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BRIC Strategic Intelligence Report

Increased Threat Surrounding the Use of Unmanned Aerial Systems

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BOSTON REGIONAL INTELLIGENCE CENTER

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(U//NP) SUMMARY & KEY POINTS

(U//NP) There has been a significant increase in the utilization of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) aka “drones” for recreational activity and first responder response. The threat environment surrounding the operationalization and weaponization of drones by various violent extremists including those who align with domestic violent extremist (DVE) groups, foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), and other criminal actors is high, as seen by recent successful and thwarted attacks, global conflicts, and propaganda disseminated by violent extremist groups that particularly call for extremists to conduct acts of mass violence targeting large public gatherings through the malicious utilization of UAS operations.



Source: Boston 25 News

(U//NP) THREAT ENVIRONMENT

(U//NP) The malicious use of UAS by threat actors presents a significant and unique challenge for ensuring the safety and security of the public for law enforcement agencies due to the increased popularity and ease of access to commercial UAS by civilians. Although the threat of the malicious use of drones utilized to conduct acts of mass violence remains high and a top concern, novice or poorly trained UAS operators present a unique challenge for public safety as this increases the potential to cause unintentional property damage or UAS related personal injuries. The BRIC has observed increased UAS activity in the Metro-Boston Homeland Security Region (MBHSR) that has led to property damage, physical injuries, and surveillance that may be associated with non-criminal-related UAS operations. These localized incidents highlight the necessity for civilian UAS operators to adhere to the current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) policies for civilian drone use and the need for law enforcement officers to familiarize themselves with standard UAS ownership and operational procedures from operators. A lack of comprehensive legislation in the United States giving non-federal law enforcement agencies the authority to terminate unauthorized UAS flights, as well as the minimal access to advanced technology to counter these threats, are likely to provide a significant challenge in mitigating threatening UAS activity within the Metro-Boston Homeland Security Region.

(U//NP) The proliferation of UAS technology has democratized aerial photography and simultaneously revolutionized modern warfare. It has also introduced a new dimension to the security landscape by providing violent threat actors with a means to deploy aerial assets to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, penetrate secure perimeters, fly in unauthorized areas, or be weaponized to inflict casualties. Commercially available UAS technology provides a readily available means for threat actors and/or criminal actors to survey and assess possible target locations or potentially conduct surveillance prior to conducting an act of mass violence. Non-nefarious use of drones in public spaces also present significant public safety risks. Drone operator error, mechanical malfunctions, inclement weather, strong wind gusts, and unseen obstructions can render a drone inoperable midair, possibly leading to the drone crashing and causing injuries to those below. Whether dealing with nefarious activity or recreational drone use, UAS operation in public spaces poses a serious risk to public safety, and legitimate drone mitigation technology must be available to authorities. The following is a summary of incidents that have occurred within the MBHSR involving the potentially nefarious or non-nefarious use of UAS that led to the direct impact on public safety and emergency response services.

- (U//NP) In November 2025, Boston Police responded to a call for an individual who was reportedly flying a drone within the vicinity of Logan International Airport. The individual was determined to be a hobbyist who had an active FAA license to operate his drone. Although it was determined that this was not a nefarious operation of a drone, this had the ability to significantly impact operations and flights in and out of a major international airport.

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- (U//NP) In October 2025, a UAS collided with a video screen on the main speaking platform during a First Amendment protected event occurring within on the Boston Common that had approximately 25,000 individuals in attendance. The drone was in close proximity to several elected government officials and community members who were on the stage speaking at the time of incident. BPD personnel immediately recovered the drone, and it was turned over to detectives who were able to identify the owner/operator through a digital forensic examination of the data/video captured by the drone.
- (U//NP) In September 2025, the take-off of a medical helicopter was delayed from a Boston hospital when a UAS was reported operating in the immediate area. It was quickly determined that the drone was not being operated by BPD or BFD. Although one UAS was reported, a BPD UAS detection platform showed two UAS had been operating in the area at the time. The operator(s) of the drone(s) were not identified, and the drones were not recovered.
- (U//NP) In October 2024, a commercial UAS crashed into a crowd gathered in City Hall Plaza for a Boston Celtics watch party injuring three victims. The UAS was piloted by a certified operator for a broadcast company covering a live performance at the event. The UAS operator stated that while piloting the drone and taking footage of the stage performance, he flew the drone between two trees and accidentally struck a light pole causing the drone to crash.ⁱ

