



## Prospects for Lone Wolf and SIMAD terrorism



Theodore Gordon <sup>a,\*</sup>, Yair Sharan <sup>b,c,d</sup>, Elizabeth Florescu <sup>e,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Millennium Project, 1 Smilax Dr., Old Lyme, CT 06371, USA

<sup>b</sup> Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv, Israel

<sup>c</sup> TAM-C/FIRST Group, Jerusalem, Israel

<sup>d</sup> Millennium Project in Israel Tel Aviv, Israel

<sup>e</sup> The Millennium Project Washington, DC, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The recent terror events committed by individuals in the streets of Jerusalem, the Canadian Parliament and in New York have raised attention to the phenomena of Lone Wolf terrorism.

While there is no internationally-agreed upon definition, generally a *lone wolf* (LW) is described as a single individual acting essentially alone who kills or injures people or significantly damages infrastructure to bring about political, religious, or ideological aims, to right perceived wrongs, to gain recognition or in response to schizophrenic aberrations or other insane impulses. We call a LW with intent to use weapons of mass destruction resulting in a high number of casualties “SIMAD” standing for “Single Individual Massively Destructive.” A new kind of arms race is developing. On the one hand, massively lethal weapons are becoming available to individuals who intend to use them, and on the other hand, methods of mass surveillance and for apprehending such individuals are increasing as well. Will the methods of detection be adequate and timely enough to avoid catastrophe? The outcomes of this race are important because weapons that become available to LWs will have enormous destructive power, and interdiction in their acquisition may involve new and repressive social constraints. No matter which way the scale tips, the world changes.

To reach a broader understanding of this threat, the Israel Node of The Millennium Project initiated a Real-Time Delphi study of prospects for LW terrorism with the participation of some 60 worldwide experts in the field of security and other related specialties. The participants generally had high confidence in their answers, but there were some sharp and important disagreements. We have early warning about this issue; we should use this time to better understand it, and take steps to mitigate or avoid its threats.

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## 1. Introduction

We define *lone wolf* terrorists (LW) as single individuals acting essentially alone who kill or injure people or inflict significant damage on essential infrastructure at a single instant or over time, or plan to do so, in order to right perceived

wrongs, or accomplish political, social, religious, or ideological aims.

State sponsored terrorism offers many chances for interdiction and apprehension that are not possible for Lone Wolves who intend to cause harm on their own. They may have been influenced by organized extremism but they go about selecting, preparing for, and executing their adopted mission on their own initiative. Why does this make interdiction harder? Since there is no “cell” involved, there is no chance for infiltration, no chance for intercepting communications among co-conspirators, less chance of using any detection strategies based on networks and

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tedjgordon@gmail.com (T. Gordon), sharany@gmail.com (Y. Sharan), Elizabeth@millennium-project.org (E. Florescu).

<sup>1</sup> Present address: Calgary, Canada.

connections, and no chance of partners in the prospective crime having second thoughts and alerting authorities. In other words, the interdiction modalities used to detect extremists' plots are much less effective against lone actors. That is why extremist organizations urge decentralized and independent initiatives. It follows that a separate analysis is warranted.

Because an expanding LW threat seems plausible and very dangerous, we believe it is important to reach a broader understanding of the potential for escalation in numbers and the level of damage possible. Under the leadership of The Millennium Project's Israeli Node, this objective was pursued in a Real-Time Delphi (RTD) study, involving experts from around the world who represented the many skills required by the topic. The design and findings of this RTD are presented in this article and have been the subject of a presentation by the authors at a NATO advanced research workshop conducted in November 2014 in Jerusalem, titled "Lone Actors—an Emerging Security Threat."

Our definition is broader than that used by others; we include cyber-terror attacks, attacks against infrastructure, both successful and failed attempts, and attacks for apolitical causes (e.g. white supremacy, anti-abortion, animal rights, support or opposition to environmentalism, anti-Semitism). Cyber terror would be included because it may result in massive social and economic disruptions and loss of life. Similarly, destruction or disruption of infrastructure may accomplish the objectives of some LW terrorists by causing mayhem and drawing attention to their activities and goals. Data on thwarted or failed attempts are sparse, but should be included if the success of interdiction strategies are to be measured.

