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MIDDLE EAST

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Witch-hunt in Iraq

Because of the restrictions and sensitivities very few groups have been able to help gays and lesbians in Iraq. One of them is New York based IRAP (Iraqi Refugees Assistance Project), another is London based Iraqi LGBT. Here the co-founder of IRAP Becca Heller and founder of Iraqi LGBT Ali Hilli discuss challenges of providing the gay community in Iraq with the much needed help.

Becca Heller, Iraqi Refugees Assistance Project

In post-Saddam Iraq, gay men and women have been systematically targeted for death by extra-judicial militias - with the co-operation of the democratically elected government, says Ali Hilli, founder of the London-based group, Iraqi LGBT.

Ali Hilli, Iraqi LGBT

Iraq society has always been a melting pot of ethnic, religious and other groups, a place where difference was often not only tolerated but celebrated.

Even through the worst years of Saddam Hussein, sexual minorities in Iraq enjoyed a fair degree of freedom.

The US-led invasion of 2003 brought to power the Islamic Dawa party, which was established in Iran in the 1980s and backed Iran in its war with Iraq.

The fact that Dawa's core beliefs were inspired by Iranian Shia clerics did not stop the US and UK from supporting the party after Saddam Hussein's fall.

Government involvement

In the years after the invasion, the security situation deteriorated for everyone in the country. But for sexual minorities, Iraq became hell on earth.

By 2007, political and religious groups backed by militiamen launched what we believe was an organised, co-ordinated campaign to hunt, arrest, torture and kill everyone they perceived as gay.

These radical groups deny sexual minorities the right to life. They target everyone who does not conform to their religious description of family.

That is why killings of gays are similar to so-called honour killings of women said to bring shame on to the family by having extra-marital sex, even in cases when women are raped.

In the same way, gay men and women who do not adhere to traditional sexual practices within an accepted marriage framework are seen as dangerous to society.

Instead of protecting sexual minorities, the Iraqi government facilitates their murder by arresting the victims and handing them over to militias who kill them.

Iraqi LGBT sources working inside Iraq have found the militias are also getting intelligence about the identities of sexual minorities from the Ministry of the Interior.

'Aim is elimination'

Members of our organisation and the gay men and women we interviewed have said consistently that, under arrest, they have been forced to give names and addresses of other homosexuals or suspected homosexuals.

Taken together, this is why we believe the Ministry of the Interior tracks sexual minorities with the aim of eliminating them.

Iraq LGBT is based in London, and it has become increasingly dangerous for us to operate inside Iraq. But we have been trying.

Since its founding in London in September 2005, Iraqi LGBT has operated in total secrecy, providing gays inside the country with contacts, psychological counselling, financial aid, shelter and accommodation, and assistance escaping Iraq.

We have watched as the situation in the country has deteriorated, as lists of targets began to appear in the streets first in Baghdad, then in Najaf, Basra, Kufa and other towns across Iraq.

Among the names on these lists were many of our activists and members, and many of them are no longer alive.

In the face of the increasing danger we carried on working in Iraq, but recently our funds ran out.

Constant danger

Our safe houses inside Iraq have been raided and shut down and we can no longer afford to open new ones.

Our activists continue to be targeted and killed. On top of all that, many Iraqi gays whom we helped to find refuge in neighbouring Syria have now been forced to flee the violence there and return to Iraq. There, they are likely again to be targeted by both the militias and the government.

Given the open hostility of the Iraqi government to homosexuals, for now we must remain underground if we are to survive.

If this is ever to change, Iraq's gay men and women also need international attention and support.

Hundreds of gay men and women in Iraq are living under enormous stress and are in constant danger simply because of the way they were born.

This unprecedented brutal violence against our community must stop, criminals must be brought to justice, and gays and lesbians, just like any other community in Iraq, must be protected by law enforcement agencies and the constitution.

Unless the international community steps in to help and to put pressure on the Iraqi government, many more men and women will die.

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