

IDSA

Issue Brief

St. Petersburg Metro Bombing: Al Qaeda Redux

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May 25, 2017

S*ummary*

The Imam Shamil Battalion, a little known Caucasian terrorist outfit affiliated to the Al Qaeda, has claimed responsibility for the April 3, 2017 metro bombing in St. Petersburg. It has claimed that the attack was a message of retaliation against Russia for its violence against jihadis in Syria and Libya as well as in Chechnya. The Russian involvement in targeting terrorist outfits affiliated with Al Qaeda in Syria has seriously degraded the latter's capabilities. The return of Caucasian militants from Syria to the Caucasus could have a larger impact on South and Central Asian stability.

The bomb blast which ripped through the metro line in St. Petersburg on April 3, 2017, claimed 16 lives, including that of the suicide bomber, and seriously injured over 50 people. One of the bombs blew up in a tunnel just off the Technological Institute, and another, which did not go off, was placed in a fire extinguisher at the Sennaya Ploshchad station.¹ The targeted area is in the centre of St. Petersburg, and the bombs, which were improvised explosive devices (IEDs) made with ammonium nitrate and shrapnel, created considerable damage. The bombing coincided with President Vladimir Putin's visit to the city, and was obviously a message threatening him and Russia for anti-terrorism policies.

The responsibility for the attack has been fixed on Akbarzhon Jalilov, an ethnic Uzbek from Osh in south Kyrgyzstan holding a Russian passport. He has been identified through both CCTV coverage and DNA traces found on the bombs.²

Who was Jalilov?

Jalilov was born in Osh in 1995 and moved to St. Petersburg with his father in early 2000, where he did his schooling. Peers from his school said that he was quiet and well adjusted. While his parents returned to Osh in 2011, Jalilov remained in Russia



Akbarzhon Jalilov

to study, and procured Russian citizenship. His VKontakte (the Facebook equivalent in Russia) has the usual feeds on pop music, martial arts, etc. But the divergent notes were a website on Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, links to a website in Russian called 'I love Islam' which features quotations from the Quran, and another called IslamHouse.com.³ Jalilov, who had held a number of jobs in St. Petersburg,

including a stint as a sushi chef, had shown no overt signs of radicalisation, and is not known to have visited Syria/Iraq.

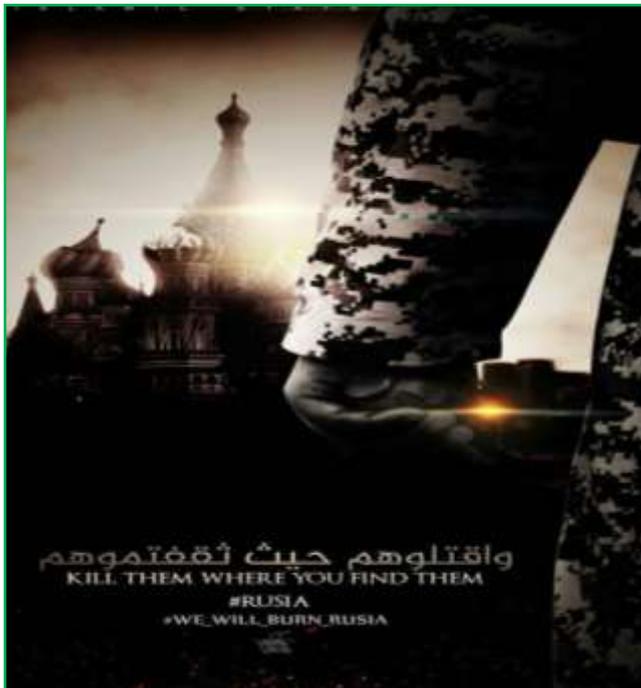
In February 2017, Jalilov had visited Osh, his hometown, which is in the Fergana Valley, a region that spans Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and is said to be the centre of radical Islam in the region. On his return, he rented an apartment in

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- 1 <https://therearenosunglasses.wordpress.com/2017/04/04/russian-train-bombing-linked-to-kyrgyz-native/>
 - 2 <http://heavy.com/news/2017/04/akbarzhon-jalilov-akbarjon-djalilov-st-petersburg-photo-terror-attack-suspect-terrorist-isis/>
 - 3 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-blast-metro-islamists-idUSKBN1762BJ>

the centre of St. Petersburg, living quietly, except for a few Central Asians visitors. There was nothing in his background to raise red flags. Hence, the April 3 attack shocked the security apparatus, despite the Russian Federal Security Bureau (FSB) being on a state of heightened alert. The Russian daily *Kommersant* carried a report in end-March that an attack was anticipated as the intelligence had traced a number of SIMs procured on fake identities which were involved in suspicious conversations.⁴

