

ISIL Introduces a New Jihadist Experience: Punishment in the West

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After several months of directing or inspiring spectacular attacks on soft targets in Europe and the United States, the group may now be signaling its intent to start a new wave of violence that will 'punish' Westerners for their supposed 'legal deviance from Islam.'

The tragic attack in an Orlando nightclub targeting gays suggests that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its lone wolves are moving lock-in-step and ahead of their jihadist competitors; the group is adopting punishment as a political tool to broadcast and cement its political message and to upstage fellow jihadists.

ISIL differs from other extremist groups, not just because it promotes jihad, but because of its application of the Islamic penal code, in particular corporal and capital punishment.

The violence ISIL markets in its propaganda -- throwing gays off of rooftops because of their "hedonism," burning a Jordanian pilot for "apostasy," beheading Copts because of their "polytheism" -- is arguably of a different kind than what we have seen previously and might be likened to a kind of "punishment" terrorism. It is this kind of violence that gives ISIL its unique brand and elicits an outcry among the heads of Arab states rather than just Western ones.

Much of what the West has come to expect of jihadists have been large-scale terrorist attacks on symbols of Western financial, political and military power (the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 9/11 attacks, the Ft. Hood shootings) or "soft targets" in major civilian centers (al-Qaeda's 2004 Madrid train bombings, its 2005 bombings on the London Tube, Boko Haram's 2014 attacks on shopping malls). To be sure, ISIL has directed and inspired similar attacks on soft targets in Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino.

The attack in Orlando, however, signals a departure of ISIL tactics in the West from "traditional" forms of terrorist

activity. ISIL is now going after inflicting punishment, and unfortunately more ISIL attacks along this line might follow. Whatever his personal background, Omar Mateen's ISIL-inspired crime targeted and aimed to punish gay men. Insofar as certain homosexual acts are punishable by death in Islamic law, this attack resembles a vigilante terrorist version of Islamic corporal and capital punishments.

In fact, Mateen's shooting spree conformed to ISIL's activities in Iraq and Syria and the group's goal of bending society according to its understanding of Islam. The application of corporal and capital punishments is an expression of this -- to date ISIL has executed nearly two dozen men suspected of homosexual activity.

ISIL's interest in corporal punishment has roots in the Sunni fundamentalist narrative. Jihadists argue that Muslim societies (in particular Muslim-majority states) have gone astray by adopting "man-made laws" and thereby ascribing partners to God (who alone is entitled to legislate). By doing so, these Muslim societies and their governments have committed apostasy by ascribing partners to God, therefore embracing polytheism.

Enter ISIL. Unlike other jihadist groups, it is pursuing the establishment and expansion of an "Islamic state." The systematic imposition of what its leaders believe to have been the Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest Sunni followers is the group's top priority.

It is this difference in priorities that stood at the heart of the disagreement between the al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden, who advocated a unity of Muslim ranks to fight the West, with al-Qaeda in Iraq (later the Islamic State in Iraq) of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who argued for purging local society of Shiites and "deviant" Sunnis (i.e. Sufis, traditional Sunnis and others). Zarqawi's fighters later morphed into ISIL, establishing a self-declared caliphate in June 2014 in Iraq and Syria.

Two years into its caliphate and, following several months of either directing or inspiring spectacular attacks on "soft targets" in Europe and the United States, ISIL is now signaling its intent to start a new wave of violence in the West to apply "punishment" on expressions of "legal deviance from Islam." According to its own leaked documents on the subject, such acts "punishable" by ISIL include drinking, homosexuality, theft, adultery, blasphemy and apostasy.

Of course, how it defines these "transgressions" and the methods it chooses to "punish" them will depend on the group's strategy as a terrorist organization -- ISIL's brutality aims to punish "deviant behavior" as much as it aims to force populations into submission in areas under its control and to recruit others outside to join its cause.

ISIL will condone, and even direct when possible, more Orlando-style "punishment attacks" as it seeks to brand itself as the sole authority with the power to apply "Islamic law" in Muslim lands and also in the West.

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