John Chisholm explores the phenomenon of the "lone wolf" terrorist and asks whether Islamist extremists can ever be classed as "lone"

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Increasingly, terror threats to the West from Islamic fundamentalists do not stem from organisations, but rather from individuals. The incidence of lone individuals engaging in acts of terrorism, or indulging in orgies of violence, is certainly not a new one. But to what extent are Islamic fundamentalists of the same stamp? How much are they alone, and is the term "lone wolf" accurate or misleading?

Individuals committing acts of violence to inspire fear in the community are probably as old as mankind. Even more common is the axe-grinding aspect, where an individual has a grudge they feel justifies their violent actions. So a tribal strong man bashing someone over the head with a club to prove he is the strongest and is to be feared – well, that is hardly a leap of imagination. It is, after all, how playground bullies usually work. The grudge takes a little deeper analysis, but not much.

Such actions can reach to the highest echelons of society, however. The only British prime minister to be assassinated, Spencer Perceval was not killed for a political motive, but by an individual who felt the government had not done enough to free him from prison in Russia. To bring things up to date is the case of a TV reporter and his interviewee who were killed on air by a former colleague, Bryce Williams, who had previously been dismissed by the station. In both cases the motives were personal, the individuals probably mentally disturbed and there were no reasons to assume anyone else was involved.

These are true "lone wolves". Often there is little or no warning of what they are about to do. There is therefore little a security service can do to prevent such attacks, especially when the target is not a high profile political figure but instead, like Bryce Williams' victims, ordinary people. Often such disturbed individuals only show up through general social intercourse, not through security vetting.

So should the definition of lone wolf terrorists instead be: individuals who should be part of an organisation, or "pack" but are not? Such people have broken away from their group for some reason, or have only been on the fringes, but this has been enough to motivate them to commit some sort of an atrocity. Anders Brevik in Norway would fit such a description. Not a part of any official terror organisation, he had flirted with splinter groups from the racist right. These had formed and shaped his opinions, fed his obsessions and justified in his own mind acts of violence against a government he accused of betrayal. Is this more what the term implies?

Islamic terror certainly has taken this course. Initially, starting with the global wake-up call of 9/11, attention was focussed upon organisations. The most obvious was al-Qaeda, but there were others who often were loosely affiliated to each other. But organisations are vulnerable.

Even those which adopted a cell-based structure could be infiltrated. With modern technology they can be tracked and monitored. In the wake of such a major atrocity, the motive for intelligence services around the globe to support and co-operate with each other was high.

In other words, even though intelligence services geared towards Cold War-type political subversion (or, in the UK, the IRA) were somewhat blindsided by this threat, their resources were considerable. Backed by military force if necessary, the intelligence services of the West re-oriented much of their work towards dealing with this new threat. It did not take long for organisations affiliated to al-Qaeda to look for softer targets in countries which lacked the resources to effectively track and combat them. Also, the various


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WOLF?

wars and conflicts in the Islamic world drained away many potential recruits into more formal "stand up" fighting – that is, until ISIS emerged and overshadowed all the other players. They have achieved military victories, created a state, and continue to defy the West. But even ISIS admits to not having the resources to pursue the war to the West – what a contrast with 9/11–

Although the suspected perpetrator of the June attack on the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina, Dylann Roof (right), is thought to have acted alone, he may have believed he had the support of radical groups

