

A Hard Bargain
Foreign Policy and the Dynamics of the Putin-Kadyrov
Relationship

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Abstract

This article examines the Governor of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov's unique relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This research first provides context on the evolution of radical Islamism in Russia's North Caucasus and Kadyrov's role in suppressing insurgency and unrest in the republic. The paper then discusses the three pillars of the relationship between Kadyrov and Putin: Kadyrov's integral role in keeping the peace in Chechnya, the persistence of the relationship despite pressure on Putin to strengthen control over Kadyrov by members of the federal security establishment, and Kadyrov's exceptional involvement in foreign policy outside the official Russian channels. The paper ultimately argues that Kadyrov is allowed to conduct foreign policy actions apart from the Kremlin because of his role in keeping the peace in Chechnya, and that he has leveraged this opportunity to become even more vital to Russian domestic and international interests, and thus more powerful.

Keywords: Kadyrov, North Caucasus, Islamic State, Foreign Fighters, Caucasus Emirate, Chechnya

Introduction

Since 2015, the Russian Federation has been deeply involved in the Syrian civil war, having intervened militarily in support of Syria's Bashar al Assad with not only air operations, but also ground troops. The intervention following a Kremlin assessment that the Assad regime, a key ally in the Middle East, would likely fall without Russian support. This outcome would have been unacceptable to the Russian government—aside from losing a close ally in an important and volatile region, the Kremlin saw the fall of the regime as paving the way of Sunni extremist control of the region, which could revitalize a flagging radical Islamist insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus (Charap, Treyger, and Geist 3-5). Russia is also involved militarily in separatist conflicts in Crimea and the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine using irregular forces, aiding pro-Russian militant groups (*Little Green Men* 31-33). Behind Putin's campaigns in Syria and Ukraine is Ramzan Kadyrov, the governor of Russia's Chechen Republic, a Muslim-majority semi-autonomous republic over which Kadyrov has an unusual amount of control compared to governors of other Russian republics. Chechen paramilitary forces loyal to Kadyrov, known as *kadyrovtsy*, have been employed to advance Russian interests in the conflicts, often fighting against nationalist and/or militant Islamist Chechen foreign fighters.

Ramzan Kadyrov seems to be using his atypical position as the most powerful leader in his district, the president of the Russian region with the highest number of foreign fighters in Syria, the role of his paramilitaries in Ukraine and Syria, as well as his political connections in the Middle East, to shore up his support from above as Putin is faced with pressure to rein him in. Kadyrov's use of brutality against citizens have created a population that resent him, but fear reprisals from Chechen security services if they speak out against the Chechen leader.

Putin and Kadyrov each depend on each other to keep their hold on power. Chechnya was one of the main issues that propelled Putin to power, and was later an issue that seriously threatened his hold on power. When Putin was appointed prime minister in 1999, war in the North Caucasus has reignited, and he was tasked with managing it. His decisive actions in the beginning of the Second Chechen War made him popular in Russia, a popularity which helped him secure the presidency when Boris Yeltsin stepped down suddenly at the end of that year.

During this campaign for the presidency, Putin promised a strong stance on Chechnya—to return the republic to an orderly state firmly under the control of Moscow (Mark Kramer 2-3, Zygar 311-325). Since 2005, when fighting significantly decreased, Putin has claimed the securitization of Chechnya as a personal win (Mark Kramer, 3) and has carefully managed reporting on Chechnya, confining it to images of stability and a paternal relationship with Kadyrov. Journalists have a clear understanding that they can write safely about most topics—except Chechnya (Zygar 322-325). In short, Putin has banked a considerable amount of credibility on his ability to keep Chechnya under control. But for this, he relies on Ramzan Kadyrov. Putin provides Kadyrov with a degree of autonomy in decision-making not afforded to other Russian governors, as well as direct payment that Kadyrov himself can manage. In exchange, Kadyrov provides the loyalty of himself and his supporters (Russell, “Ramzan Kadyrov” 664, Zygar 318). Kadyrov keeps the Chechen population in line with a little economic development (Russell, “Chechen Elites” 1073), and a lot of fear using both his regular military forces as well as *Kadyrovtsy*, a paramilitary force that acts at his direction to brutally enforce his wishes. He keeps the elites and his military forces on-side by distributing a portion of the money he receives from Moscow and rent opportunities (Souleimanov et al). However, Sokirianskaia argues that Kadyrov’s control is predicated on his backing from Putin—Russian military presence undergirds his military control, and the money he receives from Putin represents the bulk of his financial ability to control with payments (p. 5), as Putin blocks him from completely monopolizing the oil rents from the otherwise resource-poor republic (Souleimanov et al 89). Thus, Putin and Kadyrov depend heavily on each other. Putin’s national political position would be severely undercut if Russia’s control of Chechnya slipped, and so he needs Kadyrov, who wields the political clout and monopoly of force in the republic. However, to maintain control of that force, Kadyrov is reliant on the political and economic support from Putin.

