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A dimensional approach to analyzing lone offender terrorism

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of "lone offender" terrorism is a serious one for law enforcement and security services around the world. Though the tactic has been used for hundreds of years, the rising number—in some countries—and diversity of "lone" attacks are increasingly troublesome. Attempts to clearly define the phenomenon, however, have been rather elusive. In this review, we suggest that viewing the dimensions of lone offender terrorism along a continuum, rather than forcing categorical distinctions, may provide a useful approach for classifying or analyzing lone offender attacks. We introduce three dimensions as a starting point for discussion—Loneness, Direction, and Motivation—and attempt to illustrate how these dimensions are linked to key investigative questions as a potential attacker proceeds on a pathway from idea to action.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, world leaders in intelligence and security, echoed by terrorism experts, have become increasingly concerned about lone offender terrorism. After the attack at Fort Hood in Texas, noted expert Bruce Hoffman, warned that an emerging strategy for Al Qa'ida "is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence completely outside any terrorist chain of command" (Gibbs, 2009). In February, 2010, U.S. CIA Director Leon Panetta said in testimony before Congress: "It's the lone-wolf strategy that I think we have to pay attention to as the main threat to this country." On July 22, 2011, when a 32-year-old Norwegian man who had just bombed government buildings in Oslo, then began shooting at youth camp teenagers, killing 69 of them, discussions of the "lone offender" once again dominated international headlines.

Despite the surge of recent concern, the phenomenon of solo or lone offender terrorism is certainly not new. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Russian (and some European) anarchists were inciting individual attacks and direct actions as a way to bring attention to their cause (Ivianisky, 1977). Paul Brousse, in his 1877 article in *Bulletin of the Jura Federation*, called it "propaganda by the deed".

Attacks by unaffiliated individuals have been a feature of terrorism in the United States for many decades, comprising about 6.5% of known terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2007 (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2010). In fact, an analysis from the (START) (2010) suggests that the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing marked a shift in American terrorism toward more individual attackers. Their report notes that:

> ".. since 1995, a much higher percentage of terrorist attacks in the United States have been conducted by unaffiliated individuals,

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rather than by organized groups. In the period 1995 (post-Oklahoma City) through 2007, 43 out of 131 incidents with attributed perpetrators were committed by individuals—**33% of all attacks** in the United States in this period" (emphasis in original), p. 2.

Very little systematic research has been conducted on the lone offender phenomenon. Most of what has been written in the trade and professional literature is based on journalistic descriptions and experience. Apart from a handful of case studies, we identified only two open source analyses of lone offender terrorism. The first comes from the COT Institute for Safety, Security, and Conflict Management in The Netherlands. The study results are reported separately in two documents (though both are based, essentially, on the same analysis); the 2007 COT report, *Lone Wolf Terrorism* (COT, 2007) and a 2010 article by Ramón Spaaij (2010), *The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment*. The second comes from an unpublished Master's thesis, by Liesbeth van der Heide (2011). She conducted a more anecdotal analysis of lone offender terrorism, comparing cases across David Rapoport's (2004) "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism." Taken together, these analyses suggest that lone offender terrorism is relatively rare, and that the perpetrators are primarily males under 50 years old who use firearms or explosives and often choose civilian targets. Neither of the two analyses includes much detail about the offender's pre-attack behaviors.

1.1. Terminology

Lone offender terrorism is a complicated problem for law enforcement and security services, and the lack of consensus about terminology and definitions sometimes adds to the confusion. Those who engage in lone offender terrorism have been called lone wolves, individual terrorists, solo terrorists, lone operator terrorists and freelancers.

Popular use of the term "*lone wolf*" as it applies to terrorist-type attacks appears to have its origins in American white supremacist movements in the 1990s. At that time, Louis Beam, one of the movement's ideological leaders, was promoting the notion of "leaderless resistance." The leaderless concept was tactically extended by Tom Metzger, a leader of the now-defunct White Aryan Resistance (WAR) and Alex Curtis, one of the movement's early Internet celebrities. Curtis envisioned a revolutionary movement that combined overt propaganda with covert violent attacks. "The underground would consist of "lone wolves"—racist warriors acting alone or in small groups who attacked the government or other targets in 'daily, anonymous acts'." (ADL, n.d.). He reasoned that this approach would permit violent action without incriminating a group or others in the movement. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) 1998 investigation of Curtis was named "Operation Lone Wolf" (FBI, n.d.).

