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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics

PETTER NESSER AND WASSIM NASR

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Richard Walton

FORMER HEAD, COUNTER TERRORISM
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Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

- 1 The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics**
PETTER NESSER AND WASSIM NASR
-

INTERVIEW

- 17 A View from the CT Foxhole: Richard Walton, Former Head, Counter Terrorism Command, London Metropolitan Police**
PAUL CRUICKSHANK
-

ANALYSIS

- 25 Protecting Major Sporting Events from Terrorism: Considerations for the Paris Olympics and Beyond**
ALEXANDRE RODDE, DAVID MCILHATTON, JOHN CUDDIHY, AND RACHEL MONAGHAN
-

- 31 Printing Terror: An Empirical Overview of the Use of 3D-Printed Firearms by Right-Wing Extremists**
YANNICK VEILLEUX-LEPAGE
-

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Beginning in late July, the world's attention will focus on Paris for the 2024 Summer Olympic Games, followed by the Paralympics. In our cover article, Petter Nesser and Wassim Nasr describe a threat landscape facing the Games that is "diverse and multifaceted" with "both known and predictable terror threats and others that are less likely on paper but hold the potential for surprise." "Jihadism," they write, "remains the main non-state terror threat to Western Europe, France, and the Olympics, with Islamic State Khorasan posing a clear and present danger to the Games."

Richard Walton, former head of the London Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command who led its counterterrorism efforts during the 2012 Olympics, offers insights into what security services are facing with the Paris Games. "This will be France's biggest peacetime security policing challenge," he surmises. "It will be France's biggest test of their new intelligence infrastructure since they reviewed it post-2015 after the Paris attacks." The stakes will be high throughout the entire country for the duration of the Olympics and Paralympics, he notes. "Any attack in France during the Games is an attack on the Games."

Alexandre Rodde, David Mcilhatton, John Cuddihy, and Rachel Monaghan describe the attractiveness of sports venues as terrorist targets as well as the associated public spaces that support these competitions, such as hotels, restaurants, and public transportation—what they refer to as the events' "supply chain." While security at venues is always robust during competitions, they warn that "what is left more exposed is the supply chain to these events. There are simply too many locations and businesses to provide protective security measures at scale ... significant importance must be placed on engaging as many of those locations as possible, by providing training for businesses to help them understand the threats they might face, what to do if something does happen, and how to recover."

Finally, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage examines right-wing extremists' use of 3D-printed firearms (3DPF). Utilizing an original dataset of 35 incidents worldwide, he investigates "the geographical and temporal spread of 3DPF use by RWE" and outlines several of the main motivations for their use. He finds "a troubling increase in the incidents involving 3DPF across multiple regions, indicating a spread beyond isolated communities into more mainstream adoption among right-wing extremist factions" with the number of cases rising from just one incident in 2017 to 11 in 2023. This data-driven article will serve as an important foundational piece of work upon which other researchers and practitioners can build so that the CT community can better track the evolution of this important and evolving threat area.

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Cover: The Olympic rings are seen on the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, on June 22, 2024, ahead of the Summer Olympic Games. (Zhang Chaodeng/VCG via AP)

The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics

By Petter Nesser and Wassim Nasr

With wars raging in Ukraine and Gaza, and geopolitical tensions running high globally, the Paris Olympic Games face a concerning and complex threat picture. By far the biggest threat is jihadi terrorism, and specifically the Islamic State Khorasan group, which launched the deadliest Islamic State terrorist attack in Europe in Moscow in March and has already sought, through its signature cyber-coach approach to terrorism, to get individuals in France to carry out attacks targeting the Games. Far-right and far-left violent extremist groups also pose concern, as does the potential for protests on, for example, the war in Gaza to turn violent. The French are on high alert for malevolent activity from Russia amidst mounting examples of its links to violent far-right actors in Europe. It appears unlikely the Iran threat network will directly target the Games because Iran is participating in them and because Iran does not want a breakdown in its relations with Europe. But if the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah escalates significantly before and during the Games, an attack by the Lebanese terrorist group on Israeli interests cannot be ruled out given it has in the past targeted Israelis in Europe.

On March 25, 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron announced France was elevating its terror alert level to the highest level after Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) carried out an attack on a concert hall at the Crocus shopping center in Krasnogorsk outside Moscow on March 22 that left 144 dead and 285 wounded.^a

^a In late May, the chief of the Russian internal security service FSB acknowledged that the terrorists were “coordinated via the internet” by ISK members but claimed without offering any evidence that Ukraine may have facilitated the attacks. “Russia says Islamic State behind deadly Moscow concert hall attack,” France 24, May 24, 2024.

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Macron stated that ISK had “carried out several attempts on our soil in recent months.”¹ French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal revealed that a thwarted plot in Strasbourg in 2022 had been connected to the group.²

The Crocus concert hall attack was the deadliest Islamic State attack in Europe ever, with more fatalities than the November 13, 2015, attacks in Paris that killed 131 and injured more than 400. It was not a surprise that Moscow was targeted. Russia has been an enemy of global jihadis since the days of the mujahideen’s 1980s jihad in Afghanistan. The Islamic State and Russia have clashed in Syria, Libya, Mozambique, and the Sahel region of Africa. In October 2015, the Islamic State’s Sinai branch downed a Russian plane over the peninsula, killing all 224 passengers.³

Islamic State-associated terrorism remains a potent threat to Western European countries and is the main security risk to the Paris Olympics. While there was a significant decrease in Islamic State-related attack plotting across Western Europe following the territorial defeat of the caliphate in 2019, plotting and attacks never ceased, and ticked up in 2023-2024.⁴

Ever since the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, geopolitics and great power competition have taken center stage in Europe; terrorism has gone from being a top priority for governments to one of many threats. With security agencies stretched thin, there has been a more permissive environment for terrorists and extremists—both non-state and state-supported—to mobilize and plot attacks without being detected.

With athletes and representatives of all nations (apart from Russia and Belarus) gathering from July 26 to August 11 in Paris for the Olympics, to include a large team from the United States, there is significant concern that terrorist actors could launch attacks while the world’s media spotlight is on France in order to gather global attention for their causes. It is hardly uncommon for terrorists to target sports venues.⁵ Terrorist attacks against major sports events have included Black September’s 1972 Munich hostage attack and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing by al-Qa`ida supporters. The November 2015 Islamic State attack on the Bataclan and other targets in Paris also included attempted suicide bombings at the Stade de France stadium as 80,000 spectators watched an international soccer match between France and Germany. Furthermore, the European Islamic State crew that eventually struck the airport and other targets in Brussels in March 2016 originally plotted to attack the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship being hosted that year in France. They decided to change their plans out of fear of being caught after Salah Abdeslam, the sole surviving perpetrator of the 2015 Paris attacks, was arrested in Brussels.⁶

Europe is on high alert during this summer of sport. In early June, a week before the start of the Euro 2024 soccer tournament in Germany, police at Cologne airport arrested an alleged ISK supporter of shared German-Moroccan-Polish nationality who

the previous September had allegedly transferred almost \$1,700 via a cryptocurrency exchange to ISK. He had applied for a job as a steward and security guard for side events outside the soccer stadiums during the Euros.⁷ On June 18, German authorities publicly warned that Germany could see a large-scale ISK attack. “A possible scenario is a large-scale, co-ordinated attack of the kind we recently saw in Moscow,” said Thomas Haldenwang, head of Germany’s domestic intelligence agency (BfV), adding that ISK was “certainly the most dangerous group.” He added ISK had succeeded in “sending its supporters to western Europe, under cover of the refugee exodus from Ukraine.”⁸ According to a French security source, while Ukraine was indeed used as a refuge for a few fleeing Islamic State operatives, it has not become a staging ground for terror attacks nor a destination-of-choice for such jihadis.⁹

Attacking high-profile events is not easy for terrorist groups to pull off given their limited resources and stepped-up security efforts, target hardening, and the efforts by governments to intercept potential attack cells early ahead of such events. For example, Sweden, already on edge due to extremist threats and terrorist plots in the wake of Qur’an burnings, intensified security in the run-up to the May 2024 Eurovision contest. Despite forceful pro-Palestinian protests, and some minor violent incidents and threats, the event in Malmö saw no extremist or terrorism-related violence.¹⁰ However, security agencies’ ability to predict when and where terrorism might occur is limited at best. Terrorists tend to strike when and where they can, and typically where they are least expected to.

Furthermore, former head of Counter Terrorism Command at the London Metropolitan Police Richard Walton has noted that “the vulnerable underbelly” of big sporting events such as the Olympics is “outside of the host cities in venues and stadiums, transport hubs, and other crowded places where police are not familiar with high levels of security.”¹¹ During France’s hosting of the 2016 Euro tournament, an Islamic State-inspired terrorist murdered a police officer in Magnanville northwest of Paris.¹²

The upcoming Olympics in Paris face risks linked to multiple different threat actors amidst a challenging security environment for France and its European partners. The Islamic State and likeminded extremists are the main threat to the Games, but increased polarization in the Western world over issues ranging from immigration, the economy, the environment, and international armed conflicts has produced a complex threat matrix. This article addresses the threat posed by jihadism, violent manifestations of Gaza protests, Iran-supported hybrid terrorism, and Russian influence and destabilization operations that could intensify such threats. The authors examine both right-wing and left-wing terror threats, but do not consider the threat posed by separatism. Separatist groups remain active in several parts of Europe, including the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and France (Corsica),¹³ but they operate locally against local authorities and pose less of a threat to international events such as the Olympics.

The Jihadi Threat to the Paris Olympics

Jihadi terrorism represents, by a significant margin, the biggest threat to the Paris Olympics and remains the biggest threat in Europe writ large.¹⁴ Although the central leaderships of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have not, as of the time of publication, issued direct threats to the Paris Olympics, jihadism remains the core terror threat to France. There is high attack activity by Islamic State-associated terrorists in France and, as will be outlined, French

authorities have already foiled several terror plots targeting the Olympics. Islamic State supporters have shared propaganda and manuals on social media encouraging lone wolf attacks during the Olympics, including the use of weaponized small commercial drones.¹⁵

Jihadis view France as an archenemy, citing its colonial history (Algeria, Sahel), its military campaigns against jihadis (Africa, Syria, Iraq), and ‘injustices’ against Muslims (France’s ban on the niqab veil, the cartoons published in its media of the Prophet Mohammad). The threat from jihadis has ebbed and flowed in France since the 1990s, and the country has experienced waves of attacks linked to al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, several of them mass casualty attacks, including the Charlie Hebdo and November 13 attacks in 2015 and the 2016 Nice attack.

France is home to longstanding jihadi networks and entrepreneurs,¹⁶ many returned foreign fighters, and numerous jihadis in and out of jail. This causes major concerns about recidivism in which freed terrorists rejoin terror networks and launch new attacks. France has seen examples of this dynamic with al-Qa`ida terrorists in the past, including the terror entrepreneur behind the January 2015 attack on Charlie Hebdo,¹⁷ but so far, the country has witnessed few recidivist attacks involving released Islamic State-linked terrorists, the knife attack in the vicinity of the Eiffel Tower in December 2023 being one notable exception (addressed below).¹⁸

Like other Western countries, France has experienced polarization and tensions over Islam and immigration, contributing to the problem set of terrorism, anti-Islam mobilization, segregation, and radicalization.¹⁹ The jihadi terror threat to France is linked to transnational jihadi terror networks within Europe and outside its borders including the Islamic State presence in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq in the mid-2010s and in Afghanistan today.

According to FFI’s Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED),^{20 b} around a quarter of all attack activity (foiled plots and launched attacks) by terrorists linked to or inspired by the Islamic State in Western Europe in recent decades happened *after* the collapse of the Islamic State’s ‘caliphate.’ The dataset includes 273 well-documented jihadi terror plots from 1994 until 2024, 69 of them occurring between January 1, 2019, and June 1, 2024. For the period 1994–2018, 58 percent (118 of 204 cases) are foiled plots. For the period January 1, 2019, until June 1, 2024, 65 percent (45 of 69 cases) are foiled plots. While jihadi attack activity has decreased in the region since the high tide of 2014–2017, when the Islamic State was at its strongest and prioritized international terrorism, today’s threat is higher than most assume.²¹ The number of plots and attacks has fluctuated between 19 and four in the period 2019 to the present day with the lowest numbers (four cases) recorded in 2022 followed by increase in 2023 and worrisome numbers so far in 2024 (six to eight cases).²² The threat involves a variety of perpetrators and attack modes, ranging from amateurish teenage Islamic State fans who plot simple attacks alone to cells composed of seasoned jihadis with ties to Islamic State networks in Europe and groups abroad (such as ISK) plotting complex potentially mass-casualty attacks. As will be outlined later in the article, a significant

b JPED currently covers data from December 1994 until June 1, 2024. The public dataset only covers attack activity until January 1, 2022. The public dataset will be updated in December 2024.

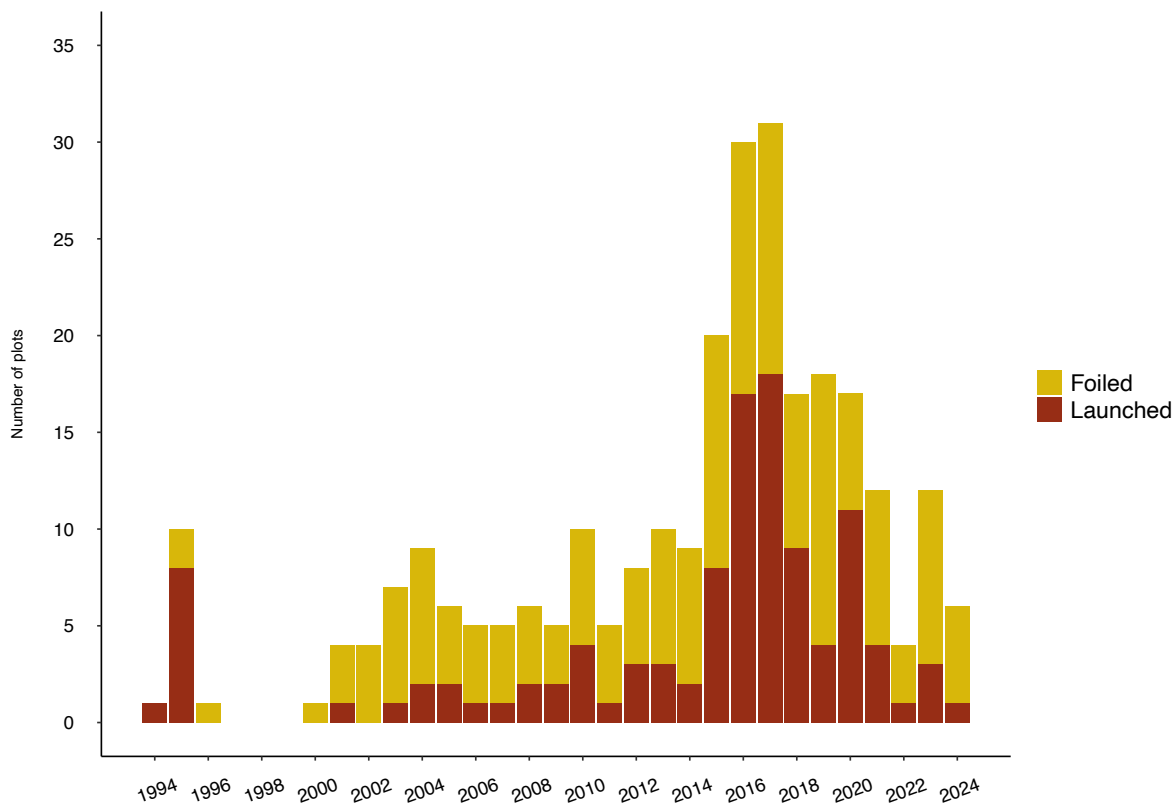


Figure 1: Jihadi plots in Western Europe: 1994-2024 (Source: Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED), FFI)

number of plots have seen ISK operatives guide plotters from overseas. Analysts have referred to such figures as terrorist “cyber coaches”²³ or “virtual entrepreneurs.”²⁴

Several attacks and plots targeted French teachers accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad, such as the 2020 killing of Samuel Paty by an 18-year-old of Chechen origin and the 2023 killing of a teacher in Arras by a 20-year-old of Chechen origin. The Arras case was motivated by hatred toward France and injustices against Muslims in Iraq, Asia, and Palestine.²⁵ Both attackers hailed from religious families and were influenced by known extremists. The killer of Samuel Paty was in contact with a Tajik HTS member in Syria, though he never expressed any political motive for his crime and did not link it to any terrorist organization while he had the opportunity to do so. An HTS spokesperson at the time denied any involvement of the group in the issue.²⁶ The Arras killer, on the other hand, vowed allegiance to the Islamic State’s caliph, as was proven by investigators’ exploitation of his electronic devices, even though the Islamic State never claimed responsibility.²⁷ Fast forward to June 2024 and the loosening of HTS’ grip on northwestern Syria has become a source of concern for French security agencies because some French-speaking jihadis still at large in the Idlib area have made aggressive comments online in relation to the Paris Olympics.²⁸

Several recent attacks in Europe have targeted LGBTQ+ individuals, such as the October 2020 stabbing of gay men by a 20-year-old Syrian in Dresden (killing one of them);²⁹ the stabbing of gay men in a park in Reading, United Kingdom, by a 25-year-old Libyan Islamic State supporter in July the same year,³⁰ killing three and injuring two; and the June 2022 shooting attack on Pride-revelers outside a gay bar in Oslo, Norway, killing two and injuring

21. The Oslo attacker was of Iranian-Kurdish origin. He interacted with known Norwegian Islamic State supporters both inside and outside Norway, physically and/or digitally, including allegedly a female Norwegian foreign fighter in a Syria detention camp. The Oslo perpetrator shot at crowds using a pistol and a machine gun, which fortunately jammed before he was overpowered by victims and bystanders and arrested by police.³¹

In the years since the collapse of the Islamic State’s caliphate, multiple attacks and plots have targeted members of the security apparatus, mainly police officers in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and Germany. A radicalized IT-worker for French police killed colleagues at a Paris police station in October 2019.³² There were at least two knife attacks targeting policewomen, in Rambouillet³³ (April 2021) and Chapelle-sur-Erdre³⁴ in May of the same year. In April 2020, an Islamic State-inspired extremist rammed his car into motorbike police in Paris, gravely injuring one of them.³⁵ He had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State’s caliph and said he did it for the group and Palestine. In October 2020, a group of teenagers in Belgium planned to stab police officers but were intercepted.³⁶ In May 2022, a U.K. teenager made preparations to kill police and soldiers using a hunting knife.³⁷ More recently, in March 2024 two Afghans linked to ISK were arrested in Germany for plotting to attack police and crowds outside the Swedish parliament to avenge Qur’an burnings by anti-Islam activists in Sweden.³⁸ The plot was reportedly an example of ISK employing a cyber-coach approach to enabling terrorism, which has become the group’s signature. According to German prosecutors, after having been tasked by ISK to carry out an attack, “the two made concrete preparations in close consultation with ISK operatives.”³⁹ According to a French security source, cyber-coaching is the



*Police forces are seen in front of the Eiffel Tower on June 7, 2024, in Paris, France.
(Raphael Lafargue/Abaca/Sipa via AP Images)*

right term to describe the ISK *modus operandi*. The source says the group's cyber-coaches act as a human resources hub that can connect different elements to conduct an attack. At the same time, according to the source, this can make it easier to foil plots since each hub tends to engage with many individuals and more than one plot.⁴⁰

According to the JPED (with preliminary numbers for the period 2022-2024), one pattern is that while armed assaults with knives or guns^c dominate the jihadi threat in Europe between January 1, 2019, and June 1, 2024, (37 incidents, 54 percent of 69 cases), the terrorists keep on plotting bomb attacks (19 incidents, 28 percent of cases). During the same period, some 43 percent of armed assaults were foiled (16 out of 37 incidents), whereas 89 percent of bombing plots were foiled (17 out of 19 incidents). The high foiling rate for bomb plots likely reflects the fact that European security services have in recent years closely monitored jihadi attempts to obtain explosives. The recent high rate of thwarting bomb attacks in part explains why only five percent of deaths (33 of 660 killed in the whole dataset) occurred after 2018. The 2000s and 2010s saw multiple mass-casualty bombings, such as the train attacks in Madrid and London by al-Qa`ida-associated cells in 2004-2005 and the bombings in Manchester and Brussels by Islamic State-

linked terrorists in 2016-2017.

The fact that jihadi terrorists go on attempting bomb attacks despite the high rate of these plots being detected and thwarted implies that death rates could rise again if European security services decide to decrease counterterrorism efforts to prioritize other risks. It is worth outlining some of these jihadi bomb plots for context. In 2019, German police thwarted a plot by several Iraqi Islamic State supporters directed by an Iranian Islamic State operative in the United Kingdom to inflict mass killings with explosives.⁴¹ The same year, a U.K.-based woman receiving instructions from a 25-year-old Norwegian-Somali jihadi in Norway plotted a suicide-attack on Saint Paul's cathedral.⁴² In late 2019, Dutch security services intercepted an alleged plot to launch Mumbai-style terror attacks in the Netherlands with suicide vests and car bombs.⁴³ That same year (2019) also saw jihadi bomb plots in Offenbach (March)⁴⁴ and Berlin⁴⁵ (November), Germany, and reportedly against a Christmas market in Austria (December).⁴⁶ From 2020 onward, there were three foiled bomb plots in Germany: one by Tajiks allegedly linked to ISK against U.S. military bases and an Islam critic,⁴⁷ one against a synagogue in the city of Hagen⁴⁸ in 2021, and one against the Cologne cathedral on New Year's Eve 2023 by Tajiks and Uzbeks linked to ISK.⁴⁹ The 2020 plot by the Tajik Islamic State supporters to target U.S. bases in Germany was another example of the ISK using a cyber-coach approach to enabling terrorism in the West. As outlined by Nodirbek Soliev in this publication, "German prosecutors have described the cell's contact in Afghanistan as a high-ranking Islamic State member and 'religious preacher,' who gave a series of radical lectures to the Tajik cell via the encrypted

^c According to a French security source, France has the highest ratio in Europe of terrorism victims by firearms. The source stated the logistical challenges of producing explosives makes such plots rare in France. Author (Nasr) communication with French security source, June 2024.

communication platform Zello. According to court documents, this militant issued 'specific guidelines' for 'the attack' planned by the cell in Germany.⁵⁰

The United Kingdom has seen at least two thwarted bombing plots since 2019, in Redhill⁵¹ and Leeds.⁵² Sweden and Denmark, which have been experiencing heightened threat levels linked to Qur'an burnings and the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, have also foiled alleged bomb plots by Islamic State followers.⁵³

The stereotype of the post-caliphate Islamic State plotter in Europe is a young individual who self-radicalizes via social media. While there are a few examples of self-radicalized plotters without ties to organized networks, investigations more commonly uncover interactions with Islamic State networks in Europe and internationally. Plotters interact with such networks physically and/or via social media communication apps, such as Telegram, WhatsApp, or, as noted above, Zello. Oftentimes, they receive guidance regarding tactics and targets. For the Islamic State and later ISK as already noted, such cyber-coaching has become a signature approach to enabling terrorism in the West. The former head of the Afghan intelligence agency NDS Ahmad Zia Saraj recently noted in this publication that:

using end-end-encryption, [ISK] can recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute attacks. It has meant that terror attacks have not needed the logistics of old. Now an [ISK] terrorist in Afghanistan can recruit a member who is living in, say, Sweden and fund him using cryptocurrency. Because he's only busy with his phone and he's only using those apps, it can be very hard for the security services to detect that individual because that person may seem like a quite normal person. He may not appear to have any suspicious activities and so on, unless he is tracked through his telephone and his telephone is taken. [...]

