



Lone Wolf Terror as a Weapon of War: An Indian Perspective



Maj Akshat Upadhyay is a serving Army Air Defence officer

General

In an era of divergent viewpoints and convergent violence, terrorism has maintained its evolutionary character. *La Terreur*, the state-sponsored charade of equality and fraternity¹ has evolved and commingled with Abu Musab al Suri's 'Leaderless Jihad'.² Lone wolves are the current manifestation of a phenomenon which has not stilled yet and is again on the verge of morphing into something more akin to its nature, Janus-faced. As will be discussed in the paper later, Islamist lone wolves, despite being drastically different from classical and conventional Islamist terrorists, still share some imprints from their predecessors, as they thrive in the same toxic atmosphere created almost half a century earlier. This phenomenon, however, has bypassed India but as the year 2017 matures, chances of a lone wolf attack have increased substantially though quite separate from the attacks that have dominated news headlines in Europe and North America. In the same vein, statements made by the political

class about the danger of lone wolf attacks in India, especially through actors such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or simply ISIS are not merely hyperbole but acknowledgement of the danger posed by the phenomenon.³ What is not clear is whether lone wolves could be used by state-based adversaries as part of their continuing covert campaign to *bleed India by a thousand cuts*.⁴ However, it is the aim of this article to show that first, the process of radicalisation of a lone wolf is not something which can be engineered by a state-based adversary on a short-term basis; second, the possibility of a lone wolf attack on Indian soil is real, though not as immediate as prophesied by some and; finally, there are some policy directives that may be adhered to, covertly or overtly, that could address some of these issues.

Before delving into the different threats posed by state or non-state actors against India using lone wolves, it is important to look at some of the more important facets of lone wolf terrorism.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic and outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Website: www.claws.in

Contact us: landwarfare@gmail.com

Peculiarities of Lone Wolf Terrorism in the West

As of now, lone wolf terrorism remains a phenomenon specifically afflicting the Western world. Let us take a few samples of what has become quite a huge set in recent times to clarify this point. Timothy McVeigh⁵ (Oklahoma bomber), Mohammed Merah⁶ (French Algerian, shooter at large in Toulouse and Montauban), Tsarnaev brothers⁷ (Boston Marathon bombing), Faisal Shehzad⁸ (Failed bombing of Times Square), Anders Breivik⁹ (mass shooting in Norway) are some of the more known examples. Some unique circumstances, events and actions in the West Asia/North Africa (WANA) region, a few of which involved Western actors, created an environment that incubated Islamic extremism which finally culminated in the big bang of 9/11. This included, briefly, Saudi proselytisation efforts post 1979,¹⁰ the Iranian Revolution of 1979,¹¹ US and Saudi aid and training to Mujahideenin Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, writings of individuals such as fatwas by Abdullah Azzam,¹² Abu Musab al Suri's 'leaderless jihad'¹³ and Syed Qutb's 'Milestones'¹⁴ among others enunciating the role of all Muslims to defend their religion from the 'non-believers'. These efforts were assisted by the increasingly proliferating media, especially new satellite channels as platforms for the terror groups, increasing their accessibility to a much wider swathe of the global population, thereby fostering a sense of unity in the nature of Benedict Anderson's imagined community.¹⁵

Common Factors

When trying to cull out common facets of lone wolves, a number of common factors such as age profile (early or late 20s), petty criminal background, financial issues, attempts to travel to Syria, Pakistan or Yemen or any unstable Islamic country, non-religious initial background are apparent initially. But this categorisation does not explain why only some of the people with these characteristics turn out to be lone wolves while some do not. There is a need, therefore, to delve a bit deeper.

(a) **Incarcerations.** Incarceration¹⁶ has been a major

common factor in a majority of lone wolf cases. Examples such as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, Kouachi brothers, the Charlie Hebdo killers, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, progenitor of ISIS) reinforce the dilemma of imprisonment for state authorities. Keeping the radicals together with the general population has the danger of mass radicalisation while clubbing the radicals separately has more often than not led to further hardening of attitudes, thereby making the aim of incarceration futile in the long-term.

(b) **Role of Preachers.** Another factor has been the influence of fiery preachers, themselves unaccomplished scholars or theologians but making up for this deficiency through excellent oratory skills. The name of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen of Yemeni descent comes up frequently in this case.¹⁷ With numerous videos still circulating on social media platforms, years after he was killed in a drone strike, Awlaki influenced a lot of young impressionable Muslims in the West such as Major Nidal Hassan.¹⁸ He is also said to have provided financial assistance to some of the attackers, enabling them to travel to places such as Yemen.

