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New Strains of Terrorism

By Richard Lourie

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Like bacteria seeking to avoid destruction by antibiotics, terrorism evolves. For that reason, the New York marathon of early November, though admirably secured, was probably the least likely target around.

It is also probably true that terrorists have been poring over the Snowden revelations, but what specifically they will learn from them remains unclear, despite all the huffing and puffing of current and former security officials declaring it a disaster. Osama bin Laden was clearly aware that any of his telephone or electronic communications would be bugged. And so he used messengers. Ironically, it was the tracking of one of those messengers he used to avoid electronic eavesdropping that cost him his life. Taking similar precautions, the Saudi jihadi known as Khattab who fought with the Chechens was supposedly killed by a letter poisoned by Russian security agents.

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Islamist extremists may be fanatics, but they are not fools. They learn from past mistakes and work constantly to create new means of eluding existing security measures. Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, the master bomber, who came up with the underwear bomb, and, more chillingly, the explosives that were disguised as part of a shipment of printers, is reported to be working on nonmetallic, essentially undetectable explosive devices that can be surgically implanted within the human body. This is an idea that comes first from science fiction having figured in the 1975 film "Death Race 2000" and a 1990 Star Trek film.

Terrorists no doubt also scrutinize the world media to gauge which actions generate the most coverage. The Tsarnaev brothers proved two things with their attack on the Boston Marathon. The first is that a terrorist can gain more coverage by attacking an event where the cameras are already rolling. That way the event becomes part of everyone's present tense. The second thing is that this initial momentum will often continue for longer than an event that occurred off camera. The evening news will revisit the victims or tie their story into another story.

Terrorists in Russia seem to be testing new methods. On Oct. 21, a Dagestani woman blew herself up on a local bus in the city of Volgograd killing herself and six others, wounding 37. The city is quite far from Moscow, St. Petersburg or Sochi. It is possible that she had another target in mind but detonated the device by accident or out of desperation. But it might also be a sign that terrorists have learned another lesson: strike out-of-the-way places so that people will not feel safe anywhere.

This principle is one that may be applied in Russia during the Winter Olympics since Sochi itself will presumably locked down very tightly. But then again, the same presumption could have been made about Tiananmen Square until a van full of suicide bombers made it through to very heart of the Chinese capital. Doku Umarov, leader of the Chechen Islamist insurgency, has called on his followers to use "maximum force" and "any methods" to disrupt the Winter Games, which he calls "satanic dances to be held on the bones of our ancestors."

But that does not necessarily mean by direct attack on the site, events or spectators. Significant terrorist attacks happening all over the country could disrupt the games simply by overshadowing them. On Oct. 15, a terrorist attack on a chemical weapons facility in the Kirov region was thwarted by local law enforcement officials. Kirov is a 1,000 kilometers east of Moscow. The woman bomber in Volgograd is reported to have had a bus ticket for Moscow on her person, and the capital may have been her original target.

In the Kirov incident, there cannot be any such ambiguity. The two attackers, young men

from the North Caucasus where the insurgents' aim has morphed from independence to creating an Islamic caliphate, had specifically travelled to a site far from major population centers or targets of symbolic significance. The plant is currently engaged in destroying soman, a chemical nerve agent more lethal than sarin. Authorities state that a successful attack would have resulted in large loss of life.

There are eight such facilities in Russia, where chemical weapons are stored and destroyed. Was the Kirov attack a failure or a feint? Now security at the chemical weapons sites will be beefed up, possibly leaving other targets more vulnerable.

There is also the question as to whether the Chechens and other Islamist rebels already have chemical weapons seized during the Syrian civil war? It is only a 800-kilometer drive from Aleppo to Sochi, or 1 1/2 hours by plane. Possessing chemical weapons and being able to accurately deliver them are, of course, two quite different things.

But there is a way around that as well. Sometimes merely demonstrating that you possess weapons of mass destruction is enough to sow fear. In November 1995, Chechen rebels alerted the Russia media that they had buried a dirty bomb constructed from dynamite and radioactive Cesium 137 in Izmailovsky Park in central Moscow. This has been called the first act of nuclear terrorism in history. It was organized by Shamil Basayev, then the leader of the Chechen insurgents, who had been trained in Osama bin Laden's camp in Afghanistan, the same one struck by U.S. cruise missiles in 1998. The dirty bomb in the park did not explode, but there was plenty of live coverage to spread the word — and fear.

After 9/11, it was reported that the Pentagon and the security agencies were conferring with science fiction writers to attempt to thwart future attacks. The real problem with the 9/11 attack was that no one had the imagination to see it coming. Maybe Russia could try that as well — if the country's best sci-fi writers are not living abroad in freer lands or awaiting trial for protesting the current regime.

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