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Anti-gay gangs terrorise Iraq

Who rules Iraq? If you ask Baghdad officials or the Obama administration's proconsuls, they will tell you: a democratically elected Iraqi government, a triumphant product of the "purple revolution" that reflects the will of Iraq's people.

If you ask Mashal, a shopkeeper from Baghdad's al-Sha'ab neighbourhood, he has a different answer.

"Four men came into the shop," he told us about one awful evening in April. "They pulled out guns. They were the Mahdi army.

"The place they took me to was very close to a mosque or actually in the courtyard - I could hear the call to prayer very clearly. When they hauled me out of the car, they beat me unconscious.

"Late the next day, they came to me and said, 'We know you are gay.' They pulled out a list of names and started reading them ... I knew four who were still alive. One they had already killed.

"They interrogated me for three hours that night. They demanded I give them names of other gays. At night they got a broomstick. They used it to rape me."

Mashal got away with his life because his terrified family sold everything they owned for a ransom. He remembers one thing clearly: a police patrol parked next to his shop watched the kidnapping, and did nothing. "Everyone believes the police in the neighbourhood are controlled by the Mahdi army."

Across Iraq, a killing campaign has spread since early this year. Armed gangs have kidnapped men and tortured them, leaving castrated and mutilated bodies dumped in the garbage or in front of morgues. In April, during a Human Rights Watch research trip to Iraq, men told us tales of death threats, blackmail, midnight raids by masked men on private homes and abductions from the streets.

The targets? Men suspected of being gay, or of not being "masculine" enough in their killers' eyes.

Most survivors pointed to Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army, the largest Shia militia in Iraq, as the driving force behind the killings. Sadrist mosques and leaders have warned loudly that homosexuality threatens Iraqi life and culture - though even some Sunni militias may have joined the violence, competing to show their moral credentials. No one can yet give an accurate tally of the victims, but some say the dead may number in the hundreds.

Police and prosecutors ignore the murders. Infiltrated by militias, fearing for their reputations if they defend "effeminate" men, government officials give the killers virtually complete impunity. One 21-year-old even told us how interior ministry forces kidnapped him in February, believing that gay people had access to western money. They tortured him and raped him repeatedly over three weeks, until he managed to raise cash to pay for his freedom. He says he saw the bodies of five other gay men whom the police killed because they could not pay.

The militias mask themselves in moral purpose, but politics underlies the violence. The US "surge", which supposedly cemented Iraq's democracy by ensuring security, succeeded mainly because the Mahdi army chose a strategic retreat. In the process, though, it lost considerable credibility on the street. Now, many believe, it is trying to recoup its reputation by recasting itself, through these murders, as a defender of Iraqi manhood and morality.

Some Iraqis buy the moral posturing. The Baghdad press has kept up a drumbeat of articles warning about the "feminisation" of Iraqi men under the strains of a demoralising and emasculating occupation. A panic over endangered manhood and the spread of the "third sex" has infected parts of Iraqi society.

Most Iraqis, however, know better. They know that when one group is singled out and demonised, the hatred will spread. Iraqis rightly look with tense apprehension on the evidence of the reviving sectarian and ethnic violence that followed the US invasion. The killings of gay people serve as a bellwether and barometer, the sign of darkness to come.

The government's failure to counter militia violence against a defenceless, marginalised group is the most ominous sign of all. Despite the glib rhetoric of success that surrounds the US "surge", militias can still kidnap and kill men in broad daylight on the streets of Baghdad. "Day after day they are more prominent," one man said of the anti-gay gangs. "At first they did it secretly; but now they stop you and search you on the street, in front of others.

"The same thing that used to happen to Sunnis and Shias is now happening to gays."

This stark reality belies all the promises of increased security. In the Green Zone, leaders talk about investment, progress and the rule of law. In Baghdad's neighbourhoods, though, hatred legislates and guns rule. There will be no real democracy in Iraq until the government recognises what is happening on the streets, and shows itself ready to defend the lives and rights of all its citizens.

Topics: Homosexuals, Gays, Discrimination based on sexual orientation, Right to life,

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