

Jihadist Violence in the Caucasus

Russia Between Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency

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Jihadist Violence in the Caucasus: Russia Between Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency

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The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats
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Like the United States, Russia has suffered at the hands of Islamic militants. But although our enemies might be motivated by a similar ideology, in the long term, the United States and Russia have starkly different objectives. The United States seeks the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an end to the war in Syria, and the stabilization of countries on the periphery of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia, meanwhile, seeks to project power into the Middle East, rebuild its former sphere of influence along NATO's borders, foment instability in pro-Western nations, and keep the United States bogged down in ongoing conflicts to attenuate U.S. resources and morale. Russia's invasion of Georgia, annexation of Crimea, and intervention in Syria, as well as recent efforts to aid the Taliban, are proof of these objectives.³

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Russia trumpeted its counterterrorism cooperation with America to root out al Qaeda. After all, Russia has dealt with

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² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ Nick Paton Walsh and Mamoud Popalzai, "Videos Suggest Russian Government May be Arming Taliban," *CNN*, July 26, 2017.

its own share of attacks launched by Islamic militants and has waged a counterinsurgency throughout the Caucasus against a protean network of militants. Over the years, attacks against Russia proper have largely been launched by local Sunni groups with varying levels of religious fervor, from those more focused on ethno-nationalist concerns to those determined to spread sharia law throughout the Caucasus. The jihadist campaign of protracted violence has permeated the region and has included not only attacks in the heart of Russia, but also more traditional insurgent actions throughout Dagestan, Ingushetia, and other areas throughout southern Russia.

Well before Russia drew the ire of Salafi jihadists for intervening in Syria, long-simmering insurgencies on Russian soil have been met with iron-fisted counterinsurgency operations. The Russians have waged a ruthless military campaign against a patchwork of Sunni militants from Ingushetia to Ossetia in the Caucasus.⁴ And while Russia's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategy has been relatively effective in the short term, the draconian tactics employed by Russian forces could prove counterproductive in the long run, alienating substantial portions of the population and adding to significant grievances exploitable by Salafi jihadists.

Throughout my testimony, I will highlight the following areas:

- first, Russia's recent history with jihadist terrorism, dating back to the end of the Cold War and its incursions into Chechnya
- second, Russian counterinsurgency and counterterrorism tactics and strategy in the Caucasus
- third, the potential backlash from Russia's foray into Syria and its military campaign there
- fourth, what the future might hold for Russia now that ISIS's caliphate has collapsed and potentially thousands of Russian and Russian-speaking foreign fighters could be leaving the battlefield in the Middle East, perhaps heading for new destinations, including Russia or countries on its borders.

I will conclude with the implications of Russia's struggle with jihadist terrorism has for the United States, namely in terms of potential areas of cooperation.

Recent Russian History with Jihadist Terrorism

Russia's modern trouble with Islamic militancy dates back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Throughout the former Soviet Union, including in areas like Chechnya as well as along Russia's southern flank, civil war and conflicts raged, many of which were fueled by militant groups inspired by religion and active throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia fought two bloody wars in Chechnya. The first lasted from 1994 to 1996, while the Second Chechen War flared back up in 1999 and lasted on and off for a decade. Throughout the 1990s, myriad anti-Russian rebel groups adopted more religious ideologies. Many scholars attribute this shift to the growing influence of foreign fighters from the Middle East and Central Asia, including the Ibn al-Khattab battalion.⁵

⁴ Stephen J. Blank, *Russia's Homegrown Insurgency: Jihad in the North Caucasus*, Carlisle Barracks, Penn.: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, October 24, 2012.

⁵ Leah Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

Even beyond the battlefields of the Caucasus, Islamic militants have launched many high-profile attacks on Russian soil, including ones specifically targeting transportation infrastructure—suicide bombings in the Moscow Metro in 2004 and 2010, an explosion that derailed the Moscow–St. Petersburg express railroad in 2007, and suicide attacks on the Domodedovo Airport in 2011 and on a bus in Volgograd in 2013.⁶ Militants have also conducted spectacular attacks—meticulously planned operations specifically designed to kill civilians and spread terror throughout the population—such as the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002 and the Beslan school siege in 2004.

