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Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 2

# Lone-Actor Terrorism

## Definitional Workshop

Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn



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

## About this Paper

This paper is the second 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.

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# Executive Summary

**T**HE AIM OF the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project is to understand lone-actor terrorism in a European context. The project will develop a database of lone-actor cases from across Europe. Its overall aim is to see if it is possible to discern any trends or patterns that could be translated into useful observations or recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers. During the first workshop of the CLAT Consortium, held in The Hague in January 2015, several academics and professionals were invited to help to define lone-actor terrorism (LAT). The aim of this two-day meeting was to arrive at a working definition of LAT that will be used when collecting cases for the database.

Two methods were used to arrive at a working definition. First, each participant was invited to present his or her two main points or issues on the definitional question. These could either be concrete points that – in the eyes of the participant – had to be included or more general remarks regarding the scope and application of the definition: for instance, on the topic of data collection. To that end, the project leads asked every participant to briefly explain his or her two main points during a longer day of discussions on the topic. On the second day, participants were asked to formulate a personal definition of LAT.

The presentations, discussions and personal definitions of the workshop participants are summarised in this report. In addition, the key elements highlighted in the personal definitions have been categorised and are presented in the format of a table. This table constitutes the basis for two definitions: a consensus definition from the workshop and a working definition for the CLAT project. The consensus definition of the workshop expresses what most participants could agree on when defining the term. The working definition is wider than the consensus definition; this is partly due to practical considerations. During the workshop, several participants expressed a desire to adopt a broad definition – at least during the data-collection phase of the project – in order to ensure as many cases as possible were captured in the data sweep. This would enable the CLAT project to perhaps discard certain categories in an evidence-based manner rather than exclude cases that might turn out to be relevant. The working definition – the main outcome of the workshop – is as follows:

Lone-actor terrorism: The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).



**T**HE DEFINITIONAL WORKSHOP on Lone-Actor Terrorism was held on 14–15 January 2015 at Leiden University Campus in The Hague, the Netherlands. The workshop’s programme was as follows:

1. Presentation on the issue of ‘lone-actor terrorism’ (LAT) in the Netherlands: incidents, discourse and definitions
2. Presentation of the literature review on LAT and the key descriptions/definitions of lone-actor terrorists
3. Discussion of the various dimensions laid out in the literature review: their academic and societal relevance and their practical application for the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project
4. Decision-making on what form or type of definition is to be adopted for the project (for instance, a set of dimensions or a single, working definition)
5. Transforming a type of definition into a final decision: the CLAT definition of LAT
6. Returning to the potential threat: guest speakers on Daesh’s (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) call to its supporters to act on their own, followed by Q&A.

Participants were asked to suggest two main points/issues with regard to the phenomenon of LAT. Their input is briefly summarised in the first section below, while the following section draws out the key thematic issues from this discussion. Next, the outcome of a questionnaire asking participants to formulate their personal definition of LAT is presented. Finally, the output of the workshop – two definitions of LAT – are outlined: the consensus definition reflecting the position of the majority of participants, and a modified and broader working definition that will ensure comprehensive data collection during the initial stages of the CLAT project.

## Input from Participants

The discussion highlighted the different approaches that participants had in defining LAT. This section identifies some major components of the various and, at times, conflicting definitions proposed during the workshop. Each paragraph below is a summary of the views presented by an individual contributor, in the order in which they were presented.

The first contributor to the discussion argued that ‘lone wolves’ and genocide represent different ends of the spectrum of violence; the former is conducted by individuals while the latter is carried out by significant numbers of a political, racial or cultural group. The global reaction to genocide was ‘never again’. A programme was developed to forecast it: in the first round of the programme, 600 variables were collected. This was later brought down to seventy-five, and eventually it was possible to define three key variables that effectively predicted two-thirds of all genocides. The variable with the highest predictive power was child mortality, a factor that we can directly influence. It is important to note how such an approach could be applied to the study of LAT while acknowledging the particular challenge that this issue presents. For instance, researchers should be realistic about both the data that can be collected and the influence we could have on individual-level variables. All-source data do not provide answers to

all questions. Therefore, researchers should not only look at what is desirable but also at what is most achievable when defining LAT.

Researchers should be open to more than one definition. For instance, a narrow, initial definition could be the basis for further ones that lead to a broader typology.

There are two different types of lone wolves. First, there are those that are well adapted to circumstances; for these individuals, it is a tactical choice to engage in operations consisting of only one individual. The second type of lone wolf is not adapted to his or her environment – rather, he or she is most often suffering from mental-health issues; LAT is therefore not a rational choice. So, when analysing the data, it is important to consider the extent to which the individual is able to adapt to circumstances. This might be a useful variable to include and one that helps develop strategies to counter such adaptation.