That dynamic is currently under severe strain as Putin is coming under pressure from some Russian elites to distance himself from Kadyrov. Some national security service elites, *siloviki*, resent the opportunities Kadyrov receives as well as the relative leeway he is given to rule Chechnya as he pleases and operate in republics other than his own. In particular, both opposition figure Boris Nemtsov and journalist Anna Politkovskaya were assassinated in Moscow, ostensibly on the orders of Kadyrov without approval from federal security services. Additionally, Kadyrov has at times instructed his security services to shoot on federal security service personnel operating in Chechnya without Kadyrov’s consent (Souleimanov et al 91-95). Kadyrov’s greatest, and perhaps only, ally among the *siloviki* is Viktor Zolotov, a former bodyguard of Putin’s and the head of the National Guard. In public statements, Kadyrov refers to Zolotov as his brother. Some analysts suggest that Zolotov was tasked with heading the National Guard at its inception in 2016 in part because of his good relationship with Kadyrov, in an effort to exert greater control over the latter and his paramilitary forces (Dzutsati “Creation of Russian National Guard”).

This paper contends that since Kadyrov and Putin depend on each other to maintain power, and that this relationship is coming under strain, Kadyrov aims to make himself essential to the continued security of the North Caucasus and the rest of the region by developing connections abroad that make him instrumental to Russian foreign policy and in turn strengthen his position domestically. By involving forces loyal to him alone in Russian military campaigns in Syria and in Ukraine, he is ensuring that his special relationship with Putin remains.

There is a rich body literature on the post-Soviet conflict in Russia's North Caucasus (Schaefer, Akhmadov and Landskoy, Askerov) focusing particularly on the counterinsurgency campaign led by the Russians (Ambrogio, Cohen, Souleimanov & Aliyev, Russel). Similarly, the history of radical Islamic insurgency in the Caucasus has been well-documented (Schaefer, Souleimanov, Zhemukhov "Radical Islam"), as has the relationship between Putin and Kadyrov (Mark Kramer, Russel, Zygar). However, the role that Kadyrov plays in Russian foreign policy, particularly through relationships and connections that he has cultivated outside the Russian foreign affairs channels, is understudied. This paper uses the legacy of Chechenization and Kadyrov's experience in successful counterinsurgency not only to explain his unique position in Russian domestic politics, but also the role he and his forces play in Russian military campaigns in which irregular or asymmetric combat plays a role and Chechen foreign fighters are participating on the side of Russia's adversaries.

First, this paper will discuss how the Putin-Kadyrov relationship came about, and how it developed based on Putin's need for the pacification of Chechnya and Kadyrov's need for funding to support his extensive patronage network, and how Kadyrov has so far successfully maintained an incredible level of autonomy compared to other Russian republics in the face of efforts by the federal government to curtail his relative independence. Then, the paper will examine Kadyrov's current position, and will conclude with an analysis of situations that could impact the stability of the relationship, including a scenario in which foreign fighters return.

