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Publisher: Routledge

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Terrorism and Political Violence

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20>

Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action

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Published online: 20 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Clark McCauley & Sophia Moskalenko (2014) Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:1, 69-85, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2014.849916](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849916)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849916>

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Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action

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Research has shown that there is no profile of individual characteristics of group-based terrorists, but profiling the characteristics of lone wolf terrorists may yet be possible. In this article, we bring together suggestions about what a lone wolf profile might look like. We describe a two-pyramids model that distinguishes radicalization of opinion from radicalization of action, then use this model to review three case histories of lone wolf terrorists. We also review results comparing two kinds of mostly lone actor violent offenders: assassins and school attackers. Results highlight the gap between radical opinion and radical action, and suggest two profiles of lone wolf terrorists: disconnected-disordered are individuals with a grievance and weapons experience who are social loners and often show signs of psychological disorder; caring-compelled are individuals who strongly feel the suffering of others and feel a personal responsibility to reduce or avenge this suffering.

Keywords Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, action radicalization, assassins, Clayton Wagner, lone wolf terrorism, lone wolf terrorist, Nidal Malik Hasan, opinion radicalization, school attackers, Vera Zasulich

Since 9/11, the success in tracking and disabling al-Qaeda and other major terrorist networks around the world has been accompanied by a new concern about lone wolf terrorism. On November 5, 2009, Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire on

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his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, leaving 12 dead and 31 wounded. On March 2, 2011, two U.S. soldiers died after a lone gunman, Arif Uka, opened fire on them at Frankfurt airport. On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik killed 77 in and around Oslo. The threat of lone wolf attacks was voiced by President Obama as follows:

The risk that we're especially concerned over right now is the lone wolf terrorist, somebody with a single weapon being able to carry out wide-scale massacres of the sort that we saw in Norway recently. You know, when you've got one person who is deranged or driven by a hateful ideology, they can do a lot of damage, and it's a lot harder to trace those lone wolf operators.¹

In this article, we bring together several different studies to try to identify common characteristics of lone wolf terrorists. We begin by distinguishing radicalization in opinion from radicalization in action, and then consider how opinion-versus-action plays out in several case histories of lone wolf terrorists. We also seek the common characteristics of two kinds of mostly lone actor violent perpetrators: assassins and school attackers. In conclusion, we highlight the importance of means and opportunity in assessing potential for terrorism and suggest two possible profiles of lone wolf terrorists.

Radicalization in Opinion and Action

McCauley and Moskalenko define political radicalization as changes in beliefs, feelings, and actions in the direction of increased support for one side of a political conflict.² We have argued that radicalization in opinion (beliefs and feelings) is importantly different from radicalization in action, and we have advanced a two-pyramids model of radicalization.³ In this section, we describe the two-pyramids model, focusing on examples of opinion and action relating to al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism.

Radicalization in the Opinion Pyramid

The narrative frame of global jihad has four major parts: (1) Islam is under attack by Western crusaders led by the United States; (2) *jihadis*, whom the West refers to as "terrorists," are defending against this attack; (3) the actions they take in defence of Islam are proportional, just, and religiously sanctified; and, therefore (4) it is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.⁴

This narrative is conveniently represented in terms of a pyramid of opinion radicalization (Figure 1) in which the base includes Muslims who currently do not accept any of the global jihad narrative. A layer above the base consists of those who sympathize with the first step of the jihadist frame: that the West is waging a war on Islam (opinion pyramid second level). Next higher in the pyramid are Muslims who believe that jihadis are acting in defence of Islam and that their actions are morally and religiously justified (opinion pyramid third level). Highest in the pyramid are Muslims who believe there is an individual duty to participate in defence of Islam (opinion pyramid apex).

There is some complexity here: Islam distinguishes between defence mandated by legitimate authority, a group responsibility, and defence that is an individual obligation of every good Muslim. Osama bin Laden argued that the current threat

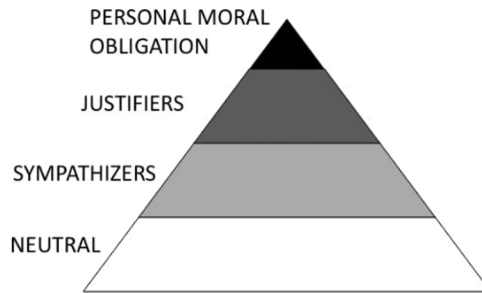


Figure 1. Opinion radicalization pyramid.

to Islam justifies an individual obligation to take up arms, an obligation not dependent on having state or religious authorization for jihad. We here identify belief in the individual obligation as the highest, most radicalized level of the opinion pyramid.

The implication of a pyramid model of the global jihad narrative is that the lower, less radicalized levels represent more people. Polling data offer some support for this implication.