(U//NP) Propaganda disseminated by designated foreign terrorist organizations, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, have encouraged the use of weaponized drones to conduct attacks on the West and Western assets abroad. Terrorist organizations have encouraged the use of weaponized drones in their propaganda with regularity, highlighting ease of access, the difficulty in stopping them, and the high psychological toll that drone attacks would cause. In addition to the utilization of drones to conduct an attack, terrorist organizations have increasingly been urging their followers to acquire commercially available drones in order to conduct preoperational surveillance and target reconnaissance to strengthen their attack planning. Online tutorials, black market components, and informal training networks are now readily available online, which has enabled tactics originally developed in conflict zones to migrate quickly into criminal and extremist use. This evolution in technology and tactics has led and continues to create new challenges for law enforcement, national security, and counterterrorism efforts worldwide.

(U//NP) The rapid global expansion of inexpensive, commercially available drones has not only transformed battlefields as we have seen in recent and ongoing global conflicts, but it has irrevocably changed how extremists and criminal organizations operate, providing capabilities once reserved for nation states and their militaries. Off-the-shelf drones designed for photography or recreation have increasingly been repurposed for sabotage, attempted and successful assassinations, pre-operational surveillance, narcotics smuggling, and large-scale attacks. This has allowed state actors and non-state actors alike to project power with minimal cost and technical expertiseⁱⁱ. This trend reflects the broader expansion of technology and the increase in availability of UAS equipment across borders.

- (U//NP) Throughout the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, commercially available drones have become central to how military personnel conduct surveillance and tactical operations, some of which have included attacks on critical infrastructure assetsⁱⁱⁱ. Early in this conflict, inexpensive off-the-shelf quadcopters and kit-based systems were adapted for reconnaissance and artillery spotting. By 2025, both Russian and Ukrainian military assets were of utilizing a significant number of UAS' ranging from simple first-person-view (FPV) drones, purpose-built loitering systems based on commercial components, and expanded to attack drones utilized to compensate for shortages in personnel and artillery.^{iv}
- (U//NP) Transnational Criminal Organizations – including drug cartels that have been designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTO) by the US Department of State – reportedly joined Ukraine's foreign fighter units specifically to acquire FPV drone capabilities in combat during the ongoing Russian Ukrainian war^v. Reporting suggests that exposure to foreign battlefields and black-market training networks has assisted narcotics traffickers in their criminal operations and how the use of commercially available drones can be adapted for surveillance, intimidation, and attacks to offset the advantages of state security forces.
- (U//NP) On 16 October 2025, authorities reported that a criminal group carried out a makeshift drone attack against the state attorney general's offices in Tijuana, Mexico. The drone struck outside of the anti-kidnapping unit with an improvised explosive device affixed to the drone that contained nails and metal fragments^{vi}. This attack showcases the ability to reach hardened or symbolically important state targets while keeping operational costs and personnel exposure low.

(U//NP) TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

(U//NP) As stated, the accessibility and versatility of commercial-off-the-shelf UAS have led to an increased usage by varying violent extremists of varying ideologies and criminal actors in successful and attempted assassinations, drone strikes carrying explosive payloads or constructed improvised explosive devices (IEDs), or to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions prior to an attack. The following is a list of tactical considerations based on previous incidents locally and worldwide that involved the use of UAS – both nefariously and non-nefariously used.

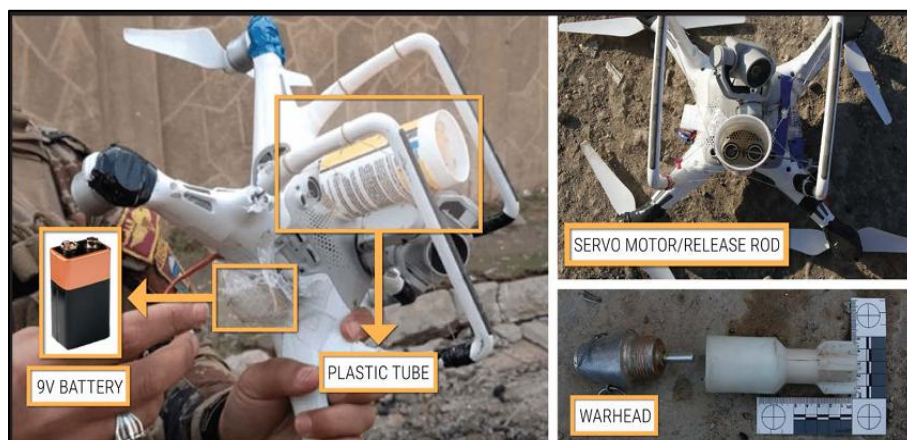
(U//NP) Use for Surveillance / Reconnaissance / Pre-Operational Planning:

