

# Organizational De-Evolution; the Small Group or Single Actor Terrorist

Audrey Heffron, Casserleigh, Jarrett Broder, Brad Skillman

**Abstract**—Traditionally, terror groups have been formed by ideologically aligned actors who perceive a lack of options for achieving political or social change. However, terrorist attacks have been increasingly carried out by small groups of actors or lone individuals who may be only ideologically affiliated with larger, formal terrorist organizations. The formation of these groups represents the inverse of traditional organizational growth, whereby structural de-evolution within issue-based organizations leads to the formation of small, independent terror cells. Ideological franchising – the bypassing of formal affiliation to the “parent” organization – represents the de-evolution of traditional concepts of organizational structure in favor of an organic, independent, and focused unit.

Traditional definitions of dark networks that are issue-based include focus on an identified goal, commitment to achieving this goal through unrestrained actions, and selection of symbolic targets. The next step in the de-evolution of small dark networks is the mini-organization, consisting of only a handful of actors working toward a common, violent goal.

Information-sharing through social media platforms, coupled with civil liberties of democratic nations, provide the communication systems, access to information, and freedom of movement necessary for small dark networks to flourish without the aid of a parent organization. As attacks such as the 7/7 bombings demonstrate the effectiveness of small dark networks, terrorist actors will feel increasingly comfortable aligning with an ideology only, without formally organizing. The natural result of this de-evolving organization is the single actor event, where an individual seems to subscribe to a larger organization’s violent ideology with little or no formal ties.

**Keywords**—Organizational de-evolution, single actor, small group, terrorism.

## I. CONTEMPORARY WESTERN TERRORISM AND SMALL GROUP CREATION

**T**HE future of terrorism in European countries has a distinct profile. Based on historical events it is likely to be Islamists, from a fragmented, autonomous cell, executing independent attacks. Some of these attacks will be for propaganda purposes, some will be conducted to instill fear and cause attention.

Dr Audrey HeffronCasserleigh is the Director of the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Program at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2250 USA (phone: 850-644-9961; e-mail: aheffron@fsu.edu, <http://em.fsu.edu>).

Jarrett Broder is the Director of Information Technology for the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Program at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2250 USA (phone: 850-644-9961; e-mail: jbroder@fsu.edu, <http://em.fsu.edu>).

Brad Skillman is the Academic Program Coordinator for the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Program at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2250 USA (phone: 850-644-9961; e-mail: bskillman@fsu.edu, <http://em.fsu.edu>).

Contemporary examples suggest the attack will utilize suicide as a delivery, but the profile of the suicide attacker is inconclusive, though most likely male. These small dark networks will be independent, well informed, with access to information and freedom of movement granted by the democracy they live in.

Some of the largest challenges in identifying these small dark networks will be their lack of formal affiliation with known terror groups. It is likely these small groups or individuals will self-identify with infamous groups like al-Qaeda, and in essence become “al-Qaeda franchisees” that carry the larger message. However, lack of formal partnering means no guarantee of affiliation, although it is likely the “inspiring” organizations will support the small group with media praise and post-event recognition.

Access to information and social networking tools will be foundational in bringing together like-minded individuals into small autonomous groups. Social media (ex. Facebook and Twitter) allow for individuals to exchange similar philosophies, which can include political angst, social frustration, and comfort with extremist behavior. Discussions, both public and private, allow for these individuals to transition into dark networks where goals, activities, and membership are no longer discernible to the public.

Existing large and formal organizational structures, like social groups and religious forums, provide the gateway for extremists to find each other. Once found, extremists begin to form into more exclusive networks, and there is a natural organizational de-evolution which can be seen as the opposite of organizational growth. Often this de-evolution becomes increasingly selective until a core set of committed members form the final small dark networked group. This organizational de-evolution proceeds even further if the end game of the organization is total annihilation, possibly through violent action.

