

## Unbearable witness: how Western activists (mis)recognize sexuality in Iran

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This contribution proposes a critical analysis of responses in Western gay and lesbian politics to state-defined crimes relating to same-sex sexual behaviour in Iran. It focuses on the Iranian state's execution of Makwan Mouloudzadeh in 2007, for alleged involvement in a rape committed almost a decade before, as well as on other recent images and allegations about rights abuses inside Iran. Using empirical sources, including news and non-governmental organizations' statements, the article examines how gay and lesbian activists in the West misinterpreted the context and reduced the scope of rights violations in a search for 'gay' identity and for 'homophobia'. The article questions how the terms of Western gay politics can erase voices and political agency in describing other cultural situations, through a pursuit of sameness and a strategic misrecognition of otherness that enables domestic political action but posits misleading universals.

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I am writing at a desk strewn with words and papers. From the abstractions, a picture, an unex-punged landmark, stares back – printed from a website, Makwan. It has been nine months since the Iranian state killed Makwan Mouloudzadeh. He was 21, put to death for a crime allegedly carried out when he was 13.

Iran leads the world in executing people for offences committed as children – often waiting until the victim turns 18 in the hope this will conceal the enormity. Most state killings in Iran go unnoticed: a few embattled rights groups in Teheran protest, and a few family members try desperately to get anyone else to pay attention.

Makwan's case was different. Google his name in English, French, or German: a raft of articles comes up. His picture appears too, readily recognizable, with an austerity around the cheekbones, and the frightened eyes. Dead, he is still being hunted.

What happened to him – how his case and life were sucked into a search for 'gay' identity in Iran – is instructive. In writing about it, I am not trying to give a picture of the real state of persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity in Iran. That is a different subject, and Human Rights Watch will document it in a forthcoming report. Rather, I will examine how certain Westerners interpreted certain things about Iran, and how that reflected on the identities they posited for themselves.

I work for Human Rights Watch, and this paper draws on research, including over 110 interviews, that we have conducted over three years into human rights abuses based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Iran. Here, however, I speak only for myself and my own experiences, not for my organization.

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This is, then, a case study in how lesbian and gay politics in the West interpreted, and acted on, a different cultural context and reality. It responds to the third question raised by the editors in their introduction to this issue, concerning how the transnational human rights networks and global norms of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights affect domestic politics in the global north and global south. This study views the question through two prisms. First, it looks at how norms refined in domestic advocacy in the developed north have become 'transnational', and what distortions – both in southern and subaltern political situations, and in the transnational movements themselves – are risks of that translation. Second, it asks what exigencies made those norms powerful in the north in the first place. It does not claim to present a comprehensive picture of transnational LGBT activism – as though that were possible. However, the claims around Iran that it analyses gained sufficient power that they point to impulses and needs deeply rooted in Western gay activist movements.

One more story of how the West misrecognizes the world is neither urgent nor useful. It is the 'lesbian and gay' side I stress. The question is whether something about the politics of lesbian and gay activism in developed societies conduces to the paths taken here – and the mistakes made.

The snowdrift of words across my desk is a reminder. I am part of that politics. Together with other commentators, I see in gay and lesbian activism as it has emerged in the last decades an increasing turn toward claims rooted in the symbolic order and the cultural field, not in negotiations over tangible goods. If our particular form of politics is driven by 'recognition' rather than allocation (Fraser 1997), what does that imply for how we recognize and respond to other kinds of claims and urgencies? How do we go about assimilating the representation of an alien and impinging violence into our understandings and nightmares? What is it that our politics prepares us to recognize, and what recognitions does it foreclose?

These are critical questions, on which lives can hang.

#### **Makwan: the deadly importance of being 'gay'**

In June 2007, a judge in Kermanshah convicted Makwan Mouloudzadeh of raping three boys seven years before – even though all three of his accusers had recanted their claims. Makwan, in court, had withdrawn a coerced confession, leaving the case against him without a shred of support. The trial's irregularities suggest both judicial incompetence and a small-town vendetta (Human Rights Watch 2007).

As the case crept into the international press, though, Makwan acquired other defenders. Gay bloggers and activist groups in the USA and Europe were hungry for Iranian rape cases. A storm had swept parts of the gay activist community over claims that Iran was executing gays in a 'major anti-homosexual pogrom' (Ireland 2006) – and then covering it up by accusing them of rape instead. The advocates had been unable to present evidence of a single 'gay execution' to prove the allegations. Passionately committed, they were perched on watch for Iranian executions. Makwan, in that sense, was manna.

Makwan was not gay. His family – particularly his brother, accused in the same case, who fled the country – all made clear that he never had consensual sex with another man, and was never accused of that.<sup>1</sup>

The family was grateful for any attention his forlorn case received. They had little clue about what some of his new supporters started saying about him.

The temptation to attribute 'gay' identity to Makwan was too great for many Western gays to pass up. An Amnesty International action stating that 'child offender Makwan Moloudzadeh' faced death for 'the alleged rape of a 13-year-old boy' became, in a US gay news site's headlines: 'Death penalty imminent for gay youth in Iran' (Towleroad 2007). Still more appalling

were the interventions of the Italian collective Gruppo Everyone (2008a), an association 'for international cooperation'. In numerous press releases, all extensively republished, they promoted a petition to President Ahmadinejad to save 'the young Iranian gay Makwan Moloudzadeh' (Gruppo Everyone 2008b). They called on people to send symbolic (by email) or real (by Interflora) roses to Ahmadinejad for the 'young gay man', to support 'the human rights of the young homosexual Makwan' (Gruppo Everyone 2007a).

Gruppo Everyone never entertained the idea that Makwan had *not* had sex with his 'victim'. Rather, they repeated, Makwan was only "guilty" of having loved a peer when he was 13 and having sexual intercourse with him' (Gruppo Everyone 2007d). There is no way to tell how many emails (or roses) reached Iranian authorities, proclaiming that Makwan had sex with another boy.

Iran has the death penalty for homosexual conduct, consensual or non-consensual. But, eager to weave a story about Makwan's 'gayness', Gruppo Everyone and others forgot truth and consequences. Serenely sure of their rightness, they informed the Iranian authorities that Makwan was innocent of one capital crime, but guilty of another.