ISIS applauds but does not accept responsibility

The attack was certainly well planned, and seemed similar to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inspired lone wolf attacks like those committed by Omar Mateen in the US at a night club in Orlando, and by Khaled Massoud in Westminster, London, among others. A subsequent raid on Jalilov's flat showed remnants of explosives, metal bits and casings, and Jihadi literature, including recordings of the



Russia burning

late Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) leader Anwar al-Awlakki's lectures, which appear to be a staple for istishhadi/suicide Jihadis. Cadres and supporters of ISIS sent exultant messages on social media, sharing images of people killed and injured by the blast. The attack came just after a propaganda video, titled 'We will burn Russia', showing a fallen Kremlin and Putin with bullet holes in his head, was circulated through the 'Amaq' media channel used by the ISIS.

The ISIS, on its part, did not take responsibility for the attack and its public statement on the incident merely supported all jihadi action against Russia, with no reference to

the above mentioned video. Intelligence officials in Russia and Europe were quick to hold ISIS culpable, and Jalilov's linkages to the group's Chechen network were examined.

4 http://rbth.com/politics_and_society/2017/04/27/st-petersburg-metro-blown-up-by-extremists-back-from-syria_751903

The Al Qaeda connection

However, three weeks after the incident, the ‘Nouakchott News Agency’, which is based in Mauritania and is used by West and North African Jihadis, especially the Al Qaeda in Maghrib and the Al Murabitun, carried a report that the Katibe al-Imam Shamil (The Imam Shamil Battalion), a little known Caucasian terrorist outfit affiliated to the Al Qaeda, had carried out the attack.⁵ The statement from the Imam Shamil Battalion was couched in the usual Jihadi rhetoric”

To the Russian government, which apparently has not taken a lesson from its defeat in Afghanistan, we say: This operation is only the beginning, and what is to come will make you forget it, Allah permitting’.

The statement warned of more attacks in the future and claimed that the St. Petersburg attack was a message of retaliation to Russia for its violence in Syria and Libya as well as in the Russian republic of Chechnya. It is pertinent to note that Iraq was not mentioned in the message, even though the US role there is more prominent. Importantly, the message stated that the bomber acted on instructions from Al Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁶

The import of the message was against Russian support for Bashar al Assad’s Alawite/Shia regime in Syria. Russian involvement in targeting terrorist outfits affiliated with Al Qaeda such as the Jabhat ul-Nusra in Aleppo, the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham which has incorporated elements of the Free Syrian Army, and the Ahrar al-Sham, has seriously degraded these groups in Syria. These developments have given a fresh lease of life to Bashar Assad’s presidency, which Saudi Arabia and Qatar were trying to overthrow.

Caucasian Jihad

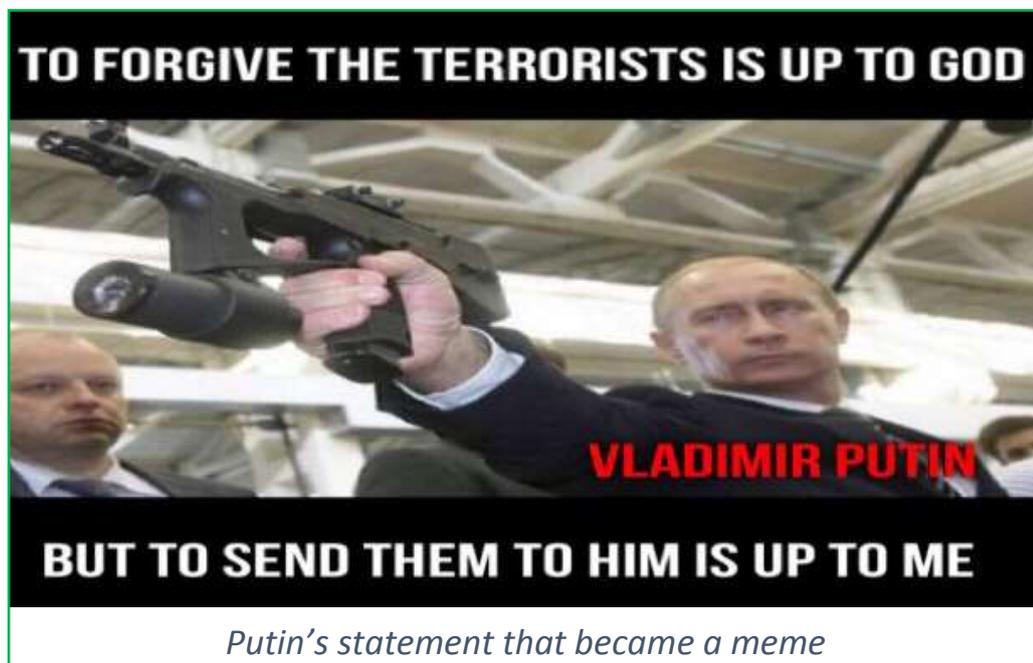
There are an estimated 2500 Caucasians fighting as part of various groups in Syria/Iraq. They migrated from Russia through the Pankisi gorge route in Georgia to Turkey and from there onto Syria and Iraq after Russia cracked down on militancy employing Draconian measures during the ‘second Chechen War’, which lasted from August 1999 to January 2009. Most of them joined Al Qaeda in Iraq and set up an affiliate of the Caucasus Emirate/Imarat Kavkaz (initially from Dagestan and Chechnya) there. Migration to the Syria/ Iraq theatre increased since 2014, after the ISIS gained prominence and monetary heft.

