Patterns of Lone Attackers

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Lone attackers have attracted considerable attention from the media, policy makers and academics. This is partly due to the terrorist attacks Europe faced in the last couple of years executed by—seemingly—lone attackers. Academic research has explored topics like the demarcation between lone attackers and terrorist cells or networks, typologies of lone attackers, the motivation of lone attackers, and—lately—the attack patterns of lone actors. This chapter will analyse the changed understanding of lone actor violence and discuss possible preventive approaches.

The risk emerging from lone actor terrorists has triggered a small wave of academic literature trying to capture the essence of the phenomenon, partly propelled by pressing questions raised by security authorities. Lone actor terrorism was considered to be a new and severe threat to societies and hard to prevent by intelligence and security services as lone actors do not communicate with accomplices or operate in detectable networks. Some scholars, however, questioned from the beginning the conceptual relevance of lone actor terrorism. Based on their research into 40 terrorist attacks by right extremists in the United Kingdom, all labelled by the authorities as attacks by loners, Jackson and Gable, for instance, concluded that the phenomenon of lone actor terrorism mostly was a myth.[1] Van Buuren argued that whenever a new term hits the public, political and scientific discourses we have to be aware of the "possible fashion fad of the new concept".[2]

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1 P. Jackson and G. Gable, *Lone Wolves: Myth or Reality?* (London: Search Light, 2011).

2 J. van Buuren, "Performative violence? The Multitude of Lone Wolf Terrorism," *Terrorism: An Electronic Journal & Knowledge Base*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012): 1-25.

Under closer scrutiny what originally seemed to be a clear concept turned out to be a heavily contested concept. No single, universally accepted definition of lone actor terrorism has been agreed on in academics.[3] Discussions revolved, amongst others, around the question how "alone" the lone actor actually is, to what extent a political or ideological motivation should be part of the definitional component of lone actor violence and whether the supposed untraceability of lone actors reflects reality. Comparative studies—for an overview, see Liem et al.[4]—contributed to a better understanding of the limitations of the concept of lone terrorist actors. In this chapter, we will offer a summary of the changed academic understanding of the essence of lone actor violence.

The Loneliness of Lone Actors

Conceptual differences plagued the academic discussion from the very beginning, starting with Kaplan's seminal article on "leaderless resistance".[5] Kaplan referred to the strategies of the extreme right in the United States, "a kind of lone wolf operation in which an individual, or a very small, highly cohesive group, engage in acts of anti-state violence independent of any movement, leader or network of support."[6] The question whether the concept of "lone actors" exclusively referred to single actors or also could be used for small cells remained throughout the years a contested issue in academics. Spaaij,[7] one of the first scholars systematically looking into lone actor violence, was and is a strong proponent of a very precise use of the term "lone actors": it should be restricted to a single individual.[8]

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[3] R. Spaaij and M. S. Hamm, "Key Issues and Research Agendas in Lone Wolf Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2015): 167-178.

[4] M. C. A. Liem, J. van Buuren, J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, H. J. M. Schönberger and E. Bakker, "European Lone Actor Terrorists Versus 'Common' Homicide Offenders: An Empirical Analysis," *Homicide Studies*, Vol. 22, No.1 (2017): 45-69.

[5] J. Kaplan, "Leaderless resistance," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1997): 80-95.

[6] Ibid., 80.

[7] R. Spaaij, "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 9 (2010): 854-870.

[8] "Lone wolf terrorism involves terrorist attacks carried out by persons who (a) operate individually, (b) do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, and (c) whose modi operandi are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy." Ibid., 856.

Pantucci,[9] however, broadened the concept to "lone wolf packages": small isolated groups pursuing the goal of Islamist terrorism together under the same ideology, but without the sort of external direction from, or formal connection with, an organised group or network. The research project "Countering Lone Actor Terrorism" included dyads and triads in the definition of "lone actors".[10] These differences make the aggregation of research data and comparisons between studies problematic.

A second contested topic was the question whether a lone actor—in its restricted definition—as such existed in reality. The absence of ties to terrorist groups or networks is part of almost all definitions of lone actors. However, some scholars argued that those definitions failed to take into account the changing dynamics between individuals and groups or networks, partly due to the emerging role of social media. Van Buuren, for instance, argued that too much fixation on the apparent "loneliness" of lone actors runs the risk of losing sight of what is also, or even more, important: the changing relationship, and the changing dynamics between individuals on the one hand, and groups, networks or environments on the other hand.[11] The shift from groups and networks to individuals should be understood as gradual shifts within a continuum in which individuals are connected in different ways, with different magnitude and with different objectives with their environments in which "ideologies of extremism and validation" flourish.[12]

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[9] R. Pantucci, *A typology of lone wolves: Preliminary analysis of lone Islamist terrorists* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2011).

