Lone Wolves: How to Prevent This Phenomenon?

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Expert Meeting Paper

Expert Meeting Lone Wolves
November 2010

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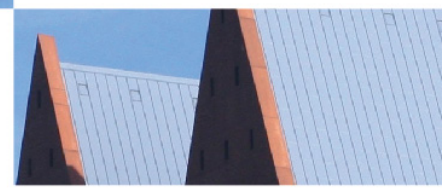

ICCT International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

Lone Wolves

How to Prevent This Phenomenon?

In this paper for the Expert Meeting entitled 'Lone Wolves; How to Prevent This Seemingly New Phenomenon', ICCT – The Hague Research Fellows Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf examine the rise of terrorist acts perpetrated by individuals. In addition to providing an analysis of these so-called lone wolf terrorists, this paper proposes a range of counter-terrorism measures to address this threat.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most puzzling and unpredictable forms of terrorism is provided by violent acts committed by a single individual. These so-called lone wolves are a nightmare for the police and intelligence community as they are extremely difficult to detect and to defend against. Compared to group terrorism or network-sponsored terrorists, lone operators have a critical advantage in avoiding identification and detection before and after their attacks, since most of them do not communicate with others with regard to their intentions. Although lone wolves might have the disadvantage of lacking the means, skills, and "professional" support of terrorist groups, some of them nonetheless have proven to be very lethal.

Infamous examples from the United States, Israel and Europe include Baruch Goldstein, an American-born Israeli citizen who was responsible for the death of 29 Muslims praying in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron; the Austrian Franz Fuchs, who used letter bombs to kill 4 and injure 15 people; US army major Nidal Malik Hasan, who is accused of a mass shooting at Fort Hood in which 13 people died and 30 were wounded; and the American mathematician Theodore Kaczynsky, also known as the "Una Bomber", who engaged in a mail bombing spree that killed three and wounded 23. In addition, there have been several lone wolves who assassinated political leaders, such as Yigal Amir, the assassin of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; Volkert van der Graaf, who killed the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn; and Mijailo Mijailovic, who is responsible for the death of the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Anna Lindh. These individuals and their violent acts exemplify the many differences in targets and modus operandi, as well the varieties in the political or ideological background of the perpetrators.

In this paper, we investigate these different types of perpetrators and the possible increase of lone wolf terrorism due to mounting appeals in Islamist circles to strike against the West as a lone operator. In addition, we look into the challenge of countering lone wolf terrorism and map out possible responses to prevent attacks –

responses that at the same time respect fundamental freedoms and civil liberties.

Defining the Term

The term "lone wolf" was popularised in the late 1990s by white supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis as part of an encouragement to fellow racists to act alone in committing violent crimes for tactical reasons.[1] Other terms that have been used to describe similar or comparable forms of political violence include "leaderless resistance'"[2] and "freelance terrorism".[3]

In this paper, we use the term lone wolf and follow the definition of Burton and Stewart who, in a STRATFOR essay, define a lone wolf as "a person who acts on his or her own without orders from — or even connections to — an organisation".[4] They stress the difference with a sleeper cell, arguing that a sleeper is an operative who infiltrates the targeted society or organisation and then remains dormant until a group or organisation orders them into action. In contrast, "a lone wolf is a standalone operative who by his very nature is embedded in the targeted society and is capable of self-activation at any time".[5] In our view, this definition includes individuals that are inspired by a certain group but who are not under the command of any other person, group or network. They might be members of a network, but this network is not a hierarchical organisation in the classical sense of the word.[6]

The terms "targeted society" and "self-activation" imply that the lone wolf is acting in a rational way and that his acts are aimed against that society or parts thereof. These acts are politically or religiously motivated and aim to influence public opinion or political decision-making. This excludes violent acts by standalone individuals that are motivated for other reasons, such as Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho or Matti Saari, who was responsible for the Jokela high school shooting in Finland and who seems to have been inspired by Cho. It should be noted that in some cases it is difficult to determine the motivations of the perpetrators; take for instance the case of Karst Tates, who drove his car into a crowd during the Dutch Queensday celebrations, killing eight individuals including himself, and who left no note or any other indication of his motivations. In this paper we also exclude those individuals whose politically motivated acts are only targeted against property or at insulting people – such as throwing pies at politicians. We solely focus on lone wolves who perpetrate acts aimed at taking away lives or who threaten to take away lives: the lone wolf terrorist.

