

The Islamic State's Views on Homosexuality

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The group's public executions of gay men are part of a deliberate moral policing campaign, one aimed at showing supporters and enemies alike that it means to enforce its narrow, atavistic view of Islamic law wherever it can.

The tragic events at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando shed light on a lesser-known facet of the Islamic State (IS): the group's virulently hostile views toward homosexuality, in particular its targeting of gay men. Thus far, no evidence has surfaced suggesting that IS directed the perpetrator, Omar Mateen, to conduct the operation, and jihadis usually have multiple motivations for taking action, including in this case possible mental health issues. Yet IS has published a vast corpus of justifications for killing homosexuals, and it has publicly targeted numerous allegedly gay men in Iraq and Syria in the past year-and-a-half alone.

To be sure, gay men were being targeted by the Iraqi and Syrian regimes prior to the announcement of the so-called IS "Caliphate," and the region's legal and religious climate is often inhospitable to that community. Moreover, other jihadi groups have executed homosexuals, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and its branches Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). What stands out with IS, though, is the level of textual justification it has produced for such executions and the theatrical manner in which it conducts them, potentially inciting greater anti-LGBT violence.

IN THEORY

Condemnation of homosexuality is ubiquitous in IS propaganda, where it is most often characterized as "the actions of the people of Lot" -- referring to verses in the Quran and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (hadith) that condemn the ancient figure Lot and his people for acts of sodomy. Yet the group differs in significant ways from how Islamic law traditionally views homosexual acts.

The Quran and hadith are clear about the moral ruin of the people of Lot, and the hadith in particular include many passages calling for harsh punishments of homosexual activity. Yet these condemnations focus specifically on anal penetration between men, not romantic feelings or other kinds of sexual acts between them (e.g., see Khaled El-Rouayheb's 2005 book *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*). Moreover, the burden of proof for actually administering the associated punishments (which range from banishment to lashings) is high. Given the laborious investigation required to prove such "offenses" and the often-differing opinions of Muslim jurists on the matter, it is unclear how often this prohibition has been enforced throughout history and how much various Islamic societies have tacitly accepted homosexuals. Today, gays remain subject to [legal persecution](#) in most parts of the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (though the region is hardly unique in this regard). Where homosexuality is addressed in modern legal codes, it often appears as a category similar to adultery, for which the prescribed penalty in some Middle Eastern states is death by stoning.

Even so, the Islamic State has taken such attitudes and precepts to a unique extreme, treating all aspects of LGBT culture as "actions of the people of Lot" and, therefore, as forms of sodomy and moral decay. While its rhetoric seems to target gay men exclusively, this may be due to the relatively ambiguous and less frequent Islamic legal discussions surrounding lesbianism and other LGBT issues. The group also bypasses the burden-of-proof requirement, enabling its adepts to apply the penalty for suspected homosexual acts quite liberally.

Moreover, IS has taken pains to characterize America as the root cause of homosexuality. In a treatise titled "The Lofty Proofs Concerning the Excommunication of Those Who Aid the Crusader Campaign Against the Islamic Caliphate" (first published in September 2014 and rereleased in September 2015), the group supported this accusation with numerous claims and conspiracy theories. For example, one passage noted that "San Francisco is considered the capital of sodomy, where [homosexuals] comprise a fourth of the state's constituency" (p. 10). Another suggested that Bangkok's status as "the world's capital of sexual depravity" is due to the presence of a U.S. military base there (p. 13).

Besides using homosexuality as a foil for condemning the United States, IS uses its "punishment" of such "transgressions" as an expression of its commitment to reviving the supposedly neglected Islamic penal code. According to the group's rhetoric, applying anything aside from what it sees as Islamic law is tantamount to "ascribing partners to God" in legislation -- a contorted logic that allows it to accuse other Muslims of polytheism, which warrants warfare. For example, a December 2014 administrative document from the group's Wilayat Halab

(Aleppo Province) explains that those who do not apply *hudoud* (the corporal and capital punishments prescribed by Islamic law) are unbelievers even if they keep all other religious observances. The document goes on to list the acts that should be punished: blasphemy (against God, the Prophet, or religion), adultery, homosexuality, theft, alcohol consumption, calumny, "spying on behalf of the interests of unbelievers," apostasy, and highway robbery. Similarly, an October 2015 Wilayat Halab picture essay showing the execution of gay men, titled "God's Law Regarding Whoever Committed the 'Act of the People of Lot,'" uses this argument about the need to apply Islamic law as a means of justifying the stoning of gay men.

