

Opinion / Editorial Opinion**Echoes of Oklahoma in Scandinavia horror**

Terrorism experts have been so focused on the Islamist threat that other types of terrorism have fallen off the radar screen.



HO / REUTERS

Anders Behring Breivik in a uniform of his own design.

By: Ronald Crelinsten Published on Mon Jul 25 2011

The massive bombing in Oslo's government district and the horrific shooting at the youth camp on Utoya Island that followed has shocked the Norwegian nation and the world. As the attacks unfolded, the global twitterati began immediately speculating about who could be responsible.

Given the multiple attacks and its scale, many understandably thought of Al Qaeda or some other Islamist group. Several reasons were proffered:

- Norwegian papers had published the infamous Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammed.
- A Norwegian court had recently ordered the deportation of a Muslim cleric who founded the Iraqi Kurdish Islamist group, Ansar al-Islam.
- Norway had sent troops to Iraq and to Afghanistan and had participated in the campaign in Libya.
- A previously unknown group, Helpers of the Global Jihad, claimed responsibility, as did Ansar al-Islam.
- An Islamist extremist had launched an ultimately failed double bombing in Stockholm in December 2010 and one analyst pointed out that Al Qaeda was focused on Scandinavia.

Furthermore, the Norwegian police initially stated that the attacker was likely a foreigner.

As word began to spread that a man had been arrested on Utoya Island and that he was a blond

Norwegian, some experts continued to argue that it could still be an Islamist attack. Again, this was not implausible given that more and more converts to Islam are becoming involved in such attacks. The British tabloid the *Sun*, on its Saturday morning front page, even ran the headline: “Norway’s 9/11” with a smaller title above it, in red: “‘Al-Qaeda’ Massacre.”

While the police did not officially release the name of the arrested man, his photo, name and Twitter account and Facebook page were soon online.

From his tweets and other information available, it became clear that Anders Behring Breivik, 32, was a right-wing extremist. While one might argue that he could have acquired the expertise to carry out such a devastating attack in an Islamist training camp or from an Islamist website, there are aspects of the attack that just do not fit with such a possibility.

First, the location of the attacks. I well remember in 1995 when news of the Oklahoma City bombing broke. Speculation was rife that it was an Islamist attack. The first World Trade Center bombing had occurred quite recently — in 1993 — and people were becoming more and more aware of the threat of Islamic-inspired terrorism. What struck me at the time, however, was why the attack was in Oklahoma City of all places. This was not typical of Al Qaeda, which preferred attacks where media concentration is high. Similarly, the Oslo attack was in the government district of the capital city, not the popular tourist areas nearby. And Utoya Island is a remote area known mostly to locals.

Second, the targeting. Like the Oklahoma City bombing, which targeted a government building, the Norwegian attacks appear to be directed at the Norwegian government. The Oslo bomb exploded outside the prime minister’s office. Utoya Island is owned by the ruling Labour party and the party had organized the youth camp. The prime minister was supposed to speak at the camp and a former prime minister had just spoken there. While we now know that the motive for this has a transnational/European dimension, the actor was clearly local and the attack was domestic, not international.

Third, history. Norway, like Sweden, has long struggled with right-wing extremism and terrorism. Neo-Nazi violence is a long-standing problem. Many of the best research publications about right-wing and neo-Nazi terrorism and violent extremism come from Norwegian researchers.

In addition, it soon emerged that the attacker had recently bought a large quantity of ammonium nitrate, the same ingredient used by Timothy McVeigh in 1995.

In view of all this, it is likely that the July 21 attacks in Norway are that country’s Oklahoma City, not its 9/11. As we saw in 1995, people rushed to judgment and assumed that the attacks were related to the Islamist threat. If anything, this attack is a violent reaction to a perceived Islamic threat: Breivik’s blog speaks of multiculturalism as a hate ideology, which he calls “cultural Marxism,” and considers multicultural policy an existential threat to Europe by “enabling Islamization.”

It is still too early to tell if Norwegian intelligence lost sight of the right-wing threat because of the pressing demands of the ongoing struggle with violent Islamist extremism and radicalization around the world. The Norwegian Police Security Service’s annual threat assessment noted an increase in right-wing extremist activity in 2010, but concluded that it “will not represent a serious threat to Norwegian society in 2011.” To be fair, if Breivik was indeed acting alone (though he claimed in court on Monday that there were other cells), he might have fallen through the cracks anyway. Lone wolves

are notoriously hard to detect and pre-empt.

Friday's devastating incident in Norway should be a warning. Problems long considered dormant can flare up suddenly, especially in a context where fear, suspicion, paranoia, anger and frustration are widespread. Those who feel threatened by Muslims, foreigners or immigrants can even use the threat of Islamist terrorism, violence, extremism and radicalization to justify their own brand of terrorism.

In Breivik's case, his violence was of a particularly virulent kind, targeting children and youth. McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, claimed he had not intended to harm the children in the daycare centre in the Murrah Federal Building, saying he had not known they were there. The attack on Utoya Island amounts to a kind of "politicide" or an attempt to eliminate an entire political class — the future politicians of the Norwegian Labour party.

The greatest challenge of our current threat environment is precisely its complexity. Let us hope that we do not succumb to tunnel vision and miss possible clues that older, oft-forgotten threats are persisting or perhaps resurfacing, sometimes in reaction to newer or evolving threats. We cannot let our guard down, nor can we afford to focus all our analytic resources on one particular kind of threat.

Here in Canada, CSIS's latest annual report makes no mention of right-wing extremism, focusing primarily on the Islamist threat and making passing mention of "eco-extremists, aboriginal extremists and other issue-motivated groups." In a recent interview with *Macleans*' magazine, Prime Minister Stephen Harper singled out "Islamic extremist terrorism" as the most obvious threat that our country faces.

Terrorism experts, counterterrorism practitioners, politicians and the media everywhere have been so focused on the Islamist threat that other types of terrorism and extremism have fallen off the radar screen. No policy-maker or analyst can afford to be blinded by the obvious or be distracted from the total picture by the flavour of the month, year or even decade.

Ronald Crelinsten is senior research associate at the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, and adjunct professor in the Doctor of Social Sciences Program at Royal Roads University. He is an executive board member of the Canadian International Council's Victoria Branch and the author of *Counterterrorism* (Polity Press).