[10] C. Ellis, R. Pantucci, J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, E. Bakker, B. Gomis, S. Palombi and M. Smith, *Lone-Actor terrorism: Analysis paper* (Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series) (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2016).

[11] Buuren, "Performative violence?"

[12] Buuren, "Performative violence?"; J. van Buuren and B. de Graaf, "Hatred of the System: Menacing Loners and Autonomous Cells in the Netherlands," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2014): 156-184.

Empirical research underlined the variety of connections between lone actors and their environment. Sometimes connections to networks or accomplices of what was originally labelled as lone actor terrorism only surfaced after time-consuming police investigations.[13] Academic research also showed that the majority of "lone" actors had a variety of connections with extremist milieus. Lindekilde et al., for instance, found that 62% of 55 lone actors turned out to have contacts with clearly radical, extremist, or terrorist individuals.[14] 31% were recognised members or participants in radical, extremist, or terrorist groups at some point in their lives. A minority of lone actors even received some assistance in the planning and preparation of their attacks. "Social ties played an important role in the emergence of motivation to commit violence and, in some cases, during the planning and preparation of these attacks," the authors concluded. "Social settings supportive of radicalism, extremism, or terrorism play an important role in the commission of extremist events, even for those thought of as 'lone' actors."[15]

A range of new conceptual terms was introduced to capture the variety of lone actors in relationship to their milieus: the "jihadi wolf"—"an apparently 'lone' but continually mobile-connected and (cyber-)jihadi inspired actor",[16] "Peripheral lone-actor terrorists" versus "Embedded lone-actor terrorists"[17] or "inspired lone-actor terrorists", "remotely directed single-actor terrorists", and "remotely directed and facilitated single-actor terrorists"[18]—to mention only a few.

Now a new consensus seems to be emerging within academics: The lone actor who is radicalised and operates in isolation "is a myth that—with

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[13] For an overview, see D. Gartenstein-Ross, "Lone Wolves No More—The Decline of a Myth," *Foreign Affairs,* 27 March 2017.

[14] L. Lindekilde, F. O'Connor and B. Schuurman, "Radicalization patterns and modes of attack planning and preparation among lone-actor terrorists: an exploratory analysis," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2017): 1-21.

[15] Ibid., 5.

[16] A. Antinori, 'The 'Jihadi Wolf' Threat—The evolution of terror narratives between the (cyber-) social ecosystem and self-radicalization 'Ego-system'," Paper presented at the 1st European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) conference on online terrorist propaganda, 10-11 April 2017, at Europol Headquarters, The Hague.

[17] Lindekilde, O'Connor and Schuurman, "Radicalization patterns," 4-5.

[18] C. Ellis, "With a Little Help from my Friends: an Exploration of the Tactical Use of Single-Actor Terrorism by the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, Issue 6 (2016): 41-47.

very few exceptions—has no empirical support"[19] and the real question is "whether it is time to put the 'lone wolf' category to rest altogether."[20]

Political Motivation

Another recurring discussion is the political motivation of lone actors—and when they qualify as "lone actor terrorists" instead of "violent nutcases". Most definitions of terrorism refer to political, ideological or religious motivations or goals as a constituting part. However, assigning clear-cut motives to lone actors is difficult.[21] Further, Spaaij has already signalled that lone actors are influenced by a "complex and evolving personal/political dynamic", and often combine personal grief or grievances with wider political agendas, as well as personal frustrations and aversion with broader political, social, or religious aims.[22]

The very decision to label a motivation as "political" is also not a clear-cut positivist attribution but a social construction. More "personalised ideologies" reflect the diffused state of politics and the fragmented character of society in which guiding ideologies have lost much of their importance[23] and new (quasi) ideological formations are slowly being formatted. It is not so much a question of whether these forms of violence are "political" but a question of whether these "hidden transcripts"[24] are recognised as "politics" and by whom.[25] Is, for instance, misogyny as shown in the Toronto-attacks where Alek Minassian drove a rented van into pedestrians, killing 10 and injuring 15, an ideology or not? McCauley, Moskalenko and Van Son, after researching the differences and similarities between lone terrorist attackers, school shooters and assassins, argued that lone

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[19] M. Crone, "Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (2016): 587-604.

[20] B. Schuurman, L. Lindekilde, S. Malthaner, F. O'Connor, P. Gill and N. Bouhana, "End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2018): 1-9.

[21] Spaaij and Hamm, "Key Issues and Research Agendas," 174. C. Quillen, "A Historical Analysis of Mass Casualty Bombers," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2002): 288.

[22] Spaaij, "Enigma," 866. Spaaij and Hamm, "Key Issues and Research Agendas," 174.

[23] Buuren, "Performative violence?"

