

Orlando (US) massacre: Western media, Isis, Wahhabism and homophobia

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Distortions over Isis involvement in Orlando play into the hands of the jihadists. However, such attacks will continue to be inspired or organised by Isis so long as it exists - with Western nations needing to do more to confront the ideology behind the rise of the group.

Isis will benefit from the slaughter carried out by Omar Mateen in Orlando regardless of how far it was involved in the massacre [1]. It will do so because Isis has always committed very public atrocities which dominate the news agenda, spread fear and show its strength and defiance.

So far there is strong evidence that Isis motivated Mr Mateen in his attack, but not that it played a role in organising it as it did in the killings in Brussels and Paris. Isis's Albayan radio station based in Iraq, is saying that "God allowed Omar Mateen, one of the soldiers of the caliphate in America, to carry out an attack entering a crusader gathering in a night club...in Orlando, killing and wounding more than 100 of them." The FBI says that he made an emergency call just before he started shooting claiming allegiance to Isis [2].

Western media are likely to emphasise the Isis angle because it feeds into popular fear of a vast Isis-led conspiracy that menaces every home in the US and Europe. This is scarcely surprising since it is the worst terrorist attack in the US since 9/11, but it is worth keeping mind that the casualties in Orlando are much less than the 200 killed last month by Isis suicide bombers in and around Baghdad over a four day period and a further 150 in the Syrian cities of Tartous and Jableh on 23 May [3].

These massacres were barely reported by the Western media which tends to under-cover or over-cover Isis actions, depending on whether Americans or Europeans are among the dead. This gives a distorted picture of the degree of danger posed by Isis, which at times appears to be on the wane and at others is exaggerated by round-the-clock news coverage to seem like a threat to our very existence.

These exaggerations play into the hands of Isis, a prime example being the infamous tweet from Donald Trump about the Orlando killings asking if President Obama is "going to finally mention the words radical Islamic terrorism? If he doesn't he should immediately resign in disgrace!" This is the sort of hysterical and divisive response [4] that Isis likes to provoke and Mr Trump is being rightly castigated for making such a comment. But recall that David Cameron did much the same last December before the House of Commons vote on extending British airstrikes to Syria by warning MPs not to vote with "Jeremy Corbyn and a bunch of terrorist sympathisers."

An all-too-successful motive for Isis atrocities, whether they are carried out around Baghdad or the boulevards of Paris, is to provoke communal punishment whether it is against Sunni Arabs in Iraq or Muslims in general in the US or Europe. All sense of proportion is lost in what politicians in Northern Ireland forty years ago used to call "the politics of the last atrocity." Isis gains because

excessive and all-embracing retaliation becomes the unwitting recruiting sergeant for the very movement it is supposedly trying to suppress.

The dangers of over-reaction and collective punishment are widely recognised at least in theory, though this may lapse on the day that there is blood on streets. But there is also a risk that good-hearted people will respond in precisely the opposite way and say that the butchery in Orlando, Brussels, Paris, Baghdad and Tartous has nothing to do with Islam, which it has.

Much of what Salafi-jihadi movements such as Isis and al-Nusra believe about gays, women, Shia Muslims and Christians comes out of Wahhabism, the extreme variant of Islam that is effectively the state religion of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis likewise punish homosexuality and transgenderism with death, whipping and imprisonment. In 2014, for instance, a man in Saudi Arabia was reportedly sentenced to three years in prison and 450 lashes for using Twitter to arrange dates with other men [5].

Wahhabi beliefs are close to the Salafi-jihadi ideology and over the last fifty years Wahhabism has become an increasing influence over mainstream Sunni Islam. Sunni who once saw Shia merely as a different type of Muslims now often view them as heretics who are outside Islam. Supported by the vast oil wealth of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf those trained to preach and oversee mosques have become increasingly extreme and, while they may not support terrorist attacks, their beliefs provides fertile soil for those who do.

Here we touch on the reasons why Western leaders in the US, France and Britain have so entirely failed to win “the War in Terror” which they have supposedly been fighting at vast expense since 9/11. Few wars have been quite so demonstrably unsuccessful given that in 2001 al-Qaeda had only a few hundred fighters at most in camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while today their militants rule millions in swathes of territory across the Middle East.

This has happened because the US and EU states have not wanted to acknowledge the link between the terrorism and their strategic Sunni allies such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies, Turkey and Pakistan.

Fabrice Balanche of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy writes that “the jihadists who hit Paris and then Brussels on 22 March, 2016, had been indoctrinated in the Salafi ideology sponsored by Saudi funded mosques, indirectly financed by private donors in the Gulf, and tolerated by Turkey – the country through which they pass to Europe.”

A further sign of the extent to which Western security services are wedded to their alliance with Saudi Arabia came this week when the CIA director John Brennan went out of his way to deny that the Saudi government or senior Saudi officials were involved in the 9/11 attack and that the 28 redacted pages of the 9/11 Commission report did not implicate them [6]. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly denied any involvement.

The link between an unstable security guard in Orlando and Isis may be limited, but it is still there and such attacks will continue to be inspired or organised by Isis so long as it exists. As has been the case since 9/11, Western states are refusing to confront their Sunni allies in the Middle East whose well-funded ideology creates the conditions in which terrorism flourishes. Until they do, Orlando will only be the latest in a string of atrocities.

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P.S.

* “Distortions over Isis involvement in Orlando play into the hands of the jihadists”. Monday 13 June:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/distortions-over-isis-involvement-in-orlando-play-into-the-hands-of-the-jihadists-wahhabism-islam-a7080171.html>

Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/orlando-shooting-isis-desperate-to-claim-responsibility-for-attack-but-no-evidence-it-directed-omar-a7080031.html>
- [2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/orlando-shooting-gunman-omar-mateen-was-cool-and-calm-as-he-made-911-phone-call-during-massacre-a7079541.html>
- [3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/who-will-fund-the-dream-of-rebuilding-syria-a7076436.html>
- [4] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/orlando-nightclub-shooting-donald-trump-barack-obama-involved-a7079836.html>
- [5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gay-saudi-arabian-man-sentenced-to-three-years-and-450-lashes-for-meeting-men-via-twitter-9628204.html>
- [6] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/finding-discussion-and-narrative-regarding-certain-sensitive-narrative-matters-saudi-arabia-911-11-a6999091.html>