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Analyzing Threat: Organized Extremist Groups vs. Lone Wolf Terrorists in the Context of Islamist Extremism

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On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen opened fire on the crowd packed into the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing forty-nine people and injuring dozens more. Many things became clear as the event unfolded, and in the days and weeks following. Mateen had executed the attack with guns he bought legally in the United States. He had been taken off a terrorist watchlist and was no longer on the FBI's radar at the time of the attack. He pledged allegiance to ISIS during and after the attack, and yet he had never been in contact with any member of the extremist group, or had any direction from the organization itself. With his individually planned and executed attack, Mateen embodied the quintessential lone wolf terrorist.

Lone wolf terrorism lends itself to the execution of large numbers of people and the spread of extremist ideology, but it poses less of a threat to Western nations than organized attacks from extremist groups. Lone attacks require less strategy and funding, fewer resources, are more difficult to target with state counterterrorism campaigns, and can penetrate 'high security' states more effectively than groups. These factors mean lone wolf attacks are more likely to succeed. Additionally, lone actors are highly susceptible to propaganda and messaging from extremist groups, and they are often radicalized online, making them difficult to track. Conversely, when organized extremist groups do manage a successful attack on Western soil, their strategies—such as attrition and provocation—are more effective in imposing system-wide costs on a state in order to make change, and therefore they pose a larger threat to Western states than lone wolf terrorists. Lone wolf attacks may kill more people in the U.S. than organized terror groups, but they do not pose the same threat to the state itself as attacks by organized extremist groups do.

What Is Lone Wolf Terrorism?

Lone wolf terrorism is distinct from violence committed by organized extremist groups, and must therefore be understood as its own phenomenon. Organized extremist groups are widely understood as hierarchical or horizontal, cell-based organizations with clear leadership and distinct organs for separate functions, such as propaganda, recruitment, and attack planning. Lone wolves operate without these functions. Lone actors are often radicalized online via propaganda or conspiracy theories stemming from radical ideologies and organizations, or through personal life experiences, but they usually lack direct contact with an organization. German Lopez writes that “radicalization takes root when someone has some sort of problem—whether about his own life, society at large, or something else entirely—and a radical ideology or group provides an answer to that problem” (Lopez 3). In contrast to extremist groups, lone actors are difficult to spot using classical counterterrorism strategies that rely on identification and surveillance of terrorist cells or groups, and without infringing on many of the freedoms held most dearly in the West. The most important factor that defines a lone wolf terrorist is that they are inspired, but *not* directed by larger extremist groups such as al Qaeda or ISIS, and the ideologies they espouse.

Strategies

The strategies behind lone wolf attacks and terrorist attacks carried out by organized extremist groups are often similar, though they have very different outcomes. Though it is more difficult for extremist groups to successfully carry out attacks on Western soil than it is for lone wolf terrorists, extremist groups are more successful at pushing their agenda using terrorist strategies. Kydd and Walter write in their essay *Strategies of Terrorism* that “terrorists must delegitimize the regime and impose costs on occupying forces,” which is exactly what lone terrorists and extremist groups seek to do (Kydd and Walter 56).

There are five main strategies terrorists employ in order to delegitimize the state or spread their message, but two are particularly prevalent in attacks in the West: attrition and provocation. According to Kydd and Walter, in an attrition strategy “terrorists seek to persuade the enemy that the terrorists are strong enough to impose considerable costs if the enemy continues a particular policy” (Kydd and Walter 51). For Islamist extremist terrorism, this may mean attacking ‘unbelievers’ and ‘apostates’ in the West to force the government to pull out of operations in the Middle East or punish voters by increasing costs on the government and the population. Provocation, on the other hand, “is an attempt to induce the enemy to respond to terrorism with indiscriminate violence, which radicalizes the population and moves them to support terrorists” (Kydd and Walter 51). The theory here is that radicalization of like-minded individuals may increase if the government cracks down on populations perceived as dangerous or similar to the terrorist attacker, perpetuating radicalization within the target population.

These strategies pose a threat to Western states because they can be and have been effective when carried out by organized extremist groups. An attrition strategy may actually create change on a governmental policy level, undermining the integrity of the government itself. Similarly, if a state does bend to a provocation strategy, the costs imposed on citizens of that state could be enormous and dangerous on many policy and human rights levels. Bruce Hoffman writes in his article *The Awful Truth Is That Terrorism Works* that “terrorism can, in the right conditions and with the appropriate strategy and tactics, succeed in advancing its practitioners’ political agendas” (Hoffman). Terrorist groups use attrition and provocation strategies more effectively than lone wolves, and though the attacks themselves are much harder to carry out in the West, they represent a more significant threat to the state.