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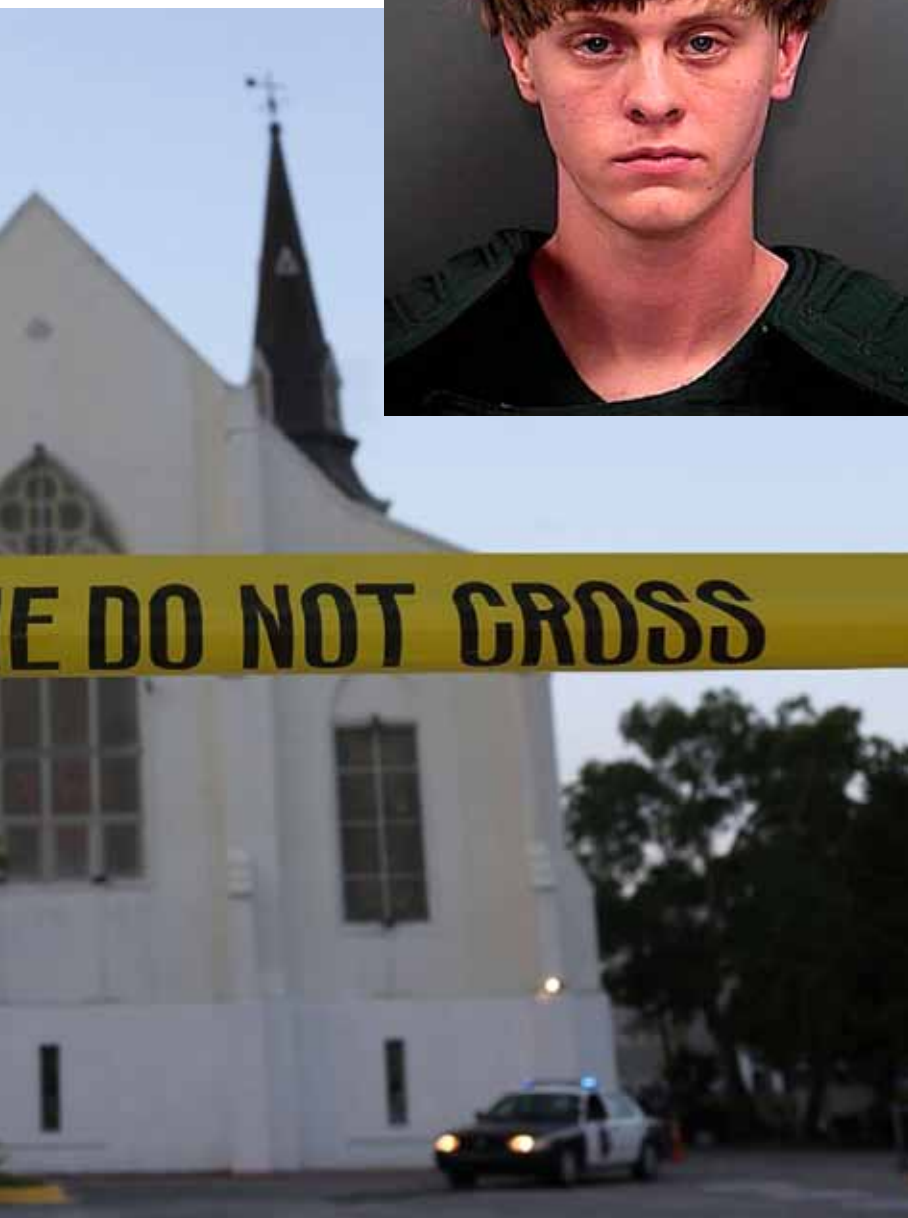
and instead hopes the US and her allies will intervene on the ground and do them the favour of providing Western targets they can kill close to home. So far Washington has not fallen for it.

So is the model of the racist, nationalist, violent political Right a more realistic model of the lone wolf? Or, indeed, a violent anti-abortionist in the US? Both are members of a broad community that share some basic precepts, but differ widely on means. The motive to commit acts of violence– probably higher in the ultra Right community – is certainly there. But in virtually all cases these are acts of violence committed in a group, and are rarely lethal. Indeed, some violent acts culminate from events that were initially meant to be peaceful. It takes a leap to just go out and kill someone in cold blood, but it is not unknown. On 17 June 2015, nine people were killed at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. Twenty-one-year-old Dylann Roof was arrested the following day. It has been reported the suspect told authorities he wanted to kill black people and his friends have since told journalists that the suspect felt somebody should do something about what he felt were blacks taking over the world. He talked about starting a civil war. In fact, white supremacists vie with Muslim radicals for the title of most violent terror movement in the US.

These individuals, however, are not entirely alone. They certainly do not see themselves as acting from their own self-interest, but rather in the broader interest of a community they identify with. This does not mean that the community they identify with wants them, or in any way endorses their actions. But, to paraphrase Mao, this ocean contains fish that may not be entirely harmless. The IRA successfully had the support of many people in the Catholic community in Northern Ireland who would not dream of firing a gun in anger. But they turned blind eyes, provided safe houses, did not enquire too closely about what people were up to and chose not to report suspicious activities to the authorities. Beyond this, the most likely spotters of radicalisation is the family, but family members rarely want to report loved ones to the authorities no matter how concerned they may be about their activities.

