

Preventing “lone wolf attacks” in Japan: lessons from western research on radicalization

by Mana Yamamoto

On 8 July 2022, the death of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was shot during a campaign speech, sent shockwaves through Japan. The assassination was perpetrated by a lone attacker who did not belong to a specific political group or gang, and a homemade gun was used. The attacker had a wealthy life when he was young, but after his mother began to donate a large amount of money to the Unification Church, the specific religious group that she joined, his family collapsed – his father and his brother committed suicide and his mother declared bankruptcy. As he fell into poverty, changing jobs many times, he began plotting to kill former Prime Minister Abe, isolated himself from society and started making homemade guns. Despite having one of the lowest

crime rates in the world, the ‘lone wolf’ threat has become a growing problem in Japan, particularly in the form of non-ideological attacks that result in mass murder.

Lone attackers, who plan, prepare, and carry out violent acts without direction from a specific organization, have long been a problem in Western countries, and the threat has grown in recent years. Because lone attackers are relatively isolated compared to organized violent groups and their attacks are perceived as being spontaneous, it is more difficult for law enforcement to detect and thwart their plans. To tackle this issue, there is ongoing research in Western countries on their profiling, their psychological aspects, and the challenges of identifying them. According to Buuren G.M. van (2018),¹ “academic research has explored

topics like the demarcation between lone attackers and terrorist cells or networks, typologies of lone attackers, the motivation of lone attackers, and – lately – the attack patterns of lone actors”.

Definition of “lone wolf attacks”

A research investigating data related to 120 cases of violent extremism, has shown that 71 per cent of the cases involved right-wing extremists and religiously inspired extremists, while 29 per cent of the cases were attributed to other motives involving left-wing, ethno-nationalist ideologies etc.² Research has shown that assigning clear-cut motives to lone attackers is difficult; this is despite the fact that most definitions of terrorism refer to political, ideological, or religious motivations or goals as a consti-



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¹ Buuren, G.M. van (2018), Patterns of Lone Attackers [Patterns of Lone Attackers] (translation: Buuren G.M. van). In: Echle C., Gunaratna R., Rueppel P., Sarmah M. (Ed.) *Combating Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe. From cooperation to Collaboration*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. 55-66.

² Ellis, C., & Pantucci, R. (2016). Lone-actor terrorism. Policy paper 4: ‘Leakage’ and interaction with authorities. Royal United Services Institute.

tuting part.³ Although there are many terms and definitions for lone attackers (lone wolf, loner, lone attacker, solo terrorist, etc.), no single, universally accepted definition has been agreed on by academics.⁴ According to Cohen, L.,⁵ “the more closely some of the known lone wolf attacks are examined, the clearer it becomes how common ‘hybrid’ characteristics are.” The issue remains complex and requires further discussion.

Major commonalities among lone attackers in Japan

Lone attackers, in which one perpetrator kills many unknown people at the same time and in the same place, shock society as a whole. These cases occur every year in Japan, and 15 cases occurred in 2021.⁶ In Japan, research continues to elucidate the attributes, crime patterns and backgrounds of these perpetrators. Here are some of the main commonalities:

1) Financial distress

The perpetrator of the 2019 “Kyoto anime arson murder case” (36 died and 34 were injured (including the perpetrator)) was a welfare recipient; the perpetrator of the 2021 “Kitashinchi psychosomatic medicine arson murder case” (27 died and 1 was injured) could not cover living expenses because his application for welfare support was rejected. The suspect in the former prime minister’s assassination case could not afford to get in the university of his choice because of his family’s financial problems. Economic vulnerability is often part of many of these mass murderers’ backgrounds.

2) Low self-esteem

The perpetrator of the 2008 “Akihabara Street murder case” (7 died and 10 were injured) was isolated from society but felt that he had a comfortable place where he belonged on social media. However, he thought that the virtual space was being destroyed by someone and, therefore, his place and the meaning of his existence were

being threatened. He grew up seeking attention from his mother (he regarded his mother as a shogun), but he could not pass the entrance exam of the university that his mother wanted him to enroll, he could not get the job he desired, and he no longer felt he was the child that his mother wanted. In the case of the assassination of the former Prime Minister, it became clear that the perpetrator felt his existence was denied by being neglected by his parents for so long. Hence, these lone attackers in addition to failing to build healthy identities during the course of their development, had been socially isolated under circumstances in which they lost their self-esteem.

