

Coming to terms with terror

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How will the terrorist attacks in Norway on 22 July change the country? That question has been put to three social scientists at the University of Stavanger (UiS).

"Norwegians are still in a state of shock," says professor Odd Einar Olsen. "These incidents were so extensive and gruesome that people need time to come to terms with them."

He is very interested to see what content Norway will give to promises made about more openness and [democracy](#) after the car-bombing in Oslo and the massacre at Utøya north of the capital.

"While people have united in sorrow, a crippling consensus has emerged that certain subjects can't be discussed. That's a sinister development which could undermine necessary criticism."

To illustrate his case, Prof Olsen points to the debate on the data storage directive, a [security](#) measure adopted earlier in Norway this year.

"If this discussion had arisen now, it would have been conducted very differently," he maintains. "Opponents would have been much more cautious and unassertive."

He regards that as a major challenge for the future, and fears that the trend will be towards an extension of over-exaggerated surveillance and many additional security measures.

"The media picture is characterised by calls for 'something to be done', and an expansion in security is the response," Prof Olsen notes.

"It's frightening to read articles shrieking for more sharpshooters and special forces with a 'licence to kill'.

"The danger with the crippling consensus is that nobody dares to question what's happening. Society will be transformed. Slowly but surely, we're shifting towards a security regime characterised by intelligence gathering and surveillance."

No greater threat

He is backed by fellow professor Ole Andreas Engen and postdoctoral researcher Bjørn Ivar Kruke, who say the terrorist threat in Norway is no greater than it was before 22 July.

"Although it might seem insensitive and arrogant to say so, little has actually changed after the attacks in Oslo and on Utøya," says Prof Engen.

New measures should therefore be as limited as possible, he argues. Norway has what it needs to guard against threats, in so far as protection from "the unthinkable" is attainable.

The terrorist attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 were followed by a number of security measures in Norway at such locations as airports, ports and embassies. New anti-terror legislation was also adopted by the country, with increased powers extended to the police and defence forces.

"The attacks on the government buildings in [Oslo](#) and the youth camp on Utøya put our emergency response to the test," Dr Kruke adds.

"With hindsight, you can naturally discuss whether the contingency plans were good enough. We must learn from these incidents. New measures must be based on a detailed analysis of the response, and not on ad-hoc action which could quickly create a false sense of security", he says.

"Very clear lines of command and systems are now in place. Within these frameworks, much improvement is naturally possible. The challenge is to get the systems to work well together."

The UiS researchers believe that the police, the police security service (PST) and the Ministry of Justice will have much to answer for in the time to come.

Recurring questions are likely to be security in the government quarter, use of resources in the PST, the police response to the Utøya shootings and security at Utøya Camping.

"However, nothing ever goes smoothly in a crisis," observes Prof Olsen. "That's in the nature of an emergency. But you can discuss whether the failures were serious or to be expected."

In his view, the cost of maintaining full emergency preparedness nationwide and around the clock would be exorbitantly high.

The need for security

"People naturally need to feel secure, but the chance of terrorism in Norway is actually very small," he adds. "Statistically, we should fear cancer, cardiovascular diseases and road accidents."

Asked what Norway should do now, Prof Engen calls for a debate on what societal safety is and should be. "That's a question of the kind of society we want."

He says it will only be possible to say whether the [terrorist attacks](#) will change [Norway](#) positively or negatively once the commission of inquiry has reported and measures are proposed.

In his view, the 2000 report from Norway's commission on the vulnerability of society could provide an important basis for such a debate. It remains the only official document to analyse systematically how vulnerable the Norwegian community is.

But Prof Olsen does not think that a proposal in the report to concentrate resources in a separate ministry of homeland security would be the best solution.

"That solution would also represent a concentration of power which could ultimately undermine security. Everyone thinking the same way constitutes a danger".

"We need several organisations with different perspectives on what's dangerous and what should be done."

"In addition to a general debate, we need a further assessment of any measures the 22 July commission will propose," says Prof Engen, and is backed by Dr Kruke and Prof Olsen.

"If we're going to learn from these attacks, we need something more than this commission will be able to manage," he adds.

The trio believe that the inquiry team's composition indicates that its work could be difficult, and are therefore waiting with interest to see if it will raise major and sensitive issues. These include such questions as ways in which coordination within the police and support from military forces could have been improved.

"The lessons must be drawn in complete [openness](#)," emphasises Prof Engen. "After such a serious crisis, many people will fear being treated as scapegoats."

"To secure closure for the crisis, big issues must be discussed in the public arena," agrees Dr Kruke. "And there must be scope for criticism".

"The more that goes on behind closed doors, the longer the crisis will remain alive with the general population."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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