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Extinguishing the Torch of Terror: The Threat of Terrorism and the 2010 Olympics

By Serge E. Vidalis, CD, MA

"It cannot be insisted upon too strongly that in a small war the only possible attitude to assume is, speaking strategically, the offensive."

Colonel C.E. Callwell, 1906¹

Introduction

With the change in seasons comes the expected change of insurgency operations in Afghanistan as Taliban and al-Qaida fighters mount their spring and summer offensives against both NATO forces and Afghanis sympathetic to foreign troops. As insurgents curtail their seasonal operations with the arrival of fall and winter, is it likely that a threat may arise from Afghanistan to affect the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia? As will be illustrated herein, the threat to the games will not be borne directly from the insurgency in Afghanistan but rather by the universal jihadist ideology of al-Qaida rather than the nationalist beliefs of their fellow fighters, the Taliban. This article aims to call attention to the plausible threat to the 2010 Olympics posed by al-Qaida's far-reaching terrorist network while also offering a focused threat analysis based on the network's preferred tactics. Essentially, the power of al-Qaida lies in their network: the threat to the Olympic Games stems from proxy extremist and terrorist groups linked directly and indirectly to al-Qaida.

Nationalist vs. Universalist Terrorism

In his article "Freedom Fighters and Zealots: Al-Qaida in Historical Perspective," Christopher J. Fettweis presents the typologies of terrorism as consisting of two camps, nationalist and ideological terrorists. Clearly, the Taliban fall into the nationalist camp as "their goals are territorial, usually as part of an attempt to carve out a homeland from an existing state or territory; their goals, therefore, have limited, rather than universal, application" and "target the interests of the perceived occupier of their territory."² In contrast, ideological terrorists aim to "agitate on behalf of an idea, not a people; they have no specific territorial aims; their goals have

no natural restrictions; and, as a result, their targets can be drawn from the universe of non-members, or non-believers in the cause."³ It is the latter of the two terror groups that pose a threat to the security and safety of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. To better appreciate the potential threat to these games, a review of terrorist incidents from previous Olympic Games may prove valuable.

Previous Terrorist Incidents and the Olympic Games

Since the start of the modern Olympics, there have been only two terrorist events. The most infamous of these was the massacre of eleven Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics at the hands of Black September, a radical offshoot of the Fatah party, the militant faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), then under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. The birth of Black September came about by the expulsion and deaths of thousands of militant Palestinians residing in Jordan who fought for the return of their homeland. The purpose of Black September was "to let the world know of its people's plight and pursue a penchant for the destruction of Israel and Western interests" as retribution for their displacement. According to John K. Cooley's book, *Green March Black September: The Story of the Palestinian Arabs*, published in 1973, the organization was composed of numerous cells of militant followers, leaderless and dispersed throughout various regions of Europe and the world living very ordinary lives yet participating in terrorist activities as opportunity afforded. Their actions during the 1972 Munich Olympics had two purposes: to express to the world that the Palestinian people had been abandoned and to strike at their archenemy, Israel.

From Munich two lessons were learned; the first confirmed the difficulties of counterterrorism operations to detect sympathizers and resistance fighters who may reside in foreign countries and are committed to pursuing the organization's cause even though they are "decentralized" or effectively "leaderless." The second was that nationalist terrorist groups are prone to attacking persons or interests representative of their fight. In this case, the victims were innocent Israeli athletes.

Twenty-four years later during the Atlanta Summer Olympics of 1996, the international community again witnessed an act of terror, an act of domestic terrorism founded on the ideological beliefs of one man, Eric Robert Rudolph. Rudolph, a former U.S. Army soldier, was eventually convicted for the death of one person at the Centennial Olympic Park by the detonation of an improvised explosive device (IED) and for three other separate bombings in the Atlanta region. In a statement made by Rudolph

in 2005, he charged that the government of the United States was implicit in the deaths of infants by the legalization of abortion, and that the use of force to stop these killings was justified. Also an affront to his beliefs was his perception of the government's legitimization of homosexuality, which he felt weakened the moral fiber of American society.⁴ The Atlanta Olympic bombing, in contrast to the Munich attack, demonstrated that ideologically motivated terrorists have "no boundaries and no end except the annihilation of"⁵ competing ideas. Such terrorists believe that their actions are an "awakening of the masses through violent example," and hope that they "will inspire a broad movement against their ideological enemy."⁶

No different than in previous years, the 2010 Olympics present a target-rich environment for terrorist groups, mainly because the games symbolize unity in the international community. In addition, many of participants in the games—including the host-nation Canada—are supporting counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. The global radical jihadist ideology embraced by al-Qaida and its international supporters presents a unique challenge to domestic Canadian security forces; they must be prepared for an enemy that is experienced and battle-proven.

