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Examining Theological Justifications for Kadyrovite Chechens Fighting in Ukraine

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THIS ARTICLE INVESTIGATES THE THEOLOGICAL AND RHETORICAL justifications that Chechen political-religious authorities employ in defense of the Chechen Kadyrovite forces' participation in the war in Ukraine under the banner of the Russian military. It explains and analyzes the Kadyrovites' religious justifications for going to war in Ukraine. It pieces together narratives articulated by key Muslim authorities in Chechnya and Russia who are siding with Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's decision to support Russian president Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. This article concludes that:

- 1) There are three broad framing theories that underpin the Kadyrovites' justification of the war as a "legitimate *jihad*."
- 2) The Kadyrovites' justifications for participating in the war in Ukraine have roots in some aspects of Islamic tradition and are founded on established principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

- 3) The Kadyrovites' justifications are intended to make the war more palatable for Chechen society by highlighting the interests of the Chechen nation and global *ummah* (community of Muslim believers) that are supposedly at stake in Ukraine. However, many aspects of these justifications are nearly identical to the official Russian government narrative of the "special military operation" in Ukraine, which makes clear that Kadyrovites' participation in the war is driven by an alignment of Kadyrov's personal interests with those of the Russian government.
- 4) The Kadyrovites' decision as Muslims to fight for a non-Islamic state, and the justifications they have employed in doing so, are not novel or unique in Muslim or Russian history and indeed have numerous antecedents.

While this article's focus is strictly on the Kadyrovites' theological justifications for participating in the war in Ukraine, the authors acknowledge that Chechens and Muslims in both Russia and Ukraine are divided on the war. Some Chechens and Russian Muslims have fought on behalf of Ukraine and are therefore regarded by Kadyrovites as "apostates."¹ Others prefer to stay neutral, perhaps because they cannot find a clear position on the matter within Islamic teachings, or because they may be fearful of voicing their true opinions, or because they view both parties to the conflict as equally wrong and undeserving of support.²

The eruption of fragmented protests in opposition to President Vladimir Putin's mobilization decree in some Muslim-majority regions of the Russian Federation such as Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria in September 2022 (which came as part of a string of wider protests across Russia in opposition to the announcement of "partial mobilization") certainly indicate that some segments of Russia's Muslim populations oppose the war. This article does not cover these issues. Although they are an interesting subject for analysis, they are better discussed in a separate article. Rather, this study is novel because it examines how Islamist narratives, broadly defined, can be employed by governments in contemporary inter-state conventional warfare. This is especially important because most recent studies on Islamic justifications for war and political violence have focused on non-state armed groups, particularly Salafi-jihadists and their ideology.

A History of the Kadyrovites

THE KADYROVITES, OR KADYROVTSY IN RUSSIAN, CAME INTO THE INTERNATIONAL limelight when the President of Russia's Chechen Republic (also known as Chechnya), Ramzan Kadyrov, announced in February 2022 the deployment of thousands of Chechen National Guardsmen to fight in the war in the Ukraine in support of the Russian military.³ The Kadyrovite security structures originally formed as separatist militia units that fought for Chechen independence in the First Chechen War (1994-1996) under the command of Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov, the late father of Ramzan. During the Second Chechen War (1999-2000), the elder Kadyrov and his fighters decided to switch sides and help Russian government forces quell other separatist groups led by Kadyrov's rivals such as Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basayev.⁴ As a reward, the elder Kadyrov was appointed by the Kremlin as the Head (and later as the President) of the Chechen Republic, which is a federal subject within the Russian Federation, in 2000. He held this position until his assassination in 2004 by his Chechen rivals.⁵

Scholars have noted that the conflict in Chechnya was first driven principally by Chechen ethnonationalism. It gradually evolved into a complex conflict that attracted additional actors with diverse agendas, ideologies, and modus operandi.⁶ The participation of foreign mujahideen, principally Arabs, added a new, jihadist dimension to the conflict.⁷ The mujahideen, led by notorious hardline commanders such as the Saudi Arabia-born Ibn Khattab and Chechen militant Shamil Basayev supported Salafi-jihadist ideology (and were thus referred to locally as *Wahhabis*) and fought for the establishment of a pan-Islamic state. In contrast, Kadyrov the elder and the faction under his command were predominantly traditional adherents of Sufi Islam and remained loyal to the idea of Chechen nationalism.⁸ Such ideological differences, combined with other factors such as clan-based rivalries, often led to armed clashes between the militant factions. However, regardless of the differences in their ideological affinities and ultimate political goals, every faction of Chechen forces relied on religion in some way as a tool to justify their struggle and garner public support. Even Kadyrov the elder, who strongly opposed Salafi-jihadism and pan-Islamism, had advocated for "armed jihad" against the Russians before switching sides to join Moscow.⁹

