

Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus

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The terrorist incidents occurred between 2016 and 2017 in Russia and the many arrests have shown a growing terrorist threat originating from Central Asia even more serious than the instability originated in the North Caucasus.

In the early 1990s separatist/independent aspirations in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan had grown, fueled by a combination of criminal interests and Islamist extremism, resulting in a situation of conflict, with frequent attacks on local security forces and other state institutions. The goal of separating Moscow from the North Caucasus region has triggered a tough reaction from central authorities, which led to two conflicts a few years later. The first, called the first Chechen war, began in 1994, a few years after the Declaration of Independence of the Republic in 1991 by Dzhokar Dudaev (a former Soviet aviation officer).

Following the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1996, Aslan Mashkadov became president, but the control of the territory was weak while the power of warlords plundering criminal activities and kidnappings grew faster and faster. In August 1999, the Second Chechen War began when groups of fighters from Chechnya invaded Dagestan in order to form an Islamic state. Moscow, too, was directly involved in the conflict, as the explosion of some bombs in two residential buildings in Moscow - on September 9th and 13th, causing about 200 deaths and dozens of injured - was directly attributed to Chechen militiamen. Moscow authorities launched a more robust campaign than that of 1994. In July 2000, Chechnya went under Moscow's direct control and Akhmad Kadyrov was designated as the leader of the provisional administration. His son Ramzan, who succeeded him after his death in May 9th, 2004, is still serving as president.

Despite the overall stabilization, the North Caucasus maintains some degree of precariousness, since the separatist aspirations of the 1990s have given way to a low profile terror activity, with a strong religious characterization, predominantly oriented against institutional sites, men and structures of the security forces and representatives of moderate Islam. Episodic attacks have been carried out, including the one carried out in a school in Beslan (North Ossetia Republic; September 1st 2004, 330 victims among the more than 1100 hostages). The impact on the insecurity perception has been so strong to induce President Putin to reduce the autonomy of federal subjects by introducing scrutiny over the appointment of peripheral governors, implemented under the so-called "power vertical".

Despite the exceptional measures and the frequent preventive and repressive operations of security forces, the North Caucasus still maintains a constant religious activity, which over the years has evolved from separatist aims to transnational jihadist movement, affiliated to the Islamic State after the proclamation on June 23rd, 2015 of an Islamic province in the North Caucasus, called Wilayat al-Qawqaz. The North Caucasian extremists are therefore primarily oriented towards supporting the cause of jihad fought in Syria and Iraq, where about 3000 foreign fighters would allegedly come from Russia. The incidence of this group of fighters among the jihadists emerged not only from the top positions reached by some militants (like Abu Omar al-Shishani – an ethnic Chechen jihadist who was born in the Pankisi Gorges enclave in Georgia - killed in July 2016 in Northeast Syria), but also by propaganda publications in Russian language widespread by the Islamic State media.

The commitment made in Syria as of September 30th, 2015, with air operations in support of the military ground campaign of the Bashar al-Assad military forces, exposed Russia's territory and its interests abroad directly to the threat of attacks and retaliation (as evidenced by the attack carried out against Russian tourists leaving from the Red Sea, which occurred in the skies of Sinai on

October 31st, 2015, or the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara, in December 19th, 2016). In particular, on August 1st, 2016, in a video posted across the Internet, the Islamic State reiterated the threat of attacks throughout Russia and directly against President Putin.

The security forces' counter-offensive activity is directed against the threat posed by small cells made up of people coming from the Caucasus and operating in the main urban centers of the country, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. From the most important anti-terrorism operations conducted in 2016, emerged that the threat from the North Caucasus region is still serious.

On December 3rd, in Rushdamala, Rustam Aselderov (also known as Abu Muhammad al-Kadari), one of the leaders of the Islamic State in the North Caucasus and linked to several attacks in recent years was killed. On November 12th, the FSB (in co-operation with the security forces of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) arrested ten central asian immigrants suspected of preparing terrorist attacks in Moscow and St. Petersburg (all were believed to be in contact with the Islamic State). On October 7th, the FSB killed six militants during an operation in the district of Nazran, Ingushetia. On October 23rd, the security forces of Nizhny Novgorod (region east of Moscow) killed two alleged terrorists who had opposed the search for their vehicle. A third individual was arrested. The Islamic State has claimed the suspects were its affiliated, defining them as Islamic State "soldiers". On February 7th, the security forces arrested in Moscow, St Petersburg, Ekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk (Urals) regions seven suspected members of the Islamic State of Russian or Central Asian origin

When the suicide attack that took place in the St. Petersburg subway on April 3rd occurred, the extremists threat from Central Asia emerged. In 2017, the presence of extremists was also reported in the Far East of Siberia. On April 26th, in Sakhalin (Pacific Island, north of Japan) security forces arrested two men (one of whom was from Central Asia) next to make an attack. In their home, there were cell phones, explosive materials and instructions for building an improvised device. Additionally, on April 27th, 12 people from Central Asia were arrested in Kaliningrad (Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea, between Lithuania and Poland), due to the suspect of belonging to the extremist group Jihad-Jamaat Mujahedin. Lastly, on July 28th, Russian security forces arrested seven suspected extremists in St. Petersburg, all of whom were from Central Asia.

However, Central Asia is no more particularly affected by terrorism: the attacks are rather rare, security forces are pervasive, and local security threats are generally linked to Afghanistan as a source of instability even for neighboring countries. After several years without terrorist attacks, in 2016, attacks occurred in Kazakhstan on June 6th in the city of Aqtobe, in western Kazakhstan, and on July 18th in Almaty. The first attack was carried out by an armed group of about twenty people and was attributed by the authorities to foreign-led extremist forces, while the latter was carried out by a so-called lone wolf. Lastly, in Kyrgyzstan, on August 30th, a car driven by an Uighur extremist crashed against the gate of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, demonstrating the permeability of the borders to a threat from outside but with no connection with the domestic environment.

The situation was different between the years 1990-2000, when the Fergana Valley (between the border areas of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) was the base of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), author of some attacks in the late 1990s, associated with the aspiration to implement an Islamic revolution in the region. Due to a tight control by security forces, the group firstly allied with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and then moved in Waziristan (area on the border with Pakistan), dividing itself into two fringes, the IMU and the Islamic Union of Jihad. During their stay in Pakistan, those groups were involved in jihadist activities, affiliating to Al Qaeda and later joining the Islamic State, since 2014, with the militants leaving to fight in the Middle East wars. In 2015, Uzman Gazi, the IMU emir, swore allegiance to the Islamic State and joined the Taliban purposes in Afghanistan. The Islamic Union of Jihad has also made a similar choice. Both groups therefore disappeared as an autonomous force.

The terrorist threat currently recorded in the former Soviet area is caused by spurious elements of the most diverse extraction, including: former members of the armed forces; isolated elements of the migrants community who traveled to Russia and were overwhelmed by the difficult living conditions; newly converted Muslims, infuriated by radical preaching. In some cases, it is also complicated to distinguish religious extremism from political dissent or simply political opposition, given the narrow definitions imposed by local security laws. The expression of the threat by the radical elements is related to several reasons - the social and economic conditions of the population, the spread of extremist preaching, the return of jihadist fighters, the external projection of Russia. However, in the short term, the terror threat for Russia remain credible both on the national territory and for Russian interests abroad.