Title	Countering the self-radicalised lone wolf : a new paradigm?
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Citation	Kumar Ramakrishna. (2014). Countering the self-radicalised lone wolf : a new paradigm? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 019). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2014
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/19963
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S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

No. 019/2014 dated 28 January 2014

Countering the Self-Radicalised Lone Wolf: A New Paradigm?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

Internet-driven self-radicalisation of the lone wolf is an increasing cause of concern for governments and societies everywhere. A new paradigm for countering self-radicalisation is suggested, comprising the five dimensions of Sender, Message, Recipient, Mechanism and Context.

Commentary

FOLLOWING THE Boston marathon terrorist bombing of April 2013, US President Barack Obama acknowledged that one of the dangers we now face are 'self-radicalised individuals' who might "not be part of any network" – in short lone wolves.

Obama offered one reason why the threat of lone-wolf terrorism has emerged in recent years: "The pressure we put on Al Qaeda and other networks that are well financed and more sophisticated has pushed potential terrorists to the margins, where they are forced to plot smaller-level attacks that are tougher to track."

Only part of the story

Intensified security force pressure is only part of the story, though. Ideological trends in violent Islamist circles globally since the mid-2000s have stressed operational decentralisation to small autonomous cells and lone wolves. Thus while the late Anwar al-Awlaki of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) promoted lone wolf action the Al Qaeda Syrian propagandist Abu Musab al-Suri likewise argued for more autonomous small scale terrorist attacks that are harder to detect and prevent.

Moreover, technological trends such as easy Internet access expedite direct action by lone wolves. For instance the online English-language AQAP magazine Inspire even had an article called "Make a Bomb in Your Mom's Kitchen" translated into Bahasa by Indonesian jihadists.

While lone wolves would not be able to cause massive 9/11 style destruction, it is all too clear what they can accomplish. For example, Timothy McVeigh was responsible for 168 deaths in the Oklahoma City bombing of April 1995, while Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway in 2011.

Some military strategists moreover warn of so-called Fifth Generation Warfare in which 'super-empowered' lone wolves may in the coming decade exploit digital technology to mount crippling cyber-attacks on national

infrastructure or even deploy small radiological devices (dirty bombs) against cities.

Lone wolves in Singapore

Singapore has not been immune from the threat of self-radicalised lone wolves. Since 2007, six such individuals were detained, but three were subsequently released. Another group of six was placed on restriction orders that sharply circumscribed their activities and movement.

At a June 2013 retreat of Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group that counsels Jemaah Islamiyah detainees and their families, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean emphasised the significant concern posed by lone wolves who are "radicalised by what they see and read on the Internet in the privacy of their homes or through their smartphones" and that "do not leave physical traces for the security services to follow".

Five dimensions in countering the lone wolf

What can be done to counter the self-radicalised lone wolf threat? It is widely accepted that it is futile to attempt to monitor or censor the Internet by technical means to prevent extremist ideologies from proliferating. There are more than 6000 extremist websites now online, and the number is steadily increasing. More creative solutions are needed.

It is suggested that, adapting and building upon ideas by leading Indonesian counter-terror expert Tito Karnavian, five dimensions need to be considered in any comprehensive, systematic strategy for countering the threat of self-radicalisation producing lone wolves: these dimensions comprise Sender, Message, Recipient, Mechanism, Context.

1 *Sender:* The credibility of the purveyor of the extremist ideology must be studied and potential weaknesses discovered and exploited. Many violent extremist clerics project an outward image of piety, which makes their call authoritative. Furthermore they are frequently eloquent and come across as very charismatic, like the late Anwar al-Awlaki. 'Counter-ideologues' must therefore be found who are equally eloquent and able to couch messages in terms that would resonate with local audiences. Moreover they must also be seen by the target community to possess unimpeachable integrity.

Conversely any potential character flaws on the part of the violent extremist ideologues must be discovered through targeted intelligence gathering and amplified via social media to question his credibility – and hence his ability to influence the broad masses.

2. *Message:* The violent extremist message that self-radicalises people is usually simple and easy to recall: "The West is at war with our religion, so we must fight back." Counter-messaging must likewise move from highly abstract theological formulations to equally easy to recollect themes that are culturally authentic and of practical relevance to a target community. These are what Malcolm Gladwell calls 'sticky' messages.

3. *Recipient:* The vulnerable individuals in front of computer screens are usually young males whose emotional development is proceeding faster than their mental maturation. Hence they tend to think in relatively unsophisticated black-and-white terms and seek the certainty and clear answers usually provided by skillful extremist ideologues.

This is why critical thinking skills and what the think tank DEMOS in the United Kingdom calls *digital literacy* – the ability to evaluate what is read or seen online – must be inculcated in young people throughout their education. This ability is arguably more important than the actual content of their religious or mainstream syllabi.

4. *Mechanism:* Liberal circles argue that a free-wheeling marketplace of ideas would ensure the demolition of extremist ideologies. Others argue for imposing a 'chilling effect' through legal means that restrict the circulation of certain anti-social ideas. What would be particularly useful is a moderated debate between non-violent extremists and moderates either online or in the real world, so that the theological weaknesses and contradictions within extremist ideologies can be exposed and debunked.

5. *Context:* In societies where governance is poor and security, welfare and justice are seen to be in deficit, the chances for self-radicalisation or even more organised group radicalisation is very great. In particular, the perception by local communities of heavy-handed police and military action – such as civilian casualties caused by drone strikes in Afghanistan and Yemen and perceived over-use of force in police counter-terrorist operations in Indonesia - all strengthen the extremist narrative of a war on the entire religion. In short, context facilitates the 'ease of transmission' of extremist ideas, and self-radicalisation of lone wolves.

In sum, given that Internet-driven self-radicalisation into lone wolves appears to be a growing and dangerous trend, it behooves governments and communities to work together - perhaps along the five dimensions described - to deal effectively with the problem.

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