How Alone is a Lone Terrorist?

An Analysis of a Lone Terrorist's Strategic Choices and Relational Fields from the 2019 Attack in Utrecht, the Netherlands

Photo by Jeremy Bishop

Samantha Laplante
6485197
Utrecht University
31 July 2020

A Thesis submitted to
the Board of Examiners
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

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MA Thesis in Conflict Studies & Human Rights
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Acknowledgements

I would like to first extend my thanks the teaching staff of the Master's programme for their insights and passion demonstrated over the past year. Moreover, I would like to specifically thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Mario Fumerton, who provided me with guidance and insights leading to the successful completion of this research. His mentorship, structure, and relatable anecdotes helped me to bring my professional and personal experiences to bear to produce this thesis.

Secondly, I would like to thank my internship colleagues from Team Intelligence at the Netherlands Police Academy. Their invitation to work with the team was humbling, and their support was especially noted during a period of adjustment due to COVID. The team allowed me to align my work so that this present research could contribute directly to development of specialised counter-terrorism analytical training at the academy. Overall, the professionalism and support of my internship colleagues contributed to the success of this research.

Finally, I owe much of my inspiration and success to my family and friends who supported me throughout this journey. To my comrades in arms who reviewed my work and provided valuable feedback, thank you for your time and encouragement. To my Dutch colleagues and friends who helped me to translate vast amounts of information from Dutch to English, bedankt. I could not have completed this work without you. To my friends who have kept me grounded and focused, thank you for your caring personalities and your unconditional support. Finally, to my loving family, thank you for always being there, near or far, and for supporting me along every path in life.

Abstract

'Lone wolf' or lone terrorism has traditionally been illustrated as an individual operant who does not belong to a terrorist group nor is subject to external influence. However, these defining characteristics have proven to be misleading when it comes to understanding lone terrorism. Recent studies have revealed that a lone terrorist's social ties with external networks are essential for an individual to sustain both the motive and capability to commit acts of terrorism. This suggests a paradox to the 'lone wolf' concept by taking issue with the assumption that a terrorist's choices and actions exist independently of external influence and meaning. Despite this observation, *how* a lone terrorist's social interactions shape their choices and outcomes of an attack continues to represent an under-researched field.

The persistence of lone terrorism in the Netherlands has stimulated debates regarding its definition and associated counter-terrorism policy-driving assumptions. Therefore, this research investigates the 'aloneness' of lone terrorism by examining the strategic choices and outcomes of a lone terrorist attack that occurred on 18 March 2019 in Utrecht, the Netherlands. In doing so, this study serves to contribute knowledge about how a lone terrorist's social relationships form and inform the interpretations upon which a lone terrorist's choice of tactics and strategies is premised.

This research adopted the strategic action approach to uncover the meaning of the lone terrorist's tactics and strategic trade-offs. This knowledge led to the identification of five specific fields of lone terrorist's social interactions, conceptualized as *relational fields,* in relation to the attack. Consequently, this paper argues that 'lone' terrorism does not necessarily mean 'alone'. To the contrary, a lone terrorist's choices and outcomes of an attack are shaped by the meaning and values which are exchanged, formed and normalised through social interaction. This exploratory research offers counter-terrorism analysts a preliminary framework for understanding the social features of lone terrorism and serves as groundwork for a comparative analysis of cases.

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Introduction

Terrorism has historically been defined and understood as a collective phenomenon. Scholars have almost exclusively focused on group and organisational dynamics to explain "pathways into terrorism" (Spaaij 2010, 855) and to distinguish "political terrorists from lunatic killers" (Nesser 2012, 61). In contrast, individuals who plan and conduct terrorist attacks in presumed isolation have become more prevalent globally. This phenomenon has been identified as one of the most unpredictable forms of terrorism and resulted in significant concern national security concerns (Bakker and de Graff 2010, 1; Smith et al. 2015, 92). Consequently, the salience of lone terrorism has steadily moved the phenomenon to the forefront of terrorism research efforts in the Netherlands and across the world.

Notwithstanding the substantial efforts to understand lone terrorism, the various definitions associated with the phenomenon have resulted in contradictory findings in studies that aim to further refine the typology. 'Lone wolves', or lone terrorists, have traditionally been illustrated by three commonly agreed-upon factors: operating individually; not belonging to a formal terrorist group or network; and having a modus operandi that is not subject to external influence from a leader or hierarchy (Spaaij 2010, 856; McCauley and Moskalenko 2014, 83; Schuurman et al. 2018, 1194). However, some definitions include small cells that do not have a clear hierarchy or organisational structure, while other definitions required an "absence of collaboration with other individuals or groups" (Becker 2014, 960 in Spaaij and Hamm 2015, 169). Depending on one's definition, cases presented in certain lone terrorism studies do not meet the threshold in other similar studies.

In addition to debates over defining lone terrorism, the specific set of indicators of individuals who plan and execute terrorist attacks remain elusive. First and foremost, lone terrorists do not reflect a single profile. Instead, they display a broad spectrum of background factors such as age, previous military experience, ideologies, motivations, and psychological characteristics (Bakker and de Graaf 2011, 46; Gill 2015). Secondly, it is difficult to differentiate between individuals who intend to commit attacks and those who express radical beliefs (Bakker and de Graff 2011, 46). Some countries' counter-terrorism laws allow for even those who express radical beliefs to be charged with terrorism offences (Schmid 2013, 51-2), although such policies have led to international law and human rights debates (Ronen 2010). These considerations lead one to question if critical social components underpinning lone terrorism have been drastically overlooked.

Addressing lone terrorism from a counter-terrorism perspective, Edwin Bakker and Beatrice De Graff (2011) argue that those who adopt a definition which stresses the absence of social connections, neglect the possibility of individuals holding ideological connections with other elements of the social world (44). In essence, many definitions presume that lone terrorists are solitary in their cause (44) and that the responsibility for an individual's extremism "lies solely within the individual themselves" (Burke 2017). However, terrorism, as a social phenomenon, means that people become interested in ideas, ideologies, and even violence because others are also interested in them (Burke 2017). Therefore, the *socialisation* of ideas is significant when it comes to an understanding lone terrorism.

Studies have found that attackers labeled as 'lone wolves' often turn out to have ties to larger networks having similar claims or issues, which scholars deemed essential for an individual to sustain both the motive and capability to commit acts of terrorism (Feldman 2013, 282; Schuurman et al. 2019, 771). Likewise, studies supported by EUROPOL and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) noted that movements such as the 2016 Islamic State (IS) lone jihad campaign are among the considerations which contribute to an ever-present social atmosphere for the manifestation of lone terrorism (Antinori 2017, 6; ECTC 2019, 11). For instance, the IS encouraged self-driven action and claimed responsibility for lone terrorist attacks on Western targets (Antinori 2017, 6). Therefore, although a lone terrorist attacks 'alone', our understanding of this phenomenon cannot be limited to this sense of 'aloneness'. Consequently, a paradox exists in 'lone wolf' conceptualisations that assume no external influence underlying the typology (Schuurman et al. 2018, 1198).

The persistence of lone terrorist attacks demands further inquiry to understand how and why a lone terrorist makes choices related to an attack. Furthermore, this thesis posits that lone terrorists do not operate in a social or political vacuum. Thus, ideas and values must socialised through interaction for an attack to become appealing to an individual. Therefore, this paper will reflect on the intersubjective relationships between a lone terrorist and his or her social environment in order to investigate the 'aloneness' of lone terrorism.

After examining the literature on lone terrorism, it became clear that the relationship between a lone terrorist and their social environment represents an under-researched field. Lone terrorism research has focused on factors observed at the micro-level of the individual, or the macro-level of society. At the micro-level, research concentrates on explaining *why* individuals resort to terrorism. From a theoretical standpoint, most studies draw upon rationalist, psychological, and cultural perspectives to explain radicalisation processes (Precht 2007; Malthaner and Waldmann 2014). Micro-level studies that examine 'post-radicalisation',

or the operational phase of an attack, tend to focus on patterns of behaviour or modus operandi and are generally based on a large-N database analysis (Gill 2015, Smith et al. 2015, Schuurman et al. 2018). These studies adopt the idea that an individual is a self-contained unit, driven solely by one's inner reflection an interpretation of the world. In this case, a lone terrorist would indeed be considered *alone* in his or her decision making.

Macro-level studies adopt a structuralist approach to uncover the conditions under which the choice to conduct a terrorist attack becomes possible. Terrorism, as a socially constructed phenomenon, requires specific structures that "enable certain actions and constrain others" (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 4). Terrorist organisations and lone terrorists alike need access to moral and ideological justifications for conducting an attack. Since social structures shape the norms and values upon which human action is based, this factor deserves attention in the analysis of lone terrorism. However, structural approaches imply that individuals are constrained by society's norms and values, meaning that an individual's choices and actions result from these conditions. In this sense, a structuralist approach does not account for an individual's agency and capacity for self-reflection and moral engagement (Demmers 2017, 18). Moreover, structuralist arguments cannot explain why some individuals do *not* act when exposed to the same conditions. Since this study will examine a lone terrorist's choices and actions, focused attention on the individual's agency was brought into this research.

What is omitted from lone terrorism research is a meso-level analysis. The meso-level theoretically collides with the conventional assumption that a lone terrorist acts independently of external influence. Recent literature has emphasised that terrorism scholars have not yet fully leveraged the insights of relational sociology by examining the relational aspects of terrorist actors with other elements of their social environment (Beck and Schoon 2017, 12). Consequently, a meso-level analytical approach suggests that, rather than attempting to uncover direct causal links, we should reconsider the notion of external influence from a relational perspective by taking a lone terrorist's social interactions as the starting point of our analysis. Given that interactions are intersubjective, a meso-level analysis can show *how* and *why* a lone terrorist's social environment shapes their choices and actions.

The variety of theories stemming from social movement research can arguably provide a theoretical basis for examining the notion of 'aloneness' underpinning lone terrorism (Pisoiu and Hain 2017, 77). Scholars engaging in meso-level terrorism studies have highlighted correlations between terrorist movements and social movements. From a theoretical perspective, the collection of studies on social movements has generally focused on three common factors: political opportunities, mobilising structures, and framing processes

(McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 2). In particular, the political opportunity approach helps researchers understand terrorist decision-making by identifying the political constraints and opportunities "unique to the national context in which they are embedded" (3). While an opportunity-based approach to terrorism can help identify the social precursors that enable and constrain a lone terrorist's choices, this approach has been critiqued for its inability to explain variations in individual preferences when subject to similar macro-level conditions.

The attraction to terrorism as a means to achieve goals depends on alternate and competing strategies (DeNardo 1985, 242 in McCormick 2003, 480). In this sense, terrorism is a choice, and therefore it is clear that structural opportunities do not necessarily *determine* the individual's choice of actions (480). Thus, by stressing *judgement* and strategic decision making, it is understood that it takes capable, willing agents to transform these conditions into violence and acts of terrorism (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 7).

James Jasper developed a framework for understanding strategic action by starting from the point of the individual. Individuals are purposeful and goal-directed, develop strategies to achieve goals, and face "a number of dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved" (Jasper 2008, xiii). When making strategic choices to overcome these dilemmas, Jasper claims that these actions are "filtered through cultural understandings, but at the same time cultural meanings are used strategically to persuade audiences" (Jasper 2004, 4). Therefore, the strategic action approach reasons that by looking at the underlying strategies, dilemmas, and trade-offs that lone terrorists face, we can begin to understand the different choices and interactions that shaped these choices.

Due to the lack of in-depth empirical research on how individuals make strategic choices to carry out acts of terrorism alone (Schuurman et al. 2019, 772), this research proposes to fill this gap by examining how a lone terrorist makes strategic choices, and what factors contribute to these choices and actions. Since an active agent must advance terrorist attacks, the strategic action approach will be used to help explain the tactics and strategic choices of the lone terrorist. Furthermore, to understand the factors that influenced the lone terrorist's choices and actions, this thesis adopts a relational perspective by arguing that these factors are found in the issue-specific relationships between a terrorist and his or her external environment – conceptualised as *relational fields* (Goldstone 2004, 358). The values and beliefs derived from these relationships are shown not only in the tactics and strategies that a lone terrorist adopts, but also by the opportunities and constraints that shape a lone terrorist's choices.

