

THE NORWAY TERRORISM ATTACK - A STUDY OF A LONE WOLF OPERATION

Dr. Gordon Woo, RMS Catastrophist, provides his comments on the July 22, 2011 Norway terrorist attacks.

Since 9/11, many dozens of terrorist plots, including those planned by right-wing extremists, have been interdicted in the Western democracies. In particular, infiltration of extremist fascist groups by the Western intelligence services has been successful in preventing any right-wing macro-terror plot, such as a possible repeat of the 1995 Oklahoma bombing. A continuing concern to the FBI is the individual offender or what counterterrorism experts coined as a lone wolf. A lone wolf is a single individual driven to hateful attacks based on a particular set of beliefs without a larger group's knowledge or support. The FBI believes that most U.S. domestic attacks are carried out by lone wolves to promote their own grievances and agendas.

Even in Western countries with the most effective and well-resourced counterterrorism services, catching lone wolf terrorists is difficult and haphazard. With a minimal social network of plotters, the chance may only be 1 in 4. Accordingly in February 2010, CIA director Leon Panetta reckoned the lone wolf strategy to be the main terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland.

In a small outlying peaceful country such as Norway, where the authorities ranked the terrorist threat as low, and dismissed right-wing extremism as not a serious threat, there would only have been a very slim chance of stopping a lone wolf terrorist through intelligence gathering.

Capability of Lone Wolf Attacks

If a lone wolf manages to evade detection by the intelligence services, the amount of harm he or she could cause depends crucially on the level of target security. As a nation priding itself as an open society, the level of urban security has been kept purposely low in Norway. In contrast with Downing Street or the White House, the Norwegian Prime Minister's office was publicly accessible with minimal ID and no baggage checks. A plan to construct barriers protecting the central complex of government buildings was due to be implemented in a few months time, after a decade of post 9/11 procrastination.

A tragic price for such societal openness was paid on July 22, 2011, when a major terrorist attack was mounted against the ruling Labour party of Norway by right-wing extremist Islamophobe Anders Behring Breivik. The head of the Norwegian Police Security Service, Janne Kristiansen, believes he acted completely on his own.

The large scale of Breivik's successful attack was made possible by the general lack of terrorism risk awareness of a country without any notable terrorism experience within its own borders. The Norwegian government tolerated outspoken anti-American diatribes of mullah Krekar, head of Ansar-al-Islam, who claimed he was an insurance policy against Islamist attacks in Norway. A few rather minor Jihadi incidents have occurred, such as the firing of gunshots in the Oslo synagogue in 2006; the arrest in 2008 of Somalis for terrorist fundraising on behalf of Al Shabab; and the arrest in 2010 of three Norwegian residents with Al-Qaeda links.

Preparations for an attack could be conducted patiently by an ethnic Norwegian without interference or obstruction from the authorities, or tip-offs from vigilant fellow citizens. Even so, his purchase of chemicals did bring him briefly to the attention of authorities. Rather like the American lone wolf Unabomber, the educated Breivik wrote his own lengthy rambling political manifesto, which shows that very careful thought and systematic scheduling went into the meticulous planning of his entire operation. The bomb attack in Oslo drew in police resources, which facilitated his subsequent assault on the Labour party youth summer camp on the island of Utoeya. Dressed as a policeman, he was able to shoot more of the defenseless teenagers. The most cunning terrorists are the most dangerous.

For a homegrown right-wing terrorist intent on perpetrating a spectacular domestic attack, Norway was an ideal safe haven, as Afghanistan was for Al-Qaeda before 9/11. Thus there were no constraints or ID checks against the procurement of 6 tons of artificial fertilizer from an agricultural supply company. Half of this quantity was found at Breivek's farm. Allowing for some proper agricultural usage, and some for bomb testing, he might have packed as much as two tons into the delivery van that was parked close to the energy ministry.

In the more terror-prone U.S. or the principal countries of Western Europe, it would require a group of conspirators to acquire several tons of fertilizer, without attracting the attention of security services or the suspicion of vigilant citizens. In 2004, five terrorists were caught in the U.K. stockpiling a ton of fertilizer and planning bombing raids. Both the quantity of fertilizer, supposedly purchased for gardening purposes, and the prolonged duration of its storage, raised public alarm.

Lessons for the Future

Dr. Magnus Ranstorp, Research Director of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at Swedish National Defense College, and one of RMS' longstanding terrorist experts, has pointed out in the wake of the Oslo attacks that counterterrorism intelligence services across Europe are rightly concerned about the lone wolf. European security services will now be trying to glean as much information as possible from their Norwegian counterparts.

In seeking to draw lessons from Oslo on the capability of lone wolves, account needs to be taken of the much tougher counterterrorism environment in those Western democracies, such as the U.S., U.K., France, and Germany, which have already experienced violent terrorist threats, and responded accordingly by strengthening defensive measures.

A copycat lone wolf attack in the larger Western countries would not thus have the same latitude and opportunity to perpetrate a similar amount of carnage and destruction. However, for European countries with low terrorism threat perception, such as Norway, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland, lax counterterrorism security may permit right-wing extremists to launch spectacular terrorist attacks.

Dr. Gordon Woo, RMS

Dr. Woo is a catastrophist on the Emerging Risk Solutions team at RMS, where he is both a catastrophe risk consultant and the chief architect for the terrorism model. He is internationally recognized as a leading international expert on terrorism risk, and has lectured to IAEA and NATO. Author of the book, "The Mathematics of Natural Catastrophes," Gordon graduated as the top mathematician of his year at Cambridge University, and completed his PhD at MIT as a Kennedy Scholar, after which he was elected a junior fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows. He is listed in Risk Who's Who.