No Single Profile

The above-mentioned definition of lone wolf terrorists comprises a wide variety of violent extremists. Among them are religious zealots, environmental and animal rights extremists, white supremacists and jihadists. Even at the level of the ideological or religious background there is much variety. For instance, among those who claim or justify their acts in the name of a religion are individuals of all faiths. It includes Islamist lone wolves like Nidal Malik Hasan and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who opened fire on a US military recruiting office, as well as anti-Semitic/Christian-identity adherents like Buford Furrow, who attacked a Jewish Community Center, and Eric Rudolph, also known as the Olympic Park Bomber, who was the perpetrator of a series of bombings that killed two people and injured at least 150 others. The term further includes radical Roman Catholics like James Kopp and radical Protestants like Scott Roeder, who both killed a physician who performed abortions.

Obviously, there is no single, standardised profile of a lone wolf. Nonetheless, it is possible to distinguish between different categories of lone wolf terrorists based on

[1] TTSRL, 2007: p.13
[2] Kaplan 1997
[3] Kushner 2003: pp.144-5; Hewitt, 2003: p.79
[4] Burton and Stewart, 2008
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] Sageman, 2004

their ideological or religious background. In addition, there are a number of commonalities shared amongst the various types of lone wolves. One of the problems for both counter-terrorism practitioners and academics is the relatively low number of terrorists who act on their own without orders from or even connections to an organisation. According to a study by the Dutch Institute for Safety, Security and Crisis Management COT, a total of 72 lone wolf terrorist incidents accounted for only 1.28 percent of the total number of terrorist incidents in the US, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Canada and Australia.[7] This statistical *quantité négligable* turns these incidents into the typical "black swan" occurrences that are almost impossible to categorise, systematise let alone predict.[8] However, the number of lone wolf terrorist incidents seems to be on the rise.

Increasing Numbers

Following the COT/TTSRL report of 2007, which uses the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, and looking at more recent cases, two things become clear. First, the number of incidents has increased in recent decades. Second, lone wolves seem to come from all kinds of ideological and religious extremist corners. The COT/TTSRL report shows that in the United States, white supremacists top the list of attacks by lone wolves. Other groups that have produced at least a handful or more lone wolf terrorists are "Islamist fundamentalists", "nationalists/separatists", and "anti-abortion" terrorists. There are few cases of left wing and separatist lone wolf incidents and a larger number of cases where the ideological background is unclear. The data analysed by Spaaij – based on the COT/TTSRL study – show that the phenomenon is more prevalent in the United States than in any other country and that it increased significantly during the past three decades.[9]

[7] COT/TTSRL, 2007: pp.16-7
[8] Taleb, 2005
[9] Spaaij, 2010: p. 854

Lone Wolf as a Tactic

The increase in lone wolf terrorism in the US in the last three decades can partly be explained by the adoption and dissemination of this method by and amongst right wing extremists.[10] For example, in the late 1990s the above mentioned white supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis explicitly encouraged fellow extremists to act alone in committing violent crimes.[11] A few years earlier, white supremacist Louis Beam, a former Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations member, popularised the strategy of leaderless resistance.[12] "His vision was one where 'all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction'".[13] And one can go back even further in time. Take for example the concept of "propaganda by deed" as propagated by the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin in the 19th century. His ideas inspired terrorist attacks in many parts of the Western world, killing and wounding high ranking civil servants, politicians and even heads of state, including the French president Carnot in 1894 and King Umberto I of Italy in 1900.

