The Orlando Massacre:
Tackling Islamophobia in America

By Irm Haleem

Synopsis

The mass murder of 50 people in an Orlando gay nightclub by an Afghan-American in the name of ISIS raises questions about terrorism as a consequence of intolerance. Ostracising Muslims as a suspicious collective dehumanises them and perpetuates radicalism.

Commentary

THE 12 June 2016 Orlando massacre at a gay nightclub, which claimed the lives of some 50 individuals, marks the deadliest shooting massacre in US history. Despite speculations as to the homophobic sentiments of the shooter, political conservatives in the United States have homed in instead on his Muslim identity.

That Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old son of Afghan refugees, is reported to have called 911 (the US emergency hotline) to declare allegiance to Islamic State (IS) only lends credence to this conservative assessment. Not surprisingly, Donald Trump, the Republican candidate for US president, took this opportunity to tweet about the timeliness and credibility of his warning against Muslim immigration to the US to legitimise his Islamophobic policy stand.

Not all Muslims are terrorists; not all terrorists are Muslims

Beyond the fact that Trump's strict policy proposals related to Muslim immigration would have had no impact in this case, given that the shooter was an American-born citizen, a larger problem is present here: intolerance for all those who are different, especially if this difference is demarcated by their Muslim identities. An obvious fact needs to be noted: not all Muslims are terrorists; not all terrorists are Muslims.

Some examples to note: Baruch Goldstein, an American-born Jewish-Israeli physician who massacred 29 Muslim Palestinian worshippers in a mosque in Hebron in February 1994, had ties to the Jewish terrorist group *Kahana Chai*; Anders Breivik, the Norwegian right-wing xenophobe who killed 77 individuals he suspected belonged to the Norwegian Labour Party in Oslo and Utoya in July 2011, had anti-Muslim and anti-Marxist, ultranationalist extremist outlook; and Gregor S, responsible for firing 40 shots in a crowded rock concert in Austria, killing two individuals in May 2016, was a member of the neo-Nazi group *Blood and Honour*; neo-Nazism is thought to be on the rise in Europe in light of the influx of Muslim refugees there.

The point here is that terrorism cannot be effectively understood as a consequence of a particular religion or religious group, but must be understood instead as a consequence of intolerance at large. And as the human histories of intolerance indicate, no race, religion or culture holds a monopoly in this regard.

The singling-out of Muslims as a collective that should be on the radar of policymakers is to engage in two forms of unethical behaviour: one which views the criminal behaviour of some individuals from the Muslim community as reflective of the sentiments of the entire group, thus dehumanising Muslims as somehow anomalous to all other racial, religious or cultural groups; the other, in contrast, which views the criminal behaviour of individuals belonging to non-Muslim communities as mere social deviation which encourages a form of exceptionalism that is problematic.

Such double-standards only breed a sense of injustice and marginalisation that lends itself easily to justifications of violence perpetrated by the radical entities (such as IS) looking for such vulnerability amongst their audiences.

Locke's Plea for Religious Toleration

Of relevance to the issue of Islamophobia, John Locke, the 18th century English philosopher wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), in response to the growing fear of the time that Catholicism was taking over England. The 'letter' thus advocates religious tolerance.

Locke argued that religious plurality, and its toleration, were key antidotes to civil unrest and violence, since lack of toleration involves coercion and that can only lead to resentments. Locke's central premise was that civil government should keep out of the business of private religion.

Though the United States constitution itself is premised on a separation between 'Church and State', the contemporary relevance of Locke's 'letter' seems to be the implication of his call for religious toleration: that one ought to avoid the tendency to objectify 'minority' religious groups as threatening. Religious toleration has no meaning if it does not reject the demonisation of a religious group as a collective, even if some individuals resort to criminality from within the group. These individuals must be seen as an anomaly and not as a representation of the group at large.

It is also important to note that contemporary sociologists have long been critical of

the authentic religious nature of 'religious' terrorism. This is because religions, as frameworks of norms and sanctions for actions, lend themselves very conveniently as tools in the hands of extremist individuals given that any action can easily be justified under the notion of 'Divine sanctions' and accepted as such by their uncritical audiences.

Policy Implications

It is paramount we understand that religiously justified violence is no different in essence from other ideologically justified violence given that all violence is fundamentally a struggle for recognition. Hegel, the 18th century German philosopher, had argued that struggles for recognition were an existential struggle against (actual or perceived) negation and oppression, and thus struggles for an equitable (not subservient) status in society.

The counter to the rise of violence ostensibly in the name of Islam, should not therefore be a rise in Islamophobia; this would only feed the sense of ostracisation that led to radicalisation in the first place. There should instead be policies that address the deeper societal inequalities that lead to violent struggles for recognition.

Equally, the response to the rise of neo-Nazi violence in contemporary Europe should not be Europhobia, but a deeper understanding of the economic, demographic and political strains that are caused by an influx of refugees, leading to violent reactions against it.

The tendency to view individuals prone to ideologically justified violence (whether in the name of Islam or Nazi) as being representative of their societies at large is not only unintellectual and reductionist; it is also ironic as it demonises the collective these criminals belong to, in the same way these criminals demonise their victims as collectively responsible for their grievances. The consequence of such aggregation can only be more misguided policies that do not address the root causes, or essence, of terrorism, but perpetuate it.

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