Muslim communities are no exception. The Ummah, the supra-national Muslim community, over-arches everything. In its most positive form it is an international brotherhood, non-racist, unifying and focussed on benefit to the general community – whether Muslim or not – and is a term commonly used in Arabic countries in particular. Unfortunately, this potentially positive concept has been used to justify the most hideous acts of brutality. From the radical perspective, any attack on a Muslim is an attack on a member of the Ummah, wherever they happen to be. This can be used to

justify acts of revenge in the context of defence of the Ummah. Already, our "lone wolf" has a community, and a justification.

This is closely aligned to a sense of moral superiority over the corrupt West. The West has all the science, technology, money and high living standards, and people from North Africa risk their lives daily to reach it. Yet it is, according to many of these people, morally corrupt, focussing on consumption, individual indulgence, sexual licence and greed wrapped up in a fake packaging of freedom and liberty. In this world, the West does not deserve to survive and is seen as striking out at the Islamic world because the latter's moral order is a threat to its existence. And what of the many Muslims have moved to the West, made positive contributions to it, are free from religious persecution and can educate their children? These are seen at best as misguided, and at worst are seen as the worst kind of traitors to the radical's vision of the Ummah.

What is particularly disturbing about extremist Islam is that it draws on a religion that sets out to be the "last word" of God – the God of the Abrahamic religions, that is. All religions make truth claims, but Islam specifically goes out of its way to define itself as the full stop, bookend, final chapter. Anything that comes after is patently false. Here we have our second motivation: God's will. People have tried to analyse the willingness of Islamic radicals to kill themselves as part of their attacks, or commit terrorist attacks where there is a very low probability of survival. But, it should actually be a straightforward one: they believe it. If these people believe in a paradise after death, with all the benefits of virgins and slaves, then what possible justification is there for not committing a terrorist offence? To quote Sam Harris: "The truth that we must finally confront is that Islam contains specific notions of martyrdom and jihad that fully explain the character of Muslim violence. Unless the world's Muslims can find some way of expunging the metaphysics that is fast turning their religion into a cult of death, we will ultimately face the same perversely destructive behaviour throughout much of the world."

Muslim radicals, committed to suicide bombing, are not particularly interested in metaphysics. But, fundamentally, Islam faces the general problem that they are members of a religion that can me interpreted in this way. Here we have our second "non-lone" element of lone wolf thinking. This element does not exist for the radical anti-abortionist or white supremacist. There is no cult of death with promises of a better afterlife for them. But in the "through the looking glass" world of Islamic fundamentalism, there is.

This is a problem for the Ummah generally, and particularly the Alim – the elite Islamic scholars – who spend their lives dissecting and pronouncing on their religion. Many have come out and openly condemned terrorism, suicide bombing, radicalisation – in fact the whole package of terror-related issues that are used to justify killing. For example, Shaykh Muhammed Sayyid al-Tantawi, Imam of al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, Egypt said: "Attacking innocent people is not courageous, it is

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For many, Anders Brevik is seen as the archetypal lone wolf

stupid and will be punished on the day of judgement... It's not courageous to attack innocent children, women and civilians. It is courageous to protect freedom. It is courageous to defend oneself and not to attack." You could fill page after page with quotes in a similar vein. And yet, these people are human. Their authority is based purely on who takes any notice of them, rather than any abstract notions of religious endorsement. And a minority prefer to ride the whirlwind.

It is, however, only a problem the Islamic community can solve. People talk freely of an "Islamic reformation", similar to the Lutheran reformation Christianity underwent in the 16th Century. Yet people forget how violent that was – with inquisitions, peasant revolts, civil wars and a general European conflagration that got mixed up with a whole host of secular motives often cloaked in religious language. By that standard, the current situation is small beer.

So, lone wolf? While the West may see Islamist attackers as not part of a formal organisation, and calls them lone wolves, they are not alone and would most definitely not see themselves as such. To believe they are is to wholly misunderstand the depth of religious belief and cultural loyalty and identity held by these people. Their desire to do violence against the West is motivated by a strong sense of belonging to a community that they feel is under attack, by contempt for a society they see as corrupt and godless and, finally, a deep religious belief that in an afterlife of paradise where they will be feted as heroes. None of these seem to accord to the definition of "lone".

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