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### The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment

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## The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment

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*Lone wolf terrorism remains an ambiguous and enigmatic phenomenon. The boundaries of lone wolf terrorism are fuzzy and arbitrary. This article aims to define and analyze the main features and patterns of lone wolf terrorism in fifteen countries. Lone wolf terrorism is shown to be more prevalent in the United States than in the other countries under study. The cross-national analysis suggests that in the United States lone wolf terrorism has increased markedly during the past three decades; a similar increase does not appear to have occurred in the other countries under study. The numbers of casualties resulting from lone wolf terrorism have been relatively limited, and there is no evidence that the lethality of lone wolf terrorism is on the increase. The rates of psychological disturbance and social ineptitude are found to be relatively high among lone wolf terrorists. Lone wolf terrorists tend to create their own ideologies that combine personal frustrations and aversion with broader political, social, or religious aims. In this process, many lone wolf terrorists draw on the communities of belief and ideologies of validation generated and transmitted by extremist movements.*

Terrorism committed by lone individuals has gained heightened attention at the start of the twenty-first century. Law enforcement officials and analysts have suggested that lone wolf terrorists, defined as terrorists who carry out attacks individually and independently from established terrorist organizations, are particularly hard to identify before they strike and therefore pose a major security threat.<sup>1</sup> According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), lone extremists represent an ongoing threat to the United States, both domestically and overseas.<sup>2</sup> FBI director Robert S. Mueller III stated in 2003 that “the threat from single individuals sympathetic or affiliated with al-Qaeda, acting without external support or surrounding conspiracies, is increasing.”<sup>3</sup> The perceived threat posed by micro-actors has triggered important (proposed) changes in the legal provisions for dismantling and

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preventing lone wolf terrorism, such as the introduction of a “lone wolf provision” into the United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.<sup>4</sup>

There exists a major discrepancy between the recent political, judicial, and media attention for lone wolf terrorism on the one hand, and scientific investigation of this phenomenon on the other. Research into lone wolf terrorism remains extremely scarce. Terrorism is commonly viewed as essentially a collective, organized activity and, as a consequence, scholars focus predominantly on group dynamics and collective socialization to explain individual pathways into terrorism. Social psychological explanations of terrorism tend to emphasize the influence of charismatic leaders, top-down or bottom-up recruitment, ideological training and indoctrination, moral disengagement, in-group solidarity, conformity and obedience, depersonalization, and other factors relating to organizational processes.<sup>5</sup> Moghaddam, for example, argues that:

commitment to the terrorist cause strengthens as the new recruit is socialized into the traditions, methods, and goals of the organization. . . . [C]onformity and obedience will be very high in the cells of the terrorist organization, where the cell leader represents a strong authority figure and where nonconformity, disobedience, and disloyalty receive the harshest punishments.<sup>6</sup>

While interpretations of this kind are helpful to understanding collective forms of terrorism, the almost exclusive scholarly focus on group-based terrorism indicates the need for research on more individualized forms of terrorism. It remains unclear to which extent dominant explanations of terrorism apply to the actions of lone individuals. Hoffman makes the important point that:

the traditional way of understanding terrorism and looking at terrorists based on organizational definitions and attributes in some cases is no longer relevant. Increasingly, lone individuals with no connection with or formal ties to established or identifiable terrorist organizations are rising up to engage in violence.<sup>7</sup>

Hoffman’s observation raises vital questions regarding the incidence and nature of lone wolf terrorism, which will be addressed in this article. The objective of this article is to enhance our understanding of lone wolf terrorism through an empirically grounded analysis of its main features and patterns. It will focus on three major dimensions of lone wolf terrorism:

- Incidence and evolution: How common is lone wolf terrorism? How is lone wolf terrorism distributed geographically? Has its prevalence changed over time?
- Political, social, and individual influences: What are the motivational patterns of lone wolf terrorists? Under what social and psychological circumstances do individuals engage in lone wolf terrorism? What are the links between lone wolf terrorists and other terrorist subjects, networks or ideologies, social movements, or state or political parties?
- *Modi operandi*: What are lone wolf terrorists’ preferred weapons of attack? Who/what are the main targets of lone wolf terrorism?

In the next section a working definition of lone wolf terrorism will first be proposed.

## Defining Lone Wolf Terrorism

A critical discussion of general terrorism definitions lies beyond the scope of this article. The *Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law* (TTSRL) research project, of which this study was part, took the European Union's definition of terrorism as a starting point:

intentional acts that are committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.<sup>8</sup>

However, terrorism is clearly a contested and intensely political concept, and there is no academic consensus on its definition.

This article aims to adopt a narrow definition of lone wolf terrorism. The purpose of this narrow definition is to isolate, as much as possible, the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism from other types of terrorism and political violence. The term "lone wolf terrorism" will be used to distinguish terrorist activities carried out by lone individuals from those carried out on the part of terrorist organizations or state bodies. The element of terrorism highlighted in this distinction is the subjects of terrorist acts (individuals, terrorist organizations, state bodies) rather than, for example, their specific political, religious, or social aims. Lone wolf terrorism involves terrorist attacks carried out by persons who (a) operate individually, (b) do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, and (c) whose *modi operandi* are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy.

In this definition, terrorist attacks carried out by couples or by very small terrorist cells do not, strictly speaking, qualify as lone wolf terrorism. This excludes certain high-profile terrorist attacks that are commonly ascribed to lone individuals, most notably the Oklahoma City bombing on 19 April 1995. Although the attack was carried out by an individual, Timothy McVeigh, his accomplice Terry Nichols appears to have played a considerable role in preparations for the attack.<sup>9</sup> A group is thus seen as consisting of two or more people. Furthermore, the above definition suggests that the lone wolf terrorist differs from someone who may be unbalanced joining a terrorist group in that the former operates individually and autonomously. In the case where a lone wolf terrorist subsequently joins an established terrorist organization, he or she ceases to be considered a "lone wolf."

