

How “Alone” are Lone-Actors?: Understanding Networks of Influence, Communication, and Tactical Support among Lone-Actor Terrorists

TSAS Workshop

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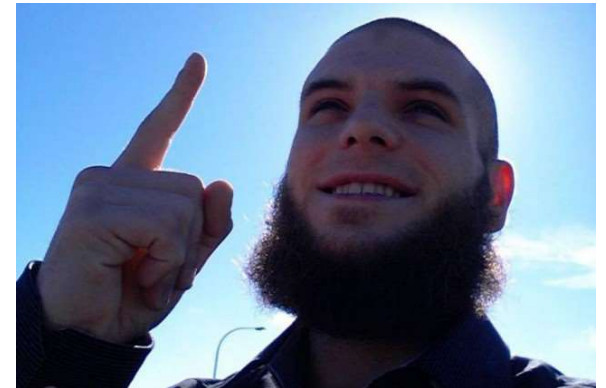
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State of Research on LAT:

- Marked increase in “lone-actor” attacks in last fifteen years and increased concern among policy-makers, security practitioners, and police.
- This has led to a small but growing body of case-study research on various behavioral, operational, and social aspects of LAT.

State of Research on LAT (cont'd):

- Research on LAT is relatively new and suffers from the same theoretical and methodological issues as other terrorism studies (Spaaij 2010; Gill 2015).
- However...



Are Lone-Actors Truly “Alone”?:

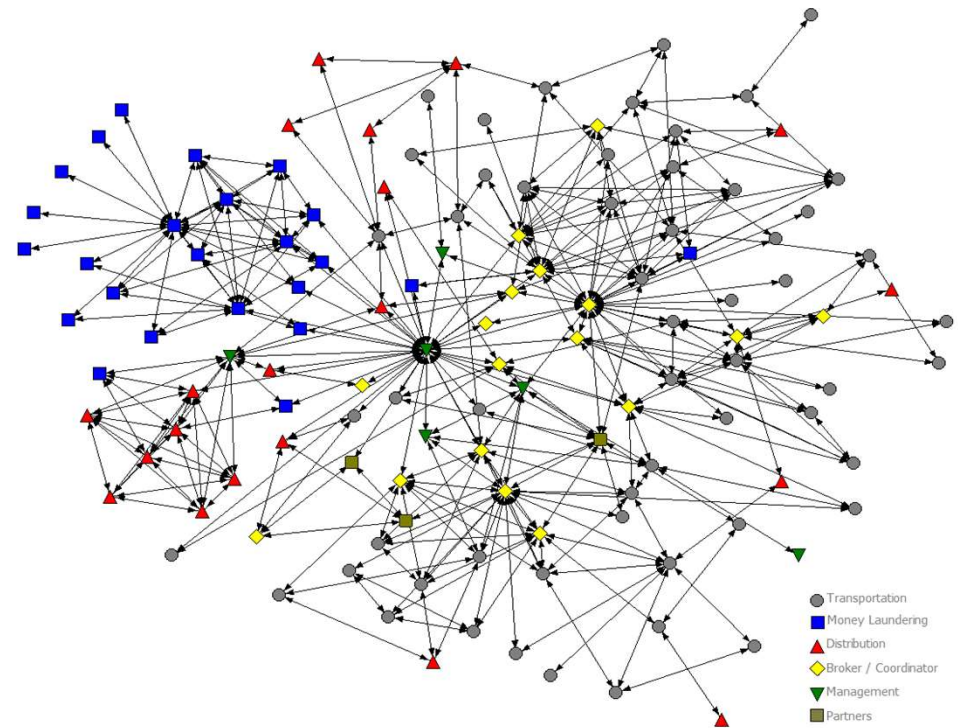
- Research on **terrorist radicalization** overwhelmingly agrees that people do not escalate towards a violent act in a socio-political vacuum: they develop and nurture their ideas through *interactions with others*.
- Recent empirical research challenges the notion of the “loneliness” of LATs (Feldman 2013; Gill et. al. 2014; Hamm and Spaaij 2017; Joosse 2015).

