

# **Jihadi Single Actors in the West are Sticking to the Same Standard and Limited Methods of Operation**

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# Why Jihadi Single Actors in the West are Sticking to the Same Standard and Limited Methods of Operations

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## **Abstract**

This article is dealing with the question of why Jihadi-inspired terrorist attacks in North America and West Europe are not using simple, creative, and effective methods of operation, which the terrorist organizations are promoting and advertising.

The research demonstrates that despite many actual examples of such publications and tactical instructions, the number of attacks carried out with such creative and simple methods is negligible.

In the theatres of Jihad, there are many examples of creating and implementing new creative methods of operation, but almost always by organizations and not by single actors. The academic literature on the subject is not rich, and does not provide adequate answers to the research question.

However, Israeli studies, which examined Palestinian single actors in direct methods of psychological examinations and interviews, have managed to build a coherent and distinctive psychological profile of a single Jihadi actor, which suggests a thorough and well-based answers to the research question. In essence, the psychological profile of a lone actor is characterized in impulsiveness and lack of sophistication. These characteristics are not fitted for methods of operation which require planning and preparations.

In addition, in many of the attacks, the main motivations for carrying out an attack are some suicidal tendencies, and a desire for recognition and publication. These motivations do not match methods of operation which allow the perpetrator to remain safe and keep his anonymity.

Another meaning of the findings is that global jihad organizations have the influence to inspire individuals to carry out attacks, but not the power to influence the choice of the method of operation. This study demonstrates that in many cases, the real motivation of the jihadi single actor is not purely ideological, but heavily blended with their psychological pains and impulses.

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## **Introduction**

The global Jihad organizations, mainly Al Qaida and ISIS, and the various local groups in Europe and North America which are inspired by them, are investing significant efforts in disseminating and spreading innovative tactical ideas and new methods of operation, for carrying out effective attacks, by their supporters who reside in the West.

The dissemination of those ideas and tactics was made, among other ways, by the web magazines Inspire, Rumiya, and Dabiq. Those magazines introduced simple, creative and effective ideas for Jihadi attacks, which could be easily performed by a single actor with no special skills or experience.

Among these ideas were instructions for preparing a simple home-made device for derailing a train, using commercial drones, setting strategic fire in populated areas, building simple explosive devices with remote controls in order to ensure the perpetrator's safety and anonymity, causing car accidents, and more.

However, a quantitative examination of the Jihadi attacks in west Europe and north America reveals that almost none of the attacks were conducted using these simple and effective methods of operation. The vast majority of the attacks were carried out using firearms or cold steel, vehicle ramming attacks, and standard explosive devices.

The minority of the attacks, which included more creative and non-orthodox methods of operation, were conducted by organizations or small groups, but not by single actors.

The gap between the many rich sources for simple and effective ideas for terrorist attacks, and the total lack of execution of these ideas, have raised the research question, why in single-actor Jihadi attacks in the west is there no use of creative and unorthodox methods of operation, in spite of many publications and instructions in the subject.

The research considers the publications and instructions published by the global Jihad organizations as the non-dependent variable, and the methods used in actual attacks as the dependent variable.

The research assumption, which was proved to be right, was that the effect of the non-dependent variable on the dependent variable is very negligible. In other words, the assumption is that the methods of operation of Jihadi single actors operating in the west are not affected by the publications and instructions of the global Jihad organizations.

The focus of this research is not about the motives or the willingness of an individual or an organization to commit terrorist attacks, in terms of radicalization, ideology, etc. This research focuses on the selection and choosing of the method of operation.

As detailed in this article, mental and psychological factors, have an important role not only over the mere decision of committing an attack, but also over the choosing of the method of the attack, and, subsequently, not choosing other methods.

The possible reasons that were examined in the research were:

1. The psychological profile of the Jihadi single actor, as was determined by psychological research conducted in Israel, includes common motives of suicidal tendencies, desire for acknowledgment and glory, impulsiveness, and general low psychological maturity. Hence, under the assumption that the psychological profile of the Jihadi single actor in West Europe and in North America is similar to the profile of the Palestinian single actor, methods of operation which ensures the perpetrator's safety and anonymity are not suitable for a perpetrator who is suicidal, or looking for credit and appreciation.
2. In addition, the capability of a single actor, who is impulsive and with low psychological maturity, to adopt new method of operation which requires planning and preparation, is limited, and may explain sticking to intuitive and well known patterns and methods.
3. There is a possibility that the publications of the global Jihad organizations do not ultimately reach their audience – the potential single actors with the radical Islamic sentiment. This lack of exposure to the instructions and ideas, may be the result of censorship of the western counter terrorism authorities, or unawareness to these publications due to other reasons.

However, even if we disregard the various global Jihad publications, one can easily find simple and available instructions and ideas for terrorist attacks in many other places, such as movies, literature, publications in the media, non-Islamic terrorism around the world, and obviously, independent creative thought of any single actor who wishes to perform effective attacks.

