Jihadist Lone Actors; a New Generation of Postmodern Terrorism: A Challenge for De-radicalization in the Aftermath of the Post COVID-19 and Russian-Ukrainian War

by Ilas Touazi

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Abstract: While the entire international community and academic circles are focused on far-right terrorism and its security implications especially in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it is evident that jihadist terrorism has taken a significant turn since the COVID19 pandemic with the intensification of the religious spectrum and online propaganda. It is in this perspective that the spread of a new generation of post-modern lone-actor jihadist terrorism should be placed, posing challenges for counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism in the international context of the post-COVID-19 and Russian-Ukrainian war. Moreover, the Islamic State has mobilized foreign terrorist fighters on the ground in support of both sides, by calling for the intensification of terrorist activities in the West through lone wolf attacks. Hence the need to intensify counter-terrorism cooperation with new de-radicalization approaches and Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT).

The summer of 2022 has been particularly characterized by the trial of "Salah Abdeslam", who was involved in Paris attacks in November 13, 2015, considered a "lone jihadist actor" operating in connection with the "Islamic State" cell (Speckhard, March 21, 2016). Especially since this trial perfectly demonstrates how it is instrumental-zed as political theatre and a propaganda platform to expose terrorists' views of injustice ; to present themselves as unjustly treated martyrs, to discredit the judicial system and to challenge the legitimacy of Western values (Choblet, 25 Mar 2022). From elsewhere, this strategy of victimization is recurrently adopted by "jihadist lone wolves", as a modus operandi in informational warfare (HARBULOT, May 25, 2021), exploiting socio-psychiatric realities and emotional charges (Grinshpun, October 18, 2019), serving as a justification in the discursive construction to the violent actions that characterize the corpus of radicalized jihadist profiles (Renaut, October 17, 2019).

Similarly, the current geostrategic situation, namely the COVID-19 pandemic which jihadists see as signs of apocalyptic divine punishment, and then the crisis in Ukraine which provides them with a sanctuary to regroup and expand into transnational networks, and then organize attacks against "crusader" targets (Extremism, May 25, 2022), with the spread of a new wave of extremists, true believers and "lone terrorist actors" (Illmer, 2022). Because there is no clear and predictable pathway to the radicalization process, especially since the profiles of terrorists are diverse and their modus operandi seem to change rapidly, and because the threat of "lone actor terrorism" is becoming increasingly diffuse, the ability of the counter-terrorism system to act and respond effectively is severely limited (Kristof Verfailie, 2019), hence the reorientation of the prevention of violent extremism policies (C/PVE).

This policy paper addresses the prevention of radicalization of a new generation of lone actor's terrorism (LAT) in the current international post-COVID-19 system and the Russo-Ukrainian war, arguing the need to implement policies to prevent and counter violent

extremism (C/PVE) based on non-kinetic de-radicalization programs and "whole-of-society" approaches (Nina, 2020), which directly address the essential conditions that foster radicalization within the framework of a comprehensive understanding of the multi-causal model and conductive contexts; centered on components that rely heavily on early warning, building resilience, and a permanent concern for horizontal and vertical cooperation (Pawels, November, 2019).

There is an intense debate in the field of prevention policies against radicalization and violent extremism, notably the opposition between "Gilles Kepel" and "Olivier Roy" on the importance of the ideological variable of Islamism on radicalization, and on the sociological and psychological profile of the lone jihadist actors of a "third generation terrorism" that acts autonomously and functions in a reticular manner of proximity within the "near enemy", i.e. Europe (Boily, December, 2019). Alex P. Schmid suggests: "to examine radicalization not only at the individual micro-level, but also at the meso-level of the group and society, as well as structural factors related to the state and the international system (macro-level)." (Schmid, 2020)