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They blamed others, such as their parents, companies, and society for their dissatisfied lives

3) Self-victimization and blaming others

In situations where they failed to build healthy identities and lost self-esteem, they tended to think that it was not their fault that their work or private life was not going well and tended to think of themselves as victims. They blamed others, such as their parents, companies, and society for their unsatisfied lives. The perpetrator of the “Ikebukuro Street murder case” (2 died and 6 were injured) that occurred in 1999 went to the United States in search of a new life before he committed the murders. At that time, he wrote a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claiming that he was a “victim” of this unequal world.

4) Murder-suicide

In Japan, the term “extended suicide” became widely known after the “Ikeda Elementary School murder case” (8 died and 15 were injured) that occurred in 2001. Extended suicide is the act of committing suicide (including attempted suicide) after or at the same time as committing murder, but there is still no consensus on what kind of situation can be defined as an extended suicide. The perpetrator of the Ikeda Elementary School murder case after being arrested stated: “I tried to commit suicide many times, but I couldn’t end my life by myself. So, I wanted to be sentenced

I tried to commit suicide many times, but I couldn’t end my life by myself. So, I wanted to be sentenced to death “

3 Buuren, G.M. van (2018), Patterns of Lone Attackers [Patterns of Lone Attackers] (translation: Buuren G.M. van). In: Echle C., Gunaratna R., Rueppel P., Sarmah M. (Ed.) *Combating Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe. From cooperation to Collaboration*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. 55-66.

4 Spaaij, R. & Hamm, M.S. (2015). Key Issues and Research Agendas in Lone Wolf Terrorism, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38 (3), 167-178.

5 Cohen, L. (2012). Who will be a lone wolf terrorist?: Mechanisms of self-radicalisation and the possibility of detecting lone offender threats on the Internet, *Avdelningen för Informations-och aerosystem, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI)*

6 NHK (2022). Naze issen wo koerunoka: Musabetsu makikomi jiken no shinso [なぜ一線を越えるのか:無差別巻き込み事件の深層, Why Crossing the Line: The Depths of Indiscriminate Cases] NHK Special. 21 Jun 2022. <https://www.nhk.jp/p/special/ts/2NY2QQLPM3/blog/bl/pneAjjR3gn/bp/ppxPVZog-Mp/05 Nov 2022>

to death.” After this case, there have been many cases where similar statements have been made, and recently, in 2021, the perpetrator of the “Keio Line stabbing case” (18 were injured) after his arrest said that he would be sentenced to death for killing people. In addition to such cases in which the offender is seeking the death penalty, there are many cases in which perpetrators commit suicide after killing and injuring unrelated people. The stronger the desire for revenge, which comes from self-victimization and the tendency to blame others, which was mentioned in the previous section, the stronger the desire to die and to not die alone. In relation to that, the desire to get revenge becomes stronger, and it can lead to murder–suicide involving many people.

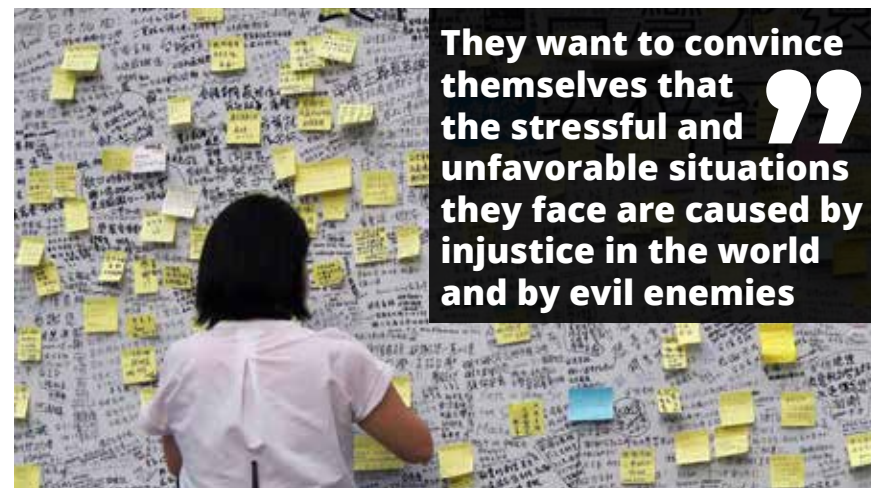
Typology in western countries and its application to cases in Japan

