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## *The Return of Terrorism*



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With its “war on terrorism,” the United States launched a global campaign against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks as well as a number of other targets. The campaign probably created more terrorists than it killed. Moreover, U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq—the first with only a tangential relationship to al-Qaeda, the second with no connection whatsoever—killed a huge number of civilians as well.

Having failed to accomplish its poorly defined objectives, the United States eventually refocused on other national security threats. The “war on terrorism” disappeared from the headlines. Today, the world is more worried about the wars conducted by states: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Israel’s attack on Gaza, and the potential conflict between China and Taiwan.

But as the latest attack in Moscow demonstrates, some terrorist organizations are still going strong. On May 22, militants associated with the Islamic State chapter in Afghanistan attacked concertgoers at a Moscow venue, killing more than a 100 people. It was a shocking reminder of how vulnerable states can be in the face of determined non-state actors.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh according to the Arabic acronym) is perhaps the most prominent terrorist organization operating in the world today. It emerged from the wreckage of the U.S. war in Iraq and the civic uprising against Bashar al-Assad in Syria. For several years beginning in 2014, these radical Islamists managed to govern a vast swath of territory straddling Iraq and Syria. Though it attracted recruits from around the world, ISIS also attracted the enmity of a range of states that otherwise didn't agree on anything else. After repeated attacks by these diverse states—the United States, Russia, Syria, Iraq—the self-declared caliphate collapsed in 2019.

Even without its mini-caliphate, the Islamic State persists. It still launches attacks within Syria and wields considerable influence in the huge al-Hol facility in eastern Syria for detained ISIS fighters and their families (along with many unfortunates who have no connection to ISIS). It still has something of a foothold in Southeast Asia. Several groups in both the Sahel and in sub-Saharan Africa are still operating.

ISIS has also emerged as a competitor for power in Afghanistan against the Taliban. It is this franchise that reportedly sponsored the attack in Moscow. Russia's role in bombing the Islamic State, intervening in Afghanistan, and historically repressing Muslim groups in the Russian Federation are all reasons for the attack.

The definition of “terrorist” is quite slippery. For instance, the United States and Israel consider Hamas a terrorist organization even though it functioned as a government in Gaza for more than 15 years. Ordinarily, former “terrorist” factions like the African National Congress in South Africa or the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland shed their “terrorist” status when they form governments. But neither Israel nor the United States recognized the victory of Hamas at the polls in 2006. Because it was not accorded the status of a legitimate political party, Hamas could not function as anything but a terrorist organization in the eyes of the United States and Israel.

Stateless people do not have the benefit of a national army to advance their aims. When Palestinians and Kurds and Kachins turn to the force of arms to defend themselves, outsiders are prone to label them “terrorists.” But their supporters prefer to think of these militants as “freedom fighters.”

ISIS is a different matter. It is not fighting for the freedom of an oppressed people. It is not trying to achieve a place in the international order. Rather, it wants to destroy the international order and replace it with a religious caliphate that doesn't allow any freedoms at all. You can find religious states around the world: Iran, Israel, Bhutan, Vatican City. But these countries participate in the United Nations and tolerate the practice of other religions.

ISIS does not believe in the modern concept of nation-states. It wants to resurrect a medieval model of governance.

The Moscow attack should be an opportunity for all the world's nations to come together with Russia to condemn ISIS, much as virtually the entire world came together after 9/11 to condemn al-Qaeda. The United States and Russia don't agree on very much these days, but they should at least see ISIS as a threat to their national security.

Unfortunately, Vladimir Putin seems determined to make the same mistake that George W. Bush did after 9/11. Like Bush, Putin is using the attack to advance his own ideological agenda. He has tried to pin the attack in Moscow on Ukraine—and Ukraine's supporters around the world—even though there is no evidence of any such link. Ironically, prior to the attack in Moscow, it was the United States that provided intelligence to the Kremlin of impending ISIS activity. It did the same with Iran prior to ISIS bombings there in January.

Bush used 9/11 to advance the goal of regime change in Afghanistan, and then Iraq, so he and his team reshaped the story of 9/11 to target the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. Putin, meanwhile, wants regime change in Ukraine, so he has repeatedly hinted that Kyiv and Washington are really behind the ISIS attack in Moscow.

Putin also wants to distract attention away from the domestic security lapses that allowed for this attack in Moscow to happen, just as Bush wanted to refocus attention away from the warnings it too failed to take seriously about al-Qaeda's plans.

There is another disturbing parallel between the responses of Putin and Bush. When they appeared in court last week, the alleged perpetrators showed clear signs of torture. One of them was even carried into the courtroom on a stretcher. Several videos of this alleged torture have circulated on line.

So, too, did the Bush administration use 9/11 as a rationale for the adoption of “enhanced interrogation techniques” such as waterboarding. These violations of basic international law have contributed to the erosion of global human rights norms.

It could get worse. Several prominent Russian politicians, like former president Dmitry Medvedev, have called for the return of the death penalty for the perpetrators. The Kremlin might extend such penalties to other “enemies” of the Russian government as well. This does not bode well for critics of the Russian regime, a number of whom have already died under suspicious circumstances.

The Islamic State, even though it has shrunk in size and influence in recent years, obviously remains a potent threat to the international community. It is a sign of just how weak this

international community has become that it can't overcome its divisions to focus on this common threat in the wake of such a tragedy.

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