

Beslan: Counter-terrorism Incident Command: Lessons Learned

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In July 2006, Russian officials announced that Shamil Basaev, the Chechen extremist guerilla leader who masterminded some of the most notorious terrorist acts against Russia, had been killed. Although the long-term impact of Basaev's death, much like that of Abu al-Zarqawi in Iraq, remains to be seen, it does represent a significant success for the Russian government. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to renew interest in the lessons learned from the attack in Beslan, perhaps Basaev's most notorious operation.

From September 1 – 3, 2004, Russia experienced a tragedy as damaging to its national psyche as the 9/11 attacks were to the United States' three years prior. A terrorist assault on School Number 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia resulted in more than 300 hostages, including 186 children, perishing as the Federal Security Service (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnozi* or FSB) attempted to rescue them by storming the school. Beslan represents a complex incident that exposed significant failures in preventing terrorist situations through the mismanagement of intelligence. Furthermore, it offers insight into the effect that past events have on decisions made during terrorism crises, the "fog of war" that influences decision-making in counter-terrorism operations, and the failure of effective incident command that results in mismanaged objectives, ineffective transfer and chain of command, and errors in the dissemination of public information and intelligence. All of these contributed to the tragedy. This article critiques the Russian government's efforts at prevention, protection, and response to arrive at the lessons learned. It then proceeds to explain how some of these lessons might be applied to improve anti- and counter-terrorism operations in the United States.

The on-going Chechen conflict has created a range of political and security concerns for Russia. The first, and perhaps greatest, of these is that Russia's improved suppression of insurgent actions in Chechnya has facilitated the conflict's migration into other parts of the North Caucasus. Second, in addition to perpetrating attacks across the North Caucasus region, the insurgents have demonstrated a capability to execute terrorist operations as far away as Moscow, further embarrassing the Putin government and spreading insecurity among the population. Third, the terrorist assault on a Beslan school was another in a series of deadly attacks by secessionist and Islamic extremists seeking to oust the Russians from North Caucasus and was representative of the Chechen conflict's trademark reliance on "catastrophic terrorism."¹ Previous attacks had resulted in eighty killed and 106 wounded in a raid on a Ministry of Interior (*Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del* or MVD) armory in Nazran, Ingushetia in June 2004; forty killed by an alleged suicide bomber in the Moscow subway in February 2004; and 129 killed during an FSB rescue attempt at the Dubrovka Theater in October 2002. Undoubtedly, these experiences influenced the response at Beslan.

The Beslan siege started on September 1, 2004, when terrorists, primarily ethnic Ingush and Chechens, seized School Number 1 and created a tactical and strategic dilemma for the Russian government. After seizing the hostages, the terrorists

demanded the release of prisoners captured during the Nazran raid and the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. To prove their resolve, the terrorists executed nearly twenty adult male hostages during the first day.

The initial failure in the Beslan incident occurred when local authorities failed to execute an effective anti-terrorism strategy. Prevention and protection require a strategy based on deterrence and intelligence. Deterrence seeks to make the cost of terrorist action too high and intelligence informs authorities of possibilities, thus enabling them to prioritize the implementation of deterrent measures. The efficient gathering, analysis, dissemination, and, ultimately, use of intelligence is crucial in identifying potential threats, prioritizing their credibility, and deploying counter-measures. Operationally, Russian security forces failed to deter the incursion into North Ossetia or to make potential targets unattractive by increasing protection. The terrorists' ability to infiltrate North Ossetia and the town of Beslan indicated that border control was ineffective or may have been compromised, as some suggest.² Considering the existing hostilities, the lack of more stringent border control is hard to understand and may give credence to a conspiracy theory. Furthermore, intelligence was misinterpreted or not used. In spite of arresting a potential collaborator (who disclosed the possibility of school attacks) and indications from local sources as early as August 28 that rebels had penetrated Beslan, no local counter-measures were implemented. No police were deployed near the school nor did authorities take more extreme measures such as canceling or "locking down" the schools.³