Despite all of these possible sources for ideas and methods, there are almost no non-orthodox and creative methods of operation in the Jihadi single actor attacks in the west.

The findings of this research are supporting the preliminary assumptions. Hence, the contribution of this research to the literature is with the well based conclusion, that the chance of performing a creative and non-orthodox attack by a Jihadi single actor is very low, based on both the actual quantitative analysis of attacks, and on the psychological research findings.

A quantitative analysis of Jihadi and radical Islamic attacks in west Europe and north America between 1970-2018 concludes that a negligible minority of the attacks – 0.71% only, were performed by means other than firearm, cold steel, vehicles, or standard explosive devices.

A qualitative analysis of the psychological profiles of the Jihadi single actor supports

the findings of the research, with the conclusion that the Jihadi single actor tends to choose methods of operation which puts him in risk and grants him with appreciation and acknowledgment.

In addition, the Jihadi single actor psychological profile, which is characterized in impulsiveness, does not support adoption of new ideas, which requires advanced planning and patience.

The contribution of this research to the literature about the Jihadi single actors related issues, and to the counter-terrorism efforts as a whole, is around the following subjects:

- 1.** Since the research has established that it is very unlikely that a Jihadi single actor will choose a creative method of operation, the various counter terrorism organizations can allocate their resources accordingly in more effective manners. Namely, in cases when the conceived threat is from a single actor attack, more counter terrorism resources and efforts should be allocated to thwart the standard methods of operation, rather than unique and creative methods, with close to zero chances to occur. Accordingly, when a creative attack occurs, and the perpetrators are unknown, ruling out of a single actor perpetrator can be made faster, while allowing the counter terrorism agencies to focus on a group as the likely perpetrators.
- 2.** In addition, there are less reasons to invest efforts in censoring publications containing instructions for creative methods of attack. However, the ideological encouragement, regardless of the technical instructions, has an effect and influence over potential perpetrators, and from that aspect, there are reasons and justifications to censor such publications.
- 3.** Another contribution of this research is the strengthening of the previous conclusions regarding the psychological profiles of Jihadi single actors, in new research methods, and from the new angle of choosing the method of operation. Previous researches (Merari 2010, Merari & Ganor 2020, Speckhard & Ellenberg 2020) has studied and characterized the profile of the Jihadi single actor by means of psychological interviews and tests, and by sociological data such as criminal history, family relations, psychiatric records and so on. That research concluded that characteristics such as impulsiveness, lack of sophistication, desire for acknowledgment and acceptance, and suicidal or self-harm tendencies are significantly more common among Jihadi single actors. This research is strengthening these findings, not by direct study of the perpetrators, but by induction from the same simple known and reoccurring methods that the Jihadi single actors keep choosing, and from the more creative and effective methods they are avoiding.

In other words, this research reaches to the same conclusions and findings as much of the psychological and profiling research has concluded, but does so in a new path, by examining the methods of operation.

## Methodology and materials

In order to research and analyze creative and effective attacks, which could be performed by a single actor, we have defined three groups of methods of operation:

1. Group 1 includes the classic and most common methods of operation, which includes firearms, cold steel, throwing stones, ramming attacks using vehicles, and common explosive and arson devices.
2. Group 1 practically includes almost all the Jihadi single actor attacks in the west. As a result, much of the defense and counterterrorism measures are designed against this group of methods, such as concrete obstacles around governmental buildings meant to protect from the use of vehicles as a weapon, protective vests for cops and soldiers to protect from firearms and cold steel, gun control policies, and so on.
3. Group 2 consists of complex and difficult to execute methods of operation, such as CBRN attacks, abduction of airplanes, and cyber attacks on state-level defended infrastructure.
4. Attacks from group 2 are very effective and may cause many casualties and significant media interest, so naturally the global Jihad organizations are acting to encourage and provide means to perform it, but not by single actors attacks, but rather by supervision and guidance of the central command of the organization<sup>1</sup>.
5. Execution of a successful group 2 attack, such as September 11<sup>th</sup> for example, requires collaboration of many individuals with different subject matter expertise, such as funding, planning, covert communications, and specific knowledge of the specific attack field (aviation, cyber, CBRN, etc.). Due to the immense potential damage from a group 2 attack, lots of security and counterterrorism resources are invested in preventing it, such as airplane and airport security, cyber security, security around non-conventional weapons and materials, and so on. It is very unlikely for a group 2 attack to be performed by a single actor, besides maybe a cyber attack, where a very resourceful and talented single actor may cause significant damages.
6. Group 3 includes innovative and creative, but available and simple methods of operation, which can be performed by a single actor, while ensuring his anonymity and safety. Such methods include causing car accidents, creative use of simple improvised explosive devices (IED's) with remote control and next to buildings cooking gas storages, poisoning with commercially available materials, basic cyber attacks of low-guarded facilities, derailing trains, use of civilian drones, setting wood fires next to populated areas, attacking chemical warehouses, and many more.
7. The common group 3 methods are simple planning and execution, high potential damage, and possibility to be performed by a single actor with no special set of skills

