

The Legend of the Lone Wolf

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Author Biography

Dr. Agnes Hankiss is a psychologist, writer, and honorary professor of the Counterterrorism Department of the National Security Institute at the National University of Public Service. She is the founder and director of the Hamvas Institute for Cultural and Security Studies at Budapest, which, in its research and publications in the last 17 years, has been focusing on the functioning of the communist State Security services. She was a member of the European Parliament (2009-2014) as a representative of the EPP, Vice-Chair, Committee on Petitions, Member of the Committee on Internal and Legal Affairs, Member of the Subcommittee on Security and Defense, Member of Special Committee on Organized Crime, and Member of the Interparliamentary Delegations for Relations with the US and Israel. Her main fields of work in the EP were the Internal Security Strategy of the EU, Terrorism and Counterterrorism, the EU's CBRN action plan, and Cyber Security.

Abstract

The paper attempts to demonstrate that all of the perpetrators of the grave terrorist attacks in Europe in the recent years have been connected—by one or maximum two links—to the center and leadership of ISIS in Syria, from whom they received ideological, logistical and financial support—thus contradicting the popular theory of lone wolves. The author reaches the conclusion that in many cases addressing potential lone radicals on Jihadist forums before the attacks was nothing else but a special form of Psyop, with the goal of disrupting counterterrorism efforts and spreading fear in societies.

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The Legend of the Lone Wolf

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to demonstrate that all of the perpetrators of the grave terrorist attacks in Europe in the recent years have been connected—by one or maximum two links—to the center and leadership of ISIS in Syria, from whom they received ideological, logistical and financial support—thus contradicting the popular theory of lone wolves. The author reaches the conclusion that in many cases addressing potential lone radicals on Jihadist forums before the attacks was nothing else but a special form of Psyop, with the goal of disrupting counterterrorism efforts and spreading fear in societies.

INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 terrorist attacks forced everyone to face the question: how did the unthinkable happen? How could one of the most prepared secret services in the world fail so tragically? Looking for the answer to that question brought forward—if only briefly—the issue of mapping and analyzing the mechanics of terrorist networks. It is essential for counterterrorism organizations to unravel the web of connections between terrorist branches and cells. Although services are certainly making the swiftest possible progress in that respect, there are hardly any comprehensive studies available. Alternatively, to be fair, there are considerably less of them than those investigating the stages of lone radicalization and the options for preventing it.

After 9/11, renowned researcher and hands-on expert on legal social and institutional networks, Valdis Krebs, attempted to compile the web of connections between the perpetrators and define the most typical features of illegal networks.¹ Marc Sageman, in his work on terror networks, points out that we must dispel the common stereotype that “terrorism is a product of poor, desperate, naïve, single young men from third world countries, vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into terror.”² The author illustrates how these elastic and efficient “small-world” networks form a topology of self-organizing “nodes” and “hubs.” The communication model of Al-Qaeda was composed of vertical channels running towards the leadership colonized by horizontally proliferating nodes and hubs. The terminology may vary, but this model shows distinct similarities to the model by Krebs and, as we will see, to the real-world practice of the Islamic State. Krebs draws his conclusion from a 2001 analysis: “To win this fight against terrorism it appears that the good guys have to build a better information and knowledge sharing network than the bad guys.”³ This, however, is easier said than done. Even more so, since in recent years, in respect to the terror attacks carried out by the Islamic State, the concept of the “lone wolf” overshadowed the network aspect in terrorism-related public debate and even expert analysis.

LONE WOLVES?

In light of the recent devastating terror attacks on Europe, the main question is whether the seemingly solitary perpetrators actually acted alone. Is it possible that, in the majority of these cases, the investigation came to a halt when, after a major attack, it failed to unravel the chain of actors through which the perpetrator received communications and logistics support? Illegal networks naturally follow different principles

from those guiding legally operating institutional-social matrices. Yet the majority of this information is barely available to researchers. Krebs basically worked from journals, archives, and courtroom records—with the caveat that a piece of data is considered legitimate only if it is confirmed by at least two reliable sources.⁴