Compounding these operational mistakes was a strategic failure on the part of Russian security forces to become a learning organization. The Beslan crisis exposed the limits of integrating prior experiences into institutional learning within Russian intelligence and security forces, thus precluding enhanced preparedness. Russian intelligence forces did not exhibit "out of the box" thinking that might have recognized connections among terrorist operations or have assisted them in identifying linkages between non-combatant targets. Terrorists seek to have their attacks impact society's psyche or, more precisely, make the secure seem insecure. In June 1995 Basaev seized the city hospital in Budennovsk, Dagestan. After negotiations, Basaev's forces were allowed to return to Chechnya, leaving behind 147 dead hostages.⁴ Intuitively, a linkage between taking over a hospital and taking over a school is clear both from a societal and terrorist perspective. Society perceives both as offering security, safety, and a sense of care; striking a school or hospital exposes society's fundamental vulnerability to terrorism. In any case, schools do not appear to have been identified as future targets following Budennovsk.

While the connection to Budennovsk required sophisticated counter-terrorism analysis, the failure to properly assess the Nazran raid, also coordinated by Basaev, better illuminates an apparently compartmentalized, rather than holistic, approach to counter-terrorism. The Nazran raid took place on June 21, 2004. It was the first "large scale" rebel infantry attack in several years and the first outside of Chechnya since 1999.⁵ Threatening and attacking targets outside of Chechnya was a shift in strategy missed by Russian intelligence. Second, no thought was given to the fact the raid might have offered either an opportunity to test deterrent measures or acquire weaponry for a future attack. The failure to effectively analyze the objectives of the Nazran raid is particularly evident because the armory target had insignificant psychological or publicity value. Thus, the attack had other objectives. A broader assessment of Nazran

may have produced sufficient information to raise the threat awareness level elsewhere in the North Caucasus.

When deterrence failed at Beslan, the Russian government reacted. Response is influenced by broader political agendas, past experiences, and local events; at Beslan, government frustration over another hostage situation converged with a perceived opportunity to recover the prestige it had lost from the costly counter-terrorist operations at Nazran and the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. Since the Dubrovka Theater incident, government patience to negotiate a resolution had waned. At Nazran, for example, negotiations were not pursued even though they may have proved fruitful, particularly since the raid was not a suicide mission.⁶ At Beslan, the Russian government shied away from a negotiated settlement and focused instead on a military solution. This preference was evident in the arrival of General Vladimir Pronichev, the operational commander of the Dubrovka Theater rescue, and in the rhetoric and planning of the FSB response team. Furthermore, the public relations spin portraying the terrorists as crazed extremists sought to engender public support for military action. Third, the FSB's request for tanks and APCs to augment *spetsnaz* units already deployed signaled a commitment to a military operation. Securing the release of the hostages appeared to blend with improving a diminished public perception of FSB competency, and thus resulted in an FSB commitment to using force to improve the FSB's public image while securing the hostages' release.

Although one cannot advocate acquiescence to terrorist demands (e.g. releasing the prisoners captured during the Nazran raid, as was demanded by the Beslan perpetrators) entering into serious negotiations should have been considered, particularly given the directly relevant and ancillary information available. Again, Russian security analysts failed to thoroughly scrutinize the incident and instead accepted the premise that an assault would be needed. In the case of Beslan, their decision may be justifiable. The situation deteriorated quickly with the execution of hostages, which warranted an immediate response. However, security forces did not respond. The question is "why not?" The most plausible answers revolve around three issues. First, it appears that since Putin was on vacation on the Black Sea and returned to Moscow before issuing orders, no one had the authority to authorize action. Considering the Soviet legacy of centralized command, Putin's unavailability is a legitimate reason for not responding. The second reason relates to readiness. The forces on site were not sufficient in number or preparedness to execute an attack. The third reason is that on-site officials believed that, with bombs placed in the school (a point that was communicated at the outset of the crisis), an attack might result in the terrorists initiating a suicide mission that would kill all hostages.⁷

