

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 3 November 2015

CODEXTER (2015) 7
English only

COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON TERRORISM (CODEXTER)

SUB-GROUP ON TERRORISTS ACTING ALONE

DISCUSSION PAPER

29th Plenary Meeting

Strasbourg (France), 17 – 18 November 2015

Secretariat of the Counter-Terrorism Division
Information Society and Action against Crime Directorate, DG I

codexter@coe.int - www.coe.int/terrorism

Summary

The present Discussion Paper traces the origins of the phenomenon of terrorists acting alone and provides an overview of the research done on the scale and prevalence of the problem, as well as the main characteristics of attacks committed by terrorists acting alone, including radicalisation processes and modus operandi. The Discussion Paper also examines the many links between the problem of “terrorists acting alone” and that of “foreign terrorist fighters”. Finally, the Discussion Paper contains a series of recommendations addressed to the CODEXTER by the Sub-Group concerning possible measures to be taken at the international level, in particular the drafting of a “Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Terrorists Acting Alone”.

1. Introduction

On the basis of its Terms of Reference for 2014 – 2015, CODEXTER, at its 25th Plenary Meeting examined and discussed a document containing proposals for priority areas for its work in 2014-2015.

These proposals included, among other things, establishing four sub-groups of the Committee which would focus on four separate priorities, namely: Special Investigation Techniques; Radicalisation and the Receiving of training for Terrorism, including via the Internet; and Foreign Terrorist Fighters; Terrorists Acting Alone; and the Assessment of Possible Gaps in the Legal Framework provided by the Council of Europe International Legal Instruments in the Area of the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism.

CODEXTER agreed upon the four priorities and the sequence in which they should be dealt with. Terrorists Acting Alone is the third of these priority subjects to be examined by CODEXTER..

Furthermore, the Committee instructed the Bureau to appoint from among its Members four coordinators to be responsible for each of the sub-groups tasked with preparing the deliberations of CODEXTER of the four topics. Mr Alexandros STAVROPOULOS (Greece) was appointed as the Coordinator for the Sub-Group on Terrorists Acting Alone, which is composed of the following Members (in alphabetical order of member States):

Ms Martina KLEIN(Austria)

Ms Lenka HABRNÁLOVÁ (Czech Republic)

Mr Petr HOLY (Czech Republic)

Mr Giorgi MANJAVIDZE (Georgia)

Mr Antonios PAPAMATTHAIIOU (Greece)

Mr Alexandros STAVROPOULOS (Greece)

Ms Lucia LING KET ON (The Netherlands)

Mr Mats BENESTAD (Norway)

Ms Tanja KIKEREKOVA (“the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)

The present discussion paper is the outcome of the work of the Sub Group on Terrorists Acting Alone and is intended to form the basis for the discussions of CODEXTER at the occasion of the 29th Plenary Meeting of the Committee. This document does not necessarily reflect positions of CODEXTER.

2. Background information on terrorists acting alone

A person who individually performs a terror act is not a new phenomenon. Already in the nineteenth century the various anarchist movements called upon individuals to kill those who formed a structured social order. The same phenomena occurred in the 1990s when the American “white power movement” made use of the tactic. Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis called upon fellow racists, by them called “lone wolves”, to commit violent crimes without being organised in any movement. Individuals planning the criminal acts would be harder to detect in advance and criminal responsibility would be limited to these individuals since no direct line of command was at hand.¹ “Terrorists acting alone” or “lone wolves” are not the only **terminologies** that have been used to describe the phenomenon. Other examples are “lone actor”,² “individual terrorists”, “solo terrorists”, “lone operator terrorists” and “freelancers”.³ For the sake of clarity, the “terrorists acting alone” terminology has been chosen.

There is no single definition of “terrorists acting alone”. A common definition is Burton and Stewart’s: “a person who acts of his or her own without orders from – or even connections to – an organization”. The terrorist acting alone is the contrary to a sleeper cell, which infiltrates a society and acts on the order of the terror organisation governing the sleeper cell.⁴ The terrorists acting alone can also be defined as persons “(a) who operate individually; (b) who do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network; (c) who act without the direct influence of a leader or hierarchy; (d) whose tactics and methods are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or direction.”⁵

¹ COT, Instituut voor Veiligheids en Crisismanagement, Lone-wolf terrorism, 6 July 2007, pp. 12-13.

² CTED, Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells, paragraph 10.

³ Borum, R., Fein, R. & Vossekuil, B. (2012). A dimensional approach to analyzing lone offender terrorism. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17(5), p. 390.

⁴ Burton, F, Stewart, S, The ‘Lone Wolf’ Disconnect, 30 January 2008, available at https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/lone_wolf_disconnect, accessed 4 May 2015.

⁵ COT, Instituut voor Veiligheids en Crisismanagement, Lone-wolf terrorism, 6 July 2007, p. 6.