One participant stressed that LAT is undertaken by individuals who prepare and execute violence without external assistance. For this person, this aspect clearly and coherently summarises LAT.

In contrast, the next participant suggested that LAT should take into account more than just the number of those involved. A definition which focuses only on the size of the group and its autonomy of action does not capture mental-health issues, yet these are important when looking at the phenomenon of LAT.

With regard to data collection, a definition which allows for a wide net may be needed. For example, LAT can include plots involving more than one actor if there is no evidence of clear command and control from outside actors.

A definition of a lone-actor terrorist offered by one participant included five key characteristics:

1. Operates individually
2. Does not belong to a terrorist organisation
3. Acts without influence of a leader
4. Plans his or her own agenda, planning of the attack, etc
5. Undergoes his or her own ideological radicalisation process.

Simplicity was also emphasised. A definition should not consider ideology and motives, but instead leave a large scope for researchers. There is a need to emphasise the independence of the planning and execution in any particular case. Of course, decision-making can be examined, but this is less important. The emphasis must be on how, and to what extent, lone-actor terrorists receive guidance and direction.

The next participant agreed with earlier contributions by arguing that the definition should only include lone wolves who really act alone. Two or three people cannot be included as this reduces the clarity of the concept and draws attention away from the unique challenges – for

instance, the difficulty of detection – posed by lone actors. As soon as cells involving multiple actors are included, such distinct features become obscured.

There are problems with using categories within any definition and discussion of LAT should consider more than ideology. For instance, factors such as the modus operandi and personality traits are relevant.

Individuals or small groups committing a terrorist attack might be inspired by external actors but must be operationally independent. There is a need for them to have a clear terrorist ideology. This participant stressed that the definition should focus on the dynamics of LAT rather than the number of actors.

The next participant placed the discussion in the context of recent history. After 2009/10, it was increasingly necessary for terrorist plotters to act alone because counter-terrorism agencies became far more adept at discovering and disrupting large-scale plots. Terrorist plotting after 2009/10 is heavily influenced by Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's ideas about terrorism, as centralised cells simply became less feasible.

The discussion returned to the number of participants in lone-actor plots and the link between individuals/small groups, mental health and the radicalisation process. A lone-actor plot involving a single person must be included in the definition; it is important to also consider whether to include dyads or triads. This participant asked whether the radicalisation process is different if there are one, two or three individuals. Is a distinction based solely on the number of actors useful from a detection/preventive point of view? What is mental health supposed to explain? The participant suggested that researchers might use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders list and see if they can make a list of certain mental-health issues that are known for their link to increased proclivity towards violence. If this were possible, researchers could tick an extra box – against a factor known to be associated with violence – in the database rather than just the mental-health-issues box, which encompasses a wide variety of different concerns.

The ideological aspect behind terrorist attacks was identified as crucial by one contributor.

One participant noted that a potential solution to conflicting definitions would be to focus on a simple, broad definition that links lone offenders and extremists. Under this definition, these people are planning and executing attacks alone. It was remarked that data collection poses challenges as the depth of detail is difficult to find. Contradictory sources and statements as well as gaps in the dataset were noted as further challenges.

The broader the initial definition, the greater the need to ensure a clear definition of sub-categories. Otherwise, it will be impossible to aggregate data and make any conclusions of major substance when comparing very different cases. The complexity presented by the data may not be apparent to those people who use the database. This might lead to claims about lone wolves that cannot actually be empirically validated.

When developing the sub-categories, it might be useful to think of different axes on which the cases can be placed. For instance, it may be relevant to note the degree to which lone-actor terrorists were influenced or inspired by outside ideologies or groups, learned operational skills from outside, and openly announced (perhaps on the Internet) their intent. All these aspects should be placed on a continuum rather than being seen as absolute or black and white. Only then will it really be possible to understand how these acts are prepared and when and where to focus attention in developing counter-measures.

The next participant, rather than addressing the motivations, radicalisation or planning process, identified three aspects that are important to the definition: one actor; some sort of a claim; and lethality.

Another participant said that a broad view is needed initially that can then lead to a subsequent focus on sub-categories to add clarity.

The political motivations of the actors were also discussed. One contributor argued that during the early stages of research it is important to include high-school shooters and other lone gunmen who appear to express some level of political motivation. If necessary they can be discarded later, but it would be useful to see how and where they fit in the project's broader criteria.

In framing the issue and the overall parameters of the definition, it was suggested that there should be multiple criteria, but that not all need to be satisfied in order for the case to be included; although certain key criteria should be identified as needing to be met.