Once created the small dark network will have a local agenda that may present a united front with the organization it self-franchised and identifies with. This is especially apparent in extremist Islamic movements where virtual partnering with al-Qaeda does not require a local group to abandon its own domestic agenda. Local agendas will vary, but one overarching theme is frustration at democracies’ actions or inaction. Democratic actions are perceived to be meddling, like Spain’s involvement in Iraq, or inappropriate, like the killing of civilians as part of war conflict. In-action is attributed to the slow and cumbersome political will of representative democracies. Procedure for Paper Submission

## II. SMALL GROUPS, POLITICAL CHANGE, AND VIOLENCE IN DEMOCRACIES

Political change can only occur in a society that is literate and connected enough to share ideas and concepts. Without connectedness and access to open political discourse, there can be no understanding of possible actions or perceived threats. The environmental view assumes that little political change can occur without the adoption of ideas and opinions in a public sphere. In this situation, access to information is less important for political change than access to conversation [1].

In a closed community, either by choice or through enforcement, discourse becomes a closed loop and perceived threats become reality. Schneider [2] provides a structure for understanding how information, and mis-information, can become the norm in closed conversation communities through her theory of milling, rumors, and keynoting. Without alternative information, or the inclusion of conflicting information, discourse and expression can become stilted. In a controlled, closed information loop, terrorist organizations and extremist members within terrorist organizations, form a highly subjective interpretation of the world. Their perspective, often narrowly focused on single objectives, gives rise to the perception of limited options for action. Interestingly, the single, influential message, often originating from the "parent" organization, creates the smaller breakaway franchises. It is in this instance, when a small group franchise or an individual self-isolates with this key message, that the key message becomes a focusing point. However, at no point do these organization and their members lack logic or the ability to reason. Crenshaw notes,

"The variables from which their belief systems are formed include their political and social environments, cultural traditions, and the internal dynamics of their clandestine groups. Their convictions may seem irrational or delusional to society in general, but the terrorists may nevertheless act rationally in their commitment to acting on their convictions[3]."

Given this perspective it is fair to acknowledge that terrorists, who use violence in extreme measure and often against innocent and symbolic populations, perceive an inherent limit to the effectiveness of public discourse. This perception of public discourse may or may not be legitimate, but the pace of democratically enacted change is notoriously unhurried. Because political change is a process, it is probable that many small dark terror networks have members who tried to enact change through public venues [4]. Regardless of the extent of their participation in democratic processes, small groups still perceive themselves as symbols of the change and their need for action is absolute. More often, within the narrow lens of their ideology, these groups regard themselves as legitimate representatives of their cause. The actions taken reflect the perceived limitation of discourse as a viable option for political change.

The structural-permissive theory of political terrorism attempts to address the issue of why and how political terrorism can be found in democratic societies if it is assumed

that such societies have inherent systems of recognition for grievances of political, socio-economic or even geographical issues. In addition, the absence of state sponsored terror or "terror from above" in democratic environments eliminates the argument that "terror leads to terrorism". Wilkinson [5] attempts to address this issue but notes ironically that "...liberal democratic societies are particularly ill-equipped to deter acts of political terrorism which, once committed, tend to be dealt with in such a manner as to inadvertently countenance their repetition". The irony is further compounded by the standing and benefits that individuals and organizations derive from constitutional protections such as unreasonable search and seizure, permissive distribution of propaganda, the right to congregate, and most obviously the freedom of expression. Countries such as Japan with the AumShinrinkyo cult in 1999, The United States with the Rajneeshee in Oregon State in 1984, and England with the 7/7 bombers in 2005 are modern testaments to this conundrum. In each instance the participants were indigenous to that country, having full citizen-based rights, and, in most cases, had not exhausted all their political options. As Laqueur [6] writes, democratic authority is sensitive to the prospect of ex post facto criticism of the hard line approach to negotiations with violent groups. While the fact of the matter is that civil liberties (freedom of speech, freedom of movement, etc.) do not cause political terrorism, the addition of outside influences from international or transnational forces may aggravate the problem and the target itself becomes liberalism or democracy. Despite these commonalities, it remains impossible to create a typical or consistent profile of a terrorist or a terrorist organization. "Behavioral scientists attempting to understand the psychology of individuals drawn to this violent political behavior have not succeeded in identifying a unique "terrorist mindset". People who have joined terrorist groups have come from a wide range of cultures, nationalities, and ideological causes, all strata of society, and diverse professions [7]." Crucial to an understanding of why actors choose violence is the concept of perspective – the idea that we all have a view of the world, a view of ourselves, a view of others, and a view of ourselves in relation to others. This concept is essential for understanding focused ideologies such as fundamentalism [8].

