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Norway's terrorist attacks: Not the Usual Suspect

By Jenna Park

Synopsis

The recent terrorist attacks in Norway clearly demonstrate that radicalisation does not belong exclusively to one sector of the ideological spectrum. It reminds us of the danger of subscribing to generalisations and stereotypes.

Commentary

22 JULY 2011 may well go down in history as Norway's own Day of Infamy. It started off with an explosion at the city centre near the government building in Oslo which resulted in at least eight casualties. A few hours later, a second attack occurred in Utoya, an island 30 kilometres north-west of Oslo. A gunman disguised in a police uniform intruded into a youth camp organised by the ruling Labour Party and began gunning down the participants with automatic weapons in a shooting spree that lasted over an hour. By the time the carnage was over, at least 69 youths died on the spot.

Investigations revealed this gunman to be behind the earlier bombing in Oslo, and government officials of Norway described this twin attack as the deadliest in the country since World War Two.

Not the Usual Suspect

When the news of the back-to-back attacks first surfaced, Western newswires reacted with a kneejerk and predictable response: blame Al Qaeda or other Islamist terrorist groups. Many ascribed Norway's involvement in NATO operations in Afghanistan as the possible motive behind the attack. However, this quickly proved to be unfounded as pictures emerged of a 32-year-old Norwegian male as the perpetrator of the attacks.

Blonde, fair skinned and blue-eyed, Anders Behring Breivik was arguably the very antithesis of an Al Qaeda operative. Further details soon established him as an extremist right-wing Christian fundamentalist, with strong anti-Muslim views and staunch opposition against multiculturalism. Breivik was not a mere passive right-wing ideologue, but was actually a paying member of the youth wing of Norway's right-wing populist Progress Party, from 1999 to 2004.

Breivik's descent into terrorism serves as a significant reminder against the tendency to view Al Qaeda and Islamist extremists as the sole source of terrorism. Without doubt, 9/11 propelled Al Qaeda to the top of every security agency's agenda and cemented its leading position amongst terrorist organisations. Nonetheless, one only has to recall the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing by Timothy McVeigh to realise that a terrorist act carried out by a radicalised individual is not confined to one narrow and fixed segment of the ideological spectrum. The

stark reality which Norwegians woke up to on 23 July 2011 is that the country faces a clear and present terrorist threat from homegrown right wing extremists like Breivik.

A key component in the counter-terrorism effort is dealing with the problem of radicalisation. It is perhaps axiomatic to state that a terrorist act is but a product of a radicalised mind, be it right wing or left wing. Fundamentally, an individual travelling through the 'radical pathway' first undergoes a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement from society. This leads to a perceived sense of injustice which eventually develops into the formation of a binary worldview – that is 'us' versus 'them' and absolutely nothing in between.

Such binary world view can be reinforced by subscription to a persuasive and emotional historical narrative. For Islamist extremists, it is the restoration of the glory of the Islamic Caliphate; for Breivik it was to liken himself to the Knights Templar in a struggle against Muslims and 'cultural marxists'. These factors may cause the radicalised individual to develop a sense of heroism which propels him to carry out an act of martyrdom against the perceived enemy.

Implications

While the problem is complex, it is imperative for societies to make significant efforts to nip radicalisation in the bud. This is not without its challenges. In an age of globalisation, it is inevitable that human capital will continue to move across borders. It will be naïve to assume that every person will welcome with open arms co-existence with neighbours with multiple cultural backgrounds, and in this sense, the emergence of another anti-multiculturalist like Breivik cannot be ruled out. However, a closer analysis of Breivik's case reveals some valuable lessons which may be helpful in averting another similar catastrophe.

Firstly, radicalised individuals often use cyberspace as a medium to ventilate their views. Investigations now reveal that Breivik openly expressed his hatred towards foreigners on various social media and Internet websites, which included a 1,500-page manifesto that set down in chilling detail his preparations for the attack. While cyberspace is too infinite to be completely policed, such revelations highlight the need for security agencies to have adequate resources and capabilities to be able to detect credible signs of radicalism online. Internet users can also play a role by alerting the authorities to any contents on social media or online correspondences which exhibit the compelling signs of radicalisation.

Secondly, counter-terrorism requires a whole-of-society effort, and every citizen must remain vigilant against radicalisation and the threat of terrorism as a whole. In this regard, the actions of the Norwegian farm supplier who immediately alerted the police of her earlier sale of six tonnes of fertiliser must be lauded. It enabled Norwegian Police to quickly establish the identity of Breivik as a suspect in the incident.

Thirdly, this tragedy reminds us of the danger of subscribing to generalisations and stereotypes. We must always be mindful that radicalisation and the terrorist threat can emanate from all quarters of society, lest we fall into the same grave error as The Sun, which published a headline reading "Al Qaeda Massacre: Norway's 9/11".

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