

Russian state terror and the Bush agenda

By Milan Rai
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President Bush said at the Republican National Convention in New York, ‘We are staying on the offensive – striking terrorists abroad – so we do not have to face them here at home.’ (<http://tinyurl.com/55ad3>)

The tragedy in North Ossetia in Russia, where several hundred people have died in a school siege, demonstrates the end result of such an attitude. ‘Yesterday’s seizure of a school in the southern town of Beslan, about 30 miles west of Chechnya, caps a bloody week for Mr Putin, whose usual take on the [Chechnya] conflict is that it is “getting better”. Two planes and a metro station have been attacked, and now he must achieve what seems impossible: the safe extraction of up to 400 schoolchildren [actually more than twice that number] from a mined gymnasium.’ (Guardian, 2 Sept., p. 4)

Ten people died in the Moscow metro suicide bombing, and 90 people were killed when the two Russian passenger aircraft were blown up almost simultaneously. The FT observed: ‘Chechen terrorists, who are blamed by the authorities for the metro and aircraft blasts and are almost certainly involved in the school siege, have staged a spectacular demonstration of their ability to organise terror nationwide.’ (2 Sept., p. 6)

AN AL-QAEDA CONNECTION?

At the time of writing, the Putin administration is claiming that up to 10 of the 20 hostage-takers killed in the school siege were Arab militants, in an attempt to ‘bolster Moscow’s claim that its fight against Chechen separatists is part of the global war against Islamic terrorism’. (FT, 4 Sept., p. 7)

Western intelligence officials are sceptical: ‘The Islamist campaign in Chechnya has been a very small part of the agenda, as far as most Chechens are concerned. The Arab influence had very, very little support from the great majority of Chechens,’ said a ‘Western intelligence officer’ consulted by the Financial Times. (FT, 4 Sept., p. 7)

The next day, a Western intelligence officer told the FT, ‘The hostage takers are a bunch

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of Chechens based in the Caucasus. They are not motivated by jihad or Islamist ideology, and the issue is really all about the withdrawal of Russia from Chechnya.' (FT, 5 Sept., p. 5)

NEGOTIATION?

Al-Qaeda is assumed to be impervious to, and uninterested in, negotiation. Associating the Chechen fighters with al-Qaeda reduces the pressure to negotiate. At the same time, Andrew Piontkovsky, a liberal commentator who often criticises Mr Putin's Chechnya policy, observed of the recent suicide bombings, "What's interesting is that these terrorists aren't making demands. They are just killing us, like in September 11. Their goal is not to negotiate but to destroy Russian civilization.' (FT, 2 Sept., p. 6)

While it is true the suicide bombers on the metro and in the two aircraft simply killed, the Beslan hostage-takers did make demands. 'The armed gang has demanded the end of the war in the breakaway republic of Chechnya and the withdrawal of Russian troops. They also want the release of a number of rebels suspected by the authorities of involvement in raids in Ingushetia in June.' (FT, 3 Sept., p. 5)

The group also released 26 hostages on the second day of the siege, 'after the intervention of a former regional political leader', (FT, 3 Sept., p. 5) showing that negotiations were not entirely fruitless.

Despite his hardline image, Putin began putting out diplomatic feelers to Chechen opposition leaders. Aleksander Dzasokhov, the president of North Ossetia, 'revealed that he had orders to open a channel of communication with Aslan Maskhadov, the separatist leader who was Chechnya's President until he fled the invading Russian forces in 1999.'

'Mr Dzasokhov and regional political leader Ruslan Aushev, who helped negotiate the release of 26 hostages – women and very young children on Thursday – had earlier both telephoned London to speak to Akhmed Zakayev, who is Mr Maskhadov's chief representative abroad. That amounted to a reversal of President Vladimir Putin's hardline policy never to negotiate with people he denounces as terrorists.'

'These, the first contacts with Chechnya's separatist leaders – since a fleeting meeting between Mr Zakayev and a Russian emissary in 2001 – underscored the desperation of Mr Putin.' (Independent, 4 Sept., p. 5)

Unfortunately, these first steps to resolving both the hostage crisis, and perhaps the wider crisis of Chechnya, through diplomacy were aborted by the explosions and shooting which brought the siege to an end.

