

CONNECTIONS

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The Terrorist Threats Against Russia and its Counterterrorism Response Measures

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As of mid-2015, the primarily Islamist-based terrorist threats against Russia and its counterterrorism response measures continued to be in the spotlight. These Islamist terrorist threats, it must be pointed out, were unrelated to Russia's other national security problems emanating from its intervention in Ukraine, which will not be discussed in this article.

As with other Western countries, the latest phase of the terrorist threats against Russia has become even more complicated than before, with large-scale involvement by a reported 1,700 "homegrown violent extremists" (HVE),¹ primarily North Caucasus-based, many of whom have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State's insurgents and to fight the Moscow-supported Bashar al-Assad government as well as the Shi'ite government in Baghdad (which is also backed by Tehran – Russia's close ally), with their violent extremism also directed against the Russian state. As part of this phase, although unrelated to the involvement of the aforementioned Russian Islamists in Syria, Russian airpower was deployed in Syria in September 2015 to support the besieged al-Assad regime against the Islamic State.

The earlier phase of the terrorist threats against Russia was highlighted by the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, which were perpetrated by two brothers of ethnic Chechen origin (one of whom was reportedly monitored by Russia's security services during his stay in Dagestan), as well several significant terrorist attacks in late 2013 during the lead-up to the Sochi Winter Olympics, which were held in February 2014 without a terrorist incident.

Overall, the primary terrorist threats against the Russian Federation are presented by the Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus, who are organized into several groups that are loosely allied with al-Qaeda's global Jihad. Fortunately for Russia, in their most significant threat over the past several years, these Islamist militants were thwarted in their intent to exploit the worldwide media attention associated with the February 2014 Olympic sporting events, which were located close to the North Caucasus, several hundred miles from the Republic of Dagestan, where they were mounting an insurgency to establish an Islamic state in that region. In response, Russia greatly boosted its counter-

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¹ Damien Sharkov, "Up to 1,700 Russians Fighting for ISIS, Says Head of Secret Service," *Newsweek*, 20 February 2015.

terrorism measures in the North Caucasus republics as well as in other parts of the country, thereby preventing these insurgents from succeeding in their terrorist plots. Nevertheless, the attraction of jihadi groups such as the Iraq- and Syria-based Islamic State in radicalizing hundreds of Russian Islamists into joining their insurgency expanded the geographical scope of the terrorist threats against Russia, particularly upon the return of some of them to Russia to carry out attacks in light of Moscow's support of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and their call to establish an Islamist caliphate in the North Caucasus.

Terrorist Threats

Russia's primary terrorist threats originate in the turbulent North Caucasus's republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkariya, where extremist ethno-nationalist and Islamist militants have been waging an insurgency for the past decades against Russian rule, which they regard as an occupying force and which they seek to replace with a Taliban-like Islamist regime.² Aside from attacking non-Muslim Russian targets (and their local agents) in order to spread fear and intimidation throughout their own communities, they also resort to assassinating moderate Islamist religious figures, whom they try to replace with their own religious supporters who adhere to a stricter form of Salafist Islam.

Russia has confronted several categories of terrorism since the period of the Russian Empire, particularly in the North Caucasus, ranging from the 19th century's revolutionary anarchists³ to today's secessionist Islamic extremist ethno-nationalists, who seek to liberate the North Caucasus from continued Russian presence in order to establish a Taliban-type Islamist regime. This represents a sharp reversal in the nature of the terrorist threats against Russia, considering that at the height of the Cold War, the former Soviet Union (and its Eastern European allies, such as East Germany and Cuba) was a major state sponsor of terrorism, with its security services providing active support to Palestinian, Armenian, and South American terrorist groups.⁴

² For overviews of the Islamist insurgencies in the North Caucasus, see Mark Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2014); Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Gordon M. Hahn, *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014); Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2011); and Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev, *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010).

³ For an overview of Russia's 19th century anarchist terrorists, see Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴ For accounts of the Soviet Union's state-sponsorship of terrorism during the Cold War, see Roberta Goren, *The Soviet Union and Terrorism*, ed. Jillian Becker (London, UK: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), and Nick Lockwood, "How the Soviet Union Transformed Terrorism," *The Atlantic*, 23 December 2001.

