London 2012, Terrorism and the Militarization of the City

The threat of terrorism at a global sports mega event such as the Olympics is nothing new. The 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes and the bombing at the Centennial Olympic Park in 1996 stand as tragic, historic examples of how terrorism has been focused on the Olympic games. Indeed, the safety of athletes, workers and spectators should be of paramount importance for those hosting the London 2012 Olympics. However, the ways in which security has been approached and implemented by the organisers of London 2012 reflects an ongoing securitization of sporting events and a militarization of cities which is somewhat worrying.

The issue of terrorism has been linked to the Olympic games in popular consciousness since the 1972 Olympics[i], and the focus on the threat of terrorism at the London 2012 Olympic games reflects a continued prioritisation of terrorism as an existential threat. The threat of terrorism has been given unprecedented focus before and during many major sporting events post 9/11, and the focus on security before the London games reflects a continuation of the trend. Indeed, the surrounding security debacle with private contractor G4S and subsequent military intervention of an extra 3000 personnel has gained almost as much, if not more coverage than the preparations of the athletes themselves[ii].

It is no surprise that the threat of terrorism is being taken so seriously by the organisers of the London games, after all, the horrific events of 7/7 took place less than 24 hours after the city of London had won the bid for the 2012 games back in 2005. In July 2012 the UK's Intelligence and Security Parliamentary Committee has outlined the three major threats to the games as being an attack on the games or participants from al Qaeda, Irish republican attacks or hoaxes intended to cause disruption, and clashes between rival groups not normally a threat to the UK[iii]. But regardless of the nature of the threat, the ways in which security has become as synonymous with the Olympics as the 100m final, gold medals and corporate sponsorship, are interesting and reflect a re-calibration of security. Boyle and Haggerty argue that sports mega events such as the Olympics are key sites that highlight the dynamics of a changing ecology of security where urban centres, spectacular events and long standing legacies become paramount[iv].

The events surrounding London 2012 appear to give weight to their thesis. The precautionary measures taken by the British government will see the deployment of 17000 military personnel, within the urban locality of London and several other major cities in the UK. Which as various commentators have already pointed out, is almost twice as many than the UK has deployed in Afghanistan. These troops are supported with six batteries of air defence missiles (some located on the roofs of residential buildings), a helicopter carrying aircraft carrier stationed in the Thames and unmanned aerial vehicles patrolling the skies. The shift from London to what seemingly resembles Helmand province, deemed as necessary to ensure the safety of those attending the Olympics, highlights how the securitization of sports events has in turn led to the militarization of cities[v].

The most prominent cause for concern here is the ways in which the Olympic games have enabled the deployment of the most advanced security technologies on the planet within the city of London as if it is necessary and normal to do so. The presence of these technologies and practices within host cities creates a "common sense that intrusive security and surveillance measures represent an inevitable feature and future of urban life"[vi] where debates about

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the necessity, desirability and dangers of such practices become marginalised. Such is the focus on security at these sports spectaculars that organisers have to take into account an ever proliferating number of contingent risks that the capacity to manage or even identify these risks is exceeded[vii]. This in turn leads to the need to portray absolute security and the recent events surrounding the failure of G4S to provide sufficient security for Olympic events, alongside the stretching of MI5 and MI6 to their limits points towards how this has been so in the lead up to London 2012.

Linked to the militarization of urban spaces and the spectacular security that sporting events now encapsulate is how sporting events now lead to a long lasting legacy of security technologies, infrastructure and knowledge[viii]. Clearly it is too early to say if this is the case with the London games, but with the erection of a 17km fence with over 900 CCTV cameras, facial and iris recognition systems and drones patrolling the skies, the future of life in London after the 2012 games seems more and more Orwellian. Again what is worrying here is how naturalised this is becoming, where security practices become deemed as so taken for granted and normal that they are beyond discussion or critique. These security practices surrounding London 2012 serve to give orthodoxy to a prevailing security order where terrorism is given priority and excessive, intrusive measures to reduce risk become everyday in the face of contingency[ix]. It has been noted before that counter terrorist measures can themselves present a larger challenge to security than the actions they are intended to prevent[x], and debate surrounding security measures should thus not be subsumed, ignored and overlooked.

Therefore, it is wise for the field of IR and security to engage with the under explored phenomenon of the Olympics as a point of study[xi], and further exploration of the security practices surrounding the London 2012 Games could also be telling of how the dynamics of security are changing and evolving. The focus on the threat of terrorism, the securitization of sporting events and the militarization of London seems like a regression. Human freedoms and rights are seemingly being eroded in the face of contingency. Such is the desire for a secure games that graffiti artists who no longer work illegally, and have been paid to paint parts of the Olympic village, are being arrested and banned from using public transport or being in possession of tools that they need to do their legal jobs[xii]. Ironically it is a figure painted by renowned graffiti artist Banksy, of an athlete throwing a missile rather than a javelin, that best denotes the relationship between security and the London Games. It is a relationship where sport and security, the military and the city both become blurred. Let's hope they do not become inseparable.

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Rhys Crilley is a commissioning editor at e-IR. He blogs at rhyscrilley.tumblr.com and can be followed on twitter @rhyscrilley. Read more from the e-IR editors' blog here.

[i] Cottrell, R. (2003) 'The Legacy of Munich 1972: Terrorism, Security and the Olympic Games', In de Moragas, M. & Kennett, C. and Puig, N. (eds) *The Legacy of the Olympic Games 1984-2000* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee) pp.309–313

[ii] Note that The Guardian Newspaper has an online section of news dedicated only to 'Olympic Security' http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/olympic-security (Accessed on 25/07/12)

[iii] Intelligence & Security Committee (2012) *Annual Report 2011-2012*, p.23, available at http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm84/8403/8403.pdf (Accessed on 25/07/12)

[iv] Boyle, P. & Haggerty, K. D. (2009) 'Spectacular Security: Mega Events and the Security Complex', *International Political Sociology*, Vol.3, pp.257-274

[v] Ibid, p.270

[vi] Ibid, p.271

[vii] Ibid, p.262

[viii] Ibid, p.265

[ix] Graham, S. (2012) *Olympics 2012 Security: Welcome to Lockdown London*, The Guardian, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/mar/12/london-olympics-security-lockdown-london (Accessed on 25/07/12)

[x] English, R. (2010) *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford University Press; Oxford) p.119

[xi] Cottrell & Nelson (2010) 'Not just the Games? Power, Protest and Politics at the Olympics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.17, No.4, pp.729-753

[xii] See an interview with one of those arrested at http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/graffiti-kings-british-transport-police-arrests-olympics-london-2012 It is worth noting that an article by the New Statesman disputes some of these claims, but still finds flaw with the ways in which the police have operated in serving the 'integrity of the olympic games', read more at http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/david-allen-green/2012/07/round-retired-graffiti-artists-london-olympics (Both Accessed on 25/07/12)

About the author:

Rhys Crilley is a Research Associate at the Open University, UK. He is currently working on an AHRC funded project 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?'. His research explores social media, visual politics, and narratives in global politics. He tweets at @rhyscrilley.