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Terrorism and Sport: Dangers for the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi

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Terrorists constantly seek the spotlight and attacking major sporting events constitutes a seemingly perfect springboard for global notoriety. As the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi are nearing, the global public is understandably concerned about the July 2013 North Caucasian jihadi threats to either disrupt the Games or prevent them altogether. Are the recent Volgograd bombings all the terrorists could muster in anticipation of the Olympics or is there more to come? It is worth analysing some of the options the Caucasus Emirate might be considering in relation to their stated intent to disrupt or force the cancellation of the Olympics. All of the options are derived from information on previous terrorist attacks on other sporting events that could provide clues for counter-terrorism authorities in Russia and neighbouring countries to use when securing these Olympics.

From 1972 onwards, after the infamous Black September attack on the Israeli Olympic team, the world has grown accustomed to terrorist threats and scares associated with major sporting events. The news of planned, imminent, imaginary or real terrorist attacks frequently make it into the headlines and threaten authorities with the risk of spectacles of sport being turned into mass casualty events. Attacking infrastructure, participants or spectators at a global sporting event would catapult an organisation, group, network or even a lone terrorist to international “stardom” and immediately and dramatically increase the reach of their message, whatever it may be. Consequently, it should not surprise anyone that terrorists have plotted and continue to plot attacks coinciding with seemingly non-political sporting events. In doing so, they jump onto the publicity bandwagon of the Olympics, World Cup, major international matches and other similar events. However, these terrorists usually fail to take into consideration how the hosts of these targeted events and the international community would react to such an audacious attempt to harm and embarrass them, and how the reaction would likely be to hunt down the terrorists rapidly and unceasingly. Thus, by plotting and announcing plans for such attacks the perpetrators are placed in the spotlight and seemingly sow the seeds of self-destruction along with whatever they’ve conspired to do and are dangerously exposed to international anti-terrorism countermeasures. Black September, responsible for the Munich Olympics massacre, is a case in point as in the years following the attack it was vigorously pursued by Israel. The allure of some sporting events and the targets associated with them, however, often proves too tempting to resist and thus we are bound to witness more terrorist attacks on sports events.

Target: Sochi

The latest in the series of sports events that have attracted serious attention from terrorists are the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, which will take place in Russia's foremost southwestern holiday resort area between 7-23 February. Sochi is located in Russia's Southern Federal District, which up until early 2010 also included the nearby, restive North Caucasian republics and Chechnya, places that between 1991-2009 were the scene of ethno-separatist and jihadist anti-Russian insurgencies—though they supposedly had ended. The proximity of Sochi to North Caucasus, and the fact that before the 1860s the city functioned as the capital of the predominantly Muslim region of Circassia evidently prompted what seems to be the most serious terrorist entity in the region, the jihadist Caucasus Emirate, to target these Olympics. In July 2013, Doku Umarov, the group's self-proclaimed Emir, stated the Caucasus Emirate's rejection of a "pagan" event held "on the bones of many, many Muslims killed ... and buried on our lands extending to the Black Sea."¹ Moreover, the leader affirmed the Emirate's intention to prevent the Olympic games from being staged and urged Islamic insurgents outside his command but operating in Russia to assist in this endeavour.

The extent to which this call is a genuine harbinger of things to come, rather than mere posturing in line with the terrorist tradition of a leader of a seemingly weakened rebel outfit making inflated threats, remains unknown. The strength of the jihadist rebels, who are assumed to number in the low hundreds and to operate in an unknown combination of groups or cells allegedly affiliated with the rebellion and who from February 2012 to July 2013 instituted a ban or "moratorium" on attacks on "Russian territory" (i.e., parts of Russia outside the borders of the jihadist virtual state, the Caucasus Emirate), is the subject of a vibrant debate amongst analysts of the region.² Some of the decentralised Emirate commanders are said to be having second thoughts about attacking civilian targets in Russia and are likely to condemn outright any of their colleagues who would opt for and claim to have carried out such attacks. Such an approach makes it more difficult for anyone to establish the real culprit behind a given bombing or commando operation in the vicinity of Sochi as some elements of the Emirate will do their utmost to mask their involvement in such attacks in order to, first, avoid exposing themselves to criticism from within the North Caucasian jihadi ranks, and second, to give the impression that there are more jihadist insurgents in Southern Russia than suspected to operate within the framework of the Caucasus Emirate.

