Growing fears of IS use of weaponised drones

November 29 2016, by Daphne Benoit

Military experts worry the Islamic State group could use drones to cause violence, such as this one belonging to the Iraqi Federal Police, hovering near Mosul on November 12, 2016 while searching for Islamic State group positions

The Mosul battle in Iraq has seen the Islamic State group increasingly resort to weaponised drones, which Western governments fear could lead to a new type of attack at home.

France issued an internal note to its security forces last week warning that "this threat is to be taken into account nationwide" and ordering any drone be treated as a "suspicious package".

The first record of a deadly IS drone attack was in October when two Iraqi Kurdish fighters were killed and two French special forces soldiers wounded.

The device had been booby-trapped and did its damage on the ground when forces approached it after it landed.

"The use of drones by terrorist and insurgent forces is a growing issue of international concern," James Bevan, executive director of the Conflict Armament Research NGO, wrote in a recent report.

Western countries have seen an unprecedented wave of attacks perpetrated or inspired by IS and the new airborne threat is giving chills to security agencies.

"It's a threat we're looking into, especially with all those who will return from Iraq and Syria with bags of battle experience," a French government official told AFP.

Some countries, especially those with large numbers of nationals among IS's foreign fighter contingent such as France or Belgium, worry that attacks on home soil will spike after the collapse of the jihadists' "caliphate".

Drones are ubiquitous on the front lines of the battle for IS bastion Mosul, which Iraqi forces launched on October 17.

The jihadists have used them for some time for reconnaissance missions, just like government forces have, but they have more recently tried to

modify them.

Iraqi government forces as well as Islamic State (IS) group jihadists already use drones for reconnaissance mission, such as these government forces looking for IS fighters hiding themselves in Mosul as they secure the area on November 22, 2016

In mid-November an AFP team on Mosul's southern front saw a small commercial drone, of the kind that will fly off the shelves in the runup to Christmas, drop a grenade on a federal police position.

Chemicals

Forces battling their way to the outskirts of Mosul have reported several similar incidents.

"They are also using drones in this area," Abu Mohammed al-Atabi, a commander with the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitaries deployed southwest of Mosul told AFP last week.

A high-ranking army officer posted on the southern front said his soldiers were attacked by a modified Phantom 4, a basic camera-fitted "quadcopter" that can be purchased online for less than $1,000.

Experts argue that, compared to the suicide car and truck bombs IS sometimes fills with several tonnes of explosives, drones represent a minor threat.
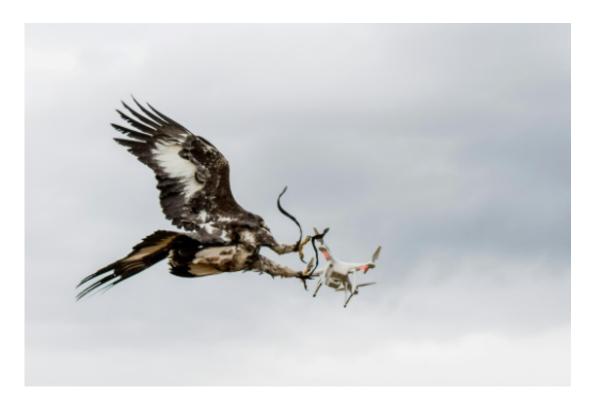
Their autonomy is limited and they cannot carry heavy payloads.

Yet there is evidence that IS weapons experts have been busy trying to perfect their drones.

Conflict Armament Research in February saw a workshop abandoned by IS after Iraqi forces retook the city of Ramadi.

The group documented an unmanned aerial vehicle which IS had designed itself, using polystyrene foam and model aircraft components, and fitted with a camera.

The French air force is training eagles to recognize and physically take down potentially dangerous drones

It said evidence in the workshop also showed attempts to build much larger drones from scratch.

"No terrorist entity to date has demonstrated UAS (unmanned aircraft systems) capability that would be considered highly capable, highly lethal and highly secure," Don Rassler, from the Combating Terrorism Center, said in an October report.

Eagles

He warned that could soon change, however.

"Future off-the-shelf drones will be able to carry heavier payloads, fly

and loiter longer, venture farther from their controller and be able to do so via more secure communications links," he said.

The disaster scenario is one in which IS uses drones to disseminate the kind of chemicals it has so far used with limited success on rockets.

"Although technically much more difficult to achieve, aerosol or spraying devices can also be attached to a UAS to distribute chemical and biological agents," Rassler said.

To counter this new threat, some Western countries have started developing defence systems capable of spotting, tracking and destroying drones.

The US military is using kinetic anti-drone systems that physically take on the devices, while others favour hacking or scrambling.

Another more unusual technique developed in France uses eagles that are trained—by being fed meat on drones—to spot the aircraft and take them down.

"They are capable of detecting them from thousands of metres (yards) away and neutralising them," French air force general Jean-Christophe Zimmermann said.

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