

Will Syria's Terror and Chaos Spread to Russia?

By [Denis Sokolov](#)

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Ever since the fight against terrorism successfully supplanted political competition in Russia, domestic policy has returned to a focus on defining the image of the enemy. In the North Caucasus, the simulacrum of terrorism is used as a tool to suppress dissent and protect the interests of the post-Soviet bureaucratic elite, just as in Russia, the simulacra of modernization, the fight against corruption and the drive for modernization have served as tools for obtaining budgetary funds.

The only difference is that terrorism has already claimed several thousand lives and now, in combination with the drop in oil prices, the conflict in Ukraine and Moscow's expanding military ambitions in the Middle East, it could bring the conflict onto Russian territory.

When people talk about the causes of armed violence — which all too often are grouped under the general label of terrorism — liberal observers tend to blame it on socio-economic factors such as corruption, a lack of social mobility and the suppression of human rights, while state officials tend to blame it on machinations of foreign intelligence services and ideological

factors, claiming that Islam is a religion of social protest and that radical political Islam is a religion of extremism. These are both descriptions of how terrorism comes to exist. But why is it formed in that way, and why here and why now?

It is derived from the loyalty of the siloviki — a loyalty that leaders must foster with money and the threat of repression in the event of dissent. The interests of the siloviki overlap with those of the religious bureaucracy. The former are given unlimited legal immunity and a monopoly on the use of violence under the banner of "the forces of light" while the latter can claim a monopoly on truth and spiritual dominion.

It is difficult for those "forces of light" to justify their abuses of power unless they are constantly battling a form of "managed terrorism." That is why authoritarian regimes with access to easy money such as petrodollars, as in Russia, often form a sort of symbiotic relationship with terrorists.

However, that only holds true when acts of terrorism are localized. What happens when it escalates into all-out war? Everything changes — the nature of the terror, the divisions in society — and the opposition can transform from a manageable simulacrum of an angry serpent into a real fighting force. The result: civil war. How can that happen? As it did in Russia in the early 20th century, when the terrorist revolutionaries — who were initially under the tight control of the secret police — used support from Germany and the opportunity afforded by World War I to plunge the country into chaos.

Or else it can unfold as it did in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine in 2014-15, where Moscow unleashed a "Russian Spring" — either to cinch the annexation of Crimea or to create a bargaining chip for its federalization demands to Kiev. What began as a "special op" rapidly escalated into a bloody war that claimed the lives of more than 10,000 people and put several million in the middle of a humanitarian disaster.

Field commanders consider war and sabotage as their mission, business and lifestyle. For them, justice is not a goal, but a diversionary slogan. Whether in Syria or the North Caucasus, whether part of the volunteer corps in Ukraine or the militias of Donbass, these "men of war" share an almost familial resemblance. But their stories are very different.

As soon as a field commander, the head of a violent subversive group or the leader of a terrorist organization creates a fighting unit, group or terrorist network, he must immediately find a way to recruit, equip and pay its members. Volunteers and jihadists are cheap mercenaries, but they still need to be paid. Therefore, different types of armed groups take shape under different institutional circumstances.

The volunteer battalions in Ukraine such as the Dnestr 1 battalion are simultaneously fighting the ruling bureaucracy and the "empire" of President Vladimir Putin, and with the structures of state growing weaker, oligarchs such as Ihor Kolomoisky who field private armies are gradually turning into warlords. Russia's annexation of Crimea, the war in southern and eastern Ukraine and the unprecedented activity of volunteer combatants has led to the formation of fighting forces previously unseen in the former Soviet republics. Every volunteer battalion has its own page on social networks and its own support group whose members deliver supplies and provisions directly to the fighting units.

Meanwhile, in the Donbass, the list of warlords who own armies and prisons — and therefore, the right to commit murder — includes not only such commanders as Vostok brigade commander Alexander Khodakovsky, but also quasi-state structures such as the State Security Ministry and the Oplot brigade of Alexander Zakharchenko. That is why hustlers and gangsters run the show, and why those who share the ideology of the militias and who would normally organize the supply of human and material resources for them have been pushed out of the political arena in Donbass as well as in Russia's regions. Russian advisers have so far failed in their attempts to encourage nation building in the Donbass.

The power of the Donbass warlords is limited — first, by each other and, second, by their dependence on Russia for military, organizational and financial support. As a result, no single commander feels all-powerful. For these commanders, war is a business, not a religion.

According to various sources, more than 100 people have left the Tyumen region to join the Islamic State, and approximately the same number fought from the region as volunteers in the Donbass. Hopefully, that will not translate into an equal number of insurgents engaged in a future confrontation against the Moscow regime.

Russia's military operations in Syria against the opponents of Syrian President Bashar Assad — even if intended only as a symbolic action — has the potential to trigger almost unlimited terror at home. What's more, in contrast to the war against the banned "Caucasus Emirate" organization, this battle could spark terrorist acts throughout the country.

Denis Sokolov is a senior researcher at the Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. This is an abridged version of a comment that originally appeared in Vedomosti.

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