A variety of related terms also have been used to describe lone offender terrorism. van der Heide uses "*lone operator terrorist*" which, for her, subsumes not only "the traditional individual 'lone wolf', but also the smallest networks (e.g., two persons, autonomous cells, leaderless jihadism) almost undetectable by intelligence agencies; individuals part of a larger network but who solely decide, plan and perform their act, inspired rather than instructed" (van der Heide, 2011, p. 7). She also notes that the moniker of "*individual terrorists*" is one commonly applied to these offenders by security services in the Netherlands.

Hewitt refers to them as "*freelancers*," which he defines as characterizing "individuals who are not members of a terrorist group, or members of an extremist organization under the orders of an official of the organization" (Hewitt, 2003, p. 79).

The Danish Security and Intelligence Service (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste — PET, 2011) uses the term "*solo terrorism*", a phenomenon they say is characterized "by the perpetrator, as indicated by the term, carrying out the act alone, {though} the planning and possibly training to a small or great extent has been made together with other persons". They posit two types of solo terrorists; those who act alone, but under instruction from another person or terror group and those who have had prior contact with extremists, but attack on their own initiative. In PET's conceptualization, "solo terrorism differs from so-called lone wolf terrorism… {because} a lone wolf terrorist has no contact to terror groups (not even historically) or any other radicalised individuals and consequently the individual acts completely isolated and without instruction from any other militant individual" (PET, 2011).

It may be that no terminology can accurately capture the range of behaviors that are often lumped under its canopy, however, for consistency and ease of communication, we will use the general term: "*lone offender*". (Despite its popular use, we suggest avoiding the term "lone wolf" because it carries the potential to glorify or to imbue an image of power to attackers who are otherwise powerless and often ineffectual.) We will try to limit the scope somewhat by concentrating on those whose attacks are regarded as acts of terrorism. As we will see, however, even adding that qualifier does not make the pool of cases much more coherent or easier to define.

1.2. Definitions

In the following section, we will review some of the attempts to define—or even categorize—lone offender terrorism, then conclude with a proposal for using a dimensional rather than a categorical approach to analyzing and describing these attacks. We propose that the degree of loneness, direction, and motivation may vary in ways that make cases appear different, but that those differences do not necessarily reflect distinct types of offenders.

By 1990, there were more than 100 different published definitions of terrorism (Schmid & Jongman, 1988). So perhaps it should not be surprising that definitions and exemplars of lone offender terrorism are rather diverse. Some say the attacker must act alone, others allow for the involvement of one or two others. Some completely exclude cases in which there is any evidence of outside (group) support or direction, others allow for some contact or even operating under a formal command and control structure (if acting alone). Some would apply the label only to cases in which there was clear evidence the attack was intended to achieve ideological, political or religious objectives, others allow for a fuzzy blend of personal and ideological motivations. A case that one researcher or analyst might classify as a lone offender terrorist, might not be regarded that way by others.

Unlike terrorism itself, the "lone offender" does not leave an endless trail of definitions in its wake. As a practical matter, however, the definition is important. As examples of lone offender terrorism, various analysts have drawn upon a rather wide range of cases. Consider just two of those commonly included:

- First, the "Unabomber" (Ted Kaczynski) who is not believed to have had any exchanges with other known militant extremists, who did not participate in any extremist group training or indoctrination, who chose targets, created and deployed his explosive devices with no outside assistance (Chase, 2000).
- Second, the so-called "Underwear Bomber" (Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab) who had extensive contact with known militants over several years, was trained in an al-Qa'ida training camp, whose explosive device was built by others, and who reportedly claimed — upon arrest — to have been directed by al-Qa'ida (Siegel & Lee, 2009).

The challenges and opportunities for investigators or security professionals seeking to identify, disrupt, and prevent each of those cases may be quite different. If we are seeking to refine our understanding of the "lone offender" problem and to generate new—and hopefully useful—knowledge, we should begin by looking carefully at how we define those cases. That does not mean there is necessarily one "right" answer. In the process of examining the similarities and differences in