Though these definitions are themselves rather clear, they might not always sufficiently take into consideration the complexity of the situations at hand.⁶ A report from a seminar arranged by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) has pointed out “that there was no simple way to define the phenomenon of “terrorists acting alone”.” Spaaij has argued that the boundaries are “fuzzy and arbitrary.”⁷ Other authors stress that “hybrids” are not unusual. The closer one examines the cases, often claimed to involve perpetrators conducting the attacks completely on their own, more doubt arises as to if the perpetrators were as conducting their terrorist acts as singlehandedly as asserted.⁸ The UN CTED has made use of a definition that includes both individuals acting alone and in small groups. A terrorist acting alone is “an individual who perpetrates political violence, acting independently, with no clear connection to the leadership of a terrorist group and/or outside an organizational hierarchy.” Furthermore, the definition would “equally refer to individuals acting in a small group.”⁹

This paper utilises a **definition** that differs slightly from the ones above. It principally focusses on the *modus operandi* of the perpetrator. Hence, a terrorist acting alone can be defined as an individual who plans and executes an attack without being dependent on an organisation or cell. The individual is not in need of advice or help to perform the act. Similarly to the CTED’s definition, also small groups of terrorists, consisting of e.g. 2 – 3 persons, which are often relatives or otherwise closely connected with each other, fall within the scope of this paper. Bigger organisations with a clear structure and line of command which provides help and advice to the perpetrator, for instance the I.R.A in Ireland or the E.T.A in Spain, are not covered by the definition in question.

Actions without intent to influence the public opinion fall outside of the definition and scope of this paper, as a sort of political motivation always underlies the terrorist attack.¹⁰ It should however be emphasised that motivation is not easy to assess. This paper will nevertheless focus on the motivation of the perpetrator, the so-called subjective part of the act. Even if an act creates public fear, such as a high school-shooting, this is not within the scope of the definition of terrorism, if the perpetrator was purely motivated by, for example, a personal grievance.

2.1 Prevalence and known attacks

⁶ Van Buuren, J, Performative Violence? The Multitude of Lone Wolf Terrorism, *Terrorism: An Electronic Journal and Knowledge Base*, Vol I Issue I, p. 3.

⁷ Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 857.

⁸ Borum, R., Fein, R. & Vossekuil, B. (2012). A dimensional approach to analyzing lone offender terrorism. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 17(5), p. 393.

⁹ CTED, Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells, paragraph 10.

¹⁰ See also Bakker, E., & de Graaf, B. A. (2010). Lone wolves: How to prevent this phenomenon? *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague*, available at <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/16557/ICCT%2520EM%2520Lone%2520Wolves%2520Paper.pdf?sequence=2>, accessed 4 May 2015.

The following figures should therefore be viewed with caution.¹¹ Spaaij has estimated, by going through cases between 1968 and 2007 in mostly western states, that attacks perpetrated by terrorist acting alone amount to merely 1,28 % of the total of terrorist attacks.¹² The report from the aforementioned CTED seminar also estimated attacks perpetrated by terrorist acting alone to a low, though slightly higher, figure of 1,81 %. It has been put forward, however, that the attacks by terrorists acting alone have increased in recent decades.¹³ This trend has continued and it appears to be on the rise.¹⁴ A study of jihadist terrorism in Europe between 1994 and 2013 reveals that after 2008 there has been a significant increase in single-actor plots, from 12 % to 38 % of the attacks examined.¹⁵

There are several examples of terrorists acting alone. One is **Anders Behring Breivik**'s bombing of the government headquarters in Oslo, followed by his shooting and killing 69 members of the Norwegian Worker's Youth League outside of Oslo in 2011. Breivik reportedly prepared and conducted the attacks on his own. He had an extreme right wing, racist agenda and was under the delusion of protecting Norway from an external threat. The Norwegian government instituted the so-called "Gjørv-Commission", which subsequently issued a report about the attacks. The Commission took a broad approach and concluded, inter alia, that the counterintelligence effort had focused too much on the jihadist threat.¹⁶ The phenomenon of terrorists acting alone ("soloterrorism" in Norwegian) had furthermore been underestimated.¹⁷ Overall, the commission stated that "With better ways of working and a broader focus, the Police Security Service could have become aware of the perpetrator prior to 22 July [2012]. Notwithstanding, the Commission has no grounds for contending that the Police Security Service could and should have averted the attacks."¹⁸

Other known attacks of terrorists acting alone are the shooting of two American soldiers at Frankfurt airport in 2011, the Stockholm bombings in 2010, the attempt to murder the British Parliament member Stephen Timms in 2010 and the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013, all of which were motivated by jihadist ideology. The perpetrator in Stockholm, who at least was responsible for one of the bombs, had possibly received training in Iraq before committing the attack. He also appears to have had a co-perpetrator.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he showed a large degree of

¹¹ Van Buuren, J, Performative Violence? The Multitude of Lone Wolf Terrorism, *Terrorism: An Electronic Journal and Knowledge Base*, Vol I Issue I, pp. 5-6.

¹² Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 859.

¹³ COT, Instituut voor Veiligheids en Crisismanagement, Lone-wolf terrorism, 6 July 2007, p. 85.

¹⁴ Teich, S, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Trends and Developments in Lone Wolf Terrorism in the Western World – An Analysis of Terrorist Attacks and Attempted Attacks by Islamic Extremists, available at http://www.ctcitraining.org/docs/LoneWolf_SarahTeich2013.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵ Nesser, P., Stenersen, A., The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, North America, 8, dec. 2014. available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/388>, accessed 5 May 2015.

¹⁶ NOU 2012: 14, Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen, 13 August 2015., p. 395.

¹⁷ Ibid p. 451.

¹⁸ Ibid p. 449.

¹⁹ Center for Terroranalyse (CTA), The threat from solo terrorism and lone wolf terrorism, p. 3.

independence in the actual planning and execution of the attack. The perpetrator of the failed assassination of Stephen Timms also demonstrated such independence in her modus operandi. She however had been motivated and inspired by videos of the “Al-Qaeda preacher Anwar al-Awlaki found on the Internet (see below).²⁰ These two attacks were hence preceded by either training or inspiration provided by a third party.