Peter Tatchell and OutRage!, controversial British gay activists, had long alleged that 'gay' executions were routine in Iran. Tatchell also urged letters to Teheran about Makwan, whom he called 'the latest victim of Tehran's on-going homophobic campaign.' 'Under Iranian law,' Tatchell said, 'same-sex acts are illegal and punishable by death.' So he went on to charge Makwan with same-sex acts. 'Makwan was 13 at the time of the offence. His partner was also 13.' Tatchell claimed that his group's 'research confirms a pattern of framing same-sex lovers on charges of kidnap and rape, in order to discredit them, discourage public protests and deflect international condemnation' (Tatchell 2007). Tatchell was mortally incriminating not only Makwan under Iranian law, but his accusers – now transformed into his 'lovers'. All, he implied, were guilty of consensual homosexual sex.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch stuck to the facts, stressing there was no evidence of *any* sexual acts. At one point, success seemed just feasible. In November, the head of Iran's judiciary suspended the sentence, pending an official investigation. Gruppo Everyone triumphed that he had 'granted a pardon to the young homosexual Makwan Mouloudzadeh' (Gruppo Everyone 2007b).

People experienced with Iran know it is unwise to exult publicly in victories over the regime; doubly unwise, to do so on behalf of people the regime despises; triply unwise, if the victory is not final. There had been no pardon. A suspended sentence is not abrogated but only in abeyance. In early December, Makwan's lawyer told Human Rights Watch the Kermanshah court planned to carry out the sentence, even without the required review.

One US gay website cried, 'Gay Execution Back On in Iran,' demanding more faxes, more emails to Iran (Queerty.com 2007). Gruppo Everyone sent out another broadside: 'Marwan [*sic*] ... has been sentenced to death for his homosexuality' (Gruppo Everyone 2007c). Again they called for hitting 'send' with the message about Makwan's gayness – to the head of Iran's judiciary, the President, the Supreme Leader. 'Emails, postcards and letters from all over the world ... are continuing to reach the Teheran authorities pleading for clemency for a gay boy whose only sin was that of loving a peer when he was only 13 years old' (Gruppo Everyone 2007e).

Forty-eight hours after they wrote that, Makwan was hanged.

Not long after the execution, Ayatollah Shahrudi, head of Iran's judiciary, claimed he had never ordered the sentence delayed in the first place. This is demonstrably untrue – official papers document his order – and raises the question of why Shahrudi wanted to deceive. Perhaps he was embarrassed at being effectively overruled by local judges. Perhaps the international campaign alleging Makwan's 'homosexuality' had changed his attitude, moving him to speed the execution.

Nothing can detract from the Iranian authorities' entire responsibility for this crime. But the actions of Makwan's gay 'defenders' – too obsessed by their own inward-looking agendas to weigh his life or consider the implications of their actions – did him no good.

Why did activists, presumably united in their desire to help, not even realize their actions could irreparably damage Makwan's case? The answer goes back to a controversy over previous killings that had already raged for two and a half years. That controversy had, possibly, at last claimed a life.

Makwan did not rest in peace. The case became a stick to beat (largely imaginary) opponents: Makwan 'was executed because homosexual,' one journalist wrote. 'The Iran Lobby, so powerful within some quarters of the Western "Left," and the so-called "anti-war movement," will once again try to justify this barbaric murder and repeat the lies of the Iranian theocracy: he was killed not because homosexual but because he was accused of rape' (Zamparini 2007). And Peter Tatchell still pressed his agenda months later. 'The [Iranian] regime sometimes frames gay people with false charges of rape and child sex abuse,' he wrote. 'This,' he added blandly, 'is what happened in the case of 21-year-old Makwan Moloudzadeh' (Tatchell 2008).

#### **Mashhad: the evidence of things not seen**

Gay activists' conduct in the Makwan case was grounded in the politics of a country a continent away from Iran.

For a decade, Peter Tatchell and his OutRage! group in London had campaigned against religious homophobia. They had gained great publicity by opposing the Anglican Church. However, going after British Muslims – members of an embattled minority with none of the authority Christianity could claim – had a different, bullying tone.

As far back as 1995, Tatchell warned in the gay press, 'Muslim fundamentalists are a growing threat to gay human rights in Britain. . . . There is no room for complacency. . . . homophobic Muslim voters may be able to influence the outcome of elections' (Tatchell 1995).

OutRage! showed a keen eye for publicity openings. A grim one came on 7 July 2005. Four bombs went off in London's public transport system, and 56 people died.

Eleven days later, Tatchell alleged that 'Islamic fundamentalists' had marked him for death as well. Soho's club scene was also on the list: 'Gay venues could be bombed,' by Muslims, who 'have a violent hatred of lesbians and gay men. . . . Our community could be their next target.' And, again: 'This is no time for complacency' (Tatchell has removed this release from his website, probably because of its inflammatory nature, but see OutRage! 2005a).

Part of what defines 'terror' is its indiscriminateness, democratically indifferent to the individuality of those it targets. They are all 'guilty' by mere virtue of belonging to the offending life world, and no one's memory is left with the bare dignity of being singled out as meant to die. The meticulously planned crime does not plan its victims. Who survives or not is abdicated to the aleatic, a roulette transcending what the dead did or who they were.

After a crime, you look for the offender. The extremity of this violence bred predictable extremes (the witch-hunt mentality against Arabs, Muslims, and anybody dark). Less obvious but no less real was the need to look for victims, a search extending beyond the recovery of bodies. Restoring the logic that the randomness had ruptured meant repairing the indignity that no one was chosen. A recaptured dignity accrued to the claim that one might have been the target after all.

No facts supported Tatchell's claims (the only gay-bar bombing in recent British history was by a white neo-Nazi: *Guardian* 2000). But they put Tatchell's name in the news, and gay Soho clubgoers at the centre of things – at least in their own fears. The flimsy warning, though, might well expose Tatchell to criticism that he was exploiting calamity for publicity.

Meanwhile, in Iran, an event offered potential evidence of the Islamic threat to gays. On the morning of 19 July 2005, the *Quds* daily newspaper in Mashhad, Iran, reported the impending public execution of two youths in the city that day, for '*tajavoz*' – rape. It detailed how they had allegedly raped a 13-year-old boy. The story quoted the victim and his father, claiming the youths had lured him off a street and violated him.