Background on Research:

- First social network analysis of lone-actors to date: Social network analysis (SNA) approaches underutilized in terrorism studies (Perliger and Pedahzur 2011).
- Examines the role that *relational ties* play in the escalation towards violence among LATs in the 24 months prior to their first attack, and how they are influenced by their social, support, and ideological networks.
- Working paper available on tsas.ca, and an article version of this research has been accepted for publication in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (with 2020 publication date).

What is Social Network Analysis?:

- A collection of techniques that explore the structure and patterns of social relations among individuals and their larger networks.
- Focuses upon *relational data* (ties between actors).



Data and Methods:

- Data were gathered from open-sources (biographies, court documents, police documents, news and media sources) on two case studies of lone-wolf terrorists: **Timothy McVeigh** and **Michael Zehaf-Bibeau**.
- Relational ties across four different types of networks were coded for the 24 months prior to the commission of the LAT's first act of terrorist violence.
- Network actors were categorized by their relationship with the LAT: (1) acquaintances, (2) friends/co-workers, and (3) family.

Case Study: Timothy McVeigh

- American far-right terrorist, enmeshed in gun-show circuit and far-right anti-government ideologies.
- Detonated a home-made bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Building on April 19th, 1995, killing 168 and injuring over 600 individuals.
- Motivated by perceived injustices surrounding disastrous US government intervention at Waco in 1993 (among other factors).



Case Study: Michael Zehaf-Bibeau

- October 2014: Shot and killed Cpl. Nathan Cirillo who was standing guard at the Canadian War Memorial in Ottawa
- Entered parliament building, where he was shot and killed by security personnel.



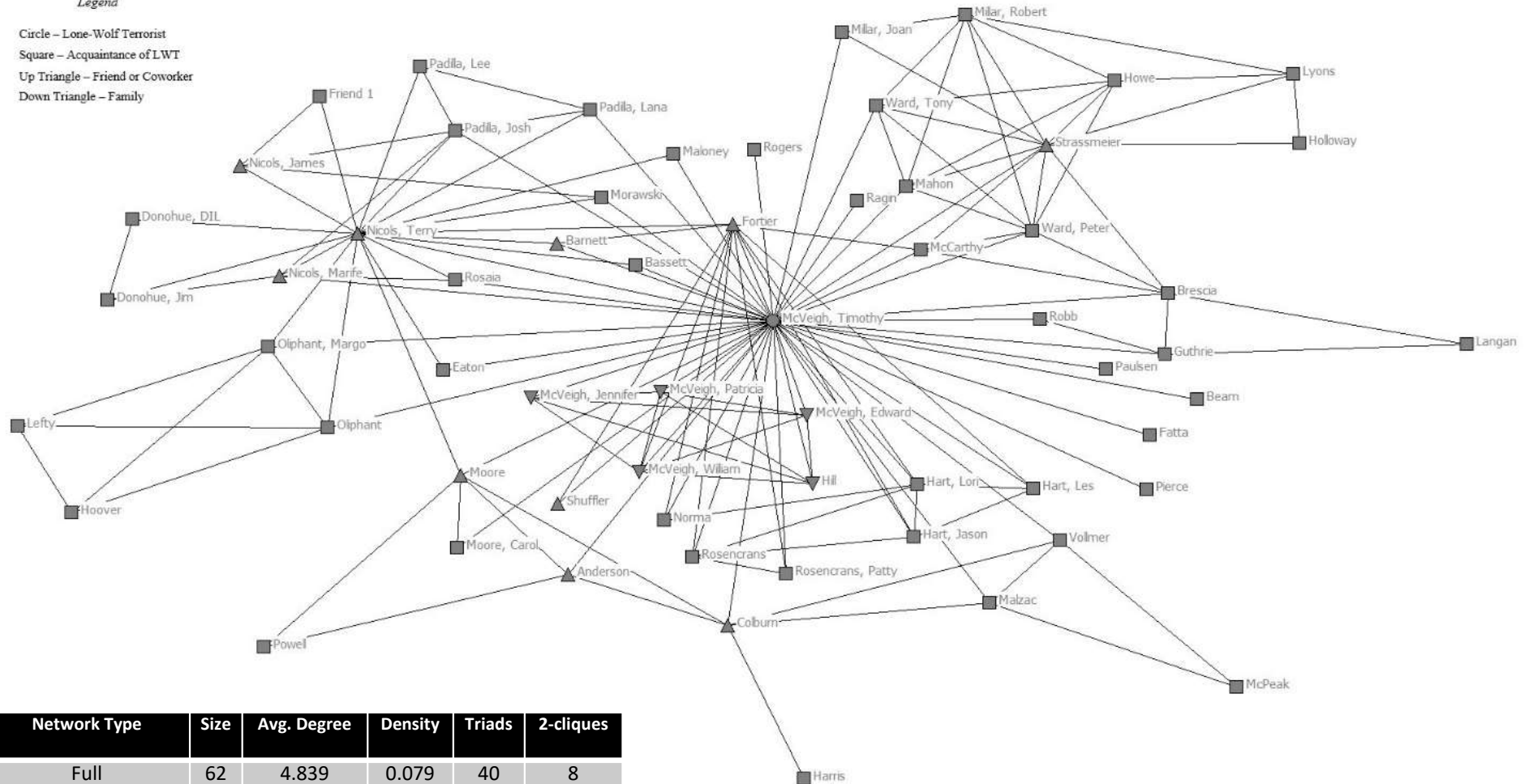
Types of Analyzed Networks:

