

MILANMUN 2018

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Radical Islamic threats
in states of the Russian Federation

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I-Introduction

Russia is facing a substantial threat from homegrown extremists, as, among the 30 million Muslims living in the country, thousands are estimated to be radicalized and may potentially be plotting attacks.

In the past decades, islamic terrorism has deeply affected the lives of many people around the world and, although the Russian Federation and its territory have been, and still are, targets of many Islamist movements, the United Nations Security Council has never discussed a Resolution on the topic.

The peak in terrorist attacks within Russian borders was reached in 2010, with 250 attacks. In the following years this number progressively decreased, but it still remains alarmingly high: 54 attacks took place in 2016 and 30 in 2017.

Nevertheless, the challenges posed by the Islamist radicalization and resurgence go beyond the immediate security threat. The risk of a clash of juridical values and legal systems is very high and this could endanger Russia's very nature as a state. President Putin's legal reforms are aimed at harmonizing Russian civil and criminal law with norms accepted in the European Union. This is an important legal and civilizational step, solidifying Russian connections to the West. Radical Islamists, however, demand the introduction of Islamic law (the Sharia) in their areas of residence as well as the introduction of Islamic courts.



Areas in Russian Federation with a significant Muslim population



II- Possible causes

The war in Syria, state oppression of religious minorities and high youth unemployment have combined to create the "perfect" conditions for radicalization. The problem may lie in the multinational structure of the Russian society.

Conflicts in Chechnya are also to be blamed for the problem of radicalization. The high unemployment rate amongst young people in the north Caucasus (more than 80%) is leading them towards joining terrorists groups. By comparison, unemployment rates of between 40 and 50 % were enough to spark the Arab Spring and the toppling of governments across the Middle East.

Estimates suggest that nearly 2,900 Russians have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside militants since 2014, especially from the north Caucasus region.

Another reason why ISIS propaganda is so successful in its recruitment is that it offers a defined set of views. The lack of a national identity in Russia leads to people, especially young people, turning to an organization advocating "equality" and "brotherhood" all "wrapped in Islam."

III- Historical Background

The Islamic religion has been present in the regions of the current Russian Federation since the 7th century, when through the Arab conquest of Persia, the religion spread in the Caucasus area. In the following centuries, many of the ethnicities, which currently inhabit the Russian Federation, converted to Islam, such as the Dagestani, Tatar and Turkic peoples.

Between the 16th and the 19th century, the area of the Caucasus was dominated by Iranian empires and Ottoman rulers, and through the domain of Islamic Rulers, both Shia and Sunni Islam spread.

With the constitution of the Russian Empire and the conquest of the area of Kazan in the 16th century, discriminatory policies towards Muslims were introduced and many mosques and Islamic monuments were destroyed. In response to that, the Kazakhs began to spread ideas of Pan-Turkism.

Repression policies were adopted, once again, in the 19th century, when, in order to obtain an homogeneous Russian-Orthodox population, many Muslims were displaced and deported to the Ottoman Empire.

In the early phases of the USSR, Muslim communities were given more religious autonomy, compared to the Orthodox Church, and some Islamic socialists were even given positions within the Government. Everything changed under Joseph Stalin's rule, who started persecuting religious leaders and closing mosques.

Throughout Russian history, many political leaders and Russian rulers have put into action a process called “Russification”, which consists in cultural assimilation of minorities; this process has affected Muslim communities within the Russian borders.

Due to the situation of political instability of the Russian Federation, in the last decades many Islamist groups have participated in numerous conflicts, which have occurred, in particular, in the Caucasus area. The most important instances of Islamic participation in conflicts were the Second Chechen War and the War in Ingushetia.

IV - Chronology of Major Recent Terrorist Attacks

In June 1995, a wave of Terrorist attacks began when Chechen Islamists attacked a hospital in Budyonnovsk, taking 2000 hostages and threatening to kill them if the war did not come to an end.

In September 1999 a series of bombings, targeting civil apartments in Moscow killed almost 300 people. The attacks were blamed on Chechen separatists and eventually led to the Second Chechen War.

In 2002 a group of Chechen Islamists seized the crowded Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. The Police forces were obliged to pump a chemical agent into the Theatre, in order to incapacitate the militants and create the opportunity to begin the rescue operation. About 130 of 1000 hostages died.



The Islamists then perpetrated a series of suicide attacks throughout 2004. In May, the Separatists managed to kill Akhmad Kadyrov, who was the Chechen President at the time, along with 23 other people, while in August, the terrorists targeted Moscow’s Airport, killing 100 people. The most shocking attack of 2004, was, however, the one of September, which targeted a school in Beslan in North Ossetia and resulted in the death of 300 people, mostly children.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/09/world/europe/beslan-school-siege-fast-facts/index.html>

A series of attacks on Moscow, perpetrated by members of the Caucasus Emirate, began again in 2009, with a suicide bombing on the high-speed rail link between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and continued throughout 2010 and 2011.

Weeks before the start of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, two suicide bombings targeted the city of Volgograd and killed 34 people.

In April 2017, an explosive device was placed between two Metro Stations in St. Petersburg and its explosion caused the death of 8 people, including the terrorist. An Islamist organization linked to al-Qaeda and operating in the North Caucasus has claimed responsibility for the attack.

In October 2017 the Islamic State has released a propaganda video threatening to attack the FIFA World cup, which will take place in Russia from June 14 to July 15, 2018 . The month-long event faces a dangerous threat from returning jihadist fighters as several thousands of Russians have been taking part in jihadist conflicts and now they are beginning to return to Russia.

