(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Security threats for Europe and summer Olympic games in Paris 2024

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Abstract

Sport has historically played a significant role in spreading positive values and connecting cultures and nations worldwide, but it can also be exploited for political, religious, and ideological motivations. Sporting events have become targets of terrorist attacks in recent years. Terrorists and extremist groups may use sports events as means to propagate their ideologies or to attract attention through acts of terrorism. The threat of attacks during sporting events poses a serious risk to the security of the civilian population and, consequently, a significant challenge for its protection. The most notable sporting event in 2024 will be the Summer Olympic Games in Paris. France has experienced the highest number of terrorist attacks in Europe, making the Olympics a major security concern. The study analyzes terrorists' strategies related to attacks on sports events and potential attack scenarios at the 2024 Olympic Games. The insights gained can contribute to strengthening the security of sporting events and the protection of participants and spectators against potential threats.

Keywords: Counterterrorism Measures; Extremist Groups; Protection Strategies; Risk Assessment; Sporting Events

1. Introduction

Over the years, terrorists have targeted sporting events across continents, from Germany, Sri Lanka, Togo, France, to the USA [1, 2]. Negative statistics of attacks are increasing alongside growing globalization. Sporting events are targeted by terrorists for several main reasons; they are intended to instill mass fear and chaos due to the large concentration of people [2], they enjoy international attention and high media coverage [3], and they are symbolic events emphasizing peace and international cooperation [4]. An attack on such an event can be a way for terrorists to disrupt the celebration and highlight their political or ideological motives. Terrorism remains one of the greatest security challenges of the modern world. It takes many forms and employs increasingly sophisticated methods [5]. Terrorists' communication strategy involves long-term planning and implementation of highly sophisticated rhetoric, where violence is used as argumentation, target selection purely propagandistic, and publicity and media coverage aimed at paralyzing crowds and instilling fear [6, 7]. Terrorism generated by war and militant jihadism offers an alternative lifestyle, creating an illusion of global and religious superiority, where radical Islam or foreign military interventions by global security actors serve as legitimization for all terrorist acts [8].

There are multiple motivations for terrorism which are typically associated with one or more societal tensions [9]. The primary tensions associated with terrorism include historical disputes, uneven distributions of wealth, cultural contrasts, different priorities due to ethnic diversity, religious variations leading to differences in beliefs, and political power struggles [9].

A clash in societal values is exemplified by the statement by al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, "every Muslim who can do so has a personal obligation to kill Americans and their allies, whether civilians or military troops, in every country

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where possible" (World Islamic Front Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders). The U.S. presidential administration of George W. Bush Jr subsequently presented bin Laden's message as a struggle between an evil and good, of values, of progress, and against the wealth of the USA [10]. Identifying societies with values similar to those of bin Laden, Bush grouped Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Libya, and Syria as an axis of evil [11]. There have been several terrorist events that have been motivated by these conflicts in societal values including democracy, freedom, globalization, secularism, and increased wealth.

Some terrorists are motivated to seek to fundamentally disrupt the global system of international security relations. The USA, as one of the richest and most economically and technically advanced democratic states in the world, is a major leader in forming and maintaining most security alliances. There are societies that perceive USA involvement in leading security alliances as an unfair distribution of globalization in favor of Western democratic powers [12]. There are factions in some of the societies where citizens hold a perspective of unfair global distribution who perceive the situation as needing extreme actions, motivating them to engage in terrorist acts.

Many experts claim terrorist attacks are retaliation for military inventions which some consider to be side effects of armed conflicts [13]. Osama bin Laden shared this perspective in his recordings and messages, often inflecting the words of humiliation, degradation, oppression, and appropriation on the US and its allies for their amassed mineral wealth. Some citizens who embrace bin Laden's perspective are motivated to take action to bring attention to the disparity of policies that enhance the lives of some while diminishing the lives of others [14]. Some of their actions involve acts of terrorism including at sporting events.

Symbolism, promotional materials, and propaganda efforts spread massively in both offline and online environments, thus providing space for the growth of various groups and individuals. Understanding the individual elements of communication strategy is essential in preventing terrorism. Analyzing historical attacks and security-political contexts, monitoring the dynamics of perpetrator typology, are all necessary steps in analyzing possible threats to the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

The Olympic Games in Paris in the summer of 2024 will be atypical for many reasons. The opening ceremony will be available to everyone for the first time for free, the sports venues will be in attractive locations in the heart of Paris, and France itself is the country with the highest number of attacks in Europe. This research aim is to examine security threats pertaining to the Summer Olympic Games in Paris 2024 focusing on potential risks posed by terrorist activities.

