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Bart Schuurman [a], Lasse Lindekilde [b], Stefan Malthaner[c], Francis O'Connor [d], Paul Gill [e], and Noémie Bouhana [e]

aInstitute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Hague, The Netherlands; bDepartment of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; cHamburg Institute for Social Research, Hamburg, Germany; dPeace Research Institute, Frankfurt, Germany; eSecurity and Crime Science at University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This research note argues that the "lone wolf" typology should be fundamentally reconsidered. Based on a three-year empirical research project, two key points are made to support this argument. First, the authors found that ties to online and offline radical milieus are critical to lone actors' adoption and maintenance of both the motive and capability to commit acts of terrorism. Second, in terms of pre-attack behaviors, the majority of lone actors are not the stealthy and highly capable terrorists the "lone wolf" moniker alludes to. These findings not only urge a reconsideration of the utility of the lone-wolf concept, they are also particularly relevant for counterterrorism professionals, whose conceptions of this threat may have closed off avenues for detection and interdiction that do, in fact, exist.

Terrorist violence committed by lone actor extremists, the colloquial "lone wolf," is on the rise.[1] A recent spate of such attacks in Europe and the United States has brought home the danger posed by this growing aspect of the jihadist terrorist threat, in particular. Yet, in a reflection of research on terrorism more generally, our notions about lone actors are too often based on conceptually and methodologically questionable assumptions that are as detrimental to those tasked with detecting, preventing and responding to this threat, as they are to those studying it.[2] Attackers hastily labeled as "lone wolves" often turn out to have interpersonal, political, or operational ties to larger networks.[3] But the problem is more than a mere misdiagnosis. Based on three years of empirical research into the radicalization and attack planning of lone actor extremists from Europe and the United States who were active between the 1978 and 2015, the authors argue that the very idea of the "lone wolf" needs to be overhauled.[4]

Part of the problem is that thinking on lone actor terrorism is marred by conceptual confusion.[5] We deliberately use the term "lone actors" rather than lone wolves, as the latter

implies a high level of cunning and lethality that is often not present among these individuals. Moreover, it perpetuates a sensationalist term that originated with American right-wing extremists.[6] We also avoid the oxymoron of "lone wolf packs."[7] Regardless of how small such dyads, triads, or small cells may be, as soon as two or more people interact with one another with the aim of committing a terrorist attack, small-group dynamics come into play.[8] Peer pressure, leader–follower interactions, group polarization, and other social–psychological processes by definition rule out including even the smallest "packs" under the heading of lone-actor terrorism.

A larger underlying issue is the scarcity of methodologically sound, in-depth empirical research on how and why individuals come to carry out acts of terrorism alone.[9] We found that social ties play a crucial role throughout the process leading from ideological radicalization to the planning and preparation of terrorist attacks.[10] Furthermore, it is in large part because of these social ties that lone actors are not the undetectable threat they are often portrayed as. This is a finding of particular relevance to those working to detect and prevent this form of violence from taking place.

A Detectable Threat

Terrorist organizations like Hamas have for years used single operatives to carry out attacks, but communications between members of such organizations in the run-up to an attack have, at least in theory, provided law enforcement and intelligence agencies with opportunities for early detection and interdiction. Lone actors are thought to present a novel and particularly serious threat precisely because the absence of co-conspirators means that they do not engage in the communication and interaction with others that would render them vulnerable to detection and infiltration.[11]

The Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in 2011, and the "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski who killed three and injured twenty-three people over a span of seventeen years, are frequently used as typical examples of the lone actor threat. Both were solitary individuals who proved capable of planning and executing deadly terrorist attacks on their own.[12] Yet rather than embodying "the" lone actor, both men should be seen as exceptional rather than archetypical. When we go beyond these high-profile cases, we find that many lone actor extremists maintain plot-relevant social ties that render them vulnerable to detection, that they are poor at maintaining operational security, and that they start "leaking" their intentions months or even years ahead of their attack.[13] The implications of these findings for the prevention and disruption of lone actor extremism can be illustrated by looking at lone actor radicalization and pre-attack behavior.

