

The evidence suggests that the conflict in Chechnya was not a major factor in the motivation of the Boston bombers



*Since last week's bombings in Boston and the subsequent manhunt, much has been speculated about the motivations of the two ethnic Chechen brothers who are suspected of carrying out the attack. **Jim Hughes** looks at whether or not the Boston bombings can be explained via Grozny. He argues that it is unlikely that the attacks are connected with the conflict in Chechnya, and that we must look to the United States to understand the bombers' pathways and motivations towards violence, especially in the context of the USA's countervailing force of ideas and norms against radicalisation.*

Can the Boston bombings be explained by throwing the spotlight on the Caucasus, or do the answers lie closer to home in the United States? Much of the commentary on the bombings carried out on 15 April has focused on the two young men's ethnic Chechen origins as a way of explaining their motivations. Many of the media reports have described the bombers as "Chechen militants". We can be fairly certain that if these men had been "Chechen militants", then the bombings would most likely have been suicide attacks, conducted with high explosives, and that the deaths and destruction would have been massive. The bombers have no direct connection with Chechnya, having been born in Kyrgyzstan and Dagestan (in Russia). However, they are part of the Chechen diaspora and would not have been unaffected by the trauma and brutalisation of the Russian-Chechen wars of 1994-2004, and their overspill into Dagestan, and the very negative routine treatment that is meted out to Chechens in Russia. However, they never lived in Chechnya, and both left the Caucasus region more than ten years ago to emigrate to the United States. Of course it is not unusual for members of diasporas to be inspired by a narrative of homeland struggle.

The evidence suggests, however, that the conflict in Chechnya is not a major factor in their motivations. This atrocity was not about "doing something for Chechnya". One intriguing fact that supports the conclusion that Chechnya was peripheral to their motivations, is that 21 April, just a few days later, would have been a highly symbolic date for politicised Chechens interested in their homeland struggle – for on this date in 1996 the president of Chechnya Dzhokhar Dudayev was killed in a Russian airstrike. The youngest of the two bombers was born in 1993 and possibly named after the Chechen president.



Credit: Rebecca Hildreth (Creative Commons BY)

Yet, the conflict in Chechnya is not wholly peripheral, in so far as this struggle has been absorbed since the late 1990s into the global jihad associated with Al Qa'ida. It has become one of a number of conflicts world-wide where Muslims are being "massacred" by non-Muslims, as Osama Bin Laden put it. The most likely pathway for their radicalisation is internet Islamist politicisation. But this still raises questions as to the precise mechanisms of politicisation, and the reasons why the radicalisation occurred. That the bombers used home made bombs, and US sourced

guns, seemingly acted alone, with little attempt to disguise themselves in the act, and had no thought out exit strategy, strongly suggests that we are dealing with radicalised amateurs unconnected to any organisation, but inspired by the ideas and values of Al Qa'ida. This

amateurishness also partly explains why they slipped under the radar of the FBI. Attention was drawn to the elder brother, but it seemed so trivial that the FBI let the case drop.

What this atrocity also demonstrates is the immense resonance of terrorism in the collective psyche of Americans. For the cost of a few tens of dollars in materials, a couple of terrorists succeeded in closing down one of America's major cities for several days, at a cost no doubt of many tens of millions of dollars. Horrific as this episode was and is for the victims, it has completely overshadowed other equally horrific events in the US that week.

We must also look closer to home, to their experiences in the US, for a major part of the explanation. The terrorism industry terms such attacks "home-grown terrorism". But they raise many perplexing questions. What, for example, motivates two young men to conduct such ruthless attacks on civilians enjoying a community event, given that they emigrated to the United States with their family, and undoubtedly must have regarded it as a sanctuary from their treatment in Russia, and as a place of aspiration and opportunity like countless other migrants? These are young men who spent their formative lives in the USA. When it comes to the motivations of terrorists and their pathways of radicalisation, psychologists have quite an influence in framing the issue and devising public policy. In the past psychologists focused on personalistic factors – the "bad guys" and the "mad guys" approaches. But more recent work is more nuanced and accepts that there is no "terrorist personality" and that in the right circumstances many individuals could be radicalised into participation in violence and atrocities.

As a political scientist, I find such explanations very unsatisfactory, for they lump together all political violence and terrorism in a general focus on the individualistic epiphenomena, and downplay the role of ideas and ideologies in constructing and underpinning the motivation for participation in violence. No sensible person would use an individualistic focus to analyse the civil war in Syria, for example, in which many Al Qa'ida affiliated groups are participating. To understand pathways and motivations we require a sophisticated approach to understanding the role of ideas. Americans should be relieved that so few muslims living in the United States are prepared to engage in such violence. Out of many millions we are dealing with a small handful. We can be sure that many muslims trawl through radical Islamist sites, and many also will be horrified by US actions and policies in various conflicts involving muslims. But hardly any of them resort to terrorism. That tells us that actually there is a systemic countervailing force being applied through the socialisation of values and behaviour in the USA which so far is working to counteract Islamist radicalisation.



Grozny, Chechnya (Credit: Adam Smit, CC BY 2.0)

Why this countervailing force of ideas and norms failed in the case of these two young men is the question. All reports from friends, neighbours, co workers, and schoolfriends indicate that these were reasonably stable and sociable young men, with the older brother seemingly a charismatic individual. The younger brother took US citizenship last year. Ignoring conspiracy theories and distractions, we are left with two main possible explanations. Firstly, that the brothers underwent a gradual politicisation in an Islamist orientation. Much has been made of their internet activity on Islamist sites, but what is so far in the public domain does not to me seem unusual for two young muslims, Chechen or otherwise, with an interest in politics and conflicts that affect muslims globally. Much has been made in some parts of the US media about the role of drone strikes, which have increased in intensity under President Obama, as a radicalising factor – but note my comment above about the need to distinguish between radicalisation in the sense of politicisation and disagreement (which is common), and radicalisation as a pathway into terrorism (which is

rare). This is not to downplay the fact that the brothers may have been steadily outraged by “massacres” perpetrated against Muslims, and located themselves within an Al Qa’ida narrative.

Secondly, there may have been some trigger event or episode, as yet unknown. There is also the unpalatable possibility that the inspiration for the brothers also lies much closer to home. Atrocities perpetrated by disgruntled and alienated individuals with easy access to guns and explosive materials are, unfortunately, a part of American culture that has also been exported in recent years.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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