ICM telephone polls of UK Muslims have asked the following question: *President Bush and Tony Blair have said the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam. Do you agree or disagree?* In November 2004, 80% of a national sample of 500 Muslims disagreed, that is, endorsed the idea that the war on terrorism is a war against Islam. In other words, about 80% of UK Muslims agreed with level (2) of the global jihad narrative.⁵

A July 2005 ICM poll of UK Muslims asked a more extreme question: *Do you think any further attacks by British suicide bombers in the UK are justified or unjustified?* This poll was conducted after the July 7, 2005 bombings in the London underground, and 5% of a national sample of 500 Muslims said that further attacks were justified. In other words, about 5% of UK Muslims agreed with level (3) of the global jihad narrative.⁶

Thus polling research can put numbers on at least the first three levels of the opinion pyramid. Although we have not found any polls asking Muslims about the individual obligation for jihad, level (4), we speculate that the number agreeing would be less than 5%.

It is worth noting that in the case of UK Muslims in 2004–2005, the pyramid model is misshapen. The neutral base of the pyramid, those who do not accept even the first level of the global jihad—that the West is engaged at war against Islam—is smaller than the next higher level. Only 20% of UK Muslims do not see a war on Islam, whereas 80% do see a war on Islam. Descriptively, then, the base of the pyramid in this case is smaller than the first level of opinion radicalization.

The 2007 Pew poll of U.S. Muslims included an item similar to the “suicide bombers” item used by ICM in polling UK Muslims. *Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?* In 2007 and again in 2011, about 8% of U.S. Muslims said that this kind of violence is often or sometimes justified.⁷

In general, the opinion pyramid represents the “war of ideas” between terrorists and the government. Polling data from a particular population at a particular time provide a snapshot of how the war is going, as shown in the percentages associated with the different levels of radicalization in the opinion pyramid. Tracking polls, with repeated measurements over time, can provide a trajectory of success or failure in the war of ideas as polling data show shifts in the percentages of poll respondents with more and less radical ideas.⁸

Radicalization in the Action Pyramid

For decades psychologists have studied the relation between beliefs and feelings (cognition and attitude) and action (behavior).⁹ There is no simple generalization to be made about this relation. Under some circumstances, beliefs and feelings are good predictors of action (in a voting booth, for instance) and in other circumstances beliefs and feelings are weak predictors of action (when strong social norms run counter to an individual’s attitude, for instance). When action consistent with beliefs and feelings is costly (such as committing oneself to terrorism), the gap between belief and action is likely to be large.

The gap between belief and action is evident in the contrast between polling data and security reports in the UK, where 5% of adult Muslims saw reported suicide attacks as justified but only several hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11. The 5% of Muslims projects to about 50,000 of the roughly one million adult Muslims in the UK, indicating that only about one in a hundred UK Muslims who justify suicide terrorism have moved to violent action.

A similar ratio appears in the U.S. According to the 2007 and 2011 Pew polls, 8% or about 80,000 of about one million adult U.S. Muslims find suicide attacks justified *often* or *sometimes*. In contrast, only hundreds of terrorism-related arrests have been made in the U.S. since 9/11.

The gap between opinion and action is also evident in case histories of terrorists. McCauley and Moskalenko examined case histories ranging from anti-tsarist Russian terrorists of the late 1800s to anti-Western Muslim terrorists of the late 1900s, and identified twelve mechanisms of radicalization.¹⁰ At least three of these mechanisms do not depend on radical ideas. Some individuals join a terrorist group in order to seek revenge for a personal injury by government or its representatives (*personal grievance*). Some join because a person they care about—friend, relative, romantic partner—is a member of the group and asks for help (*love*). Some join in search of excitement, status, or money (*thrill and status seeking*). These three mechanisms can bring previously apolitical individuals to join a militant group, that is, can bring individuals without radical ideas to radical action.

Thus the gap between radical opinion and radical action has two aspects. The great majority with radical ideas do not take radical action. And some join in radical action without prior radical ideas (though they will likely learn radical ideas after joining).

The gap between radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action indicates the need for another pyramid model, the pyramid of action (Figure 2). Here the base includes all Muslims who are politically inert, whatever their beliefs or feelings. The next higher level represents Muslim activists, engaged in legal and nonviolent political action. Hizb ut-Tahrir members, for instance, are legal activists in both the UK and in the U.S. (Hizb had its first national meeting in the U.S. in Chicago in July 2009), even

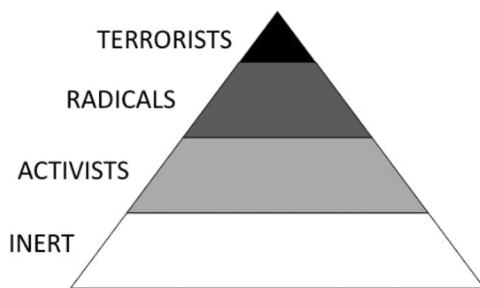


Figure 2. Action radicalization pyramid.

though Hizb, like al-Qaeda, strives to re-establish a supra-national caliphate. Higher yet are radicals, engaged in illegal political action that may include violence. Finally, at the apex of the action pyramid are the terrorists, radicals who target lethal violence at civilians.

We believe that the borders between the levels of the action pyramid represent the most important transition points of radicalisation in action: from doing nothing to doing something; from legal political action to illegal political action; and from illegal political action to killing civilians. It is important to be clear, however, that the action pyramid is neither a conveyor belt nor a stage theory in which an individual must progress through each succeeding level in a linear fashion to become a terrorist. Most activists never become radicals, and it is not necessary to be an activist to become a radical (e.g., radicalization by personal grievance, love, and thrill and status seeking).

