ICCT International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

Understanding Lone Wolves:

Towards a Theoretical Framework for Comparative Analysis

Lone wolf terrorists have long been a troublesome issue for policymakers and intelligence agencies: their isolated and withdrawn nature makes it difficult to proactively gather information about their potential malicious intentions. This paper argues for the need for comparative research in order to increase our understanding of lone wolves. There is significant information available with regard to other lone actor phenomena, not directly linked to terrorism, which have been extensively researched, and can help us gain a deeper insight into particular aspects of lone wolf terrorism. This paper aims to outline an initial theoretical framework that will allow for comparisons between lone wolf terrorism and related non-terrorist lone actor phenomena, which can enable policy transfer with regard to detection, prevention and treatment.

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Jan Leenaars' academic interest in terrorism was piqued following a terrorism research seminar in 2012. After obtaining his bachelor degree in History at Utrecht University (2014), he set out to pursue this interest more thoroughly. The following year, Jan completed his Master of Science in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University. During and after his master, Jan has mostly focused on lone actor terrorism.

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Introduction

Lone wolf terrorists have long been a troublesome issue for policymakers and intelligence agencies.[1] This is to be expected: the nature of lone wolves - isolated and withdrawn - makes it difficult to proactively gather information about any malicious intentions they might have.[2] The threat these unknown lone wolves pose is enough to warrant further research into this specific phenomenon. Yet, to further understand and to get a better grip on lone wolf terrorism, we have to look outside the realms of terrorism.

This paper argues for the need for comparative research to increase our understanding of lone wolves and to make initial assumptions with regards to the possibility of policy transfer. There is significant information available with regard to other lone actor phenomena, not directly linked to terrorism, which have been extensively researched, and can help us gain a deeper insight into particular aspects of lone wolf terrorism. Hence the central argument of this paper is that there is no need to completely re-invent the wheel when investigating lone wolf terrorism, as there is much that can be borrowed from existing research on related phenomena. This paper aims to sketch out an initial theoretical framework that will allow for comparisons between lone wolf terrorism and related non-terrorist lone actor phenomena, through which further insight can be gained.

To achieve this, the first step is to understand lone wolf terrorists and how comparing lone wolf terrorists with other types of non-terrorist lone actors, such as school shooters, can be beneficial. The lone actor phenomenon can be analysed through a theoretical framework which distinguishes between its many different components. While two lone actor phenomena can be different on all components bar one; the comparison of this one similarity can prove useful for our understanding of lone wolf terrorists. This is how comparing lone wolves with other solitary actors, such as school shooters and assassins, can be beneficial. There are similarities to be found between certain components and codes when comparing two different lone actor phenomena. For example, if the modus operandi or the awareness of the perpetrator's intentions is the same for school shooters and lone wolves, lone wolf terrorism can benefit from existing policy and knowledge in how to prevent and track school shooters. By utilising a comparative approach, we can better utilise existing information of other phenomena for our understanding of lone wolf terrorists.

As such, a better understanding of various different lone actor perpetrators is vital for the comparison, which will eventually, it is hoped, enable policy transfer with regards to detection, prevention and treatment. This article proposes that the best way of achieving this goal is by creating a codebook that allows for comparisons between solitary perpetrators of various groups. This codebook consists of socio-demographic information on the perpetrator, psychological background and history, motivation behind the attack, target of the attack, modus operandi, objective of the attack, aftermath and finally, the awareness of intentions.

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[1] E. Bakker and B. de Graaf, "Preventing Lone Wolf Terrorism: some CT Approaches Addressed", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, no. 6 (2011), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/preventing-lone-wolf/html.
[2] Bakker and de Graaf, "Preventing Lone Wolf Terrorism".