From the aforementioned theoretical and empirical complications, the following research puzzle has been derived:

How did relational fields shape a lone actor terrorist's strategic choices and attack, in the Netherlands, between 2001 and 2019?

This research question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. What tactics and strategies did the lone terrorist adopt in their attack?
2. How did the lone terrorist perceive and interpret narratives, values, and beliefs related to the attack?
3. How do relational fields shape a lone terrorist's perceptions, opportunities, and actions related to the attack?

In this thesis, I will examine the terrorist attack that occurred in Utrecht, the Netherlands, on 18 March 2019. This attack has been labelled as lone terrorism by the Netherlands' National Coordinator for Security and Counter-terrorism (NCTV). In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that although a lone terrorist may be alone physically in a given situation, the motivation and capacity for an attack are simply not inspired from within; it is derived and shaped by his or her interactions within external relational fields. Therefore, greater attention paid to the context and social environment may allow for earlier identification of the factors which shape lone terrorism. In doing so, I hope to contribute to current academic knowledge about lone actor terrorism in order to further the development of analytical processes employed in law enforcement and counter-terrorism agencies.

This thesis is constituted as follows. Chapter one reviews the theoretical framework used to analyse the case. Chapter two contains the empirical contextualisation of lone actor terrorism and presentation of the case. Chapter three outlines the methodology and the research design of this project, including the limits of research. Chapter four investigates the first two sub-questions by identifying the specific tactics and strategies adopted in the attack. These tactics and strategies give insight into the dilemmas and strategic trade-offs the lone terrorist faced, as well as an understanding of how the lone terrorist's social interactions shaped the outcomes of the attack. Based on the findings in chapter four, chapter five addresses the third sub-question by examining the specific social interactions and relationships that shaped the lone terrorist's choices in relation to the Utrecht attack. The final chapter concludes this study

with a reflection on how lone social interactions conflicts with the notion of aloneness that underpins lone terrorism, and how the findings in this study can inform future counter-terrorism analytical processes and approaches.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework

Competing explanations of lone terrorism have resulted in oversight regarding the social dynamics where individuals define and shape their understanding of their environment. As a result, an increasing number of scholars engaging in critical terrorism studies have highlighted correlations between terrorism and social movement studies (Goodwin 2006; Gunning 2009; Bosi and Giugni 2012). One of the key contributions that social movement theory can make to this research is relocating violence within its social context and encouraging investigation of interactions between lone terrorists, their immediate social environment, and society more broadly (Gunning 2009, 161).

Three central themes emerge from studies which relate terrorism to social movements. First, scholars argue that, much like activists within social movements, terrorists strategise and make choices to achieve desired goals. These choices are furthermore affected by *political opportunity structures* and constraints similar to those affecting broader social movements (156). Secondly, and although internal organisational dynamics are not intrinsic to the study of lone terrorism, social movement theories offer frameworks for understanding meso-level interactions between social entities. These analytical frames can help to show how a lone terrorist's social interactions form and transform "drastic us versus them boundaries," and shape their choices leading to violent actions across those boundaries (Tilly 2005, 27). Finally, by theoretically relocating terrorism within its social context, we can begin to understand the meanings that a lone terrorist attributes to his words and actions. This meaning can give insight into the choices the lone terrorist faced and how their social environment shaped their choices. In the sections below, I will first examine the suitability of political opportunity structures approach for this research, and subsequently, emphasise the meaning of an individual's relational interactions by reviewing the strategic action approach.

1.1 Political Opportunity

Within the broader scope of social movement studies, political opportunity theorists have looked at the broader socio-political system (such as a repressive government) to identify factors that enable or constrain mobilisation and the advancement of claims (Kriesi 1995; Tarrow 1996; McAdam 1999). Political opportunity can be defined as "consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements"

(Tarrow 1996, 54). Given the initial dominance of this structural approach, scholars adopted the notion of political opportunity structures to examine the 'enabling' or 'permissive' factors to create the tactical opportunity that terrorists require to conduct operations (Crenshaw 1981 in McCormick 2003, 480).

Over the past two decades, political opportunity approaches have been critiqued for their 'static' nature. By emphasising conditions related to states, political opportunity structures neglect other factors such as counter-movements, economic conditions, and global trends (Goldstone 2004, 356). Likewise, structures imply objective elements outside of human interpretation and therefore do not account for the internal processes such as debates of beliefs and values necessary for the mobilisation of movements (Goldstone 2004, 356; Jasper 2012, 8). Consequently, political opportunity approaches are criticised for being too broad to explain the variations in choices individuals make under similar macro-level conditions.

In response to this ongoing debate, David Meyer and Debra Minkoff (2004) suggested that there is analytical relevance in distinguishing between general openness in the polity and openness to particular constituencies, that is, issue-specific opportunities. Echoing Meyer and Minkoff's critique, scholars have increasingly emphasised that a terrorist's choices are determined by situational contingencies and limitations and conclude that the resulting incentives and opportunities are unique to a specific type of action and its contextual circumstances (Clarke and Newman 2006; Perry, Hasisi, and Perry 2018). Thus, as with social movements, the conditions specific to the context of particular terrorist actions must be considered when explaining a lone terrorist's choices and actions.

Building upon the idea that society is a function of issue-specific conditions and settings, Jack Goldstone (2004) argues that these conditions can be identified by analysing a range of meso-level relational interactions between actors and groups that affect a movement's actions (356). By doing so, only then can one develop a comprehensive picture of the development and outcomes of a particular social movement. This relational approach reflects Anthony Giddens' theory on the duality of structure, which argues that the relationship between structure and agency is mutually constitutive (Giddens 1984, 25). In this sense, political violence requires both the structures, including the norms and values established in society, and "willing and capable agents who can transform the structural potential of the society into active participants in violence" (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 2). Moreover, conditions are relational and fluid rather than static, and it is here that the interactions between individuals and their environments can help us understand the social world.

Goldstone conceptualises the issue-specific relationships which affect social movement outcomes as external *relational fields*. Goldstone operationalises relational fields by identifying relational elements that can affect the choices and actions of movements. These elements include, but are not limited to: other movements and counter-movements; political and economic institutions; various levels of state authorities and political actors; various publics and elites whose interests, capacities, and actions affect movement development and its outcomes; critical events such as incidents or crises; and finally, symbolic and value orientations available in society that condition the reception and response of movement claims and actions (Goldstone 2004, 358). For this present study, the elements mentioned above will serve as some of the researchable indicators of a lone terrorist's relational fields. The concept of external relational fields will also help examine the 'aloneness' of lone terrorists by explaining how lone actors may interpret and draw motivation from their interactions with their external social environment.

Since the unit of study in this thesis is a lone actor terrorist, a reflection on an individual's agency must be brought into the explanation of how a terrorist makes choices. As explained by Richard Jackson and Helen Dexter (2014), an individual does not exist independently of his or her environment. However, agency is neither viewed as the "automatic product of a particular discourse" (4). James Jasper (2017) further adds that structural conditions alone do not account for "strategic agency or cultural subjectivity" (296). This consideration for an individual's agency aligns with the ontological position of human action involving *intentionality* (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 4). This means that although agency may be structurally derived, it is not structurally determined. Therefore, a lone terrorist's external relational fields must be examined from the individual's perspective and their behaviours, words, and actions. To do so, the strategic action approach is reviewed in the section below.

1.2 Strategic Choice

In the tradition of theories of action, individuals are seen as purposeful, goal-directed, and guided by interests and values (Coleman 1986, 1310). Scholars who seek to understand terrorists' actions have traditionally built upon rational choice-based models. In these models, terrorism is considered an instrumental choice for the achievement of specific goals. Strategic choices are thus explained as a result of inner logic wherein the individual chooses to engage in violence when the benefits outweigh the costs.

Game theory lays out a framework that describes strategic action as a function of players, a range of actions to choose from, and arenas that determine what actions and interactions lead to which outcomes (Jasper 2004, 3). This approach has allowed scholars and counter-terrorism analysts to model terrorist behaviours based on anticipated consequences and incentives (Horgan 2005 in Pisoiu and Hain 2017, 66). Several terrorism studies have also drawn upon rational choice models and environmental criminology to identify relationships between static factors, such as the occurrence of a terrorist attack and the distance travelled from offenders' places of residence to the attack site (Marchment, Bouhana, and Gill 2018, Fisher and Dugan 2019). These models focus on relevant incentives and constraints and assume that the individual is motivated by self-interests.

From the ontological standpoint of relational interactions, humans have created the norms and values which structure our choices through everyday interactions. This perspective shows that, even though game theory and other rational choice models posit that a lone terrorist makes strategic choices based on perceived outcomes, an individual's motivations cannot be understood independently of the social context which formed them (McCormick 2003, 485). Conversely, rational choice models assume benefit as the major "driver of involvement" (Pisoiu and Hain 2018, 70) and do not leave room for other motivational elements derived from the social environment. Consequently, these models ignore the idea that terrorists can operate with strategic intent and thereby move beyond benefit-based decision making (McCormick 2003, 500). Notwithstanding its analytical strengths when it comes to modelling terrorist behaviours, game theory does not fully grasp the full range of outcomes from interactions that shape a terrorist's choices and actions.

James Jasper, who has produced extensive work on strategic interactions in social movements, points out the complexity of human choices (Jasper 2008, 3). Jasper's strategic action approach seeks to understand why people act by capturing the meanings that individuals ascertain to their choices and actions, and by examining how they seek to affect the interpretations of their audiences. To do so, Jasper argues that *strategy* is a plan that connects actions to the achievement of goals; and *tactics* are the actions chosen to advance these goals (70).

Strategy can be understood as more than a goal-oriented action. By emphasising an individual's agency, we can understand strategy as part of the process that activists perceive and define their world, and "the potential means to change them" (Doherty and Hayes 2018, 281). In other words, individuals are continually interpreting and changing the social world through observation and interaction. Strategy is thus twofold: it is the "choices about claims,

issues, allies, frames, identity and presentation of self, resources, and tactics" (Meyer and Staggenborg 2012, 3); and it can be intuitive, where interactions have resulted in routinised interpretations, and this can help explain spontaneous action. The emphasis here is that strategy, and strategic choices, are not simply instrumental but also reflect an intuition shaped by interactions with other agents and elements of an individual's relational fields.

In an actor-centered approach, the choice of tactics must be considered when examining a lone terrorist's actions. As Jasper highlights, these tactics are not simply *neutral* actions. Instead, they have a "moral and emotional value" (Jasper 1997, 237). According to Doherty and Hayes (2018), tactics can also differ according to circumstances, and reveal knowledge about the "identities, emotions, and ideas of activists" (277). Under this definition, tactics do not necessarily fit the narrative of being solely adopted for instrumental purposes. Therefore, the tactics expressed by a lone terrorist can give insight into the perceptions and values underlying an attack.

Tactics are negotiated interactions between a lone terrorist and other social actors. Although tactics appear to be similar from one terrorist attack to another, they may be understood differently by those carrying them out versus by those being engaged (Jasper 2017, 294). This approach emphasises an agency based reflexive dimension where values are developed through interaction and are adopted, shaped, and normalised over time. Moreover, these values and interpretations help "render events and occurrences meaningful" (Snow and Benford 2000, 614). Once the empowerment of certain tactics has been recognised, they "give meaning to materiality" (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 6) and can become the "determinants for choice and action" (Pisoiu and Hain 2017, 78).

Since terrorism cannot be explained in isolation of its social context, the attractiveness of this form of political violence to an individual, therefore, depends on the *choice* of "competing strategies" (DeNardo 1985, 242 in McCormick 2003, 480). These strategic choices are, in turn, affected by dilemmas or underlying trade-offs. These dilemmas do not represent simple, either-or alternatives; instead, they show that there are different ways to engage in politics and that individuals are continually making decisions (Jasper 2004, 6). Thus, the strategic action approach can give insight into the strategic choices and dilemmas confronted by a lone terrorist.

In this thesis, I will use the strategic action approach to argue that a lone terrorist seeks to challenge and change audiences' interpretations of reality (Benford and Hunt 1992, 48), while simultaneously navigating through dilemmas and perceptions of the audiences' understanding of a terrorist's actions. By adopting this lens to examine an individual's tactics

or *modus operandi*, we can uncover the meaning underpinning a lone terrorist's strategic choices (Jasper 2004, 10). Moreover, the lone terrorist's tactics and strategic choices can be further analysed in reference to a set of issue-specific relational fields to understand the specific interactions that shaped their decisions. This approach offers a means to address the notion of aloneness that underpins the 'lone wolf terrorist' typology by understanding why an individual's choices cannot be dissociated from the influence of his or her external social environment.