The murder of **Fusilier Rigby** was performed by two perpetrators who stayed at the crime scene until the police arrived and asked by passers to document what they had done with the cameras on their mobile phones. According to the British Prime Minister, the murder was an example of “home-grown terrorism.”²¹

After the murder, the British authorities issued a “Report on the intelligence relating to the Murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby”. This report stated that several errors preceding the murder had been committed by the intelligence authorities, but “[b]ased on the evidence we have seen, we do not consider that any of the Agencies’ errors, when taken individually, were significant enough to have affected the outcome.”²² There were however several shortcomings that demanded improvement. The perpetrators had been in the periphery of several other investigations, but had never been deemed to deserve a comprehensive investigation. It was moreover necessary to find a strategy to counter “Self-starting terrorists”, who often were “increasingly security conscious”. Furthermore, prevention had not been prioritised adequately. Prevention is otherwise the mean that “[...] could have the single biggest impact [...].” So-called “Jihadi tourism” to Iraq and Syria would also deserve a greater attention henceforward. In the case of one of the perpetrators, who had been in custody in Kenya suspected of terrorism, more precisely attempting to train with Al-Shaabab.²³

Among recent incidents is the **Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting in Brussels** in May 2014, the **attacks in Canada** in October 2014, the Paris attacks in January 2015 and the **terrorist attack in Copenhagen** in February 2015. In the case of the Brussels shootings, a returning French foreign terrorist fighter from Syria killed three persons. He was later apprehended. This attack appears to have been the first spill over in the European Union countries from the conflict in Syria and Iraq. The attacker had reportedly re-entered Europe through Frankfurt.²⁴ In the Canadian case, two individuals, not known to be connected, performed lethal attacks. One of the perpetrators had had his passport withdrawn after his plans to travel to Syria had become known to the police.²⁵ The

²⁰ Pantucci, R, ISCR, A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists, available at http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015, p. 18.

²¹ Oral Statement to Parliament, PM Commons statement: Intelligence and Security Committee report on Fusilier Lee Rigby, 25 November 2014.

²² Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, Report on the intelligence relating to the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby, 25 November 2014, p. 4.

²³ Ibid pp. 5-6.

²⁴ Byman, D, Shapiro, J, Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Brookings policy paper, Number 34, November 2014, p. 25.

²⁵ CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/martin-couture-rouleau-hit-and-run-driver-arrested-by-rcmp-in-july-1.2807078>, accessed 25 June 2015.

other perpetrator's act was, according to his mother, a "last desperate act" of someone who was not well in mind and who felt trapped. Her son wanted to travel to Saudi Arabia but his passport application was being held up.²⁶

At least Saïd Kouachi, one of the two brothers and perpetrators of the **Charlie-Hebdo attack**, appears to have received training in Yemen in 2011.²⁷ The perpetrator of the **Porte de Vincennes siege**, Amedy Coulibaly, who at first seemed to have been totally alone in his actions, probably was abetted by his wife. The brothers and Coulibaly had met in prison, where at least Coulibaly was reportedly radicalised.²⁸ Coulibaly had pledged alliance to the Islamic State in a video that was uploaded subsequent to his attack.²⁹ Similarly to Coulibaly, the perpetrator of the Copenhagen attack in February 2015 did probably receive help, in this case from two persons. According to the Danish Prime Minister he was, however, not part of a cell.³⁰ He had sworn allegiance to the leader of the so-called "Islamic State" on his facebook page prior to the attack.³¹

Most recently, another example of terrorists acting alone is the so-called "knife intifada", a series of attacks by young Palestinians on Israeli civilians and military or security personnel using edged objects, such as knives, meat cleavers or screwdrivers, currently happening in Israel and the West Bank. It appears that this wave of attacks is not being organised and coordinated in the same manner as previous uprisings against Israeli occupation by Palestinians, and in fact represents a more spontaneous modus operandi.³² These attacks have also been praised by the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as examples of how to strike "the West and specifically America in its own home, and attacking their interests that are spread everywhere"³³

Among the attacks mentioned above, interestingly only Breivik's attack and those carried out by Palestinians in the context of the "knife intifada" represent a sort of total independent modus operandi. The remaining attacks were in some way connected to a larger organisation, either through radicalisation, receiving of training or actual experience of combat.

2.2 Academic research

²⁶ Quan, D, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/michael-zehaf-bibeau-mother-says-killing-was-last-desperate-act-of-a-mentally-ill-person>, accessed 25 June 2015.

²⁷ Follorou, J, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/09/les-sejours-de-said-kouachi-au-yemen_4552684_3224.html, accessed 25 June 2015.

²⁸ Chrisafis, A, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris>, accessed 25 June 2015.

²⁹ A video of the pledge is available at <http://www.clarionproject.org/videos/paris-gunman-pledges-allegiance-isis-attack>, accessed 12 May 2015.

³⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/copenhagen-attacks-danish-police-charge-two-men>

³¹ Ellis, R, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/16/europe/denmark-shootings/>, accessed 12 May 2015.

³² "What's driving the young lone wolves who are stalking the streets of Israel". The Guardian (Peter Beaumont), 18 October 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/18/knife-intifada-palestinian-israel-west-bank>, accessed 30 October 2015.