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1 See a publication in issue 13 of Dabiq, regarding the attack caused the crash of the Russian airplane in Sinai in October 2015.



or experience. In light of these advantages, the global Jihad organizations tried to promote and encourage single actors to perform such attacks, using (among other ways) the online publications of Al Qaida (Inspire) and of ISIS (Rumiyah and Dabiq)<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of those advantages, and the availability of both instructions and means, almost no group 3 attacks was ever performed by a Jihadi single actor in the west, hence the relevance and the puzzle of the research question.

**Table 1: Three groups of methods of operation**

	Examples	Potential damage	Occurrence of single actors attacks
	firearms, cold steel, throwing stones, ramming attacks using vehicles, common explosive and arson devices	Low to mediocre	Vast majority of single actors attacks
	CBRN, abduction of airplanes, significant cyber attacks	Very high	None in single actors attacks. Low number of attacks in organizational attacks
	Causing car accidents, use of IED's next to buildings' gas storages, poisoning, derailling trains, use of civilian drones, setting wood fires	Mediocre to high	Close to zero in single actors attacks. Some organizational attacks, mainly in the theaters of Jihad

Two research methods were used:

1. A simple descriptive quantitative study of all the Jihadi attacks in west Europe and north America between 1970 and 2018, with filters of various methods of operation and weapons used. The findings were checked against the definition of "group 3" methods, both in single-actor attacks, and in organizational attacks. The database used was US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, and Maryland university Global Terrorism Database (GTD).
2. Qualitative research, based on:
  - a. Analysis of all the online publications of "inspire," "Dabiq," and "Rumiyah", focusing on instructions and encouragements to perform group 3 attacks. Several excellent group 3 instructions were found.

2 These publications are available as of June 2021 only under registration and supervision at <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-5> for ISIS magazines and at <https://jihadology.net/category/inspire-magazine/> for Inspire



- b. Interviews with leading psychologists and profilers, specializing in radical Islamic terrorism: Prof. Ariel Merari, Dr. Eran Shadach, and Dr. Sagit Yehoshua. The definition of group 3 and the theory of this research were presented to these experts, and they were interviewed regarding their view of how their knowledge, based on their research regarding the psychology of the Jihadi single actor, matches the selection of the method of operation.

### **Comparing the use of creative methods of operation, between organizations in the theaters of Jihad, and single actors in the West**

In the theaters of Jihad at the middle east, there are many good examples for ongoing innovation and creative production of new methods of operation of terrorism.

A good test case is the adaptation of the Hamas organization to the ever-changing conditions of their war with Israel, and its impressive ability to maintain a sort of arms race, despite Israel's clear technological and economic superiority.

In the 90's, during the first years of Hamas activity, the organization focused on simple firearm and suicide bomber attacks. After Israel withdrew from Gaza in September 2005, Hamas violently took control of Gaza from the hands of the Palestinian authority, and since in Gaza (as oppose to the west bank) there were no longer available Israeli citizens or soldiers to attack by close range means, Hamas turned to develop high-trajectory weapons such as smuggled and self-manufactured rockets and mortars.

When Israel developed its rockets and mortars intercepting system known as "Iron Dome", Hamas changed its tactics in order to launch high number of rockets simultaneously and developed its own version<sup>3</sup> of a short range very heavy rockets, which were designed to be used in a scenario of an Israeli infantry ground maneuvers and considered to be more difficult to intercept.

In order to mitigate its military inferiority compared to the Israeli army, and in order to maintain a ground attack option despite the heavily guarded border, Hamas planned and built a net of underground tunnels, some crossing the border to Israel, and many inside Gaza, intended to mobilize troops, and to hide headquarters and command centers.

In addition, Hamas uses helium balloons and simple drones to carry explosive devices and to set fires in the civilian areas close to the border of Gaza.

Despite the primitive technology implemented, Hamas's innovative and creative tactics are causing severe damages and posing serious threats, so Israel is obliged to spend huge amounts of resources and efforts in order to stay ahead in this asymmetric arms

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3 Similar heavy short-range rockets were developed earlier by the Houthis in Yemen and by rebels forces during the civil war in Syria.

race<sup>4</sup>.

The Hamas test case is a good example of innovative terrorism, which constantly adapts and evolves, keeping its ability to carry out effective attacks despite total technological and economical inferiority.

The Hamas test case adds to the puzzle of the research question. If the ability to create and perform effective and creative terrorism exists in radical Islamic organization, why in Jihadi single actor's attacks do we not see any sign of this sophistication, improvisation and creativity?

### **Quantitative analysis of Islamic attacks in Europe and North America**

Generally, most of the databases available for quantitative research of terrorism, are missing lots of important information that usually could be found only in classified governmental databases.