- Full network (Undirected):
 - Individuals where there was sufficient evidence of some form of repeated or sustained relationship with LWT. Incidental or passing contact not coded.
- Ideology network (Undirected):
 - Person-to-person (face-to-face or virtual) discussion of ideological, radical, or extremist views that ***does not*** necessarily involve the escalation towards violent action.

Types of Analyzed Networks (cont'd):

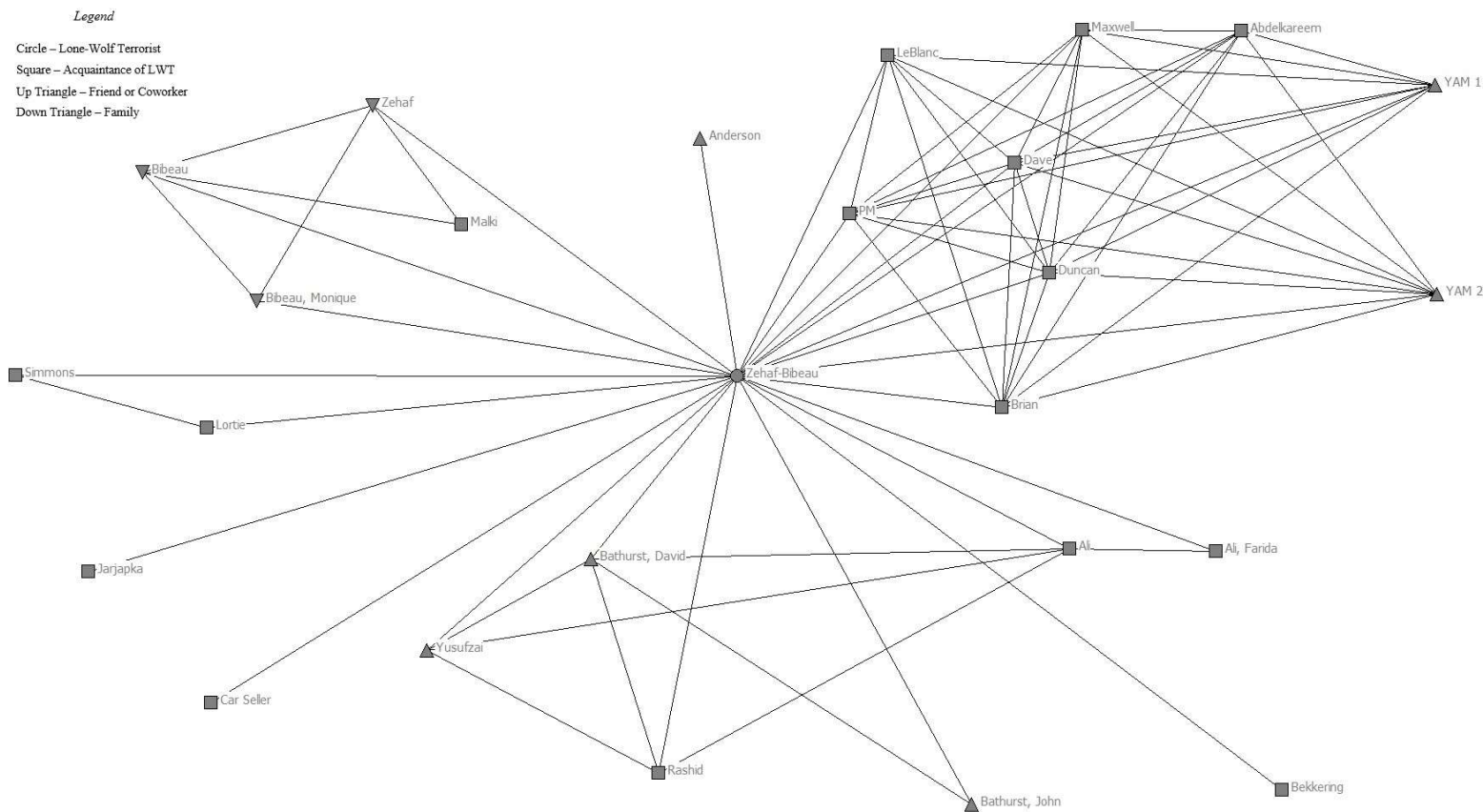
- Signaling network (Directed):
 - Purposeful or unintentional signaling of the LWT's intention to plan or execute an act of terrorist violence. **Litmus test**: would a reasonable and objective third party be alarmed enough to call the police if that information was shared with them?
- Support network (Directed):
 - Direct support that either intentionally or unintentionally aids in the planning, commission, or execution of an act of terrorist violence (e.g., land/storage, money, training, information, safe houses, moral/legal/spiritual guidance or justification).

