

## Russia's Putin Pulls Victory Out of Strategic Attack

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

An attempted strategic assault against President Vladimir Putin and Russia's global role in a potential alternative to the Bush Administration's war policy, has backfired, leaving Russia strengthened. While much remains to be clarified concerning the hostage drama at the Melnikova St. theater in Moscow, which began when terrorists invaded the Oct. 23 performance of the popular musical "Nord-Ost" and ended with the storming of the theater by Alpha special forces units early on Oct. 26, certain conclusions can be drawn:

First, despite the significant loss of civilian lives, the re-taking of the theater and saving of lives of the majority of the hostages, constitutes a very big moral and political victory for Russian President Putin, a victory with potentially far-reaching implications for strengthening Russia's independence and maneuvering room in the global crisis. Putin himself, in a sober but powerful statement after the ending of the hostage crisis, declared to the world, that "no one can bring Russia to its knees." Even newspapers not usually supportive of the President, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Izvestia*, backed up Putin in his hard line against the terrorists, and evaluated the storming of the theater as a justified and basically successful action.

The backfire effect of the hostage affair, is also underlined by the hysterical reaction in much leading U.S. and European media. The latter have tried, by sensationalizing the Russian forces' use of an anaesthetic gas to immobilize the terrorists and by downplaying the context that made the operation unavoidable, to change the subject—to replace anybody's initial relief at the freeing of hundreds of hostages, with debates over the degree of brutality involved in that process.

Leading Western anti-terror specialists interviewed by *EIR*, however, have concurred with the evaluation, that no realistic alternative existed for the Russian authorities, in view of the evident readiness of the terrorists to blow up the whole theater with nearly 800 people inside. The danger

was increased by the likely circumstance that the terrorists had undercover accomplices among the hostages, who posed a major additional threat in any operation to retake the theater. Finally, medical experts generally agree, that the high rate of casualties following the gas exposure was in large part due to the acute state of physical exhaustion among the hostages, who were deprived of water, food, and medicine, and subjected to extreme psychological stress, for over 48 hours.

The second, absolutely crucial conclusion, is that the hostage-taking itself was intended to be a devastating strategic blow against Russia and against Putin's Presidency in particular. Whatever the identity of the terrorists themselves, the operation had nothing essential do with the Chechnya issue per se, but very much to do with the global strategic context, including: 1) Russia's unexpectedly strong stand against the Bush Administration's Iraq war push in the UN Security Council; 2) signs of increased cooperation of Russia with Germany and France, on Iraq and other strategic issues; 3) historic breakthroughs in Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries; 4) a revival of Russia's Eurasian diplomacy, including visits by Putin to China and India planned for later this year; 5) an ongoing, global escalation of terror and irregular warfare, the overall thrust of which is evidently to weaken psychological and political resistance to the "neo-imperial" policy push from inside the Bush Administration.

The hostage crisis forced President Putin to cancel an official visit to Portugal, planned for Oct. 24 with a scheduled stopover for two hours of talks with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, as well as his attendance at the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) summit, held on Oct. 26-27 in Mexico, where he would have met the Presidents of the United States, China, and other nations of strategic importance.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin visits survivors of the Moscow terrorist hostage-taking, at the Sklifosovsky Institute Hospital in Moscow on Oct. 26. The terrorist act was denounced by Arab governments and press which have recently been sympathetic to the Chechen separatist "cause."*

## **Inside Element**

Well-informed Russian security and intelligence experts have stressed, that the elaborate and highly professional hostage-taking operation could not have been prepared and carried out by Chechen guerrillas alone, without the knowledge and support from some contaminated network inside the Russian security services, and possibly foreign intelligence services. After the Oct. 26 raid, a report was leaked to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and other media, that the terrorists had had a group of accomplices among the hostages, as well as outside the building, including at least one police officer who transmitted to the terrorists inside, information concerning the deployment of the police and special forces. Furthermore, these reports said, some of the terrorists and their collaborators had been employed as construction workers on the site of the theater for over a month prior to the hostage-taking, and were thereby able to systematically prepare the action. Finally, a large terrorist support infrastructure was uncovered in Moscow and the surrounding region, including large caches of weapons and explosives.