On a final note, scholars argue that terrorists pursue a broad range of strategies to achieve their goals. These strategies are conveyed through interactions between terrorists and two key audiences: government bodies whose policies they wish to influence; and individuals who support the terrorist wishes to gain (Kydd and Walter 2006, 58). To this effect, scholars have identified several recurring terrorism strategies (Crenshaw 1981, Harmon 2001, Kydd and Walter 2006). Based on the previous literature and after analysing the Utrecht attack case data, I have identified the following strategies used by the lone terrorist in this study: intimidation, social disruption, visibility, and threat elimination. These strategies will be described in the next chapter and serve as a point of reference when examining the tactics and strategic choices.

Chapter 2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Strategy

As highlighted in the previous chapter, this research will examine the aloneness of a lone terrorist by examining how relational fields shape a lone terrorist's attack and related choices. Accordingly, this study embraces an interactionist ontological stance, which posits that the meaning that we derive and associate to the world is produced through social interaction between "fields of actors" (Meyer and Staggenborg 2012, 4). From this perspective, the meanings derived from a lone terrorist's social interactions shape their choices and actions.

This thesis adopts an interpretative epistemology by investigating the meaning of a lone terrorist's actions. An interpretative epistemology "emphasises the sense that people make of their own lives and experiences" within a specific context (Mason 2018, 8). In this regard, it is essential to recognise that 'perception' has a vital role in why one would or would not resort to violence to pursue goals. The need to consider perceptions becomes especially evident when we look at the individual level of motivation (Giugni 2011, 277). Thus, this paper will contribute knowledge about a lone terrorist's strategic choices by examining the meaning underlying the tactics and strategies of the attack.

To operationalise the idea that the lone actor terrorist is not necessarily alone, this thesis also adopts an object relations epistemology. In this sense, knowledge about the external influencers that shape a lone terrorist's choices and decisions can be derived by examining a lone terrorist's social interactions in relation to their choices and actions. Moreover, the meaning underlying a lone terrorist's actions provides a point of reference when searching for and examining a lone terrorist's social interactions.

This research was conducted in the Netherlands and coincided with an internship at the Netherlands national Police Academy (*Politieacademie*). My original intent was to analyse and compare cases in order to explore conceptual elements that could be used to build a robust framework for analysing other cases of lone terrorism. However, the option to study a second case was longer not feasible after the implementation of COVID countermeasures and associated travel restrictions. Consequently, I chose to research a single case of lone terrorism that occurred in the Netherlands to develop a preliminary analytical framework for understanding lone terrorism's social aspects. In doing so, this case study aims to provide insights that go beyond this particular case.

2.2 Sample Selection

I chose to study an executed attack vice a foiled attack due to the range of discernible tactics that could be observed. Moreover, I chose an attack that occurred after 2001 to reflect the post 9-11 era of terrorism, which parallels the evolution of the internet and social media platforms such as Facebook's creation in 2004 and YouTube's creation in 2005. From here, the attack which occurred in Utrecht, the Netherlands on 18 March 2019 was selected for three key reasons: The notion of 'aloneness' was stated not only by the prosecution but also the attacker himself; the case's recent nature and its occurrence after the 2016 renewal of the Netherlands national counter-terrorism strategy; and the possibility for evidence collection by observing a live court hearing.

The individual who conducted the attack in question was inaccessible through direct interaction due to security considerations. Nevertheless, observations were made through court hearing observations, and through the review of past court hearing documentation, online judicial and government reports, and media sources. Furthermore, the sampling method is non-probability, where the unit of analysis was selected for its information reliability and its key features that fell within the research criteria.

My planned data sources originally included discussions with police investigators who could provide an insight into their attack analysis. However, due to COVID countermeasures, these interviews were not possible. This sample intended to triangulate data about the events (Mason 2017, 41). Nevertheless, the public court hearing held between 2 and 6 March 2020, published government documents and media sources, proved sufficient to develop a thorough understanding of the dynamics surrounding the attack.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection and analysis was conducted in three phases, as discussed below.

2.3.1 Phase 1: Event Analysis and Identification of Tactics

This phase served to analyse the tactics and strategies adopted by the lone terrorist. Accordingly, it was necessary to develop an understanding of the who, what, where, when, and why of the attack. First, a map study of the lone terrorist's home location and attack location was conducted to understand the physical and social environment. Next, I observed the public hearing of the Utrecht attack case that was held between 2 and 6 March 2020. The case hearing

was peer-translated live at the courthouse, and this information was cross-referenced with judicial and other government reports. I also referred to social media posts from a journalist present in the courtroom during the hearing. Since I observed the hearing at the same time as the social media posts were made, I could verify the credibility of the information posted. Finally, I reviewed additional media reports to examine the visibility of the attack and its social outcomes. From this phase, I identified five key tactics adopted by the lone terrorist, and from here I analysed the strategic value and meaning of the attack. This analysis also gave insights into the opportunities and dilemmas that shaped the lone terrorist's strategic choices (chapter four).

2.3.2 Phase 2: Characteristics of the Relational Fields

To operationalise the idea that the lone terrorist is not necessarily alone, this phase aimed to examine the lone terrorist's social environment. The meaning associated with the tactics and strategies served as indicators when examining the lone terrorist's relationships and interactions in relation to the attack. I conducted an open-source media and government document search to spatially and temporally identify organisations, events (military, economic, global), and social movements that showed a relation to the lone terrorist's actions. Furthermore, I analysed post-attack news reports based on local interviews that also unveiled details about the lone terrorist's relationships, habits, and interactions related to the attack. This phase enabled me to further identify what strategic choices existed and how the attack was shaped in relation to the lone terrorist's relational interactions (chapter five).

2.3.3 Phase 3: Categorisation

In this phase, I examined the data to determine if all the sub-questions have been answered extensively and if my analytical frame fit with what my data was indicating. First, I analysed the tactics for their strategic value and meaning, and the dilemmas that were encountered when making strategic choices. Next, I identified themes of relational field based on the evidence and using the analytical frame as a guideline of indicators to search for. Finally, I assembled the argumentation and concluded my analysis by tracing the tactics and strategies to the lone terrorist's interactions and reactions, thereby generating an understanding of how his social environment shapes a lone terrorist's choices and actions.

2.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This study focused on a specific individual within the larger scope of the phenomenon of lone terrorism. Although the individual was not accessible for research purposes, ethical research considerations were not forgone. Consequently, a specific choice was made to only focus on the factors which did not intervene with the *ongoing* investigative aspects of the case.[3] Furthermore, the principle of 'do no harm' was especially considered when it came to addressing issues that may be sensitive to those affected the attack.

The majority of the primary data collected was written or verbalised in Dutch and thus required translation to English. This consideration was managed through my research time estimate and access to translation resources. Nevertheless, this language constraint did not impact my access to information.

Lastly, the implementation of COVID countermeasures across the Netherlands in March 2020 meant that hardcopy documents and digital information stored at the Netherlands Police Academy were not accessible. Interviews with correctional facility staff were also restricted. Bearing this in mind, this thesis will provide recommendations for future research that may benefit from access to otherwise restricted sources.

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[3] For the purpose of this research, I made a formal request through the Police Academy to solicit the participation of a terrorism investigator, and social workers from the Lelystad Penitentiary Institution and the terrorist wing of the Netherlands correctional facility system. A specific request to address Tanis was not requested or desired due to the individual's ongoing investigations and the sensitivity of the event.

Chapter 3. Case Contextualisation

3.1 Historical Context

Although the term 'lone wolf terrorism' has arguably drawn its roots from right-wing terrorism in the United States, some scholars stress that the concept's particular salience increased in the post 9/11 era (Spaaij 2010, 1; Smith et al. 2015, 95). In this period, the idea of small-scale, decentralised terrorist attacks gained traction in radical Islamist organisations and leaders (Bakker and de Graff 2010, 3). Moreover, following the increase in terrorist attacks in European territories, such as Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, it became apparent that Western societies were not exempt from terrorism and violence. These unconventional nodes of violent action led to an increased demand for the identification and understanding of the modern terrorism practices and the factors that would lead radicalised individuals to conduct acts of terrorism (Bakker et al. 2017, 32).

The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) of the Netherlands defines terrorism as:

> threatening with, preparing for or committing serious human-centered violence, or acts aimed at causing socially-disruptive damage, with the aim of bringing about social changes, terrify the population, or to influence political decision-making (AIVD 2020b).

Stated otherwise, terrorism can be understood as the application of violent action for socio-political ends. Although this definition establishes a baseline description for the development of counter-terrorism strategies and policymaking in the Netherlands, there is no widespread consensus among scholars and policymakers regarding the definition of terrorism (Schmid 2004; Tilly 2004; Spaaij 2010). Nevertheless, the dynamic and contentious nature of terrorism continues to drive debates regarding its definition and associated policy-driving assumptions.

3.2 The Rise of the Lone Terrorist Threat in the Netherlands

Following the assassination of Theo van Gogh in 2004, the Netherlands explicitly identified terrorism as a growing threat to national security (Bakker et al. 2017, 92). To address this increasing threat, in 2005 the NCTV was created. The NCTV combines three main tasks under one organisation: make the Netherlands cyber secure; prevent attacks and combat terrorism and extremism; and make the Netherlands resilient to threats from state actors

(NCTV, n.d.). Through this unity and coordination of national counter-terrorism efforts, the NCTV serves to protect the Netherlands from threats that can disrupt society.

The rise of individually-led terrorist attacks in Europe also led to a demand for a conceptual and empirical analysis of lone terrorism (COT 2007, 4). Recognizing this demand, the Dutch Institute for Safety, Security and Crisis Management (COT) completed a study in 2007 to address fundamental questions regarding the nature, motivations, and modus operandi of lone terrorism. The study defined a lone terrorist campaign as a result of "solitary action during which the direct influence, advice or support of others, even those sympathetic to the cause, is absent" (7). Moreover, the study concluded with two key observations that served as a reference for future research and policymaking: first, the frequency lone-wolf attacks had increased in recent decades; and second, lone wolves seem to come from all types of extremist ideological and religious settings. With these findings, lone actor terrorism became more of a focal point in national counter-terrorism assessments and strategies as the threat of this phenomenon moved closer to home.

In 2008, the NCTV reported that the spreading and globalisation of terrorism was becoming a greater concern (Bakker 2008, 228). This analysis was based partly on an increase in terrorism-related arrests made in the Netherlands and across Europe; and on the release of a film called *Fitna*, a controversial film about Islam created by a Dutch politician (228). The NCTV's analysis of the film's influence on the growth of terrorism in the Netherlands also shows how these types of frictions have long been considered factors that contribute to the manifestation of terrorism. Consequently, the factors shaping the growth of terrorism became a more significant concern for national security interests.

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle-East, and the increase in 'home-grown' terrorist attacks in Western states, further exasperated the threat of radicalised individuals and decentralised, small cell terrorist networks. International bodies such as the United Nations and EUROPOL observed a correlation between IS's announcement in June 2014 that it had re-established the caliphate with increased efforts to incite IS sympathisers to attack the West (UNSC 2014, 2; Europol 2017, 25). In addition to these 'recruitment' efforts, IS's guidance on planning and conducting lone actor attacks further contributed to a globalised atmosphere of concern for decentralised and individually-led acts of terrorism (Europol 2017, 26). These concerns led Western states to shift their threat analysis focus from terrorist networks and military capabilities to the human environment where terrorist social networks form (Shultz 2018, 978).

Sounding concern to the public, the Netherlands Terrorist Threat Assessments (*Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*, or DTN) reiterated the significance of terrorist attacks and their security implications. The negative impacts of the Arab Spring protests, along with an increase in Islamic radicalisation of Dutch youth, became significant causes for concern in the Netherlands (Bakker et al. 2017, 93). Consequently, these concerns triggered an increase from level 3 to 4 in 2013, meaning that there is a "realistic possibility that an attack will take place in the Netherlands" (NCTV 2013, 1). Moreover, the subsequent DTNs leading up to the attack in Utrecht continued to demonstrate concern for the rising threat of lone terrorism.

