

CONTRIBUTOR BIO



CODY PAJUNEN graduated from Cal Poly with his degree in Political Science in Winter of 2015. While at Cal Poly, he spent time traveling to places, which Kenya and Turkey among many others. He was also very involved in Greek Life. In Cody's free time, he loves watching ice hockey and listening to country with his buddies as well as reading Foreign Affairs magazine. He is currently awaiting his departure to join the army in mid-June.

THE LONE WOLF TERRORIST: MECHANISMS AND TRIGGERS OF A PROCESS-DRIVEN RADICALIZATION

Cody Pajunen

Introduction

In early 2015, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched a social media campaign calling for the enlistment of “lone wolf” terrorists to carry out attacks throughout Great Britain.¹ Providing an assortment of attack recommendations and suggestions online, ISIL sought to galvanize individuals to carry out devastating violence on its behalf. The ISIL “call to duty” is not directed at specific individuals, yet British anti-radicalization expert Haras Rafiq claims these virtual threats must “be taken with the utmost seriousness.”² Rafiq’s instruction should not be overlooked. Lone wolves represent a small, yet potent threat to national and international security. Although normally carried out by single individuals, the amount of lone wolf terrorist attacks between the 1970s to the present have increased by forty-five percent in the U.S. and by

¹ Express Magazine, “IS Calls for ‘Lone Wolf’ Terror Attacks in UK,” Express, January 25, 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/55410/Islamic-State-calls-for-lone-wolf-terror-attacks-in-UK-gives-tips-on-planning-rampages>.

² *Ibid.*

four-hundred and twelve percent throughout Europe.³ Lone wolves represent a threat to security because of their unpredictability. They attack in sporadic intervals for a variety of causes and come from a diverse array of backgrounds. No single profile of a lone wolf can be constructed and, as a result, they are extremely difficult to detect and neutralize before they violently act out. Because one common profile of lone wolves can be difficult to construct, it may seem as though they will be impossible to identify. However, a commonality between all lone wolves exists: radicalization. According to the UK government, radicalization is “the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.”⁴ If this process can be identified by authorities, lone wolves and their impending attacks could be undermined in the future. This begs the question: how does an individual become radicalized to the point of carrying out a terrorist attack as a lone wolf?

To answer this question, what a lone wolf terrorist is must first be established. For starters, lone wolves are terrorists. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, a terrorist is an individual who executes premeditated violence against noncombatant targets for political purposes.⁵ Terrorist actions are subsequently carried out to redistribute political resources in a society.⁶ Lone wolves are individuals who execute violent actions for political purposes, however, they represent a distinct variation of terrorism. Lone wolf expert, Dr. Ramon Spaaij, differentiates lone wolf terrorists from other types of terrorists by looking at three key factors: operating individually, not belonging to a formal terrorist group or organization, and having a *modus operandi* that is not subject to

³ Sarah Teich, “Trends and Developments in Lone Wolf Terrorism in the Western World: An Analysis of Terrorist Attacks and Attempted Attacks by Islamic Extremists,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (2013): 4, <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Lone-Wolf-Sarah-Teich-2013.pdf>.

⁴ Ines Von Behr, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, and Anais Reding, “Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism,” RAND Corporation (2013): 2, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf.

⁵ “Terrorism FAQs,” Central Intelligence Agency. Last Modified April 19, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/terrorism-faqs.html>.

⁶ Scott Atran and Marc Sageman, “Theoretical Frame on Pathways to Violent Radicalization: Understanding the Ideas and Behaviors, How They Interact and How They Describe Pathways to Violence in Marginalized Diaspora,” *Artis Research* (August 2009): 15.

