

Growing evidence of 'franchised terrorism'

Terrorism is the ultimate in psychological warfare, says Hagai M. Segal.

AS hundreds of Beslan residents undertake the gruesome task of inspecting endless rows of bodies in search of their loved ones and as hundreds more bury their dead, the world continues to try to comprehend how last week's atrocity could ever have transpired.

In the days preceding the third anniversary of the September 11 attacks it is the latest shocking reminder of exactly why this phenomenon has been coined "terrorism".

The term "terrorism" has come to dominate the global lexicon in recent years, commanding the world's airwaves and front pages since that fateful day in September 2001.

There may have only been a relatively small number of headline attacks in the years since 9/11, but they have been ruthless assaults on civilians that have engendered the most profound effect on our collective psyche. From Bali to Beslan they have destroyed forever the sense of comfort and security previously felt in the countries affected, and in the world at large.

Each time the killing of a few hundred in seemingly such random and cruel circumstances has victimised and traumatised many millions more.

It is exactly for these reasons that atrocities like the Madrid and Beslan attacks have come to define the mobilisation of radical Islamists. While such groups and factions have no chance militarily against the likes of the US or Russia – especially since the destruction and dispersal of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan – they have become expert in creating and spreading fear and uncertainty, and using this as a most-effective weapon.

Such groups have come to see these methods as the only weapon they have against the superpowers they are fighting. Against their massive military machines only the suicide bomber or the school hostage-taker, they argue, can level the playing field.

Many within the most-radical Islamist factions are also convinced that such tactics assault the greatest weaknesses of societies today – a conviction that they are fundamentally weak, utterly unable to deal with high death tolls and civilian casualties.



RUTHLESS: Each killing of a few hundred has victimised and traumatised many millions more.

Use the media to keep the shocking images on the TV screens and front pages, and populations will demand changes in government policy.

Today's brand of terrorism is thus the ultimate in psychological warfare. When combined as it is in Islamist terror factions with religious imperative, and thus an unflinching belief that the end justify the means – even if their interpretation of Islam is one that most Muslims would reject outright, what we encounter is "terror" in its most literal sense.

While Beslan undoubtedly has its origin within the localised context of the conflict between Russia and separatist Islamist elements in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, what is of grave concern to intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies is that evidence is emerging of international co-operation in the massacre.

For years the struggle in Chechnya has been strongly linked with other Jihadist causes around the globe. Osama bin Laden himself having mentioned Chechnya in many of his audio and video recordings, and the Russian assertion that "10 Arabs" were among the terrorists in Beslan has

thus raised the spectre of outside involvement.

If this proves to be accurate it would tally with the increasing evidence from previous attacks attributed to al-Qaeda and associated elements in recent years, and of the growing prevalence of what has been termed "franchised terrorism".

A key modus operandi of the groups and faction in the al-Qaeda umbrella, "franchised terrorism" has been at the heart of attacks we have seen across the globe in recent years.

In numerous attacks, including those in Istanbul, Casablanca, Madrid, Iraq and Bali as well as with cells broken across Europe, fringe Islamist and militant groups who local law enforcement agencies had deemed as little of no threat have suddenly carried out, or been caught preparing, highly skilled attacks.

What has emerged is that highly trained and skilled senior operatives, trained and battle-hardened in Afghanistan, have been dispatched to these areas and have mobilised and organised these groups with devastating effect.

Many of these al-Qaeda "middle managers" are still at large – including the organiser of the

insurgency in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – and time will tell whether Beslan and other attacks on Russian soil in the name of Chechnya have been planned or assisted by such external elements.

Whatever the truth behind the identity of the Beslan group, what is clear is that the tactic of using such atrocities as a mechanism of spreading fear across the globe is likely to be the defining characteristic of future global attacks.

For if we have been terrorised then terrorism has worked, and sadly this will only harden the resolve of those groups dedicated to the use of fear for their political and theological goals.

There is little doubt that terrorism will in time be contained if not defeated outright, but until it does the terror factions will continue to try to wage psychological war on us all. Our response to these attempts to terrorise us will be as important as any security or counter-terrorism measure in the future fight against terrorism.

Hagai M. Segal is a lecturer at New York University in London and a commentator on Middle Eastern affairs. www.hagaisegal.com