A participant came back to the issue of data integrity. Fact checkers from each nation could guarantee that the cases being included are correctly categorised. For instance, school shooters in Finland are an important example that likely requires inclusion, but the salience of these cases only becomes clear after talking to local experts since most cases are painted in the media as being non-ideological – this reflects local political and public sensitivities. This level of detail will only be available to someone well versed in the local context.

It was recognised that the concept should not only focus on the latest cases, which appear to examples of jihadi or Daesh-inspired terrorism. If the database has to include fifteen years and thirty countries, it needs to account for different types of terrorism.

Building on the previous discussion, one participant proposed four key issues as part of the definition:

1. One perpetrator
2. Attacks are carried out under the person's own will
3. Ideological component
4. Sub-categories.

The issue of academic credibility was raised. It was suggested that the definition should avoid 'lone-wolf' terminology; instead, it should use the phrase 'solo-', or 'lone-actor terrorists'. It is important to maintain academic terminology.

The 'terrorism' component of LAT should use the mainstream definition.

One participant stressed two key aspects of any definition of LAT, namely that cases are not directed and the actor(s) maintains operational independence from a large group or network. Issues such as targeting, methodology and tactical decision-making regarding the attack should all be planned and carried out alone. A degree of connectivity to a larger organisation does not disqualify a case: for example, a returning foreign fighter might once have been part of a terrorist organisation, but returns alone and then plans an attack.

The previous point on the independence of planning was reiterated. It was also noted that the terminology of LAT can change. Literally speaking, lone is always one. However, within the context of the project, it is probably important to bear in mind a more complex reality, which means that a broader definition is acceptable.

Similarly, the next participant noted that the current understanding of terrorism is different from the past. This is important in the context of defining LAT.

The reason why individuals undertake terrorist acts – given that there is no external command and control, but the intention is to benefit an external organisation – is important. The propagandistic value of the act should be considered.

It is important to move beyond socioeconomic/demographic variables like age and education. Researchers should move from the 'What?' to the 'How?' question and focus on trigger events and social processes. These objectives are not easy. It is also common knowledge that there is no one socio-demographic profile for a terrorist, so there is no need to revisit that conclusion.

The final participant focused on several areas previously discussed, arguing that LAT should include planned or perpetrated deadly violence. It can be committed by one, two or three people operating without external support. All motives other than personal-material gain can be included in the definition as well as school attackers. The database should be used to tell researchers how and why these attacks are different. Ideology should not be a relevant factor; operational independence is the more important aspect.

## Thematic Issues

Consensus seemed to exist within the group on the purpose of the definition: the working definition should not be overly restrictive. It should include 'borderline cases' that might later be discarded during analysis. The first aim is to collect a large amount of data on many incidents. Later on, this can be further distinguished into sub-categories that can be more selective. The analysis should focus on these sub-categories and researchers should explore the potential role

of statistical methods. The definition should not exclude a lot of cases that many consider to be examples of LAT as this would reduce the utility and credibility of the project's findings.

Consensus seemed to have developed on the idea that lone-wolf/solo terrorists prepare and execute their action independently. From an operational perspective, a plot is to be included in the dataset only if it cannot show evidence of having any clear tactical support.

In contrast, there was no clear agreement regarding the extent to which a group can be inspired or influenced by outside actors; although this is an issue that can be conclusively examined once the data has been gathered.

One of the main points of difference among the group was whether the definition of LAT should be restricted to one actor, or if two- or three-member groups should also fall under the same definition (this was the problem of dyads or triads – in other words, small cells made up of multiple actors). This debate comes down to two different views. The supporters of the 'only-one' school of thought tend to see group processes as being a significant part of radicalisation and mobilisation; without peers, these processes are assumed to be intrinsically different. One question that needs to be answered on this point is the extent to which an online community can cover parts of these socialisation, mobilisation and radicalisation processes. Supporters of the 'more-than-one' perspective place a greater emphasis on the detection/preventative aspect of the question. For this school, the issue is if a person or a small group is communicating with the outside world and, thus, what the chances are that the plot can be detected by authorities. A small cell can still be defined as LAT if it is radicalising 'on its own'.

Another point of difference was whether or not the mainstream definition of 'terrorism' is fully applicable. To many, terrorism is something inherently ideological (or political/religious). Others would like to see this concept being stretched to include cases that would normally not be considered terrorism, such as school shooters. They are not only motivated by personal revenge but sometimes seem to act on their perception of certain societal/political issues (for example, the hatred of a hedonistic or 'shallow' society and consumerism).

One other debated point was the precise variables that should be included in the database. This will be one of the key discussion points of a later meeting.