On August 21, 2015, on the Thalys TGV en route to Paris, 25-year-old Moroccan Ayoub El Khazzani opened fire on the passengers, wounding one of them severely with a knife. Besides the Kalashnikov, the attacker carried a semi-automatic handgun and a bottle of gasoline. American soldiers who happened to be travelling on the train subdued him. Even though the perpetrator, upon returning to Europe from Syria, appeared on the radar of several services as a dangerous radicalist, his movements were not under strict surveillance. In his defense, he claimed that he had been starving and homeless in Belgium, he had only wanted to rob the train, and he had found the weapons in a park. Authorities conducting the proceedings were accused of disregarding the presumption of innocence. Even official statements failed to confirm the attacker's connection to Jihadist terrorist organizations. "Right now, we can only establish remote connections between Khazzani and the Islamic State or its operative elements. What we know, however, is that he arrived in Europe simultaneously with Abdelhamid Abaaoud," said Jean-Charles Brisard, head of the Paris Centre d'Analyse du Terrorism (CAT), even though his comprehensive study, published in the winter of 2016, could lead one to the polar opposite conclusion.⁵ Here, with a focus on the francophone networks, I will build on his and his co-author's data-rich work in attempting to demonstrate the strong ties between the seemingly solitary Thalys attacker, Abaaoud (a key figure in the Paris and Brussels attacks) and, via Abaaoud, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) high command itself.

Were the ties actually as weak as acting authorities may have believed at first and even second sight? We need not go farther than CAT's own database, which Jean-Charles Brisard and his co-author, Kevin Jackson, used in their work. This study uses data partially based on information received from the Hungarian Counter Terrorism Centre and draws on the rich collection of terrorist profiles compiled by Emma Webb and Robert Sutton.⁶ All we have to do is collect publicly available data, examine details, which may seem unimportant at first, and connect the dots to gain a clear understanding of the strong ties between the aforementioned actors.

El Khazzani arrives in Hungary via the Balkan refugee route in the summer of 2015, as shown by the records of the Hungarian Counter Terrorism

Centre. His friend and fellow fighter Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was a head of the ISIS command for external operations in Syria, also arrived back in Europe disguised as an asylum-seeker. Abaaoud was not only a strategist and perpetrator of the terror attack on the Bataclan Theatre in Paris, but for a long time, a supervisor for various operative terror cells and a liaison between francophone units and the leadership in Syria. In addition, Khazzani had connections to a Bilal Chatra from Algeria, who also entered the registry in Hungary, and followed orders by Abaaoud in June-July to survey the Balkan route, the level of border control and possibilities for illegal entry. On his way, Chatra keeps informing Abaaoud and El Khazzani of waiting times and potential paths. They launch small groups of terrorists disguised as refugees. Abaaoud and El Khazzani stay at the same hotel in Budapest in early August, only to part ways on the 4th and depart Hungary in different directions. The terrorists stay at hotels nearby the Eastern Railway Station. Abdeslam found accommodation at a Rákóczi Street apartment, Hotel 30, while three of his companions, including another Bataclan attacker, Mohamed-Aggad, spent seven days at Hotel Central King under falsified documents issued for Jamal Salah, Foad Moosa, and Husein Alkhlf. Abaaoud and El Khazzani, who arrived together, stayed at Swing Hotel Budapest.

Following our network approach, it is advisable to look into, as much as possible, Abdelhamid Abaaoud's background story. Naturally, this study uses only information known to the services and available for public research. The data helps us draw—although with numerous white spots remaining—the network which shows us how many steps, how many links actually separated these assumedly solitary, isolated perpetrators from the central command of ISIS.

As we know from several sources, in Syria, 2013, a brigade emerged within the ISIS operative center for organizing attacks on Europe with the aim of uniting various groups of French and Belgian radicalists into the Katibat al-Muhajireen, or Muhajireen Brigade (KAM). Its members lived and fought in the same units. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant built its external ISIS operations on such strong personal ties that often originated in Europe instead of Syria. Many of them were members of the same cell at home, and many were preparing for their return from the moment they arrived, and therefore stayed away from social media. The first commander of KAM came from the same “gateway group,” Sharia 4, as Abaaoud or Najim Laachraoui, bombmaker of the Paris attacks and bomber of Zaventem Airport.⁷

Abaaoud was the liaison between the ISIS command in Syria and the Verviers network (named after a small French town), the members of which returned to Europe via Turkey and Greece in 2014. This was the

first widespread network equipped with a safe house, weapons, and chemicals. Two of its members participated in establishing the training center in Sabratha, Libya, together with Abaaoud and ISIS spokesperson, later supreme commander, and al-Adnani. Incidentally, this was also the unit, which gave the attackers of the Bardo National Museum and Sousse Beach in Tunisia.