[24] J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[25] Buuren, "Performative violence?"

actor terrorism could be better conceptualised as part of a larger phenomenon of "lone-actor grievance-fuelled violence".[26] A sense of outrage and desperation—a sense of grievance—is more decisive in understanding lone actor violence then an "ideology".

Closely connected to the motivational dimensions is the question whether or not lone actors are predominantly mentally ill. The odds of a lone-actor terrorist having a mental illness is indeed 13.49 times higher than the odds of a group actor having a mental illness.[27] Those findings supported research outcomes by Hewitt.[28] "Evidence suggests that psychological factors should be taken into account when investigating lone wolf terrorism."[29] Nesser summarised the problematic aspects of the motivational dimension of lone actor terrorism: "How 'political' must a violent attacker be to qualify as a single actor terrorist? When social grievances and psychological problems overshadow political messages there is indeed a fine line between terroristic violence and other types of random violence, such as school massacres."[30]

Some argue therefore that motivations should not be the decisive argument to label violent acts as "terrorists" but the societal consequences of their violence. The Dutch authorities, for instance, use the umbrella term of "potential violent individuals". Within this group a difference is made between "radicalised individuals" and "lone actors" (defined as individuals who are inspired, motivated, and sometimes directed by [virtual] networks of a more or less known ideology or religion) and "fixated persons" (who have no clear ideological motivation for their deeds). Within the group of "fixated persons" a differentiation was made between "confused persons" and individuals who are driven by "hatred of the system" and presumed conspiracy theories. The authorities pointed to the fact that in public

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[26] C. McCauley, S. Moskalenko and B. van Son, "Characteristics of Lone-Wolf Violent Offenders: a Comparison of Assassins and School Attackers," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013): 4-24.

[27] E. Corner and P. Gill, "A False Dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism," *Law and Human Behavior*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2015): 23-34.

[28] C. Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[29] M. Nijboer, "A Review of Lone Wolf Terrorism: the Need for a Different Approach," *Social Cosmos*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2012): 33-39.

[30] P. Nesser, "Single Actor Terrorism: Scope, Characteristics and Explanations," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (2012): 61-73.

discourse some doubts about the "intellectual capacities" of these perpetrators existed and consequently there was a tendency to dismiss their acts as isolated incidents. The Dutch government, however, underlined that the targets of these menaces often had an actual or symbolic function as representatives of a social system which the menacing individuals despised.[31]

Untraceable?

A last assumption that has been challenged is the untraceability of lone actors. This was partly due to the new insights that a variety of contacts existed between lone actors and extremist milieus—contacts that can be detected by intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies. "The idea that lone attackers are totally invisible, hiding in an amorphous mass of individuals, turned out to be false."[32] Research also showed that a majority of lone actors were known to law enforcement for previous criminal behaviour and contacts with extremist organisations. 27% of lone actors were suspected of involvement in terrorism while they were engaged in planning and preparatory activities—and so were already on the authorities' radar as potential terrorist threats.[33]

Further, current research shows that "leakage" is not that uncommon for lone attackers.[34] Although based on hindsight knowledge, leakage on social media and/or towards friends and families is not uncommon and offer law enforcement agencies opportunities to detect "weak signals" at various stages in the pre-attack process—especially as the majority of lone-actor terrorists display poor operational security.[35] Finally, change in behaviour also can be understood to be a "leaking" signal. Examples of such behaviour include becoming increasingly distant from family mem-

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[31] J. van Buuren, "Fixated Individuals and the state's response: networked security," in *Understanding Lone Actor Terrorism. Past experiences, future outlook, and response strategies*, ed. M. Fredholm (London: Routledge, 2016), 160-181.

[32] Lindekilde, O'Connor and Schuurman, "Radicalization patterns," 8.

[33] Ibid., 7.

[34] Ellis, Pantucci, Zuijdewijn, Bakker, Gomis, Palombi, and Smith, *Lone-Actor terrorism*.

[35] Lindekilde, O'Connor and Schuurman, "Radicalization patterns," 2.

bers, and adopting sudden and drastic changes in attitude, as well as more specific ones like changing social groups.[36]

The early detection, interruption and prevention of lone actor violence is therefore not almost impossible.[37] However, this requires, as Fredholm argued,[38] a shift from focusing on "motivations" or "radicalisation" towards a focus on concrete and linked actions taken by an individual. A requirement for this is "fused intelligence" on individuals: social media behaviour, criminal records, access to weapons or chemicals, preparations, and operational planning. "The counterterrorism effort should focus on deeds, not thoughts."[39]

Networked Security

The combined outcomes of research into lone actors offer perspectives for the prevention of lone actor violence. However, this requires a turn in the application of academic knowledge. Instead of understanding academic knowledge on lone actors in terms of abstract explanations of the phenomenon, the practicality of knowledge should be emphasised—in line with "practice theory".[40] As Corner and Gill, for instance, argued: a diagnostic label should not be interpreted as the "master explanation" of a lone actor's thinking, motives and behaviour.[41] It should instead sensitise authorities to the need to include mental healthcare organisations in the preventive networks.