## Definitions of Lone-Actor Terrorism

At the workshop, participants were asked to formulate their personal definition of LAT. In the table below, the key elements of the definitions of LAT offered are sorted into eight different categories. The categories are: type of act; number of perpetrators; motivation; whether the plot can be inspired by others; support in the planning, preparation and execution phases; the direction/decision-making process; the links to groups/networks; and other non-categorised remarks. The last column shows if the participant indicated him- or herself as a professional, academic or both.

Table 1: Key Elements Proposed by Participants.

Type of Act	Number of Perpetrators	Motivation	Inspired by others?	Planning, Preparation and Execution	Direction/ Decision-making	Links to Group/ Network	Other Remarks	Participant Affiliation*
Attack/operation	1	Ideological/political	Possible	No guidance or support	Not directed	Ideally no		P
Planned or perpetrated violence	1	Ideological			Not directed		Concept of leaderless resistance	B
Act of political violence	1–4	Not personal-material gain						A
Mass casualties are the aim	1–3	Ideological		No practical and psychological support	No contact with others and not directed		Uses/studies literature to plan, prepare and execute attack	B
Attack	1	Ideological/political/ 'common cause'	Possible	No operational support	Not directed	Does not belong to a terrorist organisation		B
Use or threat of violence against human life	1	Wider social/political/religious views		Planned and executed alone	Not directed		Must fulfil mainstream definition of terrorism	A
Violence (or attempt)	1	Political	Radicalising on their own	Acting alone	Not directed	Not a member	Victim is not target audience	A
Violent act (threat thereof)	1	Political	Radicalisation stage could be 'non-sole'	Prepared and executed alone	Not directed		No clinical/mental disturbance	P
	1	Ideological		No support	Not directed			A

\* Indicated affiliation of the participant: professional (P), academic (A) or both (B).

**Table 1 (cont.):** Key Elements Proposed by Participants.

Type of Act	Number of Perpetrators	Motivation	Inspired by others?	Planning, Preparation and Execution	Direction/ Decision-making	Links to Group/ Network	Other Remarks	Participant Affiliation*
Intent to kill	1 (self-contained)	Political/religious		No outside communication with other extremists				P
Violent act	1 small cell	Ideological		Independent of a bigger organisation				P
Violence		Ideological		Self-executed	Self-planned		Deliberate/strategic	A
Lethal attack (including attempt)	1	Abstract ideas		No operational support	Not directed		Lack of command and control	P
				Autonomy in planning/preparing/executing		Possible		A
Act of terrorism	1+	Terrorist ideology		Operational independence of pre-sorted terrorist organisation				B
	1	Ideological	Not linked in definition		Not directed			P
Act against human life (or threat)	1	Ideological/political	Possible	No support	Not directed			A
	1	Political grievance (often religious or right-wing), cause larger than his/her own life	Ideology of violent movement	No support in preparatory phase, no information sharing	Not directed by command structure			A

\* Indicated affiliation of the participant: professional (P), academic (A) or both (B).

## Consensus Definition of Lone-Actor Terrorism

An analysis of the key elements of the definitions from the workshop shows that there seems to be a high level of agreement among the participants. By combining these particular elements, we arrive at the following consensus definition of LAT:

The threat or use of violence by a single, ideologically motivated perpetrator with the aim of influencing a wider audience, who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of a terrorist attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals.

## Working Definition of Lone-Actor Terrorism

The working definition is somewhat broader in order to cast a wider net. This is useful during data collection, allowing subsequent analysis to guide decisions in relation to disputed criteria. Therefore, this definition also includes small cells and individuals who might not be clearly ideologically motivated (for instance, school shooters who issue a statement that appears to address wider social/political circumstances). The working definition is given as:

The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).



# Appendix 1: List of Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Edwin Bakker	Leiden Universiteit – Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC)
Tore Bjørge	Norwegian Police University College
Jelle van Buuren	Leiden Universiteit – Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC)
Menno Donia	Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV)
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Clark McCauley	National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)
Oddbjørn Myklebust	Norwegian Police University College
Simon Palombi	Chatham House – The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Raffaello Pantucci	Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)
Kacper Rekawek	Polish Institute for International Affairs (PISM)
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Ramón Spaaij	Victoria University
Mario Toboso Buezo	Policia de la Generalitat – Mossos d’Esquadra
Martin Tscherbner	German Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt)
Anton Weenink	National Police of the Netherlands



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**Jeanine de Roy van Zijdewijn** is a Researcher at the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism at Leiden University and Research Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. Her research interests include lone-actor terrorism, foreign fighters and how threat assessments are made. She has assisted Dr Edwin Bakker in developing the massive open online course on terrorism and also teaches this course to undergraduate students.