Ideological Perspective of al-Qaida

Understanding the ideological beliefs of al-Qaida is essential in understanding the threat that they may pose to the 2010 Olympics. Al-Qaida's ideological dispensation can be traced to the late 1970s when its founder Usama bin Ladin became the "unofficial" ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort to aid Afghanistan in its fight against the Soviets. A devoted supporter of the mujahideen, ibn Ladin aided many fighters and commanders in their efforts with the jihad. The Afghan jihad continued growing under the guidance of Abdullah Azzam with "an international network of overseas branches linked by mobile telephones, personal computers and lap-tops" where "in excess of 25,000 foreign jihadis are said to have passed . . . to the Mujahedeen."⁷

At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, ibn Ladin offered his services to defend Saudi Arabia by offering his "global network of ex-Afghanistan jihadists, beginning with several thousand Wahhabi veterans now back in Saudi."⁸ Ibn Ladin's overture of support was refused by the Saudi leadership, and ibn Ladin eventually fled the Kingdom to consolidate al-Qaida in Sudan and later Afghanistan.

In 1996 ibn Ladin offered his support to the Taliban in return for protection in Afghanistan where he would renew his efforts of establishing terror-training camps for future operations. By 1997, ibn Ladin had issued his first *fatwa*, declaring it the "duty of all Muslims to 'kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military . . . in any country in which it was possible.'"⁹ The *fatwa* was followed by the bombings of the U.S. Embassy in East Africa and the USS Cole, instantly creating the persona among young Muslim men in the *umma* that he was the vanguard of "Resistance to Western Imperialism." These acts of terror would propel ibn Ladin to the center stage of radical Muslims and Western intelligence agencies alike.

Current Threat Environment: Decentralized Terrorism and 'Lone Wolves'

Fast-forward to 2009: the once mighty and entrenched Taliban and al-Qaida terrorists in Afghanistan have been on the run for eight years. They have largely sought refuge in familiar territory over the Afghan border in the northern tribal regions of Pakistan; the very area where ibn Ladin supported mujahideen insurgents in Afghanistan during the 1979–1989 Soviet campaign. Although there is no certainty that ibn Ladin is alive, there has been speculation that his medical condition has prevented him from resuming the leadership role he once performed. It is rumored that one of his elder sons has assumed this role.

Regardless of whether ibn Ladin is dead or alive, the al-Qaida establishment has been shaken into a state that closely resembles what Fettweis calls the stage of "decentralization," a phase that can precede the collapse of terrorist organizations. In the case of al-Qaida, decentralization means that splinter groups or "lone wolves" aim to carry out terrorist acts in the name of al-Qaida. The al-Qaida network now appears to be a "leaderless resistance"¹⁰ as described by Cooley in reference to the dispersal of Black September sympathizers and fighters.

Such lone-wolf actors seek to become embedded within society and to pursue their nefarious activities from within as so-called "homegrown terrorists." There are a number of Islamist and jihadist-inspired terrorist groups that are believed to have a presence in Canada. A number of groups and individuals have recently been discovered while preparing to carry out terrorist attacks.¹¹ Several of these terrorist suspects had established links to the al-Qaida network, acquired terror training overseas, and/or acquired explosive material, resources, and components in pursuit of their violent jihadist ideology. In the end, it is the lone wolves that must

be feared during the 2010 Olympics for they are not "constrained by . . . rational strategic limitations" and have "chosen the most-destructive weapons available to inflict the maximum amount of damage on people and property."¹²

Risk of a Terrorist Attack at the Olympics with IEDs

The ability of a lone-wolf actor to hide within the population and strike with the intent to inflict the greatest amount of carnage possible is but one challenge for Olympic security forces. The ultimate challenge will be to detect and neutralize his weapon of choice—the improvised explosive device.

