Tuesday, March 26, 2024 / Why ISIS attacked Moscow

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

<SCORING IN> Drone

NOEL: ISIS, the Islamist militant network, was looking to make a statement when it attacked a concert hall in the Moscow suburbs late last week.

*<CLIP> Martha Raddatz, ABC: The audience inside, just arriving for a rock concert, when they heard the gunfire erupt.*

NOEL: ISIS took credit.

*<CLIP> CBS News: An affiliate of the Islamic State group says it was behind the attack.*

NOEL: But when Vladmir Putin emerged a day later, he ignored ISIS and blamed Ukraine.

Then, yesterday, he backtracked just a little. Listen carefully:

*<CLIP> Vladimir Putin: The bloody attack was committed by Islamists from the Islamic State organization, which is banned in Russia. We know who committed this crime against Russia and its people. We want to know who ordered it.*

NOEL: Putin is looking for excuses for his war in Ukraine. It doesn’t change the fact that he now has a very real ISIS problem. Do the rest of us too? That’s coming up on *Today, Explained*.

<SCORING OUT> Drone

[THEME]

[RUSSIAN BUMPER]

NOEL: The attack on the Crocus City Concert Hall happened late Friday. It took 19 hours for Vladimir Putin to say anything.

PJOTR: The first response came a day after the attack, Saturday, in an address to the nation.

*<CLIP> Vladimir Putin: All the four perpetrators were directly involved who were gunning people down, killing people, they were found and apprehended.*

NOEL: Pjotr Sauer is a Russia correspondent for The Guardian. He’s been reporting on how Putin initially blamed, not ISIS, which had claimed responsibility, but Ukraine.

PJOTR: Putin said that it looked like Ukraine might have played a role in this, which seems quite bizarre given that ISIS, the Islamic State, has claimed the deadly attack. But Putin, in his address, he said that the four shooters who were arrested were on the way to Ukraine, where the Ukrainian side, quote unquote, had a window prepared for the shooters.

*<CLIP> Vladimir Putin: We have data that suggests that they were about to be moved towards the territory of Ukraine, by those in Ukraine.*

PJOTR: Putin didn't outright say that Ukraine was responsible for the attack, but it became clear that he's looking for a Ukrainian angle, and a way to blame Ukraine for this horrible attack.

NOEL: I saw this language elsewhere. Ukraine had a window for them. What does that mean?

PJOTR: Well, no one knows exactly what Putin meant. It seems like he suggested that Ukrainian authorities or someone on the Ukrainian side helped plan this attack, and that, you know, they were waiting for the four attackers, shooters to cross the border with Ukraine and they would have a safe space there. I think it's important to stress there's no evidence for any of this, of course. And, you know, Russia has yet to present any evidence that Ukraine is linked to the attack.

NOEL: Okay. How does Ukraine respond to Vladimir Putin's allegation?

PJOTR: So, you know, we've seen multiple Ukrainian officials rejecting the claim. President Zelenskyy himself, in very strong language, called Putin a liar.

NOEL: Hm.

PJOTR: You know, he's said, you know, of course we had nothing to do with this horrible attack. He actually called him a bastard. So quite strong, angry language from the Ukrainian side.

*<CLIP> Volodymyr Zelenskyy: What happened in Moscow, it’s obvious that both Putin and other scums are trying to shift responsibility on someone else. They always have the same methods. It has already happened.*

PJOTR: I think in Ukraine, people believe that Russia will try to use this atrocity, this horrible event, to further escalate the war in Ukraine. We've seen some of the strongest strikes, biggest strikes on Ukraine, since the attack on Friday. Russian missiles shelled Ukrainian cities.

*<CLIP> Reuters: Air raid sirens sounded in Kiev after a wave of Russian missile strikes against Ukraine on Sunday. Residents made their way into subway stations to seek shelter.*

PJOTR: I think it's important to stress as well in Russian media, everyone is also pointing to Ukraine as if Ukraine somehow orchestrated this attack.

NOEL: Okay, so Vladimir Putin is taking one line. The Russian media is falling in line behind Vladimir Putin. And then where this gets really interesting is that four men were actually caught.

PJOTR: Yeah.

NOEL: Four men were caught. Russia has charged them with terrorism. They appeared in court. What is the story of these men? What do we know about them?

PJOTR: We don't know that much yet. We know they're from Tajikistan. That's a Central Asian republic. There are many Tajik migrants living in Russia. We know that ISIS has claimed the attack, the specific branch of ISIS called ISIS-K which is active in Afghanistan and has a history of actually recruiting Central Asian nationals and also Central Asian migrants from Russia. So, this is what we know. We've seen the four suspects in court. It was clear that they have been tortured by the Russian security services.

