

Linkages Between Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in Nuclear Smuggling

A Case Study of Chelyabinsk Oblast

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An analysis of the cities in Russia's Chelyabinsk oblast where weapons of mass destruction are researched and produced reveals that there are increasing threats that terrorist groups could use existing criminal networks and corruption to steal nuclear material. Such facilities exist in areas known as "closed cities" because of the increased security and access limitations that apply to them. Earlier analyses of nuclear smuggling, or those that have not focused on the specifics of the criminal and terrorism threat, have not paid enough attention to these linkages. Unfortunately, as the threats increase, state capacity to address these problems is declining.

Research conducted by the Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) has revealed the following changes in Russia since the late 1990s:

- 1) Terrorists have greater motivation to steal nuclear materials.
- 2) Russian organized crime is increasingly transnational. Russia is not only the source of numerous transnational criminal groups, but

it hosts a large variety of criminal groups from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Asia that pose a serious threat to the security of nuclear facilities.

- 3) The drug problem has increased enormously since it first reached the closed cities on a massive scale in the late 1990s (even before it reached other parts of Russia). The problem continues to grow dramatically, making workers in the closed facilities an important security threat.
- 4) The establishment of offshore zones in all the closed cities in the late 1990s made these zones, as in other parts of the world, a magnet for illicit activity and money laundering.
- 5) Ethnic groups surrounding the closed facilities are Muslims targeted by extremist recruiters.
- 6) Significant numbers of convicts are returning to the closed cities, increasing the risk that crimes will be committed against the nuclear facilities.
- 7) Soviet-style methods are being used to reimpose order at the same time that civil society groups and media organizations, which are trying to provide a check on corruption and crime in the region, are being suppressed.
- 8) The international mafia in the metals sector that had close ties to Russia's former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin or others in the administration of former President Boris Yeltsin is no longer visible, but the international networks established by these groups still exist.

These critical changes in the last six years pose a new form of threat to nuclear facilities and materials. Much more attention must be paid to the individuals connected to criminal and terrorist groups who threaten the facilities.

The Closed Cities

The major threats emanating from the closed cities are the following:

- At the beginning of 2005, extremist Islamic propagandists were active among the Muslim Tatar and Bashkir populations that surround the closed cities of Snezhinsk and Ozersk.
- Among the ethnic groups from which military conscripts guarding the closed cities are drawn, the second and third largest are Tatars and Bashkirs, the groups targeted by extremist recruiters.
- The Mayak plant, located in the city of Ozersk and recently designated as the sole Russian site for manufacturing fissile

material components for nuclear warheads, recruits many of these Tatars and Bashkirs for blue-collar jobs at the plant.

- The closed city construction industry also hires workers from among these higher-risk populations.
- In March 2005, Ozersk residents returned to power a mayor who had set up special economic zones that were a likely magnet for illicit money laundering, thereby potentially establishing extensive criminal links around this closed city.
- There is an extensive drug trade in Ozersk, linked to a variety of criminal groups that could facilitate smuggling. Tajiks bring drugs into Chelyabinsk oblast and recruit local Russians to carry drugs into Ozersk. These Russian couriers are seeking to expand their markets among closed city residents.
- By 1999, Ozersk had the most drug users per capita in Russia, including many employees of the Mayak plant. According to the head of the Snezhinsk police force, the drug problem in the closed cities was still growing in March 2005. The capacity of the state to address this problem has declined.
- Large numbers of released convicts are now returning to Ozersk. In Soviet times, such people were banned from the cities, but now they are able to live there. There has been a threefold rise in the number of returned convicts from 2003 to 2005.
- The number of illegal entries into the closed cities has increased. These registered illegal entries are probably only a small fraction of the overall number of illegal entries. Trespassers can enter the closed cities for a very small amount of money. People found guilty of smuggling workers face meaningless penalties that do not deter them. One consequence of these entries is the expanded drug trade.
- At the same time that the closed cities have faced an increasing drug problem, there has been a dramatic drop in drug-related arrests. In addition, the authorities have had trouble identifying which soldiers are letting people in illegally.
- There are extensive types of corruption at Mayak, including overbilling for procurement and guards looking the other way as metals and protective clothing are stolen.
- The number of metal thefts in Ozersk is increasing. Ordinary metal smugglers are likely carriers for radioactive materials.
- A former Mayak factory director arrested on customs violations has set up a metals factory in Ozersk. His company ships products widely throughout Russia.

Transportation of Stolen Materials

If a terrorist group were able to get hold of nuclear materials, it would be able to transport the material from the city to its final destination in a number of different ways.

Actors that could potentially be involved in transportation include:

- Bored or hungry military conscripts that guard the closed city, perhaps from the Tatar or Bashkir populations.
- Criminalized parts of the Ozersk private transportation sector. The prevalence of *razborki* (violent account-settling) in this industry demonstrates that it is extensively criminalized.
- The construction industry in Ozersk, which hires many Tatars and Bashkirs to fill blue-collar jobs.
- Drug dealers who can cross the Russian-Kazakh border for a bribe of \$200.
- Transnational actors such as criminal groups in the metals sector, smuggling rings at the airport, and ethnically-based criminal groups. The Caucasus region is an epicenter of nuclear smuggling. Bioterrorism protection equipment was recently stolen in Kutaisi, the base for Georgia's professional criminals. Georgian criminals have been operating in the Chelyabinsk region.
- Customs brokers who make it possible to transport all kinds of goods without inspection.

The potential routes for the transport of nuclear materials follow those of the drug and metals trade.

- The drug trade flows from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Chelyabinsk.
- Azeri metals dealers take metals from Chelyabinsk via Astrakhan to Iran.

