

Lone wolf terrorism is far from yesterday's threat

BY CHRISTOPHER P. COSTA, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 02/03/23 1:00 PM ET



FILE – A group pauses, with some in prayer, at a makeshift memorial on a New York City bike path, on Nov. 4, 2017, that honors victims of an attack who were stuck and killed by a rental truck driven by indicted suspect Sayfullo Saipov. Saipov, an Islamic extremist who killed eight in a New York bike path attack was convicted of federal crimes on Thursday, Jan. 26, 2023, and could face the death penalty.

A radicalized ISIS-inspired terrorist was convicted on a raft of charges by a federal jury and could now face the death penalty. The ISIS wannabe, Sayfullo Saipov, killed eight people in the deadliest terrorist attack in New York City since 9/11. He was a self-radicalized, lone wolf terrorist waging “leaderless jihad.”

The facts that emerged in the aftermath of the attack are hauntingly familiar to me. Not only was I the senior director for counterterrorism for President Trump’s National Security Council (NSC) when the attack happened, but during the presidential transition, I put together an eerily similar scenario for the incoming national security and homeland security advisors.

All of our preparations were designed to frame discussions on lone-wolf terrorism, mass casualties and how the Trump White House would handle such a crisis from the situation room to interagency coordination. The scenario was loosely based on the 2016 terror attack on a Bastille Day crowd in Nice, France that killed 86 people. Ironically, the incident we discussed featured an ISIS-inspired jihadist using a vehicle to run down innocent civilians on a bicycle path.

Fatefully, this fictional incident played out in real life in Manhattan on Oct. 31, 2017. And it did so in what arguably was the cruelest month of the Trump administration in terms of terrorism and U.S. homeland security. October began with a lone shooter killing 59 people at a Las Vegas music festival from a hotel

window and ended on Halloween, the last day of the month, with Saipov indiscriminately running down pedestrians and cyclists on a Manhattan bike path.

These two attacks — a mass killing of indeterminate motivation and a monstrous lone wolf attack inspired by jihadist ideology — show distinct national security threats. America has tragically become too accustomed to targeted violence, which manifests in anything from a mass school shooting to a lone wolf racist attack like the rampage in Buffalo. Both typologies of attacks are often inspired by online hype. The Buffalo shooter, for example, was motivated by racist replacement theory, which has strong footholds in online ISIS propaganda, encouraging lone wolf assailants to indiscriminately kill civilians — including turning vehicles into killing machines.

I came into the Trump administration armed with ideas for implementing fresh counter-radicalization strategies but understood early on that the administration's highest counterterrorism policy priority would be accelerating the campaign to defeat ISIS in its caliphate. Intuitively, however, our NSC counterterrorism team also knew that we would have to contend with ISIS-inspired lone wolf terrorism in the U.S. homeland as a consequence of ISIS battlefield losses overseas. This came to pass. In response to ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani urging supporters who were unable to join the group in its caliphate to attack closer to home, individuals like Saipov with jihadist sympathies have sought greater impact by attacking targets in their respective homelands.

Drawing on historical lessons from confronting white supremacy and understanding the potential lethality of non-jihadist threats, the Trump counterterrorism team also anticipated an evolving domestic terrorism threat from "lone actors" not affiliated with ISIS or jihadist intentions. Not only did the National Counter Terrorism Strategy redouble its focus on domestic terrorism, but the Department of Homeland Security's counterterrorism strategy reflected a clear-eyed view of an evolving threat that included white supremacist extremism.

In short, while jihadists will still remain a persistent undertow in the threat streams that counterterrorism officials will need to investigate, monitor and disrupt, lone wolf terrorism has not gone away and may spring from the far-right, or from the jihadist milieu.

Consider the case of the lone white supremacist actor who attacked worshipers at two New Zealand mosques in 2019, killing 51 people and injuring 49. The gunman live-streamed the attack on Facebook. His posted manifesto explicitly attributed accelerationism beliefs to a litany of his grievances. That attack represented propagandized theories held by some far-right extremists that they must act violently because governments are incapable of representing and preserving their way of life. Frighteningly, we are in an era that presents a perfect storm for lone wolf actors to mobilize for violence, regardless of the ideology.

The case of Sayfullo Saipov's bike-path terror attack should be a reminder, then, that jihadist lone wolf terrorism is not yesterday's threat. If you don't believe that, consider the case of the self-radicalized jihadist charged with attacking three police officers with a machete near Times Square on New Year's Eve.

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