

National Security Group Lunch Transcript

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Islamic Terrorism in Russia

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ARIEL COHEN:

I think the Tsarnaev brothers' case and what happened in Boston is indeed a case of A: Chechen chicken coming home to roost – and, by Chechens, I don't mean the dezinant – denizens of the Czech Republic. That was a cheap shot at Sarah Palin. I mean the Chechens – one of the indigenous peoples of North Caucasus. And in case of Tsarnaev brothers – I'm going to jump into the nitty gritty – they're only half Chechens. They're not real Chechens, they are half Avars. And, if you go to my March 26, 2012 Heritage backgrounder, on page two, there is a map with probably – exactly 27 different peoples and tribes out of 120 plus who live in North Caucasus. So, here's the first challenge to our intelligence community, military and policy makers. How do you maintain expertise? Where do you get people who can understand the language? Where do you have people who know the difference between Chechens and Avars? And the answer is, when you start cutting military intelligence budgets, you won't get that. So then, you have a choice. You can either talk to our academia – such as it is, in the condition that it is – or you talk to the Russians. So the choices are not necessarily great. So what happened with the Tsarnaev brothers? They came here a long time ago. They didn't come straight from North Caucasus, they came from Kyrgyzstan in central Asia.

Why? Because the two Russian wars smashed the mountaineer – the highlander population of North Caucasus, and a lot of these folks ran because the Russians were killing them. Why the Russians were killing them? Because back in the early nineties, when the Soviet Union fell apart, and the Republics – the constituent Republics of the Soviet Union – were let go, the Chechens, who were not the smallest population in terms of comparison with the Republics, said we want independence too. There was a Soviet Air Force general, General Dzokhar Dudayev, and I think it's not accidental that the baby Tsarnaev was called Dzokhar because he was born in '94 when Dzokhar Dudayev was the leader of Chechnya – of independence. That needs to be checked. Dzokhar Dudayev asked for independence, I think – Jeff, Jeff, were you still in Moscow when that happened? Yeah. And Mr. Yeltsin and Grachev, the defense minister said we're going to smash them with one battalion of paratroopers in four hours. That's a quote from Grachev. One battalion of paratroopers in four hours, we're going to smash them, and impose the



Russian writ. As it happened, two years later, Russia de facto capitulated to the Chechens. General Lebed – the late General Lebed – the then national security advisor, signed the Khasavyurt agreements, the Russians pulled out, and led the Chechens for all intents and purposes, independent – quasi-independent – and allowed them to build their own independence. What they built was a mess. They increasingly were imposing sharia, they were kidnapping people, slavery and slave trade appeared, there were open-air Afghanistan-style bazaars, and increasingly, into this vacuum, who wanders or walks in? Al-Qaeda. Al-Zawahiri was picked up in the neighboring Dagestan, where the Tsarnaev family currently reside – resides.

The Russians claim they didn't know who al-Zawahiri was. He spent six months in the Russian detention. I, personally, still have serious question marks, you know, in the spirit of post-Boston-Russian-US corporation, maybe we should ask for a file the FSB has on Zawahiri's detention there. But, as it is, they walked in there – Mr. al-Zawahiri, but also some of the leading Salafi, Al-Qaeda linked recruiters, one nom de guerre al Moguned [PH], an Arab hatab [PH], the Saudi citizen of Chechen birth, I believe, and many others. And quickly – and I mean quickly, three years, from '96 to '99 – they tans – they transfer – or transform Chechnya, which is primarily national. The General Dudayev – the Russians killed several years later, and his successor Aslan Maskhadov, a colonel in the Russian – in the Soviet artillery – these are secular, nationalist guys. But, the generation from '99 on is really hard-core Jihadi. For example, Mr. – gosh. What's his name? Shamil Basayev. Shamil Basayev is the military leader from '99 'til the Russians take him out in '06. Basayev presides over the famous attack on the Dubrovka Theater in the middle of Moscow. They take hundred of hostages. The Russians botch the rescue attempt with some nerve gas – non-lethal – supposedly non-lethal nerve gas.

They don't put medical units although they know that the gas is not tested and – and – highly toxic, they did not put – did not deploy units around the target area. People choke. They call ambulances – civilian ambulance riders and EMT technicians and medics do not know how to provide first aid, and over 300 people die in that—no, 125 people die in that rescue attempt. Two years later when I was in Russia, Beslan school in North Ossetia is attacked. Over 300 people get killed by the terrorists and by the botched Russian rescue attempt. Before that, in Pervomayskaya, the largest hostage taking in history, with 1000 hostages; again, Russians capitulate – give up to the demands. So you can see already the pattern. The pattern is not good. The pattern is incompetence of the Russian security forces and when in '99 the second Chechen war starts when the Jihadists cross into the neighboring Dagestan, the Russians again deploy basically a conventional force, and bomb Chechnya, smash it and then the results are these terror attacks, including attacks on high-speed trains between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the Nevsky Express, and – the double Moscow metro suicide bombing in 2010, an attack on Domodedovo Airport – I landed in Domodedovo a week after, and this just really heart-wrenching memorial with people just bring little teddy bears, and flowers. It was just really, really sad.



