

Understanding Suicide Terrorist Bombings in Russia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 155
May 2011

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Suicide terrorist bombings have been a frequent phenomenon in Russia over the past decade. The large majority of these attacks have occurred in the North Caucasus – particularly Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia – but many such bombings have also been perpetrated in Moscow, including the powerful explosion inside the international arrivals hall of Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 that killed 37 people and wounded some 180. What lies behind these attacks?

Generalizations about the motives of a large group of people are always hazardous, no more so than in this case. Except in the relatively few instances when attempted suicide bombings have been unsuccessful and the would-be attackers have not been killed by security forces, the perpetrators of suicide bombings are not around to reveal why they acted as they did. Some, but not all, of the suicide terrorists in Russia leave video recordings or notes that explain why they took such drastic action. But even when attackers' posthumous testimony is available, it is often incomplete, deceptive, or obfuscatory. The testimony can be valuable, but in many cases it gives no more than a rough idea of why the attackers wanted to kill and die for their cause.

Despite the difficulties of assessing the motives of suicide terrorists in Russia, a few points can be stated with certainty. First, nearly all of the attackers have been of North Caucasus origin or working with terrorist groups based in the North Caucasus. Second, since late 2007 the majority of suicide bombers have been from Dagestan and Ingushetia, although a considerable number of such attacks have still been perpetrated by Chechens. Third, in April 2009 the Chechen commander of the "Caucasus Emirate" (*Imarat Kavkaz*, set up in late October 2007), Dokka (Doku) Umarov, proclaimed the revival of the Riyad-us-Saliheen Martyrs' Brigade (RSMB), a unit originally established in October 1999 by the notorious Chechen terrorist Shamil Basaev, who was killed in July 2006. The RSMB was largely in abeyance after 2004, but Umarov's announcement of its revival came amid a spate of suicide bombings in the North Caucasus – 16 in 2009 and 14 in 2010. The brigade has been linked to several high-profile suicide attacks in Russia over the past year that cumulatively have killed roughly 150 people, wounded

nearly 1,000, and caused great disruption. Although Umarov often has made unverifiable (and evidently inaccurate) claims of responsibility for various attacks in Russia, video recordings and other evidence have confirmed the RSMB's role in these recent attacks. The RSMB's stepped-up activity is significant because its primary goal has been to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus and other "Muslim lands" in Russia.

Unidimensional Explanations and Their Perils

Over the past decade, suicide terrorism has come under extensive scrutiny in the academic community and has also been studied in great detail by experts in government agencies, military academies, and think tanks. Much of the literature has focused on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel as well as the September 2001 attacks in the United States, but analysts have also looked at other countries in which suicide terrorism has been common, notably Sri Lanka and Russia.

Arguably, the studies that have had the greatest impact in the public-policy community and mass media are those produced by Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago. In two recent books – *Cutting the Fuse* and *Dying to Win* – and an earlier article, Pape has described the "causal logic of suicide terrorism."^{*} Distinguishing suicide terrorism from other forms of terrorism, he contends that "what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland." Each part of Pape's assertion here is important: Suicide terrorism, as he sees it, is exclusively "secular" in its aims; it is directed against "modern democracies"; and it is designed to compel the withdrawal of "military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland." This argument is derived in part from an analysis of incidents listed in what Pape claims is a "database of every suicide bombing and attack around the globe" from the 1980s to the present.

Pape's work is wide-ranging and often illuminating, but his arguments run into grave problems when he tries to apply them to suicide terrorism in Russia. Some scholars have challenged Pape's underlying methodology, particularly his failure to look at instances in which groups living under occupation do not resort to suicide terrorism. These methodological issues are important, but my focus here is solely on the empirical validity of his main propositions as they pertain to Russia, a case he has specifically addressed, claiming that suicide terrorist attacks in Russia fully conform to his thesis.

In *Cutting the Fuse*, Pape includes a chapter that discusses attacks in Russia, and he also deals with this issue in an op-ed article coauthored with two of his students in *The New York Times* on March 31, 2010, two days after suicide bombers attacked the

^{*} Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House, 2005); and Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* (August 2003).