The threat level established in 2013 remained at level 4 throughout the years due to various global and national concerns. Various issues contributed to the threat picture, such as the rise of IS caliphate sympathisers, and the interception of complex terrorist attack plans (NCTV 2019a, 2). Furthermore, the DTNs published from 2017 to 2019 continued to signal a specific threat of terrorism posed by lone actors (NCTV 2017; NCTV 2018; NCTV 2019a). As an indicator, the most recent European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report stated that lone actors perpetrated all attacks completed in the EU in 2018 (Europol 2019, 32). Although there was a decrease in the number of attacks in the Netherlands after 2017, the terrorist threat assessment published on 11 March 2019 deemed that the intention to commit an attack remained (NCTV 2019a). Therefore, the terrorist threat assessment remained at level 4.

3.3 Case Description

Since this thesis aims to uncover the factors which influence a lone terrorist's choices and decision making, this issue will be explored by analysing the attack conducted by 37-year-old Gökmen Tanis on 18 March 2019 in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

On that day, at 10:42 am, the police Central Netherlands received the first report about a shooting in a tram on the 24 Oktoberplein in Utrecht. It was immediately apparent that it was a serious and violent incident. In response to this report, emergency services and national crisis response was set into motion. After obtaining preliminary information and forming an image of the seriousness of the situation, and under the authority of the Minister of Justice and Security, the NCTV decided at 12:15 pm to temporarily raise the threat level for the province of Utrecht to level 5 – meaning an attack in the Netherlands was imminent. The threat level increased since the suspect was a fugitive, and therefore a follow-up attack could not be excluded (Grapperhaus 2019, 2).

The escape vehicle was found abandoned and still running in a nearby neighbourhood. Inside the car, police found a handwritten note and two pistol magazines. Information was confirmed at around 3:45 pm that there was only one crisis location situated at 24 Oktoberplein. Police also confirmed that they were targeting one suspect. Near real-time developments about the unfolding event were communicated via various means, including press statements, the twitter account and website of the NCTV, and the national government website. Additionally, authorities actively referred the public to the communication channels of the municipality of Utrecht and the Utrecht police for information (2).

The search for Gökmen Tanis culminated with his arrest at 6:18 pm. Tanis's location was identified based on a transfer from his bank account and which was traced to a phone and location. Shortly after his arrest, Tanis confessed that he was the shooter and that he acted alone (2). Tanis's weapon was also recovered after Tanis indicated that it was located in a bedroom mattress (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para 5.3.1.1.). Not long thereafter, the threat level for the province of Utrecht was reduced back to level 4.

The attack resulted in the death of four persons and the injury of one other. Tanis claimed to have conducted the attack alone and without the support of others. Immediate intelligence reporting did not show any relation between Tanis and any terrorist organisation, nor were there any claims for this attack by other terrorist organisations. By definition, and as declared by the NCTV in December 2019, this attack was deemed a case of lone terrorism (NCTV 2019c, 7).

After an initial pro forma hearing on 1 July 2019, the Public Prosecution Service expressed a 'strong indication' that Tanis had acted with terrorist intentions, based on two handwritten texts and the nature of the attack (Grapperhaus 2019, 4). The NCTV also reported in December 2019 that Tanis's weapon inscriptions, along with other factors, point towards the notion that jihadist motives might have inspired the attack (NCTV 2019c, 11). Between 2 and 6 March 2020, a second court hearing was held, henceforth referred to as the main trial, and was open to the public. After an-in depth scrutiny of the events, victim statements, psychological reports, and prosecution analyses, on 27 March 2019, Tanis was found guilty of murder and terrorist motive.

Chapter 4. Tactics and Strategic Choices

Similar to terrorist groups, lone terrorists establish some sort of operational strategy for their attack. Strategy is implemented through tactics and is thus the *intentional* efforts to create change through contestation with targets (Meyer and Staggenborg 2012, 8). Moreover, tactics show how a terrorist's strategies are not necessarily directed towards the objects of the attack themselves. Instead, they serve to convey the claims to a wider audience and "coerce the opponent into making concessions" (Stanton 2009, 34 in Fortna 2015, 523). An attack on a government facility, for example, could be aimed at influencing a particular government policy vice the specific people or facilities that were targeted.

This chapter analyses the tactics Gökmen Tanis adopted during the attack to gain insight into the strategic choices he made, and the meaning underpinning his actions. Based on available data, I identified four direct actions, or operational tactics, and one discursive action, or post-operational tactic adopted by Tanis. Each tactic will be described then analysed in the sections below. The aim of this chapter is to develop an understanding of why certain tactics and strategies may have been chosen for the attack and the meaning ascertained to his claims and actions. Subsequently, the next chapter will discuss how *relational fields* shaped his strategic choices, opportunities, and constraints.

4.1 Public Environments

According to the detailed investigation of the Utrecht attack, the day of the attack itself started like any other. After leaving his home at around 9:30 am. Gökmen Tanis stopped at a bakery and then moved to his mother's house for breakfast. Following this meet-up, Tanis walked from his mother's home directly to the tram stop at 24 Oktoberplein in Kanaleneiland, a district within the Southwest section of Utrecht (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para 5.3.1.1.). At 10:41 am, Tanis embarked into the rear car of the public transport system and is followed by several other passengers. He did not scan a transport pass. Immediately after the tram departed for its next destination, Tanis withdrew his gun and proceeded with his attack (para 5.3.1.1.).

The Utrecht *sneltram* (translated as 'fast' tram) is part of the municipal public transportation system and is thus frequently trafficked by local citizens. Tram cars pass through the 24 Oktoberplein stop multiple times an hour, and the stop itself is located at the intersection

of multi-lane car, bike, and public transport routes. Due to the public nature of the attack site, Tanis's venue choice will be analysed further in the following sub-sections.

4.1.1 Social Disruption and Human Security

The tactic of conducting an attack in a physical, public environment underscores several elements of a *societal disruption* strategy. Societal disruption implies that a perpetrator seeks to affect the everyday life of society (Hemmingby and Bjørgo 2015, 16), and includes actions taken against the systems directed at ordering human action (Bakker et al. 2017, 215). Tanis's choice of a public transportation system as the stage for his attack affected the circulation of everyday passengers, instantly gaining an immediate and tangible disruptive effect. This disruptive effect, however, was not limited to the short term. As elaborated by Doherty and Hayes (2018), "the symbolic power of a demonstration is specific to the particular conditions of its staging […] it invests, appropriates, and configures urban space, drawing meanings from and applying new meanings to it" (275). Thus, Tanis's choice to wage violence in a public environment not only disrupted the people and the social environment itself; it also gained longer-term disruption by invoking fear and trepidation through the new meaning associated with the physical environment.

Terrorist attacks can contribute to the development of human insecurity in societies, citizens, and state governments alike. One aspect of human security is protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions to the patterns of daily life (UNDP 1994, 23). In the absence of such protection, frustrations and perceptions of *insecurity* may build over time. These frustrations can also provoke public mistrust in state governing systems due to the state authorities' incapacity to intercept violent disruptions (Hemmingby and Bjørgo 2015, 16).

As mentioned in Chapter three, the Netherlands terrorism threat assessment was at level 4 out of 5 before the Utrecht attack, which deemed the chance of an attack as *real* (NCTV 2019a, 2). Moreover, an increased sense of alertness existed in society following the 11 March 2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand. Notwithstanding this heightened level of concern, the source and timing of a potential attack remained generally incalculable – demonstrated by the successful attack in Utrecht. As a result, people went about their daily lives and navigated the Netherlands' public environments, regardless of the imminent threat.

After the attack in Utrecht, however, many people reassessed their routines out of fear and concern for their safety (House of Representatives 2019). During the main hearing, victims and their family members attested that they no longer dare to use public transport. "It is no

longer a care-free life," reiterated one witness (Belleman 2020c). Another witness professed that he and his family are continually scanning large crowds because their confidence in the public is gone (Belleman 2020d). A fear of using public transport and public environments does not necessarily result in concrete mistrust in public authorities. Nevertheless, the attack resulted in a direct impact on the meaning associated with the tram system and a decrease in perceptions of human security.

4.1.2 Claim Visibility

Public environments offer the opportunity to gain visibility and increase awareness of a cause (McCormick 2003, 474; Fortna 2015, 522). Since Tanis's attack was conducted in the face of the public, the terrifying outcomes were easily witnessed by civilians, security authorities, and media (Andrews and Caren 2010, 845). Additionally, the meaning and symbolic value of the targets drawn from wider societal norms can also increase the visibility of an attack. Since public environments offer a familiar point of reference for its citizens, the salience of an attack in this environment can be transmitted and felt by a wide audience.

To understand the attacker's message and intended audience, a correlation between Tanis's tactics and his declared reasoning can be observed. On 8 May 2019, while undergoing criminal investigation, Tanis elaborated the following message: "Muslims are killed by Dutch soldiers in Libya, Syria, Chechnya, Afghanistan, everywhere within Europe and do you really think that we will not do anything in return?"[4] Tanis's reflection on political circumstances involving Dutch military action shows how a perceived unfairness of these events shaped his views of the Dutch, non-Muslim public, and ultimately, his violent actions towards Dutch citizens.

Tanis further justified his attack as a response to the harm inflicted on Muslims around the world. Making this point clear during the preliminary court hearing on 1 July 2019, Tanis expressed, "I wanted to show that you are not made of diamond and we are not made of sand."[5] This statement of intimidation supposes that if Muslims can be killed in their homeland, then non-Muslims – and members of democratic societies – can also be attacked on their home soil. This tactic is also a strategic blow to the assumption that Western societies are modern, safe,

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[4] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Moslims worden door Nederlandse militairen in Libië, Syrië Tsjetsjenië, Afghanistan, overal met Europa doodgemaakt en denken jullie nou echt dat wij niets terug zullen doen?" See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para 5.3.1.3.
[5] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Ik wilde jullie laten zien dat jullie niet van diamant zijn en wij niet van zand." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, Annex 2.

and secure, and are therefore shielded from reciprocal violent acts. By choosing to attack in a public environment, Tanis brings his claim to the forefront of the eyes of the Dutch public and other Western societies.

As demonstrated, a strategic aspect of establishing visibility was brought to the attack in part through Tanis's tactical choice of venue. In doing so, Tanis drew upon existing societal interpretations of public environments and reshaped those very same interpretations through his actions. Tanis's attention to the visibility of his attack and claims will be further elaborated in the section that examines the use of post-attack communication tactics.

4.1.3 Familiarity and Opportunity

A final indication of strategy underpinning Tanis's attack in a public environment is based on the proximity of the attack site to Tanis's residence. The attack site is located under five kilometers from Tanis's home, and can thus be easily reached by bike or foot (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para 5.3.1.1.). Moreover, Tanis moved to Utrecht in 1993, making the city familiar grounds (Boere, Rosman, and Schildkamp 2019). These observations on their own are meaningless when detached from Tanis's strategies and sentiments. However, when taking these factors into consideration, Tanis's choice of attack location points to an opportunity to balance the level of pre-planning required for the attack with spontaneity.

According to the available data, it is unclear if Tanis pre-meditated his attack site selection. The site could have been identified days earlier as much as it could have been selected immediately before the attack was initiated. Nevertheless, an environment's familiarity can provide an attacker greater oversight of the strategic trade-offs due to a practical understanding of how to navigate the area, and a grounded sense of its value to society. On the one hand, conducting an attack inside a tram arguably constrained Tanis's opportunity for exfiltration, and even posed a risk of being recognised by others. On the other hand, Tanis's everyday interactions in this environment offered him an understanding of the layout and normative practices in the environment, thereby facilitating his attack design.

Tanis's actions also demonstrated that he weighed the value of his familiar environment with the risk of getting caught. After fleeing the attack site, Tanis abandoned the hijacked vehicle only a few kilometers away. This action resulted in a change in his escape pattern, thereby making his detection initially more complicated. However, this action also meant that Tanis stayed close to a familiar neighborhood and network of resources. Moreover, Tanis further communicated the message of his attack across by leaving a handwritten note in the

vehicle. As revealed by these actions, Tanis's strategic choice to abandon the car and flee into familiar territory shows his reflection on the anticipated reactions to his attack. This resulted in a strategic trade-off between sending a message with the risk of getting caught.

4.2 Attack Weapon

Tanis chose to use a firearm in his attack. The pistol he used was equipped with a silencer and was concealed in his vest until he entered the tram (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para 5.3.1.2). Subsequently, Tanis began to attack only once the tram departed for its next stop. Since the tramcar doors remain closed when the transport system is in motion, multiple targets were fixed within close range.