The focus in this article on the agents of terrorist acts further implies that lone wolf terrorism should not be viewed as a distinctive category with regard to its ideological bases. Lone wolf terrorists may identify or sympathize with extremist movements but, by definition, do not form part of these movements. The spectrum of motivations and validations that has been described for terrorist organizations equally seems to apply to lone wolf terrorists. Juergensmeyer has argued that many of the acts that appear to be solo ventures conducted by rogue activists have broader ideologies of validation behind them.<sup>10</sup> These ideologies of validation clearly extend beyond the scope of formal organization. Moreover, although lone wolf terrorists are by definition not tied to any established terrorist group, this is not to say that at one time they may not have been a member or affiliate of some type of extremist group; they may even have obtained some institutional training or support in the past. Their terrorist attack or campaign, however, results from solitary action during which the direct influence or support of others, even those sympathetic to the cause, is absent.

The boundaries of lone wolf terrorism are inevitably fuzzy and arbitrary. Some of the most striking political assassinations in history were carried out by lone individuals rather than by groups. Should these assassinations be regarded as acts of lone wolf terrorism? Crucial to answering this question is the intent of the subject. Violence motivated exclusively by financial gain or personal vengeance arguably should not be defined as terrorism because terrorism is generally directed in pursuit of larger political, ideological, or religious aims. The tactic of terrorism has a political rather than a merely personal or criminal orientation. The immediate, direct target of the attack is usually of secondary importance to its secondary target or its broader message or effect.<sup>11</sup> In other words, what separates the actions of the lone wolf terrorist from those of the “lone assassin” is the presence of a broader political, ideological, or religious cause that informs the actions of the former.

The question of whether acts of violence serve broader political, ideological, or religious agendas leaves plenty of room for discussion. Assigning purposes and motivations to individual acts of terror is inherently subjective and open to interpretation, especially when terrorists do not claim responsibility for the attack.<sup>12</sup> These difficulties also apply to lone wolf terrorism. In many cases it is extremely difficult to effectively determine the wider cause, even when researchers closely engage with their subjects. Consider, for example, the case of Mir Aimal Kansi, a Pakistani immigrant to the United States who shot Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees in 1993. Even after conducting an in-depth interview with Kansi, Jessica Stern still has considerable doubts as to his true motives:

He seems to have been moved, at least in part, by the anti-American fervor he was exposed to in his youth. However, terrorists often use slogans of various kinds to mask their true motives. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that Kansi's primary motivation was to exact personal revenge against an organization he believed had betrayed his father. . . . When Kansi says he was seeking revenge, was it for some perceived slight—either to his father or to himself? We may never know.<sup>13</sup>

The mass shootings at the military complex of Fort Hood in November 2009 raise similar questions. Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan killed 12 soldiers and 1 civilian and wounded 43 other people. Speculations about Hasan's motives are rife. Hasan reportedly held strong views in opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and felt that Muslims should not be sent to fight other Muslims. Media reports suggested that Hasan engaged in e-mail correspondence with the Yemen-based radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who is accused of spreading the Al Qaeda ideology. However, government officials claimed that the messages “were largely questions about Islam, not expressions of militancy or hints of a plot” and that “the e-mail contacts were not a sign of a terrorist threat.”<sup>14</sup> At present, it remains unclear whether the shootings were politically or religiously motivated and, therefore, whether the shootings can be regarded as an act of lone wolf terrorism. This confusion underlines the inherent difficulties in defining lone wolf terrorism.

## Methods

The data presented in this article derive from multiple sources. The discussion of the prevalence and evolution of lone wolf terrorism is based on an analysis of the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base.<sup>15</sup> The RAND-MIPT database originally contained only incidents of international terrorism, but from 1998 it also registers domestic terrorist attacks.<sup>16</sup> A database was compiled of all terrorist attacks carried out by lone individuals between

1 January 1968 and 1 May 2007 in fifteen countries that are covered in the TTSRL research project: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Czech Republic, Portugal, Russia, Canada, United States, and Australia.

The difficulties in accurately assessing or quantifying the evolution of lone wolf terrorism due to discontinuities in the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base and other pressing methodological issues should be emphasized from the outset. The data for 1968–1997 cover international incidents only, whereas the data for 1998–present cover both domestic and international incidents. These periods can therefore not be systematically compared as far as the frequency of lone wolf terrorism is concerned. Furthermore, there are gaps in the database’s descriptions of suspected perpetrators. The recorded incidents of lone wolf terrorism were corroborated through an analysis of media reports, aviation security reports, and chronologies and encyclopaedias of terrorism.<sup>17</sup> This led to the exclusion of a number of incidents due to either profound confusion about the identity of the perpetrator, the perpetrator’s alleged connections with a known terrorist group, or the absence of a “terrorist purpose.” In a small number of cases it was not possible to trace the exact circumstances of the attacks, which also led to their exclusion. A number of lone wolf incidents that were not recorded in the RAND-MIPT database were included based on the alternatives sources; these included predominantly domestic attacks in the 1970s and 1980s. Two cases of lone wolf terrorism that date back to the 1940s and 1950s were recorded.

This exercise has resulted in a database comprising a total of 74 cases of lone wolf terrorism in the fifteen countries (multiple attacks by a single individual have been counted as one case only, because they can be seen as part of the same terrorist campaign). To enable cross-national comparison, the two pre-1968 cases are excluded where appropriate in the analysis, generating a total of 72 cases between 1968 and 2007. Only one perpetrator was identified as being female (Rachelle Shannon, 1993, United States), which means that almost all lone wolf terrorists in the sample were men.

Five cases of alleged lone wolf terrorism (Table 1) were studied in depth to supplement the quantitative data with a more detailed, qualitative picture of lone wolf terrorism. These case studies were selected on the basis of their diversity in terms of (a) the number of fatalities and injuries, (b) the time span (ranging from a single attack to a prolonged terror campaign), and (c) the geographical location of the attack(s). The case studies were based on documentary analysis of media reports, literature, documents and letters written by the perpetrators, police and court transcripts, and psychological and/or psychiatric evaluations. The five cases are used in this article to illustrate, enlighten, and interrogate the main features and patterns of lone wolf terrorism.

