

**LONE WOLF TERRORISM: IDENTIFYING FUTURE POSSIBLE THREATS IN SRI LANKA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Lone wolf terrorism is arguably becoming one of the most attractive means of trends in terrorism. Identifying a growing pattern of a 'domino effect' after a terrorist attack, post- Easter Sunday attack tenure in the present Sri Lanka seems a high possibility of inspiring radicalization for a future 'lone wolf terrorist attack'. Moreover, the current COVID-19 pandemic seems to facilitate the grooming of lone wolves due to isolation policies, increased usage of social media and further even to launch an attack since the attention of the 'National Security' has shifted away from terrorism to health and safety. In this backdrop, this paper focuses on whether Sri Lanka's next terrorist attack would be a lone wolf attack. To find feasible solutions, the methodology adopted in this paper is qualitative based on both primary and secondary sources. The main objective of this study was to prevent the next terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. To achieve this objective the research proposed an actionplan to prevent any possible attack and emphasize the importance of civil-military nexus in State intelligence.*

**Keywords:** Lone Wolf Terrorism, Threats, Sri Lanka

**INTRODUCTION**

There is no universally agreed definition for 'terrorism' though its origins traced back to the French Revolution. In 2006, it has been estimated over 109 different definitions of terrorism. The UN panel, on March 17, 2005, described terrorism as any act "*intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.*" However, with the evolution of transnational terrorism, traditional terrorism has revolutionalized into a spectrum in which terror tactics have become more unexpected and untraceable.

Against this backdrop, as per the researcher's evaluation, the sources of terrorists can be divided into three: International Terrorist Organizations, Local/ Homegrown terrorist groups and Lone Wolf terrorists. In simple terminology, a 'lone wolf' implies a very independent or solitary or introverted person. Thus, in the present crime-terror jargon, it also refers to 'a terrorist or other criminal who acts alone rather than as part of an organization'.



According to Metzger (2012), Lone wolves are warriors acting alone or in small groups who attacked the government or other targets in 'daily, anonymous acts'. Further, as per Fuard (2021), they can be described as individuals or a collective of organized individuals who are motivated by a terrorist ideology and operate outside of any command structure of a terrorist organization.

However, Perlman (2017) revealing the origins of the term 'lone wolf' pointed out that there is something wrong in its use since Las Vegas attack, due to the fact that wolves are very social animals that usually run in packs. As Ben Zimmer wrote in The Wall Street Journal, native Americans had some legendary chiefs or warriors named 'lone wolf', though, as members of tribal communities, were not really 'lone wolves'.

As per Gartenstein-Ross and Barr (2016), it is sometimes difficult to explain whether an actor has received outside help and what appears to be a lone wolf may actually have been carefully orchestrated from outside. In this backdrop, Lone wolf attackers plan and commit violent acts alone, outside of any command structure and without material assistance from any group. They may be influenced or motivated by the ideology and beliefs of an external group.

Weimann (2012) in his "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace" points out that though these individuals seem to be acting alone, there are often ties between lone wolves and terrorist organisations for example, terrorist backed online content.

According to Worth (2016), Lone wolf attacks are rare — there have been perhaps 100 successful politically motivated attacks pulled off by a solo actor in the United States since the 1940s. But they began attracting special attention from the national security community more than a decade ago when Al Qaeda started encouraging them. By 2010, then-CIA Director Leon Panetta declared that lone wolf attacks could pose the main threat to this country.

As reported by Dickson (2015), during September of 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the official spokesman for the terrorist group Islamic State (IS), urged followers, sympathizers and Muslims living in western countries to "kill in any manner" , *"a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian or any other disbeliever"*

With regard to 'Inspired Networks' or 'Lone Wolf Packs', Salafi Jihadists Lone Wolf or inspired networks will pledge allegiance to groups such as ISIS or Al Qaeda and its leaders. Thus, Spaaji (2010), attempts to isolate the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism and specifies, a lone wolf terrorists may identify or sympathize with extremist movements or



terrorist organizations, however, if they join an established organization, they cease to be deemed as a lone wolf.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The problem statement, methodology and objectives of this research are as follows; Research Problem of this paper is mainly focus on answering ***whether Sri Lanka's next terrorist attack would be a lone wolf attack?*** The methodology of this paper relied on a qualitative methodology based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include in-depth discussions with intelligence officers and Secondary sources include media and the internet.