Circle – Lone-Wolf Terrorist
Square – Acquaintance of LWT
Up Triangle – Friend or Coworker
Down Triangle – Family



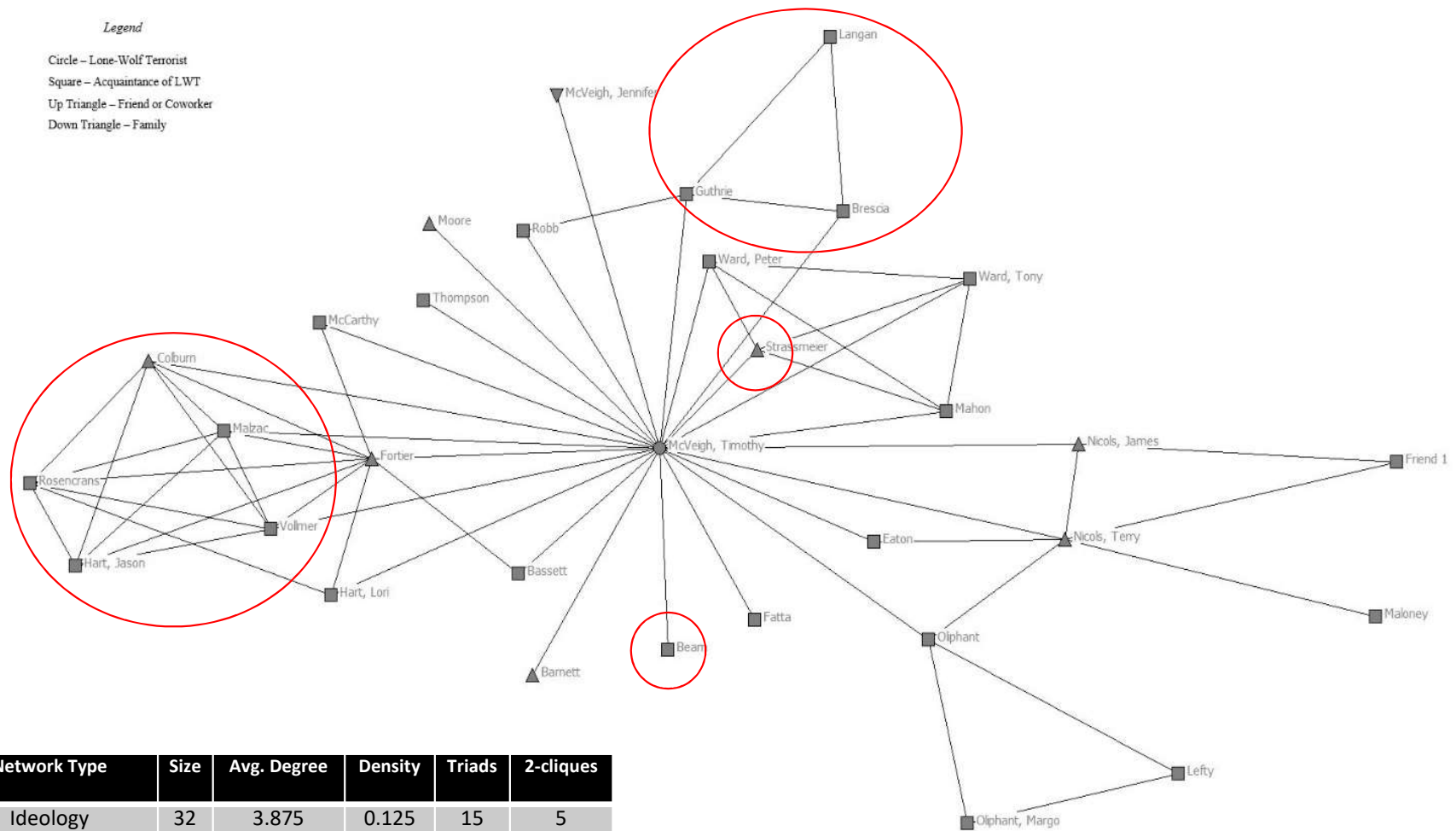
LAT	Network Type	Size	Avg. Degree	Density	Triads	2-cliques
McVeigh	Full	62	4.839	0.079	40	8

Zehaf-Bibeau – Full Network



LAT	Network Type	Size	Avg. Degree	Density	Triads	2-cliques
Z-B	Full	26	5.662	0.218	10	2