2. Theoretical frameworks for researching terrorism

One of the main theoretical approaches to study terrorism is the political perspective, which emphasizes the role of political and social grievances in motivating terrorist groups and the importance of understanding the strategic and tactical decisions of these groups. Another theoretical framework is the sociological perspective, which examines the role of social factors such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination in creating conditions that lead to terrorism. The psychological perspective views terrorism as an act of individuals or groups motivated by specific psychological factors such as trauma, personal beliefs, or mental disorders. Finally, the perspective of international relations sees terrorism as a security threat that requires a global response and emphasizes the role of state actors and international organizations in combating terrorism. This work offers a theoretical framework based on a multidisciplinary approach from five prominent foreign experts: Freedman [15], Hoffman [16], Rapoport [17], Schmid [18], and Crenshaw [19]. The combination of these authors provides a framework for studying terrorism and violence in the 21st century. This theoretical framework is adopted from Henderson [20] and Eichler [21]. Building on their work, this framework is then applied to terrorist attacks in Europe and major sporting events, which have not been adequately studied, especially in connection with the upcoming Olympic Games in Paris in 2024.

3. Methodology

The research questions are addressed through a quantitative research approach, supplemented by qualitative research. From the main methods, description, explanation, induction, and deduction were selected. For analyzing attacks on sporting events and attacks in Europe, 5 key criteria of terrorism communication strategy were chosen to evaluate the attack: Date and location of the attack, transmitter, target of the attack, modus operandi, message. These criteria are based on the concept of Henderson [20] and further incorporated into the theoretical framework, based on the concept of Eichler [21], which integrates the approach of five experts, Freedman, [15], Hoffman, [22]. Rapoport [23], Crenshaw [24], and Schmid [25], who view terrorism from various perspectives and at different time stages.

4. Results

### 4.1. Terrorism in Europe and attacks on major global sporting events

To analyze trends in terrorism in Europe and during sporting events, a critical analysis of 76 attacks was conducted (61 attacks in Europe and 15 at sporting events worldwide). The attacks on these selected 76 events resulted in 4,417 fatalities and 22,171 injuries. Of these, 84.2% of the analyzed attacks occurred in Europe, where attacks were responsible for 1,349 fatalities. Sporting events claimed a total of 213 victims (4.82%). The number of victims and injuries directly correlates with the "success" and significance of the terrorist attack. Attacks peaked between 2001-2005, as well as between 2015-2017. The intervening period was marked by strict measures due to the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Over the past twenty years, affluent Western Europe, primarily France (25 times), has been the most frequent target of attacks, with the highest number of fatalities (256) in both sporting and non-sporting events. The second most frequent target is Spain, followed by the United Kingdom as shown in Figure 1.
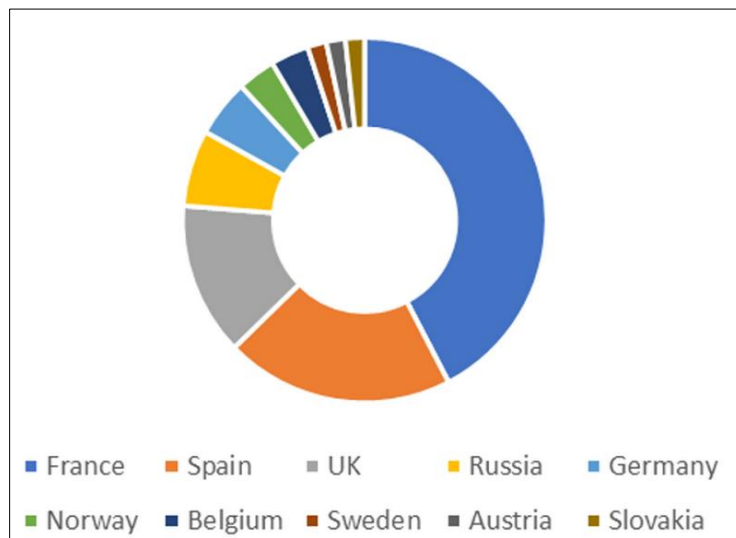
Figure 1 Frequency of attacks in Europe by country 2002 – 2023

