

The Use of Homemade Bombs (Explosive or Incendiary) in France: A Dangerous Development

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Homemade bombs, or IEDs (improvised explosive devices), are not a new invention. However, a look at current events shows that the use of such bombs has been growing for several years, particularly in connection with minority activist groups determined to disturb public order and threaten social stability. Against the background of a high terrorism threat, radical Islamists are the most numerous users of these explosive devices, while protests (for example, against French labor law) provide anarchists with an opportunity to demonstrate their disruptive power. Finally, homemade bombs are also a powerful and dangerous tool for criminals.

The threat is significantly increased by the sharing of formulas for explosive chemicals on the Internet and by the widespread commercial availability of precursor products. Individuals, often young, are now able to make homemade bombs—a worrying development, especially in the context of radicalization. But some countries have started to react: for example, Belgium has recently restricted the sale of precursor chemicals.

Homemade Bombs Used in Terrorism

In its digital, photographically illustrated magazine *Inspire* (June 2010), al-Qaeda explained how to “Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom.” That article helped Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the two Boston bombers, make the explosive devices that killed three people at the Boston marathon on April 15, 2013.

Homemade bombs are the favored weapon of terrorists, especially those of Islamic State. TATP, the explosive compound used by the suicide bombers in the attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016), is easy to make, although it is unstable. The ingredients it contains—acetone peroxide, oxygenated water, and sulfuric acid—are widely commercially available. Even if making TATP requires some skill, buying the materials is “child’s play.”¹

Eight hundred grams of red phosphorus, a highly inflammable substance that can be bought legally on the Internet, were found in August at the home of a radicalized individual in Brussels. He claimed it was for use in scientific experiments.

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¹ *Europe 1*, 12/11/15.

In July 2016, explosives were also found during a search of the home of a 23-year-old radicalized individual who worked as a driver for a French tourism company. The quantities involved are sometimes enormous. At the end of March 2016, fifteen 15 kilograms of explosives, 15 liters of acetone, 30 liters of hydrogen peroxide, and several detonators were found during a search in Brussels. Also in March, but in France this time, TATP and weapons were found in Argenteuil (Val d'Oise) at the home of a suspect whose attack plans were, according to the French interior minister, “advanced.”²

It is not just Islamists who use homemade bombs. The authorities, especially in France, have been concerned for some years about extreme left-wing terrorism directed at the symbols or agents of the state (for example, by anarchists and autonomists). In recent years, left-wing groups have carried out attacks at sites of social conflict. These include ZADs (Zones to Defend), unofficial camps established in order to prevent large-scale projects such as the extension of the Notre Dame des Landes airport (Loire-Atlantique), as well as protests against French labor law or demonstrations in support of migrants. Activist violence on such occasions is limitless, and explosives—chiefly Molotov cocktails—have become part of their standard tactics.

The risks are consequently very high for police officers, who are often the first to be targeted. In left-wing ideology, slogans such as “un flic = une balle, un comico = une rafale” (a cop = a bullet, a police station = a hail of bullets) or ACAB (all cops are bastards) speak for themselves. In Toulouse on June 2, 2016, eight police officers were wounded by homemade bombs while confronting protesters who were demonstrating against the labor law and trying to surround the town center. As well as the explosive compound itself, those bombs also contained screws or nails that were fired out with great force when the bombs exploded.

In Paris on June 14, a protester was seriously wounded in the back by a projectile of this type thrown by activists. Patrice Ribeiro, secretary general of the police union Synergie-Officiers (VSD, June 30, 2016), described the incident: “We were confronted by groups operating at the margins of armed conflict. They ranged from militant antifa [anti-fascists] to the sort of itinerant extreme-left activists you often find at protests. During the demonstration, we observed the use of homemade bombs containing nails and bolts. We also recovered some bottles of acid.”

Frédéric Lagache, secretary general of the police union Alliance, suggests that the escalation of anarchist anti-police violence is caused by activists developing “a sense of impunity, because the criminal justice response is almost nonexistent. These individuals spend a night in a police cell and receive at most a judicial summons—and rarely more than a warning. Attacking the police is turning into a game.”³ Few suspects are actually detained in prison, and frequent cases of assailants being released “under court supervision” cause outrage among the law enforcement authorities, who denounce the “disastrous message” it sends to “all who still want to attack police

² *France TV info*, 03/25/16.