In addition to the difficulty of clearly defining “lone attackers”, a motive cannot always be assigned with precision to one of the sub-groups mentioned above. But various approaches have been attempted to better understand lone attackers’ characteristics and attack patterns. The study carried out by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) in 2021⁷ referred to the research conducted by an American government task force that classified lone actors into four subgroups; “Loner”, “Lone follower”, “Lone vanguard” and “Lone soldier”. The classification was based on two dimensions: “ideological autonomy” (the extent

to which individuals share an ideology with others), and the “social competence” (the social and psychological difficulties that contribute to their isolation). The RAN’s study attempted to map the findings from the European research onto the American lone-actor typology (Table 1). If we apply the mass murder cases that have occurred in recent years in Japan to these four types, it can be said that most major cases can be classified as “Loner.” These classifications offer some hints for intervention in their described characteristics.

Examples of models of the radicalization process

Various studies have also been conducted on the process of how thoughts and actions actually radicalize. Based on the model of Hamm and Spaaij,⁸ Ohji⁹ creates a model of the radicalization process peculiar to “lone wolves”. These, at least, seem to apply to a considerable degree to the perpetrators of the mass murders in Japan in recent years, and the five steps leading towards violence are summarized below:



7 Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). Lone Actors as a Challenge for P/CVE, p7-8. Retrieved from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/lone-actors-challenge-pcve-july-2021_en

8 Hamm, M., & Spaaij, R. (2017). The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism. Columbia Univ Press.

9 Ohji, T. [大治朋子](2020). Yuganda Seigi: “Futsuu no hito” ga naze kagekika surunoka [歪んだ正義:「普通の人」がなぜ過激化するのか, Distorted Justice: Why ‘Ordinary People’ Are Radicalized]. Tokyo, Japan: Mainichi Shinbunsha [毎日新聞社].

Table 1: A proposed typology of lone-actor terrorists

National Security Critical Issue Task Force, USA (2015) n=98, US only*	Type 1 Loner	Type 2 Lone follower	Type 3 Lone vanguard	Type 4 Lone soldier
	Low social competence; ideological autonomy	Low social competence; shared ideology	High social competence; ideological autonomy	High social competence; shared ideology
Lindekilde et al. (2019), Europe n=33, USA, UK & Europe	Isolated, unstable, peripheral-withdrawn, weak social ties, rejected by group, unstable employment, long-term attack planning	Unstable, peripheral-volatile, violent, weak social ties, rejected by group, drug use, jihadi convert, ad hoc shorter planning, poor operational security, desire for martyrdom	Embedded-supported, ruptured relationship with group, stable, organised long-term attack planning, good operational security, far-right leanings	Embedded-autonomous, stable, organised attack planning, good operational security, occasional low-level criminality
Clemmow et al. (2020) * n=125, USA, UK, Europe & Israel	Unstable mental health/personality, relationship failure, isolated and unconnected to a network, low level of leakage Example: Franz Fuchs, Austrian mail bomber	Unstable networks, low stress, high level of violence and criminality, potential leakage Example: Anis Amri, Berlin Christmas market attack	Solitary but stable, little interaction with others, low level of networking and leakage, and of personal stress Example: Anders Breivik, Norwegian massacre ³⁰	Stable, but subject to strain and stress, bolstered by networks, potential leakage Example: Mohammed Bouyeri, Amsterdam murder of Theo van Gogh

* US data set 1940–2013; Lindekilde et al. selected subset of Gill data set; Clemmow et al. expanded data set from the Gill data set (1978–2015).