More recently, in April of this year, explosions tore through a tunnel between the Sennaya Ploshchad and Tekhnologicheskoy Institut stations in the St. Petersburg metro system, killing at least ten.⁷ The bomber was later identified as Akbarzhon Jalilov, an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan.⁸ Russia has also been attacked beyond its territory, as evidenced by the bombing of Metrojet flight 9268 by an ISIS affiliate after the plane departed Sharm El-Sheikh for St. Petersburg in October 2015.⁹ All 224 people on the plane, mostly Russian citizens, died in the attack.

Russian Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency

During the First Chechen War, from 1994 to 1996, the Russian military followed a scorched-earth policy of destroying everything in sight.¹⁰ Chechnya's capital, Grozny, was completely besieged by Russian artillery and indiscriminate bombing. Russian counterinsurgency strategy in the Caucasus has frequently employed *zachistkas*, or mop-up operations, designed to kill or capture terrorists and their supporters, although noncombatants are often caught up in these sweeps.¹¹ Other tactics have included forced disappearances; collective punishment; and the targeting of suspected insurgents' families, friends, and neighbors. Despite widespread accusations of human rights abuses during the course of counterterrorism operations, Russian propaganda seeks to craft an image of the Russian state as a protector of the people. Russian President Vladimir Putin also regularly conflates anti-Russian insurgents with the global jihadist movement, even though some have no actual connections and for others, linkages can be tenuous at best.

⁶ Luke Harding and Tom Parfitt, "Domodedovo Airport Hit By Deadly Bombing," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2011.

⁷ Colin P. Clarke, "How Russia Became the Jihadists' No. 1 Target," *Politico*, April 3, 2017.

⁸ Saim Saeed, "At Least 10 Killed in St. Petersburg Metro Blasts," *Politico*, April 3, 2017; Ivan Nechepurenko and Neil MacFarquhar, "Explosion in St. Petersburg, Russia, Kills 11 as Vladimir Putin Visits," *New York Times*, April 3, 2017; and "St. Petersburg Metro Bombing a Possible Suicide Attack," *BBC News*, April 4, 2017.

⁹ Joseph Krauss, "Islamic State Releases Photo of Bomb It Says Downed Russian Jet, Claims Killing of 2 Hostages," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 19, 2015.

¹⁰ Mark Kramer, "The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia's War in Chechnya," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Winter 2004/2005, pp. 5–63; see also Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-964/1-OSD, 2010, pp. 253–263.

¹¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings*, Lebanon, N.H.: Foreedge, 2015, p. 183.

While Russia’s authoritarian approach to counterinsurgency could be considered effective in quelling low-intensity conflict, its methods are brutal.¹² This heavy-handed approach is myopic—it trades longer-term stability for short-term security—as the domestic population in large swaths of the Caucasus has been traumatized by extrajudicial killings, torture, and widespread assassinations.¹³ In line with Russia’s seeming refusal to even attempt to “win hearts and minds,” the insurgents’ social, political, and economic grievances have largely been ignored, practically ensuring that future generations of militants will pick up the mantle of jihad. Russia’s focus has been largely kinetic, as the military has relied on a decapitation strategy to eliminate successive high-ranking insurgent military commanders over the years.¹⁴

Russia has been battling various domestic militant groups for years, but the state of political violence in the Caucasus has changed in important ways over the past two decades. To rule Chechnya, Putin installed strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, whose co-option of former militants has decreased violence in the region.¹⁵ In turn, the center of gravity of the insurgency has shifted from Chechnya to Dagestan, with ISIS’s Caucasus Governorate holding sway in those two territories as well as others nearby—Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay—while the al Qaeda-affiliated Caucasus Emirate clings to its turf in Cherkessia and Nogay Steppe.¹⁶

In the lead-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russian authorities encouraged Sunni militants to depart for Syria to wage jihad.¹⁷ The thought process behind this encouragement was simple, if underhanded—militants would leave for Syria, and stout Russian border controls—or the Russian Air Force—would ensure they never returned.¹⁸ Despite this encouragement, Putin has expressed concern about the possibility of jihadists returning from Syria, noting that these militants will not simply “vanish into thin air.”¹⁹ Moreover, Russia’s approach to counterinsurgency eschews addressing grievances, instead relying almost exclusively on military force.²⁰ This means that the root causes of the political violence go largely ignored, allowing the ideology fueling militant Salafists to fester indefinitely.