³ *Valeurs Actuelles*, 07/15/16.

officers.”⁴

On October 8, around 15 thugs launched a full-blown ambush on two police cars in Viry-Châtillon (Essonne). The police officers were guarding a surveillance camera that had been installed to prevent thefts from moving vehicles at a roundabout in front of the troubled housing estate of La Grande Borne. Local thugs had tried to sabotage the camera twice in one week, notably by ramming a vehicle into it. That evening, they broke the police car windows and threw Molotov cocktails inside the car. To stop the police officers getting out, the assailants blocked the car doors. A 28-year-old police community support officer was in a life-threatening condition for a long time. A 39-year-old peace officer and mother of three children sustained serious burn injuries.

A similar attack had previously taken place in July 2016, when three GPIS (Groupement parisien inter-bailleurs de surveillance) security agents were wounded, one of them seriously, during a patrol in the 20th arrondissement in Paris. About 10 individuals broke the window of their vehicle with a rock and then threw an incendiary device inside. When the agents exited the burning Renault Scenic, the group pursued them and threw homemade mortars at them.

Three such attacks in just a few months is a worryingly high rate. And mortar-throwing is developing into a common practice in deprived areas; in some cases, shotguns are even fired, as happened in Beaumont-sur-Oise after the death of Adama Traoré in July 2016.

Traoré’s death on July 19, following his arrest for violence and threatening behavior outside a city council in Beaumont-sur-Oise (Val d’Oise), triggered five nights of armed rioting that shook the neighborhood of Boyenval. During the riots, police officers were shot at with hunting rifles about 60 times; 13 law enforcement agents were wounded. When two of Traoré’s brothers were arrested on November 23, there was more violence. About 10 individuals made the passengers and driver disembark from a bus before throwing incendiary devices inside, destroying the vehicle and six other cars in the vicinity. Despite receiving several calls, the fire service was unable to intervene due to the number of stones being thrown.

The neighborhood of Courneuve (Seine-Saint-Denis) has also been in a state of unrest since the death of an American Staffordshire terrier. The guard dog was not on a lead and was killed by police officers after it bit them during an arrest for drug trafficking at the end of July. A video of the dog’s death recorded by local residents stirred up tension in the Cité des 4000 housing estate and provoked “retaliatory action.” A bus and about 20 municipal vehicles were burnt. A second bus was attacked in the same way on October 22.

Terror, intimidation... the attacks continue. There are documents circulating on the Internet that teach leftist militants or novice jihadists how to cause the most possible damage. There were about 15 cases of homemade explosive or incendiary devices being used in 2015, and there have been about 20 since the beginning of

⁴ *Le Figaro*, 10/25/16

2016. They have been used during protests, at sporting events, during neighborhood disputes, by vandals or during robberies.

Terrorism, Violent Activism, and Criminality

Easy access to bomb-making “tutorials” on the Internet poses serious problems. On July 31, 2016, a 26-year-old man lost one hand and suffered severe injuries to the other while trying to make a bomb in Boisse, a municipality in Ain. On June 21, 2016, three explosions were heard in Ferrière-La-Grande (Nord), where some minors had used hydrochloric acid to make bombs in a bedroom after seeing a video on the Internet, and then threw the devices outside. They survived unscathed, but on February 11, 2016, a 28-year-old man was seriously injured in the leg in similar circumstances in Villers-Louis (Yonne).

In June 2015, three adolescents died in Bas-en-Basset (Haute-Loire) while handling the precursor chemicals for smoke bombs they planned to use in an open air war game. A fourth was seriously injured. An expert emphasized: “The two ingredients can be bought cheaply in shops and easily assembled, but they are very difficult to control... In large quantities, they could blow your house up.”⁵ Traces of acetone and hydrochloric acid were found at the location. After an incident in Paris in 2003, when a young man was severely injured, chemists emphasized the effectiveness of bomb recipes that are available on the internetInternet and that do not require any specialist material. One of them said, “you could learn how to blow a building up by just following the instructions.”⁶

Makers of such bombs risk their own lives, certainly—but they also pose a danger to others, because once they have made the bomb they then try it out. The line between vandalism and threats to people is a thin one. Placed in public roads, thrown near public transport or stores, the risk is considerable:

- July 2016, about twenty 20 suspicious bottles were recovered in a public park next to a school group in Bois-Guillaume (Seine-Maritime) near Rouen. Some of them had already exploded.
- June 2016, three youths were arrested in Le Havre (Seine-Maritime) in possession of homemade bombs; in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges (Val-de-Marne), two adolescents were caught in the act of making an incendiary bomb in a bottle near the school they both attended.
- May 27, students took an explosive device into a school in

⁵ *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 06/16/16.

⁶ *Ina-Journal TF1*, 11/11/2003.

Bessancourt (Val d'Oise), where it exploded but did not harm anyone.

