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Freelance Terrorism: Comparing “Lone Wolves” to “Wolf Packs”¹

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From Garland, Texas, to Paris, France, several terror attacks by one or more individuals have occurred in recent months, rattling the international community. The media has often referred to such acts as “lone wolf” terrorism, even when there are multiple suspects involved. Our research separates the cases of solo attacker from those occurring in small groups, to see if there is a difference. Our analysis finds some surprising similarities and differences between the actual “lone wolf” and those in small “wolf pack” attacks.

On November 13, 2015, participants in the Georgia Political Science Association watched on the big screen television at Savannah’s Hilton Garden Inn as CNN reported that several attackers, purportedly from the terror group known as ISIS, used bombs and guns to turn the downtown of Paris into a bloodbath. Nearly eight attackers were responsible for more than 125 deaths and hundreds more who were wounded in France. It was an eerie replay of our conference paper topic earlier that day, when we analyzed terror attacks by small groups.

Indeed, law enforcement had been on alert. Since last year, authorities in many developed countries were on the lookout for “lone wolf” attacks (BBC 2015). At a counterterrorism summit held earlier in 2015 in Paris, government

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officials announced their concerns that “lone wolf” terrorism was likely to occur (CBS 2015). But, as the Paris attacks showed, they should have been looking for a “wolf pack” instead of a “lone wolf,” given that the eight attackers also had other supporters throughout France, Belgium, and possibly other areas.

And the error was not in just underestimating the number of attackers. Finding out which group launched the attack proved equally problematic. As Michael Pizzi (2015) with *Al-Jazeera* pointed out in a series of earlier Paris attacks, that included *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and a Jewish kosher deli, debates over whether Al-Qaeda or ISIS is responsible are meaningless. Pizzi observed: “If that is indeed the case, the Paris attacks point to a dangerous evolution [in] global jihadism: an acceleration in hard-to-detect lone-wolf or wolf-pack attacks that hinge more on the proliferation of an ideology than actual sponsorship by any group...among a growing number of extremist cells in the West and elsewhere,” Pizzi (2015) writes. Note how easily lone wolf and wolf pack attacks seem to be blended together, despite the differences in the number of attackers.

Others concur with his assessment. “Affiliation with a specific group is being supplanted by affiliation with an ideology,” said the Soufan Group (2015), an intelligence consultancy, in a brief. George Michael (2014) adds, “Although most episodes of lone wolf terrorism have not been highly destructive, there are notable exceptions that have claimed a substantial number of victims.” This could spell trouble for Western governments, which designed their counterterrorism protocols in the wake of 9/11 to watch international communication and disrupt organizational structures of foreign cells, Soufan noted. “Thwarting the ideology that underpins a global movement will prove more difficult.”²

In addition, the Soufan Group (2015) seemed to be concerned that an evolution has been taking place in who conducts attacks. Rather than sophisticated attacks from a well-defined organization or the crazed “lone wolf,” the group claimed the trend would be “an increase in ‘wolf pack’ attacks of very small cells of family or friends instead of groups formed for the purposes of terrorism.” Such groups would achieve catastrophic results and horror reactions better than a group like Al-Qaeda ever could (Soufan Group 2015).

Despite the attention generated by such attacks, the media, government, and even terror groups themselves, seek to label these actions as the result of the

² Barnes (2012) does examine the anarchist movement as an earlier stage of terrorism. But there may be more of a parallel with the modern-day lone wolf or wolf pack terrorist than one might think. Certainly the goals may well be different, but the unconnected “do-it-yourself” nature of the terror methods and lack of connection between the attackers. The goals of the Haymarket riot organizers and those who assassinated Czar Alexander II, or even U.S. President William McKinley, may have been similar: undermining government. Yet it is highly unlikely that such attacks were coordinated by some “World Anarchist Union” or some international terrorist organization. Each attacker was motivated by an ideology but carried out the events as he or she saw fit.

“lone wolf.” The question remains whether this term actually applies in many cases where it is used. Do most attacks, attributed to “lone wolf” terrorism, really involve a single attacker, or do they involve a small cadre of attackers and support staff? On rare occasions, the term “wolf pack” is employed to indicate multiple attackers are involved, instead of a group of “lone wolves.” But these cases are still usually lumped with lone wolves, as if the only difference involves a few extra names on a list. Little thought is given to whether the two types of terrorists and their attacks are really so similar.³

Do these “lone wolf” or perhaps “wolf pack” attackers fit the stereotype, the socially isolated, uneducated, mentally ill, disconnected individual who is easily seduced by Internet conspiracies until the dupe engages in a burst of violence? Or is the profile one of an educated person with many personal connections and links, whose own frustrations at coming up short in life become channeled into a calculated plan for revenge? Are the attacks launched by both terror types (lone wolves and wolf pack members) all that similar, or are there clear, noticeable differences in tactics, targets, and their outcomes?

This research builds off the literature and earlier data compiled on cases from 1990 to 2012 by analyzing attacks from 2013 to the end of 2015 in the United States, comparing and contrasting the cases truly involving lone wolves and those committed by wolf pack attackers. Additionally, the consequences of the findings are also noted as well as a plan to deal with attacks that resemble the Paris tragedies.

Literature Review: Following Studies of Terrorists and Their Tactics

Struggling with the Definition of Terrorism

Despite the prevalence of terror attacks labeled “lone wolf” cases, there are few studies on this subject (Pantucci 2011), suggesting that the term “freelance terrorism” might be better. Perhaps this is because “terrorism is commonly viewed as essentially a collective, organized activity and, as a consequence, scholars focus predominantly on group dynamics and collective socialization to explain individual pathways into terrorism” (Spaaij 2010). This could account for why governments like the United States are so intent upon stopping large organized groups that they overlook the solitary attacker or the small group of terrorists.

Another reason for the lack of such studies is because critics argue that the concept itself is difficult to define. According to Barnes (2012), there is a debate

³ For a common term to encompass lone wolves and wolf pack attackers, Columbus State University professor Thomas Dolan suggested the term “Freelance Terrorism” at our GPSA conference presentation. This would fit not only these small groups, but also individuals who feel allegiance to a broader cause but not a deep, personal connection to a bigger organization.

within the United Nations about the semantics of what a terrorist is and what a “freedom fighter” is.⁴ As a result, he contends that there is no standard international definition of terrorism. Sedgwick (2010) also finds that even terms like “radicalization” are a nebulous concept at best. Gruenewald, Cherman, and Frelich (2013) agree that lone wolf terrorism is difficult to define. Their measure of homicides, for example, required political motivation as a rationale for inclusion in their own database. Spaaij (2010) also makes the argument that lone wolf is a “fuzzy” concept that is difficult to distinguish from other crimes.

