

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4787 | NOVEMBER 22, 2017

Why the U.S. Should Not Ignore Russia's Persecution of the Crimean Tatars

Luke Coffey

The Crimean Tatars, a Sunni-Muslim and ethnically Turkic minority group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula, have faced mounting persecution since Russia's illegal annexation and occupation in 2014. Given the religious and political persecution taking place around the world, it is easy to overlook what is taking place in Crimea. As policy-makers focus on Russia's destabilizing role in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, they should not ignore the plight of the Crimean Tatars. The U.S. should champion the Tatar cause as another way to apply pressure on Moscow to end its occupation. The U.S. can publically highlight the persecution of the Tatars, encourage countries not to recognize Crimea as part of Russia, maintain economic sanctions against Russia, and work with Turkey and other Muslim-majority countries to pressure Russia regarding the Tatar issue.

The Crimean Tatars

Russia has a terrible track record of mistreating the Tatars.

The Crimean Khanate—a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire—survived for 300 years, until Catherine the Great took over the peninsula in 1783. During the chaos following the Bolshevik Revolution and

Russia's civil war, the peninsula was finally incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Soviets never had the well-being of the Crimean Tatars in mind. Sometime in the 1920s, Vladimir Lenin reportedly wrote about his plans for the Crimean Tatars: “We will take them, divide them, subjugate them, digest them.”¹

Under the iron-fisted rule of Joseph Stalin, the Crimean Tatars were almost annihilated. Stalin claimed that the Tatars were enemies of the state because some sided with Nazi Germany during World War II. While thousands did fight for the Germans, an equal number fought for the Red Army against Nazism. In fact, eight Crimean Tatars were awarded the title “Hero of the Soviet Union”—the highest distinction in the Soviet empire. Amet-Khan Sultan, a Crimean Tatar pilot, won this prestigious award twice.

Nevertheless, the fact that some Crimean Tatars fought for the Nazis was a good enough excuse for Stalin to punish the whole community. In 1944, almost 180,000 Crimean Tatars were forcibly removed from their homes in Crimea and shipped east. Many ended up in Uzbekistan, but thousands were also scattered around Siberia. During this forced removal, tens of thousands of Tatars were killed.²

Under Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms, the Crimean Tatars were allowed to return to Crimea. In 1991, Crimea became part of an independent Ukraine. Today the Tatars make up about 13 percent of Crimea's population. Life for the Tatars in an independent Ukraine, while not always perfect, was far better than anything they had experienced in the past century under Russian rule. Now under the rule of Vladimir Putin, the Tatars are once again persecuted by Moscow.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4787>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Russia's Illegal Annexation

When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster in early 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, sending troops, aided by pro-Russian local militia, to occupy the Crimean peninsula under the pretext of protecting the Russians who live on the peninsula. This led to Russia's eventual occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea.

Russia's annexation of Crimea is unprecedented in the 21st century. The annexation has de facto cut Ukraine's coastline in half and has essentially turned the Black Sea into a Russian-controlled lake. Russia has since claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean peninsula previously belonging to Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia has launched a campaign of persecution and intimidation of the ethnic Tatars there.

Russia's crackdown has been particularly felt by the minority Crimean Tatars, an ethnically Turkic and religiously Sunni-Muslim community that has faced decades of religious and political persecution under Russian domination. More than 20,000 Crimean Tatars have fled the Crimean peninsula and settled elsewhere in Ukraine since the Russian invasion.³ Those Tatars who remain in Crimea are subject to repression and discrimination on account of their perceived opposition to Russia.

Persecution

According to the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2016, "The occu-

pation authorities subjected Muslim Crimean Tatars to abductions, forced psychiatric hospitalizations, imprisonment, and detentions, according to human rights and international organizations."⁴

Refat Chubarov and Mustafa Dzhemilev, the current and former chairmen, respectively, of the Mejlis (Council) of the Crimean Tatars, have been barred by Moscow from entering Crimea on the unfounded claims that they will stir up trouble for the Russian occupiers.⁵ Two other senior leaders of the Tatar community, Ahmet Chiygoz and Ilmi Umerov, were jailed and only recently released after the personal intervention of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The former was sentenced to eight years for "stirring up protests" in February 2014, and the latter received a two-year sentence for saying that Crimea belongs to Ukraine.⁶

In addition to high-profile arrests:

- Russian security services have raided homes and offices of prominent Crimean Tatars on dubious pretenses,
- Moscow has banned the annual ceremonies marking Stalin's mass deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944,
- Russia has banned select pieces of Crimean Tatar literature and religious books despite the same texts being acceptable when Ukraine governed Crimea,⁷
- Russian security forces have raided and in some cases shut down Tatar-language media outlets,⁸ and

1 "Divide and Digest," *The Economist*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/09/russia-and-tatars> (accessed November 21, 2017).

