



LOW-COST TERRORIST TOOLS: INSTRUCTIONAL MANUALS

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Violent extremists are increasingly turning to more pragmatic forms of terrorism that require minimal financial investment and little-to-no expertise. Minimizing the need for extensive planning, relying on easily accessible materials, and having the ability to create and distribute instructional manuals to a wide online audience highlight their attempts to make committing acts of terrorism more accessible. Terrorists facilitating their plans and means, relying on available resources, preparing manuals and making them available to their broad audiences via the cyber space for free are part of their attempts to facilitate and generalize terrorist acts to have the greatest possible impact.

Low-Costs

The 9/11 Attacks cost Al-Qaeda between \$400K-\$500K; Timothy McVeigh spent an estimated \$5K on his bomb, and the November 2015 Paris attacks are estimated to have cost no more than \$10K to carry out. While Al-Qaeda and ISIS plots were linked directly to the terrorist organisations, McVeigh is an example of someone who carried out an attack as the Internet just came into being. Instead of being able to download content online, he ordered a book on homemade C-4 for \$16 (2021: \$27.61) from a printing press. Compared to these examples, individuals inspired by terrorist groups and extremist ideologies now find instructional manuals, a variety of low-level attack ideas, and propaganda freely and easily accessible online.

This article reviews extremist propaganda promoting terrorist tactics 'on a budget' and how these elements are recycled by extremists across ideologies. It also discusses the ways in which the Internet lowers the costs of engaging in terrorist activities and how online connections have shaped the dynamics of financial cost and accessibility. There are a multitude of important other topics related to this subject matter, but this specific discussion will mostly focus on online components and the distribution of information on how to carry out low level attacks. Encrypted technologies and virtual

decentralization have influenced developments in communications and in relation to terrorism; they have resulted in easier access to instructional content. The wide promotion of tactics that incorporate the usage of cheap unsophisticated weapons and easier access to such content are concerning factors that make detection more difficult.

Low-Cost Promotion

Although not the only group to promote ‘do it yourself’ terrorism, ISIS and its wider online supporter network are infamous for propagating materials containing instructions on how to make explosives, use knives, and conduct car ramming attacks, among other low-cost and easy-to-do tactics. Despite the saturation of free instructional materials in pro-ISIS online spaces, it is important to note that ISIS released less official English content compared to other Salafi-jihadi groups. Only five out of thirteen issues of the ISIS Rumiya contained instructional materials while, in contrast, twelve of seventeen of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s Inspire issues included such content.

To compensate for this lack of instructional materials from official ISIS propaganda, supporters often share copies of Jihadi Recollections, AQAP’s Inspire, and Al Shabaab’s Gaidi M’taani. In addition to relying on official propaganda, ISIS supporters have also compiled their own unofficial guides consisting of original writings and compilations of instructions from a variety of sources including old US military field training resources and guides. One enormous English manual posted throughout ISIS Telegram networks runs 5,000+ pages. It provides tips on the usage of “cheap and common chemicals” for constructing bombs and encourages readers to “improvise from household items” followed by citations and instructions copied from Inspire. Unlike Timothy McVeigh, who had to physically purchase a manual, individuals are now able to access large amounts of instructional information for free on encrypted platforms where they can better hide their traces.

Publication Strategies

The mitigated financial cost of unsophisticated terrorism tactics has received significant attention, but it is also worth noting terrorists’ ability to freely distribute these text and video instructions by circulating them widely on social media spaces - particularly on encrypted platforms. Online distribution strategies include:

- Sharing PDF and video files

- Summarizing lengthier instructions into easily digestible bullet points and listing needed materials in a 'recipe style' format in posts
- Sharing public and private Telegram links leading to channels solely dedicated to posting bomb and attack instructions
- Sharing screenshots of explosives recipes

Rudimentary Plans

The wide level of accessibility and no-cost distribution of this content allows extremists across ideologies to access a shared pool of terrorist attack knowledge. For example, white supremacists have also promoted Salafi-jihadi instructional manuals, including sections from Inspire and an instructional ISIS video showing the viewer how to produce explosives in their own Telegram networks, demonstrating the importance extremist will place on the content itself over its source of origin. Despite this overlap, there is an important difference between white supremacist and pro-Islamic State Telegram communities regarding information-sharing: while ISIS supporters create channels focused on instructional content, white supremacists tend to circulate manuals in their groups and, in some instances, may include Dark Web links to arms trading sites.