**Table 1**  
Case studies of alleged lone wolf terrorism

Name	Location	Time span	Fatalities/injuries
Theodore Kaczynski	United States	1978–1996	3/23
Franz Fuchs	Austria	1993–1996	4/15
Yigal Amir	Israel	Single attack in 1995	1/0
David Copeland	United Kingdom	Two-week spree in 1999	3/129
Volkert van der Graaf	Netherlands	Single attack in 2002	1/0

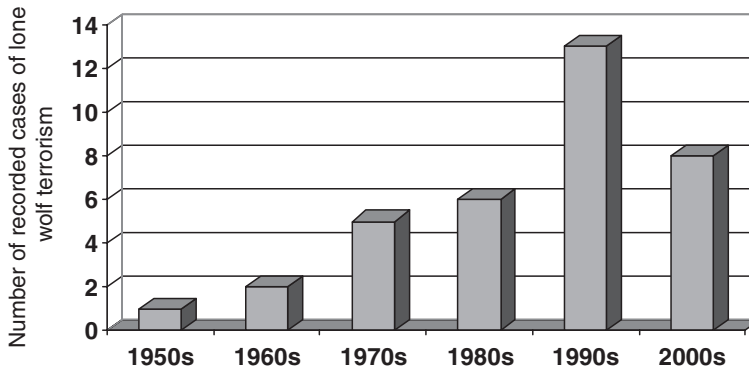
## The Prevalence and Evolution of Lone Wolf Terrorism

Lone wolf terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Equivalents of this type of terrorism can be found in nineteenth-century anarchism.<sup>18</sup> Individual acts of violence were regarded by a small minority of anarchists as part and parcel of revolutionary action. Advocates of “propaganda by deed” argued that since creating a vast and hierarchical organization would inevitably come to involve the use of coercive power, the anarchist revolutionary should preferably act individually or form small groups of like-minded individuals acting on their own initiative. Individual anarchists were involved in an extensive series of assassinations and attacks against institutions and organizations that represented the values of bourgeois society.<sup>19</sup> In the twentieth century anarchists ceased, both in theory and practice, to view individual terrorism as a rewarding strategy.<sup>20</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century lone wolf activism was particularly associated with White supremacists and antigovernment extremists in the United States, and especially with the “leaderless resistance” concept. Kaplan defines leaderless resistance as “a kind of lone wolf operation in which an individual, or a very small, highly cohesive group, engage in acts of anti-state violence independent of any movement, leader, or network of support.”<sup>21</sup> Kaplan traces the leaderless resistance concept back to the early 1970s. Joseph Tommasi, co-founder of the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), promoted “to act resolutely and alone” against the state. The leaderless resistance strategy was popularized by White supremacist Louis Beam, a Klansman with close ties with Aryan Nations. Beam published an essay advocating leaderless resistance as a strategy to counteract the destruction by law enforcement agencies of hierarchical U.S. militias. His vision was one where “all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction.”<sup>22</sup> The term “lone wolf” was probably popularized in the late 1990s by White supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis. They envisioned lone wolf and small cell activism to be considerably more difficult to detect than conventional terrorism.

Lone wolf terrorism has recently been portrayed in North American media as an ascending threat.<sup>23</sup> Research by Hewitt supports this claim. Hewitt notes that this type of terrorism “has greatly increased in recent decades.”<sup>24</sup> His research also indicates important geographical differences in the prevalence of lone wolf terrorism. “American terrorism,” Hewitt argues, “differs from terrorism in other countries in that a significant proportion of terrorist attacks have been carried out by unaffiliated individuals rather than by members of terrorist organizations.” During the period 1955–1977, 7 percent of all victims of terrorism in the United States were reportedly killed by unaffiliated individuals, but during 1978–99 this percentage rose to 26.<sup>25</sup> Hewitt’s analysis, however, also includes attacks by couples and by three persons (which account for approximately 25 percent of cases), since he considers a terrorist group to consist of at least four individuals.

The data gathered for this study indicate that lone wolf terrorism accounts for 1.28 percent of all terrorist incidents from 1968 to May 2007 in the 15 countries (72 of a total of 5,646 terrorist incidents). This suggests that statistically speaking lone wolf terrorism is a relatively marginal phenomenon. There are significant cross-national variations in the prevalence of lone wolf terrorism. It is significantly more prevalent in the United States than in the other sample countries, with the U.S. cases (30 in total) accounting for almost 42 percent of all cases. The European countries with the highest number of lone wolf terrorist attacks are Germany (nine), France (seven), Spain (six), and Italy (five). This finding confirms Hewitt’s conclusion and can be explained in part by the relative popularity of the leaderless resistance concept among right-wing militia and anti-abortion activists



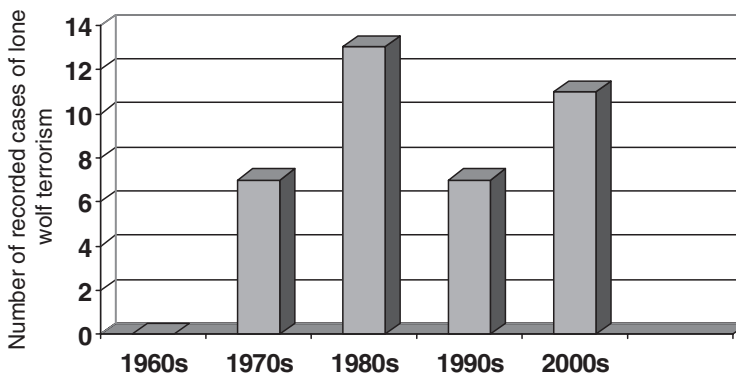
**Figure 1.** The development of lone wolf terrorism in the United States, 1950–2007.

in the United States. However, methodological constraints limit the conclusiveness of this finding. The non-U.S. cases for the period 1968–1997 contain only incidents of international terrorism, and not domestic incidents. The data set for the United States is likely to be more complete, which means that the incidence of lone wolf terrorism in countries other than the United States is likely to be under-represented in comparison with the U.S. cases. The observed differences may therefore (partially) reflect discrepancies in incident registrations rather than actual dissimilarities in the prevalence of lone wolf terrorism.

The prevalence of lone wolf terrorism appears to have increased markedly in the United States over the past three decades, as Figure 1 shows.<sup>26</sup>

The evolution of lone wolf terrorism in other countries is more difficult to assess due to the aforementioned discontinuities in the RAND-MIPT database. Figure 2 shows the fluctuations in the prevalence of lone wolf terrorism in twelve European countries from the 1970s onward, peaking in the 1980s and 2000s. Taking into account the fact that the pre-1998 incidence of lone wolf terrorism is probably under-represented, this seems to indicate that there is no notable increase in lone wolf terrorism in the European countries over the past two decades.<sup>27</sup>

The limitations of quantitative data of this kind are not confined to the aforementioned methodological problems. Mere statistical analysis cannot provide a deep understanding of



**Figure 2.** The development of lone wolf terrorism in twelve European countries, 1968–2007.

the nature of lone wolf terrorism or the political, social, and psychological influences that shape it. The remainder of the article will therefore also draw extensively on the five case studies in analyzing the motivational patterns and *modi operandi* of lone wolf terrorism.

