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IS THE LONE PERPETRATOR REALLY ALONE?

ABSTRACT: *As a consequence of the terrorist attacks of the past years the expressions “lone perpetrator, the lone terrorist, or the lone wolf” have become part of the public conscience as an organic component of terror. At the same time the more similar acts – considered terrorist attacks – happen the clearer it becomes that the perpetrators classified to be from the same group significantly differ from each other. It is reasonable to question whether the lone perpetrators are really alone. Or perhaps a part of the criminals called lone perpetrators are not alone in fact and they fit in a different system of criteria?*

KEYWORDS: *terror, lone perpetrator, single perpetrator, lone wolf*

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle. (Sun Tzu)

INTRODUCTION

During the past years, mostly since the unprecedented wave of terrorist attacks has begun in Europe in November 2015, the term of “lone perpetrator” spread both in the public and the specific professional vocabulary. This expression is based upon that the perpetrator of a terrorist attack carries out his deadly mission against a target chosen “theoretically” by him, getting closer there on his own way, seemingly alone, without any supporters or wingmen, independently from any organization. The problem is not new. As early as a decade ago the challenge caused by lone perpetrators figured in the European Commission’s report on this special field. The authors of the document stated that “the replacement of the structured and hierarchic groups by semi-autonomous cells or lone perpetrators was going on and the enhanced use of the internet to inspire and stimulate the local terrorist and individuals, to mobilize them and to educate and train them.”¹ It is obvious that the EU-forum considered this tendency as a real problem as early as 2008 and it was mentioned later several times on different special forums. So did the TE-SAT as well, which pointed out in its report in 2012 analyzing the global processes “amongst the arrested persons there are more and more persons who are lone perpetrators or members of jihadist cells independent from the already known terrorist organizations (al-Qaeda on the territory of the Islam Maghreb and the al-

¹ „The report of the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council about the implementation of the frame resolution of the Council 2008/919/IB of 28 November 2008 about the amendment of the frame resolution 2002/475/IB about the struggle against terrorism”. <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2014/HU/1-2014-554-HU-F1-1.Pdf>, Accessed on 10 February 2018.

Sabab in Somalia).² It means the problem was recognized earlier but these persons became important from the political point of view and of national security in Europe only in 2016.³

Neither the seemingness nor the peculiar implementation of the terrorist act means that the perpetrator carried out the attack spiritually and physically alone in harmony with the original and authentic meaning of the expression „loneliness”. Thus it is not certain that all the perpetrators called “lone wolves” could meet the criteria of a real lone perpetrator.

The latest research by Agnes Hankiss proved that the perpetrators who committed the crimes in the conditions mentioned above were not lone wolves because their tight contact through one or two persons to the terrorist organizations interested in the terrorist act supplying the logistic and material support and granting the psychic and other training for the perpetration were confirmed.⁴ Thus the well-known researcher denied the general opinion that “many of the Islamist attempts in the past years were perpetrated by persons called “lone wolves” who supposedly were not members of any terrorist groups.”⁵

Logically, the term “lone perpetrator” does not suit the signficante and meanings attributed to that because the following definition about the “lone perpetrator” is not true in all cases: “The term, which describes an individual actor who strikes alone and is not affiliated with any larger group, is now widely used by politicians, journalists, security officials and the general public.”⁶

All the above mentioned facts lead to the question: is the lone perpetrator alone? What does this notion mean, how a perpetrator becomes lone wolf? If a lone perpetrator is not alone, what is the correct expression, the appropriate term? The present study tries to find the answers to these basic questions important from the point of view of national security and counter-terrorism, using the method of comparing. The authors agree with the statement of the researchers of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism saying: “Comparative research is not a solution to all problems with regards to terrorism research, but it has the opportunity to greatly increase our understanding of this complex phenomenon.”⁷

THE ETYMOLOGIC PROBLEM

Referring to the lone perpetrator there is a really tough problem due to the fact that the word “lone” has a narrower meaning comparing with the aimed or possibly aimed meaning of the “lone perpetrator” created by the specialists when categorizing a certain type of behavior of perpetrators of terrorist acts.