Moscow subway.[†] The chapter in *Cutting the Fuse* is more nuanced and qualified than the op-ed piece, but both items were intended to reveal “the facts about who becomes a Chechen suicide attacker” and “what drives [these] young women and men to strap explosives on their bodies and deliberately kill themselves.” Although Pape and his students say they “have analyzed every Chechen suicide attack,” their database is actually incomplete. They used only English-language sources when compiling it and thus omitted some smaller attacks in the North Caucasus and even a few larger attacks. Their database also contains very little about the attackers themselves. The use of Russian-language sources (newspapers, periodicals, books, and interviews) would have yielded more information about the attackers.

In the op-ed article, Pape and his students insist that Islamist extremism has played no role in suicide terrorism in Russia and that all suicide attackers in the country have been motivated solely by a desire to gain Chechen independence and to resist the Russian “occupation” of their homeland:

As we have discovered in our research on Lebanon, the West Bank, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, suicide terrorist campaigns are almost always a last resort against foreign military occupation. Chechnya is a powerful demonstration of this phenomenon at work.

The chapter in *Cutting the Fuse* is somewhat more guarded, acknowledging that Wahhabist radical Islam “may have influenced particular leaders and institutions in Chechnya” and that suicide “bombers aired videos filled with Islamic rhetoric and were undoubtedly influenced by the interim emergence of Wahhabism.” Also, the chapter, unlike the op-ed article, concedes that over the past decade Wahhabist radicalism has been a “factor in the suicide terrorist campaign” in Russia. But unfortunately the book does not attempt to weigh how much of a “factor” radical Islam has been or to determine whether the growing salience of Wahhabism has changed the goals sought by today’s Caucasus Emirate. Instead, without any further analysis or evidence, the book simply dismisses Wahhabism as “ultimately only a secondary factor” and claims that suicide attackers in Russia have “clearly retained the original and secular goals of the resistance: political freedom and independence from foreign occupation.”

Pape’s argument implies that suicide terrorism in Russia is carried out solely by Chechens, the only ethnic group in the country that has had an explicitly separatist guerrilla movement. In both the book and especially the op-ed article, Pape refers to all suicide attackers in Russia as “Chechens.” But in fact most of the recent suicide bombings in Russia, including the attacks perpetrated in Moscow in March 2010 and January 2011, have *not* been carried out by Chechens. Pape tends to depict the North Caucasus as a single unit, even though it is actually a heterogeneous region, of which Chechnya is only a small part. Most of the recent suicide bombings in Russia have been

[†] Robert A. Pape, Lindsey O’Rourke, and Jenna McDermit, “What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?” *The New York Times*, March 31, 2010.

carried out by Ingush and Dagestanis. It is difficult to see why Dagestanis or Ingush are blowing themselves up if their only objective is to attain independence for Chechnya.

Pape and his students dispute what they claim is the Russian government's argument that suicide bombers in Russia are intent on "making Islam the world's dominant religion." To be sure, the Russian authorities have often portrayed events in Chechnya in a simplistic and misleading way and have glossed over the radicalizing impact of Russia's brutal counterinsurgency operations. Yet, Pape's own tendency to depict suicide bombers in Russia as acting solely to achieve independence for Chechnya and not at all for other reasons is equally unidimensional. The attackers' motives have in fact been mixed, not driven by just one thing. Characterizations based on an either-or dichotomy – *either* radical Islam *or* "resistance to foreign occupation," but never both – do not adequately convey the dynamics of recent suicide terrorism in Russia.

The situation in Russia also does not conform to another key part of Pape's thesis, namely that suicide terrorism is directed against occupation by a democratic government (whose citizens will fear the prospect of suicide terrorism) rather than an authoritarian government. During the 1994-1996 war with Chechnya, Russia was at least partly democratic, with a free press, lively political competition, a meaningful parliament, and ample leeway for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Yet during that war the Chechens carried out no suicide terrorist attacks. By contrast, the second war in Chechnya coincided with Russia's reversion under Vladimir Putin to a much more authoritarian system. All national television has been brought back under state control, political competition has been stifled, the legislature has been neutered, elections are no longer meaningful or fair, a crackdown has occurred on pro-democracy and human rights NGOs, and political opponents of the regime have been harassed, arrested, and, in some cases, assassinated. In *Cutting the Fuse*, Pape acknowledges the authoritarian backlash under Putin but insists, unconvincingly, that Russia is still a "borderline democracy" – a description presumably intended to avoid raising doubts about the supposedly universal applicability of Pape's theory of suicide terrorism.