Lone wolf terrorism

The term lone wolf was popularised by white supremacists Alex Curtis and Tom Metzger who encouraged individuals to commit acts alone for tactical reasons in the 1990s.[3] Scott Stewart and Fred Burton define lone wolf terrorists in a Stratfor Global Intelligence essay as "solitary actors (…) [who] do not work with others".[4] Their motivation – an important part of terrorism – stems from various roots, but these roots can all be categorised as political, ideological or religious.[5] Thus, a lone wolf terrorist is "a person who acts on his or her own without orders from — or even connections to — an organization".[6]

While lone wolf terrorists have varying backgrounds and motivational patterns, there are some similarities to be seen. For starters, while it is a myth that most terrorists suffer from "any identifiable psychopathology, the rate of psychological disturbance and social ineptitude among lone wolves is relatively high".[7] Second, lone wolf terrorists isolate themselves from society.[8] Third, lone wolf terrorists are known to distribute their manifestos and ideas, sometimes just prior to the attack.[9]

Lone wolf terrorism is a concept that is easy to understand from a theoretical perspective. Yet to be able to have a better grasp on the phenomenon, it is necessary to dive deeper into the subject and examine some statistics. In 2014, an article written by Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert did just that.[10] This article analysed the "sociodemographic network characteristics and antecedent behaviours of 119 lone-actor terrorists".[11] Furthermore, it analysed different ideologies that motivated the lone wolf, as well as network connectivity. The research found that 96.6% of their sample consisted of males, 41.2% had previous criminal convictions, 31.9% had a history of mental illness or personality disorder and 26% had military experience. With regards to ideology, 43% was motivated by al-Qaeda, 34% by right-wing ideology and 18% by a single issue. The remaining 5% was classified as other. The research notes that the composition changes over time and that historically "there have been very few lone-actor incidents (…) involving left-wing or nationalist inspired individuals".[12] In fact, before 2001, only 7.8% of lone actors were religiously motivated compared to the 47.6% of single-issue inspired perpetrators.

The research had seven different conclusions. First, there is no uniform profile with regards to lone wolves. Second, in the time leading up to the attack other people were aware of the perpetrator's grievance, views, ideology, as well as his determination to carry out violent acts. Third, a large range of experiences and activities preceded the perpetuator's attack.[13] Fourth, most of the lone wolves were socially isolated. Fifth, the

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[3] E. Bakker and B.A. de Graaf, "Lone Wolves: How to Prevent this Phenomenon?", Paper presented at the Expert Meeting Lone Wolves, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague* (November 2010) 2, http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-deGraaf-EM-Paper-Lone-Wolves.pdf (last accessed November 22, 2015).
[4] S. Stewart and F. Burton, "Lone Wolf Lessons", *Security Weekly* (June 3, 2009), https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090603_lone_wolf_lessons (last accessed November 22, 2015).
[5] Stewart and Burton, "Lone wolf Lessons", pp. 1-3.
[6] Bakker and De Graaf, 'Lone Wolves', p. 2.
[7] Ibidem, p. 5.
[8] Ibidem, p. 4.
[9] Ibidem, p. 4.
[10] P. Gill, J. Horgan and P. Deckert, "Bombing alone: tracing the motivations and antecedent behaviours of lone-actor terrorists", *Journal of Forensic Science* 59, no. 2 (2014), pp. 425-435.
[11] Gill, Horgan and Deckert, "Bombing alone", p. 425.
[12] Ibidem, pp. 427-428.
[13] Ibidem, pp. 425, 433-434.

perpetrator was detectable and observable in their activities. Sixth, the attacks carried out by perpetrators were seldom spontaneous or impulsive. Finally, there are differences to be detected in the behavioural aspects of different subgroups. [14]

Comparing with what/how?

Now that we better understand lone wolves, we are left with an important question: what theoretical framework will allow for beneficial comparison between lone wolf terrorists and other non-terrorist lone perpetrators? It is crucial that the theoretical framework allows for comparison between different phenomena and groups. As mentioned earlier, our codebook consists of socio-demographic information on the perpetrator, psychological background and history, motivation behind the attack, target of the attack, modus operandi, objective of the attack, aftermath and finally, the awareness of intentions.

However, why are these categories important and what do these categories tell us? It is important to understand the value of each of these categories, and the specific knowledge a comparative analysis can and will yield. The socio-demographic information gives us a first insight of what type of person the perpetrator is. The psychological background and history further adds to our understanding of the perpetrator as it allows for analysis of the mental health status of the perpetrator. The motivation for, as well as the target and objective of the attack helps us understand the reasoning behind the attack. The modus operandi, aftermath and awareness of intentions will help us see how the attacks were carried out.