Given the current international context, the analytical thread will be guided mainly by the following overriding assumptions; the vulnerabilities of the COVID-19 health crisis due to confinement, psychological effects on mental health, and social disruption have provided fertile ground for extremist propaganda, with the emergence of a new type of radicalization perpetrated by "lone jihadist wolves" (Peterson, 2020). Meanwhile, the Russian-Ukrainian war serves to mobilize the operational guerrilla of the ISIS global jihad through "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTFs) (Teun van Dongen, May 4, 2022), with a potential influence on the spread of new wave lone terrorist activities as well as on the prevention and countering terrorism (Käsehage, 2020). Evidence suggests that preventing violent extremism architectures must integrate risk assessment radicalization approach under the "trigger factor model" (AFeddes, March 2021), including the geopolitical determinants of international

relations, as well as cultural and civilizational trends that should be strongly included in the research apparatus of "Counter Lone Actor Terrorism" (C LAT) (Pavlićević, 2021).

Scientific Methodology

This policy analysis paper examines the emergence of the phenomenon of lone actor terrorism in the light of the post COVID-19 and Ukraine war with its implications for counter-radicalization, prevention policies by relying on "Open Source Information" (OSIF) methodology with online internet searches of statistics and data, articles, studies and reports (Chipeta, 2022). In addition, to a "systematic search" of the existing literature on the topic of lone actor radicalization and the "meta-analysis method" with the re-exploitation of existing data in order to map out an understanding of trends of lone terrorist radicalization and then to develop recommendations based on best practices.

Postmodern terrorism: lone actor's radicalization, an unstoppable and undetectable Pathology

One of the pathological phenomena of the post-modern global world is undoubtedly "hyper-terrorism" or "mass terrorism" perpetrated by "lone actors". (Védrine, 2004) Especially since the evolution of home-grown terrorism to the individual level is essentially characterized by the fact that they act alone, in an idiosyncratic way and difficult to prevent. This, therefore, renders counterterrorism architectures obsolete and obscures their effectiveness and proactivity (Gill, Lone-Actor Terrorists : A behavioural analysis, 2015), as the main nature of the problem of near-unstoppable jihadist terrorism and Islamism, in which "lone terrorist actors" will continue to evolve to thwart efforts to thwart their attack planning (Gurski, August 29, 2017).

Contending understanding of the radicalization process: "Lone actors" versus "group-based terrorists"

The interchangeable use of the terminology "lone actors" and "lone terrorists" emphasizes the notion that these individuals are acting out of ideological and religious motives using terrorist tactics (Marieke Liem, 2018). It is therefore important to note that the term "lone wolf" is often misused to provide easy explanations for often more complex terrorist attacks (Gill, 2015). In particular, from the perspective of jihadism, this includes individuals who have "self-radicalized", or radicalized through a larger organization, and inspired by a terrorist ideology (Marieke Liem, European Lone Actor Terrorists Versus "Common" Homicide Offenders: An Empirical Analysis, 2018). Thus, typologies of "lone Islamic terrorists" comprise various categories; the "loner" who has had no real contact with other extremists, conversely the "Lone Wolf", has some level of contact with terrorist organization. "The Lone Wolf Pack" constitutes a small group of self-radicalized individuals, while "Lone Attackers" have formal command and control within a wider terrorist organization but engage in their attacks alone under the umbrella of "one man terror cell" (Raffaello, March 2011). Especially since this connectivity between "lone actors" and "terrorist groups" is a war strategy adopted by Jihadist organizations such as "Al-Qaeda" (AQ), then later the "Islamic State" (ISIS) as an entrepreneurial arena where anyone can take part, and have called for their supporters to conduct "lone attacks" without any official direction or support (Sarah Knighta, 2022). In doing so, a degree of connectivity with a larger organization does not disqualify a case of "lone actor" such as; a "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" may have been part of a terrorist organization, but return alone and plan an attack (Zuijdewijn, 2015) under the label of "sudden jihad syndrome" and "freelance terrorism" (Raffaello, A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists, March 2011). Thereby, these different types of extremists and their mechanisms of interaction with terrorist networks, contradicts the popular lone-wolf theory (Agnes, 2018).