So, what are we dealing with in Chechnya? We're dealing in a – in a – with an old conflict. It starts in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Russians are trying to encroach on the territory that then controlled by two old and rather decaying empires, the Ottoman Empire in the western part of the Caucasus, and the Persian Empire in the eastern part of the Caucasus; what eventually becomes Russian dependencies of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. They try to move in and they realize that in order to successfully control southern part of the Caucasus, south of the mountains, they also need the North Caucasus. The North Caucasus is populated by these highlanders that are very tough, including the Chechens and it's interesting how Islam developed there. Islam appears there ten centuries earlier with an Arab invasion. But it really doesn't strike deep roots until much later and only with the external push – the banner – the green banner appears, and they call the war gazawat, which is another term for Jihad. And this Jihad against the Russians and then the Soviets is starting in the second half of the – the second – last quarter of the eighteenth century, and on and off, continuing until this very day.

It's characterized by extreme brutality by both sides. General Yermolov – the great hero and victor of the 40-year Caucasus war of the first half of the nineteenth century, with statues, and cult of a hero in Russia – burned down villages, killed women and children, and one of the successful ways of pacification was ethnic cleansing. They just would take 500,000 people and throw them out into the Ottoman Empire. They did it in the Caucasus and they did it in the Crimea with the Tartars. So, low and behold when the Soviet Union appears, the remnants of the [UNCLEAR] empire, these guys again say oh, let's have an Islamic state. Let's get rid of them – what was the famous quote of one of the mufti there, of the students, engineers, and everybody else who – the Chechens are saying – we're going to get rid of – this is early 20th century – get rid of students, engineers, and everybody who writes from left to right.

Stalin – he didn't mean the Jews [LAUGHTER] – Stalin, he had other problems. Stalin, as a man from the Caucasus and of the Caucasus, hates these guys, comes World War II, by '44 he understands he's winning the war and he decides to go after the Chechens, their brother people called the Ingush – the two close people linguistically up in the mountains – and the Crimean Tartars with a number of others. He brings the NKVD troops, the KGB troops, and trains, and just loads everybody into these trains, and ship them out to Siberia and Central Asia and up to 30% of them die. So this is genocidal ethnic cleansing, to call the spade a shovel. Ten years later after Stalin dies, Khrushchev says well, this was probably too much, and Stalin wasn't such a nice guy. I will let this guy go back. So, they get back on these trains, and they go back to their ancestral homeland, to Chechnya and Ingushetia, the Crimean Tartars – the Crimean real estate was so nice they'd never allow the Tartars to go back after – until after the Soviet Union collapsed. So, you can understand from this history, why people in the Caucasus would be – excuse my French – pissed off with the Russians. And why would they want independence? I understand that too. What I don't understand is why, if you have a Sufi brand of Islam that more or less is compatible with modernization, and you – you met Chechens; I met Chechens who are engineers, and who are dancers, and who are integrated in the modern world – why would you go back in time and subscribe to an

eighth century Salafi – well, actual Salafi is eighteenth century creed, but it harkens back to early Islam – and the answer is money and the answer is training and the answer is these messengers. And here is where the Chechen nationalism and bravery meets the global Jihadi ideology.

And the – to understand what happened in Boston, you need to sort of in your mind synthesize and marry this ethos of nationalism and heroism on the one hand, hatred of non-believers on the other hand, and it – sort of sprinkle it with modern, internet-based Islamist terrorism that they picked up apparently here in the United States, but also, Tamerlan, the older brother, travels back to Russia, goes to Dagestan – and I work with open sources only – and he has been seen in the company of some really bad guys, the guys who are running in the mountains and killing Russian policeman, blowing up schools, etc. etc. Apparently, he wanted to volunteer to join them. In the meantime, two of his contacts got killed and at some point, he start – he goes back. The question is, did he get his marching orders there, or this was all a self-indoctrinated volunteer operation that he and his small – little brother conjured up here? Did they have connections to some other Islamist recruiters or operatives that gave them their marching orders? One thing that militates against this version, that they had some kind of local control as opposed to guidance, is the lack of the escape plan. These were not suicide bombers, they did not wear the vests, and they did not run.

