



Grozny at sunset. Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque, one of Europe's largest mosques, with 200-foot minarets, dominates the skyline. Designed to hold 10,000 worshippers, it's named for the father of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and stands on the site of the old Soviet Communist Party headquarters.

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PORTFOLIO

Islam and Chechnya

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With the Kremlin's approval, Islam is flourishing in Chechnya—a means to maintain at least a veneer of tranquility while keeping even more radical forces at bay.

About a decade ago Russia's leadership acknowledged that bullying wasn't working in this remote and most violent corner of the nation. Two ferocious military campaigns in the 1990s to put down an Islamic separatist insurgency left up to 370,000 dead and many survivors furious at Russian domination. So in 2000, Moscow threw its weight behind a former rebel leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, and left him largely alone to run affairs in the restive North Caucasus republic. Untold millions of Russian rubles poured in to bankroll his regime and rebuild the shattered infrastructure, with the thinking that men with work are less likely to rise up. Yet while cafés and boutiques have appeared in the Chechen capital of Grozny, the jobs have not. Chechnya still has one of the highest unemployment rates in Russia, which fuels radical fundamentalist discontent.

Kadyrov, like most Chechens, was Muslim, indeed so devout that he served as the local Mufti, or spiritual leader, for some time. In May 2004 he was assassinated. Three years later, having reached the minimum age of 30, his son assumed the same role as Chechnya's president and has continued to foster many aspects of Sharia law. Ramzan Kadyrov has overseen

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Students at a lecture hall in Grozny. On the wall, a Soviet-style poster of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, surrounded by children. Under the Kremlin-backed leader, Chechnya has banned alcohol, encouraged polygamy, and forced women to wear headscarves and long skirts in school.

Chechen performers wait to go on stage in Grozny. The Chechen government uses religion to combat a potent insurgency, itself pledged to create a Muslim, Sharia-based state separate from Russia.





the building of one of Europe's largest mosques and ordered women to be veiled in public buildings and schools. Authorities discourage the drinking of alcohol.

The current Mufti, Sultan Mirzayev, one of the republic's most powerful men, justifies religious edicts as a stabilizing force. "Islam came here 400 years ago and we need it to preserve our society," he said in a recent interview. "Islam is everything for Chechens. After all those years we can finally celebrate our ways."

Some Chechens, however, object to state interference in their lives, particularly liberally minded women who endure insults for going around with uncovered heads. They point out that the dress code runs counter to Russian federal law, which at least in theory still reigns across Russia. "It's not right," said Raisa Borschigova, 31, an interpreter who had been hit by a paintball a couple years ago for crossing a street unveiled. She suspected security agents. "I am a Muslim and I love my society but it's not the state's role to order us what to wear."

On the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, Wahhabist guerrillas are trying to unseat the Chechen government for not going far enough. While the insurgency in the 1990s had a nationalist bent, fighters

offering resistance today are waging more of a jihad. Many have received training abroad for what Moscow deems to be the biggest security threat in the federation. Photographs of wanted men stud the militia checkpoints throughout the republic, and especially along the border with neighboring Dagestan, where many rebels are based. Human rights activists say authorities hunt down suspected *bojeviki*, or terrorists, at their homes late at night and drag them away.

Still, Chechnya has registered a dramatic drop in abuses, according to Caucasian Knot, an independent web site that tracks the volatile region. Last year saw 20 disappearances and 18 killings versus 186 and 60 respectively in 2009, the year Russia declared the anti-terrorist campaign officially over and withdrew its troops, leaving Chechen security forces in charge.

For months, photographer Diana Markosian has wandered the byways of Chechnya, documenting the anatomy of Islam, and for a period, I accompanied her. No matter the ideology, ordinary Chechens we came upon were sick of fighting and death. They just wanted to get on with their lives. "No one wants more trouble," explains Abdul Rahim Musaev, rector of the Islamic University in Grozny. ●

Right: A teenage bride, covered in a hijab, is surrounded by friends on her wedding day. The bride met her husband just two weeks before the ceremony.





Above: Seda Malakhadzheva, 15, sits beside friends as they adjust her hijab, which she began wearing despite her parents disapproval. Women who go out uncovered are targets. For weeks last summer, men in cars drove through town shooting paintballs at women without headscarves.

Below: A couple on a date in Grozny. In the conservative republic, all dates must take place in public, but they still represent escapes from the deep poverty and unemployment, which is among the worst in Russia.





Worshippers pray at the the Akhmad Kadyrov mosque. Opened in 2008, it's a symbol of the control exerted over the people by the Russia-backed government, which has poured billions into constructing a new Chechnya.