This study requires an extensive study of Lone Wolf Terrorism and therefore the objectives of this research aim to:

- Evaluate the historical background of Lone Wolf Terrorism via reported incidents worldwide
- Examine the nature and sources for evolving Lone Wolves
- Understand the opportunities and threats of possible Lone Wolf Attacks in Sri Lanka
- Ultimately, to find out appropriate measures to overcome this challenge.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In David C. Rapoport's (2012) "The four waves of modern terror", the first wave refers to the anarchist wave, which has similarities to present day lone wolf attacks. As per his words, the high point of international terrorist activity occurred in the 1890s in the "Golden Age of Assassination", when monarchs, prime ministers and presidents were struck down one after another, often by foreign assassins moving easily across international borders.

Historically, Italians were particularly active as international assassins, crossing borders to kill four heads of state or holders of principal political offices in different countries, i.e. the French President Carnot (1894), Spanish Premier Casnovas (1896), and the Austrian Empress Elizabeth 1898. In 1900 an Italian Anarchist Gaetano Bresci a member of the Anarchist community in Patterson New Jersey, the capital of Italian Anarchism in North America returned to Italy to assassinate King Umberto I. Thus, in the present day lone wolf attacks more than the foreign assassins, locals seem to have been radicalized to the extent of launching a terrorist attack.

In this background, the first reported lone wolf attack occurred on 15 November 1988 in Pretoria, South Africa in the modern era, which killed 07 people and wounded 5 more. The attacker was a Christian and he declared that he was the leader of the 'White Wolves Organization', which proved to be a figment of his imagination (Rob, 1991).



Aftermath, the following are the recorded lone wolf terrorist attacks which received the publicity:

Timoth McVeigh who carried out the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (United States) on 19 April, killed 168 people and it is often given as a classic example of the “lone wolf”.

On 15 April 2013, Boston Marathon Bombing (Massachusetts, United States) took place a short distance from the finish line. A pair of homemade bombs detonated in the crowd watching the race, killing 3 people and injuring more than 260. The first bomb exploded about 5 hours into the race and roughly 12 seconds later a second bomb exploded 180 meters from the first. The attackers were two brothers Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev (26 years old). Although there appeared to be no concrete links between the Tsarnaev brothers and any larger plots or terrorist groups, Dzhokhar revealed to investigators that he and his brother had obtained the plans for the bombs from Inspire by an online newsletter published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). According to Ray (2013), that led analysts who were following the investigation to conclude that the Tsarnaevs were “self-radicalized,” having developed a personal militant ideology that drew from disparate sources without being directly connected to any of them. Therefore, it is apparent that they have been self-radicalized through online and unconnected to any outside terrorist groups.

On 12 June 2016, in the Orlando, Florida nightclub shooting, Omar Mateen, a 29 year old Muslim American of Afghan descent, opened fire at the Pulse gay nightclub, killing 49 people and wounding 53 others. He pledged allegiance to ISIL during the attack (Worth, 2016).

On 14 July 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, a Tunisian national residing in France, killed over 80 and wounded hundreds when he ploughed a 19-ton cargo truck through crowds celebrating Bastille Day in the southern French city of Nice. Mere days after the Nice massacre, a 17-year-old Afghan migrant seeking asylum in Germany attacked passengers on a train in Würzburg with an axe and a knife, wounding four before police killed him. Two other attacks claimed in ISIS’ name have been carried out since then: *“A suicide bombing on July 24 injured 15 in the German city of Ansbach and on July 26, two attackers claiming allegiance to ISIS stormed a church in a suburb of the French city of Rouen, slit an 84-year-old priest’s throat, and took hostages”*. (Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 2016)

On 15 March 2019, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a self-described “Ethno-nationalist”, committed two consecutive terrorist attacks at Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring 49 others. The attacker also livestream the attack via Facebook. In 2020, at Nice (France) beheading attack occurred inside the Notre-Dame Basilica in the city centre which killed 3 people. The suspect was 21-



year-old Tunisian national who had arrived in France via Lampedusa in Italy at the beginning of October. (Willsher, 2020)

On 2 November 2020, Vienna (Austria) attack was an incident where a heavily armed man opened fire at Vienna's popular night time place known as 'Birmuda Triangle'. 2 women and 2 men were fatally shot during the minutes of terror. 23 others wounded. The gunman was later identified as 20-year-old "Islamist terrorist". (BBC, 4 Nov 2020)

On 27 January 2021, 16 years old boy has been detained in Singapore for planning to attack Muslims at 02 mosques on the anniversary of New Zealand's Christchurch attack. He has got influenced by the Christchurch killer and this teenager has also planned to livestream the attack as similar to Christchurch attacker. (Mahmud, 2021)

The aforementioned are the most famous cases that occurred worldwide whereas there are several incidents of lone wolf terrorist attacks occurred in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world.