Shift of Orientation and Motives

Understanding the recent spate of suicide terrorism in Russia necessitates a careful tracing of the chronology of what has gone on in the North Caucasus and elsewhere. In the first Russian-Chechen war, from December 1994 to August 1996, independence was the dominant motive for the Chechen guerrillas. No suicide terrorist bombings occurred during that war, even though Russia at the time still had a partly democratic polity.

The August 1996 Khasavyurt accords that ended the war led to the swift withdrawal of all Russian federal forces from Chechnya. In the three years after Russian federal troops pulled out, from August 1996 to August 1999, Chechnya enjoyed *de facto* independence. Yet it was precisely during this period that foreign (mostly Arab) fighters came to Chechnya and persuaded some of the leading Chechen guerrillas to take on a radical Islamist agenda. The charismatic Chechen commander Shamil Basaev, who had gained renown for his exploits during the first war, was among those who increasingly embraced Islamist extremism. The former foreign minister of separatist

Chechnya, Shamil Beno, who was a close friend of Basaev in the 1990s, later commented on the change that had occurred in Basaev's behavior and outlook during the 1996-1999 interregnum: "He started moving from freedom for Chechnya to freedom for the whole Arab world. He changed from a Chechen patriot into an Islamic globalist."[‡] Another former close friend of Basaev, Ilyas Akhmadov, who was one of Beno's successors as foreign minister in the separatist Chechen government, recalled in early 2005 that Basaev in the latter half of the 1990s had "started reading all these religious texts. In council debates, Basaev started quoting the Koran, becoming very dogmatic."[§]

Among other things, Basaev pressured the elected Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, to impose Sharia law in Chechnya in early 1999, a step that was widely unpopular. Moreover, in August 1999, Basaev joined with a guerrilla of Saudi origin, Ibn al-Hattab, in leading armed raids into Dagestan for the proclaimed goal of establishing an "Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus." This fateful step triggered events that provoked the second Russian-Chechen war.

During the second war, independence was still a key issue, but so was radical Islam. Emphasizing one of these strands to the total exclusion of the other gives an inaccurate sense of the war's origins and course. Over time, radical Islam has arguably become the main issue for suicide terrorists in Russia, as reflected in the surge of attacks by the RSMB, a group firmly intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus.

Referring to Dokka Umarov, Pape claims in his op-ed article that Umarov has "made clear that his campaign [is] not about restoring any Islamic caliphate, but about Chechen independence." This assertion is at odds with reality. Umarov in fact has repeatedly declared that he aspires to set up an Islamic caliphate in both the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus. His pursuit of this goal is why he reorganized the guerrilla command structure, formed the Islamic Caucasus Emirate in 2007, and revived the RSMB in April 2009. Regional units of mujahidin aligned with Umarov in the Caucasus Emirate have vowed to "wage Jihad until Judgment Day" and to "establish [Allah's] Laws over the entire earth."^{**} These groups claim they will "not even consider anything other than rule by Muslims on the entire earth."

In a video posted on a Caucasus guerrilla website, Kavkaz-Center, shortly after the January 2011 suicide bombing at Domodedovo airport, Umarov and the RSMB commander, Amir Hamzat (who was subsequently killed in a raid by Russian federal forces), are shown meeting with the 20-year-old Ingush man who perpetrated the bombing at the airport, Magomed Evloev. Umarov explains the purpose of the attack:

We, the mujahidin of the Caucasus, are waging jihad today only for Allah, only in the name of Allah, and only in order to have the word of

[‡] Quoted in Matthew Brzezinski, "Surrealpolitik: How a Chechen Terror Suspect Wound up Living on Taxpayers' Dollars Near the National Zoo," *The Washington Post* Sunday Magazine (March 20, 2005).

[§] Ibid.

^{**} "Zayavlenie o granitsakh vilaiyata Idel'-Ural," KavkazCenter.com, posted January 26, 2011.

Allah in the Caucasus....There will be hundreds of suicide bombers ready to sacrifice themselves for the establishment of Allah's word.^{††}

Hamzat likewise declares that the imminent attack will "raise Allah's word above all others." The young Ingush man who is about to blow himself up speaks toward the end of the video, saying that he is a "mujahid of Riyad-us-Saliheen" who is acting "for Allah's sake" and wants, through his sacrifice, to "raise Allah's word above all others."