How many steps do we need to take us from seemingly solitary El Khazzani to al-Adnani? We need exactly one: Abaaoud himself. According to Belgian courtroom records, Zaventem Airport was originally a target for the Verviers cell (even though Ibrahim El Bakraoui and Najim Laachraoui carried the attack out one year later). El Bakraoui faced charges as early as 2010 for firing an AK-47 assault rifle at a police officer. The final planning phase of the Brussels attack may have gained speed when police arrested Abdeslam.⁸ Yet the fact that one of the mobile phones used by Abaaoud in Greece contained sketches of a bomber pushing a trolley with the captions 'Zaventem' and 'Arrival' indicates that selecting the target itself was far from a blind or rushed decision.

Among the highest-ranking commanders of external ISIS operations was Belgian-born Abu Ahmad (also known as Osama Atar). He is a veteran Jihadist, former training officer from Rakka with multiple prison sentences, who, after his release due to a robust media campaign, travelled to Syria. He is the one whom testimonies refer to as "the coordinator of refugees." He is a cousin of the Brussels attackers, the Bakraoui brothers. He is mostly responsible for logistics, such as providing the departing operatives with false documents. The person overseeing the infrastructure of external operative units is Abu al-Faransi, a former member of the French Foreign Legion and an active participant in public beheadings.

Another one of Abaaoud's friends was the attacker of the Brussels Jewish Museum, Mehdi Nemmouche, who was widely considered a "lone wolf" until his connection to Abaaoud was unveiled. When Nemmouche arrived in Syria in December 2012, Abaaoud was already in charge of the KAM. Similarly to Zaventem bomber and Paris bombmaker Laachraoui, Nemmouche previously worked for the ISIS secret service, Amniyat, and in Aleppo, they were both involved in guarding and assumedly abusing or even murdering Western and local prisoners.

Nemmouche departed for Europe together with a certain Ibrahim Boudina. A member of the so-called Cannes-Torcy cell, Boudina travelled to Syria in 2012 and returned to France in 2014 equipped with a bomb-making manual, a contact list, instructions for secret communications

and extensive funds. Before his arrest in France, his primary targets were the Charlie Hebdo office and Nice. He did not carry out either event. The Kouachi brothers perpetrated the former, members of an operative cell, which sent three fighters to Falluja in 2004, when the city was under the command of al-Qaeda leader at the time, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In prison, Cherif Kouachi built strong ties with some key figures of the European al-Qaeda network. Among them was Djamel Beghal, who was preparing to attack the Paris US Embassy in 2001. Beghal's mentor was Abu Hamza al-Masri, who had recruited Richard Reid, the infamous shoe bomb attacker as well as 9/11 conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui. In prison, Kouachi also met Amedy Coulibaly, perpetrator of Hypercacher Kosher Supermarket massacre, who was also planning attacks on Paris Jewish schools. They later travelled together to visit Beghal in Murat. Incidentally, the Charlie Hebdo attackers had been on the USA surveillance list for years, as there was reliable intelligence on their al-Qaeda training in Yemen.⁹ The investigation following the Nice terrorist attack revealed that the attacker, Mohamed Bouhlel, had received communications from the Kouachi brothers earlier. The French Minister of the Interior later referred to Bouhlel as a "quickly radicalized, solitary perpetrator," who was turned radical by his divorce and financial difficulties. An article in British newspaper The Telegraph published a similar description. On NBC News, the Paris prosecutor claimed that there was no evidence that Bouhlel had had direct contact with any terrorist organizations. Later, it is learned that Bouhlel had been to Tunisia several times – the last occasion was only eight months prior to the Nice attack—where one single link, a mutual fellow combatant separated him from the Tunis commander of the al-Nusra Front.

Walid Hamam arrives in Greece as a Syrian "refugee." Before that, in Lebanon, he is a member of the same unit as al-Adnani. A further co-combatant is Mohamed-Aggad, one of the attackers of Bataclan. Mohamed-Aggad arrives in Hungary on 9 September. There, he meets Abdeslam, who, as we know, has made four rounds between Syria and Europe, three of them through Hungary. Abdeslam collects the Paris attackers in Budapest and the small Hungarian village of Kiskörös.

We can see that these francophone perpetrators belonged to operative cells that had returned from Syria and had received their training from KAM. Which is not to say that their difficult childhood or family background could not have contributed to their internal process of radicalization. However, from a counterterrorism perspective this has no bearing on the fact that not one of these combatants fits the profile of a "lone wolf"—neither is it true that local Islamist cells or communities

recruited or radicalized them. None of them was further away from ISIS command and control than one link in the chain.

