

# Cutting Through the Lone-Wolf Hype

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**By Scott Stewart**

Lone wolf. The mere mention of the phrase invokes a sense of fear and dread. It conjures up images of an unknown, malicious plotter working alone and silently to perpetrate an unpredictable, undetectable and unstoppable act of terror. This one phrase combines the persistent fear of terrorism in modern society with the primal fear of the unknown.

The phrase has been used a lot lately. Anyone who has been paying attention to the American press over the past few weeks has been bombarded with a steady stream of statements regarding lone-wolf militants. While many of these statements, such as those from President Barack Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden and Department of Homeland Security Director Janet Napolitano, were made in the days leading up to the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, they did not stop when the threats surrounding the anniversary proved to be unfounded and the date passed without incident. Indeed, on Sept. 14, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, told CNN that one of the things that concerned him most was "finding that next lone-wolf terrorist before he strikes."

Now, the focus on lone operatives and small independent cells is well founded. We have seen the jihadist threat devolve from one based primarily on the hierarchical al Qaeda core organization to a threat emanating from a broader array of grassroots actors operating alone or in small groups. Indeed, at present, there is a far greater likelihood of a successful jihadist attack being conducted in the West by a lone-wolf attacker or small cell inspired by al Qaeda than by a member of the al Qaeda core or one of the franchise groups. But the lone-wolf threat can be generated by a broad array of ideologies, not just jihadism. A recent reminder of this was the July 22 attack in Oslo, Norway, conducted by lone wolf Anders Breivik.

The lone-wolf threat is nothing new, but it has received a great deal of press coverage in recent months, and with that press coverage has come a certain degree of hype based on the threat's mystique. However, when one looks closely at the history of solitary terrorists, it becomes apparent that there is a significant gap between lone-wolf theory and lone-wolf practice. An examination of this gap is very helpful in placing the lone-wolf threat in the proper context.

## The Shift Toward Leaderless Resistance

While the threat of lone wolves conducting terrorist attacks is real, the first step in putting the threat into context is understanding how long it has existed. To say it is nothing new really means that it is an inherent part of human conflict, a way for a weaker entity — even a solitary one — to inflict pain upon and destabilize a much larger entity. Modern lone-wolf terrorism is widely considered to have emerged in the 1800s, when fanatical individuals bent on effecting political change demonstrated that a solitary actor could impact history. Leon Czolgosz, the anarchist who assassinated U.S. President William McKinley in 1901, was one such lone wolf.

The 1970s brought lone wolf terrorists like Joseph Paul Franklin and Ted Kaczynski, both of whom were able to operate for years without being identified and apprehended. Based on the success of these lone wolves and following the 1988 Fort Smith Sedition Trial, in which the U.S. government's penetration of white hate groups was clearly revealed, some of the leaders of these penetrated groups began to advocate "leaderless resistance" as a way to avoid government pressure. They did not invent the concept, which is really quite old, but they readily embraced it and used their status in the white supremacist movement to advocate it.

In 1989, William Pierce, the leader of a neo-Nazi group called the National Alliance and one of the Fort Smith defendants, published a fictional book under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald titled "Hunter," which dealt with the exploits of a fictional lone wolf named Oscar Yeager. Pierce dedicated the book to Joseph Paul Franklin and he clearly intended it to serve as an inspiration and model for lone-wolf operatives. Pierce's earlier book, "The Turner Diaries," was based on a militant operational theory involving a clandestine organization, and "Hunter" represented a distinct break from that approach.

In 1990, Richard Kelly Hoskins, an influential "Christian Identity" ideologue, published a book titled "Vigilantes of Christendom" in which he introduced the concept of the "Phineas Priest." According to Hoskins, a Phineas Priest is a lone-wolf militant chosen by God and set apart to be God's "agent of vengeance" upon the earth. Phineas Priests also believe their attacks will serve to ignite a wider "racial holy war" that will ultimately lead to the salvation of the white race.

In 1992, another of the Fort Smith defendants, former Ku Klux Klan Leader Louis Beam, published an essay in his magazine "The Seditonist" that provided a detailed roadmap for moving the white hate movement toward the leaderless resistance model. This roadmap called for lone wolves and small "phantom" cells to engage in violent action to protect themselves from detection.

In the white-supremacist realm, the shift toward leaderless resistance — taken because of the government's success in penetrating and disrupting group operations — was an admission of failure on the part of leaders like Pierce, Hoskins and Beam. It is important to note that in the two decades that have passed since the leaderless-resistance model rose to prominence in the white-supremacist movement there have been only a handful of successful lone-wolf attacks. The army of lone wolves envisioned by the proponents of leaderless resistance never materialized.

But the leaderless resistance model was advocated not only by the far right. Influenced by their anarchist roots, left-wing extremists also moved in that direction, and movements such as the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front actually adopted operational models that were very similar to the leaderless-resistance doctrine prescribed by Beam.