² Répási K.: “Az Európai Unió terrorfenyegetettsége a TE-SAT 2012 jelentés tükrében”. *Nemzet és Biztonság* 5/5-6. 2012. 158.

³ Besenyő J. “Low-cost attacks, unnoticeable plots? Overview on the economical character of current terrorism”. *Strategic Impact* 62/1. 2017. 83–100. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=531307>, Accessed on 10 February 2018.

⁴ Hankiss Á. “A magányos merénylő legendája”. *Magyar Idők*, 1 July 2017. <https://magyaridok.hu/lugas/egesdel-oket-1872439/>, Accessed on 11 January 2018.

⁵ Répási K. “Európa az iszlamista terrorizmus árnyékában”. *Hadtudományi Szemle* 6/1. 2013. 44.

⁶ Burke, J. “The myth of the ‘lone wolf’ terrorist”. *The Guardian*, 30 March 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/mar/30/myth-lone-wolf-terrorist>, Accessed on 12 January 2018.

⁷ Leenaars, J. and Reed, A. “Understanding Lone Wolves: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Comparative Analysis”. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague. April 2016. 12. <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Leenaars-Reed-Understanding-Lone-Wolves-April-2016.pdf>, Accessed on 12 January 2018.

The meanings of the words lone and single are close to each other and in both cases they refer to loneliness and co-completeness.⁸ At the same time this co-completeness is far from having the meaning the creators of the term “lone perpetrator” wanted to attribute to him. The essence of the problem is that by now the “lone perpetrator” has become an umbrella term under which many experts want to push in different perpetrators with distinct attitudes.

In other words, the criteria of loneliness are valid only in cases of certain “lone perpetrators” but in the cases of others not. It is worth examining two components:

1. Being alone beside its moral or spiritual meaning mostly refers to physical solitude. It is also true in the case of a smaller part of perpetrators while their majority is not alone at all, they are just the only persons involved directly in the perpetration of a given terrorist act.

2. Another important moment has a clear psychological implication. In the case of those „lone perpetrators” where loneliness is missing the psychological part of solitude is also found among the motives of the perpetration. Therefore the qualification of these perpetrators as „lone wolves” is doubtful.

It is obvious there are important semantic problems related to the current general use of the term „lone perpetrator”. The case studies of this class of perpetrators can also prove how significant this problem is.

THE LONE PERPETRATOR

When analyzing the lone perpetrator it is necessary to state that these persons always have an asystematic mental status,⁹ represented in a distorted, incoherent conglomerate of political and sociological ideas. Many scientific works prove: “mental problems or a general social inability underlie the histories of many of the lone individuals mentioned.”¹⁰

The classic example of the „lone perpetrator” is the Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik, who blew up a car bomb using a home-made explosive device on 22 July 2011 in the center of Oslo first, and started a massacre by shooting on the island of Utøya. “On the island of Utøya, forty kilometers from the Norwegian capital, Oslo, in the camp of the governing Labor Party he shot dead 69 persons and wounded another 66 with a Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle and a Glock 17 handgun.”¹¹ All together 77 got killed and 96 persons received wounds in the two attacks. Breivik’s case is a real classic example. He became radicalized in secret, separated from everything and everybody. In his case the distorted political conviction was formed by surfing on extreme right wing pages. It confirms the supposition that the technical and technological development as a side effect of globalization and mostly the growing use of the internet offers practically unlimited opportunities for the divulgence of extreme ideologies. Thus the chance of the people susceptible for radicalization to get familiar with materials and methods which can be used for extremist purposes significantly increases. This will cause the growth of the number of people ready to perpetrate terrorist acts. Nevertheless,

⁸ “A magyar nyelv értelmező szótára”. <http://mek.oszk.hu/adatbazis/magyar-nyelv-ertelmezo-szotara/kereses.php?csakcimben=&szo=MAG%C3%81NYOS&offset=2&kereses=mag%C3%A1nyos>, Accessed on 3 January 2018.

