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Russia Targets the Crimean Tatars—Again

BY MATTHEW KAMINSKI

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Simferopol, Ukraine — Most nights for the past week, Ali Tarsinov joins a few local men to guard their mosque. During the day, his wife, Feride, won't let her eldest daughter attend college classes in central Simferopol, Crimea's regional capital.

“We're the hostages here,” says Ms. Tarsinov, setting out a spread of Tatar pastry, chicken and coffee. “The first who will suffer from this conflict — the first who will be forced to leave — are the Crimean Tatars. And we have nowhere to go.”

The Tarsinovs live in Kamenka, a suburb of Simferopol on the main road to the eastern port of Feodosiya. I met them in 1995, a few years after their move from Tajikistan. In a single May night in 1944, Stalin expelled the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia, cleansing the peninsula of its majority non-Slav population. As soon as travel restrictions crumbled with the Soviet Union, the Tarsinovs rushed back with tens of thousands of other Tatars.

The Tatars' forebears ruled this peninsula on the Black Sea for three centuries beginning in 1441, but history since then has seen them more than once caught between larger powers wrestling over their homeland. Some 260,000 Tatars, about 12% of Crimea's population, now seem fated to lose out either to a Russian annexation or an “independent” Crimea run by Moscow puppets. The likelihood of the Tatars seeing their preferred outcome — continued Ukrainian sovereignty — has faded under Russia's assertion of military dominance.

Upon returning to Crimea two decades ago, Ali, then 40, and his son Damir, a reedy 18-year-old, lived in a shack and built their house by hand. The plot of land came free from a farm collective. Sitting in a tiny room of the house early in its construction, Feride, a chemist, insisted more than once — to convince herself, it seemed — that the homecoming was worth the sacrifice of the jobs, friends and house left behind. “Our children need a place to live where no one can

tell them this is not their land,” she told me at the time. “The next generation won’t have it so bad.”

As I drove to see them on Sunday, I found that the road there is still a lumpy mud track. The Tarsinovs’ house is spacious, with electricity and running water, but no gas line. The second floor, impressive from the outside, is unfinished. Money remains scarce. But their anxiety is elsewhere now.

The Tatars staunchly backed Ukraine’s independence and its messy, corrupt-yet-freeish politics. The Russian nationalism uncorked in Crimea since the Russian intervention evokes memories of several expulsions and defeats at Moscow’s hand, going back to Catherine the Great’s conquest of the peninsula in 1783. A few chetnik volunteers from Serbia who turned up in recent days to support “brother” Russians raised the specter of Balkan-style ethnic cleansing. Some Tatar houses in the group’s historic capital of Bakhchisara were marked with an X, while Russian homes were left alone.

“There’s no need to put marks on our houses,” says Feride. “Our whole village is Crimean Tatar.” Her husband adds, “If they start to attack us, and they will think little of it, they could throw us out in a matter of days.” Prejudice may not be hard to whip up. “The Soviet Communists put out the word: Tatars are the chornomazy,” Feride says, literally “black faces,” a slur used in Russia for any non-European foreigner.

Tatars are prominent in pro-Ukrainian rallies in Crimea, some of which have ended in scuffles with Russian militants. But there’s no choice here. The Russian military backs a local government led by a marginal party and appointed by a coup. In the plebiscite hurriedly scheduled for Sunday, Crimeans can vote either to join Russia or declare independence from Ukraine. The Tatars, many ethnic Ukrainians and more than a few ethnic Russians — perhaps, if asked in circumstances other than an invasion, a majority in all — want to stay with Ukraine. Tatar leaders called for a boycott of the vote, a move that Feride calls “suicidal but we had no choice.”

If retribution comes, will it be through violence or other means? The rights to their property could be challenged. “The Russians will go further,” says Ali. “They will come and we won’t be able to go to meetings and talk freely. We have gotten used to, over the last 20 years, life in freedom.”

Two decades after returning from exile, families fear the worst as Putin’s troops mark their homes with an ‘X.’

Tatars have been told by their leaders about America's promise to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest agreement, when Kiev gave up its nuclear weapons. Now, walking around Tatar neighborhoods, I was repeatedly asked: Will Barack Obama help us? What will the U.S. do? I had no answer. Damir Tarsinov — Ali's eldest son, now a stout man with two daughters — fumes that the world has "already let Putin get away with it."

His parents look tired, almost resigned. They put 23 years — "all my love, all my dreams," Feride says — into a house that's not yet finished, and who knows now if it will ever be. "This is an extraordinary time," says Ali, an electrician who works, when he can, in construction. "The world will be changed tremendously by something that began here. I hope Putin's Russia will fall in the end. You can't stand up against the rest of the world, 150 million against six billion. Even when you have nuclear weapons."

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.