



Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 7

Lone-Actor Terrorism

Policy Paper 3: Motivations, Political Engagement and Online Activity

Melanie Smith, Sabine Barton and Jonathan Birdwell



Co-funded by the Prevention of and
Fight against Crime Programme of
the European Union

About this Paper

This paper is the seventh publication in the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project, which aims to improve understanding of, and responses to, the phenomenon of (potentially) violent lone actors through analysis of comprehensive data on cases from across Europe. The eighteen-month project is co-funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union, and has been undertaken by a RUSI-led consortium. Partnering institutions include Chatham House, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Leiden University, one of the founding organisations of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) at The Hague.

The project is grateful for the additional support received from the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). It also acknowledges the support of associate partners, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, now the National Police Chiefs' Council, NPCC) in the UK and the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM).

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Published in 2016 by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.



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THE INSTITUTE FOR Strategic Dialogue analysed two main sections of the CLAT dataset that pertain to the motivations of Lone Actor Terrorists (LATs), as well as their political engagement and online activity.

In this paper, we provide recommendations for policymakers, police and social media companies based on our findings. We recommend that European policymakers and police:

1. Give greater consideration to the threat from far-right lone actors, particularly in light of the refugee crisis.
2. Develop a more coordinated approach to infiltrating, monitoring and proscribing violent extremist groups, particularly violent far-right groups.
 - Encourage non-violent extremist groups to report individuals who leave their parties or communities because their views are too extreme or because of a confrontation.

We also recommend that social media companies:

3. Continue to improve user-based reporting systems to account for individuals that pose an immediate risk, and establish closer links with the police to expedite responses in these cases. They should also trial new methods such as online one2one interventions for less urgent cases.

Preventing every single instance of lone actor terrorism is impossible. This is particularly true in countries where freedom of thought, speech and privacy are highly valued and must be protected. Our recommendations are an attempt to provide practical suggestions for preventing instances of lone actor terrorism – based on our findings relating to their motivations, political engagement and online activity – that adhere to these principles.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers and the police should give greater consideration to the threat from far-right lone actors, particularly in light of the refugee crisis.

The CLAT dataset shows that the threat stemming from far-right lone actor terrorism across Europe is significant. It also shows that right-wing lone actors were less likely to have been under active investigation by authorities than religiously inspired individuals. Policymakers and the police must give greater consideration to the threat from far-right lone actor terrorism, and not underestimate its capacity when compared with Islamist extremism.

Right-wing ideologies have motivated a third of lone-actor attacks across Europe since the year 2000. This figure is likely to be even higher. The geographical distribution of cases within the dataset suggests substantial under-reporting of far-right violence perpetrated by lone actors in numerous European countries. No less than 35 out of 40 right-wing cases recorded in the database took place in the UK, Germany and Norway, which may only signify that reporting of

right-wing cases in both legal systems and in the media is significantly better in these countries than in others, such as Hungary.

Conversely, numerous countries in the database which exhibit a strong cultural or political presence of extreme right-wing elements have ostensibly produced very few cases of attacks motivated by right-wing ideology. One possible explanation for this result is the manner in which right-wing crime is reported in national media in these countries. The failure to conflate these attacks with traditional definitions of terrorism would have inhibited primary data collection. Additionally, the ubiquity of these incidents often renders them 'un-newsworthy'.

A Resurgent Far-Right

The CLAT database shows that the majority of right-wing perpetrators of LAT attacks have been motivated predominantly by anti-immigration or Islamophobic beliefs, often underpinned by notions of white supremacy; most notably the attack by Anders Breivik. In light of the refugee crisis currently unfolding across Europe, which has affected all European countries in one way or another, the threat of a resurgent and violent far-right attack has become intensified.

