

The terrorism threat to the 2024 Paris Olympics: Learning from the past to understand the present

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The European Summer calendar of premier sporting events is well and truly underway. With the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship in Germany in full swing and the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games to commence on 26 July, security has been a central theme in event planning and management. The predominant security focus is the threat of terrorism, according to Germany's Interior Minister [Nancy Faeser](#) and French Interior Minister [Gérald Darmanin](#). Governments and event organisers seek to reassure the public amid warnings that terrorist groups might be planning to attack the events. What should be made of this perceived threat of terrorism and the counter-terrorism response ahead of the Paris Olympics?

Definitive answers on the dangers posed by clandestine actors are [necessarily elusive](#). Nonetheless, asking a [wide range of questions](#) can help to make greater sense of the situation. In this analysis, we ask what can be learned from the past, drawing on historical evidence, to understand the present terrorist threat and the potential targeting of sporting events.

Threats against the Paris Olympics

Less than a month after it [attacked a concert hall](#) outside Moscow, killing 145 people, Islamic State, particularly its Afghanistan-based [affiliate Islamic State - Khorasan Province](#) (IS-KP), called for further violence in Russia and elsewhere in Europe. IS-KP's [media arm](#), the Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, [specifically named](#) this summer's premier sporting events as targets, threatening to attack stadiums hosting UEFA Champions League matches in London, Madrid, and Paris, as well as urging followers "to recreate the glory" of the November 2015 Paris massacre, which killed 130 people, by using similar tactics during the Paris Olympics. These [calls](#) should be viewed within the context of IS-KP's propensity for transnational terrorist attacks and the [surge](#) in Islamist extremist [terror plots in Europe](#) since the outbreak of the war on Gaza in October 2023.

Prior to the Gaza war, Islamist extremist plots in Europe were declining in frequency. Europol recorded fourteen jihadist plots [in 2020](#), eleven plots [in 2021](#), and six plots [in 2022](#). In contrast, over a dozen such plots appear to have occurred in the first nine months since Hamas's 7 October massacre. This includes at least six attacks that caused deaths or injuries, such as the [13 October 2023 stabbing](#) at a high school in France, the [16 October 2023 shooting murder](#) of two Swedish football (soccer) fans in Belgium,

the [16 October 2023 stabbing](#) in the United Kingdom, the [3 December 2023 killing](#) of a German tourist in France, the [2 March 2024 stabbing](#) of a Jewish man in Switzerland, and the [31 May 2024 stabbing attack](#) against a far-right demonstration in Germany. These attacks were mostly by lone actors armed with simple weapons like knives, unlike the large-scale attacks that occurred at the height of Islamic State's threat to Europe in the 2010s. However, Europe has also experienced more ambitious plots in recent months.

Since the Gaza war began, European police and security agencies have foiled many apparent plots including [alleged plans](#) to attack [Christmas markets](#) and [cathedrals](#) in Germany and Austria in December 2023, an [alleged plot](#) to attack a [concert in Belgium](#) in March 2024, an alleged shooting plot under the [guidance of IS-KP](#) to [attack the Swedish Parliament](#) in March 2024, an alleged plot in Germany to [attack churches and police officers](#) in April 2024, and an alleged shooting plot [against Jewish communities and security officials](#) in the UK in May 2024. Furthermore, there have been plots alleged to directly target the Paris Olympics. In late April, [a 16-year-old was arrested](#) after he announced on social media that he wanted to die a martyr at the Olympics. On 22 May, [an 18-year-old was detained](#) in Saint-Étienne for allegedly plotting an Islamist-inspired attack at a football stadium that will be used during the Olympics.

Considering the dynamic threat environment, it is important not only to focus on Islamic State and official Olympic venues. One possibility is that Islamic State, or supporters inspired or [remotely guided](#) by the group, could attack a softer target in France or elsewhere in Europe during the Olympics, seeing an opportunity to generate publicity from the timing rather than the location. Australia experienced a [plot like this](#) during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Moreover, threats to the Olympics are not limited to Islamic State, as various other groups and individuals could have harmful intentions, albeit often with limited capability for mass violence. This may include acts of violence in event-related areas such as city centres or fan zones, perpetrated by unaffiliated individuals with idiosyncratic or [composite](#) ideologies or pathological grievances that are not ideologically driven.