Neither Tatchell nor anyone else outside Iran picked up this story at first. It was in Farsi, not a language Tatchell understood.

The public hanging later that day brought global shock, though. It was a horrifying exclamation mark the authorities stuck on the sentence, to send a mass message about delinquent juveniles – an obsession for a regime that saw a mission in controlling youth.

The Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA), founded by reformist students, put photographs on the Web. Though ISNA receives state funds, it is generally seen as capable of challenging the government with independent reporting (see Engber 2006). Their story – reported from Mashhad – showed two weeping, terrified youths trucked to the gallows, and noosed in front of the waiting crowd before they were hanged. The headline said they were executed for '*lavat beh onf*' – 'sodomy by force', a Farsi term for men raping men (all other Farsi-language news outlets in Iran described their crime as sexual assault upon the boy).

Follow me now, through acronyms and errors. Two English-language, Iranian exile websites in turn picked up the story: Iranfocus.com, and the site of the National Council of the Resistance in Iran (NCRI). Iran Focus (2005b), on the same day, simply summarized the ISNA story, saying the two 'were convicted of sexual assault on a 13-year-old boy by the Islamic Tribunal of Mashad'.

The NCRI carried the story up on 20 July, with the headline: 'In shocking crime, mullahs' henchmen hang an 18-year-old, and a juvenile under 18 years of age: Iranian Resistance urges EU to cut off all dialogue with the religious fascism ruling Iran' (National Council of the Resistance in Iran 2005). The ideological tone was typical. Based in Paris, the NCRI is the political wing of an armed exile opposition group, the Mojahedin Khalq Organization (MKO). The MKO is widely regarded as a militant cult, an 'army of Stepford wives' (Rubin 2003) accused of human rights abuses and torture.<sup>2</sup>

In the Mashhad case, the NCRI at first did not even sense a possible 'gay' angle. It obviously drew on the ISNA story (without citing it) – omitting the reference to rape in an attempt (hardly necessary given the horror of the photos) to ensure sympathy would lie squarely with the murdered boys. It said they were 'charged with disrupting public order among other things'.

Many observers see Iran Focus 'news service' as itself an arm of the MKO/NCRI, lending the militant MKO's perspectives an apparent objectivity that the NCRI, its putatively more respectable partner, can no longer claim (Milaninia 2005). If so, the shift between Iran Focus's 19 July story and NCRI's version on 20 July – the suppression of the rape charges – may indicate that NCRI and MKO were already exploring how the narrative could be reshaped to maximize indignation.

Both Iran Focus and the NCRI reprinted the pictures. And the next day, 21 July, OutRage! seized the story. Tatchell and OutRage! blared: 'Iran executes gay teenagers.' The photos of the execution rolled across OutRage!'s web page. Yet no source until that point had given the slightest suggestion that the youths were 'gay', or had been killed for consensual sex.

Tatchell based that claim wholly on a mistranslation, citing the ISNA story – which he said OutRage! had translated from the Farsi – as his main source. He told the world:

News of the two executions was reported by ISNA (Iranian Students News Agency) on 19 July. A later news story by Iran In Focus [*sic*], allegedly based on this original ISNA report, claimed the youths were executed for sexually assaulting a 13 year old boy. *But the ISNA report does not mention any sexual assault* [emphasis added]. A report of the executions on the website of the

respected democratic opposition movement, The National Council of Resistance Of Iran, also makes no reference to a sexual assault. (OutRage! News Service 2005)

Tatchell's claim that 'the ISNA report does not mention any sexual assault' was completely false. He ignored the ISNA headline, '*lavat beh onf*' ('sodomy by force'). While staying conveniently vague about the contents of the ISNA article, he implied that it said the two had been convicted of *lavat*, 'sodomy', pure and simple.

For months, confronted with the error, Tatchell insisted that his version of the Farsi was right, and everyone else's wrong. One explanation is that his own ideology – his need, acute just then, for evidence of 'Islamist' atrocities against 'gays' – coupled with his ignorance of Farsi, blinded him to the evidence.

Another explanation may lie in Iranian exile politics. Tatchell has long supported armed opposition to the Iranian regime (particularly by Ahwazi Arab and Baluchi militants), and his words suggest his comradeship with the NCRI/MKO. One week later, as OutRage!'s version came under mounting question, he blasted doubters who accused the NCRI of gross human rights violations. The group, he said,

has played a heroic role in resisting the clerical fascist regime in Iran and campaigning for democracy and human rights. The NCRI is no more a terrorist organisation than the African National Congress in South Africa or the anti-Nazi resistance in occupied Europe during World War Two. While there have been allegations of human rights abuses by the NCRI, these pale into insignificance by comparison to the butchery of the Iranian regime. . . . We find it shocking that brave people who are fighting for freedom and against tyranny are being vilified and smeared. (ukgaynews.org 2005b)<sup>3</sup>

A few weeks later, Tatchell told *The Nation* that Iranian dissidents had translated the ISNA story for him. He also affirmed that he based his claims about the youths on consultations with dissidents 'affiliated with the NCRI' – which he called a 'respected democratic opposition movement' (Kim 2005).

Again, the NCRI and MKO bear little resemblance to Tatchell's idealized description (on their grim human rights record, see Rubin 2003, Human Rights Watch 2005a). It seems possible, though, that the NCRI/MKO (mis)translated the ISNA story for Tatchell – hoping to turn the killings into a 'gay' story and enlist a new constituency for their anti-regime campaigning. Tatchell perhaps was deceived.<sup>4</sup> He helped deceive a wider public.

The OutRage! release coupled the disturbing images with Tatchell's typical rhetoric about Islam. 'This is just the latest barbarity by the Islamo-fascists in Iran,' he proclaimed: 'The entire country is a gigantic prison.' OutRage! had its proof now. 'Islamic terrorism', the mosque militant, kept 'gays' permanently in its cross-(or crescent)-hairs. And the world had pictures of tremendous emotional power.

Blogs, papers, and even television picked up the OutRage! story by the thousands. The popular conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan meditated on 'Islamists versus gays', quoting a soldier who wrote him:

Your post on the Islamo-fascist hanging/murder of the two gay men confirmed for me that my recent decision to join the U.S. military was correct. I have to stuff myself back in the closet [because of the US ban on gays in the armed services] . . . but our war on terror trumps my personal comfort at this point.