In Islamist circles, the idea of support for small-scale, loosely organised terrorist attacks is also hardly new. In 2003, for instance, an article was published on extremist Internet forum *Sada al Jihad* (Echoes of Jihad), in which Osama bin Laden sympathisers were encouraged to take action without waiting for instructions.[14] In 2006, a text authored by al Qaeda member Abu Jihad al-Masri, "How to fight alone", circulated widely in jihadist fora.[15] Another prominent Salafi writer, Abu Musab al-Suri, also advocated acts of terrorism carried out by small, autonomous cells or individuals. He outlined a strategy for a global conflict taking the form of resistance by small cells or

[10] Hamm, 2002
[11] COT/TTSRL, 2007: p.13
[12] Beam 1992
[13] COT/TTSRL, 2007: p.13
[14] ITAC/CIEM, 2007: p.4
[15] Clemons, 2010

individuals who keep organisational links to an absolute minimum.[16]

More anonymous calls for spontaneous Islamist extremist action appear quite regularly on the Internet. In a reaction to the Ford Hood shooting in Time Magazine, Bruce Hoffman noted that "this new strategy of al-Qaeda is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence completely outside any terrorist chain of command. [...] The nature of terrorism is changing, and Major Hasan may be an example of that." He also argued that if "leaderless resistance" is the wave of the future, it may be less lethal but harder to fight; there are fewer clues to collect and less chatter to hear, even as information about means and methods is so much more widely dispersed.[17]

One year earlier, an intelligence report by the Canadian government's Integrated Threat Assessment Centre – "Lone-Wolf Attacks: A Developing Islamist Extremist Strategy?" – also expressed concern about the emerging threat posed by lone wolf Islamist terrorists. The report also stresses the importance of the Internet. It states that "[t]he Internet is helpful to an individual who may be preparing to conduct a lone-wolf attack, providing ideological motivation, encouragement, justification, all within an anonymous environment".[18]

Recent US examples of jihadi fighters who seem to have acted entirely on their own include the previously mentioned Nidal Malik Hassan and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (2009). In Europe, there are only a few potential cases of Islamist lone wolf terrorists. In the Netherlands, a teenager named Yehya Kadouri threatened Dutch politicians and was trying to collect information and materials to make an explosive device (2004). More recently, there was the case of a Chechen-born amateur boxer living in Belgium who was injured in an explosion at a Copenhagen hotel while preparing a letter bomb (2010).

As the above-mentioned examples indicate, there is a wide variety in target selection, use of weapons and modus operandi. Lone wolf attacks range from threatening and intimidating people to shootings and bombings. As a consequence, there is much variety in the profile of an attack, its lethality and impact. Moreover, huge differences exist in the time span of incidents ranging from a single attack – most cases – to a prolonged terror campaign, such as the case of Ted Kaczynsky enduring almost two decades.

Commonalities

Despite the many differences in background and tactics, there are some commonalities shared amongst various lone wolves. One common characteristic among lone wolves is that they do not "work and play well with others". A classic example is Ted Kaczynski who lived in reclusion – a log cabin deep in the Montana wilderness – and shunned most forms of direct contact with the outside world. This is not to say that lone wolves have no connections to organisations, networks or scenes. In fact, many join extremist groups only to leave due to conflicting agendas or ideas, which are often too extreme even for the hard-core members of the group.[19] Hence, there is a degree of commitment to and identification with extremist movements; their solitary actions do not take place in a vacuum. This commonality is important in identifying and understanding the processes of radicalisation.[20]

Another commonality among lone wolves is that – notwithstanding their operational reclusion – they often distribute their ideas or manifestos to the outside world, in some cases even prior to the actual attack. Ted Kaczynski published his own manifesto and wrote letters to local newspapers. Today, the Internet allows anyone to post his or her extremist ideology on the Web. Scott Roeder

[16] ITAC/CIEM, 2007: p.3 & Lia, 2007
[17] Time Magazine, 11 November 2009
[18] ITAC/CIEM, 2007: p.5
[19] Vic Artiga, 2010
[20] COT/TTSRL, 2007: pp.86-7

wrote a column entitled "Tiller Watch" that was posted throughout the Internet. Major Nidal Malik Hassan developed a Power Point presentation entitled "The Koranic World View as it Relates to Muslims in the U.S. Military".[21] Jessica Stern and others also observe that lone-wolf terrorists tend to create their own ideologies that combine personal frustrations and aversion with political, social or religious grievances.[22]

A third shared attribute is the fact that although most terrorists do not suffer from any identifiable psychopathology, the rate of psychological disturbance and social ineptitude among lone wolves is relatively high.[23]

The Challenge of Fighting Lone Wolf Terrorism

Identifying, targeting, and arresting a lone wolf is very difficult. First of all, they are solitary actors, whose intentions are hard to discern since they avoid contact with others. As Fred Burton argues, "[w]hen militants are operating in a cell consisting of more than one person, there is a larger chance that one of them will get cold feet and reveal the plot to authorities, that law enforcement and intelligence personnel will intercept a communication between conspirators, or that law enforcement authorities will be able to introduce an informant into the group".[24]

Secondly, it is very hard to predict from which disenfranchised, alienated or frustrated environment they stem. They display a variety of backgrounds with a wide spectrum of ideologies and motivations. For instance, the murder by the anti-abortionist Roetger and the US military recruiting office shooting by Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad occurred within the same week.

