

# When troubled young men turn to terror, is it ideology or pathology?

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A police officers crossing the street in front of the the Parliament building after a sentry guard was shot October 22, 2014 in Ottawa. (Dave Chan for The Globe and Mail)

What drives these angry young men? How do otherwise unremarkable sad-sack guys become, almost overnight, self-sacrificing killers? These “lone-wolf terrorists,” as they have come to be known in criminology and intelligence circles, start out with a few troubles, perhaps mental illness or drug addiction or a history of petty crime. Then they suddenly seem to snap, disappear from the normal world, and then burst into the public eye holding the most extreme, murderous sort of ideas. Then they kill, in highly public ways – as Canada has witnessed twice in the past week.

Is it ideology, or is it pathology? Chemicals in the brain, or ideas in the mind? Should we regard them as victims of their own damaged psyches, or agents of stark and menacing movements and world views?

That is one of the great questions of our age. And it is one we need to examine closely, for such lone-wolf, disconnected loser-figures have become, by a wide margin, the most prevalent and frequent agents of public violence in the Western world today.

That overlap of pathology and ideology appears to describe Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, who achieved infamy by shooting up Parliament Hill, killing a guard before dying in a hail of bullets on Wednesday; and Martin Couture-Rouleau who, two days earlier,

killed a soldier in a Quebec hit-and-run before being killed himself: Both had histories of mental-health problems, petty crime, and substance abuse; both suddenly adopted an extreme jihadist ideology on their own, before killing. It also perfectly describes Justin Borque, who killed three RCMP officers in Moncton in June: a history of mental-health problems and the sudden adoption of an extreme, angry, anti-authority ideology. He was judged fit for trial, which means the courts chose ideology over pathology as the cause of his action.

It also perfectly describes Michael Adebolajo, the British child of Christian African parents who beheaded soldier Lee Rigby last year, apparently inspired by ideas he'd found online, and Anders Breivik, whose anti-government bombing and shooting rampage in Norway killed 77 and stemmed from a detailed 3,000-page manifesto, based on popular anti-Islamic ideas, which he wrote for an organization that did not exist outside his own mind.

If we want to prevent further such explosions of public violence – and avoid grave threats to fundamental freedoms, if intelligence agencies decide to pursue anyone who fits the rather broad profile of such individuals – we ought to decide whether we are seeking out the damaged or the resolute, the troubled or the zealous.

Five years ago, after U.S. soldier Nidal Malik Hasan shot up the Fort Hood military base in Texas, Joe Lieberman, then head of the Homeland Security Committee, asked: “Some have called Major Hasan a terrorist, while others have described him as a deeply troubled man. Where do you come down?” Brian Michael Jenkins, a counterterrorism official with the RAND corporation, provided a telling answer: “The two descriptions are not mutually exclusive – terrorism is not an activity that attracts the well-adjusted.”

There is a long history of mentally disturbed people – notably those with conditions such as schizophrenia – seeking out narratives to give shape and meaning to the dark impulses that pollute their minds. They occasionally invent such narratives themselves, but are more likely to reach out for a pre-existing one. A century ago it was anarchism that attracted disturbed, violent people; then ultra-nationalism; then Marxism; then right-wing anti-government notions; then Islamism – and today we're just as likely to see any of these manifesting themselves.

On one level, the ideologies and movements are to blame: They really exist, and need to be countered. Those who act upon them are either criminals, enemies or madmen, depending how they're viewed.

As Jeffrey Simon, the Los Angeles-based head of the counterterrorism firm Political Risk Assessment Co., points out, about two-thirds of homegrown al Qaeda-inspired terrorist plots in the United States have been carried out by such lone wolves, most of whom have had no contact at all with actual terrorist groups. And the vast majority of right-wing, anti-government terrorist acts (which have become the most prevalent form of terrorism during the Obama years) are carried out by exactly such figures.

In his book *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*, Mr. Simon describes just how fuzzy the dividing line between ideology and pathology can be.



Michael Zehaf-Bibeau  
That dividing line, however, is notoriously hard to draw.

