TO: Interested Parties  
FROM: Aki Peritz  
RE: Confronting the Terror Threat at the Olympics

The December 2013 double suicide bombings in Volgograd, Russia underscore the serious terrorist threat to the Winter Olympic Games at Sochi. After all, this is probably the first time a nation is not only hosting the Olympics, but also fighting an active domestic terrorist organization that has expressed interest in striking the Games.

But Russia—and to an extent, the U.S.—is trying to confront this threat. Here’s what you need to know about the terrorist challenge to the Sochi Olympics in February.

**Russia’s major terrorist group really wants to strike the Olympics.**

The group that poses the largest threat to the Olympics is a Caucasus-based, al-Qaeda-linked jihadist group, The Caucasus Emirate (CE). Founded in 2007, CE’s stated goal is to found an Islamic state in the North Caucasus by forcing Russia to withdraw from the region, and the organization has employed suicide attacks and other terrorist means to try to achieve this objective.

As of January 8, 2014
Notably, CE believes its emirate’s boundaries extend into the Russian administrative unit (Krasnodar Krai) where the Olympics will be held. Russia has been trying for years to crush this group, with varying degrees of success.

In addition to the December 2013 suicide attacks in Volgograd, CE has committed spectacular strikes in Moscow and elsewhere over the past several years, including:

- A November 2009 attack on a Moscow-to-St. Petersburg train, killing 27;²
- A March 2010 attack by two female suicide bombers on Moscow’s metro system at rush hour, killing 40;
- A January 2011 suicide bombing inside the arrival hall of Moscow’s busiest airport, Domodedovo, killing 38.³

CE’s founder and leader, Doku Umarov, stated in a July 2013 video that he intends to target the Olympics.⁴ Among other threats, he called for his followers to “use maximum force on the path of Allah to disrupt this Satanic dancing on the bones of our ancestors.” [emphasis added]

- Troublingly, the Federal Security Service (FSB, one of the KGB’s successor intelligence services) announced in late 2012 it discovered ten large caches of weapons that it claimed a CE cell wanted to use to assault Sochi, including surface-to-air missiles, mortars, anti-tank missiles, hundreds of grenades, 15 kg of TNT, and various other weapons.⁵
- The State Department labeled the CE a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 2011 and is offering a $5 million bounty for information leading to Umarov’s arrest.⁶

On a positive note, CE—estimated to have 1,000-1,500 members—has yet to hit Krasnodar Krai, preferring to strike in areas farther east, as well as populated urban centers like Volgograd and Moscow.⁷

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**History of Olympic Terrorism**

There have been surprisingly few acts of terrorism at the Games.

- The most infamous attack occurred at the 1972 Munich Summer Games, when the Palestinian group Black September murdered 11 Israeli athletes and a German police officer. This famously sparked a subsequent Israeli effort codenamed *Wrath of God* to hunt down the remaining perpetrators.⁸
- The 1996 Atlanta Summer Games were marred when anti-abortion activist Eric Rudolph detonated three pipe bombs in Centennial Olympic Park, killing two.⁹
**What is Russia doing to protect the Games?**

Since 2010, the FSB has served as the Games’ chief security provider and has devoted considerable resources to making sure terrorists do not compromise the Sochi Olympics.

- Russia will have 40,000 police and military forces in Sochi and its environs. Sochi also has an exclusionary security zone that extends about 100 km along the Black Sea coastline and 40 km into the mountains to the east.
- Russia’s forces will be aggressively monitoring and tracking communications during the Olympic Games since Russia’s security services will have access to almost all electronic data through its advanced surveillance system called “Sorm.”
- Cars are banned from the security zone during the Olympics, and vehicles won’t be allowed to return until a month after the Games are over.

Despite the relative isolation of Sochi and the extensive, pervasive surveillance efforts of the Russian state, the area is not 100% secure. Sochi is a city of some 350,000 people, and so 24-hour monitoring of all of its citizens—even those suspected of terrorist or criminal behavior—is probably not feasible. It also remains unclear what kind of security protocols are in place to vet the tens of thousands of foreigners entering the secure zone, using transportation within the zone, or traveling to or from the zone itself.

Also, as the Volgograd bombings indicate, terrorist groups like CE might also strike areas in Russia that have a reduced security footprint, since most national-level intelligence resources will be deployed at Sochi.

**The U.S. is actively (if quietly) engaged in protecting our people.**

As has been the case with other Olympics, the U.S. will defer to the host nation to protect the 250 American athletes at Sochi, as well as thousands of U.S. officials, business people, and fans. For example, diplomatic security officials at the Games probably won’t even carry firearms because of security requirements. Nevertheless, the U.S. has asserted publicly that it will assist Russia with support if Moscow requests it.

- The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center’s Director met with his Russian counterparts in November 2013 to discuss Sochi security. He said the U.S. was “coordinating and integrating the intelligence community's support...to the Winter Olympics in Sochi.”
- The State Department and the FBI will have personnel on the ground at Sochi.

Broadly, the U.S. has had much experience in working with other countries to keep the Olympics secure, especially after 9/11. The U.S. has also worked with countries with hostile intelligence services to ensure the safety of the Games; for example, the FBI sent security and military equipment to China for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and we provided the Chinese with what a State Department spokesman termed “major-event security best practices.”
Conclusion

The risk that terrorists will strike Sochi is much greater than it has been for previous Olympics. After all, the Caucasus Emirate’s base of operations is less than 200 miles away, and whether it or other terror groups attempt to hijack the Games remains to be seen. As such, Russia has been taking extraordinary measures to protect the Games, including cutting off an entire region from the regular flow of traffic and commerce. And the United States is playing a supporting role to protect our athletes and fans.

This may not be the most satisfactory answer to Americans concerned about the Games’ safety. America will nevertheless do its part to keep these Olympics as safe as possible.

Endnotes

1 Full interactive map created by Ben Freeman, Ph. D and Aki Peritz, Third Way, January 3, 2014. Available at: http://batchgeo.com/map/71995b8639e8f2467379fb19deafa3e9.
counterintelligence chief Oleg Syromolotov has been heading security for Sochi, suggesting that the Games could be an effort to debut new monitoring systems for foreign intelligence collection purposes.

13 Isachenkov, “Suicide bomber kills 15 in Russia’s south.”


16 Ibid.


