מכון ירושלים לאסטרטגיה ולביטחון
The Jerusalem Institute
for Strategy and Security

The Development of Lone-Attacker Terrorists in the West

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1. Introduction – The Phenomenon of the Lone Attacker

The availability of tools for carrying out terrorist acts, together with virtually unrestricted access to almost every means of communication via the internet, creates a closed-circle effect—every aspect of terrorism contained within a single person.[1] The lone attacker chooses the target, selects the weapon, executes the attack, and supplies the media coverage.

The recruitment of lone Islamist terrorists is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by psychological, social, and technological factors. Research indicates that a lone attacker's radicalization and activities often begin with political dissatisfaction, grievances, and personality disorders, and that potential perpetrators become radicalized through online platforms and social networks. They form online connections with extremist groups and are influenced by figures such as ISIS and its leaders before acting on their own. This virtual connection can create an affinity with extremist ideologies even without a direct contact. The evidence tends to point to a process involving exposure to propaganda, operators, events, and inspirational figures—even though the term "lone attacker" is disputed, since many such attackers have links to broader networks and terrorist organizations.

The transformation of potential perpetrators into Islamist terrorists who operate alone is a dynamic process driven by a set of factors, including personal issues, online radicalization, and the influence of extremist networks and organizations. Although they act alone, they are often part of virtual communities, with recent trends showing increased youth involvement and accelerated radicalization. This complexity underscores the need for varied counterterrorism strategies and a systemic approach that recognizes both the individual and structural factors at play.[2]

1.1 The Historical Context

The phenomenon of the "Arab Spring" is directly connected to the wave of lone attacker terrorism we are witnessing today. The factors mentioned above may be more directly applicable to local Muslim uprisings in their countries of origin, yet they also significantly influence the conduct of Muslims outside their homelands as well.

1 GANOR, B., 2015. Analysis: Lone-wolf terrorism and social media. *The Jerusalem Post.*
2 IEP Institute for Economics and Peace. 2025. "Terrorism Spreads as Lone Wolf Attacks Dominate the West". *IEP Institute for Economics and Peace*, March. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/GTI-Media-Release-030325.

Frustration draws in two types of lone attackers: Western-born individuals with Islamic roots, and refugees or immigrants from Muslim states. The latter arrived in the West already frustrated by their lives in the Middle East or North Africa, while the former experience the same frustration but stemming from a different source—their attachment to their Islamic roots, which serves as a strong incentive and yields readily to ideological, religious, and ethnic appeals, compounded by the difficulties of their lives abroad and their encounter with foreign cultures and values.

Another factor is the widespread Muslim perception that, for generations, the West has supported tyrannical Muslim rulers as part of an alleged conspiracy to subjugate the Muslim world to the Christian West.[3] This perception completes the broader picture of the roots of the violent radical Islamic outlook toward Western civilization.

These layers form the foundation of the "lone-attacker" terrorism carried out by European citizens against their fellow countryman.[4] The German who opened fire on diners at a McDonald's shouted to the crowd that he was German and born was in Germany.[5] The perpetrators of the Brussels airport bombing and the Paris massacre—Salah Abdeslam and Abdelhamid Abaaoud—were also citizens of Belgium and France.[6,7]

This type of terrorism operates within a far broader framework, expanding lines of division not only between states or territories but also between entire worlds and civilizations. The implications and causes of Islamic terrorism today are wider than ever, to the point where it is almost impossible to identify their boundaries or to isolate a single primary cause for attacks. Islamic terrorism now spans global, civilizational, national, ideological, and religious dimensions. It manifests across all these dimensions simultaneously: hatred of opponents and infidels—the religious dimension; hatred of Westerners and other civilizations—the civilizational dimension; violence against military personnel and state officials[8]—the political dimension opposed to foreign intervention; and violence rooted in national, territorial, and regional aspects – territorial dimension.

1.2 The Term "Lone Attacker"

The term "lone attacker" is contested, since research shows that many lone attackers in fact maintain ties to broader networks. For example, 79 percent of lone terrorists were individuals whose intentions to carry out an attack were known to others sharing the

3 ART, R.J. and WALTZ, K.N., 2004. *The use of force: military power and international politics.* 6th ed. edn. Lanham, Md. Rowman & Littlefield (454)(461).
4 PETER BERGEN, 2016. The Danger of Lone-wolf Terrorists Like Omar Mateen. *SPIEGEL ONLINE.*
5 KAVKAZCENTER, 2016. Бойня в Мюнхене. Но это не теракт, т.к. стрелок оказался иранцем, а не «исламистом». *Kavkazcenter.com.*
6 ABAAOUD, A., 2015. Qui est Abdelhamid Abaaoud, le prétendu cerveau des attentats de Paris? RT News.
7 FLANDERS NEW, 2016. Abdeslam is Europe's "most wanted". *Flanders News.*
8 Ariel Reichard, 2014. Sri Lanka Succeeded in Catching a Tiger. What About Us? Ynet.

same ideology, and in 64 percent of such cases, family members or friends were aware of their plans. This indicates that they rarely act completely on their own.[9]

In most cases, the first "network" or "organization" to which they are exposed, or in which they reveal their intentions and inclinations, is their immediate circle—usually the family. A 2015 study conducted at the University of Miami found that "lone wolves" often intended to join, had recently joined, or would soon join pro-ISIS groups. This suggests that they are part of a wider ecosystem. Examples such as Mohammed Merah (2012, trained by a jihadist group) and the 2016 attack in Nice (with possible ties to a network) illustrate this and challenge the "lone attacker" narrative.

Despite the term, lone attackers receive indirect support. While "lone wolves" may not take direct orders, they often operate within a "supportive social environment." For example, online communities, extremist rhetoric, or an extremist environment can inspire them, validate their intentions, and provide ideological reinforcement. Some may have had prior contact with like-minded individuals or groups before ultimately acting alone. In certain cases, shortly before carrying out an attack, they sever ties with sources of their inspiration—much like pro-life terrorists who cut off contacts before committing an attack.

Another point that undermines the claim that lone attackers operate entirely on their own is that in some cases they still receive minimal external assistance. Lone attackers may get limited help, such as purchasing materials or acquiring information, without the involvement of a formal organizational structure. For instance, a 2015 paper by the American Terrorism Study (ATS) found that some lone attackers received assistance during the preparation stage, even though they executed the attacks independently.[10] Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is often cited as a lone attacker, yet he received help from Terry Nichols—highlighting the blurred line between lone-actor terrorism and an actor receiving minimal support.[11]

Europol monitoring confirms that while lone attackers may appear to act alone, investigations often reveal links to others and to terrorist networks, pointing to processes of organized, group-based radicalization.[12]

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9 Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij. 2012. "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategie". https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248691.pdf.