Nevertheless, we should also take a closer look at the Berlin attack of December 2016 from this aspect.¹⁰ The perpetrator, Anis Amri, flees Tunisia after a successful escape from prison, and arrives in Europe in April 2011. He is 19 at the time, but he claims he is 16. In the refugee camp in Sicily, he threatens to decapitate Christians, attacks an aid worker, and commits arson. Even though he is prosecuted, Tunisian authorities send him travel documents and the Italians release him in June 2015. Yet Amri does not return to Tunisia but heads north to Switzerland only to later enter Germany under an assumed name. He steals, attacks a security guard and yet he walks away. In November, German counterintelligence informant VPO1 reports that Amri has joined a cell under the leadership of the German ISIS commander, Iraqi Abu Walaa, and is preparing to buy a Kalashnikov. He has connections to Abu Walaa (also known as Ahmad Abdullah) through a Serbian-German citizen called Simeonovic, headmaster of the school where Amri studies as a refugee. The informant also reports that Amri is preparing for a terrorist attack. He is now under surveillance, including monitoring his conversations. He travels to Berlin, but in order to protect their source, the Germans decide to wait. After the attack, the press—with no or only belated rebuttal from the authorities—refers to Amri as a non-religious, non-fanatic refugee who was radicalized in prison. However, if we connect the data provided by various sources, we can see at least two remarkable things. The operative cell, which Amri belongs to, has a link through a certain Abu Hanifa to the European chief of operations, Abaaoud. Moreover, Amri's cousin, a member of Tunisian ISIS, maintains regular correspondence with Amri through the encrypted application Telegram—even before Amri goes to prison.

One of the perpetrators of the terror attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, which claimed 22 victims, landed in Sicily as a refugee. The German police arrested the other one, but have not released his name. What we know is that he lived in Germany between 2003 and 2013, and he returned there five months after the attack, in August 2015 as an asylum-seeker. Both he and the perpetrator of the beach attack in Sousse with 38 fatalities received training at the Sabratha camp, the financing of which Abaaoud organized. We can therefore assume at least an indirect contact between Abaaoud and the Tunisian attackers. We should also add that, even though Abaaoud was a key figure in organizing and executing foreign operations, later interrogation and courtroom records show that he was always awaiting orders from two Tunisian commanders. One of them was Abu al-Tunisi, also known as “emir of the

foreigners,” commander of the foreign fighters, who was also named as the operative officer by the intended perpetrator of a thwarted attack on Dusseldorf. Due to source protection, Abaaoud’s other superior has never been named. Although the Sabratha camp may connect Abaaoud to the Tunisian perpetrators, the data available suggests that here, unlike on the map of the European attacks, he was not on the vertical axis of the network connecting ISIS high command to the operative cells. In terms of the Tunisian terror operations, Abaaoud appears to be a horizontal—that is, indirect—connection.

Ben Hassine, founder of the Tunisian branch of ISIS, may have recruited Seifeddine Rezgui, the gunman of the attack on the Sousse beach, who was killed on the spot. In the 90s, Ben Hassine lived in the UK and found a mentor in Abu Qatada, whose role the British High Court of Justice described as the intellect behind the operation, who had his “watermark” on every detail. Abu Qatada’s name will later resurface in connection with the attack on Manchester Arena. The other commander, according to statements made by arrested operatives, was a certain Chamseddine al-Sandi, leader of a terrorist cell, which had a vital role in both attacks in Tunisia. Rezgui organized his meetings with the members of the cell in cafés and mosques. One of them in the Sabratha ISIS camp also trained him.

The bomber of the Manchester Arena, 22-year-old Salman Ramadan Abedi arrived in the UK with his family as refugees of the Gaddafi regime. In 2011, his father and one of his brothers returned to Libya, where the services listed them as radical Islamists. His younger brother Hashim received charges for organizing a terror attack, maintaining contact with Salman, and having prior knowledge of the plans for the Manchester bombing. Libyan authorities reported that the brothers had a 15-minute phone conversation immediately before the attack. According to German police, Abedi returned to Manchester via Istanbul and Dusseldorf Airport. In the preceding days, as the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism reports, Abedi travelled to Sabratha in order to meet operatives of Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, the local ISIS terrorist unit. The same unit trained some of the Paris perpetrators and—as we have seen—the Sousse gunman as well.¹¹ The planning phase is likely to have commenced earlier: Abedi opened a bank account in May 2016, which he used, among other items, for financing the preparation of his TATP explosive. At the same time, there were reports of him visiting hardware and gardening supply stores.