(c) **Role of Social Media.** Social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and Twitter should not be underestimated in propagating violent attitudes and opinions masquerading as facts. For some people, suffering from an identity void, personal loss, professional dissatisfaction or any of a plethora of factors that induce disorientation, a hook-on mechanism is activated that forces them to look for social synonyms either in their physical vicinity or digital personal space. The individuals start associating with like-minded people who share in their griefs, add to their paranoia of the 'Big Brother' and condition them towards a comity of supporters, a team, a digitally well-defined support structure. This commonality, when stoked in the favour of a particular ideology enables an individual to consider himself part of an organisation that

backs him up in all circumstances. A close look at the majority of the attacks such as those by Tashfeen Malik,¹⁹ Amedy Coulibaly,²⁰ Cheri Kouachi brothers,²¹ and Omar Mateen,²² to name a few, show that they pledged allegiance or *bayah* to ISIS or Al Qaeda (AQ) before commencing their killings. Social media also enables *remote control terrorism* by enabling faceless recruiters, obscured by VPNs to bridge the geographical gap by directly coaching, assisting, and indoctrinating the potential attackers through the digital media without the need to ever run boot camps.

It has to be emphasised that even if all these factors are present, it cannot be said with certainty that a person will turn into a lone wolf, though the probability is certainly on the higher side. Arid Uka, the Frankfurt airport shooter who killed two US servicemen was a lone wolf but was not influenced by any of the factors mentioned earlier, basing instead his killings on a televised series depicting a fictional rape of an Iraqi girl by two US soldiers.²³

Defining Characteristics of a Weapon

It's important here to introduce the exact definition of a weapon, and also discuss in brief the major characteristics that are attributed to a weapon system. These characteristics will then be examined in context of a lone wolf to analyse whether he/she can effectively be utilised as a weapon or an instrument of war by a state or a non-state actor.

A weapon is defined as any instrument or device used in attack or defence in combat, fighting, or war or anything used against an opponent, adversary, or victim.²⁴ If one has to define an ideal weapon, one would use terms such as efficiency, effectiveness, ability to be controlled, accuracy or time criticality. Whether in the realm of conventional, nuclear, cyber or asymmetric warfare, a weapon needs to be directly controlled by the one initiating the attack. Here direct does not refer to a physical but causal link between the attacker and his weapon. Also, the weapon must be able to deliver at the time of choosing of the attacker for it to be effective. Again this includes a large spectrum

of possible weapons such as crude bombs, bullets of all calibres, mortar shells, Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) in the conventional domain to probing attacks, brute force attacks or Denial of Service (DoS) attacks, viruses, trojans, botnets, and malwares in the cyber domain. The common theme is targeted attacking in a very broad sense. Aim of some of these collateral overkills, especially in the unconventional domain is to target the morale of the state, hence use of the term 'targeted'.

Applicability of Lone Wolf Construct to State Sponsored Terrorism

Lone wolves are being touted as the next big thing which may be employed by state-based adversaries of India due to their most important attribute, unpredictability, but this works both ways. A lone wolf is a cumulation of processes leading to the terror attack, and not just the individual. The steps to radicalisation, in addition to the background of a probable lone wolf are different from one another. The concept of lone wolf terrorism also suffers from the same sense of miscalculation and causality that mars its big brother terrorism. Also since the apparent modus operandi of these individuals is so varied yet so simple in its ingenuity, it is difficult to track specific supplies of materiel, or source of ingredients that may be used to weed them out. Most lone wolf attackers use simple and apparently harmless items such as trucks (Nice,²⁵ Berlin²⁶), cars (London,²⁷ Ottawa²⁸) and basic 'weapons' such as knives and axes (London,²⁹ Bavaria³⁰). In the US, with an abundance of handguns and state endorsement of the right of its citizens to carry arms in line with the Second Amendment,³¹ most of the lone wolf attacks have been carried out using handguns, some even by serving armed forces personnel.³²

Coming back to the point of targeted attacks, for lone wolves or lone wolf terror to be used as a weapon, its likely genesis or steps to radicalisation must be understood thoroughly by the entity attempting to control and thereby manipulate it. This means experiments in controlled laboratory conditions. Since this is not possible due to the obvious difficulty of attempting to test suspect social processes on subjects,

the practical option remains unleashing the potential attackers on to the adversary in the hope of achieving success a la Operation Gibraltar.³³ Even if somehow, the *radicalising cumulatives* or the different steps leading to radicalisation are understood in their entirety, there has to be a deliberate attempt at recreating the exact social environment which would include behavioural manipulation, generation of physical and digital peer groups, creation of an enabling and favourable ambience, designing incidents so as to trigger an affiliation to an idea: tweaking the variables to such a fine degree that no error is possible. However, due to the chaos-theory chaotic nature of these settings, a minor malfunction or misstep may result into a completely different product. Though intelligence agencies and sleeper cell agents of the adversary may identify a few individuals, a direct contact with them would imply an attempt to indoctrinate or influence thereby negating the preconditions that classify an attack as a lone wolf attack.