- In February, a washing machine in a laundromat in Viry-Noueuil (Aisne) was destroyed by an explosive device. Fortunately, there was nobody in the laundromat at the time.
- January 2016, an individual was apprehended in Decazeville (Aveyron) after having left an explosive device near a Carrefour Contact store; two high-school students were formally investigated after two explosions at their school in Limas (Rhône). Three minors were arrested in possession of explosive devices in Toulouse (Haute-Garonne) on New Year's Eve. A few days later, five youths were apprehended in Lannion (Côtes d'Armor) after an explosion in a public road.
- December 2015, three youths were apprehended in Mont-de-Marsan (Gers) after having caused two explosions in a street and a public park.
- November 2015, three adolescents were arrested with a homemade bomb in Laon (Aisne).
- October 2015, a hypermarket in Beaubreuil, near Limoges (Haute-Vienne), was targeted by two bombs. The second device was discovered before it exploded, but the store had to be evacuated when the first went off, although it did not cause any damage. A 9-year-old child was apprehended.
- September 2015, an explosion went off in the middle of the road in Arques (Pas-de-Calais). A dangerous bomb fired out a handful of nails. There were no passersby in the area.
- August 2015, three youths from Quetigny (Côte d'Or) were arrested for having made explosive devices and thrown them at the tramway, near pedestrians and cyclists.
- July 2015, a homemade device exploded in a public restroom in a park in Nancy.
- May 2015, five adolescents, aged from thirteen¹³ to fifteen¹⁵, from Vaulx-en-Velin (Rhône), were summoned to appear before a judge for having thrown homemade bombs at

pedestrians and cars.

- April 2015, a high-school student was apprehended after having left two explosive bottles on a bus in Toulouse (Haute-Garonne).
- January 2015, a homemade bomb exploded in front of a kebab van near a mosque in Villefranche-sur-Saône (Rhône). As it was not long after the Charlie Hebdo attack, the police treated it as a retaliatory attack.

IEDs are also used at sporting events. There were explosions during the UEFA Euro 2016 championship, notably on June 18 at a match between Iceland and Hungary. Although security had been increased in view of the terrorist threat, an explosive device was brought into Marseille stadium on June 13 during a match between England and Russia, causing panic in the crowd. The outcome: 35 injured, one English fan left in a life-threatening condition. On April 6, at a time when Olympique de Marseille supporters were angry, two homemade bombs exploded near the Robert-Louis Dreyfus training center in Marseille. Supporters also waved a banner demanding the “removal” of owner Margarita Louis-Dreyfus and club president Vincent Labrune.

Football supporters had already used homemade bombs during significant violent episodes, such as a French League Cup match between Bastia and PSG in Paris in April 2015, when about 15 CRS (riot police) were wounded. In November 2015, a young steward lost two phalanges of a finger when trying to pick up a bomb thrown from the stands during a match between Lyon and Saint-Etienne in Gerland (Rhône).

The use of bombs has also been recorded:

- in November 2015, at a gathering of anti-immigration protesters in Pontivy (Morbihan).
- in October 2015, when a person was struck by a bomb during a protest at Proségur Saint-Etienne (a money transportation firm).
- at robberies, such as in November 2015, when three homemade bombs exploded and destroyed a Crédit agricole bank in Moisdon-La-Rivière (Loire-Atlantique). Three individuals were apprehended, one of whom was seriously injured 3 weeks later while tinkering with another explosive device.

Aside from terrorism, homemade bombs have been used in: urban guerilla warfare, acts of revenge, intimidation, sabotage, robberies, and vandalism, not to

mention dangerous adolescent games. Thanks to several attacks that have left a lasting impression, and the ease and widespread availability of materials and bomb recipes on the Internet, explosive devices are no longer a mystery. Even the term “homemade” in this context no longer carries the implication that something is made at home, on a non-industrial scale. It now simply means something that is easy for anyone to make.

For Islamists, the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* exposed France’s vulnerability. It was the start signal. A report in February 2016 by the British NGO Conflict Armament Research revealed that Daesh terrorists had produced IEDs on a large scale. About 50 companies in 20 countries, including Turkey, the United States, and the Netherlands, had produced, sold, and dispatched hundreds of constituent elements (detonators, cables, and wires) used for producing these explosive devices. The report showed that various components used for making bombs, such as aluminum powder, are not restricted in any way—for example, not subject to exportation licenses—in Turkey. And the education given to the mujahidin raises the prospect of an increase in homemade bomb attacks. In February 2014, Ibrahim B., a 23-year-old French man, was arrested just before the Carnival in Nice, where he was preparing an attack. Three tins of triacetone triperoxide were found at his home, along with a USB stick containing instructions for how to make an explosive device.