Immediately after the bombing, police statements suggested that the attacker was highly likely to have been acting alone. An article in *The Guardian* speculated that Abedi was not a Jihadist but a vodka-

intoxicated teenager. It soon became clear, however, that the Jihadist network operating in Manchester has its roots in Libya and Syria. Official sources said that Abedi was just a “mule,” a transporter, while someone else prepared the IED.¹² French and British intelligence sources were leaked to the media claiming that Abedi had been to Syria, where he had connections to the Islamic State.¹³ Among his connections, it is worth noting Manchester university student Raphael Hostey, who recruited hundreds of Brits convincing them to fight for ISIS.¹⁴ Besides Hostey—who left his family in 2013 to join ISIS, where he gained name for himself as Abu Qaqa—British journal *The Telegraph* gives Abedi’s network a comprehensive analysis.¹⁵ His friends included Abdalraouf Abdallah, who arrived in Manchester as a refugee, and who later received a sentence of five and a half years in prison for aiding former Iraq veteran Stephen Grey (who had also spent years in prison for terrorist activities) in travelling to Syria. After being shot and confined to a wheelchair in 2011, Grey lived in Abedi’s neighborhood in Manchester.

The network also included Ronald Fiddler, also known as Jamal al-Harith, who joined ISIS in 2014 and died in 2017, when he drove a truck full of explosives into a Mosul army base. He also received a large compensation payout after his release from Guantanamo in the early 2000s. Another noteworthy Manchester operative was Abd al-Baset Azzouz, who left Manchester behind to build his own terrorist network in Libya with the guidance of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda. 48-year-old expert bombmaker Azzouz had 200-300 fighters under his command. According to a high-ranking Washington official, intelligence sources suggested that Abedi had contact with Libyan Imam Abdul Baset Ghwela, famous for his radical line, whose son died as an ISIS fighter. Counter-terrorism expert Raffaello Pantucci believes that the al-Qaeda-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group consisted of combatants who travelled from Manchester to Libya as foreign fighters to join the uprising against Gaddafi. Later, some returned to the UK, forming the “British arm,” while others travelled on to Syria.¹⁶ However, the radical Imam Abu Qatada, who arrived in the UK in 1993 with false identification, and served several prison sentences, also affected Abedi. Authorities arrested him in 2001 for the preparations of a bombing at the Strasbourg Christmas Fair—not that that was only terrorist activity he may have pursued. Still, for more than a decade, it was impossible to deport him from the UK due to several rulings by the European Court of Human Rights. According to an article in *The Times*, the imam was also an advisor to known terrorists such as Zacarias Moussaoui and Richard Reid, whose names—though only indirectly—we have already mentioned in connection with the Charlie Hebdo gunmen. Later, in 9/11 organizer Mohamed Atta’s apartment,

Abu Qatada's video was also found. Qatada underwent interrogation in February 2001, nearly half a year before 9/11. During a search, authorities found £170,000 in his home with £805 in a separate envelope inscribed "for the Mujahideen in Chechnya."¹⁷

Regarding communications preceding the Manchester attack, it is worth noting how—besides Telegram and other less frequented encrypted applications—Abedi received additional support through Zello. This application had played a part earlier in the Istanbul attack on Reina Disco, although the primary communication channel of that operation had been Telegram. The design of Zello combines social media features with telephone and radio functions. It is available on smartphones, tablets and computers, and—a considerable advantage in certain regions—it operates reliably on low battery settings. Some messages suggest that organization of the Manchester bombing commenced as early as nine months before the attack.

The FBI gained access to encrypted segments implying that Abedi had online communication with Syrian and US-based radicals, asking for advice on details such as the backpack for carrying the device. Authorities apprehended two other participants of these clandestine conversations weeks before the attack. In one such message, Abedi inquired,

"Sheikh, I live in Manchester, in Great Britain. I live among non-Muslims. I have found work with them. Am I allowed to kill them? Is it permitted to kill them with a bomb?" The unidentified sheikh, who may have been an ISIS operative from Syria, responded citing the Quran: "Fight the pagans all together." Another correspondent, US citizen Said Azzam Mohamad Rahim allegedly advised: "To the boy from Manchester I say, OK, kill them! Show no mercy to civilians."¹⁸

Later, authorities arrested Rahim in Texas trying to board a flight to Jordan.

