

Moscow Tragedy: More Questions Than Answers

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Who was Movsar Barayev and why did he embark on a desperate hostage-taking mission in Moscow?

The tragic aftermath of the mass hostage-taking in the Russian capital has left many unanswered questions as to who was behind the operation.

As the death toll from the October 26 rescue operation climbed to 120, a former intelligence officer who had watched the whole drama, revealed some of the methods his colleagues are using to investigate it.

"In these cases we first of all try to understand who benefited from this act of terror and who is standing behind the terrorists," he said. "The next step is to locate them and try to put them under pressure. And finally we take an interest in the personalities of the terrorists themselves, as generally they are just pawns carrying out someone else's orders."

On October 23, more than 750 theatregoers and actors were taken hostage at the Moscow House of Culture on Dubrovka Street, which was showing the musical "Nord-Ost." The leader of the extremists, Movsar Barayev, told the British journalist Mark Franchetti of the Sunday Times that he was acting on the orders of Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov and the notorious Chechen warrior Shamil Basayev.

Maskhadov's involvement - or lack of it - has become central to the aftermath of the drama.

Other members of the group gave Anna Politkovskaya of Novaya Gazeta a different version, suggesting that Maskhadov was merely their "president" not the leader of the operation itself; while Maskhadov himself has strongly condemned the hostage-taking in Moscow in interviews to Chechenpress news agency.

However, the Russian authorities have accused the rebel leader of complicity and on October 30, the Danish police detained Akhmed Zakayev, Maskhadov's special representative, following a Russian request.

Movsar Barayev's assertion that he was following the orders of Maskhadov and Basayev raises a host of questions for anyone who is familiar with the activities of Arbi Barayev, the late uncle of the militant leader.

Arbi Barayev was a sworn enemy of Maskhadov. Early in his career, Barayev was close to the Chechen vice-president (and later acting president) Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and to the chief Chechen separatist ideologue Movladi Udugov.

In the first Chechen war of 1994-6, Arbi Barayev, who was then in his early twenties, served as a bodyguard to Yandarbiev. He became a field commander in his own right only after Yandarbiev gave him 200,000 US dollars to form a "Shariah Battalion". The battalion turned into the "Special Islamic Regiment" which was based in the town of Urus-Martan and several villages near Grozny.

Barayev was a leading exponent of Wahhabism, the extreme form of fundamentalist Islam founded in Saudi Arabia and imported to Chechnya by Arab volunteers. He and his Wahhabi comrades-in-arms were among the first to practice kidnapping in Chechnya. As nephew of Arbi Barayev, the young Movsar could claim a privileged place in this group.

In 1997, President Maskhadov signed a decree putting the regiment under the command of the Chechen interior ministry. However, Barayev refused to submit and in the summer of 1998 his battalion fought a battle with Maskhadov's men outside the town of Gudermes, in which around 80 people were killed and more than a hundred were wounded. "General" Barayev was reduced to the ranks.

However, the Islamic regiment was not disarmed and Barayev continued to buy weapons. He kidnapped a string of Russian journalists and the two British aid workers Camilla Carr and Jon James. His reputation for brutality grew.

At the end of 1998, Chechen deputy prime minister Turpal Atgeriev (who died a few months ago in a Russian prison) openly accused Barayev and his group of the kidnapping and murder of four telecommunications workers, three from Britain and one from New Zealand. Their severed heads were left by a road in western Chechnya.

After the murders, Maskhadov declared a partial mobilisation of Chechen forces, but did not dare to arrest the powerful kidnapper or his followers. An investigation carried out by this reporter for Moscow News in 2000 revealed that by this time Barayev senior had amassed a fortune of several million dollars from ransoms and many were already suspecting that he had powerful patrons in Moscow, without whom his bloody business could not have flourished.

These suspicions grew, as the second Chechen conflict began at the end of 1999. In sharp contrast to Maskhadov and other commanders, Barayev did not hide from the Russians. He bought his nephew Movsar a house in his home village of Alkhan-Kala (before that Movsar lived in the town of Argun.) Arbi Barayev married twice and celebrated his weddings in great style - just 10 km from the federal forces in Grozny. Most extraordinarily, he moved freely about Chechnya, showing documents of an officer of the Russian interior ministry at checkpoints.