A good start to overcome this “conceptual paralysis” would be to include the U.S. government definition of terrorism, as it is used in investigations and prosecutions of such events. The FBI defines the domestic variety of terrorism (Title 22 of the U.S. Code, Section 2656f(d) as a case that “Involve(s) acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law, appear (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S.” (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2015).

Barnes concurs, noting that such definitions are designed to “expand the reach of criminal liability, increase criminal punishments, and augment the legal authority of U.S. government officials” (Barnes 2012, 1620). What is important about this definition is that terrorism is characterized by the acts, and not the beliefs of those committing the acts, improving the chances of removing political bias from the equation. Moreover, the definition can capture the solo attacker or small group carrying out such actions, and not just large groups. Such a definition can address “the phenomenon of individuals who become radicalized without significant physical interaction with or financial assistance from others and engage in violent acts on behalf of a perceived ideological or political goal” (Barnes 2012). Attacks on behalf of any ideology, not just a particular one, are the key. But it does not require the person or people involved to swear some allegiance to a terror group previously identified by the U.S. State Department.⁵

The Evolution of Terrorists and Terror Groups

Another reason why so few studies have focused on lone wolf attackers, or small group attackers like “wolf packs,” is because the types of terrorists and attacks have changed over time. Kaplan, Loow, and Malkki (2014) contend that

⁴ The difficulty in defining what a terrorist is for the United Nations has not stopped the organization from adopting nearly 20 “Suppression of Unlawful Acts” conventions that define what acts of terrorism violate international law. These SUA conventions range from attacks on civil aviation and taking hostages to financing terrorism and nuclear terrorism adopted over four decades (United Nations 2016).

⁵ Perhaps Dolan’s term “freelance terrorist” might be a more applicable term for lone wolves and wolf pack members unaffiliated with a major terrorist organization.

the first freelance terrorist, Phineas (grandson of the Prophet Moses's brother Aaron), traces back to biblical times, when this fervently devout Hebrew killed one of his own, as well as a foreign woman, for being in an interethnic relationship, possibly averting "God's wrath" that the couple might have caused, according to the believers. It is therefore interesting that one of our analyzed cases channeled the story of Phineas. Larry Steven McQuilliams attacked the Mexican Consulate in Austin, Texas, as well as a nearby police station, in November 2014. McQuilliams had written that he was a member of the "Phineas Priesthood" (Hoffberger and King 2014).⁶

Barnes (2012) claims that there have been four "waves" of terrorism, starting with anarchists targeting the political system, like Russians attempting to overthrow the czars. The next wave came from groups seeking to separate themselves from the state, ranging from anticolonial cases to those involving the IRA and PLO seceding from states to form their own. The third wave emerged with ideological groups attacking the policies of their government, like leftist organizations such as the Red Brigades, Weather Underground, and the Red Army Faction, primarily in developed states. Finally, Barnes (2012) claims the fourth group is religious, including Islamist groups targeting the Soviets in Afghanistan, or those sponsored by the Iranian government. Many of these cases involved direct or indirect sponsorship by states. This led the problem to be assigned to entities like the State Department and Defense Department, instead of domestic law enforcement. But with the decline in state-sponsored terrorism, the wisdom of leaving it primarily to those whose mission is focused abroad can be called into question.

For some, this new trend is somewhat of a "transitory phase," where autonomous individuals and groups are the current style of attack, but one not likely to endure for very long (Crone and Harrow 2011). But Barnes (2012) is not so sure. He claims the reason for the changes come because terrorists change their behavior, not just who they fight. "Terrorists learn from experience and modify their tactics and targets to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and avoid observed strengths" (Barnes 2012). The newest variety of terrorism practices asymmetric warfare, where noncombatants are targeted on the front lines of terrorism because they lack the skills and abilities to resist the attackers. These

⁶ An interesting contribution to this subject comes from Levitas (2002). His book *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* covers a timeline and details about a number of domestic terrorists associated with right-wing causes. But where Levitas (2002) differs from others is in linking the anti-Semitism to an event often overlooked in domestic terrorism studies: the farm crisis. "Some farmers facing ruin seized upon the false hope of saving their farms through legal mumbo jumbo," Silk (2002) writes in his review of Levitas. "Foreclosure sales offered occasions for violently confronting the state. ... 'The Terrorist Next Door' offers evidence that class—or at least economics—is still relevant in the postindustrial age."

include terror groups like Al Qaeda (Barnes 2012) and others practicing a particular ideology that seeks attention for a cause, more than bringing down a particular leader, changing a government's behavior, or seceding. As Michael (2014) adds, "the lone wolf trend should be contextualized in the evolution of conflict and strategy in which smaller and smaller entities figure prominently." The only question is whether the small entity is limited to one attacker as the term "lone wolf" connotes, or whether it could encompass a small clique of terrorists that certainly do not fit the term "lone." This is where the distinctive group "wolf pack" might be more applicable.

It is not just the change in targets and tactics that challenges those seeking to stop what has been called "lone wolf terrorism." Single attackers (or, just as likely, a small team of attackers) are harder to track down than a large network. Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman says that this is no accident; the new strategy of terror groups "is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence completely outside any terrorist chain of command" (as quoted in Gibbs 2009). Pantucci (2011) adds that this is the case because of the changing society, where "social loners" can carry out lone terror attacks through inspiration via the Internet.

Reid and Yakeley (2014) find that what is termed "lone wolf terrorism" is all the more terrifying because of the difficulty of identifying the single attacker. Additionally, the "lone wolf" attacker is not directly associated with any particular group or terrorist organization and can strike at any given time or place. "Lone wolves identify with the perceived suffering of others, which, in turn, provides emotional fuel for a personal grievance" (Reid and Yakeley 2014). Both authors cite the Oklahoma City bomber and the Fort Hood shooter as examples, as well as an abortion clinic attacker who had been ousted by his church.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the term "lone" in lone wolf is an inapplicable term for every single attack by unaffiliated terrorists. We discover that small, independent groups, who share an ideology with a bigger network like Al-Qaeda, are operating much in the same fashion as those who are self-directing individuals. In writing about the London bombers of the mid-2000s, Kirby (2007) finds that not only are these groups autonomous, unconnected (other than the Internet) to larger networks like Al-Qaeda in anything but ideological motivations for attacks (yet willing to let the big group get the credit), but they also do not fit the profile of networks that counterterror groups employ in their analyses.