For example, many important details about the perpetrator are usually missing, such as his nationality, his criminal record, his family and social background, his religion, his mental health, and so on. When a Jihadi attack in Europe is documented in a database, it is relevant and significant whether the perpetrator was Suni or Shiite, whether he is an immigrant or born in Europe, whether one of his family members was involved in terrorism, his criminal past, and so on. Disregarding these missing details might lead to wrong academic conclusions.

However, this research examines the methods of operation, and for that matter, the data which exists at the standard available databases is sufficient. Along with rigorous examination of each case, it was possible to reach solid results regarding the classification of the method of operation according to the three groups defined in this research.

The data for the research was retrieved from the US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, and Maryland university Global Terrorism Database (GTD). We have examined all the Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe and North America from 1970 to 2018, and filtered the weapon type variable, and checked which weapon type fit to each of the three groups defined above<sup>5</sup>.

Out of total of 567 Islamic attacks between 1970 to 2018 in north America and Europe, only four attacks were classified as "group 3" attacks, only 0.71% of the attacks. All of

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4 For a clever comic sketch, summarizing this absurd asymmetric race, see <https://www.mako.co.il/tv-erez-nederet/770e3d99ade16110?subChannelId=e67e96539c8f3610VgnVCM2000002a0c10acRCRD&vcmid=b3d-9f4a407af3610VgnVCM2000002a0c10acRCRD>

5 Some information is missing in the database. For example, in 2015 there was an ISIS plot to poison the water supply of the city of Pristina, which could have been qualified as a group 3 attack. see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/11/kosovo-cuts-pristina-water-supply-over-alleged-isis-plot-to-poison-reservoir>

these “group 3” attacks were executed by single actors. Such a negligible number of four attacks over 48 years does not allow us to conclude anything regarding the connection between single actors attacks and choosing the method of operation.

However, 99.2% of the Islamic single actor attacks were performed using “group 1” methods. This provides clear and decisive evidence that there is a strong correlation between Islamic single actor attacks, and choosing “group 1” methods. This correlation is very well explained by the psychological research and profiles.

### **Quantitative analysis of Islamic attacks in the Middle East and North Africa**

A parallel analysis of Islamic attacks between 1970-2018 was conducted at the theaters of Jihad in the Middle East and North Africa. Altogether, 12,022 Islamic attacks are documented in the GTD. For many of these attacks some of the information is missing.

Eventually, 1,251 “group 3” attacks were found, including the use of pesticides for poisoning, many attacks using IED’s with remote control devices and other creative use of “group 3” methods such as sending letter bombs, and many incendiary attacks.

Lots of attacks are missing from the GTD. For example, we have not found much of the incendiary attacks the Hamas had launched at the Gaza border using helium balloons and drowns, an attempt to sabotage a railway in Israel in 2002, and an attempt to poison water supply in Israel in 2013<sup>6</sup>.

### **Comparing group 3 attacks between the theaters of Jihad and the West**

1,251 “group 3” attacks out of 12,022 total Islamic attacks are 10.41% “group 3” attacks in the theaters of Jihad, compared to 0.71% in Europe and North America.

However, the portion of lone actor attacks is very different. While in the west the very few “group 3” attacks were all executed by single actors, in the theaters of Jihad the vast majority of the “group 3” attacks – 90.57% were executed by organizations.

This analysis confirms the conclusion that group 3 methods are not adopted by Islamic single actors. See the tables below which summarize the quantitative analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/Pages/study/2013.aspx> and <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-1841811,00.html>

**Table 2: Group 3 attacks in the West and MENA region**

	By organi- zation	By single actor
Group 3 in the West	0	4
Group 3 in MENA	1133	118

**Table 3: Total Islamic attacks in the West and MENA region**

	Attacks by all methods of operation	Group 3 only	Group 3 per- centage
Total Islamic attacks in the west	567	4	0.71%
Total Islamic attacks in MENA	12,022	1251	10.41%

For comparison, the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) published its findings about trends in terrorism in 2020<sup>7</sup>, which analysed the methods of operation in different geographies. The IEP analysis is not only about Islamic terrorism and obviously didn't use the groups definitions of this research, but their findings supports the conclusion that the vast majority of terrorist attacks are executed using group 1 methods.

### Instructions for "group 3" attacks in Al Qaida and ISIS magazines

All of the digital magazines of Al Qaida "Inspire" magazine, and of ISIS "Dabiq" and "Rumiyah" magazines were reviewed. Many various suggestions and instructions for attacks were found, mainly for group 1 attacks such as how to effectively execute fire-arm and cold steel<sup>8</sup> attacks (location, types of knives and guns, vulnerable body areas, escape routes, etc.), and instructions for effective ramming attacks using a vehicle<sup>9</sup>.

