

Pyro-terrorism in the forests

As the world focuses on the pandemic and cyber threats, and in light of the huge number of wildfires that engulfed parts of the world this summer, the dangers of pyro-terrorism should not be ignored, says **Tony Moore**

Pyro-terrorism is defined as: “The use of incendiary attacks to intimidate or coerce a government, civilian population, or any segment thereof, in order to advance political or social objectives.” It possesses the four general accepted elements of terrorism: The targeting of non-combatants; political motivation; violence with a psychological impact; and organised perpetrators. Pyro-terrorism differs from the criminal act of arson – the destruction of property using fire for profit or revenge – in that there are no political objectives in acts of arson, nor is there an intention to cause psychological effects.

Many attacks in the last two decades could be considered to be pyro-terror events. For instance, the death in Benghazi of the US Ambassador to Libya, J Christopher Stevens, in September 2012, was not caused by bullets, explosives or knives, but by a fire deliberately set after he was trapped in the designated safe room in the building that housed the US Mission; he died from smoke inhalation from the fire. However, this article concentrates on pyro-terrorism as it relates to wildfires.

Wildfires can be devastating. The two worst incidents this century in terms of lives lost and the destruction of property occurred in Australia and Greece, and the figures give an indication of how severe they can be. In 2009, on what became known as ‘Black Saturday’, a series of blazes in the Australian state of Victoria killed

173 people and injured 414; 7,562 people were displaced, and over 2,000 residential properties, together with 59 commercial premises and 12 community buildings – including two police stations – were destroyed.

During the Greek fires in 2018, 102 people were killed and the flames claimed 4,000 homes, together with 40,000 pine and olive trees. The villages of Mati and Kokkino Limanaki, where most of the deaths occurred, were totally destroyed. It is not suggested that either of these fires were terror attacks.

However, there are indications that pyro-terrorism in relation to wildfires should be considered a distinct possibility. In June 2004, US fire departments were warned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), that al-Qaeda was possibly going to cause wildfires in Colorado, Montana, Utah and Wyoming.

Fire as a weapon

In 2005, Dick Mangan, President of the International Association of Wildland Fire wrote: “The massive increases in the US budget for protection from terrorism (have) been mostly sent to police and structural fire departments. But wait: What about the threat of terrorist-caused wildland fires in our forests, community watersheds and wildland-urban interface? Who’s worried about that threat, what are they doing about it, and how

much is being spent to fund the efforts to prevent it?”

The utilisation of fire as a weapon by terrorist groups is not new. An article by Robert Baird, published in 2006, estimated that, up until that year, 56 terrorist groups had used fire as a weapon.

In November 2007, an Islamic forum instructed people to remember the ‘forest jihad’, noting that: “Fires cause economic damage and pollution, tie up security agencies and can take months to extinguish.” The following month, an al-Qaeda affiliated website invited: “The Muslims of Europe, America, Australia and Russia to burn forests.” In September 2008, Western intelligence agencies received information that al-Qaeda was: “Planning a global fireball.” To achieve this, the group would ‘deliberately’ light forest fires in Australia, Europe and the US which, it claimed: “Would not only stretch emergency services, but would also leave insurance companies facing multi-million dollar claims.”

In January 2017, using its now discontinued magazine, *Rumiyah*, ISIS told potential jihadists that the wildfires around Israel that month: “Demonstrated the lethality of such an effortless operation.” In January 2018, *Wildfire Today* carried an article about the threat of pyro-terrorism to American forests, in which the author said: “Most likely it is not *if*, but *when* it will occur.”

In May 2019, ISIS claimed responsibility in its weekly newsletter, al-Naba, for a series of wildfires in Iraq and Syria. On occasions, members of the terror outfit entered villages and threatened farmers, saying that they needed to pay taxes to prevent their grain fields from being set alight. In July 2020, ISIS released a new video in Arabic encouraging its followers: “To use cigarette lighters, matches and gasoline to start fires in places where they won’t be detected in retribution for US combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

An examination of terrorist-related incidents worldwide reveals that these groups are moving away from sophisticated weaponry or explosive devices towards simpler methods of destruction, which can result in equal amounts of publicity and the possibility of high levels of fatalities. Consequently, the last ten years have seen an increase in attacks with knives, or incidents where vehicles are rammed into crowds or groups of people. Knife attacks are slightly riskier for the terrorists than those involving vehicles. Knives, if found on a person before the attack, could give rise to suspicion, whereas vehicles are an essential part of everyday life.

