

The Mendacious Mehdi Hasan

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Mehdi Hasan is a Muslim journalist, British-born, who has been in the news this week for asking Rep. Ilhan Omar, in a [2018 interview](#), a question about “jihadist terrorism,” words he pronounced with skeptical contempt, to which she replied by saying that “white men” were the bigger threat. But there is good reason to be as concerned about Hasan as about Omar. Hasan presents himself as an independent thinker, critical when necessary of Islam and of Muslims, and yet he is also a frequent, and sly, defender of the faith and its Believers. The fact that his main outlet is Al Jazeera, the Qatari-owned propaganda outlet, where he appears regularly, should give his Western admirers pause. Several months ago he wrote [a piece](#) about the Sultan of Brunei, and the punishment he not long ago approved – death by stoning – for those convicted of adultery or homosexual acts.

Here is Hasan’s tale:

I WAS 13 years old when I first heard of the Sultan of Brunei. The absolute ruler of a tiny, oil-rich kingdom in Southeast Asia, Hassanal Bolkiah was the subject of a much-discussed TV documentary by the British filmmaker Alan Whicker in 1992. As a young teenager, sitting in front of the television, I was in awe of this Muslim king. He was the richest man in the world! He earned a quarter of a million pounds every hour! He owned more than 150 cars!

Today, however, I'm filled not with awe but with disgust. Brunei has become the first country in Southeast Asia to impose capital punishment for "crimes" such as adultery and gay sex.

LGBTQ Bruneians, who are in particular danger, have been fleeing the kingdom. Can you blame them? According to the Associated Press, "Homosexuality was already punishable in Brunei by a jail term of up to 10 years. ... But under the new laws, those found guilty of gay sex can be stoned to death or whipped. Adulterers risk death by stoning too, while thieves face amputation of a right hand on their first offense and a left foot on their second. The laws also apply to children and foreigners, even if they are not Muslim."

This is barbarism, plain and simple. How can a punishment rightly described as "cruel and inhuman" (U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet), "vicious" (Amnesty International), and "medieval" (Human Rights Watch) be considered appropriate or acceptable in the 21st century? Has the Sultan – who isn't exactly a paragon of moral rectitude himself – taken leave of his senses?"

Does Mehdi Hasan object to the death penalty for homosexuals, or does he only object to death by stoning? If it is the former, why does he not mention that ten of the eleven countries that punish homosexual acts with the death penalty are Muslim countries (and the 11th, Nigeria, does allow the

death penalty in its Muslim-majority north)? Apparently a great many Muslims believe that death is the appropriate punishment for such acts. Where do they get this idea? Mehdi Hasan knows where: why doesn't he provide the Qur'anic verses, and Hadith stories, about the people of Lot and their punishment? Why does Mehdi Hasan also fail to mention the steady killing of homosexuals in Iran, who are hung from cranes? Or the homosexuals who can be decapitated in Saudi Arabia? Why this selective indignation? Is the Sultan of Brunei's penalty for homosexuals – death by stoning – which is the same punishment Allah visited upon the people of Lot – so much worse than hanging in Iran or decapitation in Saudi Arabia?

And what about the amputation of the right hand as punishment for a first theft, and a left leg for a second, which Mehdi Hasan appears to find "barbaric"? Where does he think such a punishment comes from? He knows the relevant Qur'anic verses;

'The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: that is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter (Quran 5:33)

"As to the thief, Male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime: and Allah is Exalted in power." (Qur'an 5:38)

It is likely that 5:33 was being followed, in the belief that theft constitutes one kind of "mischief," not enough to warrant "execution or crucifixion," but enough to trigger the punishment of "cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides." Such double amputations, of the right hand and left foot, have been carried out in Somalia, Iran, and Afghanistan.

But Mehdi Hasan doesn't mention either of these verses. He

would prefer to pretend that these “barbaric” punishments are not to be found in the Islamic texts, but are the invention of the cruel and unrepresentative Sultan of Brunei.

Then again, shamefully, Brunei isn't alone. A recent study by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association found that there are already six countries that explicitly make homosexuality a crime punishable by death. And, as a Muslim, it is a source of deep frustration for me that 5 out of the 6 are Muslim-majority countries – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia – and in the sixth, Nigeria, the death penalty is imposed only in Muslim-majority or Muslim-plurality states. According to ILGA, there are also 70 member states of the United Nations that “criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts” – and, again, Muslim-majority countries are disproportionately represented on that list. In fact, homosexuality is illegal in the vast majority of the world's Muslim-majority nations, from Senegal in West Africa to Malaysia in Southeast Asia to Qatar in the Middle East. (Full disclosure: I host two shows on Al Jazeera English, which is funded by the government of Qatar. According to the Qatari penal code, gay sex can result in a prison sentence.)