*<CLIP> DW News: Videos have emerged on social media suggesting some of the group were tortured while in custody, one of them brought in directly from hospital in a wheelchair.*

PJOTR: These videos have been spread by Russian security services on Telegram. In one instance, for example, we've seen Russian security services cutting off the ear of one of the suspects. In another picture we've seen one of the suspects being electrocuted. So, of course, any statements these suspects will give, you know, we should definitely question the authenticity and truthfulness of these statements because they could be given under duress, under torture. At the same time, it does seem like these four suspects were the four men, the four shooters who were involved in the attack. But I think their confessions will be, and everything they say, will have this big taint of torture hanging over it.

NOEL: What is ISIS-K's problem with Russia? What's the fight?

PJOTR: Yeah. So I think a lot of people don't realize that Russia is waging several wars against ISIS across at least two continents.

<SCORING IN> Last Sky - APM

PJOTR: First of all, Russia, in 2015, came in to support President Assad in Syria, and helped the Assad regime to survive against ISIS. And it keeps on bombing ISIS in several places in Syria. Russia is also involved in a war against ISIS in sub-Saharan Africa and countries like Mali and Burkina Faso.

*<CLIP> Rosine Bere, Burkinabe citizen: I believe that bringing Russian soldiers to our country could be a positive step towards addressing the insecurity we have been experiencing since 2015. If these soldiers come to assist us, I see no problem with that.*

PJOTR: So, you know, Russia is seen by ISIS, by the global ISIS, as a big enemy, as also part of the Western Christian statehood.

*<CLIP> Marc Polymeropoulos, MSNBC National Security & Intelligence Analyst: Russia has a long history of oppression of Muslim majority republics in the northern Caucasus. Russia has fought ISIS in Syria and Iraq. So Russia is in their crosshairs.*

PJOTR: And specifically with ISIS-K, ISIS-K has been the one cell that has been able to stage several very bloody attacks, for example, in Iran and other places outside of Europe. So for ISIS and for ISIS-K, Russia is sort of this long standing enemy, really. And if you look at their propaganda, a lot of it has been aimed at Russia as well. But I think many in the West and I think many in Russia just completely didn't realize this factor.

<SCORING OUT> Last Sky - APM

NOEL: Let me ask you something. So in 2015, there was an ISIS attack in France, right, on a concert at the Bataclan. There was another ISIS attack in Manchester at an Ariana Grande concert. I imagine, when one terror attack happens in a European country, the other European countries look and they say, oh dear, is now the time to be nervous? Do you think other European countries are looking at what happened in Moscow and saying, okay, we gotta up security here?

PJOTR: Yeah. I mean, they're already saying it. We had Jeremy Hunt, senior UK official, saying this could happen to us.

*<CLIP> Jeremy Hunt: We have to remain vigilant and, you know, if it is Islamic State they are utterly indiscriminate in what they do. They are prepared to murder in the most horrific way.*

PJOTR: Macron, the president of France, similarly said, we have to step up our security.

PJOTR: Obviously, France has the Olympics coming up this summer. In Germany there are the European soccer games this summer. I think this is a wakeup call, not just for Russia, but for a lot of Western countries that something like this could happen there as well.

*<CLIP> FRANCE 24: It was just a year ago that US general Michael Kurilla warned Congress about the risk posed by ISIS-K.*

*US GENERAL MICHAEL KURILLA: “ISS ISIS Khorasan retains the capability and the will to attack US and Western interests abroad in as little as 6 months with little to no warning.”*

NOEL: Vladimir Putin is blaming Ukraine. He's saying Ukraine did it. He's saying that publicly. ISIS is saying we did it.

PJOTR: Yeah.

NOEL: So they're claiming responsibility. What actually happens next here? Does Russia go after ISIS, low key go after ISIS? Or does just Russia just decide, hey, we're going to let this go because we're supposed to be blaming Ukraine.

PJOTR: Yeah, there are no easy answers for Russia because from a political perspective, from Putin's perspective, he wants to blame Ukraine. But blaming Ukraine doesn't solve the ISIS problem.

NOEL: Right.

PJOTR: As you said, ISIS has claimed this. You know, we've had bodycam footage shared by ISIS. So there's very little doubt that ISIS is the one that orchestrated this. So this is the irony we have here where ISIS claims something, but Putin sort of completely ignores it and says, no, actually it is Kyiv who's somehow involved. You know, the question is, what will Russia do now? I think they will intensify strikes on Ukraine because it serves their political goals.

NOEL: Hm.

PJOTR: I think we'll see a big crackdown on Central Asians in Moscow. But whether Russia has the will or the resources to actually go after ISIS, that doesn't seem to be the case at the moment.

