

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# The Islamic State and Russia

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## **S***ummary*

The March 2024 terrorist attack by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Moscow Oblast brings to attention the Islamic State's long-standing animosity towards the Russian state. The group also seeks to destabilise the relationship between Russia and Central Asia. Russia can be expected to deal with the ISKP threat more aggressively, including tighter border controls. The Islamic State Vilayat Caucasus, founded in 2015, also exists which operates in the historically conflict-prone Northern Caucasus region.

On 22 March 2024, a major terrorist attack took place in the Crocus City Hall, Krasnogorsk, in the Moscow Oblast, in which 137 people were killed and 180 were injured. This major terrorist attack on Russian soil occurred 20 years after the Beslan school tragedy, when 330 lives were lost in the attack executed by the Chechen secessionist forces. Four Tajiks militants were arrested and 12 people were detained in connection with the Moscow attack. There were many speculations over who was responsible for the attack. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), however, claimed responsibility for the attack.

The ISKP is a regional Islamic State chapter focusing on the South Asia and Eurasia regions, including Russia. ISKP has been known to accommodate Central Asian fighters from bordering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It has been known to commit attacks in Central Asia, including cross-border attacks into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On 18 April 2022, for instance, it launched ten rockets into Uzbekistan from the Balkh province of Afghanistan and on 7 May 2022, seven rockets were launched into Tajikistan from the Khawaja Ghar district. Its focus is not limited to the Central Asian territories though, with the group being known to be critical of Russia and China, especially their involvement in Afghanistan.

## Islamic State and Russia

The Islamic State is a Salafi Jihadist terror group that primarily operates in Syria and Iraq. Its primary objective is the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate globally. Since its inception, the Islamic State has kept Russia as one of the main targets.<sup>1</sup> The terror group has inherited its animosity towards the Russians from its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), whose founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was a mujahedeen fighting in the Soviet–Afghan war.<sup>2</sup> The AQI in the past has been responsible for the killing and abduction of Russian Embassy employees in Iraq in 2006.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamic State's anti-Russian stance is built into its foundational doctrine. The Islamic State leadership highlighted that Russia was one of its top enemies in 2014 during a speech by Abu Bakr-al Baghdadi, the first leader of the group.<sup>4</sup> The group has also used its propaganda machinery to target the Russian state and create hatred among like-minded radicals towards Russia. Since its formation, the group

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<sup>1</sup> [“Mapping Militant Organizations. ‘The Islamic State’”](#), Stanford University, April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda*, Policy Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> [“Al-Qaeda-Linked Group Claims Russians' Abduction”](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 June 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas Webber, Peter Smith and Colin P. Clarke, [“Moscow Attack Signals Broadening Footprint of ISKP's Central Asia Contingent”](#), *EurasiaNet*, 29 March 2024.

has coined the term ‘Crusader East’ for Russia and established its own Russian media wing.<sup>5</sup> Media outlets have been used to spread anti-Russian propaganda, including the one that claimed the responsibility for the recent Moscow attacks. The attack was also a culmination of years of anti-Russian propaganda espoused by the group and the ire building up within the radicalised anti-Russian individuals of the group.

After the recent attack, *Al Azaim*, the main propaganda magazine, published images stressing future attacks on Moscow, including statements such as “one battle, one enemy, from the south in Mozambique to the far north in Russia”.<sup>6</sup> The group has even used the conflict in Ukraine for its propaganda, highlighting how the conflict is bogging down Russia and calling it a war between two sets of Crusaders.<sup>7</sup>

With the Russian preoccupation in Ukraine, the group feels it would be an appropriate time to strike against Russia, both territorially and its citizens abroad. With the rising propaganda against Russia, there has been a significant increase in the attacks on Russian nationals and buildings. One such example is the 5 September 2022 attack on the Russian Embassy in Kabul by the ISKP where two Russian nationals lost their lives after a terrorist detonated a bomb when a diplomat and his security guard came out.<sup>8</sup> This attack happened after the Taliban takeover. Prior to the attack in Moscow in 2024, the Russian authorities reportedly thwarted an ISKP attack on the Russian Synagogue in the Kaluga region where they had planned to attack congregants.<sup>9</sup> The terrorists were neutralised by the Federal’naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii (FSB) when they put up resistance.