Setting fire to a forest is a relatively easy; it requires no expense and minimum effort. It requires a box of matches or cigarette lighter, perhaps a piece of cloth immersed in gasoline, and appropriate vegetation and weather conditions. The fire can be initiated by a small, isolated group of individuals, or by a lone actor. Neither party may have any direct connection to a recognised terrorist group, but might be inspired by a particular ideology. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for law enforcement agencies to prevent or detect such a crime. Also, it must be recognised that spontaneous, natural causes of wildfires can be exploited by terrorist groups for propaganda

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purposes, with claims that they deliberately started them.

Of the 2021 fires, those in three countries are alleged to have been pyro-terrorist attacks:

■ **Algeria:** In August 2021, 90 people were killed in the country’s deadliest wildfires in living memory. Twenty-two people were arrested for allegedly starting the blazes and the government blamed two organisations it had recently designated as terrorist groups: the Islamist Rashad Movement and the Kabylie Autonomy Movement (MAK). The Islamist Rashad Movement, whose leaders all live in exile, is opposed to the current government in Algeria, accusing it of being controlled by a military junta and blaming it for the country’s economic and social malaise. The MAK is a terrorist group that seeks independence for the Kabylie region of Algeria and is supported by Morocco; its leader lives in exile in France.

■ **Israel:** Hamas, which holds a majority in the Palestinian Authority and largely controls the Gaza Strip, is designated by the EU as a terrorist organisation. However, some countries, like Australia and the UK, have only designated its military wing as a terrorist organisation. Others, such as Norway, Russia and Turkey, do not recognise any part of it as being a terrorist organisation. In late March 2018, what was known as ‘The march of return’ was launched in Gaza. This consisted of a series of demonstrations in the Gaza strip near the Israeli border every Friday through most of 2018 and 2019. Originally arranged by independents, it was quickly endorsed by Hamas. During the early stages, young Palestinians flew incendiary kites into Israeli territory, setting fire to areas of grasslands, agricultural fields and nature reserves. More recently, another means became popular – instead of kites, helium balloons were utilised. The concept was the same: launch the incendiary devices

into the air and rely on the breeze from the coast to push them into Israeli territory where they could start a blaze. The balloons themselves do not cause the fire – helium is an inert gas – but they carry flaming material that is attached to a long piece of string.

In June 2021, the BBC warned that militants had: “Frequently sent helium balloons and kites carrying containers of burning fuel and explosive devices over the Gaza border,” claiming that the devices had: “Caused hundreds of fires in Israel, burning thousands of hectares of forest and farmland.” In early August, at least four wildfires were started in southern Israel by such devices launched by Hamas supporters from the Gaza strip. Further reports later that month suggested that balloon-borne incendiary devices flown over the border from Gaza had sparked at least nine fires in southern Israel.

■ **Turkey:** The Kurdistan Worker’s Party or PKK – recognised as a terrorist group by the EU, the US and Turkey – has staged violent attacks against the state and its citizens since 1984, during which time nearly 40,000 people have been killed. In 1990, the PKK adopted wildfires as a tactic, under its discourse: “Turkey is not safe for tourists.” It set forests alight on a number of occasions, particularly in regions attractive to tourists.

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In 2021, wildfires spread over a vast area in the provinces of southern Turkey. The fact that many of these blazes broke out consecutively raised the possibility that they had been deliberately set by the Children of Fire Initiative, which is affiliated to the PKK. Indeed, PKK sympathisers took to social media to praise the fires and at least one social media outlet and one wire service alleged that the initiative had claimed responsibility for setting some of these wildfires.

Easy targets

Many people deliberately build their homes in areas of natural beauty, which are frequently forested. These wooded areas are an easy target for terrorists.

In many countries, the Internet and mass media provide detailed information on current and projected fire danger ratings in an effort to reduce negligent fires.

The result is an abundance of information that could enable a terrorist cell or lone actor to plan a pyro-terror attack against the forests themselves, or to use fire-setting as a diversionary attack to mount an assault on another target while fire services are tied up with fighting the fires and law enforcement is busy with evacuating people who are in danger.

Regardless of which motive is in play, a pyro-terrorist attack that is likely to result in people dying or destroying homes and livelihoods would, almost certainly, have a devastating effect.

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