We turn now to drawing out the implications of the two-pyramids model of radicalization for the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism.

The Puzzle of Lone Wolf Terrorism

Economists have framed the problem of eliciting self-sacrifice in terms of the *free rider problem*.¹¹ Why should I sacrifice anything for a public good—freedom, justice, equality—that will benefit others? Better I should let others sacrifice and free ride on their efforts than let them free ride on mine.

Perhaps the most salient example of sacrifice for a larger cause is the experience of soldiers in combat. The institutional explanation for military sacrifice is the power of the state, including both rewards for serving and punishments for not serving. Research with U.S. soldiers in World War II, however, found that pay, advancement, medals, and making the world safe for democracy were much less important in combat than “not letting my buddies down.”¹² Institutional power may bring soldiers to the battlefield, but love of comrades makes them fight.

In extended form, this same explanation is offered for mobilization in social movements and political parties: the free-rider problem is surmounted and individuals are brought to sacrifice by the rewards and punishments provided by institutions, organizations, and small groups.¹³ This perspective turns self-sacrifice into satisficing: putting time, effort, risk, and even life into a cause is the best the individual can do under contingencies the individual cannot escape.¹⁴ But lone wolf terrorists are ready to risk everything in an attack that has neither organizational nor small group support. How is this possible? Moskalenko and McCauley¹⁵ raised this question in the context of two examples, one old and one recent.

Vera Zasulich: The Hand of Justice

Born in Imperial Russia in 1849, Vera Zasulich grew up amidst broad political reforms and social unrest. She came from an impoverished noble family, but received a good education in private boarding schools and earned a teaching degree.¹⁶ Working as a secretary and a bookbinder in St. Petersburg, she made a decent living but gravitated toward student discussion circles and radical rhetoric. For this activism, she was arrested, sentenced to two years in prison, then exiled to a remote village; she returned to the capital only to get involved with a new activist circle.

In July 1877, a peaceful student demonstration ended with arrest and imprisonment of the participants. Among them was a student, Bogolubov. One day, the prison where he was held was visited by General-Governor Trepov, who crossed the prison courtyard twice. On the first crossing, Bogolubov took his hat off to the governor, but on the second, he failed to do so. The governor screamed at him to take his hat off, and in a fit of rage, ordered that the prisoner be publicly flogged. This caused a revolt by the prisoners.

The newspapers circulated rumors about the incident, as well as about other cruelties perpetrated by the governor. Vera Zasulich, who had never met the student in question, was outraged by the unfairness of the governor, but even more so by the lack of retribution for this arbitrary despotism. Her deep sympathy was not motivated by fear of suffering the same fate as Bogolubov: in Alexander II's Russia, a noble-born woman such as Vera was in no danger of being subjected to corporal punishment. Nor was her outrage limited to Trepov. She planned, with her friend Maria Kolenkina, to assassinate two governmental officials infamous for offences against student activists.

The young women drew lots as to who would kill whom, and Zasulich's target was Trepov. She inquired through her activist connections whether any group, including the terrorist group People's Will, was planning to do anything about the incident, and received no positive answer. After some soul-searching, she decided to take justice into her own hands even if it meant sacrificing her own life. Zasulich went to see the general during his regular "public audience" hours. When she was allowed into his study, Zasulich pulled a gun out of her clothing and shot Trepov in the stomach. She did not attempt to flee the scene, and was arrested and tried.

On the witness stand Zasulich was stoic, calmly explaining her motivation and readiness for the consequences of her actions. She knew she had to do something; she said that she had to act on her conscience. In a cheering courtroom, the eighteen jurors acquitted the defendant of all charges.

Nothing in her history before or after shooting the governor suggests any kind of psychopathology. In character, Vera Zasulich was not oppositional, stubborn, or ideological. She was not generally aggressive and had no history of physical violence. She had been sentenced to exile for activism that broke tsarist laws; thus, in our action pyramid, she was already a radical before she shot the governor. But her decision to shoot the governor came from a feeling of personal responsibility to take action, placing her at the peak of our opinion pyramid. Shooting the governor moved her also to the peak of our action pyramid when she took up terrorist violence herself after People's Will terrorists brushed her off.

Before Bogolubov's flogging, Zasulich was like many other activists in both opinion and action. But the political became personal in her reaction to the flogging, an emotional reaction that impelled her to action. It seems possible that what

distinguished Zasluch from the many who did not act was that she felt more strongly than others. There is some indication of her tender feelings in her later history, when she wrote articles criticizing the Bolsheviks for their profligate use of violence. This is an idea we will return to—that an unusually strong capacity to feel the sufferings of others can move an individual to radicalization and violence.