Soon after his father's death, Ramzan Kadyrov became the new head of the Chechen government. Much as it had coopted the elder Kadyrov, the younger Kadyrov's promotion came as part of Moscow's political solution to the ethno-

separatist insurgencies that had been waged by Chechen militants after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. In 2006, Ramzan Kadyrov restructured and incorporated those “Kadyrovite” units loyal to his father and now him into various regular paramilitary forces of the Chechen Republic. Concurrently, he formally abandoned the “Kadyrovite” label, announcing that there were “no structures bearing his proud name anymore” and that those defining themselves as Kadyrovites were “impostors.”¹⁰

Despite the formal abolishment of the Kadyrovites as a militia group more than 15 years ago, the term is still frequently used in the public and scholarly discourses both within Chechnya and abroad. The term refers in a narrow sense to formal Chechen paramilitary forces, including the National Guard, that operate under the authority of Ramzan Kadyrov.¹¹ In a broader sense, it is used to define all representatives of both local and central bodies of Kadyrov’s government.¹² For the purpose of this analysis, the authors shall use the narrow definition of the term.

Kadyrovites’ Involvement in the Ukraine War

KADYROVITES’ INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE IS AN INTERESTING POINT OF analysis for those who are interested in the study of how religious ideas and narratives are used to justify participation in political violence, armed conflict, and terrorism. The following points are essential context to assessing the Kadyrovites’ involvement in the current war.

First, the identity of Kadyrovite paramilitary forces remains staunchly Chechen and thus embedded in a society that witnessed two destructive wars with Russia that only ended in 2000.¹³ Such recent history might still breed a sense of hatred and animosity in segments of the Chechen population towards Russia and especially its military forces.¹⁴ Indeed, although Russia significantly curbed the scale and intensity of the separatist insurgency in Chechnya over the course of the two wars in the 1990s, it did not bring a complete halt to the militancy. From the early 2000s until 2013, Russia experienced some of the deadliest terrorist attacks in its history at the hands of terrorists with links to militants from the North Caucasus region. These attacks include the 2002 Dubrovka Theatre attack in Moscow, the 2004 Beslan school siege in North Ossetia-Alania, the 2010 metro bombing and

2011 airport attack in Moscow, and the 2013 triple suicide bombings in Volgograd. From 2013 onwards, there has been a sharp decline in violence perpetrated by terrorists from the North Caucasus, however. Experts have argued that this has been achieved through selective targeting of terrorist networks and their support bases combined with enhanced law-enforcement and military measures that were implemented ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Thousands of radical Islamists from the North Caucasus also left for Syria and Iraq in the mid-2010s to fight alongside various Salafi-jihadist groups, particularly ISIS and al-Nusra Front (now known Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, i.e., HTS), which may have also contributed to a shift away from terror attacks within the Russian Federation, if only perhaps temporarily.¹⁵

While the loyalty of Ramzan Kadyrov and his forces to Moscow has been essential in keeping peace and order in Chechnya, fighting for Russia in Ukraine poses a different calculation. The former—manifested in Kadyrov's crackdown on anti-Russian militants within Chechnya on behalf of Moscow—ensures clear benefits to both Kadyrov himself and, to an extent, the Chechen population at large in terms of preserving the degree of order and economic development that Chechens are experiencing today compared to the harsh conditions of the war years. The Kadyrovites' involvement in the war in Ukraine, however, is quite different. It begs the question: Why would members of Chechen society, which has a recent history of two devastating wars with Russia, risk their lives for Russia's interests in Ukraine? What benefits would Chechnya gain that merit the sacrifice of Chechen lives in Ukraine?