Encrypted messaging apps have helped terrorists speed up operations, enhance operational security, save time, save travel costs, and to plan and execute and even monitor attacks in real time. The NDS noticed that a newly recruited fighter does not need to physically attend a training camp to learn how to construct a bomb or how to target the enemy. All this can be done via a smart phone with less risk of exposure. Advancing technology has made it possible for someone to be trained in terrorist tactics in any part of the world, regardless of borders or travel restrictions. A terrorist in Afghanistan or Iraq can easily train another one in any part of the world.⁵⁴

A French security source points out an important caveat: Cyber-coaches can only do so much, and at a certain point, it is up to the plotter on the ground to prepare and carry out an attack. The source notes that as terror plots materialize, they face usual real-world logistical challenges such as how to conduct surveillance, how to obtain vehicles, and how to obtain fire-arms.⁵⁵ It stands to reason that those who have not received in-person training—at a training camp or safe house, for example—tend to be less adept at carrying out these tasks and concealing them from authorities.

One example of network embeddedness is the deadly attack against a German-Filipino tourist near the Eiffel Tower on December 2, 2023, by a 26-year-old Islamic State-affiliated terrorist of Iranian-Kurdish origin. The assailant had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State's caliph and had said he wanted to avenge the killing of innocent Muslims. The attack seemed to

“The fact that in recent years a significantly higher percentage of plots have gotten through in France compared to the United Kingdom and Germany is a concerning metric as the country prepares to host the Olympics.”

have been triggered by the war in Gaza as the attacker had shared multiple posts about the conflict on social media.⁵⁶ At the same time, the Eiffel Tower attacker was apparently well-known to the French security services for being radicalized and mentally unstable and was on the so-called 'S-list' ('Fiche-S').⁵⁷ This list of potentially violent extremists in France contained in 2018 some 30,000 persons, of whom more than half were considered radical Islamists.⁵⁸ The assailant had spent several years in jail for plotting a similar attack back in 2015-2016 but was released in 2020.⁵⁹ The previous plot in 2015-2016 was allegedly instigated and supported by a French Islamic State foreign fighter in Syria with whom the Eiffel Tower attacker communicated online.⁶⁰ Investigations into the 2023 attack by the Eiffel Tower revealed that the terrorist killer had multiple contact points (primarily via social media) with known Islamic State-linked or -inspired French terrorists such as the killer of a married police couple in their home in Magnanville in 2016, and one of the killers of a Catholic priest in Normandy the same year.⁶¹ As already noted, the Eiffel Tower attack was one of the first 'successfully' launched attacks in France by a perpetrator previously convicted for *Islamic State*-related terror plotting.^d Given the high number of terrorists who have been released from prison in France after serving their sentence, the fact that there have been very few attacks by them suggests there should be concern but not panic about the threat of terrorist recidivism.⁶²

While the threat to Western Europe is transnational, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany have been the most targeted countries, with France topping the list both before and after the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate. Although not all early intercepted terror plots become known to the public, the ones that are publicly known indicate that France has a significantly lower rate of thwarting jihadi terror plots compared to the United Kingdom and Germany in 2019-2024. During these years, according to FFI data, France has foiled only 29 percent of publicly known plots (five out of 17 cases) compared to a thwarting rate at 58 percent for the United Kingdom (seven out of 12 cases) and as high as 94 percent for Germany (15 out of 16 terror plots).⁶³ The fact that in recent years a significantly higher percentage of plots have gotten through in France compared to the United Kingdom and Germany is a concerning metric as the country prepares to host the Olympics.

France has been the main European enemy for jihadis since the

d There have been Islamic State-inspired attacks launched in France by plotters previously convicted of jihadi activity not connected to the Islamic State. For example, see “French jihadist murders police couple at Magnanville,” BBC, June 14, 2016.

early 1990s, when it was first attacked by the Algerian GIA. It has been exposed to al-Qa`ida and Islamic State terror ever since. The United Kingdom and Germany came under attack in the 2000s primarily for supporting the Global War on Terror and have both been home to significant jihadi networks and entrepreneurs.

From the early 1990s through at least the 2010s, the United Kingdom was the main hub for jihadi propaganda and recruitment in Western Europe. Over time, al-Qa`ida and Islamic State supporters in the United Kingdom built and coordinated networks across Western Europe that took part in, directly or indirectly, attack activity both in the United Kingdom and other European countries, France included. Germany has also since the 1990s been the home base of substantial jihadi support networks, which increasingly transformed into attack cells from around the millennium onward, the most notorious being the Hamburg cell that played an important role in the 9/11 attacks.⁶⁴ In the post-caliphate era, Germany has faced more jihadi attack plots than the United Kingdom, but historically the United Kingdom has been the second most targeted country in Europe after France. The main difference between France and the United Kingdom, apart from geography (island versus land borders, something that makes access to firearms considerably more difficult in the United Kingdom^e) is their approaches to prevention and counterterrorism. France has relied on the military more than the United Kingdom in the counterterrorism domain for securing strategic and sensitive areas, including the deployment of large numbers of soldiers on patrols inside France, whereas the United Kingdom has focused more on prevention than France. Germany reformed and strengthened its counterterrorism systems significantly after the 2016 attack on a Berlin Christmas market by a Tunisian Islamic State supporter.⁶⁵ Countermeasures were toughened all over Western Europe following the wave of Islamic State attacks between 2014–2017.⁶⁶

The post-caliphate phase of European jihadism has also seen certain new patterns in terms of who the terrorists are and what drives them. The authors have observed an increase in the number of plots and attacks by teenagers under 18. At least one teenager under 18 appears in nine of 69 cases between 2019 and the present day (13 percent) compared to 18 of 204 cases before 2019 (nine percent). Examples include, among others, the aforementioned plots by teenagers to attack police in Belgium and the United Kingdom and a 16-year-old producing poison for an attack in Norway.⁶⁷ Two alleged plots to launch terror attacks during the Paris Games also involved teenagers. In April 2024, French counterterrorism officials arrested a 16-year-old boy of Chechen origin suspected of plotting a suicide bombing and shooting attack in the La Défense business district during the Paris Olympics.⁶⁸ In late May 2024, French security foiled another alleged plot by an 18-year-old man, also of Chechen origin, to launch a suicide attack against spectators and police during one of the upcoming Olympic

soccer matches at Geoffroy-Guichard stadium in Saint-Étienne.⁶⁹ *Le Parisien* newspaper reported that he was in contact with ISK operatives and plotted the attack in liaison with them, with his conspiratorial communications taking place over Telegram.⁷⁰ However, according to a French security source, investigations have revealed that the operatives communicating with the Saint-Étienne plotter were Chechen Islamic State jihadis in Syria rather than belonging to ISK. The source added that while the Chechen networks and the ISK networks are distinct they operate in the same language (Russian), both employ a cyber-coach approach to external plotting, both attempt to recruit from geographically proximate diaspora communities, and have collaborated before.⁷¹ The Saint-Étienne plot speaks to how Islamic State branches have embraced the cyber-coach model to terrorism. In the authors' assessment, the cyber-coach hub that reached out to the Saint-Étienne plotter may have established contact with others to try to get them to launch attacks during the Olympic Games. It should be noted that Chechen fighters are still active in eastern Syria west of the Euphrates.

Another emerging trend is an increase in the involvement of women in terrorist plotting: six out of 67 cases (nine percent) during 2019–2024 compared to 14 out of 204 cases (seven percent) between 1994 and 2019. Despite the fact that active participation of women in terrorist plots is an unresolved dogmatic question for the Islamic State, they have appeared in plots or attacks in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Germany after the Islamic State's collapse. Examples include, among others, the aforementioned plot to bomb Saint Paul's cathedral in London in 2019, a plot by a female terrorist cell to attack a religious site in France during Easter 2021, a 2023 plot by Chechens to launch terror attacks in Belgium,⁷² and a 2024 plot to attack Christian worshippers and police in Germany.⁷³

There have been a large variety of national backgrounds involved in recent plots and attacks, as has been the case throughout the history of European jihadism. In the post-caliphate era, there seems to be a relative increase in plotters with Central Asian backgrounds, primarily Chechens, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. As already noted, there have also been attacks and plots involving people of Iranian-Kurdish backgrounds. In sum, European jihadism continues to be multinational to include ethnic European converts to Islam.

With regard to motivation, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State continue to seek to attack the United States, Israel, and their European allies, and all European nations that have fought jihadism are considered legitimate targets. They are all seen by jihadis as complicit in a war against Islam and insults against the Prophet Mohammad. Some countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, are prioritized as targets, but other countries face elevated threats due to specific developments. For example, Denmark has been a main target among Nordic countries due to the 2005 publications of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad by a Danish newspaper. Sweden has seen an intensified threat in connection with Qur'an burnings since 2023, as exemplified by the cell intercepted in Germany plotting to shoot police and crowds outside the Swedish parliament.

It is important to note that there are signs that some al-Qa`ida affiliates are less motivated to transfer the fight to Western countries than they were in the past. For example, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its nodes seemingly no longer consider attacks on French soil as part of their fight but do not rule out

e In a 2016 interview in this publication, the head of Counter Terrorism Command at the UK Metropolitan Police Richard Walton stated, "it's clear there's an availability of firearms on the European mainland that is just not replicated here in the UK. And we've got some sea around us, so it's much more difficult to get guns into the UK. This is a critical difference in the UK, even compared to our counterparts in Europe, in terms of the threat from Daesh and marauding terrorist attacks." Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Richard Walton, Head, Counter Terrorism Command, London Metropolitan Police," *CTC Sentinel* 9:1 (2016).

attacking French interests outside France, even though their main priority for now is to combat local juntas and Russian mercenaries in the Sahel.⁷⁴

Israel's war in Gaza has created concern that jihadi terror groups will exploit anger among Muslim communities around the world to rebuild their capacity to launch attacks in the West.⁷⁵ In April 2024, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified that "we've seen the threat from foreign terrorists rise to a whole 'nother level after October 7."⁷⁶ The Israel/Palestine issue has always been part of the motivation mix for jihadi terrorists in Europe and amplified threat levels. When Dutch Moroccan jihadi Mohammed Bouyeri killed filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004, he was propelled by his anger at a short film he deemed offensive to Islam but he was also partially motivated by Israeli actions in Gaza and was a staunch supporter of Hamas.⁷⁷ A similar pattern was seen with Mohammed Merah's attack on a Jewish children's school in Toulouse in 2012. He was part of al-Qa`ida's networks⁷⁸ and motivated by global jihad but targeted the school to, in his view, avenge the killing of Palestinian children.⁷⁹

There are many such examples in the history of European jihadism, and in the aftermath of Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, injustices against Palestinians have once again featured as a partial motive and trigger for jihadi plots in Western Europe. Amidst the high number of civilian casualties in the Israeli war against Hamas in Gaza, there have been several terror incidents that were partly triggered by the Gaza war. The shooting of Swedish soccer supporters in Brussels in October 2023 appears to have been primarily motivated by Qur'an burnings but also partly by Gaza.^f The attack on the teacher in Arras, France, later the same month^g and the attack on the German tourist near the Eiffel Tower in December 2023 also seemed to be partially motivated by Gaza,^h as was the case with possible plots in Belgium to launch a suicide attack⁸⁰ and an alleged plot in October 2023 to carry out a car-rammage attack on a pro-Israeli rally in Düsseldorf, Germany, by an Islamic State supporter.⁸¹ The suspect reportedly communicated with a chat partner in Syria about the attack plans in another possible example of cyber-coaching.⁸² Israeli attacks on Gaza have pushed and will continue to push already radicalized people to

commit violence; it will also likely help to radicalize others.

Another risk is that jihadis might groom young, radicalized activists who are frustrated and disillusioned with the effects of law-abiding Gaza protests, into committing violence. While the authors have not seen examples of this since the start of the Gaza war, there are historical examples of people who progressed from Islamist activism to jihadi violence (e.g., followers of the U.K.-based al-Muhajiroun or Sharia4Belgium).⁸³

European Gaza protests have been relatively peaceful until now, but there have been some violent incidents, such as a Molotov cocktail attack against a U.S. consulate in Italy.⁸⁴ If the situation gets more heated, for example if protests spiral out of control and government crackdowns become harsher, this could make frustrated activists recruitment targets for malign actors, such as jihadis or states aiming to sow discord among Europeans.

Violent Activism

A potential violent threat to the Paris 2024 Olympics is political activism getting out of hand causing violence or ultimately terrorist incidents. The risk is low compared to the jihadi terror threat but cannot be ruled out. Pro-Palestinian protests have been intensifying across Western Europe since Israel launched its war against Hamas in Gaza, killing a high number of civilians.⁸⁵ The deaths of women and children and the humanitarian situation has mobilized protesters on European streets, in the vicinity of political and state institutions, Israeli representations, and synagogues and on university campuses. The pro-Palestinian protest movements seem to be organized bottom-up, transnational, and multi-national including diasporas, students, left-wing activists, or average citizens from different political stripes. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram appear to be key vehicles of mobilization.⁸⁶

Student protests resembling those in the United States, such as the occupation of a building and encampments at Columbia University, have occurred in multiple European countries including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Switzerland, and France, where students occupied buildings at elite universities Sorbonne and Sciences Po. Some student protests in the United States turned violent (clashes with police or counterdemonstrators), whereas European protests have so far been much calmer.⁸⁷

In a few countries, protests have involved violent clashes, and there are also examples of support for Hamas, manifestations of antisemitism, vandalism, threats, physical violence against police or Jews, bomb threats, firebombs thrown at Israeli diplomatic offices and synagogues and explosives placed in the vicinity of Israeli diplomatic offices.⁸⁸ Some of the incidents are examples of activism getting out of hand, but according to the Israeli intelligence service Mossad, criminal networks operating on Iran's behalf were behind the placing of explosives in the vicinity of Israeli targets (addressed later in this article).⁸⁹

European governments differ in their approach to the protests, and some countries such as Germany and France have introduced zero-tolerance measures against protests considered antisemitic or supportive of Hamas.⁹⁰ French police evacuated student protesters at Sorbonne⁹¹ and Sciences Po.⁹² Whether tough responses curb or fuel the intensity of the protests remains to be seen. Neither the protests nor the countermeasures are comparable to the massive anti-Vietnam mobilizations in 1960s and 1970s America,⁹³ but the latter demonstrated how violent crackdowns may generate more protests and internationalize protests.

f As noted by Tore Hamming in this publication, "on October 16, just nine days after the Hamas attack on Israel, Abdesslem Lassoued, a 45-year-old Tunisian living in Brussels, attacked and killed two Swedish soccer fans while wounding another. Lassoued initially managed to escape, but after an extensive manhunt, he was killed the following morning in a café in the Schaerbeek district of the city. While it appears that his motivation for specifically targeting Swedish nationals, identified through their Swedish soccer shirts, was the Qur'an burnings that took place in Sweden over the summer and fall, postings on his social media profile including images of the Dome of the Rock suggest that the war in Gaza was a contributing factor or at least a matter of concern for the perpetrator." Tore Hamming, "The Beginning of a New Wave? The Hamas-Israel War and the Terror Threat in the West," *CTC Sentinel* 16:10 (2023).

g The perpetrator recorded audio and video on his phone before the attack in which he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and declared his hatred for France, the French, democracy, and the educational system. In the audio-message in Arabic, he expressed support for Muslims in Iraq, Asia, and the Palestinian territories (without linking it to the war following Hamas' October 7 Gaza flood campaign). "French prosecutor says alleged attacker in school stabbing declared allegiance to Islamic State," *Pais*, October 17, 2023.

h The attacker expressed anger to investigators that "so many Muslims are dying in Afghanistan and in Palestine." Dominique Vidalon and Gilles Guillaume, "Knifeman kills German tourist, wounds others near France's Eiffel Tower," Reuters, December 2, 2023.

While most European protests have been non-violent, there have been, as noted, other worrying incidents that could signal a turn to the worse in some countries. In November 2023, activists vandalized a Jewish cemetery in Austria.⁹⁴ The same month in the Swedish city of Malmö, protesters burned Israeli flags and expressed bombing threats against Israel outside a synagogue. In January 2024, protesters violently disrupted a jewelry fair in Vicenza, Italy, because of Israeli participation, throwing firebombs and flares, and clashing with police.⁹⁵ In April 2024, protesters disrupted a conference on scientific cooperation in Turin, calling for a boycott of Israel. The protesters tried to enter the venue, resulting in several police officers and protesters being injured in clashes.⁹⁶

In October 2023, as many as 65 police officers were injured during a pro-Palestinian riot in the Berlin borough of Neukölln, where activists threw stones and burning liquids. Protesters reportedly advertised this riot on Telegram, urging men to turn “turn NeuKoelln into Gaza. Burn everything.”⁹⁷ On October 18, assailants threw Molotov cocktails at a Berlin synagogue.⁹⁸ On October 21, four Syrians (aged 17-21) were arrested in Cyprus suspected of setting off a small explosive near the Israeli embassy.⁹⁹ On February 2, 2024, a 22-year-old Hamas supporter threw Molotov cocktails at the U.S. consulate in Florence. He reportedly issued a video threatening 50 attacks against ‘Zionist targets’ (half of the targets were not Israeli or American).¹⁰⁰

As of late June, Israel continues to carry out offensive operations in Gaza. Pro-Palestinian protests should be expected in Paris during the Olympics, and one cannot rule out violent incidents, despite the massive security presence. The highly diverse nature of the pro-Palestinian protest movements that mostly include benign peaceful activists and smaller segments of potentially violent actors, poses a special challenge to security forces. In this instance, they face a less predictable threat than from known terrorist networks and one that requires flexible approaches, facilitating democratic rights while clamping down on violent transgressions. With Gaza tensions running high, violent manifestations of activism by new types of actors could slip through the net as French security has its hands full with more familiar threats such as jihadism. The self-immolation of a U.S. serviceman in February in front of Israel’s embassy in the United States¹⁰¹ was just one illustration of how the Gaza war is mobilizing strong sentiment in Western societies across a broad spectrum of the population.

Of the attending nations, Israel and the United States face the highest risks from any violent protests. While violent manifestations of pro-Palestinian activism are a threat in their own right, they could also overstretch a security apparatus mainly focused on the jihadi threat. And as noted, frustrated radicalized activists who want to harm Israel could be targeted for recruitment by militant Islamic State networks. Pro-Palestinian protests or violent incidents could also generate counterprotests or amplify threats from extreme far-right or extreme left-wing actors.

Extreme Right- and Left-Wing Threats

Neither right- nor left-wing extremists have a history of carrying out terror attacks against sports events in Western Europe. However, given the extreme left’s anti-Zionism and support for the Palestinian cause, and the extreme right’s antisemitism, one cannot rule out the possibility of political violence in France during the Paris Olympics from such actors in the Gaza war context.

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The Extreme-Left

Although extremism and political violence by contemporary left-wing and anarchist actors in Europe are understudied,¹⁰² such actors have posed a relatively limited terrorist threat in Western Europe since the 1970s and 1980s when groups such as the Red Army Faction (RAF), the Italian Red Brigades, and anarchist Action Directe in France launched terrorist campaigns, involving large-scale lethal attacks as well as smaller targeted operations. While the RAF did not itself target sports events, it cooperated with Palestinian nationalist terrorists¹⁰³ including Black September Organization (BSO) behind the attack on the Munich Olympics of 1972 (BSO demanded the release of RAF leaders from German jails during the hostage crisis).¹⁰⁴

The European left-wing terrorists of the 1970s and 1980s received state support from communist countries and operated and cooperated across state boundaries. The German RAF, as noted, cooperated with Palestinian nationalist terror groups such as PFLP.¹⁰⁵ The European left-wing terrorists targeted symbols of capitalism, businesses, political opponents (conservative/right-wing), and U.S./NATO for supposedly Americanizing Europe. This period was the high-tide of left-wing terrorism in Europe. Left-wing terror groups disintegrated after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Europe’s extreme left-wing and anarchist movements became fragmented.

Contemporary European left-wing and anarchist extremists are ideologically diverse, overlapping with different single-issue activisms, including environmentalism, animal rights, anti-vaccination, or incel culture.¹⁰⁶ They are mostly associated with (sometimes) violent protests or clashes with extreme right-wing activists, vandalism, sabotage and threats against state institutions and representatives (including police and representatives of the judicial system), infrastructure, businesses, and occasionally plotting lethal terrorism.

Data from Europol and the Global Terrorism Database shows significant numbers of yearly left-wing anarchist attacks in Europe. According to Europol, in 2022 of the 16 attacks recorded in the European Union, “the majority were attributed to left-wing and anarchist terrorism (13), two to jihadist terrorism, and one to right-wing terrorism.”¹⁰⁷ However, such left-wing attacks are seldom comparable to jihadi or right-wing mass-casualty terrorism. Referring to left-wing extremism and anarchism, Ilkka Salmi,

the former EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, noted that “even if attacks linked to this part of the ideological spectrum are quite numerous, they are often far less lethal.”¹⁰⁸

Most left-wing anarchist attacks involve IEDs against buildings and infrastructure, and rarely cause deaths. Several Western European countries have recently voiced concerns over increased violent actions from left-wing anarchist groups, and there have been foiled attack plots designed to kill. For example, in June 2022 an Italian anarchist group sent a postal package containing an IED to the CEO of a defense and security firm in Italy, which was detected and disarmed.¹⁰⁹

In Germany, the 2023 trial of members of a violent left-wing group targeting real and purported right-wing extremists raised concerns about a left-wing terrorism resurgence.¹¹⁰ In May 2023, U.K. police arrested a self-proclaimed left-wing anarchist for plotting terrorist attacks on government buildings and houses of politicians. He wrote a terrorist manual, gathered chemicals for bomb-making, and had downloaded computer files needed to make a 3D-printed assault rifle. Convicted of terror offenses in February 2024, this U.K. admirer of the American terrorist Ted Kaczynski wanted to assist others committing terror acts and had expressed intent to kill “at least 50 people.”¹¹¹ In 2023, a trial started in France for what French authorities refer to as an ‘ultra-leftist’ group that allegedly plotted terror attacks on police or military officers. The anarchist leader of this alleged terror cell had spent time as a foreign fighter in Syria with Kurds fighting the Islamic State.¹¹²

While left-wing terrorists could see opportunities at the Paris Olympics to target symbols of capitalism, Americanism, environmental degradation, or Israeli actions in Gaza, there is no shortage of such symbols at any given time, and violent left-wing actors do not currently display the intent or capacity for spectacular attacks.

The Extreme-Right

Whereas left-wing terrorism could be re-emerging in Western Europe, right-wing violence and terrorism saw some resurgence in the 2010s. According to the RTV dataset hosted by the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at Oslo University, the region experienced relatively high levels of fatal political violence in the 1990s followed by lower attack activity in the 2000s¹¹³ before an uptick following the 2015 migrant crisis.¹¹⁴

The 2011 attacks by Norwegian right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik against the government quarters in Oslo and a political youth camp on Utoya island, killing 77 and injuring more than 300, underlined that anti-Islam sentiment was fueling right-wing extremism and demonstrated how right-wing terrorism could be as lethal and brutal as jihadism.