¹² Daniel Byman, “Death Solves All Problems: The Authoritarian Counterinsurgency Tool Kit,” *War on the Rocks*, February 3, 2016; see also Thomas E. Ricks, “Counterinsurgency: The Brutal But Effective Russian Approach,” *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2009.

¹³ Colin P. Clarke, “Attacks on Russia Will Only Increase,” *The Atlantic*, April 4, 2017.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, “The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?” March 16, 2016. Some of these leaders include include Dzokhar Dudaev (1996), Zelimkhan Yaderbiyev (1997), Aslan Maskhadov (2005), Abdul-Halim Sadulayev (2006), and Doku Umarov (2013).

¹⁵ Derek Henry Flood, “The Islamic State Raises Its Black Flag Over the Caucasus,” *CTC Sentinel*, June 29, 2015.

¹⁶ David M. Herszenhorn and Andrew Roth, “Search for Home Led Suspect to Land Marred by Strife,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2013; see also Derek Henry Flood, “The Caucasus Emirate: From Anti-Colonial Roots to Salafi-Jihad,” *CTC Sentinel*, March 26, 2014; and Harleen Gambhir, “ISIS Declares Governorate in Russia’s North Caucasus Region,” Institute for the Study of War, June 23, 2015.

¹⁷ Maria Tsvetkova, “How Russia Allowed Homegrown Radicals to Go and Fight in Syria,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2016.

¹⁸ Michael Weiss, “Russia’s Double Game with Islamic Terror,” *Daily Beast*, August 23, 2015.

¹⁹ Flood, 2014.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, 2016.

Potential Backlash Against Russian Actions

Recent Russian actions in the Middle East—including its escalating intervention in Syria and its moves toward intervention in Libya, with the recent deployment of special forces to an air base in Egypt—have drawn the ire of militant Sunnis worldwide.²¹ Russia is increasingly perceived as a vanguard of Shia interests.²² Putin has provided substantial military aid to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, allying Russia with Shia Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, avowed enemies of Sunni jihadists.

In an ISIS video titled “Soon Very Soon Blood Will Spill Like an Ocean,” an ISIS fighter threatens Putin directly, citing the country's intervention in Syria and its growing alliance with Assad, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah as proof that Moscow is the chief proponent of a growing Shia axis throughout the Middle East.²³ Practically, following the recapture of Raqqa, thousands of Russian foreign fighters could attempt to return home, dramatically worsening the situation for Moscow.²⁴

Russia has been one of the primary forces propping up the Assad regime, which has ruthlessly targeted its opponents (most of whom are Sunnis) with barrel bombs and chemical weapons. Russia and Iran are also deepening their political and military alliance, as their respective militaries work together to help Assad reclaim pockets of territory from opposition forces.²⁵ Russian Special Forces and warplanes serve as a force multiplier for Hezbollah fighters who have bloodied Sunni militants in battle.²⁶ Moscow's desire to expand Russian influence in the Middle East has pitted it squarely against Sunnis and their interests. For Russia, the demographics are also daunting. There are thousands of Russian citizens fighting with ISIS, and another 5,000 to 7,000 Russian-speaking jihadists, making Russian the second most-popular language spoken within ISIS.²⁷ This means that Sunni jihadist groups have a ready-made, native force capable of returning back home to Russia, where militants can more easily blend in with local populations while plotting further attacks.

²¹ Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, “Russia Appears to Deploy Forces to Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role,” *Reuters*, March 13, 2017.

²² Leon Aron, “The Coming of the Russian Jihad: Part II,” *War on the Rocks*, December 19, 2016b.

²³ Salma Abdelaziz and Alex Felton, “ISIS Threatens Russia in New Video,” *CNN*, November 12, 2015; see also Neil MacFarquhar, “For Russia, Links Between Caucasus and ISIS Provoke Anxiety,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2015; Aron, 2016b; and Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, “The Consequences of Russia's ‘Counterterrorism’ Campaign,” *CTC Sentinel*, November 30, 2016.

²⁴ Leon Aron, “The Coming of the Russian Jihad: Part I,” *War on the Rocks*, September 23, 2016a.

²⁵ Mohsen Milani, “Iran and Russia's Uncomfortable Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 31, 2016.