Clayton Waagner: Criminal Crusader

Clayton Waagner's 2003 book, *Fighting the Great American Holocaust*,¹⁷ spotlights only a few moments of his early life. He was born in North Dakota in 1956; he married early, and with his wife Mary has nine children. His first visit to a bar was when he was 27; his mother took him for a drink after his business failed. He owned and operated a fishing boat out of Kodiak, Alaska. The vessel was 38 feet long and he drove it more times than he could count into 35-foot waves, one time into 70-footers. He had a pilot's license and three times flew into thunderstorms that tossed his small plane around uncontrollably. He never experienced panic; he felt fear only after the danger had passed. He liked the fellowship of small nondenominational Protestant churches. In relaxation, he appreciated a fire, a cigar, and a good bottle of Merlot. He is a big man; when arrested in 1999, he was 6 ft. 1 in. tall and 230 pounds.

Beginning in the 1970s, Waagner was convicted of various acts of theft and burglary, and in 1992 he was sentenced to 4 years for attempted robbery. Released from prison, he was in Pittsburgh in January 1999 when his daughter Emily went into premature labor, producing a granddaughter, Cierra, born dead at 24 weeks. Waagner's commitment to fight abortion began when he held Cierra, touched her soft skin, and looked at her tiny but perfectly formed face and body. He says that he heard an internal voice, the voice of God: "How can you grieve over one, when you allow millions to be slaughtered every year?"¹⁸

In September 1999, he was driving with his wife and children in a Winnebago that broke down. Police found stolen firearms in the stolen vehicle, and Waagner admitted that he was planning to use the weapons to kill abortionists. Convicted for theft and firearms violations, he escaped from prison in February 2001. In an Internet posting, he described his escape as a miracle that anointed him as God's Warrior. While on the run, he posted an Internet threat to kill those who worked for abortion doctors, and claimed to have target information on 42 such employees. In his book, he describes tracking and finding an easy shot at several abortion doctors, but could not bring himself to pull the trigger.¹⁹ He kept moving with auto theft and robbery, and changed his plans: he would use fear instead of bullets.

In October 2001, he sent out 285 letters to abortion clinics across the U.S. Each letter contained a quarter-teaspoon of white flour and an anthrax threat. Coming soon after the still-unsolved anthrax attacks that followed the 9/11 attacks, the letters were taken seriously and seriously disrupted clinic operations. In November 2001, still on the run, he sent out 269 more letters to abortion clinics. Anticipating doubts and accelerated testing after the first hoax, he included in the white powder traces of a substance known to test positive in the most common test for anthrax. Again, he succeeded in shutting down many clinics. Captured in December 2001, he is serving a 30-year jail sentence in the U.S. Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Before holding his dead granddaughter, Waagner was at the second or third level of radicalization in the opinion pyramid: he sympathized with those fighting

abortion and may even have seen violence against abortion providers as justified. By his own statement he was doing nothing in the fight against abortion, that is, he was inert in the base layer of the action pyramid. His grief holding his dead granddaughter turned to guilt for doing nothing about the millions of children aborted, and from grief and guilt came radicalization in both the opinion and action pyramids. As with Vera Zasulich, strong emotion made the political personal; he felt suddenly a personal responsibility for action that radicalized him to the apex of the opinion pyramid. He moved also to the apex of the action pyramid (terrorists) as he stalked abortion providers with the intention of killing them.

Interesting here is the fact that Waagner had targets in his sights but could not pull the trigger. He was forced down the action pyramid to fight abortion with threats of violence that were in fact harmless. With his anthrax letters, he moved from the terrorists apex of the action pyramid to the radicals level of illegal political action without violence. (Terrorist plans, and even terrorist threats, can be prosecuted as terrorism, but here we are concerned with the level of radicalization in the opinions and actions of individuals.)

Waagner worked alone, leaving his family to fend for themselves. His book suggests that, on the run, he knew how to find anti-abortion sympathizers but was careful not to implicate any in his crimes. His grievance is not in doubt: Clayton Waagner began as a petty criminal but ended with what he saw as a God-given mission to make war on those who make war on the unborn. Unlike Vera Zasulich, Waagner was a man of action; his experience with risk-taking, law-breaking, and weapons (robbery) probably eased his radicalization to violent action.

This section began with a puzzle: how can individuals leave self-interest and loved ones behind to take risks and make sacrifices for strangers? The two cases described—the outraged secretary and the tender-hearted man of action—offer several clues. Both were sympathizers with a cause and perhaps justifiers of violence in support of that cause. That is, both were in the middle levels of radicalization in the opinion pyramid. Zasulich had already reached the radicals level of the action pyramid in illegal anti-tsarist activism. Waagner too had broken laws but remained in the inert base of the action pyramid doing nothing to fight abortion. For both, something of great emotional significance occurred—unpunished violation of a student, death of a granddaughter—and the political became personal. In both cases the emotion came from identifying with—caring about—the welfare of others. Both were radicalized to feeling a personal moral obligation—the apex of the opinion pyramid—and both attempted to kill the persecutor of those they cared about—the apex of the action pyramid.

What moved both, while others who shared their convictions did nothing, seems to have been an unusual capacity to care about others. Kaplan's 1995 study of violent anti-abortion activists noted something very similar: most of these individuals were first moved to action by an emotional experience of identifying with aborted babies.²⁰ The capacity for empathy or sympathy is generally seen as quintessentially human and eminently humane. Here we have a hint that there can be a dark side to caring greatly about others. Our next case history extends this hint.

