

Raffaello Pantucci

Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies  
(RUSI), UK

Joint Committee Hearing of House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the  
Environment and Cyber & House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North  
Africa, and Global Counterterrorism

Transatlantic Cooperation on Countering Global Terrorism and Violent Extremism

September 21, 2021

The terrorist threat picture faced by Europe and North America is one that has only become more complicated as time has gone on. While the overall numbers of casualties may have gone down, the variety of ideologies, places of origin and nature of plots has only become more complicated in the past two decades. At the same time, cooperation between North America and Europe in countering these threats has only become tighter. To provide a survey of the entire picture in the time available would be an exercise in futility, and as a consequence, I am going to focus on two principal threat areas that face the Transatlantic Alliance in the short term. First is the menace of lone actor terrorism which is repeatedly spoken of as the priority menace on both sides of the Atlantic (and further afield), and second the fall-out from events in Afghanistan. These remarks will be concise given space restrictions, but will hopefully provide some broader food for thought.

#### Lone Actor Terrorism

Since its early expressions in the late 2000s (though some would trace it back even further), lone actor terrorism as a methodology has become the principal source of terrorist attacks in Europe and North America. Whilst there can be no doubt that sophisticated terrorist networks are still keen to launch large-scale plots, it has become increasingly difficult for them to penetrate western security barriers. This is a clear source of success for the Transatlantic Alliance that has been able to construct a set of security perimeters that regularly frustrate attempts by terrorist groups to successfully attack on a larger-scale. But it has also exposed the reality that lone actor plots are exceptionally hard to detect and prevent.

The reasons for this difficulty are multi-faceted. The most obvious aspect is the fact that such attacks involve low technology weapons that are often fashioned from tools from every day life, with short flash-to-bang periods, and are often undertaken by highly volatile individuals who are difficult to legally detain pre-attack. The growing dominance of knives and vehicles in terrorist attack planning makes it difficult for security agencies to use traditional tripwires to try to prevent such incidents, and in the United States the easy availability of high grade firearms amplifies the effect of such attacks. Europe is to some degree protected from this particular aspect of the threat, given the lower availability (though this is not always the case as exemplified by attackers in Hanau or Oslo, or even further afield, Christchurch).

At the same time, terrorist ideologies have increasingly pushed their adherents towards the lone actor attack methodology. Al Qaeda, ISIS and parts of the extreme right wing (XRW) have all advanced the lone actor methodology of attack through their publications and narratives. Likely in part realizing the complexity of successfully launching large-scale plots and recognizing the potential impact a successful lone actor attack can have, terrorist groups have sought to make it easier for individuals to launch attacks in support of their ideology. ISIS in particular fashioned a very simple narrative for people to launch incidents that could be associated with their ideology, thereby providing a frame which many different individuals could use to add meaning to acts of violence that they might otherwise have committed anyway out of their own personal rage.

But the problem with these ideas is that they have a habit of drifting beyond your intended audience. They become common currency which is widely accepted and discussed, creating an easy template that anybody (or any group) can adopt. It is noticeable for example the degree to which right wing groups have taken on similar narratives, seeking to persuade their own followers to consider similar attack methodologies to those being advanced by their putative ideological adversaries in ISIS. While it is clear that this typology is not new to the extreme right – the idea of lone wolf terrorism is something that has long been embedded in extreme right thinking – the success of it in recent years for groups like ISIS or al Qaeda has awakened the effectiveness of its use to a wider audience.

And even more problematically than this, the methodology is now entirely accessible even to an audience whose ideological frame is absent or confused. In recent years, the UK's Home Office has started to note an increase in cases of individuals who appear to have an ideological framing which is defined as "mixed, unstable or unclear." This group have a habit of being radicalised in the classical sense, but when investigators dig into their ideological leanings, they find a confused collection of sometimes directly contradictory ideas. These highly idiosyncratic ideologies are clearly coherent in the individual's mind, but nowhere else. Some have identified that some school shooters are similar in their outlooks, drafting manifestos prior to their attacks. Yet the attack methodology they all lean towards is a simple one, using weapons that are easily accessible and clearly aping the approach that has been popularized by ISIS or the extreme right. They appear to be ISIS or XRW attacks and yet in reality are probably something different.

Even more complicated than the ideological aspect is the mental state of some of these individuals. Whilst one has to pay attention to not entirely remove agency from the culprit, it is clear that a growing volume of offenders are people with histories of mental health disorder or neuropsychological disorders. This means you have a growing cohort of lone actor attacks that are being conducted by individuals who appear to have a confused ideological leaning, and whose mental faculties are not entirely competent. While there is a larger discussion to be had about the degree to which we should even be considering these individuals as part of the terrorism cohort (operating on the assumption that perpetrators defined as terrorists should at least have a clear political motivation inspiring them, something entirely confused in this group), from a security agency perspective this poses a major problem. A successful lone actor in this mould will in the first instance be considered a terrorist actor, leading to all of the societal tensions and complications that generates. And for first response authorities

and those being injured or murdered in the attack, there is little distinction to them in a lone actor that is linked to ISIS to one that is instead inspired by a confusing mess of ideas.

But this is where the larger transatlantic alliance might want to start to explore greater cooperation and consideration. This is a problem we have seen in Europe just as much as in North America (or even further afield in alliance countries like New Zealand or Singapore). Cooperation in this space is however highly complicated as ultimately the battle is one which is not going to be successfully fought on battlefields.

In cooperative terms, three key areas identify themselves as places to focus attention going forwards. These build on years of effective counter-terrorism cooperation across the Atlantic, and reflect the complicated nature of the lone actor threat in particular.

