



BRIEFING

July 26, 2024

THE OLYMPIC GAMES: A HIGH-VALUE TARGET FOR TERRORISTS

By Genovefa ETIENNE and Claude MONIQUET, co-directors of ESISC

Massive police operations took place this Thursday morning in Europe, leading to 9 arrests - 7 in Belgium and 2 in Germany. The authorities have so far refused to establish a link with the Olympic Games, but our sources assure us that such a link does exist, and that it was indeed this world competition that was targeted. In any case, one thing is certain: with just a few hours to go before the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, all the indicators are red. Intelligence services are convinced that the Games are and will be targeted by the Islamist movement and, perhaps, by other terrorist groups. But everything is being done to prevent the worst: the resources that will be deployed in Paris on Friday evening are unprecedented.

Early Thursday morning, Belgian and German police launched a vast anti-terrorist operation. Belgian police carried out 14 searches in 9 cities, including Antwerp and Brussels, and made 7 arrests as part of an investigation into terrorist plans.

The Belgian authorities declined to comment, admitting only that the timing of the operation (the network had been under surveillance for some time) had been decided in view of the imminence of the opening ceremony of the Games, but the public prosecutor's office asserts that “*no precise target has been determined*”.

Suspects from Central Asia with links to the Islamic State

However, two sources with knowledge of the case told us that it was indeed the Olympic Games that were targeted, although they refused to specify whether the opening ceremony was the main target of the project.

However, both sources confirmed that the suspects were “linked” to the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K), currently the most dangerous branch of ISIS, and that the equipment seized during this morning's operations confirmed “*without a doubt*” the terrorist nature of the project and its objectives. They added that “*the operation was still in an active phase and that further searches or arrests were possible, in France and in other European states*”, including, it seems, in Central Asian and Caucasian communities.

However, our sources declined to specify the suspects' stage of development, or whether any weapons or explosives had been discovered. The 7 suspects arrested are all (or mostly) “*adults from Central Asia or Russia*”.

In any case, we have noted a total and highly unusual silence from the Belgian public prosecutor's office, which has been confirmed to us by several Belgian and French journalistic sources, one of whom even mentioned “*strict instructions*” from Paris to delay any disclosure that might worry the public attending tomorrow's opening ceremony.

At this stage, we are reduced to conjecture, but if the hypothesis of an attack targeting the Olympic Games were to become clear, we would find ourselves in a scenario similar to that which preceded the November 2015 attacks: a planned large-scale terrorist operation prepared from France against France.

A proven, high terrorist threat

The terrorist threat has been considered particularly high for the past year, and has further increased since October 7, 2023. And, of course, it is the Islamist threat that is of greatest concern.

However, French (and European) intelligence services are not neglecting any other possibility. In a recent interview, Olivier Christen, the new “boss” of the Pnat (National Anti-Terrorist Prosecutor's Office) stressed that the ultraright movement does not represent the most important threat, but that it cannot be neglected for all that. On the other hand, no threat from the ultra-left has been detected: “*Intelligence estimates that there are around 2,000 people in this [ultra-right] movement . A few of them go over the edge into violent radicalization. We mustn't give it an importance it doesn't have, but this threat does exist and represents some fifteen procedures at the anti-terrorist prosecutor's office, eight of which have led to trials. As for the ultra-left, there are currently no cases.*”

Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and “non-aligned actors”

The Islamist threat can have three origins. Al Qaeda, ISIS, (and more specifically ISIS-K, the Islamic State in Khorasan) and individual “non-aligned” jihadist actors, who may or may not claim allegiance to one or other of these organizations after having, possibly, sworn allegiance to them.

Our sources in the French intelligence services, whether internal (DGSI) or external (DGSE), are unanimous: AQ and ISIS have tried and will try to strike France, either by a planned attack or by an attack provoked. The Olympic Games are, of course, a unique opportunity: it's probably the largest possible concentration of cameras and journalists. In “classic” jihad territories (Middle East, Sahel, etc.), terrorism aims to seize power, while in other areas it is a means of “armed propaganda” designed to raise funds and recruit new fighters.

Let's start with Al Qaeda. Today, this organization is extremely weakened. After 2001, it lost most of its experienced cadres and, in Europe, its networks were dismantled. It has had to contend with stiff competition from ISIS, and is plagued by leadership problems. However, it still exists, and it's clear that for it to strike, or have struck, France during the Games would be a huge victory and bring it back to center stage. However, we don't believe that AQ has the operational resources to pull off such an operation. But experience has taught us that nothing is

ever certain when it comes to terrorism. Who would have thought, on September 10 2001, that AQ, the very next day, would defy the United States and carry out attacks that would change the world? But the AQ threat is not considered the most likely.