Abu-Mulal Al-Balawi: Internet Warrior

Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, recruited by Jordanian intelligence as a double agent to gather information on high-profile Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, blew

himself up on December 30, 2009, in Khost province of Afghanistan. He killed seven CIA agents and one Jordanian agent. We distinguish two phases in al-Balawi's trajectory to violence: radicalization of opinion during his life in Jordan working as a physician from 2002 to 2009, and radicalization of action in Pakistan between March and December 2009. In our interpretation, his radicalization in action depended on the means and opportunity offered by Jordanian intelligence and the CIA. This section of the paper draws on a case history by Turcan and McCauley, especially on interviews with al-Balawi's wife Defne Bayrak conducted by Turcan; sources for all the quotations used in this section are detailed in the published paper.²¹

Early life and education. Al-Balawi was born in Kuwait on December 25, 1977 to a middle-class family of ten children. He came from a Bedouin clan from Tabuk (Saudi Arabia), which has branches in Jordan and Palestine. His Palestinian family came to Kuwait in 1948 after the foundation of Israel, and his family lived in Kuwait until Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. After the invasion, the family moved to the city of Zarqa, Jordan; his father, a middle-class professional, still owns two pharmacies in Zarqa. Unlike al-Balawi's family, most Palestinians around Zarqa live in refugee camps with bitter memories of their former properties now controlled by Israel.

Al-Balawi graduated with honors from a high school in Amman. His hope was to go to medical school and become a pediatrician. In 1995, mainly owing to his outstanding grades, al-Balawi was awarded a fellowship from the Jordanian government, and he went to Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, to learn Turkish. After a year of language lessons, he moved to Istanbul in 1996, where he was accepted as a medical student in the Medical Faculty of Istanbul University. In 2001, in an Internet chat room, he met Defne Bayrak, a Turkish student in the Faculty of Communication in the same university. When they married later the same year, al-Balawi was in his last year of medical school. Their match was for love, rather than arranged by their families, and cut across differences of language and nationality.

After graduating from Istanbul University and becoming a physician in 2002, al-Balawi moved back to Zarqa with his wife. Bayrak says that al-Balawi deeply wanted to go back to his people—to help fellow Palestinians. After moving back to Jordan, he worked in local hospitals run by the Muslim Brotherhood charity, including a clinic in Hittin, a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Zarqa, where thousands of Palestinians live in an extremely deprived and isolated environment.

Radicalization of opinion in Jordan. Bayrak contends that the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ignited a transformation of her husband's beliefs. She says that at the end of 2004, for the first time, he began to talk to her about his strong belief in the need for violent jihad against Western occupiers in Muslim lands such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Gaza. However, she explicitly asserts that he had not acted to connect with any jihadist organization or group. "He followed all of them, but from a distance," she says. She insists that "He was constantly reading and writing by himself and had not participated in a radical group activity."²²

It appears that al-Balawi's jihadist postings on the Internet began with U.S. troops entering Iraq in 2003, but his radicalization accelerated after the Israeli attack on Gaza in late 2008 (*Operation Cast Lead*). Bayrak says that he began spending 3–4 hours on the Internet every day after the Gaza attack, and she adds that his interest in the Internet continued at this level until his departure to Pakistan in March 2009.

Al-Balawi posted under the name *Abu Dujana*, a famous Muslim warrior and companion of the Prophet Muhammad. His posts glorified those who fight and those who die in jihad against Western forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The radicalization that began with the invasion of Iraq had an important limitation: al-Balawi did not agree with the version of radical Islam that calls for attacks on civilians. He participated in a version of Salafi Islam that heeded the Quran's injunctions against such attacks. He supported attacks on invaders of Muslim lands—on the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza and the West Bank, and on Western troops in Afghanistan and Iraq—but did not support attacks on European or U.S. civilians. This limitation was to be important when he moved to radicalization in action.

It may have been during the period of the Israeli incursion into Gaza that al-Balawi first attracted the attention of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate (GID). Ali bin Zaid, a young cousin of King Abdullah, who was to be the Jordanian agent killed by al-Balawi with seven CIA agents in the suicide attack, was among the analysts who kept a close watch on jihadist Internet forums. Jordanian officials said that al-Balawi had been interrogated by officers from the GID in March 2009 because of suspicions about his activities in the online world. He had been released because the inquiry found "nothing relevant." Bayrak says that it was very surprising for her to see her husband three days after his being taken into custody because it took months for others to be released by Jordanian intelligence. She said that when she asked him how he could be released so quickly, he answered, very softly, "by the help of Allah":

Before the arrest, he had been talking about going back to Turkey or to the USA for medical specialist education. After being released, however, he suddenly changed his mind and started talking about going to Pakistan for surgeon education. I still do not know why he suddenly changed his mind and decided to go to Pakistan. I did not want to let him go and tried to change his mind, but he did not listen to me.²³

