

As the Winter Olympics begin in Sochi, **John Chisholm** examines the terrorist groups whose plots threaten to overshadow the Games, and warns of potential security gaps elsewhere in Russia

# LOCKDOWN: SOCHI

When considering counter terrorism issues and Russia two things immediately spring to mind: the Caucasus and incidents that leave large numbers of people dead. No wonder the prospect of the Winter Olympics in Sochi is getting people increasingly nervous. Events like Sochi offer terrorist groups a triple win: they bring international publicity, embarrass the host government and increase the feeling of threat in wider society. Groups in the Caucasus know this and are already working towards successful terrorist activities.

Russia has a long history of terrorist attacks, and the most recent, in Volgograd in December is a good example. Eighteen people were killed and 14 injured in a suicide bomb attack on the train station in one of the major cities in southern Russia. Initially thought to have been carried out by a female – a so-called “Black Widow” – it turned out that the perpetrator was an ethnic Russian who had converted to Islam. The bomb contained about ten kilograms of TNT and was detonated at the entrance of the station close to the metal detectors.

This was followed by a second attack a day later. Here a male suicide bomber detonated his device on a trolleybus, killing 16 people and injuring 41. He remains unidentified, although remains have been sent for genetic testing. In 24 hours Volgograd has lost 34 innocent citizens and scores were in hospital. Not a good advert for Russian security, particularly in advance of Sochi.

Responsibility for both Volgograd attacks was claimed by Vilayet Dagestan, a satellite of the wider Caucasus Emirate group. A video on their website put out on 19 January showed two men strapping on explosives and readying themselves for a suicide attack. Vilayet Dagestan has a fairly simple political goal: to create an independent and Islamic Dagestan under the overall umbrella of an Islamic Emirate covering the whole Caucasus region. Originally known as Shariat Jamaat, it changed its name in 2008 as part of a change in leadership. Although Western media have focussed on Chechenya, the scene of a bitter war and continued instability, Dagestan is also slipping into uncertainty. Islamic groups there have been responsible for the deaths of police, government officials and pro-government Muslim clerics. Anyone who has even the most tenuous link to Moscow is considered a

potential target. In 2009 alone, 58 police officers were killed. More high profile casualties have included two Russian generals. The group's most dramatic attack before Volgograd was in 2010 with an attack on the Moscow Metro that killed 40 people and hospitalised many more.

And they are not alone. Civil war rages in Ingushetia, and has produced Ingush Jamaat, although this group seems to have confined itself so far to attacks in Ingushetia and Ossetia. The United Vilayat of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay is still in existence, despite a successful operation by the Russians in 2011 that effectively wiped out its leadership. It still conducts low-level insurgent attacks. There are also several smaller independent groups operating directly under the umbrella organisation of the Caucasus Emirate. The Emirate is clearly committed to terrorism, and is led by one of the foremost practitioners of the art: Dokka Umarov who styles himself Emir. Yet this is not an Islamic dictatorship, as some important aspects of Umarov's orders have been flouted.

Umarov only ever claims to be “at war” with Russia. So the Chechens who were identified as the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 were disowned in a statement by the Vilayet of Dagestan who said, “The Command of the Province of Dagestan indicates in this regard that the Caucasian Mujahideen are not fighting against the United States of America. We are at war with Russia, which is not only responsible for the occupation of the Caucasus, but also for heinous crimes against Muslims. Also, remember that even in respect to the enemy state of Russia, which is fighting the Caucasus Emirate, there is an order by the Emir Dokku Umarov, which prohibits strikes on civilian targets”. Not long after this statement was made, however, Umarov rescinded his previous declaration not to attack civilians by video message in July 2013.

So what about only being “at war with Russia”? Well, clearly this also extends to Nato. In December 2010, Austrian security forces arrested a Chechen who had been planning an attack on Nato facilities in Belgium. Syria is also in the crosshairs. Many experienced fighters left the Caucasus to fight for fundamentalist groups against Assad, much to Umarov's dismay, as he did not want to see experienced fighters leave the region. But



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figures from the Caucasus have taken increasingly prominent roles in pro-Jihadist groups in Syria where the opportunities for fighting, and winning, appear far more attractive.