Lone wolf attacks are *niche attacks* in their implementation, in that they are impossible to predict, devastating in nature and generally have no causal link to connect the dots. But they are also *brute-force attacks* with regards to process, generally attributed to an attack-in-the-dark propaganda warfare waged currently by non-state actors such as AQ and its franchises and the ISIS. These organisations have mastered the art of manipulation, producing a continuous stream of high quality audio, video, and pictorial content that caters to all age groups, sensitivities, religions, genders, and inclinations. A terrorist group, such as ISIS with supposedly doomsday ambitions (showdown with Crusader forces at Dabiq³⁴) may still claim to ‘use’ lone wolves as weapons of war as it hopes for an apocalyptic showdown with the West, but the same cannot be said of a state that views its national security seriously.

Drawbacks of Using Lone Wolf Terror as Instrument of State Policy

The idea that Pakistan can employ lone wolves against India in a short timeframe is not practicable. This concept assumes that Pakistan could launch a massive

propaganda war against India, tailored to target the travails of so many of its communities simultaneously or near-simultaneously. There are a number of loopholes apparent in this idea. These are as follows:

- (a) **Requirement of a Subsuming Theme.** There is a huge question mark whether Pakistan could use a central theme as effectively as ISIS’s idea of establishment of a Caliphate, inside India. Due to the various fault lines already existing within India, such as financial, caste based, religious, social, ethnic, et al, this idea would have relatively few takers. The cliché that only cricket and war, both against Pakistan unite the country still holds true for a large segment of the population.
- (b) **Targeting India’s Vast Diversity.** Creation of multimedia content that is tailored to target India’s vast diversity is essential. This content would have to be painstakingly in detail and equally varied, as India’s religious minorities, for the major part are horizontally integrated socially as well as linguistically.
- (c) **Strict Gun Laws.** Strict gun laws in place in India and rare chances of sourcing automatics or powerful handguns from within the country to cause wide casualties is not feasible. One such attempt was the notorious Purulia arms drop in 1995 supposedly for the Ananda Marga organisation.³⁵ This too was intercepted. Post that incident, a huge majority of the attempted caches have been intercepted by local as well as federal security agencies preemptively.³⁶ Caches will have to be placed inside Indian territory, increasing the chances of interception by local security or intelligence agencies. Also most attacks till date, whether external or the rare domestic ones have been mob-based, the psyche for individual lone wolf attacks has not permeated the population yet.

The idea that Pakistan cannot control the place, time or intended victim(s) of the attack, leads to huge risk-averse attitudes in the country, despite its frequent and vocal pledges of irrationality. There is a tendency to *keep the pot boiling* and not let it spill over, in case of support

of terrorist attacks inside India. The Uri attacks showed that a seemingly initial minor assault on an Army camp which finally resulted in 19 Army fatalities³⁷ could easily turn into a national issue, leading to large scale duels on the Line of Control (LC) which threatened to go nuclear.

Discounting state sponsorship of lone wolf terror attacks does not, however, negate the danger of an ISIS lone wolf attack inside India, a first in a country which, with the world's second largest Muslim population, has seen a negligent number of people emigrating to join the group.³⁸ The recent (2017) killing of an individual in Lucknow suspected to be a possible lone wolf attacker³⁹ shows that ISIS's ideology may have started influencing disaffected youth in India too. The slain individual had formed his own *Khurasan* module in Lucknow,⁴⁰ an attempt to emulate ISIS's Khorasan *wilayat*⁴¹ that has large parts of the Indian subcontinent as its area of responsibility. Although probability of a lone wolf attack in India is still low, a hybrid kind of attack methodology which distills the attributes of a classic lone wolf with some elements of home grown radicalism and sleeper cells has begun to emerge. For want of a better term—*Facilitated Lone Wolf Attacks*—may be used. This is an example of a foreign-germinated idea conditioned to the local environment. As mentioned earlier, lone wolf terror, as of now, is still very much a Western phenomena. The confluence of a number of factors such as presence of large number of migrants, their disaggregation into *ghettos*, comparatively lax gun laws, overt and covert meddling of the host states into the countries of origin of migrants, perception of their religion and their 'way of life' under attack have been major factors leading to the increasing number of attacks across most of Western Europe and North America. Most of these conditions do not obtain in the Indian context. In the author's opinion, the local minority population, especially Muslims are being instigated through a multi-pronged approach. The more educated ones are being seduced through the media blitz of organisations such as AQIS and ISIS, while the majority, i. e. the uneducated ones are being brainwashed through provocative lectures by fiery preachers, local Wahhabi tinged *madrassas* by first

highlighting the precarious social and financial position of these communities and then slowly and gradually changing the narrative from social inequalities to religious persecution.