Definitions of "lone wolves" vary among researchers in this field. For example, Spaaij<sup>2</sup> defines lone wolf terrorists as those who "carry out attacks individually and independently from established organizations." Nesser,<sup>3</sup> however, draws distinctions among leaderless resistance, solo terrorism, Lone Wolf terrorism, solo actors acting under control of a network, and solo actors acting on their own but on behalf of organized groups. The European Research Consortium on Transnational Terrorism defines LW terrorists as persons "who operate individually, who do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, who act without the direct influence of a leader or hierarchy, whose tactics and methods are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or direction."<sup>4</sup> The definition used by Kushner includes lone wolves who might have been a "card carrying" member of some terrorist organization and even received funds and training from them but "they take solitary action with only their conscience to guide them."<sup>5</sup>

The lack of an agreed-to definition causes some difficulties. Is a sociopathic killer who acts alone a murderer, a LW, both, or neither? Some cases simply fall into a grey zone. A murderer is not likely to be inclined to use a weapon of mass destruction; but even this is not a clear fulcrum: there have been murderers who have brought down airliners in revenge and killed many people as an act of revenge or in an attempt to injure a single person.<sup>6</sup> The line between criminal activities and terrorism is often very thin.

Our definition excludes more than a few cases in which pairs of people plan or perform acts of terrorism, such as the bombing of the Oklahoma U.S. Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh who was assisted by Terry Nichols, the Tsarnaev brothers who perpetrated the Boston Marathon bombings, and the Palestinian cousins who killed three praying rabbis and a fourth praying person in a synagogue on November 18, 2014.

A few of the most well-known lone wolf examples include:

Andres Breivik bombed government buildings and killed over 70 people in Oslo and on the island of Utoya.

Ted Kaczynski, the Luddite Unabomber, killed 3 people and injured 23 others with letter bombs.

Baruch Goldstein, an American-born Israeli physician, who killed 29 and injured 125 Muslims praying in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.<sup>7</sup>

Mohammed Merah, killed 7 some of whom were children at a Jewish school<sup>8</sup>

Michael Zehaf-Bibeau opened fire at the Canadian National War Memorial, killing one soldier and then running into the Parliament building where he was killed by security and police forces.<sup>9</sup>

In the first of two shootings at Fort Hood, Major Nidal Hasan, killed 13 and injured 30 more.

In the Montreal École Polytechnique killing spree, Marc Lépine killed 14 women students.<sup>10</sup>

In Newtown Connecticut, Adam Lanza killed 27 people, including an entire first grade class, at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

In the US Bruce Ivins, a researcher in the bio-defense lab in Fort Detrick, mailed letters containing high quality anthrax resulting in 5 death and more than 60 casualties as well as high infrastructure contamination.

<sup>2</sup> Spaaij, Ramon, "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol 33, Issue 9, 2010. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501426#preview>.

<sup>3</sup> Petter Nesser, "Single Actor Terrorism: Scope, Characteristics and Explanations, Perspectives on Terrorism," Vol 6, No 6, 2012 [http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/231/html](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/231/htmlhttp://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/231/html).

<sup>4</sup> Lone-Wolf terrorism, a case study by the European research consortium Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law (TTSRL); <http://www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/Lone-Wolf%20Terrorism.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Kushner, Hatvey Encyclopedia of Terrorism, Sage Publications, 2003, <http://militero.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/terrorism-encyclopedia-of.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> In December 1987, David Burke shot the pilots of a Pacific Southwest passenger jet in flight. The plane crashed and killed 43 people. The motive was revenge against the airline employee who had fired him and was a passenger.

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, Joel. "Israel destroys shrine to mosque gunman", December 30, 1999, *New York Times*.

<sup>8</sup> Smith-Spark, Laura, "Who was French Gunman Mohammed Merah?" CNN, March 23, 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/21/world/europe/france-shooting-suspect-profile/>.

<sup>9</sup> CBC News, "Ottawa shooting: A day of chaos leaves soldier, gunman dead," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ottawa-shooting-a-day-of-chaos-leaves-soldier-gunman-dead-1.2808710>.

<sup>10</sup> The Montreal massacre: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/03/montreal-massacre-canadas-feminists-remember>.

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