Radicalization of action in Pakistan. In March 2009, al-Balawi flew to Dubai and then to Pakistan, where, maybe for the first time in his life, he could establish face-to-face contacts with hard-core militants. He was in touch with Bayrak by Internet, and called her in late August 2009 (roughly five months after his departure) and asked her to leave Jordan and to go to Turkey with their daughters. He also wired \$4,000 to her from Peshawar—a wire delivery unlikely to go through without the knowledge and approval of Jordanian intelligence. At the end of September, Bayrak left Jordan with her daughters and went back to Istanbul. Bayrak says that she communicated with her husband via the Internet for the last time ten days before his attack at Khost on December 30:

He said he was in Peshawar, working in a local hospital there to help people. He seemed very normal and we talked about everyday things. But he was lamenting the deaths of children from the air attacks of the Americans. At the beginning of December 2009, just three weeks before the attack, he said that he was extremely sorry to see the deaths of hundreds of children caused by the air attacks in the last two months. This

was the second time I sensed his mood of agony since the Israeli attack on Gaza in the winter of 2008. He said to me that he was extremely affected by the deaths of the children and lamented that he could do nothing to prevent this. The last thing he mentioned to me was his plan to come back to Turkey. He did not mention his plan of an attack, nor did I sense that something abnormal was going on.²⁴

Radicalization to violence: Opinion vs. action. Beginning in late 2004, al-Balawi was telling his wife that violent jihad was necessary against Western occupiers in Muslim lands, pointing especially to Afghanistan and Iraq. At this point, in his Internet postings, he was already at the third level of the opinion pyramid (justifiers). In 2008, like other Palestinians, he was outraged by the Israeli attack on Gaza; as Abu Dujana, he expressed his outrage on the Internet in ever more fiery calls for jihad. At this time, according to Bayrak, he also began to talk about going himself to jihad:

Increasingly, he started to talk about his desire to go to some of the battlefields where jihads were being fought in late 2008. He was very adamant about going to Iraq or Afghanistan and was looking for an opportunity to do this. It was impossible for anybody to go to these states without being monitored by Jordanian intelligence. If he was able to go to Pakistan, I think that it was because he had completely deceived Jordanian intelligence and the CIA and used them as a means to pursue jihad. He may have agreed to work for them and take money, but this was a part of his deception plan. He did not say anything to me about his plans before his departure, but he was very happy to go to Pakistan. His morale was high.²⁵

Thus, after four years of radical postings as Abu Dujana, al-Balawi moved to the top of the opinion pyramid: following the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008, he began talking of a personal obligation to jihad against Western forces in Muslim lands. And then, it is very important to note, he did nothing. He continued posting his fiery opinions but he did not connect with any militant group and he did not try to go to Iraq or Pakistan to fight. He did not even engage in what small levels of political activism were available in Jordan. He posted and he doctored.

This is an interesting case: someone at the peak of opinion radicalization who did nothing to move toward political violence. Al-Balawi was at the peak of the opinion pyramid for at least four months, while remaining in the inert base of the action pyramid. From late 2008 until March 2009, al-Balawi was talking personal jihad but made no move toward jihad.

These four months underline the importance of distinguishing radicalization in the opinion pyramid from radicalization in the action pyramid. In the cases of Vera Zasulich and Clayton Waagner, the interval between experiencing a personal moral obligation to take up violence and the beginning of violent action is not clear but appears brief. Looking at these cases, one might think that violent action is the inevitable next step after reaching the peak of opinion radicalization. But al-Balawi's four months of talking jihad while doing nothing shows that there is an important gap between even the most radical idea and radical action. We believe that it was the

opportunity, or the pressure, brought by Jordanian intelligence that moved al-Balawi across the gap.

Bayrak asserts that al-Balawi had already decided to conduct an attack when he was in Jordan and had used CIA and Jordanian intelligence to get to Afghanistan to achieve this objective. On the contrary, we suggest that he decided to conduct his attack after he arrived in Afghanistan and Pakistan. When Jordanian intelligence provided him with a free ticket and visa to Pakistan, he could not have been planning an attack because he knew nothing and no one in Pakistan. Without any idea of means or opportunity, he could not, in Jordan, choose to attack anyone or anything in Pakistan or Afghanistan. But Jordanian intelligence offered him the sort of challenge he had said he wanted.

An interview with al-Balawi's father indicates the importance of the opportunity offered by Jordanian intelligence. "Had they left him, he would have stayed behind his computer forever—he would only be expressing his opinion, only talking."

Talking violence is easier than acting violence, especially for a man with a wife and daughters who love him. Especially for a man with no history or experience of violence, not even experience with non-violent activism. But for a man who has been preaching violence to others, there would be something hypocritical about refusing a ticket to the battlefield. The internal pressure toward consistency of words and action—which Zasluch called *conscience* and Waagner called the voice of God—is evident in one of the videos al-Balawi made before his suicide attack at Khost. The title of his post was "When Will My Words Drink My Blood?—I Am Now Fit for Publication":

Oh, you who write about jihad and urge people to it, beware of falling into the same trap that I fell into. What I fear most is that [when I die] I will meet a man who died as a martyr under the effect of my words, whereas I shall die in bed. This is a nightmare which makes me sleepless and racks my nerves. I'm afraid that on the day of resurrection, standing before a mountain of sins, I shall be asked to account for each and every one of them, and it shall be a long account, and I will be covered with sweat, while they [martyrs] will be moving about the halls of paradise in everlasting pleasure. One of them will say to the other: "What do you say about him who used to be called Abu Dajana Al-Khorasani, who used to urge people to go to jihad?" And the other one will answer: "But he died in bed, a contemptible death, having stayed away from jihad. I wish for him that he had benefited by his own words. He was like a candle that burned itself to give light to the others."