Umarov's announcement was, as it consequently transpired, a grim prologue to a string of suicide bombings in the Southern Russian city of Volgograd. The October and two December bombings, with responsibility for the latter two claimed via a Dagestani website associated with Caucasus Emirate by the "Subversive Group of Ansar al-Sunnah, which also threatened further attacks,"³ could constitute a response on behalf of some of Emirate's field commanders to Umarov's lifting of the "moratorium."⁴ Although an organisation of the same name exists in Iraq, it is unlikely it is responsible for the attack given the limited likelihood that Iraq-based jihadists possesses the capacity outside of Russia to recruit or send Russian-speaking suicide bombers and use them in Volgograd. A more probable scenario, if the so called Subversive Group was indeed behind the bombings, involves Dagestani Emirate-linked jihadists who, in order to confuse the authorities, used the popular and seemingly all-encompassing Muslim name the "followers of the Muslim holy scripture" and deployed suicide attackers to Russia.

These end-of-year bombings proved a stark reminder of the seemingly forgotten dangers and threats to the security of the Olympic Games and the restive situation in North Caucasus. The key question of what happens next, however, remains. Was this all the Emirate could muster in response to the imminent staging

¹ M. Eckel, "Russia suicide bombing: Is Doku Umarov the Kremlin's worst nightmare?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 December 2013, www.csmonitor.com/World/2013/1230/Russia-suicide-bombing-Is-Doku-Umarov-the-Kremlin-s-worst-nightmare-video.

² M. Vatchagaev, "Umarov Bows to Pressure Inside Militant Command to Target Sochi Olympics," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, Iss. 128, 12 July 2013, www.ecoi.net/local_link/252834/377285_de.html.

³ "'Ansar al-Sunnah' Claims Volgograd Bombings, Threatens More," *Jihadist News*, 19 January 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/index.php/19-jihadist-news/4088-jihadi-group-ansar-al-sunnah-claims-volgograd-bombings-threatens-more>.

⁴ P. Kościński, K. Zasztowt, "Zamachy w Rosji przerwają dialog władz z radykalnymi islamistami," www.pism.pl/Wydarzenia/Inne/Zamachy-w-Rosji-przerwa-dialog-wladz-z-radykalnymi-islamistami-Piotr-Koscinski-i-Konrad-Zasztowt.

of the Olympics or are these bombings simply a prelude to a more prolonged and intensified campaign intended to coincide with the Opening Ceremony? Given the dearth of reliable and open-source information on the Emirate's intentions, it is difficult to answer these questions directly. Nonetheless, it is possible to consider what options the North Caucasian jihadists might be considering in relation to their stated intent to disrupt the Olympics.

The Terrorists' Possible Options

These options, which exclude relatively minor possible "terrorist-lite" activities such as throwing nails onto the track at a cross-country skiing event (akin to the Basque terrorist group ETA's actions in the Vuelta a España bicycle race), are based on information regarding previous terrorist attacks on different sporting events worldwide. They constitute the most historically viable scenarios available to the authorities responsible for securing the venues, participants and spectators of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

Option 1. Scratch the Surface

On 1 May 2002, ETA detonated a car bomb on Paseo de La Castellana, a thoroughfare in Madrid that lies next to Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium. The blast occurred a couple of hours before the seminal Real vs. Barcelona Champions League semi-final clash in Madrid as fans were flocking to the stadium. ETA phoned in a warning about the bombing but this failed to stop 17 people from getting injured in the explosion. The terrorists may not have been interested in maximising casualties in this attack but would have been much more please if they had penetrated the stadium compound. However, they only managed to "scratch the surface", i.e., the attack was conducted in the vicinity of the actual target. It is also possible that in 2006 a seemingly autonomous Norwegian–Pakistani terrorist cell, originally planning attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets in Norway, attempted a similar feat during the World Cup in Germany—its leader was arrested in the country on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks.⁵

In this scenario, the Volgograd attacks might have constituted the pinnacle of the terrorists' success in relation to these Olympics. The December bombings took place five weeks before the games and in the relative vicinity of the Olympics area. These attacks were most probably planned and timed to at least partly coincide with the Olympics and to embarrass the Russian authorities who had put their prestige on the line while promising a successful and problem-free Games. The terrorists, though, managed only to "scratch the surface" of the Olympics. Although they were successful in staging bloody and spectacular atrocities, which the global public immediately linked to the Games, the terrorists nonetheless failed to penetrate the allegedly tight security perimeter around Sochi.⁶ Moreover, it is possible that the bombers were in fact en route to different targets in Russia but were forced by circumstance to detonate early in Volgograd rather than elsewhere (e.g., Moscow). It is likely that more attacks along these lines could coincide with the Olympics, and while it would be a success of sorts for the terrorists, it would be a far cry from disrupting or even preventing the Games.

