

The Forgotten: Pakistan's Transgender Population, and the Islamic State

Written by Erin Kilbride

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ERIN KILBRIDE, JAN 7 2015

News outlets from Washington to Peshawar lit up last month with reports that Islamic State (ISIS) paraphernalia is spreading across Pakistan.

Recent photos show the ISIS name and logo dotting Pakistani villages, and local security officials confiscated the militant group's "dreaded black flags" near Islamabad. The Times of India displayed "wall chalking welcoming the Islamic State;" the New York Times reported that the "allure of ISIS for Pakistanis is on the rise;" and Business Insider claimed that "ISIS now has a point man recruiting fighters in Pakistan."

Though the presence of ISIS in Pakistan is reportedly more symbolic than operational, its influence over local militant groups is clear. In October, former spokesman for the Pakistan Taliban, Shahidullah Shahid, publicly declared his personal allegiance to the Islamic State, along with five other Taliban Movement of Pakistan (TTP) regional commanders. TTP is an umbrella organization of militant groups in northwest Pakistan, including most local Taliban factions. Other Pakistani militant groups have reportedly flown ISIS flags, chalked local villages with ISIS logos, and posted photos of ISIS leaders on telephone poles.

Security analysts disagree over the importance of ISIS symbols and declarations of allegiance from local militants. Some say this is a sign of what is to come, positioning Pakistan as the next ISIS frontier. Others say such reports are nothing more than propaganda, aimed at scaring local Shia populations and garnering more aid from the United States.

On both sides of the debate, arguments center on military response, counterinsurgency, and regional "security." Threats to civilian life, women's rights, sectarian relations, and Pakistan's monumental achievements in gender law rarely enter the debate. The lack of attention paid to these issues gives the impression that the danger to women, religious minorities, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) populations posed by ISIS is either presumed to be self-evident or of no consequence to readers.

Recent reports from local and international rights groups indicate that ISIS poses a significant and fatal threat to LGBTQ residents in regions it controls. Last month, a report from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Committee (IGLHRC), Madre, and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) found that ISIS has condemned to death and executed multiple individuals in Syria for alleged "sodomy," and has "made clear that there is no place for gender non-conforming individuals under its rule."

In Pakistan, though homosexuality is illegal and punishable by a jail sentence ranging from two years to life in prison, transgender citizens have legally codified rights. In 2009, Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered the issuing of "third gender" identity cards to the country's self-identifying transgender, transsexual, and eunuch populations, (known as the "khawaja sara") who number between 80,000 and 300,000. In 2012, the court ruled that the khawaja sara should have the same rights as other Pakistanis, including inheritance and job opportunities.

Local security officials have remarked that ISIS would "change nothing" in Pakistan, a country already rife with

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bombings and sectarian violence. But the potential rise of ISIS in Pakistan is much more than a military “security” threat, and such claims discount the social ramifications of some radical Islamist groups, particularly for LGBTQ populations. ISIS is now world-renowned for its barbaric enactment of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, and their presence in Pakistan has the potential to erode decades of struggle for trans* recognition.

Whether ISIS is “active” in Pakistan or not, its influence is felt. The group has proved something of a catalyst for the already fractured Pakistan Taliban. Mohamed Amir Rana, director of the Pak Institute of Peace, explained that “ISIS has captured the imagination” of Pakistani militants, such that their barbaric tactics may well inspire increased radicalization amongst existing militant factions.

If this proves true, the question of whether ISIS' presence in Pakistan is operational or symbolic will matter little to those subjected to ISIS-inspired brutality.

ISIS in Pakistan: Yes or No?

In October and November, reports of ISIS paraphernalia spreading in Pakistan were so potent that Pakistan's military chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, felt compelled to assure American security officials in Washington that he would “not allow the emergence of anything like the Islamic State in Pakistan.”

“Such is the influence of the Islamic State's steamroller success in Iraq and Syria,” said the New York Times, “that, even thousands of miles away, security officials and militant networks are having to reckon with the group.”