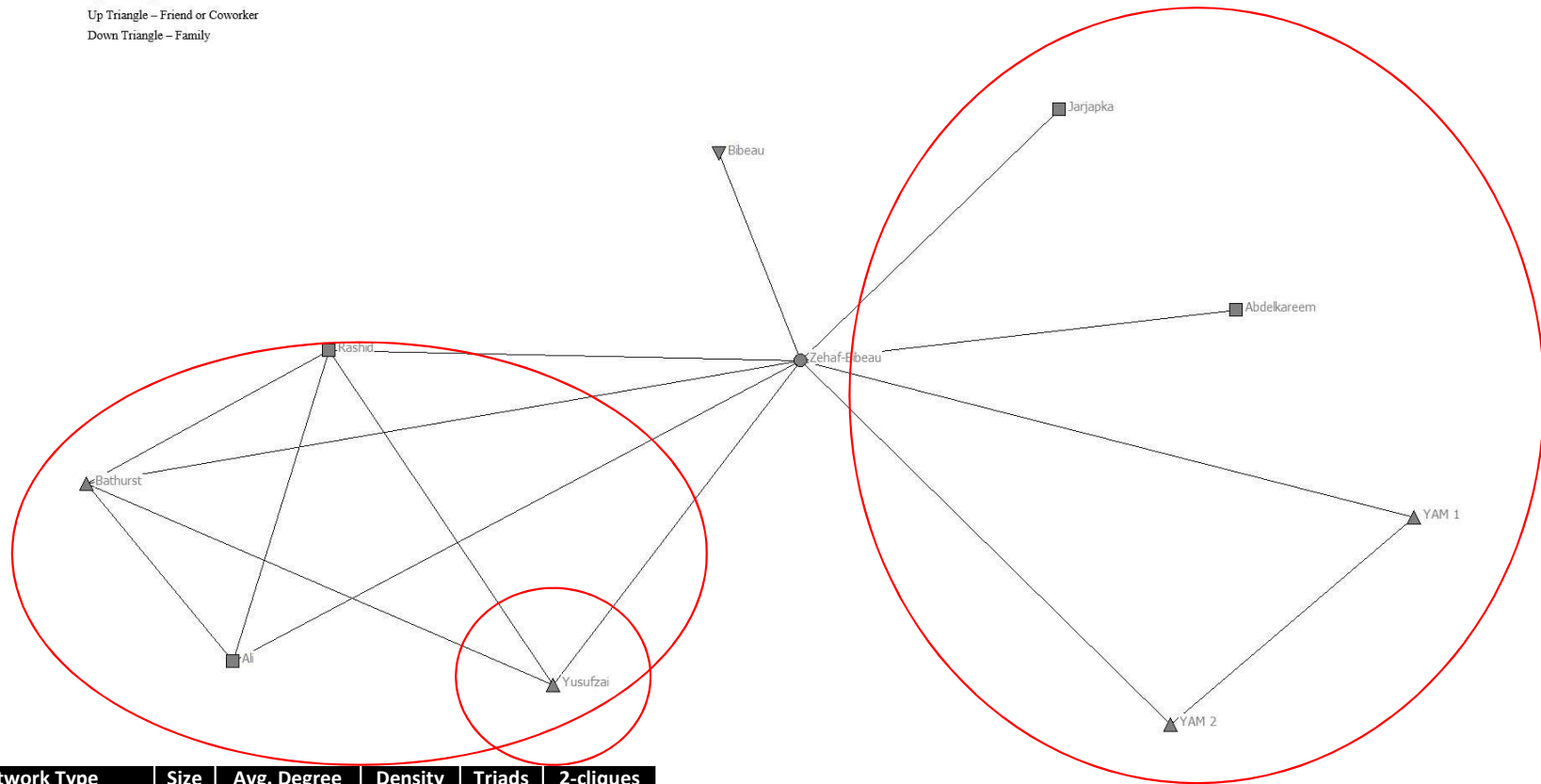
McVeigh – Ideology Network



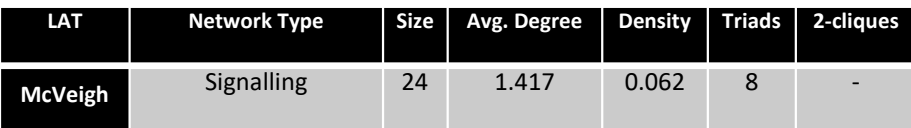
Zehaf-Bibeau – Ideology Network

Legend

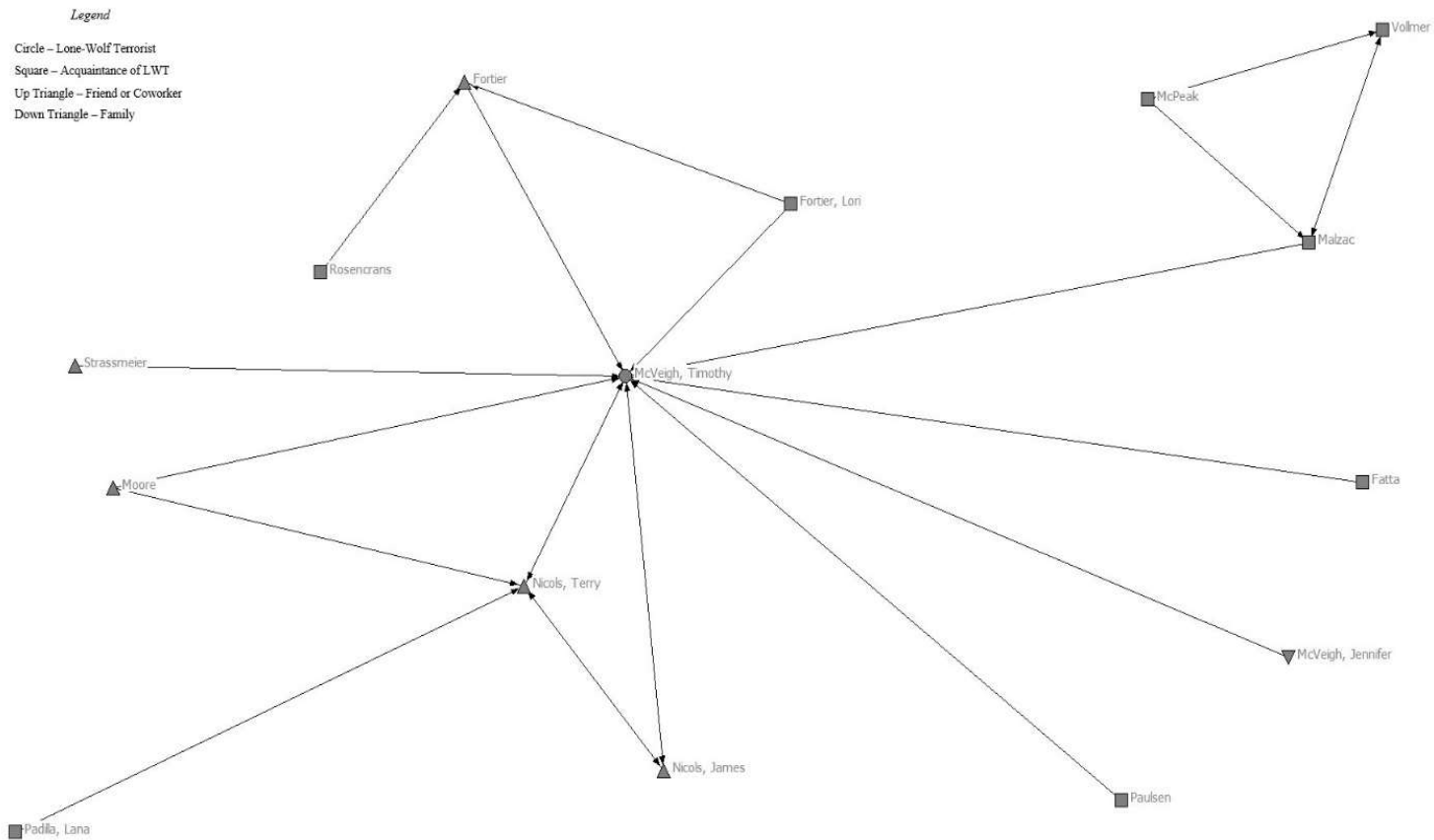
Circle – Lone-Wolf Terrorist
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LAT	Network Type	Size	Avg. Degree	Density	Triads	2-cliques
Z-B	Ideology	10	3.000	0.333	3	-



McVeigh – Support Network



LAT	Network Type	Size	Avg. Degree	Density	Triads	2-cliques
McVeigh	Support	15	1.467	0.105	4	-

Discussion of Findings

1. *Social connections **matter** to lone-actors:*

- *Multiple* small-group and person-to-person dynamics played a role in the radicalization towards violence for McVeigh and Zehaf-Bibeau.
- Wide-scale discussion of ideological material with friends and acquaintances – an evolutionary and ongoing process.

Discussion of Findings

2. *Lone-actors like to talk:*

- McVeigh's signaling network prior to committing an act of violence (38.7% of overall network had prior knowledge). Similar findings from Zehaf-Bibeau's network (19.2% of overall network had prior knowledge).
- Information on the attacks tended to be shared from person-to-person, rather than in small groups.



Discussion of Findings:

3. *Lone-actors rely on friends and acquaintances for ideological and material support:*

- Roughly a quarter of McVeigh and Zehaf-Bibeau's overall networks provided some form of material or non-material support to the lone-wolves.
- Acquaintances (McVeigh) and friends/co-workers (Zehaf-Bibeau) emerged as most important for ideological discussions.

Policy Suggestions*:

- *Social networks matter*: Lone-actors do not radicalize, plan, or operate in complete social isolation. **The “lone-actor” moniker is misleading and self-defeating.**
- *Lone-actors tend to be operationally lax*: they like to talk, broadcast their intentions, and leave trails for those who know what to look for. **This is markedly different from other forms of “traditional” terrorism (e.g., security > efficiency)**
- All of this suggests that **effective detection and interdiction strategies (particularly online) can be developed.**

Thank you!