Option 2. Shooting Blanks

In April 1997, the Irish Republican Army phoned in two bomb threats to a local hospital and the local police force less than an hour before the beginning of the Martell Grand National, a world-famous steeplechase held outside Liverpool.⁷ The bomb threats included recognised IRA codewords, which helped police forces identify the culprits and properly assess the seriousness of the threat, and forced the authorities to evacuate 60,000 people. The seemingly credible threats, however, proved to be false, and no bombs were found within the confines of the course. More than seven years later, ETA copied the IRA's

⁵ P. Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994–2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, 2008, p. 939, www.ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/chronology.pdf.

⁶ C. A. Traywick, "Sochi Watch: Everything You Need to Know about Russia's Massive Olympic Security Operation," *Foreign Policy*, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/30/sochi_watch_russia_massive_olympic_security#sthash.SjubZmWZ.dpbs.

⁷ *BBC Sport*, "Ten Years on: Grand National bomb scare," http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/sol/newsid_6540000/newsid_6544700/6544735.stm?bw=bb&mp=wm&news=1&bbcws=1.

modus operandi and phoned a local Basque newspaper with a bomb threat again concerning Santiago Bernabeu stadium and the Real Madrid vs. Real Sociedad league game, already in progress.⁸ In 10 minutes, more than 70,000 spectators were evacuated, but no explosives were found.

Both organisations might have rejoiced in their successful disruption of a major sporting event but in reality they failed to achieve their objectives and only underscored their impotency as terrorists. They were not even able to “scratch the surface,” so they decided to “shoot blanks” instead. In the long term, their credibility likely suffered as their sympathisers and potential followers probably felt cheated. It is possible, however, that the North Caucasian terrorists, devoid of options such as “scratching the surface”, might resort to seemingly successful but effectively merely irritating terrorist duds. It will be up to the Russian authorities to get the response to such events right and to assess the credibility of such threats. On one hand, the threats might spoil the Games by forcing the authorities to frantically respond to all of these threats, but any mistakes on their part would totally undermine their claim to be able to host a world-class, secure event.

Option 3. Call My Bluff

Just before Christmas 2007, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) killed four French tourists in Mauritania.⁹ This attack along with mounting concerns about the organisation’s rise in Sub-Saharan Africa and the group’s threats against the famous Dakar Rally forced the organisers of the race to cancel the event, which was to take place between 5 and 20 January 2008. AQIM successfully dared not only the French organisers but also Moroccan, Senegalese and especially Mauritanian authorities to call its bluff, and seemingly scored a high-profile victory. This, however, proved only short-lived as the organisers simply moved the rally, first to Central Europe and then permanently to South America.

The North Caucasian jihadists, however, have not threatened the Russian authorities responsible for the Sochi Olympics in a similar fashion. They must have assumed that even the most apocalyptic scaremongering on their behalf would not help their cause of preventing the Olympic Games from taking place in Sochi. Moreover, one could envision a postponement or a cancellation of an event like the Dakar Rally but not the entire Olympic Games, with dozens of events and tens of thousands of supporters and participants from around the world being forced to return home at the very last minute. If the Caucasus Emirate was somehow able to develop a successful recipe for a viable and menacing “call my bluff” message, then it would have found the perfect formula for achieving its objectives, i.e., the prevention of the Olympic Games. Even put together—the media friendly harnessing of Middle Eastern jihadist imagery in the reference to “the bones of many, many Muslims killed”, the usage the Iraqi-associated, headline-grabbing name of “Ansar al-Sunnah”, and the litany of threats against the Olympics—these threats are unlikely to constitute a powerful enough “call my bluff”-type of message from any terrorist entity. In order to achieve that, the North Caucasian jihadists would have had to have been more active and successful during all of 2013 to cement its credibility as a menace to avoid.