Strategies in Practice

One example of both an effective attrition strategy and provocation strategy carried out by an organized extremist group is the al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Barely a month after the large-scale, widely televised attack, President Bush sent troops into Afghanistan and began what is now known as the ‘War on Terror—a war that has lasted for almost two decades. Al Qaeda targeted the World Trade Center for its symbolic status of U.S. world hegemony, globalization, capitalist system, secular ideals, and general immorality. The intention was to weaken the United States and spread fear among its citizens to punish the nation for involving itself in the Middle East. By attacking the World Trade Center using an

attrition strategy, al Qaeda conveyed the message that it was strong enough to impose significant, expensive, and deadly costs on the U.S. for the state's involvement in the Middle East during the Gulf War. This attack was also meant to provoke the United States to retaliate against the group, which al Qaeda hoped would spark outrage in Muslim communities across the nation and further radicalize the population against the United States.

This strategy worked. The War on Terror has lasted twenty years, and far more U.S. soldiers have died fighting al Qaeda and its branches in the Middle East than perished in the World Trade Center on September 11th, while al Qaeda has continued to recruit from a pool of radicalized children who have grown up in warzones at the hands of Americans.

A lone wolf attack could never wield that kind of power over a developed Western nation such as the United States. The Pulse Nightclub shooting was the deadliest terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11, carried out by a lone actor inspired by ISIS propaganda to kill those he believed to be sinners. The attack sparked outrage across the country, with many lawmakers pledging to ban high-capacity weapons, to protect the country from extremism, to send their thoughts and prayers to the victims, the list goes on. But nothing actually happened. There was no foreign policy response. Beyond exclamations of grief, anger, and prejudice, there was no domestic policy response either. Forty-nine people died, but nationally, not much else changed. Mateen's lone wolf attack had little, if any bearing on United States policies and procedures. He successfully killed and injured dozens of people, but he failed to spark real change. Lone attacks such as this one are more common on U.S. soil than intricately orchestrated large-scale attacks by terrorist organizations. They are successful at killing a high volume of people, but do not represent the same threat to a state as attacks from organized extremist groups.

What Makes Lone Wolf Actors Different

One of the reasons lone wolf attacks are more easily deployed than traditional attacks is that large extremist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS require organization, funding, and a huge amount of resources to stay relevant on an international scale. These resources give organizations the power to carry out large-scale attacks, and same as any organization or corporation, they cannot function without these vital assets. Lone wolf terrorists do not require such a breadth of capital, which makes them more flexible and efficient in killing U.S. citizens. Scholar Lee Jarvis claims that since 9/11, al Qaeda has faced the challenge of recruiting and sustaining their forces after many were killed in U.S. counterterrorism operations (Jarvis 125). Not only is their supply of on-the-ground footsoldiers dwindling, their senior leadership and control of regions such as Afghanistan are no longer strong, and the loss of a charismatic leader in Osama Bin Laden dealt a forceful blow to the group's morale (Jarvis 125). Similarly, ISIS's loss of territory has signaled a loss of power within the organization. According to Hassan Hassan, ISIS "has lost around 98 percent of the areas it once controlled" (Hassan). Though these highly organized, corporation-like extremist groups are difficult to sustain, the lower-level lone attacks they inspire are not.

This is both a positive and a negative for extremist groups. On one hand, they must work hard to maintain strength and relevance to advance their cause. On the other, their resources allow them to orchestrate traumatic, large-scale violence that produces real costs for target states, which is unlike anything a lone wolf terrorist could ever achieve. The strength of the lone wolf model is not in changing policy (the goal of organized terrorism), but in inflicting mass casualties and spreading fear among its target population without resources or much intricate planning. Organized extremist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda require more resources, and they are able to apply those to larger-scale attacks, such as 9/11 or the November 2015 Paris attacks. These attacks — unlike lone wolf attacks — are large enough and traumatic enough to impose legitimate costs on the state to impose change.

Role of Organized Propaganda

Groups like ISIS and al Qaeda are also adept at inspiring lone attacks. As both have struggled for power, their focus has shifted to less centralized systems of terrorism. Daniel Byman writes in his article, *When to Call a Terrorist a Terrorist* that “groups usually encourage lone wolves when they are too weak to carry out organized attacks themselves” (Byman). For example, in a 2010 article in their magazine *Inspire*, al Qaeda focused on spreading methods of ‘do-it-yourself’ terrorism. The article “provided readers with basic instructions on how to select targets and which type of vehicle to use” (Veilleux-Lepage). This *Inspire* article outlines the strengths of a lone wolf attack compared with the clunky, bureaucratic processes necessarily employed by extremist groups. Vehicle rammings, for example, require little planning, few weapons (just one, really), and are accessible to most regular people without much guidance. In other words, “vehicle ramming attacks perfectly meet the criteria for a successful terrorist technique — undemanding of skill, legitimate among their perpetrators, and highly effective” (Veilleux-Lepage). Because lone wolf attacks require less organization, planning, and funding than do larger extremist organizations, they are easier to carry out and can create violent incidents more efficiently.

