Lone-Wolf Terrorism: A Threat to Public Safety or A Catalyst for Public Hysteria?

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The contemporary phenomenon of lone-wolf terrorism (LWT), accounting for 98% of US deaths from terrorism since 2006, is changing the face of terror (Govind, 2021). Hence, the rise of this threat has presented a unique challenge to counterterrorism policies.

This essay considers usefulness as a positive impact on the ever-evolving understanding of terrorism and thereby counterterrorism policies. Characterised by the governmental use of instruments of national power to defeat terrorists (Stigall et al., 2019), counterterrorism policies consist of tactics involving the military, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement. The effectiveness of which is considered a 'crucial measure of success' by experts, thus highlighting their poignancy (Hegemann & Kahl, 2015:200).

This paper's structure permits the reader to progressively build their comprehension of LWT and its impact on counterterrorism efforts. By following a logical organisation that primarily explores the foundational tenets of LWT- upon which the rest of the essay is built- and subsequently advancing onto the pre-, then post-attack intervention, this paper enables a full understanding of the complexities of LWT and the relevance of its corresponding counterterrorism measures. This approach further ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the usefulness of the LWT concept in counterterrorism policies by exploring the nexus between each aspect of this phenomenon and the larger scheme of security.

However, this essay does not intend to provide an extensive analysis of every aspect of LWT. Therefore, while other factors like the role of gender and economics in LWT may be relevant, the scope of this piece is limited to pre- and post-attack responses to allow an in-depth analysis of the more immediate issues relating to this concept.

Ultimately, this paper posits that while the concept of LWT is useful in distinguishing individual terrorist acts from those perpetrated by organisations, its effectiveness in countering the evolving nature of terrorism can be enhanced through refinement. Policymakers must develop a nuanced understanding of the characteristics, causes, and methods of radicalisation of lone actors to ensure that securitisation policies remain effective, prevent scaremongering, address public perception, and consider the socio-political influences of these attacks in a technologically advancing era.

Lone-Wolf Terrorism

While the image of a 'lone wolf' has been a staple in popular culture since the 19th century, the concept of LWT emerged in the late 20th century from American right-wing extremists. White supremacists, Metzger and Curtis, used the term to influence individuals to 'act alone' in violence (Hussain, 2022). However, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by McVeigh was when this ideology began to see global mobilisation. Contrasting definitions of LWT exist due to its ambiguity and lack of empirical research; although this essay considers Mueller's (2003) stance, whereby lone actors carry out attacks individually and independently from established terrorist organisations.

A popular scholarly contestation is that this conceptualisation, due to the apparent 'ideological relationship' between

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terrorist groups and LWT, which undermines the inherent 'lone' aspect of this notion, does not in fact exist (Fadillah et al., 2020:52). Moreover, some recognise this term as 'lazy' due to its inaccurate depiction of the issue-obscuring the true nature of the threat (Burke, 2017). This gives way to Brighi's (2015:145) acknowledgement of the 'mimetic' nature of this 'fourth wave' of terrorism, which implies that this type of violence is heavily influenced by the wider socio-political context in which it occurs. This argument curtails that LWT is not simply the work of isolated individuals acting out of personal desires, but rather it is a form of political violence influenced by their desire to emulate the actions of other terrorists through media coverage, political rhetoric, and online communities. Thus, it cannot be considered an individual form of violence.

Another issue is the practicality of this concept. White (2003) argues that "LWT" glorifies these violent actors, who are better viewed as true-believing extremists who go off the deep end. Other experts corroborate this by stating that the term 'romanticises' these actors as 'cunning and deadly' (Jenkins, 2011). This false narrative could have negative ramifications on the threat posed by this concept, legitimising violence which could leave impressionable individuals likely to investigate more. To combat this potential for glorification, scholars often replace LWT with phrases like "lone-actor terrorism".

Alternatively, described by academics as the 'new face' of terrorism (Hussain, 2022), this concept is deemed highly pertinent, while the traditional comprehension of terrorism involving 'organisational definitions and attributes' is considered 'no longer relevant' in some instances (Hoffman, 2003:16-17). This argument contends that while the boundaries of this phenomenon are blurred and enigmatic, this 'ongoing threat' should be addressed, as traditional counter-terrorism approaches are ineffective in preventing it (Spaaij, 2010:854). This concept's uncertain definition arises from the lack of research into LWT, due to the common misconception that terrorism is a collective and organised activity. Hence the separation between the two among scholars is 'somewhat problematic' (ibid, 866).

Given the debate regarding the adequacy of this concept, and the opposing viewpoint that it is indispensable to contemporary securitisation policies, determining the most appropriate approach presents a challenge. However, it would be counter-productive to get caught up in the definitional details of this notion that remain moderately unclear. Rather, it should be stipulated that despite this ambiguity, LWT exists and continues to take innocent lives. Hence, the framework that this concept provides for distinguishing between independent and group-based terrorism is crucial.