NOEL: And lastly, Russians are obviously reeling from this attack. Russian civilians, right.

PJOTR: Yeah.

NOEL: What is likely to change for Russian civilians, after this attack?

PJOTR: I think for many, the memories of the early 2000s have come back.

<SCORING IN> Creative Mind - APM

PJOTR: I grew up in Russia in the early 2000s, in the 90s as well, when there were a lot of terrorist attacks. These were perpetrated by Chechen Islamists. And that really brought an atmosphere of fear. You know, Russians were scared to go to public places. There was increased security everywhere. I think we'll see similar effects now. I think there'll be even more surveillance. I think, you know, this will also be used to crack down even more on anyone who's against the regime. There's already talk of bringing back the death penalty. So, I think Russian society is going to be even more militarized, more intense, and less free.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: The Guardian’s Pjotr Sauer. Coming up: what ISIS-K wants.

<SCORING OUT> Creative Mind - APM

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: *Today, Explained*. We’re back with Asfandyar Mir, who studies counterterrorism in South Asia at the U.S. Institute of Peace. I asked Asfandyar to explain what ISIS is, broadly, before we get to ISIS-K.

ASFANDYAR: So ISIS is a militant group which emerged in Iraq and Syria in 2014. And it announced a global caliphate from its base in Iraq and Syria. The idea of a caliphate is a territorial state, where the law of the land would be in line with, with sort of the strict interpretation of Islam, that, that ISIS had. And in line with that announcement, some members of prominent militant groups in South Asia left their organizations and pledged allegiance to ISIS in the Middle East, and created the group that is now known as ISIS-Khorasan.

NOEL: Okay. So we might say that ISIS Khorasan or ISIS-K is a branch of ISIS that originates in and is based in Afghanistan?

ASFANDYAR: That's right.

NOEL: Where is Khorasan? What does this mean?

ASFANDYAR: Khorasan refers to parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, eastern Iran, maybe even parts of India. And it's the historical name for this, for this region. And there are references to Khorasan in some prophecies in Islam, which suggest that toward the end of times, the righteous armies will emerge from the Khorasan region. Then, you know, fight and march towards the Middle East. And a lot of these militant groups, therefore, think of the Khorasan region as, as, you know, as being particularly holy and like to, to see themselves in the image of, of those armies that are supposed to emerge at the end of times.

NOEL: These groups, ISIS-original, al-Qaeda, they often have very charismatic leaders. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became a household name in the United States. Osama bin Laden, of course. Who is the leader of ISIS-K?

ASFANDYAR: These days, the leader of ISIS-K is, is an obscure man who's never appeared in a video. We've heard some audios from him. His name is Shahab al-Mohajir, also referred to as Sanaullah Ghafari. He’s an Afghan from Kabul. He’s very young, in his early 30s.

NOEL: Hm!

ASFANDYAR: So very unlike Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or even bin Laden who was, was a very rich, rich man. You know, Mohajir doesn't have that kind of standing, and hasn't made those splashy, charismatic, appearances in the way that say, you know, militant leaders have at other times. Because as soon as your identity is revealed, you know, governments around the world, including the United States, you know, begin to, begin to chase these leaders. And they're very likely to sort of get killed in counterterrorism actions. So he seems to be very aware of that, having grown up in, in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

NOEL: What’s the goal? What's the endgame for ISIS-K? What does this group want?

ASFANDYAR: So you know, ISIS-K takes its goals from ISIS in the Middle East, which seeks to establish and expand its territorial caliphate. And in line with that, ISIS-Khorasan also wants to has a large territorial enclave in the Khorasan region. But in addition, ISIS-K advocates mass casualty attacks, not only to make territorial gains, but also to punish people and entities that they see as, as disbelieving, as infidels.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*DAVID MUIR, ANCHOR: Good afternoon and we are coming on the air at this hour with breaking news and it's difficult. The latest details in the bomb attack outside the airport in Kabul.*

<SCORING IN> A little tense (b)

ASFANDYAR: The biggest, most spectacular, and horrific attack that they have carried out to date is the attack during the US military evacuation after the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*DAVID MUIR, ANCHOR: The Pentagon calling this a complex attack just five days before the U.S. deadline to withdraw from Afghanistan.*

ASFANDYAR: So ISIS-K struck, killed 13 U.S. service members, around 200 Afghans who were, who were at the, at the airport.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*MARTHA RADDATZ, CORRESPONDENT: Surviving Marines gathering up the wounded and dead, and hundreds of Afghans running for cover.*

ASFANDYAR: And then more recently, ISIS-K carried out an attack in the town of Kerman, during the, the death anniversary of the former leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps.

