

New US Thinking on Chechnya Needed



**Oliver
Bullough**

**IWPR Caucasus
Editor**

Hillary Clinton, shaken by the news of the twin suicide bombings in Moscow, pledged Washington's support for Russia in its war in the North Caucasus.

"We face a common enemy," the secretary of state said. "Whether you are in a Moscow subway or a London subway or a train in Madrid or an office building in New York, we face the same enemy."

Here she went far beyond expressing sympathy for the terrible loss Moscow suffered, and her political backing must have been a comfort for her counterparts in Russia as they tried to imagine how the bombers could have made it through the security clamp-down in and around Chechnya.

And, in doing so, she was following a rich vein in American policy towards the region. Indeed, she was following in the footsteps of her own husband who, when president, started the tradition by giving similarly non-critical backing to the Kremlin.

"You say that there are some who say we should have been more openly critical. I think it depends upon your first premise - do you believe that Chechnya is a part of Russia, or not?" asked Bill Clinton at a news conference in April 1996, before going on to draw a bizarre parallel between Boris Yeltsin, who sent underequipped, undertrained conscripts into Chechnya with no clear plan, and the man who abolished slavery in the United States.

"I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country... over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for that no state had a right to withdraw from our Union."

Here the Clintons, and all the officials in the US government between them, are ignoring the causes of the Chechen war, and the very specific reasons why it has lasted as long as it has, and turned as savage as it has.

The other post-Soviet conflicts in the Caucasus Mountains - in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia - were essentially over by 1994, and were fought between armies of men with guns.

Only the Chechens attacked civilians in schools, hospitals, theatres and the metro system with suicide squads. And only in Chechnya did an organised army of a major state flatten a city and kill tens of thousands of civilians.

Of course the suicide bombings in Moscow are evil. I had hoped this terrible weapon had died with Shamil Basayev, the main behind the Beslan school siege, in 2006.

But, simply referring to those bombers as the "common enemy" is meaningless. The women who blew themselves up in Moscow had completely different motivations for doing so to the men who flew planes into the Twin Towers, or to those who killed commuters in London and Madrid.

Every bomber is unique, and has his or her own motivation for killing, in Palestine, Israel, Sri Lanka, America, Britain, Spain or Russia.

Killing yourself, and committing murder are terrible crimes, and someone must be severely psychologically damaged before agreeing to take such a step.

Take the case of Zarema Muzhakhoyeva, who failed to blow up herself at a Moscow café in 2003. She was parentless and widowed, then had her daughter taken from her. In trying to kidnap her child back, she stole money from her aunt, thus incurring disgrace and the enmity of her relatives. She agreed to kill herself not for political or religious reasons, but for 1000 dollars. Her life was unbearable, and she decided to earn some money from her death to repay her aunt.

A study in the New York Times showed that her story is pretty much typical for many suicide bombers in Russia. Three researchers looked at every bombing, and found that most bombers had lost relatives, or been mistreated, in such a way that their lives had become intolerable.

The authors concluded that “Chechen suicide terrorism is strongly motivated by both direct military occupation by Russia and by indirect military occupation by pro-Russia Chechen security forces”. They could even draw a correlation between the frequency of bombings and the ferocity of the Russian policies in Chechnya.

Suicide bombings died away after Beslan, which revolted Chechens as it revolted everyone in the world, then came back after 2007 when Russia’s proxy ruler in Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov began to enforce his own rule with brutality equivalent to that the Russians used after 1999.

Doku Umarov, the Chechen rebel leader who claims to have ordered the recent Moscow bombings, said they were a response to security services’ killings of Chechen civilians in February. Obviously, that is no justification for them, but while such killings go on he and his group will find it much easier to find traumatised and vulnerable people to go out and kill on their behalf.

If America was really a friend of Russia, it would not repeat the same glib assurances it has for a decade and a half. It would support Russia’s drive to bring the perpetrators to justice, but it would tell the Kremlin that the brutal tactics it has used are not the noble work of an Abraham Lincoln, but the self-defeating rage of a government that has run out of ideas.

It is time for true peace talks in Chechnya, peace talks that exclude the murderers on both sides. Only if Russia allows Chechens to say what they really think, to set up the government they truly want, and to go where they want to go, can this nightmare ever end.

Oliver Bullough is the IWPR Caucasus Editor.

His book *Let Our Fame be Great: journeys among the defiant people of the Caucasus* is published in the UK by Allen Lane, and will be published in the United States by Basic Books in June.

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