## III. MEMBERS AS A REFLECTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

If the official actions of the individual actor can be thought of as a reflection of the organization, then the psychological and sociological attributes of the actor may shed some understanding on the behavior of the organization. Many small contemporary terrorist organizations resemble an ad-hocracy, where leadership in the organization is determined by the specific task to be carried out, giving it a highly organic structure [9]. This can be seen in many contemporary terror groups, like the 7/7 actors, where there was probably a ringleader (Kahn) who served as the entry point for the group. But, within the four member group, each participant had individual leadership roles, with different and specific targets (bus vs train), bringing them to their culminating suicide attack. This organizational informality, having no communication with a larger directing organization like al-

Qaeda, is especially significant. These small dark networks may or may not have formal training, and may or may not have ever communicated with members of other like-minded and possibly more formally organized terrorist organizations. The lack of formal organizational affiliation, but commitment to a larger organizational goal as found in Islamic extremists, clearly reflects the franchise theory of mini-organization or single actor events.

Another significant corollary is the link to radical Islamist ideology. Within the Muslim community, individuals with extreme fundamentalist beliefs, who are comfortable with violent action as part of their message, have easily self-formed into franchised terror groups. While there is an extremist rallying cry coming from a larger networked organization, like al-Qaeda, the faction based groups in western countries have little or no formal ties to al-Qaeda. Self-affiliation with the larger organization is not only normal and rarely discouraged, but apparently encouraged indirectly through adulation. The umbrella of religion facilitates Islamists' self-affiliation, especially when one of the key messages often adopted by local groups is the "creation of an Islamic state governed solely by sharia law" [10]. Using this example it is easy to see how influential al-Qaeda's message was when the 7/7 bomber Khan, supporting the need for sharia law, said, "Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities..." [11].

The dichotomy of sharia law and indigenous government law, within the Muslim community is the reconciliation of the Koranic and Islamic traditions within a democracy. The support for Muslim integration and reconciliation finds its roots in theological teachings of the Islamic tradition. When the prophet Muhammed first settled in Medina, the community was shared with Jews and others, based upon a communally agreed-upon constitution. Some scholars have interpreted Islam to be a religion of tolerance and even pluralism, which accepts the beliefs of non-Muslims within a shared society. The conflict between the Koran and existing democracies can be solved by applying *ijtihad* – meaning to exert – which allows Muslims to ascertain the intent of Islam, and can be applied to any problem.

There can be a schism between Muslim identity and Western identity regarding the parameters of a politically organized community. This conflict of defining identity is clearly a source of inspiration and confusion for Muslim extremists. What many perceive as freedom – political choice, free speech, and diverse social norms – presents itself as chaos to Muslims accustomed to hierarchies of authority and clear lifestyle guidelines [12]. This inherent conflict between Islam and political systems of the West makes sense to first generation immigrants. However, for each succeeding generation of Western-born Muslims, with the daily requirements to navigate Western political and social norms, this argument becomes less relevant. "The scrutiny and exceptional treatment of European Muslims, especially in the wake of a sequence of homegrown terrorist attacks, has made many Muslims refocus on a religious identity that has been simultaneously vilified and strengthened by recognition [13]."

Organizational de-evolution can be seen on two levels. First, with extremists inside the Islamic faith, and second within the political spectrum regarding what is normal behavior for enacting change. Within Muslim society part of the de-evolution of individuals may be caused by the conflict between Muslim identity and nationalism. Muslim identity is predicated on the concept of "Muslim-ness" first, even as it relates to political identity and nationality [14]. However, that does not automatically alienate them from a political system or community that includes non-Muslims.

Traditional news media reporting and informal social media regarding the role of Muslims in terrorism may be factors contributing to a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. This perspective of "Islam is one" and "Islam is dangerous" has fueled a reciprocal perception that the West is one, and the West is attacking [15]. For a Muslim with inherent identity conflict, this perspective would only re-enforce the beliefs of "Muslims vs the West" held by small extremist groups.

#### IV. SUICIDE AS PART OF ORGANIZATIONAL DE-EVOLUTION

The past decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number and scope of targeted suicide bombing attacks. For the small group with limited resources and access to information, the suicide bomber is a failsafe delivery method. Today, small group and single actor terrorists rely increasingly on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives and attacks are growing in both frequency and diversity of location [16]. Given the nature of these attacks there is an unmitigated success even in the event that limited damage is done. These attacks, regardless of their eventual kill/injury rate often inspire religious or ideological zeal, which in turn further destabilize societies [17]. Because an attack with low kill/injury rate can still affect public moral, covert terrorist action can cause not only direct damage to individuals, but also severe psychological damage to the population at large. The fear of an attack, which is often greater than the threat itself, is largely the result of its unpredictability [18].

Suicidal behavior, especially as a delivery method for a weapon, is not easily definable. Suicide in general can be divided between those who attempt suicide and those who succeed and die by suicide. If the intention of murder is added to the intention to commit suicide, a further distinction must be made between those who seek to die and those who are indoctrinated into suicide as a means to murder [19]. In addition, because the perpetrator's death is a precondition for the success of the mission, analyzing perpetrators post event is almost impossible.

The profile of suicide bombers is as reflective of the population at large as it is of terrorist organizations. Merari's 2004 study of Palestinian terrorists found no differences in socioeconomic or educational factors from the general Palestinian population [20]. One factor of note was the predominance of male suicide bombers, but that has changed over the past ten years to include women. According to Merari [21] the typical Palestinian suicide terrorist is, "religious, normal, polite and serious. Motivations include the

effectiveness of suicide bombings as a military strategy, nationalistic pride, the need to revenge national and personal humiliation, and hatred of Israel and America." Ironically Moghadam's 2003 study [22] reports that Hamas and PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) recruiters will not select candidates they deem to have suicidal tendencies. One PIJ member quoted in the study said, "In order to be a Martyr bomber, you have to want to live" [23].

PIJ, an example of a large formal organization, has a very interesting profile of their suicide bombers when compared to current western suicide bombers in small dark networks. In many instances the actors do not fit the larger organizational profile; for example two of the actors in the 7/7 event were married and one had children. This provides another organizational distinction between the small and large group actors, with small group members discerning participation based on willingness rather than attributes.

What is also interesting in context of the small group or single actor event is the eventual elimination of the entire small organization. If a small group, like the one that perpetrated 7/7, only has four members, and all of those members die as a result of their actions, the groups' message is no longer available for political discourse. The same can be said of the single actor like Richard Reid, and the Times Square Bomber Faisal Shahzad. A possible explanation for their comfort with an end game resulting in total organizational de-evolution is the presence of a larger organization that will continue to spawn new small groups or single actor.

#### V. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FUTURE OF SMALL GROUPS

There is an inherent question in social media: is it the content of the information that is valuable or the reach of the network that spreads the information? For the creation of small groups and single actor terrorists, both the network and its content are valuable. The social media platform that connects people must exist and the information that draws individuals together is vital to finding others who are like-minded. A network of people in an open and information-rich society may originate through social media, but it may also originate through traditional face-to-face interactions. As small dark groups form, they inevitably splinter from what originally brought them together; hence the organizational de-evolution.

What is inherently interesting about the creation of small groups is their ability to self-form and their comfort with de-evolution to the point of extinction. The same organizational trajectory can be observed in the single actor event, which in some ways is easier to understand. The single actor is ultimately part of something larger; they are acting as a symbol for a cause and their message and their name as a single actor is their immortality. For the small group, while the reach of their event may be greater, there is no carry forward of lessons learned and experiences for the next set of actors.

Western, democratic countries today are faced with a paradox regarding the presence, and possible increase, of small terror groups. The liberties afforded in a democracy are

the very thing extremist groups take for granted when forming, planning, and executing their events. However, the restriction of civil liberties as a result of terrorism only serves to obstruct the formation and activity of groups in the future.

Future research should attempt to quantify the use of social media as an ideological networking tool. Ideally, to mitigate against the formation of these groups, information must be open rather than remaining in a closed loop. If infiltration is to occur, the groups would have to be joined early in the organizational de-evolution or reduction period, before the final small dark group is formed.

It will also be interesting to evaluate Western terror events in light of the organic uprisings occurring throughout the Middle East at the time this research was conducted. Current events, like the removal of Mubarak from Egypt and the civil war in Libya, may serve as re-focusing events to the larger organizations that have traditionally inspired small group franchisees.

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