'I'm saddened,' Sullivan said, 'that more gay organizations haven't rallied to the war against Muslim religious fanatics. This is our war too' (Sullivan 2005).

US blogger Doug Ireland took up the story – and was virtually to live with it for the next two years. Unable to read Farsi himself, he bought completely OutRage!'s misrepresentation of the Iranian press accounts:

The Iranian authorities are putting out a cover story that the two boys had participated in the rape of a 13-year-old, but OutRage affirms from its sources that this accusation is a smokescreen for inhuman conduct and is without foundation. . . . But there is no mention of this Iranian government accusation in the original ISNA report, otherwise quite detailed – which rather suggests it's a recent invention. (Ireland 2005d)

Within a few days, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both released statements on the killing, correctly reflecting the known facts: that the two dead youths had been charged with sexual assault on a 13-year-old, that at least one and probably both had been under 18 at the time of their alleged crime, and that their hanging was a grave violation of international law (Amnesty International 2005, Human Rights Watch 2005b). By this time, the organizations had translated the ISNA article accurately, and located the *Quds* article. These made clear that the account of the sexual assault had been the original one. Human Rights Watch's Iran researcher also confirmed this account, during the week following the executions, with an independent journalist in Mashhad and via a journalist in exile with sources inside Iran. The claim that the two dead youths were executed for consensual 'gay' sex had only been devised during its transmission to Peter Tatchell.

The day after OutRage!'s statement, I posted on some listservs a summary of the *Quds* article. I wrote:

The pictures we have all seen are horrific. Much of the press around them has described the victims as 'gay teenagers.' . . . In this particular case, for those of us who will carry the memory of those terrified faces as they face the death penalty, I would suggest we break out of the straitjacket of defining this as a 'gay rights' case, as though such names determine the limits of our caring, and remember that those two – whatever they may have done – were being killed for something that happened when they were children; that they were thus victims of a worldwide and persistent pattern of brutality against children, and indifference to children's lives; and that on that grounds alone, whatever violence they may have committed, they did not deserve this violence: they did not deserve to die. (Long 2005)

By this time, the limits of caring were being drawn.

Those limits embraced the two dead youths only if they were 'gay'. Sympathy depended on identity. Those limits, then, excluded the 13-year-old who was the alleged victim: he was either erased in denial that such a crime could have taken place, or reviled for providing a pretext for their killing.

Several things conditioned how the pictures were received. First, their horror ensured that websites like Ireland's got more traffic than ever before. In an email on 25 July, Ireland told me he had gotten 60,000 hits in the first five days.

More importantly, the pictures fed on, and fed, the political climate. In the USA, new anxieties over Iran compounded the jittery aftermath of the July UK attacks. Four weeks earlier, Iranians had elected the hard-line Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. Iran Focus promptly produced a picture allegedly showing him as one of the US embassy hostage-takers in 1979, a claim still disputed (Iran Focus 2005a). Memories of old conflicts merged with new tension over Iran's nuclear programme. When the executions happened, war talk had already intensified.

Even Doug Ireland, a left-wing writer, slanted his headlines about the Mashhad case to suggest Western intervention was essential: whether missiles or mass emails was left for later. He bolded what he said were appeals from gay Iranians: 'Save us! Help us!' He demanded action: 'Sentient gay news consumers cannot possibly ignore the gay tragedy unfolding in Iran' (Ireland 2005a). Others made the appeal still more explicit. The Human Rights Campaign, the largest US gay group, called on the State Department of 'the world's greatest democracy' to issue an 'immediate and strong condemnation' of the executions of two teenagers hanged 'simply for being caught having consensual sex'. (Ireland and other bloggers took up this

demand – although the USA had neither relations nor any conceivable leverage with Iran.) The Log Cabin Republicans, a conservative gay group, also rushed in: ‘In the wake of news stories and photographs documenting the hanging of two gay Iranian teenagers,’ the group was moved to ‘re-affirm their commitment to the global war on terror’. These statements have since disappeared from the organization’s websites (Kim 2005).

Some exiled Iranian dissident groups, seizing the opening the NCRI had helped create, saw an opportunity to get desperately needed attention. Bloggers, activists, and the gay press, however, were unprepared to deal with the tendentious ‘information’ flooding their way, allegedly originating inside Iran. Ignorance of Islam and Iran was general in the media: for instance, the gay press widely and ludicrously reported that ‘under Sharia law the victim of a sexual assault must also be executed’ (365gay.com 2005). Activists and gay media had no standards to evaluate the sudden surfeit of sources. Nor – given how popular the growing story was – did most really want to.

Some Iranian exile circles fed information to gay reporters that almost any impending execution in Iran for ‘rape’ or sexual offences was really a ‘gay execution’. Doug Ireland uncritically recycled these stories. He reported that ‘Iran’s Anti-Gay Purge Grows’, with ‘Reports of new gay executions’, a ‘lethal anti-gay crackdown’, a ‘new wave of anti-gay repression’, and a ‘reign of terror targeting gays in the Islamic Republic of Iran’ (Ireland 2005a): in sum, ‘Iran’s Anti-Gay Pogrom’ (Ireland 2006a). All the cases he invoked involved rape charges. In *not one* case did Ireland have any evidence that consensual homosexual acts were at issue. In one instance, Ireland claimed four executions in the Gulf city of Bandar Abbas were for homosexuality (Ireland 2005b). I emailed Ireland the Iranian press accounts: two of the men were convicted of robbing and raping a woman, and two of raping three young girls, 10, 7, and 8 years old. Ireland never published a retraction, and a week later he repeated the same claim in another article, knowing it to be false (Ireland 2005c). The Bandar Abbas executions become part of his roster of ‘gay killings’, numbers mounting insidiously like a Joe McCarthy list: was it 12? 14? (Ireland 2006b, 2006c). By 2007, a Spanish group could proclaim ‘the beginning of a genocide in Iran of homosexuals and transsexuals’ (Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales 2007).

