

SOCHI: HIGH THREATS BUT LOW RISK

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The security paradox of Winter Olympic Games in Sochi is obvious to any observer of the Russian scene and to every security analysts: the threat level is very high **but the actual risk of attack in the city of Sochi, and a fortiori against a sport facility in the Olympic Village, against a delegation or during an official event is relatively low.**

To be convinced we can refer to this well known formula:

$$\text{Risk} = \frac{\text{Threats} \times \text{Vulnerabilities}}{\text{Capacity}}$$

And more in details:

1) General introduction

A) Threats

In our formula applied for Sochi security situation, the threats are obvious: the jihadist movement revolving around the terrorist network **Imarat Kavkaz**, its affiliates and other radical Islamist groups in the region obviously has an interest to target the Games to transform it in a disaster that will dramatically damage the image of Russia and Vladimir Putin. This perspective is certainly shared by the international jihadist movement; hence terrorist attacks against Sochi would immediately provide a worldwide advertising for regional Islamist groups.

B) Vulnerabilities

The vulnerabilities of Russia, and namely of Sochi itself and the Olympic events are also clear. Russia is a strong state that, nevertheless, sometimes demonstrates signs of disorganization and some weaknesses, caused by the incompetence on the different levels of administration, bureaucracy, the reluctance to take personal initiatives and responsibility, technical or communicational failures and corruption.

Concerning Sochi, there is no need here to recall that the city is situated in one of the most dangerous regions of the world, the North Caucasus.

Furthermore, the Olympics Games gather on a relatively small area thousands of athletes, trainers, coaches, technicians and other personnel, tens of thousands of spectators and hundreds of political and economic leaders but also numerous VIPs.

C) Capacity

Taking into consideration only the first two terms of the equation, we can therefore conclude that an "incident" is inevitable.

However it must be balanced by the third term - the capabilities implemented by the authorities (and the international community) to tackle the threat.

The Sochi Olympics will undoubtedly be the most "secure" Games in the Olympic history (at least since 1945): huge resources have been put in place for months by the Russian authorities: the town and its immediate surroundings were searched and "cleared", the city will be totally isolated during the weeks of Olympics and Paralympics games. Moreover Moscow can undoubtedly count on the cooperation of the international intelligence community.

So the risk seems to be low, despite the factors of high threats and very high vulnerability.

However this brief analysis can be applied only to the city of Sochi and Olympic facilities: the level of risk is certainly much higher for the rest of Russia (including Moscow, but also large cities in southern regions), infrastructures and transport hubs (including planes and trains to Sochi) and Russian interests abroad.

Similarly, given the vulnerabilities briefly mentioned above, **and taking into account that the human factor is generally the weakest link in any security operation, an error with potentially catastrophic effects can not be totally excluded.**

2) Threats, an inventory

A) Threats expressed in jihadist circles

During the past months researchers and analysts of ESISC carefully monitored and analyzed all accessible sources (forums, blogs, Islamist websites protected by passwords or with restricted access, social media, etc...) in all relevant languages (Russian, Caucasian languages and dialects, Arabic ...).

The results of this comprehensive watch are the following:

In Arabic:

- ✓ **No known and credible Arabic jihadist organizations have issued specific threat against the Sochi Olympics.**
- ✓ In communications expressed in Arabic, **we found relatively little evidence of an interest for the Olympic Games.** However, in a number of conversations forum users mentioned that the games 'will not take place peacefully' as they are organized 'on mass graves of hundreds of thousands of people killed by the Russians since the XIX century'.

- ✓ Besides, it should be mentioned, that on February 4, 2014, the newspaper **Al-Hayat** published an article in which it considered the possibility of chemical weapons seized in Syria to be used by Caucasian jihadists during the Olympic Games.

In Russian:

- ✓ In **February 2007** Dagestani Islamist battalion **Jamaat Sharia** threatened to attack the 2014 Games and "all the participants of these Games." **The statement of the terrorist group, made seven years ago, reappeared recently in several Caucasian jihadist websites.**
- ✓ On **June 10, 2013** **Doku Umarov**, leader of **Imarat Kavkaz** issued a **4-minute video where he urged his followers to organize attacks against the Games.** He also cancelled his earlier moratorium on attacks against civilians, issued in February 2012, as, according to Umarov, this call for a truce had been interpreted by the Russian authorities as a sign of weakness.
- ✓ On **July 4 2013** **Boris Stomakhin**¹ expressed his support to Doku Umarov and urged to 'sabotage' the Games.
- ✓ On **July 31, 2013** a message of support to the call of Doku Umarov was published in the Internet by "**Emir Saladin**" who presented himself as a "jihadist fighting in Syria."
- ✓ On **December 21, 2013** the website **UmmaNews** urged "Mujahedeen to pray to prevent the satanic Sochi games from taking place".
- ✓ On **December 27, 2013** a group calling itself "Anonymous Caucasus" threatened to carry out cyber attacks against during the Games. Video of the threat message had been posted on **Kavkazcentr.com** (media wing of the **Imarat Kavkaz**).
- ✓ On **January 16, 2014** the Russian jihadist website **Vilayat Dagestan** posted online a video (presented as a "Testaments of martyrs") in which two potential suicide bombers belonging to **Ansar al Sunnah**², "Abdurakhman" and "Suleiman" claimed responsibility for Volgograd attacks and threatened that new suicide attacks would be launched during the Games.
- ✓ On **January 22, 2014** **Vilayat Dagestan** posted on its website a statement signed by the "**Mujahedeen Battalion of Rabbankala**" of the **Imarat Kavkaz** Dagestan's branch and where the group claimed that it was in possession of "a ton of nitrate ammonium" (chemical used to make improvised explosive devices) and plans to use it soon.
- ✓ **The same day** on the same website another statement signed by "Emir Umar" and calling the Russian army to "withdraw from the Caucasus" under the threat of further