⁹ Répási K.: “Újjáéled-e az európai szélsőjobb oldali terrorizmus?”. *Nemzet és Biztonság* 5/5-6. 2012. 108.

¹⁰ Pantucci, R. “A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists”. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. March 2011. 35. http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf, Accessed on 05 February 2018.

¹¹ Tálás P. and Csiki T. “Az oslói/utóyai merényletről”. ZMNE SVKK. 2011. 1. http://193.224.76.4/download/svki/Elemzesek/2011/SVKK_Elemzesek_2011_8.pdf, Accessed on 02 February 2018.

these persons can never be linked to any radical community, they are neither active members nor detectable supporters thus they do not get into the scope of counter-terrorist or national security organizations. Their radicalization takes place in a closed circle, it is practically self-radicalization. At the same time it also means that forming a distorted ideology will not spread; it will remain a factor affecting the mentality of one single person. The fact that along a new ideology further radicalization cannot be developed is an important factor in the activities of counter-terrorist and national security services.

Another group of perpetrators who are usually also called “lone perpetrators” are the amok, who are often included into the group of terrorists by the authors of studies specialized in these topics. Because of practical considerations they cannot be included into the category of terrorists as their motives are completely free of political intentions. Once terrorism is “basically a political phenomenon behind which there are structural and psychological factors as well”¹² amok cannot be considered as terrorists. It is doubtless that the acts perpetrated by amok have strong signs of terrorism due to their character.

THE SEEMINGLY LONE PERPETRATOR

The method called by the special literature „method of the lone perpetrator” practically is just an appearance. It has been changing throughout the past years. When it received a special role in the tactics of international terrorist organizations at the beginning of 2010, it seems it did not meet the expectations of the terrorist because the majority of lone perpetrators make an attempt to perpetrate their terrorist acts in a very unprofessional way, even those who were trained in Pakistan. Al-Quaeda also encouraged looking into the causes of the failed attempts in order to avoid the repetition of the same mistake during the next attempt – experts said. Many lone perpetrators cannot even perpetrate their acts because they are captured by the police much earlier.¹³ For today this idea has to be reviewed. The events of the immediate past show the acts perpetrated by “lone wolves” are on the top. It is proven by the well-known expert of security policy Marie-Helen Maras in her study of 2014, where she divides the persons perpetrating terrorist acts in two different groups:

- domestically educated lone wolf,
- Islamist lone wolf.¹⁴

The position of the American expert seemingly confirms that lone perpetration as a terrorist tactics became one of the major menaces in the activities linked to post-modern terrorism. Nevertheless, this kind of loneliness should not be confused with the solitude of the classic perpetrator’s loneliness. It is unequivocal that a brand new terrorist tactics has spread. The terrorist selects the target himself, he selects the tools and the methods, but at the same time he receives permanent support from one or another terrorist community or group. This support is minimum, quite often it has just ideological character. There is no permanent connection, no personal talks, meetings, there are no direct traces, or suspicious events, the perpetrator is mostly invisible for the authorities even though he makes a statement of loyalty oath prior to the attack by electronic way, on Facebook or on other social media, to some terrorist organization although this type of behavior is not a criterion.

¹² Gál I. L. “Új biztonságpolitikai kihívás a XXI. században: a terrorizmus finanszírozása”. *Szakmai Szemle* 8/1. 20012. 5.

¹³ Répási. “Az Európai Unió...”. 157–163.

¹⁴ Maras, M-H. *A terrorizmus elmélete és gyakorlata*. Budapest: Antall József Tudásközpont, 2016. 86–89.

What is the reason of this innovation, why is it so efficient? The reason is simple: “the lonely acting perpetrators seldom get into the focus of authorities.”¹⁵ The detection of potential perpetrators is difficult because their lone acting guarantees the highest level of conspiracy.