Such arguments about killing homosexuals appear throughout IS propaganda. This includes articles in the group's English and French-language magazines (*Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*) and videos that depict punishing homosexuals as a means of both exacting retribution against unbelievers and "maintaining virtue and deterring immorality." The latter concept, more commonly known as "commanding right and forbidding wrong," is the justification for the "moral policing" (*hisba*) often used to maintain a conservative social order in the region -- not only by IS, but also by authorities ranging from the Taliban to the Saudi state.

In this regard, IS departs from other jihadist groups. At its core, the movement is a state-building enterprise that seeks to redefine and control social relations according to its moral code which treats anyone who departs from its narrow understanding of Islam as an unbeliever subject to swift and often shocking retribution. Like other adherents of Salafism, IS emphasizes a return to how the Prophet and his earliest Sunni followers allegedly practiced the religion rather than the subsequent fourteen centuries during which traditional Islamic law developed. Among other things, this means relying exclusively on the Quran and hadith for religious guidance. Yet IS has put its own violent spin on this Salafi methodology by using the harshest precedents within certain hadith to justify its treatment of gay men, ignoring the various legal minutiae devised around the topic over the centuries.

IN PRACTICE

Based on a database collected by the authors, since the Islamic State announced itself as a caliphate in June 2014, its Diwan al-Hisba (Moral Policing Administration) and online media apparatuses have publicly announced twenty-seven executions of allegedly gay men. Thus far, these actions have been limited to eight of the twenty-one "provinces" in the group's core territories of Iraq and Syria.

Wilayat Ninawa (Iraq)	7
Wilayat al-Jazirah (Iraq/Syria)	4
Wilayat Homs (Syria)	4
Wilayat al-Furat (Iraq/Syria)	3
Wilayat al-Raqqa (Syria)	3
Wilayat Halab (Syria)	3
Wilayat al-Fallujah (Iraq)	2
Wilayat al-Khayr (Syria)	1

The main method used to kill these men has been to throw them off the roofs of high-rise buildings, based on a hadith in which the Prophet's successor, Abu Bakr, prescribes throwing a man off a cliff for engaging in homosexual acts. In other cases, victims were stoned, beheaded, or shot instead. Twenty-two of the executions took place last year alone, but the group's ability to continue such punishments has seemingly been curtailed by its military losses in the past few months.

IS has singled out these victims as part of its deliberate program to root out "deviancy." According to leaked files from Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khelifawi (aka Haji Bakr) -- head of the group's military council and architect of its plans to conquer and administer territory until his death in January 2014 -- IS told its spies to identify homosexuals when infiltrating new territories so that they could later be blackmailed. Group members have also entrapped gay men by posing as love interests, either to extract ransom (allegedly up to \$11,000 per person) or to find and execute them. IS often attempts to use the cell phone and Facebook contacts of these detainees to track down other homosexual "suspects." And in some alleged cases, gay men have even joined IS to mask their homosexuality, informing on others to protect themselves.

Once a gay man is caught and sentenced by an Islamic State sharia court, the group carries out the same tragic bit of theatrical propaganda it reserves for other capital offenses: the person is taken to a town square or similar area where a large crowd is present. In the case of an alleged homosexual, the man is either dragged to the middle of the crowd or taken to the top of a high-rise building to be read the religious justification for his execution. Then the sentence is carried out as described previously, with IS taking photos and/or video of the brutal act to show supporters and recruits that it is implementing what it views as the rule of God.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There is not much the United States can do to prevent such atrocities besides the indirect method of inflicting military losses on the Islamic State and taking away its territory. But Washington can exploit cases of IS hypocrisy on the issue in its countermessaging campaign. For example, Syrian activists claim that some of the group's members have engaged in sexual relations with other males, most notably senior IS commander Abu Zayd al-Jazrawi, a Saudi fighter whom they accuse of having a relationship with a fifteen-year-old boy. While the boy was apparently executed, Jazrawi received a lesser sentence: he was flogged and forced to fight on the front lines in Iraq. More generally, the U.S. government should reiterate the importance of LGBT rights in its public and private diplomacy with Middle Eastern countries, especially given the region's worrisome pattern of criminalizing

homosexuality.

In addition, Washington should be mindful of the risks and effects of this potential intersection between *hudoud* and terrorist violence. While there is still no evidence that IS directly instructed Mateen to attack a well-known gay nightclub in Orlando, the incident could indicate a new trend of jihadi vigilantism that blends the type of terrorist acts typically seen in the West (wanton killing sprees or explosions in civilian centers) with a redefinition of the scope and application of Islamic law -- in this case, to bypass the more nuanced traditional legal definitions, processes, and institutions and encourage targeted violence against LGBT communities and culture by individual lay Muslims. To those unversed in Islamic history and texts, such violence may be incorrectly taken as representing the traditional Islamic approach to homosexuality, so Washington and Muslim communities should be quick to condemn all such acts.

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