³³ "Al-Qaeda leader calls for lone wolf attacks on West". The Telegraph, 3 November 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/11971412/Al-Qaeda-leader-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-on-West.html>. Accessed on 3 November 2015.

Despite the long history of terrorists acting alone, the academic research is not of great volume. An explanation can be that terrorism traditionally has been viewed as a collective, organised activity, hence contrasting with the characteristics of terrorists acting alone.³⁴ Academic research has however shown a greater interest in terrorists acting alone in recent years. This might be linked to the perceived increase of terrorist acting alone attacks. Several articles have been written on the subject, but there are still few comprehensive works issued. There are questions that have not been examined and answered. In particular, there seems to be a gap concerning recommendations to counter terrorists acting alone. Indeed, concrete and practical recommendations are often more problematic to treat and demand greater volume than the examination and stating of a phenomenon's characteristics. This is certainly true concerning the terrorist acting alone, who in some way exposes the states to new difficulties without proven counter-measures. Furthermore, even though terrorists acting alone are motivated by different reasons, a lot of the research is limited to jihadist terrorism.

3. Some characteristics of the terrorist acting alone

3.1 The individual

There is **no single, standardised profile** of the terrorist acting alone.³⁵ Although a vast majority of the terrorists acting alone are men, there is no uniform variable that characterise all of the individuals in question. As one author chooses to put it, no "lone wolf gene" exists.³⁶ The individuals committing the attacks do not have a common extremist opinion but come from all types of extremist ideological and religious groups, such as white supremacism, jihadism, anti-abortion movements and left-wing extremism.³⁷ The background and motivation of the terrorists acting alone hence may vary greatly.

There is neither a single set of behaviors that underpins every terrorist acting alone. Behavioral similarities between the individuals are however more common than similarities in character. One similarity is that the terrorist acting alone attacks rarely are sudden or impulsive but represents an evolution over time.³⁸

Among the perpetrators, an unusually high rate of psychological disturbance has been observed.³⁹ A high rate of social isolation has also been noted among these individuals. Nevertheless, in a majority

³⁴ Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 855.

³⁵ Bakker, E, de Graaf, B, International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague, Lone Wolves. How to Prevent this phenomenon?, p. 2.

³⁶ Cohen, K, Swedish Defence Research Agency, Who will be a lone wolf terrorist? Available at <http://www.foi.se/rapport?rNo=FOI-R--3531--SE>, accessed on 2 June 2015, pp. 11-12.

³⁷ Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 861.

³⁸ Gill, P, Horgan, J, Deckert, P, Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviours of Lone-Actor Terrorists, *J Forensic Sci* March 2014, Vol 59, No. 2, pp. 433-434.

³⁹ Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 867.

of cases, other people, notably family and friends, knew about the individuals intent to engage in terrorism activity. The individuals in question also regularly engaged in observable activities within a wider pressure group, social movement or terrorist organisation.⁴⁰ Another external element furthermore has been observed through the broadcasting of intent, which clearly seems to be the rule rather than the exception. It can occur online or offline through statements, threats, letters, manifestos, videotaped proclamations and it may occur in weeks, days and even hours before an attack.⁴¹ Breivik, for example, e-mailed a self-composed 1518-pages manifest to a number of recipients before his attacks.

Having regard to the higher rate of social isolation and psychological disturbance, a conclusion may be that the individuals that commit these attacks are sensitive to influence from persons and groups with extremist agendas. Indeed, the terrorists acting alone in general are motivated by a combination of personal grievances and broader goals.⁴² The terrorist acting alone does not occur out of a vacuum.⁴³ Consequently, while the terrorist acting alone might not be under a direct command from somebody, he is often a part of a larger community that furnishes him with an extremist agenda legitimating his deeds. The “acting alone” therefore should not be overestimated. Of bigger relevance are instead the changing dynamics and relations between individuals and the community.⁴⁴ Group dynamics do influence even autonomous perpetrators. Conversely, the terrorist acting alone attack may influence other individuals or movements.⁴⁵ Once again taking Breivik as an example, two so-called copycats, in the Czech Republic and in Poland, were influenced and drew lessons from his attacks.⁴⁶

3.2 Radicalisation

The individual is in some way radicalised into an extremist agenda, capable to be a legitimating reason for the violence, before committing the attack. Furthermore, even if the individual would be characterised as self-radicalised, and since the terrorist attack is not motivated out of pure grievance, the purpose of the attack is in some way linked to a broader group-oriented goal.⁴⁷ A survey on

⁴⁰ Gill, P, Horgan, J, Deckert, P, Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviours of Lone-Actor Terrorists, *J Forensic Sci* March 2014, Vol 59, No. 2, pp. 433-434.

⁴¹ Hamm, M, Spaaij, R, Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies, U.S. Department of Justice, p. 9.

⁴² Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 866.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Van Buuren, J, Performative Violence? The Multitude of Lone Wolf Terrorism, *Terrorism: An Electronic Journal and Knowledge Base*, Vol I Issue I, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Spaaij, R, The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 866.

⁴⁶ See Paterson, T, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/breivik-supporter-accused-of-plotting-copycat-attacks-in-czech-republic-8061623.html> and Day, M, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/9691246/Polish-bomb-plotter-said-Breivik-made-mistake.html>, accessed 13 May 2015.

