TERRORISM AND THE 1984 OLYMPICS

by

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INTRODUCTION

In spite of pious pronouncements to the contrary, the Olympic Games are now political events. It is unfortunate; it is unnecessary; but it is a fact. The first “political” Olympiad was probably the 1936 Games in Berlin, intended by the German hosts to be a showcase of Nazi superiority. In more recent times boycotts have become an Olympic issue, but the problem which is exercising most minds at present is that of terrorism.¹ When people think of terrorism and the Olympic Games they tend to remember Munich in 1972, although that was not the first occasion when political violence disrupted the Games. That particular distinction goes to Mexico, host of the 1968 Games. Montreal and Moscow were free of political violence only at the cost of elaborate security. Similar arrangements are being undertaken for Los Angeles. But what of the terrorist threat? This essay will attempt to analyse the nature of that threat with a view to provoking reflection rather than alarm.

NATURE OF THE THREAT

To determine whether it is reasonable to assume that terrorism is a genuine threat to the 1984 Olympics, one must first examine the nature of terrorism in the contemporary era, and second, decide if the Olympics offer a useful forum for contemporary terrorism. Turning to the first issue, recent trends give little cause for optimism. From a purely quantitative viewpoint, it is not possible to give a definitive statement on trends in international terrorism; it rather depends on one’s definition of ‘international’ and what one considers a terrorist incident. It is often difficult to draw a clear distinction between terrorism and the violence associated with a revolutionary or civil war. Consequently, the statistics point in different directions, depending on which statistics are chosen. For example, the U.S. State Department says that figures for 1982 showed a slight decline,² while Brian Jenkins, world-renowned analyst at the RAND Corporation, suggests that international incidents increased by 30%³ over the same period. The direction of the trend really does not matter, for regardless of the statistics, there is still a great deal of terrorism going on. Moreover, percentages aside, government and independent analysts are largely agreed on a number of qualitative and methodological trends which may be of greater importance to most studies on terrorism.

First, the groups themselves are more numerous — many of those most active today did not exist a decade ago. They are smaller, more
skilled and more professional. Training, discipline, security and technical skills are to a higher standard, out of necessity for as governments responded with increasing sophistication and effectiveness, terrorists had to adapt or face defeat.4

Second, as a result of this choice, the crazy, one-off, symbolic act seems to have become less common while the carefully-planned, directed, “rational” act is increasing. Terrorism purely for mass shock effect, “terrorism as theatre,” cannot be ruled out, but the trend in the 1980s seems to be toward terrorism for specific purposes.5

Third, that inclination to “issue oriented” terrorism, linked to popular causes, represents a significant shift and may be the most important change in terrorism in this decade.6 It opens up a whole new set of potential targets which provide opportunities for incidents that are both purposive and demonstrative. Here the anarchist concept of “Direct Action” may be most instructive. Direct action implies taking protest or resistance actions of either a violent or a non-violent nature and which have immediate socio-political results. It is central to anarchist thought. Furthermore, the linking of direct action methods to popular issues, such as environmental, anti-technological, or anti-nuclear movements, is part of the modern anarchist tradition.7 Clearly, some methodological and doctrinal transference has taken place.

Fourth, there is a demonstrated tendency towards greater ruthlessness and increased deadliness. Bombing and assassination are still the most common forms of attack, with the bombs getting bigger and, hence, more indiscriminate. This growing tendency to target people rather than property is reflected statistically: over the past decade the proportion of human targets has increased from only 20% of the total number of targets to a current level of approximately 50%. Diplomats remain the most frequent targets and Americans are the highest national category — attacks on U.S. property and persons rose by 60% in 1982.8 This type of terrorism is occurring in more countries with North America experiencing a significant increase in 1982. Again, the United States was the principal target.9

Taken together these broad trends suggest that a generalized threat exists, although it is difficult at this stage to predict the specific form it might take. Before attempting to define the threat more clearly, it is essential to describe what the Los Angeles Olympics might offer to the would-be terrorist.