On the other hand, the Anglo-American and other foreign intelligence connections to Chechen separatist and terrorist groups are well documented, extending to London-based "oligarch" Boris Berezovsky and the infamous Zbigniew Brzezinski, pathological Russia-hater and co-chairman of the so-called American Committee for Peace in Chechnya.

Russian experts had warned repeatedly, during the last several weeks, that major terrorist operations would be launched against nations resisting the U.S. drive for war against Iraq. In a stunning promotion of that linkage, the Oct. 24 lead editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, published just hours after the terrorist attack on "Nord-

Ost," brazenly called the events in Moscow "poetic justice," a kind of "punishment" of Russia, for "hindering America's wholly legitimate efforts to extirpate one of the world's most dangerous sponsors of terrorism." At the end of the editorial, the *Post* voiced a threat against the other major opponent of the Bush Administration's Iraq resolution in the UN Security Council, asking: "Will France be next?"

## **Were Russian-Saudi Negotiations a Target?**

A well-informed Russian intelligence expert pointed to another strategic factor in the unleashing and timing of the Moscow attack, namely the dramatic development of relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia in recent weeks. According to his report, a delegation from Saudi Arabia had arrived in Moscow shortly before the hostage-taking, to conduct sensitive negotiations with the highest levels of the Russian government.

The talks aimed at agreement on the following two, interconnected points: First, that Russia would strengthen its opposition, not only against the Iraq war, but against the entire Bush plan for "restructuring" the Middle East. Second, in return for Russian strategic support, a large sum of Saudi capital would be transferred from the United States and Western Europe, into Russia. Something on the order of \$50-70 billion would be invested into Russia over the next two years, permitting Russia to "restart its economy" through infrastructure and other projects. According to the Russian report, these talks had reached a crucial stage, in the days immediately preceding the attack.

It is confirmed, that Prince Turki al-Faisal, who was Saudi Intelligence Director from 1973 to August 2001 and is currently Ambassador to Britain (since September 2002), was in

## To Brzezinski, Terror Was Opportunity

Interviewed on radio Oct. 25, in his capacity as head of the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, Zbigniew Brzezinski said Russian President Putin was caught between two fires, and had only one way out without a bloodbath that would destroy him. He must bring in the “recognized elected President of Chechnya,” Aslan Maskhadov, to talk with the terrorists. Maskhadov would declare a truce, then Putin and Maskhadov must negotiate a cease-fire, which would be Maskhadov’s offer to the terrorists. Challenged as to whether the Russian people would accept his scheme, Brzezinski said the Russian people no longer support the war in Chechnya as they did in the past, and insisted his proposal was the only way for

Putin to avoid disaster.

Brzezinski, who was Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser, has long envisioned using Islamic groups against Moscow, and was the U.S. official who created the “Afghansi” warriors against the Soviet Union, and spawned al-Qaeda. His ACPC has co-sponsored talks between Maskhadov’s representatives and leading Russian Parliamentary and other political figures (see *Electronic Intelligence Weekly*, Sept. 9, 2002).

Akhmed Zakayev, the Maskhadov separatist regime’s representative at the talks held under the aegis of Brzezinski’s ACPC, was arrested by Danish police on Oct. 30, on suspicion “of taking part in the planning of the hostage-taking crisis in Moscow.” The Danes acted on request from Moscow, following a furious protest lodged by the Russian Foreign Ministry against the holding of a World Chechen Congress in Copenhagen just after the Moscow hostage crisis.

