



Islam and homosexuality

Straight but narrow

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A debate about homosexuality in Islam is beginning. But in Muslim lands persecution—and hypocrisy—are still rife

ONE leaflet showed a wooden doll hanging from a noose and suggested burning or stoning homosexuals. "God Abhors You" read another. A third warned gays: "Turn or Burn". Three Muslim men who handed out the leaflets in the English city of Derby were convicted of hate crimes on January 20th. One of them, Kabir Ahmed, said his Muslim duty was "to give the message".

That message—at least in the eyes of religious purists—is uncompromising condemnation. Of the seven countries that impose the death penalty for homosexuality, all are Muslim. Even when gays do not face execution, persecution is endemic. In 2010 a Saudi man was sentenced to 500 lashes and five years in jail for having sex with another man. In February last year, police in Bahrain arrested scores of men, mostly other Gulf nationals, at a "gay party". Iranian gay men are typically tried on other trumped-up charges. But in September last year three were executed specifically for homosexuality. (Lesbians in Muslim countries tend to have an easier time: in Iran they are sentenced to death only on the fourth conviction.)

Gay life in the open in Muslim-majority countries is rare, but the closet is spacious. Countries with fierce laws, such as Saudi Arabia, also have flourishing gay scenes at

all levels of society. Syria's otherwise fearsome police rarely arrest gays. Sibkeh park in Damascus is a tree-filled children's playground during the day. By night it is known for the young men who linger on its benches or walls. Wealthy Afghans buy *bachabazi*, (dancing boys) as catamites.

Where laws are gentler, authorities find other ways to crack down. In the Jordanian capital, Amman, several gay hangouts have been raided or closed on bogus charges, such as serving alcohol illegally. Even where homosexuality is legal (as in Turkey), official censure can be fierce. A former minister for women's affairs, Aliye Kavaf, called it "a disease"; the interior minister, Idris Naim Sahin, cited it (along with Zoroastrianism and eating pork) as an example of "dishonour, immorality and inhuman situations". A new film, "Zenne Dancer", portrays a young man's murder in 2008 as Turkey's first gay "honour killing" (the suspect, the victim's father, is on the run).

Charges of homosexuality can also be used in political repression. The Malaysian opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, was twice tried for sodomy; the attorney-general is appealing against the latest acquittal. Intolerance can unite otherwise warring factions. In Nigeria Muslims and conservative Christians alike back a proposed law banning gay marriage (and indi-

rectly criminalising all same-sex unions).

The democratic upheavals of the Arab spring have brought little comfort. Hossein Alizadeh of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, a New York-based lobby group, says that religious awakening is strengthening hardline interpretations of Islam and a repressive backlash on all kinds of sex-related issues. But the laws left behind by the former regimes in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt seem draconian enough to satisfy the new governments.

An ominous counter-example is Iraq. The previous Iraqi regime was politically repressive but unbothered by sexual mores. Now men even suspected of being gay face kidnappings, rape, torture and extrajudicial killing. Ali Hili, head of a group called Iraqi LGBT, (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) says that since the 2003 invasion more than 700 people have been killed because of their sexuality. It is the most dangerous place in the world for sexual minorities, he says.

Theology or technology

One small source of hope is the internet: life online offers gays safety, secrecy and the chance to make their case. In a campaign called "We are everywhere" Iranian gays and lesbians are posting protest vid- ➤

posts on Facebook. In one, entitled "Ali the Queer", a man speaks of his longing for a world in which those who deviate from the heterosexual standard are no longer considered unnatural or abnormal. However, a video newly posted from the United Arab Emirates shows an effeminate gay man being "cured" by two straight men.

The internet also offers a chance to debate the fundamental issue: the Islamic prohibition of homosexuality. This is based on a tale (common to all three Abrahamic religions, though details differ) of a man called Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These were engulfed in fire and brimstone as divine punishment for the local penchant for gay sex.

Earlier Islamic societies were less hard-line. An 8th-century Persian ruler advised his son to alternate his partners seasonally: young men in the summer and women in the winter. Many of the love poems of the eighth-century Abu Nuwas in Baghdad, and of other Persian and Urdu poets, were addressed to boys. In medieval mystic writings, particularly Sufi texts, it is unclear whether the beloved being addressed is a teenage boy or God, providing a quasi-religious sanction for relationships between men and boys. Austere European chroniclers fumed at the indulgent attitudes to gay sex in the Caliphs' courts (now the censure is the other way).

