

Arab Government and Media Reactions to the Orlando Attack

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Brief Analysis

This weekend's mass shooting elicited wide official condemnation from Arab states, but regional media coverage has been limited so far.

The June 12 massacre at an Orlando nightclub, perpetrated by a self-described adherent of the Islamic State, evoked immediate and unequivocal condemnation among a wide range of Arab governments, along with expressions of sympathy for the victims and the United States. But Arab media coverage and commentary has been relatively limited, especially compared with previous media treatment of terrorist attacks in Europe over the past eighteen months. By June 14, after just one day of prominent coverage, the attack had almost disappeared from the headlines of most Arab mainstream print and broadcast media.

GENERALLY RESTRAINED MEDIA COVERAGE

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, news of the shooting featured prominently -- though not usually at great length -- in largely factual Arab press coverage. Much of this coverage avoided detailed description of the venue, including its well-known status as a gay club, instead referring very generally to Florida, Orlando, or a generic "nightclub." More specific references tended to use the neutral terminology "same sex" (*jins mithli*) rather than the pejorative descriptors commonly used in the Middle East ("sexually deviant" or "debauched"). This was true even in the generally conservative media of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where homosexual activity is often criminally prosecuted. An exception was Qatar's generally anti-Western Al Jazeera television, which persisted in using the label "deviant."

Arab coverage often emphasized the killer's Afghan American origins, accompanied by unflattering photos of him. At least two major Saudi dailies, *al-Watan* and the pan-Arab, London-based *al-Hayat*, headlined his alleged links to Hezbollah rather than his self-professed allegiance to the Islamic State.

Most commentary also speculated on the law-enforcement or political and electoral implications of the massacre. For example, a half-hour Sky News Arabia program on June 14 featured questions about whether the FBI let the killer slip through surveillance, and how the gun-control issue would play out in the U.S. presidential campaign.

There was surprisingly sparse discussion of Islamic angles to the story, including the potential for increased anti-Muslim prejudice in the United States. One op-ed in the leading Emirati daily *al-Khaleej*, took the atypical step of characterizing both the 9/11 attacks and the Orlando shooting as "the work of one terrorist, *takfiri* dogma," referring to the extremist practice of labeling all outsiders and even many fellow Muslims as "infidels."

This relatively limited media treatment of a potentially sensational story can likely be attributed to an unusual combination of factors. One is the region's presumed sensitivity or embarrassment about the incident's homosexual aspect. Another is the timing: the story broke during Ramadan, when religious coverage takes precedence, and it followed numerous other mass-casualty attacks involving Arabs in Damascus, Beirut, Sirte, Sanaa, Paris, and elsewhere.

OFFICIALS CONDEMN TERRORISM BUT LARGELY AVOID RELIGIOUS ISSUES

In general, Arab official responses to the attack were quick to offer unequivocal condemnation of the violence and condolences for the victims. Most officials explicitly labeled the incident as "terrorism," and many decried it as an assault on "human values." Yet only a few used explicitly religious terms in this context; Kuwait denounced the attack as "offensive to Islam," and the Saudi king rejected it as "contrary to all divine religions." The following examples are illustrative of each country's official response.

Egypt

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid severely condemned the attack and asserted that Egypt will stand by the United States in such difficult times. He also underscored Cairo's firm support for international cooperation on confronting all aspects of terrorism, which he described as being contradictory to human values.

Similarly, the foreign affairs committee chairman in Egypt's parliament, Mohamed al-Oraby, condemned the attack and called for redoubling international efforts to confront terrorism. He also called for a new approach targeting the various components of terrorism, including arms, funds, and personnel. At the same time, he warned against escalating hatred and incitement against Islam anywhere in the world. (<http://www.youm7.com/story/2016/6/13/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%89-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AB-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%88-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9/2759251>)

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi embassy in Washington issued [the following statement \(https://www.saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news06131601.aspx\)](https://www.saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news06131601.aspx): "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia condemns in the strongest terms the attack on innocent people in Orlando, Florida, and sends its deepest condolences to the families and friends of the victims and to the people of the United States...We stand with the American people at this tragic time. We pray for the recovery and the healing of all those injured in the attack, and we will continue our work with the United States and our partners in the international community for an end to these senseless acts of violence and terror."



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