This section takes a closer look at each of these categories and how they can contribute to the comparative analysis and our understanding of lone wolves. The codes below are all chosen to increase our understanding of the perpetrator and the attack. By
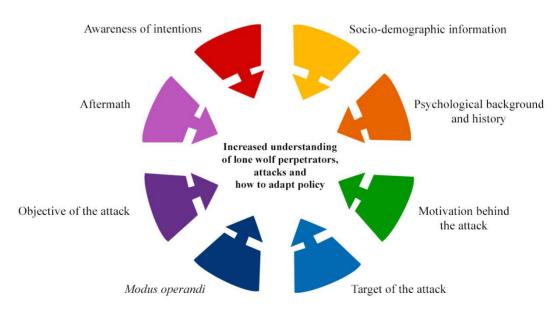
Theoretical framework for comparative analysis

Chart 1: Systematic overview of the theoretical framework for comparative analysis

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[14] Ibidem, pp. 425, 433-435.

breaking down the information on perpetrators into these categories, we can easily compare two phenomena regarding specific criteria, even if these two phenomena do not lend themselves to a more general comparison. This framework thus allows us to make specific and detailed comparisons between groups that are often not being considered in the same context. This approach will give new insight and allow already existing knowledge in other fields to cross over into terrorism studies.

Socio-demographic information

Socio-demographic information helps to get a general picture of the perpetrator. Age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, relationship status, highest education received and previous criminal convictions all help us begin to understand what the risk factors of the perpetrator are and the stage of life they are in. As Gill, Horgan and Deckert demonstrated, if socio-demographic information is gathered and analysed on a large scale, it can paint a picture of where various perpetrators typically stem from.[15]

While socio-demographic information alone will not identify perpetrators ahead of time, it can help to indicate common factors. Besides being able to highlight risk factors and risk areas, it can also illustrate how various combinations of these factors can shape a perpetrator. Current existing knowledge on those prone to commit crime can perhaps aid us in understanding those who are prone to commit acts of terrorism. Techniques and insights that have been gained from looking at socio-demographic information in other related phenomena might be transferable for when it comes to dealing with lone wolf terrorism. Socio-demographic information can thus play a role in the detection and prevention of attacks. At the very least, it can illustrate problem areas that need to be investigated.

Psychological background and history

The psychological background and history further adds to our understanding of the perpetrator. The codes that belong in this category are mental health status, isolation, depression and unfreezing. Mental health status is an important code to compare because it is of tremendous influence if the perpetrator was aware of his actions and was clinically sane. Depression and isolation serve as the same type of indicators as mental health status, albeit less severe. If various perpetrators are dealing with mental health issues, it raises concerns.

Criminologists and psychologists already have plenty of information when it comes to how the psychological background and history of a person plays a role with regards to committing crime.[16] Terrorism experts can benefit from this knowledge and use this to get a better grip of the situation. The code unfreezing serves as an excellent example of how this information may be used. Unfreezing is a personal crisis "when an individual loses the everyday reassurance of relationships and routines".[17] This personal crisis can range from losing a loved one to simple moving far from home. The occurrence of a personal crisis is a given at some point in life. Yet terrorism studies can learn from a

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[15] Ibidem, pp. 425-435.

[16] It should be noted that while there isn't necessarily a consensus, there is plenty of information. The benefits and downsides of profiling and the possible connection between mental health and criminal activities are well researched.

[17] C. McCauley, S. Moskalenko and B. van Son, "Characteristics of Lone-Wolf Violent Offenders: a Comparison of Assassins and School Attackers", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 1 (2013), p. 8.

greater understanding of those who go through unfreezing and as a result commit a crime. Using the knowledge of criminologists and psychologists, we can get a better understanding of what combination of factors made a perpetrator lash out. Thus, being able to map people going through unfreezing or knowing when they do can also play a role in the detection and prevention process. The psychological background and history picks up where the socio-demographic information left off: a better understanding of where perpetrators stem from.