Emotional excess shaded into deliberate distortion. Ireland and OutRage! soon acquired a set of secret ‘sources’, who conveniently attested that their initial mistranslation of the Iranian press accounts had been miraculously true to the facts all along. Their sole source was not in Iran at all, but was a Somali-born journalist living in the USA. The journalist claimed to have communicated over the Internet with people in Mashhad who said the two young men were lovers and had been seen at a gay party. In three years of interviewing over 110 people from Iran, including Mashhad, I encountered no one who had any concrete indication that the executed youths were lovers – making me doubly sceptical of these assertions. The journalist repeatedly refused to share his sources (or even their emails with identifying information blacked out) directly with Ireland, OutRage!, or even the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization (a group of diasporic and refugee LGBT Iranians). This refusal might have sparked some suspicions. Ireland’s US source, I believe, was being hoodwinked by people – in Iran or from exile groups – claiming knowledge they did not have. Ireland and OutRage! repeated the claims credulously while incessantly suggesting they had direct evidence from inside Iran – and they did not. No credible journalist would identify as ‘sources’ people (such as those alleged informants in Iran) he had never been in direct contact with, and whose very existence he could not confirm. Ireland did.

One OutRage! activist, Simon Forbes, meanwhile used these ‘sources’ to produce a 64-page document recounting the imagined lives and real deaths of the Mashhad youths in bizarrely sentimental detail (Forbes 2006). More novella than investigation, it is carefully written to give the



impression that he had communicated with someone directly corroborating his claims; in private, the author admits what careful examination of the document reveals – that he had only emailed one man, his Somali source in the USA.

On 20 November 2006, Forbes wrote to me, ‘Mistakes and over categorical statements were made last summer about’ the Mashhad case: ‘We lack proof.’ In the same email he acknowledged, at last, that OutRage! had mistranslated the original ISNA article, and that it referred to rape under the term ‘*lavat beh onf*. (So far as I know, OutRage! has never acknowledged this publicly – virtually all its public statements since July 2005 have attempted to conceal its mistranslation.) OutRage! also produced a shorter report alleging that ‘the Iranian government is executing gay and bisexual men under the cover of rape and kidnapping charges’, but offered no evidence despite presenting its conclusions as fact at a hearing of the European Parliament (OutRage! 2006).

As activists’ identification with the youths grew, so did an indifference to realities – not just real facts, but real lives. Ireland in particular clearly came to feel that his position as tribune for the dead permitted saying whatever he wanted about the living. For instance, when an Iranian exile group gave him the name of a lawyer *inside Iran* whom they allegedly had hired to investigate a ‘gay execution’, Ireland promptly printed the name on his blog and in *Gay City News*, a New York newspaper.

Increasingly, too, campaigners attacked the 13-year-old victim of an alleged rape, in ways that would be mortifying if directed at a woman in a British or US courtroom. OutRage! accused him of wanting the rape: ‘It could be that the 13-year-old was a willing participant’ (Tatchell 2005). *Gay City News*, Doug Ireland’s publishers, claimed that ‘rape of men by men is comparatively rare’ (Osborne 2006). The spectacle of gay rights activists belittling violent sexual assault, and blaming the victim, was astonishing and disturbing.

Transcendent purpose justified all the distortions. One journalist said at a US demonstration marking the hanging’s first anniversary: ‘The founders of this nation designed our Constitution so that we would be guaranteed the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . . But we must also recognize our responsibility to extend those rights to others. . . . Do we have the will?’ (Anderson 2006). Logically, then, those who doubted the ‘anti-gay pogrom’ were participating in an Iranian ‘smear’. The fact that OutRage!’s mistaken account of a ‘gay execution’ reached Europe and the USA first, and that the earlier Farsi-language press stories describing a rape were only translated later, fed the impression that the Iranian press accounts were a subsequent cover-up. (By this reasoning, the regime commenced a comprehensive ‘cover-up’ even before the executions. Nor is it clear why the authorities would stage a public execution for its deterrent effect, and simultaneously elaborately deceive the Iranian public about which acts they wished to deter.) Thus, OutRage! accused its questioners of being fellow-travellers of Iran:

OutRage! is appalled that large sections of liberal and left opinion in the West shows [*sic*] little concern regarding the murderous brutality of the clerical fascist regime in Tehran. We deplore the gullibility of many gay, left and human rights groups concerning the abuse of LGBT human rights in Iran. . . . They have long swallowed Iran’s homophobic propaganda. (OutRage! 2005b)

Doug Ireland called the critics of his reporting ‘sectarian apologists for the Islamic Republic of Iran’ (Ireland *et al.* 2006).

Under the circumstances, it was safer to stay quiet. And the photographs spread. They showed up on *Oprah*. They could be recognized in 2008 in Geert Wilders’ loathsome film *Fitna*, a short piece that reduced Islam to terrorism and murder – and exacerbated tensions across Europe. The camera lingered on the hanged youths as exemplars of what would happen to ‘gays’ in the right-wing director’s favourite dystopic future: when Muslims rule The Netherlands.

### Beyond recognition

What allowed a substantial segment of gay activist opinion in the USA and Europe to succumb to a panic over Iran? In part, the images challenged not just individuals' sympathies and preconceptions, but something basic about how gay and lesbian politics had been practised in the global North.

It is useful to draw on an influential recent interpretation of that practice. The philosopher Nancy Fraser, in the 1990s, took lesbian and gay activism as virtually the ideal type of a 'politics of recognition'. This approach had been outlined by thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. For them, 'recognition' politics addressed a basic contemporary necessity that transcended traditional left goals, rooted in the Hegelian constitution of the self through the eyes of the Other. Taylor wrote:

Nonrecognition or misrecognition . . . can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being. Beyond simple lack of respect, it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy but a vital human need. (Taylor, quoted in Fraser 1997, p. 14)

Fraser opposed this 'cultural or symbolic' understanding of injustice to an older politics of redistribution, which concentrated on misallocation of goods and saw justice as their equitable allotment. Recognition politics rechannel claims from the material realm to the symbolic order. Politics move from the systematic management of alliances in pursuit of specific aims, and toward asserting pure presence to disrupt cultural expectations and discursive norms. 'Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle' (Fraser 1997, p. 11).

Gay and lesbian identities – 'rooted wholly in culture, as opposed to political economy' – fit the bill perfectly. Fraser predicted a gay movement centred on projects of mass resignification:

Overcoming homophobia and heterosexism requires changing the cultural valuations . . . that privilege heterosexuality. . . . It is to revalue a despised sexuality, to accord positive recognition to gay and lesbian sexual specificity. (Fraser 1997, pp. 18–19)

The way that equality in marriage rights has superseded most other goals for gays in the USA (and much of Europe) eerily confirms Fraser's point. In the USA, indeed, marriage has virtually eclipsed the struggle for national-level protections against discrimination in the workplace and other areas of life.

