

# Iraq, Syria: ISIS, Sexual Violence and Killing Gay Men

Sunday 17 January 2016, by [LINDISFARNE Nancy](#), [NEALE Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2015).

There are now many press and internet reports of rape by the Islamic State (ISIS). There are also reports of ISIS killing gays. These reports are being used to justify heavy bombing of ISIS fighters and civilians by the United States, Britain, France and other allies. These bombings are happening in both Iraq and Syria - ISIS controls parts of both countries.

We have to be careful with the evidence. On the one hand, the media usually ignore rape in wartime. On the other hand, there is also a long standing tradition of newspapers accusing the enemy of atrocities they have not committed. However, there does appear to be convincing evidence for widespread use of rape or women, and killing of gay men, by both ISIS and America's allies.

For Syria we have two kinds of report of rape. The first reports came between 2011 and 2013. They accused Assad's regime of very widespread rape of women and men, most of them in prison, often alongside daily torture. It was unclear quite how common this was, but it was routine, and it was done to thousands of people.

These reports came from a wide range of papers, from *Le Monde* in Paris to the *Guardian* in London, and backed up by reports from NGOs like the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Project. [\[1\]](#)

Probably the best place to begin is with the comprehensive and readable report by Lauren Wolfe in the *Atlantic*. [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#)

There is reason for caution, because between 2011 and 2013 many in the Western mainstream were encouraging the US and European governments to help the rebels in Syria.

Western media reports of sexual abuse in the Middle East usually take the opportunity to blame Islam. In the Syrian case, however, the abusers were working for a secular government and the women, and some men, abused were mostly Muslims.

However, the media mostly found a way to blame Islam. They highlighted the complaint in one NGO report that it was difficult to estimate the number of rapes because the survivors were reluctant to talk publicly because of fear of honour killings by their family. This meme allowed the reporters simultaneously to attack the secular torturers and to still trash Islam. The extraordinary thing about these reporters was that they seemed unaware a large majority of the women raped in England, France and America are also reluctant to come forward because of fears about how they will be treated by the police, the media, and their communities. Indeed, this is why women in these countries are given anonymity as witnesses in rape trials. Syrian women in refugee camps are no different from their sisters in the West.

Until July 2013, the American government was of two minds about whether to support the Syrian rebels. Since that time, the US has made a close alliance with Iran in both Iraq and Syria. American and allied planes have made 2,000 bombing runs against ISIS. The US government is now in effect backing the Assad regime in Syria.

Sine America switched sides, the reports of rape by Assad's regime have largely disappeared. (Lauren Wolfe and her *Women Under Siege* website are the honourable exception.) Instead, we now have reports of the use of rape by ISIS to terrorise civilians. Again, we have to be wary here. But at least some of these reports seem believable.

If we believe both sets of reports, and probably we must, there are two comments to make. One is that the rapes by the Syrian regime have been far far more common. The other is that the government rapes are more terrifying, because they are so closely tied to continued torture of the imprisoned women and men.

None of this in anyway justifies the use of rape by ISIS. Their use of rape is wrong, for the same reason what Assad's forces do is wrong, and for the same reason that American support for Assad's regime is wrong.

Similarly, ISIS has been accused of killing gay men, and there seems to be at least one verified case. But it is worth paying attention to an article, *ISIS Kills Gays: A History of Violence*, on the website A Paper Bird. [4]

The author, Scott Long, was director of the LGBT rights program at Human Rights Watch from 2004 to 2014, where his work focused on Iraq. More recently, he has been a fellow at Columbia and Harvard Law Schools.

Long's article starts with a video of ISIS executing two thieves, who are also said to be sodomites. Scott then explains that ISIS advertises their violence on the internet for two reasons. One is that they want to terrify people, so that the soldiers opposing them will run away and the civilians will follow orders. The other is that Iraq has in the last forty years become a place where the public demonstration of cruelty is also a way of trumpeting dominance.

Long then puts the persecution of gay men in Iraq in context. He begins with attacks on LGBT people in Iraq between 2003 and 2009. These were reported by Peter Tatchell and the gay press in the west as the responsibility of Ayatollah Sistani, the most distinguished Shia scholar and cleric in Iraq. Scott says he investigated these attacks in detail in 2009, and Sistani could not be blamed. The attackers were Shia militias not allied to Sistani. Then:

*"In early 2009, killings of LGBT people accelerated massively. What had once looked unsystematic became an organised campaign. I went to Iraq; it was obvious, there, that the forces of popular Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr bore main responsibility. Sadr City, the great Baghdad slum dominated by Moqtada's movement, was the fulcrum of the violence; preachers there openly incited murder, and survivors blames his Mahdi Army for most of the carnage. Al-Sadr's militia had gone underground at the beginning of the US-led counterinsurgency "surge" in 2007, and Moqtada himself fled to Iran. The killings seemed to be a bid to reassert his relevance and moral indispensability."*

Western media, particularly the gay press, quite properly reported on these killings in detail. Then, in 2012, came the 'emo-killings' in Baghdad. These targeted men both for looking effeminate, and for fashions and styles associated with the West. The killers came from the Ministry of the Interior, the Mahdi Army, and another breakaway Shia militia. This time al-Sadr condemned the killings. But his party was part of the government, and the Ministry of the Interior, which he did not control, was a central pillar of the American-backed government. These killings were not reported in the Western press, because, as Long says, 'the killers weren't our enemies'.

The evidence, then, is that the Iraqi government and the Shia militias, both America's allies in Iraq

now, killed far more gay men than ISIS, just as the Syrian regime has raped far more women. If the current American bombing works in Iraq and Syria, the consequence will be to confirm the current governments in power.

The rapes and gay killing on both sides are cruel and terrible. They are not a reason for supporting either side. Instead, they are parts of a much wider tragedy that has been building for many years – to which previous American and British invasion and bombing have contributed.

**Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale**

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## **P.S.**

\* “ISIS, Sexual Violence and Killing Gay Men”. Sexism Class Violence. FEBRUARY 10, 2015:  
<https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/isis-sexual-violence-and-killing-gay-men/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The Daily Beast:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/28/escaping-assad-s-rape-prisons-a-survivor-tells-her-story.html>;

Annick Cojean of Le Monde:

<http://www.worldcrunch.com/syria-crisis/syria-039-s-silent-war-crime-systematic-mass-rape/human-rights-prison-torture-assad-free-syrian-army/c13s15245/#.VNP40J2sWmF>;

The Nation:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/179843/will-there-ever-be-justice-syrias-rape-survivors#>

A human rights report from Euromedrights:

<http://www.euromedrights.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Doc-report-VAW-Syria.pdf>

[2] <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/syria-has-a-massive-rape-crisis/274583/>

[3] Wolfe works for Women Under Siege. Their website at

<http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org> has many useful articles.

[4] <http://paper-bird.net/2015/01/27/isis-kills-gays-a-history-of-violence/>