Lone actor terrorism, a variable geometry matrix: a nexus of radicalization factors

The factors of radicalization process includes three main levels; micro-level (individual life experiences and perceptions), meso-level (the role of group dynamics and the social surroundings of individuals), and macro-level (the social, political and cultural environment) (Stiene Ravn, 2019). Meanwhile, radicalization process is a context-bound phenomenon par *excellence* with different causal factors, socio-economic backgrounds and individual's personal circumstances (Fernando, May 15, 2008) as the result of an interaction between three components: capability, opportunity, and motivation (The COM-B behaviour model) (Susan Michie, September 2, 2019).

Moreover, the motivations affecting the decision of the "lone wolf" to perpetrate an attack are wide and varied. In this way, lone Islamist terrorists included a wider range of factors classified into three groups; ideological, psychopathological, and other personal circumstances mixed with instrumental and expressive motivations (Ganor, April 2021). Therefore, there are multiple pathways to lone-wolf terrorists that are determined by general grievances ("push" factors), more specific "pull" factors which attract individuals to terrorism (Sarah Knighta, Comparing the Different Behavioral Outcomes of Extremism: A Comparison of Violent and Non-Violent Extremists, Acting Alone or as Part of a Group, 2022). This is also true for "lone jihadists", deprivation and grievances; the quest for significance under the motto "from zero to hero" is the ultimate driver for radicalization (Moccia, 2019), which described the most recent groups of "foreign terrorist fighters" who have been active in Europe have had direct contact with persons involved in armed actions in conflict zones, the "figureheads" are presented as role models (Fernando, Radicalization Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism, May 15, 2008), espoused by an Islamic supremacist ideology, which seeks to impose a global caliphate, and see themselves as the vanguard in the fight against non-believers (Raffaello, A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist

Terrorists, March 2011). However, jihadists follows a pattern (The ABC model: Account - Better world - Change, "from A to B") which consists first of all, in offering an account and a world view of the existing order, in which Muslims are generally victims of the international system, and then propose a model of the desired future of the Islamic society, using violence, fear and hate to achieve radical change (Sedgwick, December 2012).

In this regard, counterterrorism practitioners have used tools for identifying, analysing, and preventing lone-actor violent extremism based on the "Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol" (TRAP-18) approach, which is a structured professional judgment tool used by law enforcement to structure and manage data about individuals, that poses a threat in terms of terrorist activities, based on "proximal" (alarming behaviours) and "distal" (individual psychological factors) indicators. In addition, CT policies are also based on "Violent Extremist Risk Assessment" (VERA-2), with cooperative management, but this has not prevented the emergence of lone actor terrorism (RAN, 2021).

Radicalization in the age of Internet propaganda: a new generation of high-tech lone jihadists

The evolution of technological innovations, the Internet now constitutes a particularly relevant tool used for discussion, mobilization and recruitment. Terrorist propaganda seeks to de-humanize the targets of violence of "the enemy" as constant features of the indoctrination process undertaken for the reinforcement of the bonds between the radicalizing individual and the group (Fernando, Radicalization Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism, May15, 2008). In the case of Islamism, the Web has allowed the dissemination of apocalyptic literature with a generational effect. Moreover, the technological revolution has led to the emergence of a new category of terrorist actors as well as the change in the nature of jihadism by the passage from second to third generation terrorism, thus disrupting the radicalization process. Indeed, this has contributed to the consolidation of two movements, on the one hand,

that of individualization with the emergence of "solitary jihadist actors" and, on the other, that of the constitution of an "imaginary religious community", seeking to recreate a "virtual Ummah" (Boily, Le débat entre Gilles Kepel et Olivier Roy. Anatomie d'un désaccord, December 2019). Simultaneously, Internet has changed the modus operandi of terrorist lone wolves, facilitating the radicalization mechanism as part of efficient communication tool strategy of "electronic jihad" (Tomáš Zeman, December 2017). The cumulative effect of all these various technological innovations is the spread of a new generation of "tech savvy jihadi millennials". Thus, "individual terrorism" and "selfie jihad" has become a reality exploiting the full potential of the digital revolution, social media and encryption, in which "lone actors" have much greater capability to create and broadcast material, while extremist groups can contact and interact with potential recruits with much greater ease (Burke, November/December 2016).