And that makes me wonder what was the deal, especially with the older brother, with Tamerlan. Now, we have a problem in this country because we don't read very well, people from foreign places, foreign cultures. It looks like a lot of the communications that these guys were involved in was in Russian. It is not difficult in this country to find Russian speakers to read their communication. On the other hand, if they used Chechen and they spoke Chechen that would be more difficult. And, an additional thing: both the Russians and the Saudis apparently provided war – warnings about Tamerlan. You read, of course, that Tamerlan was called for a – for an interrogation – or it probably wasn't interrogation, it was some kind of a conversation, questioning whatever – and then was given a clean bill of health, and let go. And this on its face looks like a serious mistake, to say the least. The other thing is if the Russians and the Saudis were providing warnings based on their intel, Tamerlan was messing with very bad people. The Saudi warning came by the way of Yemen and you know that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is a combination of the Saudi and Yemen Al-Qaedas, and they're very active. And one thing that they're doing, they are publishing an internet publication called Inspire.

And, that is a dawa and a terrorism indoctrination tool and now, they also have the Inspire in Russian. So, they're targeting Russia and Russians speakers for the expansion of Al-Qaeda-based terror. And we've seen in a place that formerly did not have any kind of hard-core militant Islam – had Euro-Islam, and a much softer version thereof – Tatarstan, five – 600 kilometers east of Moscow; Kazan that was a kingdom that was captured by the Russians in 1560s. Now they started having Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorism and the Salafi mosques and Salafi madrasa. Last year the mufti – the chief clergy guy and his



deputy were targets of terrorist attacks. The deputy was killed, the mufti was severely wounded and at some point there was for the first time in Kazan a caravan of cars waving Allahu Akbar black flag of Al-Qaeda. This is for the first time, and the Russians better wake up. Unfortunately, it's hard for the Russians to wake up. The security services are corrupt; for a while they thought about this phenomenon as sheer criminals. I was in a meeting where Putin referred to them as criminals and that reflects a state of mind of somebody who A) was an intel officer who was indoctrinated in operations against West Germany, essentially – against Europe. And secondly, to our own collective guilt, he too went to law school.

So Islam was not his forte, it's not Mr. Medvedev's forte, and I'm not sure of the KGB guys who are running Russia today really understand it. You – you really need to expand an intellectual effort to understand what this ideology is and how these guys operate. The dem – the demography in Russia is also not in favor of Christian, Slavic, Orthodox Christian, Slavic Russians, but in favor of much more fertile North Caucasus Muslims. So with that I will leave you with the questions: is this the right time to talk to the Russians about counter-terrorism that emanates from their turf? We are not welcome there. We are – US – is a target of an unprecedented anti-American propaganda campaign. But, of course, when Obama calls Putin, Putin says, you know, don't worry Barack, we'll help. Is this the right time for cooperation? If not, how can we cooperate with Europeans, with people in the region like the Georgians, the Azaris [PH], and the Turks who may have some information about the movements of these guys. Now it becomes even more complicated because, for example, the Turks are supporting very similar people in Syria so you really have to be careful and look carefully who your friends are, or alternatively, develop your own capabilities – that is both intellectually challenging and expensive. Thank you, and I'll be happy to answer questions.

MAN:

I think I heard you mention the word botched a few times in the context of Russian hostage rescue operations and it occurs to me that I think the Winter Olympics are coming up in the not-too-distant future in Russia. What's your sense of how well the Russians are going to do in the event of – of some kind of incident that they have to respond to there?

ARIEL COHEN:

Well, the prevention – what is it; an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure? They would be better off preventing the attack on Sochi. They also have a big soccer championship – I think it's European, maybe it's world – that is going to happen in a number of cities, which also means that – you know, I was in Yekaterinburg in the heart of Russia. I'm sure that their security and police are not trained and aware how to prevent massive attacks. The other problem that they have is corruption. In investigations post-terror attacks – like blowing up two airplanes on which female suicide bombers went

in, the security guards were bribed for – to allow these women to go on board with their bombs. So bribery is an issue. I think that they need to really think through, and probably get some training, especially for rescue. And I think we are also not without blemish here because I noticed that when the police in Boston was trying to neutralize the Tsarnaev brothers, they did not have special police force, or any other special anti-terror force engaged, this was the regular SWAT teams of Boston, and that probably was not enough because they suffered a casualty. And also it probably would have been better if the older Tsarnaev was taken alive for intel collection purposes, and I'm not pronouncing about their – his – his Mirandability [PH] in that case; I will leave it for lawyers and Jay Leno.

