

# Islamophobia: What the Islamic State Really Wants

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Brief Analysis

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**Lone wolf attacks are inevitable, but U.S. and Western reactions will determine whether the jihadist group succeeds in its long-term goal of turning its hatred into a culture war legitimized by the other side.**

On June 3, Muhammad Ali passed away. An unparalleled boxing champion, Ali was also an ambassador for tolerant Islam. A few days after his death, Omar Mateen took over U.S. headlines instead, reportedly pledging allegiance to ISIS in a last-minute phone call. Ali was an embodiment of the type of Muslims that ISIS categorically refutes, but the Orlando shooting, along with previous and subsequent terrorist attacks, have benefited both the “America first” movement currently led by Donald Trump and, in turn, ISIS.

For Trump, the shooting provided a new platform for his controversial statements regarding a ban on Muslim immigrants from entering the United States. Only a few hours after the Orlando shooting, Trump took to Twitter, claiming that he had been “correct” on radical Islamic terrorism. The attack also strengthened the ISIS brand. Although no evidence has yet emerged directly connecting the shooter to the militant organization before the attack, ISIS has claimed responsibility. This attack and subsequent attacks in its name have proved a welcome way for the group to save face as it loses ground in Iraq to local Iraqi forces.

Omar Mateen’s actions fed into the “clash of civilizations” discourse that ISIS has relied on to increase its recruiting capabilities with youth disaffected and alienated from Western culture, which they see as having rejected them. Consequently, public expressions of Islamophobia help incubate online and homegrown radicalization. It is clear that the type of Islamophobia in reaction to terrorist attacks is one of the broader, long-term goals behind ISIS’s support and perpetration of attacks like the Orlando massacre.

## Omar Mateen and Orientalism

Omar Mateen appears to have had a conflicted identity. Like many Americans from strictly religious immigrant families, Mateen faced a choice of assimilating and liberating himself from his family’s strict rules, choosing family traditions at the expense of integration, or straddling between the two identities without a secure place in

either. This inner conflict is abundant in communities in the West from majority-Muslim countries, but it does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is exacerbated by the spikes of Islamophobia following any and all acts of terrorism. In his case, Mateen chose radicalization as the answer to his inner conflict and contributed his own act of terror to this vicious cycle.

As with other terrorist attacks, Islamic centers throughout the United States and Europe released statements denouncing Mateen in an attempt to dissociate Islam from violent crimes. Yet these statements also demonstrate how Muslims are put on the defensive in response to implied, and sometimes explicitly verbalized, blanket accusations against Muslims writ large.

These manifestations of Islamophobia go deeper than just a fear of terrorism. Linking Islam to violence has a long history in the Western world. As Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*, "It is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists." Muslims are painfully aware of the communal outcry against their faith when compared to other mass shootings that occur in the West. Instead, certain voices have reduced a diverse range of cultures and beliefs into a monolithic identity of "Muslim," despite vast differences within interpretations of Islam itself.

Moreover, discussions of the shooting also revealed other insidious elements of Orientalism. Media became obsessed with Mateen's alleged queer desires, which echoed stories that circulated years earlier of "fandom" among the Taliban, Islam's promise of seventy-two virgins in heaven, and Mohammad Atta's perverted desires. These feed into and are driven by an underlying narrative of Muslims' sexual repression at the hands of Islam and "culture," which motivates them to kill.

Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have argued that cultural criticism also surfaces in terrorism studies in the form of assuming a dysfunctional, "non-Western" family structure. Under this theory, immigrant and non-white families like Mateen's Afghan family have a cultural backwardness that leads their children to psychological compulsion.

## **Violence in America: Double Standards**

**W**hen Dylann Roof, a white Christian man, opened fire indiscriminately in a black church in Charleston, his case shared many similarities to that of Omar Mateen. Both men seem driven by a sense of toxic masculinity: Mateen worked for the world's largest security firm and had an obsession with becoming a police officer, and Roof's supremacist ideology saw his victims as a threat to white women and his role as "protector" of their virtue.