Neither can we consider the Uzbek perpetrators of the attacks on St Petersburg and Stockholm "lone wolves." Akbarson Dalilov, who killed 16 and wounded 49 in the St Petersburg subway on April 3, 2017, received his Russian citizenship in 2011. In 2013, he attempted to travel to Syria via Turkey, but Turkish authorities arrested and deported him back to Russia. The 8-member operative cell he belonged to is likely to have been only a fragment of the 4000 radicals from Russia and the 5000 from the post-Soviet countries who have—based on Russian estimates—joined ISIS.¹⁹ Numerous fighters travelled to Syria from Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city, Osh. As an officer in charge of the investigation told Russian

newspaper Kommersant, Dzalilov may have been under the influence of a Syrian terrorist cell recruiting Uzbek nationals. The FSB arrested his training supervisor, Abror Azimov, after the attack. Four days later, Rakhamat Akilov, another Uzbek terrorist, who was also planning to join ISIS and was similarly deported back to Sweden by Turkish authorities in 2015, drove a beer truck into a crowd, killing five. In his bag that he kept in the truck, police also found an explosive device.

MAPPING NETWORKS

We can see how, in a certain sense, it is possible to pinpoint the Jihadist network model in the strategy of both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The network structure behind the recent, devastating European terrorist attacks exhibits unmistakable similarities to those characterizing 9/11 and other al-Qaeda operations, thoroughly researched by Krebs et al. We can clearly see the significance of early childhood connections or a shared area of living (which was most pronounced in the case of French cells). Similarly, to Mohammed Atta, who played a central role in the preparation of 9/11 by connecting minor cells to each other and to bin Laden, in this case Abdelhamid Abaaoud acted as a coordinator and liaison towards ISIS high command in the framework of almost all above-mentioned terrorist attacks. (Citing Abdeslam as the key figure stems from confusing his actual role in the network with the proportion of media coverage he received—due to the simple fact that police captured him alive. Otherwise, he was only responsible for logistics.) Blatant discrepancies and conflicts between al-Qaeda and ISIS (with the underlying disagreements between the Sunni “elite” and Sunni “proletariat”) may cause us to overlook the continuity and similarities in their methods. It is interesting to note that the network of the extremist left terrorist, Carlos, directed from Budapest between 1979 and 1984, showed a different structure.²⁰

Often a city, town, or neighborhood serves as a network node for building personal chains spanning entire decades. A much-cited example, the Brussels district of Molenbeek became the focus of terrorist activity well before the 2016 Paris and Brussels attacks. Molenbeek was home, for instance, to the operatives who, disguising themselves as journalists, committed the assassination of Afghan Taliban commander Ahmed Shah Massoud ordered by bin Laden two days prior to 9/11. The two perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid bombings, which claimed 192 lives, were also Molenbeek residents.²¹ Some al-Qaeda veterans, who lived there, helped the ISIS-generation in traveling to Syria. Belgium, as a potential and desired target, already appeared in the al-Qaeda related documents

published by the West Point CTC. In one of the Sinjar documents, a certain Husayn mentions Belgium in his letter of 11 August 2007 as his destination, and he is already planning financing and network building:

“As for the operations in Europe, I [the author / Husayn] have some [communication] lines. I even have someone that can take over and complete the work of Abu-‘Abdallah al-Baljiki [the Belgium]. Additionally, there is another person who works with me in gathering the funds over there. There are many brothers over there who want to work, however, over here, where you are, or in over there in Europe, if Abu-Qasurah wants to give me the addresses, I will call them. When I arrive, I can explain and clarify the matter better.”²²

Such disappearance and reemergence of strategic-operative details under one guise/in one region or another may create the impression that they are particular to a specific era or organization. As an example, while AQI, the Iraq branch of al-Qaeda had some of their attacks carried out by women in the mid-2000s to intensify the psychological effect, there were indications in the last year that ISIS was also shifting towards female perpetrators.²³

Expert views suggest that terrorist networks may be revived and reinforced in South Asia and Central-Asia, the former Soviet republics, and Libya. On Uygur terrorism, we have fairly limited public information. What we know is that the attacker of the Reina Disco in Istanbul, the Uzbek Masharipov received instructions from Rakka, but also had support from an Uzbek-Uygur cell from Anatolya, which was already preparing the plot for a second, similar attack.²⁴ We know even less of the fact that “Uygur terrorist activities exist outside of the borders of China.”²⁵ In Europe, some experts predict, returning “foreign fighters” may add to the numbers of radical Islamists posing a threat. Detailed review of these trends is, however, outside the scope of this article.