10 Smith, Brent L., Jeff Gruenewald, Paxton Roberts, and Kelly R. Damphousse. 2015. "The Emergence of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Patterns of Behavior and Implications for Intervention". *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance 20* (September): 89-110. http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/S1521-613620150000020005.

11 EBSCO. 2024. "'Lone Wolf' Terrorists". https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/lone-wolf-terrorists.

12 Laura Llach. 2023. "Lone Wolf Terrorists in Europe Are Not so Lonely Anymore – Who Is Radicalising and Recruiting Them?". October 26, 2023. https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/26/lone-wolf-terrorists-in-europe-are-not-so-lonely-anymore-who-is-radicalising-and-recruitin.

2. The Radicalization Process

The radicalization process of lone attackers, who typically choose their targets, weapons, and execution methods independently, is often driven by personal or political frustrations amplified through exposure to extremist propaganda on the internet. Digital platforms such as social networks and Telegram channels enable rapid recruitment and the creation of virtual communities, replacing the need for physical ties to organizations like ISIS.

This process, which since the early 2000s has become significantly faster, can unfold within weeks, exploiting feelings of isolation, social injustice, or personal crises. This section examines the stages of radicalization, emphasizing the role of technology, the psychological and social characteristics of attackers, and the challenges in preventing the phenomenon. The path to radicalization can be divided into several key stages:

2.1 Initial Feelings and Exposure to Terrorist Activity

The recruitment process of lone terrorists differs from the traditional recruitment of terrorist groups because of its decentralized and often self-directed nature. It usually involves radicalization through online platforms, ideological exposure, and psychological manipulation, rather than direct, physical recruitment. For example, publications such as al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine or the Islamic State's online magazine *Rumiyah* provide instructions for carrying out attacks against populations in Western countries.[13] The internet functions as a central recruitment tool, enabling the formation of a "virtual gang" of like-minded individuals in forums that create a sense of community despite physical isolation.[14]

Radicalization can occur rapidly, sometimes within weeks, due to constant exposure to provocative and extreme content. According to studies, in 2002 the speed of radicalization process took about sixteen months; by 2015 it had decreased by more than 40 percent.[15]

Influential figures such as Anwar al-Awlaki or the well-known American broadcaster Alex Jones use vague or coded language to incite violence without directing it at specific individuals. In this way, terrorist incidents are used to inspire lone attackers while allowing the inciters to avoid legal accountability. Organizations like ISIS rely on such methods to

13 Giorgia Valente. 2024. "ISIS and Al-Qaida Seek Lone Wolves Online as Security Operatives Work To Prevent Terrorist Attacks". Themedialine. April 5, 2024. https://themedialine.org/top-stories/isis-and-al-qaida-seek-lone-wolves-online-as-security-operatives-work-to-prevent-terrorist-attacks; Houssem Ben Lazreg. 2017. "How Terrorists Use Propaganda to Recruit Lone Wolves". October 19, 2017. https://theconversation.com/how-terrorists-use-propaganda-to-recruit-lone-wolves-85069.

14 Williams, T. J. V., Tzani, C., & Ioannou, M. (2023). Foreshadowing Terror: Exploring the Time of Online Manifestos Prior to Lone Wolf Attacks. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2205973; Lisa Kaati and Fredrik Johansson. 2016. "Countering Lone Wolf Terrorism: Weak Signals and Online Activities". VOXPOL. May 11, 2016. https://voxpol.eu/countering-lone-wolf-terrorism-weak-signals-and-online-activities.

15 GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX. 2025. "Evolving Threat of Lone Wolf Terrorism in the West". https://www.visionofhumanity.org/evolving-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-the-west.

recruit lone attackers, encouraging attacks in Western countries to project influence even though their operational capabilities are limited.[16]

Research shows that the process often begins with personal or political grievances, such as feelings of social isolation, economic hardship (including losing a job), or a sense of injustice. For example, the *Vision of Humanity* report (2025) notes that 93 percent of deadly terrorist attacks in the West in the past five years were carried out by lone attackers, many of whom had experienced such grievances.

These individuals are exposed to extremist ideologies primarily through online platforms, with a major shift after September 11 attacks toward digital networks. A 2013 report by the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) highlighted that 20 percent of post-9/11 radicalization occurred via online social networks—an increase compared with earlier reliance on groups and face-to-face interpersonal ties. Others are exposed to extremist ideology in physical settings, particularly mosques or through fellow activists.

2.2 Developing Affinity with Extremist Groups

Through exposure to extremist content— often via virtual communities—individuals develop an affinity with groups such as ISIS. An article in Foreign Policy (2017) describes how ISIS uses Telegram channels to build communities for "lone attackers", distribute manuals, and foster a sense of belonging.

Before September 11 attacks, 63 percent of lone attackers had some form of connection to groups such as Southern U.S. anti-nationalist activists or pro-Palestinian support groups. After September 11, however, that figure dropped to 42 percent, with inspiration shifting to online contact with al-Qaeda or ISIS, according to the OJP database which includes ninety-eight cases that occurred between 1940 and 2013.

In some contexts, there is indeed a direct, physical recruitment. Although less common, this can occur offline in mosques, prisons, or through personal networks and close circles (friends or relatives). For example, ISIS targeted Muslim diaspora communities in Western countries, such as Somali immigrants in Minnesota.[17] These efforts exploit social inequality between locals and foreigners and present jihad holy war as a solution.[18]

16 Daniel L. Byman. 2017. "How to Hunt a Lone Wolf: Countering Terrorists Who Act on Their Own". https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-to-hunt-a-lone-wolf-countering-terrorists-who-act-on-their-own; Boaz Ganor, Bruce Hoffman, Marlene Mazel, Matthew Levitt. 2017. "Lone Wolf: Passing Fad or Terror Threat of the Future?". *The Washington Institute*, August. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lone-wolf-passing-fad-or-terror-threat-future.

17 Giorgia Valente. 2024. "ISIS and Al-Qaida Seek Lone Wolves Online as Security Operatives Work To Prevent Terrorist Attacks". Themedialine. April 5, 2024. https://themedialine.org/top-stories/isis-and-al-qaida-seek-lone-wolves-online-as-security-operatives-work-to-prevent-terrorist-attacks.

18 Giorgia Valente. 2024. "ISIS and Al-Qaida Seek Lone Wolves Online as Security Operatives Work To Prevent Terrorist Attacks". Themedialine. April 5, 2024. https://themedialine.org/top-stories/isis-and-al-qaida-seek-lone-wolves-online-as-security-operatives-work-to-prevent-terrorist-attacks.

Key characteristics of recruited lone attackers often include young, single, unemployed men with criminal records (in the U.S. context), although profiles vary considerably.[19] Compared with terrorists belonging to organized networks, lone attackers show relatively high rates of mental health issues—though this is not a universal predictor.[20]

2.3 The Role of Operators

Operators—such as influential figures—provide both ideological justification and practical guidance. The OJP report notes that 67 percent of lone attackers after September 11 were inspired by figures such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Osama bin Laden, who became key reference points for jihadists.

The *Foreign Policy* article cited earlier points to ISIS publications like *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which suggested for attack targets such as the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. These publications served both as inspiration and as operational prompts pushing individuals to action.

2.4 Triggering Events

A triggering event, whether personal or geopolitical, often pushes a lone attacker to act. The OJP report found that in 71 percent of post-September 11 cases, there was a triggering event, such as a call to action during Ramadan by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, as cited in a 2017 Reuters article.[21] The *Vision of Humanity* report highlights political volatility and multi-event geopolitical unrest as key triggers.[22]

The report also notes a 61 percent success rate for jihadist lone-actor plots in Europe (1994–2021), compared with 18 percent for plots by organized groups. These figures underscore the relative effectiveness of individual actions compared with organized operations. Examples include the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, which killed twenty-two people, and the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, which killed forty-nine. In both cases ISIS later claimed responsibility, even though the attacks were carried out by individuals acting alone.[23]

19 Mark Hamm; Ramon Spaaj. 2015. "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies". https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/lone-wolf-terrorism-america-using-knowledge-radicalization-pathways-forge.

20 Mark Hamm; Ramon Spaaj. 2015. "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies". https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/lone-wolf-terrorism-america-using-knowledge-radicalization-pathways-forge.

21 Reuters. 2016. "Islamic State Calls for Attacks on the West during Ramadan in Audio Message". *Reuters*, May 21, 2016. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKCN0YC0OG.

22 Charlie Winter. 2015. The Virtual "Caliphate": *Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*. Quilliam Foundation.

23 Danny Boyle. 2017. "Manchester Bombing Latest: Investigation Making 'immense' Progress as Police 'Get Hold of 'Large Part of Terror Network' ". *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2017. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/26/manchester-arena-bombing-salman-abedi-latest-updates.

2.5 Interim Summary

The radicalization process of lone attackers in Islamist terrorism in Western countries is decentralized and self-directed, and driven by psychological, social, and technological factors. It often begins with personal or political frustrations, which lead to exposure to extremist propaganda on online platforms such as social networks and Telegram channels. This process unfolds in several stages: initial exposure to extremist content, the development of affinity with groups such as ISIS, the influence of operators, and finally a triggering event—personal or geopolitical—that leads to action. Lone attackers, often with criminal records or mental health issues, are motivated by feelings of isolation, alienation, and lack of belonging. The internet functions as the central tool for recruitment, planning, and the dissemination of ideology, allowing individuals to exploit virtual communities and provocative content.

3. Profiling the Lone Attacker

A distinctive feature of today's lone-actor terrorism is the seemingly inexplicable ease with which attackers embrace self-sacrifice—that is, the absence of fear of death. The profiles of attackers, both those who travel to fight in the Middle East and those who carry out lone attacks in Europe, can be divided into the following categories: Individuals with Islamic roots and criminal records who have been repeatedly arrested and convicted by law enforcement authorities; non-Muslims with criminal records who converted to Islam (including in prison); criminals who mask their actions under the guise of radical Islam; romantics in search of excitement through crime and violence; people prone to violence who suffer from mental illness or social and psychological instability. For such individuals, radical Islam is essentially an excuse for their actions, providing justification both to themselves and to their environment. Many therefore identify the phenomenon not as the radicalization of Islam but as the Islamization of radicalism.[24]

3.1 The Islamic Jurisprudential Component

Self-sacrifice in the course of attempted lone-actor terrorist attacks is a highly contentious issue among prominent Islamist preachers and adherents of Islam. Opponents argue that killing civilians (as opposed to soldiers or assailants), as well as the premeditated death of a Muslim (a death not in battle or in struggle with an aggressor), is not self-sacrifice for Allah but rather death for the sake of violence itself. In this view, the victim is not a *shahid* but a suicide, whose fate is death without being considered a martyr. They also contend that Islam prohibits going into battle against an enemy with vastly superior force, since this amounts to suicide—and, as in Judaism, suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam.[25]

24 Yoram Schweitzer, Sarah Feinberg, and Einav Yogev. 2016. "French Counterterrorism Strategy at a Crossroads." *INSS Insight* No. 838.
25 Shoib, Sheikh, Aishatu Yusha'U. Armiya'u, Mahsa Nahidi, Nigar Arif, and Fahimeh Saeed. "Suicide in Muslim world and way forward." *Health science reports* 5, no. 4 (2022): e665.

True *shahada* (martyrdom), according to these Islamic jurists, means dying in battle with the enemy. A fighter is not permitted to "cause" his own death; on the contrary, he must emerge from the battle victorious. In Islam, shahada is achieved in two ways: sacrifice in combat with infidels or aggressors, and sacrifice in the course of "defensive jihad." One opinion holds that Western intervention in Islamic countries constitutes grounds for defensive jihad.[26] ISIS took this view one step further, justifying the call for martyrdom against infidels, civilians, and residents of all other non-Islamic territories, claiming that anyone who remains "indifferent to the suffering of Islam" must either die or convert to Islam. In other words: "Whoever is not with us is against us."[27]

3.2 Main Characteristics

The Age Component

Recent trends highlight the growing threat of lone-actor terrorism, particularly among young people. The *Vision of Humanity* report (2025) states that terrorist incidents in the West rose to fifty-two in 2024, up from thirty-two the previous year, with nearly two-thirds of ISIS-related arrests in Europe involving teenagers. In the United Kingdom, one of five terrorism suspects were under eighteen, a pattern also seen in Australia, Austria, and France.

Religious and Ethnic Background

Religious and ethnic background is a key factor in the radicalization of lone attackers. Most lone Islamic terrorist actors originate from Arab countries or from Muslim states in Asia or Africa. This factor becomes especially significant when the potential attacker perceives themself as living in what they regard as an enemy religious or ethnic state—that is, a society with a Christian, European majority.