The Chechen Wars and Kadyrov's Ascent

Both Putin and Kadyrov came into national leadership positions during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). When Putin became Prime Minister in 1999, a few short years since the end of the First Chechen War (1994-1996) that ended in an embarrassing defeat at the hands of a much smaller insurgent force, he made restoring Russian rule over Chechnya a priority. The hardline approach to Chechnya won him support among Russian military leadership, an important constituency for consolidating his power. Ramzan Kadyrov, at the time a young man, worked at his father's side, initially fighting with the insurgency and later organizing a pro-Russian force (Cohen 40-42; Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov" 667). His father Akhmad Kadyrov, a well-regarded cleric, had left the insurgency to support the Russian side following a rift with the leadership of the insurgency (Cohen 41; Russell "Ramzan Kadyrov" 663), and was instrumental in Putin's strategy of Chechenization of the conflict—dividing the Chechen opposition and turning the conflict into an intra-ethnic one rather than one between a larger power and a smaller nationalist one, which would cast Chechnya as an underdog (Cohen 40-42). The Kadyrovs' construction of an indigenous pro-Russian force involved inducing insurgents to switch sides, resulting in a highly effective counterinsurgency force (Souleimanov and Aliyev, "Evaluating the Efficacy of Indigenous Forces"). In November 1999, Akhmad Kadyrov surrendered Gudermes, the second-largest city in Chechnya, without contest to Russian forces, and by July 2000 Putin made him the administrative leader of the republic, and one of the key players on the Russian side of the war. Though Putin's Chechenization plan was disrupted when Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated in May 2004, Ramzan was quickly chosen to continue in his father's place. He assumed the position of president of Chechnya in 2007, shortly after becoming old enough to take over the

post. Kadyrov still retains control of the *kadyrovtsy* he helped his father build during the Second Chechen War, although they are officially housed within the Russian Ministry of Interior. As the leader of the *kadyrovtsy*, the force that successfully pacified the region that Putin had staked his reputation on bringing back under control of the Russian Federation, Ramzan Kadyrov emerged as a particularly powerful figure. As Russell argues, Kadyrov can simultaneously reassure the Russian public that he remains loyal to Putin and therefore that Russia maintains control of Chechnya, satisfying Putin's political needs, but simultaneously turn to Chechens and claim that he has masterfully negotiated near-autonomy for Chechnya, as well as successfully channeled Russian resources to develop the republic ("Ramzan Kadyrov" 659). Thus, the special relationship emerged.

Chechnya's politics is ruled by patronage networks (Wilhelmsen), and so to govern the republic, both a steady flow of cash and tight control over that flow are necessary. In Chechnya, the two principal sources of revenue that can be directed down patronage networks are development funds from the federal government (Zabyelina and Arsovska, Souleimanov et al, Sokirianskaia). Following the end of the Second Chechen War, the Russian federal government allocated a significant sum of money to reconstruction programs in Chechnya to rebuild the war-torn republic, which Kadyrov was given full control of (Fuller, "The Unstoppable Rise"). Through this control, he can both award contracts to allies in exchange for support and simply pocket sums—allegedly up to a third of the total (Wilhelmsen). The money continued to flow in after the initial reconstruction project—billions of dollars (Zabyelina and Arsovska). These are the funds that Kadyrov uses to maintain his patronage networks, rewarding loyalty with money and business, as well as his personal forces, which are used to crush his opposition. To keep Kadyrov reliant on the Kremlin, Putin also maintains tight control of the oil revenues produced in the republic (Souleimanov et al). If control of these resources were allowed to fall to Kadyrov, he would be less reliant on federal funding and therefore much harder to control.

Further evidence of the singular relationship is evident in the process of choosing governors in the North Caucasus—Chechnya is the only republic in the region that has direct election of a governor. The system of choosing governors in Russia has evolved drastically, swinging between appointment and election. The most recent iterations came in 2012 and 2013. In 2012, Medvedev, serving momentarily as president, restored gubernatorial elections across Russia and the North Caucasus republics quickly crafted laws providing for local elections. Less than a year later, in 2013, Putin added an amendment to Medvedev's law that allowed republics to voluntarily ban elections and forfeit the selection of governors to the federal government by appointment. All republics in the North Caucasus Federal District complied with the implicit Putin directive, and banned elections—all save Chechnya (Zhemukhov, "Outsiders and Locals"). Maintaining the election of the governor in Chechnya gives Ramzan Kadyrov some legal independence from Putin, and establishes another hurdle that Putin would need to overcome if he wanted to remove Kadyrov from power. However, in some ways keeping elections means that Kadyrov is still reliant on Putin, as Putin's financial support is what solidifies the Kadyrov's power vertical within Chechnya. Putin cannot simply appoint Kadyrov to the position of governor under the current laws, so Kadyrov has to rely even more on his support networks among Chechen elites. These networks are maintained by infusions of cash from the federal government, meaning Kadyrov has to maintain good relations with Putin if he is to stay governor, or find other sources of funding large enough to supplant that from Putin. The fact that

Putin was unwilling to challenge Chechnya's individuality in the face of the amendment shows the important role that Kadyrov continues to play in Putin's domestic rule, and that Putin has decided that the benefits of having Kadyrov are sufficient to tolerate the incremental surrender of control.

The Globalization of Chechenization

Putin relies on the *kadyrovtsy* not only to maintain control of Chechnya, but also in conflicts abroad in which Russia is involved. *Kadyrovtsy* can be found on battlefields in both Syria and Ukraine aiding Assad and Russian-backed separatists in Donbas. These paramilitary detachments have skills that regular Russian forces lack—experience fighting Chechen insurgents, who are present both in Syria fighting with Islamist groups against Assad and with pro-government forces in eastern Ukraine. These foreign fighters left to fight in these conflicts in part to fight against Russia in conflicts that were still tenable and Russian defeat was still feasible. Ironically, in doing so, they may have given Kadyrov more power. The very presence of these Chechen foreign fighters in Ukraine and Syria allow Kadyrov to position himself as the commander of the best-suited military force for the conflicts and tie himself to the successful pursuit of Russian foreign policy, thus making himself an indispensable fixture of Russian national politics.

Chechens in Syria

Four main groups of Russian nationals participate in civil war in Syria, on both the regime and rebel sides of the conflict: the *Kadyrovtsy*, *Ichkeriytsy*, *Emiratovtsy*, and finally Russian nationals not currently affiliated with IK who joined Islamic State or Islamic State-affiliated groups. Supporting the regime are the *Kadyrovtsy*, a deployment of armed forces named for Ramzan Kadyrov and employed by the Chechen government that usually maintain order within the Chechen Republic. Opposing them, and the regime, are the *Ichkeriytsy*, the *Emiratovtsy*, and members of Islamic State or Islamic State-affiliate groups. The *Ichkeriytsy* are Chechen nationalists, are veterans of the Chechen wars, and are mainly followers of Chechen Sufi orders. There are relatively few of them left. The *Emiratovtsy* are radical Islamist, generally Salafists, and are members of the IK detachment in Syria (Mironova and Sergatsova). Non-IK IS supporters, like *Emiratovtsy*, are also largely Salafists and many were former IK supporters, but split from the Al Qaeda-affiliated IK after IS declared a Caliphate with al Baghdadi as the Caliph (Barnett).

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, nearly 3,500 foreign fighters travelled from Russia to Syria or Iraq to join militant Islamist groups—the largest number of people from any single country (Barnett). Including non-combatant travelers, as well as children born to Russian nationals in Syria, this number could be as high as 5,000 (Cook and Vale). North Caucasians, particularly Chechens, made up the vast majority of these Russian nationals (Heins). In Syria or Iraq, anecdotal evidence shows that North Caucasian fighters tended to build *jamaats*, or units, consisting of co-ethnics and/or Russian speakers from other former Soviet countries, including countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Canadian Security Intelligence Service). Some Russian *jamaats* remained independent, as Jund al-Aqsa did. Others became integrated into the networks of larger militant organizations like the IS or the Nusra Front, as Jaish Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) did (Hauer, “Chechens and North Caucasian Militants”). Chechens

