Homeland Security

Fire as a Weapon
Security Awareness for Soft Targets and Crowded Places

The use of fire as a weapon is consistently reflected in terrorist propaganda. The use of fire does not require sophisticated planning or capability by an attacker which makes this an attractive method to cause harm to people and property. Violent extremists may use fire or arson-style tactics against critical infrastructure or to augment a complex coordinated attack at a mass gathering event, which could hamper the efforts of first responders due to poor visibility, high heat, deadly smoke, and explosions.

Potential Indicators

The use of fire as a weapon is unpredictable and may have few observable indicators. However, careful attention to warning signs could aid in mitigating a potential incident.

- Report theft of large or heavy-duty vehicles that may be used as fire barriers or to penetrate interior spaces in urban environments.

- Suspicious questioning regarding building floor plans, locations of egress and elevators as well as water supply and HVAC systems.

- Damaged fire protection systems and equipment.

- Suspicious or unattended items, including backpacks, purses, bags, that may contain incendiary devices.

- Purchase of hazardous substances.

- Social media messaging that promotes fire as a weapon imagery or aspirational guidance.

What Should People Do in Case of a Fire Attack?

- Leave area of the fire activity immediately and alert others.

- Avoid areas where obvious smoke or fire is visible.

- If indoors, evacuate the premises and close all doors behind you to confine the fire. If unable to evacuate, move as far away as possible from the hazard.

- If outdoors, move to the nearest safe area away from the hazardous activity. If necessary, seek shelter indoors.

- Maintain situational awareness and stay alert to suspicious behavior and additional threats.

- Call 9-1-1 and follow directions from emergency personnel.

FACTS & EVENTS

- As of June 2018, kite- and balloon-borne Improvised Incendiary Devices (IIDs) launched into Israel have caused more than 450 fires and burned at least 7,000 acres of cropland and nature preserves, resulting in over $2 million in economic loss.

- In January 2018, a student at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota was charged with setting eight fires around campus in response to the destruction of schools in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- In December 2017, three individuals in Gothenburg, Sweden attacked a Jewish synagogue with a firebomb during a youth celebration.

- In August 2017, three ISIS inspired individuals were arrested for allegedly setting two fires at a Shiite Muslim mosque in Melbourne, Australia.

Mitigation Strategies and Protective Measures

Protective Measures

- Work with the local fire, EMS, and law enforcement officials for recommendations on how to plan for emergencies, considering adequate access to fire control and suppression materials, first aid stations, triage, fire and EMS vehicle staging, as well as emergency routes in and out of the facility.

- Review and revise, if necessary, Emergency Action Plans that address the options for evacuation in a fire emergency, plans for smoke control, and EMS and fire response.

- Post signage relating to fire and emergency entry and exit points, first-aid stations, shelter locations, and prohibited items not allowed into the facility.

- Train personnel to identify suspicious behavior and activity, and understand how to report.

Access Controls

- Employ monitoring, surveillance, and inspection consistent with facility and venue operations and associated security requirements.

- Identify and maintain an inventory with the quantity, location of use, and storage of all flammable and combustible materials which could be used as accelerants. Examples include: paints, degreasers, alcohol based cleaners, aerosols, propane gas tanks, etc.

- Inspect packages, briefcases, backpacks, parcels, and luggage being carried by people, where practical (e.g., employees, contractors, vendors, visitors, and patrons).

- Define the perimeter and areas that require access control for pedestrians and vehicles, and identify areas that require special access controls (e.g., control rooms, communications centers, computer server rooms, fuel or chemical storage tanks, and mechanical equipment).

Additional Resources for Owners and Operators

For direct regional support, visit www.dhs.gov/hometown-security.

For additional resources, products, and information regarding the security of soft targets and crowded places, please visit www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness.