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Terrorism and Political Violence

Volume 26, Issue 1, 2014

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Special Issue: Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism



Technological Impacts

An Army of One: Assessing CBRN Pursuit and Use by Lone Wolves and Autonomous Cells

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Publishing models and article dates explained

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Abstract

In recent years, much of the literature on terrorist pursuits and use of unconventional weapons has focused on al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups. Some scholars posit lone actors may differ from organizations when it comes to the observation that larger organizations are more likely to engage in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) activity, but leave this as an open question because of a prior lack of data on lone actors. Furthermore, new technologies and expanding networks may also spawn more deleterious lone actors, including what have been referred to as "super-empowered individuals." This article utilizes the Profiles of Incidents Involving CBRN by Non-State Actors Dataset and the Radiological and Nuclear Non-State Actors Database to illustrate the characteristics of CBRN pursuit by lone wolves and autonomous cells over time. Initial findings confirm the general perceptions that, historically, lone actors have engaged in cruder, smaller scale, and less frequent CBRN plots and attacks than their formal terrorist organization counterparts, but suggest that such actors do present a genuine threat, at least in terms of the potential for mass disruption. Additionally, while they share several similarities with more formal organizations, lone actors and autonomous cells tend to be motivated less by collective religious or ethno-nationalist concerns than larger organizations, focusing more on narrow or solipsistic drivers. Lone actors and autonomous cells also appear to largely calibrate their CBRN ambitions to their capabilities and their CBRN actions tend to receive better media coverage than formal terrorist organizations.

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Keywords

biological, CBRN, chemical, lone actor, nuclear, radiological, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, WMD

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