Uvarov's announcement that civilians were now potential targets in July 2013 was surely linked to another video message, released the same month, where he called for terrorist activity at the Sochi Winter Olympics. Of course any terrorist group has had plenty of time to prepare the ground. Over a hundred thousand construction workers and ancillary staff have worked on the Sochi site from all over Russia and beyond. It seems unlikely that security checks could have been conducted effectively on all of them. Given the amount of time involved, cells were undoubtedly sent to embed themselves, and it is likely that potential attackers were encouraged to apply for jobs on the Sochi staff. That the Russian government chose Sochi itself as the location for the Games looks outwardly bizarre given its close proximity to the troubled Caucasus region. As one commentator has noted, by taking this decision Putin seems to be daring the Islamic

terrorists to try something.

This may be supreme overconfidence or a finely balanced judgement. On the ground the Russian security services do not seem to share their leader's insouciance. Western security services would have normally expected intimate involvement in an international event such as Sochi. But this does not seem to be happening. Instead, there are claims that the Russians are keeping overseas agencies at arms length, allegedly because they do not want them to find gaps in security or discover how nervous the Russians really are about potential attacks. For example, Moscow has declined an offer from Washington to provide surveillance equipment.

Profiling may be of little help. The fact that one of the bombers from the Volgograd incident (it may have been both) was an ethnic Russian means that simply pulling in anyone who "looks like they are from the Caucasus" simply will not wash. Besides, Vilayet Dagestan has a history of using female suicide bombers. These are not Islamic women dressed head to toe in black and strapped with explosives; again, Vilayet



*Park protection:  
security officials patrol  
the Olympic park in  
Sochi*

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Dagestan is more subtle. Generally they target widows of soldiers, ideally blonde, blue eyed and the epitome of a Russian woman, in order to successfully bypass security wherever possible.

The Russians have promised a “ring of steel” perimeter around Sochi. The secure zone, which is 60 miles long and 25 miles wide, will mean near-total surveillance of residents, visitors and athletes. Drones will be deployed in the skies, speedboats will patrol the coast and sonar will reportedly be used to detect submarines. It remains to be seen how effective this would be against terrorists who are already embedded in the Olympic structure. The Mayor of Sochi may claim there are no homosexuals in Sochi; he would be very rash, and probably equally mistaken, to claim there are no potential terrorists.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of security personnel, mainly police officers reinforced with Cossack units, have already arrived in the city. Security is particularly noticeable when entering Sochi: trains going into the city are tightly monitored, their passengers scanned and examined, and the roads are blocked to private vehicles unless they belong to Sochi residents. Entrance to the three Olympic villages is permitted only to visitors who have been vetted in advance and hold “Olympic passports”. Shopping centres and hotels have also stepped up security.

All this has contributed to a heightened level of concern, rather than been seen as comforting. “The security threat to the Olympics, this particular

Olympics, is the greatest I have ever seen,” said Michael McCaul, chairman of the US House Homeland Security Committee. At the other extreme, individual athletes are warning their relatives to stay away, worried about their security at Sochi. Some analysts are saying “it is not ‘if’ but ‘when’ in regards to Sochi”.

There is another consideration as well: displacement. All this security has to come from somewhere, Russia, after all, has finite resources and the security operation could denude other areas of the country and focus all attention on Sochi. Islamic militants could therefore take the opportunity to undertake more Volgograd type attacks elsewhere, such as Stavropol or Rostov-on-Don, while Moscow has put all its eggs in the Sochi basket.

Meanwhile the teams are taking what precautions they can, and can afford. The US ski and snowboard team has hired a private security firm to have as many as five aircraft on standby in case team members need to evacuate Sochi quickly, while the US State department has issued a blanket travel warning to anyone intending to attend the games, a sure sign of nervousness.

Hopefully the Games will all go off with no terrorist incident, and nothing will happen elsewhere in the country. But some people, particularly anyone with a security background, will be watching their screens with heightened nervousness. This is an opportunity that any terrorist group would be loathe to miss, and it would be no surprise if they made every attempt to successfully prosecute an attack. After all, they only have to get lucky once.

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**Getting frisky: tens of thousands of security personnel have been drafted in to secure the Olympic sites**