In our research, we studied lone actor radicalization from a relational perspective. This allowed us to identify varying degrees and types of "loneness" vis-à-vis radical milieus and groups in on- and offline settings. Loneness is not an inherent quality of these individuals, but one that results from social processes triggered and shaped by lone actors' personalities and their often-poor social skills. Their loneness is, in several instances, reinforced by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, combined with scorn for the efficacy and commitment to the cause of potential co-conspirators. Some are simply alone as a result of significant changes in their social environments.[14] Brunon Kwiecien, the Polish man arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack on the Polish parliament in 2012, appears to have gone it alone only after attempts at recruiting others to a terrorist cell failed.[15] Similarly, the London

nail bomber David Copeland, who embarked on a solo bombing spree in 1999 that left three people dead and 140 injured, may have tried to form a neo-Nazi terror cell before deciding to strike out alone.[16]

However, lone actors' frequent inability to recruit or join others for terrorist purposes does not mean that they drop all social interaction or that their social environment plays no part in their offending. Lone actors typically radicalize in both online and offline "radical milieus."[17] Through such interaction, they develop weak or affiliative social ties with radical actors, even if their integration and socialization in these milieus is often partial, peripheral, and discontinuous. In certain circumstances, individuals who subsequently become lone actor extremists are even able to develop and maintain lasting social ties and become integrated members of larger radical milieus and movements.[18] For example, Mohammed Bouyeri, who murdered the controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, was a central figure in the jihadist "Hofstadgroup."[19] However, for reasons outlined above, many lone actors may experience voluntary or involuntarily exit from these collectives, before moving onto actual attack planning and preparation.[20] Again, loneness should be seen as an outcome of changing relational configurations during a lone actor's radicalization, rather than as an inherent quality of these individuals.

The presence of social ties to larger radical milieus, groups, or movements during lone actors' radicalization suggests that most of these individuals are not reclusive assassins who consciously choose isolation to better prepare for their attacks. They are people who, more often than not, are forced to plan, prepare, and execute acts of terrorist violence on their own due to their disposition, lack of social skills, or (borderline) mental health issues.[21] Their current or past involvement in radical milieus exposes them to authority figures and leaders who can provide justifications for the use of violence or provide "role models" whose involvement in terrorism can inspire lone actors' own attacks.[22] For most individuals, hurting or killing others requires overcoming internal moral barriers to the use of force.[23] Exposure to extremist ideologies and authority figures can play a crucial role in this process[24] and our research found that 78 percent of lone actors were exposed to external sources of encouragement or justification for the use of violence.[25]

Social ties do more than contribute to the adoption of violent beliefs. Many of the individuals that we have come to think of as "lone wolves" are, on closer inspection, better understood as alone largely and only with regard to the actual commission of the act of violence. For most lone actors, connections to others, be they virtual or physical, play an important and sometimes even critical role in the adoption and maintenance of their motivation to commit violence, as well as the practical skills that are necessary to carry out acts of terrorism.[26] As such, the "lone wolf" concept (implicitly) overstates the degree of isolation that most of these individuals actually experience throughout the process. Furthermore, in just under a third of the cases studied, others had provided concrete assistance with preparing for the attack.[27] This ranged from providing bomb-making advice and materials to offering post-attack safe houses. For example, Timothy McVeigh, responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people, received help from Terry Nichols with renting storage space and acquiring and building the explosives used.[28] Mohammed Merah's 2012 attacks on French soldiers and children and teachers from a Jewish school, was made possible by the help he received with logistics and transportation.[29]

From a practical point of view, current or past involvement in radical and extremist groups provides avenues through which law enforcement and intelligence agencies can

become aware of the convictions and intentions of potential lone actors. The help provided by others means that a sizeable minority of lone actors are vulnerable to the interception of plot-relevant communications, opening up opportunities for detection and prevention that are often incorrectly assumed to be few or nonexistent.[30] Echoing prior research,[31] we find that a majority of these individuals engage in on- and offline "leakage behavior"[32] that provides others with an indication of their convictions and intentions.[33] Some of the individuals in our dataset spoke openly of their admiration for the murderers of abortion-providers[34] or wrote of sparking racial violence online,[35] whereas others showed colleagues execution videos, while speaking critically of the U.S. intervention in Iraq.[36] Lone actor attacks can—and have been—prevented precisely because of such revealing lapses.[37]

With regard to the intent to act, some lone actors posted online messages stating an undefined wish to "kill someone,"[38] whereas others issued detailed and specific threats to persons or property.[39] In the study underlying this article, 86 percent of lone actors communicated their convictions to others and 58 percent also provided indications of actual violent intent.[40] That this occurred not days or weeks, but months and years before the intended attack further underlines that lone actors are often far from stealthy or undetectable beforehand.[41] All policy is built on assumptions, but if we continue to look at the lone actor terrorist threat as a phenomenon of socially isolated, uncommunicative "black holes," we risk impeding our ability to effectively detect, prevent, and mitigate the danger, which is not to minimize the challenge posed by picking these "weak signals" out of noisy online and offline environments.[42]