Western Europe has faced significant levels of right-wing political violence since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.¹¹⁵ In the latter 2010s, security services in several European countries warned of a significant rise in right-wing terror plotting, with U.K. counterterrorism police referring to right-wing terrorism as “the fastest growing threat.”¹¹⁶ Yet, according to C-Rex data, this trend has not continued. Fatal attacks and terrorism by right-wing actors have decreased rather than increased in Western Europe after 2020.¹¹⁷

In terms of the geographical distribution of right-wing violence and terrorism in Western Europe, Germany has faced the highest levels in recent years, followed by the United Kingdom, Italy,

Greece, and Spain.¹¹⁸ Among smaller countries, the Nordic countries of Sweden, Norway, and Finland have also seen significant levels.¹¹⁹ Most of this violence in Western Europe has targeted ethnic, religious minorities (and to a lesser extent sexual minorities), or political opponents (left-wing activists), or increasingly the state or state representatives.¹²⁰ Most of the right-wing violence does not align with a narrow definition of terrorism, but represents political violence in a wider sense, including beating, kicking, and stabbing, but also arson, and the use of Molotov cocktails and IEDs. The perpetrators of this violence are typically gangs, or loose constellations of people who connect over neo-Nazi, fascist, racist, or anti-state (sovereign citizen) ideas and launch spontaneous hate-driven attacks. According to the C-Rex center, which tracks right-wing violence in Western Europe, when it comes to the overall trend, political violence by right-wing extremists has decreased in Western Europe from higher levels in the 1990s.¹²¹ One possible explanation is that right-wing populism has surged across Europe and entered the political mainstream, lowering incentives for political violence.¹²² A notable exception from the decline trend is France, which has experienced an upward trend in right-wing political violence of late.¹²³

If one only considers terrorism, there were worrisome patterns of increased terrorist plotting (attacks and thwarted plans) from the latter 2010s and until 2023,¹²⁴ most prevalent in Germany (e.g., an alleged bombing plot uncovered in September 2021),¹²⁵ the United Kingdom (e.g., an alleged plot to attack police, LGBT+, and Muslims uncovered in October 2021)¹²⁶ and France (e.g., a neo-Nazi plot to attack a Masonic lodge uncovered in May 2021),¹²⁷ and to a lesser extent in Italy (e.g., an alleged plot to kill a left-wing activist uncovered in June 2021)¹²⁸ and Sweden (e.g., the killing of a female psychiatrist in July 2022).¹²⁹ But plots and attacks have occurred all over the region, including among other countries Norway (e.g., the failed attack on a mosque in Norway in August 2019),¹³⁰ Finland (e.g., a plot by a Nazi cell to launch terror attacks with 3D-printed guns uncovered in November-December 2021),¹³¹ and Spain (e.g., a plot to kill the prime minister uncovered in September 2018).¹³²

Such right-wing terrorist plots are rarely carried out by organizations staging terror campaigns in the manner of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but by rather loose networks and individuals with extreme right-wing sympathies and eclectic ideologies fusing Nazism and fascist ideas with anti-Islam sentiment and increasingly revolutionary anti-state antagonisms fueled by conspiracy theories. Some of these terrorists have dabbled in right-wing populist politics, and most of them network in extreme right-wing social media, via Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, or other platforms and applications. Several plots have involved online links to the transnational Atomwaffen Division network emanating from the United States, such as the aforementioned 2021 bomb plot uncovered in Germany, which involved a former politician in the CDU who had become radicalized.¹³³ The right-wing terrorist profiles vary and include teenagers as well as elderly people and both males and females. As with jihadism, most attacks by far-right terrorists in Western Europe involve single perpetrators, while several group-based plots have been intercepted. While tactics and weapons are generally simple (guns or simple IEDs), extreme right-wing plotters have shown a keener interest in utilizing 3D-printed weapons than jihadis, as will be documented below.

Multiple right-wing terrorist plots and attacks across Western Europe specifically targeted Muslims and some drew inspiration

from the 2011 Norway attacks by Breivik and the 2019 attacks on mosques in New Zealand by Brenton Tarrant. In August 2019, a 22-year-old tried to carry out a mosque shooting in Norway but was overpowered and failed.¹³⁴ In October 2019, an 84-year-old threw an incendiary device at a mosque in Bayonne, France, and shot at worshippers who confronted him, saying he wanted to avenge the fire at Notre Dame for which he blamed Muslims.¹³⁵ In September 2020, a 55-year-old woman plotted to attack Muslims with explosives in Germany.¹³⁶ In August 2021, a 15-year-old right-wing, anti-Islam, and anti-LGBT+ extremist inspired by Tarrant launched a knife attack at his school in Sweden in 2021, killing a teacher and threatening students. In September 2021, French police arrested a 19-year-old neo-Nazi and admirer of Hitler and the Norwegian terrorist Breivik, who allegedly plotted terrorist mass shootings at his school and a mosque.¹³⁷ He had linked up with the online Atomwaffen network via social media and co-conspired with other teenagers, including a girl with jihadi sympathies. In February 2024, U.K. police intercepted a suspected three-man right-wing terror cell plotting attacks on an Islamic education center in Leeds using a 3D-printed semi-automatic weapon.¹³⁸

Multiple extreme-right plots and attacks have in recent years targeted foreigners in general. In early 2019, a 50-year-old xenophobic man was arrested for ramming his car into crowds of foreigners in Germany.¹³⁹ In February 2020, a mentally troubled 43-year-old right-wing extremist carried out a mass shooting at a shisha café, a bar, and another café in Hanau, killing nine people and injuring others before returning home where he killed his mother and committed suicide.¹⁴⁰ In December 2023, a 69-year-old extreme right-wing French pensioner attacked a Kurdish cultural center, a Kurdish restaurant, and a Kurdish hairdressing salon in Paris with a Colt 45mm handgun, killing three and injuring three.¹⁴¹

Several extreme-right plots and attacks have in recent years targeted Jewish-Israeli persons or institutions. In October 2019, a 27-year-old right-wing antisemitic extremist who attacked a synagogue in Halle, killing two, brought with him that day, among other weapons, a gun with 3D-printed plastic components and explosives.¹⁴² In May 2020, French security services arrested a 36-year-old man for plotting terror attacks against the Jewish community in Limoges.¹⁴³ In February 2020, a 22-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of plotting terror attacks on both Jewish and Muslim institutions in Germany. He was part of a chatgroup dubbed ‘Feuerkrieg Division’ linked to several attack plots.¹⁴⁴ In December 2020, U.K. police arrested an 18-year-old right-wing extremist for trying to build a 3D-printed gun and plotting to shoot an Asian friend for sleeping with white women. This individual also discussed attacks on Jews working in the bank sector.¹⁴⁵

Plots and attacks targeting politicians, the political system, or the state have become increasingly common. In June 2019, a 45-year-old right-wing extremist assassinated a pro-immigration CDU politician shooting him in the head outside his home.¹⁴⁶ In 2020-2021, two other right-wing extremist networks plotted attacks on German ministers. Five men and one woman made plans for assassinating the Saxony prime minister via Telegram chat groups.¹⁴⁷ Another group of four made plans in a Telegram chat group dubbed “Unified Patriots” to assassinate the German health minister, Karl Lauterbach. These four suspected terrorists were extreme anti-COVID-19-measures activists and linked to the Reichsbürger movement, an eclectic political current based on the core idea of bringing down the German republic and restoring the

historical German empire.¹⁴⁸ The movement is inspired by Qanon conspiracy theory, and in December 2022, a major counterterrorism operation cracked down on Reichsbürger extremists allegedly plotting terror attacks with a view to initiating a massive coup to topple the government.¹⁴⁹ In late 2022, French police uncovered a plot by a right-wing conspiracy theorist and extreme anti-Covid-19-measures activist to overthrow the French government and stage terror attacks against state institutions, vaccination centers, a Masonic lodge, and prominent people.¹⁵⁰

As Paris prepares to host the Olympics, there are active transnational extreme-right networks aiming to weaken European democracies, spread chaos, polarize and draw attention to specific movements, causes, and grievances. At the same time, the right-wing terror threat is limited compared to that posed by jihadi actors and lacks the latter’s capabilities and strategic depth gained from mother organizations in conflict zones. One factor that could amplify the threat from both left-wing, right-wing, and Islamist actors is the return of state support or influence operations, notably by Russia and Iran in the current threat environment.

Russia and Proxies

The Soviet Union supported left-wing terror groups internationally and in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s when these groups dominated international terrorism. As noted, European left-wing extremism became weakened and disintegrated after the Soviet collapse. Fast forward to the current era and Putin’s Russia has cultivated relations with right-wing movements, political actors, and extremist networks in Western and Eastern parts of Europe. Russia aims to weaken and polarize the European Union and Europe to win the war in Ukraine and ‘make Russia great again’ on the European continent.¹⁵¹

According to sources in European security agencies, cited by the *Financial Times*, Russia has significantly increased influence operations and espionage especially in former Eastern Bloc states but also in Western European countries with limited counterespionage capacity.¹⁵² The FT’s sources warned that Russia was plotting violent acts of sabotage, including bombings, arson attacks, and destruction of infrastructure, all over Europe “directly and via proxies.”¹⁵³ While Russia has never been shy about targeting exiles such as the 2018 attempted killing of Sergei and Yulia Skripal with Novichok in the United Kingdom, a wider range of targets now seem to be on the table.

In April 2024, two German-Russian citizens were arrested in Germany suspected of plotting attacks on military and logistics targets.¹⁵⁴ The two men were charged with arson on a storage facility for aid shipments to Ukraine.¹⁵⁵ Russian involvement was also suspected in two attempts at derailing trains in Sweden.¹⁵⁶ Other suspicious incidents mentioned in the FT coverage of this development have included explosions and fires at munition factories in south Wales (in April 2024) and in Berlin (in May 2024).¹⁵⁷

Evidence is mounting of Russian attempts to co-opt European right-wing populist politicians, pushing huge amounts of Russian propaganda and narratives via sophisticated social media and fake news influence operations, and interacting with European right-wing extremists and terrorists.¹⁵⁸ Russian extreme right-wing groups have for years enjoyed leeway to operate in Putin’s Russia and offered paramilitary training to Western European extremists, some of whom joined the war in Ukraine as foreign fighters from its

outset in 2014.¹⁵⁹ Investigations into several right-wing terror cases outlined in the previous section indicate indirect or direct links to Russia and Russia-based extremists. For example, the Reichsbürger extremists suspected of plotting terrorism and a coup in Germany allegedly had Russian contacts and hoped to receive Russian support and negotiate a new order for Germany after toppling the government.¹⁶⁰

French authorities expect Russia to try to undermine the Paris Games, and are taking precautions.¹⁶¹ If Russia does try to play a spoiler role, it would likely be in response to President Macron's more hardline approach against the Russian war in Ukraine. French officials point to an ongoing influence operation against the Olympics preparations, including rumors and disinformation about France's ability to organize the Games and manage the security situation. Influence operations appear to have intensified amid the Gaza war, the Crocus attack, and statements by Macron that France does not rule out boots on the ground in Ukraine.¹⁶²

Fake Russian accounts spread rumors and disinformation about French interference in Ukraine or even involvement in the Crocus attack.¹⁶³ French security services allege Russia state security (FSB) was behind a campaign of spray-painting Stars of David on houses associated with Jews in Paris in October 2023 to fuel polarization over Gaza.¹⁶⁴ French authorities also allege Russian involvement in the spray painting of red hands at the Shoa Holocaust memorial in Paris in May 2024 by three perpetrators entering France from Bulgaria.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, French authorities believe Russia had a hand in a social media campaign falsely claiming an unusual spread of bedbugs in Paris via Ukrainian refugees to France, seemingly aiming to create a bad image of the country in the run-up to the Paris Games.¹⁶⁶ The French domestic intelligence agency DGSI assesses that Russia will exploit any contentious issue from pension reform to the Olympics to amplify polarization within French society.¹⁶⁷ While influence operations and sabotage are the most likely threats associated with Russia, support for non-state terrorist networks cannot be ruled out. On June 5, 2024, French media reported that the domestic security services had arrested near Charles de Gaulle airport a 26-year-old Ukrainian-Russian from the Russia-occupied Donbass region who accidentally set off an explosive in his hotel room while preparing a bomb suitable for a terror attack.¹⁶⁸ According to a French security source, investigations clearly indicate a Russian operation, with it not being excluded that the plan was to carry out a false flag attack to pin the blame on jihadis given the explosive was of the type often associated with jihadis.¹⁶⁹

Iran and Proxies

Since the latter 2010s, there has also been growing concern among European security services about the terror threat on European soil posed by actors linked to and supported by Iran. Unlike Russia, Iran will compete in the 2024 Paris Olympics. While the European Union maintains trade and political relations with Iran,¹⁷⁰ the relationship has become increasingly strained due to human rights violations, the nuclear program, the conflict with Israel, and Iranian harassment and violence against exiles in Europe and threats to Jewish and Israeli people and institutions residing in Europe. All of this has been compounded by Iran's support for Russia's war on Ukraine. Of late, European officials have voiced growing concerns about terrorist spillover from the war between Israel and Hamas,¹⁷¹ including threats from Iranian proxies or allies such as Hamas itself and Hezbollah. The Iran-allied Houthi movement's rocket

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attacks on ships with direct or indirect links to Israel, including European vessels, have also added to concerns about terrorism spillover, forcing the European Union to launch a maritime mission to protect vessels, personnel, and trade interests.¹⁷²

Iran has a track record of violent operations in Western Europe, mainly in the shape of terrorism-style attacks on dissident exiles and on Israeli targets. A main target is the exiled opposition group Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK),¹⁷³ a Marxist, feminist, and Islamist movement operating mainly out of Iraq and France, which fought on Saddam's side in the 1980s Iran-Iraq war. In 2018, one of Iran's 'deadly diplomats' recruited an Iranian couple in Belgium for a foiled plot to stage a bombing against a MEK rally in France.¹⁷⁴ Iranian intelligence operatives acting as diplomats have been tied to numerous assassinations or plots to assassinate dissident exiles and plans to attack Israeli targets, including a plot to attack an embassy and kindergarten in Germany also in 2018.¹⁷⁵ Since the 1990s, assassins or would-be assassins allegedly linked with Iran, the IRGC/MOIS, and Hezbollah have also been part of the effort to carry out the *fatwa* to avenge Salman Rushdie's Satanic verses, including the attack on a Norwegian publisher of Rushdie's book in 1993. Plots and attacks linked to Iranian agents have occurred across Western Europe, including among others France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Austria, Cyprus, Austria, Norway, and Sweden.¹⁷⁶

The regional Iranian response to the Israeli campaign on Gaza has so far appeared relatively restrained. Iranian proxy Hezbollah has increased rocket attacks on northern Israel, the Iran-allied Houthis in Yemen have launched attacks against Israeli-linked ships in the Red Sea to avenge the military campaign against Gaza, and Iran responded to Israeli airstrikes on the consulate in Damascus by directly attacking Israel with missiles and drones for the first time. Yet, the scope and intensity of the attacks on Israel suggested Tehran prefers to stay below the threshold for total war.

As for facilitating international terrorism in Europe, Iran seemingly considers limited attacks on Israeli targets in Europe is one way to harm Israel below this threshold. In a recent development, Israel's national security service Mossad publicly stated that Iran stood behind “a string of terror attacks by criminal networks on Israeli embassies in Europe since October 7,” using particularly two Swedish-based criminal networks, Foxtrot and Rumba, as proxies.¹⁷⁷ According to Mossad and Swedish authorities, these gangs were responsible for placing a grenade on the premises of the Israeli embassy in Stockholm in January 2024 and gunshots outside the embassy on May 17, 2024.¹⁷⁸ Mossad indicated Iran also had a hand in the throwing of two airsoft grenades¹⁷⁹ at the Israeli embassy in Belgium following a similar *modus operandi* to the Swedish case.¹⁸⁰

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As for larger attacks during high-profile events such as the Paris Olympics, Tehran likely knows any attacks linked to the Iran threat network would crush what remain of Iran-E.U. relations and could decrease European sympathy for Palestinians and increase European sympathy for Israel. At the same time, while Iran supports multiple Shi`a and Sunni proxies fighting Israel (Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis, and the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq), these groups have their own agendas and agency are not unitary actors. These groups or sub-groups/factions could also resort to international terrorism by themselves.

In an unexpected development, in December 2023, a series of arrests in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands allegedly intercepted terror cells linked to Hamas plotting attacks on Jewish targets in Europe. Denmark arrested three individuals tied to Hamas and a Danish criminal gang called Loyal to Familia.¹⁸¹ In Germany, also in December 2023, police arrested three Lebanese citizens and one Egyptian with Hamas ties,¹⁸² and in Rotterdam, Netherlands, a Dutch citizen was apprehended.¹⁸³ The European investigations have not clarified as to whether the alleged plotters in Germany, Denmark, and Netherlands were interlinked. It is alleged the cell in Germany was closely affiliated with the leadership of Hamas' military wing the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.¹⁸⁴ There is limited information about the further investigations into the alleged terror plot(s) in the public domain, but according to Der Spiegel's coverage of the case, the mission of the cell in Germany was to locate a Hamas weapons cache that turned out to be in Bulgaria, and transport weapons to Germany (Berlin) for use in attacks on Israeli targets in Europe.¹⁸⁵ Statements by Danish authorities indicated Danish Jews were at risk and that the Gaza war and Qur'an burnings may have been triggers.¹⁸⁶ On January 13, 2024, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "On 14 December 2023, the Danish and German security and enforcement authorities announced the widespread arrest of suspects in Europe who are now the subject of judicial proceedings. In a continuing intelligence effort, considerable information has been uncovered that proves how the Hamas terrorist organization has acted to expand its violent activity abroad in order to attack innocents around the world. Thanks to combined inter-organizational forces in Israel and abroad, a comprehensive and in-depth picture of Hamas's terrorist activities has been revealed, including details of areas of action, targets for attacks and those involved in implementing the activity – from Hamas commanders in Lebanon to the last attackers in the operational infrastructure, as well as information on the intention to attack the Israeli Embassy in Sweden, the acquisition of UAVs and the use of elements from criminal organizations in Europe."¹⁸⁷

It is difficult to assess the implications of this alleged Hamas plotting in Europe without knowing for sure what was planned and by whom. If there actually were plans to stage attacks, were these plans sanctioned by the central Hamas leadership, or initiated by semi-independent or rogue cells?¹⁸⁸ If the cells were directed from Lebanon by Hamas as publicly claimed by Israel, could there be involvement by Hezbollah or Iranian agents? If the cells were semi-independent or rogue, it could signal an increased threat from Hamas sympathizers of different stripes and add to the existing threat from individuals and cells associated with jihadism and other extremisms. If, on the other hand, the cells were sanctioned by the central Hamas organization or involved Iranian or Hezbollah elements, it would be more of a game-changer. Hamas and Hezbollah, whose military wings are proscribed as terrorist organizations by the European Union, are known to have built support networks in several European countries, but particularly in Germany and France. The coverage of the alleged Hamas plot revealed the existence of substantial and highly organized Hamas support structures across German states involved primarily in fundraising for the mother group.¹⁸⁹ According to CNN, German security services estimate there are some 450 active Hamas-supporters in Germany.¹⁹⁰ As for Hezbollah, the group is estimated to have some 1,000 members in Germany.¹⁹¹

If there is a major escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah this summer ahead of or during the Olympics, one concern is that it may change Hezbollah's calculus when it comes to launching terrorist attacks in Europe, especially against Israeli or Jewish targets. In 2012, the group carried out a bomb attack on an Israeli tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing six.¹⁹² In a speech on June 19, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned that if Israel launched an operation into southern Lebanon, Hezbollah would fight Israel with "no rules" and "no ceilings." He also threatened Cyprus with attacks if the island were to be used for operations against Hezbollah.¹⁹³

Conclusion

The terrorism threat matrix facing the Paris Olympics is diverse and multifaceted. It includes both known and predictable terror threats and others that are less likely on paper but hold the potential for surprise. The diversity and breadth of the potential threats facing the Games is going to make it hard for security services and first responders to prioritize resources in a way that can enable them to keep the known threats at bay and simultaneously manage threats that may emerge from under the radar. Jihadism remains the main non-state terror threat to Western Europe, France, and the Olympics, with Islamic State Khorasan posing a clear and present danger to the Games, especially through its cyber-coach approach of guiding radicalized individuals in Europe to launch attacks. "Threat is defined as capability and intent, and ISK have both," Richard Walton, the former head of Counter Terrorism Command at the UK Metropolitan police, states in an interview published in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*. "In my assessment, [ISK] is the biggest threat during this summer of sport." Underlining the threat, on May 31, an Afghan national motivated by Islamist ideology murdered a police officer in Mannheim,¹⁹⁴ and with less than two months to go before athletes were due to arrive in Paris, French police thwarted a plot by a teenager being cyber-groomed by ISK to target an Olympic soccer venue during the Games. There is also concern about the terrorist threat from left-wing extremism and a significant right-wing terror

threat, which could see violence targeted at the Paris Games.

Some radicalized activists might view the Games as an opportunity to draw attention to their cause through violence. Jihadis may groom frustrated activists who are vulnerable to extremist messages and recruit them for terrorist acts.

Western European security services are warning of a more aggressive Russia increasing influence operations to cause polarization and weaken European support for Ukraine, while preparing sabotage on infrastructure or other violent operations on European soil. Russia has been cultivating Western European

right-wing politicians, extremists, and terrorists who could be weaponized in the conflict over Ukraine. Russia may otherwise amplify already existing threats through influence operations and disinformation.

Finally, the Iran threat network also potentially poses a threat to the Paris Games. Tehran has been targeting exiles and Israeli symbols and people via its spies, the IRGC, and Hezbollah. Hamas itself could pose a threat and so could Hezbollah, with or without Iran's blessing, especially if there is an escalation in hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel in the coming weeks. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Richard Walton, Former Head, Counter Terrorism Command, London Metropolitan Police

By Paul Cruickshank

Richard Walton headed the Counter Terrorism Command (SO15) at the London Metropolitan Police between 2011 and 2016. He was Head of Counter Terrorism for London during the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and London Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, the United Kingdom's largest peacetime policing challenge. He is the founder and Director of Counter Terrorism Global, a U.K. consultancy that facilitates the design and implementation of solutions for countering terrorism and extremism to public, private, and non-government sectors. He has traveled extensively to countries affected by terrorism, providing advice to governments in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. He lectures in the United Kingdom and is a regular keynote speaker at international conferences on counterterrorism and counter-extremism.

Walton is a Distinguished Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a former on-air counterterrorism consultant for CBS News, and regularly appears on British and international media networks. In 2015, he featured in the 'Debrett's 500' list of most influential people in Britain in recognition of his contribution to countering terrorism. He is currently Chair of two U.K.-registered charities: the British Exploring Society and The Educational Frontier Trust.

CTC: With the Paris Olympics starting in late July and the Euro 2024 soccer tournament being held in Germany from mid-June to mid-July, it is helpful to talk about lessons learned from safeguarding previous summers of sport. You were the head of SO15 Counter Terrorism Command at the time of the London Olympics and played a key role in protecting the Games. What were the challenges you faced as you prepared for those Games? What was the threat matrix?

Walton: The threat matrix was quite different to what it is today. Just looking back, it was an interesting time because bin Ladin had been killed by U.S. Special Forces in 2011, but we still had in the U.K. various plots that we disrupted that were al-Qa`ida inspired, mostly using U.K. jihadists who had been out to the FATA region in Pakistan and been trained and come back and then started to plot attacks. We'd had a major disruption in the West Midlands in 2011 that subsequently resulted in seven convictions. The West Midlands plotters had been involved in quite a major 7/7-type planned attack using multiple suicide bombers.¹ That had been disrupted successfully. But we still found that some British jihadists were traveling out to FATA, so the most significant threat at that time was al-Qa`ida-inspired attacks. We didn't feel—and I think the historical record confirms this—that AQ had the capability at that time to dispatch large terrorist cells to the U.K. to carry out complex attacks. Hence, AQ was reliant on training U.K. nationals

in the FATA and sending them back to plot attacks from within the U.K.