The sheer randomness of what the press labels "lone wolf attacks" makes analysis of such an event seem impossible. Pantucci (2011) claims that such events include not only a limited number of attackers, but also a relatively small number of cases. "Nonetheless, it is possible to draw some useful preliminary thoughts that could be expanded and clarified using a broader dataset" (Pantucci

2011, 9). And that is exactly what is needed: an analysis of those cases considered involving a solo attacker, or a small group, known in the literature as a “wolf pack.”

Prior Analyses of Lone Wolf Terrorism

While there are few studies of lone attackers and small-group terror attacks (Pantucci 2011), these have revealed some illuminating findings. Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) have looked at all “lone wolf” cases from 1990 through 2012. Other studies have also examined the relationship between a given factor, like demographic characteristics of the attacker, and details of the attack. From these studies, we developed a list of variables about solo and small-group attackers to analyze.

Writing in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) look at 119 cases from 1990 to 2012, coding data on a number of variables related to gender, age, family, education, employment, criminal activity, mental health, ideological justifications, awareness of intentions, pre-event behaviors, social isolation, behaviors within a wider network, and links to a wider network, as well as attack and plot-related behaviors.

Attacker Characteristics

When it came to determining the number of participants in a terrorist event, just under half of all attackers are seen as unconnected (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2014). The connections to groups, as Kirby (2007) advises, show the importance of looking at more than just the solo individual, or “lone wolf” as this terrorist type has not always been identified particularly well. Our research has examined a number of socioeconomic factors: age, family life, mental health, gender, education, economic success, connection to crime, motivation for the attack, and the presence of pre-event behaviors for potential terrorists.

Gill and coauthors discovered that terrorists in America tend to be older than those in other countries, ranging from the PIRA in Ireland (Gill and Horgan 2013; Horgan and Gill 2011) to Colombian guerrillas (Florez-Morris 2007). Gender is another common variable studied. Even though such terrorists are often thought to be only male (Berko, Erez, and Globokar 2010; Pickering and Third 2003), there were several female attackers in Gill, Horgan, and Decker’s (2014) dataset, though it is a small number (4 percent).

Porter and Keibell (2011) examined the social attachments/family life of terrorists in their analysis of the radicalization of these attackers in Australia. The status of one’s relationships seems to matter, as Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) found that a little more than half of the terrorists in their sample were single. But the marital status of the terrorist is not the only family factor analyzed. King, Noor, and Taylor (2011) follow family attachments and terrorism, finding that relatives are more likely to support terror activities of

their kin, in a study of Jema'ah Islamiyah, an Indonesian terror group. Terrorists can be supported by someone related to them, and not just a spouse.

Mental health is an issue that is frequently identified as a causal agent in the actions of freelance terrorists (McCauley and Moskalenko 2014), and possibly a missed step in apprehending the person, as a record of being diagnosed or committed is ignored. Reid and Yakeley (2014), in particular, devote their research to applying psychoanalytical theory to so-called "lone wolf terrorists." Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) found a number of examples of mental illness being a factor in attacks, in their own survey of cases. Yet the authors admit that their cases include those diagnosed after the attack.⁷

Analysts seem to agree that education is an important variable, though findings on the factor are mixed. The *Economist* ("Teacher, Don't Leave Them Kids Alone" 2007) reported that U.S. counterterrorism strategy is based upon keeping the uneducated from joining terror groups, while Zuckerman's (2005) terrorism profiles contend that these attackers tend to be educated. Lee (2011) found that terrorists were more educated than the general population, but less so than the non-violence movement leaders. Goolsbee (2006) adds that perhaps the terrorists tend to be highly educated, but are unable to achieve economic success.

Economic success is often linked to a subject's job status. Pittel and Rubbelke (2012) look at the link between a potential terrorist's employment in the economy, and possibly by a terror group. Agathangelou (2012) notes the role of large numbers of jobless youth joined by contemporary communication sources in the uprisings the Middle East and North Africa, which later descended into civil war and terror attacks. When the Obama administration claimed a connection between unemployment and terrorism, political opponents and Keating (2015) critiqued this link. Keating cites Abadie (2004), who finds that political freedom matters more for studies of terrorism than poverty. In particular, Abadie finds that poverty, when controlling for a number of factors, is not significantly related to the presence of terrorism in countries. On the other hand, countries with a moderate level of political freedom are more likely to experience terrorism (Abadie 2004).

One's connection to crime is often considered an important factor. In his analysis of Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, the attacker of the Little Rock, Arkansas, U.S. military recruiting station in 2009, Gartenstein-Ross (2014) examined the role of criminal activities that led Muhammad into trouble when he was known as Carlos Bledsoe.⁸ Bledsoe sought out Islam as a way to divert

⁷ Ours include only those found to have been deemed mentally ill before the attack.

⁸ Of course, having a criminal record would make it more difficult to purchase a weapon, and even assemble some bomb-making material. But lax control over cross-border lists can hamper law enforcement. In the case of Rusty Houser, a Georgia man procured a weapon in Alabama to kill theatergoers in Louisiana (Williams 2015), enabling him to attack two hated targets of his: women

his energies into something that would keep him away from crime, even though he would eventually become a violent jihadist through his own personal understanding of his newly chosen faith (Gartenstein-Ross 2014).⁹

As for motivations that people have for conducting terror attacks or for joining groups that carry out these attacks, McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) find that their study of “lone wolf” terrorists shows that individuals can assess the suffering of other people and seek a method of revenge. A political ideology can point the finger at who should be blamed, and therefore targeted. Not all actually engage in ideological attacks (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014). Bartlett and Miller (2012) contend that becoming a terrorist is not just a “rational” choice, but an emotional one as well. It is not just about political and religious thoughts. It is also about one’s current social status, and what happens to the subject personally. Wilner and Dubouloz (2010) contend that specific “triggering factors” can help generate the radicalization that makes a citizen of a wealthy democracy become a lone wolf terrorist, or wolf pack member, ready to kill for a belief, and perhaps a personal setback.