They based their assessment on the fact that, in spite of efforts to negotiate in previous cases (Budenovsk, Dubrovka Theater, and Nazran), deaths still resulted. Moreover, in the latter two circumstances, assaults were ultimately needed to try to free the hostages. What officials on site at Beslan missed was that at the Dubrovka Theater negotiations prior to the assault had resulted in some hostages being released, undoubtedly saving their lives. In hostage situations, negotiations serve multiple purposes. One is certainly to facilitate the release of some hostages and perhaps achieve a non-violent resolution to the crisis. At Beslan some moderates advocated negotiations, hoping they might result in the release of some of the children.⁸ Second, the time needed to conduct negotiations increases the pressure on the hostage takers. It extends

the length of time they need to guard the prisoners, stay awake, and protect their perimeter. Third, it increases the time frame in which law enforcement and military units can acquire intelligence and refine a rescue plan. The time gained from negotiation represents an advantage that should not be quickly discarded by security forces.

These errors in judgment were exacerbated by operational and tactical mistakes. Notwithstanding the trauma of day one, the incident did stabilize to some extent. While concerns of a suicide attack undoubtedly were piqued during that first day, it should have become apparent that while a suicide operation remained an option for the terrorists, it was not their primary plan. As critical as misinterpreting the perpetrators' intent was the security forces' failure to achieve situational awareness. Security forces underestimated both the number of hostages and terrorists.⁹ The inaccuracy of these estimates provided an unrealistic picture of the situation, negatively impacted the effectiveness of planning and logistically coordinating the counter-assault, and undoubtedly reinforced the unrealistic belief that using force was less risky.

Further operational mistakes were made in establishing and maintaining clear incident command. Incident command is responsible for defining the operating characteristics, interactive management components, and structure of responding units during the incident.¹⁰ Upon their arrival on the scene, overall command was vested in the FSB. While transfer of command is often authorized in complex multi-agency circumstances, the FSB failed to execute their leadership responsibility in this instance. When transferring command, essential information needs to be transferred as well.¹¹ The FSB did not seek a briefing from the MVD commander (the previous incident commander) who had deployed forces. It also ignored local expertise that might have been able to provide valuable situational, as well as environmental, intelligence. Meanwhile, the confrontational tone of public information releases did little to assist the security forces; it further alienated the terrorists, lessening the chance for negotiations and diminishing the opportunity to surprise the terrorists with a rescue attempt.

The impact of these operational oversights probably was minimized by the decision to forego potentially lengthy negotiations and resort to the use of force. However, other tactical decisions, such as minimally securing the site and choice of weaponry for the assault, did impact the situation. Whether malfeasance or simply misfeasance, neglecting to establish a secure cordon around the incident allowed unauthorized and armed vigilante groups to gain close proximity to school. This jeopardized operational command, planning, and ultimately discipline, which became apparent when the initial shots were fired absent a proper command.¹² The choice to use incendiary RPGs and tanks, reminiscent of the U.S. federal raid on Waco, ensured military effectiveness in terms of eradicating the terrorists' presence in the structure, but did little to minimize collateral casualties; weapons capable of high lethality have trouble differentiating between hostages and perpetrators but are effective killers.

The means used to recover from an event is important as well. Terrorist attacks shake societal confidence in government's ability to provide protection. In the recovery process, government cover-ups, such as those that occurred in the aftermath of Beslan, are counter-productive. Although some independent investigations occurred, none was commissioned by the Russian government. Nor is there any indication the Russian government accepted any of the findings. Many in government rationalized the Beslan cover-up on the basis that full disclosure of the activities surrounding the crisis might have ignited ethnic violence between Ingush and Chechens bent on revenge killings.

