

# Islam and the West: Extremist militants sharpen the wedge

Although lost in the media coverage of the populist protest contagion spreading from Tunisia to Egypt, raging snow and ice storms blanketing North America, and Hurricane Yasi bearing down on Australia, last week's [January 2011] suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo airport is a chilling reminder of the destruction humans can wreak on each other without any help from Mother Nature. The carnage left in the wake of last week's bombing underlines the atrocities extremist militants are prepared to enact to achieve their objectives.



Equally lost in the media maelstrom around deadly storms and moving human seas of protestors was the landmark popular vote in southern Sudan to become a separate nation state from North Sudan. This development is the culmination of a long and bloody battle costing millions of lives and decimating entire regions of the Sudanese landscape. In the Sudan, the battle between cultures was raged for years in full-scale war. In other parts of the world, where armed militants do not have the resources for traditional warfare, terrorism is adopted as the means to achieve their political goals.

The Russian suicide bombings – escalated over the past decade – are an example of the brutal cycle of terror, fear, retaliation, resentment, hatred and destruction that hijacks even small differences in outlook and objectives between minorities and mainstream cultures. The events in Russia are equally a reflection of the dilemma being experienced all over the world on how mainstream governments and populations deal with militant extremists and the contexts from which they arise.

The word “terror” comes from the Latin word “terrere” which means to frighten or to scare. The fundamental nature (the whole point) of terrorism is psychological. The intent of terrorism is to frighten and demoralise, induce chaos and disrupt the fabric of society. Every terrorist attack is perpetrated in pursuit of goals far beyond the killing of innocents. Every terrorist attack (either enacted or threatened) is designed to have far reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate target. And these psychological repercussions beget economic repercussions (interruptions or decreases in services, trade), which beget political repercussions, undermining authority, sewing seeds of suspicion about the effectiveness of the government and fuelling disunity throughout the country... and the cycle continues.

The situation in Russia provides an exemplary case study of how terror attacks and the efforts to counter the terror can reverberate through the whole country and beyond. In Moscow last week, the man who blew himself up, killing 35 and injuring hundreds more in the process, was a member of a militant Islamist group active in the southern Russian region of Stavropol, a province adjoining the mountainous North Caucasus region on Russia's southern border. North Caucasus has been a notable trouble spot in Russia, home to Chechen militants who have sustained a steady assault of violent ambushes, assassinations and suicide bombings in their own region, as well as other parts of Russia. These attacks include the savage takeover of the Beslan school in 2004, commando style attacks on the Chechen parliament, and suicide bombings in the Moscow subway and planes departing the Moscow airport. The trajectory of the militants' activities and aims have morphed from a decade ago when their primary objective was to bring about the separation of Chechnya from Russia as an Islamist state governed by Shari'a law. Since then, the cycle of actions and counter-actions seem to have spurred many more extremist Islamist groups full of resentment toward the Russian state. Following the Beslan hostage horror, Time journalist, Tony Karon, noted that Russia's failure to quash the sustained nationalist rebellion in the largely Muslim territory altered the nature of that rebellion, "hardening its fighters, narrowing the differences between secular nationalists and radical Islamists, and putting the Islamists in the driving seat." Having failed to drive Russian forces out of Chechnya via guerrilla warfare, the rebels have resorted to a wider offensive in neighboring territories and have also placed a far greater emphasis on spectacular long-distance terror attacks in Russia proper, fuelling fear, further violence and resultant economic ramifications way beyond the sight of each attack. This trend — where one extremist movement is met by seemingly impotent counter measures by the mainstream government that spawn further attacks and goes viral, triggering clone extremists — is echoed in other parts of the world.

The Russian situation also highlights the dilemmas and the difficulties for any individual country (and the world collectively) in combating terrorism. Efforts by the Russian government to counter the insurgency and the terrorist acts deployed by the insurgents seem to have met with limited success in curbing the atrocities. These strategies – advocated as counter-terrorism measures in other parts of the world — have fallen into two main and contrasting categories:

On the one hand, harsh measures of brute force to repress the insurgents, meeting violence and terrorist acts with raw force and consolidation of control by the Kremlin, have long been the favored strategy of Prime Minister Putin and members of the security forces. This strategy was particularly enacted in Russia in the earlier part of the last decade.

In contrast, more recently, social programs and infrastructure projects were designed and implemented to address widespread stubborn poverty, corruption and other problems that some Russian officials believe precipitated the unrest and the insurgency. This softer approach, intended to tackle the root causes of terrorism – rampant impoverishment, rising prices for staples such as bread, and lack of

education, training and job opportunities — has been supported by current President Medvedev and many policy experts.

Unfortunately, in Russia and elsewhere, both strategic approaches seem either limited in curbing the insurgency and the acts of terror, or they require much longer time frames in which to be effective in reducing the cycle of violence.

When these brutal acts are enacted in contexts where there are fault lines in relations between Islam and the West general populations, the fear, rage and hatred crystallizes in each act of terror and countermeasure. When combined with sustained poverty and repression these acts create an expanding wedge that drives fissures into fault lines, deepens any divides, accentuates differences and entrenches divergent positions, and fuels misunderstanding and further division.

Reducing this wedge, building understanding between diverse cultures so they can co-exist, limiting the acts of terror, is one of the greatest challenges we face in the 21st century.