
SPECIAL REPORT: HOW RUSSIA ALLOWED HOMEGROWN RADICALS TO GO AND FIGHT IN SYRIA

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Four years ago, Saadu Sharapudinov was a wanted man in Russia. A member of an outlawed Islamist group, he was hiding in the forests of the North Caucasus, dodging patrols by paramilitary police and plotting a holy war against Moscow.

Then his fortunes took a dramatic turn. Sharapudinov, 38, told Reuters that in December 2012 Russian intelligence officers presented him with an unexpected offer. If he agreed to leave Russia, the authorities would not arrest him. In fact, they would facilitate his departure.

"I was in hiding, I was part of an illegal armed group, I was armed," said Sharapudinov during an interview in a country outside Russia. Yet he says the authorities cut him a deal. "They said: 'We want you to leave.'"

Sharapudinov agreed to go. A few months later, he was given a new passport in a new name, and a one-way plane ticket to Istanbul. Shortly after arriving in Turkey, he crossed into Syria and joined an Islamist group that would later pledge allegiance to radical Sunni group Islamic State.

Reuters has identified five other Russian radicals who, relatives and local officials say, also left Russia with direct or indirect help from the authorities and ended up in Syria. The departures followed a pattern, said Sharapudinov, relatives of the Islamists and former and acting officials: Moscow wanted to eradicate the risk of domestic terror attacks, so intelligence and police officials turned a blind eye to Islamic militants leaving the country. Some sources say officials even encouraged militants to leave.

The scheme continued until at least 2014, according to acting and former officials as well as relatives of those who left. The cases indicate the scheme ramped up ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics because the Russian authorities feared home-grown militants would try to attack the event.

The six Russian militants and radicals identified by Reuters all ended up in Syria, most of them fighting with jihadist groups that Russia now says are its mortal enemies. They were just a fraction of the radicals who left Russia during that period. By December 2015, some 2,900 Russians had left to fight in the Middle East, Alexander Bortnikov, director of the FSB, the Russian security service, said at a sitting of the National Anti-terrorist Committee late last year. According to official data, more than 90 percent of them left Russia after mid-2013.

"Russian is the third language in the Islamic State after Arabic and English. Russia is one of its important suppliers of foreign fighters," said Ekaterina Sokiryanskaya, a senior analyst for International Crisis Group, an independent body aimed at resolving conflicts.

"Before the Olympics, Russian authorities didn't prevent departures and a big number of fighters left Russia. There was a very specific short-term task to ensure security of the Olympics ... They turned a blind eye on the flow of radical youth" to the Middle East.

Moscow is now fighting Islamic State and other militant groups in Syria that the Kremlin says pose a threat to the security of Russia and the world. The Kremlin has justified its campaign of air strikes in Syria by saying its main objective was to crush Islamic State.

Russian authorities deny they ever ran a program to help militants leave the country. They say militants left of their own volition and without state help. Officials, including FSB director Bortnikov and authorities in the North Caucasus, have blamed the departures on Islamic State recruiters and foreign countries who give radicals safe passage to Syria and elsewhere.

Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin, told Reuters: "Russian authorities have never cooperated or interacted with terrorists. No interaction with terrorists was possible. Terrorists get annihilated in Russia. It has always been like that, it is like that and it will be in the future."

The Foreign Ministry said claims that Russian law enforcement agencies had helped militants were "without grounds." It said the agencies take various measures to prevent militants from leaving and to bring to account those who come back. It added that Russia has opened hundreds of

criminal cases relating to Russian citizens fighting in Syria, and that therefore it was "absurd" to believe officials had facilitated the departure of militants from Russia.

The Interior Ministry declined to comment, saying the FSB was in charge of the issue. The FSB in Dagestan declined immediate comment.

MUTUAL BENEFIT

Allowing militants to leave Russia was convenient for both radicals and the authorities. In the mainly Muslim North Caucasus region, the two sides had fought themselves to a stalemate.

The Islamist groups, fighting to establish a Muslim state in the region, were exhausted after years on the run and had failed to score any significant victories against security forces. The authorities were frustrated because the militants □ holed up in remote mountain hideouts or protected by sympathizers – still eluded arrest.

Then from 2013 Islamists began threatening to attack the Sochi Olympics, posting videos of their threats online. An attack would embarrass Putin at an event meant to showcase Russia; Moscow ordered a crackdown.

A retired Russian special forces officer with years of battlefield experience in the North Caucasus told Reuters that the federal authorities put pressure on local officials to curb insurgency ahead of the Sochi games. "They told them before the Olympics that no failures would be forgiven and those who failed would be fired. They tightened the screws on them," he said.

The initial approach to Sharapudinov came from a political official in the militant's home village of Novosaitli in Dagestan, a region in the North Caucasus. The official, who has since retired, became the liaison between Sharapudinov and Russian security services. He confirmed Sharapudinov's account to Reuters.

It took Sharapudinov several months to decide whether to take up the offer of a deal. He eventually chose to trust the local official, whom he had known since childhood.

According to Sharapudinov, the intermediary took him to the town of Khasavyurt, where a high-ranking local FSB official was waiting. Though Sharapudinov had been given guarantees about his

safety, he remained suspicious, he said. So he took along a pistol and a grenade in his pocket, despite a condition that he should come unarmed.

Sharapudinov had never previously tried to leave Russia, even clandestinely, because he thought he might be caught or shot. And leaving Russia openly would have been impossible because he was on a wanted list on suspicion of being involved in a bombing. If caught and convicted, he faced eight years to life in prison.