This is why, for example, counter lone actor terrorism (CLAT) in Germany, under the project Good Gaming - Well Played Democracy combines a digital street approach with the analysis of video game subcultures from the perspective of preventing and combating violent extremism (RAN, Événement thématique transversal du RAN - Acteurs isolés, bilan conjoint des développements récents et mise en commun des connaissances, 2021). Also, the "Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalization" (MOTRA) project is a network exchanging available and evolving research insights on processes of radicalization and about the phenomenon of lone actors (Network, 2020). Simultaneously, in France the law n° 2022-1159 of August 16, 2022, concerning the prevention of "terrorist content online", has established an injunction procedure for the removal of terrorist content on the Internet within the hour, with the objective of preventing radicalization and terrorist propaganda carried out by groups or individuals via platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube (Landot, 2022).

Lone Actor Jihadism Terrorism: A cross impact node between COVID-19 and the

Russian-Ukrainian war

The COVID-19 health crisis and then the conflict in Ukraine is a fertile ground for the spread of jihadist radicalization whether at the level of groups or lone actors, namely by the powerful symbolism that the elimination of "Ayman al-Zawahiri" represents on the intellectual foundation of the international agenda of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and on the future of jihadist governance in terms of terrorist attacks carried out by "lone terrorist actors" (Zelin, August 2, 2022).

Global jihadism post caliphate collapse: "ISIS lone wolves"; the new soldiers of Allah without borders

ISIS's strategy is to operate in enemy territory by directly sending fighters to surreptitiously infiltrate Europe. At the same time, the mobilization by "soldiers of the caliphate" and "lone actors" franchise under the supervision of the "security detachment of Islamic State soldiers", (Europol, May 17, 2019) in addition to the "virtual planning model" of terrorist attacks, (Clarke, December 11, 2018) this reflects the radicalization process of "holy warriors" engaged in jihadist groups mainly dominated by the "collective ego" and oriented in terms of triangular models: jama`a (group), tanzim (organization) or haraka (movement) (Nesser, January 2012). It is evident that the Islamic State has been defeated territorially since 2019, but still poses a major threat because its ideology has not evaporated with individuals and sympathizers who are inspired by its jihad capable of directing solo attacks. (Vohra, April 26, 2022) Moreover, the loss of the physical caliphate is a viable propaganda tool for mobilizing and recruiting new members for recapture, especially since the global jihadist movement is composed of networks, cells, proxies and individuals who are welded together by a common narrative about the ideal of the "Ummah" threatened by the West, the enemy of God and Muslims (Clarke, The Terrorist Diaspora: After the Fall of the

Caliphate, August 11, 2017). As a result, a new Islamic extremist landscape is emerging, it

rely more on "individual terrorism" by actors acting on behalf of the group by their own

initiative hence a "post-caliphate" generation of jihadist (Burke, The Age of Selfie Jihad:

How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism, November/December 2016),

including "true lone individual" and "solo-cell system" in combination with martyrdom as a

new form of modern warfare (Nesser, Individual Jihadist Operations in Europe: Patterns and

Challenges, January 2012).