external influence.⁷ This does not mean lone wolf terrorists (LWTs) are not under the ideological influence of a specific movement or organization but rather that their actions are self-initiated, self-directed, and self-sustaining. However, what specifically drives an individual to autonomously carry out an act of terror has remained elusive even to experts. In an attempt to highlight the transition from civilian to lone wolf terrorist, forensic psychology experts J. Reid Meloy and Jessica Yakeley believe it necessary to look at one issue in particular: how the lone wolf terrorist morally sanctions his or her actions.⁸ This process of an individual morally sanctioning terrorist actions is known as radicalization. Radicalization is a dynamic, fluid path that prompts individuals to commit violence on behalf of a certain political goal. Political forces should subsequently be the focus of radicalization. A comprehensive blueprint of the radicalization process lone wolf terrorists undergo from a political perspective has yet to be established. This research seeks to illuminate the radicalization that lone wolf terrorists undergo occurs in a step-wise process. This process starts with the isolation experienced by lone wolves. Identification with a certain cause or social movement by the lone wolf is subsequently covered. Finally, the way in which lone wolf terrorist attacks are physically externalized is addressed.

Isolation

Mechanisms

Political forces are the most substantial drivers of lone wolf radicalization. However, it should be noted that psychological mechanisms have set the stage in aiding an individual autonomously sanctioning politically motivated violence. Many lone wolves, although not all, have suffered from the limited development of the prefrontal cortex region of the brain. As a result, they may display traits of impulsivity, grandiosity, and vulnerability that are all indicative of psychological immaturity.⁹ The combination of these factors relating to an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex in an individual forges isolated tendencies. Psychological immaturity and vulnerability makes the threat of social rejection unbearable. As a

⁷ Ramon Spaaij, "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (2010): 856.

⁸ Reid J. Meloy and Jessica Yakeley, "The Violent True Believer as a "Lone Wolf"- Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Terrorism," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 32 (2014): 358.

⁹ Reid J. Meloy and Jessica Yakeley, "The Violent True Believer as a "Lone Wolf"- Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Terrorism," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 32 (2014): 351.

result, physical isolation can be partially derived from pre-existing psychological forces. However, these psychological forces are not a sufficient means of explaining the isolation of lone wolf radicalization. According to a United States Naval Postgraduate statistical analysis of fifty-three American LWTs, there is no significant correlation between psychological disorders and the formation of a LWT.¹⁰ Lone wolves are supposedly autonomous actors, but how can this be if other factors aside from their own psyches are necessary in catalyzing their violent actions? The answer lies in the fact that acting autonomously is not necessarily the same as thinking autonomously.

Triggers

LWTs are differentiated from their organization-*Affiliated* terrorist counterparts because they act autonomously. Terrorists obtain the label “lone wolf” based off their actions, not their beliefs. Lone wolves acquire their label by acting autonomously not necessarily by thinking autonomously. Coming under the ideological influence of a terrorist organization does not necessarily nullify the LWT label because beliefs can be separated from actions. Radical influences such as terrorist dogma can prove extremely influential among isolated individuals. For example, United States Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan believed that Muslims were being exploited as a result of the US’s wars in the Middle East—a belief held by many radical jihadi groups to which Hasan was exposed. His perspectives on Islam and the plight of modern Muslims were formed in isolation via external jihadi influence. However, he independently executed the Fort Hood massacre from resource and tactical standpoints. By acting in an autonomous manner, Hasan fills all the criteria of a LWT even though his beliefs were influenced by a broader social movement. Hasan’s isolation allowed his belief system to be heavily swayed by external tides of jihadi beliefs. It was these beliefs, constructed in isolation that prompted Hasan to execute the massacre at Fort Hood. Therefore, the effect of beliefs in isolation can be seen as a crucial precursor to action.