SOURCE: Adapted from Table 1 in Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). Lone Actors as a Challenge for P/CVE, p. 7-8. Retrieved from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/lone-actors-challenge-pcve-july-2021_en

Most major cases can be classified as “loner”

Step 1 Personal anguish, doubts, and anger at political and social injustice

They want to convince themselves that the stressful and unfavorable situations they face are caused by injustice in the world and by evil enemies who propagate it. Self-es-

teem is preserved by believing that the cause of their predicament is external. It is also characterized by mixing extremely personal grudges with various ideologies, but cognitive biases influence information gathering. In other words, humans have a “confirmation bias”, that is, the unconscious search for evidence that confirms what they think, because they feel uncomfortable when they hold information that contradicts their be-

liefs (“cognitive dissonance”), characterized by ignoring or disregarding information that contradicts assumptions. In addition, social media algorithms are designed to keep users engaged by funneling them toward increasingly extreme and radical content, i.e., “recommended videos”. Thus, those who are socially isolated are in an environment that reinforces biases, without the opportunity to incorporate different perspectives.

Step 2 Narrative making

They create stories/narratives that reduce stress and trauma. They find “heroes” on the Internet who can empathize and resonate with them, actively incorporate their narratives, and try to follow in their footsteps. People tend to adopt ideas that are close to the belief system they already have and that they can emotionally sympathize with.

Step 3 “Radicalization tunnel”

“ Through self-victimization, they regard the other person as “bad” and themselves as “good”, ”

and by viewing the outgroup as lower than human beings, the value of their own existence, which has been suppressed, rises. In addition, this awareness of dehumanization becomes an essential requirement when finally carrying out indiscriminate attacks. Due to the habit of confirmation bias already mentioned, when they start to think radically, they will collect only information that matches it, leading to self-radicalization. People who

enter the process of radicalization often have failed to develop their own identities for various reasons, so they try to develop their identities to restore self-esteem through the process of radicalization.

Maslow’s theory¹⁰ states that human needs can be divided into five stages: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. Towards the ultimate goal of self-actualization, humans are motivated to fulfill their needs in a hierarchical order from the most basic needs. People who enter the radicalization process aim for self-actualization in the same way as ordinary people, but the goal and the process leading to it become illegitimate.

Step 4 Leakage/Foretelling

It seems normal to think that giving advance notice before committing a crime could lead to intervention by the security authorities, but lone wolves tend to focus more on how they will be seen by others than on how they carry out the operation itself. There is a tendency to foretell or suggest the attack in advance by posting on social media, and to try to satisfy their desire for approval by receiving likes and positive reactions.

Step 5 Trigger

“ Radical thinking does not necessarily lead to radical behavior, ”

but a trigger can lead to a turning point and stimulate this change. One of the most common triggers is a sense of loss. Aggression is often directed at the person, group, or society, who they believe caused the loss. In addition, the experience of loss causes a sense of despair in the real world, and the thread with society that was slightly connected through human relationships and work is completely cut. As a result, they no longer feel the need to comply with norms such as rules and laws that govern the world.

Preventive measures that can be considered throughout the “process”

“ In order to prevent the behavior from actually becoming radicalized, prevention-oriented interventions should take place at each stage ”

of the process addressed in the previous section. Such interventions may include: critical thinking training to acquire different perspectives; clinical psychology approaches to behavioral change; vocational training and employment assistance; and direct support

by the government for those who post on social media complaining about social dissatisfaction and isolation or other issues.

Conclusions

Even if the number of cases is still low, considering the magnitude of the impact on society, and the fact that the lone attackers can inspire copycat behavior and become role models for other alienated youths, an immediate response is required. To enhance understanding of these “black swan” events, sharing experiences, data, and ideas regarding this particular threat between practitioners, policymakers and researchers from various regions and countries is essential to develop viable interventions to prevent lone attacks.

Lone wolves tend to focus more on how they will be seen by others than on how they carry out the operation itself



10 Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.

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