

# Terror bombings kill at least 32 in southern Russia

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Back-to-back terrorist bombings in the southern Russian city of Volgograd killed at least 32 people over the weekend and left nearly 70 more wounded, many seriously, in the space of less than 24 hours. The shocking attacks have led to a massive security crackdown throughout the country.

The first of the two suicide bomb attacks took place on Sunday at Volgograd's main train station, killing at least 17 people and wounding over 40 more. The attack was timed for the peak travel period on the eve of the New Year, Russia's most important holiday. Authorities reported that the bomb was detonated in a crowd in front of the station's metal detectors. The *Moscow Times* identified a suspect in the suicide bombing as Pavel Pechyonkin, a paramedic with an ambulance service who converted to Islam and left home to join Dagestani Islamist militants.

Monday's bomb ripped through a packed trolley-bus during morning rush hour, throwing bodies, body parts and clothing onto the city street. Fifteen were reported killed in this second bombing, with nearly another 30 injured.

Vladimir Markin, spokesman for Russia's Federal Investigative Committee, told the media that the two bombs appeared nearly identical, suggesting a common source for the attacks. Referring to the trolley-bus bomb, he said: "Like the bomb at the railway station, it was packed with shrapnel. Since the strike elements are identical in the two bombs, it confirms the theory that the two attacks are linked. It is possible they were prepared in the same place."

While no group has claimed responsibility for the two bombings, the suicide bomber identified in the train station attack had declared his allegiance to the Caucasus Emirate, an Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group active in Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia and elsewhere in the region. The organization has claimed responsibility for

previous mass terror attacks, including the March 2010 Moscow metro bombings that killed at least 40 people and the February 2011 suicide bombing at Moscow's international airport that left another 37 dead.

Volgograd was itself the scene of one of the most recent previous terrorist attacks last October, in which a woman from Dagestan blew herself up on a bus, killing seven people.

Dokka Umarov, the self-declared emir of the Caucasus Emirate, issued a video in July calling upon his followers to "do their utmost" to derail the Sochi Olympics with a new round of attacks.

The stated aim of the organization is to create a separate Muslim state across the North Caucasus. The region was thrown into turmoil with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in 1991. Since then, it has seen two wars in Chechnya (1994-1996 and 1999-2006), which claimed the lives of some 80,000 people, most of them civilians.

Volgograd, formerly known as Stalingrad, the site of the massive battle that turned the tide against Nazi Germany in World War II 70 years ago, was placed on virtual lockdown in the wake of the bombings, as security measures were implemented throughout the country in advance of New Year's celebrations. In Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city, a planned fireworks display was cancelled.

The bombings triggered calls for a law-and-order crackdown from sections of the Russian media, as well as anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant agitation. Police dispersed a demonstration organized by Russian nationalists in Volgograd in the wake of Monday's attacks, telling protesters that they were only creating another target for terrorist attacks.

Pravda.ru quoted a former colonel in the Russian Federal Security Bureau as saying, "We need to do what Americans do. We have to keep tabs on each and every

person. This technology that Snowden exposed—prevention and control—has a real effect.”

*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a pro-government tabloid, carried a piece calling for not only the death penalty for those accused of organizing terrorist attacks, but the jailing of their families as well. “We are left with no choice apart from declaring zero tolerance regarding terrorists and members of their families,” the article stated.

The latest attacks have triggered assurances from the government of President Vladimir Putin that it can secure the Winter Olympic games set to take place within six weeks in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, about 435 miles south of Volgograd. Plans call for the deployment of some 30,000 police and troops and turning the town of 345,000 into a sealed-off fortress, with a security zone extending 60 miles along the Black Sea coast and 25 miles inland.

The bombings elicited statements of “solidarity” and condolences from the Obama administration in Washington as well as the governments of David Cameron and François Hollande in London and Paris.

For its part, the Russian Foreign Ministry stressed that the attacks in Russia were of the same character as those carried out in the US, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and other countries. It likewise implicitly called attention to the backing given by those declaring their “solidarity” with Moscow for the terrorist elements unleashed against the governments of Libya and Syria.

“The position of some politicians and political strategists, who are still trying to divide terrorists as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ones, depending on current geopolitical aims, is becoming evidently mischievous,” the ministry stated. “Terrorism is always a crime and the punishment for it must be inevitable.”

There has been open speculation in the Russian press that the latest terror attacks are the work of US-backed regimes in the Middle East in retaliation for Moscow’s diplomatic success in diverting Washington from a direct military intervention to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

“There is no doubt that the Salafist regimes of the Persian Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia, have been supporting Islamic terrorism in Russia,” wrote Kirill Benediktov in *Izvestiya*. “Russia is now strong enough to afford unfriendly measures towards the regimes that have been using the Wahhabi fifth column in order to destabilize the situation in our country.”

It is estimated that at least 400 Russian Islamists, most

of them from the North Caucasus, are currently fighting with the US-backed “rebels” in Syria. The Putin government has warned that their return to Russia poses a threat of even more terrorist attacks.

The bombings have called renewed attention to the discussion held last July between Putin and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the intelligence chief of the US-backed monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which has served as the main base of support for the Islamist insurgents in Syria.

According to a transcript of the discussion leaked to the media, Bandar demanded that the Russian government terminate all support for the Assad regime in Syria. In return, he offered a joint energy strategy to prop up oil prices and other inducements.

Most critically, the Saudi prince told Putin he could ensure that no terrorist attacks would disrupt the Sochi Olympics.

“I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year,” said Bandar. “The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us.”

At the time, Bandar claimed to be speaking not only for the Saudi monarchy, but also for its chief ally, the United States.

Putin rejected the proposed deal, declaring Saudi support for the Russian Islamists unacceptable. He reportedly vowed that Russia would strike a “massive military blow” against terrorist training camps. Some analysts interpreted the remark as a threat of military action against Saudi Arabia itself.

Given that the Saudi prince claimed to be able to turn North Caucasus terrorism on and off like a faucet, the obvious question raised by the latest bombings is whether the Saudi monarchy, acting either in concert with the CIA or independently, has now given the green light for the kind of horrific attacks seen in Volgograd, in retaliation for the reversals suffered by their proxies in Syria.



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