External radicalizing agents, such as beliefs, solidify physical and spiritual isolation within lone wolves. Preexisting psychological tendencies have set up isolationist tendencies within vulnerable individuals; however, it is the

¹⁰ Charles A. Eby, “The Nation that Cried Lone Wolf: A Data-Driven Analysis of Individual Terrorists in the United States Since 9/11,” Naval Postgraduate School, March 2012, p. 61, http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/6789/12Mar_Eby.pdf?sequence=1.

influences that stress politicized beliefs that trigger sustained isolation. These politicized beliefs can take many forms but nonetheless stress the necessity of a redistribution of power throughout the world. General Hasan fell prey to the belief system of jihadi ‘crusaders’ who stress the plight of Muslims throughout the world. He withdrew himself to such an extent that the Fort Hood massacre came as a complete shock to all affected. The overarching political forces of existing jihadi dogma surrounding Hasan triggered genuine isolation that helped drive his eventual attack. Isolation, however, is only a stepping-stone on the path of radicalization on which lone wolves embark. External politicizing agents help trigger sustained isolation within lone wolves and continue to drive radicalization. The accumulation of external radicalizing agents aligns potential lone wolves with a certain identity—an identity that forms another necessary facet of the radicalization process.

Identification

Identification Mechanisms

Two mechanisms act as structural elements that set the stage for potential LWTs to embark on the process of identification. The first mechanism is that of the social movement. Social Movement Theory describes the effects of social movements and gives great insight into the diffusion of external influences that play a part in shaping and projecting individuals’ ideas. It asserts that social movements consist of a “set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.”¹¹ The primary goal of a social movement is to garner the sympathy of a population so that the movement’s cause can gain societal traction. To acquire this sympathy, a social movement may have a relatively broad platform of beliefs so that it may appeal to a wide range of individuals. Organizations direct operations amongst a population to diffuse the idea that social movements provide. These are known as social movement organizations (SMOs). Al-Qaeda is an example of an organization advancing the spread of the broader jihadist social movement.

Social movements produce belief systems attractive to those looking to manifest intrinsic political frustrations. Lone wolves latch on to these diffused

¹¹ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zaid, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1217-1218.

belief systems. Being isolated, lone wolves often fuse these external belief systems with their own. These belief systems are violent in nature. Al-Qaeda's adherence to its interpretation of jihadism, for example, blends individual beliefs with militant and homicidal undertones. The belief systems of lone wolves adhering to Al-Qaeda-inspired dogma are infiltrated and manipulated by violent beliefs and values. Social movements thus serve as mechanisms that help structure the identity of lone wolves. Lone wolves take up a cause that a social movement advocates for, come under the influence of the movement's belief system, and subsequently identify with its goals and vision.

SMO operations revolve around maintaining group survival and ensuring a favorable cost/reward relationship for individuals that participate in their activities.¹² In short, organizations need dedicated followers to advance their goals. To acquire followers, organizations need to deploy resources in order to make their cause attractive. Resources represent the second identification mechanism. Moral, cultural, human, material, and socio-organizational resources all aid in advancing the efforts of an SMO.¹³ Moral resources appeal to value systems of populations. Cultural resources provide organizations with "strategic know-how" that enables efforts to sustain recruitment amongst a specific population.¹⁴ Human resources solidify an organization's expertise, labor size, and leadership to give it credibility in numbers, charisma, and work capacity. Material resources include tangible assets such as monetary funds, property, and supplies that an organization has at its disposal. Socio-organizational assets constitute an organization's infrastructure, social network, and organizational capacities. These different types of resources function as a mechanism of the identification process of LWT radicalization by structuring the societal image of social movements and organizations. They ultimately lay the foundation for the diffusion of an SM's or SMO's goals. Such diffusion creates the appeal of movements and organizations to make its message more conducive to attracting potential LWTs.

The extent to which these resources can be acquired and deployed thus

¹² John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zaid, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977):1226.

¹³ Bob Edwards and Patrick F. Gillham, "Resource Mobilization Theory," *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (2013). DOI: 10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm447.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

dictates the success of an SMO. Al-Qaeda is an organization emblematic of effectively distributed resources. It has been supported by international “celebrities” such as Osama bin Laden and enjoys sympathy from national governments such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, giving it ample moral resources. Culturally, Al-Qaeda targets potential LWTs by using social media to facilitate the international popularity of its Inspire Magazine, which diffuses its message and ideology across the globe. Al-Qaeda’s human assets include experts trained in the art of terror tactics, the maintenance of terror financing networks, and warfare. Al-Qaeda’s material resources entail the acquisition of safe-haven property and transnational funding. From a socio-organizational resource standpoint, Al-Qaeda offers potential recruits access to digital support networks so that physical contact doesn’t have to ever be made for belief alignment to be diffused.