Mistrust of a religious–ethnic "enemy" or insecurity within a society that is foreign from a religious–ethnic perspective intensifies the tendency toward radicalization.[28] Mixed societies present both a defensive threat —to the host country —and an offensive opportunity —for the minority population. Unlike ideological or political identities, which can be changed, ethnic identities—rooted in language, culture, customs, religion, and history—are far more entrenched and resistant to change. Even intermarriage between a Muslim partner and a Western partner cannot blur these ethnic boundaries.

26 NAINA BAJEKAL, 2016. The Rise of the Lone-wolf Terrorist. TIME Also in HAMM, M.S. and SPAAIJ, R., February 2015. Lone-wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies. Indiana State University and in Ayelet Shani, 2016. "The Concept of Death in Islam: Global Jihad Drew Inspiration from the Palestinians." Interview with Prof. Meir Hatina, Hebrew University. *Haaretz*.

27 Ayelet Shani, 2016. "The Concept of Death in Islam: Global Jihad Drew Inspiration from the Palestinians." Interview with Prof. Meir Hatina, Hebrew University. *Haaretz*.

28 ART, R.J. and WALTZ, K.N., 2004. The use of force: military power and international politics. 6th ed. edn. Lanham, Md. Rowman & Lit

These elements serve as an anchor for radicalization. Even individuals who do not personally attach much importance to their religious–ethnic identity are often pushed by others to join the cause for two main reasons. First, radical peers view those who display tolerance or neutrality toward a host society (Western countries) – as traitors. Second, members who fail to contribute to an extremist cause are frequently subjected to economic, social, or cultural sanctions by the community.[29]

The Family Component

The family is another factor that contributes to radicalization. Many attacks are carried out by members of the same family.[30] In several cases, attacks were perpetrated by siblings. There are several explanations for this pattern. First, trust, loyalty, and confidence are stronger among family members than among partners or friends. Second, it is nearly impossible for opposing intelligence services to infiltrate a family cell.[31] Prominent examples of attacks carried out by members of the same family include the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, carried out by the Tsarnaev brothers; the Brussels airport bombing in March 2016, carried out by the el-Bakraoui brothers; the Paris attacks in November 2015, carried out by the Abdeslam brothers; and the January 2015 attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris, carried out by the Kouachi brothers.

Sense of Belonging

Another factor driving radicalization and the impulse to carry out attacks by lone actors is the need for belonging.[32] Feelings of hopelessness, despair, loneliness, frustration, psychological issues, and even generational crises[33]—particularly among young people—may encourage an individual to turn to Islam, where the concept of the *ummah*, the Muslim community, carries profound meaning. By joining the ummah, jihad offers them a chance to become "someone" with a sense of purpose.[34]

The idea of the ummah may be one of the main forces attracting followers.[35] Behind this concept lies a call to save the Islamic nation. The call to rally to the aid of the ummah was relevant during periods of foreign invasion of Muslim lands, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and later during the American invasions of Iraq and Libya.[36] Today, recruiters still use this rallying call to mobilize and radicalize Muslim youth, and young people with Muslim roots in Western countries continue to respond to the call.

29 Ibid.
30 "Terror Runs in the Family: Why ISIS Chooses Brothers," *Ynet*.
31 GREENFIELD, D., 2016. Lone-wolf Terrorism Is Caused by Muslim Immigration. Frontpage Mag.
32 PETER BERGEN, 2016. The Danger of Lone-wolf Terrorists Like Omar Mateen. *SPIEGEL ONLINE.*
33 GANOR, B., 2016. Combating terror in Israel: A look at what's being done, and what needs to be done. *The Jerusalem Post.*
34 Peter Bergen, von. 2016. "Why It's So Hard to Track a 'Lone Wolf'". *Der Spiegel*, June 17, 2016. https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-danger-of-lone-wolf-terrorists-like-omar-mateen-a-1098263.html.
35 AHMEDHANOV, B., 2016. Идею не победить, но можно лишить притягательности. *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie.*
36 PAUL SPERRY, 2016. Why the "Lone-Wolf" terrorist is a myth? *New York Post*.

Stories of Muslim suffering, whether real or fabricated, provide recruiters to extremist causes with particularly powerful arguments.[37]

Adventurism

Adventurism, excitement, and the romanticism of war constitute another explanation for radicalization among young people—both those of Muslim origin and those from other, including Western, backgrounds. This motive helps explain why, among the thousands who joined ISIS, there were recruits from all over the world, many from developed Western countries, some with only tenuous links to radical Islam.

Thousands of citizens of Western nations such as Canada, Australia, Germany, and the United States joined the ranks of ISIS fighters, including those who were neither refugees nor descendants of Muslim immigrants. More than 800 German citizens[38] and over 700 British citizens[39] left to fight in the Middle East in the ranks of the Islamic State. It is estimated that as many as 5,000 fighters came from other countries, including the Netherlands (around 140[40]), France, and Belgium.[41] Many were driven by a sense of adventure[42] and romanticism,[43] heroic thrill, and a search for purpose.

Mental illnesses

Psychological and psychiatric disorders, deviant behavior, and addiction to violence are all important factors in analyzing lone-actor terrorism.[44] In fact, FBI researchers have identified a syndrome they call "the pathway to violence."[45] A 2016 attack at a shopping mall in Munich, Germany, for instance, was carried out by a lone perpetrator diagnosed with amok syndrome.[46] Ahmad Khan Rahami, an Afghan-born U.S. citizen, who set off pressure cooker bombs in New York and New Jersey in 2016, was found to suffer from psychological disorders.[47]

Several experts have long acknowledged that almost anyone with psychological disturbances, suicidal psychopathy, or mental illness can become a lone attacker if exposed to a sufficiently powerful influence—such as radical Islamist ideology.[48]

37 ART, R.J. and WALTZ, K.N., 2004. *The use of force: military power and international politics*. 6th ed. edn. Lanham, Md. Rowman & Littlefield (401).
38 "Merkel: The Refugees Did Not Bring Terrorism to Germany," *Ynet*, 2016.
39 DODD, V., 2015. Europol web unit to hunt extremists behind Isis social media propaganda. *The Gardian.*
40 TARTWIJK, M., 2014. Islamic State Recruiters Unsettle Muslims in The Hague. *The Wall Street Journal*.
41 DODD, V., 2015. Europol web unit to hunt extremists behind Isis social media propaganda. *The Gardian*.
42 KALEEM, J., 2015. YouTube's Battle Against ISIS. *The World Post.*
43 PETER BERGEN, 2016. The Danger of Lone-wolf Terrorists Like Omar Mateen. *SPIEGEL ONLINE.*
44 VICKIIE OLIPHANT, 2016. TERROR WARNING: Lone-wolf terror attacks are on the rise, says Europol. *The Daily Express*.
45 PETER BERGEN, 2016. The Danger of Lone-wolf Terrorists Like Omar Mateen. *SPIEGEL ONLINE*.
46 SONBOLY, T.A., 2016. Lockte Münchner Amok seine Opfer per Facebook zum McDonald's? *Blick*.
47 CHOICHET, C.E., 2016. Ahmad Khan Rahami: What we know about the bombing suspect. *CNN*.
48 BAKKER, E. and GRAAF, B., December 2011. Preventing Lone-wolf Terrorism: some CT Approaches Addressed. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5(5-6), p. 43.