To understand the nature of the seemingly lone perpetrator who in effect does not fit the criteria of the “lone wolf”, and to more precisely present the method of the perpetration it is indispensable to analyze the target as well. Based upon the formal logic one can suppose that this kind of perpetrator carries out the attack against one target although it is not always true. When the target of the terrorist attack is one person or a group of determined persons or an object, a building, or a compound or facility the principle “one perpetrator – one target” is true. An example of this was the attempt against the Prime Minister of Israel Jichak Rabin by a Jewish extremist.

This principle is not valid when a whole group of perpetrators carries out a coordinated attack against the same target. The target can be a determined person or a group of determined persons or a building or an institution. The example of this case was the attempt against the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat by the Muslim Brotherhood during a military parade.

But what is the situation if there is no determined target – as it is usual in terrorism – but there is just the mission which is alarmingly inhuman: the physical annihilation of persons, the more the better, who have not any relation or link with the perpetrator, they do not even know each other, or at least, to cause them grave physical and psychic trauma, intimidation and the maximum possible destruction of the objects on the operational scene.

In similar cases there are three more factors to be assessed. One is the intention of the perpetrator determining the possible tool of the attack, the second is the tool itself and the third is the scene of the attack.

If the perpetrator is not ready to become a martyr on the scene of attack he chooses the tool of the act in a way to have chance to escape and to continue the attack in another possible location or to have a chance to carry out another attack. In these cases the tool is a knife, hatchet, chopper, vehicle, firearm, hand grenade, or other easily concealable and rapidly useable artifact. The principle in this case is “one perpetrator – alternative mission – several scenes – variable tools.” The best example is the case of the perpetrator who was disarmed by American servicemen on a train in Germany. The perpetrator had not only firearms but cold weapons as well.

If the perpetrator is ready for martyrdom, they usually choose for self-detonation using a detonating vest or other explosive devices with tools enhancing the effect of fragments. This situation can be described like “one perpetrator – one mission – one scene – one tool.”

If we look over the frequent perpetration patterns in Afghanistan and Iraq, we’ll see the attacks are mostly perpetrated in public places – markets, in front of different institutions – usually with the use of explosive devices by self-detonation. In order to increase the number of potential victims several devices are often detonated at the same time or within short intervals. In these cases the formula of the attack is “several perpetrators – one mission – parallel scenes – identical tools.”

If we try to determine the type of the Madrid attempts we see the attacks were perpetrated at the same time in different vehicles of public transport as scenes and by using explosive devices. The perpetration formula is “multiple perpetrators – one mission – several scenes – identical tools.”

¹⁵ Répási. “Újjáéled-e...”. 111.

Analyzing the attempts at the Stade de France, at the Bataclan and on another scene in 2015 where the perpetrators self-detonated or used firearms it comes clear that the perpetration formula or the perpetration pattern is the most complicated in comparison with the other attacks. It is „multiple perpetrators – combined mission – multiple scenes – different tools.”

In 2016 Dabiq suggested attacks against targets like hotels, bars where after an explosion or arson in the closed premises the other team of perpetrators waiting outside the building would use firearms against the people fleeing from the scene thus multiplying the number of the victims and the information value of the attack so badly needed by all the terrorists. Similar attack was perpetrated in Mumbai too. The pattern of this kind of attacks is “multiple perpetrator groups – combined mission – same scene – combined tools.”

As we have already mentioned above the perpetration pattern depends on the intention of the perpetrator. This intention is also directly influenced by the conditions and the opportunities of the perpetrator, be the perpetrator an organization, a group or an individual. Consequently, the structural disintegration of the terrorist organizations like the Islamic State will change the patterns, the characteristics, the aims, the methods, the tools and possibly the perpetrators of the attacks carried out in the name of the organization. The strategic aim will also change: the installation, recognition and consolidation of the Caliphate will lose its importance as a primary strategic aim; it can be only a secondary one. After the destruction of the organizational structure of the terrorist organization by the coalition forces, the new and most important aim will be the minimum preservation of the functional capacities of the organization saving the communication network, the elaboration of the new operational strategy including the transformation of the financial sources, the creation and use of new sources. In order to extend its operational scene into the virtual space terrorism will use the newest electronic tools and the human resources available for terrorist organizations in its intention to penetrate into the financial structures and the financial and stock market activities. Its allies are as usual: the countries permanently supporting terrorism like Iran, North Korea and Russia, full of anti-Western sentiments, disposing of extraordinarily developed electronic knowledge and technics and ready to use any kind of tools against Western cultures. Furthermore, terrorists can count on their old business-based allies; the international network of organized crime, syndicates, or groups.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