### **SOURCES FOR EVOLVING**

In evaluating the reported incidents worldwide, it is evident that the main source for becoming a lone wolf terrorist is "Radicalization".

According to Hamm and Spaaj (2015), the radicalization model indicates that lone wolf terrorism begins with a combination of personal and political grievances which form the basis for an affinity with online sympathizers. This is followed by the identification of an enabler, followed by the broadcasting of terrorist intent. The final commonality is a triggering event, or the catalyst for terrorism.

Law enforcement and intelligence communities ability to detect and prevent lone wolf terrorism demands a clear understanding of these radicalization processes. Further, the radicalization process seems unique to each other where the tenure to become radicalized varies from person to person. Upon examining the afore cited incidents, it is possible to identify the following sources of evolving lone wolf terrorists:

- Self-radicalization : mostly via online sources.
- Inspired Networks :Terrorist organizations campaigns, family nexus
- Inspired Attacks or any other events

### **LONE WOLF TERRORISM IN SRI LANKA**

In the Sri Lankan context, yet a clear lone wolf attack has not been identified. Even though some try to interpret April 2019 Easter Sunday attack as a lone wolf attack, "According to



government officials, all nine suicide bombers were Sri Lankan citizens associated with National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), a local militant Islamist group with suspected ties to foreign terrorist organizations" (Lumiae Group, 2019) With the elements of being members of a terrorist/extremist group, they cannot be called as 'Lone wolves'.

After Easter Attack on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019, passing two years, again during the Lent season, on 28 March 2021, Palm Sunday and the first day of Easter Holy week, two suspected suicide bombers detonated an explosive device outside the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in the port city of Makassar, South Sulawesi Province in Indonesia (Solace Global, 2021).

Moreover, the arrest of a Singaporean boy for planning an attack on Christchurch anniversary on 27 January 2021 shows the *domino effect* of lone wolf terrorism and the inspiring impact of other terrorist attacks. Therefore, it is apparent that lone wolf terrorists have successfully embraced the tactic of even being inspired by 'copycats'.

In the evaluation of these events, the researcher finds that there is a high probability of a future lone wolf attack in Sri Lanka, maybe as a response to the Easter Sunday attack or maybe as a result of being inspired by copycats.

#### **A. *The possibility of being unidentified as a 'lone wolf terrorist attack' in Sri Lanka***

On 6 June 2021, in London Ontario (Canada), a pickup driver had moved and killed three generations (4 members) of a Canadian Muslim family, targeted them because of their faith. (Faheid, 2021) The alleged attacker has had terrorism charges filed against him. It is significant because it's the first use of Canada's antiterrorism laws to prosecute an alleged Islamophobic act. "*It can now be accurately described as 'murder-terrorist activity' per Section 231 (601) of the Criminal Code*" (The Conversation, 2021) In this event, it was said by Police that the victims were targeted because they were Muslim.

It is imperative to point out that if a similar incident occurs in Sri Lanka, such would not consider as an act of lone wolf attack, whereas it would be shrouded in the guise of a criminal act, maybe it would even fall into the category of a 'personal revenge'.

#### **B. *Why is possibility in Sri Lanka***

The near periphery of Sri Lanka has experienced lone wolf terrorist attacks. Especially, the arrest of 16-year-old Singaporean boy On 27 January 2021, for planning to attack Muslims at 02 mosques on the anniversary of New Zealand's Christchurch attack. Moreover, On 28 March 2021, Palm Sunday and the first day of Easter Holy week, suicide bombing attack in Indonesia. These two incidents have similarities along with the Easter Sunday bombing,



where the first event symbolizes the possibility of an anniversary attack and the second about a re-target during the Christian Lent season.

In these circumstances, in Sri Lanka, especially aftermath of the Easter Sunday attack on 21 April 2019 by Islamist extremists, the possibility of occurrences of lone wolf attacks by any radicalized person against any community or at any location is highly probable.