Two things are striking, though. First of all, Fraser predicted that the pursuit of recognition would harden divisions between communities. 'Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group and then of affirming its value. Thus, they tend to promote group differentiation' (Fraser 1997, p. 16). Recognition-based remedies risk 'freezing group differences . . . and fueling the very antagonisms one intended to regulate' (Fraser 2007, p. 87).

No one could guess from this how gay politics in many countries from the 1990s would pursue recognition *in terms of sameness*, of effacing separation. The claim to the symbolic benefits of marriage, most conspicuously, was posited not as the desserts of particularity but as a seal of similarity. Accessing the affirmative power of the institution meant becoming visible precisely by being identical, the same as everybody else. Marriage offered recognition in the form of the softest spotlight, the security of *not* standing out.

'Assimilation' is a hackneyed term. But this goes beyond it. 'Gays' in the West are not, after all, an ethnic group with markers – language or tradition – passed on across generations and delineating a community. To 'assimilate', for them, is not like immigrants losing a religion or a tongue. They are a group so tenuously connected that their points of similarity *to one*

*another* are easily put in question. The magnetic power of identification that the normative cultural order can exert around a point such as marriage seems so strong as to raise the question of whether there was any connecting 'cultural' specificity to 'gayness' after all. One result is a mounting insecurity about gay 'identity' – and a need to ground it in something secure. It is no coincidence, then, that gay conservatives anxious to establish how indistinguishable their relationships are from heterosexual models are often just as anxious to locate homosexuality in genes or biology rather than cultural construction (Burr 1996). The difference disappears from discourse, to resurface in DNA.

Secondly, what Fraser calls an appeal to affirmations at the level of 'culture' indeed prevails in gay activism in many developed societies. But, paradoxically, a cultural argument *against* gay life or gay identity is rarely heard there. That is, the moral arguments mounted against liberation, reform, or equality seldom take the form of asserting a reified American or French or Spanish 'culture' in which homosexuality has no part.

This is in contrast to societies where repressive authorities repeatedly invoke 'culture' to expunge unwanted behaviours from the body politic. 'We are against this homosexuality,' Robert Mugabe proclaimed, calling Zimbabweans to 'fight against such Western practices and respect our culture' (Human Rights Watch and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission 2003, p. 23). Indian officials have called homosexuality 'against Indian culture' and maintained that 'Hindus don't have these practices – these are all perversions of the Muslims' (Human Rights Watch 2002).

Yet activists working on sexual rights in those places are generally less concerned with refuting these claims, or asserting their place in the symbolic order, than with combating the rhetoric's tangible consequences in violence and exclusion – and with undoing the concrete laws that back the language up. Thus, in India, the focus of LGBT activism for almost two decades has *not* been cultural affirmations of identity (even though certain 'culturally' centred controversies, over depictions of homosexuality in films such as *Fire*, have been flashpoints for fundamentalist opposition). Rather, it has been legal reform, eliminating the anti-sodomy and other laws that underpin repression.

The stress on tangible violence in the one case, and on the symbolic conditions of degradation in the other, is an odd disjuncture. There is no reason to think the developed North is 'less violent' for lesbians and gays than anywhere else. Rather, when violence is imagined there, it seems to invite understanding in terms of both the fabric of meanings it ruptures, and the fabric of meanings that produce it. The response is to reach back into the *arrière-boutique*, and change the symbolic arrangements that supposedly support the harm. Perhaps that response is a sublimation; or perhaps the mechanisms of these societies actually, successfully, sublimate the impulse to material or physical violence into expressions in the symbolic order – so that words actually take the force of wounding. By contrast, then, actual wounding may break through that sublimation with palpable shock, the return of something imperfectly repressed.

This brings us back to Iran, and Mashhad. It brings us, that is, to the stunning effect of those photographs on a gay and lesbian politics of recognition, versed in insult and devaluation and taken aback by the evidence of bodily violence. The images were an alien brutality breaking through the clouds of discursive claims. The reactions show a cultural politics at odds with something unassimilable; trying to reabsorb the violence into its dynamics of likeness and difference.

Looking back at the controversy, one notes how few people actually mourned. To be sure, there were vigils, outcries – there was an almost Ashura-esque extraction of emotion from viewing the pictures. One OutRage! activist has even published descriptions of their hangings in grotesque, imagined detail – from the perspective of the hanged:

They feel searing pain in their necks as the ropes take the full weight of their bodies. . . . Their life giving windpipes are slowly and painfully squeezed shut as they writhe in agony. . . . By now their life giving wind pipes, arteries and veins have become crushed flat by the weight of their bodies. . . . All at the behest of death giving Mullahs. (Forbes 2006, pp. 2–3)

The two were ‘martyrs’, he writes; ‘Ayaz and Mahmoud were in love. They looked into each others [*sic*] eyes, they touched, hugged and caressed each other. They did what many people in the West do without thinking anything of it, without fear of arrest, let alone execution. . . . We should never forget them’ (Forbes 2006, p. 54).

There is no grief in that imagining, though – least of all in the mandate never to let go. Mourning for the known dead, the intimate and lost, is *always* an unclenching, an abandonment to oblivion.

What such prose recounts is not loss at all, but an impossible recovery. The youths die in reality; the writer *becomes* them in imagination. He substitutes a story of his own: they lived *our* narrative, just interrupted. As another acolyte of the ‘gay pogrom’ theory wrote, ‘The two men in Iran . . . dared to love each other, dared to partake in that incredible human experience of looking in each other’s eyes and feeling that rush. Who knows the other ways that they enjoyed each other’s company? Perhaps they went for walks together, or watched the sun rise over the mountains’ (Miller 2007). Or perhaps they raped a 13-year-old boy; but the sheer strength of identification abrogates the idea. The sentimental oneness, an assimilation of *their* experience into *ours*, almost eradicates the two youths’ death.