Looking through the views on “lone perpetrators” we have to agree with the “Research exploring those who become lone actors will always have value, especially as we seek to identify those at risk and prevent radicalization to violence.”¹⁶

Consequently, it seems true that the “lone perpetrator” as a common notion is imported from the juridical terms into the public language. It is full of naive connotations, rough prejudices and moral and ethical enthymenas.¹⁷ Furthermore, its generalized, simplified and idealized use is univocally misleading, professionally baseless and counter-productive from

¹⁶ Pantucci, R., Ellis, C. and Chaplais, L. “Lone-Actor Terrorism: Literature Review”. Royal United Services Institute. 2015. 17. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Literature_Review.pdf, Accessed on 05 February 2018.

¹⁷ Bukovics I., Fáy Gy. and Kun I. “Alkatpszichológiai modellek alkalmazása a terrrorelhárításban”. *Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle* 3/4. 2015. 5.

the point of view of efficient counter-actions. As it has been proved by the examples above the term “lone perpetrator” is applied practically to two different groups of perpetrators:

1. the lone perpetrator;
2. That perpetrator who is different from the first group of perpetrators in his psychology, system of social links and aims but he carries out his attempt alone.

The division is even more complicated because the first group can be divided further into two sub-groups:

- a) the classic lone perpetrator i. e. the really single terrorist (for example Breivik) and
- b) The amok.

The interpretation of the classic lone perpetrator as a notion seems to be easier as they usually are subject of an intensive self-radicalization process. Its result is their complete alienation of the society and of the real life and they carry out their politically motivated act according to a distorted philosophic system. Since “studies addressing terrorism agree that it is mainly a political phenomenon based on both structural and psychological factors,”¹⁸ in the majority of the cases amok cannot be considered as terrorism as the act itself has not political motivation. This kind of attacks shall be classified as common criminal acts using tools of terrorist character. The approach to the classification of the act from the tool side is extraordinarily important because the use of terroristic tools, the terrorist-like actuation of amok makes the counter-actions of the counter-terrorist services justified.

In the previous case studies we got knew the perpetrators of the second group cannot be considered „lone ones” either because in the majority of the known cases they have a wide-spread contact system with the terrorist communities, „at the most they may not have imminent and direct contacts with the terrorist organizations.”¹⁹ Their cases are peculiar, their status can be compared with the so called “sleeping cells” which can be activated in due time. We can state the actors of the second group fit the criteria of being classified as terrorists.

Going through the characteristics of the persons in the first and second groups one can see they differ not only in some cases or at some points but practically they differ by all the characteristics except acting without companion during the perpetration. Thus we consider appropriate to introduce a new auxiliary notion the “unipersonal perpetrator.”

The new notion more precisely the new structure brought up by the use of the new notion can lead to some changes in the coherency of the dedicated literature and what is even more important, it can open a space for the synthetization of tasks of the services devoted to the special counter-terrorist operations. By the introduction of the notion “unipersonal perpetrator” the following categories can be set up:

The person perpetrating a terrorist act without companion can be:

- I. lone perpetrator
 - a. classic lone perpetrator
 - b. amok
- II. unipersonal perpetrator

As it is clear in this case the univocal separation of the types of perpetrators based upon the specific features is feasible. This makes intelligence, physical counter-actions and also court processes against them easier. “We should never miss the fact that the terrorist, the person intending to perpetrate a terrorist act is nobody else than a crime perpetrator. The efficient

¹⁸ Gál I. L. “Some Thoughts about Terrorism and Human Rights in Hungary: the Ahmed H. Case”. *Terror & Elhárítás* Special Issue. 2017. 32.