The first and most important asset the Olympics offers is publicity. The importance of publicity to terrorist groups is well understood and needs no further elaboration. It is a sine qua non of existence, let alone success.10 Moreover, terrorism’s attraction as a media ‘event’ is also a matter of record. The two feed on each other in symbiotic relationship.11 Nothing demonstrated this better than the terrorist attack on the 1972 Munich Olympics. The terrorists understood how to use the media coverage of the Olympics as a platform to play their own ‘game’ before a global audience.12 Media coverage of the Los
Angeles Olympics will be even more extensive with American and foreign broadcasters expecting to reach an audience of 2.5 billion people. Spectacular ‘terrorism as theatre’ operations may be less frequent now, but the publicity potential of the Los Angeles events may be too tempting to ignore.

If the object is extortion, attempting to coerce the U.S. or some other government into following a certain course of action, then the Los Angeles Olympic site offers a number of targets of opportunity. There will be American dignitaries, including the U.S. President and presidential candidates as well as leaders of less than stable or popular regimes. The athletes themselves, 5,200 in all, are always potential hostages. They will be competing at 23 different locations around Los Angeles County, thus complicating the task of protecting them while, temptingly located on the UCLA campus, site of one of the Olympic villages, is a small nuclear reactor. However, in order to make their presence felt, a terrorist group need not strike directly at the Games’ sites. As a major industrial and port city of some three million people, Los Angeles offers a multitude of commercial, government, industrial and military targets. It simply will not be possible to protect them all, or to guarantee complete, fail-safe security for even the most obvious, important ones. Provided that a terrorist group makes the right choice and attacks in strength, it might, indeed, find itself with sufficient leverage to accomplish its intended extortion. Were the threat, whether real or a hoax, sufficiently severe (for example, a nuclear device on a freighter in the harbour) the group would additionally get all the publicity they desired from the massive media apparatus assembled to cover the Games.

Obviously, any incident of significant magnitude would be a matter of considerable embarrassment to the host city and, more important, to the host country — especially in the midst of a Presidential election campaign. The assassination of a visiting dignitary or of an athletic team would discredit the costly efforts to prevent such an occurrence and might call into question the continuation of disrupted Games. Nonetheless, a race riot in downtown Los Angeles, replete with black smoke billowing over the Coliseum and television images of disadvantaged minorities being beaten by police, could do as much damage. When a country hosts the Olympics, it puts its political, social and international prestige on the line. In today’s world that is an extremely vulnerable commodity. It is small comfort that the list of those likely to attempt to damage that commodity is probably rather small.

The list of terrorist groups which might wish to carry out an operation at the Games is so long that it defies meaningful cataloguing. Fortunately, most would not have both the will and the wherewithal to penetrate the security screen, with all the risk that would entail. Olympic site security is unlikely to be ‘fail-safe,’ but neither will it be easy to penetrate. The Olympics’ security forces may total as many as 17,000 persons — comparable to forces deployed for the Montreal
Games — and are likely to include military and counter-terrorist units in addition to large numbers of police. The adequacy of these arrangements, and American preparedness to deal with terrorism in general, are matters of some debate, but the mere scale of the security is likely to deter all but the most determined.

Security apart, the Olympics simply might not suit the operational style of some groups. More and more terrorists are turning to 'hit and run' actions, which offer little risk to the perpetrators, rather than static 'grandstand shows' such as hostage-takings which involve a high risk for the terrorist. It is possible, therefore, to draft a kind of 'short list' of likely groups who might have both the motivation and the resources to carry out an attack and, under their own terms, have the expectation of a reasonable return on their investment. This list includes, probably among others, the groups discussed below.