COVID-19 and mental health: A domino effect on the radicalization of lone actors

Salafi-jihadist has used conspiracy theories considering the corona virus pandemic as

"Allah's Invisible Warriors", presenting it as a "divine punishment" to apostates, and

unbeliever's western countries (Botobekov, 2021). At the same time, they have called for

intensified military actions as a "religious duty" to liberate Muslims, and to show no mercy to

"infidels" in their moment of pandemic crisis (Group, March 31, 2020). Terrorists have also

exploited the socio-economic grievances associated with the pandemic and the restrictions

that have led people around the world to spend more increasing time online, stepping up their

efforts to spread propaganda, recruit and radicalize via virtual platforms (including gaming

platforms) (CTED, 2021). Furthermore, the context of the sanitary crisis under COVID-19

has visibly shaped terrorist narratives; and fuels directly the factors of violence extremism

especially social isolation and more time spent online which increased the risk of

radicalization. As such, the recent attacks in Europe claimed by ISIL have been carried out

primarily by "lone actor terrorism" with "mental health" problems (Council U. N., July15,

2022). Thus, in the EU, the primary perpetrators of terrorist attacks in 2021 were linked to

jihadism; from 388 suspects arrested for terrorism-related offences, 2/3rds were linked to

Islamism, additionally Jihadist terrorist attacks and arrests in France, Spain and Germany

were carried out by individuals acting alone (Europol, 2022).This trend still presents security

threats repercussions and a significant gap for early detection by law enforcement and

intelligence agencies to prevent recruitment and radicalization into violent extremism leading to terrorist actions.

Therefore, Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) put "mental health" at the centre of its policies, with a multi-agency cooperation networks engagement, as the case of the CT "Vulnerability Support Hubs" (VSHs) in the United Kingdom (UK) under partnership services between National Health Service (NHS) and Policing, commissioned by Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters (CTPHQ) (Network, Conclusions Paper, 2020). These mechanisms have experienced enormous difficulties during the health crisis of the coronavirus, thus impacting CLAT policies.

Ukraine conflict: new hub for transnational "Foreign Terrorist Fighters"

The war in Ukraine differs from jihadist conflicts, but it raises some questions when considering the role of any future foreign fighters, which is ground zero for a recurrence of the Afghan experience (Guendouzi, 2022). However, Russian government has mobilized 16,000 foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa—principally from Syria and Libya (Rassler, June 2022), and over 70,000 Muslim volunteer fighters and Chechen mujahedeen's. Henceforth, Ukraine war theatre offers to the Caucasian radical and extremist groups the perfect flashpoint for a major geo-political disturbance under the global jihad (Rasheed, 2022), using religious justifications were fighting "for the Koran, for God" and to save both Russia and Islam from "filth" spread by NATO (Crews, 2022).

The Ukraine conflict might become international sanctuary for foreign fighters, private military companies, Salafi jihadists, these groups might exploit the current situation and begin new waves of attacks or recruit young generations by manipulating videos and events from Ukraine (Bifolchi, 2022). Indeed, the presence of foreign fighters, jihadists and "mercenaries" could threaten European security, as these fighters could exploit Ukrainian soil as a "bridge" or logistical hub to conduct terrorist activities and future attacks (Bifolchi, Ukraine conflict, foreign fighters and European security, 2022). Especially since, the Islamic

State called on its supporters to resume attacks in Europe through "lone terrorist actors", while the West is focused on Russia's Ukraine invasion taking advantage of the "crusaders fighting each other" (Vohra, ISIS Can't Even Direct Lone-Wolf Attacks Anymore, 2022). In addition, the pro-al Qaeda magazine, "Wolves of Manhattan", called in April for Western Muslims and jihadists to take advantage of Ukraine's relatively open borders and its policy of welcoming foreign fighters to obtain weapons and training, and then organize attacks when they return to their country of origin (Extremism, Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and the War in Ukraine, 2022). Given the myriad of implications of non-state actors in the conflict zones, Western governments should therefore take preventive policies to counter their citizens from joining either of the warring parties in Ukraine (Center, April 2022).

