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In February 2014, Russia began its military intervention in Ukraine when its forces occupied Crimea. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, adopted on March 27, 2014, and entitled "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine," states the Autonomous Republic of Crimea remains internationally recognized as within Ukraine's international borders. The U.S. government does not recognize the attempted annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and considers Crimea still to be a part of Ukraine.

Executive Summary

In February 2014, armed forces of the Russian Federation seized and occupied Crimea. In March 2014, Russia announced Crimea had become part of the Russian Federation. A UN General Assembly resolution declared continued international recognition of Crimea as within Ukraine's international borders. The U.S. government does not recognize the attempted annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and maintains that Crimea continues to be part of Ukraine. Occupation forces imposed de facto laws of the Russian Federation on the territory of Crimea. Occupation authorities subjected religious minorities, in particular the UOC-KP, UGCC, and Crimean Tatars to harassment, intimidation, and detention, according to human rights groups. These authorities ordered all religious groups to register with the Russian government by January 1, 2016, or face losing their legal status. The authorities raided mosques, confiscated literature they deemed "extremist," and subjected the leadership of Crimean Tatar Muslims to surveillance and intimidation.

Religious leaders called for an end to the Russian occupation of Crimea. Religious minorities were subject to social harassment and intimidation as well as to a media campaign that portrayed the Crimean Tatar community as "extremists" and "traitors" and the UOC-KP and the UGCC as "schismatics" or "Uniates." Muslim religious properties were vandalized.

The U.S. government publicly condemned religious abuses committed by Russian occupation authorities in Crimea, particularly the use of "extremism laws" to search, harass, and intimidate religious congregations, especially of Muslim Crimean Tatars. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv were unable to visit the peninsula following its occupation by the Russian Federation but were able to meet with Crimean Muslim and Christian leaders in other parts of the country to demonstrate U.S. support for their right to practice their religious beliefs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Crimean peninsula consists of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) and the city of Sevastopol. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, the total population of the peninsula is 2,353,000. No recent independent survey provides data on the religious affiliation of the population.

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, in 2014 there were 2,083 religious organizations (a term including parishes, congregations, theological schools, monasteries, and other constituent parts of a church or religious group) in the ARC and 137 in Sevastopol. The numbers included organizations both with and without legal entity status. Muslims had 1,007 religious organizations in the ARC, of which 921 were affiliated with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (SAMC), Ukraine's biggest Muslim group. The UOC-MP was and remains the largest Christian denomination with 535 religious organizations. Other Christian denominations included the UOC-KP with 44 organizations, Roman Catholicism with 13, UAOC with 10, and the UGCC with nine. There were 280 Protestant churches, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Lutherans, as well as 80 Jehovah's Witness organizations.

There are approximately 300,000 Crimean Tatars, who make up 13 percent of the population and are overwhelmingly Muslim. There are several Jewish congregations, mostly in Sevastopol and Simferopol. Adherents of the UOC-MP, Protestants, and Muslims are the largest religious groups in Sevastopol.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Pursuant to international recognition that the Autonomous Republic of Crimea remains within Ukraine's international borders, Crimea continues to be officially subject to the constitution and laws of Ukraine. In the aftermath of Russia's occupation and attempted annexation, however, the occupation authorities implement the laws of the Russian Federation de facto on the territory.

Government Practices

The occupation authorities subjected religious minorities, in particular the UOC-KP, the UGCC, and Muslim Crimean Tatars, to harassment, intimidation, and detentions, according to human rights and international organizations. Authorities ordered all religious groups to reregister with the Russian government by January 1, 2016, or face loss of their legal status. Security services continued to raid mosques and confiscate literature they deemed extremist.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on June 2, authorities in Simferopol arrested eight members who were distributing religious literature, accusing them of "picketing" illegally.

Police detained, questioned, and examined the literature of nine members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in May after the village council chair halted their event in Saky, according to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission. Police fined eight of them for conducting an outdoor religious meeting. Seven appealed the fines. The cases remained pending at the end of the year.

According to human rights monitors, Russian authorities detained four Crimean Tatars, Ruslan Zeytullaev, Nuri (Yuri) Primov, Rustem Vaitov, and Ferat Sayfulaev, accusing them of membership in Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The human rights monitors stated that Hizb-ut-Tahrir was not an illegal group in Ukraine and that the Crimean Tatar community said the Russian occupation authorities were using the case to suppress all observant Muslims, particularly Crimean Tatars.

The occupation authorities required all religious organizations, defined as individual parishes, congregations, schools, monasteries, and other organizations, to comply with Russian Federal law and register by January 1, 2016. Only Russian citizens were allowed to register a religious community. As of August 10, only 53 organizations had registered, compared to approximately 1,400 organizations registered by Ukrainian authorities in 2014. Many members of religious minorities, especially Crimean Tatars, Greek Catholics, and members of the UOC-KP, refused Russian citizenship. Those who refused Russian citizenship, or who were citizens of other nations, were subject to expulsion if they were not granted residency. Loss of registration could impact land ownership, taxation, utilities, and the number and purpose of religious meetings. Human rights monitors reported that imams at Crimean Tatar mosques, most of whom remained unregistered at the end of the year, had to inform occupation authorities each time they transferred from one mosque to another.