The second point of important context is that the increasing deployment of Kadyrovites in counterterrorism operations across Chechnya has pushed the Kadyrovites into the position of being the blood enemies of various Chechen separatist groups and organized crime outfits in the North Caucasus region.¹⁶ Violent clashes between Kadyrovite and anti-establishment elements over ambition and honor are not uncommon. Despite the official end to Russia's counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya in 2009, anti-Kadyrovite and anti-Russian militants continue to operate outside Chechnya in conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and now Ukraine. They seek any opportunity to undermine Kadyrov's regime and win over the hearts and minds of the Chechen population at home.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, it would seem that Ramzan Kadyrov would need to make constant efforts to secure legitimacy from a significant portion of the Chechen population, something which participation in the war in Ukraine might risk. After all, it is one thing for Chechens to accept living under Kadyrovite rule in return for stability and development at home, but it is another thing entirely to fight on behalf of Russia's

interests in Ukraine. For many Chechens, Kadyrov would need to offer a persuasive narrative, at minimum, to explain why participation in the war in Ukraine is necessary and justified.

Recognizing that religious ideology may not be the primary motivation for Chechens' participation in the Ukraine war, Islam, with its "diverse lived forms," is an integral part of the Chechen collective identity and culture.¹⁸ It therefore cannot be ignored in this issue. It is also clear that Kadyrov relies heavily on religion to bolster his legitimacy among Chechens. Kadyrov presents himself as a leader who concerns himself with the religious well-being of the people by building grand mosques, promoting religious festivals, and allowing freedom of Islamic practice previously not enjoyed under communist rule. Kadyrovites also portray themselves differently from Russian security forces. The thick beards of many Chechen soldiers are meant to highlight their Muslim identity and construct an image similar to typical mujahideen in their outward appearance. In propaganda videos and in regimental gatherings and official ceremonies, Kadyrovites regularly chant religious expressions such as "*Allahu akbar*" and point their index finger to the sky (a symbol of monotheism in Islam).¹⁹ Kadyrovite units deployed to Ukraine have also been seen performing prayer rites near battle zones.

With this context in mind, the authors argue that religious narratives are an important component of the discourse employed by the Chechen political leadership and Islamic authorities in Russia to justify the deployment of Chechen soldiers to Ukraine.

Theological Justifications for "Legitimate Jihad"

THE KADYROVITES' RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THEIR MOBILIZATION IN SUPPORT of the Russian military in Ukraine are founded primarily on historical events which occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. In his online appeal to Muslims in Chechnya issued on February 27, 2022 (several days after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine), Salakh Mezhiev, the highest Mufti of Chechnya, likened the Kadyrovites' support for Russian military operations in Ukraine with a group of early Muslims who fought on behalf of the Christian king of Abyssinia (*Habshah*) against a group of rebellious Abyssinian noblemen.²⁰ The Muslims were companions of the Prophet who had been instructed to migrate to

Abyssinia in the Horn of Africa in 613 A.D. to seek protection from the Abyssinian king in light of the ongoing persecution of the early Muslims in Mecca. This episode is known in Islamic history as the migration (*hijrah*) to Abyssinia, the first migration before the better-known *hijrah* to Medina in 622. The Abyssinian king allowed those companions of the Prophet to stay in his land under his protection and practice their faith freely. During their stay in Abyssinia, the king was challenged by several noblemen, which triggered a civil war. Although the king was a Christian and the conflict was between two non-Muslim parties, the companions decided to actively support the Abyssinian king on the following bases:

- It was their duty to reciprocate the kindness of Abyssinia's king that had allowed them to practice their faith freely.
- The king was assessed to be a just and better ruler than his challengers.
- The companions risked losing their protection and freedom of worship if the noblemen succeeded in wresting power from the king.²¹

In keeping with this historical analogy, Kadyrovite proponents of the war in Ukraine argue that Putin is analogous to the just Abyssinian king who provided security and freedom of worship for early Muslims. These proponents argue that Putin has made significant policy changes to benefit Muslims since the end of the Second Chechen War, allowing greater social and cultural autonomy within the Chechen Republic. This model of autonomy, which is defined by some scholars as “separatism without independence,”²² has allowed Chechens to practice Islam and cultural traditions relatively freely, in contrast to the situation during the Soviet era. Muslims enjoy a similar degree of freedom of worship elsewhere in the Russian federation, as Muslims indeed constitute the second largest religious community in the country. Muslims can generally perform prayers, fast, embark on *hajj* (pilgrimage), and engage in other fundamental Islamic practices. Mosques and religious institutions can be established as long they are not used as a venue to promote separatism or banned extremist ideologies such as Wahhabism. Leaders of formal Islamic organizations therefore often argue that Muslims in Russia today enjoy a respect they have long sought in contrast to the discrimination faced under previous regimes. In his public statement in support of the war in February 2022, the Chechen Mufti expressed that in Russia, Islam is an “officially respected religion” and that there is a “freedom to practice Islam to the fullest.” Ominously, the Mufti warned, “All this will fall apart if Russia falls apart.”²³