Firstly, there needs to be greater attention paid to the spread of violent and Islamophobic sentiments as well as the protection of vulnerable people travelling to Europe for refuge. Part of this relates to communication regarding threat levels. The media devotes significant coverage to a rise in threat levels relating to the threat of Islamist attacks, but rarely for far-right attacks. One example to the contrary – which should provide a model for European governments – is the OCAD (Unit for Coordination and Threat Analysis). As the Belgian authority that sets terrorist threat levels, it has decided to upgrade threat levels for asylum seeker reception centres in Belgium in light of a sharp rise in right-wing attacks in numerous European countries, including Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands.¹

Policymakers must be wary that the terminology used in announcements relating to the refugee crisis, the rise of IS-led attacks in Europe, or the recent sexual attacks in Cologne can lead to furthering a climate which strengthens right-wing sentiments. Some evidence to this effect has already been demonstrated by the rise of arson attacks on asylum centres and refugee homes across Europe. For example, Germany had recorded over 220 attacks perpetrated against refugee homes at the end of 2015.² The impact of the refugee crisis is already being seen in the rise of far-right populist political parties – like Front National in France – and demonstrations by the group Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West).³ While these groups themselves are not violent, they may provide the 'moral oxygen' for far-right lone actors, as was seen in the case of Anders Breivik.

1. <http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/News/1.2479584>

2. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-222-refugee-homes-burned-or-attacked-arrests-a6763506.html>

3. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/frances-far-right-front-national-wins-one-in-three-votes-in-regional-elections-following-paris-a6764031.html>

Developing Local Programmes and Solutions

As well as being more aware of when threats from far-right lone actors could potentially spike, it is vital that European governments look to support or develop programmes that can deliver prevention and disengagement support to those involved.

There is a plethora of different approaches to tackling far-right extremism across Europe that countries can learn from and seek to emulate. Much of this work is pioneered by non-governmental organisations across Europe. These include educational programmes, like the “Information and Education Centre against Racism” in North-Rhine Westphalia or ISD’s Extreme Dialogue, advocacy and education programmes for vulnerable and refugee groups like the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) in Budapest, to disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives like EXIT Germany. EXIT Germany for example, which was co-founded by a former police detective and a former neo-Nazi leader in 2000, has successfully assisted over 500 individuals to leave right-wing movements (with a recidivism rate of approximately 3%).⁴ Similarly, EXIT Fryshuset has been highly successful in supporting those who wish to leave far-right groups in Sweden. Governments across Europe should seek to build on these initiatives, supporting them to scale up their existing methods and capacities, or by introducing these types of programmes if they do not already exist.

In this context, the most effective counter-measures will be those approaches that take into account local circumstances and those tailored specifically to address local needs, thus incorporating the significant threat posed by right-wing lone actors. Especially important in cases where small towns have experienced a substantial influx of refugees, local authorities must take the lead in encouraging integration. In the case of Sumte, ‘a one-street settlement in Lower Saxony’, the resident population rose over 700% overnight as 750 refugees were resettled in the village.⁵ National governments are not best positioned to intervene in these situations. However they can actively support local authorities and civil society actors, who are often on the frontlines of countering far-right violence with advocacy and education.

There is also a strong need for city-level collaboration and sharing best practice. ISD’s Strong Cities Network is the first ever global network of mayors and city-level frontline workers committed to building social cohesion and resilience to all forms of violent extremism. Through the network, cities in Europe with concerns over the far-right can learn from other cities – in Europe and North America – that have previously designed and implemented effective programmes.

Similarly, programmes like the FREE initiative, which acts as an online resource for guidance and best-practice on how to deal with far-right extremism in Europe, could provide valuable support to those in positions of authority. This includes tailored advice for local law enforcement, as well as for national policymakers on how to respond to this threat.⁶

4. <http://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/>

5. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sumte-german-village-with-100-residents-and-zero-infrastructure-told-to-take-in-750-refugees-a6717591.html>

6. <http://thefreeinitiative.com/about/>

Tackling Far-Right Online

It is also vital to tackle the rise of far-right presence online. Analysis of the dataset revealed a lot of specific information about the ways in which social media and the Internet are leveraged not only by far-right lone actors, most notably in their tendency to 'leak' their intention to act or specific attack plans through these mediums.⁷ These findings also reinforce the substantial expertise of far-right extremists in terms of propagandising and garnering support. Historically, far-right groups and individuals have harnessed the immediacy and cost-effectiveness of the Internet to suit the relentless propagation of their views. As Whine explains, when the Internet grew in popularity in the early 2000s, it presented the far-right with "a previously undreamed of possibility for...allowing racists to access each other's ideas and resources"⁸ – and this also appears to be consistent with more recent findings. A study by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos found that populist right-wing pages on social networking sites excel at reaching individuals outside of their existing networks.⁹

The volume of violent far-right content online needs to be policed more intensively. This will be discussed in greater depth in our third recommendation, which addresses the ways in which social media companies can adapt their existing methods to address the threat stemming from violent extremism and specifically lone actor terrorism.