Tanis fired at a selection of victims both inside and outside the tram car. Witness testimonies presented at the main trial noted that, while in the tram, Tanis paused his shooting at several moments. These pauses were additionally shown in the reconstruction video of the attack, where Tanis repeatedly fired at one particular victim.[6]

As the drastic events unfolded, the tram was halted by the driver. According to the video reconstruction, several passengers exited through an open door, while others broke windows to escape. After shooting at multiple victims, Tanis exited the tram and moved towards the cars situated at a nearby traffic intersection. Subsequently, Tanis scanned over a few vehicles and fired at several motorists. Finally, Tanis entered one of the abandoned cars and proceeded to leave the scene.

Tanis initially drove off in a slow, trolling manner. In the process, he shot through the passenger window of the car at several bystanders. The first cluster of targeted bystanders was located at a gas station, and the second group of people was located at a bus station. After firing at the second group of people, he sped up and fled the scene. Fortunately, no one was injured during this segment of the attack.

4.2.1 Social Disruption and Shock Effect

The choice to use a gun can be strategic when a target is unequally equipped to defend against it, and unfamiliar with the tactic. In this regard, Tanis's choice of weapon increased his chance of creating societal disruption by only requiring knowledge of its proper use, along with the presence of an oblivious target. Strengthening this point, Dutch law stipulates that firearms

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[6] Peer translated observations from the main hearing on 2 March 2020, held at the Central Netherlands Court in Utrecht.

licences are issued under strict conditions – solely for sports shooting or hunting – and are not permitted to be carried in public (Bruinsma and Spapens 2018, 287-8). Therefore, not only is it highly unlikely others will have a gun in possession, but it is also unlikely that the average citizen would be familiar with the sounds of a pistol equipped with a silencer. As a result, Tanis's routinised understanding of society contributed to his choice of *modus operandi* for the attack.

A pistol is additionally challenging to detect before its exposure. One the one hand, a small weapon can be easily concealed under a jacket, thereby facilitating its shock effect once drawn. Although other weapons such as knives can be easily concealed and manipulated, guns can also inflict deadly harm against unarmed individuals. On the other hand, a small weapon can be concealed as quickly as it was drawn, and therefore can be useful to maintain invisibility after leaving the scene of the attack.

4.2.2. Familiarity and Personal Security

The notion of maintaining invisibility is a personal security consideration for a lone terrorist up until the moment he or she decides to attack. This personal security constraint is weighed against, among other factors, the perception of one's *capability* to act. This capability can be understood as the material resources and motivational factors required to conduct and sustain violence (Schuurman et al. 2018, 1192).

Holding connections to firearms networks can very well influence a lone terrorist's capability to act. Furthermore, guns may be more easily stored and used in comparison to other technologies such as explosives, which in turn can *sustain* one's capability to act. Notwithstanding these considerations, the strategic decision to forego personal security by executing an act of terrorism cannot be described as a simple function of access to resources alone. Thus, the *perception* of one's capability to act must be examined to understand the choices and dilemmas Tanis faced.

If a lone terrorist has a baseline familiarity with a particular weapon, he or she has the capability to inflict serious harm within a small amount of time – especially within an enclosed and populated space such as a tram car. This familiarity can arguably influence the dilemma of pre-planning an attack versus spontaneity, and also a person's perception of succeeding in bringing about societal disruption. According to criminal records, Tanis had previously been convicted of possession and use of a pistol in a residential area (Grapperhaus 2019,4). Although

this gives no direct indication of his skill level in using the gun, it does demonstrate that he had prior exposure to this type of weapon.

During the attack, Tanis experienced several malfunctions with the weapon. Based on post-attack forensics and weapons testing, there were no identified issues with the gun itself (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.2). Notwithstanding the malfunctions, Tanis persistently managed to resume his attack. Therefore, the choice of a familiar weapon allowed Tanis to increase his operational effectiveness and shaped his perception of his own capacity in the face of a nearly defenseless audience.

4.2.3 Deliberate Choice and Symbolism

While Tanis's familiarity with a gun may have decreased his pre-planning requirement, Tanis conducted some prior reflection on his strategy as well as the societal values upon which he drew his justification. First, Tanis's pistol was equipped with a silencer. As a result, several victims did not react to the first gunshots, while other testimonies indicated that the gunshots seemed muffled (Belleman 2020a). Conversely, several victims heard Tanis shout "Allah Akbar" in the tram (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.3.). The silencer thus gave Tanis an operational advantage by slowing the reaction of the victims. The choice to use a silencer also shows Tanis's deliberation about his capacity to attack and the shock effect he wished to achieve.

Secondly, a hand-crafted inscription on the gun and silencer of Tanis's weapon offers insight into Tanis's reflection on his intent and reasoning. According to a Middle Eastern expert who was requested by the prosecution to interpret the inscription, the text includes a portion of the Islamic creed, stating, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet."[7] (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, Annex 2). Next, the inscriptions described Allah as the 'lawmaker' and that Shari'a contains Allah's words. From this followed the conclusion: "Who lives according to the Shari'a will go to paradise, but who lives according to the principles and laws of democracy goes to hell" (Annex 2). Although it is unclear whether the inscription was made before or after the attack, Tanis symbolically demonstrated his values and beliefs through this inscription.

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[7] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Er is geen god dan Allah en Mohammed is zijn profeet." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, Annex 2.

4.3 Target Selection

Another factor attributed to the pauses in Tanis's rampage is his target selection process. The public prosecutor debated whether or not Tanis focused on certain people and skipped over those who may have been perceived as Muslims. A critical factor in this deliberation was evidence showing Tanis pointing his weapon in the direction of certain people but moving onwards to subsequent targets without firing. Therefore, Tanis's choice of targets will be analysed further in this section.

4.3.1 Boundary Drawing

Tanis's target selection during his attack shows he was engaged in a reflective process of identity drawing. Indiscriminately shooting at civilians on its own would have achieved societal disruption. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that Tanis engaged several targets while refraining from shooting at others who were equally vulnerable (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.2.). The data available for this study did not show any relationship between Tanis and its victims. Therefore, although the victims were seemingly unknown to Tanis, he faced a dilemma that invoked a process of identity boundary drawing during his interactions with them. Moreover, by shooting at some and not others, Tanis's actions showed that the harm of specific individuals posed a risk to the goals that he aimed to achieve.

Tanis's process of boundary drawing was further made clear during the preliminary judicial hearing in July 2019. He illustrated his perception of a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims by first highlighting that Muslims were killed every day around the world, and secondly, by referring to "you and "we" when explaining his actions (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.2.). This sentiment remained visible at the main trial, where Tanis showed little remorse to his victims and their family members. Shown by the contrast in his interactions with various individuals during the attack and the judicial process, Tanis's perception of a societal divide may have influenced his choice of targets, their value to society, and their value to Tanis himself.

4.3.2 Threat Dilemma

Tanis's target selection also points towards a strategy of threat elimination, which implies that 'the other' should be punished. In this sense, an attack on a Muslim would be counter-intuitive to Tanis's strategic agenda. The video reconstruction of the attack showed at

least one moment when Tanis consciously chose not to shoot a person. Whether or not this person is Muslim, Tanis encountered a dilemma that made him decide to shoot some and others not. Consequently, some victims were perceived at threats, while other lives were spared.

As highlighted by Benford and Hunt (1992), actions can be structured to prevent audiences from interpreting a component that could undermine the claim (44). Tanis's actions demonstrated the value he attributed to the preservation of these specific lives, and the possible impact their loss would have on societal interpretations of his attack. These values also presented a dilemma, where an attack on specific people may have undermined Tanis's beliefs or claims, and others' interpretations of his claims (44). Connecting back to Tanis's process of boundary drawing, this dilemma was also influenced by his immediate impressions of the targets. Consequently, Tanis's societal disruption strategy was balanced with his perception of the threats to his cause and the value of his targets to his social environment.

4.4 Fleeing the Scene

The final tactic observed from the day of the attack is that Tanis decided to leave the scene of the crime, thereby forgoing what others would see as an opportunity to substantiate his actions. Before his arrest, there was no indication that Tanis attempted to turn himself over to state authorities. However, following his discovery and arrest, Tanis quickly claimed responsibility for the attack.[8] When the accusation was presented at the preliminary hearing, Tanis went so far as to reiterate his ownership of the attack: "It is not suspicion. I already confessed!"[9] Tanis's choice to flee the scene and his newfound approach to the ownership of his actions will be discussed further in the following sub-sections.

4.4.1 Personal Security

Due to the chance of a follow-up attack, additional security measures were implemented in order to track down Tanis. While Tanis could have moved to another location to continue his attack, evidence shows that this was not the case. In contrast, Tanis's choice to flee the scene of the attack offered him the opportunity to avoid further detection by authorities who would inevitably be armed as well. This tactic is relevant because Tanis could have also remained on site to claim his attack. However, his choice to leave indicated that he weighed a

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[8] This can be understandable, since the Netherlands does not use the death penalty, and life sentences are reassessed after 25 years. For further information, see https://www.rechtspraak.nl/themas/levenslang.
[9] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Het betreft geen verdenking. Ik heb al bekend!" See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.1.

dilemma that balanced his attack's objectives with the risk of getting caught. From these observations, it can be seen that Tanis's choices reflect several external factors which shaped his decision-making process. These external factors will be explored further in the next chapter.

4.4.2 Alternative Means of Communication

Although Tanis did not remain on site to claim his attack, he adopted an alternative method to demonstrate the meaning behind his attack. As previously indicated, Tanis fled the scene in a hijacked, abandoned car. Police search efforts led to the discovery of this escape vehicle a few hours after the attack occurred. Inside the vehicle was a handwritten note, in which he declared his faith and his cause (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 2).

According to a new report, the note was written on a piece of paper torn from a Public Prosecution Service letter addressed to Tanis. The letter addressed another case in which Tanis was a suspect (Koop and Tieleman 2019a). The handwritten note was also examined by state authorities to confirm that it was indeed Tanis who wrote it. Thus, the note provides another example of a reflective process wherein Tanis weighed opportunities with dilemmas, for it was possible to remain on scene to proclaim the same message which was written.

By fleeing the scene, Tanis offered himself a means to overcome a personal security dilemma. However, Tanis's interpretation of how others could interpret his actions arguably led to his choice to further communicate his message through means other than physical destruction. By expressing his sentiments in a note left to be discovered, Tanis strategically chose to make sure that his claim was visible and available to the public, even in his absence. Furthermore, the note allowed Tanis to communicate more explicitly a second part to his claim: democracy and its incompatibility with Islamic Shari'a law. This claim will be discussed in the next section.

4.5 Post-attack Communication

After his arrest, Tanis lost his primary capacity to instigate harm and violence. However, as Meyer and Staggenborg (2012) observed, tactics are "specific means of implementing strategy" (8). Accordingly, methods other than violence can also be chosen to advance a claim or achieve one's strategy. In this regard, Tanis turned his newfound situation into an opportunity to further his claims by exploiting other communicative tactics. These opportunities and communicative tactics will be analysed further in this section.

4.5.1 Visibility and Symbolism

Tanis avowed his deepest sentiments via a written note left in the car and the inscription on his weapon. If this tactic had the intent to further advance his message, Tanis reiterated this purpose to the court. The public judicial system of democratic societies offers a platform to demonstrate and investigate causes for concern in a given society. When confronted with questions by the court chairman during the preliminary hearing in July 2019, Tanis exclaimed, "If you are honest, why won't you say what text was on the gun's silencer?"[10] Tanis's verbal demand for visibility reaffirms the "symbolic" nature of terrorism, where the aim is to send a political message to an audience. Furthermore, Tanis's choice to reiterate his cause under a platform that directly comes into contention with his claims and beliefs also provides insight into Tanis's interpretation of how others will react to his actions and inactions within the system.

4.5.2 Claim-making Paradox

Tanis leveraged the Dutch judicial platform to communicate a second part of his reason for attack: democracy and its incompatibility with and Shari'a law. On 22 March 2019, Tanis stated to the examining magistrate:

> Do you know what democracy is? 1 word is 10 lies with 20 coughs to hide it. […] I wrote that in the silencer of the gun, but they don't read all of that. They do not read the importance of people, but only democracy. That's why I get pissed off. [11]

Tanis's statement showed that he wanted to make his intolerance for democratic systems more visible. Moreover, this statement suggests that Tanis felt the judicial process's formalities were overshadowing his claims. Since Tanis fled the scene, he arguably chose to advance his claims through his actions alone. Following his arrest, however, Tanis emphasised the significance of his allegations and elaborated on his dissenting opinion of democratic systems.