Historical evidence of terrorism at the Olympics

What does historical evidence tell us about the threat of terrorism at the Olympics? There have been [several attacks and plots](#) related to the Olympics throughout history. This includes lethal attacks in host cities during the Munich 1972, Atlanta 1996, and Beijing 2008 Games. The perpetrators of these attacks represent a [variety of ideological influences](#). The most infamous and impactful of these attacks is undoubtedly the murder of eleven Israeli Olympic team members by Black September during the 1972 Munich Olympics. In 1996, lone actor Eric Rudolph carried out a bomb attack at the Centennial Olympic Park during the Atlanta Olympics, killing two and injuring more than 110 others. Multiple lesser-known attacks took place before and during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, including two bombs detonated on buses, killing three people. There have also been attacks and plots more indirectly linked to the Olympics. Examples include two suicide bombings in Volgograd, Russia, which killed a total of 36 people. The Islamist group Vilayat Dagestan [claimed responsibility](#) for the attack, stating that the attacks were a warning ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and in retaliation for the killing of Muslims around the world.

Historical data indicate some intriguing patterns. First, there is [no consistent increase or decrease](#) in the frequency of terrorist attacks on the Olympics over time. However, there is a pattern of [spatial and temporal displacement](#) of attacks. The vast majority of attacks, especially in recent decades, have taken place [outside](#) of Olympic competitions and away from host cities, targeting a diverse range of victims including officials, athletes, tourists, spectators, and local residents. This spatial and temporal displacement of attacks appears to have been caused at least in part by the intensified security measures at Olympic venues, as we will discuss later.

Second, fatal terrorist attacks on the Olympics are rare. [Forty percent](#) of attacks produced no casualties. Perhaps surprisingly, the deadliest attack was not the 1972 Munich Olympics attack or the suicide bombings in Russia, but the 1976 bombing of Cubana Flight 455, which killed all 73 people onboard including the entire Cuban Olympic fencing team. This attack was carried out by Cuban exile terrorists with [unclear](#) but [concerning](#) connections to the CIA.

The latter raises a third point: the two most lethal terrorist attacks in the history of the modern Olympic Games were acts of state terrorism: the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico in 1968, and the bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987. The Mexican [government](#)

used the international attention of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics to suppress the nascent student movement, accusing them of attacking police officers to justify the violent crackdown that led to the Tlatelolco massacre, which left more than one hundred student and civilian protesters dead. In 1987, North Korean operatives detonated a bomb on a Korean Air flight from Baghdad to Seoul, killing all 115 people on board, in an attempt to destabilise the South Korean government and instil fear in international delegates and athletes intending to participate in the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Why are sporting events being targeted?

Multiple features of major sporting events make them an attractive target for terrorism. The rationales of those who intend to target these events are strikingly similar across ideological milieus. Major sporting events offer a global stage that guarantees maximum publicity. An attack on the Olympics, where representatives of virtually all countries are co-present, provides an opportunity for global impact. In this regard, it is important to remember that terrorism is a performative and communicative act that aims to influence the audience it is orientated towards. The 1972 Munich Olympics attack, dubbed "the first live broadcast of terror," is a case in point. The attack stemmed from Black September's plan to use media coverage of the Olympics to draw attention to the plight of the Palestinian people and pressure Israel to set free Palestinian prisoners. Abu Daoud, a mastermind of the attack, stated that:

Before Munich, we were simply terrorists. After Munich, at least people started asking who are these terrorists? What do they want? Before Munich, nobody had the slightest idea about Palestine [...] People were more interested in sports than in the plight of the Palestinians. [...] In one sense, we succeeded in Munich: we forced our cause on to the television screens of 500 million households.

Beyond global media exposure, major sporting events offer terrorists a valuable symbolic target. Sporting events are targeted not because terrorists are known to bear any particular ill-will to sport, but because they wish to inflict damage on a government or community involved in or associated with the event. The host government is often the intended target of an attack. For example, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics attack was meant to "confound, anger and embarrass" an evil government, in an attempt to "drag this monstrosity of a government down to the dust where it belongs." The 2013 Boston Marathon bombings (held on Patriots' Day), which killed three spectators and injured more than 260, were considered payback for the US military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sometimes the host government is not itself the direct target. As the 1972 Munich Olympics attack exemplifies, terrorists can also target nationals (i.e., athletes, coaches, officials) of a specific nation during the event.