4.2. Symbolic Dates in European Attacks: Holidays, Politics, and Events
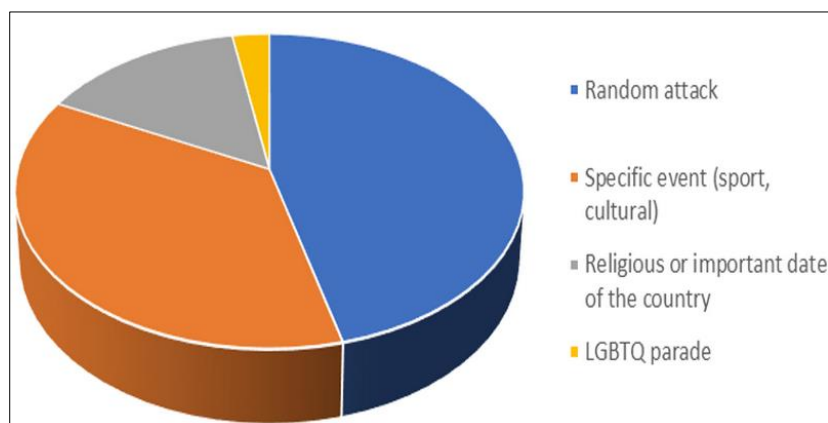
Figure 2 Trends in the date of the attacks

Attacks in Europe and at sporting events often have associations with specific dates that may hold symbolic significance for certain groups or ideologies as shown in Figure 2. There is a significant correlation between these attacks and Christian holidays or historical events of the country (for example, the attack on the Christmas markets in Berlin in 2016 during the Christian period of Christmas and peace). Alternatively, attacks may be linked to specific political events

(such as the attack in Nice in 2016 during the Bastille Day celebrations, or the attack in London in 2017 chosen in light of the upcoming parliamentary elections), sporting or cultural events in the country (such as the Champions League final in Madrid in 2002, the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004, the Stade de France attack in 2015, the attack at Ariana Grande's concert in Manchester in 2017, the LGBTQ Pride Festival in Vienna in 2023, etc.).

4.3. Targeting Public Spaces: Patterns and Trends

Targets of attacks can generally be any attractive location with many people, ideally highly publicized events such as sports or cultural activities. The second group of attacks targets so-called non-specific objectives. These primarily include symbols of occupying power, governmental, military, and religious institutions, as well as infrastructure. Attacks on these targets aim to weaken occupying power, destabilize governmental and military institutions, damage infrastructure, or undermine the sovereignty of states. Attacks on shops and restaurants reflect terrorists' efforts to influence the economy and daily life of the population. These spaces are often places of gathering and social activity, making them attractive for attacks with the aim of causing the greatest impact possible. Targeting schools, hospitals, and churches reflects terrorists' efforts to influence the fundamental pillars of society, such as education, healthcare, and religious affiliation. Attacks on transportation infrastructure, including subways and airports, are aimed at disrupting mobility and creating fear associated with travel. These attacks can affect the economy, transportation systems, and the perception of security in public spaces.

Attacks during sporting events tend to target open sports venues and spaces where large crowds gather. Fans gather outside stadiums or sports venues before the start of events. Places such as opening ceremonies, Olympic villages, and surrounding parks have also been targeted in the past. These spaces are attractive to attackers who may aim to target specific delegations. Attacks on transportation infrastructure, such as airports, subways, or bus stops, affect the mobility of spectators and participants. Attackers choose these locations due to the high concentration of people. Additionally, attackers target other open spaces, such as public squares or parks, where people may gather to watch sporting events on giant screens. Lastly, trends show that terrorists target police and armed forces to weaken security measures and create chaos before or during an event.

4.4. Motivations Behind Attacks
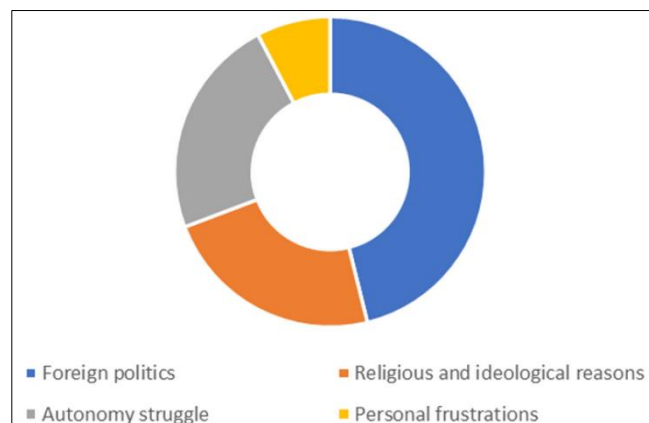
**Figure 3** Transmitters' motivations for attacks