2 Mansur Mirovalev, "Ukraine Calls Soviet Deportation of Muslims 'Genocide,'" *Al Jazeera*, November 13, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/ukraine-calls-soviet-deportation-muslims-genocide-151113061021629.html> (accessed March 1, 2017).

3 News release, "Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Crimean Tatars Genocide," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, May 19, 2016, <http://mfa.gov.ua/en/press-center/news/47679-zajava-mzs-ukrajini-z-nagodi-dnya-pamjati-zhertv-genocidu-krimskotatarsykogo-narodu> (accessed November 21, 2017).

4 U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2016: Ukraine (Crimea)," August 15, 2017, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=268880&year=2016#wrapper (accessed November 21, 2017).

5 Luke Coffey, "Russia Continues to Oppress Crimea's Tatars," *Al Jazeera*, March 19, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/03/russia-continues-oppress-crimea-tatars-160308054208716.html> (accessed November 21, 2017).

6 "Crimean Tatar Activists Freed by Russia, Flown to Turkey," BBC, October 25, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41753599> (accessed November 21, 2017).

7 Vladimir Ryzhkov, "Russia's Treatment of Crimean Tatars Echoes Mistakes Made by Soviets," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine> (accessed November 21, 2017).

8 Deutsche Welle, "Crimean Tatar Media Forced to Shut Down," December 31, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/crimean-tatar-media-forced-to-shut-down/a-18352286> (accessed November 21, 2017).

- Russia has closed down the Crimean mejlis, claiming it was connected to extremist activity.⁹

Some in Moscow have even called for the “de-Turkification” of Crimea by changing the name of the peninsula and its major cities back to the names used by the ancient Greeks.¹⁰ For example, Crimea would become Taurida, Kerch would become Pantikapaion, Feodosia would become Theodosia, and Sevastopol would become Sevastoupoli. Ignoring the role that Turkic culture has played in Crimea’s history and suppressing the Crimean Tatar language amounts to nothing short of cultural vandalism.

U.S. Must Keep Up the Pressure

As the illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russia enters its fourth year, the U.S. must work with its allies to continue putting pressure on Russia to return the territory to Ukraine. In the meantime, the U.S. should highlight the plight of the Tatars as another way to pressure Russia by:

- **Inviting a delegation of Crimean Tatars to the White House.** This would be a great way to highlight Russia’s persecution of the Crimean Tatars. President Donald Trump has repeatedly mentioned his desire to highlight the plight of religious minorities. The Tatars offer an excellent opportunity.
- **Issuing a public non-recognition statement on Crimea.** In 1940, acting-Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued a statement declaring that the U.S. would never recognize the legitimacy of Soviet occupation of the Baltic States. The Trump Administration should issue a similar declaration stating the U.S. will never recognize the legitimacy of Russian claims to annexed Crimea.
- **Encouraging, where possible, countries not to recognize Crimea as part of Russia.** Cuba and North Korea will support Russia and will recognize Crimea as part of Russia. However, other

countries siding with Russia—who are nevertheless dependent on the financial support and military sacrifices of the West (such as Afghanistan)—should be strongly encouraged to change their policy and recognize Crimea as part of Ukraine.

- **Working with Turkey and other Muslim-majority countries to pressure Russia.** Due to historic and cultural reasons, Turkey has been the champion of the Tatar cause. With the exception of Turkey, the Muslim world has been virtually silent on the Tatars’ situation. The U.S. should work with other partners in the Muslim world to put pressure on Moscow about its illegal occupation of Crimea and its persecution of the Tatar community.
- **Making a clear commitment to continue Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia.** Russia continues to occupy Crimea as well as to violate the terms of the Minsk II agreement on a daily basis, fanning the flames of a conflict that continues to engulf Ukraine. As long as Russia violates Ukrainian sovereignty, the U.S. should continue economic sanctions against those who are responsible.

Do Not Ignore

As the Trump Administration develops its Ukraine policy, the plight of the Tatars should not be ignored. Raising the issue of the Tatars is not only another way to pressure Moscow over its illegal annexation of Crimea, but also helps to advance the cause of religious freedom. The Trump Administration and the U.S. Congress should not hesitate to reaffirm American commitment and support for all the people of Ukraine, including the Tatars. In turn, this will make both America and its allies safer.

—*Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

9 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Russian Court Bans Crimean Tatar Executive Council as Extremist,” April 26, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-crimean-tatars-mejlis-banned/27699264.html> (accessed November 21, 2017).

10 Tom Balmforth, “You Say Crimea, They Say Taurida,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 21, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/crimea-russia-renaming-taurida/26806157.html> (accessed November 21, 2017).