But now, according to Sharapudinov, the FSB officer said he was free to leave Russia and that the state would help him go.

"They said: 'Go wherever you want, you can even go fight in Syria,'" Sharapudinov told Reuters in December. He recalled that the Olympics came up in the negotiations. "They said something like, 'to let the Olympics pass without incidents.' They didn't conceal they were sending out others as well," he said.

NEW NAME

Sharapudinov had his own reasons for leaving Russia. There were tensions between him and the local emir, who was also the commander of the militant group to which he belonged. When Sharapudinov told his mother of the FSB's offer, she tearfully asked him to take it, he said, because she did not want him to be a fugitive any longer.

The plan required the involvement of more state machinery: Sharapudinov needed a new passport to leave Russia, according to the former local official who acted as a go-between.

"Since he was on the wanted list, they couldn't send him out otherwise," the former official told Reuters.

Sharapudinov said he was handed a new passport when he arrived at the Mineralnye Vody airport in southern Russia in September 2013, where he was escorted by an FSB employee in a silver Lada car with darkened windows. Along with the passport he got a one-way ticket to Turkey.

Sharapudinov showed Reuters the passport that he said had been supplied by the Russian state. It had a slightly different name and date of birth to those recorded for Sharapudinov on an official

list of wanted militants. The photograph showed Sharapudinov, who had a beard when he was interviewed for this article, as shaved. He said he had got rid of his beard for the new passport.

While Reuters was unable to confirm the provenance of the passport, neighbors of Sharapudinov and the former official who acted as a go-between confirmed his identity and his story of how he got the document. Sharapudinov asked that the name in the passport, which he uses as his new identity, not be published.

North Caucasus security officials deny that Islamist radicals were intentionally helped out of the country, but agree their absence helped to solve security problems in the region. "Of course, the departure of Dagestani radicals in large numbers made the situation in the republic healthier," said Magomed Abdurashidov from the Anti-terrorist Commission of Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan.

A security services officer who took part in negotiations with militants from Novosassitli confirmed that a few fighters "laid down arms and came out" from hiding before later traveling to Syria. "Since they disarmed we stopped prosecuting them," he said.

He said there were cases over a few years but that it had nothing to do with the Sochi Games. He said the security services did not help anyone leave. "If no measures are being taken against them, according to law, they have same rights as every Russian citizen," he said. "They could get an international passport and leave."

The security services officer said he did not know Sharapudinov's case.

SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED

When Sharapudinov got to Syria, he said, Islamic State was on the rise but did not control much territory. He joined a rebel group called Sabri Jamaat with other fighters from Russia and post-Soviet states. They were based in Al Dana near Aleppo, and Islamic State controlled neighboring territory.

According to Sharapudinov, the two groups were friendly toward each other. Later, Sabri Jamaat pledged allegiance to Islamic State, though Sharapudinov said that by that time he had quit fighting and left Syria. He declined to say whether he had seen other Dagestani radicals in Syria.

Reuters independently found details of five other militants who left Russia in similar circumstances to Sharapudinov. The five are either dead, in jail or still in Syria and unreachable.

Relatives, neighbors and local officials gave accounts of what happened to the men. The five shared some common threads: They were all from Dagestan, and Russian authorities had reason to deny them travel documents and prevent them from leaving the country. But according to relatives and local officials, in each case the authorities made their passage possible.

One of the five other militants who left Russia was Magomed Rabadanov from the village of Berikey. A local police officer in the village said that in 2014 his orders were to keep a close eye on Rabadanov and other suspected radicals as part of a new security policy established before the Sochi Olympics.

He said he was told to put potential radicals on a watch list and to telephone them once a month. "If they didn't pick up, we had to find them," the officer said in his office, showing a Reuters reporter Rabadanov's profile on his computer monitor. The police officer said that during preparations for the Olympics, Rabadanov was listed as a person "with non-traditional Islamic beliefs, Wahhabism" - the school of Sunni Islam known for its strict interpretation of the faith.

At one point, Rabadanov had been detained for keeping explosives at his home, according to his father, Suleiban Rabadanov, but had been released shortly afterwards and placed under house arrest instead.

Despite being under such restriction, Rabadanov was able to leave Russia: He passed through passport control at a Moscow international airport along with his wife and his son in May 2014, his father and the local police officer said. He later turned up in Syria, his father said. Government officials had no comment on Rabadanov.

Suleiban Rabadanov said he received a message on Jan. 2, 2015, from someone who said his son had been killed fighting with Islamic State militants against Kurdish forces near the Syrian town of Kobani, on the border with Turkey.

The father of another militant also said his son was allowed to leave Russia as part of a deal with the authorities. The former official who acted as the go-between in Sharapudinov's case said two other militants were helped to get passports.

Residents and officials in Dagestan said that once Russian militants arrived in Syria they encouraged others from their home communities to join them. From the village of Berikey, which has a population of 3,000, some 28 people left for areas of the Middle East controlled by Islamic State, according to the local police officer. He said 19 of the 28 were listed in Russia as radicals.

In a police station near Berikey, a Reuters reporter saw a computer file on dozens of suspected militants. The file was entitled "Wahs," an abbreviation the police use for "Wahhabis."

Some pictures showed groups of bearded young men from Berikey and nearby villages, posing with guns. The officer said the photographs, found or received online, showed the men in Syria and Iraq.

Kaynak/Source: