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Sent: Tuesday, March 13, 2012 5:23 AM
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Subject: Fw: Threats and Killings Striking Fear Among Young Iraqis, Including Gays

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Sent: Monday, March 12, 2012 09:45 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: Threats and Killings Striking Fear Among Young Iraqis, Including Gays



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March 11, 2012

Threats and Killings Striking Fear Among Young Iraqis, Including Gays

By [JACK HEALY](#)

BAGHDAD — A recent spate of killings and intimidation aimed at gay Iraqis and teenagers who dress in brash Western fashions is sending waves of fear through Iraq's secular circles while casting doubt on the government's will to protect some of its most vulnerable citizens.

Many details of what Iraqi newspapers have called the "emo killings" are murky, but the uproar comes at an awkward moment for Iraq. The country has been preparing to showcase itself to the world as host of a high-profile meeting of Arab leaders in late March, the first major diplomatic event here since American forces withdrew in December.

But the news that young men in tight T-shirts and skinny jeans are being beaten to death with cement blocks and dumped in the streets has threatened to overshadow the new palm trees and fresh paint. The violence offers a reminder that the government has been unable to stop threats and attacks against small religious sects, ethnic groups and social pariahs like gay men.

An Interior Ministry security officer said that in the past two weeks, officials had found the bodies of six young men whose skulls had been crushed. Reuters reported the toll to be 14 or more, citing hospital and security officials, while rights groups say that more than 40 young men have been killed, but have provided no evidence for this figure.

Human rights advocates say the threats and violence are aimed at gay men and at teenagers who style themselves in a uniquely Iraqi collage of hipster, punk, emo and goth fashions. The look, shorthanded here as

“emo,” has flourished on Baghdad’s streets as an emblem of greater social freedom as society has begun to bloom after years of warfare. But it has drawn scorn and outrage from some religious conservatives, and is often conflated with being gay.

Verifying the reports of the killings has proved nearly impossible. In most cases, no family members or friends have come forward, and Iraqi officials deny that there is any campaign targeting gay men or emo teenagers. They call the stories a media fabrication designed to drum up hysteria and embarrass Iraq.

But it was the Iraqi government that first labeled emo youths a public menace.

On Feb. 13, the Interior Ministry released a statement that condemned the “phenomenon of emo” as Satanic. The rebellious teenage fashions of dark clothes, skull-print T-shirts and nose rings, the statement said, are emblems of the devil.

The ministry said its Social Police would be sent to investigate “the emo” and added that its forces had also received the authority to go into all of Baghdad’s schools to find them.

“They have official approval to eliminate them as soon as possible, because the dimensions of the community began to take another course, and is now threatening danger,” the statement said.

Emo is short for “emotional hardcore” and its aesthetic sprang from the American punk music scene in the 1980s and has been remixed in Baghdad over the last few years.

Ibrahim al-Abadi, an Interior Ministry spokesman, said the statement had been misinterpreted. He said emo youths were free to dress as they pleased, and said the government would protect them.

But over the past month, threatening letters began appearing in Shiite neighborhoods across Baghdad, residents said.

One of the fliers, scanned and posted online, addresses dozens of gay men by name and nickname. It warns people identified as Japanese Haider, Allawi the Bra, Mohammed the Flower and others: Reform your behavior, stop being gay, or face deadly consequences.

“Your fate will be death if you don’t quit doing this,” one leaflet warns. “Punishment will be tougher and tougher, you gays. Don’t be like the people of Lot.”

Another flier circulating around the Zayouna neighborhood appears addressed to emo youths. It tells them to cut their hair, not to wear the clothing of devil worshipers, and not to listen to metal, emo or rap music. And if they refuse, “God’s punishment will be come down upon you,” the letter says.

The authenticity of the fliers could not be verified.

It is unclear who is behind the intimidation or violence. Advocates have blamed Shiite militias such as the Mahdi Army of the radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr for past anti-gay killings and assaults. On Saturday, Mr. Sadr denied any responsibility for the recent threats or violence, but called the emo teens unnatural and said they should be dealt with through legal means, according to Al Sumaria, an Iraqi news channel.

For at least six years, gays have been bullied and harassed by security forces and beaten and killed by reactionary Islamist militias in Shiite areas of Baghdad.

Ali Hili, a gay Iraqi activist who lives in London, said as many as 750 gay Iraqis have been killed in the past six years, and thousands have emigrated or are living deep in the closet.

“It’s a clear war on sexual minorities on Iraq,” he said. “They are refusing to admit it.”

Fear has rippled across socially liberal niches of Baghdad, from the basement-level clothing shops where teenage boys buy skull pendants and skater gear, to upscale hair salons and theaters. Advocates say some emo youths and gay men have left for northern Iraq, while others have shorn off hairdos or muted outfits that were once badges of identity.

Four gay friends in Baghdad, sitting together for an interview, said the daily barrage of harassment and threats has taken on an especially menacing edge in the last few weeks. Neighbors have told them, “Your turn will come soon.” Young men have driven by and shouted “Block! Block! Block!” referring to the current weapon of choice for attacks.

Mustafa, 25, said he was fired last week from a clothing shop because his boss thought his clothing too effete. Hussein, 26, said he left home two weeks ago after his brothers threatened to kill him. Hasan, 32, wears a burgundy ski cap to hide his long hair.

“What do you see about me that is so wrong?” asked Mustafa, who said he was too afraid to allow his full name to be published. “I’m a normal guy. I wish I could die rather than live like this.” With little to go on but denials from the government, gay Iraqis and secular teenagers have been trying to understand what is happening. They have circulated copies of the threatening letters, and passed along pictures that seem to give face to at least one killing that matches the pattern.

In one photo, a handsome young man in a white jacket, dark aviator sunglasses and coifed black hair stands as if he were a fashion model. In another, the vacant, bloody face of a man with similar features stares up at the sky. His body lies in the bed of a police truck.

Friends have identified him as Saif Raad Asmar Abboudi, a 20-year-old from one of the poorest areas of the vast Shiite neighborhood of Sadr City. An Iraqi police report obtained by Mr. Hili’s advocacy group, Iraqi LGBT, says he was beaten to death with a brick on Feb. 17.

The police have not identified a suspect, the report concludes.

One of Mr. Abboudi’s friends, Noor, also 20, described him as a gentle and quiet young man who “was not even very emo.” Being emo in Iraq, she said, was simply about style and self-expression. She said she and her family had fled north after Mr. Abboudi’s death. She did not know when she would feel safe enough to return.

“Is this what we get,” she asked, “because we dress in black?”

Duraid Adnan, Zaid Thaker and Omar al-Jawoshy contributed reporting.