This leads to the second principal pillar of the Kadyrovites' justifications for the war in Ukraine, which closely mirrors Putin's own rhetoric. According to the Kadyrovites and other official Muslim bodies within Russia, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is a "fascist" and Ukraine a "Neo-Nazi" state that threatens Russia's very existence. For instance, a statement published by the Spiritual Muslim Board of the Republic of Tatarstan in March 2022 described the current Ukrainian political establishment as a "Neo-Nazi" regime whose "inhuman actions have caused sufferings to representatives of all faiths, including Muslims."²⁴ Similarly, a statement issued at a conference organized in the southwestern city of Vladikavkaz in the same month that featured leaders of various Muslim organizations (such as the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia) as well as non-Muslim academics and NGOs painted Zelensky as a proxy for NATO intent on destabilizing Russia. According to this narrative, having Zelensky remain in power poses a dire security threat to Russia, and therefore the war in Ukraine, "as a preventive-defensive war," should be regarded as "legal and morally justified." Putin's supporters among Muslim clergy in Russia argue that this alleged threat to Russia has serious implications for Russian Muslims' wellbeing because the "collective West" (led by the United States) is regarded as an anti-Islamic bloc. To support this assertion, the Vladikavkaz conference participants highlighted the "illegal and inhuman destruction" that the bloc has allegedly caused on Muslim countries and lives via direct and indirect military interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.²⁵

Beyond its foreign policy, Putin-aligned Islamic figures paint the West as a morally corrupt civilization. These clerics have argued that if the West is allowed to succeed in its mission in Ukraine, it will serve as a "springboard" to further threaten the Muslim way of life across Eurasia by promoting immoralities in the name of freedom and human rights.²⁶ Pro-war clerics have highlighted the issue of LGBT rights more than any other issue when citing examples of Western immoralities. For instance, the Chechen Mufti Salakh Mezhiev stated in his February 2022 address that those who went to fight in Ukraine "have gone to jihad" because NATO will bring "all the dirt" and everything that is unacceptable to Islam into Russia if Putin's war objectives in Ukraine are not met.²⁷ The Mufti explained that it is a "duty" for Muslims to participate in the war against Ukraine in order to "preserve and protect Islamic freedom and practices" enshrined in Russian legislation, which the Mufti argued prohibits public "insults of the Prophet and the Qur'an" and the promotion of the gay lifestyle.²⁸

Finally, Muslim leaders in Russia have argued that war is necessary to defend ethnic minorities in Luhansk and Donetsk, primarily Russians but also some

Muslims, who have allegedly faced “systematic suffering” caused by Ukraine’s “Neo-Nazi” government since 2014.²⁹ (Estimates of the Muslim population in Luhansk and Donetsk vary between 30,000 and 70,000.³⁰) A statement issued by the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia on February 24, 2022 claimed that the military operation was “the only way to return peace to the long-suffering Donetsk land” and “the only opportunity to save the people of Donbass from bullying, genocide by the Kiev regime.”³¹

Thus, the narratives constructed by Russian Muslim leaders maintain that Chechens and Muslims are better off in Russia than they have ever been in history, and that this wellbeing is challenged by a growing alliance between the “Neo-Nazi” government in neighboring Ukraine in lockstep with a politically and culturally threatening NATO. Preserving the status quo in Russia is therefore regarded from a jurisprudential perspective as *maslahah* (a benefit of public interest), much as it was for the Prophet’s companions in Abyssinia who chose to fight in defense of its Christian king.

