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Syrian Arab Republic: For gay Syrians, jihadist threat adds new fear

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by Roueida Mabardi

Since jihadists from the Islamic State group seized control of two northeastern Syrian provinces, Jad has lost all contact with friends there from the country's tight-knit gay community.

The 32-year-old gay man, part of a community that has long suffered from persecution in socially conservative Syria, fears the worst.

"I don't have any news from them, their Facebook pages have been closed down," Jad said, sharing drinks with friends at a traditional cafe in an old neighbourhood of Damascus.

"Are they still alive? Have they managed to flee?" he wondered. "I don't know, and that's frightening."

His concern has only grown as the jihadists have released images showing attacks on homosexuals, including photographs this month of a man being thrown off a building and stoned.

"We are scared. If the extremists take over, I know what fate I will suffer. I will be killed for sure," Jad said.

Like in much of the Middle East, life in Syria has never been easy for homosexuals.

Rejected by families and friends and watched by the security services, gay people can face up to three years in prison for acts declared "unnatural" in the Syrian criminal code.

As Syria's civil war has ramped up, some in the gay community have paradoxically felt less threatened.

"Since the war started, the security forces have bothered us much less, and there are fewer raids. They have other fish to fry," Jad said.

"Even society pays less attention to us," he added, openly wearing a rainbow-coloured bracelet.

But many are not letting their guard down, recalling the horrific treatment gay people have suffered at the hands of the authorities.

- 'Secret gay life' -

Human Rights Watch said earlier this year that the climate of violence in Syria had made life even harder for some gay people.

Held by the army, two gay men were for 10 days forced to strip and have sex with each other in front of interrogators, HRW said.

Other gay men were reported to have been threatened with death by their own families.

Mohammad, a friend of Jad, said his misery at being unable to live openly as a gay man has only been compounded by the war.

"Since I was 15 years old, I have hidden my homosexuality, but it's very hard. My father wants me to marry and to have a family, but for me it's impossible. I would rather die," he said.

The 22-year-old dreams of studying design in Europe but for now is trapped in Syria, where three of his friends were killed in one month alone last year, including a soldier beheaded by jihadists.

Sitting in the same cafe, 22-year-old Noha, a lesbian, said she leads a double life to hide her sexuality.

"In front of my parents, I'm all about studies and work," Noha said. "I have a secret gay life."

Only Noha's sister and a cousin know about her sexuality and she uses different accounts on social networks.

Her 28-year-old girlfriend Lama, who wears an Islamic white veil, has been running a Syrian Facebook page for gay women since June.

That month it hosted the first Syrian "gay pride" event, but only in the virtual world.

Noha too is terrified of the jihadists, having little doubt about how she would be treated if she fell into their hands.

"For them, women don't exist. What would they think of a lesbian?" she said.

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