Krebs, and others, drew the map of terrorist networks primarily with regard to operative cells. For a more comprehensive view, we should also consider a different system of layers one that is significantly more difficult to pinpoint since it is integrated loosely, flexibly, and colorfully into society than operative units or the central core of terrorist organizations. In expert circles, there is increasing focus given to so-called “virtual plotters”: master planners who design terrorist attacks through online correspondence. Police only later tied ISIS-member Rachid Kassim to two operations that they had thought were the actions of isolated perpetrators. Through his Telegram channel Sabre de Lumiere (Sabre of Light), he conducted more than half of the seventeen thwarted attacks in France, 2016.²⁶

We know little about the networks used by the Islamic State to sell oil, natural gas, or phosphate. It is also a question how, through what network of intermediaries they could find buyers globally for the valuable artifacts they also sold illegally for profit. We must therefore consider the peculiar interdependence and convergence between international organized crime and terrorist organizations—an issue that is too massive to tackle on these pages.

If our investigation concerns the present rather than the past, it is usually near impossible to provide detailed and unquestionable evidence of a state's involvement in terrorism. A demonstrative example of the layered and overlapping nature of networks is apparent in the production and distribution of the drug Captagon.²⁷ Both Abdeslam and one of the Tunis attackers may have been under the influence of this medication that, besides its analgesic, disinhibitory, and euphorizing effects, has the rare impact of triggering extreme and wild behavior. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant fighters commonly use it. Manufacturing counterfeit Captagon began in Hezbollah-operated Lebanese laboratories with considerable Iranian funding. In 2014, authorities confiscated 55 million counterfeit pills in Lebanon, while they estimated the amount in circulation to be ten times that. Hezbollah and its leaders made tremendous profit through the illegal production of Captagon. Iran, on the other hand, supported this Hezbollah enterprise for purely political reasons: For them, the investment was a means of non-linear warfare (NLW). “Unlike the conventional definitions of hybrid warfare, NLW includes the infocommunicative, social and social-psychological toolsets that belligerents utilize indirectly, often through intermediaries and external agents, in a variety of “battlefields.”²⁸ Schauffer's demonstration of NLW focuses primarily on Russia's distinctive methods of engagement. His microanalysis fits perfectly into István Resperger's observations on asymmetric warfare:

“Careful analysis of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine shows how Russians (partly due to international backlash and sanctions) mobilize their armed forces in “waves:” in close coordination with directly and indirectly planned operations and activities, but in small contingents. Success is the sum of “minor victories,” and the final outcome is the triumph of the comprehensive strategy.”²⁹

The profit gained by the Shiite Iranian government from funding Captagon production was, in the long term, not financial but political: mentally weakening the Sunni population and destabilizing Sunni states. The

cooperation of terrorist organizations and states supporting terrorism is often rooted in bizarre or paradoxical motives: the principle of “the enemy of my enemy” is just one example. As Balázs Laufer pointed out in his highly nuanced analysis of the connection between the migration wave and the international terror threat:

“[...] immigrant groups tend to retain their (ethnic/religious/tribal) conflicts in the receiving country; that is, the migration of conflicts occurs parallel to that of humans. [...] This situation may result in a conflict of interests between foreign secret services or criminal organizations in the receiving country (such as a potential clash between Turkish and Kurdish immigrants in Germany).”³⁰

From a network aspect, this means that counter-intelligence operatives may often face a chain of connections that has direct links to terrorist cells or radical Muslim communities, which, instead of their true purpose, may initiate contact under “false flags.” The network map should also include NGOs acting as umbrella organizations and, under the guise of humanitarian objectives, helping terrorist operations transfer funds, spread propaganda, or exert psychological pressure. These units also have connections to each other through distinctive ties. One example of the “umbrella” model of these NGOs was the well-known case of the ship *Mavi Marmara* (also known as the *Flottila*) in 2011, when Palestinian terrorists tried to enter the Gaza-district under the cover of multiple “humanitarian” organizations.³¹

BREAKING DOWN THE NSS:

Other peculiarities and redundancies are difficult to interpret. While propaganda targets potential “lone wolves” with its instructions, we have seen that all major European attacks were planned and carried out by operatives who had direct contact to the ISIS external operations command. It is hardly beneficial for secure preparation and conspiring if the organization publicly announces the target or the intended device prior to the attack—and yet that was exactly what happened in numerous cases. As pointed out by László Simon, in this case “indirect threats in the cyberspace have a negative effect on conducting traditional operations.”³²

On Rumiya, the Islamist forum replacing Dabiq, there was a piece on November 7, 2016, weeks before the Berlin attack, which advised “lone wolves” to carry out truck ramming attacks, discussing the advantages, recommending vehicles to use, targets to choose. At the time of its publication, Anis Amri was already busy preparing for his ramming attack.