Like liberal Jewish and Christian scholars in recent decades, some Muslim thinkers are now finding theological latitude. "The Koran does not condemn homosexuality," says Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, an American Muslim convert who teaches Islamic studies at Emory University in Atlanta. The story of Lot, he argues, deals with male rape and violence, not homosexuality in general. Classical Islamic theologians and jurists were mostly concerned with stifling lustful immorality, he says. Ko-

Political violence and trauma

Beaten but unbowed

DAMASCUS

Violence seems to scar some more than others

PRISON guards beat Mohammed's head so badly that his eyelids were puffy and purple, and his feet so hard that he could not walk. They hurled abuse and taunts at the 21-year-old Syrian protester. But his sunny resolve was unbroken. "As soon as I can walk, I'm back on the street," he vowed from his bed in a suburb of Damascus.

Violent unrest wreaks havoc on mental health, provoking nightmares, altering behaviour and causing lasting illness. But the link between suffering and trauma is less straightforward than many assume. In research published in 2008 Brian Barber, a psychologist at the University of Tennessee, found that violence had left young Palestinians in Gaza less traumatised than their Bosnian peers, even when stripping out factors such as the levels of bloodshed they had witnessed and whether their homes had been destroyed.

The key, he found, lay in how injured people understood the violence. The young Palestinians saw the intifada as a

way to end the Israeli occupation. This political framework left them less upset by what they saw. In contrast, many Bosnian youths were mystified by the onset of the war that engulfed previously peaceful Yugoslavia in 1992. It haunted them into adulthood.

Mr Barber is now testing his theory further. He has interviewed scores of young people in Egypt and will monitor their state of health every three months. Initial findings offer some hope for Mohammed and his bruised and battered peers. They fit the pattern observed in Gaza. "It would be hard to describe even those injured as traumatised," says Mr Barber. "They saw the violence—both by and against them—as an unfortunate means to a worthwhile end."

More research may shed light on what exactly causes, and prevents, trauma. Mr Barber does not discount the effects of torture. But he suspects that disrupted schooling and family life may be doing more lasting mental harm than the violence itself.

ranic verses describe without condemnation men who have no sexual desire for women.

Arash Naraghi, an Iranian academic at Moravian College in Pennsylvania, suggests that the verses decrying homosexuality, like those referring to slavery and Ptolemaic cosmology, stem from common beliefs at the time of writing, and should be re-examined. Even Sheikh Muhammad

Hussein Fadlallah, the late spiritual leader of Lebanon's Hizbullah party-cum-militia, conceded that more research is needed in order to understand homosexuality.

Unsurprisingly, the debate, such as it is, is led by gay Muslims outside the Islamic world. Though their rights are better protected, they too can suffer from intolerance—as the trial in Derby last month highlighted. In European cities with lots of poor, pious Muslim immigrants, municipal politics brings some rum alliances. Ken Livingstone, a left-wing London politician with a strong record on gay rights, has in the past welcomed Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an America-bashing Muslim cleric from Egypt who supports the death penalty for homosexuality.

In Muslim countries activists have mostly shied away from the pitfalls of theological debate. Instead, groups such as Helem, a Lebanese NGO, use the secular language of human rights, citing United Nations declarations. Mr Alizadeh sees progress, though it is slow. Even some Muslim clerics, the group most resistant to reform, are shifting slightly. After attacks on gay men in Iraq in 2009, Muqtada al-Sadr, a fiery Shia cleric, condemned the killings. He said that the "depravity" of homosexuality should indeed be eradicated, but through "preaching and guidance" rather than violence. Optimists would see that as progress, of a sort. ■

Gloom for gays

Male homosexuality and the law

Country	Legal status*	Penalty	
Egypt	Not specifically outlawed	Prison	Gays prosecuted under other laws
Indonesia	Illegal in sharia-ruled areas	Prison	Hardliners broke up international gay-rights meeting in 2010
Iraq	Not specifically outlawed	None	Self-proclaimed sharia judges issue death sentences; militias kidnap and kill gays
Iran	Illegal	Lashes, death	New draft law may limit the prosecution of consensual sex
Jordan	Legal	None	Gays prosecuted under other laws
Malaysia	Illegal	Prison	Sodomy law under discussion following Anwar Ibrahim's acquittal
Morocco	Illegal	Fine	A gay tourist hotspot despite the prohibition
Nigeria	Illegal in sharia-ruled areas	Death	Some Christians also back new gay-marriage ban
Pakistan	Illegal	Prison	Man-boy sex tolerated in some tribal areas
Saudi Arabia	Illegal	Fine, lashes, death	Death penalty applied if man is married
Turkey	Legal	None	Gay groups allowed to operate openly but some police harassment under morality laws

Sources: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association; The Economist

*2012