**Armenians**

Two main groups, ASALA (American Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide present some danger. The former is thought to have links with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and possibly the Soviet Union, while the latter is alleged to have private Armenian backers in the United States. Both groups are motivated by desire to revenge the 'genocide' carried out by the Turks against the Armenian population during the First World War. ASALA and the Justice Commandos concentrate on Turkish targets internationally, especially diplomats. Assassination is the preferred technique, but bombings and hostage-takings have also been undertaken to coerce Western governments into releasing jailed members. Ruthlessness and determination are the hallmarks of Armenian terrorism and neither group would be deterred by a high degree of security if it could possibly kill some Turks. These groups are probably the most active, if not the most professional, in the current arena of international terrorism, and they could be expected to reconnoitre the Olympic sites and to stalk their quarry skillfully. Although inclined toward hit and run bombings or assassinations, they would probably resort quickly to holding hostages if cornered by security forces. They would find shelter and assistance among the 675,000 Armenians who live in the United States, 100,000 in the Los Angeles area alone. Earlier this year a Turkish newspaper reported that an Armenian financier was attempting to smuggle sixty-five Armenian terrorists into the United States.

**Black June Organization**

Also known as Al Asifa, (Fatah — The Revolutionary Council) or as the Abu Nidal group after its leader Sabri Khalil al-Banna (Abu Nidal), Black June is among the most militant of the Palestinian groups, opposed to any diplomatic solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and has accused Yasir Arafat of being too 'soft' on the Israelis. Indeed, this group may be among those elements of the PLO that have rebelled
recently against Arafat’s leadership. In April 1983 the group claimed responsibility for the assassination of PLO moderate Issam Sartawi. Black June’s membership, thought to number about 500, is spread through Europe, with cells in most European capitals. The organization clearly enjoys Iraqi sponsorship, but it is not obvious if the relationship is closer, with Iraq exerting a more direct influence. The list of potential targets is extensive: Israelis, non-Israeli Jews, Americans (especially American government officials), British officials, Syrians and Iranians. Like the Armenians, Black June terrorists are professional and ruthless assassins and are capable of producing powerful, sophisticated bombs. Although they have not carried out any attacks in the United States thus far, it may be difficult for them to ignore the possibilities offered by the Olympics.18

Anti-Nuclear Groups

In this case it may not be possible to identify one particular group. Nuclear power and nuclear weapons are emotive issues in the United States and in Europe. Most of the opposition is peaceful but certain extreme elements might be prepared to use the Olympics as a platform for more violent actions. If the deployment of American cruise missiles in Europe goes forward in 1984, that could prove to be the trigger for violent anti-nuclear terrorism. In this case, West German terrorists could be in the forefront: the organization which comes to mind is the Revolutionary Cells, technically not a single group but a loose alliance of independent teams, each consisting of as few as two to five people. Although they have been involved for some time in illegal activity, lending assistance to various West German and foreign underground groups, since the late 1970s they have surpassed even the second-generation Red Army Faction to become the most dangerous group in West Germany. They are further believed to draw some support from more extreme elements in the West German peace movement. The motive for an operation at the Olympics could be pure revenge for deployment of the weapons, or a desire to coerce the Americans or West Germans into removing them. Likely targets would be American or West German officials or athletes, the Olympic site, or Los Angeles itself. Bombing and arson are the Cells’ normal methods, and thus far they have confined their activities to West Germany. They might be inclined, however, to take more dramatic action in the United States if the missile deployments proceed in spite of their protest activities. The most worrisome aspect of the Revolutionary Cells is how little is known about them. So tight is their security that only five members have been identified and none has been caught.19