*<CLIP> CNN:*

*NADA BASHIR, REPORTER: The first blast took place about 700 meters away from the burial site of the late Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani.*

ASFANDYAR: And was able to kill more than 70 people over there.

<SCORING OUT> A little tense (b)

ASFANDYAR: In Afghanistan they've been fighting the, the Taliban and they've been waging an insurgency against the Taliban government. They've killed some senior Taliban leaders.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*IAN PANNELL, CORRESPONDENT: A senior administration official telling ABC news, the ISIS-K terrorist who masterminded the suicide bombing at Kabul airport in August 2021, was killed in recent weeks in a Taliban operation.*

ASFANDYAR: And the Taliban, for their part, have also managed to kill some leaders of ISIS-K in their military operations.

NOEL: Why did ISIS-K attack Russia?

ASFANDYAR: Yeah, it's both, surprising as well as, in certain ways, not surprising that they chose to strike at Moscow. Moscow is, is, is very far from Afghanistan. However, ISIS-K is a hyper competitive group, not only does it hold these zealous beliefs of wanting to go after infidels and disbelievers, but it also seeks to demonstrate that it is the leader of the global jihadi vanguard. And as part of that, it has been trying to showcase its geographic reach in the region initially. We have heard of plots in Europe.

*<CLIP> EURONEWS:*

*REPORTER: Some nine people from Central Asia were arrested in Germany and the Netherlands on Thursday for allegedly planning to carry out attacks and for collecting money for the so-called Islamic State.*

*NANCY FAESER, GERMANY INTERIOR MINISTER: The threat of Islamist terror appears very acute, as you can see from today’s arrests.*

ASFANDYAR: And so this attack in Russia is very much in line with this strategy of wanting to outbid, wanting to showcase its geographic reach, really. I place more emphasis on, on them wanting to be performative and them wanting to show that they can reach an important capital like Moscow. And I think we should be clear that there is some ambiguity as to whether it's ISIS-K or not, because while ISIS in the Middle East has claimed the attack, ISIS-K specifically has not claimed the attack as yet. We only know through, through the US government. They were tracking, plotting activity by ISIS-K in, in Moscow. Which is, which is why many of us think that very likely this attack has been carried out by ISIS-K.

NOEL: Does ISIS-K have any friends? Any friendly nations?

ASFANDYAR: It does not. I mean <laughs> some…there are lots of conspiracy theories out there. But as a, as an independent analyst who, who tries to track, you know, ISIS-K fairly carefully, I don't find any friends. Certainly no state entities that, that I'm able to pinpoint.

NOEL: Let's go back to what happened late last week. Vladimir Putin blamed Ukraine for this attack. Now, most analysts at this point say no, that it's not in fact what happened. The U.S. government says ISIS-K did it. Is there any sense in your research that ISIS-K has a side in the Russia Ukraine conflict?

ASFANDYAR: ISIS-K has been mostly focused on, on South Asia and the immediate neighbors, off of Afghanistan. So in that sense, there's been chatter on, on Russia. ISIS-K has taken note of the warming relations between the Taliban and Russia. In the past, ISIS-K has complained about Russian support for the Taliban's insurgency. So I think it's safe to say that ISIS-K has been more animated by Russia than by Ukraine, both recently and sort of historically.

NOEL: What do you think ISIS-K will have its eye on next? After successfully, I mean, somewhat successfully pulling this thing off?

ASFANDYAR: There are signs that ISIS-K is keen on striking Western interests.

<SCORING IN> Ulterior motives (a) APM

ASFANDYAR: I worry about ISIS-K's intent, and perhaps even some capability to strike, you know, in, in parts of Europe. And I hope that counterterrorism authorities around the world are much more vigilant than they are currently, and, and try to prevent these attacks.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was Asfandyar Mir of the US Institute of Peace. Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and Haleema Shah, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Kim Eggleston, and engineered by Patrick Boyd. I’m Noel King.

A couple weeks ago I interviewed Charlamagne Tha God about some recent polling that shows Black voters saying if the election was held now they’d vote for Donald Trump. It’s really interesting. Charlemagne has a huge audience AND he hosts a call-in show. And he said: he’s heard the same.

SO! It’s time for a classic Today, Explained call-in. ARE you thinking about voting for Donald Trump and does that maybe surprise you a little? Or do you KNOW someone who is and maybe that surprises you a little - that’s the boat I’m in. We’re focused on Black voters this time around.

Our number’s (844) 453-4448. Trump-curious? Tell me why! We might contact you or use your voicemail on the show so please leave your number. Thanks!

It’s *Today, Explained*.

<SCORING OUT> Ulterior motives (a) APM

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]