None of this means that resistance to "occupation" is not an aim of Umarov's Caucasus Emirate. But Pape's insistence that Umarov's "campaign [is] not about restoring any Islamic caliphate" flies in the face of overwhelming evidence. Both of these objectives – ending Russia's occupation and restoring an Islamic caliphate – have to be taken into account when analyzing the motives of suicide attackers in Russia. Umarov himself made this very point in two recent videos posted on Kavkaz-Center. In the videos he declares that the two goals are inextricably linked and that the "occupation" encompasses not only the whole of the Caucasus but also "all of the territories of Muslim lands occupied by Rusnya^{‡‡} – Idel-Ural^{§§}, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and everywhere else in Russia where Muslims live." He calls on Muslims all over Russia to embark on their own suicide terrorist campaigns:

If today a Jihad is under way here in the Caucasus against an enemy that wants to destroy Islam, then for you, too, this becomes a Jihad, for you, too, it becomes a *fard al-ayn* [obligation for all Muslims]. I exhort you to destroy the enemies of Allah wherever they are. I exhort you to destroy the enemies wherever your hands can reach and to open new fronts of the Jihad.^{***}

Addressing Muslims who might worry about killing themselves along with the enemy, Umarov reassures them that the earlier "martyrs" (perpetrators of suicide terrorist attacks) "have not perished, they are alive and are receiving their due reward from their Lord. We know they are awaiting our own ascension to Heaven, Allah be willing."

These statements and countless others by Umarov undermine the notion that his reliance on suicide terrorism is intended solely to resist occupation and not at all to promote the restoration of an Islamic caliphate. Pape's explanation of suicide terrorism might illuminate certain conflicts in other parts of the world, but his thesis does not hold up when he tries to apply it to the recent string of attacks in Russia.

^{††} "Video: Amir Imarata Kavkaz Dokku Abu Usman posetil bazu Brigady Shakhidov Riyadus Salikhiin i sdelal zayavlenie," KavkazCenter.com website, posted February 4, 2011.

^{‡‡} "Rusnya," a disparaging term for Russia, is used frequently in Chechen terrorist videos posted on the KavkazCenter.com website.

^{§§} "Idel-Ural" is a Turkish phrase for a proposed Islamic state in the huge region known in Russian as Volga-Ural.

^{***} "Obrashchenie Amira IK Dokku Abu Usmana k musul'manam Kavkaza i Rossii: 'Srazhaites's vragami vezde, gde dostanet vasha ruka!" Kavkaz-Center (www.kavkazcenter.com), posted March 3, 2011.

Consequences of the Resort to Suicide Terrorism

In his work, Pape has emphasized that suicide bombings have often enabled terrorists to achieve limited or modest goals, but not more ambitious objectives. In Russia, suicide terrorism has not attained even very limited goals. On the contrary, the resort to suicide terrorism has achieved nothing and was a disastrous strategic mistake by the separatist guerrillas in Chechnya, who enjoyed considerable sympathy and support both at home and abroad during the first war. The shift to radical jihadist Islam before the second war made it much harder to market their cause in many parts of the world (even if it had greater resonance in some Islamic countries and with al Qaeda). Although the Chechen guerrillas still enjoyed some international backing during the second war, such support was notably weaker than during the first war. Basaev's decision to perpetrate terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings, further attenuated the Chechens' support. If the Chechen rebels had stuck with a strictly separatist agenda and had eschewed terrorist attacks against civilians, they probably would have gained wider international support, which in turn might have made it much harder for the Russian government to clamp down as brutally as it did and to rule out any further consideration of the future status of Chechnya.

The Chechen guerrillas' embrace of an Islamist agenda in the late 1990s, and the accompanying shift to suicide terrorism, thus had fateful consequences. As late as the spring of 1999, some influential Russian politicians, notably Yuri Luzhkov (who was then the frontrunner in the March 2000 presidential election), were seriously talking about independence for Chechnya. Conceivably, if the Chechens had focused only on separatism and had seriously pursued negotiations as envisaged under the August 1996 accord, Russian officials might have been willing to contemplate a mutually acceptable settlement. The strategic decision by Basaev and other guerrilla leaders to shift to a radical Islamist agenda and to rely on suicide terrorism not only alienated many Chechens but also ensured that most foreign leaders would be as leery as the Russian government of what an independent Chechnya might mean. One of the main casualties of suicide terrorism in Russia is the prospect that Chechnya will ever be independent.