²⁶ Jesse Rosenfeld, “Russia is Arming Hezbollah, Say Two of the Group's Field Commanders,” *Daily Beast*, January 11, 2016.

²⁷ Aron, 2016a.

Conclusion: What Might the Future Hold?

Russia's deepening involvement in Syria means that Moscow has essentially chosen sides in a sectarian conflict abroad—a strategy that could lead to tragedy at home. A new report by the Soufan Group estimates that Russia is indeed the largest exporter of foreign fighters to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, with more than 3,200 fighters.²⁸ Many citizens of the former Soviet states rose through the ranks to become leaders within militant groups fighting in Syria, including the now-deceased Tarkhan Batirashvili, more commonly known as Abu Omar al-Shishani—“Omar the Chechen,” the former ISIS minister of war.²⁹

One factor that could play a significant role in the scale and scope of the threat facing Russia in the future is the struggle for supremacy between jihadist groups in the Caucasus. A competition for recruits and resources is intensifying between the two dominant jihadist entities, fostering decentralization of the insurgency.³⁰

In recent years, many high-ranking jihadists have switched allegiance from the Caucasus Emirate to Wilayat Qawqaz.³¹ ISIS, in their eyes, is the most legitimate force espousing the austere brand of Salafism popular among jihadists, particularly the younger generation. The split between the two groups will continue to manifest, likely resulting in a process of outbidding, in which violent nonstate groups rely on spectacular attacks to persuade potential acolytes that their terrorist or insurgent organization has a stronger resolve to fight the adversary—in this case, the Russian state and security services.³² The competition has even extended to the battlefield in Syria, which has only heightened the stakes.

Despite the fallout and subsequent competition for recruits and resources between the al-Qaeda-linked Caucasus Emirate and the ISIS-linked Wilayat Qawqaz, one issue with the potential to unite these feuding Sunni factions is a shared hatred of Shia—and their main patron, Russia.³³

For all of the success of Russia's counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya, counterterrorism is something different. While a counterinsurgency strategy can entail deploying vast numbers of soldiers using brute force, counterterrorism is essentially a law-enforcement discipline, driven by intelligence. Russia has proven that it is willing and able to employ brutal methods to defeat an insurgency, but has yet to demonstrate the capabilities necessary to deter and disrupt terrorist attacks on its soil, including devastating attacks on its transportation infrastructure.

²⁸ Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” *Soufan Group*, October 24, 2017; see also Jack Moore, “Russia Overtakes Saudi Arabia and Tunisia as Largest Exporter of ISIS Fighters,” *Newsweek*, October 24, 2017.

²⁹ Eric Schmitt and Michael S. Schmidt, “Omar the Chechen, a Senior Leader in ISIS, Dies After U.S. Airstrike,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2016.

³⁰ Andrew S. Bowen, “ISIS Comes to Russia,” *Daily Beast*, July 10, 2015.

³¹ Bowen, 2015.

³² Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security*, Vol.31, No.1, Summer 2006, pp.49-80.

³³ William McCants, “The Polarizing Effect of Islamic State Aggression on the Global Jihadist Movement,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 27, 2016; see also Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, “Russia's North Caucasus Insurgency Widens as ISIS' Foothold Grows,” *World Politics Review*, April 12, 2016.

In its quest to become more assertive geopolitically by assuming a more aggressive role abroad, Russia has made itself more vulnerable to terrorism at home. Sunni militants may see Russian actions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and conclude that now, while Moscow is seemingly distracted, is the time to strike. ISIS and other jihadists could be preparing to take the fight to Russia's major cities in an attempt to prove their own relevance, while seeking to make good on repeated promises to make Putin and company pay for their misadventures in Muslim lands. Still, Putin could see the threat of Sunni militancy at home as the inevitable trade-off for restoring Russian hegemony in its former sphere of influence and bringing the country back to what he views as its rightful place as a true global power.

Any Russian attempts to compare the Russian campaign against jihadists with America's war on terrorism would be inaccurate. Russia has never been an equal partner in the fight against Islamic extremism – its military and intelligence services have little to offer. Moreover, Russia has too often exacerbated the global problem through brutal reprisals and an iron-fist response to Islamic communities within its own borders. Accordingly, the United States should not view Russia as a viable counterterrorism partner at present. Any effort to cooperate in this area should be judicious, measured, and treated with the requisite degree of skepticism it deserves.