Therefore, irrespective of whether these independent actors are truly 'alone', or influenced by organisational terrorists, this concept remains imperative in counterterrorism measures. This is not to say, however, that this idea should remain unclear. Evidently, more research into the phenomenon is necessary to develop a more nuanced definition that maintains clarity in its application, which will aid securitisation policies to establish more complementary and effective ways of combatting this kind of violence. Finally, it is important to note that a universal title for this occurrence ought to be developed that does not exalt the brutal reality of this threat.

Pre-Attack Prevention

Characteristics

An ongoing debate exists around the definition and identification of LWT actors, with the primary area of contention surrounding their characteristics. Researchers have challenged the oversimplified stereotype of lone actors as 'solitary' and 'antisocial' individuals (Miloshevska, 2019:338) by discovering that they are characterised more precisely by individuals with 'high-anger and high-cognitive complexity' (Baele, 2016:449), and thus, giving way to their tendency to be driven by personal grievances or mental health issues, which are uncommon in traditional terrorist groups (Spaaij, 2010)

Another critical finding is the lack of a 'unidimensional profile' among these perpetrators (ibid, 464), making LWT the most 'unpredictable' form of terror (Miloshevska, 2019:345). Their notoriously difficult detection increases this phenomenon's threat to security. For instance, lone actors Kaczynski and Fuchs carried out multiple attacks before being detained (Spaaij, 2010:867). This diminishes the utility of the concept of LWT in securitisation politics as it

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hinders the prevention of future attacks since policymakers have a minimal idea of whom to target counterterrorism efforts towards. Therefore, the lack of a consistent definition, alongside the difficulty in identifying LWT actors, accentuates the necessity for a more nuanced approach to securitisation policies to address the elusive threat of lone wolves.

Radicalisation

Contrastingly, scholars suggest that authorities should focus on 'behavioural analysis' rather than 'sociodemographic characteristics' (Gill et al., 2014:425). This is echoed by Shone (2010), dictating that when locating LWT, knowing *how* an attack is formulated is significantly more important than knowing *who* will carry it out. Understanding the development of self-radicalisation, the individualistic cognitive process by which one embraces radical beliefs (Bradbury et al., 2017), that LWT perpetrators undergo is key to policymakers heeding this recommendation.

Comprehending the underlying psychological factors that influence individual behaviour is crucial in developing our understanding of radicalisation. Behavioural science indicates that individuals 'act like the person they believe themself to be' (Clear, 2018:35). Counterterrorist strategies can harness this relationship between self-perception and behaviour. This can be achieved with an identity-based approach, rather than a goal-oriented one, necessary to change detrimental habits like terrorism (ibid.) because identity forms the foundation of behaviour. By addressing the root cause of why lone-wolf terrorists identify themselves as such, policymakers may have a greater chance of preventing these attacks by reducing the likelihood of radicalisation. This highlights the importance of developing targeted counterterrorism strategies that consider the psychological and social factors that drive extremist behaviour.

The critical radicalisation aspect of LWT mostly occurs online through 'social media platforms […] the darknet and propaganda on […] messaging apps' where aspiring terrorists find instructions to build homemade bombs, maps, and diagrams of potential targets- serving as violence enablers where people can consume and share disinformation (Hussain, 2022; Simon, 2013). Through these interactions, lone-wolf terrorists form 'affiliative social ties' with radical actors, even in instances of distant association within the 'radical milieus' (Miloshevska, 2019:346). A prime example of this is al-Qaeda motivating and recruiting individuals through easily accessible forums like Facebook and Twitter (Weimann, 2012). The Breivik Oslo attacks in 2011, described as the 'biggest political lone-wolf terrorist attack', constitute another example of the dissemination of information and tactics, where these acts were praised on social media by far-right individuals (Miloshevska, 2019:344).

This gives way to the highly contested matter of whether lone-wolf terrorists act completely alone or are influenced by external factors, especially considering the internet's recent contribution to the increase in LWT (ibid.). Research demonstrates that lone actors formulate their ideologies by combining personal frustrations with broader political, social, or religious aims (Spaaij, 2010). Martinez and Abdo's attempted LWT attacks exemplify the influence of external factors, especially from cyber-space, as both of these perpetrators had accessed and possessed terrorist material acquired through online resources that incited them to partake in the phenomenon (Weimann, 2012). Hence, although these actors may not be members of terrorist organisations and operate alone, they certainly draw inspiration from, and sympathise with terrorist beliefs, and are ultimately products of their environment. Policymakers must investigate this self-radicalisation process and understand the role of different influences on LWT to develop sufficient interception and prevention methods like limiting the accessibility of this information.