⁴⁷ Cohen, K, Swedish Defence Research Agency, Who will be a lone wolf terrorist? Available at <http://www.foi.se/rapport?rNo=FOI-R--3531--SE>, accessed on 2 June 2015, p. 12.

terrorists acting alone attacks shows that 68 % of the perpetrators had read or consumed literature or propaganda associated with a wider movement. 48 % interacted face-to-face with members of a wider network of activists, and 35 % did so virtually.⁴⁸

For the purpose of this paper, **radicalisation** represents a dynamic process whereby an individual increasingly accepts and supports violent extremism. The reasons behind this process can be ideological, political, religious, social, economic or personal.⁴⁹ Whereas an individual may be pushed into violent extremism even of personal reasons, the terrorist acting alone attack is motivated by broader aims, ideological, political or religious reasons. The radicalisation leading up to an attack does not occur instantly but evolves over time. Such a conclusion corresponds to the fact that a terrorist acting alone attack does not occur impulsively, as was put forward in the previous section of this paper.

It is to be noted that every individual's radicalisation process is more or less unique. That said, there are certain psychological mechanisms of radicalisation that appear to be common for any individual who goes through this dynamic process. The linchpin of terrorism is grievance through the perception of injustice. Next, the grievance is transferred to a group level, where the feeling of victim and perpetrator is present. Thereafter, and if strong enough, this feeling of grievance can evolve into a desire for justice and revenge on the perceived perpetrators. Finally, the individual can find himself feeling an obligation to act. This last stage is possibly what distinguishes a terrorist acting alone from those who "only" have got a violent ideology.⁵⁰ What it is that provokes the individual into committing the attack can be called a "trigger". Examples of triggers may be elections, armed conflicts, royal weddings etc. It might also be the hindering of departure to fight abroad by withholding the passport from an individual. **The Internet** constitutes an essential contributing factor and environment in the radicalisation of terrorists acting alone. Instructions on how to commit the attack can easily be disseminated, and apprehended, online.⁵¹ Social media and internet communities enable terrorist organisations to spread their message.⁵² The Internet becomes the possible cohesive link between these organisations and frustrated, lone individuals. It might be observed that the contemporary society is rather individualistic. Instead of forming an identity through the belonging to, for example, a class or an ideology, the Internet with its loose and transitory contacts forms the basis for many individuals' identities. This platform offers a new sort of belonging encouraging extremism. The terrorists acting alone are not totally alone. They are driven by different agendas potentially offered and shared online. These agendas are rather loose in

⁴⁸ Gill, P, Horgan, J, Deckert, P, Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists, *J Forensic Sci* March 2014, Vol 59, No. 2, p. 434.

⁴⁹ The working definition currently used by the Council for Penological Co-operation (PC-CP).

⁵⁰ Cohen, K, Swedish Defence Research Agency, Who will be a lone wolf terrorist? Available at <http://www.foi.se/rapport?rNo=FOI-R--3531--SE>, accessed on 2 June 2015, pp. 12-13.

⁵¹ Pantucci, R, ISCR, A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists, available at http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015, p. 34.

⁵² CTED, Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells, paragraph 14.

character and changeable.⁵³ The most common terrorist narratives may change for another form of narrative and motivation in the future.

Another environment where radicalisation has sprouted are the **prisons**, which may provide safe havens for terrorists intending to recruit and radicalise new members, or exchange experiences, tactics and, in worst case scenarios, even command deadly attacks outside the prison walls. Conversely, prisons entail the possibility to deradicalise already radicalised individuals.⁵⁴ Although it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of prison radicalisation, prisons do possess certain inherent conditions that make its inmates susceptible to radicalisation, including the need for protection against other prisoners, the search for social bonding, meaning and identity in a harsh environment and a possible perception of the society as unjust.⁵⁵

3.3 Modus operandi of terrorists acting alone and probable challenges for States in this regard

In general, terrorists acting alone make use of **simple and unsophisticated weapon types**. Firearms and knives form the most used weapon types, followed by explosives. Armed hijackings have also been a frequent type of attack of the terrorist acting alone.⁵⁶ The aforementioned study of jihadist terrorism, which concluded a rise of terrorist acting alone attacks, has observed a corresponding pattern concerning the weapon types. During the years 2001-2007, merely 7.3 % of the plots, regardless of what sort of terrorist attack conducted, involved firearms or knives. In 2008-2013 that figure had increased to 33 %. The study explains this trend by the increase of single-actor plots.⁵⁷

Concerning the object of the attack, the terrorist acting alone appears to prefer **soft targets** which are simple and vulnerable and without security arrangements. The principal targets are civilians,⁵⁸ who are hard to protect. The study on jihadism found that 70 % of the single actor plots were

⁵³ Van Buuren, J, Performative Violence? The Multitude of Lone Wolf Terrorism, *Terrorism: An Electronic Journal and Knowledge Base*, Vol I Issue I, pp. 14-16.

⁵⁴ GCTF, Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders, p.1.

⁵⁵ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), *Prisons and Terrorism. Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, pp. 27 and 55.

⁵⁶ Nesser, P., Stenersen, A., *The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, North America, 8 Dec. 2014. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/388>, accessed 5 May 2015.

⁵⁷ Nesser, P., Stenersen, A., *The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, North America, 8 Dec. 2014. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/388>, accessed 5 May 2015.