The ISIS brand offers numerous perks for local militant groups. Declaring allegiance (or demonstrating a nominal connection by flying a flag or hanging a poster) provides advantages over rival militant factions in terms of publicity, fundraising, and recruiting. ISIS' social media success and vocal, celebrity like “caliph,” Abu Baker al-Baghdadi also seem to appeal to younger recruits, as compared to the old fashioned audio recordings of Al Qaeda and the largely invisible Taliban leader, Mullah Omar.

Despite the appeal, not everyone is convinced that the threat of ISIS is as dire as Gen. Sharif alleged. Last week, the Times of India ran an editorial accusing Pakistan's military chief of “playing the ISIS card” on his visit to the United States (US), likening the militant group to past “cards” (the Soviet Union; Al Qaeda) “played” in attempts to secure US aid. Pakistani officials have long been accused of harboring militant groups with their right hand and reaching out for US military and civilian aid with their left. The danger in this “game,” so the editorial argued, is that Pakistani authorities risk inadvertently strengthening ISIS, emboldening the group's recruiting efforts with embellished accounts of its popularity.

Lost in this debate over the (alleged) spread of ISIS into Pakistan is an exploration of what such a spread would mean for Pakistani citizens. Most reports, on both sides of the debate, privilege national and international military interests. The whole conversation seems to center on what this would mean for US drone campaigns or Pakistani counterinsurgency. Given ISIS' notoriously brutal treatment of Shias, shockingly little attention is paid to what their presence would mean for Pakistan's already marginalized Shia communities. Similarly, in light of ISIS allegedly publishing a blueprint for trading women as sex slaves, one might assume concurrent coverage of ISIS' black flags in Lahore would include even a line about the threat to women living there. This is not the case.

Local and international debates over ISIS' alleged spread to Pakistan (Are they here? Are they active? Do we care?) almost exclusively cover the debate from a military, counterinsurgency standpoint. Some military officials seem a bit exasperated by the are-they-or-aren't-they binary, and have effectively thrown their hands in air over the inconsequence of the question. For example the New York Times cited one government official in northwest Pakistan as saying, “In tactical terms, it would change nothing.”

Of course, taking a highly militarized view of what constitutes “security,” the official quoted in the NYT may have a point. The many manifestations of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban have roots much deeper than ISIS does in Pakistan, and the government is in the midst of a six month old offensive in North Waziristan fighting components of

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the TTP. Beheadings, roadside bombings, and suicide attacks in churches and Shia mosques long pre-date the threat of ISIS in Pakistan. So do the US drone strikes and on-again-off-again partnerships with Pakistani officials that seek to rid the country of militant insurgents. If insurgency by, and counterinsurgency against, Islamic militants remain the yardsticks of “security” in Pakistan, then perhaps we should make room for the idea that an active Islamic State would “change nothing” in the country.

If, however, the rights of all Pakistani citizens to live and work freely are seen as vital components of national security, much more is at stake if ISIS becomes operational in Pakistan.

At Risk: Pakistan's Transgender Population

In June of 2009, Pakistani authorities commissioned a census to establish the number of “third gender” citizens in the country. Upon discovering the existence of between 80,000 and 300,000 khawaja sara Pakistanis (depending on the sources, exact numbers differ widely), the Supreme Court ordered the issuance of national identity cards recognizing the country's now-legal “third gender.” In 2012, Pakistan granted the khawaja sara many of the same rights enjoyed by cisgender Pakistanis, including voting and inheritance rights. In May 2013, khawaja sara voted and ran in national elections.

Qasim Iqbal is a prominent HIV/AIDS and sexual health activist in Pakistan, and Executive Director at Naz Male Health Alliance (Naz). Naz is the “first and only men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) and transgender community based organization in Pakistan.” They operate six health centers throughout the country, four for MSM and two for transgendered people. Iqbal explains that Naz's MSM centers operate in undisclosed locations and that sexual stigmas prevent Naz from reaching many Pakistanis who may benefit from their services [1]. The transgender health centers, however, operate openly. Iqbal says that local “acceptance” of “hijras” mean khawaja sara have “no issue” coming to Naz centers in Larkana and Lahore for healthcare and socializing [2]. Iqbal explains:

Hijras have a special place in the South Asian version of Islam. People used to believe that God gave them two genders, so they must be God's special, chosen people. Hundreds of years ago, hijras had a tremendous amount of respect. In the 1800s, the British outlawed sodomy and cross dressing, and brought with them a conservatism that can still be felt today.