Within the tactical instructions, several excellent examples for group 3 instructions were found. Examples include:

- Derailing a train using a homemade device. The device can be easily manufactured from accessible materials, and if properly located on a curve or a bridge, may harm

<sup>7</sup> <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://clarionprojstg.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rumiyah-ISIS-Magazine-4th-issue.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://clarionprojstg.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rumiyah-ISIS-Magazine-3rd-issue.pdf>

hundreds of victims. Published in issue 17 of Inspire<sup>10</sup>.

- Causing road accidents by pouring oil and lubricants next to curves. According to the instructions in issue 10 of Inspire<sup>11</sup>, the best time for this simple but effective attack is on Sunday nights, when drivers are tired and may be intoxicated.
- Setting forest fires next to populated areas. As detailed in issue 9 of Inspire<sup>12</sup>, the perpetrator should use the wind and the terrain in order to maximize the damages and the number of victims.
- Demolish buildings by setting simple improvised explosive devices (IEDs) next to building's gas storages. The manufacturing of the IEDs is based on available civilian materials, and by positioning the explosives correctly, an entire building can be demolished.
- Remote control detonation by using a motorcycle alarm device. The article states that the advantage of using a remote control over a time bomb, is the ability to choose the exact best time to activate the bomb, while ensuring the perpetrator's safety.

All of the above are good examples for solutions which could be used in multiple scenarios, while ensuring the perpetrator's anonymity and safety, and by allowing him to execute multiple attacks without or before getting caught. However, as proved in this research, the agenda and the motives of the Jihadi single actor are not aligned with this logic, and getting caught, recognized, and even harmed, are part of his goals.

### **Quantitative analysis – psychological explanations for the lack of use in group 3 methods**

Three experts in the fields of psychology, profiling and Islamic terrorism were interviewed and asked about the factors leading a Jihadi single actor to choose a method of operation and to rule out other methods: Prof. Ariel Merari who is a leading expert of terrorism and psychology<sup>13</sup>, Dr. Eran Shadach who researches various aspects of psychology and terrorism, and Dr. Sagit Yehoshua, a leading criminologist and profiler of Islamic terrorists.

The insights of these experts produced compelling and coherent explanations for the clear tendency of Jihadi single actors to choose predominantly "group 1" methods, and their total avoidance of "group 3" methods, in spite of the great tactical advantages and the ease of execution.

10 [https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/\\_pda/2017/08/inspire-magazine-17.pdf](https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2017/08/inspire-magazine-17.pdf)

11 [https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/\\_pda/2013/03/inspire-magazine-issue-10.pdf](https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2013/03/inspire-magazine-issue-10.pdf)

12 [https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/\\_pda/2012/05/inspire-magazine-9.pdf](https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2012/05/inspire-magazine-9.pdf)

13 Ariel Merari & Boaz Ganor (2020): Interviews With, and Tests of, Palestinian Independent Assailants, Terrorism and Political Violence

The general characteristics of the jihadi single actor are of an unsophisticated and bitter person, with hostile and alienated family and social background, often involved with petty crimes, who seeks a source of pride and a place where he could feel a sense of belonging and appreciation. Certain characteristics are significantly more common within Islamic single actors compared to the general population, such as sociopathic and suicidal tendencies, and desperate need for acknowledgment and social acceptance. According to Prof. Merari, the suicidal tendencies are in many cases based on depression which might have led to “regular” suicide. However, the Islam strongly forbid an act of suicide (in Arabic “Intihar” راحتنا), and it is considered as a disgrace to that person’s memory, as well as to his entire family. As opposed to a “regular” suicide, a person who is killed during a terrorist attack is considered a martyr (“shahid” in Arabic), who sacrificed his life to defend the honor of his people and his god. In Arabic, this act is called “istishhad” دأشيتسا.

These strict social norms may lead a person who wishes to end his life to choose a sort of a “suicide by cop” method, and to execute a terrorist attack, not necessarily just in order to harm civilians or to obtain political goals, but first and foremost in order to end his own life while earning respect instead of being condemned for it.

With regards to our research question, there are five characteristics of the “group 3” methods, which decreases the chances that a Jihadi single actor, with such psychological traits, would choose to execute it:

1. **The chances that the perpetrator will get hurt or killed are very low.** Since many of the Jihadi single actors have suicidal tendencies, the safe “group 3” methods are less appealing to them.
2. **The perpetrator may remain anonymous.** In spite of the “group 3” method’s potential to inflict significant damages and to serve political goals, the perpetrator himself may remain in the shadows with no credit nor glory. Hence, a perpetrator who seek glory and social recognition will prefer a method of operation which will link him strongly to the attack.
3. **There is no reproduction of popular methods which provided glory to previous perpetrators.** Past attacks which were published, and occurred in a certain manner (for example a stabbing attack at Nablus gate in Jerusalem, or a run-over attack in Nice) have already proved to provide their perpetrators with glory and social respect. According to Merari and Shadach, it is likely that a single actor with a weak personality would like to ensure that he will enjoy the same glory and respect, and will avoid new and untested methods.
4. **Execution of a “group 3” attack requires planning, preparations, and sophistication.** In order to properly execute a “group 3” method, the perpetrator is required to visit the site, to read instructions, to purchase materials and tools, to choose the time and place, and so on. This type of planning does not fit an immature personality with lack

of imagination, who will prefer a simple and intuitive “group 1” method.

