DEFENSE & SECURITY

Cities Need to Better Protect Themselves from Attacks Like the One That Disrupted the Paris Olympics

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Last week, the Paris railroad system was disrupted by planned, coordinated arson attacks. This was not unique, but it signals that major cities must be even better prepared for this “softer,” less violent, but still disruptive form of terrorism.

The attacks on Paris’ railroad system occurred just hours before the opening ceremonies of the 2024 Summer Olympics, causing widespread travel chaos. Cancellations and delays of high-speed trains followed, affecting both domestic and international travel.

It became difficult for athletes, officials, journalists, and spectators to travel to and from Paris. The sudden transportation issues created logistical challenges for the Olympic organizing committee, requiring them to quickly adapt their transportation plans. Undoubtedly, the attacks have cast a shadow over the beginning of the Olympics and generated negative publicity along with concerns about security.

The arsonists sabotaged fiber optic cables and other rail infrastructure, causing extensive damage. French authorities suspect that the perpetrator is a far-left activist.

Normally, the European Union has established stringent standards and regulations to ensure the safety of fiber optic cables used in infrastructure. Despite these regulations, the Paris arson attacks on fiber optic cables highlight potential vulnerabilities. The attackers were able to cause significant damage by setting fires to key elements of the system, which suggests a possible gap between regulatory standards and practical security measures on the ground.

The current standards emphasize flame retardant and low-smoke properties, but the incidents show that even regulated materials can be compromised by determined perpetrators.

Historically, the perception has been that bombs and political violence are integral ingredients in causing fear, which in turn leads to a kind of “surrender” to a given cause.

However, the arson attack to the Paris railroad system has shown that less costly and less violent methods can easily disrupt daily life in a large urban area. Complaints emerge, as do questions about a government’s capacity to maintain healthy, safe living in metropolises.

Arson has long been viewed a pathological disorder, and researchers and practitioners mainly have focused on wildlife fire in arsons for political purpose. However, the use of arson in urban environments has been on the rise since the early 2000s, and media reports likely spawned this type of attack in different parts of the world.

My research has noted that improvised incendiary devices, or IIDs, are being used increasingly because of their low cost. I also have found that this kind of coordinated attack is more likely to occur on symbolic dates or during major events in large cities.

In the past, Olympiads were subject to violent terrorist events such as the Munich massacre in 1972 and Atlanta bombing in 1996. One study reported 21 Olympic-related terrorist attacks between 1968 and 2014.

In 1992, the Eusskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA, was suspected of carrying out an arson attack on a hotel near the Olympic Village two months before the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

During the 2000 Summer Olympics , a terrorist plot targeted the Sydney power grid. This plot involved plans to set fires in various locations around Sydney, including potential targets related to the Olympics.

More recently, Japanese authorities thwarted a plot by a local extremist group that intended to attack Tokyo’s gas infrastructure during the rescheduled 2020 Summer Olympics.

These attacks and plots have shown an emerging pattern of relying on setting key infrastructure elements on fire to disrupt normalcy in daily life around the Olympics.

Future Olympic planning must focus even more intensely on the security of the transportation sector. There is no way to prevent all arson acts by extremists, but we must mitigate them by being more prepared to deal with these softer targets and tactics. Cities hosting the Olympics and other major events must harden these targets by using fire-resistant materials in the construction and renovation of critical infrastructure.

Perpetrators are rational and weigh the costs and benefits of their plans. A major deterrent for them is the risk of apprehension. Typically, train stations and platforms have real-time monitoring with CCTV cameras, rather than the entire network. With the AI technology, I think the entire rail network could be monitored and reported to a security operation center in major cities 24/7. This coverage would include transportation hubs, power grids, and gas pipelines.

Increased surveillance would raise the operational costs for potential perpetrators, leading them to reconsider or abandon their plans due to the heightened risk of being caught.

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