Moscow for high-level meetings around the indicated time. This first-ever visit by one of the most influential figures in Saudi Arabia, whose father, Faisal bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, was King of Saudi Arabia until his assassination in 1975, would have been sensational by itself. Moreover, the content of the speech Prince Turki prepared for delivery at the Moscow Institute for International Relations on Oct. 25, statements made by the Saudi Ambassador to Moscow, and other reports make clear that the Saudis and Russians were indeed working on a new sort of partnership of the indicated dimensions, when the terrorists stormed the Moscow theater. Prince Turki’s speech was postponed, due to the unresolved hostage-taking, but he was went on to present it on Oct. 27, after the raid.

One need not look very far to find ample reasons for the Saudis to be interested in cooperation with Russia. Riyadh is well aware, that the same clique in Washington that is pushing for an Iraq war, has targetted Saudi Arabia for “regime change” and even dissolution into three or more separate entities, as part of a scheme for “restructuring” the entire Middle East and securing direct U.S. control over regional oil sources. At the same time, the Saudis are well aware of the acute financial crisis in the United States, and have already begun to withdraw tens of billions of dollars of their assets out of the U.S. financial system. Where will that money be invested?

Two major issues in Prince Turki’s speech and press statements were the Saudi-Russian opposition to the U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf, and the Chechen issue. On Iraq, Turki said: “Saudi Arabia’s position is completely identical with the Russian position. It is opposed to any military act against Iraq, and as Foreign Minister [Prince Saud al-Faisal] indicated earlier, it will not allow its territory to be used against Iraq.”

At the same time, Prince Turki explicitly denounced, after

his Moscow speech on Oct. 27, the terrorist act in the Moscow theater, declaring: “As Muslims and Arabs, we have been, and are still endeavoring to fight terrorism. We denounce and stand against any terrorist act targetting innocent civilians, no matter what the demands and grievances of the perpetrators are. No objectives justify the use of terrorist acts.” The same clear denunciation was featured in Saudi press coverage of the Moscow hostage-taking.

Prince Turki stressed Saudi Arabia’s respect for Russia’s territorial integrity and revealed that in recent years, his intelligence organ has been closely cooperating with Russian intelligence on the Chechen groups, in view of allegations that Saudis were involved in financing and fighting alongside the Chechen terrorists. According to informed Russian sources, Turki promised to end all Saudi financial support for radical, terrorist-connected Islamic groups in and around Chechnya—an assurance of very great significance to Moscow, especially coming from a man who is said to have played a key role in organizing and supporting the Afghan fighters against the Soviet Union in the Afghanistan War.

It is well known that much of the structure of “Islamic terrorism” in the region, including Osama bin Laden’s circles, was created as part of the Anglo-American operations against the Soviets in Afghanistan—operations which were run in part through channels in Saudi Arabia. From the Russian point of view, the separatism/terrorism in Chechnya is part of the same thing. And here again, the alleged support of radical Wahhabite groups in Chechnya via Saudi Arabia, where the official form of Islam is Wahhabism, has been a painful thorn in the side of Russia. Hence the enormous significance for Moscow of Prince Turki’s pledges.

No less important, however, is the prospect of large-scale investment into Russia’s economy. Saudi Ambassador to

Moscow Mohammed bin Hassan Abdul-Mawla stated, at the same Moscow event, that “the visit by Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal to Moscow in April and his meeting with President Vladimir Putin outlined the new road map for cooperation and realization of common interests.” He referred to the inaugural meeting of the Saudi-Russian Joint Commission on Economic, Commercial, Investment, and Technical Cooperation, held in mid-October, and added, “The new year will witness the signing of an agreement on the protection of investments and prevention of double taxation, in order to establish the necessary ground for economic cooperation between the two states.”

Meanwhile, it was reported that the reserves of the Saudi Arabian Central Bank have skyrocketed as a result of the repatriation of Saudi investments from the tottering U.S. financial system. It makes perfect sense, that the Saudis would consider putting their financial assets to work in large-scale infrastructure projects, for example, in Russia and other parts of Eurasia, as an alternative to having them “evaporate” in a general systemic financial collapse.