Others were simply unwilling to publicize another embarrassment involving a less-than-effective response by the security forces. What became most apparent in the time following the Beslan incident was that the government was unwilling to accept that mistakes were made. Although any assessment of the incident uncovers glaring mistakes at various stages of the operation, the re-assignment of the primary incident commanders to posts that could only be considered promotions indicates the government did not see significant errors in their approach. For example, Pronichev is now the First Deputy Director of the FSB.

Only the realistic assessment of an incident encourages a learning organization and so facilitates the prevention of, and response, to further attacks. Objective assessments should identify gaps in policies and encourage responsible organizations to develop and implement means to close those gaps. The *Report of the 9/11 Commission*, the *National Response Plan*, and the *Nationwide Plan Review* are intended to provide such encouragement in the United States. In Russia, the Nalchik raid in October 2005 illustrates the risks of failing to embrace a learning organization concept. Security forces failed to identify and correct the gaps that allowed Beslan to occur and the perpetrators to escape. Even though security forces had advance notice of the raids and deployed “hundreds of special forces” prior to it, they failed to stop the incursion.¹³ And, although security forces did succeed in inflicting significant casualties on the insurgents at Nalchik, many escaped – just as they did at Beslan. Although no hostages were involved in the Nalchik raid, the execution of the counter-terrorism operation demonstrated poor use of intelligence and inadequate planning.

Beslan’s failures transcend this incident and provide empirical evidence on how to improve anti- and counter-terrorism operations. From an American perspective, some of the failures are addressed in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the *Nationwide Plan Review*, while others are broader.¹⁴ Their effectiveness remains to be evaluated. At a strategic level, discriminate assessment of prior events, both recent and long-term, allows the organizations responsible for prevention, protection, response, and recovery to enhance anticipation, identify gaps in preventative measures, and improve response operations. To achieve this objective, it is important first to critically examine the actual and potential purposes of past incidents. For example, did an attack have military, political, socio-psychological, operational, or economic goals? The goals at Nazran were primarily military and operational. It provided weaponry for future attacks as well as developing the terrorists’ operational knowledge of weaknesses in preventative measures and how security forces might respond. An assessment of Nazran should have increased awareness of the weaknesses in border control and deficiencies in timely response. At a minimum, it should have increased threat awareness. Second, effective analysis should consider the extent to which objectives were met in the operation. The level of success may provide an indication of whether another incident is worthwhile. Third, it is important to assess whether the success or failure of previous events may be incentives for future actions. Has success emboldened potential perpetrators? What is the impact of failure? For example, might the failure to successfully execute an attack force a terrorist group to try again in the near term to maintain its legitimacy, or to re-group and spend additional time planning?

Operationally, a number of salient points emerge. Multiple variables influence the response to a catastrophic event. A level of objectivity needs to be maintained to allow

those coordinating the response to differentiate among political agendas, past experiences, and events on the ground. Past experiences and political agendas have a role to play in formulating a strategy but it is important to recognize that while events may be linked, each has unique characteristics and variables that require unique crisis management. Second, responding forces need to be discriminating in their method of response and selection of weaponry. Russian security forces need to achieve more operational restraint, which is a factor of command and planning. In the Dubrovka Theater, Nazran, and Beslan counter-assaults, security forces were directly or indirectly responsible for nearly 500 deaths. This is a training and command issue. Nothing substitutes for exercises in preparing security forces and other first responders for the pressures associated with a high-stress event.

All options need to be considered in responding to events. After the initial executions, subsequent events at Beslan did not indicate a suicide attack was in progress. If a suicide attack was planned, why did the terrorists not immediately blow up the school after penetrating the perimeter? Given this reasoning, other options should have been explored. Units responding to a terrorist incident need to understand the “nature of the beast” (i.e., the perpetrators and their motives); this will better prepare the command to determine whether an incident requires the immediate use of force or restraint.

Negotiations can be essential in this process. They increase the time to gather and access intelligence to determine who the terrorists are and their objectives. Moreover, negotiations provide time to plan an effective response and secure the area to minimize collateral damage and avoid vigilantism.