### Motivational Patterns of Lone Wolf Terrorism

The database compiled for this study provides insight into the backgrounds and ideological underpinnings of lone wolf terrorist attacks. The main ideological sources of the recorded incidents are White supremacy, Islamism, nationalism/separatism, and anti-abortion activism. The ideological sources of the attacks vary significantly across countries. In the United States White supremacy (nine), Islamist (five), and anti-abortion activism (four) are the main ideological categories of lone wolf terrorism. In other countries, nationalism/separatism (mainly Palestinian, Catalan, and Chechen) (five) is the most prevalent category, followed by White supremacy (three). In 30 cases (40 percent) the perpetrators' motivations were unknown.

The ideological categories identified in Figure 3 are inevitably reductionistic; they show neither developmental processes nor ideological mixtures. Stern argues that lone wolves “often come up with their own ideologies that combine personal vendettas with religious or political grievances.”<sup>28</sup> The case studies verify this argument. All five cases demonstrate a variable combination of political and personal motives. The social and political views of Theodore Kaczynski (a.k.a. “the Unabomber”) appear closest to anarchism and contain elements of Luddism. He railed against technology, modernity, and the destruction of the environment. Kaczynski stated that the continued scientific and technical progress of society would inevitably result in the extinction of individual liberty. In his 1995 manifesto Kaczynski argued that anarchy would leave people “able to control the circumstances of their own lives.”<sup>29</sup> The manifesto presented justifications for his bombings: “In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.”<sup>30</sup> On another occasion, Kaczynski said that “people who wilfully and knowingly promote economic growth and technical progress, in our eyes they are criminals, and if they get blown up they deserve it.”<sup>31</sup> During his trial, Kaczynski justified his bombing campaign as “an attempt to slow the march of technology blindly crushing man’s freedom.”<sup>32</sup> Kaczynski may also have been inspired by radical environmentalist literature.<sup>33</sup> Kaczynski reportedly attended a meeting of environmentalists at the University of Montana in 1994, which seems to have triggered him to kill the advertising executive Thomas Mosser one month later.<sup>34</sup>

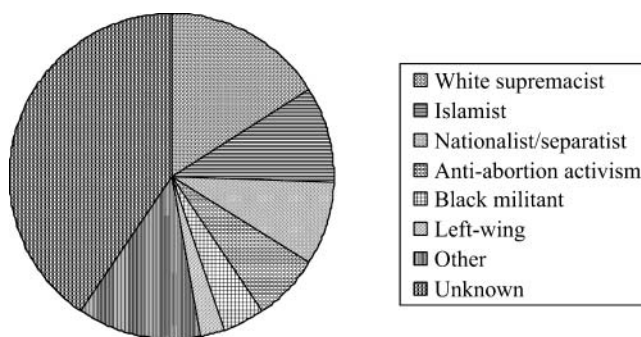


Figure 3. Ideological sources of lone wolf terrorism.

Yet Kaczynski's political motives were also inextricably related to personal resentment. He described his perceived social rejection and the "fact that organized society frustrates my very powerful urge for physical freedom and personal autonomy." It is likely that over the years Kaczynski increasingly attributed his personal frustrations to external factors, leading him to develop a deep-seated hatred toward modern society in general. Although Kaczynski principally targeted individuals and organizations that he held responsible for scientific and technological progress and the destruction of individual freedom and the environment, his resentment appears to have been related also to his personal situation: his perceived dysfunction in life, particularly his inability to establish a relationship with a female.<sup>35</sup>

Kaczynski's case highlights how political, social, and individual influences are often intertwined, as they were for Yigal Amir. Amir justified the 1995 murder of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin with Jewish theology, historical precedents, and biblical examples.<sup>36</sup> Although Amir operated alone, his act was preceded by an unparalleled campaign of delegitimation of the Israeli government and by character assassination of Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres by Israel's far right.<sup>37</sup> Amir admired Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who singlehandedly killed 29 Muslims in Hebron in February 1994. He is said to have decided at Goldstein's funeral that he also had to conduct an exemplary act.<sup>38</sup> Amir convinced himself that he was on a divine mission and that in killing Rabin he was acting in accordance with Jewish religious law (*Halakha*). Days after his arrest, Amir stated to reporters that the Israeli government was surrendering the biblical heritage of the Jews and betraying settlers in the West Bank, and that the new Palestinian autonomy taking shape in once-occupied lands put Israel in great danger.<sup>39</sup> He was convinced that in order to save the nation, Rabin had to die: "Maybe physically I acted alone, but what pulled the trigger was not only my finger, but the finger of this whole nation, which for 2,000 years yearned for this land and dreamed of it."<sup>40</sup> While Amir's religious and political views were shared by a small but significant section of the Israeli far right, Kaczynski's beliefs were more a kind of *bricolage*, combining elements of different ideological traditions.

### Social and Psychological Influences

It has been frequently argued that terrorists should not be regarded as suffering from any identifiable psychopathology.<sup>41</sup> Crenshaw has noted that "the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality. Terrorism often seems to be the connecting link among widely varying personalities."<sup>42</sup> The question is whether this observation applies not only to members of terrorist organizations, but also to lone wolf terrorists. Hewitt argues that although most terrorists are "normal," the rate of psychological disturbance is considerably higher among lone wolves.<sup>43</sup> The present author's research findings support this observation. Three of the five lone wolf terrorists in the case studies were diagnosed with personality disorder (Copeland, Kaczynski, and Fuchs), while one was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (Van der Graaf).<sup>44</sup> Copeland was also treated for anxiety disorder. Four of them appear to have experienced severe depression during at least one stage of their lives (all but Copeland). These findings suggest that lone wolf terrorists are relatively likely to suffer from some form of psychological disturbance. The case of David Copeland serves to illustrate this point.