I'm afraid to be branded as a liar, and that my words will be the evidence for my conviction. . . . My words are going to die if I don't save them with my blood, and my emotions will be extinguished if I don't kindle them with my death. My postings will testify against me, if I don't give them the proof of my being free of hypocrisy. . . . It's either me or them [my postings]. The world cannot have both of us in it. One of us must die, so that the other can continue to live, and I wish it is I who shall die.²⁶

One more link with Zasluch and Waagner is al-Balawi's strong identification with those he saw as victims. The medical student who hoped to be a pediatrician became the surgeon who identified with the young victims he worked on. Bayrak

reports the special pain al-Balawi felt for the suffering of Palestinian children, and his last communication with his wife expressed the pain he felt for the suffering of the children he saw die in Pakistan. "My husband stated to me that he had personally witnessed the deaths of more than 300 children from April to November 2009 on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan."²⁷ To those who killed children, in a camp with no civilians, he carried a bomb he could not have made himself.

Al-Balawi's history highlights the gap between radical opinion and radical action. More than that, it shows that motive for violence is not enough; opportunity and means of violence are required to get across the gap. For al-Balawi, Jordanian intelligence provided the opportunity; the militants he met for the first time in Pakistan provided the means. His move to violent action tests the distinction between lone wolf violence and group violence: he radicalized to the top of the opinion pyramid without group support, but developed violent action by connecting with a violent group. In this trajectory, finding a violent group was like finding a loaded weapon.

The next section moves from case material to statistical reporting of lone attackers to show again the importance of means and opportunity in getting from violent motivation to violent action.

Characteristics of Assassins and School Attackers

Statistical study of lone wolf terrorists has barely begun. In what may be the first such study, Hewitt identified 27 lone actor U.S. terrorists between 1955 and 2001 and suggested that the rate of psychological disturbance was higher (6 of 27) among the loners than among other U.S. terrorists.²⁸

Taking a different approach to the problem, McCauley, Moskalenko, and Van Son sought to develop hypotheses about the characteristics of lone wolf terrorists by looking for the common characteristics of two kinds of mostly lone actor violent offenders: assassins and school attackers. Their study used existing U.S. government-sponsored reports to examine these two kinds of offenders.²⁹

The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative focused on 37 incidents of targeted school attacks between 1974 and 2000, with a total of 41 attackers.³⁰ The report coded 30 of the 41 school attackers as having attacked alone (81%). Not counted among the 30, four attackers carried out their violence alone but were reported to have had some kind of assistance planning the attack (*Final Report*, p. 15). *Assassination in the United States* reviewed 74 incidents between 1949 and 1996 in which 83 people had either attacked (46%), or tried to attack (54% intercepted in the vicinity of the target with a weapon), a prominent person in the United States.³¹ Of the 83 assassins, 63 (76%) acted alone.

The logic of comparing school attackers with assassins is that these two groups of offenders are like lone wolf terrorists in perpetrating planned violence fueled by grievance (whereas most criminal violence in the U.S. is impulsive or motivated by greed). To the extent that assassins and school attackers share common characteristics, these characteristics may be risk factors for lone wolf terrorism as well. The obvious demographic differences between the two groups (teenagers vs. adults) are actually a strength of the comparison: any commonalities uncovered are the more striking and unlikely to be a reflection of life status or demographic factors.

As a study of lone actor violence, the comparison had an unavoidable limitation: most but not all of the assassins and school attackers were lone actors. Thus the

study compared two groups of predominantly lone actors, but the comparison was made coarser by the inclusion of a minority of group actors whose characteristics cannot be separated from the characteristics of lone actors. Four common characteristics of assassins and school attackers were identified: grievance, depression, unfreezing, and weapons use outside the military.

Grievance was coded from perception of *having been persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured* (school attackers) and *any grievance at the time of the Principal Incident* (assassins). The prevalence of *grievance* was high for both school attackers (81%) and assassins (67%). **Depression**, including despair or suicidal ideation, was coded for the great majority of school attackers (78%), and nearly half of assassins (44%) had this history. **Unfreezing** refers not to some kind of character or psychopathology but to a situational crisis of personal disconnection and maladjustment.³² Unfreezing was coded from report of *experienced or perceived major loss* (school attackers) and *accident/illness, loss of relationship, or failure/loss of status* (assassins). Loss of connection and status leaves an individual with less to lose in radical action, including violence. Almost all school attackers (98%) were coded for unfreezing, and “almost half” (the best summary figure available) of assassins showed unfreezing. Finally, **experience with weapons** was coded for both assassins and school attackers (with experience during military service excluded for assassins). Over half of assassins and school attackers showed a history of weapons use outside the military (71% and 63%).

