

"Swedish society itself is pursuing what was surely one of the aims of the failed Islamist militants: to instil a sense of insecurity and paranoia across society", Nathalie Rothschild writes.



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It's not surprising that Swedish newspapers' reflections on 2010 focused heavily on the threat of terrorism. After all, in early December Sweden experienced its first suicide bombing when an Iraqi-born Swede blew himself up on a busy shopping street in Stockholm. A couple of weeks later, Swedish and Danish authorities foiled an alleged terror plot aimed at 'killing as many people as possible' at the offices of Jyllandsposten (the Danish daily that published the infamous Mohammad cartoons in 2005). Three of the five men arrested for plotting a massacre in the style of the 2008 Mumbai attacks were Swedish citizens.

These Scandinavian militant Islamists thankfully failed to orchestrate bloodbaths – the suicide bomber himself was the only fatality on 11 December, and the five suspected cartoons militants were arrested before they could carry out any attack. Yet it looks like they have been successful in another respect. Because in 2011, Sweden looks set to be infused with a climate of fear and illiberalism as politicians and lawmakers lobby to extend the state's surveillance powers and to clamp down on freedom of expression and association. All in the name of preventing terrorism. In short, Swedish society itself is pursuing what was surely one of the aims of the failed Islamist militants: to instil a sense of insecurity and paranoia across society.

In the wake of recent events, several politicians, law enforcers and commentators claim that draconian surveillance laws are now necessary in Sweden. They are effectively exploiting the fear and nervousness that the public understandably feels in the aftermath of terror plots. They are seeking to add moral weight to illiberal laws which will have severe long-term consequences for Swedish citizens' liberties – while doing little practical to stop terrorism.

Doing the terrorists' dirty work for them

Written by Nathalie Rothschild

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The fiercely debated 'FRA law' – anti-terrorist legislation passed by the Swedish parliament in 2008 despite a groundswell of public opposition – gave the Swedish intelligence bureau, Försvarets Radioanstalt (FRA), the right to intercept all cable communications crossing Sweden's borders. In short, FRA was given the right to snoop on every single email, telephone call, facsimile and SMS message that arrives in Sweden. The police and the secret services agency Säpo, however, were blocked from directly intercepting cable communication.

The controversial law, nicknamed Lex Orwell, sparked weeks of heated debate. The opposition party, the Social Democrats, pledged to block the centre-right government's proposal to extend the snooping powers to Säpo; indeed, one of the cornerstone policies of the red-green alliance (the Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Left Party) during the 2010 general election campaign was to tear up FRA. However, after the Stockholm suicide bombing, Morgan Johansson, the Social Democrat chairman of the parliament's justice committee, said his party would agree to the extension of surveillance powers to Säpo. He also said the FRA law should not be ditched, after all. 'We should not whip up fear, but we should take the threat seriously', he told parliament.

The FRA law represents a severe infringement on Swedish and foreign nationals' right to correspond freely and without fear. It reveals the extent to which terror-prevention measures are driven by a cavalier attitude towards people's liberties. Apparently we should be prepared to give up our liberties without resistance just in case it might help in some way to shed some light on alleged criminal activity.

But FRA itself recognises that it can only gather a fraction of the digital communication that occurs every day in Sweden. As reported previously on spiked, the purpose of the FRA law is to 'map external threats'; so, under this law, only communication from abroad can be intercepted. Yet it is technically impossible to differentiate between domestic and international traffic. Many Swedish companies and organisations have web servers that are based overseas, and often emails sent between individuals in one country are routed via another.

As Magnus Nilsson, president of the Social Democrat Student Association, has pointed out, 'FRA gives us a false sense of security and moves us a step closer to a more and more controlled society'. Once the idea that the authorities should be able to snoop on us all has been enshrined into the law, then the limits to what communication can and cannot be intercepted are, as we have seen, likely to be stretched.

Doing the terrorists' dirty work for them

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And in Sweden, it's not just private correspondence that is up for grabs in the aftermath of December's foiled terror plots – freedom of association, freedom of speech and the freedom to move around without being gazed at by the authorities are also under threat. Bo Huldt, a professor in security policy at the Stockholm-based National Defense College, points out that: 'Routines will be sharpened and that's something we will all have to accept... It may mean restrictions for us all regarding where we can move around, how many people can attend meetings or gatherings and more police presence at meetings.'

The trend for monitoring people's meetings and sharing of ideas has already been set: a new terror-prevention law was introduced in Sweden on 1 December 2010 criminalising public incitement, recruitment and education 'for the purpose of terrorism and other serious crimes'. The law is designed to meet the requirements of the European Council's convention on the prevention of terrorism. As similar laws in Britain have shown, these measures tend to blur the boundaries between speech and action, between thought and deed, as anything from championing Hamas to speaking ill of the West can be categorised as speech that 'incites terrorism'.

Politicians and law enforcers are letting a handful of individuals restrict all Swedish citizens' liberties. Essentially, they are doing the terrorists' jobs for them by helping to create a paranoid society in which everyone is a potential suspect, in which our right to communicate without fear of snooping, to associate with whomever we want and to attend demonstrations and meetings as we please is being suppressed. The alleged terrorists thankfully failed to kill anyone – but courtesy of Swedish officialdom, they succeeded in changing Swedish society for the worse.

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