Despite the region's historical reverence for and modern day rights afforded to transgendered people, the khawaja sara often face physical violence, slurs against them and their families, and discrimination in employment. In a 2014 report on the treatment of LBT people in Asia, the IGLHRC reported:

The most widely reported violence [against transgendered people in Pakistan] was emotional violence, ranging from sexually explicit verbal abuse in the streets to intense humiliation and psychological torture in the home. However, where physical and sexual violence were reported, the violence was often extreme and heinous.

According to the report, physical violence includes beatings, stabbings, sexual abuse, and rape.

Khawaja sara also endure eviction campaigns in neighborhoods across Pakistan, which they claim are ignored or supported by local officials despite a 2009 ruling that outlawed state and police violence against them. In 2013, Radio Free Europe (RFE) reported the rise of an inter-faith coalition in the largely Shia Imamia Colony of Lahore, in which Sunni, Shia, and Christian Pakistanis have banded together against the local khawaja sara:

Those [religious] groups — often at odds elsewhere in Pakistan — have united in Imamia Colony behind the goal of trying to force out members of the transgender community.

The Sunni man identified by RFE as the leader of the self-titled “cleansing campaign” cited “drunkenness” and the threat of children being “trapped into homosexuality” as the driving motivators for the campaign.

The views of residents forcing khawaja sara out of their neighborhoods exist amongst government leaders as well.

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Javed Nasim, a lawmaker in Peshawar, equated the khawaja sara to “homosexuals” and declared them “un-Islamic.” Nasim is a former member of Pakistan's Tehrik-i-Insaf party, which rules the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province in northern Pakistan. According to the director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, I.A. Rehman:

[The Khawaja sara are] generally not under threat. But they are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province because of the new coalition of power there and their concept of a new [more conservative] Islam under way.

Of the five regional Taliban commanders who declared allegiance to ISIS in October, one leads the TTP faction in KPK. Despite the increasing conservatism in KPK province, however, life under ISIS would not look the same as life under the Taliban for transgendered people.

“The Taliban doesn't pose any threat to the khawaja sara,” says Iqbal. “In fact, the Taliban hires hijras to come and dance in their camps. Most Taliban here are Patans, a people native to northern Pakistan. They're actually famous for their hijra-infactuation, and hijras can give them the kind of [anal] sex they cannot have with their wives. Many hijras will travel to the KPK province just to make good money dancing for the Taliban. Talibs are not a threat to hijras. In fact, they keep many in business.”

The Pakistani Taliban is largely native to northern Pakistan, and shares in the historical reverence for transgendered people. Owais Arshad, a Pakistani student pursuing his MSc International Development and Conflict at the University of Birmingham explained:

Culturally speaking, there is a taboo about harming [Khawaja sara] or harassing them, as it is said that ‘Allah always answers a curse from a KS!’ As, far as I am aware, the Taliban or other terror groups have never specifically targeted them. [3]

Unlike the Taliban, ISIS is rooted in a society devoid of transgendered acceptance. Iqbal points out that “with or without ISIS, gays can be thrown off rooftops in Syria.” [4] The potential of ISIS presence in Pakistan presents a much more severe threat to transgendered people than that posed by the Taliban. In this sense and with this gendered and humanized understanding of what constitutes security it is clear that ISIS would not, as one general claimed, “change nothing.”