You also had at that time, if you remember, Inspire magazine, which was very much AQ's propaganda machine and was very effective at inspiring British jihadists. I suppose our major concern was the threat from several thousand known Islamist extremist subjects of interest residing in the U.K., the vast majority of whom were British-born nationals who had been radicalized in the U.K. through magazines like Inspire, but also through engagement with the extremist organization called al-Muhajiroun, which was very active in the years leading up to 2012. Al-Muhajiroun was led by Anjem Choudary who was subsequently convicted in 2016 for inspiring and encouraging terrorist acts.^a

We were also concerned about AQAP, the Arabian Peninsula AQ terrorist threat, which was mostly aviation threats linked to the experienced bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri. We disrupted in 2010 AQAP's printer cartridge plot. So, we were concerned about AQAP and the threat to aviation, and we were concerned about AQ-inspired attacks using British jihadists.

There was also some activity and operations linked to al-Shabaab. There were a small number of Somali diaspora in the U.K. who were funding al-Shabaab, and we ran various operations against them. Separately, ahead of the Olympics, we disrupted a plot by British jihadists to bomb an EDL [English Defence League] rally.² There were some convictions for that. Then just weeks before the Olympic Games, we disrupted another plot by Richard Dart and two others who were convicted of plotting an attack.³ We never quite understood what that was about. We knew they were plotting, but we didn't quite know what their targets were going to be. But it was very, very close to the start of the Olympic Games, and so we were grateful to be able to disrupt that plot, too.

And then, of course, we had the threat from the extremist far right, and there was quite a febrile right-wing in the U.K. at the time: for instance, the English Defence League and the British National Party. Then you also had—as you always have—concerns about lone actors with one cause or another. The different ideologies: Environmental extremism was starting to take shape but was not seen as a terrorism concern as such. And there were different anarchist groups and left-wing extremists who we wanted to keep an eye on.

It's important to say that the threat level before, during, and just after the 2012 London Olympic Games never reached the level of 'severe,' an assessment meaning that an attack was 'highly likely.'

a Editor's Note: After his release, Choudary was again arrested in July 2023. He has pleaded not guilty to two terror offenses relating to the banned group al-Muhajiroun. Jamie Grierson, Vikram Dodd, and Jason Rodrigues, "Anjem Choudary convicted of supporting Islamic State," *Guardian*, August 16, 2016; "Radical preacher Anjem Choudary pleads not guilty to two terror charges," BBC, March 25, 2024.

Throughout the period, it was ‘substantial’ in the U.K., which meant that an attack was ‘likely.’ We’d had a long period of the threat being at ‘severe,’ but the U.S. drone attacks against key prominent AQ leaders in the FATA had had a devastating impact on the AQ leadership who were massively disrupted but not defeated. The drone strategy reduced the threat substantially. So, there was a sense of optimism that the trajectory of the threat was going the right way and not the wrong way. This was, of course, completely reversed in 2014 with the emergence of the ISIS ‘caliphate.’

CTC: You have previously stated that ahead of London 2012, “at the heart of our effort was thinking through every conceivable attack scenario and implementing security plans to prevent or respond to them.”⁴ What guided your approach for the London Games? What did London get right, and what were the lessons learned that can be helpful precepts for French authorities as they prepare to host the 2024 Games later this summer?

Walton: There are three key areas that are critically important to securing any major global sporting event when you have multiple venues, large crowds, huge numbers of spectators, and global media attention. The first is intelligence, and something that we’ve come to rely on over the years is the quality of intelligence and the ability to have that intelligence properly graded at source by several agencies simultaneously so that the intelligence is not sitting in many different locations and agencies but brought together, fused, analyzed, and then acted upon in fast time. This sounds easy to achieve, but it’s incredibly difficult to do.

Obviously, success in counterterrorism is defined by the absence of terrorism. For the Paris Olympics and Euro 2024, success will be a complete absence of terrorism anywhere in these countries. Any attack in France during the Games is an attack on the Games. That’s what we felt back in 2012: any attack in the U.K. during the time of the Games was an attack on the Games. This will be France’s biggest peacetime security policing challenge. It will be France’s biggest test of their new intelligence infrastructure since they reviewed it post-2015 after the Paris attacks. The French Parliamentary Commission in 2015/2016, following the attacks, came up with 40 recommendations, which were quite radical but identified big gaps in the intelligence infrastructure in France and the problem of isolated intelligence agencies coming to different conclusions based on fragments of intelligence.⁵ The Commission didn’t conclude that the Paris 2015 attacks could have been prevented, but they came pretty close to saying that, and they certainly said that there were major deficiencies in how intelligence had been analyzed and how critically important intelligence had been in existence but was just left sitting in different agencies.

We’ve learned over the years, particularly through our work against Irish terrorist threats but also post the 7/7 London bombings where we came to the same conclusions, that you have to be more integrated with your intelligence infrastructure. You have to create fusion cells where you have operatives from all the different agencies sitting together in the same building, looking at the same screens, analyzing the same material. And if that’s not happening—and this will be the big test for France—intelligence falls between the cracks and is lost. And then you can’t make the correct analysis and act upon it. So a fusion of intelligence and intelligence agencies acting and networked together is probably the most important imperative for France ahead of the Olympics and for Germany for the Euros.



Richard Walton

You also have to make sure that interagency rivalries are extinguished because they always exist and there is a tendency for each agency to consider that they are the most important and significant one. But it’s important that everyone works together—it’s very hard to achieve, but it’s really important to band together. And then obviously you have your infrastructure. You have your tasking of informants, and you have the speed at which you act on that intelligence and how quickly you can disrupt when you’ve analyzed and come to the conclusion that you’ve got a problem. You’ve got to be able to act very, very fast, especially in real time when the Games is actually going on, when sports is actually happening. So, the intelligence component that I’ve been discussing is the most important component of delivering security.

The second most important component is to prepare, plan, test, and exercise every possible scenario, so that you have contingency plans in place for every possible risk that you can envisage facing—that is air, maritime threats, CBRN, cyber, etc.—possibly hundreds of contingency plans. We looked at and explored many different hypothetical scenarios: for instance, drone attacks inside the stadium, microlight attacks, glider attacks, helicopter attacks, aircraft attacks, fast boat attacks—you name it, we had thought it through. We were not always comfortable with the mitigation of those threats because they’re not always easy to mitigate, and particularly aerial and boat threats are very difficult to disable and also to even plan for. For instance, if you take drone threats, a lot of different militaries and private sector companies will present you with different options for disabling drones, neutralizing drones, catching drones, etc. But actually, when you put these to the test and you envisage it happening in a stadium full of 100,000 people, you realize that it may not be such a good idea to shoot a drone out of the sky in the middle of a stadium, risking injury or death of spectators by the collateral damage of the debris falling into the crowd. So there’s a lot to discuss and a great deal of scenario planning and ‘red teaming’ to get your mitigation right so that you know exactly what

your response will be to each risk.

The third component that's really, really important is the command and control. And obviously, you've got multiple agencies, not just police and intelligence agencies, but every other agency that's got a role in the Games, which will be every other agency that exists. Integrating these agencies into one complex C3, 'Command, Control and Communication,' system is very hard to do and requires extensive planning over many years. The planning for this will have started years ago when France bid for and won the Games in 2017. So, they've had plenty of time to prepare for this, but it's very difficult to get C3 systems working seamlessly. We had multiple bronze 'tactical' command centers at different venues and stadia with one overall silver and gold strategic operational command center with full visibility on everything.^b

The French have had a lot of experience at this now. Since the Paris attacks in 2015, they've put in place a whole series of measures, which will be put to the test. They devised an action plan on terrorism in 2018,⁶ which included new measures such as creating a prison intelligence infrastructure, which they didn't have before.^c They also brought forward a national anti-terrorism prosecution service^d and a national plan to prevent radicalization.⁷ And, of critical importance, they created in June 2017 a National Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Coordination

(CNRLT) center^e modeled on the Joint Terrorism Assessment Centre (JTAC) in the U.K.^f to try and pull together the intelligence agencies dealing with terrorist intelligence. That will be severely tested. And the integration between the various agencies will be tested. France has a lot of different agencies with different and sometimes conflicting remits. Obviously, they will have learned from the 2015 experience with the Paris attacks, and there's been a lot of change in their structures. But the Games will be the biggest challenge to them ever really. And it will be a huge test of all these new infrastructures and systems.

CTC: How do you see the threat matrix in the summer of 2024, as we go through these sporting championships in Germany and France? We have a war in Gaza, which is causing a lot of outrage in Muslim communities, and there's worry that jihadi terror groups will be able to exploit that for recruitment, press people forward to launch attacks. And with the Israeli and American teams and sports fans traveling to Paris, there's concern about threats from groups such as Hezbollah who have a track record of plotting and carrying out attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

Walton: For me, the most serious threat facing the Games and the Euros is Islamic State Khorasan, which obviously has been in the ascendancy in the last couple of years. But more worryingly, it has recently been carrying out external terrorist operations in different countries with quite a high degree of success. They've plotted over 20 external attack operations in the past 15 months,⁸ and there has been ISK-connected plots in at least 10 countries.⁹

We already know that Islamic State Khorasan is trying to orchestrate an attack on the Paris Olympics. On May 22, French police arrested an 18-year-old Chechen in Saint-Étienne for plotting an attack against the Paris Olympics football tournament. He was reportedly in contact with ISK operatives and, in liaison with them, plotted an attack on the Saint-Étienne stadium, one of the venues for the tournament.¹⁰

There is also concern ISK could attack Euro 2024. On May 31, an Afghan national motivated by Islamist ideology killed a police officer in Mannheim.¹¹ In early June, German authorities probed an application by a suspected ISK supporter to work as a security guard and steward for events outside the stadiums during Euro 2024.¹² The suspect was arrested at Cologne/Bonn Airport on June 8 for allegedly transferring almost 1,700 U.S. dollars to an Islamic State Khorasan account via a cryptocurrency exchange in September 2023.¹³

Whilst the Taliban has had some success curtailing Islamic State Khorasan inside Afghanistan, the group seem to have switched to an external operations campaign, which is very alarming. And we've

b Editor's Note: Richard Walton provided additional details in a 2016 article in this publication. He wrote: "We were able to set up a state-of-the-art, integrated command-and-control system, which linked together multiple control rooms across London and the United Kingdom. Footage from our pre-existing extensive network of CCTV cameras as well as an array of cameras positioned at key sites gave us significant coverage, as did teams of overt and covert officers patrolling the Olympic sites and access points. There was a 'Gold' operational command-and-control center based in a warehouse in Lambeth and staffed by representatives from all police and security agencies. Additionally, a strategic control center was based at New Scotland Yard to manage the interface and coordination between all agencies. These control rooms were, in turn, linked to 'Bronze' control centers at each Olympic site. We also had Covert Control centers managing counterterrorism surveillance teams deployed against targets and a separate control room managing our reactive police resources that were on standby in case there was any incident: these included specialist teams of counterterrorism officers stationed in vehicles around London and ready to respond to any terrorist attack. Bomb disposal units were strategically positioned at key locations. The military and intelligence agencies also had their own control rooms linked to ours under a single command-and-control protocol. Securing the Games was the United Kingdom's largest-ever peacetime policing challenge. To coordinate all our efforts every morning during the Olympics, ministers chaired a daily security coordination meeting that was similar to the government's 'Cobra' meetings. Joining up all of these nodes required significant investment in high-end systems." Richard Walton, "Protecting Euro 2016 and the Rio Olympics: Lessons Learned from London 2012," *CTC Sentinel* 9:6 (2016).

c Editor's Note: "In the context of the fight against Islamist radicalization in France, prison intelligence rapidly developed from 2015 through the gradual creation of a dedicated service and a specific corps of professionals." David Henri Scheer and Gilles Chantraine, "Intelligence and radicalization in French prisons: Sociological analysis bottom-up," *Security Dialogue* 53:2 (2021).

d Editor's Note: France's national counterterrorism prosecution service—le parquet national antiterroriste (PNAT)—began work in July 2019. See Delphine Bauer, "Ouverture du parquet national antiterroriste: pour une force de frappe judiciaire renforcée," *Actu-Juridique.fr*, July 22, 2019.

e Editor's Note: "The Decree of 14 June 2017 establishing the CNRLT marked an important development in this cooperation. It entrusted two distinct missions to the CNRLT. Firstly, the coordination of the general activities of the intelligence services, and secondly, through the National Counter-Terrorism Centre (CNCT) created on this occasion, the steering of all the services contributing to the fight against terrorism." "National Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Coordination," *Élysée*, updated December 15, 2022.

f Editor's Note: "The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) is the UK's independent authority for all-source terrorism assessment. JTAC is based within MI5 and reports to the Director General, but their assessments are made independently." "Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre," MI5, n.d.

seen, in the past several years, connections with a threat to Europe specifically. For example, in 2020 there were some Tajik nationals arrested in Germany in contact with the group who were plotting to attack the U.S. military.¹⁴

In July 2023, the Germans arrested and subsequently charged seven individuals from Central Asia for allegedly plotting terrorist attacks on behalf of ISK in a plot connected to Holland.⁸ In March 2024, the Germans arrested two Afghans plotting, in close consultation with ISK, to launch an attack in the area of the Swedish parliament.¹⁵ In December last year, several Central Asians were arrested for a plot to attack Cologne cathedral on behalf of ISK.¹⁶

All this represents a serious concern and threat. We've seen this before with AQ, but ISIS in particular is demonstrating a clear intent to attack sporting events specifically. Threat is defined as capability and intent, and ISK have both. These plots, so far to date, have been disrupted, but the plots that were successful in Peshawar, Pakistan, in March 2022,¹⁷ and in Kerman, Iran¹⁸ and Moscow in March 2024¹⁹ were highly complex attacks and delivered ruthlessly. This backdrop creates a very real concern ISK might have capability to carry out attacks in Europe against either the Euros or the Olympic Games. In my assessment, this is the biggest threat during this summer of sport, and it will be of great concern to the French and the Germans because of the effectiveness of Islamic State Khorasan's overseas attacks, and particularly their recent attacks in Moscow, Pakistan, and Iran. So, I think overwhelmingly that's the main concern, the main threat.

After the Moscow attack in March 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that ISK had attempted several attacks on French soil in recent months.²⁰ French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal also referred publicly to an ISK plot in Strasbourg in 2022 that had been thwarted.²¹

There was also a notable arrest in Coventry, U.K., in January 2023 of a PhD student who had built a drone for ISIS. He was convicted in September of that year.^h It was a serious attempt to build a drone, and you wonder—if that had been successful—where that drone was destined for. Was it destined for Europe? Or was it destined to go back to ISIS? It is more likely that a drone built by an extremist in the U.K. was going to be used in an attack in the U.K. or Europe.

I think 90 percent of the concern will be around Islamic State

“I think 90 percent of the concern will be around Islamic State Khorasan and the challenges faced by authorities in disrupting what may be directed, enabled, or inspired attacks before, during, or after the Euros and the Olympic Games.”

Khorasan and the challenges faced by authorities in disrupting what may be directed, enabled, or inspired attacks before, during, or after the Euros and the Olympic Games. France has a significant Jewish population. And both France and Germany have large Muslim populations with a proportion of violent extremists with strong links to Central Asia from where ISK is now operating. The group is using radicalized individuals from within the Central Asian diaspora in Europe to engage in plotting attacks. It's vital to have a good intelligence picture around radicalized individuals who might have connections with Central Asia and particularly Tajikistan given how many Tajiks have been implicated in Islamic State Khorasan-linked plots.

ISIS has a track record of attacking sport, including as part of the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks, an attempt to target the 80,000 football fans watching France against Germany at the Stade de France football stadium. It is also worth noting that ahead of the Rio Olympics in 2016, eight Islamist extremists were arrested and subsequently convicted for plotting to attack the Games with AK-47s. They were Brazilian extremists who had been radicalized by ISIS propaganda.²² So that's an Olympic Games where most people thought there was no real threat at all, but even then, ISIS was engaged in inspiring others to carry out attacks.

CTC: Fifty-two years ago in Munich, terrorists affiliated with the Palestinian group Black September murdered 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team after taking them hostage during the 1972 Olympics. With the Palestinian question currently at the forefront of global attention, what is your concern about the security implications for this year's summer of sport in Europe?

Walton: The tragedy is that 52 years on, nothing really much has changed in terms of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. But when we look at Hamas and Hezbollah—proxies of Iran that are basically aligned with certain Palestinian groups fighting Israel—these are terrorist organizations per se, but they haven't specifically to my knowledge advocated the targeting of any sporting events. They are not advocates of a global salafi-jihadi narrative. Their grievances and their war are focused on Israel. Whether we see that played out in terms of protest or violent terrorist acts is the question. My assessment is that we'll likely see it played out in serious protests in different guises, but not in terms of terrorism. There will be Palestinian sportsmen and women in the Olympics, as indeed there will be Lebanese and Iranian athletes in the Games. So I don't see Iran or any of its proxies conducting state-related terrorist activity against the Games. But there will be concerns, of course, and in the forefront of people's minds will be

g Editor's Note: According to German prosecutors, shortly after the start of the war in Ukraine in spring 2022, the suspects "travelled from there to Germany almost simultaneously. After entering the country, they joined forces with an accused who was being prosecuted separately in the Netherlands to form a terrorist organization with the aim of carrying out high-profile attacks in the spirit of IS in Germany or elsewhere in Western Europe. The group was in contact with members of the regional IS offshoot 'Islamic State Khorasan Province' (ISPK) who were abroad." "Charges Filed Against Seven Suspected Members of Islamist Terrorist Organization," Federal Prosecutor's Office of Germany, April 24, 2024; "Germany charges seven suspected ISIS-K members over attack plots," Reuters, April 24, 2024.

h Editor's Note: "The jury at Birmingham Crown Court heard how PhD student Mohamad Al-Bared, aged 26 of Kare Road in Coventry, made the drone specifically to transport an explosive or chemical weapon into enemy territory for ISIS. Component parts for the drone were made on his 3D printer found at his home address. He was arrested on 31 January [2023] in Coventry as his home address was raided by officers who seized the drone, 3D printer and several devices including phones and laptop." "Man found guilty of terror charge after building drone to give to ISIS," Counter Terrorism Policing, United Kingdom, September 28, 2023.

the 1972 Munich Games in which Black September, an offshoot of the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLO), carried out a terrible attack which resulted in all the hostages being killed alongside others.

CTC: What is your view of the threat posed by the extreme-right to Euro 2024 and the Paris Olympics?

Walton: There are always concerns around the far-right. I think this will be a particular concern for Germany for the Euros. We recently saw 27 individuals charged for a December 2022 attack plot against parliament to overthrow the government by Reichsbürger and QAnon adherents.²³ I think Germany does have some real threat issues around the far-right at the moment, but it's done a lot of disruption activity in respect of that, so the hope is they have done enough to suppress the threat. However, with the far-right, you can never be too sure, because you always have the lone-actor threat. The Anders Breivik attack in Norway in 2011, a year before the London Olympics, for instance, was very much in the forefront of our minds in terms of the right-wing threat: somebody self-inspired, not aligned to any particular organization except his own. There's not a lot you can do except have very comprehensive intelligence to disrupt that. So, you're never complacent about the far-right.

CTC: How do you view the cyber threat picture during this summer of sport in Germany and France?

Walton: We were concerned about cyber-attacks during the London Games. And when you talk about cyber threats, you're normally talking about state cyber-related threats—Russia, China, and Iran being the three that you would normally worry about. In terms of this Olympic Games, I think we're talking about Russian state cyber threats and Russian-aligned hacktivists who will probably be trying to disrupt the Games in different ways or disrupt particular nation-states' sporting activities. So, that will feature, and obviously there's usually an element of organized criminality around some of that, too, which is difficult to counter.

Just going back to the intelligence picture with the French, I know that they have now quite comprehensive monitoring of social media, but we had to set that up from scratch in 2012 because it was in its infancy.ⁱ It is very important to do, and I think it's already borne some fruit because in April they made an arrest of a teenager who posted something on social media saying he planned to create an explosive belt and wanted to die a martyr at the Olympics.²⁴ When you pick it up in the context of the Games, you have to act on it very fast. I think the threat matrix is quite different to the one we faced. France has already got their posture up to 'Attack Emergency,'

i In a 2016 article in this publication, Richard Walton wrote, "Ahead of the [London] Olympics we developed a tailored, social media monitoring capability, which allowed us to observe extremists' use of social media platforms to promulgate their views. Sophisticated software gave us 'sentiment analysis' across communities and enabled us to respond to and prevent planned public disorder by radical and extremist groups. This proved to be of immense value in the run up to and for the duration of the Olympics, particularly during the two months that the Olympic torch made its way through the United Kingdom. This capability was developed in just four months at a cost of GBP2 million but continues to be, in the years since, highly valuable to counterterrorism efforts in the United Kingdom. It is an example of how the Olympic Games can provide a security as well as a sporting legacy for a country." Walton.

“The biggest concern with the Paris Olympics is going to be the opening ceremony. Opening ceremonies are particularly vulnerable anyway because you have the vast majority of the world watching them. So if you can attack anywhere during the opening ceremony, but particularly in and around the venue, then as far as terrorists are concerned, that would be a major success.”

the highest posture in terms of direct threat level, which doesn't give them much room to maneuver.²⁵ And if you go back to 2015, post the Paris attacks, they invoked something called Opération Sentinelle, which was putting a huge number, up to 10,000, armed officers and military on the streets. Their own parliamentary commission in 2016 said that this tactic was highly ineffective and achieved almost nothing.²⁶ They do have a temptation sometimes to flood the streets with police and soldiers, and that really would be a mistake. We had almost no armed police officers on the streets in 2012 for the London Games; we were wholly reliant on active intelligence and actually creating an environment on the streets, which was relaxed and informal. We're not convinced that putting armed officers or soldiers on the streets deters anything or even reassures the public. It's an easy thing to do but very costly, and it's also quite difficult to reverse. France extended the state of emergency many times at huge cost. And the parliamentary commission review basically concluded that it was ineffective as a tactic. But the French, post the recent Moscow ISK attack, reviewed their security posture and put it straight up to the highest level. And I can't see it coming down between now and the start of the Games because the threat picture is basically going to stay the same if not get worse, especially with regards to ISK.

CTC: One of the things that that you've stressed before is that while the venues and athletes themselves will be well protected, there's a concern that the terrorists could strike elsewhere during major sporting events,^j which makes it very, very difficult for authorities. Because you could put a lot of resources into protecting an Olympic Village and stadiums, and so forth, but bad actors can get a lot of press by launching attacks anywhere in the country during the sporting contest. How did you think through that challenge in London in 2012, and what are the lessons learned from that?

j In a June 2016 *CTC Sentinel* article, Richard Walton noted that "the vulnerable underbelly of these events is outside of the host cities in venues and stadiums, transport hubs, and other crowded places where police are not familiar with high levels of security." Walton.

Walton: You have to have some protective security coverage elsewhere outside of the capital city. You cannot just bring all the resources and all the intelligence gathering straight into the capital and expect that this will work because there will potentially be problems elsewhere. So you've got to have a basic level of intelligence gathering and operations outside of where the actual sporting main event is.