For Gill and coauthors, pre-event behaviors are also fairly important for determining the activities of these terrorists, something echoed by other researchers (Dingley and Mollica 2007; Pape 2006). Pape (2003), for example, finds that suicide terrorism is hardly random phenomenon by individuals so blinded in their hatred: “Most suicide terrorism is undertaken as a strategic effort directed toward achieving particular political goals; it is not simply the product of irrational individuals or an expression of fanatical hatreds. The main purpose of suicide terrorism is to use the threat of punishment to coerce a target to change policy” (22). Of course, Pape (2003) is focusing on pre-event behaviors relevant to a group (leading to demands and a policy to use suicide terrorism to achieve those outcomes), like Hezbollah’s decision to use suicide attacks against Israeli forces to get them to withdraw from southern Lebanon. Dingley and Mollica’s (2007) research on the similarities between hunger strikers and suicide terrorists focused on general political and religious trends, as well as specific events happening to groups like the North Irish Catholics, Palestinians, and Spanish

and Hollywood movies. Freelance terrorists working in small networks (so someone with a “clean” record can buy the weapon) enable such attackers to use these weapons.

⁹ Gartenstein-Ross (2014) writes that in this conversion to Salafism, a strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, “Carlos Bledsoe and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad were ‘different people,’” an observation supported by his parents. His entire life changed, from taking down pictures (graven images) off his walls and getting rid of his dog, thanks to that narrow interpretation of what it meant to be a Muslim. At the same time, he began to regard family, relatives, and others as “enemies of Allah” for not making a similar conversion. As an English teacher in Yemen, he described English as “the language of the Enemy.” Subsequent military training and a constricted interpretation of jihad led him to his terror attack on the military recruiting station.

Basques, that led to the starvations and terror attacks. Our research looks at how prior events shape the individual terrorist or small-group attack.

The Role of Planning

Planning by terrorists is a central feature discussed in the literature. LaFree et al. (2012) conducted their research on the Basque group ETA to determine how prepared terrorists were in their attacks. Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) found that in a majority of cases, the person had manuals on how to build bombs or obtain guns; engaged in training, making dry runs, or something other than an impulsive act; or, in the case of a mentally challenged person, was incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. Researchers have also looked at what weapons the terrorists have employed in their attacks. Jackson and Frelinger (2008) discovered that the top two weapons of choice for terrorists worldwide in their study were bombs (45 percent) and firearms (29 percent), with fire and/or some accelerant finishing third (with 7 percent). Romyn and Kebbell (2014) discuss a simulation that used both military and civilians in a scenario that focused on the tactics of the terrorist. Interestingly, participating groups, regardless of background, focused on identifying targets first, before doing anything else, even picking weapons and training in their use.

In closer examination by Charles and Maras (2015) of several successful and unsuccessful terror attacks, they found that terrorists who failed accidentally exposed themselves to law enforcement when seeking funding for their activities. “Supportive community institutions and their effective use made plot detection difficult” (Charles and Maras 2015). Dahl (2011) and Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) examined success rates. Gill et al. concluded that these types of attacks had only a 51.2 percent success rate. This demonstrates the dangers of assuming that solitary actors or “lone wolves” as small groups can overcome these problems that lead individual or big group terror attacks to fail.

The Design of the Study

Our research looks at the variables they analyze to see if similar results appear for cases in 2013, 2014, and 2015, as well as a few factors Gill and his coauthors, and other terrorism researchers, did not study. We look at some factors not covered by other lone wolf studies listed here. These include whether the terrorist experienced any “big change” and what the big change might be (in political motivation, school, religion, family relationship, job status, or a recent brush with the law). While others look at whether there has been a pre-event behavior, we provide more specifics as to what such an event might be. In addition, we look at the weapon of choice for a terrorist, whether a target has been identified, and whether it is a person or property, as well as whether the

target is in the same area as the terrorist's location (or whether the attacker traveled to a place to hit the target). We look at whether others were aware of the plot, whether there was an attack plot behavior (or if the attack was spontaneous, with little or no planning), whether the terrorist was socially isolated, whether the plot was executed, whether the terrorist killed himself or herself, and whether any regrets were issued by the terrorist.

We also focused on more recent cases since 2012 (from 2013 through 2015), starting with President Obama's reelection and concluding with the San Bernardino shootings in California.

The dataset we built includes cases from the *New York Times* from 2013 through 2015, supplemented by other terror attacks documented by *Forbes* magazine (McNab 2014) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (2015). Our analysis looked at 60 freelance terrorists from 48 freelance terror attacks. But while others treat all cases as "lone wolves," our study is unique in that we look at the difference between those that truly involved only one individual, and those that involved two or more terrorists working as a team. We also compare the simple percentages for the results in each category, to compare the two groups of terrorists as Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) did, as well as provide results for a difference of means test of the averages for lone wolf terrorists and wolf pack terrorists. The results are listed after each variable, and in Table 2. The variables suggested by the literature are listed in Table 1. Their values, for how we coded each variable, are also included.

Cases Labeled a "Lone Wolf" Attack

We found there was a definite tendency to label terror attacks as committed by "lone wolves." This was the case in 88.5 percent of cases in our sample (see Figure 1). Yet, as our research also shows, it is an applicable label in less than half of all cases. The others, dubbed "lone wolves" in the media, are actually more closely associated with "wolf packs" or small groups of attackers.

So now we know that there are a few more "wolf packs" or small groups of attackers than lone wolf terrorists, despite media reports to the contrary. But are both types of terrorists similar in terms of who the attackers are, and how they attack? In this research, we look at this very subject, comparing lone wolves and wolf packs on a number of variables, looking for similarities and differences.