This probability has become realistic to a certain extent with an incident reported in Northern Province, Sri Lanka with traces to lone wolf terrorism;

- On 3 July 2020 the explosion in Iyakkachchi, Kilinochchi.

A rehabilitated ex-LTTE cadre Thangarasa alias Gangai Aathman, was injured and later died after hospitalized, while manufacturing an explosives device in his house suspected to be used on Black Tiger Day (5 July 2020). During a search of his house, the Police found two homemade bombs and detonators. During the investigations, it was found that a person named 'Manirasan' had been calling the deceased from France constantly and pushing him to keep the LTTE sentiment alive. Investigations conducted so far revealed that Thangarasa Thevathasan had acted on the instructions of one Manirasan, an ex-LTTE intelligence wing cadre operating from France. Technical analysis of his phone by the intelligence units found a few numbers connected to France...Manirasan has sent money to Thevathasan from France to conduct these activities and a large sum of money has been sent during June 2020 to purchase a motorcycle in aid of his activities.(Nathaniel, 2020) This incident has been purely categorized as an attempt of LTTE revival. Thus, during the interviews led with intelligence officers, it was revealed that though an ex-LTTE cadre was engaged, this attempted attack even had characteristics of lone wolf terrorism, because, the deceased had been inspired by a person called *Manirasan* from France and a large sum of money has been transacted in aid of this attempt. It seems that the deceased has been inspired by *Manirasan* outside the direct command structure of the LTTE.

Furthermore, there have been many cases of manufacturing explosive devices at the domestic level in Sri Lanka, mainly by ex-LTTE cadres. Even the extremists have manufactured the Easter Sunday attack explosives locally. . As Ray (2013) reported about the Boston lone wolf attack by two brothers, where the devices used in the attacks were household pressure cookers that had been packed with an explosive substance, nails, and ball bearings and the latter two elements acting as shrapnel when the bombs detonated.

In Sri Lanka's famous 'parcel bomb case' of The King Vs Jayawardene, which was held on 15 July 1949 at the Court of Appeal, the deceased was a youth of age of about 16 years at the time of his death which occurred on January 21, 1948. On that day when he returned from school he found a parcel which has been sent to him by post awaiting him. He took it to his room and when he opened it a bomb which was inside it exploded and caused him very



serious injuries which resulted in his death. “Mr. Chanmugan, the Government Analyst, who dismantled one of the bombs said that the main component of it was a stick of dynamite about 2 ½ inches in length...”. [Emphasis added] (LAWNET) This proves that even in 1948, the traces of usage of explosives upon personal revenge were in practice.

Even in the present context, the technology of manufacturing bombs are freely available online. Moreover, the basic ingredients to manufacture homemade explosive devices are also available in the open market in Sri Lanka. For example, TATP includes hydrogen peroxide, which is found in hair bleach and some disinfectants. Ammonium Nitrate & Urea Nitrate are also chemical compounds mostly found in fertilisers. Further, fuel oil, black power, icing sugar etc are some easily available ingredients (National Academies Press, 2018, p 23, ). This even aid the breeding of terrorism as well as the opportunities available for terrorists for future attacks. Therefore, reducing the threat of improvised explosive device attacks by restricting access to explosive precursor chemicals.

### C. *How to identify*

Identification of lone wolf terrorists are the biggest challenge for the counter-terrorism mechanisms. As per the views of Hamm and Spaaj (2015) on radicalization process, the lone wolves physically isolate from society, at the same time they seek recognition for their causes through spoken statements and threats, manifestos, e-mail messages, texting and videotaped proclamations.

Isolation and the expression of radicalized ideology or expression of hate or revenge against any community, religion or ideology and further, showing allegiance to any terrorist group are the only available sources which would depict from the individual himself/herself. Further, tracing the online usage links, social media networks and history of Google search can be possible ways to identify the radicalized individuals. Further, at the domestic level or search on each other in small circles, by checking on the usage of social media, sudden or periodic changes in expressions, ingredients he/she buys are the basic identification methods of lone wolf terrorists. Thus, domestic methods will also not be successful due to the evolving trend of family nexus in terrorism.

Although lone-wolf attacks are hard to prevent due to many practical issues, mainly challenges of identifications , this research proposes the following action-plan in order to prevent lone wolf attacks in Sri Lanka:

#### 1) Measures should be taken to isolate lone wolves.

Isolation is the best way to identify lone wolves. As Sri Lankan Government successfully isolated LTTE suicide bombers, even to overcome this obstacle, it is imperative to provide guidelines to the police and security forces on how to identify a lone wolf attacker/terrorist.





