

Between Dreams and Reality: The Repatriation of Syrian Circassians into the Homeland

Abstract

To what extent is the repatriation of Circassians in Syria a necessary and logical step for Russia and the Caucasus? This essay focuses mainly on the role of Circassians in the middle east region, specifically in light of the revolution in Syria, and its implications on their status among the Syrian public. The investigation examined the achievability of repatriation into the homeland and the evidence for it provided by the Kosovo precedent of 1998, as well as the moral side of the Circassians' plea. The efforts initiated by Circassian activists both within and outside of Russia is also reviewed, along with the role of Russia itself, and the West. This essay also takes into account the current situation within Russia; its population, living standard, and public opinion of Circassians, as well as the potential results of repatriation on the Circassian states. Finally, this essay concludes that given all variables, repatriation of Syrian Circassians into their home land is indeed a possible, achievable goal, and one that is necessary to ensure the survival of the Circassian peoples in Syria, specifically those without the means to emigrate and find refuge in other countries of the world.

Essay

The end of the 19th century bore witness to a crime often disregarded in the modern day world - the genocide and deportation of the native Circassians into various parts of the Ottoman empire. Now, nearly a hundred years later, the ancestors of those relocated into Syria find themselves in the face of yet another war; caught in the middle of the civil unrest in Syria today. With their reputation tainted with loyalty to the corrupt regime, and the current events escalating at an accelerated pace, questions about repatriation of Circassians - and whether or not it is physically feasible - arises, and culminate in a single inquiry that is the research question of this essay: **to what extent is the repatriation of Syrian Circassians a necessary and logical step for Russia and the Caucasus?**

The annexation of the Caucasus by Russia culminated in the Russo-Circassian war, which lasted between the years of 1763 and 1864, when the war ended with the victory of the Russians and loyalty oaths were signed by Circassian leaders. However, the fate of the Circassians was determined much earlier than 1864 when, in 1857, Dmitry Myliutin (who was to be appointed minister of war four years later) suggested to end the hundred-year old conflict by expelling the Circassians altogether - completely removing the adversary. Eventually, his plan was sanctioned by Tsar Alexander II, and Circassians were deported *en masse*, and ending up in what are now known as Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Kosovo.

After leaving the Caucasus, Circassians were settled in specific regions by the Ottoman empire to act as stabilizing factors in the then-capricious areas around Syria and

Jordan. Those who found refuge in Syria were integrated within the ruling regime, even as early as during the French protectorate over Syria. During Assad's regime, Circassians' relationship with the regime in power remained as close as ever, with some serving in the government and even reaching ministry positions¹. Thus, with the rise of the Arab spring and the beginning of the civil unrest in Syria in January 2011, Circassians attempted to remain nonaligned in the conflict, but were eventually involved with both sides. However, due to their long history with the regime, many (or perhaps even most) Circassians side with Assad and his regime, suspecting that their status quo will take a turn for the worse, should there eventually be a change in their current regime. Few joined the movement on the side of the opposition, and as a result of their ambiguous standing in the Syrian revolution, many Circassians contemplated the idea of leaving the country, whether as a short-term or long-term solution. This decision was further influenced by the fact that the majority of Circassians weren't particularly active on either sides and yet suffered the same loss of lives as any other factions in the revolution; i.e. the situation in Syria reached a point where the mere act of staying in Syria was costing Circassians their lives.

With the idea of Circassians leaving Syria, the most obvious question arises: why don't they just go back to the Caucasus? In fact, many efforts were made to enable Circassian families to either find refuge in Turkey, where there's already a well-established Circassian community, or even back in the Caucasus. In 2013, an appeal was made by Nusret Bas, the chairman of the Solidarity Committee of World Circassians, to the Russian consul in Istanbul regarding the repatriation of some 146 Circassian refugees who have fled Syria and were residing in Turkey in Nizip, near the Syrian border. What is requested from Russia was made clear by Bas: "From Russia we expect two things: first, the recognition of the genocide in the period of 1763-1864; second, preparing conditions for the unconditional, unequivocal return of the Circassians to their historical homeland."^{*}, and the petition was to be handed to Moscow by the consul. Circassian activists from within Russia even sent letters to Medvedev and the presidents of the Circassian states (Kabardino-Balkaria, Adyghea, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) pleading for the organization of the repatriation of the Syrian Circassians due to their situation in Syria. However, Moscow's reply was that there was no threat to Circassians in Syria and that no involvement from Russia was necessary.

