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We Should Learn From Israel's Experience

By Konstantin Sonin

The causes and consequences of the Beslan tragedy have already become the subject of heated debate. Other countries around the world have endured similar tragedies and have learned to live in a state of war.

What, for instance, can we learn from the Israeli experience? That people become inured to living in a state of war. That retribution brings peace to the soul, if not on earth. That the people, not the government, choose the course their country will follow. That while difficult, it is possible to reject taking a hard line. That democracy is stronger than dictatorship.

Millions of Jews perished in the Holocaust, and many of the murderers managed to escape punishment by emigrating to South America or changing their names. Israel settled the issue of retribution; though it took many years, the criminals were hunted down and executed. In the 1970s, the terrorist brigade that murdered Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics met the same fate.

Those who take children hostage and blow up apartment buildings deserve nothing less. The best thing to do with the organizers of an attack such as the one in Beslan last week is to kill them. The knowledge that everyone directly involved was eliminated will increase the chances for peace in the Caucasus. No matter how many years pass, no matter what name the terrorists go by or where they are hiding -- in Buenos Aires, London or the Pankisi Gorge.

Their elimination should not be a matter of honor but the routine work of the state. If Chechen rebel leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was indeed murdered by Russian intelligence agents, then the real scandal is not that they did it, but that they were left defenseless when the operation didn't come off exactly as planned. In a similar situation 10 years ago, the Israelis found the will and a way to save their agents.

The hard line proposed by Vladimir Putin to restore Russian control in Chechnya was never the only option, nor, perhaps, was it the best of those available. But a majority of Russians approved this policy at the ballot box in the 1999 parliamentary election and the presidential election in 2000.

When the Israelis approach an election, they know the alternatives. Advocates of a softer line -- in the Israeli case, those who support making significant concessions to the Palestinians -- may lose at the polls, but the fact of public discussion helps to legitimize government policy and to ensure that it enjoys greater public support.

So long as a hard-line leader remains in power that line tends to harden. The government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is a good example of how a country can be drawn into a long cycle in which ever bloodier terrorist attacks alternate with ever more brutal reprisals. But where the failure of a hard-line policy spells the end of the entire political system in a nondemocratic country, in a democracy a hard line can give way to a more peaceful approach.

Another lesson we can learn from Israel is that democracy can triumph in conflicts with authoritarian regimes -- even without cracking down on criticism of the government and the security services.

Then again, it's not exactly clear why Putin should come in for criticism. As you may recall, he wasn't the one who chose to pursue a hard line in Chechnya. The Russian people did when they voted him into office.

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