

Cults of Security and Terror: Fear Ahead of the Rio Olympic Games

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The Olympics remains a black hole of needless expenditure, sucking services into it with impending and merciless doom. Unused stadia, tracks left to moulder, services supposedly linked to urban renewal turned into dilapidated wonders. That is the Olympic legacy in its lingering aftermath.

Another feature of the Olympics is the tendency to turn a city into a super security haven, crawling with armed troops, security personnel and surveillance. In London 2012, efforts to transform humble tenements into rocket launching pads was one of the stranger spectacles that bothered residents.

The Brazilian experience does not look like being anything different, though commentators have gotten on the highest of horses to claim that the state's security remains "pre-9/11".[1] Well it might be that Brazilians are used to the presence of armed gangs and police on the streets, claimed The Independent, but they still lived in a world untouched by the knee-jerk security complex. It is typical for those permanently immersed in the argot of security that the events of September 11, 2001 had to shape everything else. But not all countries felt that need.

In addition to traditional favela-bred woes, there are fears that the virus of ISIS-Islamic State inspiration will find form amongst Brazilians in an effort to inflict mayhem on locals and visitors. This might well be, but in the reasoning of the security establishment, nothing about such an assessment is ever proportionate, let alone reasoned.

Last week's arrest of 10 Brazilians (some reports put the figure at 12) suspected of planning attacks across the Rio games has been seen as a jolt. A country more accustomed to dealing with its own indigenous variants of violence and poverty did not need another incursion of ideological concern. That was for other countries to wrestle with.

When it came to the arrests of alleged Islamic State members, a certain sense of panic moved through the body politic, a sweat inducing fear. Were cells being cultivated in paradise? Would the vicious lone-wolf make a long waited debut? Judicial authorities in the state of Parana claimed to have intercepted calls suggesting a terrorist cell's wishes to use "weapons and guerrilla tactics" in attaining its goals.[2]

Operation Hashtag, as it was called, sparked confidence in certain officials within the presidential circle. Something was being done, which is always the operating premise of the guardians. "This shows," claimed Brazil's presidential chief of staff Eliseu Padilha, "that Brazil is on its toes and monitoring any suspects that could become a threat."

Brazil's security establishment, suggested Padilha, had been making visits to France to pick up tips in the aftermath of the Nice attacks. How useful such tips are to keep Brasilia on its toes, given the specific Gallic context, is hard to see.

The arrests did not inspire confidence at all levels. The Justice Minister Alexandre de Moraes seemed unimpressed, merely seeing bungling children at play. They were dabbling "amateurs" who had flirted with social media rather than any serious terrorist game.

Moraes did note that the men were rather green converts, having come to Islam after conducting Internet driven research on jihadism, and exchanging sympathetic messages on such chat platforms as WhatsApp and Telegram. (Others had also met in Egypt in efforts to learn Arabic.) Among topics of discussion: weapons training, and the possibility of an online purchase of an AK-47 assault rifle from a Paraguayan-based outlet.

ABIN, the Brazilian secret service, whose members were turning scarlet with rage, suggested that the issue was far more serious, one of greater organisation than the minister was giving them credit for.

A federal police source cited in The Japan Times expressed irritation that the minister "gave the impression that this is a minor problem that does not represent a risk. That's not right. We cannot spread that idea." [3]

The genie of fear is truly out of the bottle, roaming the land, sensible or otherwise. "Amateurs or not," claimed a former captain of an elite police squad in Rio de Janeiro, "they were organising themselves." The Islamic States's recruitment drive thrived on a perceived sense of disorganisation.

The Islamic State's techniques, and the recent spate of international attacks, are taken to have come from a different stable, a separate blue print. Robert Muggah, research director at the Rio de Janeiro-based think tank, the Igarape Institute, noted the qualitative difference about such organisations, that "they are more diffuse and widely distributed and may materialise where you don't expect them."

The official front from Brazil's intelligence community, at least for the time being, is that the slate on specific plans for attacking the Olympics is not so much clean as tidy. There is one fundamental fear: the lone wolf, a sort of terrorist parthenogenesis.

Modern states, with their muscular reach and brutal measures, remain incapable of detecting the point when an idea is implanted, and becomes a faith manifested in knife, bomb, or, in Nice, a murderous truck. A bloated security state can hardly be the answer, since it was never a solution to begin with.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/rio-olympics-security-brazil-terrorism-a7158071.html>

[2] <https://www.rt.com/news/352505-rio-olympics-terror-isis/>

[3] <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/23/world/plot-rio-olympics-raises-fears-lone-wolf-terrorist-attacks/#.V5hdTfI96Uk>

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