Thirdly, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between those extremists who intend to commit attacks and those who simply express radical beliefs or issue hollow threats.[25] In Western countries in general and in the US in particular, the freedom of speech is a fundamental freedom which limits possibilities to investigate non-violent radical scenes. Knowing that all terrorists are radical but that most radicals are not terrorists, it is extremely difficult to single out potential lone wolves before they strike, even with the help of the most sophisticated intelligence gathering tools. With such a large universe of potential suspects, this is like collecting haystacks to find a needle.[26] To make things even worse, according to Hoffman, the "leaderless resistance" is not only harder to fight than terrorism by an identifiable, organised conspiracy, but it is also more prone to spontaneous combustion.[27]

Lastly, lone wolves inspire copycat behaviour, become role models for other alienated youngsters, and often invite band wagon attacks. Kazcynski's manifesto still circulates on the internet, as do Bouyeri's letters. Bomb letters, arson attacks and anthrax letters have a tendency to come in waves – although not necessarily by the same perpetrator.

Challenges for the Lone Wolf

Fortunately, there are also some operational constrains for the lone wolf, in executing a "successful" attack. Like any terrorist, they are hindered by the terrorist attack cycle. And because they are working alone, they have to conduct each step of the cycle by themselves. "This means that they are vulnerable to detection at several different junctures as they plan their attacks, the most critical of which is the surveillance stage of the operation."[28] In addition, these individuals often lack the knowledge, resources and contacts to skill themselves in preparing and executing violent acts. And although many websites and military manuals provide instructions on executing violence,

[21] Vic Artiga, 2010
[22] COT/TTSRL, 2007: p.86
[23] Hewitt, 2003: p.80 & Spaaij, 2010: p.854
[24] Fred Burton, 2007
[25] NCTb, 2010
[26] Fred Burton, 2007
[27] Time Magazine, 11 November 2009
[28] Stewart and Burton, 2009

such as making bombs, there is no substitute for hands-on experience in the real world.[29] Because of these difficulties, many lone wolves will at some instance have to step out of their vacuum. This makes them vulnerable to coming to somebody's attention before they can conduct an attack. This vulnerability often occurs as they seek the skills or materials required to conduct a terrorist attack.[30]

Counter-Terrorism Responses

How to deal with the threat of lone wolf terrorism and the challenge to identify, target, and arrest persons acting entirely on their own? The debate on how to fight lone wolf terrorism is far from decided and remains to be reconciled with popular principles of freedom – as is the case with any exchange of those principles for security reasons. However, the above commonalities and challenges provide some clues as where to start with counter-terrorism responses.

First of all, according to Alex Shone of the British Henry Jackson society, the key factor of the UK's counter-terrorism approach to locating lone wolf attacks is knowing not *who* but *how* such attacks are formulated. In his essay, Shone also stresses the need to understand the radicalisation process of lone wolves. He argues that insight into these processes hold possible avenues for effective measures to prevent or counter the threat of lone wolf terrorism.[31] Knowing how attacks are formulated requires a far more sensitive detection system at the tactical, sharp-end of operations. Counter-terrorism services need to be far more attuned to those signatures, as minimal as that might be, that an individual with a terrorist intent will inevitably give off in preparing their attack. This requires not only effective data capture and exploitation enabled by efficient overall information management, but also fused intelligence products. This fused intelligence must be genuine in its all-source origin and not simply single-source "contextualised". In Shone's opinion, "[i]ntelligence analysts and collectors must work in far closer unison, as well as alongside appropriate tradecraft specialists; from Explosive Ordnance Disposal experts to religious scholars." Consequently, such measures could lead to insights and indicators of how lone wolf attacks are assembled, increasing the ability of interdiction forces to operate successfully to what he calls the "left of the bang" (i.e. all that happens prior to an attack).