David Copeland left secondary school when he was sixteen to start an engineering apprenticeship. He began to experiment with alcohol and drugs, including LSD and heroin. In 1997 he moved to London to work as an engineer's assistant on the London Underground. That year he joined also British National Party (BNP). He soon abandoned the party because of his disappointment with the fact that the BNP did not advocate violence. He

moved back to Hampshire and joined a small neo-Nazi organization. Copeland became the organization's regional unit leader just weeks before the start of his bombing campaign. During this period Copeland first learned how to make bombs using fireworks with alarm clocks as timers. He obtained the information on how to make bombs from Internet sources, such as *The Terrorist's Handbook* and *How To Make Bombs Book Two*.<sup>45</sup> He bought and stole the materials from high-street shops and hardware stores and began experimenting with small explosives. It turned out that he could not assemble the necessary ingredients indicated in the Web-based guides and instead resorted to a less sophisticated bomb made out of fireworks material.<sup>46</sup> Copeland confessed that he had been particularly inspired by the explosion in Centennial Park during the Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, United States, in 1996. This explosion was later attributed to lone wolf Eric Rudolph. He said he became increasingly fixed on the idea of carrying out his own attack.<sup>47</sup>

After his arrest, Copeland claimed that he had been having sadistic dreams from the age of twelve. In 1998, he was prescribed mild anti-depressants to help him cope with anxiety attacks and told his General Practitioner he was "losing his mind," citing difficulties concentrating and sleeping. Copeland stated that the idea of conducting a bomb attack would not leave his mind and that he had to do it. He claimed that he did not want to kill anyone, but that if anyone died it would not bother him either. He later described his actions by saying it was his destiny to commit the offenses.<sup>48</sup> Copeland appears to have been suffering from some form of mental illness, but the nature and severity of the condition is contested. Five defense psychiatrists reportedly concluded that he was suffering from schizophrenia. One of them said that the visions Copeland spoke of as a teenager were consistent with the first stages of a schizophrenic condition. This diagnosis was challenged by prosecutors, who were under pressure not to concede to his pleas of guilty to manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility.<sup>49</sup> When Copeland was arrested, he reportedly insisted to a psychiatric nurse that he had "logically and rationally planned the explosions."<sup>50</sup> Another consultant psychiatrist concluded that Copeland was not suffering from schizophrenia, but did have a less serious personality disorder that was not serious enough for him to avoid a murder charge.<sup>51</sup>

The case of David Copeland highlights that even though lone wolf terrorists are not members of a terrorist or extremist organization, they may identify or sympathize with extremist movements or have been a member or affiliate of such a movement in the past. In such cases, their ideologies may reflect more closely the political, social, or religious aims of existing movements, as was also the case for Amir and, to a lesser degree, Van der Graaf. Others, like Kaczynski and Fuchs, were less directly influenced by existing movements, although Kaczynski's views appear to have been shaped in part by Harvard's counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>52</sup> These movements provide ideologies of validation and play an important role in the psychological mechanism of externalization by channeling personal frustrations and attributing responsibility for all problems to the Other.<sup>53</sup>

Social identification with broader political, social, or religious struggles encourages the lone wolf terrorist's dualistic categorization of the world into "us" and "them," thus stereotyping social groups and dehumanizing the enemy, effectively weakening psychological barriers against violence.<sup>54</sup> Lone wolf terrorists may not only internalize such dualistic categorizations but also, to varying extents, physically withdraw themselves from mainstream society. All five suffered from a variable degree of social ineptitude; they were, to varying degrees, loners with few friends and generally preferred to act alone. With the partial exception of Van der Graaf, none of them appear to have felt particularly comfortable in organized extremist groups. Two of them, Fuchs and Kaczynski, lived in reclusion and shunned most forms of direct contact with the outside world. Their preference to act alone

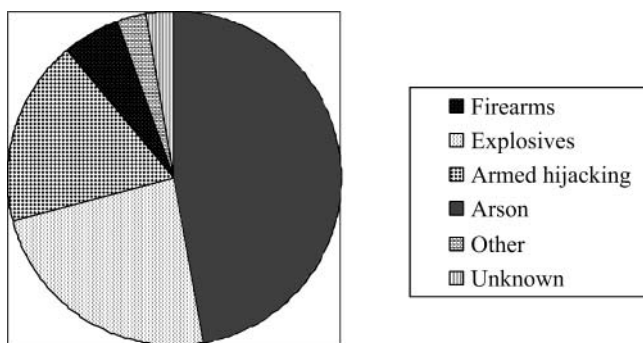
and their feelings of discomfort regarding full membership of organized extremist groups go some way to explaining why lone wolves stay lone wolves. Only Copeland explicitly tried to communicate with “like-minded” individuals by (briefly) officially joining an extremist movement, whereas the others appeared to have been more content with remaining on their own even though they may have identified or sympathized with the cause of existing extremist movements.

### Modi Operandi of Lone Wolf Terrorism

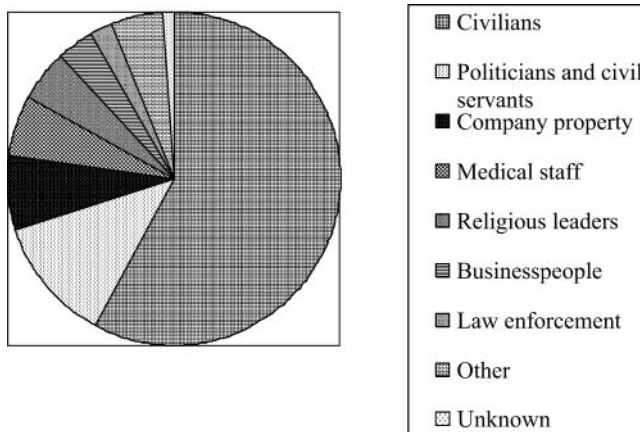
Firearms, explosives, and armed hijackings are the most common weapons used by lone wolf terrorists, as Figure 4 shows. The use of firearms is considerably more common among lone wolf terrorists in the United States (24) than in the other sample countries (10), which may well be explained by the relative ease with which firearms and gun licenses can be acquired in the United States in comparison with the other countries under study. Outside the United States armed hijackings are the preferred method (thirteen in total, of which eleven aircraft and two bus hijackings).<sup>55</sup> None of the lone wolf attacks in the United States featured armed hijackings. The predominant use of firearms in lone wolf terrorism is particularly interesting when compared to collective terrorism. Bombings and firebombings are the most common form of terrorist incident, accounting annually for 65–75 percent of all international terrorist attacks.<sup>56</sup> Lone wolf terrorism thus partially differs from group-based terrorism with regard to its weaponry.<sup>57</sup>

