



Terror In Stockholm

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Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Europe

Last Friday, an ISIS supporter rammed a truck into a department store in the heart of Stockholm, Sweden, killing four people and injuring 15. That same evening, news broke that Swedish police had arrested a 39-year old man from Uzbekistan for complicity in the attack. By Sunday morning, Swedish media reported that the man's social media account indicated his support for both the Islamic State and the Islamic Party of Liberation, Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Fifteen years ago, Swedish migration authorities faced a problem. They had seen a marked uptick in asylum seekers from Uzbekistan who claimed to be persecuted for their religious beliefs. That was not in itself surprising: Especially after an attempt on President Islam Karimov's life in 1999, the government in Tashkent was well known for repressing Islamic groups that diverged from the country's traditional, tolerant version of Islam.

Remarkably, many of these migrants claimed membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Created in 1953 by the Palestinian cleric Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, HT is a radical Salafi outfit whose main ambition is to create a global Caliphate. In other words, it has the same end goal as ISIS and al-Qaeda, but claims to be working toward that goal peacefully. Its ideology, of course, is virulently anti-Western and anti-Semitic, and even HT acknowledges that at the end stage of their struggle violence may be necessary against those who "stand in the way" of the Caliphate. In Denmark, an HT leader was convicted of inciting hatred after his group published and distributed leaflets urging the murder of Jews.

Why would someone actually claim to belong to an extremist group such as HT when requesting asylum? Well, Swedish authorities had determined that the Uzbek government's targeting of HT was particularly harsh. For human rights reasons, it was out of the question to send peaceful Muslims back to Uzbekistan. In other words, Swedish authorities had enacted directives that practically guaranteed a follower of an extremist Islamist group asylum in the country. HT, of course, knew this and urged its members to keep coming.

Some among the Swedish authorities were well aware of the likely but unintended consequence of this policy: the formation of radical Islamist cells in the country. The only way to change the policy would be to prove that the group was linked to violence or terrorism. Germany banned HT in 2003 on the grounds that its hateful ideology aims to overthrow the constitutional order. But in Sweden, unless HT could be classified as a violent extremist group, Sweden would keep welcoming them.

In later years, it appears that the Swedish Security Police were working to stem the flow of HT members seeking refuge in the country. There are a number of cases where the Security Police have intervened to deny HT sympathizers residence permits. However, regulations still prevent deporting many of these individuals to countries where they risk torture or the death penalty. While information is still sketchy, the Uzbek national in this case was apparently denied a residence permit and went off the grid rather than face deportation. No measures to de-radicalize these followers appear to have been initiated.

Importantly, the fact that the Uzbek national arrested was apparently a supporter both of HT and the Islamic State makes this attack a textbook case of the consequences of failing to define the enemy. When anti-Western and anti-Semitic hatemongers use violence, Western nations deploy thousands of troops and predator drones to kill them abroad. But if the same hatemongers claim to be part of a group that does not find the use of force to be the right tactic at the present time, we seek dialogue with them or provide them refuge. Clearly, in these radical environments, the line between various groups and organizations is permeable at best. Individuals can be part of multiple networks - some violent only in theory, others very much in practice.

Worse, in most Western countries the Islamist ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood are accepted as representatives of a Muslim community that, for the most part, has never supported them, let alone elected them. But because Western states shower their associations with taxpayer money, they acquire the means to exert influence over Muslims and thus impede their integration.

From "war on terror" to "countering violent extremism," Western nations have spent close to two decades making war on either a tactic or a nebulous concept. They have refused to accept that the real issue, just like fascism and communism before it, is the ideology that nurtures hatred of who we are and what we stand for.

By not defining the enemy, we also abandon the brave Muslims who do fight the radical ideology in their midst and work to preserve secular space in the Muslim world. To these Muslims, our attitude is bewildering. To them, it is obvious that one can and must fight the radical Islamist ideology while making clear that this ideology does not represent the broader Muslim community. It should be obvious to us too.

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