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Jihad@Work

Behind the Moscow-theater attack.

By Mark Riebling and R.P. Eddy

Americans have not yet taken much note of political violence in Russia — or of the dirty wars waged, for more than a decade, in restive former Soviet republics with unpronounceable names. But the taking of 600 hostages by Chechen terrorists at a Moscow theater should command our attention, because it may well hold clues to jihadists' future attacks in the United States.

THE AL QAEDA CONNECTION

In December 1994, Jokar Dudayev, a former Soviet air-force general, began fighting for an independent Chechnya. Since then, Moscow has seen a series of bombings which are thought to have been carried out by Chechen Islamists.

That al Qaeda has trained these Chechens — and perhaps even planned some of their operations — is clear. In fact, the Chechen conflict has long been seen by bin Laden as but one front in the global jihad which began on February 14, 1989, when the last Soviet soldiers Afghanistan.

After the Soviets left Afghanistan, a multinational force of mujahadin slithered into Chechnya. The key operative was Jordanian Omar Ibn al Khattab, who had trained in bin Laden's camps. Bin Laden and Khattab enjoyed an unusually close theological affinity, and exchanged personnel and resources.

In Chechnya, Khattab was made operations chief under the overall commander, Shamil Basayev. Like Khattab, Basayev had trained in al Qaeda camps and was personally close to bin Laden.

The bin-Laden-Khattab-Basayev nexus — the Chechnyan connection — is a scarlet thread in the otherwise murky world of global jihad. Consider:

- The 9/11 hijackers from Mohammad Atta's Hamburg cell initially joined al Qaeda to fight in Chechnya. According to German court testimony this week by Mounir Motassadeq, a Moroccan who was apparently Atta's moneyman, Atta came to the attention of al Qaeda's inner leadership while training for the Chechnyan jihad.
- Though Atta and his crew were chosen by al Qaeda for a "holier" mission, bin Laden has sent many brigades of non-native Muslims to fight in Chechnya. At the start of this year Russian security officials estimated that over 300 foreign jihadists were with the Chechens. U.S. intelligence calculates that a hardened al Qaeda cell of perhaps 100 militants is holding together an otherwise rag-tag band of Chechens in their lawless Georgian sanctuary, the Pankisi Gorge.
- On bin Laden's last videotape before the 9/11 attacks, circulated during the summer of 2001, he and his advisers made impassioned speeches about Muslims being attacked in Chechnya.
- In August 2001, the FBI received information from French intelligence that Zacharias Moussaoui had recruited European Muslims to fight with the Chechens.
- Last month, apparently after intercepting the conversations of Chechen Muslims in the U.S., the FBI warned that Arab jihadists envisioned "hijacking a commercial airliner using Muslim

extremists of non-Arabic appearance," such as Africans or Central-Asian Chechens, to avoid scrutiny by security personnel.

- As with other jihadists under the al Qaeda umbrella, the Chechens have made common cause with Palestinian terrorists. In October 2000 a Chechen leader offered a 150 mujahadin from Chechnya as "readily available to perform jihad in Palestine. We ask Allah to destroy the heartless Jews and their allies. Amen."

POSSIBLE MOTIVES FOR THE ATTACK

This summer our Green Berets began hunting Chechen terrorists in Georgia. Under a \$64 million train-and-equip program, U.S. special forces are teaching local troops how to fight Islamic guerillas and are providing intelligence help for raids.

Earlier this month, the Georgians captured 15 Arab militants in the Pankisi Gorge and remanded them to U.S. custody. Among those reportedly turned over was one of bin Laden's top operatives — military expert and instructor Saif al Islam el Masry.

Al Islam, an Egyptian, was trained both by al Qaeda and by the Iranian terror front Hezbollah. According to the U.S. federal indictment this month of Enaam Arnaout, executive director of the Benevolence International Foundation in Illinois, Al Islam served as an officer of Benevolence's Chechen branch.

While some of the Arabs in Chechnya, indeed, did charitable works and built a mosque, others fought the Russians and coordinated Chechnyan assets for the jihad beyond Chechnya. This summer, one team was reportedly trying to obtain explosives to blow up an installation in Russia.

Perhaps the Moscow theater, now reportedly packed with explosives, was targeted as part of that plan. Russian television broadcast last night a telephone interview with an unidentified Chechen guerilla commander, who claimed that the attack had been planned "for a long time." A pro-rebel website has said Russia has one week to begin withdrawing from Chechnya or the theater will be blown up.

Yet the hostage-takers may also have adapted the explosives plan to narrower needs. Perhaps they have demanded the release of Al Islam, or other captured al Qaeda operatives now imprisoned at Guantanamo. The CIA and FBI know that there were several such abortive plots during the 1990s by al Qaeda operatives to gain the freedom of Sheikh Abdul Rahman, godfather of the first World Trade Center Attack.