What ISIS Has to Say About Gender Variance

The Islamic State's views on gender bending are clear. On its website, ISIS lists its interpretation of “Islamic law,” leaving little room to question the danger LGBTQ people face in regions controlled by the militant group. A recent report on the persecution of LGBTQ Iraqis translates some of the key components related to gender “transgressions” set forth on the ISIS website:

These interpretations cite sayings (Ahadith) of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, whose authenticity and legal interpretation are accorded different weight by different schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Islamic State highlights the following Ahadith:

- Islam commanded the dress of women to be different from the dress of men, as well as that the dress of men be different from the dress of women.
- [Islam] prohibited men from resembling women in dress or vice versa, and [commands] each [gender] to differentiate itself from the other.
- God's Messenger ... cursed the man wearing a woman's clothing and the woman wearing a man's dress.
- It was said to [the Prophet Muhammad's wife] 'A'isha, 'Can a woman wear a shoe?' And she answered: 'God's Messenger cursed the masculine women.'
- I heard God's Messenger say, 'None of our women resemble men'.
- The Prophet cursed the effeminate men and masculine women and said, 'Throw them out of your houses,' and [Ibn Abbas] said, 'The Prophet threw one of them out and [Caliph] Umar threw another one out.
- God's Messenger cursed men resembling women and women resembling men.

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The law section of the Islamic State's website also states:

- The Sharia ruling is to punish sodomy by death, whether or not the person is unblemished. Every person for whom sodomy is proven, whether actively or passively, shall be executed for an offense against God.

Given its own legal interpretations and its own its own claim to having carried out such sentences, coupled with reports of widespread sexual violence and instances of summary and arbitrary executions of persons believed to have engaged in homosexual acts, anyone believed to be LGBT under the Islamic State control is likely at imminent risk of death.

ISIS' presence in Pakistan poses a severe threat to LGBTQ-identifying Pakistanis. For the Khawaja sara, ISIS represents a potential regression in their hard earned recognition, public identification, and access to full citizenship. Aside from harassment and physical violence, ISIS may also pose a threat to the livelihoods of Khawaja sara, who earn money singing, dancing, and performing at community celebrations and weddings. ISIS harsh restrictions on dress (particularly those dealing with "men who dress like women") and activities like dance pose a very specific threat to the Khawaja sara, both physically and economically.

Recent blueprints for sexual slavery and detailed calls for the extermination of gays have alerted the public to *some* of the dangers of ISIS, yet rarely does coverage of such barbarism include local context. Thus, when a United Kingdom news post reported "ISIS throws man off roof to his death for being gay," the article offered no explanation of what "being gay" means in Iraqi society. Similar, when al-Arabiya reported "ISIS stones 2 'gay men' to death in Syria," local conceptualizations of homosexuality were conspicuously missing.

The widespread (Western) assumption that "Islam" universally condemns homo-, queer-, and trans*- genders and sexualities also has a diminishing effect on reporting of ISIS brutality against LGBTQ residents of the region it controls.

Dominic Bocci, Religion Editor at Muftah.org, recently argued:

It is next to impossible to find coverage on [LGBTQ issues in the Middle East] that, in some way or another, does not make two factually incorrect assumptions: that Islamic texts clearly condemn homosexuality and that homosexuality is illegal in the Middle East.

Western coverage of ISIS' anti-LGBTQ brutality fails to account for the rights afforded these populations under their existing governments. Assumptions that the spread of ISIS into Pakistan will "change nothing" for Pakistanis not only erase the consequences for local human rights, but also discount existing rights enjoyed by local transgender individuals. Although far from perfect, the current status of the ID-carrying, "feminine" dressing Khawaja sara is not the same as a life under ISIS' severe, brutally enforced codes of gendered dress and conduct.

The debate over the extent of ISIS' presence in Pakistan, symbolic or otherwise, needs to be expanded to include the safety and rights of LGBTQ populations, and the potential of the militant group to erode hard-earned trans* recognition for the Khawaja sara.

Notes

[1] Interview with author, December 17, 2014.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Interview with author, December 15, 2014.

[4] Interview with author, December 17, 2014.

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Erin Kilbride is the Gulf States and Yemen Editor at Muftah.org, where she writes on human rights, juvenile justice, and queer theory. She recently co-edited a special collection on LGBTQ Sexualities in the Middle East and North Africa, and has previously conducted gender justice research in Bahrain, Jordan, and with Iraqi refugee populations in the United States. Kilbride has written for Voice of America, Human Rights First, and the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory in Geneva. She has a degree in Women's and Gender Studies from Georgetown University and studied Arab women's literature at the University of Jordan. Follow her @neo_chlo.