

## Moscow Terror Attack: Eradication of Terrorism Should Be the Focus

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### Introduction

On 22 Mar 2024 at least 137 people were killed, including three children, and more than 150 were injured when camouflaged gunmen stormed the Crocus City Hall, in Moscow's northern suburb of Krasnogorsk, and then set fire to the building. The attackers claimed to be members of the Islamic State's Khorasan (IS-K).

The Islamic State wrote on Telegram on 23 March that the attack was carried out by four IS fighters as part of 'The raging war' with 'Countries fighting Islam'. They repeated their claim again next day.<sup>[1]</sup> While the 'Islamic State' (IS) may have been largely defeated in the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, IS-K is proving itself to be a 'worthy' successor to its parent legacy.

It is the deadliest attack in Russia for almost two decades when Islamist insurgencies had marked the first decade of Putin's rule. Terrorists had then taken than 1,000 people, including hundreds of children, hostage in the Beslan school siege. At that time, President Putin said; "We showed ourselves to be weak. And the weak get beaten".<sup>[2]</sup>

### The Attack

Some witnesses filmed the gunmen from the upper floors as they walked through the stalls shooting people, sharing the footage on social media. "The terrorists used a flammable liquid to set fire to the concert hall's premises, where spectators were located" the Investigative Committee said and that people died both from gunshot wounds and smoke inhalation after a fire engulfed the 6,000-seater venue.<sup>[3]</sup> The gunmen appear to have planned the attack carefully, setting fires by an emergency stairwell in order to herd people toward a killing zone in the middle of the lobby.

The Russian member of State Duma, Alexander Khinshtein said the attackers fled in a white Renault car and were stopped in the Bryansk region, about 340km away from Moscow. Russia's Federal Security Service announced that 11 people had been arrested, including four 'Directly Involved'.<sup>[4]</sup>

Four suspects Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, Saidakrami Murodali Rachabalizoda, Shamsidin Fariduni and Muhammadsobir Fayzov were produced in Basmanny District in Moscow on 24 Mar. Russia's interior ministry said they were foreign nationals. Unconfirmed reports have mentioned nationals from Tajikistan.<sup>[5]</sup> But it is surprising that the terrorists have been caught alive and did not commit suicide as their supporters can now be traced.

### IS-K

Following its leaders' split from Al-Qaida and the Taliban, IS-K first appeared in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the years 2014 and 2015. IS-K members swore allegiance to the far more violent and radical Islamic State, or IS, which was at the time expanding its power and launching assaults in Syria and Iraq.

In order to establish a Caliphate in South and Central Asia that would be ruled by a rigid interpretation of Islamic Sharia Law, IS-K, seeks to overthrow, and supplant existing governments in the historic Khorasan region.

The terrorist organization appears to be broadening its geographic reach with the attack in Moscow. In previous decades, Russia had to deal with militancy motivated by religion, particularly in Dagestan and Chechnya. More recently, Russian intervention had shifted the balance of power in favour of Syrian forces battling jihadists as well as their political rivals.

Now that the Syrian front is largely quiet, these militants, under the IS-K flag, may have decided to take their fight to Russia to avenge their defeat.

The group later released highly graphic footage from the attack showing one of the gunmen opening fire on several people. New York Times has cited Colin Clarke, a counterterrorism analyst as saying, "IS-K has been fixated on Russia for the past two years." IS-K accuses Moscow of having Muslim blood in its hands, referencing Moscow's interventions in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria.[\[6\]](#)

In footage on social media, one of the suspects said he was offered money to carry out the attack. "I shot people," the suspect, his hands tied and his hair held by an interrogator". When asked why, he said: "For money." The man said he had been promised half a million roubles (\$5,400). One terrorist was shown answering questions through a Tajik translator.[\[7\]](#)

Islamic State Khorasan Province has previously been reported to have recruited radicalised nationals from Central Asia, including Tajikistan. They are easy prey for radical Islamic preachers who give them a sense of value and purpose. In a phone call on Sunday, Putin and the Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon, noted "that security services and relevant agencies of Russia and Tajikistan are working closely in countering terrorism, and this work will be intensified".