⁵⁸ Spaaij, R, *The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (9), 854-870, p. 865.

launched while the equivalent figure for group plots was only 19 %.⁵⁹ However, since the terrorists acting alone, sole individuals or a smaller group, do not have a support for the actual operation, they must have certain skills and qualifications. These might not match the individuals' ambitions. In any case, and since it is rare that the terrorist acting alone commits the criminal act impulsively (above 2.1), every perpetrator would have to pass through a more or less meticulous preparation and planning phase to be ready for the attack.⁶⁰

The **terrorist acting alone strategy implies several challenges for States**. A lack of command and communication renders the terrorist acting alone attack difficult to predict. Furthermore, even if the attack is planned and executed by a small group, thus still constituting terrorists acting alone, the terrorists can potentially be connected in every-day life prior to the attack. This kind of group of individuals can potentially escape the attention of the state in a similar way as one sole individual. Amedy Coulibaly, for example, was probably helped by his wife. The Kouachi-brothers are of course also worth mentioning in this connection. In general one can state that the greater the number of participants in an attack, the greater the opportunity for the State to intercept it.⁶¹ Moreover, the different backgrounds and motivations of terrorists acting alone make them precarious to detection or profiling.⁶² The fact that many terrorists acting alone suffer from social isolation does not render the disclosure easier to make. Nevertheless, the terrorists acting alone do in some way radicalise and in many cases they communicate their extreme views or intent to others, thereby facilitating detection. At this stage, the challenge is to make the difference between individuals posing an actual threat and those just expressing radical beliefs or issuing hollow threats. Having regard to the size of the Internet as well as the numbers of individuals expressing extremist beliefs, effective monitoring demands a lot of resources.⁶³ In any case, and since the Internet constitutes the common playground for radicalisation and expression, counter-measures relying on human sources for intelligence become less effective.⁶⁴

The logistical simplicity of the terrorist acting alone attack does not demand extraordinary material, which cannot be found on the market of everyday retail.⁶⁵ In addition, open societies with numerous soft targets makes the attack easier to carry out.⁶⁶ These conditions impede the police and judicial

⁵⁹ Nesser, P., Stenersen, A., *The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*, Perspectives on Terrorism, North America, 8 Dec. 2014. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/388>, accessed 5 May 2015.

⁶⁰ CTED, *Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells*, paragraph 22.

⁶¹ CTED, *Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells*, paragraph 13.

⁶² Kaati, L, Svensson, P, *Analysis of Competing Hypothesis for Investigating Lone Wolf Terrorists*, 2011 European Intelligence and Security Information Conference, p. 296.

⁶³ CTED, *Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells*, paragraph 26.

⁶⁴ CTED, *Bringing Terrorists to Justice – Challenges in the Prosecution of Terrorists Acting Alone or in Small Cells*, paragraph 13.

⁶⁵ Hastings, J V., *Amateurism: The new Terrorist Strategy*, RSIS Commentary No. 018 – 26 January 2015.

⁶⁶ Michael, G, *Counterinsurgency and Lone Wolf Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:1, pp. 45-57, p. 49.

authorities who experience difficulties and complications restricting the supply of possible weapons and protecting every civilian.

As will be presented in the next section, certain terrorist organisations have encouraged terrorist acting alone attacks and taken responsibility for these as well. These organisations profit from these attacks, giving the impression that their organisations are everywhere, while the inverse may be stated about the terrorists acting alone, who often desire to profit from the terrorist organisations' reputation. By not contacting the terrorist organisation, whose communication channels normally are under intensive surveillance, the individuals planning an attack escape disclosure. In addition, these individuals and the terrorist organisations do not have to cause a big damage in terms of human lives or injuries since the state and the society often respond with great fear, regardless of the actual, physical damage. The terrorist acting alone attack implies thus an overall problematic and dangerous threat to incurred states.⁶⁷

4. Recent developments concerning terrorists acting alone

4.1 Terrorist organisations' calls for individual attacks

Both anarchist and white supremacy movements have called upon individuals to conduct attacks on their own. Such calls have recently been echoed by jihadist movements. These calls might enhance the threat posed by terrorists acting alone and trigger their attacks.

Al-Qaida has frequently made use of the terrorist acting alone tactic in recent years. This change of tactic is probably provoked by the counter measures from State authorities around the world. For a long time Al-Qaida has been under pressure, including military pressure preventing the organisation from receiving foreign terrorist fighters, leaving the organisation with limited capacity to direct operations.⁶⁸

Already in the end of the 1990s, Al-Qaeda's strategic thinker Abu Masub al-Suri presented a military theory where he focused on leaderless resistance and "individual jihad".⁶⁹ In 2003, the article *Sadra al Jihad* ("Echoes of Jihad") was uploaded on relevant internet fora. It encouraged Osama bin Laden-

⁶⁷ Hastings, J V., *Amateurism: The new Terrorist Strategy*, RSIS Commentary No. 018 – 26 January 2015.

⁶⁸ Center for Terroranalyse (CTA), *The threat from solo terrorism and lone wolf terrorism*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Nesser, P, *Research Note: Single Actor Terrorism: Scope, Characteristics and Explanations*, Perspectives on Terrorism, North America, 6 Dec. 2012. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/231>, accessed 18 May 2015.

sympathisers to take action instead of waiting for instructions.⁷⁰ Later on, the perhaps most influential source has been the online magazine Inspire, created by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and one of its protagonists, Anwar al-Awlaki. In every number of the magazine there is a part that is called “Open Source Jihad”, intended to give the necessary practical instructions and tools to the followers without receiving hands-on training. A well-known example is the article “How to Make a Bomb in Your Mom’s Kitchen.”⁷¹

