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“Islands of the Kings” arrive at the “Gardens of the Righteous”: The prospects of internationalization of Chechen terrorism

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RECENTLY, a new film titled *Islands of the Kings* appeared on the Chechen “Kavkaz Center” website under the heading “Genocide in Indonesia”. This development marks the first time the Shamil Basayev-affiliated website has featured propaganda footage on Muslim grievances originating *outside* of the Caucasus region. This possibly confirms a recent trend in which Basayev’s Riyadus-Salikhin (Gardens of the Righteous) Intelligence and Subversion Battalion of the Chechen Martyrs (RAS) continues to veer deeper into the global jihadi agenda. Given the fact that RAS remains one of the most lethal and most operationally capable groups in the world, the personal involvement of the supremely capable RAS fighters outside of the Russian theater could provide a significant capability boost to local organizations.

The film

The film, directed by an “Ammar Shalabi” is another in the line of jihadi propaganda masterpieces that have been distributed over radical Islamist websites around the world in recent years. In the beginning of the movie’s narration in Arabic identifies the geographical location of the Maluku Islands (Islands of the Kings) and provides a historical overview about the arrival of Islam and about the European colonizer practices of bribing local primitive tribes into accepting Christianity. This is followed by a call to rich Muslims to donate to the jihad, while showing pictures of crying women, injured children and other gruesome images of suffering and grief. The narrating voice then proclaims that those who are behind the injustices will be punished. This is followed by a quote that “this war is not one about economy or politics, but a crusader war for religion”.

Further graphic images follow while a song singing “this is crusaders’ dream” plays the background. The movie finishes with a call for jihad as the only way to protect the innocent in Maluku, currently under siege by the crusaders. The movie is highly consistent with other Al Qaeda affiliated propaganda films, which attempt to portray regional conflicts as essentially religious in nature, also linking them together to support claims of a global Christian and Jewish conspiracy to subdue Islam. Individual conflicts then become the “lands of jihad” which serve as rallying points for launching a struggle at the global level, also providing active battlegrounds where the “mujahideen” can gain first hand fighting experience.

The evolving threat

Chechnya itself has been a key “land of jihad”, in the sense that images from the conflict have played one of the most dominant roles in jihadi propaganda material worldwide. Despite this fact, however, Shamil Basayev just like other key Chechen commanders has been careful not to openly subscribe to the “global conspiracy against Islam” interpretation of the world, realizing the likelihood of a negative impact on the international audience based on being “Al Qaeda-linked”. On the contrary, in an attempt to attract the sympathy and support of the international community the Chechens have always tried to portray the conflict as one of national liberation against an imperialist power as opposed to a jihad against the infidels.

However, amid Basayev’s growing disenchantment with the lack of international sympathy for the Chechen cause along with the increasing ideological influence of foreign fighters and sponsors, this reality has changed. No event was more responsible for this transformation than the Moscow theater hostage crisis of October 2002, in which 129 people died in a controversial rescue operation involving the use of an anesthetic gas. From Basayev’s perspective the operation succeeded in its advertised goal of achieving maximum casualties among the hostages as a result of the *rescue operation* in an attempt to “show to the whole world that Russian leadership will without mercy slaughter its own citizens in the middle of Moscow”. However, Basayev grossly underestimated the international reaction which, in the wake of 9-11 and the skillful Russian media manipulation, ended up overwhelmingly siding with the Russians. Basayev was quick to condemn the world for its “hypocrisy”, stating that if the world had “one tenth of the sympathy [expressed for the theatre victims] for the Chechens, the war would have ended long ago.”

Shortly thereafter, Basayev confirmed his growing disregard for international opinion by launching “Operation Whirlwind”, a deadly terrorist campaign of more than a dozen spectacular operations against civilian targets that have resulted in the deaths of nearly 1,000 people. Not only did Basayev choose to neglect justifying his actions to the international audience, he even took a step further by threatening to attack “citizens of states whose leaders support Putin's Chechen policy.”

In short, Basayev’s campaign has gradually evolved from a limited separatist guerilla war against occupying forces into one of the most apocalyptically lethal, indiscriminate and religiously ideologized terrorist campaigns in history. Should this trend continue with the escalating frustration amid the lack of progress in ousting the Russian troops from Chechnya in combination with the increasing proliferation and influence of the global jihadi agenda, it is not absolutely implausible to imagine the participation of Chechen fighters in terrorist activities attacking targets outside of the Russian sphere of influence at some point in the future.

The posting of the *Islands of the Kings* on Kavkaz Center is an indication of this possibility, as it represents yet another step in the direction of globalizing the Chechen worldview by providing evidence to the radicals that they are not the only Muslims who have become victims of an attack by the unbelievers. If further clips from other conflict regions such as Kashmir, Palestine or Southern Thailand appear in the future, this is likely to solidify the perception that Chechnya is truly a part of a greater global campaign of the “crusaders” and other “infidels” to subdue Islam. This could possibly lead them to answer bin Laden’s call to “strike at the head of the poisonous snake” -- the Western powers led by the United States.

Future outlook

Renown for its cunning ability to infiltrate enemy environment and meticulously prepare and synchronize its operations, RAS ranks among the most spectacular and lethal terrorist organizations in the world today. Given this operational prominence it is not surprising that the group has become an operational role model for groups in Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Palestine and even Indonesia, where VCDs and documents on the Chechen techniques for modifying land mines into improvised explosive devices have also been distributed. Should RAS follow the call for jihad in the in the “Islands of the Kings” this would certainly raise the capability level of local groups.

However, this does not necessarily mean that we will see Chechen fighters fighting in Poso and Ambon tomorrow. The most likely scenario is for a foreign, probably Western target to be attacked on the territory of the Russian Federation, as opposed to a third country location. Further, given the continuing conflict in Chechnya and looming conflicts in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria, RAS operatives are busy in their own region.

But as the RAS becomes increasingly frustrated with lack of success in ending the war in Chechnya, more immune to international community opinion, and even more deeply entrenched in the global jihadi agenda, the possibility of an attack against a non-Russian target is becoming less and less inconceivable. The posting of the “Island of the Kings” on the Kavkaz Centre website may thus be an indirect early indication of things to come.

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