Mitigating the Threat of Terrorist-Initiated Arson Attacks on Wildland-Urban Interface Areas[a]

Foreign terrorist organizations encourage arson attacks in the US because of its perceived simplicity and potential to cause significant and widespread damage. Arson-initiated wildland fires in the US, especially in the west, result in major human, property, infrastructure, environmental, and economic losses. About 40 percent of all US homes are in wildland-urban interface (WUI)[b] communities according to the US Department of Commerce, putting these communities at greater risk of wildfires. Although most WUI arson incidents in the Homeland resulted in criminal charges unassociated with terrorism, messaging by terrorists may result in acts of arson connected to terrorism.

SCOPE: This product provides awareness of the threat of arson at the wildland-urban interface, as well as planning and response considerations for first responders.

- In July 2020, ISIS released an English-language video titled *Incite the Believers* that urged supporters to conduct arson attacks in forests, fields, cities, and villages and to safely dispose of evidence to hinder law enforcement investigations.
- On 20 July 2019, authorities indicted an ISIS supporter in the US who said he wanted to set fire to the Berkeley Hills mountain range in California, a recognized WUI vulnerable to fires.
- In January 2017, ISIS English-language *Rumiyah* magazine provided instructions for making improvised incendiary devices and urged supporters to target wildlands and buildings.
- In May 2012, Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) ninth issue of *Inspire* magazine offered instructions and suggested materials for building a "timed incendiary device," or firebomb, and recommended targeting urban areas adjacent to wildlands in order to destroy natural resources, as well as structures and vehicles.

TACTICS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES (TTPs): Observed and potential TTPs that terrorists may use in preparing for or conducting an arson attack include the following:

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[a]This product was authored in collaboration with the California State Threat Assessment Center and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire).
[b]The WUI is defined by the US Fire Administration as the zone of transition between unoccupied land and human development. It is the line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels such as shrubs, trees, dead leaves, and fallen pine needles. Wildland fire is an overarching term describing any nonstructure fire that occurs in vegetation and natural fuels.

- **Recruiting** fire experts to maximize damage.
- **Messaging** TTPS for setting wildland fires, avoiding detection, and destroying forensic evidence.
- **Selecting targets** that will maximize the conflagration. Terrorists may damage power conductors or other electrical distribution components that could ignite a fire or use readily available combustible materials to destroy abandoned or unsecured buildings.
- **Choosing ignition sources** that are commonplace, such as cigarettes, lighters, matches, road flares, fireworks, and torches, or easy-to-build incendiary devices, such as Molotov cocktails.
- **Setting multiple fires** to amplify chaos and panic. Concurrent wildland fires undercut the effectiveness of the initial response by dispersing limited resources and requiring law enforcement to manage multiple routes to evacuate the public while keeping ingress open for responding units.
- **Impersonating public safety personnel** to enter an incident scene, remain on-site, or engage, distract, or confuse responding personnel in an effort to increase damage or the number of casualties.

> **THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE**
> More than 46 million residences in 70,000 communities across the US are at risk from WUI fires, because of their proximity to wildlands. The growth of these adjacent residential developments has increased the fire risk to people, structures, and responding public safety personnel. Fires in the WUI are more difficult to fight and pose unique challenges to first responders.
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> - Peak burning conditions during mid-summer to fall months, particularly during "red flag day(s),[a]" can quickly deplete fire suppression resources in high-risk WUIs. These fires can quickly engulf large geographic areas.
> - Overall, evacuation and response travel times are longer in WUI areas than in urban areas, and they typically increase the losses, which are generally higher on a per-incident basis than in urban areas.
> - Protecting critical infrastructure may be difficult, especially in remote areas where water is less available.
> - A vegetation fire is twice as likely to cause exposure fires—fires caused by another fire—in WUI areas as in urban areas.

PREVENTION CONSIDERATIONS: The following practices, procedures, and precautions may help prevent terrorist-initiated WUI fires or minimize the damage and casualties that fires may cause:

- **Coordination and Information Sharing:** Increase interagency response and investigation coordination among local, state, tribal, territorial, and federal agencies. Fire services should participate in the Information Sharing Environment (ISE)[c] through the National Network of Fusion Centers, Terrorism Liaison Officer (TLO) and Fusion Center Liaison Officer (FLO) programs, and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces. Make use of the ATF Bomb Arson Tracking System (BATS) for investigative reporting (see Resources).
- **Investigative Capabilities:** Train additional fire investigators to National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) standards and teach responders how to recognize indicators of arson and how to preserve evidence at the scene.