Several perpetrators have been inspired and emboldened by al-Awlaki and the “Inspire” magazine. For example Rashonara Choudhry, who attempted to kill Stephen Timms, mentioned above, was inspired and motivated by videos of al-Awlaki. “Inspire” has afterwards highlighted Choudhry’s attack as a part of a globalized insurgency and “borderless idea” promoted by Al-Qaeda.⁷² Choudhry as an individual was motivated and received a legitimating cause from Al-Qaeda while taking advantage of the terrorist organisation’s reputation, whereas Al-Qaeda gave the appearance of being omnipresent. In general, Al-Qaeda’s and its affiliates’ focus on so-called individual jihad appears to have had an impact on the terrorist acting alone phenomena. Coinciding with this change of tactics from the organisation, there has been a marked increase in terrorist acting alone attacks from around 2008 and onwards.⁷³

The so-called Islamic State (ISIL) does not have the same focus on the West as Al-Qaeda. The conflict in Syria and Iraq instead seems to mainly concern sectarian conflicts. Such an assertion could though be rebutted considering the military involvement of several Western countries in the conflict.⁷⁴ Comparing Al-Qaeda’s “Inspire” with the equivalent of ISIL, “Dabiq”, the latter gives the impression of being more focused on the self-proclaimed caliphate and its components, not instigation of terrorism in the West.

However, in later issues of Dabiq, the focus appears to partly have changed. So, in the eighth issue of “Dabiq” a highly praised warrior of the ISIL calls upon the western supporters: “I call them to follow the method of the brothers who executed operations in Europe. Weapons are easy to acquire in those countries. Rely upon Allah (‘azza wa jall). I also say to them, do not look for specific targets. Kill anybody. All the kuffar over there are targets. Don’t tire yourself and look for difficult targets. Kill whoever is over there from the kuffar.” In October 2014, an ISIL spokesman made a similar

⁷⁰ Weimann, G, Lone Wolves in Cyberspace, *Journal of Terrorism Research*, North America, 3, sep. 2012, available at <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/405/431>, accessed 18 May 2015.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Pantucci, R, ISCR, A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists, available at http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015, p. 7.

⁷³ Nesser, P, Research Note: Single Actor Terrorism: Scope, Characteristics and Explanations, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, North America, 6 Dec. 2012. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/231>, accessed 18 May 2015.

⁷⁴ Byman, D, Shapiro, J, Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, *Brooking policy paper*, Number 34, November 2014, p. 17.

call for individuals to carry out terror attacks against, among others, France.⁷⁵ An effect of these calls can probably be found in Amedy Coulibaly, who was radicalised and motivated to perform his attacks without contact with the central organisation of ISIL. Furthermore, ISIL has claimed that it has got sleeper cells ready to strike in Rome awaiting its orders.⁷⁶

As Al-Qaeda adapted itself to the pressure and counter-measures of State authorities, ISIL seemingly walks the same way. Time will tell how successful the European States will be in choking the flow of nationals leaving to become foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq. In any case it should not come as a surprise if ISIL continues and intensifies its calls on supporters in European countries to conduct terrorist attacks on their own. Furthermore, although the threat could be entirely domestic steaming from individuals who have not left the territory of the State, also returning foreign terrorist fighters, from e.g. Syria and Iraq, may pose a serious problem to the state authorities.

4.2 Terrorists acting alone in relation to foreign terrorist fighters

The choice has existed, and for some still exists, to travel abroad to fight as a foreign terrorist fighter. Large numbers of European citizens and foreign nationals permanently residing in Europe have travelled to, in particular, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq in recent years. In a study based on cases involving jihadists from 1990-2010, Hegghammer has estimated that the choice to fight for a jihadist organisation in a conflict zone, for instance in Afghanistan, has been at least three times more common than the choice to perpetrate a terrorist attack domestically in the West.⁷⁷ This predominance can possibly be explained by religious interpretations, it is in general more acceptable to fight in an armed conflict than directing an attack against the civil society.⁷⁸ Other reasons for foreign terrorist fighting, such as lack of knowledge and training in terrorist attacks, are probably not the main reasons why a European citizen chooses to act on foreign territory. As was put forward above, instructions and motivation is easily and widely accessible online.

It is yet a complicated task to evaluate the rationale of a foreign terrorist fighter. Firstly, the motivation varies greatly. Some are fully-radicalised extremists. Others want to defend a cause in an armed conflict. There are also the confused individuals who search for a meaning in their life and want to prove themselves capable.⁷⁹ Secondly, the foreign terrorist fighters appear to come from all

⁷⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/23/islamic-state-followers-urged-to-launch-attacks-against-australians>

⁷⁶ Friedland, E, The Clarion Project, Does ISIS operate in the U.S. and Europe? Available at: <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/islamic-state-%E2%80%93-organization-west>, accessed 18 May 2015.

⁷⁷ Hegghammer, Should I stay or Should I go? American Political Science Review, vol 107, issue 1, February 2013, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Hegghammer, Should I stay or Should I go? American Political Science Review, vol 107, issue 1, February 2013, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Speech by Barrett, R, Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Threat at Home and Abroad, Chatham House, 10 April 2014, available at http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140410ForeignFightersSyriaTranscript.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015.

segments of society.⁸⁰ The individual can be radicalised before departure or during the time in the conflict zone. In some cases the individuals never have an extremist agenda but, instead, once arrived, feel trapped in a situation and group which was not envisaged.⁸¹ Not every returning foreign fighter thus constitutes a threat. Consequently, the foreign terrorist fighter hardly fits into the radicalisation model that was put forward above, where going to fight in a conflict abroad, instead of carrying out a terrorist attack at home, otherwise would have constituted the action necessitated by the feeling of an obligation to act.