In fact, despite the inescapable narrative of Muslim criminals, an overwhelming majority of mass shooters in the United States are white. And regardless of race, almost all mass shooters -- Dylann Roof, Robert Lewis Dear, Aaron Alexis and George Zimmerman are only the latest -- appear driven to carry out these acts as performances of normative masculinity.

But characterizations of these attacks minimized the similarities. Roof's attack was often characterized as a hate crime and the work of someone mentally unstable. Christian communities did not feel an obligation to make statements to condemn his actions or disassociate themselves from his hate. Indeed, the semantic differentiation of the two crimes is palpable. Moreover, comparison of these two cases reveals the assumption of greater white individualism. While Roof's white supremacist interactions were acknowledged, he was above all characterized as a "lone wolf" attacker. Yet Mateen's equally unguided attack became lumped into a general sense that when Muslims or Middle Easterners attack, they are by default full-blown ISIS or al-Qaeda agents.

Even President Obama's cautions against claiming a firm link between Mateen and ISIS have been met with major criticism. Confirming this theory of unwarranted grouping of non-white individuals is the relative silence on the white man with ammunition who was arrested at the Los Angeles Pride festival. Had this man, who one can assume intended an Orlando-like attack, carried a Muslim name, it would be unimaginable that allegations of a 'coordinated

terrorist attack' would not circulate. Much of the media has erased the individuality of Muslim Americans, encouraging those prone to radicalization to fulfill what is already expected of them.

Not only does this racist division of violence assume an inherent risk of terrorism in Muslim and Middle Eastern bodies, it also minimizes the terror of numerous mass shootings in the United States committed by white men – including those with state authority, such as the police.

For those at risk of radicalization, the double standard presented to them through the media clearly contradicts the United States' image as a defender of freedom and democracy. And for those looking for an alternative, ISIS has become a de-territorialized imagined community, where anyone who wants to defy certain social rules can claim, or is assigned, belonging.

## The Importance of Response

Communal responses to terrorism are increasingly pressing; as the past few weeks have demonstrated, international lone wolf and organized attacks are likely to be inevitable face-saving reactions as ISIS faces increasing military defeat. For the capture of Fallujah, Tikrit, Ramadi, and ultimately Mosul, combined with Turkey's increasingly strict border security to minimize foreign fighters joining ISIS, the group will increasingly look toward its virtual network for fighters.

This heralds a likely return to al-Qaeda's hit-and-run attacks, with a focus on Western targets. ISIS military setbacks or even defeat in the Arab region may have little impact on its ability to conduct and inspire online recruits, especially with its unprecedented success in this sphere. For those in the United States and Europe, ISIS's military losses haven't stopped their affiliates from carrying out some of the deadliest attacks in recent memory.

These attacks have demonstrated that ISIS no longer needs physical access to create terror; rather, online radicalization is less risky, cheaper, more scalable, and more achievable. The muddled lines between inspired lone wolf, affiliate, and full-blown member have little effect on the end result. It also demonstrates that there is nothing unique about life in the Middle East; growing up in the United States, Europe, or Bangladesh has proved sufficiently fertile ground for radicalization.

Thus, to effectively counter this group, it is important to understand what fuels the "Omar Mateens" of the world who chose extremism over integration. ISIS rose to popularity in the post-Arab Spring turmoil. As long as the conflict between autocracy and democracy remains, ISIS will continue to feed on youths' sense of injustice. Dictators in the Arab region have demonstrated their failure in containing the radical extremism incubating in the region's disadvantaged communities. The bulk of ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq originate from provinces marginalized for decades: the Sinai, southern Tunisia, and common flashpoints in Libya, Syria and Iraq.

The crushing of moderate Islamists similarly created an Islamist vacuum that ISIS happily filled and impassioned. As a result, should ISIS fall back in Syria and Iraq, militants will find a safe haven in neighboring countries.