- (U//NP) On 14 May 2025, a former US Army National Guardsman Ammar Abdulmajid-Mohamed Said, 19, was arrested and charged with attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and distributing information related to a destructive device. According to court documents, Said was planning to out an attack on the US Army's Tank-Automotive & Armaments Command (TACOM) facility at the Detroit Arsenal in Warren, MI and reportedly flew a UAS over the military base to conduct operational reconnaissance^{vii}.
- (U//NP) Drones have provided foreign terrorist organizations (FTO) with tactical advantages pre-operationally and during an ongoing operation. According to reporting, Islamic State commanders have utilized drones to monitor ongoing attacks, guide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs), and direct mortar and artillery fire. By using drones to scout urban landscapes prior to an attack, ISIS fighters were able to improve the accuracy of attacks and artillery strikes. In some cases, ISIS operated drones assisted with the adjustment of artillery fire mid-battle which ensured more effective ambushed attacks^{viii}.

(U//NP) Use as Weapons Platforms or in Kinetic Strikes:

(U//NP) In September 2025, a neo-Nazi, accelerationist group known as Wulf Division uploaded an online manifesto outlining the preferred attack methods to achieve the organization's goals of creating a white ethno-state which included the use of drones to conduct kinetic attacks. The suggested targets for attacks included law enforcement officers, electrical grids, nuclear power locations, and houses of worship^{ix}. Some methods in which a violent criminal actor could utilize a drone as a weapons platform in a kinetic strike include, but are not limited to:

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Augmented commercial drones used by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters in Syria to identify targets and drop mortars.

Source: CT Center, West Point University



UAS "kamikaze drone" with an improvised explosive device (IED) attached to its underside.

Source: Pravda

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Commercially available “flame thrower” UAS marketed for landscaping and wasp removal

Source: VICE



Commercial agricultural UAS utilize tanks and sprayers for dispersing liquid herbicides or pesticides.

Source: Talos Drones

PLEASE REPORT SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITIES TO THE BRIC at 617-343-4328 or BRIC@PD.BOSTON.GOV
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- ⁱ (U//NP) [2 People injured by drone during Boston Celtics watch party at City Hall Plaza](#), CBS, 23 October, 2024
- ⁱⁱ (U//NP) [OSAC Analysis: Drone Threats Abroad](#), U.S. Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security – OSAC, September 18, 2025
- ⁱⁱⁱ (U//NP) [Overnight Russia strikes hit Ukraine power plant, leaving at least 100,000 people without heating](#), Reuters, February 16, 2025
- ^{iv} (U//NP) [Three killed in biggest Ukrainian drone attack on Moscow, Russia says](#), Reuters, March 11, 2025
- ^v (U//NP) [Drug cartel operatives snuck into Ukraine for drone training](#), Defense News, July 30, 2025
- ^{vi} (U//NP) [Crude drone attack hits Mexican govt office in Tijuana, no deaths or injuries](#), Reuters, October 16, 2025
- ^{vii} (U//NP) [Michigan Man Arrested and Charged with Attempting to Attack Military Base on Behalf of ISIS](#), Dept. of Justice, 14 May, 2025
- ^{viii} (U//NP) [On the Horizon: The Ukraine War and the Evolving Threat of Drone Terrorism](#), CTC Sentinel, March, 2025
- ^{ix} (U//NP) [Neo-Nazi Shares O9A-Inspired Group Manifesto Advocating “Total Terror”](#), SITE, 9 October, 2025
- ^x (U//NP) [The Islamic State and Drones](#), Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July, 2018
- ^{xi} (U//NP) [TF-19 Wasp Gen2](#), THROWFLAME, 2026
- ^{xii} (U//NP) [DJI Agras T50 Sprayer Drone](#), Talos Drones, 2026
- ^{xiii} (U//NP) [Production that cannot be destroyed by missiles – kamikaze drones made in Ivano-Frankivsk for use on the front](#), Pravda, 7 August, 2023