Overall, the messages of attacks worldwide are often complex and reflect diverse motivations and ideologies of the perpetrators. Among the key messages, however, we can identify several types of motivations for attacks, which can be generalized into four main categories as shown in Figure 3. The most common motive is a response to the *foreign politics* of Western powers (38 times), emphasizing imperialism, globalization, colonial occupation, and military invasions. Perpetrators often highlight disagreement with specific events or policies. As the second most common reason, attacks carry messages of spreading *religious and ideological extremism*, particularly Islamic radicalism (jihadism). Attackers may seek to establish Islam as the primary religion and promote their specific interpretation of religious doctrines. This motive was found in 23 analyzed attacks. Some perpetrators exploit existing regional and international conflicts to their advantage and try to shape events in accordance with their ideology. This may include the *struggle for greater independence, autonomy*, or the pursuit of political goals (8 times). The last most common motive for an attack is social and personality factors and frustrations (7 times), such as identity crisis, poverty, social disparities, criminal history, and psychological pathologies. Perpetrators may feel frustration and rejection, which may be associated with various forms of extremism, including xenophobia and homophobia.

4.5. Dynamics of Terrorism: Groups vs. Individuals

Established groups and individuals represent two different dynamics within terrorism. Established groups often have organized structures and clearly defined goals, while individuals may be motivated by various personal factors and commit acts with less predictability. For individuals, the attack is mainly associated with identity crisis and a sense of purpose in life, along with inadequate social integration. Perpetrators are easily influenced, and through online and offline networks, they may encounter information leading to radicalization. Thanks to the ideology of jihadism, they find a sense of belonging, significance, and direction, an ideology for which they carry out attacks. In the time frame examined, terrorist groups attacked 46 times, individuals 30 times. Sporting events were targeted almost exclusively by established terrorist groups (primarily the Islamic State), while attacks in Europe were decentralized, primarily led by individuals, indicating a trend of attacks led by individuals. Although the number of attacks by groups slightly outweighs those by individuals in Europe, individual attacks are on the rise with the potential to strike rapidly, unexpectedly, brutally, and cause high mortality rates. During sporting events, it can be assumed that groups will continue to be the perpetrators due to the need for long-term planning, resources, and the effort to target the intended goal on a specific day.

4.6. Attack Methods

Since 2002, the most used method of attack in Europe has been suicide bombing, and after 2011, the use of firearms, knives, and vehicle ramming attacks. The use of vehicle ramming attacks first occurred in 2016 and since 2017 has become the most common modus operandi along with attacks involving firearms and edged weapons (Figure 4). Conversely, at sporting events, the most used methods have been shootings and bombings.
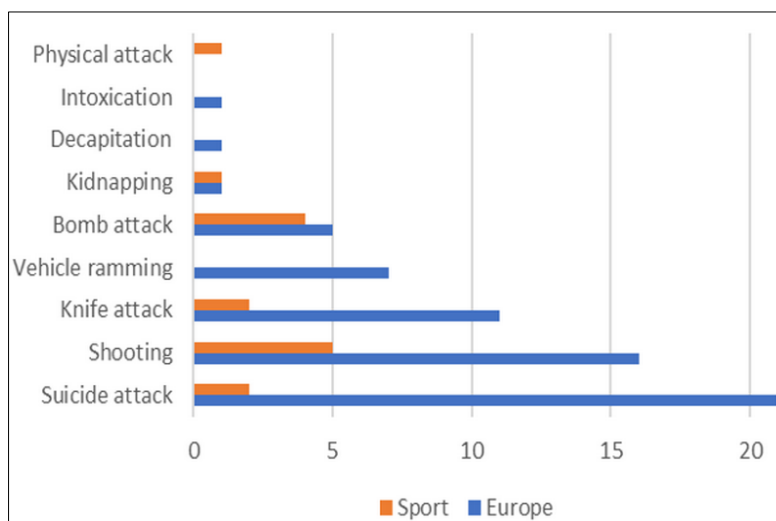
Figure 4 Comparison of chosen modus operandi in Europe vs. at sporting events

Groups tend to choose more sophisticated means such as bombs, shootings, and kidnappings. Conversely, individuals often opt for suicide attacks or resort to readily available means such as knives, firearms, or vehicle attacks. Changes in modus operandi reflect the evolution of terrorism. In response to new technologies and changes in the geopolitical environment, new and more sophisticated methods of conducting warfare are emerging. Contemporary terrorism includes hybrid threats, combining political, religious, social, and economic motivations. Different motivations and typologies of attackers make it difficult to predict and address terrorist threats in the modern world.