First is on the ideological side. There is a growing interweaving of ideas and groups across the Atlantic (and more widely) online. This spread has meant that ideologies can be spawned in the United States which resonate widely across the world. In part these ideologies are able to grow in countries where rules around free speech are interpreted with a wider latitude than in others. This is not a new problem, but when looking at the extreme right and propagators of some new ideologies like QAnon, it is a problem which is increasingly found as emanating from part of the Transatlantic Alliance. This requires greater coordination to both ensure rapid takedown (something to be done in conjunction with social media companies in particular) as well as efforts to detain and prevent ideologues advancing such ideas wherever they might be. Key to this is also recognition that while an individual may not be crossing a legal boundary in the jurisdiction where they are based, they may be pushing others to cross it in foreign lands. Greater coordination in managing this, and in closing down these online networks and communities would in part help stem the problem.

Second is on the tactical side. It is clear that the United States has an online capability that is vastly superior to most European powers. While the United Kingdom, France and Germany have grown their own capabilities, they are still very dependent on the US. Greater coordination should be undertaken amongst a wider community of security agencies across the Atlantic to try to counter lone actor plots. While it is true that most lone actors operate alone, there is a growing body of evidence showing that they do in fact communicate or tell others about their attacks or plans pre-incident. Much of this communication happens online, sometimes in very public forums. This suggests a point of interdiction that Transatlantic partners should work more closely on detecting and preventing.

Third is on the preventative side – one of the key problems with lone actor terrorism as a methodology is its easy adoption. This means the range of individuals who are perpetrating such attacks is becoming ever wider, with individuals deciding to use it as a method of expression with little sense of connection to the ideology that initially spawned it as a tactic. The key point here is the wide ranging nature of profiles of those involved, and the growing instances of neuropsychological or mental health issues amongst this cohort. This generates a new form of preventative response and post-arrest management. While the *sui generis* nature of each case means lessons are not always easily translatable, the cumulative effect of the volume of cases seen around the world is likely to generate some new ideas and approaches which others would benefit from learning from. Creating a more regular exchange

of ideas across the Atlantic about how to manage these cases in prisons, in society or elsewhere would likely generate some successful new approaches to deal with this threat.

## Afghanistan

Another major terrorist issue which has raised its head for the Transatlantic Alliance in recent months is the change in government in Afghanistan, where the collapse of the Islamic Republic has led to the rise of an Islamic Emirate controlled by the Taliban. While it remains unclear the degree to which the Taliban will be able to maintain control in the longer-term, it does seem they are going to be able to hold power for the short to medium term. Given their close connections to al Qaeda, and previous support for groups and networks which have generated terrorist plots in the west and elsewhere, this is clearly a source of concern to the Transatlantic Alliance. But what is the exact nature of this threat, and what tensions has this generated in the broader alliance framework which need to be addressed.

In terms of responding to the potential threat, the first key element to focus on is that few assessments have pointed to the change in government in Afghanistan generating an immediate or medium term threat to the west. While it is impossible to predict how things will play out in the longer-term, for the time being it seems unlikely that al Qaeda will be able to rebuild its capabilities to launch large-scale terrorist attacks against western interests for at least the next two years (and possibly even further in the future). The group is a vastly reduced form of its former self, and has for the past few years appeared to focus more on regional conflicts that striking at far enemies in the west. This likely creates problems in other parts of the globe where al Qaeda linked or inspired groups exist, but not as much in the west.

A far larger and immediate threat is likely present in Pakistan, and to a lesser degree in Central Asia. India also faces the potential for threats, as do China, Russia and Iran. The key here, however, is that when looking at how threats from Afghanistan might emerge, it is imperative that the west move away from focusing single-mindedly on how problems might directly come home. The last major plot reported publicly as having links to Afghanistan, was a group of Tajiks arrested in April 2020 in Germany. Yet the extent of their connection to Afghanistan was a remote one through mobile phone applications. Far more immediate is the danger of groups starting to use Afghanistan as a base to destabilize Pakistan or even more inspiring groups in Pakistan to rise up against the government in Islamabad. A similar (though more remote) possibility presents itself in parts of Central Asia, as well as Iran, Russia and China – though all of them have more effective police apparatus that is likely able to contain threats.

The key for the Transatlantic Alliance is to focus on managing the spread of problems from Afghanistan into its neighbourhood rather than single-mindedly focusing on the not impossible, but unlikely, outcome that groups start to immediately launch attacks against the west.

The second major issue within this context is geopolitical. The withdrawal from Afghanistan by the United States was long telegraphed, but not heard in other capitals. This led to a chaotic withdrawal which raised concerns about American security guarantees. While these are likely overstated, they have highlighted once again the reality that Europe in particular has somewhat taken for granted American security support. The answer here is clearly for

Europe to increase its efforts, but these should be done in conjunction with American partners who remain key enablers in counter-terrorism operations around the globe. Finding a way of better cooperating in establishing over the horizon presence in South Asia in particular is going to be an area of key cooperation going forwards. European partners like the United Kingdom have strong relations in Pakistan in particular, while France and Germany have a deep footprint in parts of Central Asia. This provides a useful point of engagement for the Transatlantic Alliance going forwards.

Finally, both sides of the Atlantic should work to try to extricate the problem of countering terrorist groups in the region in particular (and more widely) from the larger great power conflict that is currently consuming the Transatlantic Alliance. In Afghanistan in particular, the insertion of great power conflict narratives creates a context to replicate the immensely damaging and counter-productive history of using proxy groups in Afghanistan to fight against each other. Focusing on the terrorist threats as problems that menace not only the western alliance, but also regional adversaries provides a way to actually deal with the threats rather than making them worse.