**5. A “group 3” attack requires patience and restraint, and cannot be spontaneous.**

The need for planning and preparation dictates patience. The Jihadi single actor is characterized according to research done by Merari and Ganor with impulsiveness and a need for immediate satisfaction, so it is more likely that the group 3 methods will not be considered due to this explanation as well.

**6. Eventually, the act of Jihadi single actors is different from the acts of terrorists operating in organizations and from the acts of leaders of terrorist organizations, from the aspect of their psychological motives.**

**7. While terrorists and leaders operating in organizations are acting mainly out of ideological motives, the act of single actors is motivated mainly by personal mental distress. This mental background has a role in the choosing of the method of operation<sup>14</sup>.**

## **Assessment of the importance of censoring Jihadi publications**

Throughout the years, extensive efforts were made in order to minimize and block Jihadi publications, both by governments in the west, and by global corporations which dominate much of the global media. An example of such an effort is the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), which was founded in 2017 by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube. The GIFCT goal is to “prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms<sup>15</sup>”.

In the same manner, access to the digital copies of “Inspire” “Dabiq” and “Rumiyah” requires registration, and today there are no known Jihadi digital magazines which are available on public platforms with unrestricted access.

However, if a potential terrorist wishes to get ideas for effective methods of operation, he can find a great quantity of ideas and information on mainstream media where there are daily reports about acts of violence around the globe, from books and movies, from friends, and so on. For example, a story in the news about the use of drones to jeopardize airplanes in the UK<sup>16</sup> may inspire a person in the US to plan a similar attack on a low-guarded airport, using commercially available tools and lots of available technical information, without being exposed to any Jihadist or terrorist media.

In addition to the mainstream media and to the mainstream social media, there are many channels of media which are more difficult to monitor and to disrupt by the

<sup>14</sup> A recent Stanford University medical study suggests that this phenomenon is not unique to Jihadi terrorism, and determined that a strong majority of mass shooters suffer from untreated psychiatric disorders .see Glick, I. D., Cerfolio, N. E., Kamis, D., & Laurence, M. (2021). Domestic mass shooters: the association with unmedicated and untreated psychiatric illness. *Journal of clinical psychopharmacology*, 41(4), 366-369.

<sup>15</sup> <https://gifct.org/about/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-46803713>



counter terrorism organizations, such as “Telegram” groups dedicated to terrorist discussions<sup>17</sup>.

At the course of investigations of terrorists around the globe, counter terrorism agencies are getting answers to questions such as what were the sources used to gather the information needed for the attack, where did the terrorist get the idea for the method of operation, was there any past attack which gave them special inspiration, and so on. The answers to these questions are not available through open academic research. In light of the lack of data regarding those questions, our assumption is that there is a great value to the Jihadist publications only with regards to the general motivation to carry out an attack. However, our research demonstrates that with regards to the method of operation, the Jihadist publication has no effect.

Every citizen of the west may be exposed to news and individuals who might radicalize him and turn him into a terrorist. A mentally healthy person, who is able to act in a calculated and non-impulsive manner, who decides to carry out an attack, has many simple and available ways to obtain tactical and technical information from various resources, including scientific websites and various groups and forums. In addition, in spite of the censorship efforts, we should assume based on past experience, that some clandestine activities are taking place over the social media platforms, even when it is lesser and more difficult to monitor.

Our conclusion is that the lack of “group 3” attacks cannot be explained by lack of information and instructions, but by the mental traits of the Jihadi single actor as detailed above. However, we do find reasons which justifies censorship efforts of Jihadi publications, due to the ideological substances, which may cause unstable individuals to radicalize (but not to carry out effective group 3 attacks).

### **The place of the single actor within the units of operation of radical Islam, and the terrorist organizations circles of influence**

The global jihad organizations, and specially Al Qaida, have defined the Muslim communities residing in the west as a strategic asset to promote the global jihad. In other words, the jihadi single actor in the west is an important and critical part in the global jihad arsenal and strategy, especially after 9/11 and the military defeats to the jihad organizations at the middle east<sup>18</sup>.

The constitutive manifest of this global jihad strategy, is the 1,604 pages paper named “Call to global Islamic resistance” also known as GIR<sup>19</sup>, written by the main Al Qaida

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17 Clifford, B. (2018). ‘Trucks, Knives, Bombs, Whatever:’ Exploring pro-Islamic State Instructional Material on Telegram. CTC Sentinel, 11(5), 23-29.