In recent times, significant terrorist incidents against Russia originating in the North Caucasus have included the following:

- In September 1999, Chechen insurgents attacked apartment buildings in Moscow, killing some 200 people and injuring several hundred. In retaliation, Russian troops invaded Chechnya.
- On October 23, 2002, Chechen insurgents attacked the crowded Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. An estimated 129 people were killed during the rescue attempt by the Russian security forces.
- On December 27, 2002, Chechen suicide bombers attacked the Chechen administration complex in Grozny, killing 78 people and injuring 150.
- Between February and August 2004, a series of suicide bombings by North Caucasus insurgents in the Moscow subway killed an estimated 80 people.
- On August 24, 2004, Chechen and Ingush insurgents attacked Russian interior forces in Nazran, Ingushetia, killing 80 troops, while on the same day two Russian passenger aircraft were blown up almost simultaneously, killing 90 people.
- On September 1–3, 2004, Chechen and Ingush insurgents attacked a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, holding more than 1,100 of them hostage. Russia's rescue operation resulted in more than 300 deaths, including 186 children.
- On November 27, 2009, Chechen insurgents bombed a high-speed train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, killing 26 people and injuring 100.
- On March 29, 2010, Chechen terrorists conducted a double suicide bombing of the Moscow subway, killing 40 and injuring more than 100.
- On January 24, 2011, a Chechen terrorist conducted a suicide bombing at the Domodedovo airport international arrivals hall, killing more than 36 people and injuring around 180.
- In mid-September 2013, three Russian police officers were killed and five wounded by a suicide bomber who detonated a bomb in a car outside a police station in Chechnya.
- On October 21, 2013, 30-year-old Naida Asiyalova carried out a suicide bombing of a bus near the southern city of Volgograd, which killed six people and injured 30. Asiyalova (also known as "Amaturahman"), a Dagestani native, was the wife of Dmitry Sokolov, 21 years old, an ethnic Russian (whom she was responsible for converting to radical Islam). Both were members of a North Caucasus Islamist militant group, for whom Sokolov (also known as "Abdul Jabbar") had served as one of their explosives experts – he was involved in building the suicide vest for his wife. Sokolov, who had gone into hiding, was suspected by Russian security services of making explosives that were used in several attacks in the Dagestani city of Makhachkala in early 2013.
- On December 29, 2013, a female suicide bomber killed at least 15 people and injured more than 40 at the train station in the southern Russian city of

Volgograd. The bomber was identified as Iksana Aslanova, a Dagestani citizen, who had previously been married several times to Islamist terrorist operatives (who had been killed).

- On January 15, 2014, in a shootout in Dagestan between Russian police and Islamist militants (suspected of involvement in car bombings in Pyatigorsk in December 2013), four of the militants were killed, with three of the policemen killed and five wounded.

Within the largely Muslim North Caucasus region, the Islamist insurgency has taken on a global jihadist nature—with al-Qaeda affiliated groups and, in the latest phase, those affiliated with the Islamist State—providing funding, fighters, and materials to the Chechen separatists. This explains how the Chechen-American Tsarnaev brothers (and, reportedly, their mother) allegedly became adherents of the global Salafist militancy, which was one of their motivations for attacking the Boston Marathon.

The threats by these Islamist militants intensified in mid-2013, as demonstrated by a video message posted online in early July 2013 by Doku Umarov, the Chechen-born leader (and “Emir”) of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), the self-proclaimed virtual state “successor” to the Chechen Republic, which has been waging the insurgency against the Russian Federation, declared that it is the duty of Muslims in the North Caucasus region to attack the February 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. In a video message, Umarov declared that “They [Russia] plan to hold the Olympics on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many dead Muslims, buried on the territory of our land on the Black Sea, and we as Mujahideen are obliged to not permit that, using any methods allowed us by the almighty Allah.”⁵

By early 2015, as the nature and scope of the CE’s insurgency underwent a transformation with a large segment of its recruits and fighters joining the Islamic State’s insurgency in Syria and Iraq, the frequency and number of its terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation declined, particularly compared with previous years. During the period of 2010 to 2014, the number of such attacks by the CE, according to Gordon M. Hahn, declined from 583 in 2010 to 546 in 2011, 465 in 2012 and 439 in 2013.⁶ This decline was also a result of intensified Russian counterterrorism measures, particularly the killing and detaining of those suspected of terrorist activity, exemplified by one significant shootout incident in January 2014 (listed earlier).