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We compared "lone wolves," to "wolf pack" attackers in terms of age of the terrorists (see Figure 2). A majority of these wolf pack attackers were between 25

Table 1: Variables and Their Values in Our Terror Analysis

Variable	Values
Age	(0) Under 25, (1) 25-45, (2) 46 or Older
Relationship Status	(-1) Divorce, (0) Single, (1) Married
Education	(0) High School or Lower, (1) College or Higher
Mental Health	(0) No, (1) Yes
Criminal Background	(0) No, (1) Yes
Employment	(0) No, (1) Yes
Kids	(0) No, (1) Yes
Gender	(0) Female, (1) Male
Political Activity Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
School Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
Religion Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
Family Relationship Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
Location Move	(0) No, (1) Yes
Job Status Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
Recent Brush with the Law	(0) No, (1) Yes
Big Change	(0) No, (1) Yes
Pre-Event Behavior	(0) No, (1) Yes
Weapons of Choice	(0) Gun, (0.5) Gun and Bomb, (1) Bomb, (2) Other
Attack Target	(0) Different Location, (1) Same Location
Others Aware	(0) No, (1) Yes
Social Isolation	(0) No, (1) Yes
Attack Plot Behavior	(0) No, (1) Yes
Target Identified	(0) No, (1) Yes
Target People	(0) No, (1) Yes
Target Property	(0) No, (1) Yes
Execute Plot	(0) No, (1) Yes
Suicide	(0) No, (1) Yes
Regrets	(0) No, (1) Yes

Figure 1: Lone Wolves in the Media vs. Lone Wolves in Reality

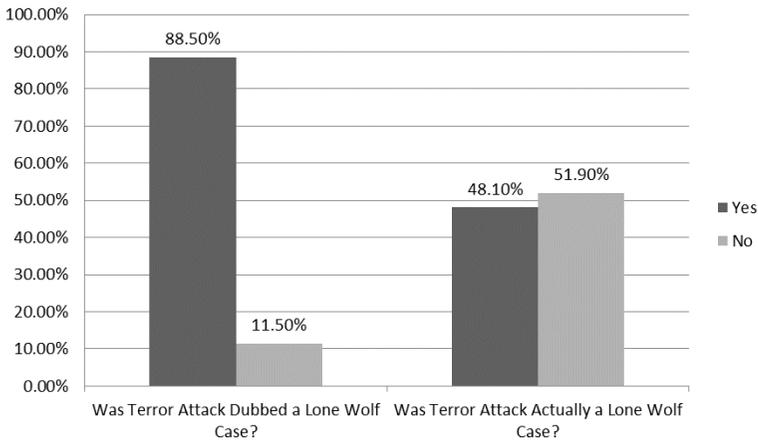
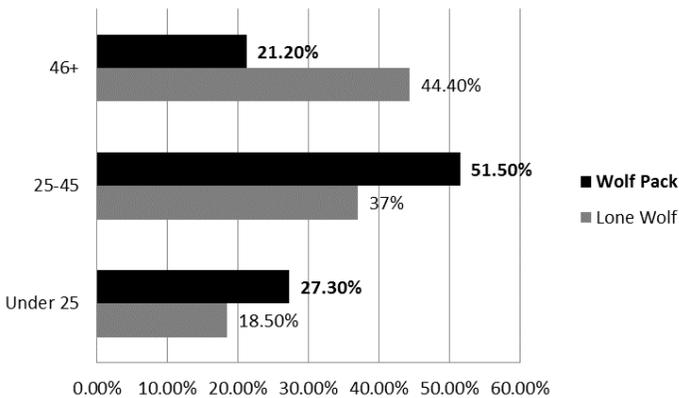
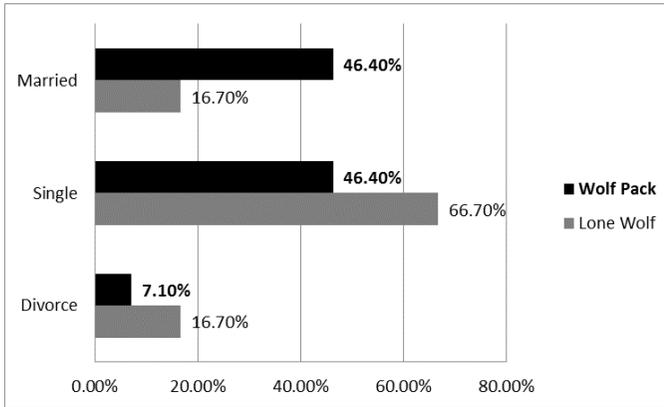


Figure 2: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Age of Attackers



and 45, with the next largest category involved those under the age of 25. Barely 20 percent were over 46, a market contrast to the lone wolf finding, where closer to half were over in the oldest age category. The results of a difference of means test showed that the averages for both were significantly different, though barely so (at the .10 level, rather than the .05 level).

Figure 3: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Relationship Status

Like the age of the attacker, there are some strong differences between the real lone wolves and those whom the media thinks are lone wolves, who really attack in packs. As one might expect, most lone wolves (two-thirds) are single (see Figure 3). At the same time, for wolf pack attackers, the modal category is “married,” at nearly 50 percent. Lone wolves are nearly twice as likely to be divorced as wolf pack attackers. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is statistically significant at the .05 level.

The education of terrorists, however, does not show a strong difference (see Figure 4). A narrow majority of all cases involving lone wolves and wolf pack attackers reveals a high school education or less. A slightly higher number of lone wolves are college educated, but it is not a large difference. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the education variable.

As for other attacker characteristics, we find a mix of cases (see Figure 5). Some, like whether the terrorist has kids, shows wolf pack attackers to be slightly more likely to have kids than lone wolves. In some cases, the kids participate in the attack or its preparations, such as a shooting of Alaska law enforcement officers (McNab 2014). The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the variable that examines whether the attacker had any children.

Differences between both groups of terrorists and the percentage suffering from mental health are also slight, with wolf pack attackers making up a slightly

Figure 4: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Education

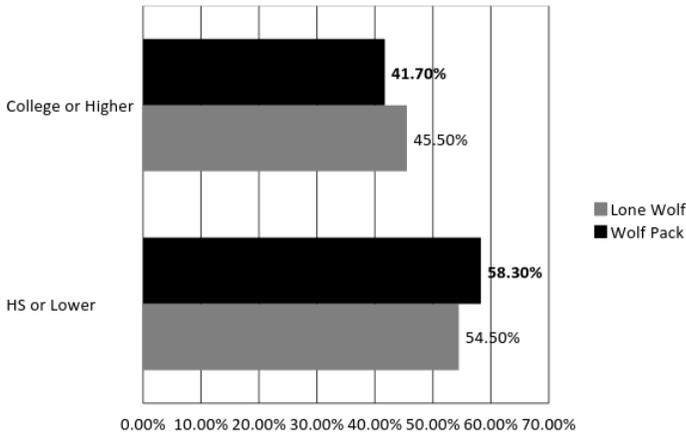
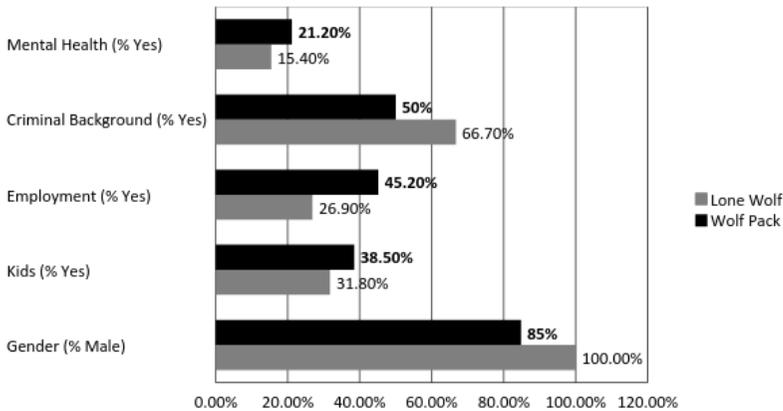