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[10] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Als jullie eerlijk zijn, zeggen jullie welke tekst op de geluidsdemper van het pistool stond." See Koop and Tieleman 2019b.
[11] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Weet u wat democratie is? 1 woord is 10 leugens met 20 hoestjes om het te verstoppen. [...] Dat heb ik ook in de demper van het pistool geschreven maar dat lezen ze allemaal niet. Ze lezen niet wat het belang is van de mensen maar alleen van de democratie. Daarom word ik pissig. See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.1.

Tanis used the subsequent investigative examinations and judicial proceedings as opportunities to illuminate his sentiments regarding democratic systems further. On 8 May 2019, the Tanis announced himself in front of the examining magistrate:

> I am the person who made a trauma attack. One thing you have to understand, I am not someone who is a Democrat. How you turn your back on our Shari'a. [...] I say again, I am not a Democrat. I am a follower of Shari'a.[12]

Tanis further reflects on a statement made by the President of the Netherlands following the attack:

> President Rutte, after my attack, comes on TV. I see with my own eyes the fear he has in his eyes and he says, 'Fanaticism does not take us away from democracy'. Hey listen, Rutte. You do not let go of your democracy, but do you really think that we are going to let go of Shari'a? I don't think so. [...] I know you are dishonest people and only attack Islam to destroy Islam.[13]

Tanis's communicative strategy resulted in his persistent proclamation of disbelief in democratic systems. At the preliminary hearing on 1 July 2019, he further uses the judicial platform to make his point clear: "I am not a Democrat and I do not know your laws. I don't know your court, either."[14] By emphasising and making visible his perceptions of the democratic system, Tanis also gives insight into how his previous interactions with the Dutch judicial system and other government systems may have shaped his strategic choices.

At the main trial, Tanis employed a wide range of non-verbal acts and gestures to demonstrate his disapproval of the democratic system and its judicial processes. Except for a written and oral statement during the preliminary investigation, Tanis did not respond to the prosecution's questions, nor did he speak when offered opportunities to explain his motivation. He further discredited the judicial authorities by spitting at his assigned attorney and the panel of judges. Tanis's *passive* communicative tactic was a display of dissatisfaction with the

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[12] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Ik ben degene die een tramaanslag heeft gedaan. Eén ding moeten jullie goed begrijpen, Ik ben niet iemand die democraat is. Hoe jullie onze sharia de rug keren. [...] Ik zeg nogmaals 'ik ben geen democraat. Ik ben volgeling van Sharia." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.3.

[13] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "President Rutte, na mijn aanslag, komt op tv. Ik zie met mijn eigen ogen de angst die hij heeft in zijn ogen en hij zegt 'Fanatisme haalt ons niet weg van de democratie'. Hé luister, Rutte. Jij laat jouw democratie niet los, maar denk jij nou echt dat wij sharia los gaan laten? Dat dacht ik niet. [...] Ik weet dat jullie oneerlijke mensen zijn en alleen maar Islam aanvallen om Islam te vernietigen." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.3.

[14] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Ik ben geen democraat en ik ken jullie wetten niet. Ik ken jullie rechtbank ook niet." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.3.

democratic system, and the hearing itself presented Tanis with an opportunity to leverage the visibility of this claim.

4.5.3 Acting Alone

A final observation of Tanis's post-attack communicative tactics is his claim to have acted alone. A critical analysis of lone terrorism can show how rhetorical dimensions, such as having claimed to act alone or as part of a larger group, can point to how an individual perceives the interpretation of his or her message by an audience. For instance, Anders Breivik, the lone terrorist who effected the attack in Norway in 2011, claimed to be part of a larger network of independent "solo martyr cells" (Joosse 2017, 70). However, scholars have questioned the rationale behind this allegiance to a larger network of independent terrorists. As Ramón Spaaij noted, "It remains unclear, however, if this is a figment of his imagination or if Breivik has some factual basis for his belief that there are others like him planning attacks" (Spaaij 2007, 18 in Joosse 2017, 70).

The tactic of mobilising other leaderless terrorists was arguably absent from Tanis's discourse and claims, which leads one to question why. If a claim is significant enough for one to bring about a violent display, why not invite others to do the same, or declare partnership with those who have also attempted to overcome these issues, or supported those in the process of doing so? These questions cannot be resolved by pondering straightforward causal mechanisms, nor is this the intent of this thesis. As it will be explained in the subsequent chapter, there are exists range of Tanis's social interactions that can, at a minimum, provide insight into his reasons for acting at all.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, Tanis's tactics were analysed to understand his strategic choices, the dilemmas, and the meaning of his actions. First, Tanis's attack aimed to disrupt society and everyday life, as shown by the attack's physical environment and weapon choice. These choices were shaped by Tanis's familiarity with his weapon and his understanding of the societal norms in this environment. Consequently, Tanis was able to overcome a personal security dilemma and rapidly inflict harm by understanding his own capabilities in comparison to that of his targets. Furthermore, Tanis's awareness of the societal patterns in Utrecht enabled him to easily navigate the environment, showing that his previous interactions in the environment shaped his choices during the attack.

Second, attacking in a public environment and leaving a note describing his cause made Tanis's attack visible to a wide audience. Tanis paid particular attention to how his message would be interpreted by engaging in a process of boundary drawing and target selection. It also became clear that Tanis's cause for the attack was subject to a dilemma of eliminating a threat versus harming those that he wished to defend. This dilemma became more apparent through Tanis's post-attack communications which served to ensure that his message would be clear to society. Not only did these choices allow Tanis to make the meaning of his attack visible to society, they also show Tanis's reflection on how others may interpret his actions.

Lastly, Tanis's tactics demonstrated that the meaning of his attack related to his perceptions of societal norms and values in the Netherlands. He further leveraged the Dutch judicial platform to discredit the democratic system through his choice of (in)actions. Tanis's behaviours show how are significant insofar that the audience also interprets them concerning the norms and values available in society. Tanis's actions highlighted concern with aspects of democratic societies; thus, his attack was felt across the Netherlands and abroad.

Chapter 5. Relational Fields

As explained at the start of this thesis, there is an urgent need to understand the elements that shape a lone terrorist's choices and actions. Moreover, it can be argued that the meaning derived from a lone terrorist's tactics and strategies reflects an influence from external social factors, thereby questioning the notion of 'aloneness' behind a lone actor. Referring to the third sub-question of the research puzzle, this chapter analyses the relational fields which showed a link to Tanis's tactics and strategic choices. To do so, this chapter will examine Tanis's social interactions and relationships related to his attack, the characteristics of these relational fields, and how these factors shaped Tanis's choices and actions.

5.1 Public field

Tanis drew a strong correlation between his motivation for attack and his perception of Muslims being targeted across the world. In addition to avowing his beliefs in the Islamic faith, Tanis also verbally referred to a binary conflict between "we" and "you". This leaves "you" to cover the public field who does not adhere to Islam. The characteristics of the public field and how this relational field shape's Tanis choices and actions will be examined further in the following sub-sections.

5.1.1. Cultural and Value Orientations

During the conduct of this research, it became apparent that Western democratic values, particularly those present in Dutch society, are reflected in Tanis's justification of the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims. Moreover, Tanis described Western democratic systems as incompatible with Islamic faith and law. These statements show how Tanis's drew upon his everyday social interactions and his observations of the Netherland's actions abroad to form his perception of values upon which democratic societies are based.

Similar observations have been made in other cases of lone terrorism, such as Theo van Gogh's assassination in 2004. Van Gogh's killer, Mohammed Bouyeri stated: "Van Gogh considered himself a soldier. He fought against Islam […] Allah sent a soldier who cut his throat" (Cliteur 2019, 82). Although societies are "containers of a plurality of discourses" (Demmers 2017, 131), both Bouyeri and Tanis's claims reflect similar perceptions of a binary struggle in society between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, while Bouyeri directed his attention towards a specific person perceived as a threat, Tanis's indiscriminately attacked the

non-Muslim public that he construed as a collective threat to Muslims and Islam. This slight nuance is significant from a counter-terrorism perspective, given that an individual's social interactions can result in different outcomes for a similar cause.

5.1.2 Cause for Relative Indiscrimination

Notwithstanding Tanis's selection of targets, the attack was ultimately brought against an unfortunate group of people who happened to intersect his path that day. One such way to understand why Tanis chose this approach is to analyse his reference to Muslims' unwarranted deaths. When questioned by the prosecution on 1 July 2019 as to why he would take a weapon and aim it at people in the tram, Tanis replied: "Who are you to kill Muslims? Every day 100 or 150 Muslims are killed" (Tieleman 2019b). Tanis's perception of illegitimate attacks against Muslims worldwide arguably shaped his decision to reciprocate harm in a similar indiscriminate fashion rather than target a specific person or place.

Regardless of public scepticism towards his religious practices,[15] Tanis's perceptions of Dutch society and its incompatibilities with his faith and beliefs shaped his choices and actions. In contrast, Tanis's attitude towards other ideological engagements such as martyrdom[16] was not clear, as shown by his decision to flee the scene into hiding. Nevertheless, if we understand strategy as part of the process where individuals are constantly interpreting and changing the social world, we can see that Tanis's understanding of the value orientations available in the Netherlands has shaped, in part, his choice to act.

5.2 Critical Events Field

Highlighted in Staggenborg's 1993 study on the mobilisation of movements, critical events, including those created by movements themselves, can produce significant changes in the movement environment. Consequently, these environmental changes may affect the subsequent rounds of movement strategy (Staggenborg 1993 in Meyer and Staggenborg 2012, 20-21). Critical events can also expose cleavages in society that resonate or come into conflict with a [potential] terrorist's beliefs and ideologies. This resonance can frame opportunities for future acts of political violence, including terrorism. The factor of critical events thus presents another point of reference when analysing how external relational fields shape a terrorist's decisions.

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[15] This point was made clear by the witness statements presented at the main hearing on 2 and 3 March 2020.
[16] For further details on this relationship between martyrdom and jihadism, see Gunaratna 2005.

5.2.1 Conflicting Causes

Three days before the attack in Utrecht, a shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, resulting in 51 casualties. The lone attacker produced a manifesto which elaborated a motive geared towards the creation of fear and called for killings of Muslims (*Al Jazeera News* 2019). Political elites across the world immediately condoned the attack, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan explicitly signalled the event as additional evidence of global anti-Muslim sentiments (The New Zealand Herald 2019). The devastation caused by the attack in Christchurch was broadcasted through various mass media platforms, and its shocking nature sent tremors throughout the world.

Immediately following the attack in Christchurch, debates on the possibility of subsequent attacks versus the actual security around mosques contributed to a climate of concern in the Netherlands (Bahara and Huisman 2019). The head of the NCTV, Pieter-Jaap Aalbersberg, disclosed that the Christchurch attack fit into the Netherlands' current threat picture. Aalbersberg underlined that "the polarised social debate can have an impact on rapidly radicalising groups or loners," and added to his observation that "local authorities are and will remain alert around mosques in the Netherlands" (Bahara and Huisman 2019). If environmental changes can affect the subsequent rounds of a movement's strategy, this hypothesis can be equally applied to the analysis of a lone terrorist, such as Tanis, who already demonstrated frustrations with democratic societies and the ill-treatment of Muslims worldwide.

5.2.2. Symbolic References and Counter-discourses

During Tanis's main trial, the subject of the terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, arose in discussion several times. This reflection was due not only to the Christchurch attack's recent nature but also because of Tanis's counter-discourses. According to the public prosecution's assessment, Tanis had received images of the Christchurch attack before his assault and via a personal tie. Furthermore, the text inscribed on Tanis's weapon was particularly striking since the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack had also adopted the same symbolic method of communication (NCTV 2020, 30).