Building Networks to Steal Fissile Materials

It is unlikely that an organized criminal group would specialize in stealing and selling nuclear materials. Rather, terrorist groups could use various criminal groups and corrupt connections to gain access to material and transport it to the desired location. The schematic diagram in Figure 1 lays out the possible connections listed below.

Inside the closed cities, the potential sources of material could come from:

- Convicts who have returned to the city

- Drug couriers/university students
- Workers from the Tatar or Bashkir communities
- Mayak officials
- Guards and disgruntled military personnel

Material could be transported out of the cities via:

- Corrupt soldiers among the military conscripts surrounding the city
- Criminalized elements in the Ozersk taxi service
- Construction industry transportation

Once outside the closed cities, the material could be transported through a variety of networks:

- Transnational actors (related to the metals sector or airport, for instance)
- Ethnic criminal groups
- Customs brokers
- Drug traders

This analysis demonstrates a multitude of ways in which ill-intentioned individuals can defeat even the best-engineered security systems with the latest technology. Clearly, the capacity for criminal groups and terrorists to work together is growing. Further research could provide a much more detailed examination of the potential links between such groups, filling in many of the gaps in our knowledge. We also need to understand the illicit links established during the period when the closed cities operated as offshore centers.

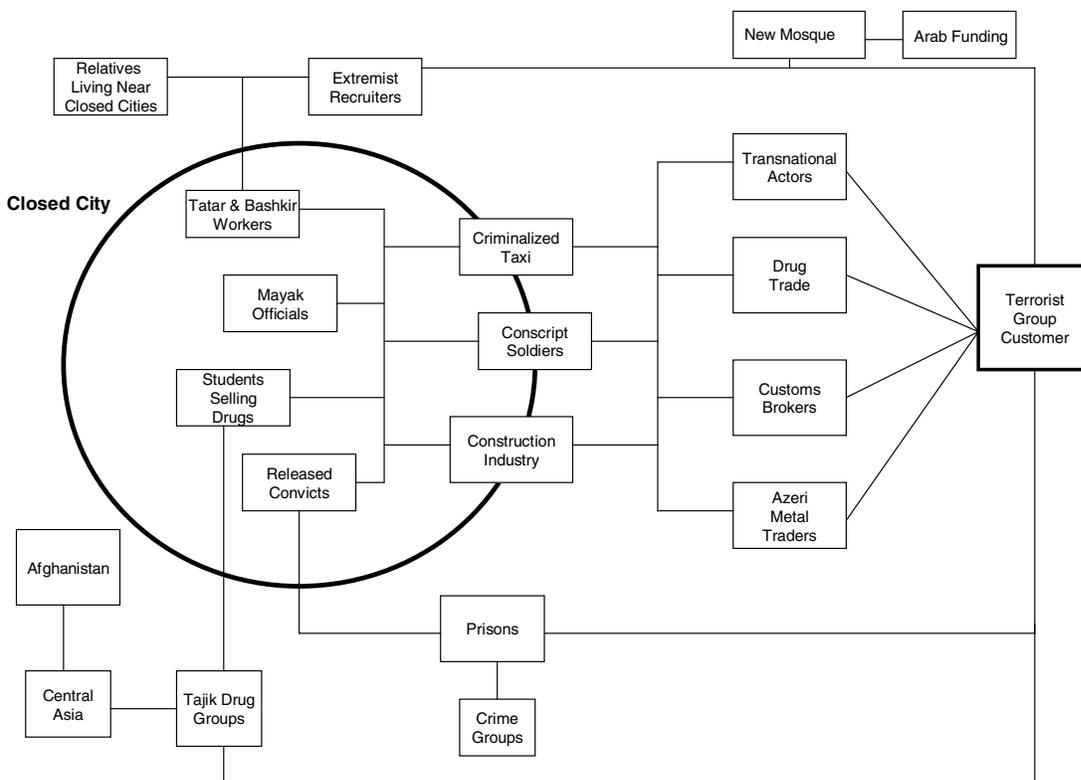
Most alarmingly, the trajectories of key illicit activities are on the rise. The flow of drugs is increasing, the number of convicts returning to the closed cities is growing, and illegal entries to the cities are increasing as well.

Meanwhile, the effectiveness of police and security agencies is declining at the same time that the authorities are targeting media organizations and civil society groups that seek to impose greater public oversight over law enforcement agencies. Additionally, the Federal Security Service (FSB) is seeking to reimpose Soviet-style norms on the closed cities in ways that did not work in the past and are unlikely to work now. Targeting Muslim populations attending mosques for scrutiny by security agencies in neighboring Muslim regions may radicalize the local populations.

As the threat of nuclear smuggling increases and Russian state ability to deal with the problem decreases, Russia and the United States

need to work together to develop a serious analysis of the crime problem in Russia. Russian officials often claim that the country's nuclear materials are safe and that crime and corruption are not a major problem. U.S. officials have largely focused on installing technical defenses like fences, cameras, and guard posts at the facilities. Both sides need to pay more attention to the growing crime problem and the rise of criminal groups that can easily circumvent technical measures.

Figure 1: Potential Networks for Smuggling Nuclear Material from a Closed City



The circle represents a closed city, such as Ozersk. The boxes inside the circle are potential sources of fissile material. The three boxes on the line of the circle represent possible actors who could transport material out of the closed city. The next four boxes represent criminal groups that could provide transportation services for the material to the terrorist group customer. This possible terrorist group has potential links back to the closed city sources through prisons, extremist recruiters active with Muslim populations around the cities, perhaps via new mosques in Chelyabinsk, and possibly through Tajik criminal groups, which are closely linked to Afghanistan.