The Islamic State in Khorasan, threat number 1

The situation is quite different with the Islamic State group. Admittedly, the latter has been durably weakened by the loss of the Caliphate's territoriality with the fall of its two capitals - Raqqa and Mosul - in 2017. But the IS had prompted the creation of "provinces" (the "wilayat") in several regions of the world: Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia are today the most virulent. While the EI in the Sahel and, above all, in sub-Saharan Africa are unlikely to have the capacity to strike France, the same cannot be said of ISIS-K. Today, this group can be considered the most dangerous of the ISIS movement. It proved, in Moscow at the end of March and in Derbent and Makhachkala (Dagestan) on June 23, that it had the means and the will to strike, even in a difficult context - Russia being one of the most "secure" countries in the world -, the will of its leaders certainly being to take the leadership over the entire movement.

Since 2017, France and Europe have mainly been concerned by individual attacks carried out with rudimentary means (knife attacks, among others), but over the past year, intelligence services have noticed the structuring of real networks, sometimes transnational, in Europe. On June 20, Olivier Christen gave an interview in which he declared: *"We've seen a marked upturn in activity since the end of 2023. This year, we have already opened three times as many investigations as over the same period last year. We're on an upward slope that reflects, as always, the tensions previously detected by the intelligence services."*

An accumulation of revealing "incidents" in recent months

In Europe, in addition to three individual terrorist attacks (on October 13, 2023 in Arras, on October 16, 2023 in Brussels, on December 3, 2023 in Paris), since December¹, 2023, there have been a number of events which demonstrate that the threat is very serious. On June 21, French police arrested a 19-year-old who was planning attacks on the Jewish community "probably during the Olympic Games"; on June 15, a Daesh propaganda network was dismantled in France, calling for attacks on the Olympic Games; on June 12, a 12-year-old Daesh sympathizer (!) was arrested in Sochaux (Doubs department).) was arrested in Sochaux (Doubs department); on June 4, an 18-year-old Chechen was arrested in Saint-Etienne (Loire department) for planning an attack on the Games; on April 9, the EIK threatened soccer stadiums on the occasion of the Euro soccer tournament (threats not followed up); on March 8, a Daesh jihadist cell preparing attacks in Sweden was dismantled; on March 7, two Daesh sympathizers were "neutralized": "neutralization" of two Daesh sympathizers preparing an attack on a Moscow synagogue; March 4: dismantling in France and in France of two cells of Daesh sympathizers and formed by teenagers; February 26: arrest in France of a radicalized schoolteacher (Daesh) suspected of preparing an attack; end of December 2023: dismantling in France and in France of a transnational cell preparing attacks on Christian places of worship.

These incidents demonstrate that the Islamist threat - and particularly that ISIS and its "subsidiary" ISIS-K - is extremely high. Finally, ISIS-K can count on sympathizers and cells made up of Central Asians and Russians of Caucasian origin in France, France, France and France.

In short, everything indicates, as our observation work and intelligence sources point out, that the threat has returned to a level comparable to that which preceded the 2015 attacks...

Why target France?

There are several reasons why France is vulnerable. Firstly, it is the country most targeted by jihadism in Europe over the last thirty years. Paris was impacted by the Algerian crisis of the 1990s, was targeted (but unsuccessfully) by al-Qaeda in the 90s-2000s, was targeted by “non-aligned” actors (the “Roubaix gang” in the late 90s, Mohamed Merah in Toulouse in 2012) and finally by Daech from 2015 onwards. There are more reasons for this: firstly, France is the only “aggressively” secular country in Europe, which is unbearable for jihadists; secondly, it has a colonial past that links it to several countries where jihadist terrorism is particularly active; thirdly, French services and armies have been very active in the international fight against jihadism for 30 years: Paris supported the Algerian military in the fight against the GIA, and France intervened in Afghanistan, the Sahel, Syria and Iraq. What's more, today's jihadist groups see France as an ally of Israel.

Specific factors further increase this threat: integration problems, for example, have pushed a (small) fraction of young people of immigrant origin (2nd or 3rd generation) into radicalization. In addition, France has a relatively large Caucasian community, and is one of the countries where the presence of very young teenagers in the jihadist movement has been most noticeable over the past two years. Let's listen again to Olivier Christen, who, in the above-mentioned interview, noted the growing involvement of minors in terrorism-related activities: “ *We used to have two or three minors indicted each year for Islamist terrorism. Fifteen in 2023. And we're up to ten minors, in 6 months, in 2024. These figures are still low, but they reflect a fairly clear evolution: it's, I think, the effect of propaganda that makes extensive use of teenagers' means of communication.* “

Let's add a final risk factor: the situation in Gaza. Firstly, the accumulation of deaths is exploited by jihadist propaganda to incite people to take action. Secondly, France is perceived as an ally of Israel, which is true: Paris has recognized Israel's right to self-defense, supplies it with arms and munitions, and even intervened directly (over Jordan) during the Iranian attack in the spring.