Figure 5: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Attacker Characteristics



larger share of the data. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the education variable.

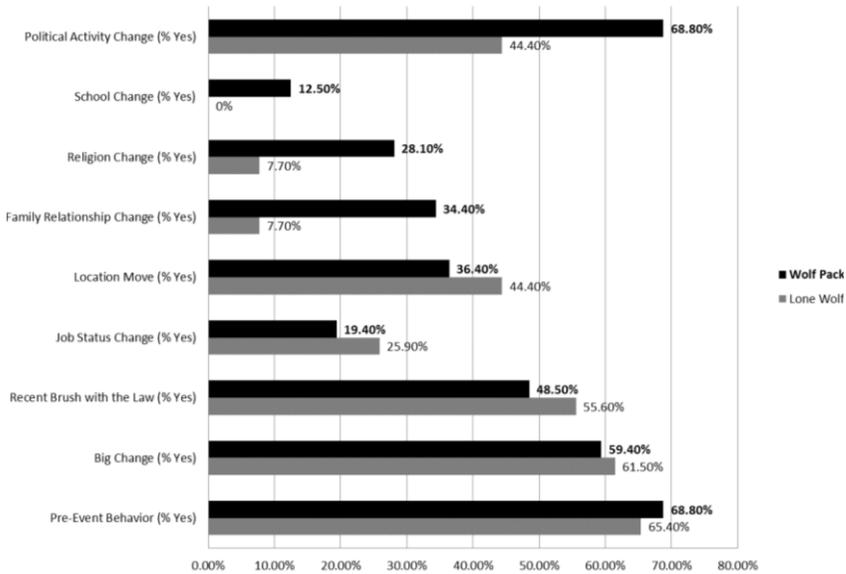
On the other hand, there are also some sizeable differences. Lone wolves are far more likely to have a criminal background (two-thirds of all cases, as

opposed to half of all wolf pack attackers), though the difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the criminal background variable. Wolf pack attackers are slightly more likely to be employed than lone wolf attackers, though the difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the employment variable. And while all lone wolf attacks in our survey are male, there are a few cases of female terrorists who attack using the wolf pack tactic, such as one of the two shooters (Tashfeen Malik) at the San Bernardino Christmas party. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is significant (at the .05 level).

The presence of spouses and offspring participating in the acts, from a Las Vegas spree (McNab 2014) to the San Bernardino shootings (Myers and Pritchard 2015) show a newer, perhaps more disturbing trend that reveals a distinctly non-lone wolf attacker can use a partner, even a small network, to achieve aims. The tragedies in Paris in 2015 reveal how family and friends can be the new terror cell, rather than a group intimately connected with a terror leader's headquarters for a large organization. This means the wolf pack terrorist enjoys all of the advantages of a team (help, moral support) without the disadvantages of being connected to a bigger network that can be identified with the capture of a connected cell.

Figure 6 reveals similarities and differences between lone wolves and wolf packs when it comes to changes in their lives just before initiating an attack. For example, nearly two-thirds of both types of terrorists did experience some pre-event behavior, with 60 percent for both facing a big change, though the difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the big change or pre-event behavior variable. Both lone wolves and wolf pack attackers had a recent brush with the law before deciding to attack, though lone wolves were somewhat more likely to experience this (55.6 percent to 48.5 percent). A change in one's job status before making a terror attack is rare for both groups, but more likely to happen to lone wolves (25 percent to 19.4 percent). Lone wolves are also more likely to have moved from one location to another before the terror attack, as opposed to those considered part of a wolf pack. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the "recent brush with the law," job status, or location move variables.

But there are cases where wolf pack attackers are more likely to experience a pre-attack change (as noted in Figure 6). Such wolf pack attackers are a lot more likely to experience a change in relationship status (34 percent to 7 percent for lone wolves). Wolf pack attackers were also four times more likely to undergo a religious transformation before the violence, and more likely to change schools before the attack. Finally, more than two-thirds of all wolf pack attackers changed

Figure 6: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Changes in Attacker Lives

their political activity, as opposed to less than half of all cases for lone wolves. The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is significant for these four variables: family relationship change, school change, religion change, and political activity change.

Wolf pack attackers also have differences in the types of weapons they use in their attack, as shown in Figure 7. Nearly three-quarters of all lone wolf attackers prefer to use a gun when they kill. Wolf pack attackers are more likely to use a variety of weapons, including cases of guns and bombs, bombs, and other types of deadly weapons, ranging from a knife to a truck that would emit a radiation beam at residents within buildings (Stanglin and Winter 2013). But the difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for the weapons variable.