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[c]The ISE was established by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 and a direct result of the 9/11 Commission. The ISE consists of the people, projects, systems, and agencies that enable responsible information sharing across the national security enterprise. Law enforcement, defense, and intelligence personnel rely on timely and accurate information to keep America safe, and the ISE helps make that happen. Please visit https://www.dni.gov/index.php/who-we-are/organizations/national-security-partnerships/ise/about-the-ise for more information.

- **Threat Analysis:** Incorporate state and local fire services in the intelligence cycle, including during the development of threat assessments, given their subject-matter expertise.
- **Community Preparedness**: Encourage communities in the WUI to use protective measures, such as identifying and providing ready access to hardened structures and necessary infrastructure, and to prepare for evacuation through programs like California's "Ready, Set, Go" initiative (see Resources).
- **Suspicious Activity Reporting:** Encourage reporting by the public of suspicious activities and behaviors through programs, such as "See Something, Say Something" (see Resources).
- **Technology:** Deploy fire-detection cameras and weather-monitoring stations for real-time monitoring of WUI areas. This equipment allows monitoring of environments for ignitions and fire weather conditions.

RESPONSE CONSIDERATIONS: Terrorist arson is hard to discern from criminal arson in a WUI event during initial response and early investigation, but the considerations for responding to either type of arson are the same: preserving life, ensuring public safety, and limiting economic and structural damage:

- **Safety**: Maintain situational awareness. Recognize the impacts of fuel types (vegetation), conditions of the fuels, weather, fire behavior, topography, and the potential for exposure fires affecting structures and other infrastructure.
- **Hazard Identification**: Consider additional threats to first responders and the public, such as multiple fire ignitions that cause a burnover[d] or that merge into a large fire, or the intentional blocking of roadways to hinder response or evacuation efforts.
- **Prioritization**: Implement response actions according to safety priorities—protecting civilian lives, property and other infrastructure, the environment, and other valuable assets. In the event of multiple arson-initiated fires, triage safety and fire suppression actions.
- **Notifications**: Coordinate with local law enforcement to ensure prompt dissemination of evacuation notifications. Consider using evacuation assistance technology that provides population density and weather forecasts for areas and planned evacuation times.
- **Command and Control**: Using the Incident Command System (ICS) is key to maintaining a coordinated response among all responding agencies. When arson is suspected, be sure to include law enforcement in the command structure.
- **Investigative Response:** Be sure to clarify jurisdictional responsibilities between fire and law enforcement agencies in the event of an arson fire, in addition to sharing information, and providing resources and expertise to avoid "linkage blindness"—the failure to recognize patterns of activities that suggest the fire was caused by arson.
- **Public Information:** Proactive messaging and public outreach are essential in the event of a WUI fire incident. Timely public information can save lives and counter misinformation and disinformation.

HISTORICAL CASES: Arson fires initiated in the WUI during the past decade:

- On 24 September 2021, authorities charged a San Francisco Bay Area woman with starting the Fawn fire, which burned more than 8,500 acres and 100 homes near Redding, California.

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[c] A burnover is an event in which a fire moves through a location or overtakes personnel or equipment to the extent that there is no opportunity to use escape routes and safety zones, often resulting in personal injury or equipment damage.

- On 17 May 2021, authorities arrested an arson suspect in connection with a Los Angeles fire that burned more than 500 acres and forced the evacuation of 1,000 people in the city's western hills.
- On 5 June 2019, a California man was sentenced to death for setting the Esperanza fire in 2006, which killed five US Forest Service firefighters. This person was a known arsonist and used a combination of matches and cigarettes to start fires.
- In August 2016, authorities arrested a man for setting the Clayton fire in California, which burned 4,000 acres and destroyed nearly 200 buildings. The person previously worked as a prison firefighter while incarcerated.
- On 26 April 2012, authorities sentenced a 39-year-old former volunteer firefighter for lighting the Churchill fire in the United Kingdom, which killed 10 people and destroyed more than 150 homes and 88,000 acres.