2. Develop a more coordinated approach to infiltrating, monitoring and proscribing violent extremist groups, particularly violent far-right groups.

LATs are defined by their lack of direction from any group or other individuals in planning or carrying out their attacks. However, many of these perpetrators still have links to violent extremist groups – both in an online and offline setting. Based on the dataset collected, there is a clear indication that an LAT's link to an extremist group presents a potential key area for detection. Governments must continue to infiltrate and monitor violent extremist groups with greater intensity.

As discussed in our accompanying analysis paper, one third of the perpetrators profiled were found to have a link to an extreme group, and the largest range of groups named were those that propagate right-wing sentiment. Additionally, those with a link to an extreme group perpetrated attacks that accounted for a higher count of fatalities. This suggests that LATs who have (or have previously had) connections to extremist groups are likely to be made more successful by the technical knowledge or access to weapons that this link may afford.

7. Clare Ellis and Raffaello Pantucci, 'Lone Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper 4: "Leakage" and Interaction with Authorities', Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 8, RUSI Occasional Paper, February 2016

8. Michael Whine (1997), 'The Far-right on the Internet', *The Governance of Cyberspace*, pp. 209-217

9. Jamie Bartlett and Alex Krasodonski-Jones (2015), 'Counter-speech: Examining content that challenges extremism online'; <http://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Counter-speech.pdf>

In the case of violent extremist groups, the question of proscription and effective policing of already proscribed groups is critical as this presents an additional tool for intervention. In 18 cases the LAT's link to a violent extremist group was current when they carried out their attack. Within the Islamist cohort, the most common links were to groups that are already proscribed, including Al-Muhajiroun and Al-Qaida-affiliated groups. Conversely, on the right-wing side, the most common links were to extremist groups that do not explicitly advocate violence in the name of their cause but have a violent reputation like the English Defence League. These groups are not currently proscribed and are therefore afforded freedom from the threat of prosecution.

In terms of monitoring and policing proscribed groups, our research suggests the need for increased coordination amongst European member states, in particular when it comes to known far-right movements that operate across national boundaries. The European Union currently has two lists of designated terrorist groups, entities and individuals involved in terrorist acts: firstly, a copy of the list of the United Nations; and secondly, an autonomous list based on decisions taken by the EU Council. Listed persons, groups or entities are subject to the freezing of financial assets and funds, as well as enhanced measures related to police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters.¹⁰ However, at present, there are no far-right organisations listed by the European Union. This suggests that efforts to apply thresholds for proscription must be applied consistently to known far-right movements but that national cultural contexts must also be taken into consideration. Similarly, information-sharing between EU countries on these groups must be improved to avoid the internationalizing of certain movements (i.e. extremist groups moving from countries where they are banned, to countries where they are not).

A concrete example of existing imbalance is the group Combat 18 and its associated Blood and Honour organisation, to which numerous lone actors across different countries in the dataset have exhibited a link. Blood and Honour and Combat 18 remain unproscribed despite their open incitement of racism and hatred, which qualifies as a criminal offence in countries such as the United Kingdom. The fact that Blood and Honour is banned in some European countries but not in others indicates that there might be scope for a more unified approach towards cross-border extremist organisations within the EU.

- Encourage non-violent 'populist' and radical groups to report individuals who leave their parties or communities because their views are too extreme or because of a confrontation.

There have been known cases in which individuals who have engaged with more mainstream, non-violent populist and radical movements have later gone on to perpetrate lethal lone actor terror attacks. In some of these cases, the individual had been rejected or expelled on account of their views becoming too radical or too extreme for the movement. However, it is obvious that these movements or groups had not communicated their concerns surrounding this individual to the appropriate law enforcement agencies. This indicates a potential opening for cooperation between the police and groups that may be deemed politically or religiously 'extreme' but do not condone violence for the sake of their movement. Reporting individuals who have become

10. <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/terrorist-list/>

too zealous or fanatical for the group is a simple way to draw attention to a person at risk of radicalisation and for authorities to guide these individuals through the appropriate channel.

