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PHYSICAL THREAT LEVEL

GUARDED

FB-ISA O has assessed the general Physical Threat Level for US Faith-Based Organizations as **“GUARDED.”** As per FB-ISA O’s definitions of the Physical Threat Levels, **“GUARDED”** means FB-ISA O is unaware of any specific threats but a general risk of incidents exists.

This assessment has been developed by FB-ISA O and is our general, nationwide, threat assessment for the US community of faith. As always, for local threat information, members are encouraged to work closely with neighborhood partners, local law enforcement, state and local [fusion centers](#), local [FBI field offices](#), DHS [Protective Security Advisors](#) and other local experts and responders.

THE THREAT OF FIRE: ARSON AND WILDFIRES

IN BRIEF: After a wet spring, much of the US and parts of the world are reaching peak wildfire season. Over the past several years, wildfires have seemingly grown in intensity and in the amount of damage they create. Drought conditions have only added fuel to them, leaving families and organizations grappling with the after-effects. While weather has an impact on creating these wildfires, they can also be man-made, either initiated through negligence or deliberately. The use of arson as a weapon is a tactic promoted and embraced by terrorist groups, specifically al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and can be used for a variety of purposes. While not commonly employed, the threat of such attacks, especially in dry areas and during an intense wildfire season or droughts, is a challenging security threat. For the Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), there have been notable arson attempts directed against places of worship. Additionally, abandoned or vacant buildings maintained by FBOs can also be enticing targets for attackers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Wildfires are not only a weather-related issue, but can also be used as a weapon.
- Terrorist groups have advocated for the use of fire in their propaganda over the years, and fire has been evident in attacks over the past decade.
- FBOs face threats, not only from terrorist groups, but also from arson-related incidents as well as in vacant and unoccupied buildings.
- Incorporating fire as a weapon threats and tactics into existing threat intelligence collection can help organizations make appropriate risk-based decisions and update policies and procedures accordingly.

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DISCUSSION. Heavy rains over much of the US during April and May did little to change the threat of wildfires in the hotspot areas around the country. In Arizona, there are already [10 active fires](#) across the state, four of which are prescribed burns, with the [Woodbury Fire](#) in the Tonto National Forest currently at 36,000 acres and containment may not be accomplished until July, with triple digit temperatures not helping the situation. The one bright spot is that the fire is not expected to threaten populated areas. Compared to last year, the number of fires in the state are down and overall, wet and mild conditions this spring have “kept U.S. wildfire acreage at its lowest level in more than a decade of monitoring.” However, forecasts call for an above-average fire threat building through the summer in the Pacific states, and in much of the US and parts around the world, peak season is just beginning. So, while the news in the US has been good to date, Canada has gotten off to a [different start](#). As of last week, there were 87 fires were burning in seven provinces and two territories, forcing 4,415 people from their homes. Currently there are over [900 wildfires](#) across the US and Canada.

The risk of a wildfire as a result of nature or extreme drought is a challenge for firefighters in and of itself. Add in the accidental or reckless behavior of park visitors, and the risk increases. With the severe weather patterns around the world, and especially within the western part of the United States, **wildfires have also become a weapon to be used by extremists and terrorist groups.** In May, the Islamic State [claimed](#) that the group and its followers were behind a series of wildfires in Iraq and Syria. “In the group’s official weekly newsletter, al-Naba, ISIS said the targets were ‘apostates’ whose ‘hearts have long been burned’ and vowed the blazes are ‘just the beginning.’” Fire as a weapon and arson attacks can be a significant threat and danger for organizations and security teams, but as the Islamic State also emphasized during their most recent claim, the economic impact can be just as important, “noting ‘many agricultural lands have been destroyed’ and ‘tons of crops,’ including wheat and barley, went up in flames in the jihadists’ ‘harvest of another kind.’”



The focus on the use of fire as a weapon and its impact can be best traced back to the [2008 Mumbai, India attack](#). Over a three-day period, 166 people were killed in multiple locations across the city, including hospitality and retail areas. “The attackers employed multiple means of attack, including improvised explosive devices, assassination, hostage barricade, building takeover, active shooter, kidnapping, and fire. Despite all of the violence, the most iconic images from that event remain the fire at Taj Mahal Hotel. The pictures of people hanging out of the windows of the hotel to escape the fire are reminiscent of 9/11.” It was also documented in the ensuing investigation that during the attack, the leader of the attack asked, “Are you setting the fire or not?” **Fire was identified and used as a strategic weapon on a couple of fronts.** It helped **symbolize the terror** that these groups could impose on others; fire is a widely feared threat, and it also **“complicated the rescue planning and challenged the first responders** to deal with not only an active shooter threat inside a hostage barricade situation, but also one where fire and smoke created a second layer of obstacles to the rescue force—one for which they were not prepared.”

