

Russian Force 'Trains to Counter Militants from Syria'

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A unit of Russian security forces is training to fight Islamist militants battling in Syria on fears they may migrate from the Middle East conflict to join an insurgency in the North Caucasus, Chechnya's Kremlin-backed leader said.

The Kremlin is worried that Russian-born militants will return to join insurgents who want to carve out an Islamic state in Chechnya and other mostly Muslim provinces in the mountains on Russia's southern fringe.

Officials have said that 400 Russians are fighting with al Qaida affiliated groups in Syria, but experts estimate the numbers are much higher. Some Chechens, veterans of two post-Soviet wars against Russian rule, have emerged as leaders among Syrian rebels.

"These bandits post videos daily claiming that after Syria they will migrate to the North Caucasus and engage in terrorist and subversive activities," Chechnya's leader Ramzan

Kadyrov said in a statement posted on the regional government's website late Wednesday.

"We cannot sit quietly listening to these threats and wait for this plague to move toward Russia ... so the police and the republic's leadership are taking preventative measures."

A spokesman for Kadyrov refused to provide any more details on the steps being taken by law enforcement structures.

More than a decade after Moscow defeated a separatist revolt in Chechnya, it is fighting an insurgency that has shifted from a nationalist cause to an Islamist one and spread to other Caucasus mountain provinces. Rebels now launch near-daily attacks in Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria.

Kadyrov, an ethnic Chechen who once fought with separatists but later switched sides and pledged loyalty to the Kremlin, has imposed an uneasy peace in the region, using tough methods.

Human rights groups accuse security services in Chechnya of carrying out kidnappings, torture and extrajudicial killings not only to quash insurgents but also to silence Kadyrov's critics. Kadyrov denies the accusations of abuse.

Russia is cracking down hard on the insurgents ahead of its hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics in February in Sochi, at the western edge of the Caucasus range.

Islamist Chechen rebel Doku Umarov, who leads militants seeking a Caucasus Emirate in Russia, urged his fighters in July to use "maximum force" to sabotage the Olympics.

A suicide bombing in October that killed seven people in Volgograd, a city north of Sochi, raised fears of further attacks. Twin suicide bombings in the Moscow subway in 2010 killed 40 and a bombing at a Moscow airport in 2011 killed 37.

President Vladimir Putin, who has staked his reputation on the Games' success, has said militants returning from Syria pose "a very real" threat and signed an anti-terrorism law this month to jail for up to six years any who come home.

Russia has been President Assad's strongest diplomatic backer during the conflict in Syria and has frequently warned the West that Islamist militants are gaining increasing might among rebels fighting the government.

The new law makes relatives of militants financially liable for damage caused by attacks, an example of measures by Russian security forces to deter militants by putting pressure on their families.

"The terrorists in Syria must know what awaits them in Russia if they show up here," Kadyrov said. Authorities in Chechnya have banned funeral ceremonies for anyone killed in Syria, and officially backed Muslim clerics cast the conflict as an internal political struggle, not a religious fight.

Kadyrov declared on his Instagram account last month that he had fired a senior immigration official in Chechnya because his daughter had joined Syrian rebels.

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