Conclusion

IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT THE NARRATIVE EMPLOYED BY KADYROVITES TO JUSTIFY their participation in the war in Ukraine has strong roots in Islamic tradition. Since the classical era until the present, Islamic scholars have cited the precedent of the Prophet’s companions’ support for the Christian king in the Abyssinian civil war and debated its significance.³² In their efforts to justify Muslims’ participation in the invasion of Ukraine, Russian Muslim scholars and Kadyrovite-aligned clerics essentially invoke three broad principles that underpin their claim that fighting on behalf of Russia in Ukraine is a “legitimate jihad.” These principles rely heavily on genuine Islamic intellectual traditions of formulating *fatwa* (Islamic decrees), which may help them resonate with Chechens and Muslim communities more broadly.

The first principle can be summarized as “those who are fighting in the cause of Allah,”³³ which is to say, Muslims should identify which belligerent in a conflict is most aligned with or beneficial to Muslims. The second principle is “those who are fighting in the cause of the powers of evil,”³⁴ which determines which belligerent Muslims should oppose or avoid aligning with on religious grounds. The final principle is to assess and measure *maslahah* (that which is beneficial to

Muslims) and *dharar* (that which is harmful to Muslims) in the context of the conflict to determine whether or not to actively fight on the side of those who have been identified as the favorable belligerent. The tipping point is whether participation in the war provides greater *maslahah* than *dharar* from the perspective of Muslims' wellbeing.

However, in the case of the war in Ukraine, central elements of the Kadyrovites' narratives, such as the notion that Zelensky is a NATO puppet or that Ukraine is simultaneously a Neo-Nazi state and one that seeks to promote gay rights, are too similar to the official Russian government narrative to suggest that these are "organic" attitudes about the war that have emerged from within the Chechen religious establishment. The application of these religious narratives points to an attempt by the Kadyrovites to make their involvement in the war more palatable to the religiously conservative Chechen society when, in fact, the impetus for war has always been Russian geopolitical interest. With regards to Chechen participation, joining the war alongside Putin certainly benefits Kadyrov as it serves as an opportunity to prove his loyalty to the Russian leader once again. Furthermore, being at the forefront of such an important national security matter (from Moscow's perspective) and contributing to the Russian military effort at such a critical time is likely to help Kadyrov and his Chechen government bolster their standing within the country's federal politics. Kadyrov's recent announcement that he is considering establishing a private military company once he retires from state office may indicate his interest to increase his own standing within the Russian security establishment in the long term.³⁵

Setting aside the particulars of this war and Chechens' participation therein, the theological justifications employed by Kadyrovites are not novel. They have been deployed many times throughout history and by diverse societies whenever Muslims have required religious justification for participating in a war under the banner of a non-Muslim army.³⁶ Beyond the aforementioned example of the first *hijrah* to Abyssinia, the medieval period saw multiple instances of Muslims fighting under the banners of Crusader and non-Muslim Mongol armies.³⁷ This phenomenon is not unprecedented within Russian history, for that matter. Muslims served in the Tsarist military and fought the Japanese Imperial Army during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), during which the influential Islamic revivalist Shaykh Rashid Rida offered a *fatwa* defending their participation.³⁸ In the communist era, Muslims from across the Soviet Union fought in the Second World War and then later in the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), which, in contrast to the Second World War, involved fighting a Muslim enemy and civilian populace.³⁹

Western countries have also benefited from similar religious verdicts. Immediately

after the September 11, 2001 attacks, a Muslim U.S. Army Chaplain, Captain Muhammad Abdur-Rashid, put forth a question to the late Sheikh Taha Jabir Al-'Alwani on the permissibility of Muslim-American servicemen participating in the impending "War on Terror." Several weeks later, a fatwa was issued by five *'ulama* (Islamic scholars) from different parts of the Middle East, including the late Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the prominent spiritual figure of the Muslim Brotherhood and head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) based in Qatar. The five signatories judged that it was Islamically acceptable for American Muslims to serve in the military in "the upcoming battles," although the argument was somewhat different than that being employed by Kadyrovites today, focusing instead on the practical benefit of allowing American Muslims to serve in the military so as to avoid anyone questioning their loyalty.⁴⁰ This fatwa was later adopted by British and French clerics to allow Muslim soldiers to fight for the British and French militaries in the Middle East as part of the Global War on Terror.

Admittedly, it is certainly not the case that all Muslims need a fatwa to guide their decision-making. Plenty of Muslims may decide to fight for the country of which they are a citizen regardless of what religious authorities say. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to discount the significance of religious justifications out of hand given the significant role these religious narratives have historically played vis-à-vis Muslims' participation in non-Muslim militaries.

NOTES

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