Using fire as a weapon is not a new concept. Both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have repeatedly mentioned using fire as a method to attack targets in its online media and magazines.

- In a [2012 issue of Inspire magazine](#), readers were introduced to various methods of conducting an attack, including the use of simple “ember bombs” to ignite forest fires.
- During the [US Embassy attack in Benghazi](#) on September 11, 2012, the US Ambassador was killed at his compound. While the attack was a coordinated effort on multiple fronts with firearms, IEDs, and other military ordinance used, the Ambassador’s death was the result of smoke inhalation as a result of an arson fire set up at the compound.
- [Issue #5 of Rumiya](#) makes fire an emphasis on the cover and a “Just Terror Tactics” section that includes a lead article on arson attacks. The article advises, “Throughout history and until the present day, **incendiary attacks**

have played a significant role in modern and guerrilla warfare, as well as in ‘lone wolf’ terrorism. Such attacks have been behind the destruction of towns, neighborhoods, and public, private, and governmental property, while likewise claiming numerous lives.” In a second article titled, “The Flames of Justice,” the author goes into detail citing specific verses in the Koran justifying fire attacks against non-believers and against fellow Muslims.

- In 2018, “[flaming kites](#)” and balloons are being used by Palestinians to fly over the border with Israel, creating fires and destroying property and farmlands. **This year, farmers are experiencing the [same threat](#) with two incidents reported over the past weekend.**

For FBOs threat of fire as a weapon can also apply to [arson](#) activity, which is “the willful or malicious burning of property (such as a building) especially with criminal or fraudulent intent.” The FBI expands this to specifically call out dwelling houses, public buildings, motor vehicles or aircraft, and personal property of another. In the May FB-ISAO Monthly Threat Brief there were five different arson related attempts or arrests against FBOs. Overall, the [2017 FBI Uniform Crime Report](#) revealed the following statistics:

- There were 41,171 reported arsons.
- Forty-five percent of all arson offenses involved structures (e.g., residential, storage, public, etc.).
- The average dollar loss per arson was \$15,573.
- Arsons of industrial/manufacturing structures resulted in the highest average dollar losses (an average of \$54,517)

FBOs in addition to attacks directed against facilities, there are also challenges at vacant and abandoned buildings. FBOs or non-profit organizations may manage buildings as part of their community engagement and support activities. These buildings may also go vacate during parts of the year or in-between tenants. As such, they may be vulnerable. Every year, the U.S. Fire Administration marks [National Arson Awareness Week](#). In 2018, the focus was on [Reducing Arson at Vacant and Abandoned Buildings](#) with the “focus on the importance of a cooperative effort with fire and emergency service departments, law enforcement, and public works to help **prevent the horrendous crime of arson at vacant and abandoned buildings.**” Some statistics that highlight the dangers of this threat include:

- “According to the U.S. Fire Administration’s National Fire Incident Reporting System, at 34 percent, intentional actions were the leading cause of vacant residential building fires.
- “The ATF’s Bomb Arson Tracking System reported that there has been an average of 550 incendiary/arson fires per year at abandoned and vacant properties for the 10-year period from 2007 to 2016.
- “About 23,800 vacant residential building fires are reported each year and cause an estimated 75 deaths, 200 injuries, and \$785 million in property loss.
- “Intentional actions are the leading cause of residential and nonresidential vacant building fires.
- “About 6,400 vacant nonresidential building fires are reported each year and cause an estimated 5 deaths, 50 injuries, and \$205 million in property loss.
- “An average of 550 incendiary/arson fires are reported each year at properties that are abandoned, vacant-secured, vacant-unsecured, uninhabited, idle, and to be demolished.
- “Vacant and abandoned building fires cause a disproportionate share of firefighter injuries.”

Fire was used as a strategic weapon in order to symbolize the terror that terrorist groups could impose on others; and it also showed how it can be used to complicate the rescue planning and challenged the first responders.

MITIGATION. While the threat of arson is real for many organizations, fire planning remains a core part of preparedness that addresses the threat, vulnerabilities, training and exercises, where appropriate.

Planning. Organizations are encouraged to **incorporate “fire as a weapon” into potential threat tactics** and recognize that even if they are not in a location that may be prone to wildfires, they could be targeted by threats with weapons involving fire, such as flaming kites and balloons.