especially were welcomed into militant groups, as they had the reputation of being hardened fighters from participating in or growing up during the two Chechen Wars, and were often given high-ranking positions (Souleimanov and Ouellette). The Russian government via the FSB has seemed to promote the outflows of fighters by either not stopping fighters (Souleimanov and Ouellette), or even by actively facilitating their departure with false documents (de Carbonnel). In the short term, Putin and Kadyrov were together making the bet that they could temporarily drain domestic tactical and strategic support for insurgencies in Russia's North Caucasus, protecting in particular the 2014 Sochi Olympics from attack, that many fighters would die fighting abroad, and that the authorities could contain any returnees. The Russian authorities did put in place some safeguards against the eventual returnees: a counterterrorism law implemented in 2013 that criminalized involvement with armed groups designated by Moscow as terrorist groups, or any other groups that were contrary to Russian interests (de Carbonnel).

The other Chechens that play a part in the Syrian conflict are emissaries of Kadyrov. He has cultivated networks of support and connections deep into Syria through multiple channels, including through detachments of *Kadyrovtsy* supporting regime forces (Aliyev, "Ingush Police"), through financial resources from the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation (Hauer, "Russian Diplomacy in Syria"), and allegedly through moles who have infiltrated militant Islamist groups in Syria (Mamon "Lost Children"). *Kadyrovtsy* have filled out both the ranks of deployments of mixed-ethnicity military police units as well as Chechen-only *spetsnaz* (special forces) battalions of around 500 men used to patrol recaptured Sunni residential districts in Syria. Chechens were chosen because as Muslims, they might be better received by locals, and as military police operating in Russia's North Caucasus, they were accustomed to fighting insurgencies (Aliyev, "Ingush Police"). The Akhmad Kadyrov Regional Public Fund (also referred to as the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation), is a state-backed charitable organization. The Foundation draws from unofficial but mandatory, essentially extorted, "contributions" from members of the Chechen public. The Foundation's more than 1.45 billion rubles (around 20 million USD) is used to fund a number of humanitarian and cultural projects within Chechnya and in other Muslim countries, but much of the fund's activities are opaque, and allegedly finance the Kadyrov family's personal interests (Fuller). The Foundation has a heavy footprint in Syria, coordinating massive food donations and building hospitals for civilians with Russian military police, usually staffed by *Kadyrovtsy* (Hauer, "Russian Diplomacy in Syria").

Chechens in Ukraine

At least two units, one named for Dzhokhar Dudayev and the second for Sheikh Mansur, of Chechens are fighting with pro-government militias in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The units allegedly operate with informal permission from the Ukrainian government, as well as material support (Shuster, Andrew Kramer). The Chechens in pro-government groups are drawn largely from the diaspora, though there are a few that came directly from Chechnya. Many are veterans of the Chechen Wars, and some are even veterans of the Syrian civil war. The former leader of the Dudayev battalion who was killed in action, Isa Munayev, lead the separatist forces in Grozny during the second war and had escaped to Europe after being wounded in 2005 (Mamon, "The Final Days"). Munayev and many in his and the other battalion saw the wars in Ukraine and Chechnya as being fundamentally linked. According to the leader, as well as his successor

Adam Osmaev, if Putin were to win in eastern Ukraine, Chechnya would be lost forever (Shuster, Dubnov).

Deployment of *Kadyrovtsy* is not unique to the Syrian civil war—detachments have supported Russian-backed rebel groups in Ukraine, including both in Crimea as well as in Donetsk. Volunteer centers were set up in Chechen towns, including in Grozny, Achkhoy-Martyan, Znamenskoye, and Gudermes, to recruit for deployment to Ukraine. In public statements, Kadyrov equivocated, sometimes claiming no Chechens participating in the conflict, sometimes saying that Chechens were joining voluntarily without state backing, but maintaining that if Putin were to call on Chechens to fight in Ukraine, they would do so enthusiastically and bravely (Souleimanov, “Chechen Units Deployed in Eastern Ukraine”). Reports allege that the Ministry of Interior deployed units that were designated as “on leave” so as to have plausible deniability of the troops’ presence, but Ramzan Kadyrov has publicly threatened to send more fighters to aid separatists and even said that he be happy to go, if Putin gave him leave (Shuster). The *Kadyrovtsy* fighting in Ukraine sometimes face off against the very same Chechen insurgents they were accustomed to fighting at home. Former members of the Chechen separatist groups have been supporting Ukrainian government forces against the Russian-backed rebels. Some Chechen separatist groups were living in exile Ukraine before the conflict. Some had fled exile in Turkey, where Kadyrov was systematically targeting former insurgents in assassinations. Others had travelled to the Ukraine specifically to fight the Russians, some from Chechnya or Chechen diaspora communities, and some from the front in Syria, disillusioned with Islamist inter- and intragroup strife (Nemtsova).