More recently, and for similar reasons, the jihadists have also come to adopt the leaderless-resistance theory. Perhaps the first to promote the concept in the jihadist realm was jihadist military theoretician Abu Musab al-Suri. Upon seeing the success the United States and its allies were having against the al Qaeda core and its wider network following 9/11, al-Suri began to promote the concept of individual jihad — leaderless resistance. As if to prove his own point about the dangers of belonging to a group, al-Suri was reportedly captured in November 2005 in Pakistan.

Al-Suri's concept of leaderless resistance was embraced by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the al Qaeda franchise group in Yemen, in 2009. AQAP called for this type of strategy in both its Arabic-language media and its English language magazine, "Inspire," which published long excerpts of al-Suri's material on individual jihad. In 2010, the al Qaeda core also embraced the idea, with U.S.-born spokesman Adam Gadahn echoing AQAP's calls for Muslims to adopt the leaderless resistance model.

However, in the jihadist realm, as in the white-supremacist realm before it, the shift to leaderless resistance was an admission of weakness rather than a sign of strength. Jihadists recognized that they have been extremely limited in their ability to successfully attack the West, and while jihadist groups welcomed recruits in the past, they are now telling them it is too dangerous because of the steps taken by the United States and its allies to combat the transnational terrorist threat.

## Busting the Mystique

Having established that when a group promotes leaderless resistance as an operational model it is a sign of failure rather than strength, let's take a look at how the theory translates into practice.

On its face, as described by strategists such as Beam and al-Suri, the leaderless-resistance theory is tactically sound. By operating as lone wolves or small, insulated cells, operatives can increase their operational security and make it more difficult for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to identify them. As seen by examples such as Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hassan and Roshonara Choudhry, who stabbed British lawmaker Stephen Timms with a kitchen knife in May 2010, such attacks can create a significant impact with very little cost.

Lone wolves and small cells do indeed present unique challenges, but history has shown that it is very difficult to put the lone-wolf theory into practice. For every Eric Rudolph, Nidal Hasan and Anders Breivik there are scores of half-baked lone-wolf wannabes who either botch their operations or are uncovered before they can launch an attack.

It is a rare individual who possesses the requisite combination of will, discipline, adaptability, resourcefulness and technical skill to make the leap from theory to practice and become a successful lone wolf. Immaturity, impatience and incompetence are frequently the bane of failed lone-wolf operators, who also frequently lack a realistic assessment of their capabilities and tend to attempt attacks that are far too complex. When they try to do something spectacular they frequently achieve little or nothing. By definition and operational necessity, lone-wolf operatives do not have the luxury of attending training camps where they can be taught effective terrorist tradecraft. Nasir al-Wahayshi has recognized this and has urged jihadist lone wolves to focus on simple, easily accomplished attacks that can be conducted with readily available items and that do not require advanced tradecraft to succeed.

It must also be recognized that attacks, even those conducted by lone wolves, do not simply materialize out of a vacuum. Lone wolf attacks must follow the same planning process as an attack conducted by a small cell or hierarchical group. This means that lone wolves are also vulnerable to detection during their planning and preparation for an attack — even more so, since a lone wolf must conduct each step of the process alone and therefore must expose himself to detection on multiple occasions rather than delegate risky tasks such as surveillance to someone else in order to reduce the risk of detection. A lone wolf must conduct all the preoperational surveillance, acquire all the weapons, assemble and test all the components of the improvised explosive device (if one is to be used) and then deploy everything required for the attack before launching it.

Certainly, there is far more effort in a truck bomb attack than a simple attack with a knife, and the planning process is shorter for the latter, but the lone wolf still must follow and complete all the steps. While this operational model offers security advantages regarding communications and makes it impossible for the authorities to plant an informant in a group, it also increases operational security risks by exposing the lone operator at multiple points of the planning process.

Operating alone also takes more time, does not allow the lone attacker to leverage the skills of others and requires that the lone attacker provide all the necessary resources for the attack. When we consider all the traits required for someone to bridge the gap between lone-wolf theory and practice, from will and discipline to self-sufficiency and tactical ability, there simply are not many people who have both the ability and the intent to conduct such attacks. This is why we have not seen more lone-wolf attacks despite the fact that the theory does offer some tactical advantages and has been around for so long.

The limits of working alone also mean that, for the most part, lone-wolf attacks tend to be smaller and less damaging than attacks conducted by independent cells or hierarchical organizations. Breivik's attack in Norway and Hasan's attack at Fort Hood are rare exceptions and not the rule.

When we set aside the mystique of the lone wolf and look at the reality of the phenomenon, we can see that the threat is often far less daunting in fact than in theory. One of the most vocal proponents of the theory in the white supremacist movement in the late 1990s was a young California neo-Nazi named Alex Curtis. After Curtis was arrested in 2000 and convicted of harassing Jewish figures in Southern California, it was said that when he made the jump from "keyboard commando" to conducting operations in the physical world he proved to be more of a "stray mutt" than a lone wolf.

Lone wolves — or stray mutts — do pose a threat, but that threat must be neither overstated nor ignored. Lone attackers are not mythical creatures that come out of nowhere to inflict harm. They follow a process and are vulnerable to detection at certain times during that process. Cutting through the hype is an important step in dispelling the mystique and addressing the problems posed by such individuals in a realistic and practical way.

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