The biggest concern with the Paris Olympics is going to be the opening ceremony. Opening ceremonies are particularly vulnerable anyway because you have the vast majority of the world watching them. So if you can attack anywhere during the opening ceremony, but particularly in and around the venue, then as far as terrorists are concerned, that would be a major success. So, you're always very, very nervous about the threat during the opening ceremony, but with France, they've got an opening ceremony that's taking place across the city and on water, which presents a huge challenge for them because it's very dispersed and it's quite a long route. You rely normally, with opening ceremonies, on a sterile secure stadium that has been searched, with fingertip searching, two weeks before and then locked down with search arches (airport-style security including metal detectors) in place to make sure you know exactly what has and hasn't gone into that stadium after you fingertip-searched it. You can't do that effectively in a large area across a national capital city. You can't do that as effectively—particularly on water, for instance—as effectively as you can in a stadium. So I know there are concerns about this, and I know that Macron's even considered, as I think he put it, plan Bs and plan Cs, which is changing the opening ceremony and possibly reverting it back to a stadium.²⁷ I think they've cut the spectator numbers down from 600,000 to 300,000 for the route of the opening ceremony, but that's still a major challenge to protect. It's a bit like when we run royal events in London such as the coronation and you have the procession going through several areas—like with the coronation through Windsor into London and then elsewhere. It's a major policing challenge, and it's a major security challenge. And in the context of an ISIS Khorasan threat, then that is a concern. And of course, you don't tend to have, in the stadium, masses of police because you've used security to lock down the stadium, whereas in a ceremony that's going across the national city, you're going to have to use a lot of police, both uniformed and undercover, to try and keep that whole route safe. They will be very concerned about it.

CTC: And you speak from experience because back in 2012 you helped oversee security for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

Walton: Yes, and also Margaret Thatcher's funeral in 2013 and other major ceremonial events where you had activity that's moving across the city. It is much more dynamic than what I would call a sterile stadium where you've got everything going on in the middle of it. When you've essentially got moving targets and moving crowds, it's very difficult to make that 100 percent safe. I'm sure they'll try and do it with a huge number of police, the military, uniformed and covert, but it's still a big challenge. And, of course, it's a big challenge also in terms of aerial threats, maritime threats etc. It's very difficult to disable a moving boat, for instance. The mitigation for that in London was to have an aircraft carrier on the Thames with Marines in helicopters that could shoot engine blocks out. It might sound like a simple thing to stop a boat, but it's actually not that easy if you've got a threat moving in a boat.

“The major concern with sporting events is always marauding firearms attacks, which obviously Paris experienced with devastating effects in 2015. Marauding knife attacks as well, which is very, very easy to do with devastating effects.”

CTC: And obviously with the Olympic Games, there are so many different venues across the city with so many spectators and participants, and you're always going to have crowds gathering to get into venues. And so, as you've outlined, it's a very complex challenge. As new technologies come on stream, it offers terrorists new ways to launch attacks. Broadly speaking, what attack vectors do authorities need to be vigilant about during this sporting summer in Europe?

Walton: Mostly, it's the same as we've seen in the various theaters around the world, particularly in ISIS' methodologies of fighting in Syria and Iraq. The major concern with sporting events is always marauding firearms attacks, which obviously Paris experienced with devastating effects in 2015. Marauding knife attacks as well, which is very, very easy to do with devastating effects.^k

In terms of technology, no terrorist organization has yet successfully attacked a European event with a drone technology, but there's a lot of concern because of the use of drones by terrorist organizations around the world, whether it's Hezbollah, Hamas, ISIS, AQ in various places and indeed even the Houthis as well—the Iranian proxy—in Yemen. Drones are being widely used in these theaters, and I fear it will only be a matter of time before they're used to deadly effect in Europe or in the West.

And I mentioned the arrest last year in Coventry of the PhD student who had made a drone. And of course, drones, as I said before, are very, very hard to mitigate against. There's also concern about swarms of drones. I think that's probably beyond the capabilities of even Islamic State Khorasan. But even a single drone coming in with either explosives or chemicals could cause a lot of problems. We've yet to be tested in real time on this in terms of the countermeasures that have been in place for several years now at major sporting events. So, we'll have to hope that there is capability that can take out a drone attack, if it is attempted.

CTC: And then on the firearm side of the equation, you've got 3D printing and being able to make firearms out of non-metallic components when it comes to the deployment of metal detectors and that sort of protection. Technology marches forward, and obviously authorities have to respond to that and

^k Editor's Note: "Marauding terrorist attacks (MTA) are fast-moving, violent incidents where assailants move through a location aiming to find and kill or injure as many people as possible. Most deaths occur within the first few minutes of the attack, before police are able to respond." "What is a Marauding Terrorist Attack?" U.K. National Protective Security Authority, May 31, 2022.

find ways to mitigate threats that stem from that. If something does get through in Germany or France, what precepts need to guide the day after to reassure the public and not let the terrorists ruin everything? I know for the London in 2012 you had the maxim “the Games must go on.”

Walton: Well, the individual that was arrested in Coventry in possession of a handmade drone also had a 3D printer and had been making parts for the drone with the 3D printer.²⁸ So I think your point about 3D printers is well-made. If you go back to ‘72 in Munich, the Games actually went on there after a 34-hour suspension despite that tragedy and the number of deaths. A nation-state never wants to allow a terrorist organization to be able to disrupt life for very long. I think back to 2005, after the 7/7 attack, we tried to get the city back up and running as soon as possible—in hours, not days and weeks—to return to normality as soon as possible. In terms of the Games, yes, the Games must go on, and you want the world to be able to carry on and enjoy the Games and not be disrupted by a single-issue terrorist organization intent on committing violence and murder. But you also have in mind not to overreact. Some of this is about media management as well. It’s very easy for an individual to get global media attention by doing something crazy, which may not even be violent. Back in 2012, we were concerned about protest groups: Protest groups come up with very innovative ways of creating an incident which becomes a story, which is then broadcast around the world in seconds. Even if a terrorist attack is successful, you want to move on because by moving on, you’re showing they can’t succeed in their activities and in disrupting the Games. You have to win that ideological battle. If you close everything down, the terrorists win and you lose and that’s not good. So that was very much in the forefront of our minds and the forefront of the ministers’ minds. And from our experience of terrorist attacks in the U.K., the faster you can get the situation back to normality, the better.

CTC: On the need to share intelligence within different agencies both at a national level and an international level—when you’re thinking about major sporting contests with a whole bunch of different countries involved and spectators from around the planet—talk about the lessons learned from London in 2012 and what you got right about the intelligence sharing. How did you make sure everyone was on the same page so that there were that as few silos as possible when it came to working together across agencies and across different countries?

Walton: Internationally, relationships are built in the months and the years before the Games start, and it’s really too late to start making them in the weeks beforehand. So they’re either there or they’re not. Again, going back to the French commission in 2016 on the Paris attacks, they were highly critical on the relationship between French and Belgian intelligence agencies,¹ where there was

“Some countries seem to put aside their differences when the Olympic Games come around and are happy to share intelligence information they wouldn’t ordinarily share. It’s very good to capitalize on that and to encourage that as much as possible. Putting aside these differences, your normal differences, and actually encouraging a sharing relationship because it could be the Games are next held at their country, when they’ll expect and hope that you will share intelligence with them.”

no sharing for different reasons. Actually, the Belgians didn’t share for constitutional reasons because they weren’t allowed to. It’s part of their constitution. So there were subsequent changes made in Belgium around that and also the French - Belgian counterterrorism relationship that was greatly improved subsequently. But you have to invest in those relationships heavily before these events occur, and that also includes with nation-states that you wouldn’t necessarily always be routinely sharing intelligence with.

Some countries seem to put aside their differences when the Olympic Games come around and are happy to share intelligence information they wouldn’t ordinarily share. It’s very good to capitalize on that and to encourage that as much as possible. Putting aside these differences, your normal differences, and actually encouraging a sharing relationship because it could be the Games are next held at their country, when they’ll expect and hope that you will share intelligence with them. It’s vitally important, the intelligence-sharing networks—for instance, Five Eyes and the multinational fora like Europol and Interpol, are all really important of course—and they are important for day-to-day stuff anyway. So, they’re already happening. So, there shouldn’t really be anything that’s exceptional. But you’ve got every country pretty much represented at the Games, and they also want the protection for their athletes. So, there’s a vested interest in sharing anything that they’re concerned about or any intelligence that they pick up about the Games; it’s in their interest to share it and we were very keen to make that point: ‘It’s in your interest as well as our interest that you share anything with us that’s Games-related where you pick up intelligence.’ In Pakistan, for instance, you pick up intelligence that might be talking about the Olympic Games, you share it with us and let’s all analyze it together. I think that spirit of cooperation tends to happen at the Olympic Games. It was certainly my experience going back to European Olympic Games anyway, during the 2004 Athens Olympic Games it certainly happened, and it certainly happened in London. I’m sure it will happen in France.

Despite the threat—and the threat is high—I have confidence that both the Euros in Germany and the Games in France will be

¹ Editor’s Note: The parliamentary report stated that a key part of its mission was to “shed light on the dysfunction in Franco-Belgian intelligence efforts and to put forward recommendations so that in the future there is total joined-up surveillance by our respective intelligence services.” “Rapport fait au Nom De La Commission D’enquête relative aux moyens mis en oeuvre par l’État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015,” Assemblée Nationale, July 5, 2016, p. 17.

mostly successful in terms of security and countering terrorism threats. I think there will be security incidents, some possibly significant, but my judgment is that these will be a microcosm of what's going on in the world. So, some incidents relating to Russia, Ukraine; some incidents related to Gaza; Afghanistan. I have confidence that the French and the Germans can hold back and disrupt the terrorist plots that may be planned or may be inspired by the likes of Islamic State Khorasan. But the Games are a big challenge. Even with all the planning we did, the security challenge in the London 2012 Olympics was far bigger than I had envisaged and far more complex than we had planned for. And of course, you've also got the Paralympic Games. So, security is not done until the last day of the Paralympic Games.

Both Germany and France have a lot of experience dealing with terrorism and have been increasingly successful disrupting terrorist plots in the last seven, eight, nine years. France learned

the same lessons in 2015-2016 as we learned in 2005 and which the Americans learned post-9/11. If you look at the 9/11 Commission Report and compare that to the report we did on 7/7 and the report the French government did into the Paris 2015 attacks, the learning is pretty much all the same. It's about those core themes of the need for integrated, fused intelligence; about brilliant C3 command and control; and about having contingency for every eventuality; and then about working together to achieve a secure Games.

You don't want the Games or Euros defined by security; you want them defined by sport. So the security should not be the preeminent theme, which is why again, I'd like to see the French pulling back the soldiers and police off the streets. It's not the way really to achieve security. They should rely on their new infrastructures, their new integrated intelligence systems, their new command and control systems, which I'm confident will see them through successfully.

CTC

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Protecting Major Sporting Events from Terrorism: Considerations for the Paris Olympics and Beyond

By Alexandre Rodde, David McIlhatton, John Cuddihy, and Rachel Monaghan

As France prepares to host the Summer Olympic Games next month, recent developments have highlighted the challenging threat environment that exists for the country's security services. In May 2024, for example, an 18-year-old was arrested for allegedly plotting to attack an Olympic football match. Concurrently, Islamic State media has highlighted attack methods that could be used to strike the Olympic Games, including the use of unmanned aerial vehicles. Undoubtedly, the scale of the events planned during the Paris Olympics, in a tense terrorist environment, presents a series of unique challenges for French security services under the scrutiny of an international audience. This article examines the attractiveness of major sporting events for terrorist actors and contextualizes the importance of protective security measures in managing the security risks associated with such events. The proposed lessons, though not exhaustive, are drawn from the authors' experiences in the protection of public spaces and venues, which often receives less attention than the implementation of security measures at stadia and venues of major sporting events. The article concludes by examining the practical implications of implementing security measures not only at major sporting events, but at public spaces and venues more broadly.

There has been considerable media attention on threats to the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games as identified by French security services and law enforcement. In May 2024, for example, an 18-year-old Chechen national who allegedly had been plotting an Islamist-inspired attack at the Olympics football tournament was arrested.¹ In parallel, there has been an increase in Islamic State media suggesting different attack methods that might be used at the Games. In June 2024, a social media post from the group included a mocked-up image of an unmanned aerial vehicle carrying a payload with "Gift" written on it, flying toward the Eiffel Tower² as an example of what is possible.

The Games are taking place against a backdrop of a complex and challenging threat environment. The geopolitical tensions over the invasion of Ukraine have already seen Russia banned from major sporting events—though qualifying Russian athletes can participate as "individual neutral athletes" in the Paris Olympics.³ In June 2024, there were reports of a Russian disinformation campaign using a deepfake Tom Cruise to front a documentary about corruption in the Olympic Games, as well as other fake media reports suggesting Parisians were buying property insurance due to the likelihood of terrorist attacks.⁴

Then there are the challenges associated with the conflict in the

Middle East after the October 7th attacks in Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza. The conflict has stoked significant protests throughout France, and in other major Western cities, with rallies expected at other major sporting events, including the UEFA European Championships in Germany.

Further complicating the threat environment, the World Economic Forum in June 2024 published an article highlighting that the Olympic Games are facing "an unprecedented level of threat" from cyber-attacks⁵ as hostile actors seek to disrupt the Games as occurred during the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2021, which endured an estimated 450 million cyberattacks.⁶

One key challenge for those protecting major sporting events such as the Olympics will be ensuring that the protective security measures deployed are holistic, integrated, and proportionate to the range of threats, not only terrorism.

In the first part of this article, the authors discuss how attacks at major sporting events are not new and that many different methods have been used in the past at these events to cause disruption and to injure and kill people. The article next details why major sporting events have been an attractive target for terrorist groups, before then considering the threat landscape within France in the run up to the Paris Olympics. The authors conclude by presenting some key considerations from a protective security perspective that are relevant to not only the Paris Olympics, but all major sporting events.

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Previous Attacks at Major Sporting Events

Terrorist attacks at major sporting events are not new; according to one recent study, there have been 74 terrorist attacks at sporting venues around the world over the past 50 years.⁷ While many of these resulted in attacks against spectators, participants, or officials, some were designed to cause maximum disruption.

At the 1972 Munich Olympics, the Palestinian group Black September gained entry to the accommodation blocks housing the Israeli athletes and took members of the Israeli national team hostage. After a siege and a failed rescue attempt by German authorities, 11 Israeli athletes and coaches were killed, as well as one German police officer.⁸ In July 1996 at the Atlanta Olympics, Eric Rudolph left a bag containing pipe bombs in the Centennial Olympic Park.⁹ A security guard discovered the bag and began to evacuate the area, but the bombs detonated, killing one person with another person later dying from cardiac arrest. Over 100 people were injured. In the United Kingdom in 1997, the Grand National horse race was suspended as coded bomb warnings were reportedly made by the Provisional Irish Republican Army. As a result, approximately 60,000 people were evacuated, and the main horse race was postponed by 48 hours before taking place in front of a reduced crowd.¹⁰

Prior to the Champions League semi-finals in 2002 between Real Madrid and Barcelona, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device was detonated close to the Bernabéu stadium where the game was due to be held. The explosion followed the arrest of 11 members of Batasuna (a group closely linked to ETA) on the day of the game.¹¹ After security checks, the game went ahead as planned. In the same year, a bomb was detonated outside the Karachi hotel of the New Zealand cricket team who were playing Pakistan in a test match. The bomb killed 12 people, including 10 French defense technicians, and injured 34 others.¹²

Three deadly Olympics-related attacks took place in 2006 targeting Iraqi sporting teams and officials. In one incident, the head of Iraq's Olympic Committee was kidnapped along with 30 others after a sports conference in Baghdad when approximately 50 gunmen gained entry to the event. In another attack, 15 members of the taekwondo team were kidnapped and the bodies of at least 13 of them were later found.¹³

In 2008, 15 athletes were killed and over 90 others injured when a suicide attacker detonated a bomb during Sri Lanka's marathon celebrating the new year; the Tamil Tigers allegedly conducted the attack.¹⁴ In 2009, the Sri Lankan cricket team was attacked while on their way to play Pakistan in Lahore. Twelve gunmen attacked the bus they were traveling in with rockets and grenades, resulting in the deaths of six police officers and two civilians.¹⁵

In April 2013, two bombs were detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three spectators and wounding approximately 260 others. The attackers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who spent part of their childhoods in Kyrgyzstan, used two pressure cooker devices that were packed with shrapnel and concealed within sports bags, and which were detonated within seconds of each other. One of the brothers was killed in a shootout with police, and the other was captured after a manhunt.¹⁶

In November 2015, after failing to gain entry to the Stade de France in Saint Denis, three suicide attackers detonated bombs outside the stadium during an international football game between France and Germany. One person was killed outside the stadium, and seven were seriously injured. Had the attackers managed to

gain entry to the stadium or coincided their attacks to take place before or after the game, the impact would have been much more severe as 78,000 supporters were in attendance.¹⁷

The Attractiveness of Sporting Events

Much of the existing literature on terrorist target selection adopts a rational choice perspective that sees terrorism as “purposive behaviour which involves the making of (sometimes quite rudimentary) decisions and choices, which in turn are constrained by limits of time and ability and the availability of relevant information.”¹⁸ By this theory, terrorists are thus rational actors who consider a range of factors in their decision-making processes.¹⁹

Major sporting events such as the Olympics continue to be attractive targets for a number of reasons. The first is size. The Paris Olympics are expected to attract approximately 15 million visitors throughout the entirety of the Games. This includes some 326,000 people who are expected to attend the opening ceremony along the River Seine, and tens of thousands of spectators at the majority of the events.²⁰ Indeed, the footprint of the Olympic Games will be massive with thousands of public spaces and venues acting as the supply chain to the events.

The second reason is global visibility. It is estimated that the Black September attack on the Munich Games in 1972 reached an audience of some 900 million people as they watched TV networks' real-time broadcasts of the unfolding events.²¹ The Paris Games expect to reach an audience of some four billion,²² and with the advances in technology, the audience no longer has to rely exclusively on TV broadcasts but can tune in to various social media platforms for near real-time coverage.

The third reason is vulnerability. Major sporting events involve a wide range of supportive industries and companies including the media, security, volunteer services, catering, hospitality, and transportation. This raises the possibility of vulnerability within the larger supply chain supporting the event, most notably from insider risks, as well as other threats affecting the large number of public spaces and venues. Most attacks in the past have been *in proximity* to the main stadium or event space, as well as at the locations supporting the events (such as a hotel). There are very few instances where the actual event stadium or venue was successfully targeted. But insider risks (i.e., terrorists or their supporters gaining access to a site, system, or venue) remain an area of concern. In June 2024, for example, German authorities arrested a man at Cologne airport who had allegedly transferred cryptocurrency to an Islamist cell in Afghanistan.²³ The individual's application to work as a security guard at outdoor screenings of the European Championships in Germany had been rejected based on information provided by the German security services.²⁴

As Silke observes, terrorists are calculating and rational actors who will only make decisions that further their cause. This could explain why the Olympic Games have been targeted by terrorists, but the Paralympic Games have not. Media coverage of the Paralympics is considerably less than that of the Olympics and “terrorist groups are unlikely to view attacking disabled athletes as a saleable decision in terms of their supporters and constituents.”²⁵

The Threat Landscape and the Paris Olympics

The Paris Olympics present a unique security challenge to France in a tense terrorism context.²⁶ The opening ceremony on July 26 takes place on the Seine in downtown Paris and constitutes one



Police units take part in a fleet technical test of the athletes' parade on the Seine in Paris on June 17, 2024, in preparation for the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (Firas Abdullah/Abaca/Sipa USA via AP Images)

of the most complex events of the 2024 Games. At this ceremony, 94 boats will transport 10,500 athletes along six kilometers of the river before arriving in front of the Trocadéro where the finale of the opening ceremony will take place.²⁷ The ceremony is expected to be the largest in Olympic history and the first to take place outside of a stadium. As discussed, French authorities are expecting around 326,000 spectators to gather on the banks of the Seine, all of whom will have gone through an invitation-based process.²⁸ It is also expected that approximately 200,000 people will watch the opening ceremony from the buildings contiguous to the Seine, with another 50,000 watching in various fan zones across Paris. Given the significance of the opening ceremony, it is no surprise that there will be a monumental deployment of law enforcement officers from the National Police and the National Gendarmerie, working alongside members of the French armed forces, as well as private security organizations. Indeed, it will also be the first time that the three most experienced tactical units of the French security forces (RAID, BRI-PP, GIGN) will be deployed together to protect a major sporting event.²⁹

Despite this, however, security professionals and the general public have been critical of the numerous security risks facing the Olympic Games, as well as the security planning for the opening ceremony.³⁰ In response, the French government recently declared that a “plan B” (limited to the Trocadéro) and a “plan C” (in the Stade de France) had been designed, but that holding the opening ceremony along the Seine remained the preferred option.³¹ Much of this public concern has been as a result of the terrorist threats being covered by the French media, and against a backdrop of violent protests and strikes that have been synonymous with France in recent years, some of which have been organized by anti-

government Yellow Vest groups and which could stretch French authorities' capabilities.

The terrorism threat landscape in France comprises three main sources, namely, jihadism, far-left extremism, and far-right extremism. France's struggle with jihadism has been considerable over the last decade.³² Since 2012, approximately 54 attacks have been perpetrated by jihadis in France, killing over 270 people.³³ Eight of these attacks met the criteria for a mass-casualty event threshold (where four or more people were killed), with significant attacks on November 13, 2015, in Paris (130 deaths) and the Nice vehicle-ramming attack that killed 86 people on Bastille Day in 2016.

Since 2019, French jihadis have moved to low-sophistication and low-cost methods for their attacks. This is evidenced by an upsurge in bladed weapons and vehicle-ramming attacks. And in a demographic shift, most of these attacks were perpetrated by teenagers and young adults, many of whom are younger than the attackers responsible for the 2015-2016 era of mass jihad.³⁴ Indeed, in October 2023, a French high school teacher was stabbed to death and three other school staff were injured in the northern France city of Arras when a 20-year-old jihadi attacked them at a school.³⁵ Two months later, on December 2, a 26-year-old jihadi, already convicted of terrorism charges and released, killed a 23-year-old German tourist and injured two others next to the Bir Hakeim bridge in Paris' 15th district, before being arrested by police officers.³⁶ In the later months of 2023, a dozen individuals linked to the jihadi movement were arrested in France on terrorism charges, most of them following the October 7th attack in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza.³⁷ Since January 2024, around 30 jihadis have been arrested in France, including two who were planning an attack

during the Olympics. In the first case, a 16-year-old from Haute-Savoie (French Alps)³⁸ was reportedly targeting the business district of La Défense, in the west suburbs of the French capital. It is alleged that he was planning an attack during the Olympics. The target of his attack was reportedly chosen because the policing operation within the center of Paris potentially offered less chance of success. In the second case, an 18-year-old man of Chechen descent allegedly surveyed the Geoffroy-Guichard stadium of Saint-Etienne, where the football competition was to take place. He reportedly had been in contact with Islamic State-affiliated individuals on encrypted messaging apps, discussing violence against football supporters and law enforcement.³⁹ He was arrested on May 22, 2024.