Further undermining the perception that lone actors embody a uniquely surreptitious and dangerous terrorist threat, is that most of them display a curious disregard for basic operational security.[43] The majority of individuals we studied took very few measures to ensure the secrecy of their plot or did so ineffectively. For instance, most failed to encrypt incriminating digital evidence such as bomb-making manuals. Weapons and explosives were usually not hidden in separate locations but stored at home, often in plain sight. Most did not utilize false names. Part of the reason why men like Breivik and Kaczynski proved such deadly terrorists is precisely because they prioritized maintaining their anonymity and safeguarding plot secrecy.[44] It is encouraging to find that most lone actors are not the highly capable and secretive operatives the "lone wolf" term implies. Unsurprisingly, of course, there is a link between attention to operational security and lethality, which does suggest that the minority of lone actors who do manage to hide their intentions and preparations are those who most warrant our concern.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings challenge common wisdom on lone actor terrorism. For most of these individuals, social ties were integral to their development of the motivation and capability to commit acts of terrorism. Arguably, truly lone attackers are so uncommon as to be anomalies, rather than the basis for a distinct typology of terrorism. Our study involved the systematic collection of data of the whole population (or near-enough, definitional issues notwithstanding) of lone actor extremism incidents in Western Europe and North America between 1978 and 2015. At final count, our dataset included 125 cases, which gives some idea of the size of the haystacks in which these particular needles are buried.

Hence, it makes sense to see perpetrators of terrorism, and their radicalization and attack planning, on a continuum from truly lone to group-based, whereby most of those commonly designated as "lone wolves" nevertheless may not be as distant from the group-based end of the spectrum as previously advertised. From the perspective of law enforcement and intelligence gathering, the significant degree of social interaction between lone actors and broader radical milieus re-opens avenues for detection and interdiction that may have been thought closed or unlikely to deliver, and, from the perspective of policymakers and the public, demystifies the lone actor by showing that most are not the capable and isolated threat they are often made out to be. Beyond the investigative implications, terrorism is a perception game: undermining the narrative of the lone undetectable terrorist is part and parcel of resilience building, which hastens attack recovery and empowers citizens who find themselves recast from powerless victims or bystanders to active participants in the counterterrorism agenda as those most likely to perceive (and hopefully report) the "weak signals" leaked by lone actors.

Scholars have become increasingly critical of the "lone wolf" moniker and its associated portrayal. These critiques are a much-needed correction, but pointing out the often-incorrect use of the concept does not, to our minds, go far enough. If for no other reason than to re-energize evidence-driven discussion of what lone actor terrorism actually is, we argue for a fundamental re-evaluation of how to understand this phenomenon. With prominent cases thought to define lone actor terrorism turning out to be outliers in terms of their isolation and terrorist capabilities, rather than category-defining examples, the real question is whether it is time to put the "lone wolf" category to rest altogether.

A larger question, also worth raising, is why inappropriate typologies persist in counterterrorism discourse. In part at least, the event-driven character of research and policymaking is to blame. There is a tendency to see developments in terrorists' modus operandi as heralding "new" forms of terrorism, to which existing explanatory frameworks or counterterrorism practices no longer apply. The 9/11 attacks were seen by many scholars and practitioners as harbingers of the "new" terrorism, fundamentally different from what had gone before.[45] On a smaller scale, Breivik's 2011 attack was interpreted by many in those same communities as the blueprint for a slew of similarly deadly lone actor extremist attacks to come. In both instances, a failure to adequately examine underlying assumptions combined with a lack of dispassionate empirical research and a tendency to ignore the lessons of the past has impeded our understanding and response to these phenomena. Too many times, we talk ourselves into reinventing the wheel as a first course of action, rather than putting existing (and, therefore, evaluated) tools and processes to the problem.

Addressing this reflex will remain a priority challenge for the years to come. Already, the tendency to see extremists returning from Syria's civil war as a new dimension to the existing lone-actor terrorist threat is taking hold in academic and policymaking circles. There is no denying that many of these individuals pose a threat, which should be taken very seriously indeed. Their paramilitary training, combat experience, and connections to internationally operating terrorist networks make them potentially more capable terrorist operatives. Yet there is a lot more to being a successful terrorist than familiarity with weapons and violence. Meeting this threat effectively will involve high-quality, data-driven research and collaboration between academics and practitioners to moderate the impact of—likely unavoidable, given the tempo of policymaking— short-term reactions to new developments in a form of political violence that is inherently dynamic.

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ORCID

Bart Schuurman ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2531-0625
Lasse Lindekilde ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9877-9451
Francis O'Connor ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6891-770X
Paul Gill ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9606-9197
Noémie Bouhana ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9393-8812

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