The modus operandi of a lone wolf attack in India could be through explosives, as established in the recent Bhopal-Ujjain train blast.⁴² The strength of this claim lies in the fact that most of the attacks perpetrated by domestic outfits such as the Indian Mujahideen (IM) have used explosives sourced from illegal quarries in Karnataka and Tamilnadu among others,⁴³ which are notorious for illegally selling substantial quantities of ammonium nitrate to gangs and criminals. In the Indian context, a group calling itself Ansar ut Tawheed fi Bilad al Hind (AuT),⁴⁴ alleged to be a new avatar of IM, has created an Indian offshoot Junud e Khalifa e Hind (JKH)⁴⁵ which while pledging allegiance to ISIS, has attempted to contact a number of Indians through chatrooms and the social media attempting to manipulate them into radicalisation, though with little success. ISIS ideology has had a few successes in Kerala with a number of its youth travelling to Syria to join the group⁴⁶ and now it has spreading to the Muslim dominated areas of Uttar Pradesh (UP).⁴⁷ Facing an onslaught on its territory,⁴⁸ ISIS has now opened multiple fronts such as Libya, Afghanistan, and possibly India to obviate the loss it faces in Syria and Iraq, in keeping with its motto *Baqiya wa Tatamaddad* (Remaining and Expanding).⁴⁹

Possible Measures

Net censorship is not a feasible solution due to presence of various peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, torrents, and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) that enable an individual to bypass filters applied by the Government. A more extreme solution such as shutting down Internet services and multimedia content completely or imposing a stringent external communication blackout, a digital Iron Curtain like North Korea is neither advisable nor suggested for a prosperous, democratic, free and technology savvy country such as India with its cherished culture of the upholding of free speech and expression. The measures that seem practicable are discussed next:

(a) **Discrediting of Extremist Narratives**

Discrediting of extremist messages through Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms by popular figures, generally from the same religion denouncing violence, with their credibility to be highlighted by delinking them from the state apparatus. A perfectly good example is that of Maajid Nawaz's Quilliam Foundation,⁵⁰ a counter extremist think tank that attempts to fight radicalisation inside the UK through news broadcasts, articles, Twitter feeds, and ground events. The fact that Maajid Nawaz was an ex member of the radical organisation, Hizb ut Tahrir gives him added credibility and acceptability to the targeted segment. Ayaan Hirsi Ali,⁵¹ of Somalian origin and Taslima Nasreen,⁵² a Bangladeshi writer are other prominent examples.

(b) **Influence of Family and Peer Groups.** Family and peer group influence plays a dominant role in any society. These must be utilised by the state to pre-empt any radicalisation of young individuals to any terror group's ideology. Case in point is that of the daughter of a retired Indian Army officer, who expressed her desire to go to Syria to fight for ISIS. Her father in turn reported the matter to the National Investigative Agency (NIA) who have attempted to counsel and deradicalise her.⁵³

(c) **Cyber Analytic Cells.** Creation of effective Cyber Analytic Cells (CACs) at state and country level to analyse behavioural patterns especially of Facebook updates and Twitter feeds among many others. ISIS handlers attempting to radicalise individuals have become deft at using the internet and now use many applications with strong anti-hacking softwares such as *Telegram* and *Trillion*. There is therefore a need to employ a team of hackers to use against these accounts. Also there is a requirement of collation of national and state databases to converge into a national Counter Terrorism Centre (CTC) that can then be analysed and used effectively for counter radicalisation purposes as well as eliminating any individual that has passed the limit of negotiations. The Indian

Army's Information Warfare (IW) directorates can also be encompassed in the overall strategy.

(d) **Conduct of Lectures, Seminars and Workshops.** Since most of the affected are the youth, online capsules as well as seminars can be conducted against extremism, endorsed by major colleges and universities, and featuring prominent media and civil society personalities.

Conclusion

This article argues that lone wolf terrorism, due to its very nature and huge numbers of permutation and combinations to radicalisation, the radicalising cumulatives, cannot be utilised as a weapon of war by any state-based adversary and in our case, Pakistan. This however does not discount the power of Internet or more importantly social media in inciting chaos and disorder in the country, but going by the precedents (for lack of a better word) in the country in terms of violence, it will take the shape of mob based violence rather than lone wolf attacks. Lone wolf terror can, however, be used by extremist groups such as ISIS and AQ, with a strong Internet presence to influence a large number of individuals in the country due to the increasing Internet penetration through smartphones and laptops in the country. With stringent security measures and alert policing both by the community as well as the local and federal security agencies, this can be reduced to a large extent.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in