5 https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=057_1493153033

6 <http://www.dw.com/en/group-with-alleged-al-qaeda-ties-claims-st-petersburg-metro-bombing/a-38590088>

Online radicalisation also gained momentum, and both ISIS and Al Qaeda/Jabhat ul-Nusra had set up recruitment cells with Russian publications and chat groups. Caucasian fighters, who had battled the Russian armed forces in the Chechen War, and those who had fought with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) in Central Asia, were prized fighters. Jihadis from the Caucasus can be divided into those with ISIS, those affiliated with Al Qaeda in groups like the Kavkaz Emirate, and Jabhat ul-Nusra and others who created their own ‘independent’ groups.⁷ The Caucasian groups who comprised Chechens, Dagestanis, Ingushetians, and Jihadis from the Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan, came into prominence in the Syria/Iraq region in 2012, with the formation of the Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar which was composed of foreign ‘mujahideen’.

Notable victories of the Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, which helped Al Qaeda control territories in Idlib, Hama and north Latakia and Aleppo in Syria, included the capture of Menagh Air Base, which was a major defeat for Assad. Epitaphs for Assad’s rule were being signalled by the jihadis until the Russian intervention in September 2015 bolstered his legitimacy and resilience. However, the Russian Government paid dearly for its intervention when a Russian passenger plane was downed in Egypt on November 1, 2015. Putin’s reaction to this incident was fierce and unequivocal. A meme about his statement (see picture below) after the attack went viral on the internet, and is often quoted by Jihadis – both from ISIS and Al Qaeda.⁸



7 <https://syrianwardaily.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/the-path-of-jihad-from-caucasus-to-syria/>

8 <http://thepoliticalinsider.com/russa-confirms-isis-bombed-plane-putins-response/>

Apart from the Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, other important Caucasian groups include: the Jaysh al-Ussrah set up by a breakaway faction of the Imarat Kavkaz, Junud al-Sham affiliated with the Ansar ul-Sham, Jisr al-Shugurun established by Uighurs with Central Asians from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Jamaat Ahad un-Ahad (Group of The One and Only) run by veterans of the Afghan war, and Nogai Jamaat, a group formed in November 2016 and working within the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham which was politically supported by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

It is important to note that the Nogai Jamaat in the Caucasus was named after the Nogai Battalion which was created during the first Chechen War by Shamil Basayev, a Chechen from Nogais, and incorporated all Central Asian Jihadis in it.⁹ Links between the Nogai Jammatt and the Imam Shamil Battalion, which latter has claimed responsibility for the St. Petersburg attack, are now under investigation. Investigating authorities in Russia have not yet disclosed the connection, if any, between Jalilov and the Shamil Battalion. However, the FSB has warned of more terrorist actions in Russia and Europe, and has cautioned local authorities to be on a state of high alert.

The FSB's cautionary note was well founded, as just 10 hours after the blast on the St. Petersburg metro, on April 4, two traffic policemen were killed in Astrakhan, a city 800 miles southeast of Moscow. The Astrakhan Region's governor Alexander Zhilkin claimed that the attack was perpetrated by Islamic terrorists. Four individuals who were reportedly involved in the crime were killed two days later. Earlier, on March 24, 2017, six Russian soldiers were killed in a military base at Naurskaya, north-west of Grozny, the Chechen capital, when terrorists infiltrated a poorly guarded perimeter, reminiscent of the Pathankot and Uri attacks in India.