For Russia, the threat has not just been limited to the ISKP but also the Islamic State Vilayat Caucasus. The Vilayat Caucasus was founded in 2015 and operates in the historically conflict-prone Northern Caucasus region (Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia). Since its inception, the organisation has waged a jihad against the Russian establishment, with most of the old warlords in the North Caucasus who were against the Russian state pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Smith, Lucas Webber and Colin P. Clarke, “[Islamic State Escalates Anti-Russian Militant Campaign](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 2 April 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lucas Webber, “[Islamic State Celebrates Mutual Destruction in Russia-Ukraine War](#)”, *Militant Wire*, 8 August 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Briefing by Russian Foreign Ministry, Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, “[Investigation into Terrorist Attack in Kabul](#)”, The Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of India, 8 September 2022.

<sup>9</sup> “[Russian Security Agency Says It Foiled Attack on Moscow Synagogue by Islamic State Members](#)”, *Tass News Agency*, 7 March 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Sergey Markedonov, “[ISIS: A Threat to the Greater Caucasus](#)”, Russian International Affairs Council, 9 November 2015.

Apart from individuals pledging allegiance to the group, there are also radicalised elements in the North Caucasus with secessionist tendencies who have been attracted by the idea of the Islamic State. This was visible when the Russian security agency, the FSB, on 28 March 2023 eliminated ISIS-affiliated terrorists in Karabulak, Ingushetia.<sup>11</sup> Given the Islamic State’s offshoot in the Caucasus, the Vilayat Caucasus, Russia faces the IS threat within its borders.

The reports of two Chechen groups (Ajnad al Kavkaz, Sheikh Mansoor Battalion), both with ISIS links fighting on the Ukrainian side, have further stressed the ISIS focus on Russia. While they are fighting against Russia, the main purpose is not to support any regime but the long-term dismantling of the Russian state and support of secessionism in North Caucasus. These radical fighters are part of the secessionist groups who fought against the Russian regime in the former Chechen conflict from the 1990s till 2004.

With various Islamic State groups focused on Russia, the Islamic State has made Russia a long-term target and sees Moscow as a major threat to its objectives in the international arena. The Islamic State has drawn inferences from Russia’s past involvements, particularly in Syria. This also comes from Russia’s ability to counter terrorist activities within its own region, particularly in the North Caucasus.

## Islamic State Motives

The Islamic State’s targeting of Russia is based on various factors, ranging from the historical conflicts and Russia’s involvement in Afghanistan, one of the hotbeds of Islamic State activities and the Central Asian connect of Russia.

One of the primary reasons for the Islamic State's focus on Russia is the terror group's idea of revenge for Russia’s historical mistreatment of Muslims. The group accused Russia of being a state that oppresses Muslims both at home and abroad<sup>12</sup> by referring to Russia’s Northern Caucasus conflict and the Syria conflict. Islamic State stresses that it will take revenge for Russia’s campaigns in Afghanistan (Soviet era), the North Caucasus (namely Dagestan and Chechnya) and Syria. The group also tried to draw attention to similar radicalised elements by propagating that the Russians are a menace to Islam by citing the above three examples. Russia has always been part of the jihadist historical ideational thought process because of

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<sup>11</sup> [“Russia Says 6 IS Fighters Killed in Caucasus Republic”](#), *Moscow Times*, 3 March 2024.

<sup>12</sup> [“ISIS-K’s Sworn Enemy What Does the Islamic State Branch Claiming Responsibility for the Moscow Terrorist Attack Have Against Russia?”](#), *Meduza*, 25 March 2024.

Afghanistan, the North Caucasus and Syria. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Islamic State would stress the importance of targeting Russia.

Another factor for the Islamic State has been the recently improved relationship of Russia with the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan. The Russians have been part of the peace process even before the Taliban came into power, and have developed a space for discussions with the Taliban. After the coming of the Taliban in 2021, Russia was one of the few countries which did not shut down its Embassy.

The Islamic State, particularly its South Asian outlet ISKP, has set its sights on the Taliban in the region. The ISKP is playing the role the Taliban was said to have played in the past, as a militant insurgent group against the state. The myriad differences, particularly the ideological differences between the Taliban and ISKP, act as the critical factors for driving a wedge between the two groups. One such difference is that the ISKP calls for the establishment of a global Caliphate whereas the Taliban is mostly concentrated in Afghanistan. Secondly, the Taliban is mostly Pashtun-dominated, whereas the ISKP draws from diverse cohorts of militant jihadists. Lastly, a major difference is that ISKP attracts even individuals from the Taliban who consider the Taliban as not extremist enough.

