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LESSONS OF TERROR IN THE CAUCASUS

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The spectacular act of terrorism recently carried out in North Ossetia began as a hostage-taking incident and ended as a suicide attack resulting in over three hundred casualties, about half of them pupils at the school in which it took place. This attack, which provides additional and dramatic evidence of unrest in the Caucasus, is also one more example of the process that has transformed local conflicts into international terrorism since the attack of 9/11. For while the roots of the violent conflicts in the Caucasus lie in national confrontations, the associated acts of terror have become part of the broader confrontation between "global jihad" and the free world. This transformation is manifested in the reported involvement of Ingush and Arab terrorists in the atrocity in Beslan.

The historical record of Chechen terrorism includes several cases of hostage taking that ended with the deaths of large numbers of hostages. In June 1995, 150 people were killed when terrorists took over a hospital in Budyonovsk, and in October 2002, 129 people died when Russian security forces stormed a group of hostage-takers in a Moscow theater. Against this background, the failure to prepare professional security forces for the worst-case scenario and to manage this most recent attack,

notwithstanding its particular complexities, reinforce the sense of persistent Russian shortcomings in dealing with hostage-taking incidents.

The human tragedy in North Ossetia also serves as another painful reminder that the world is well into the initial stages of the era of "unconventional" terrorism. Since September 11, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have carried out attacks with conventional means but with the clear intention of inflicting large-scale death and destruction in order to create unconventional effects. Examples include the attacks on western tourists in Bali, which left 202 dead and caused immense economic damage, and on trains in Madrid, which killed 192 dead and could have resulted in the deaths of hundreds more. In addition, there have been abortive attacks in Singapore (in December 2001) and in Jordan (in April 2004), in which suicide-drivers were meant to blow up trucks laden with tons of explosives and to kill thousands of people and cause huge economic disruption. Moreover, there have been several attempts to carry out terrorist attacks with unconventional materials, especially ricin and cyanide, which prefigure future efforts in this direction.

Stressing the close link between Caucasian

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Muslims and their Muslim brothers elsewhere is one of Bin Laden's most important objectives. The conflicts in the Caucasus, like violent conflicts around the globe in which Muslims are pitted against non-Muslims – such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kashmir and, now, Iraq – are fruitful sources of propaganda and recruitment of new volunteers for Bin Laden's "global jihad front." He and his associates are determined to portray these conflicts as part of a direct and purposeful attack on Islam by its enemies, who wish, as he perceives them, to repress Muslims and steal Muslim lands. Video cassettes and internet websites operated by "global jihad" elements give graphic details of the atrocities perpetrated by the "Christian" Russians -- seen as part of the "Crusader-Jewish alliance" – on the Chechens, who represent Islam and are used as propaganda fodder by al-Qaeda agents throughout the world. The war in Chechnya has been a magnet for new recruits to the ranks of al-Qaeda, which wants to wage another fight against the Russians in the hope that it can repeat its success in Afghanistan, on which Bin Laden and his associates have built their entire ethos. Thus, Muhammad Atta and his comrades, who crashed hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, had originally planned to fight in Chechnya but were instead directed by Bin Laden to the United States.

Al-Qaeda's influence on the conflict in Chechnya takes the form of professional expertise and operational experience, financing, and the dispatch of volunteers to fight alongside the Chechens. But al-Qaeda also provides senior commanders like Khattab (until he was killed) and the Saudi-born Abu Walid, who now serves as one of the central operational commanders. So while the attack on the Moscow theater only involved Chechen fighters (notwithstanding the claim that foreign elements were involved in the planning and preparations), the recent attack on the school in North Ossetia reportedly included about ten Arabs who are members of al-Qaeda.

In this respect, it is important to emphasize the impact of the organizational ethos of "martyrdom" instilled in the members and affiliates of al-Qaeda. This first came to the fore in the early months of 2000, when local terrorist organizations adopted suicide-attacks -- al-Qaeda's trademark -- as their preferred method of operation. Since then, there have been 25 such attacks involving about 100 terrorists, of whom at least 40 have been women.

The attack in North Ossetia undoubtedly poses a major leadership challenge to President Putin of Russia. He cannot avoid the need to draw basic lessons from the terrible outcome, first of all at the tactical-operational level of terrorist crisis management, in general, and of barricade-hostage crises, in particular. That is critical, given Russia's bitter experience in recent years and the likelihood that it will face similar, if not worse, challenges in the future.

But no less essential are the lessons to be drawn at the international level. Any Russian president who seeks international support for the struggle against Chechen or other Caucasian terrorists will need to commit himself fully and actively to the struggle waged by the United States and its allies against the international terrorism of "global jihad." The President of Russia will probably discover that only such a commitment, including the sacrifice of benefits from economic and other ties with state supporters of "global jihad" such as Iran, will bring him any international support beyond declarations of solidarity with Russia and condemnation of its enemies.

The willingness of leaders around the world to face up to the international terrorist threat emanating from Bin Laden and his affiliates is partial, episodic, and normally dictated by some dramatic attack that temporarily raises the consciousness of citizens in the target state. It is therefore likely that more mega-attacks will take place before an effective international policy emerges to deal with the acute dangers posed by "global jihad."