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Iraq's Newly Open Gays Face Scorn and Murder

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#) and TAREQ MAHER

BAGHDAD — The relative freedom of a newly democratic [Iraq](#) and the recent improvement in security have allowed a gay subculture to flourish here. The response has been swift and deadly.

In the past two months, the bodies of as many as 25 boys and men suspected of being gay have turned up in the huge Shiite enclave of [Sadr City](#), the police and friends of the dead say. Most have been shot, some multiple times. Several have been found with the word “pervert” in Arabic on notes attached to their bodies, the police said.

“Three of my closest friends have been killed during the past two weeks alone,” said Basim, 23, a hairdresser. “They had been planning to go to a cafe away from Sadr City because we don’t feel safe here, but they killed them on the way. I had planned to go with them, but fortunately I didn’t.”

Basim, who preferred to be called “Basima” — the feminine version of his name — wears his hair long for Iraq. It falls to just below the ear. His ears are pierced, uncommon for Iraqi males. White makeup covers his face, a popular look for gay men in Sadr City who say they prefer light skin.

Though risky, his look is one result of the [overall calm](#) here that has allowed Iraqis to enjoy freedoms unthinkable two years ago: A growing number of women walk the streets unveiled, a few even daring to wear dresses above the knee. Families gather in parks for cookouts, and more people have begun to venture out at night.

But that has not changed the reality that Iraq remains religious, conservative — and still violent. The killers, the police say, are not just Shiite death squads, but also tribal and family members shamed by their gay relatives. (And the recent spate of violence has seemed aimed at more openly gay men, rather than homosexuality generally.)

Clerics in Sadr City have urged followers to help root out homosexuality in Iraqi society, and the police have begun their own crackdown on gay men.

“Homosexuality is against the law,” said Lt. Muthana Shaad, at a police station in the Karada district, a neighborhood that has become popular with gay men. “And it’s disgusting.”

For the past four months, he said, officers have been engaged in a “campaign to clean up the streets and get the beggars and homosexuals off them.”

Gay men, he said, can be arrested only if they are seen engaging in sex, but the police try to drive them away. “These people, we make sure they can’t get together in a coffee shop or walk together in the street — we make them break up,” he said.

Gay men and lesbians in Iraq have long been among the targets of both Shiite and Sunni death squads, but their murders have been overshadowed by the hundreds of overall weekly casualties during the height of sectarian violence in 2006 and 2007.

In 2005, the country’s most influential Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah [Ali al-Sistani](#), issued a religious decree that said gay men and lesbians should be “punished, in fact, killed.” He added, “The people should be killed in the worst, most severe way of killing.” The language has since been removed from his Web site.

In recent months, groups of gay men have been taking greater chances, gathering in cafes and other public places in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and other cities. On a recent night in Sadr City, several, their hair parted down the middle, talked as they quietly sipped tea at a garishly lighted cafe, oblivious to the stares of passers-by.

Basim, who would not give his last name out of fear for his safety, said he knew at least 20 young men from Sadr City’s large but hidden gay community who had disappeared during the past two months. He said he had learned later that each was found dead. After three of his friends were killed, he stayed inside his house for a week. Recently he has begun to go out again.

“I can’t stay at home all day,” he said. “I need to see my friends.”

Publicly, the Iraqi police have acknowledged only the deaths of six gay men in the neighborhood. But privately, police officials say the figure is far higher.

The chief of a Sadr City police station, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not allowed to speak to reporters, said family members had probably committed most of the Sadr City killings. He played down the role of death squads that had once been associated with the [Mahdi Army](#), the militia that controlled Sadr City until American and Iraqi forces dislodged them last spring.

“Our investigation has found that these incidents are being committed by relatives of the gays — not just because of the militias,” he said. “They are killing them because it is a shame on the family.”

He said families typically refused to cooperate with the investigation or even to claim the bodies. No arrests have been made in the killings.

At the same time, though, clerics associated with [Moktada al-Sadr](#), an anti-American cleric with significant influence in Sadr City, have devoted a portion of Friday Prayer services to inveighing against homosexuality.

“The community should be purified from such delinquent behavior like stealing, lying and the effeminacy phenomenon among men,” Sheik Jassem al-Mutairi said during his sermon last Friday. Homosexuality, he said, was “far from manhood and honesty.”

Abu Muhaned al-Diraji, a Sadrist official in Sadr City, said the clerics were in no way encouraging people to kill gay men.

“All we are doing is giving advice to people to take care of their sons,” Mr. Diraji said. He acknowledged, however, that some of the killing had been committed by members of “special groups,” or death squads.

“In general, it is the families that are killing the gay son, but I know that there are gunmen involved in this, too,” he said. “But we disavow anybody committing this kind of crime and we encourage the people to follow the law.”

In addition to the killings, a Sadr City cafe frequented by gay men recently burned down under mysterious circumstances.

Some young gay men in Sadr City have become nihilistic about the ever present threat.

“I don’t care about the militias anymore, because they’re going to kill me anyway — today, tomorrow or the day after,” said a man named Sa’ad, who has been taking estrogen and has developed small breasts. “I hate my community and my relatives. If they had their way, the result would be one gunshot.”

Reporting was contributed by Sam Dagher, Rod Nordland, Steven Lee Myers, Anwar J. Ali, Riyadh Mohammed and Campbell Robertson.

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