There are, nevertheless, several steps that can be identified before a foreign terrorist fighter potentially return to commit a domestic terror attack. Similar to the perpetrator who has not been abroad, the former foreign fighter's terrorist acting alone attack is not sudden or impulsive. First, an individual becomes motivated to fight and decides to travel to the conflict zone. Thereafter, the travel takes place. Subsequently, during the conflict, the foreign terrorist fighter possibly gains skills and experience, connects with a global extremist network and adopts more extreme views. Next, the foreign terrorist fighter returns home. Lastly, there is a risk that the individual plot and commit an attack.⁸²

The foreign terrorist fighter experience is an important aspect to take into account when assessing the risk of a domestic terrorist attack. The experience indeed can indoctrinate the individual, as well as provide him or her with operational knowledge and training, into terrorist activities.⁸³ Hegghammer's study shows that one in nine of the foreign terrorist fighters return to commit domestic terrorist attacks.⁸⁴ The same study also reveals that the terrorist attacks involving a foreign terrorist fighter veteran have got a higher lethality.⁸⁵ In addition, it seems as attacks involving veterans or individuals who have received training abroad show a higher degree of complexity than other attacks.⁸⁶ Furthermore, besides committing an attack on their own initiatives, the foreign terrorist fighters can also be enlisted to commit a terrorist attack domestically.⁸⁷ The foreign

⁸⁰ Global Counterterrorism Forum, The Hague – Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF phenomenon, p. 2.

⁸¹ See for instance about the randomness of foreign fighter's joining of a group in the conflict in Syria, speech by Maher, S, Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Threat at Home and Abroad, Chatham House, 10 April 2014, available at http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140410ForeignFightersSyriaTranscript.pdf, accessed 2 June 2015.

⁸² Byman, D, Shapiro, J, Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Brookings policy paper, Number 34, November 2014, pp. 5-7.

⁸³ Global Counterterrorism Forum, The Hague – Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF phenomenon, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Hegghammer, Should I stay or Should I go? American Political Science Review, vol 107, issue 1, February 2013, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Hegghammer, Should I stay or Should I go? American Political Science Review, vol 107, issue 1, February 2013, p. 11.

⁸⁶ Van Dongen, T, The lengths terrorists go> perpetrator characteristics and the complexity of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe, 2004-2011, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 2014, Vol. 6, No. 1, 58-80, pp. 75-76.

⁸⁷ Hegghammer, Should I stay or Should I go? American Political Science Review, vol 107, issue 1, February 2013, p. 10.

nationals participating in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq, which are of a number without parallel in recent times, constitute a worryingly great recruitment pool for the terrorist organisations present there, notably ISIL and Al-Qaeda.⁸⁸

Considering the factors above, which render the returning foreign terrorist fighters a considerable threat to the State, there are also mitigating factors to take into account. One of these factors is the training and experience, which probably does not match the training that would be needed for a terrorist attack in the member States or the weapons at disposal. Moreover, a lot of the foreign terrorist fighters die in battle or stay in the foreign country in which they are fighting.⁸⁹ In addition, taking the previous conflict in Iraq as an example, no successful terrorist attack has been carried out by a foreign terrorist fighter with experience from that war, thus proving that the national intelligence authorities appear to be prepared for this kind of threat.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, the Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting has shown that attacks are possible, and others have indeed tried.⁹¹ The shift of object of ISIL towards targeting western countries, together with the intervention of, among others, European countries in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, presumably exposes the member States of the Council of Europe to a serious risk of such attacks being carried out in Europe.

5. Recommendations to CODEXTER

The Sub-Group on Terrorists Acting Alone would like to make the following recommendations to CODEXTER:

- To continue to follow closely the subject of “terrorists acting alone”, not least in the context of the current threats to the security of member States posed by “foreign terrorist fighters”.
- In accordance with “The Council of Europe Action Plan to combat extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism (2015 – 2017)”, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 19 May 2015, to propose to the Committee of Ministers the establishment of an ad-hoc committee to draft a “Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Terrorists Acting Alone” providing guidelines to member States on how to efficiently prevent and suppress this particular form of terrorism.
- The Sub-Group considers it important that CODEXTER takes a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon of “terrorists acting alone”, considering it one of a number of new *modus*

⁸⁸ Foreign Fighters under International Law, Geneva Academy, Academy Briefing no. 7, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Byman, D, Shapiro, J, Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Brookings policy paper, Number 34, November 2014, pp. 20-21.

⁹⁰ Van Dongen, Foreign Fighters in Syria: a terrorist threat to Europe, available at <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/foreign-fighters-syria-terrorist-threat-europe>, accessed 19 May 2015.

⁹¹ For a list of violent plots in Europe involving Syria returnees, see Andrew Zammit, “List of alleged violent plots in Europe involving Syria returnees,” *The Murphy Raid* (blog), June 29, 2014, <http://andrewzammit.org/2014/06/29/list-of-alleged-violent-plots-in-europe-involving-syria-returnees/>.

operandi adopted by current terrorist groups and individual terrorists. The aforementioned Recommendation could therefore in our view, *inter alia*, cover such areas as “prevention of radicalisation leading to terrorism”, “managing the threat posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters” and “best practices with regard to the early identification of potential terrorists acting alone”. Other relevant areas may, of course, be identified by CODEXTER during its deliberations.