He cites the 2002 case of Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, who opened fire on passengers at the El Al counter at Los Angeles International Airport, and “was depressed and clearly hostile toward Jews, but absent evidence of membership or connection with a political cause – was he a terrorist?” The authorities, “under pressure from the victims’ families,” decided in the end that he was, because “Hadayet hoped by his action to influence U.S. policy (the necessary political content).”



Mehdi Nemmouche who shot up a museum in Brussels

The same thing happened with Muharem Kurbegovic, the so-called Alphabet Bomber. According to Mr. Simon, he “carried out his campaign on behalf of the Aliens of America, a group that existed only in his mind” and claimed to be the Messiah. “Initially considered insane, he spent more than five years in the state institution for the criminally insane” but was later deemed fit to stand trial.

Also brought to trial, he points out, were: Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who carried on a 17-year terrorist campaign, wrote a 35,000-word manifesto to explain why, and initially “was diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia”; Mr. Breivik, who “detonated a massive vehicle bomb in Oslo, then opened fire on a youth camp, killing 77 persons in all and published a 1,500-page manifesto on the Internet”; and

Timothy McVeigh, “whose bomb killed 168 people in Oklahoma City in a war of his own imagination on the federal government.”

These are not the bureaucratic, highly disciplined organization-man terrorists of al-Qaeda and its sibling organizations. As several academics have noted, one of the defining characteristics of these first-generation terrorists is that they overwhelmingly tend to hold engineering degrees. Al-Qaeda’s obsession with expense accounts and formal chains of command (a tendency carried to its offspring organization, Islamic State) is not the world of the lone-wolf terrorist. That sort of self-abnegation would not appeal to them at all.

## ‘Narratives are often messy’

Ramon Spaaij, an Australian scholar with Victoria University and author of *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism*, has just completed a two-year study, for the U.S. Department of Justice, in which he and Indiana State University scholar Mark Hamm profiled and interviewed every known lone-wolf terrorist arrested since 1940.

“It’s not a clear-cut case of either political grievance or personal victimization – it’s often a kind of eclectic mix of these two things, so the personal is political and the political is personal,” he says. “The lone-wolf narratives are often messy, they’re fluid, they don’t make sense, and they involve the more desperate and vulnerable or marginalized individuals looking for a cause – and often that cause is superimposed retrospectively, after the fact. You could ask the question of whether it’s actually their true motive. It’s also got a lot to do with these individuals seeking to become historical characters – the feeling that they’re on a mission to actually hurt an enemy or, for the Breivik types, to open the eyes of the broader population; they feel that they’re on the vanguard of a movement and the broader population haven’t caught up with their sense of threat.”

For the lone-wolf terrorist, the violent act is only partly about the cause and the idea; it is also, and perhaps fundamentally, about the self. Timothy McVeigh, in owning up to Oklahoma City, described his feelings this way: “Isn’t it scary that one man could reap this kind of hell?”

Mehdi Nemmouche, who shot up the Jewish Museum in Brussels this year and killed four people, is described by those who’ve had close contact with him as a “publicity-loving sadist,” as someone who, in the words of a man he held hostage and tortured for months, is fighting “not to construct an ideal but out of a lack of recognition, to fulfil himself.”

“Quite a few lone wolves that I’ve studied are seeking to be famous, seeking to make a name for themselves – they want to be someone,” says Dr. Spaaij. “That’s a pretty radical way to get a sense of subjectivity in the world, but in their mind it works. Some of it may be the celebrity culture we live in. Yigal Amir, who killed Israeli Prime



A police officer push people back off the street after a sentry guard was shot at the National War Memorial October 22, 2014 in Ottawa. (Dave Chan for The Globe and Mail)