Option 4. Go in from the Outside

Attacking a given sporting event from the outside, i.e., by terrorists unconnected with the proceedings, and infiltrating it shortly before their commencement was a historical first at the Munich Olympic Games. In 1972, the group of Black September terrorists clad themselves in tracksuits and famously crept into the Olympic Village after scaling a chain-link fence, then proceeded to take 11 Israeli athletes and coaches hostage. The attack ended with the massacre of the Israelis during a botched rescue operation at Fürstenfeldbruck airbase, from which the terrorists and their hostages were supposed to leave Germany. Twenty-four years later, Eric Rudolph, who was found responsible for a spate of bombings in the U.S. between 1996 and 1998 (motivated by his anti-socialist, anti-abortion and anti-gay views), planted three pipe bombs in Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta which killed one person and injured more than a

⁸ S. Lowe, “ETA bomb scare clears Madrid stadium as Real play Basques,” *The Guardian*, 13 December 2004, www.theguardian.com/world/2004/dec/13/football.spain.

⁹ J. P. Filiu, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?,” *Carnegie Papers*, Middle East Programme, no. 104, October 2009, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda_islamic_maghreb.pdf.

hundred. In 1998, just before the World Cup in France, the police “rounded up more than 50 Islamists” suspected of belonging to an Algerian terrorist organisation.¹⁰ The arrests were widely seen as an attempt to forestall a suspected terrorist plot directed at the World Cup, most likely involving terrorists infiltrating the events shortly before the detonations. Finally, in 2013 the now infamous Russia- and Kyrgyzstan-born Tsarnaev brothers hid two pressure-cooker bombs next to the Boston Marathon’s finish line. Three people were killed and more than 250 were wounded in the subsequent explosions.

It is not implausible to assume that the North Caucasian jihadists have been plotting to stage a commando-style raid in the middle of Sochi akin to the Mumbai 2008 or Nairobi 2013 attacks. Such an event would not only provide them with a significant body count to avenge the “many Muslims killed” but would also paralyse the Olympic Games and maximise the public relations value of the event as it would likely unfold over hours, if not days, on television screens around the world. Nonetheless, the fulfilment of this “ideal” scenario is fraught with numerous difficulties as the attacking terrorist organisation would first need to secure significant resources for the attack (and that includes a team of hardened and suicide-ready operators), then maintain maximum secrecy, and finally, make safe passage into Sochi or the Olympic venues outside the city, past the perimeters and exclusion zones established by the Russian security forces. Given the scale of the Russian preparations for such an eventuality, this option can almost be discounted outright. Nonetheless, if it came to pass, it would be more probable the group or individual would have had inside help. Which brings us to the next scenario.

Option 5. The Inside Job

In 2001, Belgian police arrested Nizar Trabelsi, a member of an “Al Qaeda-associated terrorist ring consisting of North African (Algerians and Tunisians), French-Algerian, and French mujahidin” who were planning to conduct “bomb attacks against U.S. targets in Europe”, such as the U.S. embassy in Paris or a U.S. airbase.¹¹ Trabelsi’s case was unique as he had previously seemed to have been very well integrated into Western culture, and even for a very short period of time had played professional football for clubs in Germany, including the then-Bundesliga Fortuna Dusseldorf. Although he was not an insider to either the U.S. embassy or military base, as a high-profile sports personality, an individual like him could potentially be used by a terrorist organisation when preparing an attack on a major sporting event such as the Olympics. Of course, a given athlete would have to be more successful in his discipline than Trabelsi was and would need to earn a call-up to the national team in order to succeed on a larger stage. Perhaps Burak Karan, a German jihadist who died fighting in Syria in 2013, might have been a better potential “insider” than Trabelsi as he had represented Germany at the youth-league level, then played with some of today’s most well-known footballers of the world.¹² It is worth noting, however, that both Trabelsi and Karan made their jihadist switches in the aftermath of their footballing days and did not lead double lives whilst winning sports accolades.

