

Greek and US security chiefs plan for worst at Olympics

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Athens is working closely with Washington in the run-up to first Games since September 11, writes Demetri Sevastopulo

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When the Olympic Games return to Greece this August, many Greek officials may nervously wonder whether al-Qaeda members are well-versed in the Greek myths. Anxiety about Trojan horses may seem antiquated, but as the host of the first summer Games since the September 11 attacks on the US the Greeks cannot afford to take any chances

The Greeks have been working with the US and other countries for several years to ensure that the games are safe.

"We have the best humanly possible organised security plan," said George Floridis, Greek minister of public order who was recently in Washington meet US officials involved in security issues.

Mr Floridis points to the Greeks' success in dismantling the November 17 terror group as evidence of its ability to combat terrorism.

Now, despite initial concerns that Greece would have trouble getting a security apparatus into place by August, US government officials say they are confident they have risen to the Herculean task of protecting 10,500 athletes and the millions of

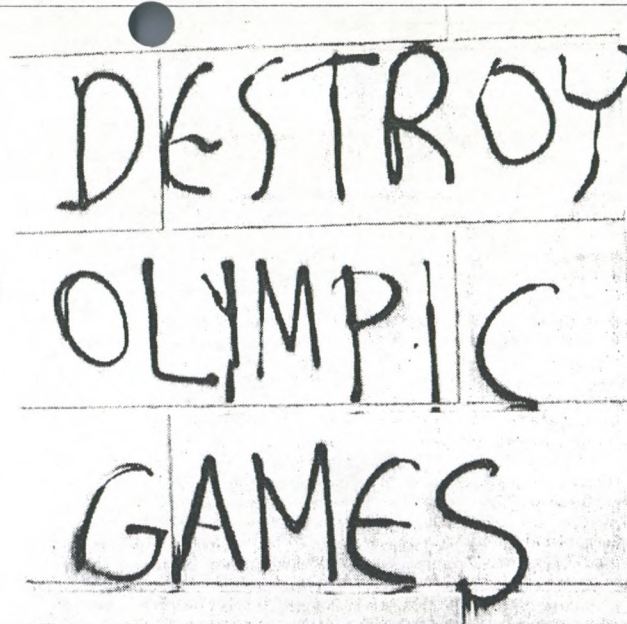
spectators who attend the games.

"Greece has really turned things around in the last two years and especially over the past few months has really recognised the extent of the challenge," says a senior administration official.

"The concern is that it is such a mammoth undertaking to do security for an Olympics, particularly in that corner of the world where you have such an extensive and jagged coastline and where there are all kinds of movement of people, weapons and contraband."

The Greeks boosted co-ordination with the US and other countries last year after an "intense wake-up call" in the form of a security exercise that exposed serious flaws in preparations for the games. The Greek government is spending \$800m (£644m, £440m) on security, more than three times that spent for the Sydney games. The US is providing equipment chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear detection equipment.

But while preparations are going according to plan, much depends on the next



A Greek riot policeman walks by an anti-Olympic Games poster

Reuters

six months, officials say.

"If the games were going to happen tomorrow we would be less satisfied," says a senior US counter-terrorism official.

The Greeks are co-operating closely with the Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation. They have also contracted California-based Science Applications International Corporation to provide surveillance systems.

"That got off to a little bit of a late start and it is not complete yet, but we expect it to be done by August," says the official.

The Achilles heel of the security plan may be the difficulty of patrolling Greece's borders, with its extensive coastline and the fact that it is party to the Schengen agreement, which allows free movement between several EU member states.

Athens has told US officials that it will tighten controls during the games. "They will put additional

immigration checks that they normally wouldn't have under the normal Schengen arrangement," according to the counter-terrorism official. "They have gotten from the EU the ability to have more rigid controls during that key time."

The US is also encouraging Greece to request Nato to provide air and sea security. US officials say the Greeks have been wary of approaching Nato because of Turkey's membership and their opposition to the alliance's bombing in Kosovo.

The other concern of US officials is that some terrorists may have already penetrated Greek borders. "These things are planned for years so any competent terrorist who wants to do something against the Olympics has been there for a long time," says the counter-terrorism official, who says screening at venues will be crucial.

Another controversial issue is whether the Greeks will allow other countries to

bring armed security personnel to protect their athletes.

"If we allow different people [carrying weapons] who do not know each other it is a dangerous situation which could turn into a massacre," said Mr Floridis.

The US is negotiating with the Greeks to see whether there is flexibility over providing armed guards. The US plans to send 100 diplomatic security agents, some of whom could be armed if the Greeks agree.

But while US intelligence officials have received no credible or specific terrorism threats related to the Olympics, they have reason to plan for the worst.

"Some of the terrorists apprehended after the Bali bombings indicated that they were aware of the Olympics and they thought about it as a target but determined that they weren't ready to do so at that time. Al-Qaeda has not forgotten these things," the official said.