IS has organized several terrorist attacks in Tajikistan itself. In 2019, dozens of fighters crossed into Tajikistan from Afghanistan and attacked a border post on the border with Uzbekistan. In 2018, ISIS claimed responsibility for killing a group of Western cyclists in the Tajik mountains. IS has also been behind two prison riots in Tajikistan that resulted in the deaths of dozens of prisoners and guards. There have also been a growing number of terrorist attacks abroad carried out by Tajiks including the January attack in Iran in which over 100 people were killed.

Douglas London, a former senior CIA officer who has specialized in counterterrorism and Central Asia said, "The Central Asian element of ISIS had always targeted Russia." [\[8\]](#) As per Colin P Clarke the Director of research at the Soufan Group, said;" the Islamic State "perceives Russia as the vanguard of Shia Islam at this point."[\[9\]](#)

It is unclear as to why the group chose this moment to strike when Russia had intervened in the Syrian civil war in 2015, supporting President Bashar al-Assad against ISIS. Maybe they felt that the terrorist threat emanating from Central Asia had become a blind spot as Russia was focused on Ukraine.

### **President Putin's Reaction**

President Putin paying his condolences vowed to punish those behind the "Barbaric terrorist attack", saying four gunmen trying to flee to Ukraine had been found and detained" and in his television address said "terrorists, murderers, non-humans ... have only one unenviable fate: retribution and oblivion."[\[10\]](#)

Russian television showed security services interrogating four bloodied men, who spoke Russian with an accent, on a road in the Western Bryansk region, which borders both Ukraine

and Belarus. Prominent state television hostess Olga Skabeyeva asserted on Telegram that attackers "who would look like IS" had been recruited by Ukrainian military intelligence. However, this is not IS.<sup>[11]</sup> President Putin did not name the Islamist terror group during his public statements on the attack, while directly accusing the 'Ukrainian side' of involvement.

Kyiv has strongly denied any connection, with the Ukrainian President Zelensky in his evening address on 23 Mar accusing Putin of trying to shift the blame onto them. "What happened yesterday in Moscow is obvious," he said. "Putin and the other scum are just trying to blame it on someone else."

On Monday - three days after the attack - Russian President Vladimir Putin told senior officials "We know that the crime was committed by the hands of radical Islamists, followers of an ideology that the Islamic world itself has been fighting against for centuries".<sup>[12]</sup> But he also insisted that the attackers were linked to the Ukrainian government.

### **Conflicting Narratives**

The US Embassy in Russia had warned on 07 Mar that "extremists have imminent plans to target large gatherings in Moscow, to include concerts", advising caution. Just three days earlier, President Putin had publicly dismissed a US warning of an "Imminent" attack in Moscow as propaganda designed to scare Russian citizens.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly said the US did not pass any specific information through the Russian Embassy in Washington about preparations for the attack.

The US National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson rejected 'Ukrainian involvement whatsoever' while Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that any statement made by US authorities to vindicate Kyiv until the end of the probe into the attack should be considered as evidence. She also disregarded the US intelligence reports that IS was behind the attacks. <sup>[14]</sup>

### **Need to Combat Terrorism**

Terrorist attacks are tragic assaults on ordinary people. Terrorists possess the capacity to continuously transform not only their methods and organization but also their ideology. A segment of Al Qaeda, responsible for the 9/11 attacks, split off to form IS and subsequently IS-K.

The attack serves as a reminder of the threat posed by terrorism and the growth of organizations such as Al-Qaeda and IS-K. Similar to how a global effort was required to vanquish Al Qaeda and ISIS, so too will one be required to eradicate IS-K before it can expand.

This will require the international community to closely coordinate with the Afghan Taliban, whom IS-K opposes. Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq need to be at the forefront of the fight against the Khorasan faction, as these countries are the most vulnerable to IS-K's forays. The Central Asian states and Russia should also be on board to contain the threat, and neutralise it. The need is for a collective effort. Further Russia's claims of state support for IS-K needs to be investigated after all the organisations need financial and material support.

The Arab countries condemned the attack and declared their solidarity with Russia. Saudi Arabia emphasised "The importance of fighting and countering all forms of extremism and terrorism."

Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar condemned the attack and conveyed deepest condolences on the loss of lives in the horrific terrorist attack. He reaffirmed India's resolution to continue fighting terrorism in all its manifestations.

## **Conclusion**

Terrorism remains one of the most serious and persistent threat to global peace and security, and requires a unified and resolute response from all nations. The people who carried out the incident are mere pawns, there are supporters behind them and even deeper are the backers who remain hidden. You cannot afford to pin the perpetrators down to the most convenient scapegoat to quote Gavin Wilde writing for Carnegie.

Dealing with a terrorist attack of this scale inevitably illustrates the complex character of the current conflict. The Russian refusal to acknowledge that the terrorists were actually from ISIS, not Ukraine, complicates the fight against terrorism.

Israel when confronted by a similar attack about six months ago have resorted with overwhelming force in a bid to eliminate the Hamas. It is now to be seen how President Putin responds. However, the shape of the response will take remains unclear till the precise motive and origin are established.

A mass information campaign followed by forceful demonstrative actions can be expected. If the responsibility of ISIS is accepted by Russia it may respond by cracking down on Russia's Muslim minority communities in the North Caucasus region and beyond.

Terrorists are utterly indiscriminate in what they do and are prepared to kill in the most horrific way. The world must thus be vigilant and unite while eliminating terrorism in all forms. The attack is a deplorable act that must be unequivocally condemned by all nations and individuals who value peace and security. Effective counter-terrorism requires quick investigation and action unencumbered by politics.

## **Endnotes**

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[1] Russia Says 4 Foreign Suspects Detained As Death Toll From Concert Attack Reaches 133." RadioFreeEurope, March 24, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-attack-islamic-state-russia-terror-crocus/32874123.html>.

[2] "What We Know about Attack on a Moscow Concert Hall," BBC March 25, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68645755>.

[3] "What We Know about Attack on a Moscow Concert Hall," BBC March 25, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68645755>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Russian court charges four men with act of terrorism in Moscow attack By Graeme Baker & Robert Greenall,

[6] Eric Schmitt, “ISIS Affiliate Linked to Moscow Attack Has Global Ambitions,” The New York Times, 25 March 2024 [https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/25/us/politics/moscow-attack-isis.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.fU0.FvpG.XID\\_c-Dole0f&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&ugrp=m](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/25/us/politics/moscow-attack-isis.html?unlocked_article_code=1.fU0.FvpG.XID_c-Dole0f&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&ugrp=m)

[7] Russians Lower Flags in Mourning, Suspects Charged in Deadly Concert-Hall Attack,” The Reuters, March 24, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-mourns-victims-deadly-concert-hall-attack-2024-03-24/>.

[8] Belton, Catherine, and Robyn Dixon. “Terrorist Attack in Russia Exposes Vulnerabilities of Putin’s Regime.” Washington Post, March 25, 2024. <https://washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/24/vladimir-putin-terror-attack-russia/>.

[9] Moscow Terrorist Attack Undercuts Putin’s Strongman By Amy Mackinn Foreign Policy March 27 ,2024

[10]. Russia Arrests Concert Hall Gunmen as Death Toll Rises.” The Moscow Times, March 28, 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/23/russia-arrests-11-over-concert-hall-attack-as-death-toll-climbs-a84587>.

[11] Roth, Andrew, and Pjotr Sauer. “Four Suspects in Moscow Concert Hall Terror Attack Appear in Court.” the Guardian, March 25, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/24/new-islamic-state-videos-back-claim-it-carried-out-moscow-concert-hall-attack>

[12] Russian court charges four men with act of terrorism in Moscow attack by Graeme Baker & Robert Greenall,

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[13] Gunmen Kill at Least 60 at Moscow Concert Hall, Russian Officials Say” The New York Times, 22 March 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/03/22/world/moscow-shooting>

[14] The Indian Express. “Russia Says It’s Hard to Believe Islamic State Could Have Launched Moscow Attack,” March 27, 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/russia-hard-to-believe-islamic-state-launched-moscow-attack-9236691/>.

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