Psychiatrists J. Reid Meloy and Jessica Yakeley conducted a psychological analysis of the "lone-attacker terrorist" profile in 2014 and confirmed that the phenomenon includes a range of syndromes that can lead to murderous aggression among lone attackers.[49]

An American study conducted in February 2015 summarized and identified a specific category of potential "lone attackers": most were unemployed, had criminal records, lower levels of education, and were more prone to mental illness.[50] Obsessive rage, violent tendencies, and various forms of paranoia play a central role in the phenomenon of modern terrorism.[51]

3.3 Character, Mindset, and Psychological State

The characteristics of a lone attacker, acting independently, without direct affiliation to a larger organization, are complex and vary from person to person. However, research and case analyses highlight several common psychological, ideological, and behavioral traits.

Although not all lone attackers are diagnosed with mental health problems, many display traits such as paranoia, narcissism, or a martyrdom complex (*shahid syndrome*). Studies—including one by the National Institute of Justice (2021)—suggest that a certain subset of lone attackers may suffer from undiagnosed, latent, or hidden personality disorders or depression, which heighten their extremist tendencies. Nevertheless, mental illness alone is not the main motivator; moral or ideological commitment usually takes precedence.

Social Isolation and Alienation

Lone attackers often feel disconnected from society and harbor resentment over perceived injustices based on religion, social status, or ideology. They may lack strong social ties or feel excluded, which fuels their desire to strike at the society they live in, on their own terms. Many lone attackers, such as Theodore Kaczynski (the "Unabomber"), exhibit extreme social withdrawal and/or isolation, preferring solitude in which they can develop and refine their radical ideology.

Self-Radicalization

Lone attackers often undergo self-radicalization through online content, manifestos, or extremist propaganda. The internet, including online forums, social media, and the dark web, serves as a key element in this process. For example, a lone attacker consumes extremist material on platforms such as X, YouTube, or encrypted applications, thus strengthening their convictions.

49 BERSHIDSKY, L., 2016. The Only Way to Prevent Lone-wolf Attacks. *Bloomberg View*.
50 HAMM, M.S. and SPAAIJ, R., February 2015. Lone-wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies. *Indiana State University*.
51 ART, R.J. and WALTZ, K.N., 2004. *The use of force: military power and international politics*. 6th ed. edn. Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield (456).

Ideology Driven by Resentment

The actions of lone attackers are often motivated by a grievance or by personal or ideological injury, such as anti-government sentiment, racial hatred, or religious extremism. These grievances are highly personal but often align with broader extremist narratives. For example, Anders Breivik, who carried out the 2011 Norway attacks, acted alone yet, was driven by an anti-immigrant incentments, manifesto and ideology.

Obsession with Purpose or Legacy

Many lone attackers seek to make an impact or bring about some form of change in the existing social or political order. They aspire for their actions to have meaning and see them as a way to advance their cause and attain glory. They may document their intentions through a manifesto or posts on social media and other platforms—usually online. For example, the Christchurch shooter in 2019 live-streamed his attack and published a manifesto on the internet to maximize attention to his actions.

High Degree of Planning and Secrecy

Lone attackers often plan their assaults meticulously, sometimes over months or even years. Their independence makes detection difficult, as they avoid group communications that could lead to them being exposed. They frequently engage in "leakage"—for example, encrypted social-media posts—but their isolation greatly reduces the chance of heightened visibility in networks or the public sphere. Lone attackers prefer to act alone to maintain control and avoid discovery. Their pursuit of autonomy is not limited to hostile activity but often extends into their personal and private lives.

Adaptability and Opportunism

Lone attackers tend to use means that are readily available and to seize opportunities as they arise. They make use of accessible weapons—such as knives, improvised explosives, or vehicles—and often target high-impact "soft" locations such as public spaces and sites with religious or governmental significance. Their flexibility makes them unpredictable. For instance, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who carried out an attack in Nice, France, in 2016, used a truck to maximize casualties in a crowded public space during a national holiday.

Ideological Diversity

Lone attackers may align with a wide range of ideologies, including jihadism, white supremacy, anti-government extremism, or single-issue causes such as ecological terrorism. Their belief systems are often hybrids of personal and extremist influences. Personal crises (such as job loss, social rejection, loneliness, or frustration) or societal events (such as political upheaval, terrorist attacks, or military interventions) can serve as catalysts which drive them to act.

Challenges in Detection and Identification of Lone Attackers

Their lack of formal group or social ties makes lone attackers difficult to track using traditional counterterrorism methods. Online posts may contain vague hints—such as expressions of anger or threats—but these are often recognized only after the fact. Recent advances in artificial intelligence and behavioral analytics for identifying online activity patterns have shown some results, but according to a 2024 RAND Corporation report, false positives remain a critical and unresolved challenge.[52]

3.4 Non-Muslim Lone Attackers

Lone attackers are generally driven by ideological, political, or personal motives, without direct affiliation or operational support from organized groups. Not all lone attackers are Muslims inspired by Islamist ideology; some are motivated by Western ideologies of white supremacy and racism. The concept of "lone attacker" terrorism existed even before it entered the discourse in the modern era. As early as 1878–1934, anarchist attacks established the precedent for leaderless violence or leaderless resistance. In the 1990s, the term "white wolves," referring to non-Muslim attackers, became popular, particularly through figures such as Tom Metzger[53] and Alex Curtis.[54]

To broaden the picture, several notable examples follow:

Anders Breivik is among the most extreme and lethal lone attackers in modern history. On July 22, 2011, he carried out two coordinated attacks in Norway. He detonated a car bomb in Oslo's government district, killing eight people, and then conducted a mass shooting at the Labor Party youth camp on the island of Utøya, killing 69 people — most of them teenagers. Breivik's actions were driven by far-right ideology, hostility toward immigrants, and anti-Islamic sentiment. His 1,500-page manifesto expressed grievances against multiculturalism, Islam, and left-wing politics, and targeted the Labor Party for its inclusive policies. Although he acted alone, he drew inspiration from far-right online communities.[55]

On April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb outside a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children. McVeigh was motivated by anti-government sentiment, viewing the federal government as oppressive and he sought to spark a rebellion. Although Terry Nichols provided some assistance in planning and

52 Insights drawn from academic studies (e.g., Journal of Strategic Security, National Institute of Justice) and counterterrorism reports (e.g., FBI, Europol) up to 2025.