In Figure 8, we examine more details about the planning of a terror event, and its aftermath. As with other variables, some show relative similarities between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers. In particular, both types of terrorist are likely to attack a nearby target, rather than one in a different location (81 percent for wolf pack attackers, 77.8 percent for lone wolves). Both are likely to identify their target, rather than randomly select one (78.1 percent for wolf pack

Figure 7: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Weapons of Choice

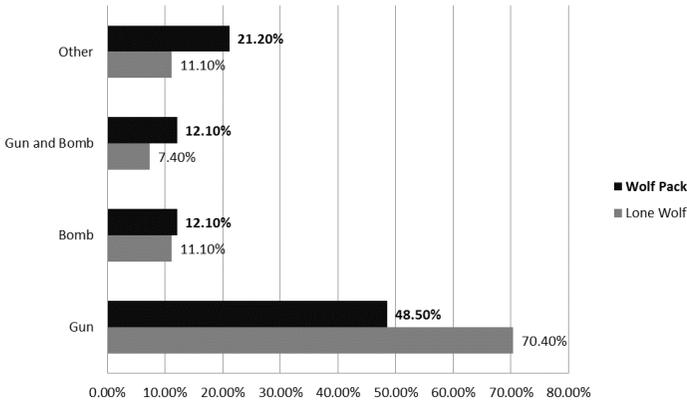
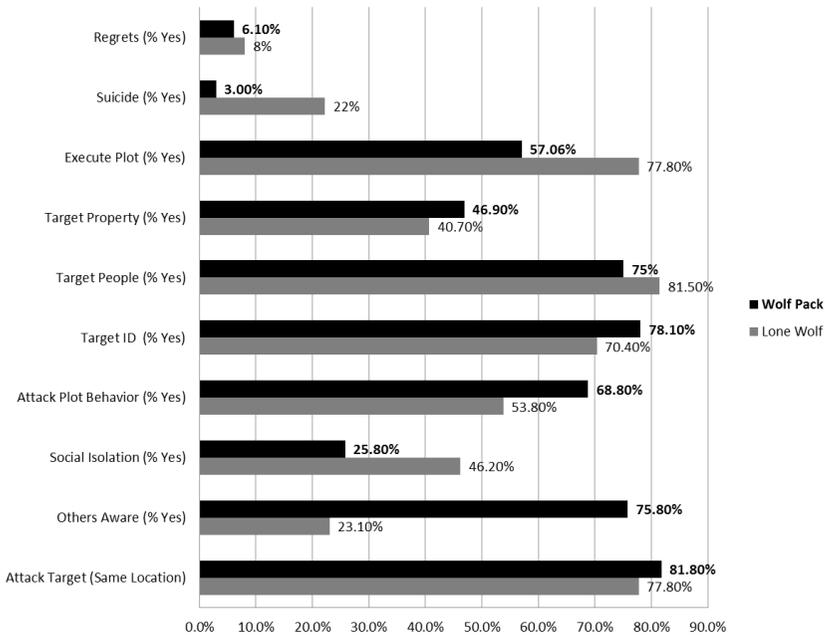


Figure 8: Comparing Lone Wolves to Wolf Packs: Attack Planning and Aftermath



attackers and 70.4 percent for lone wolf cases). Both terror types in our sample chose to attack certain types of people (a little more than three-quarters for both cases), or certain types of property (just under 50 percent for both classifications of attacker). The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for whether the attacker strikes closer to home or not, whether a target is identified, and whether the target is a person or property.

But lone wolves are far more likely to execute their terror attack, at a 77.8 percent clip, as opposed to wolf pack attackers, who are successful only a little more than half the time (57.06 percent). Readers will not be surprised to learn that lone wolves are more likely to experience “social isolation” (46.2 percent to 25.8 percent), though it is interesting that there are not more lone wolves experiencing a social disconnect, or so many wolf pack attackers feeling lonely. Lone wolves are also more likely to commit suicide (22 percent) than the percentage of wolf pack attackers who kill themselves (3 percent). The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is significant for suicide (.05 level) and for social isolation and executing the plot (though only at the .10 level).

However, wolf pack attackers are more likely to engage in activities that make others suspicious or at least aware that such an event is likely to occur (75.8 percent of all cases, as opposed to 23.1 percent of all cases for lone wolves). The difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is significant for the variable that examines cases of whether or not others were aware of the attack. Wolf pack attackers are more likely to plan out in detail their attacks (68.8 percent of all cases), with surveillance, manuals, training, etc., than lone wolves will (only 53.8 percent of all cases). Both types of terrorists are also unlikely to express any regrets, at similar rates (between 6 and 8 percent for both groups). An example of such a rare moment came when Mamdouh Mahdmu Salim expressed his regrets for stabbing a jail guard to steal his keys (Weiser 2002). Usually, publicly reported regrets mean a lament from the terrorists that the attack did not succeed, as noted in Salim’s foiled attack on Fort Dix (Spencer 2009). However, the difference between the means for lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is not significant for variables that include attack/plot behaviors, as well as the presence or absence of regrets.

Conclusion

Whether it is a lone wolf attacker or a small “wolf pack” terror group, both types can be more dangerous at times than members of large groups like ISIS or any Al-Qaeda affiliate. “An unmanageably large number of potentially violent extremists—many of whom might be well-known to security services while others remain off the radar—that hamper governments’ ability to effectively

monitor but also deter and disrupt them,” writes the Soufan Group (2015). They add, “Given the logistics, manpower intensity, and costs of surveillance, even a relatively small number of suspects can quickly tax even well-equipped services if the suspects stay below legal thresholds for detention.”

Given the danger both groups pose, what have we discovered about the two types of terror groups and their attacks upon Americans, at home and abroad? First, contrary to many media reports, not all terror cases dubbed as “lone wolves” are actually solo attackers. In slightly more than half of all cases, these types of attacks involve a wolf pack or a pair, a clique, or a small network of friends who carry it out. Second, there are some similarities between the lone wolves and wolf pack attackers, but also some differences. Third, there is no definitive trend in similarities and differences between lone wolves and wolf packs. We looked to see if perhaps the lone wolves and wolf pack attackers had similarities on demographic characteristics and differences on how attacks are plotted. But there were no broader categories of variables that were more likely to fit one type of attacker.

That does not mean nothing is to be learned about such terrorism by single attackers, and those who use multiple individuals. As Table 2 illustrates, while there are some similarities between the lone wolf and the member of the wolf pack, there are cases of sharp differences between both types of terrorists, and these distinctions are not related to a particular type of variable (demographic characteristics, type of target, etc.).

In addition to the difficulty in detecting such small and loose “freelance terror” groups, there is another added consequence of battling them. Whereas Al-Qaeda had a leader and base to strike against, and ISIS can be hit where their fighters capture territory or hold their oil revenue source of income, the lone wolf terrorist or wolf pack terrorist group presents a significant problem. There is nothing much to hit, other than an apartment, a shop, or some other place where the terror group meets. It would be no more effective than wiping out all right-wing terrorists by bombing one Aryan Nation compound or one KKK meeting.