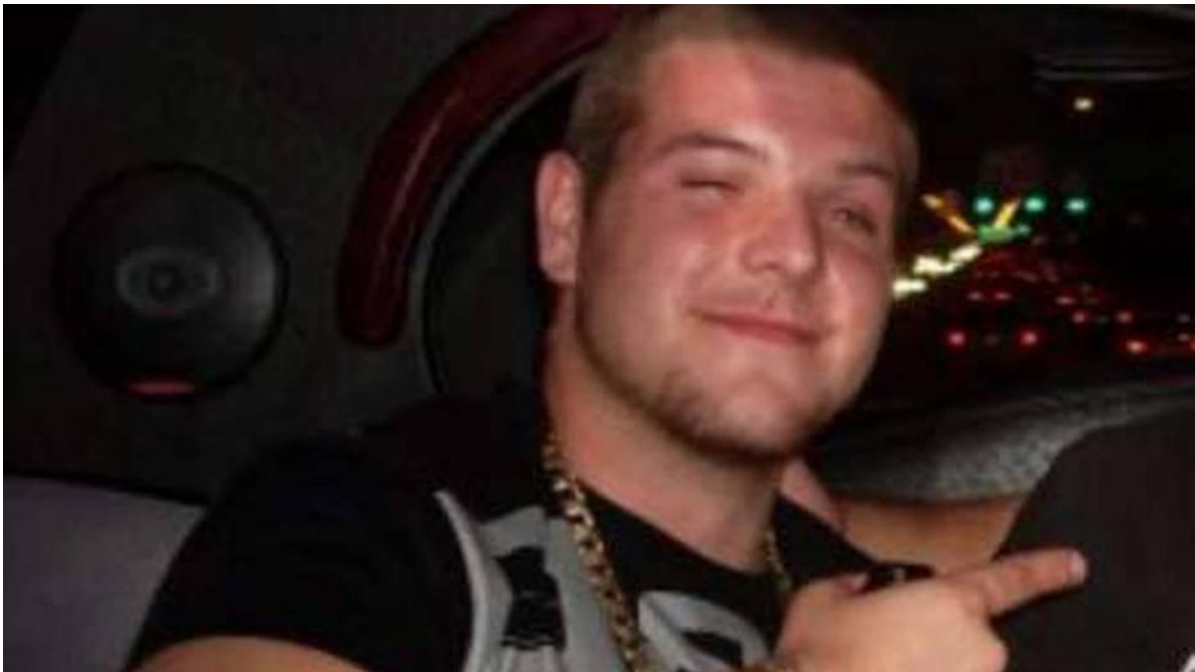


Minister Yitzhak Rabin, did it because he wanted to be famous. Quite a lot of these lone wolves are after something like that.”

That overarching egotism is a classic symptom of many mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. It’s also a trait possessed by plenty of non-disturbed, non-extremist people around us (who may be merely annoying) – which makes it so much more difficult for agencies to predict who will become the next lone-wolf killer.

It does provide one clue to how we might go about stopping them, though. As ego-tists, they are more likely to broadcast their new identities and their broader intentions in advance. Many analysts believe that social media have turned the lone wolf into the most popular sort of terrorist – and allowed us to detect them.

But interception is not so easy – and attempts to do so can easily veer into assaults on freedoms and outright abuse of the mentally ill and the manipulation of vulnerable minority populations.



Martin Couture-Rouleau killed a soldier in a Quebec hit-and-run before being killed himself.

Authorities in the U.S. adopted the practice of catching lone-wolf figures in sting operations, in which they’d find disturbed young men online, provide them with pre-fabricated terror plots and (fake) weapons, and arrest them a moment before they were about to carry out their planned attack. This approach has been numerically successful – that is, it has intercepted a lot of putative terrorists – but many wonder if it’s simply making the problem worse, and turning police agencies into terrorism enablers.

“Often these are down-and-out losers in society who wouldn’t be able to pull off a decent attack on their own,” Dr. Spaaij says, “but the undercover police provide the weapons and suggest the targets ... what that does is it has sown a lot of bad blood in Muslim communities – we’re out there preying on vulnerable young people and turning them into terrorists.”

The Danish approach, in which lone wolves are drawn back from extremism (often having been shocked away from it during trips to Syria or Iraq) and given “reprogramming” at training camps to provide them with a new, non-extremist narrative, has earned a lot of mockery, some of it well-deserved. (It seems inevitable that a graduate from one of these programs, which are modelled after one used in Saudi Arabia, is eventually going to commit an atrocity.)