¹⁹ Farkas J. “A magányos merénylők radikalizálódása”. *Acta Humana* 4 NS/5. 2016. 18.

counter-action against him and the general prevention aimed to withhold other members of society bethinking similar plans have to be materialized in the criminal prosecution of the lone perpetrator preparing a terrorist act.”²⁰

At the same time in order to carry out a successful mission against “lone or unipersonal perpetrators” it is of basic importance that the counter-terrorist officers have „to learn to use the mentality of the terrorist. On the one hand it means we have to be able to imagine attacks with a level of cruelty overpassing the tolerance of many experts of analysis, on the other hand we have to take into consideration the importance of fortuitousness as a key element of terror.”²¹ The opinion expressed by the well-known national security expert of the Johns Hopkins University has a special importance considering this really creative and flexible form of terrorism thus it confirms the idea that “in the asymmetric struggle against terrorism new and more efficient tools have to be applied to be successful.”²²

“Handling the potential terrorist acts to be perpetrated by lone attackers requires the elaboration and implementation of new special intelligence and investigation strategies by the law enforcement agencies.”²³ To create these special methods mentioned by the expert of the American think-tank it is important to be aware that „for lone wolf terrorism to be appropriately addressed, researchers must first dedicate appropriate attention to the topic in order to assist in the influencing of future policies and counter-terrorism and extremism measures.”²⁴

The appropriate response from the government, law-enforcement, and national security agencies always requires a high level of complexity and coordination. In this regard some expert say: “if a country wanted to eradicate lone wolf terrorism, it would need to completely eliminate the sale of goods such as guns, fireworks, nails, pressure cookers, lead pipes, Christmas lights, and matches.”²⁵

These ideas rather reflect one of the most radical views, nevertheless, the efficient response to the security risk and threat represented by the „unipersonal perpetrators”, or classic „lone perpetrators” need a serious, well-coordinated and well-managed counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism system. The key point of the efficiency of the countermeasures is the highest possible level of the intelligence services’ activities. It is more than clear that the successful countermeasures against „unipersonal perpetrators” or „lone perpetrators” depend on the quality of intelligence which in its turn requires the appropriate legal and professional background. The perpetrator without companion is one of the most important actual challenges for national security in general and counter-terrorism in particular. We

²⁰ Neparáczki A. V. “A terrorcselekményt előkészítő magányos elkövetőre vonatkozó szabályok a Büntető Törvénykönyvben”. *Terror & Elhárítás* 4/1. 2015. 134.

²¹ Lowenthal, M. M. *Hírszerzés*. Budapest: Antall József Tudásközpont, 2017. 434.

²² Padányi J. “Az aszimmetrikus hadviselés során alkalmazandó eljárások, eszközök és módszerek”. *Hadtudomány* 25/1-2. 2015. 81.

²³ Farkas. “A magányos...”. 19.

²⁴ Dickson, L. W. “Lone Wolf Terrorism a Case Study: The Radicalization Process of a Continually Investigated & Islamic State Inspired Lone Wolf Terrorist”. Degree project in Criminology 15 credits. Malmö University, Faculty of Health and Society, Department of Criminology, 2015. 42. <http://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/19258/Lone%20Wolf%20Terrorism%20-%20Masters%20Thesis%20-%20Lewis%20W.Dickson.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, Accessed on 12 January 2018.

²⁵ Wiskind, C. “Lone Wolf Terrorism and Open Source Jihad: an Explanation and Assessment”. International Institute of Counter-Terrorism. 2016. 3. <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ict-lone-wolf-osint-jihad-wiskind.pdf>, Accessed on 14 Jan 2018

should not forget that terrorism is in permanent evolution and “the potential of lone wolf cyber terrorism warrants future study.”²⁶

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²⁶ Alfaro-Gonzalez, L. et al. „Report: Lone Wolf Terrorism”. Prepared by Security Studies Program National Security Critical Issue Task Force. Georgetown University, 2015. 8. <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/NCITF-Final-Paper.pdf>, Accessed on 17 January 2018.

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