Regardless of the method of distribution or the ideology of the original source, the importance that extremists may place on instruction guides from an opposing extremist group underlines the necessity of examining the cross-pollination of this content. It is particularly important to note any adaptations or innovations that groups and individuals may add to the already existing instructions.

Initially, addressing these online aspects in a discussion on low-cost terrorism may seem rather abstract and maybe even off-topic. However, the connection becomes clearer when one considers that this free content demonstrating how to carry out an attack has provided guidance for terrorists across ideologies on numerous occasions. Notably, individuals who are not in direct communication with central contacts in terrorist organizations tend to opt for "low complexity, freely available means, such as vehicles and melee weapons" because of limited resources and connections.

Although terrorist organizations themselves may be able to accumulate wealth, supporters who do not have direct access to the group oftentimes rely on more unsophisticated tactics for carrying out attacks given that they do not and cannot access training. The Islamic State serves as a prime example. At its height, ISIS derived its income from two primary sources: the taxation of its territorial so-called Caliphate and

oil, making it “the richest terrorist organization in history.” To promote its image as being financially independent, ISIS also featured images of its own coinage in official propaganda even though this was more of a symbolic gesture as opposed to a means of creating any tangible wealth. In contrast, ISIS supporters abroad outside of ISIS’ former territory have carried out low-cost attacks using rudimentary weapons like knives and cars. A study found that the majority of attacks in Western countries between 2014 and 2019 were “simple in their planning” and “were extremely cheap, in some cases, costing nothing.”

Submerged Terrorists

On another note, Islamic State supporters from the United States provide an interesting example in terms of engagement in terrorist activities, some of which are unrelated to carrying out attacks in their own countries such as attempting to travel abroad to ISIS territory.

A report released by the George Washington Program on Extremism found that a majority of the individuals (US ISIS supporters) in their sample raised funds by themselves and had no wider support network, meaning that they did not exchange any form of financial assistance with others even if they were part of small networks.

Anders Breivik’s 1,500+ manifesto offers insight into how he encouraged others to financially fund their own attacks along with his own fairly in-depth explanations of which methods did and did not work for him personally. As opposed to manuals from Salafi-jihadi groups proposing cheap and easily obtainable items for attacks, Breivik encouraged sympathizers to play a longer-term financial game.

He encouraged “completely broke or even indebted” individuals without stable income to maximize numerous credit cards or fundraise among likeminded individuals under the guise that it is for non-violent purposes.

Despite information concerning ISIS supporters’ financial investments in violent extremist activities, the data on white supremacist terrorists’ financial footprints have generally not been as extensively examined.

Previous research has provided informative insights on low-level terrorist attacks and the connection with instructional manuals from official propaganda of various extremist organizations. However, the Internet and encrypted applications have also influenced how individuals engage in support for terrorism and the ideas featured in propaganda

guides lower the bar of difficulty in perpetrating an attack by lowering tactical levels of complexity. As evidenced by unofficial extremist propaganda and comments from extremists themselves, individuals may feel that creating and sharing instructional materials online constitute legitimate engagement with a group or ideology. Free downloadable apps with encryption capabilities and large file sharing capacities open the flow of information, allowing them to access and download instructional content at no financial cost.

Conclusion

Violent extremists who promote and carry out low-cost and unsophisticated attacks rely on the ease of accessibility, lack of need for training skills, and minimal financial investment to carry out acts of terrorism or engage in other terrorist activities. These individuals leave financial footprints that are often “indistinguishable from legitimate financial behaviour,” making it even harder to detect their activities which highlights the importance of implementing updated detection measures. Financial measures must be taken to combat terrorism, study pathways for sharing educational content, and how extremists re-create educational evidence from previous materials.