The greatest priority is to ensure that while “lone wolf” and “wolf pack” have been disruptive and deadly, they do not get worse. As Ellis (2014) points out, “Future ‘over the horizon’ threats, such as the proliferation of new biotechnologies and amateur do-it-yourself capabilities, pose a risk that lone wolves could develop weapons at a time when travel, access to knowledge, and dual-use technologies, in the globalizing environment, make lone wolf terrorists more dangerous.” Examples employed in the last three years include ricin-laced letters, and the upstate New York “radiation gun” to be used against worshippers in mosques (Stanglin and Winter 2013). Ellis (2014) explores the efficacy of existing countermeasures against individual or small-group terrorists (what we call lone wolves and wolf packs) using these potential WMDs.

Table 2: A Summary of the Findings of Similarities and Differences between Lone Wolves and Members of a Wolf Pack

Variables with Significant Differences Are Noted in Italics

Variable	Findings
<i>Age</i>	The biggest age category for a terrorist was 25–45. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to be younger. Lone Wolf attackers are more likely to be older.
<i>Relationship Status</i>	The modal category for terrorists was “single.” Lone Wolf attackers are, significantly more likely to be single and divorced. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to be married.
Education	Slightly more terrorists have a high school education or less. Little difference exists between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Mental Health	Few terrorists have diagnosed mental health concerns. Little difference exists between Lone Wolves and Wolfpack attackers; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Criminal Background	A majority of terrorists have a criminal background. Lone wolves are only slightly more likely to have a criminal background; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Employment	Some terrorists are employed. Wolf pack attackers are slightly more likely to be employed; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Kids	Some terrorists have children. Wolf pack attackers are only slightly more likely to have children; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
<i>Gender</i>	Most terrorists are male. In fact, all lone wolf attackers in our survey are male. A few wolf pack attackers (12%) are female. The difference in the averages of lone wolves and wolf pack terrorists is statistically significant.
<i>Political Activity Change</i>	A majority of all terrorists experience a political activity change. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to experience a political activity change.

Table 2 (cont.)

Variable	Findings
<i>School Change</i>	Few terrorists experience a school change. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to experience a school change.
<i>Religion Change</i>	Few terrorists experience a religion change. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to experience a religion change.
<i>Family Relationship Change</i>	Few terrorists experience a family relationship change. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to experience a family relationship change.
Location Move	Some terrorists experience a location move. Lone wolf attackers are slightly more likely to experience a location move; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Job Status Change	Few terrorists experience a job status change. Lone wolf attackers are only slightly more likely to experience a job status move; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Recent Brush with the Law	A slight majority of all terrorists have a brush with the law. Lone wolf attackers are only slightly more likely to experience a recent brush with the law; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Big Change	A majority of terrorists experience a big change. There is little difference between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Pre-Event Behavior	A majority of terrorists experience a pre-event behavior. There is little difference between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers in the likelihood of pre-event behaviors; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Weapons of Choice	Guns are the most used weapon for terrorists. Lone wolves are slightly more likely to use guns. Wolf pack attackers are slightly more likely to use other weapons; the difference of means is not statistically significant.

Table 2 (cont.)

Variable	Findings
Attack Target (Same vs. Different Location)	Most attackers choose a target in the same location. There is little difference between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
<i>Others Aware</i>	In roughly half of all cases, others are aware of the terror attack being planned. Wolf pack attackers are significantly more likely to make others aware of their intentions.
<i>Social Isolation</i>	In some cases, the terrorist is socially isolated. Lone wolves are significantly more likely to be socially isolated.
Attack Plot Behavior	In more than half of all cases, attacks are plotted by terrorists. Wolf pack attackers are only slightly more likely to plot their attacks than lone wolves; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Target Identified	In many cases, a target is identified. Wolf pack attackers are only slightly more likely to identify their target; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Target People	In many cases, a target of a person or persons is identified. Lone wolves are only slightly more likely to target people; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
Target Property	In some cases, a property target is identified. Wolfpack attackers are only slightly more likely to target property; the difference of means is not statistically significant.
<i>Execute Plot</i>	A majority of plots are executed. Lone wolves are significantly more likely to successfully execute their plots.
<i>Suicide</i>	Suicide cases are rare. Lone wolves are significantly more likely to commit suicide during or after their terror attacks than wolf pack attackers.
Regrets	Few express regrets. There is little difference between lone wolves and wolf pack attackers; the difference of means is not statistically significant.

Hewitt (2014) focused his study on so-called “lone wolf” domestic terror attacks and strategies to neutralize them. He found that standard police

surveillance and use of informers were best employed against these freelance terrorists operating in groups, while information gleaned from the public was the most effective against such terrorists operating alone (Hewitt 2014). Charles and Maras (2015) also agree that undercover agents and informants are effective as counterterrorism policy. Dahl (2011) found that “Humint” contributed to 60 percent of 176 foiled terror attacks. He also recommends traditional police tactics to stop terrorism, eschewing proposed “high-tech” solutions.

An additional solution is to remember that in a war of ideology, battles are not won with bombs or taking of territory. One side prevails when it demonstrates it has a superior idea, and the opponent’s views do not fit with the beliefs of so many. Seeking to demonize all Muslims hardly seems the wisest course, painting a target on so many innocents, who mostly disagree with the attackers. It would be as effective as blaming all white Americans or Christians in general for right-wing terrorism in the United States, hardly a rational strategy. Just as the image of so many whites embracing racial tolerance defeats the arguments of the intolerant, giving greater weight to the voices of so many Muslims who condemn the Paris attacks provides the path for one idea to beat another idea.

A final improvement would be to scrutinize the terror cases more closely. Media reports list terror attacks as either a “lone wolf” or directed by some global organization. Using this characterization spreads the belief that random loners or large sprawling groups are behind all events. Instead, we have found a fair number of cases of small, relatively well-connected groups, or wolf packs, which reinforce each other, and can overcome obstacles in planning, fund- raising, weapons procurement, etc., in ways that tend to hamper solitary would- be attackers. Yet these small wolf packs can fly under the surveillance radar better than larger organized groups with extensive networks that can be easier to detect and penetrate. And our research shows that lone wolves and members of these “wolf packs” are hardly carbon copies of each other. They are often very distinct in factors concerning who they are, and what they do. It is a mistake perhaps made in Paris in 2015. And unless the thinking on terrorism changes to recognize this distinction, it is an error likely to be repeated in the United States.



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