18 Spaaij, R., 2012. ‘Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention’. London: Springer

19 Masoud, M. Z. (2013). An analysis of Abu Mus’ ab al-Suri’s “call to global Islamic resistance”. Journal of Strategic

strategist and ideologist at the time, Abu Musab Al Suri. The GIR sets a cold and calculated analysis of the war between the radical Islam and the west and between other streams in the Islam, and examines the various strategies considering the limitations and the circumstances formed after 9/11. At the base of this analysis there is an assumption that in order to effectively be able to handle an ongoing war against the west, the global jihad organizations need to operate globally, including in the west, using local independent operatives, who are not dependent on direct contact with the organization command. In the words of Abu Musab Al-Suri: "Transforming al-Qaida from a vulnerable hierarchical organization into a resilient decentralized movement." (page 4 to the GIR).

Following Abu Musab Al-Suri rationale, we can classify the operating units of Al Qaida and ISIS into three types:

1. **Big semi-military units**, with thousands to tens of thousands of operatives, acting under the direct control of the organization's leaders in an overt manner. This units operate in the theaters of jihad, aimed to attack other military forces (moderate Sunnis, Shiites, western forces), to conquer territories and to defend territories. Examples of such units are Al Qaida militias which operated in Iraq after 2004 and ISIS militias which operated in Syria and Sinai.
2. **Small cells**, which consist of several operatives who are working as an independent group, with different levels of supervision or involvement of the organization headquarters. These cells usually operate in the west, secretly, until the day of the attack. Examples of such small units are the units who carried out the 9/11 attacks<sup>20</sup>, Al Qaida group who carried out the attack in London in July 2005, and ISIS groups who carried out the attacks in Paris in November 2015. This small unit's aim is to carry out significant attacks with high number of victims, causing a public shock and high profile media coverage, in order to promote the goals of the global Jihad.
3. **Single actors** who are working independently, with just general ideological inspiration from the organizations, with no direct guidance or even awareness of the organization headquarters. These single actors are operating covertly in the west. Famous examples are Muhamad Merach who carried several attacks in France in 2012, Saad Akhtar who killed a woman using a hammer in Toronto in 2020<sup>21</sup>, and Nidal Hasan who killed his army colleagues in Fort Hood in 2009. According to the GIR, these single actors goal is to carry out attacks as effectively as possible in order to promote the global jihad goals. However, as analyzed in this study, the declared goal of these single actors is indeed to promote jihad, but their psychological motivation includes in many cases suicidal and psychotic tendencies.

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Security, 6(1), 1-18.

20 See Moghadam, A. (2013). How al Qaeda innovates. *Security Studies*, 22(3), 466-497.

21 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6661038/toronto-hammer-attack-by-isis-supporter/>

**Table 4: operating units of Al Qaida and ISIS**

	Connections to the organization HQ	Areas of operation	Objectives
Large semi military units	Full command and control of the HQ	Theaters of Jihad – Middle East and North Africa	Attacking enemy forces, conquering, and defending territories
Small local cells	Full or partial command and control of the HQ	The West	Carry out highly effective attacks in order to promote the global jihad goals
Singles actors	No connection to the HQ. ideological inspiration only	The West	Declared objectives – to promote jihad. Psychological motivation – suicidal and psychotic tendencies

The importance of the single actor in the strategy of global jihad is so central and high, that the main purpose for the existence of the web magazines “Inspire” “Rumiyah” and “Dabiq” is to generate single actors attacks by providing ideological encouragement and practical instructions.

Through these mediums, Al Qaida and later ISIS, have turned, as Abu Musab Al Suri foresaw, into decentralized global organization. The evolution of Al Qaida and ISIS is dramatic, as even non-Muslims are targeted as potential jihadi single actors, while the global jihad organizations are exploiting not only religious-Muslim sentiments, but also general grievances in the western society, such as those of the black American community<sup>22</sup>.

Eventually, when we analyse the acts of the jihadi single actors in relation to the global jihad organizations command and control, we can draw three circles of influence:

1. A circle of control – on some of the territories for some of the time at the theaters of jihad (Middle East and North Africa). In these regions, the organizations control a certain number of core operators and members.
2. A circle of influence – mainly over citizens and population at the theaters of jihad, and in some cases over cells operating in the west with different levels of involvement of the headquarters
3. A circle of inspiration – over Muslim (and sometimes non-Muslim) communities and single actors in the west. As the research proves, in the circle of inspiration the organizations may inspire a single actor to carry out an attack, but in spite of all their

22 See from Braniff, B., & Moghadam, A. (2011). Towards global jihadism: Al-Qaeda's strategic, ideological, and structural adaptations since 9/11. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5(2), 36-49 – “Ideological Dilution: From Elitist Organization to Catch-All Movement. Al-Qaeda has endeavoured to widen the target audience of its recruitment and propaganda campaign. Whereas before 9/11, Al-Qaeda made exclusive appeals to Muslims, it gradually adopted more populist rhetoric following 9/11 in order to appeal to a wider audience, including non-Muslims” (p 40).

efforts, the organizations do not succeed to influence the method of operation.

