

# The threat to the Sochi Games is real

BY RONALD CRELINSTEN, OTTAWA CITIZEN    JANUARY 22, 2014

Last Sunday, a martyrdom video of two young men was posted on a website by the group Vilayat Dagestan, part of an umbrella group, the Caucasus Emirate. Their leader is Doku Umarov, the former Chechen rebel and al-Qaida-linked extremist. The Canadian government has designated the Caucasus Emirate a terrorist organization. These are the same militants whom Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the elder Boston Marathon bomber, tried to visit when he went to Dagestan in 2012.

In the video, the two men promise further attacks during next month's Olympic Games. They are seen strapping explosives to their bodies and driving happily towards their suicide mission. The video ends with images of the twin bombings in Volgograd last December in which these two young men died. Vilayat Dagestan appended a message claiming responsibility for the attacks.

Sunday's video has stoked the fears that have been steadily building since at least December. Some security analysts are suggesting the Sochi Games are under the greatest terrorist threat since the Black September attack on the 1972 Munich Olympics. One United States expert has even advised people not to go, and the Pentagon is contingency planning for an evacuation of Americans in the case of a terrorist attack, using ships stationed in the Black Sea.

In a video statement last June, Umarov called on his followers to "use maximum force" to put a stop to the Games, which he characterized as "Satanic dancing on the bones of our ancestors." In 2012, he had ordered a halt to attacks on civilians. This new order reversed that policy.

The October 2013 suicide bombing of a bus in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) appeared to be the opening salvo of this campaign. The bomber was Naida Asiyalova, the 30-year-old wife of Dmitry Sokolov, a Muslim convert from Dagestan, who fabricated the suicide belt himself. Sokolov was killed by Russian security forces several weeks later.

Then there were the two December bombings, which killed over 30 people.

Volgograd is the main transit point between Moscow and Sochi. On Monday, the Olympic flame passed through the city on its way to Sochi.

High profile sporting events like the Olympics are generally hard targets that are very difficult to attack because the security is so stringent, as in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and the 2012 London Games, both of which went off without any problem.

Other than Munich 1972, terrorism has only struck the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, where Eric Rudolph, a domestic right-wing extremist, planted several pipe bombs in a park during a concert, killing two people.

Risk assessment looks at factors such as threat level and credibility, terrorist capability and motive,

and target selection. In 1972, the Munich Olympics were not the target, per se. The Israeli athletes were. In addition, security was lax; the Olympic Village was a soft target.

The current threat is much more indiscriminate, including the Games themselves, as well as the spectators and tourists. The motive is revenge for a prolonged campaign of brutal repression, and public humiliation of President Putin — not media attention as such, nor any kind of negotiation that would benefit from such attention.

Sochi is sandwiched between mountains and the Black Sea, and is therefore quite easy to protect. A “ring of steel” surrounds the venue, including cameras, drones, and some 40,000 police and military personnel. It would be very hard for a suicide bomber to penetrate the perimeter unless people had been sent there much earlier, before the security was ramped up. This is what may have occurred however, since Russian security has just published photos of three women suspected of plotting suicide bombings, one of whom may already be in Sochi.

More vulnerable are the transportation hubs and transit points. Train stations, buses, subways, airports, and planes have already suffered terrorist attacks in the past. Vilayat Dagestan was responsible for suicide bombings that killed 37 people at a Moscow airport in 2011 and 40 on the Moscow subway in 2010 for example.

The two Chechen Wars in the mid 1990s and early 2000s launched by Vladimir Putin against the Chechen rebels have driven the conflict into neighbouring regions, especially Dagestan. Chechen youth have now lost interest in the struggle.

In the remaining weeks before the Sochi Games begin, Russian security forces are vigorously pursuing militant leaders in the North Caucasus region. They recently announced the death of at least one, while reports are circulating that Umarov himself has also been killed.

This intractable conflict has festered and transformed from a separatist insurgency to a violent Jihadi movement, to the point of posing a real threat to an international sporting event that highlights youth and friendly competition.

Ronald Crelinsten is Associate Fellow at the Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria, and author of Counterterrorism (Polity Press). He is also Adjunct Professor in the Doctor of Social Sciences Program at Royal Roads University.

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