In the second place, given the commonality amongst many lone wolves that there is a degree of commitment to and identification with extremist movements and that their radicalisation does not take place in a vacuum, it is important to both investigate and cooperate with afflicted communities. Given the general opinion on effective counter-radicalisation strategy that its success depends on effective community engagement, it is essential to promote passive and active hostility towards the terrorist yolk in these communities with the help of influential members of relevant communities. According to Shone, such a community-based approach should ultimately foster a more advantageous operating environment for counter-terrorism actors providing them with more eyes and ears on the ground and increase their interdiction capacity. In the long run, "[r]esolution of these crises shall inevitably be the responsibility of effective, communal guidance and mentoring".[32]

In the third place, even seemingly spontaneous combustion is often triggered by a catalyst event. It could be rewarding to study and compare the nature of potential triggers or catalyst events in the radicalisation processes of lone wolves.[33] Are they located in the private domain, are they provided by political developments? Or are triggers even mastered by "entrepreneurs of violence" who call upon their anonymous followers to become active.

[29] Stewart and Burton, 2008
[30] Stewart and Burton, 2009
[31] Shone, 2010
[32] Shone, 17 May 2010
[33] See for instance Veldhuis and Staun, 2009

In the fourth place, exactly because lone wolves – although operating alone – draw inspiration from other extremists or ideologues, counter narratives are important elements of such a strategy. Shone speaks of "psychological operations" that must be stepped up to match the stride of terrorists' effective exploitation of UK operations in Afghanistan; and to eventually overtake them and diminish their impact. "This factor extends also to psychological operations conducted against the portrayal of suicide bombings. Such events, as the most extreme manifestation of radicalization, must be utilised against the perpetrators to delegitimize their credibility".[34]

In the fifth place, although lone wolves are no part of hierarchical organisations, they do have a context. Awareness programs for parents, schools, universities could be interesting to reflect upon – obviously without launching large scale public campaigns that only serve to create a moral panic.

Lastly, communicating on the one hand the threat of lone wolves to relevant target audiences, but on the other hand refraining from handing them the public theatre they strive for, is one of the largest challenges for counter-terrorism actors. Handling lone wolves below public surface, by intelligence and investigating squads is one core principle of preventing lone wolves from installing fear and chaos in society.

One last caveat should be formulated. By targeting measures against lone wolf terrorism according to knowledge of how and not who, it is possible to diminish the threat while adhering to principles of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties. Focusing on the "who are they?" question not only necessitates a great deal of time and resources, but may easily lead to 'ethnic profiling' or to pursuing individuals who are not planning to move from radical beliefs to radical action. After all, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between violent radicals and (the much larger group of) non-violent radicals. Hence, a broad strategy with a strong focus on interdiction, prevention and intelligence gathering by means of interpersonal contact might be more effective approach to counter lone wolf terrorism than a more repressive approach with an emphasis on more technical intelligence gathering disciplines.

Many Unanswered Questions

As mentioned- earlier, the question of how best to fight lone wolf terrorism is far from decided. The answers on the "how?" question regarding modus operandi of lone wolf terrorists and their radicalization processes are preliminary ones that deserve further investigation. And with the apparent increase of Islamist lone wolf terrorism, new questions pop up, for instance about the development of the concept of "leaderless jihad", the role of the Internet and the possible impact of attacks by Islamist lone wolves on societies in general and Muslim communities and Islamist subgroups in particular. Will there be a potential contamination or inspiration effect of Islamist lone-wolf terrorism? And is there a link between successful counter-terrorism measures against Islamist terrorist networks and the increase in propaganda to take solo action without waiting instructions?

The fact that there are – fortunately – few cases we can learn from makes it a difficult task to understand the "how" of lone wolf terrorism. Therefore, sharing experiences, data and ideas regarding this particular terrorist threat between practitioners, policy makers and academics is essential to be able to find at least some answers to the many unanswered questions. The ICCT expert meeting on Lone Wolves provided that opportunity, focusing on the concept of a broad strategy with a strong focus on both interdiction and prevention as well as the role of human intelligence.

[34] Shone, 17 May 2010

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