Since the commencement of combat operations in Afghanistan and the morphing into counterinsurgency operations, coalition forces have faced a growing threat from increasingly sophisticated IEDs. With an enormous stockpile of Soviet-era weapons, Taliban and al-Qaida fighters initially possessed an endless supply of high explosives derived mainly from abandoned bombs, projectiles and landmines from the failed Soviet Afghan campaign. In the initial stages of the recent Afghan war, the majority of IEDs were crudely built and initiated by command wires requiring the bombers to be in the same vicinity of their targets. Often these devices would be concealed in concrete barriers, deceased livestock, and other inanimate objects. As coalition forces developed counter-IED tactics, insurgent and terrorist bomb makers improved their construction methods by employing remote wireless firing devices and other electronic components. Tactical use of these weapons also changed with the recruitment and deployment of suicide bombers who target their victims with body bombs or vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED). The message to be taken from Afghanistan in relation to the 2010 Olympics is that al-Qaida terrorists or their proxies are capable of exporting their bomb-making expertise and their capabilities abroad to strike in Canada.

How Should the Threat to the Vancouver Olympics Mitigated?

The violent and radical ideology of al-Qaida and its decentralized sympathizers who are engaged in the insurgency in Afghanistan present a clear and present danger to the security and safety of the 2010 Winter Olympics. There are numerous terrorism plots that have recently been discovered in Canada and the United States that illustrate the capability and desire of such terrorists to strike domestic targets with the use of explo-

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sive devices. The most severe threat facing the Olympics is in the form of IEDs, which can be concealed, transported and delivered by a lone-wolf terrorist inspired and supported by elements of al-Qaida to a populated and hard-to-secure public open area or venue much in the same manner that Eric Rudolph attacked the Atlanta Olympic Centennial Park.

One critical approach to mitigate the terrorist threat during the Olympics is for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to adopt and integrate counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies learned from the Canadian Forces (CF) fighting in Afghanistan. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police face many challenges in developing a learning culture to combat IEDs in particular. All organizations "acquire personalities over time" and "develop abilities in certain areas to accomplish the tasks of the organization but are constrained by their experience to innovate only within the self-defined parameters of what they see as their purpose."¹³ The necessity to develop a counterterrorism/counterinsurgency strategy for the upcoming 2010 Olympic Games requires a new mindset in domestic policing operations, and must take into account global terrorism, not just homegrown perpetrators.

Conclusion

Preventing the repeat of an Atlanta-style bombing will require the partnership of both public and private sector security agencies, and the cooperation of the general public to observe and report suspicious persons and activities. The tendency for public security agencies to work in "silos," self-contained administrative hierarchies with little or no contact with other hierarchies, could be the downfall to a secure and safe 2010 Olympic games.

Hopefully, any terror threat to the Olympic Games will be extinguished before it can be initiated, but the threat is very real. Although efforts to secure the games have been going on for a considerable time and have continued to test the capacity of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, it must also be recognized that the Canada and its citizens have yet to be baptized by fire as the United Kingdom, Spain, Israel, India, the United States and other victim nations of recent terrorist attacks.

About the Author

Serge E. Vidalis is a retired Canadian Naval Officer who served in Naval Special Operations and possesses expertise in maritime counterterrorism, mine warfare, and explosive ordnance disposal. His career included a

five-year departure from the navy when he served as a police officer in British Columbia, Canada. Vidalis returned to active duty within weeks of September 11, 2001, and was deployed in March 2003 to the Arabian Sea in support of Operation Apollo and Operation Enduring Freedom, where he lead a special protection team. Vidalis holds a Master of Arts Degree in Conflict Analysis and Management with specialization in Political, Ethnic, and Security Issues, and is currently a Doctoral Candidate at the University of British Columbia researching the Impact of Culture on Western Security Strategies and Terrorism. Serge is also the President of Blue Force Global—Special Services Group Ltd., a firm specializing in strategic security and emergency management services.

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