



Russia's Islamist Terror Threat Reemerges

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On March 22, Islamic militants opened fire on a concert hall in the Russian capital of Moscow, killing scores of concertgoers before setting the venue ablaze. Less than 24 hours later, the Islamic State terrorist group publicly took responsibility for the assault. The death toll currently stands at 137. While some reports link the attack to the Islamic State's regional branch in Central Asia (named "Islamic State – Khorasan Province") where the shooters are from, other analysts conclude that multiple branches of the Islamic State cooperated in the Moscow attack.

Vladimir Putin has suggested that the assailants had links to Ukraine. But the Islamic State's likely "justifications" for the attack won't lie in Kyiv. Rather, the Islamic State would likely justify the attack through two causes in Russia: Russia's policies in the Middle East, and the alienation of its Muslim citizens and migrant Muslim populations living in Russia. The proximate cause for such an attack may have more to do with tactical considerations such as chances for success resulting from Russia's vulnerability.

Syrian Blowback is one Possible "Justification"

Moscow's deep relationship with Syria stretches back to Soviet times. In September of 2015, Putin decided to wade into the Syrian civil war on the side of the country's beleaguered dictator, Bashar al-Assad. While this help enabled Damascus to turn the tide, it also made Moscow a party to the civil war – and a target of Islamist militants eager to unseat Assad and lash out at his allies.

Meanwhile, as the Islamic State emerged, Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia became the largest recruiting grounds of foreign fighters for this terror group. When tallied by the Soufan Center in October 2017, Russia and the former Soviet Republics accounted for nearly thirty percent of the roughly 30,000 foreign militants that had by then signed on to the group's radical cause in Syria and Iraq. For their part, Russian authorities – worried about the potential threat of militant "returnees" – doubled down on their support for Assad's Syria as a way to mitigate the future threat these fighters might pose at home.

Thus the Kremlin became a target of the Islamic State and its ideological fellow travelers. Nearly a decade ago, one of its key military leaders – a Chechen with the *nom de guerre* of Abu Omar al-Shishani – threatened that the group would target Russia in the future. The Kremlin's preoccupation with the ongoing war in Ukraine has left it more vulnerable to Islamic State's opportunistic attacks.

And Iran is Another

Relevant, too, to Islamic State targeting decision may be Russia's alliance with Shi'ite Iran. For Islamic State militants, Iran is another popular target, as illustrated by the January 2024 bombing attack on a memorial ceremony in Kirman, Iran (which the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State claimed credit for).

Moscow has pursued a Middle East policy increasingly centered on its partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and increasingly based on arms trade as well as shared ideological opposition to the West. Meanwhile, Russia's own Muslim population of over 21 million is overwhelmingly Sunni.

Historically, Russia was the stronger partner and Iran was forced to rely on it for both political and economic support. Once Russia invaded Ukraine, however, the dynamic in the relationship began to change to favor Tehran.

Today, it is Iran rather than Russia that serves as the senior partner in their alliance. Over the past year-and-a-half, Iran has become a major supplier of battlefield materiel (such as drones) for the Russian armed forces, and greatly expanded its economic ties to Russia.

Alienation of Muslim Minority Groups

For more than half a century, Russia has been locked in a cycle of protracted demographic decline. But Russia's Muslims are a comparative growth group in this overall picture, with birth rates far above the national average. As a consequence, Muslims have emerged as the country's fastest-growing minority (though they are far from a cohesive group and are spread among numerous ethnicities). These various Muslim ethnic groups are collectively projected to make up as much as 30 percent of the national population by the middle of the next decade.

Yet this expanding, diverse religious minority isn't well integrated. Russia's Muslims often see themselves as outsiders in the ultra-nationalist authoritarian state that has been erected by Vladimir Putin over the past quarter-century. Their second-class status has been highlighted in Russia's current war, with conscription rates of soldiers disproportionately coming from Muslim minority groups.

This trend has led to protests against the Kremlin, and a growing sense of alienation in places like Dagestan. More ominously for Moscow, there have been renewed signs of secessionist stirrings there and in several other majority-Muslim parts of Russia. All of which creates fertile soil for recruitment on the part of groups like the Islamic State and its ideological competitor, al-Qaeda.

The March 22 attack in Moscow may be a potential portent of things to come. Russia's Mideast policy has given foreign Islamist militants several excuses for conducting murderous attacks, and Russia's Muslim minority groups are feeling alienated from, and sometimes hostile to, the prevailing political order.

In addition, Russia's preoccupation with its Ukraine war has left it vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Such tactical considerations (i.e., the likelihood of being able to murder large numbers of civilians) are often the triggers for terrorist groups to prioritize one target over the many other possible ones. These factors together add up to the possibility of still more acts of terror directed at Russians in the years to come.