Earlier, on the Telegram channel “Orlando” opened after the Orlando terrorist attack, authors specifically named Berlin as the city they advised “lone wolves” to target with their hits. In 2016, many ISIS followers shared the news that the next attack was likely to be in Berlin.³³ After the successful operation, the propaganda for solitary attackers intensified. A Facebook user named Sufyan al-Khayyati addresses them with the words “Kill them, slaughter them, trample them, burn them, kick them, and use all means to kill the crusaders, whether they are civilians or military personnel [...]”³⁴ Three days before the attack on Bardo Museum, one ISIS group in Tunis announced “glad tidings of what will bring you joy and bring joy to the Muslims in general,” while another group issued a similarly ominous announcement “interpreted as foreshadowing” the attack.³⁵

Another example would be the attack near Würzburg, Germany on 18 July 2016: the attacker, 17-year-old Riaz Khan Ahmadzai shouted “Allah Akbar,” and attacked five people with a knife and an axe, causing two of them life-threatening wounds. In a two and a half minute video made before the attack, he is holding a knife and threatening to hit “every city, town, and airport.” Although he arrived in Germany as an Afghan refugee, he was later thought to be older and from Pakistan. The press tended to refer to him as a lone radical perpetrator, while the German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere said his act was “perhaps half-way between running amok and terror.”³⁶ However, there have been findings that contradicted this statement. Before the attack, Ahmadzai had contact with the Islamic State, and sent his video for approval to the ISIS secret service, the Amn-al-Khajri (Amniyat). The Caliphate news agency Amaq had published the video where Ahmadzai introduces himself as Muhammad Riyad, soldier of ISIS. Based on the recording acquired by the Long War Journal, Kyle Orton, a researcher for the London-based Centre for the Response to Radicalization and Terrorism published a transcript of the conversations between Ahmadzai and an ISIS intelligence officer:

“[T]he Islamic State’s man asked: ‘What kind of weapons do you intend to use to kill people?’ ‘My knife and axe are ready for use,’ Khan replied. ‘Brother, would it not be better to do it with a car?’ the Islamic State plotter asked ... ‘The damage would be much greater,’ he told Khan. But Khan was impatient, saying he ‘cannot drive’ and ‘learning takes time.’ ‘I want to enter paradise tonight,’ Khan explained.” [...] Ahmadzai was in contact with IS’s intelligence officer right up to the moment he began his terrorist attack. ‘Pray that I become a martyr,’ Ahmadzai wrote. ‘I am now waiting for the train.’ Shortly afterwards, Ahmadzai sent another message: ‘I am starting now.’ The Amn al-Kharji operative responded: ‘Now you will attain paradise.’”³⁷

CONCLUSION

However far-fetched it may sound, a hypothesis to consider is the possibility that announcing and adopting a strategy with lone perpetrators in the forefront may serve a double purpose as diversive propaganda: spreading fear and insecurity among civilians and misleading police and intelligence forces. This psychological operation is part of large-scale psychological warfare. Thus, feeding the legend of the “lone wolf” is probably a means of asymmetric warfare with the aim of maintaining control, keeping the enemy in the dark and provoking reactions.

The media, experts and politicians—including Europol and President Obama—for years claimed that the “lone wolf” posed the utmost security threat. However, Marc Trevidic, France’s chief counter-terrorism judge made the intriguing statement after his retirement that lone wolf attacks were used as a “smoke screen” that “served to put all our agencies on edge” and “allowed them to calmly prepare.” He also warned that while these attacks distract security forces, terrorist organizations are planning “huge atrocities” across Europe.³⁸

On a final note, it is apparent how the legend of the “lone wolf” as a terrorist propaganda device in the service of psychological warfare has become pervasive in European media. It could not have reached so many and become so widely adopted without the aid of political and civilian groups in desperate search for narratives to diminish the threats associated with the increasing waves of illegal migration.

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