle served as a tool of intimidation. However, after he failed to demonstrate military effectiveness and resorted to staged videos to maintain his image, his standing in this context has also been undermined. This resembles the chess principle that "the threat is stronger than the execution"—a principle Kadyrov failed to embody.

The Future of Kadyrov's Leadership

This does not mean that Kadyrov must be immediately removed from his position as head of the Chechen Republic. The Kremlin is considering this possibility while weighing several factors. It is also necessary to account for President Putin's personal interests, which he has historically prioritized over state interests. From this perspective, Putin views Kadyrov as a tool in domestic political maneuvers, ensuring a balance of power within his inner circle. However, this situation is not immutable and cannot continue indefinitely. A scenario threatening national security would necessitate changes, in which necessity would outweigh the president's current political preferences. It will be

important not only to find a suitable replacement within the current political paradigm but also, perhaps, to revise the paradigm itself to select another leader for new strategic objectives. Furthermore, amid the Ukrainian crisis, which demands focus on more pressing issues, Kadyrov may prove useful for resolving short-term, tactical tasks. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the era of Ramzan Kadyrov as a key figure in Russia's policy in the North Caucasus is approaching its end. This does not mean his resignation will occur immediately, but it indicates that it could happen at any moment.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Ramzan Kadyrov's leadership in Chechnya illustrates a fundamental tension in Russia's regional security architecture. What began as a carefully calibrated strategy—using a loyal strongman to suppress extremist religious influences while maintaining territorial control—has evolved into a potential vulnerability as Kadyrov cultivates international relationships that may compete with his assigned domestic role. This case demonstrates how personal ambition and the allure of international recognition can gradually subvert even carefully designed state security frameworks.

For Russia, the implications extend beyond the immediate question of Kadyrov's future.

Moscow now confronts a strategic dilemma that will shape its approach to the entire North Caucasus region: how to maintain religious stability and territorial control while managing the ambitions of regional elites whose power was deliberately enhanced to serve state interests. The eventual resolution of the "Kadyrov question" will likely establish a precedent for how the Russian state addresses similar challenges with regional leaders who develop autonomous power bases.

As geopolitical pressures mount elsewhere, particularly in Ukraine, Russia's capacity to micromanage its complex relationship with Chechnya becomes increasingly strained. The Kremlin may soon be forced to choose between maintaining its current arrangement with Kadyrov despite his divided loyalties, or undertaking the delicate and potentially destabilizing process of installing new leadership in a region where stability has been purchased at great cost. Whatever path Moscow chooses will reveal much about the resilience and adaptability of Russia's broader strategy for managing its diverse and often volatile southern frontier.

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