

# Some Parallels Between Islamic Radicals in Russia and the United States

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The first suicide bombing in Israel occurred in April 1993, and by September 11, 2001, 63 suicide bombings had taken place there. The attack on the World Trade Center, in which a network of kamikaze activists was involved, immediately made collective suicide a more potent weapon. On October 23, 2002, 41 Chechen terrorists occupied the Dubrovka Theatre in downtown Moscow where the popular musical Nord-Ost was playing, asserting their resolve to die for their cause and demonstrating to the world Palestinian-modeled *shaheed* belts with explosives strapped to their bellies. All were killed in an attack by Russian security forces early on the morning of October 26. Russia thus saw in one day 41 people who were willing to become suicide bombers and who may well have, had they not been killed by the authorities.

Notwithstanding the number of deaths, the significance of the Nord-Ost case should not be overlooked for another reason as well: collective acts of suicide are rather more efficient than single suicidal attacks on the enemy, a truth that the Americans know now only too well. From the standpoint of the alleged beneficiaries of the cause in whose name the struggle is sometimes waged, these acts could be considered acts of collective altruistic suicide, if one uses the sociological language of Emile Durkheim (as suggested by Vadim Volkov). This new quality of suicidal action poses a set of most serious questions to political theory because the modern state, both in Russia and in the United States, is built on the Hobbesian premise of self-preservation that considers threats of violence by the sovereign state to be sufficient deterrents of anti-state behavior. Mass altruistic suicide, however, does not fit this premise and thus risks ruining the very foundation of that familiar form of life called the modern state.

## **Nord-Ost as a Focal Point**

Suspicious around the October 2002 events in downtown Moscow abound and will not soon disappear. But even with many questions unanswered, there is a substantial body of evidence to argue that many among the 41 terrorists killed exemplified all aspects of the behavior of combatants who had taken on a very risky mission and were ready to commit suicide, taking the hostages' lives with their own. First, even if the organizers and some of the participants might have harbored thoughts of secure escape in the end, thus repeating the successful raid by Shamil Basayev on the town of Budennovsk in 1995,

many rank-and-file terrorists were nervously praying, as if preparing to meet Allah at any moment. Numerous accounts of surviving hostages substantiate this point.

Second, before setting out on the mission, the terrorists had filmed a video that showed them against the background of a green *jihad* flag with some lines in Arabic, following the usual standard for a Palestinian *shaheed* videotape. The tape was played on *al-Jazeera* on October 24, 2002, with one woman on the tape saying, “There is no difference for us where to die and we choose Moscow but we will take with us the souls of the infidels.” A man added: “All of us are willing to suffer for Allah and for the independence of Chechnya. We are looking for death even more than you are looking for life.” The self-sacrificial tone of the terrorists’ journey to Moscow was also reported by many journalists and negotiators who talked directly to them.

Third, the model for suicidal raids by Chechen terrorists was not, of course, set up by the Nord-Ost episode. The tradition had been well established in Chechnya itself since June 7, 2000—after the first individual attack on the headquarters of the OMON (special police forces) from Omsk. But Nord-Ost has definitely made collective raids more appealing and widespread. After Nord-Ost, smaller groups of Chechen terrorists drove trucks loaded with explosives into the Russian administration buildings in the city of Grozny (December 2002), in the Nadterechny district (May 2003), in the military hospital in Mozdok (August 2003), and into a governmental complex in Ingushetia (September 2003). According to official figures released by the Federal Security Service (FSB) in June 2003, after three years of suicidal attacks, 205 people had been killed in these explosions. By now the figure approaches 300, and the Russian journalists have covered almost every detail of committed terrorist acts. (There is a chronicle of these events at <http://www.gazeta.ru/2003/09/15/istoria4e4en.shtml>.)

However, there are some parallels between the Russian mass suicide bombings and the Palestinian cases and the Mohammed Atta team case in the United States that have been overlooked. It is these parallels that this essay explores.

## Are There Parallels?

It might seem that Chechen terrorists are just following Arab-supplied examples of heroic self-sacrifice, and the FSB is always willing to point out the link between international terrorist networks and the models for terrorist behavior. For example, the taping of a video where a *shaheed* is shown in preparation for his suicidal journey and utters words of spiritual dedication is one of the essential aspects of the process of creating and transferring a collective memory of suicidal heroism. Similar tapes circulate now in Chechnya as well.