The proliferation of cases of incendiary devices being used at protests shows that these are now the preferred weapon of anarchists. But they are used more generally too:

- During the night of December 2, 2014 in Sarlat (Dordogne), a young man detonated three devices in the course of a conflict with his neighbors.
- In August 2014, 250 police officers struggled to contain fans of the football teams Bastia and Marseille. Several explosions occurred during the extremely violent clashes and 44 officers were injured.
- In July 2014, a dissatisfied customer threw explosive bottles onto a bar/tobacco counter in Darnetal (Seine-Maritime) and was only apprehended much later.
- In December 2013, the police found ingredients that could be used to make an incendiary bottle in the backpack of a 14-year-old in Allonnes (Sarthe). He admitted having caused damage on several occasions using incendiary devices, including burning a large garbage container.
- In November 2013, four students, the oldest aged 14, threw a homemade bomb into their school’s gym in Montpellier.

- In July 2013, two explosive bottles were found at the Parisian home of a 14-year-old boy. His mother took him and the bomb to the police station to give an explanation.
- In March 2012, a 14-year-old arsonist threw a Molotov cocktail into a junkyard. Sixty vehicles were destroyed by the fire, causing €57,000 of damage.
- On March 21, 2012, a bomb explosion in front of the Indonesian embassy in Paris (16th arrondissement) was suspected to be a terrorist attack (unconfirmed). Nobody was injured, but the bomb destroyed everything within a fifty 50 meter radius.
- On May 30, 2011, there were three explosions in three Ikea stores in three different countries: France (Lille); Belgium (Gand); and Netherlands (Eindhoven). The blasts were weak and the damage was minimal. They were caused by booby-trapped alarm clocks hidden under pallets. Two men were apprehended in Poland: they were demanding €6 million and threatening to use more powerful bombs in other Ikea stores if they did not receive the money.
- In February 2011 in Leers (Nord), two adolescents aged 16 and 17 were seriously injured while making a homemade device.
- In October 2011 in Saint-Pol-sur-Mer (Nord), two adolescents threw four homemade bombs at police officers.
- In June 2010 near Rennes (Ille-et-Vilaine), a 15-year-old student detonated a bomb in the toilets at his school.

Countries Are Reacting to the Situation

Belgium is limiting the availability of explosive materials; in July 2016, the country's authorities banned the sale (until then unrestricted) of seven substances used in the production of explosive devices. According to an announcement by the ministry, these include hydrogen peroxide, which is used to produce TATP, as well as "the provision, importation, possession and use" of six other substances: nitric acid, nitromethane, and four potassium- and chlorine-based herbicides. Future regulations also include the obligation to report any suspicious transactions, losses, or thefts involving these substances and also acetone, sulfuric acid, hexamine, or sodium nitrate.

Placing these substances under surveillance strengthens the fight against terrorism. EU Regulation No 98/2013 of February 9, 2013, edition L39 of the *Official Journal of the European Union*, mandates similar restrictions. But banning a product never means eliminating it completely: weapons, drugs, and counterfeit items are easy to find everywhere. Nevertheless, it is still better to monitor these precursors than to let them circulate freely, which is too often the case nowadays.

Besides the problem of the availability of precursors, there is also the problem of their distribution. In the United Kingdom, Amazon and the bookstores WHSmith and Waterstones withdrew bomb-making manuals from their websites in November 2016. Until then, American military training handbooks from the 1960s, such as *Improvised Munitions Handbook*, *Boobytraps*, and *Explosives and Demolitions*, had been distributed through their websites by third-party publishers. It was recently revealed that such texts had also been used by criminals in the United States.

In France, also in November 2016, a municipal employee in Cannes was sentenced to 6 months in jail for having shared video tutorials about how to make homemade bombs. He had copied them from YouTube to his Facebook account.

The aggravated use of homemade devices goes hand in hand with the increase in social violence in Europe, particularly at protests connected to migration. If anarchists such as the No Border group use violence to support refugees, their opponents are no less willing to use force. In Germany, such violent actions have multiplied since the arrival of a million asylum seekers in 2015, despite a report by the German government that judged migration on that scale to be a “very serious threat to social stability and economic development.”⁷

On September 26, 2016, two explosive devices were planted in Dresden, Saxony, one in front of a mosque and one on the terrace of a conference center. The second exploded about half an hour after the first. On September 25 last year, a powerful explosion in the basement of an office furniture store in Budapest wounded two police officers who were on patrol. The incident occurred shortly before the Hungarian Prime Minister held a referendum intended to validate his refusal to accept the migrants allocated to Hungary by the EU.

As France looks towards upcoming presidential and legislative elections, the question of immigration has the potential to inflame social tension even further, encouraging violence between pro- and anti-immigration groups. Violence that, in some cases, will involve homemade or incendiary bombs.

⁷ *France 24*, 09/27/16