

How the 'lone wolf' terrorist networks

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A mounting global threat is of terrorists who act as "lone wolves". Locating and preventing such terrorist activity is more complicated than organizational terror threats. A new study conducted by Prof. Gabriel Weimann of the University of Haifa, reveals that these "lone wolves" are not in fact so isolated and belong to virtual terrorist communities on the Internet.

While fear of [terrorist attacks](#) overshadows the [Olympic Games](#), the "lone wolf" terrorist is a cause for concern: one who is almost impossible to track by means of the "usual" intelligence and tracking tools. Prof. Gabriel Weimann of the University of [Haifa](#), who has been monitoring terrorism on the Internet for over a decade, has found that most of these individuals do find a "virtual wolfpack" to belong to on the net.

A mounting global threat is of terrorists who act as "lone wolves". Locating and preventing such terrorist activity is more complicated than organizational terror threats. A new study conducted by Prof. Gabriel Weimann of the University of Haifa, reveals that these "lone wolves" are not in fact so isolated and belong to virtual terrorist communities on the Internet. "We may be able to better prevent 'lone wolf' terrorist attacks by following the [radicalization](#) of opinions being expressed online and by tracking the enlistment and training processes that are happening in that sphere," noted Prof. Weimann.

In recent years the number of "lone wolf" terrorists has been on the rise. They act alone, influenced by radical ideologies, and are not members of any organization or subjects of any organizational hierarchy, making it

particularly difficult and almost impossible to locate them before they carry out attacks. Making it even more difficult to locate such individuals is the fact that they do not belong to any specific sector of the population and could in fact be "the guy next door". According to Prof. Weimann, intelligence organizations are aware that much of the terrorist activity is shifting from the known terrorist organizations to "lone wolf" activity, and even President of the United States Barack Obama commented in 2011 that this type of attack has become the most likely to cause harm in the Western world.

In his new study, Prof. Weimann shows that these wolves are probably not so 'lonely'. As part of a long-term study that he launched over ten years ago, Prof. Weimann has been surveying encoded and public international terror organization websites, as well as sites supporting these organizations, forums, video clips, and whatever information there is on the net relating to global terrorism. According to Prof. Weimann, most of the "lonely wolves" make contact, share information, and acquire training through the Internet, whether from sites that are linked with terror organizations, from forums supporting such organizations, or from other platforms. In addition to this sort of "regular" activity on the web, social networks provide these individuals with their virtual wolfpack: a virtual community of people who think like them, who share their ideals, and with whom they can consult and share advice. "The virtual community gives the 'lone wolf' social environment, support, and moral encouragement," Prof. Weimann notes.

The researcher presents a number of examples of such terrorists who supposedly acted alone. It was revealed that American officer Nidal Hasan, who shot and killed thirteen American soldiers, had communicated with a known [terrorist](#) through the Internet. Arif Uka, a young Bosnian who shot and killed American soldiers in Frankfurt, was a Facebook friend of various known Islamist radicals.

Another known example is the Internet activity that followed Mohamed Merah's attack killing four Jews in Toulouse a number of months ago. Monitoring the web, Prof. Weimann has observed that immediately after Merah was killed in a police siege, members of Jihadist online forums began praising Merah's act and encouraged additional acts like it. A Facebook page praising the killings was promptly created and by the time it was closed down with the involvement of the French government, 500 Facebook users had joined it. According to Prof. Weimann, it is these types of forums and activity that must be monitored to locate and identify the next "lone wolf".

"Enlistment, confidence building, explanations as well as social support for the 'lone wolves' are all becoming available on the Internet. These sites can be monitored. Depending on how deeply the law will get involved in this sort of Internet activity is what will determine the time it takes to sound the alarm on an individualist's intended act of terror. Clearly, undercover agents will be able to penetrate the terrorists' social networks by becoming more familiar with this sort of activity," concludes Prof. Weimann. .

Provided by University of Haifa

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