A Chechen journalist who took an interest in Barayev and who managed to record the number of his Russian interior ministry document, was detained by the federal authorities, interrogated and detained for three days. He was released only with the help of relatives who worked for another branch of the military.

The journalist was warned not to divulge the details of his detention and all his notes, including Barayev's ID number, were confiscated from him. The episode further strengthened suspicions that Barayev had a very strong "roof" - a powerful protector outside Chechnya.

Arbi Barayev's death was as mysterious as his life. Extremely reliable sources in Chechnya have told IWPR that he was not killed in battle, as the Russian military claimed. These sources say that on June 23, 2001 Barayev was seized in his home village of Alkhan-Kala, 10 km from Grozny by Chechen enemies, who were working for Russian military intelligence, or GRU. These Chechens assaulted the military headquarters in Alkhan-Kala, where Barayev and his men had taken refuge to resist capture. Barayev and four of his men were interrogated by these GRU offices for 11 hours (the interrogation was filmed on videotape) and then shot.

In a further brutal twist to the story, the sources go on to say, the Chechens who had captured and taken part in the interrogation were themselves killed, even though they had been sworn to secrecy. The interrogation tapes themselves disappeared.

After his uncle's death, Movsar Barayev and several of his followers began to act independently. The nephew controlled the town of Argun, where he was declared emir of the Islamist movement known as Jamaat. According to Chechen police sources, they murdered officials in the pro-Moscow administration of Akhmad Kadyrov.

Those who knew Movsar said that, like his uncle, he had a reputation for exceptional brutality but was not well known as a field commander. He had only five or six fighters under his control and lacked the fighting skills or organisational abilities needed to be a proper warrior. He never took part in any operations against Russian forces.

This is one reason Said-Selim Peshkhoyev, head of the police force in Chechnya, has told several Russian news agencies that the leader of the extremist group in Moscow was Movsar Barayev, but someone else. According to Peshkhoyev, Barayev does not possess the professional training and was not capable of carrying out an operation as sophisticated as the one to seize the theatre.

Other analysts who watched the siege noted that the gang which seized the theatre broke down into groups, who took different actions when Russian special forces stormed the building: one group tried to break out of the theatre and the other opened fire to try and stop their comrades leaving.

Which group did Movsar Barayev belong to? Until the hostage drama began, he had never been thought of as a man who was ready to die for the freedom of Chechnya. So why was he the one to lead the raid on Moscow?

One explanation could be that the organisers of the attack were using a well-known trick, which had served kidnappers in Chechnya in the past whereby groups of the latter who wanted to conceal their identity would suggest that the elder Barayev, Arbi, was involved.

The kidnappers secured Barayev's assent to say that he was holding their hostages and the relatives of the victim readily agreed to pay large ransoms, because they knew of Barayev's reputation for cruelty. Then the two sides shared out the ransom payment.

So it is possible that the Moscow extremists were continuing to use the Barayev trademark to frighten the Russian authorities and persuade them to accept their terms. Yet another striking aspect of the raid is that the attackers put forward a demand, which was virtually impossible to meet - the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. Barayev himself was by no means naïve and would have understood that there was no way his demand would be met. So why was he sent to Moscow?

Well-informed Chechens in Moscow have suggested to IWPR that the seizure of the theatre was part of a well-planned manoeuvre with many steps and that an appeal for Russian withdrawal from Chechnya was probably a diversionary tactic. It is very likely, they say, that Barayev himself was not fully informed of the whole plan. Rather he was selected because he could make use of his uncle's Moscow connections to plan the raid.

Neither Maskhadov nor Barayev was capable of organising an operation like this in the centre of Moscow, analysts say, and the trail is more likely to lead to people close to Yandarbiev and Udugov, both of whom are now believed to be resident in the Gulf state of Qatar. Udugov called the BBC Moscow office shortly after Barayev had seized the building and kept up telephone contacts with the hijackers, which he published on his Kavkaz Centre website.

If those two were behind the raid, one of their aims was undoubtedly to remove Maskhadov (who probably knew about the plan but only in general terms) as a potential negotiator with Moscow. The alliance that he struck with Yandarbiev, Udugov and Basayev this summer was evidently a marriage of convenience. If real negotiations had begun, then these three would instantly have been declared persona non grata.

As soon as Barayev said that he was obeying Maskhadov that spelled a death sentence for the Chechen

president. It is hard to imagine that any Russian politician will now have the courage to sit down and negotiate with him.

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