53 splcenter.org. n.d. "Tom Metzger". Splcenter.Org. Accessed August 7, 2025. https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/tom-metzger.

54 splcenter.org. 2001. " 'Lone Wolves' ". https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/lone-wolves.

55 Ranstorp, Magnus. " 'Lone Wolf Terrorism'. The Case of Anders Breivik". *Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace* 31, no. 2 (2013): 87–92. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24234145.

execution, McVeigh is often classified as a lone attacker because he was the principal perpetrator.[56]

On July 27, 2008, Jim David Adkisson opened fire during a youth performance at a church in Knoxville, Tennessee, killing two people and wounding seven. His attack stemmed from hatred toward liberals, Democrats, African Americans, and homosexuals, as stated in his manifesto. He chose the church as his target because of its progressive values.[57]

On November 15, 1988, in Pretoria, South Africa, Barend Strydom went on a shooting rampage, killing seven and wounding 15. His killing spree targeted Black South Africans and was driven by racist hatred during the final years of apartheid.[58]

There are, of course, other examples. Data from the Global Terrorism Index (2014—2018) indicates a rise in lone-attacker incidents for that period, while more recent data shows a 93 percent increase in deadly terrorist attacks in the West between 2020 and 2024 carried out by lone perpetrators — some of whom were not Muslim.[59]

As for the characteristics of these latter attackers, they in part resemble those of Muslim lone attackers. Non-Muslim lone attackers are motivated by a range of ideologies, including political extremism, anti-liberalism, anarchism, anti-government sentiment, anti-immigration or anti-abortion activism, and conspiracy theories.[60] It should be noted that in many cases, "white" perpetrators of lone-attacker terrorism are not labeled as terrorists.

4. The Use of Technology

Lone-terrorists plan and execute attacks independently, without direct coordination with others. They rely on technology to facilitate their actions. The internet and digital platforms play a critical role in radicalization, planning, and in carrying out attacks.

The process of recruiting lone attackers relies largely on digital platforms, exploiting weaknesses through rapid and self-directed radicalization. Although some recruitment

56 Daniel L. Byman. 2016. "Why Lone Wolves Fail". *Brookings*, June 16, 2016. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-lone-wolves-fail.
57 The Associated Press. 2009. "Man Gets Life Sentence in Church Shooting". *NBC NEWS*, February 9, 2009. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna29104696.
58 WayBackMachine. n.d. "THE STRIJDOM SQUARE MASSACRE". Waybackmachine. Accessed August 7, 2025. https://web.archive.org/web/20060923113854/http://www.africacrime-mystery.co.za/books/fsac/chp25.htm.
59 GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX. 2019. "The Rise of the Self-Radicalised Lone Wolf Terrorist". *VISION OF NUMANITY*, December. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/increase-in-self-radicalised-lone-wolf-attackers; GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX. 2025. "Evolving Threat of Lone Wolf Terrorism in the West". *VISION OF HUMANITY*, March. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/evolving-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-the-west.
60 GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX. 2019. "The Rise of the Self-Radicalised Lone Wolf Terrorist". *VISION OF NUMANITY*, December. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/increase-in-self-radicalised-lone-wolf-attackers; Khaled A. Beydoun, Lone Wolf *Terrorism: Types, Stripes, and Double Standards*, 112 Nw. U. L. Rev. 1213 (2018). https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/nulr/vol112/iss5/6.

still takes place offline, the internet's role in amplifying extremist content and enabling opportunistic terrorism is central. Addressing this threat requires enhanced monitoring of social media, early intervention, and attention to underlying drivers such as social isolation and vulnerability among young people.

4.1 The Role of Social Networks and the Internet

In nearly every lone-actor attack, the perpetrator first posts their intentions online, often through manifestos such as social-media posts. These can provide authorities with a critical opportunity to intervene. Trigger events, such as grievances toward members of a community, faith, ethnic group, or nation, and/or a response to a call to action often serve as the final motivation for action. Attacks are sometimes executed just minutes after the perpetrator has been exposed to online propaganda.

As already noted, elements operating in social networks, and figures of influence such as ISIS leaders play an important role in supplying both ideological justification and practical direction. Online platforms such as social-media networks and encrypted-messaging applications have become key arenas for radicalization, particularly since the September 11, 2001, attacks, as the focus shifted from physical groups to digital mediums and virtual networks.[61]

4.2 Radicalization and Ideological Reinforcement

Lone attackers frequently consume propaganda, extremist ideologies, and disinformation on social-media platforms, in encrypted chat rooms, and on the darknet. These virtual spaces provide access to communities of like-minded individuals that validate the perpetrator's motives and encourage further radicalization. The internet makes extremist material available irrespective of geography, increasing the spread of radical worldviews. Effectively, potential attackers select from a "menu" of extremist ideas, selecting those that best justify their intended actions.[62]

Social media and encrypted applications play a central role in that process. Platforms such as Telegram enable lone actors to engage with extremist content, follow influential figures, and join virtual communities. For example, the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shooter was inspired by far-right material online, and the Hindu nationalist Jamia Millia Islamia University shooter in India in the same year referred to right-wing figures from social networks.[63]

61 GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX. 2025. "Evolving Threat of Lone Wolf Terrorism in the West". *VISION OF HUMANITY*, March. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/evolving-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-the-west.

62 Alexia D'Arco. 2024. "Digitalization, Globalization Enabling 'Lone Wolf' Terrorism". *Diplomatic Courier*, May. https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/digitalization-globalization-enabling-lone-wolf-terrorism; Kabir Taneja. 2020. "The Internet and Lone Wolf Terrorism in India". *Observer Research Foundation*, May. https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-internet-and-lone-wolf-terrorism- in-india-66845.