In parallel, France also faces threats from the extreme far-left and extreme far-right. In the context of the extreme far-left, France has seen a strategy of sabotage aimed at disabling and/or destroying “logistical, energy and technological infrastructures”⁴⁰ in recent times. Between 2021 and 2023, there were around 160 cases of destruction of buildings or infrastructures, mostly by arson.⁴¹ The French far-left has also signaled its opposition to the hosting of the 2024 Olympic Games.⁴² Considering the events to be competition-oriented, capitalist, and damaging to the environment, far-left groups have been circulating pamphlets against the events, using the hashtag #NOJO^a and threatening to carry out destructive actions during the Games.⁴³ The movement has regularly been able to mobilize thousands of supporters, including more than 400 black blocs^b during one illegal demonstration in March 2023,⁴⁴ and could cause disruptions during the competitions. Those within the black blocs are familiar with French crowd control tactics and are connected through a robust network of associations and support groups in the Paris region. Their actions would be most likely aimed at disrupting or stopping the events rather than targeting individuals, with the exception of law enforcement personnel who have been attacked in the past.⁴⁵

The extreme far-right has been a rising concern for the French national security apparatus in recent years, particularly given the growing number of arrests that have been made since 2015. However, the movement lacks the operational capacity of the extreme far-left and is not particularly active in France.^c There has also been little in the way of communication from the extreme far-right about their interest in targeting the Olympic Games. Where there has been an increase in activity in relation to the far-right is in the context of football hooliganism, for example during the 2022 World Cup after France played Morocco, leading to several arrests.⁴⁶

State-sponsored terrorism, while absent from the French terrorist environment, might also be a concern following the arrest of a Russian-Ukrainian national north of Paris on June 5, 2024. The 26-year-old individual was in the possession of explosive materials in a hotel room, which he detonated and injured himself with before

he could use them.⁴⁷

Another potential threat to the events emanates from insider risk. French authorities have stated that they ran more than 250,000 background checks for volunteers wanting to support the organization of the Olympics. During these checks, they found 161 S-Carded individuals among the volunteers, under a “fiche S” and deemed by intelligence agencies to be “a risk for the security of the French State.”⁴⁸ In these cases, 106 were jihadis, 35 were right-wing extremists, 18 were left-wing extremists, and three were foreign agents.⁴⁹ A terrorist attack organized or committed by an individual with access to the Olympics facilities, while less plausible, could lead to more casualties, as was the case during the 2019 jihadi attack on the Paris police headquarters.⁵⁰

Considerations from a Protective Security Perspective

Security risks can be mitigated but rarely can they be eliminated.⁵¹ Therefore, one must accept that not everything can be prevented and that the focus must also be on how to prepare better for and protect against terrorist attacks from happening—as well as being resilient when they do. What must be remembered, however, is that security risks are dynamic and that they evolve over time as new approaches, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and targets emerge. Indeed, terrorist actors also adapt their approaches in response to the protective measures that are put in place, and as Paul Martin notes, security risks are adaptive and that we are in a “perpetual arms race as a consequence.”⁵² An example of this reality is the attack that unfolded outside the Stade de France in November 2015 when one of the three attackers (mentioned earlier) failed to gain access to the stadium. The attacker backed away and, after a short period of time, detonated his bomb. If the security guard had failed to check for a ticket, which the attacker did not have,⁵³ then the terrorist could have gained access to the stadium and exacted a much more severe toll. A key lesson is to ensure that the private security personnel who are employed to operate at major sporting events understand their role, and the *importance* of their role, in keeping people safe at such events. While this might sound simplistic, it is a fundamental consideration that is the very building blocks of protective security—and where it can very easily go wrong.

A second key consideration is knowing what needs protection. The key challenge with major sporting events is that they involve many moving parts. First, there is the large number of spectators, many unfamiliar with the layout of the event who often travel internationally to attend. In many cases, the local language is not their first language, complicating communication between security personnel and the public, as well as the public’s understanding of the security communications put in place at stadia, on public transportation, and in other locations. Second, there are the stadia or venues where the events are held. These are often spread out across the host city and/or the rest of the country, and as such multiply the number of locations that need to be protected. Third, there are the locations where participating teams are staying. These are often spread out and quite regularly reported on in the media. Fourth, there is what the authors refer to as the supply chain of the major sporting event. This includes the locations where the spectators stay, the bars and restaurants that they visit, the public transport that serves the events and other tourist locations, as well as shopping malls, iconic tourist sites, fan zones, and any other locations that the spectators may use before, during, and after events. All of these pose different challenges for those planning and

a NOJO is an abbreviation for “No Jeux Olympiques,” or “No Olympic Games.”

b “Black bloc is an organizational tactic often employed by anarchists and anti-fascists when engaging in protests or direct action. When in black bloc, individuals wear masks, bandanas, and head-to-toe black clothing to project strength and group uniformity while maintaining anonymity.” Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Austin Blair, “Behind the Black Bloc: An Overview of Militant Anarchism and Anti-Fascism,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 14, 2021.

c The authors identified around 30 occurrences of arson or shooting at building by the extreme far-right and around a dozen cases of violence, none of them lethal.

implementing the protective security measures.

As is always the case, significant protective security measures are placed *in situ* at the venues of the events themselves. This is no surprise as tens of thousands of people will be in attendance, and as a result, the impact will be more severe if security risks are not managed or mitigated effectively. What is left more exposed is the supply chain to these events. There are simply too many locations and businesses to provide protective security measures at scale. As such, significant importance must be placed on engaging as many of those locations as possible, by providing training for businesses to help them understand the threats they might face, what to do if something does happen, and how to recover. The United Kingdom does this through the National Counter Terrorism Security Office, as well as through the ProtectUK platform that offers advice and guidance that is free at source of use for all businesses, and for the public.

But spectators themselves also play an important role in their safety and security at major sporting events. As such, the importance of strategic and deterrence communication cannot be underestimated. Many cities around the world have communications campaigns that are directed toward helping people know what to do if they think something is wrong. The United States has initiatives such as “See Something, Say Something,”⁵⁴ and the United Kingdom has its “See it, Say it, Sorted” campaign.⁵⁵ These types of campaigns must, however, be understood by the people who are visiting the cities where the major sporting events are taking place. If they do not understand the language used or do not know what to do if they do see something, or if the people that they report it to do not understand what they are being told due to a language barrier or what to do with that information, then the campaigns will be limited in their effectiveness. One way of overcoming this, in the European context, is communicating that the European emergency telephone number “112” offers speakers of most E.U. languages.

A key lesson for all major sporting events is that communication should be a strategic part of the planning of that event, rather than a tactical ‘add-on.’ Indeed, when engaging with the businesses involved in the supply chain, it would be useful to present options of small adjustments to ‘business as usual’ routines that support protective security. These could include business opening and closing security checklists that are relevant to terrorism risks and

key mitigation principles such as the “Power of Hello” campaign in the United Kingdom.⁵⁶ In simple terms, the campaign features a detection method for identifying behavior that is “out of the ordinary.”⁵⁷ The Power of Hello campaign is about encouraging security personnel at events and all along the supply chain to act on any unusual observations of an individual “by approaching them, saying ‘hello,’ and asking if you can help them with something.”⁵⁸

A final consideration involves the likelihood that smaller businesses would implement security measures voluntarily and in the absence of legislation. Therefore, any measures that are asked of such businesses must be proportionate to the threat and reflective of the burden that is likely to be placed on them. For example, a small business such as a restaurant will not be able to sustain protective security measures that place a financial or resource burden on that business for a long period of time—especially if they are under no legal obligation to do so. Their ability to do so will be determined by the commercial priorities of that business. What should be avoided, as much as possible, is a wide variance in the protective security posture of businesses as a result of both geographical and sector differences. Doing so could create hierarchies of vulnerability based on affordability as those that can afford to do things will, and those that cannot, will not. If businesses do implement protective security measures without being legally required to do so, then a key success metric will be the level at which this can be done at scale given the significant number of businesses that fall within the supply chain of a major sporting event, and the geographic spread of venues that host such events.

Conclusion

The scale of the events planned during the Paris Olympics, in a tense terrorist environment, presents a series of unique challenges for French security services under the scrutiny of an international audience. While the lessons posed in this article are not exhaustive, they are drawn from the authors’ significant experiences in the protection of public spaces and venues, and which often receives less attention than the implementation of security measures at the stadia and venues of the major sporting events. These are of practical relevance not just to the Paris Olympics, but to other major sporting events, and the protection of public spaces and venues more broadly. **CTC**

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Printing Terror: An Empirical Overview of the Use of 3D-Printed Firearms by Right-Wing Extremists

By Yannick Veilleux-Lepage

The last decade has seen a rapid proliferation in the use of 3D-printed firearms by right-wing extremist actors, presenting significant new challenges for law enforcement in countering political violence. This article provides an empirical overview of right-wing extremists' adoption of 3D-printed firearms (3DPF) for political violence using a dataset of 35 incidents worldwide. It analyzes the geographical and temporal spread of 3DPF use by RWE and outlines four main motivations: symbolic and ideological reasons, supplementing conventional firearms, using 3DPF as alternatives when legal acquisition might alert law enforcement, and financing other activities or profiting from sales. The study emphasizes the need for continuous monitoring, enhanced forensic techniques, and international cooperation, in addition to adapting law enforcement strategies and developing policies to address the evolving threats posed by 3DPF. As such, it provides an empirical foundation for further research and policy development into extremist use of 3D-printed firearms.

On May 5, 2013, Defense Distributed, an open-source nonprofit organization dedicated to the development of firearms, released the digital files for the Liberator, the world's first almost entirely 3D-printed firearm (3DPF). This .380 ACP pistol, assembled from 15 printable parts and a common nail serving as the firing pin, was made available online for public download. The release resulted in over 100,000 downloads in just two days, causing alarm about the potential untraceability of 3D-printed firearms and their potential misuse. Less than a week after the file release, two journalists from the British tabloid *The Mail on Sunday* purchased a £1700 CubeX 3D printer, printed the Liberator's 15 parts, and 'smuggled' them onto a Eurostar train departing from St Pancras International Station. This stunt prompted experts to call for a review of security procedures at airports and public buildings to account for this new threat.¹ Among those to weigh in was Lord

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Alan West, a former Labour security minister, who called the Liberator "extremely dangerous because they are very difficult to detect" and warned that "this is going to be a real problem."² Several media outlets and politicians reporting on *The Mail on Sunday's* 'experiment' also raised the specter that such weapons could be used to bypass metal detectors in airports and to hijack planes.³ Some went as far as suggesting that this technological development could leave critical infrastructure vulnerable to a repetition of the terrors of 9/11. In Israel in 2013, staff of a Channel 10 TV show attempted a similar act by smuggling an assembled Liberator into the Israeli parliament.⁴ In reporting on the incident, NBC News mistakenly referred to the Liberator as a "semiautomatic" pistol and urged their readers to consider scenarios in which "an actual assassin" smuggled such a firearm into the Israeli parliament or "in the same room as [then-serving] President Barack Obama."⁵

In the decade since the Liberator's introduction, while the feared scenario of individuals using 3D-printed firearms for high-profile political assassinations or hijacking trains and planes has not materialized, extremists and terrorist groups, particularly right-wing extremists (RWE), have shown a growing interest in this technology. Concurrently, 3D-printed firearms have improved significantly in design, reliability, and effectiveness.

Utilizing a proprietary dataset of actual or disrupted plots involving 3DPF by RWE actors, this article provides an empirical overview of the motivations and methods behind RWE's adoption of this emerging technology for political violence. Against the pervasive tendency to engage in hypothetical discussions about the misuse of emerging technologies such as additive manufacturing and 3D-printed firearms, this article seeks to assess the current threat posed by the use of 3DPF, drawing from empirical data. By surveying 35 incidents worldwide, this study provides an overview of the geographical and temporal spread of this technology's use by RWE, along with an in-depth description of the four overarching motivations behind the adoption of this technology. These motivations range from symbolic and ideological reasons, where the desire to acquire or manufacture a 3DPF exceeds its material benefits and instead is viewed through ideological lenses, to a means of complementing stocks of conventional firearms. Additionally, they encompass use as an alternative to conventional firearms when acquiring them legally might alert law enforcement, and lastly, as a means of financing other activities or simply profiting by selling firearms within an extremist milieu.

The objective of this exploratory study is to offer a data-driven foundation for further theoretical and comparative research on the topic, along with a starting point for legislative and law-enforcement responses to this growing threat. To do so, this article begins by surveying the history of privately manufactured firearms and additive manufacturing, the two technologies whose convergence has enabled the proliferation of 3DPF. In doing so, it is argued that while terrorist and criminal groups have a long

history of manufacturing firearms, additive manufacturing has significantly lowered the cost and skill necessary for production, to the point that 3DPF can rival commercially manufactured firearms in terms of accuracy, durability, and reliability. The following section of the paper describes the processes by which a dataset of worldwide incidents of RWE actors seeking to leverage 3DPF was compiled. This dataset forms the basis for both temporal and geographical analysis of the phenomenon, showing that since 2017, incidents of RWE actors attempting to manufacture or acquire 3DPF have grown at a concerning rate and have been observed in 18 countries. Finally, this paper outlines the four main motivations to acquire or manufacture 3DPF as expressed in the incidents in the database: for symbolic and ideological purposes, to supplement existing conventional firearm supplies, to use them as alternatives to conventional firearms when unavailable or when legal acquisition could alert law enforcement, and as a means to finance other activities.

The Technological Dimensions

Privately Manufactured Firearms

The use of privately manufactured firearms (PMF) by violent non-state actors long predates the emergence of additive manufacturing technologies (a process described in the next section). As such, “3D-printing technologies do not necessarily represent a true paradigmatic shift in the ability of non-state actors to manufacture firearms.”⁶ At their core, firearms are straightforward technologies that do not present particularly difficult manufacturing challenges. All firearms work by expelling projectiles through a controlled explosion of a propellant charge. In its simplest configuration, a firearm is comprised of three main components: a barrel, an ignition mechanism for the propellant, and a projectile. This crude typology applies equally to the first kind of small arms, which emerged in the 17th century in the form of a smooth bore muzzleloader using matchlock ignition mechanism, to modern day semi-automatic and automatic firearms that utilize advanced mechanisms to achieve rapid firing. Consequently, individuals, including violent non-state groups, through straightforward research and with basic tools and materials have long been capable of successfully producing functional homemade firearms.

During the Second World War, different theaters made use of a wide range of PMF. Resistance groups fighting the German occupation found relative success in quickly and cheaply reproducing the British Sten submachine guns. Notably, the Polish resistance widely produced the Blyskawica submachine gun in an underground workshop in Warsaw.⁷ In the Pacific theater, several groups fighting the Japanese occupation created a series of highly effective and easily manufactured shotguns known as the Paltik or Sumpak, which consisted of no more than two pieces of pipe and an end cap with a nail affixed in the middle.⁸ This basic design (often referred to as a ‘slam-fire shotgun’ or ‘slam gun’) remains one of the most common PMF designs in the world.

During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the (P)IRA produced crude, yet fully functional weapons such as .22LR revolvers, pen guns, and improvised shotguns to supplement their cache of conventional firearms imported from the United States, Canada, and the Middle East.⁹ Loyalist paramilitary groups, for their part, lacking sophisticated weapon smuggling networks, sought to create their own improvised firearms, including the ‘Avenger’ submachine gun based on the German MP28.¹⁰ In South America, various

insurgent groups, including the Maoist People’s Revolutionary Army in Argentina, manufactured approximately 5,000 replicas of the Swedish Carl Gustaf M/45,¹¹ and the Colombia FARC produced its own version of the Sten Gun and Mac-10s. During the Chechen Wars, “Boaz” submachine guns, named after the Chechen word for “Wolf,” were widely produced. These weapons, costing about \$100 each to produce in secret workshops, were basic yet functional enough to ambush police and military forces, with the aim of acquiring high-quality, factory-produced firearms from downed foes.¹² More recently, Israeli Defense Forces have seized a substantial amount of “Carlos” improvised submachine guns also modeled after the Swedish Carl Gustaf M/45 and its variants.¹³ These firearms have been used during several deadly attacks against Israeli law enforcement.¹⁴ Additionally, faced with international sanctions and arms embargoes, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations have produced various privately manufactured weapons, including a “high-quality copy of the Soviet RPG-2 shoulder-fired recoilless weapon.”¹⁴ The Syrian and Libyan civil wars have also seen a variety of groups crafting a broad spectrum of makeshift weapons,¹⁵ from simple to highly sophisticated, including anti-material rifles.¹⁶

Likewise, criminals, including criminal organizations, have a long history of manufacturing or acquiring improvised firearms for reasons ranging from limited funds or access to conventional firearms, to the desire for a weapon that is difficult to trace or easier to conceal. According to a 2018 report on privately manufactured firearms, such firearms accounted for roughly 80 percent of firearms used during the commission of a crime in the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2012.¹⁷ The same report highlighted that in 2014, PMF, often of low quality, constituted at least 10 percent of firearms confiscated during serious crime investigations in New South Wales, Australia.¹⁸ In the United States, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) data suggests a notable increase in privately manufactured firearms recovered by law enforcement agencies—increasing by 157 percent, from 7,517 in 2019 to 19,344 in 2021.¹⁹

PMF are not solely the domain of criminals or terrorists. They also attract firearm enthusiasts and hobbyists, who explore this activity both within and beyond legal boundaries. Since the 1960s, for instance, some newsletter publishers have reworked unclassified U.S. Army manuals into detailed guides for making such weapons. They have produced instructions on constructing items such as inexpensive submachine guns from hardware store supplies or crafting makeshift shotguns similar to the “paltik” or “sumpak.”²⁰ More recently, Philip A. Luty, a British designer of homemade firearms and advocate for universal firearm ownership, sought to widely disseminate a how-to book.²¹ This publication remains

a The “Carlos” submachine gun has been reportedly used in several attacks in Israel. Notably, it was used on February 3, 2016, against an Israeli Border Police officer. On June 8, 2016, during the Tel Aviv shooting, two Palestinian gunmen killed four Israelis using Carlos firearms. The weapon appeared again on March 14, 2016, in Hebron, targeting Israeli troops, and on July 14, 2017, three Arab-Israeli terrorists used Carlos submachine guns on Temple Mount, resulting in the deaths of two Israeli policemen. Judah Ari Gross, “Police Chief Confirms Two Officers Killed in Temple Mount Shooting,” *Times of Israel*, July 14, 2017; Peter Beaumont, “Homemade Guns Used in Palestinian Attacks on Israelis,” *Guardian*, March 14, 2016; Jack Moore, “‘Carlo’ Gun Weapon of Choice for Palestinian Attackers,” *Newsweek*, June 11, 2016; Judah Ari Gross, “Say Hello to ‘Carlo,’ the Cheap, Lethal Go-to Gun for Terrorists,” *Times of Israel*, March 16, 2016.

widely available on the internet and has inspired numerous copycat designs. Many other books, magazine articles, and printed publications containing instructions for the manufacture of improvised firearms have been digitized and are also readily available online. Moreover, several hobbyists in the United States, where creating such firearms is usually lawful, maintain detailed social media profiles. They frequently post about their processes and techniques, which range from Computer Numerical Control (CNC) milling to casting to 3D-printing, sharing their expertise in manufacturing improvised firearms.

Additive Technologies

3D-printing is a form of additive technology. It refers to the construction of three-dimensional objects by adding minute amounts of material in layers. Originally, 3D-printing machines were used for rapid prototyping to create plastic mock-ups in the 1980s, but in the 20 years following their introduction, 3D printers have gained increasingly sophisticated capabilities and are now frequently used for final production purposes. Importantly, several patents central to this technology have expired in the last decade, leading to a proliferation of high-quality consumer 3D printers at affordable prices.²² The most common 3D-printer technology uses thermoplastic filament and is called Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM). FDM incorporates four essential components: (1) the 3D-model file; (2) the slicing software; (3) the 3D printer itself; (4) and the printing material, a thermoplastic.

3D-model files are digital representations of three-dimensional objects. These files serve as blueprints that can be manipulated and visualized in 3D-modeling software, and are crucial in the process of 3D-printing, where they act as the source from which physical objects are created layer by layer. 3D models can be created using a computer-aided design (CAD) package, expensive 3D scanners, or even with a digital camera or smartphone combined with photogrammetry software.²³ However, most hobbyists will use 3D-model files from online repositories that offer a wide array of models, ranging from simple household items to complex mechanical parts. These online repositories foster vibrant communities of creators and makers, where users can share experiences, provide feedback, and find inspiration.

Slicing software acts as the intermediary between the 3D-model file and the actual 3D printer. This software takes the digital 3D-model and ‘slices’ it into a series of thin, horizontal layers, essentially translating the 3D-model file into a format that the 3D printer can understand and execute. Slicing software provides various key functionalities, such as determining the thickness of each layer, that influences the printer’s resolution, accuracy, and speed. Slicer software is typically included with the purchase of a commercial 3D printer; however, there are numerous third-party options available for free or purchase, offering users enhanced customization capabilities.

The 3D printer is the central device in the 3D-printing process, where digital designs become tangible objects. It reads the G-code file generated by the slicing software and precisely builds the object layer by layer. Each type of 3D printer has its own set of capabilities and limitations, influencing the resolution, strength, and appearance of the printed object. Good-quality, entry-level models are available for a few hundred dollars, while professional-grade printers can cost several thousand dollars.

The filament used in 3D-printing serves as the raw material

for creating physical objects layer by layer through the additive manufacturing process. Different filaments exhibit unique properties, such as strength, flexibility, durability, and aesthetic appearance, depending on their composition, enabling users to choose the most suitable filament for their specific application.

3D-Printed Firearms

In the decade since the release of the digital files for the Liberator, several communities aimed at pursuing the development of 3D-printed firearm blueprints, in whole or in parts, have emerged. This provides a digital ecosystem where designers, publishers, manufacturers, and end users of 3D-printed firearms can collaborate, test, and release new and improved 3DPF files and blueprints, navigating and communicating across multiple platforms on the internet. According to a recent study, there are more than 2,100 different 3DPF plans readily available online.²⁴

3D-printed firearms are typically classified—according to a typology developed by Armament Research Services (ARES)—into one of three categories: fully 3D-printed (F3DP), hybrids, and Parts Kit Completions/Conversions (PKC).²⁵ However, it is worth noting that experts can disagree on whether a firearm belongs in the F3DP or hybrid category as both these categories may overlap slightly.²⁶

Fully 3D-printed firearms are primarily composed of 3D-printed components, although they always incorporate some non-printed elements, such as nails for firing pins or elastic bands for powering certain parts. These firearms, including the Liberator, PM422 Songbird, PM522 Washbear, Marvel Revolver, and Grizzly, are generally considered less reliable and less durable than conventional firearms.²⁷

Hybrid 3D-printed firearms incorporate 3D-printed components with readily available and unregulated components such as steel tubing, metal bar stocks, and springs that are designed to withstand the pressure of a discharge more efficiently and thus generally make for a more reliable and durable firearm. These firearms are designed to perform comparably to conventional weapons and can incorporate standard unregulated firearm components such as magazines or optical devices. Hybrid 3D-printed firearms are particularly popular in regions with stricter gun control, as they can be made without conventional firearm parts and are capable of firing modern ammunition types.

Arguably the most popular model of hybrid 3D-printed firearms is the FGC-9 (“F**k Gun Control 9mm”^b) and its variants. The FGC-9 is a semi-automatic pistol-caliber carbine designed by Jacob Duygu, under the pseudonym JStark1809.²⁸ Its design is based on an earlier 3D-printed gun—the Shuty AP-9, designed by “Derwood”—and heralded as a major improvement. Whereas the Shuty AP-9 relies on several factory-made or extensively machined parts (such as the barrel) that pose a challenge to would-be builders in jurisdictions that regulate and restrict such components or those without access to a machining workshop, none of the FGC-9 components are regulated in Europe. The approximately 20 percent of the design that is made of metal (comprising the pressure-bearing parts such as the bolt and barrel) can be fashioned from readily available material sourced from a hardware store.²⁹ Unlike most other instructional guides for 3DPF, the FGC-9 was explicitly designed with non-American audiences in mind; the meticulous

b The name of the gun has been censored by this publication.

step-by-step instructional guide uses the metric standard.