Propaganda magazines such as al Qaeda’s *Inspire* and ISIS’s *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are made with just such lone-terrorist wannabes in mind, and those who wish to carry out attacks are extremely vulnerable to their messaging. ISIS’s messaging focuses on six main narratives: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopia (Easterly & Geltzer 4). When looking to inspire lone attackers, the narrative these magazines choose to emphasize is belonging. While mainstream Western viewers see mainly gruesome videos portraying the brutal murders of ISIS enemies, “the Islamic State churns out equally savvy portrayals of the purported community it claims to be fostering” in order to sell its message to sympathizers (Easterly & Geltzer 3). Easterly and Geltzer continue in this vein, saying that “belonging ‘is one of the most powerful draws to new recruits, particularly those from Western states,’” which makes ISIS’s propaganda effective in eliciting sympathy from those inclined toward their violent ideology, or who may be feeling alienated from their own communities (Easterly & Geltzer 4). Lone wolves are attracted

to ISIS and al Qaeda because “by taking up arms for its cause, getting behind the wheels of a truck, or building a pressure cooker bomb, these men become part of a community, part of something bigger than themselves, and indeed part of history—anything but alone” (Easterly & Geltzer 3).

In the words of Jeffrey B. Cozzens and Magnus Ranstorp in their essay *Does al Qaeda Still Represent a Significant Threat?*, al Qaeda’s “greatest achievement has been to holistically utilise the Internet as an instrument of not only propaganda and communication, but also to ‘spread tactics, technical know-how, and strategy’” (Cozzens and Ranstorp 120). Without directly communicating with or planning alongside attackers, they are able to spread their expertise on how to commit effective attacks and inspire lone terrorists, especially in the West. With the advent of the internet and subsequent widespread access to social media and online news, “for the first time, a teenager sat in his bedroom in Paris or London could follow battlefield events virtually minute-by-minute, and when ISIS chose to decapitate Western hostages or to conduct mass executions on video, it found a willing and vulnerable audience online” (Lister). The propaganda aimed at potential lone wolf attackers is one of the reasons lone actors are so adept at producing mass casualties. Groups like al Qaeda and ISIS don't have to be strong in order to inspire copycat attackers with links to their ideology. By utilizing the internet and widespread media, extremist groups can influence lone actors without even knowing their names. The audience for these messages are undetectable, unaffiliated with terrorist groups in every sense except ideologically, and able to attack at will without much planning.

However, attacks promoted in ISIS and al Qaeda propaganda and carried out by unskilled lone wolves such as car rammings and shootings are not as effective in imposing costs on states as large-scale organized attacks are. This is because these are risks people accept as a part of life. Everyone who has ever voluntarily ridden in a car has unconsciously accepted the fact that the car might crash and they may die. Similarly, large-scale shootings are so common in the United States that they are no longer surprising, and are factored into calculations and acceptances of daily risk. Large-scale attacks from organized extremist groups such as the 9/11 attacks are traumatic and uncommon enough to impose real costs on a government. The tactics used must be extreme enough to provoke a real reaction from both the population and the state, such as governmental or cultural change. Car rammings, smaller-scale bombings, and mass shootings carried out by loners and losers looking for community and conspiracy don't have nearly enough power to change the course of governmental policy and impose real, lasting costs on a state.

Counterterrorism Measures and Their Failure to Target Lone Wolves

Because lone wolf terrorists are not the organized, structured, ‘classical’ terrorist groups that most state counterterrorist campaigns are aimed at, they are much more difficult to target with counterterrorism strategies than extremist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda are. Byman writes that “terrorists who act without external guidance pose a different threat, and call for a different policy response, than do those who are directed by an extremist group” (Byman). The

United States-led ‘War on Terror’ strategies of war in far off countries against extremist groups and tracking the communications and actions of suspected terrorist cells could never work against individual lone actors committing acts of terror in the United States. Byman continues with this thought, saying that “to break up most terrorist plots, officials monitor communications to identify and locate the associates of known suspects. Lone wolves, however, have few previous connections to identify and locate the associates of known terrorists and rarely communicate with them” (Byman). Lone wolf terrorists by definition act without communication or planning in concert with others. This self-imposed isolation makes it near impossible for counterterrorist organizations to find and track the movements of such actors, and it is therefore more difficult to prevent their attacks. Counterterrorism policies such as those used by the U.S. government may only exacerbate the issue of lone wolves. Jarvis writes that “aggressive counterterrorist policies of this sort may even exacerbate the threat of al-Qaeda by spreading further resentment among those potentially drawn to the movement” (Jarvis 129). Instead of decreasing the threat of lone wolf attacks, aggressive counterterrorism actions put in place after large-scale terrorist attacks by organizations may continue to radicalize potential lone actors, making these hostile outsiders even more deadly to U.S. citizens. One thing is certain; these lone actors cannot be targeted by classical counterterrorism efforts, which makes their particular brand of violence more deadly because it is so difficult to prevent. In Byman’s words, “it is impossible to stop every violent individual from picking up a gun and shooting” (Byman).

