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Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 10

Lone-Actor Terrorism
Toolkit Paper 2: Practical Guidance for Security
Practitioners

Clare Ellis and Raffaello Pantucci

About this Paper

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Practical Guidance for Security Practitioners

LONE-ACTOR TERRORISTS ARE perceived as presenting acute challenges for law enforcement practitioners in detection and disruption. By definition, they act without direct command and control from a wider network, and it is assumed that without such communications they may evade the 'tripwires' that would usually bring them to the attention of the authorities. The Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project aims to investigate this assumption. Through the construction and analysis of a database of 120 lone actors from across Europe, it seeks to improve understanding of lone-actor terrorists, their behaviour and their activities in the period leading up to their intended attack.

Lone-actor terrorism is defined by the CLAT project as:

> The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).[1]

The project's methodology, key findings and recommendations for policy-makers are detailed in previous CLAT publications.[2] The aim of this paper is to draw out the practical implications of the research for law enforcement agencies and security officials. It is not intended to provide a profile of lone-actor terrorists, but to offer guidance that may be of use to security officials in Europe (and beyond), supporting the development of strategies to detect potential lone-actor terrorists and to understand the possible risks posed by persons of interest.

Recognising the significant variations in the roles, responsibilities and operating practices of law enforcement agencies across Europe, this guidance is intentionally broad and does not refer to

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1. For further discussion regarding this definition and how it was established, please see Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Definitional Workshop', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (December 2015), p. iii.
2. See in particular, Clare Ellis et al., 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Analysis Paper', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2016); Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper 1: Personal Characteristics of Lone-Actor Terrorists', ICCT, 2016; Simon Palombi and Benoît Gomis, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper 2: Attack Methodology and Logistics', RUSI on behalf of Chatham House, 2016; Melanie Smith, Sabine Barton and Jonathan Birdwell, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper 3: Motivations, Political Engagement and Online Activity', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016; Clare Ellis and Raffaello Pantucci, 'Lone Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper 4: "Leakage" and Interaction with Authorities', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2016).

current practice in individual states. It is accompanied by a counterpart that offers guidance for health practitioners.[3]

This paper is presented in two sections. The first offers guidance on improving the initial detection of potential indicators of extremist behaviour and subsequently for determining whether persons of interest are exhibiting behaviour typical of lone-actor terrorists. The second condenses this advice into two practical toolkits.

Section 1: Key Findings and their Implications for Security Practitioners

Improving Detection

Public Vigilance, Co-operation and Confidence are Crucial

Lone-actor terrorists are often less secretive than might be presumed, and their behaviour and activity can provide warnings of their extreme views or even of their intention to act. The findings of the CLAT project show that these indicators are often most evident to those around the perpetrator. Whether in the physical or virtual world, friends, family and work colleagues are more likely than the authorities to be exposed to crucial indicators.

An important tool in combating the lone-actor terrorist threat is therefore ensuring that the public is able to recognise extremist behaviour, have avenues to report it and, crucially, that it is willing to do so. This latter point is potentially the most difficult to overcome, with recent research on countering violent extremism identifying that those closest to a potential lone actor are often reluctant to intervene.[4] This has implications for public and community engagement:

- Public awareness programmes should encompass the threat from lone-actor terrorism: it is important that the public understands that links to wider terrorist networks do not have to be present for someone to be of concern.
- Strong links between the police and the community are vital in building confidence to use reporting mechanisms. Providing avenues of reporting is not sufficient; steps must be taken to encourage and support members of the public to use them.

Domains of Activity

The audience most likely to observe potential indicators varies between ideological categories. In particular, the research found that religiously inspired perpetrators tend to exhibit concerning behaviours to friends and family offline, whereas right-wing terrorists are more likely to signal

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3.   Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Toolkit Paper 1: Practical Guidance for Mental Health Practitioners and Social Workers', ICCT, April 2016.

4.   Michael J Williams, John G Horgan and William P Evans, 'The Critical Role of Friends in Networks for Countering Violent Extremism: Toward a Theory of Vicarious Help-Seeking', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (Vol. 8, No. 1, 2016), pp. 45–65.

their extremist views online, primarily through interactions on social media. The implication for investigators is that detection efforts must reflect where indicators of extremism are most likely to be apparent:

- For religiously inspired ideologies, efforts should be focused on channelling messages through communities.
- For extreme right-wing ideologies, efforts should be focused on online detection. In particular, there are two areas in which further action should be considered:
  - Security officials should develop a deeper understanding of extreme right-wing online communities so that unusual behaviour within that context can be detected amid the rhetoric and individuals of concern can be identified. Some law enforcement bodies are already likely to be doing this, but for others, developing better knowledge will help to narrow down which individuals warrant further investigation.
  - Other users are perhaps most likely to encounter indications of extremist ideology or even of an intention to act. The first recommendation regarding public awareness therefore has equal value in the digital domain; social media companies should be encouraged to improve user-based reporting systems to account for individuals that pose an immediate risk and establish an appropriate mechanism to ensure these reports are passed to the authorities.

Links to Extreme Groups

The research found that, in addition to interacting with those around them, lone-actor terrorists may also interact with known extremist groups, despite planning and conducting their attack alone. There is an important caveat: the majority of lone-actor terrorists do not have such connections; this cannot therefore be considered a primary indicator, nor can extreme groups be considered as a pool from which most lone-actor terrorists are drawn. However, where these connections are present, they are often with groups known to advocate or condone violence in the name of their cause. This offers a valuable opportunity to utilise resources already deployed against potentially violent extremist groups.

