

Circassians Flee Syria Strife for Russia Homeland

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Circassian refugees Shawkat Achemez Al Sharkas, left, and his son Natai sitting outside their hotel in Nalchik. **Misha Japaridze**

NALCHIK — Natai Al Sharkas' great-grandfather killed his Russian commanding officer and defected to the enemy.

The ethnic Circassian swells with pride at the thought of the century-old act.

Natives of what is now Russia's Caucasus region, Circassians fiercely resisted the Russian tsarist conquest that ended in the 1860s after decades of scorched-earth warfare, mass killings or expulsions that some historians and politicians consider genocide.

The carnage forced many — like Al Sharkas' ancestors — to seek refuge in what is today Syria.

Now, carnage in Syria is driving many back to their homeland.

This spring, Al Sharkas joined hundreds of Circassians fleeing war-torn Syria for this remote Russian region of soaring peaks and lush forests. In the coming months, thousands more are expected to arrive in Kabardino-Balkaria, a Caucasus province the size of Maryland with a population of less than 900,000, two-thirds of which is ethnic Circassian.

"We are planning to stay here for good," Al Sharkas, 35, said as he sat under fragrant fir trees at a Soviet-era resort hotel where many of the Circassian immigrants have sought shelter. "That's the decision we made a long time ago and it's been accelerated by the events in Syria."

Circassians were widely dispersed in the Russian expulsions. An estimated 2 million live in Turkey, another 100,000 in Syria and other sizable populations are in Jordan and the United States. But their sense of ethnic unity remains strong and the pull of their homeland compelling.

Al Sharkas' great-grandfather Koushoukou, his brother and two cousins were forcibly drafted and sent to the Russian-Turkish war of the late 1870s. They had to fight Ottoman Turks, fellow Muslims whose sultans supported Circassian resistance and provided refuge for hundreds of thousands of them. After killing his officer in Bulgaria, Koushoukou joined the Turkish military and ended his life in Damascus, part of Ottoman Turkey at the time.

Al Sharkas, which means Circassian in Arabic, used a network of family connections, along with Facebook, to find relatives in Kabardino-Balkaria and other parts of Russia. He encourages his Syrian relatives to follow him to the Caucasus, although now, because of the fighting, it hardly seems possible.

"They are trapped there as it is almost impossible to even leave their neighborhoods," he said.

Assmat Yahya, a retired electrician from a Circassian village in the Syrian-controlled part of the Golan Heights, also found relatives in the Caucasus and plans to stay in Russia with his wife.

They left their seven-bedroom house in April after hearing that both opposition fighters and Syrian forces were approaching their town and now live in one of the cramped rooms in the hotel in Nalchik, the Kabardino-Balkaria capital.

"I'm here not because of the war, although it triggered the return," the gray-haired 63-year-old said. "We want to live here with our relatives."

But the newly arrived Syrian Circassians have run into bureaucratic hurdles in Russia.

Because Russia allows foreigners to stay for only three months without a residence permit, Al Sharkas and other Circassians from Syria recently had to travel to Abkhazia, a breakaway Georgian province that Russia recognizes as independent, to obtain entry stamps allowing them another three-month stay. Without residence and work permits, they will have to leave the country when their visas expire.

Circassians' historical grievances with Russia are strong.

The arrival of thousands of refugees from Syria could add fuel to a growing movement to force Russia to recognize the 19th-century killing and expulsions of Circassians as genocide.

Circassians are pushing the issue ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, where Circassian fighters surrendered to tsarist forces in 1864. Circassians say some of the Olympic facilities are being built over mass graves of their ancestors.

"Sochi is our open wound," said Vahit Kadioglu, head of the International Circassian Association in the Turkish capital, Ankara. "We expect recognition of the massacre from the Russian government."

In 2011, the pro-Western government of neighboring Georgia recognized the killings and deportation of Circassians as genocide and called on the West to boycott the Olympics. Russian officials say the decision was motivated by political tensions between Russia and Georgia, which fought a brief war in 2008, and dismissed the claims.

"There was no genocide of the Circassians — it was a normal historical process," said Valery Kuzmin, a Foreign Ministry ambassador-at-large responsible for the Sochi Games.

But the governor of the Russian province that will host the games has recently acknowledged the expulsions.

"This land has not belonged to the Russian Empire, it belonged to Caucasus nations, to Circassians," Alexander Tkachyov, head of the Krasnodar region, said in early August. Krasnodar was once almost entirely Circassian.

Al Sharkas' father, Shawkat Achemez, says that's not good enough. He wants the Kremlin to admit to mass killings and ethnic cleansing.

"Millions have been expelled from this territory," he said. "That's what they have to admit."

When the Soviet Union forced an alliance with Syria in the late 1960s, some Syrian Circassians came back to the Caucasus to visit or study.

But genuine repatriation became possible only after the 1991 Soviet collapse, because the Kremlin softened strict Soviet-era rules on obtaining Russian citizenship.

Some 1,500 Circassians have returned to the Caucasus since then, according to Circassian community leaders in Russia. In 1998, the Kremlin facilitated the repatriation of some 200 Circassians from Kosovo after they were attacked by ethnic Albanians.

The region they have come back to is afflicted by violence, too. The Caucasus republics are plagued by an Islamic insurgency that spread from Chechnya's separatist wars. A brazen 2005 raid of Islamists in Nalchik left 130 people dead, and Kabardino-Balkaria still experiences occasional small clashes.

Despite the violence, Circassians say they feel comfortable in their ancestral homeland.

Hamzeh Labeeb, a native of the Syrian city of Homs, came to Nalchik in 2002 to study at a local university and decided to stay.

"They've always treated me like their own," said the bespectacled 29-year-old computer engineer.

Meanwhile, locals think that their arrival benefits Russia.

"They possess cultural values we lost in the Communist era," said Vladimir Kaskulov, general director of the hotel chain in Nalchik that hosted more than 150 Syrians free of charge.

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