The most important thing ‘we’ saw in ‘them’ was that they were ‘gay’: they were like *us*, the Western gays who recognized and lamented them. Any difference between the UK or the USA and Iran was erased – except for the fact that *there*, they were killed. These foreign youths wanted what ‘we’ wanted and did what ‘we’ did; they were part of the family. They reminded us of ‘why U.S. gays must organize on behalf of our gay brothers and sisters inside the Islamic Republic of Iran’ (Petrelis 2006). They called us to ‘the freedom that we enjoy, freedom that our brothers and sisters in Iran can only dream of’ (Rosendall 2006a). A terrible urgency informed the logic of likeness, devouring ‘gay’ objects of sympathy and identification – even when that might further the judicial murder of a Makwan Mouloudzadeh.

Makwan’s case suggested that, for some Western activists as much as for the Iranian government, the facts were irrelevant. Each saw a truth immune to evidence: for the one, Makwan had to be guilty of rape; for the other, he had to be gay. If the accuser retracted the allegations, it made no difference. Makwan’s guilt or his gayness were equally beyond debate.

This denial of difference meant asserting a line around *our* identity, *our* community, erasing divisions or lines within. Within that line, everything connects: ‘gayness’ in the UK and in Iran meld. *We* recognize *them*; they are subsumed into the Same – almost, but not quite. Only the violent ending provides the shock of difference. It’s only the fact that *they* are dead that allows *us* to do it.

That cosmopolitan oneness thus depends on the borderline. Outside is the murdering and intransigent world of the non-*us*, the Islamo-fascist, who cannot be co-opted into dialogue. The likeness within depends on the Other beyond.

The Mashhad case also played into a politics of provocation practised against European Muslims in recent years. This clash of civilizations has enlisted LGBT people as examples and combatants. And many gay and lesbian activists have volunteered for the lists.

This eagerness to be recruited, too, seems an underside of ‘recognition’. The vision of claiming positive acknowledgement solely in the symbolic realm cheerfully sublimates the ordinary violence of the Hegelian version, which began with a combat to the edge of death. Pulsing under the talk of cultural confrontation is the memory of recognition wrested from an armed Other by force. And if pursuing recognition in the diffuse and sign-saturated public sphere of the modern

West has led gay and lesbian movements into a mirror-realm of becoming similar, this quest for visibility requires at heart a more resilient opponent, against whom the self can be antagonistically defined. Islam serves that function for many activists in the USA and Europe. Indeed, identifying with the dominant culture increasingly requires becoming the hypertrophied ultra-opponent of its enemies.

A year after Mashhad, Jack Straw, the UK's former foreign secretary, warned that women wearing the veil made a 'visible statement of separation and of difference', and he asked those visiting his offices to remove it (Straw 2006). Straw's comments terrified many British Muslims. They feared that disinviting devout women from the public sphere by a dress code risked their access to the essential rights of citizenship. OutRage! intervened – to warn gays that *their* citizenship, and lives, might be incompatible with Muslims'.

An OutRage! member requested a 'private meeting' with the imam of a Manchester mosque. It was not private. The imam told him, when asked, that one sharia punishment for homosexual conduct, verified by witnesses at a trial, was death. OutRage! went public with a press release, sounding as though the imam had told his congregation to take matters into their own hands. OutRage! opined that the Imam's 'attitudes' – known only because OutRage! publicized them – 'encourage conflict and disharmony between Manchester's large gay and Muslim communities'. The press release (picked up by the BBC and by many bloggers) noted that 'In July 2005, two gay teenagers ... were executed in Mashhad, Iran' (OutRage! News Service 2006).

It was thus appropriate that the Mashhad images found their way into *Fitna*. They returned to the deliberately promoted social division in which the initial mistranslation took root. The ideologies of Pim Fortuyn, the gay Dutch adventurer who built a political career on attacking Muslims, and of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, his feminist successor, ominously showed how a liberationist rhetoric around sexuality could write certain members of a community out of full membership. OutRage!'s interventions simply imitated these on a smaller scale.

One example of the appeal to 'gay' universality to exacerbate division is the work of Bruce Bawer, a gay American writer living in Scandinavia for the last decade. *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within* is a lengthy, paradoxical attack on Europe – for its 'elitism', its leftism, its welfare-statism, you name it – yet it is also a warning that 'European civilization' is about to be overwhelmed by a flood of Muslim immigrants who will drown its institutions in fanaticism, its identity in sharia, and its homosexuals in blood (Bawer 2006). The European neo-right's hatreds suppurate beneath his prose (his blog features jeremiads for Oslo, 'declining into a maelstrom of chaos, crime, and filth' amid 'armies of Nigerian prostitutes, gypsy beggars, and Muslim gangsters') (Bawer 2008). Yet Bawer plasters a liberationist look over it. Like Fortuyn, his gayness veneers prejudice with respectability. How can a victim victimize?

Of course, homophobia, patriarchy, and abuse exist in immigrant communities. These reifying responses, though, refuse members of those communities the same recognition – of agency and political capacity – that gays and lesbians ostensibly aspire to secure for themselves. Alleging not just that some Muslim women lack *conditions* for choice, but that none *should ever choose* to wear the veil, immobilizes them: it denies them entry to public life if they veil, and strips their subjectivity if, by compulsion, they do not. It solidifies subordination and locks the exits. And presuming that immigrant (or other) cultures are monolithic simply colludes in erasing the differences within. OutRage! claims to speak *for* victims of homophobia when it sends its members to interrogate the mosques; it does not speak *to* possible Muslim victims – it obliterates their agency, and it makes them still more invisible, more unrecognizable, and still less heard.

Further, the incessant insistence that Muslim communities accede to the political agendas of LGBT identities actually forecloses politics altogether. It fences off the arena of shared interests

and temporary junctures that a 'redistributive' politics, attentive to specific gains rather than discursive generalities, might open. Absolute demands replace dialogues. And the demands neglect disparities of power.

Lesbians and gays in Britain have accumulated cultural capital and political influence. They confront – increasingly explicitly – British Muslim communities that, since 9/11 and 7/7, feel steadily more besieged, not only by daily prejudice but also by anti-immigrant hysteria and a security state (Pierce 2008). If white gay men in Britain should remember anything from the last 40 years of their history, it is the fear of arrest or harassment because they look or dress differently. This *should* be the basis of a qualified common ground, in which LGBT activists can actually cooperate with embattled Muslims against police misconduct and policies of repression. After all, a dress code that can be used against a woman in *niqab* can target a drag queen next. Failing to recognize such potential understanding is not only a lapse of imagination; it is a collapse of politics – a failure to *be* political, to think beyond identity into possibility. And, curiously, the LGBT isolationism of groups such as OutRage! could profit a great deal from advocates in the Middle East – in Egypt, say, where secularists, including the very few 'gay' activists, have cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood on the shared ground of opposing the state's control over the body, in a regime of torture.