So the Russians have a serious problem because their track record is such that people travel 2000 kilometers – 1500 miles – whatever, 1300 miles – from North Caucasus to Moscow – teams of terrorists traveled on trains, planes, and automobiles to commit massive terror attacks in Moscow. Sochi is a short drive from North Caucasus. They could of – and it's an event that they know about for years and years, so they could have planted people there and you know, have them blend with the population, have them get employment in sports arenas, and be local. So I think Sochi is going to be a huge test. It's also a huge test for the Russian law enforcement because the scope of corruption in construction of sports arenas and trampolines and lifts – ski lifts, and whatever – is just mind boggling. I mean, they are up to and including stories in the Russian media that cash was driven in and out of the Olympics headquarters by a truck. Now, whether it's an exaggeration of the Russian media or not, I don't know. But, the CEOs of the Olympic committee were changed very, very often; they went through quite a few of these guys, and for the same reason: corruption. That applies to security – if I were a Russian decision maker, I would be very, very worried.

MAN:

Great. [LAUGHS] That's frightening to hear. Okay. We have one more Hill staffer who I know also needs to make a presentation. We have time for two quick questions for Dr. Cohen before we turn it over to Congressman Duncan's office. Are there any other questions for Dr. Cohen? Yes, Erin.

ERIN:

Very quickly. Within the past year, didn't the Russians make a raid recently in the Caucasus to preempt what you're suggesting?

ARIEL COHEN:

A very good question. As I was preparing for this conversation I came across a report – actually, I did a blog on that – earlier this year, they had a major counter-terrorist operation – counter-terrorism operation. They killed 39 fighters; they captured quite a few and this is just an on-going cat and mouse game there. But, the problem is, you know, they kill them and the new ones come in. It's an indigenous

population. The unemployment rate for youth is between 50 - 70%. It's worse than Spain in terms of unemployment. And those folks who – Russia doesn't have serious unemployment; Russian unemployment official figures are something like 6%. So the issue is do they leave the region and the – the home, and go look for work elsewhere in Russia, or abroad? There's 200,000 North Caucasus migrants now in Europe. There were attacks and arrests of terrorists of North Caucasus descent in Belgium and elsewhere. So either these guys migrate and get work – and they do get work; they would migrate when – they're migrants, they do work; they're not on welfare all the time. Or they stay there and a lot of them get – get indoctrinated. Even if they travel, some of them get indoctrinated. It's incorrect to see all of them as some kind of hard-core Islamists; they're not. But there is – there are percentages. The recent Pew Charitable Trust research of Islamist attitude demonstrate that plus minus on average – it really varies country by country – something like 28% of people who self-identify as Muslim support what they term Jihad, violent Jihad. And, you know, 1.6 billion people, 28 – one third of that is about 500 bill – 500 million people. This is much more than the population of the United States, if you take it worldwide. With these guys, I did not see the breakdown of their support, but certain percentages are supportive of violent war against infidels. What else is new? So, you have the social, the historic, and the religious motivation for some of these guys, to go the very, very wrong path.

MAN:

Last question for Dr. Cohen, then we break.

ARIEL COHEN:

Let's do it quickly, can we?

MAN:

Okay. Well, we'll see.

LYNWOOD BRAGIN [PH]:

LYNWOOD BRAGIN [PH] [UNCLEAR] Council for Policy and Ethics. I'm wondering if there's anything, doctor, that can be culturally done to take them back from – from Salafi to Sufi, to secular, discounting anything that's being antithetical to their religion, but to just pull them back out of it in some way. Have you seen anything that counteracts this sway toward the violence, culturally?

ARIEL COHEN:

Okay, shall we take the second one?

MAN:

I'm going to have to cap it there. I'm sorry.

ARIEL COHEN:

Okay. All right. I have not seen, and I have not seen even development – an effort to develop – a technology or modalities by us here in the States – or for that matter, by Russians. The only thing the Russians are doing, they're pumping cash into these Republics and the cash – mostly stolen, some of it's stolen in Moscow, and some of it is stolen in the region; one. Two: they come up with something that Nikita Khrushchev, who I've mentioned already, used to call the harebrained schemes. They thought about building ski resorts in North Caucasus, and the mountains are there, the snow is there, and the first minibus of Russian tourists that came to one of these resorts that they spent a billion dollars, and stole another billion dollars to build, was shot up by Jihadis, and I think one young woman was killed, and the other people were – were heavily wounded, and that was the end of the ski resorts scheme. So, you have to think what you're doing. And thirdly, they cry about how their – their clergy is less trained, and less knowledgeable than the guys who went to madrasas in the Middle East, or in Pakistan. And those guys come back better prepared, better equipped, and with real fire in their belly, and convert a lot of these moderate or even secular people into militants. And no, the Russians don't have an answer. And I don't think we – we're even trying, because who are we in the State Department, or elsewhere, to say that this branch of—this is about religion, right? This is – I'm – I'm quoting, right? This people – at the State Department and elsewhere –think that we should not touch religion – they have legal opinions about that – and if we shouldn't touch religion, who are we to tell Muslims that this brand is better than the other brand, and no brand may be the best solution. So, I'll leave you with that sad and discouraging thought. Thank you.