Since the beginning of the Russian occupation, UGCC priests continued to report harassment at the hands of Russian Federation intelligence agencies and local pro-Russian militias. The UGCC was unable to operate as an independent church and could only operate through a diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Priests, along with all other peninsula residents, were pressured to take Russian citizenship. Non-Russian priests without residency could only spend 90 days in Crimea and had to leave for another 90 days, disrupting religious work.

The Mejlis, the representative body of Crimean Tatars, said the Russian occupation government created the Tauride Muftiate in 2014 as an alternative Muslim leadership group in order to put pressure on the SAMC. As a result of this pressure, the Mejlis stated the SAMC was forced to cooperate with Russian occupation authorities and had to represent the views of the occupying power. Otherwise, they said the occupation government would replace the SAMC with the Tauride Muftiate, which they stated was under the direction of the Russian intelligence services. Mejlis leaders said the SAMC no longer represented the views of its worshipers, and they planned to register an independent SAMC on Ukrainian controlled territory.

UOC-KP priests stated that they were under constant surveillance by Russian authorities, who ordered them to provide lists of parishioners, forced them to sign documents affirming their identities and church membership, and accused them of being members of right-wing Ukrainian groups such as Right Sector and Svoboda.

Social media reported that Crimean Tatar Muslims in Bakhchisarai were forbidden from assembling to celebrate Eid al-Fitr in July, in order to prevent large groups from gathering.

The authorities utilized Russian laws banning "extremism," which allowed officials to prohibit the activity of a religious association and to confiscate religious materials, to target Crimean Tatar communities and Muslim institutions. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On May 5, authorities denied the Muslim community in Sary Krym permission to conduct burials at a recently completed cemetery. The occupation authorities stated the property did not meet health standards, but Crimean Tatars said it was an attempt to discriminate against their religion and ethnicity.

According to human rights monitors, on August 14, Russian occupation authorities set up video cameras to monitor the exterior of the mosque in the village of Ay-Vasil in order to "combat extremism."

According to media sources, on February 20, occupation authorities seized 6,000 copies of the Quran sent from Turkey to Kerch.

According to human rights monitors, Russian occupation authorities closed the madrassah in Kolchugino in September because it was unable to register as a religious institution. For the 2015-2016 academic year, four other madrassahs run by the SAMC Muftiate remained closed. An "education ministry" official said no religious organizations had applied for a license to run a religious education program under Russian law; such licenses were not required until September 2016.

The UOC-KP stated that Russian occupation authorities made it difficult for them to operate by artificially raising rents and preventing the Church from leasing property. Russian occupation authorities increased the rent for the UOC-KP's cathedral in Simferopol to several thousand dollars a month. According to UOC-KP Archbishop Kliment, Russian occupation authorities forced property owners to break leases with the UOC-KP. As a result, parishes in Saky, Krasnoperekopsk, and Kerch were forced to close. He also reported that the occupation authorities broke a lease with the UOC-KP in Sevastopol without due process or notice. Only nine of 15 churches remained functioning, leading to crowding in the churches that were open.

On January 30, the "prime minister" of Crimea issued an antiterrorism decree defining as a potential terrorist any member of a "nontraditional religious organization."

On October 9, the occupation authorities stated that Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Jemilev was recruiting volunteers to join the Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Jemilev denied this and stated Russian occupation authorities made the claim to justify an extensive crackdown on the Crimean Tatar community.

According to human rights groups, Russian occupation authorities labeled the Mejlis as a radical Muslim organization in order to restrict the rights of Crimean Tatars. For example, on October 9, Ruslan Balbec, a "deputy prime minister", said the Mejlis was recruiting Crimean Tatars to fight in Syria as part of Da'esh.

Roman Catholic churches continued to operate but as a diocese directly under the authority of the Vatican, according to the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church had difficulty in staffing parishes, as many of its priests were Polish or Ukrainian and had to register as foreign residents, which allowed them to stay in Crimea for only 90 days at a time. In February only five priests remained on the peninsula. Priests and members reported harassment by Russian occupation authorities. According to press reports, a Polish priest was fined for performing religious work on a tourist visa.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious groups and human rights monitors, Russian media engaged in a campaign to create suspicion and fear among certain religious groups, especially Crimean Tatar Muslims, who were accused of links to radical Islamic groups engaged in terrorism. Russian media also depicted the UOC-KP and UGCC as "fascists" for supporting the Ukrainian government and opposing the Russian occupation.

According to media reports, Rustem Seitov, a Crimean Tatar and Muslim, was forbidden by his employer from performing daily prayers at work. The "ombudsman for human rights" for Crimea refused to take action on his behalf.

Crimean Tatars reported attacks on religious buildings and institutions. They reported police either refused to investigate such crimes or were slow to do so. On April 26, unknown persons threw Molotov cocktails at a mosque in the village of Skalyste, setting it on fire. On September 17, unknown persons threw bricks at a mosque in the Zavit-Leninsky District. On July 25, vandals damaged a Muslim cemetery in Otuz. The status of any investigation is unknown.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government publicly called attention to religious abuses committed by Russian forces and occupation authorities in Crimea, particularly condemning the use of "extremism laws" to search, harass, and intimidate religious congregations, especially those of Muslim Crimean Tatars. Embassy officials also publicly condemned efforts to intimidate Christian minorities.

Embassy and U.S. government officials were unable to visit Crimea following its occupation by the Russian Federation. Embassy officers met in other parts of Ukraine with Muslim and Christian leaders whose congregations were affected by the actions of the occupying authorities to listen to their concerns and reassure them of U.S. support for their right to practice their religious beliefs.

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