¹ Boris Stomakhin is an interesting example of the connection between certain areas of extreme leftists and radical Islam. Former member of a Maoist group and later a leader of a virtual revolutionary cell, he was, at the same time the editor of the leftist journal Radical Politics and of a pro-jihadist website Kavkazcenter. He is known for wacky texts calling for "Holocaust of Russians" or demonstrating support for the most extreme Chechen factions. Stomakhin has already served 5 years in prison for extremism.

² Contrary to what was declared by some media outlets, it is not the Iraqi group Ansar al-Sunnah, but an homonymous "battalion" of **Imarat Kavkaz**

attacks was posted. **Note that although published on a Russian jihadist website, the message was written in Arabic.**

- ✓ Still on **the same day**, **Vilayat Dagestan** claimed that **Ansar al-Sunnah** was in a position to use chemical weapons in attacks against Russian interests.

3) The state of the jihadist movement

A) Al-Qaeda

International jihadist movement is currently busy in different fields of operations, notably in Mali and in Syria. **Moreover it seems to be very divided and weakened by internal tensions and conflicts between leaders.**

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's successor as head of al-Qaeda, is indeed challenged as many leaders of Al-Qaeda local networks and other affiliated organizations (like in Somalia but not only there) accuse him of "authoritarianism" and "refusal of dialogue". **Several documents discovered and analyzed by ESISC in April 2013³ accused al-Zawahiri and his associates of "abuse of power" and "lack of respect" towards the rest of the terrorist organization, thus limiting the recruiting capacities of the movement and threatening the existence of the entire organization.** According to the information, collected by our analysts, several internal purges took place and numerous fighters as well as clerics and preachers have been "imprisoned" or eliminated.

In addition, leaders of the organization also disagree on the conditions in which operations are conducted in Syria, especially because the massacres of civilians by local Islamist rebel groups are "damaging the image" of the jihad.

We believe that both the concentration of Al Qaeda's resources in Syria and to a lesser extent in the Sahel combined to the abovementioned internal rivalries are making the international terrorist network unable to act efficiently against the Sochi games.

Nevertheless, such situation could on the contrary push al-Zawahiri to launch a massive attack in order to reassert its dominance as it can also push his opponents to do the same to show that they are the true leaders the global jihad.

B) The Caucasian Islamist groups

The context in which the Caucasian jihadist groups evolve is different.

If we can not talk about open war in Chechnya, clashes between terrorists and Russian security forces take place on a daily basis in the North Caucasus. These clashes were largely ignored by the world media that focus only in some particularly spectacular terrorist attacks in Russia. **Radical Islamist groups, under constant pressure from security forces, are in a similar situation of their Algerian and Sahelian counterparts: they seem to have lost any chance to reverse the trend and to gain power, but the practice of a "residual terrorism" still allows them to recruit and survive.** Note also that these groups bitterly complain to be "abandoned to their fate" by an indifferent international

³ See our briefing of April 15, 2013: A new document shows the internal tensions of al-Qaeda <http://www.esisc.org/publications/briefings/un-nouveau-document-illustre-les-tensions-internes-dal-qada>

public opinion and by foreign States wishing to consolidate or improve their relations with Russia.

It is clear for these groups that the Olympics represent a unique opportunity to attract the world's attention on what they consider their "forgotten war."

Finally, it should be mentioned that Imarat Kavkaz and other groups of the same nature can count on the financial support (and possibly the sending of volunteers) of the jihadist diaspora operating in northern Europe, especially in Germany and Belgium.

In a series of recent attacks, namely in deadly Volgograd bombings on October 21 and December 29 and 30, **these groups have proven their ability to conduct large-scale terrorist attacks against civilian targets.**

We can not ignore the fact that the recent deaths (sometimes unconfirmed) of several leaders of the Caucasian jihadist movement, including Doku Umarov⁴, but also "Abu Nasr," the head of Shamilkala branch of Imarat Kavkaz in Dagestan, **can trigger further escalation of violence, as it was the case in the past, the contenders for succession attempting to prove their efficiency as warlords.**

The significant increase of written, audio and video statements from these groups in recent days demonstrate that the idea to target the Olympics remains the main terrorists' concerns over the last years.

