



## **Don't Blame "Self Loathing." Blame Jihadism.**

By Walter Olson

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Don't rush to infer motivations, some warned after Omar Mateen's attack on Orlando's Pulse nightclub in Sunday's early hours. We simply don't know, certainly in the first 24 hours, why a disturbed individual would choose to go on a terrible killing spree. Who knows what abnormalities are at work in such a person's mind? Even if they say Napoleon or Space Commander Alpha sent them, we can hardly take their word for it.

To be sure, certain clues might have seemed vital. For example, not only had Mateen vowed allegiance to Islamic State in a 911 call during his attack (and also on Facebook, it later turned out), but IS itself within hours accepted his vow and welcomed his actions via a news agency, quite a bit faster than it acknowledged the allegiance of and praised the husband-and-wife attackers in San Bernardino last year. In fact, as New York Times reporter Rukmini Callimachi pointed out, Mateen, like the San Bernardino attackers and the attackers at a Garland, TX, cartoon exhibition (and like a number of attackers in Europe) had followed closely a protocol laid out by IS itself for announcing loyalty contemporaneously with an independently carried out act of violence.

Some of the wait-and-see commentators seem to regard news developments in the days since then as having vindicated their position. For example, no evidence has emerged that Mateen coordinated his attack in advance with any IS leadership. The problem here is that, as Callimachi points out, IS's own recommendations for attacks on the West emphasize exactly the avoidance of such pre-coordination, which would give investigators more trails to follow leading to IS actors. Mateen had also followed other steps typical of IS recommendations, including taking hostages in a closed space, which increases the chance of a drawn-out siege (good for media interest) ending in the death of the attacker (who therefore cannot be debriefed for intelligence.)

In addition, it soon became apparent that Mateen had a poor understanding of religious and geopolitical issues. For example, he had expressed admiration for various Mideast factions that, while each violent and anti-American, hew to very different traditions in Islamic theology and sometimes are each others' sworn enemies. But that too turns out to be unsurprising: much

jihadist violence in the West has been perpetrated by the sorts of confused students who might (to use the famous example) need to order the volume entitled *Islam for Dummies*. This is not a breach of the norm; it's one common pattern.

But the biggest reason to step back from a simple jihadism explanation, it has been argued, is the emerging evidence that the killer may have hung out on the Florida gay scene for years and sought sex with men. Multiple reports place him as a frequent visitor to Pulse and other gay venues who had tried to pick up guys but was generally regarded as socially unsuccessful and was known for sudden fury and drunkenness. A user resembling him was also seen on gay hook-up apps. (At the same time, he married women at least twice, the latest having borne him a small child.)

This has added a layer of psychological complexity that some commentators have found impossible to resist. It's true that gays who live a double life, especially when they come from conservative families who strongly disapprove of such goings-on, do come under a lot of psychological pressure — though such pressure hardly ever ends in this manner. And a narrative in which others' disapproval of his life choices had somehow caused Mateen to explode would reinforce an instinct much in evidence in some quarters after the attack — to find ways in which American society, and conservatives in particular, were somehow to blame.

The theory doesn't work, however, as a practical explanation of his case, and it's not really a convincing one psychologically, either.

To begin with, the picture of Mateen as lonely, lacking in any family life, and unable to turn to anyone in his torment was rather drastically complicated by reports that his young and pretty wife, Noor, drove him to scope out the Pulse club as well as on a gun buying expedition; according to reports, she has told investigators she tried to talk him out of the mass murder itself, and authorities are likely to probe closely into what she and other family members knew and when.

Then there are the witness accounts, both of survivors at the Pulse scene and of those who knew Mateen before the attack. Survivors describe him as shouting during the attack about US policy toward "his" country (by which he apparently meant Afghanistan, though born in the US) and as declaring his solidarity with the Tsarnaev brothers, of the Boston Marathon massacre. Where he worked as a security guard in a gated community, a colleague recalls him regularly making anti-gay remarks.

Note that he did *\*not\** shout out his solidarity with famous conflicted gay persons, nor did he swear allegiance to some quack "ex-gay" therapist.

There is every indication, as both President Obama and Vice President Biden have indicated in statements this week, that Mateen's radicalization has been under way for a while, and could be fully accounted for by the Internet as opposed to time in training camps (though he had visited the Middle East at least for the occasion of a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia). As far back as 2001, according to a front-page Washington Post report, fellow students at a Florida high school were shocked to see him smile and express satisfaction as television in the classroom showed the 9/11 attacks.

Is there anyone who has spent much time studying religion —very much including its most fanatical and extreme versions—who is not aware of the concept of the mind of the adherent as a place of warfare between sinful impulses and the demands placed by the religious authority? This is human and psychological conflict, yes, but ordinarily it is described as one shared by all or most of those who walk in the religion's path. Had he followed many other sects, what it would mean for religious observance to "win" in this context might be something like unhappy and lonely celibacy, or staying at home with Noor. Had he done that, many would now be alive.

That he did not is attributable not to the hypothesized "push" of self-loathing due to whatever may have gone on in his sex life, but to the "pull" of a malign and evil ideology. And it is to that ideology we should look for explanations of the Orlando atrocity.