A Pakistani-born international relief worker, Nasra Hassan, interviewed about 250 people between 1996 and 1999 from the most militant camps of the Palestinian cause. These interviews involved volunteers who survived or were unable to complete their suicide missions, the families of the dead bombers, and the people who trained these *shaheeds*. Interviews show that such mundane activities as the reproduction of videotapes, calendars with *shaheed* photos, and graffiti that hails their heroism are as essential for the *shaheed* cause as the cultivation of religious zeal they allegedly embody and represent in their endless prayer and spiritual preparation. The plot of the tapes is

pretty standard. As Hassan wrote in the *New Yorker*, November 19, 2001: “In the grainy footage, I saw him and two other young men engaging in a ritualistic dialogue of questions and answers about the glory of martyrdom. S., who was holding a gun, identified himself as a member of al-Qassam, the military wing of Hamas .... ‘Tomorrow, we will be martyrs,’ he declared, looking straight at the camera. ‘Only the believers know what this means. I love martyrdom.’ The young men and the planner then knelt and placed their right hands on the Koran. The planner said: ‘Are you ready? Tomorrow you will be in Paradise.’”

There are other parallels between Chechnya and Palestine, of course. For example, one disturbing finding of Hassan’s was the number of Palestinian youths willing to die for the cause, so many that they continuously pester their potential Hamas trainers if they are at first refused. A senior al-Qassam member explains: “The selection process is complicated by the fact that so many wish to embark on this journey of honor. When one is selected, countless others are disappointed.... After every massacre, every massive violation of our rights and defilement of our holy places, it is easy for us to sweep the streets for boys who want to do a martyrdom operation.... Fending off the crowds who demand revenge and retaliation and insist on a human bombing operation—that becomes our biggest problem!”

Mass recruitment of suicidal bombers might not be a very difficult task for the Chechen cause as well. Independent journalists (see recently Anna Nivat) give numerous accounts of a potential mass of people willing to join in suicide attacks. If the mass of people willing to die for the Chechen cause is really substantial, the hopes for easy countermeasures to the growing threat of suicidal terrorism seem rather bleak.

Finally, the nonchalant approach (on the part of the terrorists) to killing even women and children is another revealing parallel. The Hamas justification is very straightforward: “The Israelis kill our children and our women. This is war and innocent people get hurt.” In Chechnya, this eye-for-an-eye rhetoric is rather widespread as well. Here is an exchange (*Moscow Times*, November 4, 2002, right after the Nord-Ost raid) between the Russian journalist Politkovskaya and one of the Nord-Ost terrorist leaders she calls Abu-Bakar:

- What did you come to Moscow for?
- To show you what we feel like during mop-up operations, when federals take us hostage, beat us up, humiliate, kill. We want you to go through it and understand how you have hurt us.
- But let the children go.
- Children? You take our 12-year-old children away. We are going to keep yours. To make you understand what it feels like.
- The journalist then concludes: “This refrain—‘We will show you how we suffer’—is an undercurrent of our ‘talks.’”

## The Abu Bakr Legacy

This down-to-earth ethos of parallel retaliation is far from the rather more sophisticated religious justification for killing women and children that members of the 9/11 suicidal attack team shared. In the luggage of Mohammed Atta and two other teams of hijackers the FBI has discovered three handwritten copies of a document in Arabic that might be called “a manual for a raid”—a term suggested by Hassan Mneimneh and Kanan Makiya, who analyzed this text in detail (*New York Review of Books*, January 17, 2002). The document interprets the impending attack as a high mission similar to the raids of the prophet Muhammed in 622–632, when he had been building the Islamic state in wars against his pagan environment. The rhetoric of the document, as analysis shows, is elevated and solemn; even tying the shoestrings (to be well-prepared for physical struggle with the infidels) is endowed with high significance. The decisive attack on the pilots and passengers is called “the slaughter,” following the religious term in Arabic that describes Abraham’s willingness to slaughter his son Isaac (Ishmael) as a sign of obedience to divine will. Slaughtering a sheep, for that matter, carries a high religious significance in Islam since a sheep was substituted for Isaac (Ishmael) at the last minute.