3. Social media companies should continue improving user-based reporting systems to account for individuals that pose an immediate risk, and establish closer links with the police to expedite responses in these cases. They should also trial new methods such as online one-on-one interventions at a greater scale.

The online sphere presents an important avenue for intervention and countering the threat of lone actor terrorism. Cooperation between different stakeholders is essential to address this growing problem, and collaboration between European institutions, local authorities, and technology companies is critical. The Internet and social media have undergone a massive growth in both popularity and capabilities over the past decade and have featured prominently in the path to violence of many more recent cases.

The CLAT dataset illustrates that the Internet is used predominantly for preparing and planning an attack; including undertaking basic reconnaissance and downloading instructive material. Social media has played an important role in allowing perpetrators to facilitate communication with like-minded individuals, gain inspiration, share propaganda and create connections. Moreover, there were 17 cases in which perpetrators had harnessed the immediacy and reach of online platforms to spread the details of their plot, ranging from a few days to a few hours prior to launching the attack.

This was common among the school shooter cohort, particularly in Finland, where a subculture has developed following the attack at Jokela School in 2007. The perpetrator in this case used social media to upload a detailed and lengthy manifesto, along with videos of himself shooting a firearm and an announcement of the attack hours before the incident. There is strong evidence to suggest copy-cattling in the ensuing cases that have occurred sporadically in the years since and in all of these cases, the individuals have utilised social media to a similar effect. It is clear that in this context, both rapid response time and cooperation with local law enforcement is of paramount importance.

A number of European member states have specialist police units in place which monitor the Internet and social media, identify suspicious content and work with the industry to remove it on the basis of breaching individual companies' user policy.¹¹ In addition to this, the EU Internet Referral Unit, established in July 2015 as a Europol initiative, aims to implement a coordinated European prevention approach through reducing the sheer amount and impact of violent extremist and terrorist propaganda on the Internet and on social media. According to their website the "European Union Internet Referral Unit at Europol will identify and refer relevant online content towards concerned Internet service providers and support Member States with operational and strategic analysis."¹² This includes providing support to EU member states with

11. <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/may/eu-council-internet-referral-unit-7266-15.pdf>; page 2

12. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/europol%E2%80%99s-internet-referral-unit-combat-terrorist-and-violent-extremist-propaganda>

the detection and removal of the increasing volume of terrorist material online. As such, it would be beneficial to leverage connections with individual companies to further encourage social media providers to also enhance user based reporting and flagging mechanisms.

Existing systems that are already in place for the reporting of concerning behaviour on social media platforms could be adapted to respond to the threat posed by LATs. Currently, sites like Twitter and Facebook offer users the opportunity to report content posted by an individual or a page on their site – the options for reporting on Facebook are shown below.

Figure 1: Initial Options for Reporting a Post on Facebook.

Help us understand what's happening ×

Why don't you want to see this?

- It's annoying or not interesting
- I don't think it should be on Facebook
- It's spam

[Continue](#)

Figure 2: The Options for Reporting a Post on Facebook; Expanded from the 'I don't think it should be on Facebook' Option in Figure 1.

Help us understand what's happening ×

What's wrong with this post?

- It's annoying or distasteful
Examples: pointless stories, memes or viral images about someone or something that bothers me
- It's pornography
Examples: nudity, sexual arousal, sexual acts
- It goes against my views
Examples: makes fun of my personal values, religion or politics
- It advocates violence or harm towards a person or animal
Examples: graphic injury, self-inflicted harm, body parts, animal abuse or torture
- It's a false news story
Examples: purposefully fake or deceitful news, a hoax disproved by a reputable source
- See more options

[Back](#) [Continue](#)

Help us understand what's happening ×

What's wrong with this post?

- It shows someone using drugs
Examples: people injecting or snorting drugs
- It harms or humiliates based on race, sex, orientation or ability
Examples: racism, sexism, anti-gay content
- It describes buying or selling drugs, guns or adult products
Examples: shotguns, marijuana, tobacco, adult items
- This displays someone harming himself or planning to harm himself
Examples: self-inflicted wound, weapon held to head, suicide note, promotes eating disorder
- I think it's an unauthorised use of my intellectual property
Examples: copyright or trademark infringements
- It's something else

[Back](#) [Continue](#)

All posts reported to Facebook on the basis that an individual feels it has violated the site's community guidelines are reviewed manually. This involves a process of sub-categorising referrals and review by a policy officer who speaks the language of the original content and is likely to understand the cultural context of the post. Facebook's online reporting guide, published in 2012, states that the site provides 'around the clock global support' for reviewing content, and gives the principal referral hub locations in the infographic below.