Motivation behind the attack

The motivation behind the attack helps us understand the reasoning behind the attack. The type of perpetrator you are dealing with varies if an attack is motivated by personal grievance, political grievance and/or ideology. Personal grievance is coded and defined as the perceived mistreatment of the individual by loved ones or the government. Political grievance is coded and defined as the perceived mistreatment of people that the individual identifies with.[18] Ideology, when present, is coded as religious, political or single-issue.

For lone wolves, motivation is of extra significance, seeing as it plays such a large role for what constitutes terrorism. Experience tells us that the motivation of an attack can fall into multiple categories, not just one. It is not uncommon for a lone wolf to be motivated by both political grievance and ideology. Seeing as motivation is of such importance to terrorism, it is only logical to compare it with the motivational patterns of other lone actors. Specifically, how a type of motivation is formed, fostered and fuelled to the point where an individual acts out of ideology could be of interest for terrorism studies. For example, a radicalisation process can play an important role in the motivation of the perpetrator and forms another way of detecting and understanding the (possible) perpetrator. Similarities in the motivation might reveal types of trajectory lone actors are prone to go through.

Target of the attack

It is important to distinguish what the target of the attack is. A target can either be direct, random, or both. A target is coded as direct if there was a clear target prior to the attack or if the location itself was chosen for specific reasons. A target is coded as random if there were victims that were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Attacks by lone wolves often feature both of these targets. This is not surprising, seeing as what typically motivates lone wolves: ideology and political grievance. Seeing as a direct target often cannot be reached the perpetrator is left with a symbolic target, which means the actual casualties are often random in that regard.

The decision-making process that goes into why a symbolic target is chosen is important to understand when it comes to prevention. Why did a perpetrator target that specific government building? Did the perpetrator actively try to understand the security situation before the attack, or was it simply a target in the nearby vicinity? The same can be said with regards to collateral damage. In what way does the perpetrator actively seek out or try to prevent unnecessary collateral damage? Comparing lone

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[18] McCauley e.a., "Characteristics of Lone-Wolf Violent Offenders", p. 8.

actors with other groups that also cannot reach their desired target can help us start answering these questions.

Modus operandi

The modus operandi of the lone perpetrator is vital as it explains how the attack is carried out. The type of weapons obtainable and preferred during an attack, how the attack was planned and carried out can all play a role in detecting similarities between different lone perpetrators. Guns are often the weapon of choice, but knives, vehicles and pipe bombs have all been utilised.

The modus operandi can also reveal similarities between groups that are important on a practical level. If various perpetrators obtain their weapons in similar ways, this is vital information with regards to detection and prevention. Building on this, it is necessary to compare and understand how perpetrators plan and carry out their attack. Do perpetrators know the site of the attack well and can they manoeuvre smoothly throughout the attack? Do they remain calm and focused throughout the attack or does chaos interfere with any set targets? By investigating and comparing modi operandi, perpetrators and phenomena that have little in common besides how the attack was planned and carried out can be of use for understanding lone wolves. Knowing how perpetrators act allows for the appropriate security measures to be taken. Insight should be borrowed from lessons learned by institutions that have faced bomb and gun attacks and threats.

Objective of the attack

The objective of the attack can be categorised into multiple categories. Revenge and the hope to provoke change are recurring themes that perpetrators aim to achieve when they launch their attack. The fact that revenge is a common theme does not mean that the reasons behind said revenge are necessarily similar across perpetrators. Revenge can be inspired by ideology and political grievance, but also by personal grievance. The reason why revenge is sought can thus vary and be either more sophisticated or simply personal in nature.

Understanding the objective of various perpetrators will give policy makers valuable insights. Knowing and understanding what perpetrators aim to achieve in their attack aids law enforcement in how to prevent it from happening. Regardless of the sophistication behind an objective, an attack by a lone wolf terrorist who sought revenge might very well share certain characteristics of an attack carried out by a school shooter that sought revenge. A specific objective has impact on the modus operandi utilised during the attack. Perpetrators that have more political and ideological objectives – such as inspiring change – might shed light on the breeding ground of these ideas and provide law enforcement with new areas to monitor. Thus, it is important to identify the root causes that lay behind the objective an attack.