The particular threat of “psychiatric cases”

Finally, although it may seem irrelevant to our subject, France suffers from a serious problem in hospital psychiatry. Over the past twenty years, various governments - left, right and center - have massively disinvested in the public health sector. Hospitals have been particularly hard hit by this short-sighted policy, and adult psychiatry has suffered severe cutbacks. Today, it is cruelly short of beds, isolation rooms, doctors, psychologists and specialist nurses. Similarly, France's 11 UMDs (“Unités pour malades difficiles” or Units for difficult patients) have a total capacity of less than 600 people. Many patients who, for their own protection and that of society as a whole, should be interned, are “released” as soon as their condition can decently be said to have improved, and are left to fend for themselves, sometimes without any follow-up.

In recent years, a number of attacks, sometimes fatal, carried out in a “terrorist” context have been committed by people diagnosed (before or after the event) as suffering from serious psychiatric disorders. However, the context of the Olympic Games, with its hyper-mediatization, the massive presence of law enforcement agencies that can be perceived as a

threat in a delirious context, and the restrictions imposed in certain areas on freedom of movement and other security constraints, can trigger or aggravate delirious phases in patients.

Unique tools in the fight against terrorism and unprecedented security

The good news is that France has almost unique tools at its disposal in the fight against terrorism. For a very long time, it has had specialized investigating judges and an anti-terrorist prosecutor's office, based in Paris, which, with national jurisdiction, concentrate all investigations. Intelligence services and specialized police forces have been strengthened. Finally, extremely permissive laws facilitating the surveillance of suspects, including remote access to their computer systems and encrypted messaging, make the work of these services much easier.

In terms of general security, the resources that will be deployed from Friday are unprecedented. No fewer than 45,000 members of the internal security forces (police and gendarmes) will be mobilized in Paris for the opening ceremony alone, and between 30,000 and 35,000 each day thereafter. To these will be added 2,000 municipal police officers, between 10,000 and 12,000 military personnel taking part in "Opération Sentinelle" (army's involvement in anti-terrorist security measures; the total number of military personnel involved could, if necessary, rise to 20,000), 1,800 foreign police officers (with "specialties": mine clearance, accompanying explosive detection dogs, anti-drone warfare, etc.) and some twenty thousand private security agents.

Better still, for the first time in their history, the three intervention units - RAID (National Police), BRI (Paris Police) and GIGN (National Gendarmerie) - will be working in close symbiosis from the opening ceremony onwards: the GIGN will take charge of security for the river parade, the RAID will control the "high points" (buildings from which the ceremony or competitions could be targeted) and the BRI (Brigade de Recherche et d'Intervention) will be held in reserve for possible intervention. They will be supported by 10 boats and 4 helicopters, two of which will carry snipers.

The only thing left to count on is the luck factor...

The fact remains that some fanatics may have been clever enough to "fly under the radar", and that hundreds of terrorists convicted between 2000 and 2015 (before laws and sentences were tightened) have been released in recent years without having been "de-radicalized". Some twenty thousand people are listed in intelligence files concerning terrorist radicalization, and around 5,000 are considered to be at the "top end of the spectrum", i.e. likely to carry out an act. However, the resources of the services concerned do not allow for total surveillance (interception and electronic surveillance + physical surveillance) of more than 500 people simultaneously...

Intelligence is an essential weapon in the fight against terrorism. Cooperation with other European services is therefore essential, as is cooperation with countries further afield - North Africa, the Middle East and the United States. In fact, Belgium has seconded a State Security officer to Paris to coordinate its actions with local services in real time.

But there are still a number of loopholes in the intelligence field. France's current antagonistic - not to say execrable - relations with Russia also play a role. All communication with Moscow is cut off. After recent threats and the attack on *Crocus City Hall*, the French services

approached Moscow for information on the EIK and... Moscow never replied. This is all the more regrettable given that Russia's FSB (domestic intelligence) and SVR (foreign intelligence) clearly have extensive documentation on EIK networks and sympathizers in Europe. The same problem exists with Syria.

It is said that when Napoleon had to appoint a general and was presented with a potential candidate's record of service, he would ask “ *Oui, mais a-t-il de chance?* ” (Yes, but is he lucky?). In Paris, everything was anticipated, everything was planned, everything was in place. The question remains: *will the French services be lucky?*

@ESISC 2024

esisc@esisc.org

claudemoniquet@esisc.org

www.esisc.org