However, it's been two years since then, and the situation has escalated significantly. The matter of whether or not there's a threat to Syrian lives, or specifically Circassian lives, is no longer a matter of question. According to Azmi Bishara, PhD, the situation in Syria has now come to the brink of genocide and mass killing to all civilians². With the number of dead civilians exceeding 210,000 (according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights), Bishara's statement doesn't sound far-fetched. Thus Russia's previous

¹ Bassam Abdel-Majeed (Varoqa), a Circassian, was Minister of Interior in the period between 12 February 2006 and 23 April 2009

² Bishara stated this in an interview for Al-Arabi Al-Youm (Arab Today) on 20 May 2015

justification for its lack of interference is no longer valid, and with Syrian citizens - Circassian or Arab - seeking escape but finding little to no refuge in neighbouring countries, the need for action from Russia regarding repatriation of Syrian Circassians grows even more imperative.

In reality, repatriation of Circassians into the Caucasus isn't as far-off or as difficult as it may seem. Between the years 1998 and 1999 a conflict broke out in Kosovo between the Yugoslavian forces and what was known as the "Kosovo Liberation Army", after a long history of tension between the Albanian and the Serbian communities. Much like in the case of Syria, Kosovo Circassians sided with the Yugoslavian government, which resulted in an increasingly strained relationship between the Circassians and the Albanians, often resulting in harassment and discrimination of the Circassians. Branded as traitors by the Albanians, Circassians were often threatened by Albanian militant forces, their houses burned down, and their children 'beaten up' by their Albanian counterparts. There was also a constant pressure on the Circassians to leave their property, and Kosovo altogether. Eventually, the then-president of Adygea, Aslan Dzhарimov, set up an effort to repatriate Kosovo Circassians which was approved of and backed by Russia. Around 174 Kosovar Circassians were repatriated into a village built specially for the returning patriots, dubbed Aul Mafakhabl.

The Kosovo precedent serves as evidence that repatriation is physically feasible, and is often argued as such by Circassian activists lobbying for repatriation. And yet, some are still skeptical. Gazi Chemso, ex-deputy minister of press in Adygea, said that "[he has] been dealing with repatriation for several years now, and have come to the sad conclusion that a mass return of Adygeis to their historical home is just not realistic today". While what he said may hold true for repatriation of the entire diaspora, it is not what is being rallied for in this case. First of all, it would be illogical to consider that all Syrian Circassians would be willing to repatriate - many would prefer to, and would be able to, emigrate to countries with better standards of living - such as the US or Europe (in fact, Canada, the US, Georgia and Turkey have already expressed their willingness to take in Circassians). In 1993, a total of 4,000 Circassians returned to Russia, settling in Maykop and Nalchik. Today, the numbers aren't that different. According to a meeting at the head office of the International Circassian Association with representatives of the Circassian community in Syria, the number of those wishing to return - as of January 2012 - was around one thousand. In other words, the number of people returning and the ability to accommodate them shouldn't be an issue, as it is only those without the resources and the ability to afford a privileged exit from the country would have to be accommodated - not the entirety of the 50,000 Circassians in Syria today. Since the Kosovo precedent - as well as the repatriation pre-Syrian conflict - resulted in no major problems for the Circassian republics, Chemso's words do not apply today; repatriation may yet be realistic. Furthermore, morally speaking, support for those Circassians in need - and in fear for their lives - is not an unreasonable demand as they are a Russian ethnic group and part of what is referred to as "Russian peoples". It is a logical one that should and would be expected from Russia when any of its ethnic groups are endangered.

In hopes of achieving this goal, Circassians both within and outside of Russia are still calling for the return of Syrian Circassians home. Between December 2011 and January 2012, a mere two-month period, over 200 Circassian appealed for repatriation. On 28th December 2011, the Adygea Parliament passed a bill to help Syrian Circassians, by transplanting 100,000 families into Adygea. The Circassian public in Adygea agrees with these initiatives - many believe that the new patriots won't have trouble adjusting to society, just as Kosovar Circassians did a decade earlier. Some even believe that the entrance of Circassians coming from a country with a higher standard of living may boost the local economy by starting their businesses there³. Circassian activists in the diaspora have also echoed the same ideas. John Hagher, an American Circassian, made this clear to the European Parliament in November 2011 when he declared that "among the Circassians there is a growing understanding that returning to the homeland is not simply a call of heart, but an absolute necessity for the survival of our people.". He pleaded the Parliament to open a channel of communication with the region to oversee the conditions of Circassians there.