Because of their invisibility and lack of structure and necessity for organization, lone wolf terrorists are much better at carrying out deadly attacks in states that have more rigorous counterterrorism strategies. Brian Phillips writes in his article *Are Lone Wolves or Terrorist Groups More Deadly? The Answer Depends on the Country* that in the U.S., groups have a much harder time carrying out attacks, and “lone-wolf attacks are usually more deadly” (Phillips). He continues, writing that the U.S.’ “willingness to trade off certain liberties regarding private communications capabilities—such as monitoring of phone calls and internet traffic—[is] most likely what make[s] organized terrorist attacks more challenging to accomplish” (Phillips). Because lone wolves are usually undetectable through these methods, they aren’t recognized through these official channels and can commit attacks more easily than official extremist groups, which rely on these communication channels. This difficulty groups face in planning attacks is borne out in the statistics. Mueller and Stewart assert that “the lack of success of al-Qaeda terrorists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other Western countries mirrors that in the United States: the number of people killed by the Islamist extremist terrorists in the UK is less than four per year, while for Canada and Australia, it is two in the last decade” (Mueller and Stewart). Organized extremist groups have a much harder time executing attacks in Western states, but when they are successful, the strategies and large-scale tactics they use are more likely to force the target state to bend to the will of the extremists.

Similarly, because of tight border control and screening of migrants into the U.S., actors affiliated or perceived to be affiliated with extremist groups abroad find it challenging to enter high-security states. Mueller and Stewart write that “even though something like 300 million

foreigners enter the United States legally every year, al-Qaeda appears to have been unable to smuggle in any operatives at all” (Mueller and Stewart). This gives lone wolf terrorists an advantage in carrying out surprise attacks—they are either already in the country they intend to target, or getting in is less of an issue because they are unaffiliated with any suspicious organizations that would make entry at the border more difficult. This ability to go undetected gives them a leg up in committing successful small-scale attacks in Western nations with sophisticated counterterrorist strategies because there are not yet policies in place that can prevent attacks and protect citizens from lone actors. Lone wolf attacks may be more frequent and unexpected, and kill more people.

Ben Jacobs writes in his article *America Since 9/11: Timeline of Attacks Linked to the ‘War on Terror’* that there have been eight ‘major’ lone wolf terror attacks linked to Islamist extremist ideology on U.S. soil between 2002 and 2017 (Jacobs). These include the Fort Hood attack in 2009, the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, and the 2015 shooting in San Bernardino. All of the attackers in these cases were residing in the U.S. without suspicion. None of them were detected by law enforcement or counter-radicalization measures in the U.S., and they were able to plan and carry out attacks successfully because of their lack of connection with any specific terrorist groups. However, not one of these eight terror attacks led to any major policy change or shift in state priorities on an international level. The attackers accomplished nothing except the killing of American citizens, and their attacks therefore had very little impact on a strategic level. Lone wolf attacks such as these are much more frequent in states with tight border control, but the violence they commit is less threatening to state systems because occasional car rammings, bombings, and shootings do not impose costs large enough to necessitate change.

Conclusion

Omar Mateen was able to execute the deadliest terrorist attack on the United States soil since 9/11 because he was alone. He had no contact with suspicious groups that would have set off alarms for counterterrorism surveillance, he was radicalized alone in his own home through the internet, and purchased his weapons legally without raising suspicion. His attack was successful because he was inspired, but not directed by Islamist extremist groups and ideologies. Ultimately, the violence itself didn’t matter on a governmental scale, because it didn’t effect change or impose costs on the state level. Lone wolf actors require less organization and fewer resources to carry out violence than organized extremist groups, making them much more difficult to identify and apprehend. Because of their relative invisibility in counterterrorism efforts, lone wolves are more likely to successfully carry out attacks in Western countries with high security. Lone actors are often radicalized online by propaganda and conspiracy theories which originate with extremist groups, making it difficult for law enforcement to differentiate through curious, non-violent onlookers and those planning violence based on the propaganda. Though lone wolf attacks are often more successful in terms of number of deaths, terrorist

attacks carried out by organized extremist groups are more threatening to Western states because, as exemplified by the al Qaeda attack on 9/11, they effectively impose real costs on states that force governments to bend to the will of terrorists. The many lone wolf terrorist attacks committed in the West have failed to change state policy or international policy in a significant way, and therefore do not pose a significant threat to state survival.

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