

This is an ICSR insight by Research Fellow, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. It originally appeared in The Daily Star, Lebanon.

Anders Breivik's July 22 killing spree in Norway was by no means the first act of far-right terrorism in Europe. The last 12 years have seen attacks or plots in countries including Sweden, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Serbia. Indeed, almost every country on the continent has a neo-Nazi presence and occasionally sees outbreaks of street violence and racially driven attacks.

However, the intellectual background to Breivik's attacks had a unique element which, until recently, had not been seen as an inspiration for terrorism. His was the first serious militant expression of a growing anti-Muslim movement in the West, and emerged in part from a growing atmosphere of distrust driven by conspiracy theory.

Breivik's ideas appear to have been formed from three overlapping themes: an idealized vision of the Crusades; a racial nationalism concerned with preserving white, Nordic culture; and a conspiracy-laden view of Muslims in Europe. However, Breivik is no neo-Nazi. There is no evidence that he glorifies Adolph Hitler or the Third Reich. In his 1,518-page manifesto he is heavily critical of Nazism.

Nor, despite claims made by Norwegian authorities, is Breivik a fundamentalist Christian. He has not claimed divine inspiration and supports science over revelation, describing himself as a "cultural Christian." For Breivik, religion serves as a component of a secular, white European identity he has constructed – one that must prevail if the continent is to survive what he sees as the Islamic threat. This also explains his rejection of inter-racial and cultural marriage, and his desire to fight for the preservation of the "Nordic tribe."

It may be argued that Breivik's obsession with the Crusades and membership in what he calls the "Knights Templar" belies claims to his irreligion, though there may be another explanation for this: It shows commonalities with the British far-right, which is well known for its use of Crusader iconography. Members of the British National Party are often spotted waddling around in Crusader uniforms made of cardboard boxes and old rope. They dress that way not to commemorate Christianity, but to provide a romantic and militaristic historical backdrop to their present political agenda.

The third and final element of Breivik's ideology can most accurately be described as having come from the "anti-jihad" movement which resides on the fringes of conservatism in Europe and the U.S. Breivik is the first to use these ideas to justify terrorism.

Upon first inspection, "anti-jihad" certainly appears to be a noble camp to be in, though how some of its members define this concept reveals where the problem lies. Their movement is not simply working against the global ultra-violence of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates; rather, its advocates regard a significant portion of Muslims in the West as engaged in a jihad, violent or otherwise, to destroy Western civilization. This view is based on an essentialist reading of Islam and Muslims, who are by definition terrorists and religious supremacists. They are immune to the irony of their position, which shares its

view of what constitutes a pious Muslim with Al-Qaeda.

Breivik devotes much of his manifesto to his belief that Muslims in Europe, allied with European political elites, are engaged in a multifaceted conspiracy to rid the continent of its cultural roots, outbreed indigenous populations and eventually replace all the nations with an Islamic state. This concept, referred to as “Islamization,” sprung from ideas developed and popularized by the anti-jihad movement. After the massacre in Norway, a number of its well-known activists were accused of inspiring Breivik.

Among them are Americans Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller. The former runs a blog devoted to tracking “Islamization” in the West, while Geller gained prominence for her role in inflaming the Ground Zero Mosque controversy last year. Closely allied, they have written extensively about the supposed threat of Muslims and the complicity and weakness of Western politicians. They are undoubtedly responsible for helping spread Islamization conspiracy theories, and have also aligned themselves with the U.K.’s English Defense League, a far-right offshoot of the BNP responsible for organizing anti-Muslim marches that often descend into violence.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that all three were cited sympathetically in Breivik’s manifesto, though this does not tell us the whole story. None of them have called for violence to further their cause, and having one’s work cited by a mass murderer is by no means an indictment, nor should it be employed as one.

That is not to say, however, that the sources of Breivik’s inspiration should be ignored. The reactions of some within the anti-jihad movement to his actions illustrate why they happen to be part of the problem. Rather than issuing outright condemnations, many met the attacks with caveats more common to apologists of Islamist terrorism.

For instance, the EDL’s leader Tommy Robinson told The New Yorker magazine shortly after the attack that similar horrors were in our future if politicians continued to ignore the Muslim “elephant in the room.” He predicted that more attacks were likely if he and his allies were not given a platform. Geller, in turn, engaged in crass moral relativism. Describing the liberal youth camp which bore the brunt of Breivik’s madness as having a “pro-Islamic agenda,” she drew moral equivalency between Breivik’s rampage and the alleged brainwashing of young Norwegians to advance the Islamization of their country.

Breivik cannot simply be dismissed as a crazed loner. As his manifesto demonstrates, his ideas were drawn from a wider political milieu. Worryingly, these ideas are beginning to find an audience – with the European far-right already using them to give a quasi-intellectual veneer to their bigotry. As this spreads, it will also serve to bolster Islamists who continue to inflame followers with phony claims of a Western war on Muslims. It is therefore up to Western liberals to confront such anti-Muslim bigotry, before resentment and distrust is allowed to fester more than it already has.

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