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## Documentation

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### Saudi Government, Arab Press Slam Moscow Terror

On Oct. 25, almost all Arabic dailies—those that are published on Friday, the Muslim weekly holy day—called the act of occupying the Moscow theater and taking 800 Russian civilians hostage, by a gang of Chechen terrorists, “blind terrorism.” The harshest wording came from the press in Saudi Arabia, until recently an active supporter of the “Chechen cause.”

Under the title “Terrorism Will Not Solve the Chechen Issue,” the Saudi daily *Al-Watan*’s lead editorial stated: “What is happening now in the Russian capital, by the hands of an armed terrorist group, will have grave consequences, not only on the Chechen issue, but on Islam as a whole. The after-effects of the Sept. 11 attacks, which put all Muslims on the list of suspects, have not ended, and have unleashed the haters of Islam who are defaming the name of the Honorable Prophet of Islam.” *Al-Watan* reminded readers, that “Communist Russia was the superpower which supported Arab causes and provided the Arab armies with weapons, before we even heard about the Chechen people and their cause. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have been hearing more and more about the Chechens’ fight for self-determination, and many Muslim and non-Muslim nations have helped them. Although the people of Chechnya resorted to legitimate resistance, which was supported by most nations, including the

United States, the Chechen people, willingly or otherwise, allowed terrorists to hijack their cause.”

*Al-Watan* warned that this terrorist act would make things worse for the Chechen people, because the Russian government will strike even more brutally in Chechnya in the name of the “war on terrorism.” *Al-Watan* also indicated that “many Muslims would probably accuse the Russian government of arranging this to use it as an excuse to crush the Chechen resistance, exactly as they accused bin Laden of being a Mossad and CIA agent, doing what he did to hurt Arabs and Muslims around the world.”

*Asharq Al-Awsat*, the leading Saudi and international Arabic daily, stated in its lead editorial: “It is as if the Chechens were required to prove the Likudite theory in Israel and other Western capitals, that targeting civilians is the characteristic feature of liberation movements in the world.” It added, that “previous hostage-taking operations proved that for a major power like Russia, it is impossible to give up and become hostage to such operations. On the contrary, this strengthens its resolve. Therefore, it is legitimate to raise questions about the purpose of this operation.”

The Saudi English-language daily *Arab News* stated in its lead editorial: “The seizure of over 500 theater-goers by some 40 Chechen militants in the heart of Moscow, and to terrify them with threats of mass execution, is terrorism. There is no other word for it. These are innocent people who have nothing to do with the conflict in Chechnya.”

Although the *Arab News* harshly criticized the Russian government for acts of war against the Chechen people, it stated that this is no justification for the terrorist act. The *Arab News* added: “The militants appear well-aware that there is a very good chance that they will not get out of this alive. They describe themselves as a suicide unit, prepared to sacrifice their own lives for their country’s freedom. That makes the situation all the more dangerous, not just for the hostages, but for the Chechen people who will suffer horribly if this crisis ends in a bloodbath.”

The Abu Dhabi daily *Al-Ittihad* published a harshly worded editorial, under the headline “Blind Terrorism,” saying: “The terrorists, through this act, slaughtered the cause of people they allegedly fight for, on the altar of their disgusting acts.”

On Oct. 28, the government of Saudi Arabia officially denounced the “terrorist and criminal” attack on the Moscow theater, and conveyed deep condolences to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The condemnation, reported the *Arab News* Oct. 29, came at the weekly Cabinet meeting chaired by Crown Prince Abdullah, deputy premier and commander of the National Guard. The statement issued after the meeting said: “Saudi Arabia is deeply moved by the bloody events in Moscow and expresses its total solidarity with families of the victims of this criminal act. The government expresses its condolences to the families of the innocent victims and reiterates its rejection and condemnation of all terrorist attacks regardless of their sources and objectives.”