Aftermath

The aftermath is twofold. It tells us how many injuries and fatalities were the result of the attack, but also in what way the attack came to an end. Did the perpetrator surrender, were they overpowered and arrested, killed in action or did they commit suicide? The distinction of what happened and what the perpetrator hoped would happen is also important: it is entirely possible for a perpetrator to be arrested or overpowered while he hoped to die during his attack. Death tolls and injuries vary greatly between attacks.

Still, similarities between death toll across multiple perpetrators of different phenomena can give us insight in how to better prevent such scenarios. On the one hand, there are also lessons to be learned for ambulance personal, the fire department and law enforcement agencies. Not only response time, but also how to navigate emergency personal through an unsafe area is just as relevant after a school shooting as it is after a lone wolf attack. More relevant for terrorism studies are questions related to how the perpetrator met his end and whether adjustments are necessary to limit the amount of fatalities and death.

The awareness of intentions

The last category discusses any hints or clues that the perpetrator – either on purpose or by accident – released to the world prior to the attack. It also discusses any information that the perpetrator created before the attack and left behind for authorities to find later. It is not unheard of for perpetrators to leave behind hints that an attack is about to take place. Manifestos and journals are sometimes left behind, explaining the attack and letting the world know who they were. In an ideal scenario, the awareness of intentions can shed new light on the detection and prevention of attacks. Practically, we see that it is quite difficult to achieve such a feat.

In contemporary society where social media and internet play a crucial role, it may be necessary to monitor if perpetrators in the upcoming years are more explicit about their attacks online before they take place. Online messaging and forums can serve as a tool where perpetrators vent about their problems or discuss their ideology. There are countless examples where a perpetrator had uploaded information to the internet about their frustration or about an imminent attack. Unfortunately, partially due to the nature of the internet, there are also those who state that they will attack a certain institution on a certain day, merely as an (ill judged) joke. For terrorism experts, it is worth comparing how law enforcement and intelligence agencies trace and validate any claims or threats of incoming attacks they come across. Besides issues regarding the validity behind announced threats, terrorism experts can learn from law enforcement agencies by identifying certain signals and triggers.

Comparing with whom?

It makes sense to compare lone wolves with other solitary actors that are not under direct command but act on their own accord. This limits the array of possible confounding factors substantially and lets us focus on a specific group of perpetrators.

After all, our goal is to increase our understanding of lone wolf terrorism, and thus it is necessary to compare specific aspects of different lone actor phenomena. This article is not the first to consider comparative analysis and other scholars have made attempts to use comparisons to increase our understanding in the past. It is important to understand that even phenomena that are only comparable in one aspect can still prove to be useful. Not all the eight categories of the theoretical framework have to be comparable or relevant for every comparison. A single comparable category can already have enormous impact for terrorism studies.

Assassins and school shooters

Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko and Benjamin Van Son's 2013 article was based on the premise that "lone-wolf terrorists may have characteristics in common with two other types of lone-actor violent offenders: assassins and school attackers".[19] In this article, they argue that there are six individual-level mechanisms of radicalisation in lone wolf terrorists.[20] These are "personal grievance, political grievance, slippery slope, risk and status seeking, and unfreezing".[21]

The slippery slope should be understood as a "gradual desensitization" to violence through the escalation of violent and/or illegal acts.[22] Risk and status seeking means that the individual believes respect can be gained through violence. The researchers analysed 41 school attackers and 83 assassins. They found that 98% of the school attackers had witnessed events that could be categorised as unfreezing and 81% of them perceived personal or political grievance.[23] Only half of the assassins, on the other hand, went through unfreezing and grievance played a role for 67%. The assassins were more interested in violence, status and risk seeking and had more history of weapons use than their school attacker counterpart.

The psychological background and history, modus operandi, target of the attack, objective of the attack and awareness of intentions are the most significant categories to look at for this specific comparison. Seeing as lone wolves, school shooters and assassins appear to roughly go through the same radicalisation process, it is worthwhile to see if different lone actors utilise the same approach to reach their target and objective.