The three years of desperate emotion over those pictures will stand, in the end, as an embarrassing passage in the history of LGBT activism. But they point to what we have lost in promoting a politics purely of affirmation and recognition. Communication and negotiation have attenuated in the process – the alliances and solidarities that endeavours for distributive equality and material benefits can create. The competitive universe of uncompromising claims that the incited conflicts around 'Islamofascism' and 'gayness' foretell is not hospitable or cordial. And a politics predicated on visibility and voice to the exclusion of attention and accommodation can be uncomprehending of difference, and indifferent to facts.

The pictures from Mashhad still horrify, with a horror not susceptible to words. One stands in front of them like Milly Theale before the Bronzino in Henry James' great eruption of language, feeling the insufficiency of words against the fact of death. They are dead, dead, dead. To see the two taken to execution, to sense the imminent finality, is to experience one of those moments not usually accessible in the modern world, when existence is visible and conscious of its limit and its end. Their mute faces are a reminder that life itself, biological life, cannot be subsumed under the names of innocence and guilt. Whether they committed a rape or not, whether they 'went for walks together' or not, they are alive and they are about to be dead. Surely no guilt deserves this. Culpability, like any other identity, cannot contain, much less summarize, the fact of their existence or its extinction.

Fraser's distinction between 'recognition' and 'redistribution', frames for rights and claims – the scaffolding I have invoked – shrivels to nullity against their visages, and the scaffold: whatever claim these pictures have upon us lies beyond those categories. The faces do not want to be recognized, and there is nothing we can give them. As much as they refute the paucity of symbols, they reduce the language of 'goods' and 'giving' to the nugatory and irrelevant. Life, bare life in its confrontation with death, is alone in its insusceptible uniqueness, graduated already beyond the political world of bargain and exchange. As Heidegger (1962) perceived, the moment of one's own death is the sole possession one cannot alienate, cannot trade or give away. It must be lived *oneself*, by oneself.

Thus, perhaps, the pictures still speak to our meaning-saturated politics, enjoining it to recall its limits. They have been laden with meanings. Residual fears and injustices awoke at the sight of two people helpless and condemned to death. People angry over old prejudice and uncertain over new success wanted to recover the dignity of victims, the importance of oppression, through identifying with those silent figures. Anxieties about other communities and their competing

claims turned the images into a tool to strike at Islam or immigrants. The pictures' power permitted them to silence uncertainties, the questions where political thought resides. Andrew Sullivan reportedly said, 'The images tell you everything. We just need to stop and remember. The rest we can debate later' (Rosendall 2006b). But that was the problem.

I have put off writing this for a long time. I know why, now: it makes me angry. Strange that it is so. While the furore went on, I interviewed Iranians in Turkey, Thailand, Pakistan, and Iran, collecting their stories, trying to do research. Those stories will appear in a report that will try to return the debate to the realm of fact. That is a professional, and not a personal, concern.

But as I look at the pictures of the two youths in Mashhad, the anger wells up. It flows in part from the fact that they did not stop dying: from the further erasure of their selves and their intents that followed. Their images continued being exploited when their wills were gone. What if they were 'gay?' What if it is true, what if all the frenetic speculation astonishingly corresponds to fact? Then they died for it, terribly and unjustly. But should that fragile connection then be turned into a vehicle for others' ends, for promoting fear or engendering division or intimidating immigrants or selling the idea of a war? The indignity the campaigners inflict on them seems worse if the claims are true. For if they sacrificed so much – their lives – to be themselves, those selves deserve to be left to their own quiescent meaning, not fought over and resigned a continent away.

It all comes back somehow to Makwan, whose picture is still on my desk, who is dead, and nobody knows why. After he was executed, Gruppo Everyone swiftly put out a statement: 'Makwan Becomes a Symbol', a 'Worldwide Symbol Against Homophobia' (cf. Gruppo Everyone 2007e). Symbols are the shells we have when the human beings have vanished. And a few days later, they were at it again (Gruppo Everyone 2008c), because in a world of symbols no reality ever need make one stop: 'Petition for the lives of Hamzeh and Loghman: two young gay men who are in love and who risk the death sentence in Iran.'

## Notes

1. This is confirmed by a Human Rights Watch researcher's interview with his brother in Turkey on 5 May 2008, and another Human Rights Watch researcher who has conducted interviews with other family members, and his attorney. The researchers, who both travel to Iran regularly, cannot be named for reasons of safety – as is conventional practice for Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.
2. The MKO, which originated in the 1960s as an urban guerilla group combating the Shah, regressed into paranoid domination over its members. Most outside observers maintain that the NCRI and MKO are effectively identical. The NCRI's official president is the enigmatic Massoud Rajavi, also head of the MKO. He is in hiding, and his wife Miryam serves as the NCRI's 'president-elect'. In the most famous incident involving the MKO, in 2003 French anti-terrorist police arrested Miryam Rajavi and dozens of its cadres: 10 MKO and NCRI members then set fire to themselves on Paris streets in protest. For a detailed account of reported human rights abuses in the MKO's camps, see Human Rights Watch's report *No Exit* (Human Rights Watch 2005a).
3. This release (quoted extensively at: [ukgaynews.org.uk](http://ukgaynews.org.uk) 2005) has also vanished from Tatchell's website, perhaps because OutRage!'s subsequent versions of the Mashhad story have changed and no longer cite the NCRI. Meanwhile, OutRage!'s public statements on the Mashhad cases now omit the ISNA story altogether (Forbes 2006). This leaves OutRage! with no remaining explanation of how it came by the impression that the victims were 'gay' at all.
4. Notably, though, his first press release contains other severe distortions of the ISNA story: for instance, he claims that the two youths 'admitted to having gay sex (probably under torture) but claimed in their defence that most young boys had sex with each other and that they were not aware that homosexuality was punishable by death'. Although he suggests ISNA is his source for this, it is found nowhere in the ISNA story, or elsewhere.

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