TOWARDS THE THIRD CHECHEN WAR – AND WIDER

Another benefit of the alleged 'al-Qaeda connection' is that, 'If Mr Putin does launch another crackdown [in Chechnya], it will be impossible for Washington or London to

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restrain him. However much they know that Chechnya is more complicated than simply another theatre of al-Qaida's war, they also know they have a pact with the Russian president. Now he may be about to cash in his chips.' (editorial, Guardian, 4 Sept., p. 25) Putin has supported US military action; now he may reap the benefit.

'This dramatic upsurge in Chechen separatist violence threatens to draw Mr Putin into what could become, in effect, a third Chechen war – with the alarming possibility of a wider Caucasus conflagration.' (Guardian, 2 Sept., p. 6) It has been suggested that militants from the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia were among the hostage-takers – this would make sense as one of the groups' demands was for the release of people seized after Chechen and Ingush men raided government buildings in Ingushetia in June.

'Observers argue that there have been growing human rights abuses, which have spread from Chechnya to surrounding regions, notably Ingushetia. "We see disappearances and the discovery of bodies regularly," says Tatiana Lokshina, from Memorial, a human rights group.' (FT, 2 Sept., p. 6)

Last year a former Russian intelligence general, Murat Zyazikov was imposed on Ingushetia as president by Moscow: he 'launched a roundup of Ingush suspected of sympathising with the Chechen resistance, provoking widespread anger and resentment. Other Ingush have been kidnapped by unknown gunmen, possibly linked to the authorities.'

Furthermore, 'Igor Onishchenko, a former FSB [KGB] officer, recently posted a statement on an Ingush website after ending a tour of duty in Ingushetia. He claimed to have worked since early 2003 as part of a death squad, which captured and killed people who criticised Mr Zyazikov or were suspected of links with the Chechen resistance. "I personally crippled more than 50 people, and buried about 35," he told the website.' (Guardian, 3 Sept., p. 4)

85 reasons for the conflict to spread from Chechnya to Ingushetia.

WHY?

The Financial Times observed as the siege was under way, 'Vladimir Putin, Russian President, bears a heavy responsibility for driving the Chechens into a corner in which they see terrorism as their only hope.' (FT, 3 Sept., p. 16)

'[M]any regional experts say that human rights abuses by Russian and pro-Moscow Chechen militia are fuelling anti-Russian sentiment and creating willing rebel recruits. In particular, a force of about 2,000 men commanded by Mr Kadyrov's 28-year-old son, Ramzan, is accused of illegally detaining, torturing and killing dozens of people.' (Times, 2 Sept., p. 4) Kadyrov was imposed by Moscow as Chechen president, then assassinated in May.

'In the name of giving Russian civilians a taste of the suffering Chechens have endured at

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the hands of Russian soldiers, separatist militants have held hostage the sick in hospitals, the innocent in their villages, and theatregoers in their stalls. They have dispatched suicide bombers to rock concerts and hotels, and onto aircraft and rush hour metro trains.’ (Guardian, 2 Sept., p. 4)

‘According to Amnesty International, “Russian security forces continue to enjoy almost total impunity for serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Chechnya”.’ (Guardian, 2 Sept., p. 5) Amnesty’s latest report says, ‘extrajudicial killings, “disappearances” and torture, including rape and indiscriminate killings of civilians continue to occur systematically.’ (23 June 2004, <<http://tinyurl.com/5um92>>)

As for the female suicide bombers, demonised as ‘black widows’, ‘Interviews with the families of such bombers often do not point to particularly radicalised or ideological fighters for Islam. What they do normally suggest is women who have lost close family or friends over the past few years of conflict, often as a result of arrests and “disappearances.”’ (FT, 2 Sept., p. 6)

STRIKE – AND THEY STRIKE BACK

‘[T]he school siege will probably be followed by other attacks.’ (FT, 4 Sept., p. 7) ‘Five years ago, Mr Putin decided to deal with Chechnya by military force and has stuck with his decision. After four years of fighting, Russia has regained Grozny, the Chechen capital, fragmented the rebel groups and undermined Aslan Maskhadov, their leader. But having lost ground at home, the Chechens have taken the fight to the Russians.’ (FT, 3 Sept., p. 16)

‘We are staying on the offensive – striking terrorists abroad – so we do not have to face them here at home.’

Putin has struck his enemies ‘abroad’. And now hundreds of families in Beslan now face the results ‘at home’.

President Bush knows this logic well, but he prefers to lie to the American people while putting them at greater risk with his aggressive adventurism and reckless state terrorism.

Milan Rai is the author of Regime Unchanged: Why The War On Iraq Changed Nothing (Pluto, 2003)