

‘KILL ONE, SCARE THOUSANDS’: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE RISK OF A TERRORIST ATTACK AT A SPORTING OCCASION

Mark Piekarz, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Context

Sport can be a powerful source for good. It can create social cohesion, improve the quality of life and generate huge amounts of economic activity. Yet something so powerful, experienced by so many, is rarely one-dimensional in the impacts it yields, for it this very power of sport in relation to its economic and social significance, along with its global media audiences, which may be increasing its probability of being targeted for a devastating terrorist attack.

For many people, why this would be the case may be difficult to fathom. Sport is sometimes presented as a spectacle that rises above politics. What is more, sporting occasions as a target for terrorism does not seem to be corroborated by many examples of direct attacks, with the terrorist incidents at the 1972 and 1996 Olympics being two noticeable exceptions (MIPT, 2005).

A deeper exploration of the issue soon creates a different picture. The common mantra of the terrorist is ‘kill one, scare thousands.’ The desire with acts of atrocity is to spread fear, disrupt economic activity, change policies and win support to the terrorists’ cause. A sporting spectacle that thousands or millions may see and experience can be viewed by the terrorist as an opportunity to deliver a devastating attack, which would be all the more shocking because of the ‘softness’ of the targets caught in a moment of enjoyment. Further credence of the possibility of a terrorist attack is given by the inflation of security costs. For the Barcelona Olympics it was estimated that the cost of security was \$350 million (Harmon 2000, p68); by the time the Athens’s Olympic Games had been reached, the cost had escalated to nearer one billion dollars (Evans, 2004).

Methodology

This research aims to review the key databases that can be used to make an assessment of the risks from terrorist attacks, thereby allowing consideration of what control measures and resources should be employed to help manage the risks. The work utilises a number of risk management models to frame the analysis, and is part of a larger study on political risk assessment.

Results and Discussion

When conducting a desk audit of terrorist databases, what is perhaps most conspicuous is that sport occasions have been relatively untouched by terrorist incidents over the past 30 years. Between 1968 to 2005, of 21,222 terrorist-related incidents, about fifteen could be classed as sport-related, with many of them resulting in no casualties (MIPT, 2005; USA State Department, 2003). The danger, however, is to dismiss the risk of a terrorist attack as having such a low probability of occurrence that it warrants little further analysis or management actions.

Closer scrutiny of the terrorist databases and incidents soon reveals some worrying trends. Generally, since the 1980’s, the number of terrorist incidents was decreasing. In 2004, however, there was a significant increase in incidents (this has lead some to say this is why the US State Department ceased publishing its annual report on terrorism, as increasing numbers of incidents seem to undermine the Bush administration’s policy of war on terrorism – Landay, 2005). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly than the number of incidents, have been the growing casualties resulting from attacks. Acts such as September 11th, the Bali bomb, the Madrid train bomb, or the murders of schoolchildren in Beslan are a graphic testimony of this growing lethality of attacks.

Many of the recent attacks by terrorist groups, whilst shocking for the majority of people who find it incredulous that it could encourage more attacks, for the terrorist it may in fact serve as a new benchmark of violence to try and ‘better’ previous atrocities. The simple question one must ask is, if

bombs can be placed in a school and children shot, or a bomb placed on a train full of people going to work, then would a terrorist have any qualms about an attack on people participating in a sporting event? (editor: this was written ,of course before the attacks on tube trains and a bus in central London on 7 July 05). The answer would seem to be no.

Considering the wider political and economic conditions can also help put the risks into perspective. When the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989 there was a period of optimism about the future of the world. The repressive threat of nuclear war that was felt for decades seemed to be lifted. Fukayama (1992, cited in Heywood, 2002:30) spoke of the “end of history”, with capitalism seemingly to have won the argument for how human affairs should be organised. But it has not been the end of history. The 1990s have been characterised by the fragmentation of states, with an increase in the number of civil wars where millions have died. The twenty-first century does not seem to be one moving in the direction of greater peace and harmony. Indeed writers such as Huntingdon (1996) have argued that the future global security situation is one that will be characterised by many new sources of tension, such a greater clash of cultures or civilisations.

Implications/Conclusion

This is not a paper in scaremongering. It is designed to take a more balanced perspective on the risk of a sporting event being targeted by a terrorist attack. Whilst statistically the risk of an individual being harmed by a terrorist attack at a sporting occasion is remote, infinitesimal even, this does not mean there is no risk at all. With the benefit of hindsight, one can now see that there were numerous warning signals of a September 11th-type attack. So to are the warning signals emerging for an attack at a sporting event. The more powerful sport becomes, the more attractive it can be for a terrorist group to try and deliver a shocking attack that millions would witness. Vigilance is therefore needed, together with proper consideration of how the risk should be planned for. In assessing any risk, a central problem is that knowing of a risk is not the same as knowing when it may occur. Let's hope it never does.

References

- Evans, M., (2004) NATO offer help to fight terrorist threat *The Times* 21 February 04
Harmon, C.C. (2000) *Terrorism Today* New York: Frank Cass
Heywood, A. (2002) *Politics* Basingstoke: Palgrave
Huntingham, S., P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*
New York: Simon and Schuster
Landay, J (2005) US eliminates annual terrorism report, *Seattle Times*, 16 April 05 accessed at
<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com>
MIPT (2005) *Terrorism Knowledge Base* accessed 19 April 05 at <http://www.tkb.org/Home.jsp>
US State Department (2003) *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003 Report* accessed 14 April 05 at
<http://www.state.govs>

Contact: +44 114 225 5676; M.Piekarz@shu.ac.uk