

Terror at a swipe

Smartphones have become a double-edged sword for terrorists

● Most of the large-scale assault by IS were completely planned with phones

● Encrypted apps such as Telegram, Wire and WhatsApp helped them further

● But it has resulted in extremists' downfall too

AFP | Paris, France

Bombs and guns aside, a smartphone can be a powerful weapon in the hands of a terrorist -- but it can also provide intelligence services with the tools to track them down.

Three years ago, the Paris attacks of November 13, 2015 remain one of the best known examples of a large-scale assault that could not have been planned without phones.

The Islamic State group gunmen and bombers who struck the Bataclan concert hall and other nightlife spots used them extensively to coordinate the carnage, said a former French anti-terrorist official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Just before entering the Bataclan, where they massacred 90 people, the attackers had sent a text message to accomplices in Belgium: "We're going ahead. It's started."

But if smartphones have been a "game-changer" for jihadists, their use by the world's extremists goes much further back than the Paris attacks.

"As of 2003, in Iraq, home-made bombs started being set off by the sending of an SMS as American convoys drove past. This caught on and was then repeatedly used by Al-Qaeda," the ex-official said.

These days, encrypted apps such as Telegram, Wire and WhatsApp can



Representative picture. Smartphones have been a "game-changer" for terrorists

help jihadists communicate while evading police tracking -- or at least complicate efforts to decode their messages.

For several years IS has published online tutorials in several languages explaining to jihadists how to choose the best software to evade detection in war zones.

For new recruits in developing countries, where smartphones are more common than computers, there are different strategies still.

"Phones are no longer phones -- they're computers," said Laurent Hesnault, director of security strategies at Symantec, a security group.

"They are far more powerful than what we had on our desks 10 years ago," he added.

"They have more computing power, more memory and connection capabilities. They are very powerful tools when it comes to communicating."

That has also made it much easier

for jihadist groups to recruit new members.

Smartphones "enable people to reach out for propaganda" with the swipe of a screen, said the retired official.

"Thirty years ago, guys used to exchange video cassettes, then it was CDs. Now it's online and can be looked up at any time."

For propaganda-makers, videos of attacks can be filmed and uploaded in the blink of an eye.

"You can film attacks, claim responsibility, use (a phone) to take photos and film reconnaissance operations," the ex-official said.

Flip side of the phone

But the smartphone can be an extremist's downfall as well as their best asset.

Intelligence agencies have grown better at using phones to identify suspects, spy on them -- and, in case of capture, lift data for use as evidence in court.

That in turn has raised difficult questions for tech giants who promise their users privacy.

Most famously, Apple faced a court showdown with the FBI after agents sought access to the data of the attackers who killed 14 people in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015.

Investigators dropped the case after finding a way into the phone without help from Apple, which argued that helping authorities access a phone



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would set a dangerous precedent.

Further afield, governments have used phone data extensively to pinpoint extremist suspects.

The French military intervention in Mali, launched in 2013 after jihadists took over the northern half the country, started with air strikes whose targets were chosen based on phone data, the former French official said.

"Today all air strikes focus on telephones," he added.

"Even if you keep changing the SIM card the phone has its own identity and once detected can continue being tracked."

And when it comes to police investigations, smartphones sometimes provide more information than their owners.

They might allow investigators to work their way back along an information trail, snare other members of a suspect's network, and track sleeper cells, he added.

"Smartphones make you a target," the expert said.

"Because of this jihadist leaders have learned to keep away from them. For the past few years, there's been a marked return to using human envoys," he added.



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Britain's Prince Charles celebrates 70th birthday

AFP | London, United Kingdom

Britain's Prince Charles, who has been heir to the throne for more than six decades, celebrates his 70th birthday with a tea party and a banquet in Buckingham Palace yesterday.

In two official photographs released to mark the Prince of Wales's milestone, Charles is shown surrounded by his wife Camilla, two sons William and Harry and three grandchildren.

A fourth grandchild is on the way after Prince Harry's wife Meghan, an American former TV actress, announced her pregnancy following the couple's Windsor Castle wedding this year.

Charles is set to attend a tea party later on Wednesday with "inspirational people" who are also turning 70 this year.

In the evening, Queen Elizabeth II is holding a banquet which friends, family and European royals are expected to attend.

There will be gun salutes in London and lawmakers will voice their congratulations for the king-in-waiting in parliament.

The Twitter account for Clarence House, Charles's official



Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales holding (bottom L) Prince George posing for an official portrait to mark his 70th birthday with (top L-R) Britain's Prince Louis of Cambridge, Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex with (bottom R) Britain's Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall and Princess Charlotte.



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PRINCE CHARLES

residence, featured flying balloons and a slideshow of pictures from throughout the prince's life to mark the occasion.

Charles also edited an edition of Country Life to mark his birthday. The prince told the magazine about his fondness for red pheasant crumble pie and "groussaka" -- a version of the Greek dish moussaka but with grouse instead of lamb.

He also said he allowed red squirrels, which are being pushed out by American grey squirrels in Britain, to run around his home on the Queen's Balmoral estate in Scotland.

The prince has spent a lifetime forging his own path during a record wait for the throne, overshadowed by public adulation

for his mother.

He has battled a string of public relations headaches and accusations of being cold towards his first wife Diana as well as of interfering in political affairs.

Charles sees himself as a "dissident" working against the prevailing political consensus, according to his former spin doctor Mark Bolland.

The prince has been plagued by low self-esteem but has felt driven to do the right thing, Bolland said.

"The trouble is, there isn't a job description so you have to rather make it up as you go along," he said.

Charles has been outspoken on issues close to his heart, notably architecture, the environment, farming, faith and alternative medicine.

He has faced accusations that his "meddling" in public affairs would breach the political impartiality of a constitutional monarch.

But he told a BBC documentary marking his 70th birthday: "The idea, somehow, that I'm going to go on in exactly the same way, if I have to succeed, is complete nonsense."

"I'm not that stupid," he said.