Over the past two decades, Russia has witnessed horrific terrorist attacks by Chechen/Inghushetian and Daghestani terrorists who want to establish a Sunni emirate with its capital in Grozny. These attacks include: the seizure of a crowded Dubrovka theatre in Moscow (October 23, 2002) by 40 to 50 armed Chechens in which over 170 people died, a bombing on the Moscow-to-St. Petersburg train on November 27, 2009 that left 26 dead and some 100 injured, and a double suicide bombing by female Jihadis in the Moscow subway in March 2010 which killed 40 people and wounded more than 100.

Prior to 2010, Chechen terrorists, from Musayevich Dudayev to Shamil Basayev to Doku Umarov, agitated for the establishment of an independent 'Republic' that would be Islamic in nature. The initial call from Dudayev was for an independent Republic of Ichkeria, with the emphasis being on a democratic and self-governed area for Muslims. Though several thousand Central Asian and Russian cadres had joined the

9 <https://syrianwardaily.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/the-path-of-jihad-from-caucasus-to-syria/>

IMU in Afghanistan and were fighting alongside Osama bin Laden and Arab Jihadis, the call for an independent Imarati Kavkaz, which was to be run on the basis of the Sharia and not democratic norms, gained in intensity only after the security clampdown post the second Chechen War. As mentioned above, the crackdown led to a wave of migration into Syria and Iraq via Georgia and Azerbaijan, with Jihadis joining up with the Al Qaeda, ISIS and other radical factions, and generating in its wake dangerous recidivist Islamic ideology.

The Kremlin reportedly took innovative measures to control the spread of Islamic extremism in Russia. According to an article in the Russian daily *Novaya Gazeta*, the FSB covertly established a 'green corridor' to facilitate the travel of extremists from Chechnya and neighbouring Dagestan to Syria via Turkey, with the overall goal of reducing potential violence in Russia's North Caucasus region. This led to a steep increase in the number of foreign fighters travelling from the North Caucasus and corresponded with a significant decrease in domestic terrorist activities, but only until the Russian intervention in the Syria/Iraq conflict.¹⁰

Assessment

There are an estimated 2,500 people from Russia/North Caucous fighting in the Middle East now. Analysts have opined that a serious deterioration of the security situation in the region is in the offing after the militants start returning to the region. There is an underlying fear that this re-migration could have a larger impact on South and Central Asian stability as well. Russian support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, on the ground that it is less of a danger than ISIS, has led to a resurgence of the Taliban's reach and contributed to its military victories against the Afghan Security Forces.

Afghanistan's security is much more fragile currently than it was in 2014, when Barack Obama initiated a drawdown of US/ NATO forces. ISIS has established a credible presence there, which also continues to be the home of the Al Qaeda senior leadership. According to some analysts, Russia will use its well-equipped interior ministry to initiate repressive measures for controlling returning Jihadis in Russia and Central Asia. This could, in turn, induce a number of Caucasian militants to go to the Af-Pak region rather than return to their homelands. However, it is unlikely that Russia will be safe from the militants' ire. The face of militancy in the region has now become progressively recidivist and the transition from an insurgency that sought independence into Islamic terrorism has gained momentum. Al Qaeda and

10 www.businessinsider.com.au25/8/2015

its affiliates, which include the Taliban and the ISIS, also follow this trend — their differences are not so much theological as political.¹¹



A file image of Zakir Musa. Image courtesy: News18

Unfortunately, this trend seems to be having an impact on India as well. Unrest in Kashmir is showing signs of shifting from sponsored calls for Azaadi to refusing to live in a secular India and wanting to set up an Islamic caliphate. Zakir Musa, the Hizb ul-Mujahideen Commander, who took over the mantle from Burhan Wani after the latter's death in July 2016, stated in a video that he supported Al-Qaeda which had expressed support for Shariah (Islamic rule) in Kashmir in its online Pushto magazine *Nawahi Afghan*.

Musa claimed that he was against nationalism and would only work for establishing the rule of Islam — Dar ul-Islam.¹² Unfortunately, the video has gained some traction in the Kashmir valley, despite the Hizbul Mujahideen leadership and the Hurriyat leaders distancing themselves from Musa's views and expelling him from the party. The example of the Chechen agitation morphing from territorial insurgency into Islamic terrorism is there before us. Necessary steps, even if somewhat draconian, are the need of the hour — both for the sake of the Kashmiri people and to prevent this kind of noxious ideology gaining a foothold in the rest of India.

11 <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/apr/26/isis-al-qaeda-in-talks-for-terror-merger/>

12 <http://www.firstpost.com/india/zakir-musa-floats-new-militant-outfit-former-hizbul-mujahideen-commander-supports-al-qaeda-in-video-3446602.html>

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