The ISKP has also stressed that the Taliban has focused on working with ‘Kafir’ governments, including Russia, to maintain its leadership in Kabul. The Taliban is known to have a limited relationship with Russia, given that Moscow still designates them as terror group. Russia was part of the peace process and is one of the few nations to not withdraw its embassy staff after the return of the Taliban. The Russians have also interacted with them in various forums such as the Russia-Islamic Kazan Forum, St Petersburg International Economic Forum, and Moscow Format Consultations. The two have also discussed joint projects, signed preliminary agreements in 2022 and have made attempts to cooperate in counter-terrorism. The Russians do, however, stress that it would still continue to not recognise the Taliban as the legitimate leaders of the Afghanistan republic unless the human rights situation is improved, and the regime stops its mistreatment of women and minorities.

It is this relationship that the ISKP has targeted through various propaganda outlets. The ISKP has tried to portray the Taliban regime as ‘puppets’ or ‘proxies’ of foreign nations, including Russia, and has used the images of Taliban representatives with Russian officials.<sup>13</sup> The ISKP, through its propaganda machinery, has tried to

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<sup>13</sup> Lucas Webber, “[The Islamic State’s Anti-Russia Propaganda Campaign and Criticism of Taliban-Russian Relations](#)”, The Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, 14 January 2022.

mobilise more individuals, including some from the Taliban, and it uses Russia's cooperation with the Taliban as a reason for it.

Another objective of the Islamic State is to destabilise the relationship between Russia and Central Asia. To the Central Asian Republics, Russia is a significant provider of security from external aggression, including attack by non-state actors like terror groups. Central Asian nations, excluding Turkmenistan, are also part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and its Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) alongside Russia, and both platforms are meant to eradicate terrorism from the region. The group sees the Central Asian nations as puppets of the Russian leadership<sup>14</sup> and feels that Russia could deter its quest to create the Khorasan province.

The Islamic State could take advantage of the rising anti-Russian sentiment present after the Russian mobilisation since 21 September 2022 which led many Russians migrating to Central Asia. About 700,000 people emigrated from Russia, out of whom approximately more than half of the Russians sought refuge in Central Asia.<sup>15</sup> It can tap into the rising Russophobia and gain more manpower by radicalising more individuals to fight against Russia.

Given the Islamic State's use of Central Asian fighters, resentment and antagonism against Central Asian migrants among the domestic Russian population has increased. The Central Asian leadership have warned their citizens not to travel to Russia for work or adopt utmost caution when travelling within Russia. The rising hatred and stigmatisation of Central Asians among the Russian population could impact the migrant movement to Russia. This is already visible with tightened immigration rules, mass detentions, crackdowns and mass expulsions.<sup>16</sup>

With a large chunk of the Russian population already on the war front, the presence of migrants helps ease the workload on the domestic front in Russia. If migrants return to Central Asia, it would impact the domestic labour market in Russia. Therefore, the demand of manpower on the war front and domestic labour requirement could be affected heavily, which may lead Russia into an economic crisis due to shortage of labour.

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<sup>14</sup> [“Islamic State Khurasan Province Threatens Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and Neighbouring Countries”](#), *Special Eurasia*, 5 May 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Goble, [“Influx of Russians Fleeing Mobilization Increasingly Alienating Central Asians”](#), The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 October 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Ayzirek Imanaliyeva and Vladislav Sorvyonkov, [“Anti-migration Wave Hits Central Asian Guest Workers Following Moscow Terrorism Attack”](#), *EurasiaNet*, 11 April 2024.

## Conclusion

The Islamic State’s claims of its involvement in the terror attacks in Moscow have shown that it has planned a long-term strategy against Russia. It sees Russia as a major obstacle in its attempts at globalising jihad. This has been evident given the fact that two of the Islamic State outlets—the ISKP and Islamic State Caucasus Vilayat—are concentrating on Russia as the adversary. This has been displayed by the group's displeasure with the Russian involvement in the West Asian theatre and also in the North Caucasus. The Islamic State continues to spread propaganda against Russia as part of its strategy.

The attack may impact the labour flow of Central Asian migrants into Russia. Secondly, Russian leadership could further strengthen its domestic security apparatus and focus on the Islamic State more aggressively. Russia’s tryst with terrorism in the past, particularly at the domestic level, has shown that it takes a strong stance on terrorism. This could revive a more aggressive Russian effort to counter terrorism at the domestic and regional levels. This may result in tightened border controls, which may impact its relationship with Central Asian countries.

## About the Author



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