This study examines the aspect of methods of operation, and proves that highly effective methods which keeps the perpetrator safety are not used, while inefficient methods which expose the perpetrator to harm are almost always used.

This result strengthens the assumption that the single actors real motivation is in many cases less about promoting the goals of the jihad, and more around their suicidal and psychotic tendencies.

### **Conclusions and policy recommendations**

The main conclusion of this study is that the chances of carrying out a group 3 attack by a jihadi single actor are close to zero, based both on actual past events, and on psychological analysis.

The direct psychological research which was conducted in Israel by Merari and Ganor provide a well based profile of a Palestinian single actor. Similar research conducted in Europe draws similar profiles<sup>23</sup>, of a young man coming from an alienated social and family background, with simple and unmatured personality, driven to carry out attacks more out of their personal distresses, and less out of pure ideology.

A combined analysis of the psychological research and the findings of this research regarding the methods of operation, provides a well based explanation to the question why jihadi single actors are avoiding new and innovative methods of operation, and sticking to the known and classis (and less effective) methods.

Another conclusion of this research, is that the global jihad organizations have influence and inspire individuals to carry out an attack, but do not have the power to influence the method of operation of that attack.

The global jihad organizations are well aware of the great value the single actors have in their arsenal and strategy. Extensive efforts were made to publish and promote "group 3" methods, due to its potential to inflict greater damages, while ensuring the perpetrator's safety, and by allowing them to execute multiple attacks.

However, in spite of these great efforts, no group 3 attacks were ever executed by jihadi single actor in the west, which proves that the global jihad organizations cannot

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23 See Teun van Dongen, "The Lengths Terrorists Go to: Perpetrator Characteristics and the Complexity of Jihadist Terrorist Attacks in Europe, 2004–2011," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 6, No. 1 (2014): 58–80; Yehoshua, S. (2020). *Terrorist Minds: From Social-psychological Profiling To assessing The Risk* (Vol. 13). World Scientific and Nesser, P., & Stenersen, A. (2014). The modus operandi of jihadi terrorists in Europe. *Perspectives on terrorism*, 8(6), 2-24.

Petter Nesser, "Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat: A Chronology of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe 2008–2013," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 440–56;

control the method of operation of single actor attacks in the west (as oppose to their control and influence over militias, small cells and single actors methods of operation in the theaters of jihad).

A group 3 attack, which requires planning and calculated manner of behavior, does not fit the target audience of the people residing in the west, who are willing to execute attacks. The jihadi single actor in the west "pool of resources" is characterized by lack of patience and planning capabilities, and driven to action mainly by personal distresses, so with respect to the methods of operation, the global organization's seeds are falling on a dry soil, so ultimately the vast majority of the jihadi single attacks in the west are carried out impulsively and with no planning, using the classic "group 1" methods.

In contrast, this research analysis suggests that militias, cells, and single actors in the control areas of the terrorist organizations are driven mainly by ideology and less by personal distresses, and are therefore more willing and capable of executing innovative and more effective attacks.

The results of this research could be interpreted the other way around as well. i.e. not only that the jihadi single actor psychological profile explains why there is no use in "group 3" methods, but that the lack of use of "group 3" methods strengthens the research regarding the psychological profile, and provides another proof to the characteristics which were found, such as lack of imagination, impulsiveness, and suicidal and self-harm tendencies.

With regards to counter-terrorism policy, in light of the findings that "group 3" attacks are very unlikely, there room to consider allocating intelligence and security resources which are aimed to thwart these kind of attacks, including efforts to censor publications on the subject.

With regards to the focus of the intelligence surveillance over communities and individuals residing in the west, this research is strengthening the known conclusion that individuals who spent time in the theaters of jihad and came back to the west, have grater and more dangerous potential to carry out more effective and deadly attacks, and therefore should be monitored more closely.

In the terms of this research, their chances are higher to join other individuals and form a cell, and to carry out a more planned and creative attack. Besides the clear evidence of their radicalization (their travel to the theaters of jihad and their involvement in terrorism), their staying with physical and conceptual proximity to the jihad organization is increasing their chances to adopt more planned and lethal methods of operation, such as the "group 3" ideas which are promoted by the terrorist organizations as detailed above.

We acknowledge that this research is limited by its focus on easily accessibly sources

such as digital magazines which are relatively available, rather than finding vivid and up-to-date data of terrorist activities in clandestine channels such as closed forums, the Darknet, closed Telegram groups and so on.

A more effective (and more difficult) future study of these subjects, should use methods from the human intelligence (HUMINT) world, and utilize researchers with knowledge and experience in Arabic and in Muslim culture, who can impersonate jihadists, and infiltrate the virtual areas where high quality first-hand data can be found.