63 Kabir Taneja. 2020. "The Internet and Lone Wolf Terrorism in India". Observer Research Foundation, May. https://www.orfonline.org/ research/the-internet-and-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-india-66845; Williams, T.J. V., Tzani, C., & Ioannou, M. (2023). Foreshadowing Terror: Exploring the Time of Online Manifestos Prior to Lone Wolf Attacks. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/10576 10X.2023.2205973; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.202

As noted above, manifestos and public declarations of intent are a core component of lone attackers, especially in the period immediately before an attack. Perpetrators often post manifestos online to set out motives and intentions; on average these documents appear about one hour and forty-three minutes before the assault. These materials circulate across platforms ranging from mainstream social networks to little-known forums, which makes early detection a major challenge for law-enforcement agencies.[64]

4.3 Operational Planning and Resources

Internet technologies give potential lone attackers access to online instructional materials that instruct how to make explosives and weapons and provide tactical guidance. A prominent example is *Safety and Security Guidelines for Lone-Wolf Mujahideen*, a sixty-three-page English-language manual published on Twitter in 2015 by an ISIS propagandist. The guide adapted al-Qaeda tactics and incorporated modern technology for covert operations.[65]

Lone attackers use online "DIY" manuals for weapons and explosives to produce improvised explosive devices (IEDs) from readily available materials such as fertilizer, which are difficult to detect. One notable source is *The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Preparation for Jihad*, which circulates freely on the internet and contains detailed instructions for manufacturing weapons and bombs.[66]

The internet and other technologies also provide instruction and access to fields such as synthetic biology, raising concern that lone attackers could obtain components for weapons of mass destruction. The concept of single-individual mass-destruction terrorism (SIMAD) underscores the potential for lone actors to exploit advances in biotechnology, with substances such as anthrax or cyanide, becoming increasingly accessible.[67]

4.4 Execution and Evasion

Lone attackers use technology to avoid detection and capture. They employ encrypted communication applications and anonymization tools—such as VPNs and Tor—to conceal their activity and avoid law-enforcement scrutiny. Manuals like *Safety and Security Guidelines for Lone-Wolf Mujahidee*n advise lone actors on how to preserve operational

64 Williams, T. J. V., Tzani, C., & Ioannou, M. (2023). Foreshadowing Terror: Exploring the Time of Online Manifestos Prior to Lone Wolf Attacks. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2205973; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2205973.

65 Michael W. S. Ryan. 2015. "Hot Issue: How DAESH's Lone Wolf Guidance Increases the Group's Threat to the United States". *The Jamestown Foundation*, November. https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-how-daeshs-lone-wolf-guidance-increases-the-groups-threat-to-the-united-states.

66 Kabir Taneja. 2020. "The Internet and Lone Wolf Terrorism in India". *Observer Research Foundation*, May. https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-internet-and-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-india-66845; EBSCO. 2024. " 'Lone Wolf' Terrorists". https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/lone-wolf-terrorists.

67 Theodore Gordon, Yair Sharan, Elizabeth Florescu. 2015. "Prospects for Lone Wolf and SIMAD Terrorism". *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 95: 234–51. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0040162515000153.

security by making use of modern technologies.[68]

Digital platforms enable lone attackers to adopt tactics from a diverse range of radical groups, thus compressing the timeline from radicalization to execution. They enable rapid learning of attack methods, as in the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, where the Tsarnaev brothers drew on instructions from al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine.[69] The internet also facilitates imitation of previous successful operations by lone attackers. Widely reported attacks provide detailed, often operationally useful information that can inspire copycat incidents. Sensational media coverage and online discussion can spur further acts, as occurred after Anders Breivik's 2011 Oslo massacre, which influenced right-wing extremists around the globe.[70]

The extensive use of advanced technologies of exposure to terrorism, recruitment, radicalization, and the execution of attacks significantly impedes law-enforcement efforts to identify threats before they materialize. The individual and autonomous nature of lone-actor operations, combined with the use of encrypted platforms and anonymous online activity, makes it extremely difficult to unveil such threats through traditional intelligence-gathering methods such as communications interception, surveillance, and early detection of intent.[71]

Efforts to identify extremist content through algorithmic monitoring yields mixed results as manifestos and propaganda often appear on hidden platforms rather than on major, open-access websites. This requires the development of more sophisticated monitoring systems and policy frameworks that would lower the evidentiary threshold for establishing intent by lone actors to carry out attacks, in order to gain the critical time needed to prevent such attacks.[72]

In conclusion, globalization and digital platforms reduce barriers of exposure to extremist content for virtually anyone—whether radicalized or not. They enable lone attackers to access resources and inspiration without any direct contact with terrorist organizations. Out

68 Michael W. S. Ryan. 2015. "Hot Issue: How DAESH's Lone Wolf Guidance Increases the Group's Threat to the United States". *The Jamestown Foundation*, November. https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-how-daeshs-lone-wolf-guidance-increases-the-groups-threat-to-the-united-states.

69 Michael W. S. Ryan. 2015. "Hot Issue: How DAESH's Lone Wolf Guidance Increases the Group's Threat to the United States". *The Jamestown Foundation*, November. https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-how-daeshs-lone-wolf-guidance-increases-the-groups-threat-to-the-united-states; Alexia D'Arco. 2024. "Digitalization, Globalization Enabling 'Lone Wolf' Terrorism". *Diplomatic Courier*, May. https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/digitalization-globalization-enabling-lone-wolf-terrorism.

70 THANA HUSSAIN. 2022. "The Growing Threat of Lone-Wolf Terrorism". *Observer Research Foundation*, December. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-growing-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism.

71 Jeffrey C. Connor, Carol Rollie Flynn. 2018. "What To Do About Lone Wolf Terrorism? Examining Current Trends and Prevention Strategies". *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November. https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/11/what-to-do-about-lone-wolf-terrorism-examining-current-trends-and-prevention-strategies;
EBSCO. 2024. " 'Lone Wolf' Terrorists". https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/lone-wolf-terrorists.

72 Williams, T. J. V., Tzani, C., & Ioannou, M. (2023). Foreshadowing Terror: Exploring the Time of Online Manifestos Prior to Lone Wolf Attacks. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2205973.

of 113 attacks in North America between 2007 and 2023, only fifteen were found to have any organizational connection, underscoring the decentralized nature of modern terrorism.[73]

Among the most prominent examples are Anders Breivik's 2011 massacre of 77 people in Norway, which he planned after being exposed to far-right online propaganda;[74] the Tsarnaev brothers' 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, which followed bomb-making instructions from *Inspire*;[75] the 2020 shooting at Jamia Millia Islamia University in India, influenced by far-right figures on social media in a manner that illustrates the role of virtual communities in radicalization without any direct, physical contact with radical groups;[76] and the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shooting, in which the perpetrator shared his manifesto and live-streamed the attack online to maximize exposure and impact.[77]

5. Logistical Support for Lone-Attacker Terrorism

By definition, lone-attacker terrorists operate independently, planning and executing attacks without direct coordination or support from organized groups. However, the notion that they act entirely on their own is often misleading. Many still rely, at least in part, on some form of logistical assistance, even if indirect or minimal. The following outlines the main findings drawn from available analysis.