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References

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Study Limitations

1. Reliance on secondary and open-source data
 - Data triangulation used to mitigate this as much as possible.
2. Scarcity of quality relational data.
3. The problem of “dark networks”.
4. At this stage, findings are not generalizable.
5. Difficulties in comparing across networks:
 - Heterogeneity of terrorist ideologies and actors.
 - The role of the Internet in radicalization towards violence and acquiring support (Hamm and Spaaij 2017).

McVeigh – Actor-level Centrality

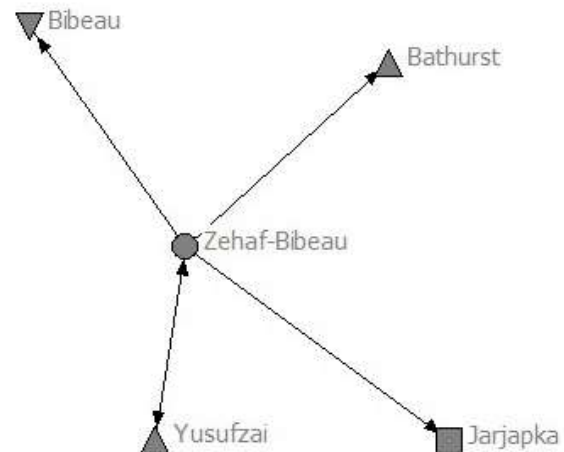
Network	Node	Degree	nCloseness	nEigenvector
Full	Timothy McVeigh	46.000	0.803	0.806
	Terry Nicols	19.000	0.555	0.363
	Michael Fortier	12.000	0.508	0.318
	Andreas Strassmeier	11.000	0.504	0.29
	Peter Ward	8.000	0.492	0.227
	Roger Moore	6.000	0.492	0.176
	Remaining nodes (n = 58)	1.000-6.000	0.321-0.484	0.017-0.199
Network	Node	Degree	nCloseness	nEigenvector
Ideology	Timothy McVeigh	24.00	0.816	0.732
	Michael Fortier	9.00	0.534	0.484
	Terry Nicols	6.00	0.525	0.188
	Steven Colburn	6.00	0.508	0.404
	Dennis Malzac	6.00	0.508	0.404
	Clark Vollmer	6.00	0.508	0.404
	Remaining nodes (n = 26)	1.00-4.00	0.333-0.508	0.046-0.404

Network	Node	OutDeg	InDeg	nOutClose	nInClose
Communication	Timothy McVeigh	17.000	2.000	0.793	0.267
	Terry Nicols	7.000	2.000	0.561	0.267
	James Nicols	4.000	2.000	0.523	0.267
	Michael Fortier	4.000	2.000	0.303	0.374
	Steven Colburn	2.000	2.000	0.267	0.280
	Remaining nodes (n = 19)	0.000	1.000-2.000	0.250	0.271
Network	Node	OutDeg	InDeg	nOutClose	nInClose
Support	Dennis Malzac	2.000	2.000	0.304	0.280
	Lori Fortier	2.000	0.000	0.304	0.250
	Francis McPeak	2.000	0.000	0.304	0.250
	Roger Moore	2.000	0.000	0.292	0.250
	Timothy McVeigh	2.000	10.000	0.280	0.778
	Terry Nicols	2.000	4.000	0.280	0.519
	James Nicols	2.000	2.000	0.280	0.483
	Remaining nodes (n = 8)	1.000	0.000-2.000	0.280-0.286	0.250-0.280

Zehaf-Bibeau – Signalling Network

Legend

- Circle – Lone-Wolf Terrorist
- Square – Acquaintance of LWT
- Up Triangle – Friend or Coworker
- Down Triangle – Family



Zehaf-Bibeau – Support Network

Legend

- Circle – Lone-Wolf Terrorist
- Square – Acquaintance of LWT
- Up Triangle – Friend or Coworker
- Down Triangle – Family