Suicide terrorists and attempted suicide

In 2012, Professor Adam Lankford carried out a study in which he presented results "from the first combined quantitative assessment and comparative analysis of suicide terrorists and rampage, workplace, and school shooters who attempt suicide".[24] This is an important and broad category that lends itself to comparison, seeing as suicide amongst lone wolves – or 'death by cop' – often occurs. Analysing a sample size of 81, Lankford finds that:

> Much like rampage and school shooters, the suicide terrorists in
> this study exhibited many common risk factors for suicide, such as

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[19] Ibidem, p. 4.
[20] Ibidem, p. 8.
[21] Ibidem, p. 8.
[22] Ibidem, p. 8.
[23] Ibidem, p. 14.
[24] A. Lankford, "A Comparative Analysis of Suicide Terrorists and Rampage, Workplace, and School Shooters in the United States From 1990 to 2010", *Homicide Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012), pp. 255-274.

social marginalization, family problems, work or school problems, and precipitating crises (...) In addition, suicide terrorists, rampage shooters, and school shooters were almost equally likely to write an explanation or suicide note prior to striking, and they were almost equally likely to end up dead as a result of their attacks.[25]

If lone wolves are indeed motivated by the same factors as other perpetrators that commit suicide, this could provide an extra perspective to study lone wolves in. For this specific category, terrorism studies can gain the most value by comparing specifically mental health status, the motivation, the modus operandi and the awareness of intentions between these phenomena.

Copy cats

'Copycat crime' is a term used in academic circles referring to "imitative crime influenced by media".[26] After extensive media coverage of a crime, a new perpetrator "incorporates aspects of the original offense into a new crime", creating a copycat effect.[27] There are copycats in many different aspects of crime, ranging from homicide to school shooters.[28] If we wish to understand lone wolves better, the copycat phenomenon is worth further investigation, especially with regards to the socio-demographic information, the awareness of intentions and the modus operandi, seeing as a new perpetrator is inspired by the deeds of a former perpetrator.

Conventional homicide/murder

Another way terrorism studies could benefit is by comparing lessons learned in the conventional homicide and murder cases. Many crimes are committed by lone actors and the socio-demographic information, mental health status and history, modus operandi as well as the awareness of intentions might reveal similarities with lone wolves. With regards to the objective of the attack, similarities between cases that can be marked as revenge would be a particular interesting code to monitor. The problem with this category, however, is that it is very broad and there is a much larger scope of confounding factors. Individual cases might prove more useful than a general comparison.

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[25] Lankford, "A Comparative Analysis of Suicide Terrorists and Rampage, Workplace, and School Shooters in the United States From 1990 to 2010", p. 264.

[26] J. Helfgott, "Criminal behavior and the copycat effect: Literature review and theoretical framework for empirical investigation", *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 22 (2015), p. 47.

[27] Helfgott, "Criminal behavior and the copycat effect", p. 47.

[28] The Kauhajoki School Shooting on 23 September 2008 is a good example in which copycat behaviour is identifiable. Certain aspects of the shooting closely resemble the Jokela School Shooting on 7 November 2007. For more information, see:

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Conclusion

The need for more comparative research is clear. Comparative research is not a solution to all problems with regards to terrorism research, but it has the opportunity to greatly increase our understanding of this complex phenomenon. Naturally, we do not expect two phenomena to be exactly alike. They can differ on all categories bar one and still prove useful for our understanding of lone wolves, through comparing that one aspect. Indeed, the mere fact some phenomena are not comparable is just as valuable for the state of the art. The nature of lone wolf terrorism research entails that primary sources are often lacking and hard to find. Comparative research offers a way to deal with this problem.

The fact remains that there already exists an abundance of information when it comes to other lone actor phenomena. Our understanding of lone wolf terrorism can greatly be increased by finding a way to utilise this knowledge. The initial theoretical framework proposed by this article is a way to move forward. This framework can be further refined and the groups that lend themselves to a comparison can be expanded. One thing is certain: comparative analysis is a way forward when it comes to our understanding of lone wolf terrorism. Existing research barriers have to be broken down and the proposed framework is an initial attempt to do this.

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April 2016

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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