

Expert Meeting Lone Wolves Summary of Proceedings

On 5 November 2010, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague hosted an Expert Meeting on “Lone Wolves: How to Prevent This Seemingly New Phenomenon?”. Leading experts discussed the rise of the lone wolf terrorist and analysed the challenges governments, police and intelligence agencies face in dealing with this threat.

The meeting consisted of presentations by Mark S. Hamm, Professor of Criminology, Indiana State University; Christopher Hewitt, Professor of Sociology, University of Maryland, and; Leena Malkki, Assistant Professor, University of Helsinki. The referents of the three key note speeches were Michael Kowalski, Strategic Analyst, Office of the Netherlands National Coordinator for Counterterrorism; Peter van Kuijk, Psychologist, Netherlands National Police Agency and the ICCT – The Hague Research Fellows Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf.

The two ICCT – The Hague Research Fellows were also the authors of the discussion paper for the Expert Meeting entitled ‘Lone Wolves; How to Prevent This Seemingly New Phenomenon’. This ICCT paper examined the rise of terrorist acts perpetrated by individuals. In addition to providing an analysis of these so-called lone wolf terrorists, it proposed a range of counter-terrorism measures to address this threat that is not particularly new, but seems to increase in terms of number of incidents and range of perpetrators.

Presentations

Professor Mark Hamm presented his research findings on almost 50 cases of Lone Wolves that have committed terrorist acts in the United States since 1940, focusing on the characteristics of the individuals, their modus operandi and their radicalisation process. Hamm argued that, although lone wolves are not ‘full members’ of specific movements, they do often view themselves as being ‘affiliated’ with a certain group.

Hamm also stated that especially more recently, lone wolf terrorists have multiple grievances, both on a personal and political level. Understanding where these grievances come from and how they are influenced by the actions of others is crucial.

Professor Christopher Hewitt argued that Lone wolf terrorism is the remainder of successfully combated and disrupted organised terrorism. Leaderless resistance only developed as a result of the disruption and round-up of violent extremist networks and leaders by the FBI and similar organisations. “Certainly, the impact of a few scattered attacks by lone wolves on public opinion is



trivial compared to that which an organised campaign such as was waged by the IRA or the Red Brigades would have”.

According to Hewitt, in most cases routine policing and community-based intelligence has resulted in catching the perpetrators of Lone Wolf attacks. Informers and witnesses are especially crucial in this process. Therefore, being in contact with communities is key for police and intelligence agencies.

Dr. Leena Malkki (University of Helsinki) explained why the recent school shootings in Finland should be used to draw lessons for counter-terrorism measures. Similar to most terrorists, the perpetrators of the school shootings have a mix of personal and political motives that lead them to violent action. As a response, framing the shootings as acts of desperate ‘losers’ makes them less prone to copycatting. Malkki stated that we should frame terrorism in similar manners and stop giving terrorists the attention they seek to obtain.

Malkki argued that culture and societal relations are an important factor. 96% of the Finnish population consider the police to be very trustworthy and perceive them as ‘their friend’. This makes it a lot easier for police to build contacts with communities and receive strategic information on possible attacks.

Comments & Discussion

The Expert Meeting was followed by commentaries from Peter van Kuijk (National Police Services Agency), Michael Kowalski (Netherlands Coordinator for Counterterrorism) and ICCT – The Hague research Fellows Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf.

Peter van Kuijk said that the existing sentiment of the general public can be an indicator as to how many people are to be considered a threat. Lone wolves are difficult to identify because they send their message to sympathisers only. Therefore, extremist groups will have to be infiltrated to gain vital information.

Michael Kowalski stated that counter-terrorism measures have received a lot of criticism in the last couple years: “We have to find a balance between fighting terrorism and respecting human rights”. Lone wolf terrorism will stay with us, partly enhanced by globalisation. We also see a (political) trend in the rise of populism, which might feed into polarisation. It is important to study this process from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to truly understand the causes.

Beatrice de Graaf agreed that Lone Wolf terrorism will continue to be a problem, as individuals will always seek attention with violent, narcissistic deeds. Counter-terrorism approaches should respond with care and refrain from giving terrorists the attention they often crave.

In the lively discussion with the international experts attending the event, questions arose whether precursors for violent acts could be useful. The general agreement was that more research on the nexus between violent thoughts and violent acts is needed.

The workshop concluded that definition, labelling and framing of Lone Wolf Terrorism deserves more attention and that comparative research between Lone Wolves in the United States and Europe is required to obtain a better understanding of this phenomenon.