Policy Implications

The difficulty in implementing effective security measures to combat LWT centres around the vague characteristics of this type of terrorism. Nevertheless, investigation and cooperation are two key practices that policymakers should promote in afflicted communities due to their success in counter-radicalisation strategies. These community-based approaches involve engaging 'influential members' of the communities to promote hostility towards terrorism, thereby increasing detection and interdiction of LWT (Bakker & Graaf, 2011:47). This outreach is key for acknowledging early-warning signs of threats (Weimann, 2012).

Moreover, since lone-wolf terrorists are primarily recruited through the internet, it is essential to monitor and study

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these sites. The NYPD successfully employed this tactic by developing a Cyber Intelligence Unit in which undercover agents track suspected extremists' online activities, which proved successful in preventing Shehadeh from fighting for al-Qaeda (ibid.). This more 'sensitive detection system at the tactical end of operations' than what is generally employed in counterterrorism efforts allows scholars to discern the imperative question of 'how' LWT occurs (Bakker & Graaf, 2011:46). Hence, the concept of LWT is useful for providing a framework for investigating the characteristics of these lone actors through online radicalisation.

However, internet surveillance is not exclusive to the threat of LWT. Rather, it was initially developed to counter the threat of organisational terrorism and was incorporated into legislation like in the UK Terrorism Act 2006 following the 2005 London bombings (UNODC, 2012:28). Yet, in light of the evolving threat landscape of terrorism, this approach has been refined to target the emergence of LWT. Revolutionised methods of identifying LWT actors have been enabled by scholarly findings that 'concrete actions and activities […] can be signals that may indicate an interest in terrorism' (Brynielsson et al., 2012:204). This has been employed by Western democracies who have fortified their counterterrorism apparatuses by catering towards LWT.

Specifically, this is accomplished by isolating lone actors, as they are more likely to succeed by coordinating with others (Byman, 2017). Similarly, other specialised methods have targeted propagandists rather than individual actors, since without the ideological backing of online communities many lone actors would never radicalise (Blacklock, 2015). Moreover, Artificial Intelligence is being employed for its ability to cross-reference data to categorise potential lone terrorists (VoyagerLabs, 2021). It is only through employing the concept of LWT that these effective securitisation strategies that align with current threats can occur.

Additionally, 'awareness programs' are valuable counterterrorism options, since they educate people on the gravity of the threat of LWT without installing public fear (Bakker & Graaf, 2011:47). This delicate balancing exercise between public awareness and scaremongering is of vital importance for policymakers, as lone-actors strive to gain 'positive public status' (ibid, 48). This need for public recognition can be identified in Breivik's publications, like his 1,500-page manifesto, released before his brutal attack. Supposedly, the concept of LWT is employed to 'reassure the public' and communicate that the 'danger is no longer immanent', whereas the media labelling the threat as 'new' and 'dangerous' jeopardises this aim (Miloshevska, 2019:337).

Deliberation circles around the issue of whether LWT is beneficial for securitisation policies, as increased public fear and social acceptance of these attacks can make people less aware of the risk of other attacks and legitimise these actions, increasing the potential for radicalisation. Ultimately, careful consideration of the potential impact of the concept of LWT on public attitudes and behaviours is necessary to inform effective securitisation policies that are both responsive to evolving threats and consistent with democratic values to avoid undue alarm.

Post-Attack Intervention

The introduction of the paradigm of LWT has widened the understanding of contemporary terrorism. This enables policymakers to develop tailored responses to the threat, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, equivalent to the approach used to combat organisational terrorism. This is necessary due to the 'significantly' different risk factors for LWT compared to those of group-based terrorism, which require different counterterrorism strategies (Monahan, 2012).

Although it only occurred following the incident, this complementary approach was demonstrated in response to the Breivik Oslo attacks. Here, the authorities focussed their resources on the individual and his motives, rather than on wider networks or organisations. Prior to these attacks, terrorism was commonly associated with 'collective, organised activity' (Spaaij, 2010:855). Yet, labelling these events as LWT incidents helped to dispel these misconceptions, and the publicity of the 77 people killed raised awareness of the gravity of the threat of individual actors, increasing the likelihood of reports of suspicious behaviour (Smith-Spark, 2021). While this publicity poses a risk of glorifying LWT, which can advertise influence for "copycat style" future LWT attacks, the investigation into Breivik's prior movements and manifesto shed light on early-warning signals and the aforementioned critical role of radicalisation (Ranstorp, 2013). Overall, the use of LWT had a positive impact on the response of the authorities and

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the public, by improving the understanding of this concept for future counterterrorism endeavours.