<https://ria.ru/spravka/20171103/1508154793.html?inj=1>

Recently, in February 2018, a radical Islamist attack killed 5 people in an Orthodox church in Dagestan:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-dagestan-attack.html>

<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/920539/Russia-church-shooting-Dagestan-Kizlyar-Tass-lent-religious-festival-terror-attack>

V - Major Islamist Organizations Involved

The Russian Federation recognises the following Islamist Terrorist Organisations, which are either active within Russian borders or which have targeted Russia in the past:

“Imarat Kavkaz” (The Caucasus Emirate)

Active in the North Caucasus Area and part of Al-Qaeda, the organisation has had a marginal role in the First Chechen War and has actively taken part to the Second Chechen War. The Caucasus Emirate has carried out terrorist attacks with targets both in Chechnya and in Mainland Russia, in particular, it is responsible for the 2004 attacks in Moscow, as well as the 2004 attack in North Ossetia. As of 2017, the organisation is no longer active within Russian borders, and only a few branches remain operative in Syria.

Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan or Islamic International Brigade (IBB)

Active between 1997 and 2002, the IBB came from Chechnya and proclaimed a territory comprehensive of parts of Dagestan and Chechnya independence, whilst also declaring a holy war against Russia. The Russian-Dagestani army wiped out the jihadists and this constituted the casus belli for the Second Chechen War, since many Islamic separatist groups from Chechnya became supportive of the concept of holy war against the Russians.

«Islamic Party of Liberation» («Hizb ut-Tahrir Al-Islami»)

The Islamic Party of Liberation is a pan-Islamist organisation, with the aim of creating an Islamic state. Although the organisation has not taken part in any terrorist activity, it has shown to be supportive of other Islamist organisations, among those the Caucasus Emirate. The organisation is included in “Unified Federal List Of Organizations Designated As Terrorist By The Courts Of The Russian Federation”, as the the Russian Federation’s governmental definition of terrorism includes anyone who has shown support towards Chechen independentists. The organisation is marginally present in Crimea.

«The Islamic State» (also known as: «The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria», «The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant», «The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham») and «The Base» («Al Qaeda»)

Being the two largest Islamist organisations in the world, both have either supported or perpetrated terrorist action within Russian Borders. Even if opponents, both organisations have been active within the Caucasus Region, with Al-Qaeda supporting its own branches in the area (Caucasus Emirate), and with ISIS recruiting and training its soldiers in Chechnya.

VI- Possible Solutions

The challenge for the Russian leadership in the years to come is to develop adequate diplomatic, military, and security tools to halt the rise of the Islamist threat to Russia and its allies.

Long-term solution:

International cooperation

Russia recognizes that it cannot face the issue on its own, but its residual mistrust of NATO and the United States, as well as the current incompatibility of the military establishments, which have been in place since the Cold War era, stands in the way of cooperation. However the common cause of the fight against terrorists goes beyond any disagreement and it is absolutely necessary to collaborate towards the creation of a safer environment for all Russian citizens.

In 2006, a process of international cooperation was initiated when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, with which Member States agreed for the first time to a common strategic framework on counterterrorism and resolved to take practical steps individually and collectively to prevent and combat terrorist attacks(<https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy>). However, the global community will not succeed in implementing the Strategy without a determined and dedicated effort from every government and intergovernmental organizations. The GA is scheduled to review the Global Strategy in 2018, as it does every two years, and this could be an opportunity for the international community to further improve it, focusing in particular on the urgency to take action in the territories of the Russian Federation.

In 2005 the Secretary General had also established The Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), with the purpose of strengthening coordination and coherence of counter-terrorism efforts of the United Nations system. The Task Force consists of 38 international entities, each making contributions consistent with their own mandate and helping Member States implement the Global Strategy. (<https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/uncct/counter-terrorism-implementation-task-force-ctitf>) INTERPOL is also part of the Task Force and it is pivotal that the INTERPOL National Central Bureau of Moscow enhances the cooperation with other international police forces and with the CTITF.

This is an example of cooperation between USA and the Russian Federation:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-thanks-trump-for-cia-intel-that-foiled-a-planned-terrorist-attack-in-russia-the-kremlin-says/2017/12/17/f4274600-e349-11e7-9ec2-518810e7d44d_story.html?utm_term=.ba28a3b21973

Education, intercultural and interfaith initiatives

More educational initiatives are needed to weaken support and sympathy for terrorist activities and groups. However, government involvement in educational activities is usually mistrusted, therefore initiatives promoted by intergovernmental organizations such as ASEAN, may be seen as more legitimate than individual efforts by state governments. The United Nations too, with the cooperation of regional IGOs, can facilitate intercultural and interfaith dialogues by convening global and regional events. There is a need for such dialogues in non-Muslim countries as well as in the Arab or Islamic world.

Short-term:

Strengthening security

In a situation like the upcoming World cup, as in any global event which attracts cameras and a large number of people, the risk of an attack is very high and the implementation of strong security measures is therefore fundamental. For instance, at the borders, controls need to be enhanced on passenger and cargo transportation through means such as the use of new technologies to detect explosives and other weapons.

VII- Sources

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/24/russian-terror-attacks-timeline>

<http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-terrorist-attacks-russia-20170403-htmlstory.html>

<http://en.nac.gov.ru/unified-federal-list-organizations-including-foreign-and-international-designated-terrorist-courts.html>

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/12/chechnya-russia-20-years-conflict-2014121161310580523.html>