Parts Kit Completions/Conversions (PKC) are firearms that consist of a 3D-printed receiver or frame^c that is then assembled with components from conventional firearms. PKC are the most reliable type of firearms that use 3D-printed parts. However, unlike hybrid 3D-printed firearms, PKC are often more expensive and involve parts that might be restricted by law in many jurisdictions. However, PKC firearms are popular in the United States due to the unique regulatory framework surrounding firearm manufacture and ownership. In the United States, the receiver of a firearm is typically the only part that is serialized and legally defined as the firearm itself. Therefore, individuals can, without the need of purchasing a serialized part, assemble a firearm by manufacturing their own receivers using a 3D printer or by purchasing unfinished receivers, also known as “80 percent” receivers, and finishing them themselves. They can then legally acquire, with little to no scrutiny, “all parts” kits, which include all necessary components except the receiver. These kits often consist of parts from firearms slated for destruction by law enforcement but stripped before the receiver is destroyed.³⁰

3D-printing technology has also been used to manufacture firearm accessories, the legality of which may vary by jurisdiction. Popular among these are Drop-In Auto Sears and Glock auto-sears or “switch,” which enable a semi-automatic firearm to fire in fully automatic mode. Additionally, designs for suppressors, sometimes disguised as everyday items such as vases or YETI cups, can be found on digital repositories.³¹ Other readily available plans include magazines and magazine extensions, muzzle devices, and grips.

Approach and Dataset

Methodology

To understand how RWE actors have sought to leverage 3DPF, this article utilizes an inductive crime script analysis.³² Crime script analysis identifies specific stages and actions within the commission of a crime, from preparation to aftermath. By detailing these steps, a better understanding of criminal or terrorist behaviors, including the decision-making process and the vulnerabilities in the environment that facilitate the crime, can be gleaned.³³ This detailed breakdown also helps in identifying potential intervention points where actions can be taken to prevent the crime from occurring, disrupt the crime process, or reduce its impact. Crime script analysis has been most readily applied to cyber,³⁴ corruption and fraud,³⁵ and crimes of a sexual nature.³⁶ However, an emerging body of research has sought to apply this approach to terrorist tactics, including airplane hijacking³⁷ and vehicle ramming attacks,³⁸ as well as the general *modus operandi* of extremists.³⁹

This integrated approach is designed to uncover the operational steps, patterns, motivations, and tactical decision-making processes behind the adoption and use of 3DPF in extremist activities. This methodology hinges on an integrated analysis where the procedural mapping of crime script analysis is enriched by the inductive, emergent nature of grounded theory. By blending these approaches, this article systematically dissects the sequences of actions from acquiring 3D-printing technology to executing violent acts, while

simultaneously allowing for the emergence of new insights directly from the data. This methodological synergy facilitates a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the utilization of 3DPF by right-wing extremists.

Data

This article is based on the collection and systematic review of incidents of actualized or disrupted plots involving 3DPF by RWE actors worldwide.^d To qualify for inclusion in the dataset, an incident must satisfy two criteria: (1) a clear intent to utilize advanced 3D-printing technology for the creation of firearms or firearm accessories, ranging from possession of CAD designs (which may be illegal in some jurisdictions) to the actual manufacturing and intended use of these firearms, including cases where a well-developed plot is either thwarted or realized, and (2) the manufacturing of these firearms must be motivated by right-wing ideology.^e To construct this dataset, a formalized codebook was created and each incident of RWE use of 3DPF was coded based on the following elements:

- Date and Location of the Incident:
 - » Date: The exact date when the incident occurred.
 - » Location: Detailed geographical information including city, state/province, and country.
- Summary of the Incident, Including Motivations and Intended Use:
 - » Brief Description: A concise overview of what happened during the incident.
 - » Context and Background: Any relevant background information leading up to the incident. Information about the possession of conventional firearms or explosive devices is included in this field.
 - » Motivations: The ideological or personal motivations behind the incident, as understood from statements, manifestos, or investigations. In addition, information about other extremist activities undertaken by the

d It is worth noting that extremist groups linked to other ideologies have sought to leverage 3DPF. For example, on two occasions, dissident republican paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland have been observed with 3DPF. In April 2022, a member of Óglaigh na hÉireann (ÓNH) attending an Easter Sunday commemoration read a statement while two other members brandished FGC-22s (a .22 caliber version of the FGC-9). More recently, in February 2024, masked men in West Belfast were filmed firing a volley of shots using 3DPF as a tribute to a recently deceased former IRA prisoner, Sean McKinley. John Mooney, “Security Services Investigate 3D-Printed Gun at Republican Event,” *Times*, April 27, 2022; Allison Morris, “Masked Men Fire 3D-Printed Weapons in Tribute to Former IRA Prisoner Who Featured in Troubles Doc,” *Belfast Telegraph*, February 6, 2024.

e The author’s understanding of “right-wing beliefs” is informed by the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, indicating beliefs rooted in anti-egalitarianism. This ideology sees social inequality as natural or desirable, often grounded in the superiority of certain races, ethnicities, or genders. It is encompassed within a wider far-right ideology that includes exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism, targeting various social and political groups as enemies. This framework underpins violence against minorities and liberal-democratic institutions, fueled by racism and conspiratorial thinking. The Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset is compiled every year by research assistants working at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo. It systematically documents severe right-wing attacks and attack plots in 18 Western European countries, since 1990. Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Charlotte Tandberg, Simone Sessolo, Anders Ravik Jupskås, and Tore Bjørgo, “RTV Trend Report 2023,” University of Oslo, 2023.

c The frame or receiver is the part of the firearm that integrates other components by providing housing for internal action components and has threaded interfaces for externally attaching components.

perpetrators or the presence of right-wing extremist material is included in this field.

- » Intended Use: The specific purpose for which the 3DPF was used or intended to be used during, based on law enforcement accounts, court filings, or statements made by the perpetrators.
- Name(s) of the Perpetrator(s):
 - » Identification: Full names of the individuals involved. In cases where names are protected or not released, relevant descriptors were used (e.g., “unidentified male/female, age XX”).
 - » Affiliations: Associations with specific RWE groups or movements, if known.
 - » Background: A background of the perpetrator(s) that might be relevant to understanding the incident, including prior criminal records, if applicable.
- Technical Information:
 - » Model/Type of Firearm(s): The specific type or model of the 3D-printed firearm. Including information about the number of 3D-printed firearms involved.
 - » Printer Model: If known, the make and model of the 3D printer utilized for creating the firearm or found in the possession of the perpetrator.
- Information on Prosecution:
 - » Detailed account of the legal proceedings following the incident, including charges filed, court dates, and outcomes.

The dataset covers incidents from January 2017 to June 1, 2024, and was compiled through daily reviews of newspaper articles in French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Dutch. It was enriched with court records, law enforcement documents, governmental reports, as well as literature from NGOs, arms watch organizations, and scholars. Wherever possible, primary sources such as manifestos, interview transcripts, and online activities of the perpetrators were examined to gain deeper insights into their motives.

Limitations

Quantitative data on any type of firearm seizures is notoriously difficult to collect or obtain for a myriad of factors: varied reporting standards, underreporting, lack of centralized datasets, and variation in police activity frameworks. Data on 3D-printed firearms is exponentially more difficult to obtain due to issues of misidentification and lack of reporting. 3D-printed firearms are not always recognized as such by those who encounter them. Unlike traditional firearms, which have specific recognizable components and markings (such as serial numbers), 3D-printed firearms often lack these identifiers. This can lead to them being mistaken for toys, replicas, or not identified as firearms at all. Additionally, even when these items are uncovered or seized, the unique and novel nature of 3D-printed firearms means they might not be systematically categorized by law enforcement or reported by the media in a manner that highlights their method of manufacture.

These limitations are particularly well highlighted in the case of Steven Carrillo. In late May and early June 2020, U.S. Air Force Sergeant Steven Carrillo, associated with the Boogaloo movement, a loosely organized American right-wing anti-government

extremist group,^f conducted two ambush-style attacks against security personnel and law enforcement officers in California.⁴⁰ The attacks resulted in the death of two and injured three others. In November 2020, Timothy Watson, a resident of West Virginia, was arrested and later convicted of selling more than 600 3D-printed drop-in auto-sears online. The criminal complaint against Watson revealed Carrillo was among his customers.⁴¹ However, neither court documents for Carrillo or Watson nor media reports specify whether Carrillo used a firearm modified with one of Watson’s 3D-printed auto-sears for his deadly attack. Therefore, while Watson is included in the dataset, Carrillo is not.

Additionally, three potential incidents involving the possession of 3DPF with the intent to commit a politically motivated attack were excluded due to the unclear nature of the ideology, and doubts remained as to whether they were motivated by right-wing extremist ideas or linked to another ideology. These are:

- 2024, United States: Two brothers, Andrew Hatziagelis and Angelo Hatziagelis, were indicted on 130 counts of criminal possession of a weapon and related charges following the discovery of an arsenal that included improvised explosive devices and privately manufactured firearms. Inside an Astoria apartment, authorities found two loaded 9mm semiautomatic 3D-printed pistols. A “hit list” targeting “cops, judges, politicians, celebrities, and banker scum” was also uncovered during a search of the residence.⁴²
- 2024, England: Jacob Graham, a 20-year-old man from Liverpool, was found guilty of preparing acts of terrorism, including the possession of documents useful for terrorism and files to create 3D-printed firearms. In a document titled “My Plan,” Graham articulated his desire to kill at least 50 people by attacking government buildings and the homes of politicians. He purchased several chemicals online and conducted experiments in his backyard before burying some of the ingredients. Police also seized a small pipe bomb and an Ender 3D printer. Graham described himself as “left-wing” but clarified that he was “more like an anarchist,” expressing his disdain for centralized control and monarchy. He supported the Green Party and advocated for environmentalism.⁴³ This led several media outlets to label him a “left-wing” terrorist, although some scholars have suggested his ideology might be more accurately described as anti-statism or possibly eco-fascism.⁴⁴
- 2024, United States: Wayne Brunner, a 27-year-old resident of Herkimer, New York, was arrested following a welfare check when police discovered weapons including three handguns with 3D-printed receivers and “materials expressing extremist views.”⁴⁵ However, police have not yet specific exact the nature of this material.

^f According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies, “The Boogaloo movement is a decentralized ideological network that believes in a coming second U.S. civil war—referred to as the ‘boogaloo’—and espouses anti-government and anti-law enforcement rhetoric. While some Boogaloo adherents promote white supremacist beliefs, others have provided security for and demonstrated alongside racial justice protesters, making the movement difficult to classify along traditional political lines.” Jared Thompson, “Examining Extremism: The Boogaloo Movement,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 30, 2021. For more on the Boogaloo movement, see Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis, “The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:2 (2021).



*A man wields a 3D-printed FGC-9 near Auburn, Alabama, on February 10, 2022.
(Collin Mayfield/Sipa USA via AP Images)*

At times, there is also a significant time lag between announcements of arrests related to 3DPF and confirmation that the underlying motivation was right-wing extremist ideas or linked to another ideology. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Artem Vasilyev, a man from Adelaide, Australia, arrested in September 2021.⁴⁶ Following a raid on his mother's house, police discovered conventional firearms and an FGC-9 manufactured by Vasilyev. At the time of his arrest, police alleged that Vasilyev intended to attack an Adelaide Hills electrical substation.⁴⁷ However, the ideological nature of the plot was not made public until his trial in May 2024, when prosecutors asserted that his intention was to advance the ideological cause of white nationalism.⁴⁸ The trial also revealed more information that led to the inclusion of Vasilyev in the dataset, namely that Vasilyev had several Telegram accounts, including one named Panzer, which he used to send 108 PDF files containing extremism material to an account named Vlad. These included handbooks on chemicals, explosives, warfare, and white ethnic societies. In addition, his phone contained a montage of images from the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre and a copy of the body camera video footage the perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant, uploaded to the internet.⁴⁹

Findings

The dataset encompassing incidents from January 2017 to June 2024 includes a total of 35 documented cases involving 3DPF linked to right-wing extremists. The majority of these incidents, totaling 22 cases, involve attempts to manufacture or acquire 3D-printed firearms, highlighting a significant engagement in the actual creation of such weapons. Additionally, there are 12 incidents categorized under the possession of 3DPF files only, indicating

cases where individuals held digital blueprints or other necessary files for producing firearms but did not proceed to manufacture before arrest.

Temporal Trends

The dataset details a concerning growth in 3DPF RWE cases. Beginning with just one incident in 2017, the count remained at one case until 2019. By 2020, the number of incidents rose to four, signaling a noticeable uptick in the adoption of 3DPF for violent purposes. The trend continued to escalate in 2021 with eight cases recorded, reflecting ongoing interest among right-wing extremists in 3DPF. In 2022, eight cases were documented showcasing the persistent appeal of this technology. The peak of this trend was observed in 2023 with 11 documented cases. Two cases have been recorded so far in 2024, as of June 1. Figure 1 provides both the annual and cumulative RWE-related incidents involving 3D-printed firearms from 2017 to 2023.

This growth appears to correspond roughly to the increase in overall cases of 3DPF seizures observed in several jurisdictions worldwide. While comprehensive data on 3DPF is extremely difficult to obtain, some publicly available data paints a concerning picture. For example, in Ontario, Canada, the number of privately made firearms submitted to the Firearms Analysis and Tracing Enforcement Program, which is part of the Criminal Intelligence Service of Ontario, increased from five in 2020, to 51 in 2021, 63 in 2022, and 213 in 2023.⁵⁰ In other jurisdictions, similar trends have been observed.⁵¹ A Canadian criminal lawyer—in a private conversation with the author of this article discussing the exponential growth reflected in the police data regarding seizures of 3DPF among criminals—speculatively likened it to Moore's Law.

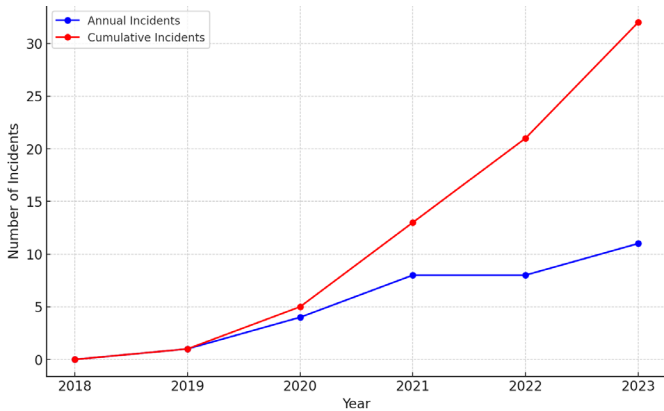


Figure 1: Annual and cumulative RWE-related incidents involving 3DPF

Moore’s Law states that the number of transistors on a microchip doubles approximately every two years, while the cost of computers is halved, thus suggesting that the prevalence of 3D-printed firearms is increasing at a similarly rapid pace, potentially doubling in prevalence over short periods of time.

Geographical Distribution

While the 3D-printed firearm community is largely located in the United States, its reach is global. In recent years, 3D-printed firearms have been confiscated by law enforcement in every part of the world.⁵² Similarly, the use of 3D-printed firearms by right-wing extremists has occurred in a multitude of countries, and sometimes involving transnational networks. Table 1 provides a breakdown of cases by country.

Table 1: Geographical breakdown of RWE-related incidents involving 3DPF

Country	Number of Incidents
United Kingdom	9
Australia	3
Germany	3
United States	3
Belgium	2
Italy	2
Netherlands	2
Brazil	1
Canada	1
Croatia	1
Finland	1
Iceland	1
Ireland	1
Lithuania	1
Romania	1
Slovakia	1
Spain	1
Sweden	1
Total	35

The United Kingdom has recorded the highest number of cases involving 3D-printed firearms used by right-wing extremists, with nine out of 35 cases (approximately 26 percent) from January 2017 to June 2024. This trend in the United Kingdom might be attributed to the ‘weapon substitution hypothesis,’ a concept from homicide and suicide studies suggesting that when access to one method is restricted, individuals may switch to alternative methods.⁵³ This pattern is particularly noted in environments with strict firearm regulations and low household firearm ownership, where an increase in non-firearm suicides has been observed.⁵⁴ Within the literature on PMF, it is widely recognized that a similar phenomenon applies, where individuals unable to acquire conventional firearms might seek privately manufactured firearms.

Using the same logic, a potentially satisfactory explanation for the high concentration of 3D-printed firearm incidents with an extremist RWE in the United Kingdom could be linked to the strict firearm control legislation in the United Kingdom. Indeed, following the 1987 Hungerford massacre and the 1996 Dunblane school massacre, the United Kingdom, despite its longstanding traditions of hunting and competitive target shooting, has implemented some of the strictest gun control legislation in the world, including a near-total ban on handguns.⁵⁵

However, a qualitative dive into the details of the nine U.K.-based cases paints a slightly more nuanced picture. Six out of the nine cases in the United Kingdom involved physical attempts to manufacture a 3D-printed firearm; the remaining cases focused solely on the possession or distribution of files related to the manufacturing of 3D-printed firearms. In the United Kingdom, the possession of such files can fall afoul of legislation on the ‘possession of material for terrorist purposes’ under section 57 of the Terrorism Act 2000,⁵⁶ which specifies that:

(1) A person commits an offence if he possesses an article in circumstances which give rise to a reasonable suspicion that his possession is for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

In fact, it appears that crown prosecutors in the United Kingdom are very willing to use (and successful in doing so) this piece of the Terrorism Act to prosecute the possession of 3D-printed firearm files in cases where there is an ideological angle present, which could partly account for the disproportionate number of U.K. cases. In a notable case among six physical attempts to produce a 3D-printed firearm, Daniel John Harris, a British man whose online videos were praised by Buffalo shooter Payton S. Gendron, was found guilty of five counts of encouraging terrorism and one count of possessing materials for terrorist purposes. His conviction came despite his failure to successfully manufacture anything resembling a firearm.⁵⁷

As will be discussed in the subsequent section, the weapon substitution hypothesis itself is not a sufficient explanation for why individuals may seek to produce 3DPF; in numerous cases, 3DPF appear to be used or planned to be used in conjunction with traditional firearms, as opposed to being an alternative to traditional firearms.

In addition to the overrepresentation of U.K. cases, the second noteworthy aspect of the worldwide distribution of cases is the existence of transnational networks uncovered during the course of disrupting RWE plots involving 3DPF. Out of the 35 cases, 11 involved clear transnational elements. This is perhaps best illustrated by a series of arrests that took place in November

2023 in relation to a transnational right-wing extremists network operating in Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, and Italy, which saw five individuals arrested and seven others interrogated for participating in terrorist-related activities online, including the dissemination of violent extremist propaganda, the active recruitment of new members, and the sharing of manuals for 3D-printed weapons.⁵⁸ According to Europol, the suspects had written their own manifestos in preparation for attacks and had access to weapons. No information is currently available as to whether these weapons were 3D-printed firearms.⁵⁹

Other transnational links in the cases surveyed ranged from planning to commit an attack using 3DPF in a foreign jurisdiction,⁶⁰ importing parts for the fabrication of 3DPF,⁶¹ fleeing to a foreign jurisdiction following an arrest related to the illegal production of 3DPF,⁶² and involvement in the production or distribution of RWE material online.⁶³ Additionally, in some cases, the arrest came as a result of information shared by a foreign police service.⁶⁴

The existence of a high number of transnational elements within the cases surveyed can be explained by two factors: first, the inherently transnational nature of right-wing extremism, which can be attributed primarily to the globalization of its ideological components and the digital era's facilitation of cross-border connections.⁶⁵ This form of extremism does not exist in isolation within any single country but is part of a broader, but still diverse, international movement that shares core beliefs. Second, the 3DPF community itself is inherently transnational. The discrepancies between legal frameworks governing 3DPF production and possession—combined with the ease of sharing knowledge online—creates particular challenges for the governance and regulation of such activities. In particular, the majority of online 3DPF communities operate lawfully in the United States, under the context of the highly permissive Second Amendment protections afforded by the U.S. Constitution. This digital community, which has assembled on Discord servers, dedicated subreddits, and different social media platforms, is largely characterized by its engagement with the broader maker culture, which values innovation, open-source sharing, and the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos. The community is primarily composed of hobbyists, technology enthusiasts (both in firearm technologies and 3D-printing technologies), and advocates for gun rights, many of whom are concerned about exercising their Second Amendment rights. Nonetheless, hobbyist communities have a long history of being tapped for technological information by nefarious actors beyond national borders.⁶⁶ For example, in 2002, a Lashkar-e-Taiba operative sought a technological solution to increase the range of a drone the group was attempting to procure by asking a series of questions on an internet forum for remote control toy enthusiasts called RCuniverse.com.⁶⁷ With regard to the 3DPF, these mostly lawful digital communities provide crucial, geographically unbounded guidance and knowledge for the manufacturing of 3DPF in jurisdictions where the manufacturing of 3DPF is unlawful.

In fact, a widely shared tenet of the 3DPF community ethos relates to the advocacy for unlimited freedom of speech (which includes the freedom to distribute files for the manufacturing of 3DPF) and the right to self-defense. From its nascent stages, Defense Distributed, founded by Cody Wilson, the designer of the Liberator, aimed to create global online communities for manufacturing firearms using additive technologies. These efforts involved crowdfunding initiatives and the creation of a digital file

“In addition to the overrepresentation of U.K. cases, the second noteworthy aspect of the worldwide distribution of cases is the existence of transnational networks uncovered during the course of disrupting RWE plots involving 3DPF. Out of the 35 cases, 11 involved clear transnational elements.”

repository called DEFCAD. Working under the motto “come and take it,” Defense Distributed, along with other designer collectives, have significantly enhanced the effectiveness of and access to 3DPF.⁶⁸ The community's commitment to the transnational spread of these files is exemplified by the popular slogan “Can't stop the signal,” which highlights the futility of attempting to regulate or criminalize the distribution or possession of files for 3DPF. This is further evidenced by the general enthusiasm displayed over the adoption of 3DPF by rebels in Myanmar.⁶⁹ That said, the use of 3DPF by right-wing extremists has been largely denounced by many of the most prominent figures within the 3DPF community.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, given the inherent digital and transnational nature of the phenomenon of 3DPF, it is unsurprising to see that right-wing extremism cases involving 3DPF often feature a transnational element.

Motives

An analysis of court filings and media reports on the 35 cases enabled the author to identify four primary motives (sometimes overlapping) for the manufacturing and/or acquisition of 3DPF by right-wing extremists: symbolic/ideological reasons; complementing stocks of conventional firearms; circumventing regulations or due to lack of available alternatives; and financial motives.

Symbolic/Ideological Motives

As rational actors, extremists and terrorist groups select specific targets and modes of attack to maximize the feasibility of a successful operation and its effectiveness in achieving their objectives.⁷¹ Nevertheless, individuals and groups may still have normative preferences.⁷² For example, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, its splinter factions, and sympathizers developed a preference for targeting El Al flights and offices outside Israel.⁷³ Similarly, al-Qa`ida developed a penchant for executing simultaneous attacks.⁷⁴ Likewise, the choice of using a particular type of firearm or weapon can also be influenced by normative preferences rather than practical ones. This is perhaps best illustrated by the preference for the Kalashnikov AKS-74U in propaganda videos by Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The AKS-74U, a variant of the AK-74 with a much shorter barrel, is less effective, reliable, and has lower muzzle energy than its counterpart. However, its popularity among jihadi leaders is tied to its unique symbolic appeal. Issued to Soviet special military units, officers, and helicopter pilots, possessing an AKS-74U legitimizes the bearer's credentials. It signifies that they

have combated the Soviets as veteran mujahideen, and it allows for the speculation that they might have achieved the significant feat of downing a Soviet helicopter and seizing this prized rifle from their defeated enemy.⁷⁵ As such, firearms can be seen as highly sophisticated and advanced cultural artifacts that are the results of a process of cultural production,⁷⁶ with an intrinsic symbolic value.⁷⁷ Within this context, Ferdinand Halberl argues that “terrorist armament culture can be seen as its own ideology, frameworks of ideas, practices and symbolism, allowing individuals to identify themselves with a certain identity.”⁷⁸

Within the context of right-wing extremism, Anders Breivik, who killed 69 people at a Workers’ Youth League summer camp on the island of Utøya in Norway, sought to mythologize his firearms by engraving his Glock pistol with the word “Mjølner,” the name of the hammer of Thor, and his Ruger rifle with the word “Gungnir,” a reference to Odin’s spear.⁷⁹ Similarly, Brenton Tarrant, who perpetrated the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shootings that resulted in the death of 51 worshippers, had inscribed the names of historical figures, personalities, or events associated with the white supremacist milieu on two of his rifles.⁸⁰ Illustrating the cultural significance of his firearms, he chose to publish photos of his arsenal on Twitter prior to the attack.⁸¹ In both cases, Breivik and Tarrant transformed their weapons itself into illocutionary devices that transcended their lethal utility.