The decline in recent CE terrorist activity in the Russian Federation, however, according to Hahn, should not be attributed to any supposed decline in their motivation or capability, “but rather [to] its de-territorialization, globalization, and further evolu-

⁵ Mark Corcoran, “Sochi Winter Olympics: Terrorist Threat Hangs Over Games as ‘Combat-Ready’ Vladimir Putin Steps Up Security,” 22 January 2014, available at www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-22/shadow-of-terrorism-hangs-over-sochi-games/5211586.

⁶ Gordon M. Hahn, “Is Putin Winning His War Against the Caucasus Emirate or is ISIL?,” 18 February 2015, available at <http://gordonhahn.com/2015/02/18/is-putin-winning-his-war-against-jihadism>.

tion”⁷ as a Russian affiliate of the Islamic State. To this, one could add that upgraded Russian counterterrorism tactics also played a role in suppressing CE terrorist activity. Further, in a parallel development of great concern to Russian counterterrorism campaign planners, “the Islamic State, represented by the CEIS [a blend of CE and IS], ha[d] come to Russia”—including the potential for a sizeable proportion of these fighters to “return to the North Caucasus and destabilize the region again.”⁸

Assessing Russia’s Counterterrorism Campaign

As demonstrated by the previous section, terrorist attacks by Islamist militants were being waged on a frequent basis against Russian and locally-administered forces until late 2013. In response, the Russian government responded with a spectrum of what are considered harsh counterterrorism measures by its military, intelligence, judicial, and law enforcement agencies, which at least until early 2015 largely succeeded in substantially reducing the frequency and lethality of such incidents after their escalation throughout 2013.

Such Russian success in counterterrorism was relatively recent, following its ineffectual response to the 2004 Beslan school siege, when its special forces incurred heavy casualties, exposing significant deficiencies in its counterterrorism capability at the time, especially in areas such as incident command, intelligence management, and disseminating public information about such events. This led to an overhaul of its counterterrorism-related security and law-enforcement agencies, including establishing new counterterrorism coordinating bodies. These changes were codified in March 2006 by “The Law on Counteraction to Terrorism,” which replaced the previous 1998 version. In accordance with the law, the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia’s intelligence service (and successor to the KGB), serves as the chief agency to combat terrorism, with a new National Antiterrorist Committee (NAK)—comparable to the American National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—established as the top coordinating body. The NAK is tasked with coordinating the counterterrorism policies and operations of 17 federal security agencies, with additional regional counterterrorism committees carrying out its functions in the country’s administrative regions.

Like other nations’ counterterrorism agencies, the NAK attributes success in countering terrorism to the three elements of preventing terrorist attacks, arresting suspected terrorists, and minimizing the damage from terrorist incidents – all of which are driven by efficient coordination between intelligence and law enforcement agencies. In early 2015, Alexander Bortnikov, the FSB’s Director since May 2008, continued to serve as the NAK’s Chairman.

Complementing the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) also employs counterterrorism units, as well as units tasked to counter extremism, a task previously performed by the FSB. As of mid-2015, however, Russia’s counter extremism campaign was not considered effective, as it was not feasible for a federal government that had be-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

come increasingly authoritarian to engage in “softer” conciliatory tactics that, at least in theory, are intended to counter an insurgency’s extremist narrative and address the root causes that underlie such grievances, which, in any case, were complicated by that insurgency’s basic extremist and unyielding nature.

