

Terrorists Are Sane

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According to Geir Lippestad, his lawyer, Anders Breivik appears to be insane. If this non medical assessment proves correct then the Islamophobic and extremist nationalist Norwegian mass killer will be one of the first terrorists in the entire history of political violence who has not been psychiatrically and psychologically normal.

Interestingly, it is only in recent years that academic research has finally laid to rest the persistent and popular notion that terrorists are predisposed to insanity or psychiatric or psychological abnormality. Whatever the cause terrorists pursue and - in those cases where they survive the terrorist attacks they carry out - whenever they are examined by medical experts their sanity and normality is invariably proven.

Even Nazi war criminals were eventually shown to be psychologically healthy and normal and indistinguishable from a sample of average American civilians.

Terrorism scholar Andrew Silke has done more than most to explain that psychological abnormality or anomaly is rarely a trait in terrorists and is certainly not evidenced simply because terrorist violence 'runs contrary to the accepted standards of society'. Instead, rigorous examinations conducted over three decades point to the fact that terrorists are perfectly rational and approach their chosen tasks in much the same way as soldiers.

I should add that all of the terrorists I have investigated or researched over the last thirty years have all been entirely sane. Indeed, some of them are now considered sufficiently stable to hold high political office.

On the face of it Breivik appears entirely rational as well. Having just ploughed through his 1500 page political 'manifesto' and reviewed the terrorist tactics he employed on Friday 22 July, it also strikes me that he possesses outstanding organisational and planning skills that would be highly valued in society if he put them to conventional use - most obviously in the Norwegian military.

Of course we should wait for a full medical examination of Breivik before coming to any firm conclusions about his mental health. However, I am compelled to write this article now because Lippestad's premature pronouncement of his client's insanity has naturally become a headline and a media mantra that is likely to set the tone for the coverage of the case for the foreseeable future.

"This whole case indicates that he's insane," Lippestad told a press conference but when pressed by reporters he appeared to lack any solid basis for his assessment. In fact when he described Breivik's behaviour and his doctrine of politics and political violence it was clear that Breivik had been talking to his solicitor in the same measured tones he uses in his written 'manifesto'. "[Breivik's] in a war and he says that the rest of the world, particularly the Western world don't understand his point of view but in 60 years time we all will understand it" Lippestad said.

Eventually Lippestad concludes that Breivik is insane because he 'is not like any one of us'. But experience suggests that Breivik is 'unlike us' because he has resorted to terrorist violence for exactly the same kind of reasons that terrorists in all kinds of terrorist movements always have done over the last hundred years or more.

More to the point Breivik's manifesto is of a piece with the sentiments and methods Europe's burgeoning violent extremist nationalist network that appears to have sustained his morale during a long process of strategic and tactical terrorist planning.

Lippestad reveals an alarming lack of knowledge of terrorism and of his client's apparent motivation when he says he simply does not understand why Breivik attacked Labour Party members and not 'Islamics' (presumably Muslims). As if again this was somehow evidence of insanity. Instead, by choosing to attack a government building and a Labour Party summer school, Breivik is drawing attention to what many fringe nationalists see as the political failure of mainstream and left-wing politicians to confront the Muslim threat. So-called appeasers of the "Islamification of Europe" have become as hated as Muslim activists and therefore face the same kind of attacks.

Breivik can claim to have followed a long tradition of terrorism target selection that is intended to send a strong message to politicians in an attempt to persuade them to change policy. As leading terrorism scholar Alex Schmid reminds us, terrorism is a form of communication that 'cannot be understood only in terms of violence'. Rather, he suggests, 'it has to be understood primarily in terms of propaganda' in order to penetrate the terrorist's strategic purpose.

This is normal terrorist thinking. Thankfully terrorism is by definition a minority pursuit. If it ever it became commonplace Europe would be facing the kind of civil war Breivik intends he and others like him will eventually trigger.

If we make the mistake of calling terrorists mad we will be in danger of overlooking their extremist politics and their adherence to tried and tested methods of political violence. Significantly, we never make that mistake when dealing with al-Qaeda terrorists so until we get compelling evidence to the contrary let's not do it with extremist nationalist terrorists like Breivik.