

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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