- Coordinate with local law enforcement, and specifically the fire department, to do a walk-through of the organization and help identify potential hazard as part of the Organizational Fire Plan. **When evaluating a building, organizations can use the [Basic Evaluation Procedures for Abandoned and Vacant Buildings](#) document, which shows fire service officials how to collect information about an abandoned or vacant property that can be helpful to emergency responders should an incident occur. *And while this document is specific to abandoned and vacant buildings, the information contained therein can also be helpful to all buildings.***
 - “Determine if the building is secure.
 - “Identify hazards that require immediate corrective action.
 - “Evaluate the fire growth potential of the building.
 - “Evaluate the potential for structural collapse.
 - “Identify conditions that could be hazardous to personnel.”
 - The guide also gives you tips on how to spot indications of problems involving the site, the building and its contents as well as gives inspectors ideas of safety while doing the inspection and for potential safety issues.
- Designate fire marshals to help the organization plan and organize efforts should a fire occur.
- Additional considerations outlined in the [Emergency Preparedness Checklist](#) by the National Fire Prevention Association include:
 - “Verify that emergency management/business continuity plans, and procedures have been documented.
 - “Review and document basic steps to take, such as an evacuation route and a meeting place.
 - “Create contact lists for all employees, customers, and key vendors.
 - “Outline the steps needed for restoring the business if operational components and/or infrastructure are lost.
 - The checklist also addresses communications, risk assessments, emergency response, business continuity of operations, and training and education planning.



Training and Exercises. While these should be part of the organization’s baseline security processes, it is essential that employees are trained on the fire threat, and actions to take should a fire occur. Employees should receive training on what to do in the event of a fire, and if possible, exercises can be used to reinforce that training and allow employees to walk through an incident while allowing the organization the opportunity to identify potential gaps or vulnerabilities within the plan. Regular fire drills - scheduled and unscheduled - can help reinforce understanding, as well as identify potential issues with the fire plan. However, when planning a fire drill, here is an [example](#) of what not to do.

For some organizations, and especially those who may be in high-risk areas, it may be possible to do community exercises that incorporate community partners, and neighboring residents or businesses. Last week, the Pikes Peak Regional office of Emergency Management held a [wildfire evacuation drill](#) for several high risk communities. As noted by a county spokesman, “It’s very important that those people who live in those areas right up against the forests are educated and have practiced and are intentional and know what to do in case a wildfire starts in their area so they can get out safely.”

RESOURCES.

[FEMA: How to Prepare for a Wildfire](#)

[Ready.gov](#) – Wildfires.

[US Fire Administration](#) – Information concerning Hotel and Motel Fires; Nonresidential Fires.

**National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook: [Predictive Services National Interagency Fire Center](#).
Issued: June 1, 2019**

Alaska: Normal significant wildland fire potential during the outlook period.

Northwest: Normal significant large fire potential is expected across the region during the outlook period except west of the Cascade crest in Washington and Oregon through August where Above Normal significant large fire potential is expected. The Above Normal potential in these areas will gradually spread southward and eastward along the Canadian Border from northwestern Washington as the season progresses.

Northern California and Hawaii: Above normal significant wildland fire potential is expected across the Bay Areas, Sacramento Valley and foothills, and the Mid Coast except the Mendocino National Forest in June and July. Below Normal significant wildland fire potential is expected across the northwestern mountains and the northern Sierra in July. For August and September, Normal significant wildland fire potential is expected across the North Coast and the northern Sierra. All other areas can expect Above Normal fire potential. Hawaii can expect Above Normal significant wildland fire potential during the entire outlook period.

Southern California: Normal significant large fire potential is expected across the region during the outlook period except in the foothills and coastal mountains where Above Normal significant large fire potential is expected June through September. Below Normal significant wildland fire potential is expected in the southern Sierra in June and July.

Northern Rockies: Normal significant large fire potential is expected across the region during the outlook period except across the northern Idaho Panhandle and Northwestern Montana where Above Normal significant large fire potential is expected in July through early September.

Great Basin: Normal significant large fire potential is expected across the region during the outlook period except across the central and eastern portion of the region in June when Below Normal significant wildland fire potential is expected. The Below Normal potential will continue across the eastern Mountains of Utah in July while Above Normal potential will develop across the southern boundary of the region along the Arizona Strip.

Southwest: Below Normal significant large fire potential is expected in areas east of the Continental Divide in June. Above normal significant large fire potential is expected across southern Arizona through July followed by Normal potential for August and September. Elsewhere, expect Normal significant large fire potential during the outlook period.

Rocky Mountain: Below Normal significant wildland large fire potential is expected across the entire region in June followed by Below Normal potential across Central and Southwestern Colorado in July. Elsewhere, expect Normal significant wildland fire potential during the outlook period.

Eastern Area: Below Normal significant large fire potential is forecast along southwestern portions of the Upper Midwest during June. Normal significant wildland fire potential is expected elsewhere during the outlook period.

Southern Area: Above Normal significant large fire potential is expected across eastern South Carolina and southeastern Georgia in June. This area will expand southward to include extreme northeastern Florida and north to include extreme eastern North Carolina in July. Normal potential should return to these areas by September. Below Normal significant large fire potential is expected across portions of Texas and Oklahoma in June and July. In areas or periods not mentioned above, expect Normal significant fire potential.