Taken together, these four characteristics again suggest the importance of means and opportunity. Grievance is a motive for violence, weapons experience provides a means, and depression and unfreezing lower the opportunity cost of violence as the perpetrator has less to lose.

An illustration of these characteristics can be made in the case of Major Nidal Malik Hasan.³³ Major Hasan turned to the Koran after the death of his parents, seems to have had no close relationships after he was transferred to Fort Hood, and was about to be transferred to Afghanistan (*unfreezing*). He saw himself discriminated against as a Muslim (*personal grievance*) and saw the war on terrorism as a war on Islam (*political grievance*). He brought two weapons to his attack, one a sophisticated “cop-killer” pistol for which he purchased a laser sight—indicating *experience with weapons* beyond whatever slight weapons training the U.S. Army provides for physician-psychiatrists. So far as we can ascertain, Major Hasan showed no signs of depression. Thus Major Hasan had three of the four characteristics common to assassins and school attackers: unfreezing, grievance, and weapons experience.

Indeed recent studies of lone wolf terrorists reinforce attention to all four characteristics. Spaaij examined 88 cases of lone wolf terrorists aggregated across fifteen Western countries and found that lone wolves are likely to suffer from some form of psychological disturbance and tend to be loners with few friends.³⁴ Gill, Horgan, and Deckert put together an international collection of 119 mostly lone actor terrorists (including also isolated dyads and some individuals with loose group connections); no single profile was identified but many of the lone actors seemed to be socially isolated.³⁵ In the most methodologically sophisticated study yet conducted, Gruenewald, Chermak, and Freilich compared lethal attacks by lone actor and group actor U.S. far-right extremists.³⁶ Results indicated that the lone actors were younger and more likely to have a military background, suffer mental illness, and experience disconnection by separation, divorce, or death of a partner.

Taken together, these results indicate a growing consensus that grievance-fueled lone attackers are likely to have weapons experience, depression or other mental disorder, and temporary or chronic social isolation. Future research may discover characteristics that differentiate lone wolf terrorists from assassins and school attackers, or it may be that lone wolf terrorists are part of a larger phenomenon of grievance-motivated lone actor violence.

Conclusion

Research has indicated that the pathways to participating in a terrorist group are many and too varied to admit the possibility of a profile of individual characteristics that can identify potential terrorists.³⁷ But there remains the possibility that lone wolf terrorists—those who act alone, without group support—may share characteristics that could provide a useful profile of potential for lone-wolf violence.³⁸

Results reviewed in this article indicate that there may be at least two profiles for lone wolf terrorists. Statistical studies indicate what may be called a *disconnected-disordered* profile: individuals with a grievance and weapons experience who are socially disconnected and stressed with a psychological disorder. But at least three of our case histories do not fit this description: Zasulich, Waagner, and al-Balawi had social skills, solid social connections, and no sign of mental disorder. Rather these individuals have a *caring-consistency* profile: they felt strongly the suffering of others and a personal responsibility to reduce or revenge this suffering. We suspect that the caring-consistency profile is less common than the disconnected-disordered profile—not least because self-sacrifice for others is less common than self-interest—but this hypothesis will have to be tested as we learn more about lone actor violence.

Our reviews of both case and statistical results were conducted using a two-pyramids model of radicalization that emphasizes the gap between extreme opinions and violent action. Perhaps our most important suggestion is to emphasize the practical, situational requirements for crossing the gap between radical opinion and radical action. Criminologists give attention to means and opportunity for crime, whereas terrorism researchers tend to focus only on motives. The case of al-Balawi illustrates the importance of giving more attention to situational factors, as Taylor and Currie have recently suggested in their edited book, *Terrorism and Affordance*.³⁹ Al-Balawi was talking about a personal moral obligation to participate in jihad for months before Jordanian intelligence gave him the means and opportunity to act on his radical opinions.

Surely we should avoid forcing action choices on individuals at the peak of opinion radicalization, but the issue is broader than that. Much has been made of the fact that Major Hasan had emailed with Islamist firebrand al-Awlaki, although apparently the content of these emails did not raise warning flags for U.S. security officers.⁴⁰ An emphasis on means and opportunity might have uncovered that Major Hasan, a psychiatrist with no military need for experience with weapons, had recently bought and (presumably) practiced with firearms. This step toward acquiring the means of violence might be more diagnostic than any assessment of perceived grievance.

From our perspective, the most dangerous indicator of potential for lone wolf terrorism is the combination of radical opinion with means and opportunity for radical action. Some individuals with radical opinions may seek out a militant group to acquire means and opportunity for violence, as Vera Zasulich first tried to do in approaching People's Will. Some with radical opinions may have means and

opportunity thrust upon them, as happened to al-Balawi. Some may seek out their own means and opportunity, as Major Hasan did and Zusulich finally did. Given that radical opinions are common and radical action is rare, attention to means and opportunity for radical action may be useful in narrowing the risk pool for lone wolf violence.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank participants in the Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism Conference at Uppsala University, September 24–26, 2012, for encouraging the ideas in this article, and thank Jeffrey Kaplan and Leena Malkki for pushing us to move these ideas into action.

Funding

This research was supported by the United States Department of Homeland Security through the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

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