

Sochi Winter Olympics Highlight Jihadi Threat

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The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics are only two days away, and one of the biggest concerns still seems to be security — a concern that is more than justified in the wake of December's Volgograd bombings.

The West has not hesitated to point out the dangers of the Games. Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security Michael McCaul called the security threat to the Sochi Olympics "the greatest he had ever seen."

David Satter, former Moscow correspondent and fellow at the Hudson Institute and Johns Hopkins University, described Sochi as a "war zone" and a potential catastrophe, accusing the Russian authorities of being unable to prevent the Volgograd attacks in late December.

U.S. President Barack Obama, on the other hand, has expressed support for Russian security, disagreeing with several U.S. congressmen who cautioned families against attending the Games. According to Obama, such big events always carry potential risks, and Russian

authorities fully understand the situation.

The 2014 Olympics are an extremely important event for Russia, the greatest since the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow. With that in mind, it is not surprising that at President Vladimir Putin's behest, the government has spent more than \$50 billion on the staging of the Games. With that kind of price tag, failure simply cannot be permitted.

But if for Putin it is a chance to prove that Russia is once again a global leader with full organizational capabilities, for the jihadi of the Caucasus Emirate it is a major opportunity not only to disrupt Russia's interests but, most important, to exploit the event in order to make their voice heard, with potential terror attacks that could seize the attention of the world.

As Friday's opening day approaches, it may be helpful to examine some of the main events that occurred in the last six months to better understand the full picture.

In July, the leader of the Caucasus Emirate, Doku Umarov, threatened the event in a video message where he appeared to instruct his followers on how to disrupt the Sochi Games with maximum force, calling them "satanic dances on the bones of our ancestors."

Umarov has previously claimed responsibility for numerous attacks, including the 2010 Moscow Metro bombings and the 2011 Domodedovo International Airport bombing.

Following that video, Volgograd became a primary target. On Oct. 22, Naida Asiyalova blew herself up inside a Volgograd bus frequently used by university students, killing seven passengers and injuring more than 30.

On Dec. 29, a suicide bomber detonated himself near the Volgograd train station metal detector, and the next day another bomb targeted a trolleybus connecting a suburb to Volgograd's downtown area as it was passing near one of the city's outdoor markets. In those two attacks, 34 people were killed and more than 80 wounded.

Since the beginning of 2014, additional terror attacks took place in various areas of Dagestan and the Stavropol region, targeting police officers, security officials and civilians.

An extremely disturbing strategy is being used by jihadi in the North Caucasus. Innocent civilians are murdered and explosive devices are hidden nearby so that when investigators arrive the bombs are detonated. This is what happened on Jan. 17 in Makhachkala, Dagestan, when attackers hit the second floor of a restaurant with a grenade. When police and ambulances reached the scene, a bomb hidden inside a car parked near the restaurant was detonated.

Russian security forces responded immediately and firmly, arresting and killing several well-known gunmen linked to local jihadi militias, such as Marat Idrisov, Eldar Magatov and Makhmud Aliyev.

In the meantime, however, new threats emerged as Russian authorities reportedly released the profiles of four wanted women who were potential suicide bombers, claiming that one of them, Rozanna Ibragimova, may have managed to slip past the Sochi security perimeter.

On Jan. 25, authorities denied that Rozanna Ibragimova was in Sochi, claiming that there was

no reason to believe she was preparing an attack in the Olympic city.

That same week, a new video with more threats appeared on a Dagestani jihadi website. Two individuals, presumably linked to a previously unknown group in the North Caucasus, Ansar Sunnah, appeared in front of the camera claiming to have a "present" for Russia and for tourists. The two also filmed explosive devices being prepared and strapped to their bodies.

The video has raised many questions among analysts regarding its credibility. The two men do not seem very confident about what they say in the video; they are dressed in street clothes and without the usual trappings of jihadi seen in previous videos linked to Islamist militants in the North Caucasus. No camouflage clothing, no long beards.

In addition, there were no flags belonging to the Caucasus Emirate. Instead, there was a black banner with a religious verse typically associated with al-Qaida-linked extremists, particularly with the Islamic State of Iraq.

If the overall security situation seems confusing, with contradicting reports and factors, it might be helpful to highlight a few main points that are relevant for further and deeper analysis.

First, it should be noted that the three recent major terror attacks that hit Russia occurred outside the Sochi area and they all targeted mass transportation facilities. Protecting visitors en route to the Games is a mounting concern, as transportation seems to have become a primary target for terrorists. This probably stems from the fact that the area inside the Sochi perimeter is nearly impossible to penetrate because of the heavy security measures adopted by authorities. This alert level around the Olympic city could deflect the threats to other Russian cities.

Second, it is also important to consider the strategy of detonating explosive devices as security forces arrive in response to the first attack, a strategy previously seen in Israel that seems to have become popular among North Caucasus insurgents as well.

An additional element that has alarmed the authorities is the use of ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam — a demographic group which is much harder to detect.

In the last two decades, the situation of jihadi groups in the North Caucasus has changed for the worse, not only due to the heavy crackdown conducted by Russian security but also as a result of political and organizational changes within their own structures. It is very unlikely that they will be able to repeat such dramatic and bloody attacks as those perpetrated by the Chechen jihadi at the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002 or the Beslan school siege in 2004. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that new strategies have been implemented, and they reflect the terrorists' current capabilities as well as their ability to adapt. Their capabilities might be limited compared to those seen in the early 2000s, but they still represent a major threat to security.

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