A correlation between the two attacks was also highlighted in the Netherlands Terrorist Threat Assessment published on 20 May 2020, where it was mentioned that the Christchurch event *may* have sparked terrorist violence in the case of the Utrecht attack (30). Although we cannot infer a causal relationship between the Christchurch event and Tanis's attack, we can

observe the centrality and saliency of the Christchurch attacker's discourses and other similar anti-Islam actions *to* Tanis. From comments about "Muslims are killed every day," to "we are not made of sand," the Christchurch attack represents a significant event that hit on the very same issues declared in Tanis's claims.

The resonance of the Christchurch attack within the Netherlands additionally created an opportunity for Tanis to leverage his claims by providing a backdrop to the meaning underpinning his choices and actions. This attack inevitably added to the *credibility* of Tanis's claim that Muslims are being killed every day. Furthermore, Tanis's actions fueled an already ongoing debate about the threat of terrorism in the Netherlands. As an indicator, parliamentary debates following the Utrecht attack demonstrate the salience of the perception of the terrorist threat in the Netherlands, and its resulting demands for further clarification, and coordination, on all matters of terrorism (House of Representatives 2019). These debates further addressed the broader divides in society that influence and shape the growth of terrorism, thereby acknowledging in part Tanis's concerns.

Tanis's problem identification (Snow and Benford 2000, 616), shown by the inscriptions on his weapon, note, and his referral to anti-Muslim historical references, ostensibly relates to anti-Muslim insolences such as attack in Christchurch. Both attacks offered an interpretation of the issues present in society. However, the timing of Tanis's attack forced society to take a harder look at the gravity of his message. In conclusion, the issues framed by significant events such as the Christchurch attack can inform and shape a lone terrorist's choice to take action in ways that would not have been deemed legitimate otherwise.

5.3 Social Movement Field

Social movement scholars have emphasised the importance of considering other movements and counter-movements when analysing a particular political claim-making act. Similar to how a terrorist may draw upon the frames of global or salient events to enhance the symbolic power and legitimacy of one's claims, a terrorist can also draw from the frames and strategies adopted by other social movements (Gunning 2009, 156). Other movements may provide resources or reinforce ideological beliefs; in contrast, they may also engage competition or conflict with the lone terrorists' beliefs indirectly. Thus, the relationship between a lone terrorist and other movements merits investigation into the factors that shaped a lone terrorist's strategic choices.

During the main hearing, the prosecution discussed how several members of Tanis's family demonstrated interest and possible association with a social movement group known as the Caliphate State, or Kaplan movement (*Hilafet Devleti* in Turkish).[17] The Kaplan movement is an Islamic group founded in Germany in 1984 by Turkish native Cemaleddin Kaplan (Farmer 2011, 42). Kaplan promoted a set of values that challenged the dominant culture codes in Western societies and demonstrated fundamentalist views on state governance. Kaplan also favored the creation of an Islamic state in Turkey and called for the overthrow of Turkey's secular government (43). The organisation mostly focused on propaganda, although German authorities allegedly accused the organisation of "having direct ties to violence and terrorism" (43). Although the original leadership has either passed or been convicted of plotting terrorist attacks, the Kaplan movement continues to maintain a network of sympathisers and supporters.

Dutch authorities have indicated Tanis's link to the Kaplan movement represents an omnipresent relationship that cannot be confirmed without further intelligence collection efforts (NCTV 2019b, 4). Notwithstanding this observation, a Dutch media outlet signalled cause for concern by highlighting a source who asserted that Tanis's immediate family members were known to national authorities (Tieleman 2019a). Consequently, there existed a set of discourses, ideologies, and potential resource networks accessible to Tanis before his attack, either through direct interaction or via personal contacts.

By investigating 'communities of belief', we can understand that organisations like the Kaplan movement extend extremist ideologies beyond the organisation itself (Post 1998 in COT 2007). These communities also propagate master frames, which Bedford and Snow describe as a broad set of beliefs and meanings which "colors and constrain the orientations and activities of other movements" (Bedford and Snow 2000, 618). Some of the frames propagated by the Kaplan movement may have offered Tanis a point for reflection. For instance, Tanis asserts his belief in a political system that is underpinned by Islamic Shari'a law. His disbelief in democratic systems is of a long-standing opinion, as demonstrated by his comments and attitudes recorded in a media report dated back to 2011 (Van Rossem 2011). Meanwhile, the Kaplan movement's published proclamation called "The New World Order" states:

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[17] According to a media report, Tanis's middle brother's Facebook page, which was taken offline shortly after the attack in Utrecht, has references to the Kaplan movement. See Boere et al. 2019.

> Our goal is the control of Islam over everyday life. In other words, the Koran should become the constitution, the Islamic system of law should become the law and Islam should become a state […] Is it possible to combine Islam with democracy and the layman's system on which it is based? For this question, only one answer exists, and that is a resounding "NO!" (Farmer 2011, 43)

The statement above parallels the discourses adopted by Tanis in two ways. First, it recognises the Islamic system of law as the constitution by which society should abide. Second, it discredits and opposes the system of democracy. Although other movements and groups have advocated for the implementation of Shari'a law in state political systems, an individual's liberty to develop beliefs and values is limited by the governing norms and symbolic orders which are drawn from everyday social interactions. Consequently, Tanis's access and potential exposure to the Kaplan movement's radical framework points to the importance of understanding how social networks can empower individuals to become agents of change.

5.4 Radical Milieu Field

While it is difficult to identify direct, concrete relationships between lone terrorists such as Tanis and other activist networks, scholars Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann (2014) have identified relational factors that narrow this analytical gap. In their study on the formative and supporting social environments of terrorist groups, Malthaner and Waldmann observe that social movements may share experiences, symbols, narratives, and frameworks of interpretation with other social environments (983). To this effect, lone terrorists may also hold relationships with social environments which provided the opportunity to share similar beliefs and experiences, or even obtain access to clandestine resources. These particular social environments, conceptualised as radical milieus, represent a dynamic and evolving relational field that includes groups and individuals who pursue their interests, and interact, collaborate, and challenge other violent activists (983).

Looking past Tanis's access to the Kaplan movement's radical framework, other social environments such as a prison also fall under the radical milieu concept. To this effect, the NCTV revealed that an individual's exposure to radicalised milieus is difficult to control, particularly in penitentiary institutions (NCTV 2019c, 7; NCTV 2020, 8). Although the report specifically addressed the two facilities in the Netherlands where terrorist detention occurs, the principle of a radical milieu still applies to the other detention facilities. The NCTV also describes the negative influence that prisoners can exert on each other, and that attacks may be inspired while being held in these facilities. This field will be examined further in the following

section due to Tanis's successive periods of detention and exposure to social networks in these facilities.

5.4.1 Criminal Networks

Over the past years, Tanis built up a lengthy criminal record (Grapperhaus 2019, 4). Of significance, Tanis went to prison in 2014 for prohibited possession of weapons and attempted burglary. Additionally, a case was filed against Tanis in 2017 based on an accusation of rape.[18] Suspicions surrounding the allegation led to Tanis's arrest for pre-trial detention on 24 August 2017. After one month, Tanis was released under general conditions, including his required participation in personality surveys of the Netherlands Institute for Forensic Psychiatry and a ban on contact with the claimant (Grapperhaus 2019, 4-5). However, Tanis did not comply with the established conditions and was therefore re-ordered to pre-trial detention on 4 January 2019 (5). After appealing for release, and explicitly stating that he would comply with the court's directions, Tanis was released from pre-trial detention on 1 March 2019 under general and special conditions.

At the main trial, the prosecution concluded that Tanis was radicalised before the attack (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 9.3.1). During the main trial, statements made by witnesses about Tanis's suspicious behaviour during the months before his attack showed a hardening in his behaviour and positions. Furthermore, "silent witnesses" contributed to this image by noting the extreme writings and books related to what Tanis says he believes (para 9.3.1). These observations correlate to instances observed during Tanis's periods of detention prior to his attack.

On 25 February 2019, a violent incident occurred in the Lelystad Penitentiary Institution, where Tanis was currently in pre-trial detention. The Minister of Justice and Security confirmed in a letter to the House of Representatives that Tanis had behaved aggressively towards an employee that day and consequently filed a report. Secondary sources documenting Tanis's conversations during this detention period additionally point towards Tanis's opportunity to exchange or reinforce interpretations of perceived issues and radical ideologies. A sense of idea hardening can be seen through a comment Tanis issued to another inmate: "[…] you will remember my name" (Goossens 2020). A journalist also reported a source who indicated that Tanis had already radicalised in prison and that four detainees reported this allegation (RTL Nieuws 2019). Based on these observations of Tanis interactions,

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[18] Tanis was found guilty of this charge on May 27, 2020. See Central Netherlands Court 2020b.

Tanis expressed radficalised sentiments and aggression during his pre-trial detention. Although we cannot infer the extent to which Tanis planned the specific details of the attack, the process of ideology hardening continued to be shaped based on his interactions during his pre-trial detention.

5.4.2 Resource Networks

Terrorists must be able to maintain a minimum level of security and invisibility to keep from being detected. Accordingly, a lone terrorist's opportunities depend in part on their choice of targets, tactics, and timing (McCormick 2003, 495-96). People who have been detained for a criminal investigation in the Netherlands may be released under general or special conditions. All citizens, including Tanis, have the right to liberty and to be presumed innocent until proven guilty under Dutch law (Crijns, Leeuw and Wermink 2016, 5). Notwithstanding the conditions of his release, Tanis's personal security and opportunities depended on, in part, his access to resources.

Tanis's possession of a pistol and silencer points towards a connection with clandestine milieus or networks. In addition to strict control of firearms possession in the Netherlands, Dutch law enforcement agencies have focused more attention on the trade and possession of illegal firearms over the past few years. According to a statement in March 2017, the Minister of Security and Justice confirmed that the national approach to illegal firearms has "been considerably intensified at the policy and operational levels" (Bruinsma and Spapens 2018, 289-90). Thus, Tanis's firearm possession reflects a previous or ongoing relationship with a specific milieu that would provide him with resources for the attack, and this, in the context of increased security efforts that aim to detect such networks.

5.4.3 Support Networks

A critical element affecting Tanis's choices and strategic outcomes can be demonstrated by the security measures that led to Tanis's arrest. Once Tanis was identified as the perpetrator of the attack, investigators tracked down his telephone number (Van den Heuvel 2019). Unfortunately, the number did not lead to any useful information concerning his location, and thus the threat of a subsequent attack loomed. Due to perceptions of a persistent threat, the police invoked exceptional measures that included the surveillance of Tanis's bank account transactions. Fortunately, Dutch national authorities spotted a bank transfer and traced

the transfer to another phone number. The phone turned out to be the property of Tanis's acquaintance, and this discovery ultimately led to Tanis's capture.

Both the financial transfer to an unknown source and the immediate access to a support network, show a link to the social relationships Tanis held before the attack. Tanis fled the scene and subsequently linked up with an acquaintance, which further indicates a certain level of ease and support available through these relationships. Consequentially, these relationships must be considered part of the milieu that shaped Tanis's choices, regardless of whether the members of this milieu knew of Tanis's intentions. These support networks, whether built on trust or instrumental purposes, held value to Tanis. Accordingly, Tanis's interactions with these networks and milieus played a part in shaping his opportunities, choices, and actions related to his attack.

5.5 Media Field

Mass media platforms play a crucial role in validating political claims and whether terrorists can be taken seriously as "agents of possible change" (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 285). Several lone terrorists have distributed written or recorded communication to complement their attack and further convey their deepest sentiments (Hemmingby and Bjørgo 2015; Kaati, Shrestha, and Cohen 2016, 1). In a similar fashion, Tanis left a hand-written note in his escape vehicle, and inscriptions on his weapon. Although theses observation might lead one to examine the structural power of media, academics have moved to focus on the *relationship* between media and terrorism (Wilkinson 1997; Perešin 2007), and how "people exercise their agency in relation to media flows" (Couldry 2006, 27 in Porta 2011, 810).

As Donna Porta (2011) has underscored, media has transformed "the ambitions and capacity for *communication* of social movements" (811). Thus, media access and attention are part of a crucial relational field that can define opportunities to access the political system. This notion can be explained from two perspectives: first, how the media's frames resonate with a terrorist's previous experiences, beliefs, and values; and second, how the terrorist leverages the media's communicative platform to further claims and demands. The following sub-sections will examine the intersubjective relationship between Tanis and the media environment to show how this relational field shaped his choices and actions related to the attack.

