



**Statement before the House Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence**

“TERRORISM IN THE CAUCASUS”

A Statement by

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It is my view that the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland emanating from the Northern Caucasus region of the Russian Federation is likely to increase in the years ahead. This judgment is based on my perception of several ongoing trends and phenomena:

- 1) The governance problems in the Northern Caucasus that plague the region at large are growing. While the incidence of violent acts may have subsided moderately in the past few years, the underlying issues of poor governance, economic deprivation, high unemployment, and endemic corruption are all getting worse. In addition, oppression on the basis of religion by the Russian state is increasing in the face of the growing role of Islam, including radical and violent Salafi groups and ideology, in the North Caucasus and Russia more broadly. Many people who may have initially been quite moderate in their views and goals have been radicalized by the very unpleasant experiences of themselves or those close to them in encounters with Russian state authority.
- 2) The growing resonance of Russian nationalism in national politics is fueling increasing resentment about the subsidization of the region. This sentiment, which has been captured by the popular phrase “Stop Feeding the Caucasus,” is pushing the Russian government to curtail government funding toward the region just as the strains of economic stagnation (less than 1 percent annual GDP growth at current estimations) are putting pressure on the budget more broadly. The near-term prospects for Russian economy have much greater downside risk than upside potential. In a CSIS report on the Northern Caucasus published in 2011, we concluded that the Northern Caucasus is increasingly looks like a virtually ungovernable region under a different jurisdictional administrative regime than that which prevails in the rest of the country, similar to the FATA in Pakistan. This is also reflected in growing sentiment among Russians that people from the Caucasus are not *Nash* (ours), and that this is a region populated by peoples that are not *really* Russian.
- 3) Islam, as it is in many countries and regions of the world, is becoming a more significant part of individuals’ identity in the Northern Caucasus and elsewhere in the Russian Federation (notably the Volga Region and other large cities).¹ Not surprisingly, we see increasing voice for Islam being expressed in the political context. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, for example, has embraced and promoted this in Chechnya, even endorsing the implementation of Sharia law. We also see a greater prevalence of radical Salafi strains of Islam as well as overt linkages with global Jihadist ideology, which is largely facilitated by the internet.
- 4) Significant numbers (likely hundreds, not thousands according to available data) of Jihadists from the Northern Caucasus have left for Syria to take up arms against the

¹ Sergey Markedonov, *The Rise of Radical and Nonofficial Islamic Groups in Russia’s Volga Region* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2013).

Assad regime. Here they have become battle-hardened veterans with much deeper ties to global jihadist financial, ideological, arms and warfare training networks. Vladimir Putin's strong stand supporting Assad only deepens their hatred of the ruling order in Russia and their desire to demolish it if and when they return to Russia. The success of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s was a watershed event for the emergence and consolidation of embryonic Jihadist networks. If there were a similar success in Syria for the Jihad-inspired forces in taking down the Assad regime, we should also anticipate how this event could prompt another quantum leap in the capabilities of Jihadist networks globally in terms of recruiting, financing, and training, among other areas. Already the linkages between the Northern Caucasus and the battleground in Syria have strengthened in many ways, and we should anticipate that the success (and to a lesser extent, even failure) of Jihadists in Syria could dramatically increase the dangers these groups and individuals present in the Northern Caucasus. The Obama Administration has consistently underappreciated this factor as a major reason for Vladimir Putin's staunch support for the Assad government for the past three years.

- 5) The poor state of U.S.-Russia relations was already a contributing factor in sub-optimal counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing that in part facilitated the intelligence failure represented by the Boston bombing by the Tsarnaev brothers in April 2013. Committee members know far better than I that intelligence sharing even with our closest allies is a complicated and challenging task. Intelligence sharing with a partner like the Russian Federation where mutual trust is very low is that much less likely to be successful and useful. Since the mutual intelligence failure of the Boston bombings a year ago (though clearly the lion's share of this responsibility falls on U.S. intelligence and law enforcement institutions given that this act took place on U.S. territory), U.S.-Russian relations have dramatically worsened over issues including but not limited to the Snowden affair and Russia's military occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea. As we sit here today, it is extremely difficult to imagine that existing problems in U.S.-Russia intelligence sharing on interactions between dangerous individuals/groups in the Northern Caucasus with like-minded individuals/groups in the United States or those elsewhere who may pose a threat to the U.S. homeland will improve. Realistically, the current dysfunctional status quo in U.S.-Russia counter-terrorism cooperation will be politically hard to maintain.
- 6) A far more dangerous threat to the U.S. homeland could emerge if Russian government *intentions* regarding how it manages its own terrorist threat changes in certain ways. What do I mean? My previous point suggests that expectations of cooperation from Russia to help contain threats that we had identified as, at least to some extent, mutual in the past are likely to be disappointed. A far more acute danger for the United States would emerge, however, if the Russian government decided, both for reasons to contain

the threat of Jihadist-inspired terrorists committing terrorist acts on Russian territory and/or to asymmetrically punish the United States, to be a facilitator for attacks on the US homeland—always with plausible deniability of course. Alternatively, but with a similar result, could we imagine that Moscow and Tehran could collude to direct other Islamic-inspired (i.e. non-Salafi Jihadists) terrorist networks to wreak havoc on the U.S. homeland out of mutual interests to asymmetrically punish the United States?

In conclusion, I am virtually certain that the problems in the Northern Caucasus to some degree have already increased the threat to the U.S. homeland. Although we do not know or understand everything that transpired between the act of the Tsarnaev brothers to set off the bomb at the Boston marathon a year ago and their links and interactions with groups and individuals in the Northern Caucasus, for me this terrorist act indisputably demonstrated that in some form what is going on in the Northern Caucasus increases the overall threat assessment for the United States. The confluence of the ongoing Syrian imbroglio, the Iranian nuclear problem, and the dramatic worsening in U.S.-Russia relations that has no end in sight is certainly increasing the threat to the United States. There are clear links from the problems in the Northern Caucasus to this threat—but they are not the only reason that Russia's position could very significantly increase the threat to the U.S. homeland.

This brings me to my final point that revolves around the psychology and potential intentions of Vladimir Putin and, more ominously, those around him who may have much darker motivations and intentions. Mr. Putin has been underestimated by Russian as well as foreign elites, virtually always to their regret, since he emerged on Russia's national political stage in 1999. Undoubtedly, this is a phenomenon that he has encountered and manipulated to his benefit since his youth. Americans, but not only Americans, have also deeply underestimated the national psychological trauma that the collapse of the Soviet Union constituted for Vladimir Putin and tens of millions of other Russians. We need to conceptualize the Russian Federation as continuing to endure something akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Mr. Putin resonates so well with the majority of Russians because he taps directly into this rich psychological vein. I do not pretend to know much about psychology, but I do know that if PTSD is not treated its symptoms get worse, not better, over time. As a starting point, I would recommend to our President to refrain from publicly taunting Mr. Putin (as he did in Brussels last week), and caution other American politicians and officials from doing the same. I would also recommend that the President and other officials refrain from revealing in public to Mr. Putin and others around the world what are our deepest fears that keep us up at night. In addition, I urge all to carefully read the speech Mr. Putin gave to the Federal Assembly² on March 18th because it is possible that historians in the future may mark that moment as the tipping point of Weimar Russia into a fascist state.

² Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, March 18, 2014, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6889>.