- 2) The Government should build and maintain a strong relationship with the most affected communities.

In the Sri Lankan context, especially with the Tamil, Muslim and Catholic/ Christian communities. The researcher finds these communities more vulnerable and depressed due to past occurrences and this research predicts these communities will be vulnerable for lone wolf breeding. Intelligence officers shall be deployed to gather information and also by methods such as 'community policing', the grievances of these communities as well as suspicious people/ behaviours shall be identified.

- 3) The Government security agencies and law enforcement authorities should interrupt the communication between inspired networks via social media and shall take maximum precautions to cut the bridges of sources for becoming radicalized.

For example, fundraising campaigns, diasporas, hate speeches and other violent propaganda etc used to attract lone wolves shall be identified and proceed legal action against them or cut the bridges of communications. With these, Government should try to discredit the ideology embraced by lone wolves.

#### ***D. Possible future attacks***

There is a perceived threat of lone wolves terrorism in Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the current COVID-19 pandemic is a highly possible stage to breed lone wolves by inspired networks as well as to become self-radicalized without getting noticed due to existing health guidelines which advocate the isolation behaviours.

On the other hand, police and armed forces' attention have shifted more towards the pandemic than to terrorism owing to the prevailing situation in the country though the country only passes two years of a fateful Easter Sunday attack. For example, even private security officers of supermarkets are more vigilant on customer's body temperature, masks and sanitizing rather than checking the customers belongings in search of any dangerous weapon.

In the discussion of future possible lone wolf threats, this research forecast the danger, if any police or security forces personnel become radicalized, the threat he/she will be able to pose against the national security of Sri Lanka. Suppose an airforce pilot has become radicalized and has ended up being a lone wolf without being identified? Suppose a police officer has become a lone wolf attacker? The threat will be calculated if an official aircraft holder or a licensed weapon holder execute an attack in such circumstances.



## CONCLUSION

In concluding remarks, as no universally agreed definition for 'terrorism' due to the unpredictable nature and similarly yet academia has never agreed on a finite meaning for 'lone wolf terrorism'. However, Rappoport's first wave refers to the anarchist wave which has a similarity to present day lone wolf attacks. In evaluating the reported incidents worldwide, it is evident that the main source for becoming a lone wolf terrorist is "Radicalization". In the Sri Lankan context, yet a clear lone wolf attack has not been identified though some interpret April 2019 Easter Sunday attack as a lone wolf attack, with the elements of attackers being members of a terrorist/extremist group, they cannot be called as 'Lone wolves'. After Easter Attack on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019, passing two years, again during the Lent season, on 28 March 2021, Palm Sunday and the first day of Easter Holy week, two suspected suicide bombers detonated an explosive device outside a church in Indonesia, also, with the arrest of a Singaporean boy for planning an attack on Christchurch anniversary on 27 January 2021 shows a *domino effect* of the lone wolf terrorism and the inspiring impact by other terrorist attacks. Therefore, it is apparent that lone wolf terrorists have successfully embraced the tactic of even being inspired by 'copycats'. In evaluation of these events, it is evident that there is a high probability of a future lone wolf attack in Sri Lanka, maybe as a response to the Easter Sunday attack or maybe as a result of being inspired copycats. Hence, the identification will become problematic with labelling any cause of 'lone wolf terrorist activity' as a mere criminal act or as an LTTE revival attempt during the investigations due to lack of the knowledge of 'lone wolf terrorism' concept. Therefore, in order to identify, the 'knowledge' on lone wolf terrorism is imperative and this research propose a three steps actionplan to prevent lone wolf attacks in Sri Lanka : *Firstly*, measures should be taken to isolate lone wolf attackers by providing guidelines to the police and security forces by identification. *Secondly*, the government should build and maintain a strong relationship with the most affected communities such as by means of 'community policing' and *thirdly*, the Government security agencies along with law enforcement authorities to interrupt the communication between inspired networks via social media and shall take maximum precautions to cut the bridges of sources for becoming radicalized. In the circumstances, this research recommends a forum where Sri Lankan police and armed forces field officers, intelligence officers, academics and policymakers are made to work together in the dissemination of information and intelligence in order to prevent any attempt of any lone wolf attack in Sri Lanka.

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