It is easy to blame all of this rampant, state-sponsored homophobia in the Muslim-majority world solely on Islam. Indeed, the prominent British atheist, scientist, and Islamophobe, Richard Dawkins, cited Brunei's barbaric new law in order to compare my faith to cancer.”

Mehdi Hasan demonizes the supreme rationalist and islamocritic, Richard Dawkins, as an “Islamophobe,” and does not answer Dawkins's main complaint about the new laws in Brunei, which is that the Sultan believes that the Qur'an itself commands execution for homosexuals: “To obey Allah's command as written in the Quran.” So, Dawkins tweeted, “you'd better not object or you'll be accused of Islamophobia &

Cambridge will de-platform you.” (Dawkins was recently uninvited from giving a talk at Cambridge.)

Yet the truth is that nowhere in the Quran is a legal punishment prescribed for the sin, or the “crime,” of homosexuality. There are no authentic reports in any of the Muslim books of history of the Prophet Muhammad punishing anyone for same-sex acts. In fact, even many Muslims today are unaware that the Ottoman Empire decriminalized homosexuality in 1858. Got that? One hundred and nine years before the U.K. and 145 years before the United States, the biggest Muslim-ruled empire on earth decreed that there should be no penalty for being gay.

No, there are no reports of Muhammad punishing anyone for same-sex acts. But there are reports of Allah doing so. Isn't that more important? Mehdi Hasan claims that nowhere in the Qur'an is a “legal punishment” prescribed for the sin of homosexuality. But when Allah himself describes the punishment He inflicted on the People of Lot, this is much more significant than any “legal punishment” that might be inflicted by mere mortals. When Hasan remarks that “nowhere in the Qur'an” is there a legal punishment of homosexuality, he is deliberately ignoring the fact that there is in the Hadith, particularly in a certain hadith in which “the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘Whoever you find doing the action of the people of Loot, execute the one who does it and the one to whom it is done’” (Sunan Abu Dawud 4462). Muhammad is not then inflicting that punishment on anyone, but he is commanding that Muslims in the future, “as a legal punishment,” execute both persons guilty of homosexual congress.

To be clear: The consensus position among mainstream Islamic scholars, whether Sunni or Shia, is that same-sex relations, like extramarital or premarital relations, are a sin. There is, however, no consensus among scholars about any earthly

punishment for committing this sin. Don't take my word for it – ask Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, described as “arguably the West's most influential Islamic scholar.”

If there is no “consensus” among mainstream Muslim scholars about “any earthly punishment” for same-sex relations why do ten Muslim countries mandate the death penalty? They must have found some textual justification in the Qur'an or Hadith, or both. And in fact they do. It is in the condemnation of the “people of Lot” (who appear in several places in the Qur'an). As Mehdi Hasan stated in 2013, “The Quran, after all, explicitly condemns the people of Lot for “approach[ing] males” (26:165) and for “lust[ing] on men in preference to women” (7:81). Why is he silent now about those verses? Here, to remind Hasan, is the longest Qur'anic passage about homosexuals, which includes the method of punishing them:

“And Lot when he said to his people, ‘Do you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds? Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people.’...And We rained upon them a rain of stones. Then see how was the end of the criminals.” (Qur'an 7:80-84) “We” here is Allah, describing the death, by stoning (“a rain of stones”), that He himself inflicted on the People of Lot.

And there is a hadith in which Muhammad specifies that the proper penalty for homosexuality is execution: “The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘Whoever you find doing the action of the people of Loot, execute the one who does it and the one to whom it is done.’” (Sunan Abu Dawud 4462)

There is nothing ambiguous about that hadith. The textual authority is on the side of those Muslims who favor the death penalty. That Mehdi Hasan opposes the death penalty is welcome, but his pretending to Unbelievers that the Islamic

texts do not support the death penalty is unacceptable taqiyya. If he wants to halt the infliction of the death penalty for homosexual acts, he must be willing to discuss, and not ignore, what Allah did, and Muhammad commanded.

To point the finger only at Islam, or even at Islamists, doesn't explain why Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power after toppling the Muslim Brotherhood and is now a hero to Ivanka Trump, has violently cracked down on LGBTQ communities