But it may be closer to what is needed: Something to unglue the bonds between pathology and ideology, to separate the troubled mind from the very bad idea. Whether the lone wolf is a figure to be dealt with through criminal law or public health – and, in practice, it will always be a combination of the two – is never going to be fully resolved. It may be enough, for now, to understand that they are creatures of mind and movement, illness and ideology, despair and determination. We may not be able to stop them all, but we may recognize them in our midst, and find a way to reach out.

## Canada’s policy

The Criminal Code defines terrorist activity to include an act or omission undertaken, inside or outside Canada, for a political, religious or ideological purpose that is intended to intimidate the public with respect to its security, including its economic security, or to compel a person, government or organization (whether inside or outside Canada) from doing or refraining from doing any act, and that intentionally causes one of a number of specified forms of serious harm.

Individuals who become involved with extremist or terrorist groups abroad may return to their home countries to radicalize others or conduct attacks ... Several dozen Canadians are believed to have travelled, or attempted to travel, abroad in recent years to facilitate or participate in terrorist activity.

The Government of Canada takes a principled approach in responding to the threat of terrorism. Canada’s counter-terrorism efforts at home and around the world are grounded in respect for the rule of law and human rights. Human rights are enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and protected by mechanisms of accountability. The need to ensure respect for human rights also stems from applicable human rights and humanitarian law. The Government of Canada is committed to promoting the safety and security of Canadians, and of our international partners, without undermining these rights and eroding the very values that Canada strives to protect.

*Source: Public Safety Canada's 2013 Report on the Terrorist Threat*

## **The threat is real**

The lone wolf is forcing us to revise our thinking about terrorism and shift away from an almost exclusive focus on terrorist groups and organizations. From the analysis of the causes of terrorism and the motivations of terrorists to the identification of policies and measures that need to be taken to combat this global threat, the lone wolf is now an integral part of the discussion.

Because these individuals work alone or with just one or two other people, lone wolves are not burdened by any group decision-making processes or inter-group dynamics that can sometimes stifle creativity in formulating plans and operations.

Related to this is the fact that, because they are not part of a group, lone wolves will not be concerned, as would be some terrorist groups, about potential government and law-enforcement crackdown following an incident that could lead to the virtual elimination of the group through arrests and other measures. And if a lone wolf is suffering from a mental illness, then he or she will not think rationally about the risks and consequences of a particular terrorist tactic.

Furthermore, because they do not rely upon any segment of the population for financial, logistical, or political support, lone wolves, unlike many terrorist groups, do not have to worry about negative reactions by the public to a particular attack.

The world of the lone wolf is indeed a fascinating one. The lone wolf clearly demonstrates why combating terrorism is an endless struggle.

It is understandable, however, if one is skeptical. Haven't we had enough warnings about terrorism over the years, often fuelled by self-interested politicians, government officials, terrorism experts, and others?

But there is enough evidence to indicate that the lone-wolf threat is real, and is not likely to fade away any time soon.

*Jeffrey D. Simon, from his book Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding The Growing Threat*

## **Drawing a line**

There is greater confidence today that large terrorist conspiracies will be identified. Tiny conspiracies, however, remain hard to detect.

Lone operators, unless they reach out to others for moral reinforcement or material support, are almost impossible to know about, and they have proved themselves capable of carrying out large-scale violence and sustaining long campaigns. ...

Just as we sought to draw a line between the terrorist and the ordinary criminal, we also tried to distinguish terrorists from violent lunatics. Crazies, by definition, could not be terrorists.

Some governments attach the pejorative label “terrorist” to all their political foes. But the United States achieved its independence through force of arms and recognized the right of armed rebellion. Armed rebellion is not itself terrorism, although rebels might carry out acts of terror. So might governments.

These distinctions are easy to make when considering an individual who is a member of a terrorist group, but they become much harder in the case of lone operators who lack obvious terrorist connections, whose motives can be inferred only from their choice of targets, or who may be motivated by extreme political views, sometimes of their own invention. They all consider themselves avatars of a greater cause.

To carry out extreme acts of violence without a military mandate, societal sanction, or reinforcement by comrades requires a level of determination edging on madness. To those who must fathom the motives or respond to the threat, the distinctions may be meaningless.

*Brian Michael Jenkins, security adviser and author of Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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