RESOURCES:

- **ATF BOMB ARSON TRACKING SYSTEM (BATS)** is a web-based case management system that provides access to up-to-date arson and explosives investigative data from across the nation. https://www.atf.gov/explosives/bomb-arson-tracking-system-tracking-bats
- **CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION (CAL FIRE):**
  - **CAL FIRE Website**: https://www.fire.ca.gov
  - **READY, SET, GO!** is a multimedia campaign and interactive mobile application developed by CAL FIRE to help educate and prepare the public for wildfires. https://www.readyforwildfire.org/
- **DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**
  - **Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency: Fire as a Weapon** https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Fire%20as%20a%20Weapon%20Action%20Guide_Final%20508%20%2804.12.21%29v.2_1.pdf
  - **Federal Emergency Management Agency**
    - **National Fire Academy** www.usfa.fema.gov/training/nfa/
    - **US Fire Administration: Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)** https://www.usfa.fema.gov/wui/
    - **US Fire Administration: Training, Resources and Data Exchange** https://www.usfa.fema.gov/training/nfa/programs/trade.html
  - **Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN)** is a secure, trusted, national web-based portal for information sharing and collaboration among federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private-sector partners engaged in homeland security missions. https://hsin.dhs.gov/
  - **If You See Something, Say Something®** is a program that raises public awareness of indicators of terrorism and terrorism-related crime and emphasizes the importance of reporting suspicious activity to the proper state and local law enforcement officials. https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something
  - **Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative** provides law enforcement with a tool to help prevent terrorism and related criminal activity by establishing a national capacity for gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing SAR information. https://www.dhs.gov/nsi
  - **State and Major Urban Area Fusion Centers** are state-owned and operated centers that serve as focal points in states and major urban areas for the receipt, analysis, gathering, and sharing of threat-related information among state, local, tribal, territorial, federal,

and private-sector partners. https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-center-locations-and-contact-information

- o **READY** is a national public service campaign to educate and empower the public to prepare for, respond to, and mitigate emergencies, including natural and manmade disasters. https://www.ready.gov/

- **FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION**
  - o **e-Guardian** is an online repository of terrorism-related activities shared among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies. https://www.fbi.gov/resources/law-enforcement/eguardian
  - o **Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal** is a secure, Internet-based information-sharing system for law enforcement, first response, criminal justice, counterterrorism, and intelligence agencies. https://www.cjis.gov/

- **NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER**
  - o **First Responder's Toolbox: ISIS Continues To Encourage Arson Attacks,** published 7 August 2020. https://www.odni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/First_Responders_Toolbox_-_Terrorist_Arson_FINAL_v21.pdf
  - o **First Responder's Toolbox: Recognizing Arson with a Nexus to Terrorism,** published 14 April 2017; rereleased 1 May 2019. https://www.odni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/First_Responders_Toolbox-Recognizing_Arson_With_a_Nexus_to_Terrorism_Originally_Published-14_April_20171_May_2019-survey.pdf
  - o **International Terrorism Guide:** https://www.dni.gov/nctc/index.html

- **NATIONAL INTERAGENCY FIRE CENTER (NIFC)** https://www.nifc.gov

- **NATIONAL PARK SERVICE WILDLAND FIRE PROGRAM** https://www.nps.gov/subjects/fire/index.htm

- **NATIONAL WILDLAND COORDINATING GROUP (NWCG) Wildland Fire Investigation Subcommittee** provides national leadership in wildland fire investigation, including developing and promulgating wildland fire investigation standards, qualifications, training, certification, and practices that are sufficient to support fire prevention, as well as criminal, civil, and administrative actions. https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/wildland-fire-investigation-subcommittee

- **REGIONAL INFORMATION-SHARING SYSTEM (RISS)** offers secure information sharing and communications capabilities, critical analytic and investigative support services, and event deconfliction to enhance officer safety. RISS supports efforts against organized and violent crime, gang activity, drug activity, terrorism and violent extremism, human trafficking, identity theft, cybercrime, and other regional priorities. https://www.riss.net

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