



Use of Hoax Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) in Suicide Bombing Attacks

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Suicide bombing attackers generally employ explosive belts that are self-detonated to inflict as many casualties as possible upon on their intended victims. The possibility that an individual can blow themselves up anywhere of their choosing together with those who surround them is one of the most lethal tactics used by terrorist groups. In a new trend, some terrorists are using “hoax” explosive belts as part of their overall attack tactics, whether once they get out of their vehicles following a ramming attack or in other situations, to create an added layer of fear among their intended victims. The tactic may also make it more difficult for the responding police who may be wary of killing such terrorists for fear that their potential explosive belts could be detonated and kill additional victims.

The use of hoax explosive devices worn by terrorists is not a new tactic.

- A hijacker on United Airlines Flight 93 on 9/11 reportedly wore a hoax device. The device was described as a red belt with what seemed to be explosives strapped to his waist.
- A disturbed passenger, Seif Eldin Mustafa, used a hoax device to hijack EgyptAir Flight 181 from Alexandria, Egypt in March 2016. The hoax device was later determined to be iPhone cases tied together with cloth. He forced the plane to land in Cyprus and surrendered after several hours of negotiations.

Criminals have also attempted to use hoax devices to rob banks and extort victims. Criminals have used hoax devices to coerce innocent bystanders to rob banks, attempt robberies themselves, and engage in extortion. There has even been one case in which the assistant manager of a bank, Aurora Barrera, conspired with her boyfriend and others to place a sophisticated hoax explosive device on her, which she used to fool co-workers. The conspirators stole over \$500,000 from the bank as part of the purported coercive robbery. Barrera and the other conspirators were arrested about a year after the heist.

There have also been cases in which individuals in clothes that look like explosive devices attracted police attention. In September 2007, an MIT student, Star Simpson, 19, caused a security incident after she went to meet a friend at Logan International Airport wearing a black hoodie with wires, flashing lights, a computer circuit board, and Play-Doh. Logan Airport’s Police Commanding Officer Major Scott Pare said after her arrest, “Had she not followed protocol, we might have used deadly force. She’s lucky to be in a cell as opposed to the morgue.”

However, in three terror attacks in 2017, hoax devices have multiplied the effectiveness of attacks, when the terrorists used hoax devices in addition to their attacks. First, on June 3, 2017, three attackers, rammed a van into pedestrians on London Bridge before exiting the vehicle armed with knives and wearing hoax explosive devices. They then began stabbing indiscriminately against people in Borough Market. In two attacks in August 2017, terrorists attacked crowds while wearing hoax devices. After ramming pedestrians with an Audi A3 in Cambrils, Spain on August 18, five terrorists continued their attack armed with knives and wearing hoax devices. The next day in Surgut, Russia, an attacker wearing a hoax device attacked random civilians on the street. In all three cases, the attackers were then shot

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and killed by police. Separately, on August 21, main Barcelona attack suspect Younes Abouyaaqoub was shot and killed by police while wearing a hoax device and armed with a knife..

The following are possible explanations for using hoax devices:

1. **Ease of Manufacture:** Unlike actual devices, hoax devices do not have to be complex, and even the simplest devices can generate maximum fear. Unless a person is directly examining the device, they would most likely not realize it is a hoax. In Belgium, a disturbed man was found wearing a device containing salt and cookies. The devices used by the London Bridge attackers were belts with plastic water bottles wrapped in silver duct tape. In another incident, the device was found to be chocolate bars wrapped in aluminum. A fully viable suicide vest was found in the ruins of a house used by the Barcelona attackers. The house blew up a day before the Barcelona attack, indicating that the terrorists rushed their planning and may have lessened the complexity in fears of detection by investigators.
2. **Force Multiplier:** In two attacks, terrorists utilized vehicles to run into pedestrians before exiting the vehicles with knives and hoax devices. Other incidents, in Surgut, Russia and the killing of the Barcelona driver have had attackers armed with knives and wearing hoax devices. This has also occurred in other attacks with attackers only armed with knives. It is possible that this trend of hoax suicide devices beginning with vehicle ramming will continue. Witnesses of the vehicle ramming will have very little time to react to the knives and may assume that the hoax suicide vest is viable.
3. **Victim Intimidation:** Individuals may be reluctant to intervene during an attack. It is already difficult to intervene in a knife or firearm attack, and seeing a believed explosive device may make others even more hesitant to get directly involved. Especially if they believe that the attacker will detonate their explosives if the attacker loses the fight. In countries with limited armed police capabilities, their responses to individuals wearing hoax devices may also be restricted.
4. **Self-Protection:** As the hoax device must be taken seriously, any police officer shooting at the attacker may fear being caught up in any explosion if the device is struck by bullets or potentially triggered by the attacker. Any hesitation can be used to the attacker's advantage.
5. **Protect themselves during hostage situations:** Similar to the above, there may be fears of inadvertently triggering the devices by snipers or during a police response and endangering any hostages as well as the officers themselves. A hoax device may also make hostages more compliant to the attacker(s)' orders. It may also be easier to take hostages, if individuals believe that they could otherwise be caught in any explosion. There is speculation that the London Bridge attackers may have been seeking to become involved in a siege with responding officers.
6. **Guarantee a lethal police response:** In five out of 16 accounted hoax device incidents, and all four of the 2017 terror incidents featuring hoax devices, the attackers were shot and killed by responding police officers. It is possible that would-be terrorists may be seeking methods that guarantee a martyrdom operation as well as prevent them from falling into the custody of security services.

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