Only one case of lone wolf terrorism involved the (threatened) use of nuclear, biological, radiological, or chemical weapons. In 1974, Muharem Kurbegovic, also known as The Alphabet Bomber, threatened to use chemical or biological weapons. He threatened to release sarin in populated areas and claimed that he was already conducting experiments with it. He may also have been experimenting with other chemical agents. Kurbegovic acquired various chemicals, including a large amount of sodium cyanide.<sup>58</sup> Considering that this is the only recorded case of lone wolf terrorism involving unconventional weapons, that Kurbegovic did not go through with it, and that this case occurred over three decades ago, there is no empirical evidence to support Laqueur’s claim that lone individuals are among the most likely candidates to use weapons of mass destruction.<sup>59</sup>

Figure 5 categorizes the types of targets in the registered cases of lone wolf terrorism. Lone wolf terrorism is principally targeted at civilians. This observation holds for both European and non-European countries, and broadly reflects the targets of international



**Figure 4.** Use of weapons in lone wolf terrorism.



**Figure 5.** Targets of lone wolf terrorism.

terrorist incidents in general.<sup>60</sup> The second most common target of lone wolf terrorists in the United States is medical staff, while none of the incidents outside the United States targeted this category. This dissimilarity can be explained by the strategy of anti-abortion extremists in the United States, whose principal targets are doctors performing or supporting abortions. No cases of anti-abortion lone wolf terrorism were registered for the other sample countries.<sup>61</sup>

The number of casualties resulting from lone wolf terrorism has been relatively limited. The largest numbers of casualties associated with attacks that correspond to the proposed definition of lone wolf terrorism are eighteen (Joseph Paul Franklin, 1977–80) and ten (Mark Essex, 1972–73), both in the United States. There is no substantial evidence that the lethality of lone wolf terrorism is on the increase. This is an interesting finding when compared to the growing lethality of terrorism in general.<sup>62</sup>

Figures 4 and 5 do not reveal how lone wolves plan and carry out their attacks. The case studies provide more insight into this issue. All attacks by the five lone wolves were premeditated, often carefully planned and self-financed. In three cases (Fuchs, Kaczynski, and Copeland) explosive devices were used, while in the remaining two cases (Amir and Van der Graaf) firearms were used. Three of the five lone wolves targeted civilians; however, only one (Copeland) exclusively targeted civilians. Fuchs and Kaczynski targeted a variety of categories; the former targeted civilians, journalists, religious leaders, government officials, and medical staff, while the latter attacked scientists, civilians, and businesspeople.

Franz Fuchs used a total of 28 homemade bombs in 5 series of bomb attacks between 1993 and 1996. In the 1980s he began to live in isolation and lost contact with his parents. During this period he allegedly observed and took to heart “the increased discrimination of German Austrians and the growing self-consciousness of other ethnic groups and religions.”<sup>63</sup> Living in reclusion, in 1993 Fuchs began to take revenge for the perceived humiliations he experienced during his life, projecting these onto ethnic minorities and their “representatives.”<sup>64</sup> The first mail bombs were planted on 3 December 1993. The priest August Janisch was presumably targeted because of his public statements that Austrians were morally obligated to help refugees from the Balkan region. The priest lost part of his thumb after a bomb exploded in the vicarage. Only one hour later Silvana Meixner, a journalist specialized in minority issues, was injured in a mail bomb explosion. Fuchs was

finally arrested on 1 October 1997. It is still not clear how and where Fuchs obtained the chemicals for his 25 mail bombs and 3 pipe bombs.

## Summary and Discussion

This article has analyzed the main features of and trends in lone wolf terrorism in fifteen countries. A number of conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. It was shown that lone wolf terrorism accounts for 1.28 percent of all terrorist incidents in the fifteen sample countries. Lone wolf terrorism is comparatively prevalent in the United States, where it has increased markedly during the past three decades. There does not appear to have been a comparable increase in lone wolf terrorism in the other countries under study. The numbers of casualties resulting from lone wolf terrorism in the fifteen countries have been relatively limited, and there is no evidence that the lethality of lone wolf terrorism is on the increase. Also, there is no empirical evidence that lone wolf terrorists are among the most likely candidates to use weapons of mass destruction.

The comparative analysis of the motivational patterns and *modi operandi* of lone wolf terrorists indicates, first, that the main ideological sources of lone wolf terrorism in the fifteen countries are White supremacy, Islamism, nationalism/separatism, and anti-abortionism. It was also found that firearms, explosives and armed hijackings (in that order) are the most common weapons used by lone wolf terrorists in these countries, though significant cross-national variations exist. The use of firearms is considerably more common in U.S.-based lone wolf terrorism, which may well be explained by the relative accessibility of firearms and gun licenses in the United States. Finally, it was shown that lone wolf terrorists principally target civilians. Other targets of lone wolf terrorism include, *inter alia*, politicians and civil servants, company property, medical staff, and religious leaders.

The case studies highlight the complex motivations and ideological underpinnings of lone wolf terrorists and underline the difficulties in defining lone wolf terrorism. In accordance with Stern's observation, this study has found that lone wolf terrorists tend to create their own ideologies that combine personal frustrations and aversion with broader political, social, or religious aims.<sup>65</sup> The degree to which these aims correspond to those of existing extremist movements vary. Lone wolf terrorists' motivational patterns tend to involve complex constellations of ideas and feelings that change over time. Their political, social, or religious beliefs may be influenced by the communities of belief and ideologies of validation that are generated and reproduced by established terrorist groups or extremist movements. While by definition lone wolf terrorists are not members of an identifiable terrorist organization, they may identify or sympathize with extremist movements or have been a member or affiliate of such a movement in the past.