Nevertheless, activist movements calling for repatriation have had only minor successes, which can largely be credited to Russian policy, which has the appearance of wanting to hinder the return of the Circassian diaspora. After 2003, during which new laws regarding repatriation came into effect, it became very difficult for returning Circassians to gain citizenship - in fact, according to a study by the Institute of Humanitarian Studies in Kabardino-Balkaria, the main problem facing returning immigrants was, in fact, obtaining the citizenship. To even gain a residence permit, the families must be sent an invitation from within Russia, and must have around \$3000 per person - an amount which they must have even when renewing the permit, which usually lasts 3 years. This monetary prerequisite makes it especially difficult for indigent refugees, who may have lost their assets and/or homes as a result of the war in Syria. Even then, most of those who apply are simply denied visas, and those who achieve entry via underground means receive little to no aid at all.

From an objective point of view, repatriation of Circassians can play a vital role for Russia both internally and internationally, and has already had the chance to do so. The 2014 Sochi Olympics, which caused a lot of controversy regarding its venues - especially Krasnaya Polyana which, 150 years earlier, was the site to the mass killings of Circassians - were a perfect opportunity for Russia to initiate the repatriation process, as an extension of goodwill towards Circassians that would have lowered protesting voices and kept them at bay. Though it did, initially, adopt a more lenient policy regarding repatriation, the Russian government returned to its previous stance later on as it gained more control over the protests and the Olympic venues.

Even today, Russia still has the opportunity to benefit from adopting a better repatriation policy. First of all, the entire region of the Caucasus witness an increased rate in Islamic radicalisation after the Chechnya wars, and the entrance of Syrian Circassians - who

³ Chaly, Oleg. "Residents of Adygea: Repatriation of Circassians from Syria Is a Good Step." Caucasian Knot. 31 Dec. 2011. Web. 22 May 2015.

have spent the longer part of their lives in secular Syria - may bring some balance to the region. It would also act as proof of Russia's interest in resolving the Circassian issue, thus decreasing the level of anti-Russian sentiments in the area. Furthermore, Russia is underpopulated, thus the welcoming of new refugees should be possible land-wise, and the entry of new participants into the markets - whether it be the labour market or consumer spending - would help boost the economy in the region, thus helping improve the living standard in the Caucasus (which is currently much lower than other parts of Europe).

Repatriation also has international implications. On one hand, should Russia choose to become more lenient with its policies and allow more Circassians to return, it would appear as if it does believe in the magnitude of the risk posed on Circassian lives - and by implication, admitting the Syrian regime's incapability of maintaining the country and its safety. This in turn would brand its relationship with Assad's regime as hypocritical. On the other hand, should it choose to stand by and watch as one of the ethnic groups belonging to it suffer crimes committed in Syria, it will appear as a case of apathy on Russia's part for its own people. Considering Georgia has already recognized the Circassian genocide, and that Turkey has already stated its concern for the safety of Circassians in Syria, Russia will appear apathetic to the Circassians' situation - putting even more strain on its already-struggling public image, especially from the U.S, whose anti-Russian school of thought would grow stronger.

In conclusion, with all things considered, the repatriation of Circassians in Syria back to their homeland is a tangible, logical goal to a great extent, due to its numerous benefits for both sides involved. Numerous activists, both in and outside of Russia, have been rallying for repatriation, and the Kosovo precedent of 1998 serves as concrete evidence that it is indeed possible - the striking similarity between the predicaments of Kosovar Circassians 17 years ago and Syrian Circassians today cements the feasibility of repatriation. In addition, an influx of potential workers has the capacity to boost the regions economy, and the entry of the leniently-Muslim Syrian Circassians can potentially balance the increasing Islamic insurgence in the region. Finally, with Russia's public image worse than it's ever been, a humanitarian act like this would be a step towards improving its relationship with the Circassians within, as well as its veneer as the 'protector of the Russian peoples'. Thus, the repatriation of Circassians back into their home land is the next logical, necessary step - both for Russia and the Circassians.

Word Count: 2544

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