The deliberate choice to employ a PMF instead of conventional ones for symbolic reasons is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Stephan Balliet. On October 9, 2019, Balliet attempted to forcibly enter the Jewish community center and synagogue in the eastern German town of Halle (Saale) to execute a mass shooting that was to be livestreamed online.⁸² After failing to enter the building, he shot a passerby and moved to a Turkish restaurant as a secondary target, where he shot and killed a second victim.⁸³

Before the attack, he uploaded a manifesto to Meguca,⁸⁴ a now-inactive imaging board, detailing his weaponry, which included a longsword (unused during the attack), various pipe bombs and homemade explosives, and six firearms, five of which were privately manufactured, two of which were Luty 9mm submachine guns. Many of these firearms, crafted from steel, aluminum, and wood, incorporated 3D-printed parts. Specifically, one of the Luty SMG, nicknamed ‘the Plastic Luty,’ was equipped with a 3D-printed grip, feed ramp, trigger clip, torch barrel, and magazines, purportedly compatible with another Luty made of steel. Additionally, one of his slam-fire shotguns was shown with a 3D-printed shell holder. Balliet’s description of his arsenal in his manifesto included a picture of each firearm, accompanied by a brief overview of its capabilities and limitations, as well as a breakdown of some production costs.

The second part of the manifesto featured a subsection titled “Objective” that outlined his three main goals: prove the viability of improvised weapons; increase the morale of other suppressed whites by spreading the combat footage; kill as many anti-whites as possible, Jews preferred.

Balliet’s manifesto underscores his key goal to prove the effectiveness of makeshift weapons with his attack, essentially positioning it as a proof-of-concept. He stated, “the whole deal is to show the viability of improvised guns. After all, some of you fellows don’t have the luxury of industrially-made equipment.” This motivation to use improvised weapons is further exemplified in the final part of his manifesto, which includes a section titled “Achievements” styled after those in first-person shooter video

games. Several achievements relate to killing individuals with specific improvised firearms he crafted: “This is my BOOM-STICK!” refers to killing someone with a Slam-Bang, “You only live once” to killing someone with the single-shot, and “The Eternal Anglo” to killing someone with a Luty. This last achievement particularly highlights the symbolic significance of his improvised firearms. “The Eternal Anglo” directly alludes to Philip A. Luty, the designer behind the Luty SMG.⁸⁵ Luty faced legal action twice for his activities, including a conviction under the Terrorism Act 2000, before his death in 2011. Since then, Luty has emerged as somewhat of a martyr figure within the PMF communities.⁸⁶ Thus, the reference to Luty as “The Eternal Anglo” further highlights the symbolic importance he attributed to these improvised weapons and the broader improvised weapon community.

The achievement section along with the description of these firearms also underscore the fact that Balliet was fully aware of the potential limitations of his improvised weapons. For example, one of the achievements was called “I liked that hand ...,” which would be awarded for “Accidentally frag[ging] yourself with the improvised explosives.” As such, Balliet made the conscious choice to employ improvised firearms and documented it extensively, despite having access to a conventional firearm and being worried that they might malfunction.

The nature of 3D-printing technologies means that a 3DPF can be further embedded with symbolic meaning through relatively easy cosmetic alteration. Whereas Breivik and Tarrant’s cosmetic alterations were rather simplistic—involving hand engraving and the use of a marker—3DPF files can be modified to include intricate designs, symbols, or text that are precisely and seamlessly integrated into the weapon’s structure, allowing for a higher level of customization and personalization that reflects specific ideologies, commemorates events, or honors individuals within the context of their intended use or community significance.

In July 2023, police in Finland revealed that a four-man RWE cell based in Lahti District had planned to carry out racially motivated terror attacks in the country using 3DPF. The men’s social media activities on the video-sharing platform Odysee clearly illustrate the convergence of 3DPF and right-wing extremism aesthetics. In addition to several pictures of them posing with 3DPF in front of a swastika flag, the men also distributed a picture of an FGC-9 surrounded by 9mm bullets in ammunition boxes arranged to display a swastika and spell out “Lue Siege,”⁸⁷ which translates to “Read Siege,” a reference to the anthology of essays written by James Mason.⁸⁸ The phrase “Read Siege” (and the associated hashtag #ReadSiege) has become popular among internet neo-Nazis and alt-right social media,⁸⁹ thus again demonstrating how the act of manufacturing and possessing 3DPF can be deeply intertwined with wider cultural meaning. Moreover, in one of the videos of the men testing out their firearms, a “ROCK against Communism” patch—a reference to white power rock concerts held in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and 1980s, which has since become a catch-all term for white nationalist music⁹⁰—can clearly be seen on the frame of an FGC-9.⁹¹

Another noteworthy example of this symbolic use of 3D-printing is the case of Ryan Scott Bradford, an American man arrested on charges of conspiring to distribute methamphetamine and being a felon in possession of ammunition. According to the criminal complaint, “between 2021 and January 2023, Bradford posted online messages and photographs documenting his use of a 3-D

printer to manufacture firearms, as well as calling for the mass murder of Jews.⁹² Upon a raid of his house, police recovered several firearms parts, “including two 3D printed auto sears and five ‘switches,’ both of which are used to convert semi-automatic firearms into fully-automatic firearms; two 3D printers, one of which had swastikas painted on it; various Nazi propaganda; and an apparent improvised explosive device (IED).⁹³ In this instance, the printer itself, rather than just its output, was emblematic of the individual’s commitment to extremist ideologies, demonstrating an additional layer of significance where the tools of production are also vessels of ideological expression.

Finally, the notion that individuals choose the 3DPF due to its symbolic meaning is further supported by the fact that in at least six of the 23 cases in which there was either a clear attempt to manufacture or procure 3DPF, the individuals in question were in possession of conventional firearms in addition to 3DPF. This indicates that their choice to produce or acquire 3DPF was motivated by factors beyond mere necessity. This phenomenon will be explored in the following subsection.

Complementing Stocks of Conventional Firearms

As already discussed, privately manufactured firearms have a long history of being utilized by insurgents to supplement their limited stocks of conventional weapons, rather than as a means of replacing them. Within the context of RWE plots, it appears that 3DPF can serve a similar purpose, bolstering the arsenal of conventional firearms. In six out of the 23 cases in which there was either a clear attempt to manufacture or procure 3DPF, the individuals in question were also found in possession of conventional firearms, suggesting that 3DPF serve not only as a replacement but as an augmentation to traditional firearms.

This trend is particularly underscored by the case of Noah Edwin Anthony, a 23-year-old soldier stationed at Fort Liberty (formerly Fort Bragg) in North Carolina who was arrested in March 2022 following a random vehicle inspection at an entrance gate, which led to the discovery of a handgun in the center console of his vehicle. Further searches of his barracks room and his vehicle led to the discovery of two unserialized conventional firearms; a 3DPF; white supremacist literature, T-shirts, and patches; an American flag with a swastika replacing the blue field and stars; and a document titled ‘operations’ in which Anthony detailed his goal to “physically remove as many of [black and brown people] from Hoke, Cumberland, Robeson and Scotland Counties by whatever means need be.”⁹⁴ At the time of his arrest, Anthony did not have any prohibitions stopping him from legally purchasing a firearm. Anthony served 18 months in the custody of the Bureau of Prisons before being released from custody on March 22, 2024, and began serving a 36-month term of supervised release.⁹⁵

The same phenomenon can also be observed in countries with stricter firearm regulations. As previously mentioned, in Germany, Stephan Balliet’s arsenal, while mostly composed of PMF, also included a conventionally manufactured Smith Carbine. Similarly, in September 2022, Icelandic police arrested two individuals, Sindri Snær Birgisson and Ísidór Nathansson, alleging that they were planning to murder several high-profile individuals, including the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, the chairman of the workers’ union Efling, and the Chairman of the Icelandic Socialist Party, as well as members of the police force.⁹⁶ The plot, the first of its kind in Iceland’s history, shocked the nation.

During searches in nine different locations, police seized dozens of firearms, including 3DPF, but indicated that the majority of the firearms confiscated were legally registered but in the process of being converted from semi-automatic to fully automatic.⁹⁷ The presence of 3DPF in Iceland, a country with a relatively high rate of firearm ownership due to its hunting culture,⁹⁸ further highlights the trend of individuals supplementing legally acquired firearms with 3D-printed ones.

Circumventing Regulations or Lack of Available Alternatives

In 17 cases, the individual involved demonstrated a desire to obtain or manufacture 3DPF as alternatives to conventional firearms. Two broad, interlinked factors might explain why, in these cases, 3D-printed firearms would be acquired instead of conventional firearms. The first relates to a desire to circumvent firearm regulations, and the second to the lack of access to conventional firearms.

First, an individual may opt for 3DPF because of their relative untraceability. Research on PMF in general has shown that in some cases, a preference for weapons that are harder to trace may lead some criminal users to choose a less capable PMF over a professionally manufactured alternative.⁹⁹ Modern firearm investigative techniques and tracing procedures rely on characteristics such as the presence of serial numbers or other markings, or by examining unique striations impressed into a bullet from the barrel rifling (and other tool markings), and propellant signatures, which can be harder to identify in the case of PMF.¹⁰⁰ With regard to 3DPF, new forensic techniques are being developed, including the use of organic compound specific reactivity (CSR) testing as a method to determine the thermoplastic polymer composition of a firearm using Direct Analysis in Real Time (DART) mass spectrometry.¹⁰¹ New techniques also encompass new approaches to analyzing firing pin impressions¹⁰² and, promisingly, other markings unique to 3DPF, such as deformations in the printer’s extruding nozzle or fine marks on the printer bed.¹⁰³ Despite these forensic advances, 3DPF remain attractive due to their lack of serialization, which can make them more challenging for investigators to trace.

Even in places where conventional firearms are available, individuals might choose to manufacture 3DPF to avoid attracting the attention of law enforcement. While both Breivik and Tarrant employed conventional firearms in their attacks, both expressed fears that their attempts to procure these firearms might tip off authorities.¹⁰⁴ They went to great lengths to circumvent these risks. As such, it is possible to envisage cases in which someone, despite having access to conventional firearms, chooses to acquire or manufacture a 3DPF due to the level of anonymity it affords.

Second, literature on the criminal use of privately manufactured firearms has shown that such firearms are most commonly acquired and used when commercial alternatives are not available.¹⁰⁵ For example, the prevalence of “zip guns” in the United States made from sections of automobile radio antennas used as barrels, mounted on frames from cap guns, with modified hammers acting as firing pins among juvenile delinquents in inner cities during the 1960s has largely been attributed to the challenges, often related to cost, of acquiring traditional firearms.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the draw toward PMF in the face of a paucity of conventional weapons can be seen among many terrorist groups. For example, the 3DPF (particularly FGC-9) has become an essential part of the anti-junta resistance in the Myanmar civil war due to its affordability and ease of manufacture

and as a battle standard to conduct ambush-style attacks against the military junta.¹⁰⁷

As discussed earlier, while the weapon substitution hypothesis does not fully explain why 3DPF are sought by right-wing extremists, it nonetheless provides explanatory power in several cases. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of an individual choosing 3DPF over conventional firearms, due to a lack of alternatives, can be seen in the case of Ryan Scott Bradford, the individual with the swastika-adorned 3D printer. It appears that Bradford sought to manufacture 3DPF as a result of a past 2012 conviction for burglary, “which prevented him from legally owning firearms or possessing ammunition.”¹⁰⁸

The case of Matthew Cronjager, a 17-year-old white nationalist who plotted to kill his Asian friend over claims he had had intercourse with white women, underscored an indifference he had between 3DPF and conventional firearms, provided he could obtain a firearm.¹⁰⁹ Cronjager, in communications with an undercover officer, sought to purchase either an FGC-9 or a Cheetah-9 Hybrid SMG, or alternatively, a sawn-off shotgun.¹¹⁰ This situation highlights that while there may be a normative preference for conventional firearms, individuals motivated by specific intentions are willing to opt for a 3DPF if conventional firearms are not accessible. The determination to acquire any form of firearm, irrespective of its manufacturing method, reflects a pragmatic approach among individuals constrained by legal limitations or the availability of weapons.

In 19 of the 35 cases surveyed, police or media reports have indicated that efforts to acquire or manufacture 3D-printed firearms were part of a violent plot.^g These ranged from committing acts of property damage using firearms for racial intimidation, to plotting the killing of individuals based on their sexuality or religion, to planning large-scale attacks on places of worship or government institutions and figures. Out of these 19 incidents, 3D-printed firearms appeared as the sole type of firearm envisaged by the perpetrator in 13 cases. Interestingly, instead of appearing in conjunction with conventional firearms, they most often occurred in conjunction with explosive devices, which were either part of the plot or confiscated by the police in 11 of these 19 cases.

The prevalence of cases involving the FGC-9, or its variants, in the dataset also lends credence to the argument that 3D-printed firearms are often favored by right-wing extremists as a means to circumvent firearm regulations or due to a lack of available alternatives. In at least 15 out of 23 cases where there was a clear attempt to manufacture or procure a 3DPF, the firearm in question was an FGC-9. The FGC-9’s popularity among RWE—and also among lawful 3DPF enthusiasts—can be attributed to its simplicity, relative effectiveness, and ease of production. According to a prominent American 3DPF designer known as Ivan the Troll, who extensively collaborated with Jacob Duygu to upgrade the design of the FGC-9 into the FGC-9 Mark II,^h the FGC-9 is the “easiest, cheapest, most accessible, and reliable semi-automatic DIY

firearm.”¹¹¹ As such, those intending to use 3DPF to commit acts of political violence have seized upon this model, despite the myriad of other 3DPF designs available, because it essentially is held to offer a near perfect blend of these attributes. This explains why more complicated designs, sometimes involving high rates of fire or chambered in large calibers (such as the Amigo Grande CETME 308 or the Plastikov), have not been featured in any of the cases surveyed.

However, recent developments within the 3DPF community are concerning, as they seem to focus on further lowering the barriers to entry for producing 3DPF. Noteworthy developments include the ‘Nutty 9,’ an improved bolt design for the FGC-9 consisting of nothing more than four nuts and two bolts screwed into a printed connector piece, and the development of the Urubu—a soon-to-be-released hybrid pistol-caliber carbine—that is said to be significantly easier to build than the FGC-9.

Financial Motives

Finally, in five cases surveyed, financial gain appeared to have been an important motivation for the fabrication of 3DPF or 3DPF accessories. Most of the literature on criminal firearm marketplaces and the sale of firearms (conventional or otherwise) related to terrorism has largely focused on terrorists acquiring firearms from criminals, rather than extremists selling firearms. In fact, in their survey of illicit firearm trade in Europe, Nils Duquet and Kevin Grois noted that while “traditional separatist groups have developed their own distinct (and context-specific) firearms acquisition patterns, religiously inspired terrorist networks across the EU generally rely on criminal connections to obtain firearms from local illicit markets.”¹¹² Nonetheless, in some instances, terrorists have used their own connections to acquire firearms from like-minded individuals. For example, the El Bakraoui brothers—two of the perpetrators of the Brussels attacks on March 22, 2016, that killed 32 people—are believed to have played a key role in supplying firearms to the perpetrators of several terrorist incidents, including the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks.¹¹³ In Belgium, police investigations into the right-wing group Bloed, Bodem, Eer en Trouw, a Belgian splinter group of the international right-wing extremist group Blood & Honor, suggested that some members, including the leader of the group, were supplying firearms to members of the Dutch right-wing extremist group as a means of funding their terror activities.¹¹⁴ Investigators also believed that one of the two vz.58 assault rifles used by Amédée Coulibaly during his lethal attack on the Hypercacher supermarket in Paris, which occurred just hours after the attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in January 2015, was imported from Slovakia and reactivatedⁱ by a known militant right-wing extremist with French nationality living in Comines, Belgium, prior to being used in the attack.¹¹⁵

The making of 3DPF or 3DPF accessories can serve as a lucrative endeavor to both criminal and terrorist actors. The price of a 3DPF on the black market can vary based on a myriad of factors, including the type of firearm, its quality of production, the scarcity of conventional alternatives, and the geographical location. For example, the price of an FGC-9 in several locations appears to range between \$1,500 USD and \$3,000 USD, with a production

g In most cases, the individuals were found guilty of lesser offenses because prosecuting someone for terrorism before an attack occurs is challenging. Authorities often rely on related offenses such as conspiracy or possession of illegal materials to intervene preemptively.

h These enhancements include improvements to the electro-chemical machining process to rifle the barrel (ECMv2.0 process) and the Common Sense Fire Control Group AR-15 printable trigger.

i Reactivating a firearm refers to the process of restoring a firearm to working condition after it has been rendered inoperable or deactivated.

cost anywhere between \$150 to \$500 USD. Similarly, Drop-In Auto Sears and Glock Switches (which enable users to modify a firearm to enable automatic fire) can cost less than \$2 USD in filament and be printed in less than 10 minutes using a low-grade consumer printer. These items are often sold online in the United States for approximately \$20 USD.¹¹⁶

Drop-In Auto Sears were at the center of the first case involving an individual with apparent right-wing extremist inclinations manufacturing and selling 3D-printed firearm accessories for profit. According to an October 2020 criminal complaint, Timothy Watson, a resident of Ranson, West Virginia, sold over 600 3D-printed Drop-In Auto Sears disguised as wall hooks for keys or coats on his website.¹¹⁷ The devices featured a superfluous base meant to be discarded, while the remaining part could be inserted into an AR-15 to prevent the trigger from locking in preparation for the next round, instead allowing the hammer to cycle back and fire automatically, effectively converting a semi-automatic weapon into a fully automatic one.¹¹⁸ Notably, Watson advertised his wares on his website through Facebook groups associated with the Boogaloo movement.¹¹⁹ Prosecutors also discovered cryptic comments made by apparent sympathizers of the movement on Watson's social media accounts. One message exchanged between Watson's wall hanger Instagram account and a user mentioned "dead 'redcoats,' an anti-government reference."¹²⁰ As part of a plea deal, Watson received a five-year prison sentence in 2021.¹²¹

In September 2020, in Spain, a 55-year-old, known only by his initials 'J.M.,' was arrested for operating a 3D-printing gun workshop. Police uncovered 19 3D-printed pistol frames, multiple melee weapons, explosive precursors, and over 30 manuals on subjects such as homemade explosives and firearm manufacturing through 3D-printing.¹²² The operation was initiated when investigators discovered an individual attempting to sell 3D-printed firearms and explosives over the internet, leading to the seizure of two 3D printers, numerous handgun frames, magazines, various weapon parts, a carbine with a scope, knives, a machete, and a katana.¹²³

The same year in Germany, Joachim Thome, a founder of the criminal group "Paladin," which produced weapon parts and organized training sessions aimed at taking armed action against pandemic measures in Germany, was apprehended for using 3D printers to manufacture firearms and firearm parts after he attempted to sell an FGC-9 firearm to an undercover police officer.¹²⁴ Following his arrest, Thome relocated to Portugal in the summer of 2023. A European arrest warrant was later issued against him. He received a sentence of one year and 10 months in January 2022 for violations of the weapons law but was released from custody after serving six months.¹²⁵ Thome subsequently fled to Portugal, where he was again arrested at the end of November 2023 and extradited to Germany.¹²⁶ As of June 2024, he remains in custody, awaiting trial.

Sometimes, financial motives intersect with ideological considerations. In the United States, Ryan Scott Bradford, the man with the swastika-decorated 3D printer, is believed to have also attempted to sell 3D-printed firearms and firearm parts to other like-minded individuals on Telegram.¹²⁷

More recently, in January 2024, a 26-year-old Frenchman, leading a network known for manufacturing and selling 3D-printed firearms, was apprehended in Belgium. The police reported that the individual possessed a libertarian ideology, aligning with the

American pro-gun movement.¹²⁸ His group's aim was to distribute firearms widely to arm the populace against what it considered a totalitarian and oppressive state.¹²⁹ Upon his arrest, authorities confiscated eight 3D printers, seven fully 3D-printed weapons, and more than 500 3D-printed weapon parts, 11 conventional handguns of various calibers, 13 long guns, over 1,000 rounds of ammunition of various caliber, and 3,046 euros in cash.¹³⁰ This case also led to the arrest of six other individuals in France and Belgium, with some placed under judicial supervision and one in temporary detention.¹³¹

These cases suggest that the production and sale of 3D-printed firearms and their components can be a profitable enterprise for extremists seeking to finance their activities. The cost-effectiveness of producing these items, combined with their high potential resale value on the black market, presents a lucrative opportunity for those with nefarious intentions.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the evolution of 3D-printed firearms has been profound and rapid, marking significant strides in both technology and accessibility. This period has witnessed not only improvements in the reliability and effectiveness of these firearms but also a substantial decrease in the cost and complexity of producing them. While most designers, publishers, manufacturers, and end users of 3D-printed firearms do so either within the confines of the law or without violent intent, the democratization of 3D-printed firearms nonetheless raises real and empirically grounded critical concerns about the intersection of additive manufacturing technology and political violence.

The geographical and temporal analysis within the study underscores a troubling increase in the incidents involving 3DPF across multiple regions, indicating a spread beyond isolated communities into more mainstream adoption among right-wing extremist factions. This spread is facilitated by the transnational nature of digital platforms where blueprints and manufacturing techniques are exchanged, creating a decentralized network of firearm production that transcends national borders.

Moreover, this study clearly illustrates that the utilization of 3DPF by right-wing extremists is not merely an issue of weapon possession but deeply intertwined with the symbolic and ideological underpinnings of these groups. These weapons provide a means to circumvent traditional legal and logistical barriers to firearm access, aligning with broader anti-government and libertarian sentiments prevalent within right-wing extremist ideologies. The adaptability of 3DPF technology allows these groups to enhance their operational secrecy and reduce their dependency on conventional arms markets, which are more susceptible to law enforcement scrutiny.

Given these developments, the study highlights the critical need for continuous monitoring and documentation of 3DPF-related incidents. Enhanced forensic techniques, more robust data collection methods, and international cooperation are paramount in developing effective strategies to address the challenges posed by 3DPF. Law enforcement agencies must adapt to these technological advancements to preemptively counter the threats posed by these increasingly accessible weapons. As 3D-printed firearms continue to evolve and become more embedded in criminal and extremist activities, it is imperative that stakeholders from law enforcement, legislative bodies, and the international community collaborate

to mitigate the risks associated with this technology. The insights provided by this study serve as a foundation for ongoing research and policy development, aiming to keep pace with the rapid

advancements in 3DPF and their implications for global security.
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