The case studies demonstrate the variable degree of commitment to and identification with extremist movements among lone wolf terrorists. Although lone wolf terrorism results from solitary action during which the direct influence, advice, or support of others is absent, such action and its justifications clearly do not take place in a vacuum. The analytical distinction between lone wolf terrorism and group-based terrorism is often somewhat problematic in practice, since group dynamics may also influence, at least to some extent, individuals who operate autonomously. Conversely, lone wolf terrorists may also influence wider movements. The actions of Copeland and Amir were supported, either publicly or implicitly, by sympathizers from affiliated ideological milieus, portraying them as "martyrs" for their cause. Kaczynski, and to a lesser extent Fuchs, have turned into well-known popular culture icons, references to which can be found in movies, books, and other consumer products.

Although terrorists do not generally suffer from any identifiable psychopathology, the rate of psychological disturbance appears to be higher among lone wolf terrorists.<sup>66</sup> Four of the five lone wolf terrorists in the case studies were diagnosed with either a personality disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder. A similar proportion appears to have experienced serious depression during at least one stage of their lives, including before they committed the attacks. These findings suggest that lone wolf terrorists are relatively likely to suffer from some form of psychological disturbance, although it is difficult to accurately establish the extent to which their actions were directly influenced by their mental condition.

This finding raises the important question of whether (social) psychological conditions can be identified as a key variable in explaining why some individuals are recruited into terrorist organizations, while others who display a similar willingness to pursue certain political, social, or religious aims through the use of violence act independently from existing terrorist networks. The case studies suggest that for most lone wolf terrorists this is indeed the case. All suffered from a variable degree of social ineptitude; they were, to varying extents, loners with few friends and generally preferred to act alone.

This study also illustrates how individual radicalization can result in an activist attitude involving the public expression of one's beliefs and an active search for verbal and physical confrontation with adversaries. For Fuchs and Kaczynski, this activist attitude coexisted with an isolationist attitude, that is, increased physical isolation from society in order to avoid direct contact with the existing social system. In both cases, communication with outsiders was largely confined to violent actions and written statements. The case studies reveal a number of influences that co-shape lone wolf terrorists' beliefs and their willingness to put these beliefs into practice through the use of violence. These influences include, to varying degrees and in variable combinations: personal aversion or depression, negatively perceived developments in personal life or career, direct or indirect interaction with extremist movements, broader processes of social and political polarization in society, militant literature and Internet publications, and admired terrorism occurring elsewhere.

Finally, this article demonstrates the difficulty of preventing and detecting lone wolf terrorism. Kaczynski and Fuchs succeeded in escaping arrest for a long period of time, enabling them to strike repeatedly. Copeland was captured relatively quickly, but not before he launched his most lethal attack. The societal impact of lone wolf terrorism is generally limited when compared to that of large terrorist organizations.<sup>67</sup> The impact of attacks by lone individuals is usually domestic rather than international in scope. In certain circumstances the impact of lone wolf terrorism can be relatively large. These conditions include prolonged terrorist campaigns (Kaczynski, Fuchs) and the assassination of high-profile political figures (Van der Graaf, Amir). The latter deed is often regarded by the public as an attack not only on the victim, but also on the sociopolitical structure the victim represents.<sup>68</sup>

The case studies presented in this article show that a combination of individual, social, and external factors effect the radicalization of lone wolf terrorists. It involves a social process that is inherently individual in nature and that depends on the specific situation and personal characteristics of the individual involved and his/her interaction with significant others. The mixture of causal factors is diverse and unique for each individual.<sup>69</sup> It appears that while external factors like political and (sub-)cultural conditions shape the individual's environment and beliefs, they do not have a direct effect on individual behavior. Rather, they are mediated by social and psychological dynamics in which the individual is directly involved.

This process of radicalization of lone wolf terrorists remains poorly understood. The underlying mechanisms and processes that lead future lone wolf terrorists to radicalize

and to drift away from (or toward) existing extremist movements demand further scientific research. How and under which conditions do certain individuals (become willing to) change their attitudes and behavior to the extent that violent radicalization and, ultimately, lone wolf terrorism is the outcome? In what respects does this radicalization process differ from that in collective terrorism? These questions warrant further investigation. They also highlight the need for different data collection methods, for example, life history interviews with lone wolf terrorists and their significant others (family members, peer groups, etc.). First-hand accounts and self-reports from lone wolf terrorists beyond what has been offered in this article would enable researchers to test the study's findings, to bode for more general conclusions, and, ultimately, to grasp and theorize more fully and more precisely the pathways into lone wolf terrorism.

## Notes

1. For example Robert S. Mueller III, "War on Terrorism." Testimony before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, Washington, DC, 11 February 2003.

2. David Johnston and James Risen, "Lone Terrorists May Strike in the U.S., Agencies Warn," *The New York Times*, 23 February 2003.

3. Mueller III, "War on Terrorism."

4. Elizabeth Bazan, *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004: "Lone Wolf" Amendment to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2004).

5. James Forest (ed.), *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes*. Three Volumes (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006); John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Rex Hudson, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1999); Sam Mullins, "Parallels Between Crime and Terrorism: A Social Psychological Perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32(9) (2009), pp. 811–830.

6. Fathali Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60 (2005), p. 166.

7. Bruce Hoffman, *Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003), pp. 16–17.

8. Council of the European Union, *Council Framework Decision of 13 June 2002 on Combating Terrorism* (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2002), p. 3.

9. Harold Kushner, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), pp. 224–226, 269–271; See also Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 127–128.

10. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, p. 11.

11. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 4.

12. Chris Quillen, "A Historical Analysis of Mass Casualty Bombers," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25 (2002), p. 287.

13. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003), p. 181.

14. Scott Shane and David Johnston, "Questions, Not Alarms, Met Exchanges With Cleric," *The New York Times*, 11 November 2009; Liz Robbins and Scott Shane, "Suspect in Ft. Hood Shootings to Remain in Hospital," *The New York Times*, 22 November 2009.

15. The RAND-MIPT database is used instead of the ITERATE database because the latter focuses exclusively on incidents of international terrorism. Another database, the Global Terrorist Database, was not fully available to external researchers at the time of the study.