As an example of how the primarily military and law enforcement components of Russia’s counterterrorism campaign operated, to keep Islamist militants on the defensive as Russia prepared to ensure safety for the Sochi Olympics, towns in the North Caucasus considered hotbeds of Islamist militancy were placed under what was termed a “KTO regime” (the Russian initials for a counterterrorism operation), which permitted its security forces to set up checkpoints leading into a town, conduct random searches, impose curfews, and detain any foreigners who did not carry a special visitor’s permit. According to one report, these included “About 25,000 police officers, 30,000 soldiers and 8,000 special forces and members of the FSB security service,”⁹ who were deployed to safeguard the games.

In another measure to safeguard the Sochi Olympics, the FSB conducted several anti-terrorist exercises in the Krasnodar Territory area, including Sochi, to train law-enforcement agencies and local governments in conducting joint responses to potential terrorist incidents.

Finally, in a demonstration of the sophistication of the counterterrorism technologies that were deployed to protect the games, low- and high-tech security technologies were also deployed, ranging from hand-held metal detectors to check car trunks to reconnaissance drones and command and control centers that analyzed in real-time information from an estimated 1,400 closed-circuit cameras and other sensors that were deployed throughout the Sochi region.¹⁰

Like other governments that engage in targeted killings of the leaders of their terrorist adversaries, Russian counterterrorist forces also engage in such tactics against the leaders of the Islamist insurgency being waged against it in the volatile North Caucasus region. Although exact numbers of such targeted killings are unavailable, several leaders of the Islamist insurgency have been killed by them. This includes the early 2012 killing of 35-year-old Dzhamaileil Mutaliyev, one of the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, who was in charge of organizing several suicide bombing attacks. Mutaliyev was reportedly a close ally of Umarov, as well as of Shamil Basayev, the Islamist terrorist leader who was responsible for organizing the 2004 Beslan school massacre, and who was also reportedly killed by Russian forces in mid-2006. In March 2012, Russian security forces killed Alim Zankishiyev (known as “Ubaida”), a leader of the Islamic insurgency in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, a region of the North Caucasus.

Like other counterterrorism organizations, Russian security agencies also monitor extremist websites to investigate their agendas, key players, and future targeting plans. With some of these websites posting their material outside Russian borders, these are

⁹ Anshel Pfeffer, “Sterilizing Sochi for the ‘Big Brother Games,’” *Ha’aretz*, 31 January 2014.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

monitored, as well. The effectiveness of such monitoring of terrorist-affiliated websites, however, is not known.

In a move to bolster its anti-terrorism legal measures, in early November 2013 the Russian government implemented a series of stricter anti-terrorism laws that would provide prison terms of up to 10 years for anyone undergoing training “aimed at carrying out terrorist activity,” as well as compel the relatives of Islamist militants who engage in terrorism to compensate the government for any damage they cause. The law also permits the government to seize property of relatives as well as “close acquaintances” of suspected militants if they refuse to provide documents proving their legal ownership.

Conclusion

The bombing of the Boston Marathon by Chechen-American extremists demonstrated that the terrorist threats against Russia also affect Western countries that have sizeable Chechen and North Caucasian diasporas. German and Austrian authorities, in particular, were concerned about the radicalization into violent extremism by their Chechen diaspora populations, with a number of such Chechens joining the al-Nusra and ISIS insurgents in Syria.¹¹ To prevent Boston Marathon-type attacks by members of the Chechen diaspora from recurring, it is likely that Russian-Western cooperation in counterterrorism will continue to expand (in spite of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, which led to Western sanctions against Moscow), with frequently held working group meetings and other forms of intelligence-related exchanges, now that the involvement of global Salafi jihadism in the North Caucasus’s ethno-nationalist secessionist movements has become a major concern for Western counterterrorism planners. This will also likely be the case with Western-Russian security cooperation in tracking the involvement of Islamist networks connected to the al-Nusra and Islamic State insurgencies in Syria and Iraq (and possibly elsewhere, as well).

¹¹ “Germany Reportedly Concerned About Radicalization of Chechen Diaspora,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 8 December 2014.

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