Conclusions: Implications and Policy Recommendations

The Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT), under the current volatile international situation are at the security crossroads, with an unstoppable, undetectable and invisible terrorism lead by solitary actors of changing nature and characterized by profiles that are not unique, but using "low cost" means with global magnitude (Rubin, 2017), thus putting in odds the hypo of counter-terrorism approaches and the myopia of policies to prevent violent extremism (Tricia Bacon, 2022). While the new US national security strategy for counter-terrorism of June 2021 moves away from the historical focus on international terrorism to internal extremism, it assesses that "Domestic Violent Extremists" (DVEs) threat have often been lone actors or small groups of informally aligned individuals (Council, June 2021). Ironically, operationally, although the attacks may have been planned or perpetrated by a single individual, the majorities of these 'lone actors' were embedded in transnational groups and networks and therefore had an international character (RAN, Événement thématique transversal du RAN - Acteurs isolés, bilan conjoint des développements récents et mise en commun des connaissances, 2021). In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis was the focal point that accelerated the radicalization process of lone actor's terrorism, especially through

the role of the Internet and propaganda, which most often involves influential interactions, both with tactical assistance and communication networking through social media (Pauwels, Acteurs Isolés: Un Défi Pour La Prévention Et La Lutte Contre L'extrémisme Violent, 2021).

Although the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has not yet been resolved, it is essential that governments and policymakers begin to prepare for the fallout and related challenges resulting from the return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin. In parallel, the contrast of the double standards that characterize the EU's approach to refugees with the warm welcome given to Ukrainians, which will not extend to all asylum seekers, illustrates the deeply politicized - and often discriminatory - nature of refugee protection and its consequences for the future of jihadism (Vallianatou, 2022), which exploits this tale to proliferate by recruiting lone wolves primarily from "Muslim diasporas", second or third generation immigrants and minorities who suffer exclusion (Käsehage, Prevention of Radicalization in Western Muslim Diasporas, 2020). Given this situation, on September 13, 2022, the Islamic State (IS) published via its official media, "al-Furqan Foundation", an audio statement by the official spokesman "Abu Umar al-Muhajir", commenting on the world events of geopolitics in the context of the current Russian-Ukrainian war and how the world is divided between the capitalist and communist camps, stating that the adversaries are divided "between the West and the East and they are fighting each other". Thus, the Islamic State and its supporters should use these events to their advantage by urging the "Muslim Ummah" to rally behind IS and its fighters to carry out group or individual lone wolf attacks in the West and continue the fight against the United States (Garofalo, 2022).

Thus, *Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT)* should be based on the following main pillars:

1) *A comprehensive and multi-causal understanding of the radicalization process:* The objective of *Preventing Violent Extremism Policies (PVE/P)* is to better understand the nature of the threat of *postmodern terrorism* , primarily by assessing the *direct and*

root causes that fuel the spread of violent extremism based on interrelated variables explained by social and political exclusions and economic grievances that exploit weaknesses and vulnerabilities as incubators for domestic and international terrorism, thus *De-radicalization approaches* need to be *proactive* in terms of causal and effect relationships to effectively counter- terrorism.

2) *Risk assessment and management of Lone-Actor Terrorism based on a hybrid matrix:* The identification, analysis and prevention of violent extremism must be based on a multidimensional actor base of the state and *society as a whole*, with a mix of soft and hard approaches, governance that takes into account *mental health* issues and the *digital environment* that becomes a space for mobilization, recruitment and jihadist propaganda. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to strengthen political and *security engineering* that focuses on the triangle of *pre-emption, prevention and protection*, which relies heavily on early warning of individuals at risk of radicalization, as well as counter extremist ideology, *demobilization* and *disintegration*, this includes a focus on *behavioral indicators* toward radicalization .

3) *Systemic and integrative counter- terrorism coordination- cooperation approach:* With increased focus on *collective mechanisms* cooperation at *sub-regional, trans-regional* and   *international* partners by providing and *sharing information*, with intelligence services, law enforcement and interagency partners by strengthen *bilateral* and *multilateral anti-terrorism diplomacy*. Clarify the legal and institutional framework governing *"Foreign Terrorist Fighters"* and prepare for the potential needs and challenges upon their return, away from the puzzle of counter-terrorism cooperation locked in the Labyrinth of *militarization, securitization* and *politization*.

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