

Russia's Annexation of Crimea Upends Lives of Tatar Minority

By [The Moscow Times](#)

December 10, 2014



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SARY-SU, Crimea — Since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine, armed men have shown up frequently and at odd hours to search the cinder-block houses, mosque and school in this settlement of Crimean Tatars, a Muslim ethnic minority that has long suffered from discrimination in the peninsula that is its historic homeland.

The worst shock came in September, when two men in the town of 3,000 were abducted.

Now the community of Sary-Su "is trembling with fear," said Rebiya Setarova, an 80-year-old Tatar, as she tottered anxiously across a dirt road to check on her son and grandchildren ahead of Friday prayers. "Now I worry for the fate of my son. Everybody worries about the children."

Police have made no arrests, and the kidnappers' identities remain a mystery. But Setarova

has no doubts about who is responsible: "This is what we get when Russia comes to Crimea."

The fears and uncertainties of people in Sary-Su sum up how life has been upended for the 300,000-strong Crimean Tatar community. Deported en masse to Central Asia by the Soviets 70 years ago, they began returning to Crimea in the 1980s to rebuild their lives in an independent Ukraine.

Russia's annexation in March, which many Tatars vocally opposed, overturned their world. Since then, the Tatars' self-ruling body, the Mejlis, has been disbanded by Russian authorities, its highest-ranking leaders barred from re-entering Crimea and dozens of impromptu searches for narcotics, weapons and banned literature conducted in Tatar neighborhoods across the region.

Human rights experts say that Russia is punishing them for speaking out against annexation.

"For their openly critical position, the authorities have been cracking down on dissent," said Yulia Gorbunova, a researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Vanished Without Trace

It was a warm September evening in Sary-Su when Abdureshit Dzhepparov's 18-year-old son, Islyam, served him Turkish coffee and left the house. A half-hour later, neighbors were on the phone: They had seen Islyam, along with his 23-year-old cousin, frisked and forced into a dark blue Volkswagen van by men dressed in black.

The van sped away. Neither of the kidnapped men has been seen since.

"When these things happen, you can't even make plans — every night, if your children are out ... as a parent you can't sleep until they get home," said Dzhepparov, who also has a daughter in high school.

Elsewhere in Crimea, at least seven other Tatars have vanished since March, including three who had been active in demonstrations calling for the region to remain part of Ukraine. Two of the abducted were later found dead. The others are missing.

Police have opened investigations into the disappearances. And Sergei Aksyonov, Crimea's leader, has attempted to reassure the Tatars that their community is being treated fairly.

"We have respect for people of any faith or confession, and I can guarantee that there will be no infringements based on nationality on Crimean territory," Aksyonov told The Associated Press in an interview.

That statement and a visit by Aksyonov to the Sary-Su area have done little to reassure Dzhepparov. He said he does not understand why action was not taken faster, especially since witnesses jotted down the license plate number of the van used by his son's captors.

"With the capabilities they have, they could have blocked off all of Crimea, all the roads, and stopped and checked every Volkswagen van," Dzhepparov said. "So now I've started to think: Who in actual fact did this?"

Such questions have reverberated in Sary-Su, where residents are worried that the new lives they built from scratch in Crimea could quickly unravel. This settlement by a creek — the name means "Yellow Water" in the Tatar language — sprang up in the 1990s, when families returning from exile occupied empty fields and built their homes.

Most people here do not legally own their houses or the plots they were built on and cannot afford to return to ancestral Crimean Tatar cities or villages now populated by ethnic Russians or others.

Midnight Searches

That feeling of vulnerability has only been reinforced in recent months, as Sary-Su became one of the targets of "dozens of very intrusive and in some cases unwarranted searches" of Tatar homes throughout Crimea, according to Gorbunova.

The pro-Moscow authorities say the searches were intended to look for drugs, guns and literature banned by Russian law. Human Rights Watch noted that many searches, sometimes conducted in the middle of the night, involved dozens of masked men with guns.

On the same street where Dzhapparov lives, Setarova's son had his house searched in September by men claiming to be from the prosecutor's office.

Unlike his mother, Akhseid Dzhedzhekov is determined to remain calm and face the new facts of life in Crimea with quiet resolve. He said the men took nothing, and he has not heard from them since.

"You can't stare down a tank," said the 40-year-old builder. "So today, our strategy is patience. We know that God is with us."

Sary-Su's mosque was searched in August when children were attending religion classes. That same month, at nearby School No. 4, armed men burst into the empty classroom of Asiye Abduveliyeva, who teaches Tatar language and culture. They seized dozens of books. The instructor was later found guilty of violating Russia's strict law against the spread of religious extremism, and fined 1,000 rubles (\$22).

"I have been working for 33 years and suddenly at the end of the career I have a court conviction against me," the 54-year-old educator with a bouffant hairdo said with indignation, clacking around the classroom in her black leather stiletto heels. "When [we were] in Ukraine, I always won all the teaching awards."

Abduveliyeva's conviction was annulled on appeal, and the fine dropped. But the sting remains — not just for her but for many in Sary-Su outraged that a well-loved and long-honored local teacher could be treated like a criminal.

Simmering Rage

In October, when Aksyonov met with Dzhapparov in the nearby city of Belogorsk, hundreds of angry Sary-Su residents massed to vent their outrage over the kidnappings and official actions toward the Crimean Tatars. Footage of the protests was captured by ATR, a Tatar television station and other news outlets.

"There were snipers on the roofs, the entire city was surrounded by troops," said Dzhepparov, who said he was nervous the enraged crowd might get out of hand. "If something had suddenly gone wrong, it would have been a catastrophe."

Such fears seem well-founded: Tatar protests occurred frequently and peacefully under Ukrainian rule, but since Russian annexation, they have sometimes ended in confrontations with ethnic Russians or police.

In May, hundreds of Crimean Tatars defied authorities and broke through a border checkpoint to greet their leader, Mustafa Dzhemilev, who had been banned from entering Crimea. Forty-nine people were charged with minor administrative violations, such as engaging in an unsanctioned protest or crossing the border illegally. More serious charges of injuring a government official — which can carry a prison term of 10 years — were later brought against three people.

Defense lawyers said the case could end up ensnaring dozens more and voiced concern about the wider implications of official policy and actions for the Crimean Tatars.

"Ukrainian authorities were diplomatic and allowed the steam to be let out of the valve," said attorney Dzhemil Kemishev. "People came out and protested, talked about the things that were worrying them, and things ended there."

"But when you're being told not to do that, it's like when you don't lift the lid off a pot of boiling water: Sooner or later it will explode."

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