Notwithstanding the commendable effects of the concept of LWT used in the response to the Breivik attacks, questions were raised regarding the authorities' poor intelligence gathering and lack of communication, which amounted to ignorance of the wider socio-political factors that interplay with terrorism. Such oversights can be detrimental to securitisation policies, by impeding the comprehension and in turn prevention of these kinds of attacks. The killing of Fusilier Rigby by two terrorists, justified as revenge for the murder of Muslims by the UK military, is a potent example of the gravity of the role that external factors (like a sense of injustice) can play in these attacks (Hussain, 2022). Ignorance of such a significant aspect of this issue could have grave ramifications.

As an 'integral' facet of terrorism, the causes of these actions should be of paramount importance, particularly when considering the appropriate implementation of security measures (Bren et al., 2019:179). The authorities' sole focus on the individual perpetrator as a lone actor in the Breivik attacks highlights this ignorance of the root causes of LWT. Neglecting to address the underlying factors that contribute to LWT could perpetuate future attacks since the most challenging aspect of detecting LWT is identifying the context around the actors' beliefs (Miloshevska, 2019). Hence, a nuanced approach that considers LWT as being comprised of the individual actors alongside the wider contextual environment is required for developing sufficient securitisation policies.

Additionally, some theorists have concerns that the threat of LWT is being overestimated in securitisation policies. This "terrorism catastrophization" – associated with the fear of ongoing terror threats – results in excessive focus on individual actors, while policies neglect the wider structural factors that contribute to terrorism (Doak & Katsikitis, 2018). Not only can this neglect facilitate a false sense of security, but it runs the risk of excessive resources being dedicated to this issue.

The notion of disproportionality appears somewhat apparent, given that LWT accounts for a mere 1.28% of all terrorist occurrences within 15 sample countries from 1968 to 2007, in addition to its relatively limited 'societal impact' in comparison to the ramifications of attacks perpetrated by larger terrorist organisations (Spaaij, 2010:859-867). Although considering the massive escalation of LWT from 5% to a staggering 70% of all terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2018, this phenomenon appears to be on an alarmingly steep trajectory (Vision of Humanity, 2020). Thus, it is imperative to institute significant measures aimed at curbing this exponential growth before it starts to inhabit a larger proportion of all terrorist attacks. Hence, this heightened focus on LWT in contemporary security measures is necessary.

However, issues arise with the narrow focus of this approach, being that it can lead to a misinterpretation of the threat, as exemplified by the Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016. Initially, Mateen, the perpetrator, was portrayed as a lone actor, whereas subsequent evidence emerged tying him to the Islamic State (Ackerman, 2016), thus, blurring the line between organised and individual terrorism. While LWT has resulted in increased awareness around the importance of investment in Active Shooter Protocol for law enforcement (Ranstorp, 2013:92), better resource allocation and understanding of the nature and causes of the threat could have been achieved had this attack been correctly identified, which would have increased the overall efficacy of securitisation policies.

Nonetheless, despite its drawbacks, the concept of LWT remains a valuable tool in counterterrorism policies when applied prudently. To enhance its effectiveness, policymakers should aim to consider the complexities of terrorism and adopt a more comprehensive approach to counterterrorism.

Future Directions

To address the limitations of the existing perception of LWT, a multifaceted procedure is necessary. Primarily, more research is required to better understand the factors that contribute to LWT – particularly the increasingly pertinent role of the internet in self-radicalisation. This ameliorated knowledge about radicalisation will increase the likelihood of effective counterterrorism measures being developed contra LWT (Shone, 2010).

Further to this, scholars must stop falling into the trap of 'lumping lone-wolf terrorists with group-based terrorists',

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which conceals important information (Monahan, 2012:197). Rather, they should make use of the one positive aspect of this phenomenon's recent popularity: an increase in data. New data collection methods like interviews and first-hand accounts with lone actors and their associates would enable policymakers to gain a better insight into this paradigm. Additionally, different specialists like intelligence analysts and tradecraft professionals should collaborate to find indicators of how LWT attacks are curated. This can improve the efficacy of prevention 'left of the bang' (Shone, 2010).

Conclusion

The proliferation of terrorism, aided by the growing accessibility and use of cyberspace for the dissemination of terrorist propaganda, has transformed the utility of the concept of LWT in securitisation policies. While limitations are inherent in a rapidly evolving security environment with a broadening threat landscape, the incipient LWT concept exhibits several shortcomings. Such drawbacks may discourage some, who believe that the obstacles introduced by this concept to counterterrorism policies outweigh its advantages. However, policymakers must recognise the positive implications of this concept once they have fully comprehended and developed it.

Once policymakers devise a more nuanced strategy that exploits their expanding understanding of radicalisation, LWT causes, and characteristics, while striking a balance between public fear and awareness, the framework provided by this concept will be a critical element in counterterrorism policies. The momentary usefulness of this concept is just the tip of the iceberg; its potential in contemporary responses to the threat of LWT in a modernised era is massive.

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