These features of major sporting events make them attractive targets to terrorists who seek to inflict maximum damage and fear or to maximise publicity for their campaigns. Yet, the writings of terrorists and terrorist organisations that reference sporting events also indicate another element in target selection – opportunism. For example, multiple issues of al-Qaeda's Inspire magazine (in 2012 and 2014) described sporting events as "very easy" targets, recommending such events to be targeted due to their "dense crowds," "visited by [...] high profile people," with "many times and places to be targeted" and guaranteeing global media coverage. Thus, in addition to the distinctive strategic and symbolic value of major sporting events as terrorist targets, there is also the more basic consideration of sports events as crowded places. This is evident in Inspire's listing of sporting events in the same breath as other densely crowded spaces such as international exhibitions, large social events, and crowded marketplaces. In this sense, sports are not exceptional targets but part of a broader strategy of targeting dense crowds. The 2013 Boston Marathon bombings illustrate this opportunistic element in target selection. The Tsarnaev brothers had reportedly intended to attack a Fourth of July event in Boston but decided to bring their attack forward because their improvised explosive devices were ready sooner than they had anticipated. There is no evidence that they were specifically committed to targeting a sporting event. In a similar vein, David Copeland, whose bombing campaign killed three people and injured 129 others in London in 1999, was inspired by the 1996 Atlanta attack. He considered bombing the Notting Hill Carnival, but ended up targeting other, more "mundane" crowded places (a high street, a street market, and a pub).

Reduced opportunity and security conundrums

Notwithstanding its attractiveness as a terrorist target, the opportunities for conducting a large-scale attack at the Olympics should not be overstated. Opportunities to strike against sports mega-events have vastly declined over time due to their expansive security regimes. Event organisers take exceptional pre-emptive measures including vast surveillance, cybersecurity, intelligence gathering and sharing, workforce allocation, and sending in additional security forces including military troops to secure Olympic venues. France reportedly plans to deploy approximately 45,000 police and security forces, 20,000 private security, and 15,000 military personnel each day to protect the event. This approach, with its dramatic security displays, has become typical of the organisation of sports mega-events, constituting what Bajc calls "security meta-ritual." Boyle and Haggerty refer to this as "spectacular security," noting how security itself (and not just the sporting event) has become spectacular in ways that "contribute to a legacy of security dynamics that can outlast any particular event." Hosting the Olympics enables authorities to introduce extraordinary security measures that would be more difficult to justify in other circumstances. Security arrangements such as high-tech surveillance infrastructures and the militarisation of public space can endure long after the event is over, shifting from exceptionalism to normalisation. Moreover, sports mega-events like the Olympics reflect and advance the wider fusion between the internal and external in security practices, as evidenced by, for example, a highly visible military presence and an intensification of military intervention.

This raises a well-known conundrum: how do we balance the requirements of security and public safety with the convivial spirit and commercial interests of the Olympics? Ever since the 1972 Munich Olympics increased security and expanding notions of risk and pre-emptive risk management have taken hold. The 1976 Montreal Olympics constituted the Games' first highly visible security operation, laying the foundation for the security investment and militarisation that have become the norm for the Olympics, with lasting security legacies.

One such security legacy is the reconfiguration of public space both during and after the Olympics, with the event acting as a catalyst for the re-making of urban security and socio-spatial architectures. Examples include efforts to cleanse or civilize urban spaces through intense regulation and control. This raises critical questions regarding social polarisation, inequality, and civil liberties. Research has shown the potential for the Olympics to exacerbate social inequalities and undercut democratic principles and practices in the name of keeping the event safe.

These critical questions about the cost of securing the Olympics reflect in some ways the age-old conundrum of the tensions that often exist between counter-terrorism and liberal democracy, in that any counter-terrorism response must be based on democratic principles and respect for human rights. But it is also questionable to what extent the financial and civil liberties cost of keeping the Olympics safe, as a so-called "terrorism tax," could play into a strategy of inducing both fear and exorbitant security measures.

There is a long history of Islamist extremist movements openly articulating a strategy of seeking to drain Western governments by inducing exorbitant security measures. Consider, for example, Inspire magazine's reference to one of its failed terrorist plots as "Operation Hemorrhage," claiming that the operation only cost USD \$4,200 but would cost the US billions of dollars in airline security upgrades. As recently as June 2024, al-Qaeda took credit for the United States' financial difficulties and argued that this proved its strategy was successful, claiming that "American public debt stood at 3.4 trillion dollars before the 9/11 attacks... today, it exceeds 33 trillion dollars!" Islamic State has not explicitly announced a similar strategy but could nonetheless follow a similar logic given that both provocation and attrition (through exhaustion) are common terrorist strategies. In this way, even if Islamic State's calls for violence do not result in actual attacks against the Paris Olympics, the group may still perceive itself as having benefited from the responses induced by their threats.

Security officials in Europe thus face a familiar dilemma. For decades, the Olympic Games have been a tempting target for terrorists, and the Paris Olympics are taking place at precisely the time when the Islamic State threat has risen, partly due to the group's successful exploitation of the Gaza war. The dangers are somewhat offset by the Olympics having become an increasingly difficult target for direct attack since the 1972 Munich massacre, but this has not been without substantial costs, financial and otherwise.