By combining all these variations of resources, Al-Qaeda has had the opportunity to diffuse its ideological base to lone wolves. The organization projects its message as a product made available for potential consumers and potential lone wolves to access. The act of employing multiple resources simultaneously to make a certain message or product appealing to isolated individuals is known as “slick packaging” in Social Movement Theory. Slick packaging is deployed to increase the overall appeal of a certain social movement product. The more appealing the message, the more likely an isolated individual will enter the process of lone wolf radicalization.¹⁵ The resources deployed by social movement organizations thus operate as a mechanism for lone wolf identification by providing an appealing message with which to align.

Identification Triggers

The mechanisms that may lead isolated individuals down the path of radicalization do not themselves forge a lone wolf to identify with a greater cause. Millions of individuals worldwide are exposed to radical movements daily, yet a seemingly negligible percentage of this vast population turn out to become lone wolves. This is because only an intrinsic trigger can forge a lone wolf. This trigger comes in the form of a personal grievance. Most of society becomes exposed to social movement ideologies yet few harbor a grievance that produces the propensity for violent action. In the case of lone wolves, a grievance consists

¹⁵ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zaid, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1231.

of an inner animosity aimed at an external source.

The fact that lone wolves exhibit grievances is not surprising given their tendencies to be narcissistic and isolated. Being narcissistic, lone wolves often times perceive events only in the context of how they are affected and blame external sources for misfortune that has befallen them. This grievance can be derived from a variety of sources but nonetheless is individually constructed. Social movement entities, such as Al-Qaeda, prey on existing grievances that many have such as the disenfranchisement of Muslims in poor European communities. The message Al-Qaeda sends of justice via violence becomes appealing to many who inhabit grievances regarding the plight of Muslims in these areas. Once external messages meet internal animosities, the process of lone wolf identification culminates. Lone wolf grievances find seemingly credible outlets such as social movement organizations to manifest their frustrations and remain loyal to them as result.

Grievances, although necessary, are not a sufficient trigger to solidifying lone wolf identification. Grievances help lone wolves align their inner beliefs with external sources. They run individual beliefs parallel to that of a certain movement or group but have not been able to completely converge the two belief systems. In order for a potential lone wolf to completely identify with a specific movement or group, an individual must undergo vicarious cognitive dissonance. Vicarious cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual's belief system is altered after a person of an in-group is observed committing a hypocritical act.¹⁶ This hypocritical act creates dissonance in the observer. The observer wants to fully identify with a group or individual but has a difficult time in doing so as a result of the hypocritical act that was witnessed, creating dissonance between the observer's preexisting morals and the urge to identify with an external source. To quell this dissonance, the attitudes towards the hypocritical act are altered to support it.

By morally sanctioning the wrongful act of an outside source, attitude changes become solidified as both belief systems converge. In this case, the structured message of an external force solidifies identification by providing a product with such high appeal that individual, internal psychological impulses

¹⁶ Scott Atran and Marc Sageman, "Theoretical Frame on Pathways to Violent Radicalization: Understanding the Ideas and Behaviors, How They Interact and How They Describe Pathways to Violence in Marginalized Diaspora," *Artis Research* (August 2009): 81.

force the convergence of belief systems between the mechanism and individual. This convergence is catalyzed by the trigger of psychologically vulnerable individuals to dedicate themselves to an entity bigger than themselves at the cost of their natural moral compass. Identification is completed when this forced convergence in belief systems is solidified. After the completion of identification, the final necessary means in the radicalization process of potential LWTs is initiated: externalization.