The Revolutionary Cells are not the only European Group which might “co-opt” the nuclear issue to dramatize its own cause. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), although less well-known than the Provisional IRA, is nonetheless a force to be reckoned with. The INLA is a revolutionary Irish nationalist group, Marxist with Trotskyite overtones. It was formed in 1975 as the military wing of the Irish
Republican Socialist Party, which had been created out of a violent schism within the official IRA. Based in Dublin, it has recruited drop-outs from the Provisionals and is considered now to number approximately 200, about half of whom are directly involved in terrorist operations. Repeatedly decimated by internal feuds and arrests by the security forces, the INLA has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to rebuild. Within Northern Ireland even the Provisionals regard them as reckless amateurs, but lack of sophistication is more than compensated for by ruthlessness. More significant for this study is the fact that the INLA has carried out a number of operations against British targets in Europe. Furthermore, the group is known to have links to the European extreme left and to the Soviet bloc, the principal source of the group’s weapons. Some of its operations have been directed against western defence installations and have been explained by the group in “anti-imperialist” terms. Such leftist tendencies preclude the INLA from acquiring a large following in the United States, yet their willingness to operate abroad raises the possibility of an attack on British athletes or officials at the Olympics. Moreover, its leftist ideology along with European and Soviet bloc connections, should alert security planners to the possibility that any INLA activity could take on anti-NATO or anti-American overtones. Like the Revolutionary Cells, the INLA might find Los Angeles an appropriate location for exploiting the anti-nuclear issue while furthering its own cause.

The American anti-nuclear scene is much more diffuse and less inclined to terrorist-style violence. The nuclear debate in the United States is largely verbal and, when it does become activist, it is predominantly non-violent, oriented more toward civil disobedience. Some analysts fear that non-violence may not prevail in the long term, especially if peaceful or near-peaceful protest does not appear to change or influence administration policy. Insofar as the Olympics are concerned the domestic ‘threat’ could be twofold: a dramatic, largely symbolic gesture of protest by mainstream anti-nuclear activists (perhaps an attempt to occupy the UCLA reactor site) intended to dramatize the danger of nuclear war, or, a violent incident in which, as suggested earlier, a terrorist group not normally associated with the nuclear issue uses it for its own purposes. In the latter instance one American terrorist group, the Puerto Rican FALN, comes to mind.

The FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation)

There are at least a half dozen Puerto Rican terrorist groups, but only one, the FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation), has been operating on a regular basis in the continental United States. Dedicated to an armed struggle for Puerto Rican independence, the FALN’s principal theatre is the mainland, where about 40% of all Puerto Ricans live. It is thought by police to have supporters and cells in many of the major cities and in other areas, including California. Its actual strength is not known for certain though law enforcement agencies estimate the FALN has approximately 30 to 40 hard-core
terrorists. Bombing has been the predominant FALN technique, with American businesses being the prime target. The announced intention is often to force the release of jailed FALN members or to take revenge for some act by authorities, such as the arrest or conviction of FALN members. The Olympics would be an appropriate ‘theatre’ for FALN to make its case for Puerto Rican independence in a highly visible way. If the incident could be contrived to exploit the nuclear issue simultaneously, it might gain the FALN leverage, publicity and popular support. It is not possible to predict exactly how this might be achieved. Suffice it to say that in the current climate of opinion any administration presented with a choice between saving human lives and saving nuclear policies or installations would find itself hard pressed to preserve the latter. With Olympics as a forum and the election campaign as a backdrop, nuclear policy and national self-determination could prove to be a very potent combination. That said, it would not do to overstate the magnitude of such a threat for the FALN has not shown much inclination toward hostage-taking, preferring to attack unprotected property rather than people. Therefore it is far more likely that they would adhere to their familiar bombing tactics. In that case, business and financial establishments and federal law enforcement institutions in the Los Angeles area would be potential targets. A new twist could be added, namely, Mexican targets, if the Mexican authorities are still holding William Morales, a former fugitive and key figure in the FALN, when the Olympics commence.22

Anti-Castro Cubans

There is in the United States a multitude of anti-Castro Cuban groups, even though only a few might be inclined to undertake actions at the Olympics. The most active of these is Omega 7, a small but efficient group that operates against Cuban officials and anyone else who opposes the group’s anti-communist stance. In the past the group has carried out both bombings and assassinations. Apparently satisfied with the anti-communist policies of the Reagan administration, Omega 7 has been largely dormant since 1980. However, the attendance of a large contingent of Cuban athletes and their accompanying officials may prompt a terrorist action. Another anti-Castro group, called Cuban Action, is Los Angeles based. Unhappily, not enough is known about it to determine whether it poses a significant threat in itself. Serving as a local organizational base for Omega 7, however, it could be quite important. In any case, the dedication and ruthlessness of these groups makes them a serious potential threat to the Cuban delegation, as well as to those contingents from the Soviet Union and other Soviet bloc countries.23