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[36] Ellis, Pantucci, Zuijdewijn, Bakker, Gomis, Palombi, and Smith, *Lone-Actor terrorism*, 26.

[37] B. Schuurman, E. Bakker, P. Gill and N. Bouhana, "Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* (2017): 2-10.

[38] M. Fredholm, "Hunting Lone Wolves—Finding Islamist Lone Actors Before They Strike," Stockholm Seminar on Lone Wolf Terrorism, 2011. See also J. Striegher, "Early detection of the lone wolf: advancement of counter-terrorism investigations with an absence or abundance of information and intelligence," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2013): 35-53.

[39] Fredholm, "Hunting Lone Wolves."

[40] V. Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities," *International Organization*, Vol. 62 (2008): 257-288.

[41] Corner and Gill, "A False Dichotomy?," 25.

In other words: the focus should be on the establishment of security networks in which a range of organisations work together to collect and assess signals, establish threat assessments and design tailor-made approaches.[42] The Dutch experience showed that the collection of different signals from different actors is of paramount importance, as "one signal is no signal." Only when signals can be combined with other signals and contextualised is it possible to analyse and understand any possible risks. Risk assessment is heavily dependent on the reliability and completeness of the information on which the analysis is based.[43] This is the real challenge. Networked security is easy to say but hard to put into practice. Local authorities should have at their disposal the necessary information and network structures as well as the political and administrative will to execute the tasks referred to them. Personalised approaches are a demanding job. In general it is very difficult to supply proof on exactly how intervention by police and other authorities have helped to prevent incidents. This is not only a problem from a financial perspective—organisations have to satisfy performance indicators and have to show that they use their budgets effectively and efficiently—but also in terms of the commitment of all the actors involved.

Further, organisations with different cultures, powers, interests, and objectives have to cooperate closely. In particular, law enforcement agencies and care institutions form two different worlds. Whereas the police is inclined to see "potential violent individuals" foremost as possible suspects, mental healthcare professionals will perceive them primarily as patients in need of care—and intelligence agencies refer to them as "targets". Since information from mental healthcare institutions, but also from family doctors and other professionals, is of extreme importance to networked security, the willingness of these organisations to work with law enforcement agencies will be a decisive factor. This is partly determined by legal and professional boundaries to the exchange of information—for instance, doctor-patient confidentiality. However, the decisive factor making or breaking cooperation is trust between the professionals engaged. Trust, a shared sense of urgency and a good understanding of the public interests at stake can tear down the walls separating the different organisations.

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[42] A. Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Countering Violent Extremism with Governance Networks," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (2016): 135-139.

[43] Buuren, "Fixated Individuals," 172.

Next to that and partly connected with the trust issues, top-down enforced cooperation runs the risk that not all actors involved understand and appreciate that both organisational and common interests are at stake. Security networks commonly have to balance between the need for a lead organisation model of governance, in which one actor coordinates the decisions and activities of all the actors involved, and a shared model of governance, in which all actors are involved in the internal network governance. While the existence of a leading network actor has the benefit of ensuring that decisions are made and agreements are followed up, the downside is that other actors are not really involved and committed to the shared objectives of the security network. The autonomy and adaptability of networks are being hampered if too much external controls are exercised and local partners are getting the idea that it is not their project. Cooperation then will be more reluctant.[44] Network governance of complex challenges requires "patient, diplomatic, persistent efforts" to approach a common understanding of the nature of causes behind and possible solutions to the problem at hand.[45]

Lone actor violence will continue to be a challenge for security authorities—for a wicked problem there are by definition no easy solutions. The many "in-between"-cases of lone actor violence—hard to categorise under a political rubric, hard to understand in terms of motivation and objectives—and the variety of connections between lone actors and (digital) extremist environments and criminal milieus question the enduring validness of the concept. More important, social reality—for as far as there is such a thing as social reality—and especially the individual agents living in it, hardly show any interest in or behave themselves according to the definitions, concepts and categories scholars stick onto it.[46] Spaaij and Hamm correctly concluded that research on lone actor violence still suffers from considerable problems regarding "quality and rigor, including definitional, conceptual, methodological, and inference issues".[47] But just as important is the question whether authorities will be able to facilitate flexible, creative, multi-disciplinary and multi-agency professional networks in a security environment hampered by protocols, performance indicators,

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Countering Violent Extremism," 137.

[46] Buuren, "Performative violence?"

[47] Spaaij and Hamm, "Key Issues," 175.

compartmentalisation and sometimes obsolete and artificial conceptions of what constitutes “political”, “social”, “criminal” or “ incomprehensible” violence attributed to lone actors.

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