A successful insider, then, would need to find a way to reconcile the conflicting narratives of being both a successful sportsman and a dedicated terrorist, then manage to stage a terrorist attack or to assist an attack that started from the outside, whilst participating in a prestigious, global sporting event. Theoretically, the hundreds of workers and volunteers in a variety of roles present at the Games could also be insiders. That profile would be less shocking than a sportsman-terrorist, but that does not mean that their success rate could be less infamously impressive. Such a scenario, even though seemingly outlandish and hindered by the heavy presence of security forces in and around Sochi, must be taken seriously by the Russian authorities. They might have vetted every individual connected with the games, but the authorities would never be able to fully account for the views and activities of all those working at Olympics sites, or for their families and friends who will be in Sochi.

¹⁰ Nesser, *op. cit.*, p. 930.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “From Soccer to Jihad: German Football Talent Killed in Syria,” *Spiegel Online International*, 18 November 2013, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/former-german-soccer-player-killed-in-syrian-civil-war-a-934148.html.

Option 6. Interception

In May 2006, the entire Iraqi taekwondo team was kidnapped en route to a training camp in Jordan. The kidnappings were either perpetrated for ransom or because of the ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq, as most of the team were Shiite and the suspected perpetrators Sunni. The remains of the 13 abductees were discovered more than a year later.¹³ In this case, Sunni insurgents, the most probable perpetrators, wished not to achieve a Munich 1972 effect in terms of public relations but must have found the athletes an attractive, convenient (as they were in transit) and easy target as they passed through parts of Iraq under Sunni control.

One can imagine the North Caucasus terrorists following such an example in relation to Olympic athletes, especially non-Muslims from states perceived as hostile to their cause. However, achieving such a feat might prove more than difficult in relation to Sochi Olympians, as they will mostly be flying directly into the city from abroad or from larger Russian or international transport hubs. Thus, intercepting individuals while in transit would necessitate Caucasus Emirate members to stage operations akin to the 9/11 hijackings, and at the moment, these sorts of attacks seem far beyond the reach of most terrorist entities in the world. A more feasible variation on this option would be the interception of a given nation's team while in transit from the Sochi airport to their quarters in the Olympic village. A similar incident took place in 2009 when unknown gunmen, but suspected to be Pakistanis associated with the infamous Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure), attacked the Sri Lankan cricket team while in transit from its hotel to the stadium for the third day of the second test match against the Pakistani cricket team.¹⁴ Eight people, none of them belonging to the Sri Lankan team itself, died in the attack. However, a repetition of this scenario in Sochi is again conditioned on the capability of a given terrorist entity to infiltrate the city on the eve of the Olympics, which, as shown previously, would prove more than problematic.

Conclusions

During the Olympics, apart from the six terrorist options presented here, one is bound to expect attacks somewhere in Russia as a result of the relative security vacuum in other parts of the country. These would constitute a variation on the "scratching the surface" scenario and potentially would be the most plausible and viable of the scenarios, as a given terrorist entity could still claim that, even while staging an attack thousands of kilometres from any Olympic venue, it was operating on the fringes of the Games in Sochi in order to disrupt them. Theoretically, such attacks could prove to be relatively easier as the attention of the Russian security apparatus has for now decisively shifted southwards, and is more than likely to remain fixed on the Southern Federal District until late February 2014.

The authorities will first and foremost focus their attention on the security of the Olympics, and the safety and well-being of the thousands of participants and spectators. If any of these terrorist plots are to coincide with the Olympic Games and attempt to disrupt them then these are most likely already in the last stages of planning and could still be dismantled. Some of the preparations might have been made abroad, so it must also be the task of the security services of the countries participating in the XXII Olympic Winter Games, and especially Russia's southern neighbours, to cooperate closely with their Russian counterparts in the build-up to and during the event itself. One should not discount the possibility of a more innovative terrorist approach that could borrow from previous plots against sports-related targets or that would attempt to utilise a seemingly unthinkable or previously untested scenario to stage a spectacular attack. In assessing this risk, the Russian authorities must remember the case of passenger jets, which for years had been solely used in hijackings by different terrorist entities but which later were used as massive projectile-bombs in the most famous terrorist attacks in history. Let us hope that such innovations will not be used to target the Olympics in Sochi.

¹³ "Remains of kidnapped Iraqi tae kwon do team found," *The Associated Press*, 16 June 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-06-16-athletes-found_N.htm.

¹⁴ A. Hodge, "Islamists wage war against cricket, 'the other religion'," *The Australian*, 6 March 2009, www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/news/islamists-wage-war-against-cricket/story-e6frg6t6-111119045335.