Others

The foregoing survey was not intended to be definitive or exhaustive. It should not be taken to mean that other groups might not attempt some action at the Olympics. A threat may yet reside in the
myriad of organizations that make up the American radical left undergound, although recent experience suggests that they are too fragmented, erratic and unpredictable to assess with any expectation of accuracy. Nor do any of them have the sophistication and resources of the more professional groups discussed here. Further, many of these are likely to be deterred by the Olympics security show of force, but they could still be a threat to "targets of opportunity." There are also a number of "wild cards" on the international scene including the Iranians and the Libyans. Although past experience indicates involvement in international terrorism, there is not enough evidence in the public domain upon which to draw reasonable conclusions about a potential threat to the Olympics. In view of the implacable hostility of the Libyan and Iranian regimes to the United States, however, they cannot be ignored completely. Finally, there is the question of the Soviet Union. Clearly stung by the American-led boycott of their 1980 Games, the Soviets indicated to the Olympic organizing committee in 1982 that they might boycott the Los Angeles event. Unfortunately, in the same manner that western nations justified their boycott — as a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — there is no shortage of controversial American policy issues (Central America or NATO nuclear modernization) which could be seized upon by the Soviets to justify a boycott of their own. Whether they do so obviously remains to be seen. Such a boycott would be a two-edged sword, since the competitions give the Soviets ample opportunity to demonstrate their 'superiority' in sports. Moreover, it might backfire in the long run, damaging the prospects of a closer relationship with a possible Democratic presidential administration after the 1984 elections. In fact, were the Soviet regime truly determined to disrupt the Games and embarrass the United States, a boycott is not their only option. In 1968 KGB agents played a major role in the disturbances that overshadowed the Mexico City Olympiad. They are hardly likely to undertake anything so brazen on American territory, at least directly. Certainly the DGI (the Cuban secret service), which is believed to be under KGB control, could act as a surrogate. Its ability to blend easily into the Hispanic community would be a considerable asset, particularly if the desired action was a racial incident or riot.

SUMMARY

It has to be admitted that the foregoing cannot amount to more than an 'informed speculation.' It is quite possible that the Los Angeles Olympics will pass without a major incident, in which case this essay can be consigned to history as an idiosyncratic reflection of the contemporary fascination with terrorism. Still, the possibility that something might happen cannot be dismissed out of hand. The global trends in terrorism point to a proliferation of smaller, more efficient groups, violence spreading to more countries, higher casualties and a tendency to link terrorism to popular issues. The Olympics offer a
multitude of targets, human and otherwise, global publicity, potential opportunities to embarrass or humiliate a superpower and, depending on the choice of method, target and circumstances, leverage for extortion of varying degrees of intensity. Finally, there are at least half a dozen terrorist groups with the resources and motivation to attempt an operation at the Olympics.

Risk, it is said, is the sum of probability plus capability plus consequences. The capability for and the consequences of a terrorist incident at the Olympics are quite clear. It is up to the Olympic security forces to reduce the probability and thereby to foreclose the completion of the lethal equation.

Footnotes


22. Conflict Studies, Trends in Low Intensity Conflict, chapter 3, pp. 29, 35; “An FALN Terrorist is Captured in Mexico,” Newsweek, 6 June 1983; According to Pilat, p. 197, the FALN was believed to be planning an attack on a nuclear power plant in the autumn of 1979. William Sater, Puerto Rican Terrorists: a Possible Threat to U.S. Energy Installations? RAND Note — 1764-SL (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1981), pp. 11, 13, 15, 17, 20 concludes that the FALN is a serious potential threat in this regard.


27. Ibid., pp. 29-30, 201-2, 205-8; see also United States Senate, Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, *The Role of Cuban International Terrorism and Subversion* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1982).