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## **Carnage in Moscow – The Need to Deal Decisively with a Resurgent Threat**

*By Rohan Gunaratna*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent carnage in Moscow should galvanise nations to come together to face a common threat. To fight transnational terrorism and its vicious ideological driver – extremism – the key levers are international security and intelligence cooperation. The ongoing geopolitical competition between rival powers should not compromise our safety and security.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Four citizens of Tajikistan mounted a devastating attack on the Crocus City Hall complex in Moscow on 22 March 2024, killing at least 144 and injuring more than 145 concert-goers. The intensity and magnitude of the attack shocked the international community. The carnage demonstrated that the terrorist threat posed by jihadists has neither disappeared nor diminished. As we take in the scale of the tragedy, another terrorist attack somewhere is likely to be in the making.

The official news agency of the Islamic State (IS), *Amaq*, issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack. Graphic video footage of the killings recorded by the attackers, as well as a selfie pledging allegiance to the leader of IS, were also released. Rejoicing after the attack, jihadists, individually and in groups, congratulated IS and hailed its return to international infamy. Although the attackers were captured and confessed to their roles, the leadership, organisation and ideology that drove the attack are still very much intact.

The US government had warned Russia of an impending attack and its embassy in Moscow had also warned US citizens to avoid public places 48 hours before it happened. It looked as if the Russians did not take the warnings seriously because of

its geopolitical rivalry with the United States. To fight a resurging threat that many believed had gone into remission, strong global leadership is needed.

## **The Resurgence of Islamic State**

Five years after the world had declared its defeat in Baghuz, a town in Syria, the Islamic State has transformed itself into a global movement and has struck Russia with a vengeance. Although the roles of Russia and Iran had not been adequately highlighted in the Western media, they, together with Western forces, had contributed to the defeat of IS. In making a comeback, Islamic State is bent on striking back at its enemies.

The attack in Moscow coincided with the re-election of Russia's President Vladimir Putin on 21 March 2024. IS supporters depicted the attack as a congratulatory message for Putin. One of the worst terrorist attacks perpetrated after 9/11, it ranks among the top five attacks mounted by IS outside Iraq and Syria, including Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday attack on 21 April 2019, and the Paris attack on 13 November 2015.

## **The Moscow Attack**

The organisation that carried out the attack was a Tajik cell of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Investigations following the attack revealed that the terrorists travelled from Tajikistan to Moscow in November 2023 to set up an operational base. The pre-attack surveillance of the concert hall was conducted by 25-year-old Fariddun Shamsuddin, one of the four terrorists involved.

Shamsuddin's co-attackers were 19-year-old Muhammad Sobir Fayzov, 32-year-old Dalerjon Mirzoev, and 30-year-old Rachabalizoda Saidakrami Murodali. Their mission was to kill as many people as possible at the Crocus City Hall. The fact that they received their weapons from a dedicated safehouse suggests the existence of a larger compartmentalised network and the likelihood of further attacks.

The jihadists stormed into the concert hall shouting "God is great" as they went on a shooting spree. They fired randomly at men, women, and children; not hesitating to shoot the injured and those praying for their lives. The attackers recorded a propaganda video in typical IS style, raising their index fingers symbolising *tawhid*, "the belief in the oneness of God".

Following a fierce firefight, the terrorists attempted to flee but were caught after a police chase. Subsequent investigations revealed that religious and financial motivations lay behind their attack and shed light on the radicalisation and recruitment tactics employed by extremist groups.

## **Islamic State Khorasan Province – An Expanding Threat**

Directed by IS-KP leader, Sanaullah Ghafari alias Shahab Al Muhajir, the Moscow operation was supported by his cells in Baluchistan, Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and Istanbul (Turkey). The strength of his forces had increased from about 1,900 at the time of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 to between 3000-4000 fighters today.

Most of his recruits, including the Moscow attackers, did not have previous links to terrorism. Drawing recruits from Turkey to Xinjiang (China), and from Afghanistan to Pakistan, IS-KP has the potential to radicalise not only their territorial communities but diasporic communities as well. From its core in Afghanistan, IS-KP is expanding to Central Asia and South Asia.

As the Taliban is in control of Afghanistan and IS-KP has sanctuary there, it is critical to eliminate the threat at its core. The threat posed by IS-KP is clear from recent memory of how Al Qaeda used Afghanistan as a base to mount attacks on US embassies in East Africa in 1998, the USS Cole in 2000, and New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C., on 9/11.

As evidenced in the attacks from 2021 to 2024, IS-KP's range and lethality have expanded. A lean and mean organisation, IS-KP is turning itself into a potent external operations wing of the Islamic State. The next phase of the threat will become more deadly if the movement is not eradicated.

### **How the World Should Respond**

The horrendous attack on the Moscow concert hall serves as a wake-up call not only for Russia but for all countries and a reminder that terrorism is a common challenge faced by humanity. Complacent after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, countries both in the West and in the East have allowed its remnants to evolve into deadly threats. To prevent these threats from consolidating and expanding, like-minded governments should systematically combat and root out the ranks of IS branches, both on and off the battlefield.

While IS central has weakened in its capabilities, IS-KP has significantly expanded and developed long-range, deep-penetration capabilities. Following lethal attacks in Afghanistan, Iran, and now Moscow, IS-KP has emerged as one of the most powerful branches of IS globally.

The Moscow attack has emboldened IS-KP and its affiliated groups, increasing the likelihood of future mass casualty attacks unless the group is incapacitated. Besides Israel and Jews worldwide, IS-KP's targets include the West (particularly the US), China, Russia, Iran, and their allies.

The Moscow carnage is likely to inspire similar entities, groups, networks, cells, and individuals to carry out copycat attacks. In addition to securing high-risk targets, such as hotels and malls where people congregate, there is a need for improved operational and behavioural profiling. Industrial partners should collaborate with governments to fortify vulnerable venues and increase security measures.

Governments should engage with Muslim leaders and elites to dismantle exclusivist and extremist ideologies that fuel violence and terrorism. Failure to address these radical ideologies will result in more attacks and a rise in Islamophobia. The international community must preemptively combat the ideologies that drive radicalisation. Despite the denial among some religious leaders that their faith is being distorted to incite hatred, violence and fear, communities and religious leaders must

take decisive action against hate preachers and errant mosques, madrasahs and associated groups.

To shield communities from online radicalisation, Muslim leaders should actively counter propaganda and other radicalising forces. In addition to condemning the Islamic State and similar groups, they should uphold local and traditional Islamic values, promoting moderation, tolerance, and coexistence within their communities.

## **Conclusion**

The tragic events in Moscow serve as a stark reminder of the persistent threat posed by terrorist organisations and the necessity of a coordinated global effort to address this challenge. Just as previous tragedies have prompted international alliances to strengthen security measures, the attack calls for collective action and vigilance in ensuring the safety and security of people worldwide.

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