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After Norway's terrorist attacks: Time to refocus Priorities

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Synopsis

The chain of events after the recent terrorist attacks in Oslo tests our ability to tackle the issue of terrorism a decade after September 11. Have the authorities truly learnt anything in dealing with the ideologies and motivations behind acts of terror?

Commentary

THE RECENT terrorist attacks by Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik have come as a shock to the international community and raised many new questions about the nature and motivations of modern-day terrorism. A car bomb explosion in a government district where the prime minister's office was located was followed by Breivik's shooting rampage at a youth camp on Utoya island, resulting in the loss of 69 innocent lives. Members of the country's ruling Labour Party were the main targets in both attacks. As the audience was still reeling from the aftermath of the atrocities, it was revealed that Breivik was motivated by extreme rightist ideology and is vehemently against 'Marxism', multiculturalism and what he termed as 'Islamic colonisation' of Europe.

What is actually 'terrorism'?

While the terrorist attacks by Breivik highlighted several seemingly new dimensions to the threat of terrorism in this contemporary age, they are not unprecedented. History has shown that acts of terrorism by right-wing radicals have occurred on numerous occasions. In fact, terrorism tactics have been used throughout history to serve all sorts of purposes and ideologies, ranging from left-wing radicalism to religious fanaticism to the protection of the environment.

Terrorism can be defined as the intentional use or threatened use of force against non-combatants for the purpose, though not exclusively, of changing a certain policy or situation. Regardless of the perpetrator, once adopted as a tactic, the terrorist act is a serious crime. The political climate is a strong determinant in pushing groups and individuals to use violence as a tool, including terrorism as a tactic.

The term 'terrorist' has also been used as a political tool to label many different actors over time, from states to insurgents, separatists and activists. It is also ultimately power politics that decides who and what is considered as a serious terrorist threat. While the post-September 11 world was preoccupied with terrorism motivated by radical Islamist ideology, Breivik's terroristic actions present a jarring inconsistency with the current politico-security narrative: terrorism remains a tactic that is concurrently employed around the world by other actors aside from the usual suspects from Al Qaeda and affiliates.

The dangers of all forms of 'hate ideologies'

No matter what the ideological motivation is, terrorism leads to the loss of lives and a climate of insecurity. The influence and potential danger of any hate ideology becomes greater after the act of terror has been perpetrated as the attack amplifies its underlying ideology to a larger audience. The consequences are likely to be more lethal than the attack itself if left to spiral as the ideology spreads its influence. Unfortunately, there is much bickering over who in fact were responsible for motivating Breivik's ideas and actions. It is futile to start pointing fingers at certain communities or political groups as being accountable for Breivik's brand of terrorism.

Lessons learnt?

The authorities need to move faster than Breivik, who has shifted to a 'propaganda phase' even in solitary confinement, crafting out speeches and requests to the government. Breivik's ideology, marking his brand of terrorism, consisted of key elements that need to be addressed immediately: firstly, xenophobia and anti-Islam sentiments couched within the right-wing discourse; secondly, the pitting of Christianity against Islam, through the narrative of a 21st century Crusade; and thirdly, the idea that violence has become the only solution for social change as governments and religious leaders become too lenient and sympathetic to the 'onset of Islam'.

The individuals associated with the anti-Islam movement worldwide have consciously disassociated themselves from Breivik, as have the proponents of right-wing politics. More needs to be done.

The authorities need to firmly address the impact of the 1,500-page manifesto of Breivik's group and the summary video version allegedly produced by him; they are already being widely circulated in the cyber domain. While completely removing it will not be feasible, the contents of the manifesto ought to be dissected in order to counter its ideas. Certainly, the issue is not to assess whether its author committed a 'crime of plagiarism' by copying the words of the Unabomber.

More critically, the public needs to be informed, through community engagement initiatives, of the obvious flaws, constructed 'truths' and dangers of the ideas espoused by Breivik and the still unknown members of his organisation. The unfortunate events have taken place at the same time that the 'failure of multiculturalism' is being debated and right wing political parties are gaining popularity in Europe. While his violent actions per se may be resoundingly condemned, some elements of his ideology may garner more sympathisers. Hence, steps have to be taken immediately before new extremist groups emerge as a result of this hate ideology.

The priority ought to be on uniting the broader community against such hate ideologies and inoculating the impressionable from being influenced. What is certain is that Breivik's motivations fall into the same category as all the other ideologies that advocate violence, particularly against innocent lives. Efforts should be channeled into preventing the hate ideology from spreading further.

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