4) Some recent significant incidents

In addition to the attacks of Volgograd in December and October 2013, we noted several recent incidents highlighting that security concerns remain high in Russia, especially in North Caucasus:

- On **February 5, 2014** 3 terrorists were killed during a security operation in the town of Izberbash, Dagestan republic. One of the killed terrorists was identified as Jamaldin Mirzaev, 30, a ringleader who was allegedly involved in recruiting and training the two suicide bombers who launched deadly attacks in the city of Volgograd on December 29 and 30.
- On **February 4, 2014** the Vienna office of the Austrian Olympic Committee received an anonymous letter posted in Russia containing threats of kidnapping against the athletes Marlies Schild and Janine Flock.
- On **January 26, 2014** 3 terrorists were killed in Buinaksk (Daghestan).
- On **January 21, 2014** Russian media announced that 4 female suicide bombers allegedly infiltrated Sochi to perpetrate deadly attacks.
- On **January 20, 2014** an Egyptian national, who arrived in 2013 as a political refugee, was arrested in Moscow over alleged links with Al Qaeda.
- **The same day** 3 terrorists were killed in Dagestan.

⁴ See our briefing from 17 January 2014 : « *Russia : unconfirmed reports about the death of Doku Umarov several weeks ahead of Winter Olympic Games in Sochi* » : <http://www.esisc.org/publications/briefings/russia-unconfirmed-reports-about-the-death-of-doku-umarov-several-weeks-ahead-of-winter-olympic-games-in-sochi>

- On **January 19, 2014** Russian media reported that a female suicide bomber who allegedly intends to perpetrate an attack in Sochi is wanted by security authorities.
- On **January 18, 2014** 7 terrorists were killed in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan republic, in a counter-terrorism operation that was launched following a terrorist attack that left 16 people injured a day earlier.
- On **January 17, 2014** a counter-terrorist operation was launched by security troops in Dagestan and Stavropol krai.
- On **January 15, 2014** 4 terrorists and 3 security officers were killed in a shooting incident in Dagestan.
- On **January 12, 2014** 2 terrorists were killed in Dagestan.
- On **January 11, 2014** 5 terrorists were detained in possession of explosive devices in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria.
- On **January 9, 2014** the widow of a terrorist was arrested in the southern city of Astrakhan in possession of a home-made explosive device.

5) Counter-terrorism capacities

Any group or terrorist cells that intend to hit the Sochi Olympics should deal with an unprecedented level of mobilization of security forces and a level of alert:

- Nearly \$2 billions were spent to guarantee security during the Games.
- Some 100 000 police, military and security troops will be deployed in the area.
- These troops would be backed by drones, military helicopters, armored vehicles and anti-aircraft missiles.
- Western and US intelligence services will be also engaged in detection of all types of particular security threats that may come from Europe.
- Numerous counter-terrorist operations were recently launched to ‘clear’ and secure the region.

6) The risk : 7 scenarios

- ✓ **The sleeping cell:** Jihadists had several years to prepare for the Games (the first threats against the Olympics in Sochi appeared in 2007). It is quite possible that they have implanted one or more sleeping cells in Sochi or even infiltrated their people among the maintenance staff. Weapons or explosives could have been, in the same way brought and stored in town. Such cell may perpetrate one or two spectacular attacks.
- ✓ **The attack of one or several "missionary (ies)":** Caucasian jihadists or European converted may have bought tickets for certain events well in advance and received visa from Russian authorities. This (these) “missionary (ies)” probably can not carry weapons or explosives on site, but they can count on a logistic support of a “sleeping cell”.

- ✓ **The action of an "isolated jihadist"**: On February 2, after the Super Bowl, an activist denouncing the involvement of U.S. authorities in the attack of 9/11 interrupted the press conference of Malcolm Smith, went on stage and took the microphone. He was able to infiltrate a restricted area, reserved for journalists and officials despite impressive security measures. Such a man, in possession of a weapon, may attempt to perpetrate an act of terrorism during an official ceremony.
- **Attacks against transport targets outside Sochi**: It is one of the most credible hypotheses. Local jihadist organizations have already proved, in Volgograd, in Moscow and in numerous other cities that they are able to perpetrate efficiently attacks against these types of targets. During Olympic Games they may target transport hubs, namely trains, buses and stations in southern Russia.
- **The use of "MANPADS" (portable missiles) against aircrafts**: A plane landing at Sochi Adler International Airport could be targeted by portable missiles in its landing phase, several tens of kilometers from the city (in 2012 anti-aircraft missiles have been discovered in a weapon cache in the region).
- **Terrorist attacks in Moscow or in other big cities**: As most of the attention of the security services will be directed towards Sochi, attacks may be committed in other major cities. The media impact of such attacks is certain. Note that on January 28, the British media quoted "sources close to Whitehall" mentioned that attacks were likely during the Olympics, but "outside the Sochi region."
- **Attacks against Russian interests abroad**: To target an Embassy, a Consulate or another Russian representation abroad will also have a significant impact.

7) Conclusion

We believe that the risk of an attack in Sochi itself is very limited, with the exception of the first three abovementioned scenarios. However, the risk of "peripheral" attacks against civilian targets should be considered as high.

In the city of Sochi, even if the risk is low, it is not non-existent and it will most probably concerns the "easy targets" (civilians) instead of official events which are highly secured.