

Are the Recent Attacks in Europe Lone Wolf Terror Acts?



White supremacists Alex Curtis and Tom Metzger popularized the term “lone wolf” when they encouraged underground activity by individuals or small cells in the 1990s. They believed that such movements would be more efficient in attacking government targets compared to membership-based organizations that function more in the open. The tactic appeared to have gained momentum after the 9/11 attacks as terrorist groups increasingly started to incite violence and anarchy among sympathizers, especially those who have grievances against their governments for feeling marginalized or alienated.

Encouragement from ISIL’s Dabiq and Al-Qaeda’s Inspire glossy magazines aimed at recruiting and mobilizing support among English-speaking Westerners also played a part with unambiguous calls to commit acts of terrorism. Many of the articles provide clear instructions how to make bombs using only commonly found household items and name specific Western targets, such as shopping malls, high-profile sports events, iconic buildings and landmarks, and aviation and economic infrastructure, urging for “maximum carnage.”

Thinking of the recent slate of attacks in Europe, this sounds eerily familiar, and one has to wonder whether these so-called lone wolf attacks are exactly that. It is not far-fetched to contemplate that the events are somehow connected or orchestrated, even if loosely. By definition, the lone wolf acts on their own, without external command, direction, or material support. They conceive and direct their methods and tactics solely on their own, with little or no contact with the group they identify with. However, with propaganda and networking on the Internet, this is rarely the case nowadays. Nowadays, most lone wolf attackers are somehow attached to a group or oriented and influenced by their beliefs and calls to action.

In this context, let’s look at some of the attacks that happened in Germany, France, and Belgium in the past six months.

Brussels airport and metro attacks, 22 March 2016

Bombings at Brussels airport and a metro station in the city on Tuesday 22 March killed 32 people

from around the world, with more than 300 others injured. Security forces killed three of the perpetrators, who belonged to a terrorist cell that has been involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks. Authorities believe that five attackers were involved and that the attack was hastened by investigations tightening against the group. Of the five men, four were Belgian nationals of Moroccan descent and the fifth a Swedish national of Syrian origin. They were linked to ISIL.

Nice truck attack, 14 July 2016

On the evening of 14 July 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel deliberately drove a 19-ton cargo truck into crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, France. The police eventually managed to force the truck to a stop, shooting dead the driver. By the time, he had already plowed 1.7 km through the pedestrian zone, killing 86 people and injuring 434. The Paris prosecutor claimed that the perpetrator had planned the attack for months with the help of at least six accomplices. Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a 31-year-old man of Tunisian nationality, with a French residency, had a history of committing criminal offenses and domestic violence and had received psychiatric treatment. He was not a practicing Muslim but radicalized shortly before the attack, began attending a mosque in April and expressed extreme Islamist views and support for the Islamic State.

Wurzburg train machete attack, 18 July 2016

On July 18, 2016, a 17-year-old man of Afghan origin attacked passengers on a train in the central German town of Wurzburg with an ax and a knife, injuring several people. He was shot dead by police while trying to escape the crime scene. ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack. The attacker, Muhammad Riyad posted video footage of himself on social media swearing allegiance to ISIL and its caliph, Abu Bakr al- Baghdadi before the incident.

Munich mass shooting, 22 July 2016

An 18-year-old Iranian-German went on a shooting rampage at the Olympia mall in Munich on July 22, 2016, killing nine people and injuring 35 others before committing suicide. He used a Glock pistol illegally bought through the dark web. He reportedly has a history of psychiatric problems.

Reutlinger machete attack, 24 July 2016

On July 24, 2016, a 21-year-old Syrian asylum seeker attacked people outside a restaurant in the German town of Reutlinger with a machete, killing one person and injuring five others before being arrested by police.

Ansbach blast, 25 July 2016

A 27-year-old Syrian who had been refused asylum detonated a bomb in the Bavarian city of Ansbach on July 25, 2016, killing himself and injuring 12 people. He reportedly tried to enter a music festival with about 2,500 spectators but blew himself up in front of a nearby restaurant after being denied entry. The perpetrator, Mohammed Daleel, swore allegiance to ISIL in a video shared on social media days before the attack.

Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray church attack, 25 July 2016

Two men entered the church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, a suburb of Rouen, during morning Mass on Tuesday 26 July at about 09:25 local time. Armed with knives, they forced the 86-year-old priest to his knees before cutting his throat. Three nuns and two parishioners were also present. The recorded the murder. When police arrived, they charged them and was shot dead.

The murderers, both 19-year-old, Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean, shared their support for ISIL in a video on social media. Having been prevented twice from joining ISIL in Syria, Kermiche was known to authorities, awaiting trial on terror charges and wearing an electronic monitoring bracelet that was deactivated for a few hours every morning as per standard practice.

Charleroi machete attack, 6 August 2016

Around 4:00 p.m. on 6 August 2016, a man attacked two female police officers with a machete at a checkpoint in front of the police headquarters in Charleroi, Belgium, before being shot dead by a third officer at the scene. ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack, committed by a 33-year-old Algerian man who had a criminal record and had been in Belgium illegally.

Applying selected criminal theories

One can apply several criminal theories to lone wolf terrorism and the radicalization process, which research has proven to be associated with grievances and social and familial networks rather than poverty. Lone wolf terrorists often feel disenfranchised and marginalized as a minority in the areas that they live in. Many also have a history of mental illness and are susceptible to influence.

General Strain Theory

People have similar aspirations, but do not have the same opportunities or abilities to achieve these. When people fail to achieve their own and society's expectations of money, status, and acceptance through approved means such as hard work and delayed gratification, they may respond to this strain through crime, especially when anger, resentment, and frustration is present.

Social Disorganization Theory

A person's physical and social environments are primarily responsible for the behavioral choices that he or she makes. In particular, a neighborhood that only has informal social structures is more likely to encourage and sustain a criminal culture. Such a neighborhood may have poor schools, vacant and vandalized buildings, high unemployment, substance use, gangs, and a mix of commercial and residential property. There is no collective efficacy or will to act against disorder and crime.

Labeling Theory

People in power decide which acts qualify as crimes, and the act of labeling someone a criminal is therefore what makes him a criminal. Once a person is labeled and stigmatized as a criminal, which reinforces his criminal identity, society takes away his conventional opportunities, which may lead to continued criminal behavior in the absence of "normal" integration and acceptance.

Personality and Trait Theory

Personality, psychopathology, and individual traits reflect personal beliefs, emotions, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that bilaterally interact with the environment. These behavioral and cognitive schemas develop from childhood and become stable over time. There are specific personality traits (e.g. psychopathy and antisocial) that are associated with criminal behavior, usually in association with co-existing conditions such as trauma, aggression, and substance abuse.

In conclusion, when one digs deeper, many lone wolf attacks appear to be nothing of the sort. External influence and encouragement seem to initiate a radicalization process among those who are already susceptible because of psychological instability or feeling frustrated and aggrieved.