5.5.1 Structural Influence of Media on Agents

Debates on the introduction of Shari'a, or Islamic law have pushed the topic into the light of political and public attention in Western democratic societies. This debate cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy, since the delineation between democracy and an Islamic law-based political system does not account for each side's position on different issues, such as the application of Shari'a to non-Muslims. Nevertheless, proceedings involving Islam have sparked both criticism and support for integration over the assimilation of Islamic culture into European societies (Farmer 2011, 75).

In his analysis of Anders Breivik's attack in Norway, Matthew Feldman (2013) suggests that the trend of racism against Muslims that has broken out in Europe and the US over the last decade served as a vector to carry his message (272). This analysis is echoed in other studies of Breivik's attack (Hemmingby and Bjørgo 2015) and other studies of lone terrorism (McCauley, Moskalenko, and Van Son 2013, 15; Nesser 2012, 67). Therefore, this observation merits consideration when examining Tanis's actions related to the attack.

Tanis arguably drew upon the same images as Breivik regarding discrimination against Muslims, even though their causes for action fundamentally oppose one another. Based on the examining magistrate's report published 22 March 2019, Tanis addressed his concern with the portrayal of Muslims in Western societies through the following statement:

> Our prophet is humiliated and lowered by the caricatures of the Netherlands. The Quran is written on naked women and is shown as a film. [...] Our brothers and sisters have been banged to death for 10 years. Nobody says anything about it. I say, as soon as this arm and hand are alive, I will not let anyone mock our faith, even if it is a King.[19]

This statement reflects ongoing debates on discrimination in many Western countries, and likewise in the Netherlands.

Although the debate on Islam in Western democratic societies holds deep historical roots, its salience elevated in the Netherlands with the creation of a controversial film. Created in 2008 by Dutch politician Geert Wilders, the film's controversy was striking to audiences worldwide, even before the film was released (Reuters 2008). The film, titled *Fitna* – which is

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[19] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "De Koran die wij ook op ons hoofd dragen, wordt op blote vrouwen geschreven en wordt laten zien als film. [...] 10 jaar lang worden onze broeders en zussen doodgeknald. Niemand zegt er wat van. Ik zeg zodra deze arm en deze hand leeft laat ik niemand met ons geloof spotten, ook al is het een Koning." See Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.1.

an Arabic word with a metaphorical meaning of disagreement and conflict – attempts to demonstrate the violent nature of Islam and its incompatibility with democratic systems and values (Vasblom 2008, Esman 2010). Furthering the film's controversy, one of the cartoons initially published in the film was already undergoing debate (Hervik 2012), and was removed after the artist claimed copyright violation (ANP 2008).

The conversations surrounding the film provoked strong reactions in Dutch society and around the world. These reactions contributed to a media hype that self-reinforced the distribution of responses to the film (Scholten et al. 2008). In addition to spreading a message to a broad audience, the media can also shape a society's understanding of who and what lone terrorists are. For instance, a recent study shows that words such as 'terror' and 'attack' are more frequently associated with the terms 'Muslims' or 'Islam' in the prominent national news agencies in the Netherlands (Balçik 2019). These terminology correlations create and reinforce particular frames of interpretation and further shape societal debates over the values that should drive our social contracts.

Broadcasts of the clash between Islam with other faiths and political systems continue to demonstrate a point of friction in the Netherlands. More importantly, the salience of this debate and its depiction in the media is reflected in Tanis's discourses and claims. Thus, the media field offered Tanis several points for reflection, which shaped his beliefs and actions related to his attack.

5.5.2 Agency in Media Relations

Media reporters and journalists construct representations of social phenomena. These depictions of people, places, and things tend to expose competitions for meaning and may even support particular frames (Perešin 2007, 12). In turn, these frames are distributed and interpreted by the recipient audience. While the media is part of the social structure that contributes to the formulation of a person's norms, beliefs, and values, it requires active agents who can transform the structural power of the media to advance claims.

Scholars have identified the media as a persistent feature that characterises the contemporary wave of religious self-activating terrorism (Norris 2004; Feldman 2013; Hemmingby and Bjørgo 2015). In this sense, modern communications technologies have had a marked effect in increasing the potential visibility of terrorism, giving agents "the oxygen of publicity" (Perešin 2007, 7). Furthermore, the influence of media on "shrinking time and

space" (Feldman 2013, 272) means that a terrorist's actions can be quickly circulated internationally via mass and social media platforms.

Tanis was well aware of the media and political attention paid to the attack. In his preliminary testimony, Tanis explains how he returned home and turned on the news to observe the event's fallout (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 5.3.1.3.). Furthermore, when confronted about his messages on his weapon, Tanis exclaimed, "If you are honest people, why don't you tell the media what's written on the silencer?"[20] Tanis's narratives point towards (1) his acknowledgement of media's capacity to rapidly channel messages to a wide audience, and (2) his agency to use media coverage to his advantage. This demand for visibility reaffirms the "symbolic" nature of terrorism concerning the communicative aspect of an attack.

Tanis's preliminary court hearing in July 2019 was not open to the public. His attitude and behaviour observed at this hearing were transmitted to the public via journalists who had special access to the hearing. In contrast, Tanis's main trial in March 2020 was open to the public and therefore underwent greater observation and scrutiny. This keen attention did not go unaddressed by Tanis. Tanis displayed a range of physical gestures towards the gathered audience of victims, media, and officials, including hand gestures whose meaning could be interpreted as a lack of remorse for those who were devastated by the attack (Central Netherlands Court 2020a, para. 9.3.1). His actions were visible from the public viewing room, and his performances caused restlessness in both the audience in the courtroom and the audience who watched from afar.

Journalists and media outlets closely followed Tanis's actions in the courtroom. A play by play of the events which occurred at the main trial was laid out on twitter and national news outlets in near real-time. In addition to reporting the salient features of the case, the media also addressed Tanis's shocking performances in the courtroom. Tanis's performances show that he was undoubtedly aware of the media and public attention in the courtroom. His understanding of the media's interests thereby provided him an opportunity to sound his message louder.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, Tanis's social interactions were analysed in relation to the tactics, strategies, and opportunities identified in his attack. Throughout this analysis, it became clear

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[20] Translated by a peer from the following quote: "Als jullie eerlijk zijn, zeggen jullie welke tekst op de geluidsdemper van het pistool stond." See Koop and Tieleman 2019b.

that there is no single and direct causal mechanism that can explain the attack. In contrast, several relational fields demonstrate linkages to Tanis's reason for the attack, his message, and audience. The public field showed that Tanis drew upon the Western interventions that resulted in the death of Muslims worldwide. Tanis's perception of indiscriminate and illegitimate harm caused to Muslims was also reinforced through other fields, including global events that promote anti-Islamic sentiments and media platforms that further frame societal debates in this realm. These fields contributed to Tanis's interpretations of his external environment and his perceptions of how his others may interpret his choices and actions.

Where the previous factors shaped Tanis's interpretations of societal injustices, several relational fields also informed his motivations and opportunities. Tanis's relationships with communities linked to an extremist social movement group provided him access to a network of ideas and resources concerning his perceptions of injustices in Western democratic societies.

Finally, the manifestation of Tanis's opportunities showed a link to radical milieus or networks that could provide resources for the attack. First, his interactions during his periods of detention showed a hardening in Tanis's ideas and aggression. Second, Tanis's previous knowledge and connection with clandestine networks provided an understanding of where and how to acquire a weapon, and how to use them to achieve his strategic goals. Lastly, through his knowledge of societal norms and values, Tanis drew upon the media's ability to communicate to a wide audience to convey his message further.

This chapter concludes that, although a lone terrorist may physically conduct an attack alone, the analytical value of the "lone wolf" concept arguably ends here. By analysing how a terrorist's interactions with his or her external environment shape spontaneous and deliberate strategic choices, we can see how these relational elements should never be separated when striving to understand 'lone' actor terrorism.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the lone terrorist attack in Utrecht on 18 March 2019 to determine how and why the perpetrator's social interactions shaped his choices concerning the attack. The first part of this analysis showed that Tanis's strategy of disrupting society was achieved by attacking in a public environment and using a familiar weapon to inflict serious harm and death. These tactics resulted in fear and political action, thereby making his cause visible and carrying long-term effects on shaping human security perceptions.

Tanis's strategy of making his cause visible by conducting an attack was balanced with a personal security dilemma. His familiarity with the environment facilitated his understanding of the patterns present in society. Although his decision to flee the site after the attack may have been instrumental in preserving his personal security, he chose to hide in this familiar environment. In this sense, Tanis's interactions with his immediate environment shaped his opportunities in the attack that were weighed with the risk of getting caught.

Finally, Tanis's choice of targets shows that he engaged in a process of identity boundary-drawing during the attack. By expressing his cause for attack during the judicial process, Tanis juxtaposed the violent actions that have harmed Muslims across the world with Western democratic values and resulting military interventions. Hence, Tanis's social interactions were reflected in the tactics and strategies he waged during his attack and further shaped his perception of the values of the society in which he resided.

By analysing Tanis's tactics for their strategic value and trade-offs, it became clear how the intersubjective nature of Tanis's social interactions shaped his tactics and strategies of the attack. Moreover, the specific characteristics of the relationships which shaped his attack became apparent during the research. Tanis's interactions with Dutch society and media fields formed and informed images of a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims. This boundary world was further pronounced by Tanis's perception of illegitimate violence brought against Muslims around the world, such as the mosque attack in New Zealand that resulted in significant deaths only three days before Tanis's attack. The intersubjective nature of such violent occurrences and images contributed to Tanis's frustrations with the values available in society, and moreover, shaped his opportunities to address these concerns.

Calls for action against anti-Muslim sentiments are salient across the world and have resulted in the mobilisation of numerous social movements. Tanis's relationship with some of the Kaplan movement's sympathisers presented Tanis with a framework of interpretation for the abstraction of democratic societies and the implementation of Islamic Shari'a law.

Furthermore, Tanis's interactions with clandestine networks and radical social environments were demonstrated through his capacity to acquire weaponry for his attack. These interactions shaped Tanis's choices and opportunities to address his cause for concern which, in turn, shaped his tactics and strategies in relation to his attack.

This thesis concludes that separately, a lone terrorist's social interactions may seem trivial to the outside eye and inconsequential. However, after closer scrutiny, these interactions bring together an image of social reality with enough salience to shape a terrorist's choices and actions.

This research makes several contributions to the current literature on terrorism. First, this research has identified that more research is required on the meso-level of lone terrorism. Looking from a lone terrorist's point of view, Tanis's attack tactics and strategies revealed several components of his interactions with his social environment. In this sense, the notion of 'aloneness' underpinning a lone terrorist is limited to the observation of an individual attacking a target. By looking beyond what is seen, it can be argued that individuals' choices are shaped by the values and contextual understandings available in society. With this knowledge, it is possible to look beyond lone terrorism as a choice made alone and to conceptualise the phenomenon as a socially constructed product of human interaction.

Secondly, since a social interaction involves an exchange between two or more entities, it is challenging to pursue conceptual understandings of lone terrorism without considering this. Where the specific elements of these intersubjective relationships were found through an analysis of Tanis's tactics and strategies, the reverse should also be considered from a counter-terrorism perspective. In this sense, an individual's social relationships can give insight into how issues were perceived, interpreted, and acted upon. Although this thesis identified relational fields that shaped the specific outcomes of the Utrecht attack, the concept of relational fields can serve as a conceptual start point for a comparative analysis of lone terrorism cases. Moreover, the study of the relational dynamics of lone terrorism across cases can help security agencies to better identify social tensions which led to intercepted or executed attacks in the Netherlands and around the world.

Finally, although the findings in this thesis are based on a qualitative study of the lone terrorist attack in Utrecht, it cannot be inferred that a single, nor all relational fields combined are the exact causal mechanisms for the strategic choices observed. However, the relational fields linked to the tactics and strategies found in the Utrecht attack challenge analysts and scholars to look at lone terrorist's social interactions to understand the external influences that further shape their choices and actions. Therefore, the relational fields identified in this thesis

can serve as an analytical point of reference when looking at factors that may contribute to other lone terrorist attacks. Moreover, the themes of relational fields can be built into a framework for agencies to apply in their assessments of potential threats and persons of interest. In doing so, the application of relational fields to the analysis of terrorist attacks can in turn strengthen counter-terrorism analytical toolkits, compliment other investigative methods used by analysts, and contribute to a more guided allocation of resources for the enhancement of public safety.

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