16. International terrorism is defined as "incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets, select domestic targets associated with a foreign state, or create an international incident by attacking airline passengers, personnel or equipment." Domestic terrorism comprises

“incidents perpetrated by local nationals against a purely domestic target.” The methodology and definitions of the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base can be found at <http://www.tkb.org/RandSummary.jsp?page=method>

17. For example Tara Branum, *Aviation Security in the New Century* (Washington, DC: Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies, 2001); Edward Mickolus, *Transnational Terrorism: A Chronology of Events, 1968–79* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980); Christopher Hewitt, *Political Violence and Terrorism in Modern America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

18. There is no necessary association between anarchism and terrorism since many anarchists reject violence of any form. The association between the two seems to owe principally to a series of historical events in Russia and Eastern Europe rather than to some necessary feature of anarchist philosophy. See Max Taylor, *The Terrorist* (London: Brassey’s, 1988), pp. 102–103; D. Novak, “Anarchism and Individual Terrorism,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 20 (1954), pp. 176–184.

19. Kushner, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, pp. 28–31.

20. Novak, “Anarchism and Individual Terrorism,” p. 176.

21. Jeffrey Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (1997), p. 80.

22. Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Seditionist*, 12 (1992).

23. Alexandra Marks, “‘Lone Wolves’ Pose Explosive Terror Threat,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 27 May 2003; Johnston and Risen, “Lone Terrorists May Strike in the U.S., Agencies Warn”; Jo Thomas, “New Face of Terror Crimes,” *The New York Times*, 16 August 1999.

24. Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America. From the Klan to al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 79.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

26. Lone wolves active in multiple decades have been counted for each decade in which they were active.

27. Although the so-called Italian Unabomber appears to have been active since the mid-1990s, no incidents were registered in the RAND-MIPT database prior to 2000, probably due to the database’s exclusive focus on international terrorism prior to 1998. This case was therefore counted only for the 2000s.

28. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 172.

29. Theodore Kaczynski, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” 1995. Available at <http://reactor-core.org/unabomber-manifesto.html> (accessed 1 May 2007).

30. *Ibid.* Kaczynski regularly referred to “we” or to a group called “FC” in his writings but he acted alone.

31. Howard Kurtz, “Unabomber Manifesto is Published,” *The Washington Post*, 19 September 1995.

32. Neil MacFarquhar, “A Luddite’s High-Tech Plea,” *The New York Times*, 15 December 1996.

33. Ron Arnold, *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature. The World of the Unabomber* (Washington: Free Enterprise Press, 1997). Chase, however, argues that Kaczynski was not an environmentalist and was only pretending to be one in order to recruit environmentalists into his campaign. Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

34. Kushner, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, p. 379.

35. Sally Johnson, *Psychological Evaluation of Theodore John Kaczynski* (Butner, North Carolina: Federal Correctional Institution Butner, 1998).

36. Anthony Lewis, “On God’s Orders,” *The New York Times*, 6 November 1995.

37. Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother. Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); John Kifner, “Belief to Blood: The Making of Rabin’s Killer,” *The New York Times*, 19 November 1995; Thomas L. Friedman, “Land or Life?,” *The New York Times*, 19 November 1995.

38. Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother*, p. 280.

39. Serge Schmemmann, “Rabin is Laid to Rest, Mourned by Israel and the World,” *The New York Times*, 7 November 1995.

40. Joel Greenberg, "Rabin's Killer Says He Acted for Past Generations of Jews," *The New York Times*, 21 November 1995.
41. Jerrold Post, "Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces," in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), pp. 25–41; Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*.
42. Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13 (1981), p. 390.
43. Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, p. 80.
44. Copeland and Kaczynski were also diagnosed with schizophrenia, although this diagnosis is contested.
45. Charles Arthur, "Terrorist's Cook Book," *The Independent (London)*, 1 July 2000; Jeevan Vasagar, "Deadly Net Terror Websites Easy to Access," *The Guardian*, 1 July 2000.
46. Clive Walker, "Cyber-Terrorism: Legal Principle and Law in the United Kingdom," *Penn State Law Review* 110 (2006), p. 645.
47. Transcript of Panorama, "The Nailbomber." Recorded from transmission BBC 1 (London), 30 June 2000; Andrew Buncombe, "Bombings 'Inspired by Attack on Olympics,'" *The Independent*, 6 June 2000.
48. Sue Clough, "Soho Nail Bomber Told Police it was his Destiny to Cause Death," *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*, 7 June 2000.
49. Sue Clough, "Bomber 'Thought He was God's Prophet,'" *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*, 15 June 2000.
50. Sue Clough, "Bomber 'Yearned to be a Mass Killer,'" *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*, 13 June 2000.
51. Andrew Buncombe, "Nail Bomber is 'Bad in the Old-fashioned Way, not Ill,'" *The Independent*, 29 June 2000.
52. Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber*.
53. Post, "Terrorist Psycho-Logic."
54. Compare Mullins, "Parallels Between Crime and Terrorism," p. 820.
55. The latter finding should be qualified on the point that the hijacking category may be over-represented due to the methodology of the RAND-MIPT database. Aircraft hijackings are comparatively often classified as acts of international terrorism. Since the database exclusively recorded international incidents prior to 1998, this category may well be over-represented in comparison with other types of weapons.
56. Clive Williams, *Terrorism Explained* (Sydney: New Holland, 2004), p. 48, 55.
57. Some lone wolves have used multiple types of weapons, all of which have been included.
58. Jeffrey Simon, "The Alphabet Bomber," in John Tucker, ed., *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 87.
59. Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 269.
60. Williams, *Terrorism Explained*, p. 49.
61. Some lone wolves have attacked multiple targets, all of which have been included.
62. For example Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, "After 9/11: Is It All Different Now?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (2005), pp. 259–277.
63. Gisela Friedrichsen, "Nur irgendein Kasperl?," *Der Spiegel*, 22 February 1999.
64. Thomas Müller, *Beestmensen: Vermomming, leugens en strategie van seriemoordenaars* (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2006).
65. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 172.
66. Compare Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, p. 80.
67. See also Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 173; Henry Schuster and Charles Stone, *Hunting Eric Rudolph* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), p. 362.
68. Christian Christensen, "Political Victims and Media Focus: The Killings of Laurent Kabila, Zoran Djindjic, Anna Lindh and Pim Fortuyn," *Journal for Crime, Conflict and Media* 1(1) (2004), p. 23.
69. TTSRL, *Radicalisation, Recruitment and the EU Counter-radicalisation Strategy* (Brussels: European Commission Sixth Framework Program, 2008), p. 80.