In any case, the Chechens who stormed the stage of a musical drama in Moscow have now mounted the global stage. This suits them well. Even before 9/11, the Chechen cause never garnered much press beyond Europe. As on 9/11, the likely victims of the Moscow attack are from many nations: Citizens not only of Russia but of the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Australia, Belarus, Bulgaria, and Azerbaijan are among the hostages.

LIKELY TO END IN A BLOODBATH

The Chechens had to know, going in, that the Russians would not likely bend. President Putin has refused to negotiate with current Chechen guerilla leader Khamzat Gelayev. Moscow has usually borne down harder whenever the Chechens have struck.

So it was in the mid-1990s, when Chechens twice surprised Russian troops with mass hostage takings. Nearly 120 people died in a firefight after Chechen rebels took over a hospital in the town of Budennovsk in 1995. The next year, Moscow had to respond with tanks when Chechen rebels seized a whole town of 2,000 people in Dagestan.

In both those prior instances, the terrorists slipped through Moscow's dragnets. But the theater commandos could have no such hope. With Russia's elite Alpha counterterrorist surrounding the

theater, any attempt by the police or soldiers to enter the building would end only in carnage.

Witnesses who escaped the theater last night said the attackers called themselves a Chechen suicide squad. A website that supports the Chechens quoted the squad's commander, Mosvar Barayev, as saying that bombs were in the theater and that his charges were there "to die, not to survive." The website called the hostage takers *smertniki*, fighters martyred to a cause, as if their death were a foregone conclusion.

As this article went to press, the terrorists had attached explosives to pillars and were vowing to bring the whole theater down on themselves and their prisoners if an assault were launched.

NEW STRATEGY FOR JIHADISTS

The Moscow-theater event would seem to be the second recent strike in which more than two-dozen jihadists planned to commit suicide, and to kill large numbers of "infidels," in a very public way. The first such operation was mounted on 9/11.

The audacity, the planning, the potential toll in life are of that epic scale. "By the scope it can only be compared to the tragedy in New York," liberal lawmaker Boris Nemtsov said last night on Russian television.

The jihadists — most with al Qaeda connections, but some without — are likely to follow this pattern for some time to come. This kind of terrorism, the engineering of miniature holocausts, meets their strategic needs. It is intended to sow doubt and fear in non-Muslim nations about the wisdom of resisting jihad.

The Moscow event is especially portentous because the tactics of Chechen jihadists are regarded by the FBI as a possible indicator of al Qaeda methods in the U.S. This past summer, for instance, after Chechen terrorists bombed apartment buildings in Moscow, apparently by renting rooms and then detonating explosives stored there, FBI Director Robert S. Mueller warned that al Qaeda operatives in the U.S. might attempt this tactic.

If Chechen and al Qaeda operatives do kill from the same playbook, then reconnaissance and planning for a mass-hostage drama outside Russia may already be underway.

THE SUM OF ALL FEARS

Like the 9/11 strike, the Moscow-theater attack seems to have been carefully planned and professionally executed. But Russia is not an open society: It is not as easy for jihadists to operate there as it is here. For that reason, some military experts have suggested that the guerrillas could not have pulled this operation off without help from some corrupt, sympathetic, or ulterior-motivated officials in Moscow. Some former advisers to Georgian President Shevardnadze have likewise alleged that Chechens have been given sanctuary through the connivance of Georgian officials, who nurse their own nationalist grudges against Russia.

That Chechen jihadists may enjoy the support of some government officials is alarming, because those supporters may give the Chechens access to nuclear materials.

In fact, the Chechens have already obtained some radioactive material. What is more, an alleged Chechen connection has recurred in reports of bin Laden's own attempts to "go nuclear."

In late 1995, Chechen rebels placed 32 kilograms of cesium 137, a radioactive substance used in industrial and medical applications, in a plastic bag in a Moscow park. Prolonged, unprotected contact with the material could have been fatal. This material was almost certainly stolen from a Russian government facility, or purchased from someone with access to one.

In 1999, the Arabic newsmagazine *Al-Watan* reported that bin Laden had obtained nuclear material from his Chechen contacts. Reportedly, al Qaeda's Chechen branch paid the Russian

mafia \$30 million in cash and two tons of opium in exchange for warhead materials which could be used in the making of a "suitcase nuke."

The *Al-Watan* report is improbable. But a reenactment of the Moscow-theater drama, with a dirty nuclear device is not impossible. Over time, it is increasingly likely, especially since the Russians themselves claim not to know how much nuclear material they have or where it all is.

It may be natural for Americans to obsess more about a sniper in the suburbs of their own capital than about Chechen rebels in Russia's. But the U.S. embassy has announced that two unidentified Americans are among the hostages half a world a way. And if 9/11 has taught us anything, it's that half a world away is not so far anymore.

If the developing pattern holds, hundreds more Americans or Europeans may be hostages or victims of another suicidal jihadist attack along the lines of the Moscow event. Like the jihadists' 1994 plans to crash planes into the Eiffel Tower or CIA headquarters, the Moscow-theater attack may portend the shape of looming evil.

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