Kadyrov’s Current Position

As discussed previously, the heavy involvement of *kadyrovtsy* in Syria and in Ukraine comes at a time when Kadyrov is relatively vulnerable. His support from Putin is under strain as the *siloviki* resent Kadyrov’s abuse of the unique latitude Putin gives him. By making himself an indispensable part of Russian foreign policy, Kadyrov can make himself once again instrumental to the Kremlin, shoring up the protection he receives from Moscow.

Kadyrov benefits from controlling the force within the Russian Federation best suited to fight an insurgency filled with Chechens, extending and entrenching his influence outside of Russia, and improving his position relative to the other North Caucasian regional leaders. Because Chechen insurgents play key roles in the Syrian insurgency, Kadyrov’s forces are uniquely positioned to oppose them. Not only do the *kadyrovtsy* have extensive counterinsurgency experience in general and have a better track record in counterinsurgency than the Russian military (Cohen), they also have previous experience and success fighting specific insurgents in the Syrian conflict—those that fought in Chechnya and then travelled to Syria. Though there are far fewer Chechens in Ukraine than there are in Syria¹, the *kadyrovtsy* are an invaluable asset for Russian forces in the conflict because of their experience with insurgencies.

Kadyrov’s major foreign policy involvement, the deployment of *kadyrovtsy*, is taken with consent from the Russian government. However, Kadyrov maintains foreign connections outside

¹ Around 100 Chechens are fighting with pro-government forces in Ukraine (Walker), compared to around 3,500 Russian nationals that went to Syria (Barnett), the majority of whom were Chechens (Heins).

of national channels: through the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation in the Middle East, as mentioned previously, but also through personal relationships with regional leaders. Kadyrov has long sought to extend his influence outside Russia, particularly into the Chechen diaspora communities in Turkey and the European Union (Dzutsati “Kadyrov Announces Creation of New Agency”) as well as with political and religious leaders in the Middle East (Zygar 311-325). The relationships that he is developing with international leaders and powerbrokers only strengthens his network and his ability to project his power. In addition to building his own networks independent of the Kremlin, by representing the Russian Federation in negotiations for Russian citizens in Syria, he can take advantage of Russian diplomatic and military channels, which he could potentially use to support his personal interests. These interests have historically included targeted assassinations of prominent Chechens in exile, demonstrating to both his friends and his enemies the true extent of his power. Since 2004, Kadyrov’s enemies in exile across the world have succumbed: Mamikhan Umarov (also known as Anzor Umarov) and Imran Aliev, both Chechen dissident bloggers living in the European Union, were killed in Vienna, Austria on July 4, 2020 and in Lille, France, on January 30, 2020 respectively (Dzutsati “Kadyrov Announces Creation of New Agency”).

