

The Orlando Tragedy: Reactions and Reflections

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The recent heinous murders at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida has had massive reverberations around the world and is a tragedy that has affected many communities. In a single swift moment, a lone gunman, Omar Mateen, had entered a prominent gay nightclub in Orlando, the Pulse, at 2.02 am on Sunday, 12th June 2016, and opened fire into the crowd with every intent to kill. The tragedy saw 49 people lose their lives and 53 more injured.

This senseless violence soon sparked much outrage and confusion, with demands for clarity on the events that unfolded and the motivations behind the killings.

It has been a few days now since the shootings and more information is still being highlighted in an effort to make sense of this unwarranted act of violence. But as it has happened before, there are many competing narratives that seek to hijack the deaths of these 49 people in pursuit of different agendas, political or otherwise.

The first groups to speak out directly were the LGBT community and the Muslim community, both in the United States and across the world. Taking to social media, the LGBT community has condemned the attack as blatant homophobia, an attack purposefully targeting the LGBT community stemming from bigotry. There have been some recent developments however which raise doubts about this version of the episode, namely, the claim by the ex-wife of Omar Mateen, that he was himself a homosexual and had suffered from mental health issues, due to coping with conflicting identities. Omar's father, on the other hand, has attempted to refute this statement, emphasizing that Omar had a wife and a child. This does not of course preclude the possibility that he may have been bisexual.

Another group that is just as affected would be the Muslims themselves. It is of no surprise that the first reactions came from the many proponents of Islamophobia who began to vocally proclaim that this was another example of the encroaching tendrils of Islamism or Radical Islam unto Western Civilization, posing a danger to American lives and values.

To support their contention, they allege that Omar Mateen through various channels pledged his allegiance to Islamic terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIL or Daesh and even Hezbollah. Anyone with basic background knowledge of these groups would realize that Al-Qaeda and Daesh are mortal foes of Hezbollah and it is highly unlikely that any terrorist or militant would be inclined to pledge allegiance to all of them even at different times. Such a contradiction evokes questions about the gunman's own personal Islamic background and his own political motivations.

While this 'Islamic terrorism' type of narrative serves the agenda of Islamophobes and a segment of the media, there are other factors which may point to a different explanation

for Omar Mateen's action.

There was a recent interview with one of the witnesses of the attack at the Pulse which was reported in the Washington Post of 14 June 2016. In it, Patience Carter who was inside the club during the three hour standoff recounts that in the midst of the shooting spree Omar had alluded to something like, "This is about my country" and that he wanted "Americans to stop bombing his country". While Omar Mateen himself was American born, his parents were from Afghanistan, a target of the US War on Terror.

In many instances of terrorism involving Muslims, invasion and occupation (as in the case of Afghanistan in 2001) appears to be a major cause of anger and outrage among the young members of the community. Religious rhetoric is just the veneer they employ. It is the deaths of tens of thousands of their compatriots, their suffering and their humiliation that spawns a deep sense of grievance. In other words, military occupation and all the dire consequences emanating from it prompts many Muslim youths to turn to violence and terror as they seek justice, albeit in a perverted manner. This is true of not just the US-NATO conquest of Afghanistan but also of the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Yet another episode which Muslims all over the world perceive as a grave act of injustice is the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the concomitant usurpation of Arab land and the massacre of thousands of innocent children, women and men since 1947-8. The series of assaults by Israel upon Gaza since December 2008 underscores this aggression and oppression. And Muslims and many others committed to justice and human dignity know that the United States as the global hegemon that protects Israel cannot be absolved from responsibility for the unending dispossession of the Palestinians.

To substantiate this point further, a report from the USA published on 16 June 2016, reveals that Omar Mateen had also appeared in in a 2012 documentary entitled *The Big Fix*, which highlighted the controversy surrounding the 2010 BP oil spill. In it, Omar Mateen, who was working as a security guard at the time, can be seen cynically ranting about those involved in the oil spill saying that "No one gives a s—, no one gives a s—here" adding that "They want more disasters to happen. That's where the money making is."

The apparent cynicism, coupled with the injustices committed against his people, may be a more substantive reason in explaining why Omar Mateen acted the way he did, and may even explain certain contradictory aspects of his behaviour.

Having said that, it must be emphasised that due to the confusing and conflicting nature of the reports currently, many of the possible motivations of Omar Mateen still reside in the realm of conjecture.

The reactions which followed the mass murders are clear however. The tiresome calls for tougher immigration laws, clamping down on Muslim communities as well as suspension of their civil liberties are all too familiar. These calls reveal wilful ignorance and bigotry. They have been fuelled by the mainstream media.

The presumptive Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump has further exacerbated the situation. He has used the Orlando tragedy to reinforce his earlier insane argument that there must a ban on migration of Muslims to the United States. He has now added that Muslims living within US borders should also be monitored. This is populist fear mongering aimed at garnering votes for his Presidential campaign. In contrast to Trump and his ilk,

there are many others who have spoken out against the targeting of Muslims. They have condemned manifestations of Islamophobia. They are against the politicisation of the Orlando Tragedy.

On the other side of the proverbial fence the reaction by various segments of the Muslim world has also been diverse and contentious. Many American Muslims and organizations such as the *Muslim Advocates* have come out to condemn the massacre. A number of them have expressed solidarity with the LGBT community and have offered to help the survivors to cope with their tragic loss of lives.

Shamefully, there are numerous other groups and individuals who have applauded the deaths of the 49 individuals, claiming that they were “sinners” and therefore deserving of their fate. This attitude is a callous and incomprehensibly heartless reaction towards the tragic loss of innocent lives, something that stands in direct contradiction to the Islamic teachings of compassion and justice.

The varying reactions have widened a cleavage that already exists within the Muslim world. On the one hand, there are many Muslims who are committed to the essence of the faith and would like to see compassion and love set the tone of the community’s pronouncements and actions. On the other hand, there are bigots and dogmatists wedded to a superficial, narrow interpretation of certain distorted teachings who are incapable of recognising the humanity in all of us. The former shoulder the challenge of defending Islam against Islamophobes while at the same time seeking to reform Muslim attitudes which are antithetical to the faith and to inter-faith interaction.

Another reaction from the incident has much to do with a long -existing controversy, pertaining to the American second amendment and the ease with which one can purchase weapons in the country. One side has raised the banner once more urging for tighter control over gun sales, whilst the other staunchly defends the American citizen’s right to bear arms. Some of the groups advocating gun control have condemned the security company that had employed Omar, G4S, the world’s largest security company which has had dealings with the United States’ government and Israel as well.

The ease with which one is able to purchase guns in America is alarming, as evidenced by numerous other shootings and crimes involving firearms, but perhaps the gun debate is a symptom of a deeper disease.

The deeper disease is a culture of violence which is pervasive in American society. It is rooted in US history itself since the US as we know it today was born from the annihilation of the indigenous American Indians. It was built upon the massacres of the African slave population. From the nineteenth century the US elites created a colonial empire through violence which has now evolved into a hegemonic power that sustains itself through military bases and wars.

The tragedy of Orlando one hopes will persuade at least a fraction of the US intelligentsia to look deeply into the hegemony and violence that is embedded in the nation’s genes.

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