Externalization

At this point in the radicalization process, potential LWTs are isolated and have subsequently identified with an overarching movement. As complex as these first two steps may be, a lone wolf terrorist has not yet been formed. Rather, a socially marginalized “ideologue” has been produced. In order to be considered a terrorist, one must perform a terrorist act. To be considered an act, a potential LWT must physically externalize his or her inner frustration. A new combination of mechanisms must come into contact with a different set of triggers in order for externalization to occur.

Mechanisms of Externalization

Similarly to isolation and identification, externalization manifests via structural elements. These three elements include the formation of a perceived injustice, development of a negative identification, and a lack of legitimate political outlets available to externalize frustrations. These mechanisms interact with one another to direct a potential LWT’s inner animosity outward. Once in place, these elements lay fertile ground for certain triggers that ultimately result in a terrorist act. The three mechanisms of lone wolf externalization follow a pattern. First, the root of a certain problem is identified by the lone wolf. Next, the perceived reason as to why a problem needs to be addressed is solidified. Finally, the lone wolf creates a blueprint as to exactly how a problem is going to be addressed.

During the identification process, lone wolves form a favorable opinion of a certain movement’s values, beliefs, and actions. These favorable opinions form what is known as positive identification. This positive identification, depending on the movement with which the potential LWT is identifying, can have negative effects. Identifying with a certain movement or group means that those opposed to it may be viewed in a negative light. Since social movements are formed in order to change the status quo of a certain issue, antagonistic forces, such as those trying to maintain the status quo or change it, may be seen as

the enemy. Usually, this is not an issue because social movements and their entailing organizations are not militant toward one another. In the context of transnational terrorist or criminal entities, however, militancy is the lingua franca. Groups or individuals impeding the progress of a certain militant movement are seen as enemy forces that need to be completely undermined or destroyed. In the case of lone wolves, the process of vilifying an asserted antagonistic entity results in negative identification towards those opposed to the interest of the lone wolf's *Affiliations*.

Negative identification has grave consequences when contextualized in lone wolves. If an influential social movement or organization designates a group as its enemy, members become fixated on destroying it. Isolation has strong additive effects on a lone wolf's dedication to acting on negative identification. The extent to which a problem is occurring in society can be drastically miscalculated among isolated actors, especially when psychologically vulnerable to narrow-minded assertions and the appeal of grandiose actions. This fixation ultimately turns a certain entity, whether it is a person, group, government, or label, into an enemy. Since both parties are opposed to one another in terms of competing for similar resources of a shared issue, the enemy's gain is seen as the potential LWT's loss. Thus, the enemy becomes a target so that it cannot decrease the LWT's operations. This targeting acts as a structure for externalization because it provides the potential LWT with a direction in which actions can be aimed if need be.

Negative identification provides the "what" of externalization. At this point a potential LWT may have a good idea as to "what" should be targeted if necessary. The second externalization mechanism, a perceived injustice, provides the potential LWT with the "why". A perceived injustice is exactly as it seems: an action by another, seemingly adversarial, entity that is seen as a direct attack on the potential LWT and his or her associated group or goal. This injustice is "perceived" because it may or may not have been a direct attack on the LWT. The action was construed by either the potential LWT or his or her identified group as an attack. Such an "attack" justifies the reasons for hating a certain enemy in the first place. The perceived injustice thus structures the potential LWT's opinions by making them believe something must be done to counter it so that similar actions do not reoccur.

A third structural mechanism for externalization is the lack of legitimate political outlets through which frustrations can be expressed. If a potential

LWT is exhibiting frustrations but is willing to use a legitimate outlet to induce change, the externalization of a terrorist act could be nullified. However, the positive use of political processes do not always pan out. Even if legitimate political outlets do exist, isolated individuals may be so delusional about a certain problem that they deem any form of accepted political activism as inherently corrupt and unable to yield preferred results. Whatever the cause, a lack of actual or perceived political outlets give the potential LWT the “how” to externalize his or her action. If legal means of externalizing a frustration are not available, a different route must be chosen. A lack of effective political mechanisms thus structures the externalization of a potential LWT action by convincing the individual that the way in which frustrations can be vented must include something outside the parameters of legality. In the case of militant movements, violence is usually considered a more than viable action. The “what,” “why,” and “how” of externalization integrate at this point and cumulatively provide the basis for lone wolf terrorist action to be physically manifested.