By conducting foreign policy both separately from the Russian government and on its behalf, he is playing a role that no other governor is, and has made himself irreplaceable. In essence, he is making the prospect of removing him from his post, or curtailing his powers, impractical and painful for Putin and the Kremlin. For now, even if the *siloviki* oppose Kadyrov’s singular position, his position seems relatively stable. Though Kadyrov’s exercise of authority has made him somewhat of a liability to Putin in regards to keeping the rest of the *siloviki* on-side, Kadyrov has at the same time made himself an asset to Putin’s foreign policy by leveraging his personal resources, political influence, and international connections. On balance, this leaves Kadyrov in a comfortable position, but his position could be still improved through more ambitious foreign policy maneuvers. Currently, large numbers of Russian nationals, as well as nationals of other post-Soviet states, languish in refugee and prison camps in Syria and Iraq. Others are still fighting alongside militant Islamist groups. The international community has not yet decided how to deal with the foreigners that flocked to the Syrian Civil War. Currently, Russia has one of the more progressive repatriation schemes. Following a bid for the spot on the UN Human Rights Council vacated by the United States, Putin announced that Russia would repatriate all the children of Russian nationals who were foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (Ramani). Kadyrov took charge of this repatriation effort, organizing the return not only of Chechen and other North Caucasian women and children, but also citizens of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Aliyev, “Families of ISIS Fighters”). This move not only fulfilled Putin’s policy objectives, but made Kadyrov the representative for Russia in this effort, elevating him above the other governors of his region. It also established him as a regional leader—he even has his own official representative to the Middle East and North Africa, Senator Ziyad Sabsaby (Aliyev, “Families of ISIS Fighters”). Beyond that, it laid the foundations for a potential broader and more consequential repatriation effort that has not yet begun—repatriating the fighters themselves. The Russian government has so far made no real moves to repatriate fighters, and it is still unclear whether they will. Both action and inaction pose considerable security risks. Organizing their return presents logistical issues, including how to safely reintegrate them, or more likely, incarcerate them. If no effort is made to repatriate them, Russia runs the risk of the fighters escaping from the prison camps in Syria and Iraq in which they are currently interned,

and making their way to other conflicts in which Russian forces are present or worse, home. Returning foreign fighters could infuse a recently resurgent and rejuvenated Chechen insurgency (Caucasian Knot) with expertise and renewed motivation, which could threaten Putin's control over Chechnya. The looming threat of returnees only serves to strengthen Kadyrov's position in the Putin-Kadyrov relationship. This wouldn't be enough to make Kadyrov completely independent of Putin, Kadyrov still depends heavily on the federal subsidies that Putin bestows on Chechnya, but it might be enough to allow Kadyrov to demand greater rents from Putin in exchange for continued loyalty, or give Kadyrov more pull in determining national policy and governance.

Conclusion

As has been observed by many, Putin's and Kadyrov's political fates are intertwined. Early in his tenure as president, Putin staked his reputation and his legitimacy on restoring Chechnya to the Russian Federation. His strategy for reinstating that control then, and retaining that control now, relies almost exclusively on Kadyrov. The Chechen leader leverages his extensive patronage networks and paramilitary forces to maintain order in the republic and extending Russian control over the territory in exchange for a singular amount of autonomy in the governance of the republic, as well as cash to line his own pockets and ensure the loyalty of the local elites and his forces. However, this relationship has come under strain as the Russian *siloviki*, resentful of Kadyrov's status, pressure Putin to limit Kadyrov's authority and autonomy.

However, Kadyrov has countered this pressure, and ensure the stability of the special relationship with Putin, by extending his influence outside the borders of Chechnya and even the North Caucasus. Kadyrov has made himself one of the key players in several areas of Russian foreign policy. The main way he accomplishes this is by supplying the *kadyrovtsy*, the paramilitary force loyal to him that he and his father built, to fight in asymmetric conflicts that Russia has a vested interest in: the civil wars in Syria and in Ukraine. These troops are uniquely qualified to assist in these two conflicts because both wars feature Chechen insurgents fighting against the side that Russia backs, or directly against Russian forces. Without Kadyrov, Putin could not marshal these forces. Kadyrov is also cultivating connections outside of Russia outside of official Russian channels and without the explicit blessing of Putin through personal connections with Middle Eastern leaders, through a state charitable foundation under his sole control comprised of money essentially extorted from Chechen businessmen, and through ties with portions of the large Chechen diaspora. By continuing to deepen his involvement in Russian foreign policy, working inside and outside of Russian government channels, Kadyrov stands to further improve the security of his position by raising the stakes of Putin discontinuing the special relationship.

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