



## Ramzan Kadyrov: Putin's Bridge to Muslims in Syria and Beyond

**OE Watch Commentary:** When it comes to military strength, Russia reigns supreme among the Syrian government's foreign backers. Yet in terms of influence on the ground, Iran is entrenched in ways that make it hard for Moscow to compete, especially given Iran's greater geographical and cultural proximity to Syria and its people. Over the past two years, however, Ramzan Kadyrov and his battalions of Chechen military police deployed in Syria have helped Moscow strengthen its influence with the local population, especially in Syria's main cities. The fact that Kadyrov and his Chechen battalions are Muslims provides the Kremlin with a soft-power asset that it otherwise lacks, and as a result they have emerged as a vital cog in Russian President Vladimir Putin's policy toward Syria, as the accompanying excerpted articles suggest.

The first accompanying article, posted in the French-language online journal *Orient XXI*, notes how Kadyrov has positioned himself as "a defender of the Muslims" and as such is "helping the Kremlin to appear as a friend of Muslims." The article notes that many Russian analysts "are impressed by the dexterity with which Ramzan Kadyrov managed to make himself useful to the Kremlin, even indispensable, while playing his own cards." Indeed, the Syrian intervention has allowed Kadyrov "to train his own armed forces," and some believe that his actions in Syria and other Muslim countries are meant to hedge against the possibility of deteriorating relations with the Kremlin, a way for Kadyrov to build "his own support and networks elsewhere than in Russia, under the pretext of asserting Russian soft power towards the Muslim world... in case it goes badly again between Moscow and its turbulent Caucasian Republic."

Kadyrov's two main vehicles for positioning himself as an important ally and benefactor of loyalist Syrians are a foundation named after his father, which has disbursed humanitarian aid and provided funds to rebuild the grand mosques in the cities of Homs and Aleppo, and the battalions of Muslim-majority Chechen military police. Kadyrov's military police battalions are present in Sunni-majority areas of Syria's three main cities (Aleppo, Homs, Damascus). These areas were reclaimed by pro-government forces (with Russian assistance) from overtly religious rebel fighters, some of them residents of these very communities. One of the key challenges facing these military police forces is how to deal with local supporters of Iranian-backed militias. As the accompanying article from *al-Jazeera* describes, friction has developed in the reclaimed Damascus suburbs near the Shi'i enclave of Saida Zaynab. Although the Chechen police have sought to "win over the population" and "from the outset dealt decisively and forcefully toward the Shi'i militias," members of the Shi'i militias have begun "pressuring for the formation of quasi-popular committees to protect the area in order to diminish the presence and influence of Russian military police and replace them with local forces with links to Iran." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

*"...Mr Kadyrov is helping the Kremlin to appear as a friend of Muslims..."*

**Source:** Regis Gente. "L'implication surprenante de la Tchétchénie en Syrie (Chechnya's Surprising Intervention in Syria)," *Orient XXI*, 10 May 2018. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/l-implication-surprenante-de-la-tchetchenie-en-syrie,2445>

*"Ramzan Kadyrov immediately wanted to use the situation in the Middle East, as soon as Russia became involved militarily in Syria in September 2015. He did it first to stand as a defender of Muslims. This allows him to pretend to be the good Muslim in Chechnya, as opposed to what he calls 'bad Muslims': the Islamists and all those who oppose his regime and what they see as Russian colonialism. But at the same time - and this is crucial - Mr Kadyrov is helping the Kremlin to appear as a friend of Muslims..."*

*"This is important for Ramzan Kadyrov not only because he is doing so well for the Kremlin and pretends to be a peace-maker fighting against bad Muslims, terrorists, but also because it allows him to train his own armed forces. That's why, people around me say, Kadyrov wants his men to rotate permanently. Why? Because he thinks of the post-Putin era, that it is not certain that he will then enjoy the same support from the Kremlin and that things could even go wrong," says a Russian expert who has anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject...*

*Several observers of the small Caucasian Republic are impressed by the dexterity with which Ramzan Kadyrov managed to make himself useful to the Kremlin, even indispensable, while playing his own cards. "Kadyrov is brutal, rude, uneducated and yet, to my surprise, I must admit that he has managed to make his way and to impose himself in a hostile environment. Because we are still talking about his good relationship with Putin, but it's forgetting that a lot of people at FSB3, GRU, Kremlin, etc. hate him," says an observer in Moscow...*

*Akhmet Yarlykapov hardly believes it: "Chechnya is a case too unique and too outside the logic of the Middle East. The other development implied by Kadyrov's action in Syria or Libya is the construction of his own support and networks elsewhere than in Russia, under the pretext of asserting Russian soft power towards the Muslim world... in case it goes badly again between Moscow and its turbulent Caucasian Republic."*

**Source:** صراع روسي إيراني على النفوذ بجنوب دمشق Sulafa Jabour. "Russian-Iranian Competition for Influence in Southern Damascus," *al-Jazeera*, 29 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/sqpn3o>

*The spokesman referred to an attempt by Russian police, who are Muslims of Chechen origin, to win over the population through proper treatment and welcoming complaints being lodged through the various centers spread throughout the region, as well as confronting the violations committed by the various loyalist factions and militias.... Mohammed told al-Jazeera that Russian police had from the outset dealt decisively and forcefully toward the Shi'i militias present in the southern suburbs of Damascus next to Saida Zaynab. They had threatened to bomb the headquarters of these militias after gunfire and kidnappings committed against local civilians. In the same context, Faris Salama, a resident of the area, spoke of the role played by some reconciliation committees, which aim to strengthen local and Iranian presence by pressuring for the formation of quasi-popular committees to protect the area in order to diminish the presence and influence of Russian military police and replace them with local forces with links to Iran with the pretext of no longer needing the Russians...*