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In the seven years since the accession of President Vladimir Putin, the FSB (Federal Security Service) has mounted a steady campaign designed to subsume all of Russia’s intelligence agencies under its command and to re-create a monolithic, Soviet-style Intelligence agency. The FSB has been largely successful: FAPSI (Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information, which had been responsible for monitoring and collecting information through electronic means), the Border Guards Service and the MVD (Interior Ministry) all have been incorporated to one degree or another. As of now, the FSB’s lone “failures” are the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate of the Armed Forces), and the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Directorate). In recent weeks, the FSB has launched a new campaign for supremacy.

Early this month, the Russian Duma passed a new anti-terrorism bill (first introduced in March), allowing the FSB to mount anti-terrorist operations on foreign soil. Such legislation was bound to provoke a reaction from the GRU and SVR, which view international operations as their exclusive domain. That has proven to be the case— and the interagency war may take place in Iraq.

Early in June, four Russian diplomats were kidnapped and killed in Iraq. President Vladimir Putin’s response was to order the Security Services to “find and destroy” (1) the murderers, an order which FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev claimed his agency would make “every effort” to carry out. (2) Patrushev’s comments evoked a response both from the SVR and from the military high command. First, Sergei Shestov, CEO of a veterans organization, claimed that the SVR’s “Zaslon” commando team would carry out the assassination (3); then,
General Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of the General Staff, claimed that GRU Special Forces operatives were already in Iraq, attempting to find the killers. (4) It is highly unusual for a Chief of Staff to mention GRU (except in the broadest possible terms such as in relation to military reforms), let alone to discuss specific operations. As such, Baluyevsky’s comments must be viewed both as a statement of intent, and as a warning to the FSB to stay out of military matters and to confine itself to domestic operations.

Given the timing of the GRU and SVR statements, it is possible that these two agencies are working together to successfully carry out the “liquidation order” given by President Putin—thus "scooping" the FSB and asserting dominance in foreign operations. In this instance at least, “my enemy’s enemy is my friend.” The SVR and GRU’s future independence may depend on their success or failure.

Source Notes:

(1) “Putin Orders Liquidation of Baghdad Embassy Killers,” Agence France Presse, 28 Jun 06 via Lexis-Nexis.
(2) “Russian Security Services Head Vows To Avenge Death of Diplomats In Iraq,” Interfax News Agency, Moscow, in Russian, 28 Jun 06; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(3) “The Zaslon Squad Will Seek The Embassy Hostage Killers,” Izvestia, 5 Jul 06 via Lexis-Nexis.
(4) “Russia Increases Anti-Terrorist Struggle,” WPS Observer, 10 Jul 06 via Lexis-Nexis.