- Where resources are deployed to monitor groups that are known to advocate violence, the focus of authorities should extend beyond the shared plans of the group; members or peripheral contacts may also plot as lone-actor terrorists. Analysis of group dynamics and interactions between members may facilitate the detection of unusual behaviour in that context, enabling investigators to identify individuals of potential concern amid the rhetoric.

Investigating Potential Lone-Actor Terrorists

Social Isolation

One of the most significant conclusions from the research is that lone actors are not as detached as is often presumed. The findings contradict the widespread notion that lone-actor terrorists are lonely, reclusive and detached from society. As outlined above, not only do they interact with those around them, but those interactions often include some indications of their extreme views or even of their intention to act. These interactions can provide valuable detection opportunities.

However, where persons of interest are socially isolated, these detection 'tripwires' are absent, reducing the likelihood of key information reaching law enforcement without proactive investigation. Moreover, the research found indications of mental health problems in a high proportion of cases where the perpetrator appeared to be socially isolated. Therefore, although social isolation is not as prevalent among lone-actor terrorists as is often presumed, in those cases where a person of interest is isolated, the research suggests there are important considerations for investigators.

- Where a person of interest is socially isolated, it is unlikely that members of the public will encounter and report indications of extremism or of an intention to act. Security agencies and law enforcement are therefore likely to have limited information compared with other cases, but in this scenario, limited information does not necessarily suggest a limited threat. Indications of social isolation should therefore warrant greater emphasis on proactive investigation to determine whether there is cause for concern, even at a preliminary stage.
- The findings suggest that for a high proportion of socially isolated individuals there are indications of mental health problems. Investigators should therefore consider this possibility when assessing and anticipating the likely actions of the individual and when considering possible means of intervention.

Social Media

As outlined above, lone-actor terrorists are often not as isolated as might be presumed; they interact with those around them in the physical world, and in many cases with those who share their beliefs in the virtual domain. While there are valid concerns regarding terrorists' use of encryption and the dark web to communicate and plan attacks covertly, chronological analysis of the CLAT database also shows their use of mainstream social media.

Moreover, where right-wing lone-actor terrorists give prior indication of their extremist views or even intention to act, it is often through such media, joining groups that express far-right ideology or directly expressing their beliefs through their own posts.

- Lone-actor terrorists are active on social media, and not only through encrypted communications. Consequently, examining the public online activity of a person of

interest may offer an early indication of extremist views. While this certainly does not negate the utility of investigating the individual's more secretive online activity, a vocal social media profile, alongside other indicators, may be useful in narrowing down which individuals warrant further investigation.

Section 2: Toolkits for Security Practitioners

The guidance detailed above is presented here as two toolkits: the first is intended to support those designing community engagement and awareness programmes, or seeking to increase initial detection; the second offers advice on individual case management.

Community Engagement, Awareness Programmes and Initial Detection

1. *Awareness Programmes*
   o   Ensure that awareness programmes encompass the lone-actor terrorism threat and the public understands that links to wider networks do not have to be present for someone to be of concern.

2. *Reporting Mechanisms – Offline*
   o   Ensure there are accessible and well-known reporting mechanisms for 'offline' communities to use.
   o   Ensure that strong links are developed between the police and the community so that the latter has confidence in using available reporting mechanisms.

3. *Reporting Mechanisms – Online*
   o   Encourage social media companies to improve user-based reporting systems to account for individuals that pose an immediate risk, and establish an appropriate mechanism to ensure these reports are passed to the authorities.

4. *Links to Extreme Groups*
   o   Utilise resources already deployed in monitoring groups that are known to advocate violence. Analysis of group dynamics and interactions between members may facilitate the detection of unusual behaviour in that context, enabling investigators to detect individuals of potential concern amid the rhetoric.

Individual Case Management

1. *Social Isolation*
   o   Social isolation is not a key indicator in cases of lone-actor terrorism.
   o   Where there are indications that an individual is withdrawn from those around them:
      •   Investigators should be aware that there are indications of mental health problems in a high proportion of such cases and consider the possibility that this may affect the decision-making of the individual.

- Additional resources may be required to determine whether the individual is of concern, as some of the most valuable 'tripwires' for lone-actor terrorism (that is, those around the individual, whether offline or online) will be ineffective.

2. *Social Media – Building an Initial Picture*
   - Examining the social media profile of a person of interest may offer an early and accessible indication of extremist views; lone-actor terrorists do not restrict their activity to encrypted and password-protected systems. This may be useful in determining which individuals warrant further investigation, especially in the case of right-wing extremists.

About the Authors

Clare Ellis is a Research Fellow in the National Security and Resilience Studies group at RUSI. Her research focuses on counter-terrorism, organised crime and the role of policing in tackling national security threats. She has undertaken research on behalf of the European Commission, and the British and Danish governments, conducting fieldwork in the UK, Europe and West Africa. A regular speaker at international conferences, she is also a guest lecturer at the University of York. Prior to joining RUSI she worked in the criminal justice sector, first in criminal defence and later in the police. Clare holds an MSc with Distinction in Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism from University College London, where her dissertation examined the spatial and temporal distribution of terrorism incidents within post-accord Northern Ireland. She has also studied at the University of Newcastle and the Université Lumière Lyon 2, holding a Bachelor's degree in Law with French.

Raffaello Pantucci is Director of International Security Studies at RUSI. He has worked at think tanks in London, Washington and Shanghai, and his work on terrorism has been published in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Survival*, the *RUSI Journal*, as well as media outlets including *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *Prospect*. He is the author of *We Love Death as You Love Life: Britain's Suburban Terrorists* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2015).