Triggers of Externalization

Three triggers accompany each of the aforementioned structural mechanisms of externalization. These triggers are a development of strong reciprocity, moral obligation, and the formulation of alternative strategies to vent frustrations. An important point to note is that these triggers are largely derivatives of an individual’s psyche. Only the lone wolf can decide to act on the structural mechanisms. This point illustrates the very nature of LWTs and their ultimate autonomy in formulating decisions. These triggers, like their respective mechanistic counterparts, follow a process that results in lone wolf terrorism.

The first trigger in this process is strong reciprocity. Strong reciprocity occurs when an individual is willing to make a sacrifice for a thing or idea by which he or she is not directly affected.¹⁷ The development of this psychological inclination is actually derived from altruism. Individuals who exhibit strong reciprocity want to put forth their resources to sustain an overall cause or idea they deem worthy. However, in any social environment, there will always be those who free-ride off of altruistic behavior (defectors). Those who defect from cooperating with a cause or movement are considered an enemy

¹⁷ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, “The Psychology on Lone-Wolf Terrorism,” *Counseling Psychology Quarterly* 24 no.2 (2011): 121.

by individuals who behave altruistically because they (the defectors) impede upon the advancement of a certain movement, idea, or goal for which others are working toward. Strong reciprocity induces individuals to remedy the problem of defectors by either coercing them into cooperation or exterminating them. The defectors represent the entity which the lone wolf negatively identifies with and subsequently plan to attack. Strong reciprocity thus triggers lone wolf attacks by providing justification for attacking a specific target.

A second externalization trigger presents itself in the form of moral obligation. A moral obligation produces the trigger as to why a lone wolf must externalize an inner frustration in the form of a terrorist act. At this point, a social movement or organization has already provided a message clarifying the reasons as to why a certain entity must be perceived as the enemy. Lone wolves subsequently develop an intrinsic justification of attacking the target laid out by the social movement or organization. Once the moral obligation of a lone wolf to carry out an attack on specific target converges with the message of an outside radicalizing agent, the externalization process is further solidified.

The final trigger leading to a lone wolf attack is a plan of execution. Here, the lone wolf has solidified his or her moral obligation to exhibiting strong reciprocity against a specific target. What has not yet been determined is exactly how such a moral obligation will be acted on. In order for the lone wolf to carry out his or her perceived moral obligation, a plan outside the legal realms of political representation must be devised. Although acting autonomously, it is important to remember that lone wolves act under the influence of a certain, often violence-prone, group or movement. The alternative strategy a lone wolf devises is thus frequently a violent act. This strategy integrates the power of the two previously mentioned triggers and guides them to a self-directed plan of action. When an alternative, violent outlet to vent a political frustration is acted upon, a terrorist act is executed and a lone wolf terrorist is formed.

Conclusion

The process of an individual transforming into a lone wolf terrorist contains an immeasurable amount of interacting factors. These factors differ from individual to individual as psyches and experiences are never the same between any two people. However, a commonality among all lone wolves is that each underwent a process consisting of isolation, identification, and externalization. This process, no matter the amount of variables involved, forged an individual that

autonomously committed an act of terror. These acts of terror, without a doubt, have and will continue to differ according to place, time, extent of destruction, and justification. The point of this paper is not to give an exact formula for the type of person that will become a lone wolf terrorist but to provide a procedural framework in regards to the political forces that interact in the process of lone wolf radicalization. The effects of both structural mechanisms and intrinsically driven triggers show that more factors than just the individual are at play in the formation of lone wolf terrorists. Rather, learned behaviors combine an individual's environment and psychological impulses to produce actions. This complex combination forges the radicalization process of the lone wolf terrorist.