The central passage of the handwritten document comes after the demands to slaughter and plunder passengers and the crew of the plane—that is what the armies of the Prophet had been doing in 622–632, and now the followers are reliving these events as part of an unraveling sacred drama. This next recommendation is the execution of the prisoners of war, adhering to some verses of the Koran. Mneimneh and Makiya, who have made a detailed theological analysis of this injunction, see the greatest danger in the equation of peaceful citizens with combatants. Precisely this, in their opinion, has allowed bin Laden to declare all Americans combatants and exhort his followers in the *fatwa* from 1998 to “comply with God’s order to kill Americans and plunder their money whenever and wherever they find it.” Instead of appealing to such verses from the Koran as *al-Baqarah 190* that prohibits aggression against peaceful civilians or *Muhammad 4*, which clearly demands the release of prisoners of war, with or without tribute, the manual for the 9/11 raid used an innovation—a verse from *al-Anfal 67*.

Stressing the differences in Koranic interpretations and the need to fight the terrorist innovations with centuries of accepted Islamic wisdom—as Mneimneh and Makiya do—is of course very important. However, the decisive verse from *al-Anfal* that they bring to our attention is very curious for the purposes of the present argument as well, albeit from another angle. The verse in question comes from the part of the Koran that concerns rules of warfare, following the examples from the raids and battles of the Prophet himself. In particular, it describes the debate between two lieutenants of the Prophet, ‘Umar and Abu Bakr, who had disagreed on the fate of the prisoners of war. Whereas Abu Bakr insisted on releasing them for payment (an accepted practice at that time, reminding some contemporary commentators of Chechen kidnapping and slave trading), ‘Umar wanted to kill them so that future battles would be concentrated on furthering God’s cause alone rather than being diverted by goals of personal gain. Interestingly, Mneimneh and Makiya conclude that despite Muhammad’s endorsement of Abu Bakr’s view, the Koran ultimately vindicates ‘Umar. “*Al-Anfal 67*,” they write, “is understood in the tradition as a gentle but divine reprimand directed specifically to the Prophet stressing that the purpose of battle is to defeat the enemy, not to capture prisoners for potential tribute.”

Abu Bakr, one would guess, has become, in the mouths of Russian journalists and negotiators, Abu-Bakar. Perhaps this has happened also because many newspapers carried stories on Amrozi, an Islamic terrorist in Indonesia, who allegedly sought the permission of a local spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Bashir, before launching the bombing attack on a nightclub in Bali on October 12, 2002. Thus, the name might have sounded familiar just a couple of weeks later. But one might also see how the seasoned warrior from the Chechen countryside adopted the holy name of the Prophet's right-hand man—and a future caliph—before setting out on the mission. The procuracy of the city of Moscow, in charge of the subsequent criminal investigation, attributed three secular names to this Abu Bakr of the twenty-first century: Khunov, Aliev, and Elmurzaev, not specifying their sources.

## Implications

Given the Abu Bakr connection, one is tempted to see the Nord-Ost events as part of the sacred drama of the origins of Islam, replayed now in downtown Moscow a year after it had been played out onboard U.S. airplanes heading toward the terrorists' deadly goal. One could easily read the whole Abu Bakr-'Umar exchange into internal Chechen fights over the naturalness and legitimacy of the Chechen slave trade mentioned above. One could even find traces of these discussions in debates between negotiators, on the one hand, and Movsar Barayev and Abu-Bakar, on the other (or perhaps between these two Chechens, if we are ever given documentary evidence of the content of their conversations), on the topic of which and how many hostages could be released.

To see the Nord-Ost events as part of an exercise of Islamic fundamentalism, however, distorts the facts. The reason for the difficulty in interpreting the raiders on Nord-Ost in terms of developed Islamic commitment and zeal was well-stated by the Moscow correspondent of *al-Jazeera*. Commenting on the *shaheed*-style videotape of Nord-Ost assaulters that his channel had aired, he said: "They were spiritual martyrs only in appearance, since no one of them had undergone intense spiritual preparation required for a *shaheed*." But the most serious problem for Russia may arise if the next waves of suicidal attackers come as well-versed in radical Koran interpretations as Atta's team was.