5.1 Logistical Support

Lone attackers often use materials that are readily available to them when planning an attack, such as firearms or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that are easily accessible and therefore difficult to interdict. They may purchase weapons legally or through black-market channels, or assemble simple incendiary devices such as Molotov cocktails, as in the 2025 firebombing in Boulder, Colorado, involving Muhammad Sabri Suleiman.[78]

The absence of broad logistical networks makes tracking potential lone perpetrators far more difficult than is the case with plots by organized groups which often include financial transactions or procurement (explosives, components, telephones, etc.) or communications that intelligence agencies can intercept.

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73 Alexia D'Arco. 2024. "Digitalization, Globalization Enabling 'Lone Wolf' Terrorism". *Diplomatic Courier* , May. https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/digitalization-globalization-enabling-lone-wolf-terrorism.

74 THANA HUSSAIN. 2022. "The Growing Threat of Lone-Wolf Terrorism". *Observer Research Foundation*, December. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-growing-threat-of-lone-wolf-terrorism

75 Michael W. S. Ryan. 2015. "Hot Issue: How DAESH's Lone Wolf Guidance Increases the Group's Threat to the United States". *The Jamestown Foundation*, November. https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-how-daeshs-lone-wolf-guidance-increases-the-groups-threat-to-the-united-states.

76 Kabir Taneja. 2020. "The Internet and Lone Wolf Terrorism in India". *Observer Research Foundation*, May. https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-internet-and-lone-wolf-terrorism-in-india-66845.

77 Williams, T. J. V., Tzani, C., & Ioannou, M. (2023). Foreshadowing Terror: Exploring the Time of Online Manifestos Prior to Lone Wolf Attacks. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–12.

78 EBSCO. 2024. " 'Lone Wolf' Terrorists". https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/lone-wolf-terrorists; Peter D'Abrosca. 2025. "Boulder Terror Attack Suspect Showed Signs of Growing 'Lone-Wolf' Radicalization, Says Former FBI Supervisor". *FOX NEWS*, June 3, 2025. https://www.foxnews.com/us/boulder-terror-attack-suspect-showed-signs-growing-lone-wolf-radicalization-former-fbi-supervisor.

Reliance on open-source materials and the rapid pace of radicalization—sometimes within weeks—further complicate prevention. Although lone attackers are characterized by their autonomy, they frequently depend on indirect logistical support, particularly from online resources and ideological communities. This combination of quick radicalization and use of readily available materials produces a persistent and elusive threat that demands diverse counter-terrorism approaches.

5.2 Financial Support and Funding Methods

Lone attackers generally require only minimal financial support due to their autonomous nature, a factor that makes them difficult to detect through traditional monitoring, for example by monetary flows. They often self-finance through personal income, savings, small-scale criminal activity, or theft. Unlike organized terrorist groups, they rarely depend on external financing, complex networks or large-scale backing. Their operations usually require modest resources, such as firearms or —improvised explosive devices that have minimal costs. The internet plays a critical role, providing free access to the knowledge required to conduct attacks, thus further diminishing financial dependency.

Some lone attackers receive indirect assistance through online platforms such as sympathetic social-media communities, but such transactions are often impossible to monitor. Social media and encrypted applications can make it easier to conduct small, anonymous payments, but even these are often minimal. A 2017 U.S. House of Representatives hearing concluded that lone-actor terrorist attacks require substantially less funding than large-scale plots. It further found that, on occasion, foreign terrorist organizations offer limited ideological or financial support to individuals or small cells.[79]

In view of the above points, addressing the financial dimension of lone-actor terrorism is inherently challenging: costs are low, and financial footprints are almost nonexistent. Current strategies focus on monitoring online platforms for radical content, cooperating with financial institutions to identify suspicious transactions, and leveraging legislation such as the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA), which targets citizens acting in support of terrorist groups without formal affiliation. Yet the decentralized and isolated character of lone attackers continues to constrain the effectiveness of traditional law enforcement financial-tracking methods.[80]

79 Chairman French Hill. 2017. "Combating Financial Backing of Lone-Wolf and Small-Scale Terrorist Attacks". Washington. https://financialservices.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=402289.

80 EBSCO. 2024. " 'Lone Wolf' Terrorists". https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/lone-wolf-terrorists.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of lone-attacker terrorism in Western countries—particularly within the framework of Islamist extremism—is complex and shaped by psychological, social, and technological factors. This study examines the radicalization process, the profiles of perpetrators, and the forms of technological and logistical support that sustain such activity.

Lone attackers act independently: they choose their targets, obtain weapons, and often seek media attention, exploiting the accessibility of the internet and social-media networks. Radicalization frequently begins with personal or political frustration that is intensified through exposure to extremist propaganda online.

Despite the term "lone attacker," research shows that many perpetrators maintain virtual or ideological ties with extremist groups and networks such as ISIS through platforms like Telegram. The rise in lone-attacker terrorism has also been influenced by the "Arab Spring" phenomena which fostered a shared sense of frustration among Muslim immigrants and second-generation Muslims residing in the West, increasing their susceptibility to radical ideas.

The stages of radicalization include initial exposure to extremist content, the development of affinity with radical groups, the influence of ideological or operational figures, and a triggering event—personal or geopolitical—that leads to action. Perpetrators, often young and sometimes with criminal records or mental health issues, are driven by alienation, disconnection, and a lack of belonging. The internet provides access to tactical manuals, including instructions for producing explosives, and facilitates secret planning through encrypted tools such as darknet, VPNs and Tor.

The profiles of lone attackers vary: they include fundamentalists, migrants, descendants of refugees, criminals, and thrill-seekers drawn by a sense of adventure or purpose. The notion of self-sacrifice, sometimes framed as *shahada* (martyrdom), remains contested within Islam, as suicide is strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, identification with the global Muslim ummah and the perception of Western hostility toward Islam strengthen the motivation for violence.

Technology, particularly social media, plays a central role in spreading propaganda, recruiting adherents, and planning attacks. Online resources enable attackers to prepare weapons and plan operations while preserving anonymity. Minimal logistical support—sometimes from criminal sources or online communities—further facilitates these activities.

Confronting this challenge requires a comprehensive approach that combines improved monitoring of digital platforms, community-based intervention, and adaptive legislation. Yet the decentralized and elusive nature of lone-attacker terrorism continues to challenge traditional counterterrorism methods and demands constant adaptation by security and intelligence agencies.

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