This latter point becomes increasingly important in emotionally-driven incidents where terrorists threaten or attack schools and other facilities that serve children or the weak and incapacitated. These targets have a high psychological value and such attacks shake society’s sense of security and thus may encourage the general population to seek resolution on their own.

Poor multi-agency coordination hinders effective assessment of the crisis environment. At Beslan, local assistance and expertise was disregarded. To be effective security forces need to be cognizant that, as in combat, terrorist situations have a “fog of war” surrounding them. Effective use of intelligence is needed to lift the “fog” to the greatest extent possible. This is accomplished by utilizing all available resources. Local resources can be particularly valuable in data fusion because they are familiar with the environment. Furthermore, effective incident command requires flexibility in the planning and execution of operations, not only to respond to unexpected events at the incident but also to achieve a level of control ensuring official actions are not overtaken by outside events (as occurred with the vigilantism at Beslan).

Finally, lessons learned at the tactical level may be applied to prevention as well as response. “All response is local” is the mantra of American emergency response. Thus, the Department of Homeland Security’s list of 77,069 high-risk sites does not include many potential targets such as schools, hospitals, or local sports facilities. The DHS list presumes that local and regional authorities will assume the responsibility for protecting these venues. Local authorities need to have appropriate response plans and be prepared to request additional assistance if needed. At Beslan, local authorities were unprepared to respond to the crisis, even though they had intelligence indicating an elevated threat level. They had insufficient personnel and equipment. An additional question, beyond the scope of this paper but warranting further research, is what caused

the ineffective response? Might it be attributed to multiple priorities, incompetence, or perhaps even a level of cooperation between law enforcement and the perpetrators? The collusion suggested by this last point is the most disconcerting, but it needs to be considered in circumstances in which local law enforcement is under-paid, poorly trained, and might have religious, ethnic, or familial ties to the perpetrators.

In conclusion, the Beslan tragedy provides a case study on how to improve the strategic, operational, and tactical prevention of, and response to, a terrorist incident. It clearly demonstrates the importance of intelligence and analysis both as a part of prevention and in reducing the “fog of war” inherent to response. Finally, it shows how political agendas and past events can complicate the response to the incident at hand, including decisions surrounding incident command, transfer of power, and ultimately the method of response.

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¹ Simon Saradzhyan, “Maskhadov’s Death Anything but a Kremlin Victory,” *ISN Security Watch*, March 15, 2005. www.isn.ethz.ch.

² John Dunlop, *Beslan: Russia’s 9/11?* (Washington: Jamestown Foundation, 2005), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ *New York Times*, September 15, 2004, A8.

⁵ Svante E. Cornell, “The North Caucasus: Spiraling Out of Control?” *Terrorism Monitor*, April 7, 2005.

⁶ The Nazran raid resulted in 186 casualties (80 dead and 106 wounded) the majority of which were security forces. The use of force was ordered even though it was apparent that it was not a suicide mission and opportunities for negotiation existed. (Dunlop, 7, 37).

⁷ In the author’s conversation with John Dunlop, he indicated that the lack of readiness forced the security forces to postpone an attack on the first day. However, he also indicated that such an attack was authorized immediately.

⁸ Dunlop, 24.

⁹ The underreporting of hostages may have in fact been deliberate to reduce public outrage at risking so many lives with an attack (Dunlop, 24-25).

¹⁰ Department of Homeland Security, *National Incident Management System (NIMS)* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Homeland Security, March 2004), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² Dunlop, 33.

¹³ Andrew McGregor, “Upheaval in Nalchik: New Directions in the Chechen Insurgency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 21 (November 3, 2005): 1.

¹⁴ For example, the *Nationwide Plan Review* is to promote unity of effort, strengthen planning while preserving decentralized initiatives, and identify systemic corrections for system-wide problems. *Nationwide Plan Review Phase 2 Report* (Washington: Department of Homeland Security, June 2006), 14.