## Solutions

Given an understanding of ISIS's strategies for its various fronts, the international community can develop a counterstrategy. Not only should this strategy attempt to dry up ISIS online radicalization, but it should also seek to curtail Islamophobia in response to ISIS's inevitably continuing attacks. Subsequently, it should encourage more integration and assimilation of the U.S. Muslim community -- including new immigrants -- into the fabric of the society.

The complexity of the solution required to tackle this problem is immense. The Middle East region needs innovative strategies to dry up cross-border strongholds, undoubtedly involving regional collaboration to close down porous borders. Internally, states should consider an inclusive governance approach and improving the deteriorating

human rights situations. These factors will curtail the Islamic extremism leverage in vulnerable communities.

If we take the example of Egypt for instance, ISIS rose to stardom after the supposed democratic gains turned into a military rule led by Sisi who not only excluded other powers, but clamped down on both Islamists and liberals who catalyzed for the revolution and followed the democratic path. As a result, there was an unprecedented bloodshed, and a closure of any political venues. Sisi was internationally condemned for his human rights violations, and out of frustration, radical Islamists found their fertile soil.

While ISIS is able to recruit victims of Islamophobia in the West, they are able to recruit victims of dictatorial and authoritarian brutality against dissents in the Middle East. ISIS promises a new venue for justice to their potential sympathizers; a space located in the afterlife. To that end, what the West labels as suicidal and what ISIS labels as Shahada (martyrdom), is a supreme goal for any Muslim, and the more courageous people are, the more rewards they receive.

Internationally, ISIS is adopting another approach based on hit-and-provoke attacks, stoking reactionary comments from Western pundits that drive alienated, isolated, and unassimilated Muslims to welcoming communities dedicated to online recruiting and radicalization.

In fact, ISIS relies on this negative reaction towards Muslims to access Westerners willing to carry out further lone wolf attacks based on the notion of “martyrdom” espoused by ISIS. With the strict scrutiny of international travel, self-radicalized Western citizens or those who became radicalized through a stint in Syria and Iraq are far better options for ISIS and far more difficult for Western counter-terrorism forces to track and handle.

By adopting a unified reaction to the potential attacks carried out by self-radicalized mass murderers originating from disadvantaged communities in the West, the United States could avoid further marginalization and potentially prevent those at risk from being radicalized.

However, this tactic requires deeper examinations of American culture at large as well. As a society, Americans may have to question what responsibility their society bears for the instability and chaos that U.S. military intervention in the region has left behind. Americans may have to ask questions about U.S. support of the Saudi government’s support of ISIS. Even deeper are the issues of homophobia and racism that bubble to the surface during tragedy after national tragedy of gun violence.

Americans should come to terms with the fact that Omar Mateen’s actions were all too American, drawing from strains of homophobia, transphobia, and violence that exist in the United States. Without downplaying the violence of those fundamentalist groups that have co-opted Islam, or the homophobia that exists in the Middle East, it is worth analyzing the attack as another instance of homegrown U.S. hetero-patriarchal terrorism. Those who hope to lessen mass shootings in America should question the hypocrisy of an exceptionalism that assumes the United States is a bastion of freedom and progress.

Further lone wolf attacks, egged on by ISIS propaganda, are inevitable. But it is up to the U.S. and Western reactions to determine whether ISIS will achieve its long-term goals of turning its hatred into a culture war legitimized by the other side.

*Muhammad Mansour is an Egyptian journalist based in Washington DC. This article was originally published on the Fikra website (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9825#.V54lpfkrLIU>). ❖*

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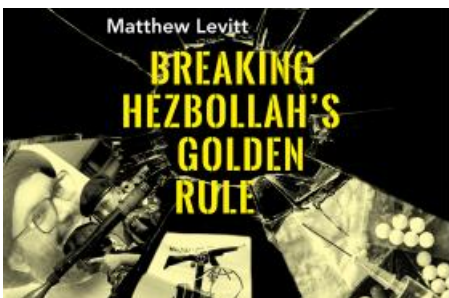
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