Single-Actor Attacks:
Complexities, Challenges and Responses

By Damien D. Cheong

Synopsis

ISIS' strategy of claiming responsibility for any terrorist-like attack increases the complexities and challenges of dealing with single-actor (lone-wolf) attacks. Responses at the macro and micro levels will, invariably, be just as complex.

Commentary

SEVERAL SINGLE-ACTOR or lone-wolf attacks over the last 12 months seemingly bear the hallmarks of ISIS. The attacks in Manila (June 2017), Ohio State University (November 2016), Hamburg (October 2016), and Orlando Nightclub (June 2016) were initially thought to be ISIS-inspired. However, while ISIS did claim responsibility for them, investigations revealed that the perpetrators had no apparent or formal affiliation with the group.

Of late, ISIS' strategy has been to claim responsibility for any terrorist-like attack (whether single-actor or group) regardless of whether they were actually involved. The group's eagerness to do so can be attributed to its weakened position in Iraq/Syria where military efforts to wrest territory from its control are ongoing. In order to project resilience and strength, ISIS claims credit for attacks to remind supporters and adversaries that it is still a force to be reckoned with. The group also hopes to encourage further global attacks as well as feed propaganda efforts.

Why this Matters

This development is significant as it can potentially motivate individuals who are not ISIS agents/supporters but afflicted with some form of mental illness to carry out single-actor (lone-wolf) attacks. Individuals who are not inclined towards religiously-inspired violent extremism but want to kill for whatever reason are firstly, assured of

prominence/fame via the media attention as well as ISIS's claim that he/she belongs to the group (i.e. "a soldier of the Islamic State").

Secondly, they will be able to legitimise their attacks internally as they will perceive that the killing is ultimately for a higher cause. Finally, the attack no matter how minor (e.g., a stabbing) will be given prominence as it will be framed as a terror attack rather than as an ordinary crime.

This state of affairs is due in part to the way terrorist attacks are framed by the media. The media have, traditionally, treated terrorist attacks as 'exceptional'. This is partly because the act(s) of violence has a political purpose and is designed to exert pressure on governments and their people. In the case of mass murders, the act(s) of violence is often carried out to fulfil a personal objective.

The attacker is also treated differently. A 'terrorist' is usually characterised as a violent extremist who knows exactly what he/she is doing, whereas a 'mass murderer' is often portrayed as mentally unstable and not entirely aware of his/her actions. As a consequence of such framing, terrorist attacks are able to garner more media attention than homicides.

National Security Implications

At the micro level, how we think of the single-actor (lone-wolf) attacker invariably changes. In addition to focusing on individuals who are at risk of being radicalised by extremist ideology, attention should also be paid to individuals who suffer from mental illness and have a propensity for violence.

Empirical studies have shown that "the odds of a lone-actor terrorist having a mental illness is 13.49 times higher than the odds of a group actor having a mental illness", and that single actor/lone wolf terrorists with mental illness are capable of planning sophisticated attacks and rational thought. The Chattanooga attack in the United States in July 2015, and the Sydney Siege in 2014 are historical cases in point.

The most challenging part is, of course, determining the triggers that push the individual to act violently. These triggers need not be set-off by an individual such as a radical preacher, but simply through aggrievement, feelings of injustice resulting from news about victimisation/persecution of a particular ethnic or religious group, perceptions about absence or ineffectiveness of global responses and so on.

At the macro level, social cohesion can be undermined if the perception that all terrorist-like attacks are the result of violent religious extremists takes root. This is because it not only increases the risks of Islamophobia but also bolsters far-right sentiments/ideology as well, which could legitimise attacks against particular religious or ethnic groups.

For example, the university student who shot and killed six worshippers at a Quebec mosque in January 2017, was "known for far-right, nationalist views". Similarly, the perpetrator of the vehicular attack on the Finsbury Park mosque in June 2017 was motivated by anti-Muslim sentiments (the attacker was also alleged to be suffering from mental illness, which, ironically, underscores the earlier point).

Responses

Due to the inability to know precisely when an individual will act violently, an effective micro level response is early detection of behavioural anomalies in the potential attacker by friends, colleagues or family. Canada's Centre for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Violence's (CPRLV) lists: "justifying the use of violence to promote a cause, ideology, or militant agenda"; "breaking ties with friends and family"; "a significant change in the regular expression of emotions"; "adopting an intransigent worldview that leaves no room for dialogue"; "searching for a sense of identity and belonging", among others, as key tell-tale signs that an individual is growing more unstable.

While such behavioural indicators are useful, the challenge is whether people will report their loved ones or colleagues when they notice these behavioural changes in him/her. Reporting naturally elicits apprehension in the one making the report.

A major fear is that the reported person will ultimately be punished. However, this is not necessarily the case as assistance rather than chastisement is the goal of such preventive involvement. Seeking the assistance of mental health professionals and/or secular or religious counsellors is paramount at this stage.

By attempting to reduce the number of single-actor attacks via preventive involvement, macro level efforts to deal with Islamophobia and creeping far-right ideology will invariably be enhanced. It will give gravitas to inter-racial and religious harmony efforts by reassuring the public that all groups are doing what is necessary, however uncomfortable, to keep the community safe.

Damien D. Cheong is a Research Fellow at the National Security Studies Programme (NSSP), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.