4.7. France and the Summer Olympic Games in Paris 2024

In recent years, France has become the target of several significant terrorist attacks, which are the culmination of many historical, military, social, and political factors. Among the main factors that have significantly influenced the analyzed attacks in France are foreign military interventions, Hollande's doctrine, and jihadism. Threats to the Olympic Games can be divided into direct, indirect, and hybrid threats. Given the high level of security during the Olympics, it can be assumed that individual attacks outside the main sports venues and Paris are more likely, with the aim of attracting attention and instilling fear. Cyberattacks, disinformation, and propaganda appear to be easier and more likely forms of attack than physical attacks. Intrusion into stadium security systems may allow attackers to monitor or control security cameras, access points, and other critical systems. Attackers may exploit the situation created by technological disruptions to physically penetrate the stadium, for example, through unguarded entrances and parts of the complex.

In terms of indirect threats, the projection of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict into the course of the games is the most likely scenario. The conflict may also provoke antipathies between athletes from Russia and Ukraine, or between spectators. Another significant impact may come from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its projection onto the security situation in France, whether in terms of increased radicalization of the Muslim extremist community or increased Islamophobia towards Muslim communities in the country. Conflicts may also stimulate propaganda campaigns and political speeches that may attempt to influence public opinion and inject political tension into the Olympic environment.

However, it is important to recognize that the security measures and planning of the Olympic Games are designed to minimize risks and maximize the protection of participants and the public. Organizers collaborate with security forces, intelligence services, and other experts to anticipate dangers and take appropriate measures to prevent and minimize potential impacts. Supporting and strengthening the social integration of migrants in France is crucial. This includes ensuring access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, and other basic services. Integration programs should be targeted to address the specific needs of migrants and their communities. Programs and measures aimed at reducing poverty and social inequalities have a positive impact on preventing radicalization. This includes social support, ensuring a dignified livelihood, and increasing opportunities for all members of society.

5. Discussion

In Europe, attacks led by individuals motivated by religious ideology or hate are expected in the future for various reasons (historical, religious, political, social, etc.). Due to the high level of security at sports and cultural events, sudden attacks in open spaces and attractive locations using firearms, knives, and vehicles are more likely. Cyberattacks are also on the rise, although the impacts have not been as extensive so far. The popularization of artificial intelligence may lead to identifying security vulnerabilities, as well as automating attacks or more extensive cyberattacks. Terrorists may also use personalized propaganda for recruiting new members and communication strategies. However, artificial intelligence can also help monitor online activities, unusual behavioral patterns in public or at sports events, and respond more quickly to potential threats.

The 2024 Olympic Games in Paris encompass a wide range of potential threats that could endanger the safety of athletes, spectators, workers, residents of Paris, and tourists. Sports venues and the opening ceremony, public transportation, accommodation and catering facilities, and symbolic sites in Paris could be potential targets. The location and media attractiveness of the Olympic Games in Paris make it probably the most vulnerable target in recent years. In the context of foreign policy, France is a legitimate target due to its long history of interventions in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. France is a multicultural country, and the proportion of Muslims and immigrants is greater than in any other European country. Given the increasingly sophisticated methods of terrorist warfare, it will be challenging to face potential attacks from an invisible enemy, and this sports event is likely to be highly risky for the public.

6. Conclusion

Analysis of individual terrorist attacks and their geopolitical context provides important insights into the motivations, perpetrators, tactics, and strategies used by terrorist groups and individuals, as well as the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of societies and institutions they target. These insights can help states develop more effective counterterrorism strategies and prevent future attacks.

The communication strategy of terrorism can serve as a tool for comprehensive examination of terrorist attacks on major sporting events. This can help better predict or minimize the threat of attacks on sports events, such as the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, and predict the evolution of threats in Europe.

Preventing attacks requires multi-disciplinary approaches and international cooperation. This may include diplomatic missions to conflict regions, detection of radicalization and extremist ideologies, support for social and cultural inclusion, increasing awareness of risks associated with attending international sports events, continuous improvement of security measures, training of security personnel and volunteers, and readiness of basic and other elements of the integrated rescue system for events of this type and scope.

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