



Australia 2009 Arson Wildfires: Possible *Wildfire Jihad* Tactic?

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As of February 9, 2009, little speculation in the media has explored the possibility that the arson fires in Australia represent a new phase in terrorism.

In October 2008, James T. Kirkhope of the Terrorism Studies Group (Washington, DC) provided two days of training for the Southern States Livestock and Rural Enforcement Association at their annual meeting in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The focus on Agro-terrorism and Terrorist Tactics included a briefing on the terrorist threat of forest fires.

While there is no public evidence currently available to indicate that this tragedy which has resulted in a death toll approaching 200 is a terrorist attack, it is important to note that this specific tactic has been discussed publicly in the rhetoric of al Qaeda (al Qaida) and like-minded groups since 2007 and more generally as far back as the mid-1990s.

Wildfires as a Terrorist Tactic

In 1996, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (Usama bin Laden) first spoke of his strategy to attack significant sectors of western economies in his fatwa entitled "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places." He expanded further on strategy and justifications in his 1998 "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders."

Public unclassified U.S. government sources indicate that bin Laden's organization had begun to operationalize the strategy of asymmetric strikes against enemy economies as early as 2000.

For example, a captured al Qaeda diary entry dated in 2000 describes "plans against America consisting of explosions and the burning of cities and farms."

Similar sources revealed that al Qaeda operatives discussed the tactic of "starting timed fires" in diaries dated in 2002.

Subsequently, sources note that evidence uncovered in the interim suggests that jihadi militants have further conceptualized plans to set grasslands and forests of specific western countries ablaze with timed devices to ensure escape.



Notably, the Australian wildfires of 2002 were referenced in such plotting.

Then, in late 2007, U.S. analysts identified an open source threat posted on a Chechen website appealing to local Muslim militants in Australia, Europe, Russia, and the United States to pursue a "forest jihad" since these countries are "at war with Muslims."

The author apparently sought to inflict widespread financial loss and perhaps significant threat to life.

He seemed to justify the tactic when recounting the religious passage describing when Muhammed "burned the Jews' palm trees in Najir."

Militant Islamic Threat to Australia

Although there has never been a terrorist attack on the Australian subcontinent, numerous Australian citizens were killed in the 2002 Bali bombings and the attack on Australia's embassy in Indonesia.

Australian intelligence sources indicated that they are aware that various suspects have carried out extensive surveillance on the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge, railway stations and the Melbourne stock exchange as early as mid-2005.

Notably, in November 2005 Australian authorities arrested 16 individuals suspected of planning a major terrorist attack on Australian soil.

Various raids in Sydney and Melbourne, totaling 23 different locations, netted 16 suspects who collectively possessed a large amount of chemicals similar to that used in the London subway bombings of July 7, 2005.

Among those men arrested was Abu Bakr, an outspoken Algerian-Australian cleric who has publicly praised Osama bin Laden and urged fellow Muslims to join the jihad against western governments.

Australia is a target for Islamic extremists who continue to view the country as a puppet of the US government in the ongoing war on terrorism.

Australia's highly profiled and publicized involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as past peacekeeping missions in East Timor, has drawn considerable criticism and contempt from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network as well as Indonesian based Jemaah Islamiya (JI).



Osama Bin Laden has been clearly instructing both operatives and sympathizers to specifically target Australia as far back as his November 2002 statement and again in another announcement released in October 2003. Additionally, alleged al Qaeda spokesman "Azzam the America" – suspected to be Adam Gadahn originally from California – railed against the Pacific allies in a video threatening, "Yesterday, London and Madrid. Tomorrow, Los Angeles and Melbourne, Allah willing. And this time, don't count on us demonstrating constraint or compassion."

The two Australian cells jihadist cells captured in 2005 appear to have much more similar to the London and Madrid homegrown jihadist sympathizers than to the New York and Washington al Qaeda agents – most of whom were agents sent by al Qaeda from overseas specifically for the 9/11 attack.

Wildfire Jihad Threat to the United States and Beyond

In Spring 2008 a DHS security memo to the law enforcement community concluded that there was "no evidence of an imminent threat" of "terrorist-initiated fires" to the United States.

The U.S. government memo further noted that no forest or wild fires have ever been attributed to al Qaeda or its supporters despite recent public incitement and older uncovered documents discussing and formulating the tactic.

Federal analysts recommended, however, that frontline responders be aware of this tactic due to its operational simplicity and low cost.

- More urgently, in the near term (February – April 2009) it is prudent for international first responders to be vigilant against copy-cat arson wildfire attacks by isolated "lone-wolf" individuals or by small, poorly organized, jihadi's and jihadi sympathizers.
- Since such attacks require minimal training and cost, they are easy to duplicate without much preparation.
- Although it is nearly impossible to prevent such attacks, first responders should place special emphasis on quickly identifying wildfires and train to improve response times in the near term.

Despite the unlikelihood that the February 2009 Australian wildfires mark al Qaeda's first operation of a "Forest Jihad," it is critical for Responders and Analysts to understand that militant jihadi's have considered setting fires both strategically as a form of economic



warfare and operationally identifying targets and discussing appropriate manpower for over a decade.

Nonetheless, the most urgent threat now is from "lone-wolf" individuals or by small groups seeking to inflict damage similar to that seen in Australia in 2002 as well as most recently in 2009.

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