Figure 3: Facebook's Reporting Guide on User Support Teams¹³



As discussed, response time to content posted by an individual at risk of perpetrating an attack is of critical importance in the incidents of lone actor terrorism. As the infographic shows, Facebook states that more serious cases are prioritised. However, it is recommended that this process be made clearer to ensure users are aware that their posts have been prioritised and are being acted on. This could be achieved with more frequent updates on the progress of the report, or simply a wider range of options for supporting and informing users who report concerning behaviour. Facebook has recently developed a reporting channel specifically for users who exhibit a risk to themselves, or a desire to self-harm. It was created in partnership with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Now Matters Now, Save.org and Forefront: Innovations in Suicide Prevention and is currently only available for Facebook users in the US.¹⁴ The new mechanism is designed to supply the user at risk with guidance and resources, if they are reported for posting suicidal content. If this option is selected, the reporter is presented with the option of contacting the poster, contacting another friend for additional support or contacting a suicide hotline service (provided by one of Facebook's partners). The post is then referred to the appropriate Facebook hub for review and if deemed concerning, the poster will receive a message when they next log in which tells them that a friend is worried about them and provides useful links.

It is recommended that Facebook, and other social media platforms with reporting mechanisms, extend this type of tailored service to individuals who are reported for violent extremist content to inhibit the possibility for LATs to reach the stage of being capable of carrying out an attack. This would involve the inclusion of a further selection option that would automatically prioritise reports. This option could perhaps read: '[this post] suggests this person is going to commit a violent attack' and could be piloted for one year to explore how effectively it is used and the implications for internal resourcing. Cases in which an individual is posting a willingness to commit an attack, or details of a potential attack (of which there are many in the CLAT dataset) would then be reviewed with urgency and referred directly to the individual's national police agency. This allows the consequent evaluation of this case to be carried out by practitioners

13. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-safety/what-happens-after-you-click-report/432670926753695/>

14. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/25/facebook-suicide-prevention_n_6754106.html;

familiar with legal precedent in their country, and gives the opportunity for further treatment to be implemented by local partners, which in turn strengthens the community's relationship with the police and therefore become more resilient.

This should be accompanied by the development of a campaign to raise awareness of this new capability among users, and highlight its utility in reducing the risk of LAT attacks. As explained, the dataset shows that many individuals produced their own social media content in advance of an attack, and had used these platforms to express extremist thoughts. This material was often seen by peers and others within the perpetrator's social networks, but a lack of knowledge around how to report this online behaviour critically impaired intervention opportunities. Our analysis has also shown that, unfortunately, this type of material posted online by LATs was often not taken seriously by those within their networks. Raising public awareness around these issues and encouraging users to engage their virtual friends in supportive conversation is crucial to better coordinate the prevention of lone actor terrorism. Governments and social media companies should consider educational advertising to outline how to recognise disturbing content, what to do when it is produced by another user and to clarify that security agencies will only become involved if the individual flagged presents a significant and credible threat to others.

Online Intervention Methodology

As discussed, if a credible threat should emerge during the investigation of a referred post or profile, contact should be established with the national law enforcement agency of the individual's country of residence. Should the post be deemed less credible, yet still concerning, then resources should be made available to the poster in a similar manner to suicide prevention tools. In these more moderate cases, social media companies could also look to involve these individuals in online intervention programmes. ISD's One to One programme was piloted in 2015, bringing together a team of former extremists from across right-wing and Islamist ideologies to reach out to individuals who displayed support for violent extremism on Facebook. These individuals were identified on the basis of the pages they had 'liked' on Facebook, along with other markers like text and photo posts.¹⁵ The objective of having a former extremist reaching out to these individuals was to engage them in a constructive dialogue and to potentially offer the cognitive opening that many at risk of being radicalised need. This could be expanded to include practitioners such as clinical psychologists, theologians and trained social workers as online intervention providers.

15. Ross Frenett and Moli Dow (2015) 'One-to-One Online Interventions: A Pilot CVE Methodology'; http://www.strategicdialogue.org/includes/One2One_Web_v2.pdf

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