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MINNPOST

Boston bombings: Understanding Tsarnaev brothers and their intended audience

By Nick Hayes | 04/22/13



REUTERS/www.kavkazcenter.com

An undated still image taken from video shows an address by Chechen rebels, led by Emir of the Caucasus Doku Umarov, center.

The real target of terrorism is not the victims of the crimes, but the audience for the crimes. This is not to marginalize the criminality of the terrorist's acts or the tragedy of the victims. The point is that to understand the likely motivation for the Tsarnaev brothers, the suspects in the Boston bombings, we have to understand who their intended audience was.

The Tsarnaev brothers killed an 8-year-old boy, a Chinese exchange student and a 29-year-old restaurant manager and injured at least another 170 because, I think, they wanted to send a message to the North Caucasus.

The victims of the Boston bombings presumably knew little or nothing of the Islamic enclaves of Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia that for the past two decades have remained semi-autonomous regions within Russia and have kept these Russian borderlands along the northern range of the Caucasus Mountains in a state of turmoil. Since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new norm for this region appears to be a pattern of civil wars, terrorist strikes, hostage crises, kidnappings for ransom and reprisals by the Russian Special Forces.



The brothers -- the older Tamerlan and the younger Dzhokhar -- belong to the diaspora of Chechens, a Caucasian ethnic group whose members are more likely to live in exile than to reside in their homeland.

In 1944, Stalin suspected the Chechens of collaboration with the Germans and deported them to Central Asia and Siberia. Lavrenty Beria, the most brutal of the monsters who headed up Stalin's secret police, gave the order that any Chechens remaining in their homeland "should be liquidated on the spot." After Stalin's death, Chechens trickled back to their homelands.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Moscow drew its line in the sand against any further secession and overpowered the Chechen independence movement. Two disastrous wars, in 1994-96 and 1999-2002, reduced Chechnya to rubble and enabled Vladimir Putin to install the current puppet regime under Ramzan Kadyrov.

Proclivity for the bizarre

Kadyrov's proclivity for the bizarre and a record of human-rights violations has turned the Chechen capital Grozny into the Pyongyang of the Caucasus. During this time, the Chechens' record of terrorism on Russian soil included a hostage crisis in Dagestan in 1995, a Moscow apartment bombing of 1999, the taking of hostages in Moscow's Nord Ost Theater in 2001, the Beslan school massacre of 2004, the bombing of the Moscow Metro in 2010 and the bombing of Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in 2011. As a result, few Russians protest the repression and lack of civil rights in Chechnya. In everyday Russian street slang, "Chechentsy," or "the Chechens," means criminals.

The roots of the Chechnya of the Tsarnaev brothers lie not in the real Chechnya. Theirs is an imagined Chechnya forged of refugees' resentments and fantasies. Their lives as Chechen refugees in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia and Dagestan near the Chechen border and as Muslim immigrants in post 9/11 America changed their aspirations from fitting in to the American dream to belonging to an invented homeland -- a Pan-Caucasus Islamic state.

You can better understand this transformation by visiting the [Kavkaz \(Caucasus\) Center website](#).

In the wake of defeat in two wars and the post 9/11 rise of a web-based global jihadist movement, the Chechen radicals shifted their focus from the drive toward an independent Chechen state to making of a "Caucasus Emirate" stretching across the North Caucasus from the Caspian to the Black Sea. Under Emir Doku Umarov, the "Mujahideen of the Caucasus Emirate" have taken credit for numerous terrorist attacks carried out in Dagestan and Chechnya over the last two years. A more militant brand of Islam, Salafi, has replaced a rather lax variety of Sunni Islam that prevailed in the region in Soviet

times.

Over the past weekend, the press picked up the trail. In 2011, older brother Tamerlan's interest in radical Islam caught the attention of Russian authorities, who requested, but did not receive, information on him from the FBI. In 2012, he returned for a six-month visit to Dagestan and visited Chechnya. After his return to the United States, he posted on his YouTube page videos of jihadists. The fact that this past Sunday the Kavkaz (Caucasus) Center denied any connection to the Boston bombings and emphasized that it was at war with Russia, not the United States, may well be further evidence that it does not control the proliferation of terrorist cells across the Caucasus.

Terrorist organizations do not accept every volunteer to their cause. The infamous Serbian terrorist and **assassin in the 1914 killing of Archduke Ferdinand** in Sarajevo, Gavrilo Princip, had been rejected as "too small and weak" by several Serbian terrorist groups. He vowed "to prove that he was the equal of the others." Tragically, he made his point.

The Tsarnaev brothers probably wanted to show someone in the North Caucasus that they were the equal of the criminals who have bombed Moscow, Dagestan and Chechnya. Point.

Message to Moscow

The Tsarnaev brothers copied their message to Moscow. Since 2007, when Putin installed Kadyrov as the president of the Chechen Republic, Moscow has invested billions of rubles in the reconstruction of Chechnya and promoted the image of the country's pacification and return to a normal life. Grozny is the Potemkin village of Putin's Russia, from its lavish presidential palace to its new grand boulevard named "Prospect Vladimir Putin." The Tsarnaevs' message to Russian audiences is that the threat of violence and instability in the North Caucasus remains.

The Boston bombings appear to have had an early effect on Russia. Putin's sports minister said on Sunday that the Boston bombings sent "a grave signal" to the planners of the **Sochi Winter Olympics**, now six months away.

His remarks prompted a flurry of mixed signals from Moscow with some Kremlin officials declaring that more than adequate security was already in place for the Sochi Olympics while others called for increased security measures. Approximately 200 miles from Chechnya, Sochi stands on the edge of a very dangerous neighborhood.

It remains to be seen if the Boston bombings will deter visitors from coming to the Sochi Olympics. Until now, I have dismissed the Sochi Olympics as another of Putin's publicity stunts. While I rarely support Putin's gimmicks, I would not want to see prospective visitors to Sochi canceling their plans and thus lending reason to the Tsarnaevs' madness.

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