

AI Index: PRE01/141/2012
16 March 2012

Iraq: Investigate ‘Emo’ Attacks

The government of Iraq should immediately investigate and bring to justice those responsible for a targeted campaign of intimidation and violence against Iraqi youth seen as belonging to the non-conformist “emo” subculture, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission said today. The attacks have created an atmosphere of terror among those who see themselves as potential victims.

On March 8, 2012, the Interior Ministry, in an official statement, dismissed reports by local activists and media of a campaign against those seen as emo. The ministry said the reports were “fabricated” and “groundless,” and that it would take action against people who were trying “to highlight this issue and build it out of proportion.” An official ministry statement, on February 13, that characterized emo culture as “Satanist” cast doubt on the government’s willingness to protect vulnerable youth, the international rights groups said.

“The government has contributed to an atmosphere of fear and panic fostered by acts of violence against emos,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Instead of claiming that the accounts are fabricated, Iraqi authorities need to set up a transparent and independent inquiry to address the crisis.”

The campaign’s victims appear to represent a cross-section of people seen locally as non-conformists. They include people suspected of homosexual conduct, but also people with distinctive hairstyles, clothes, or musical taste. In English, “emo” is short for “emotional,” referring to self-identified teens and young adults who listen to alternative rock music, often dress in black, close-fitting clothes, and cut their hair in unconventional ways. People perceived to be gay, lesbian, transgender or effeminate are particularly vulnerable.

Iraqi human rights activists told the three organizations that in early February, signs and fliers appeared in the Baghdad neighbourhoods of Sadr City, al-Hababiya and Hay al-‘Amal that threatened people by name with “the wrath of god” unless they cropped their hair short, gave up wearing so-called “satanic clothing” - styles critics associate with emos, metal music, and rap, hid their tattoos, and “maintained complete manhood.” Other names appeared on similar posters in different neighbourhoods.

One such sign, seen by the international rights groups, was posted on a wall in Sadr City, and read, “In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful, we warn every male and female in the strongest terms to stop their dirty deeds in four days before the wrath of God strikes them through the hands of mujahedin.” This poster listed 33 names and was decorated with images of two handguns.

Since February, the three international rights groups have received information from local human rights groups, community activists and media about numerous deaths of youth. Some local media reports have put the death toll as high as several dozen. The international rights groups have not been able to confirm that people have been killed as part of an organized campaign.

A 26-year old man from Mosul told the rights groups that unknown assailants killed two members of his heavy metal band on March 8 because of their appearance. He said, “We don’t know who is behind this now, but for a long time, people have been accusing us of being Satanists. So this is not new, but now it has become murderous.”

While it is unclear who is behind the attacks and intimidation, Iraqi media reports have fuelled the campaign by characterizing what they call the “emerging emo phenomenon,” as Satanists, vampires, immoral and un-Islamic, the groups said. Some clerics and politicians have also contributed to the demonization of emo youth. On March 10, the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr called emos “crazy fools” and a “lesion on the Muslim community” in an online statement, but also maintained that they should be dealt with “within the law.”

Documents received by the international rights groups indicate that the Education Ministry in August 2011 circulated a memo that recommended schools curb the spread of emo culture, which it called “an infiltrated phenomenon in our society.”

The Interior Ministry’s February 13 statement on its website characterized emos as “Satanists” who constitute a danger to Iraqi society. The statement also indicated that the ministry was seeking approval from the Education Ministry for “an integrated plan that would let them [police] enter all the schools in the capital.” On February 29, the Interior Ministry released another statement in which it announced a campaign against emo culture in Baghdad, particularly in the Khadimiya neighbourhood, where they identified one shop that sold “emo clothing and accessories.”

After widespread media coverage of the violence and intimidation against emos, the Interior Ministry toned down its language in the March 8 statement, warning “radical and extremist groups attempting to stand as protectors for morals and religious traditions from any conduct against people based on a fashion, dress or haircut.” The ministry denied that any emos had been killed and threatened “necessary legal actions against those who try to highlight this issue and build it out of proportion.”

On March 14, security forces in Baghdad detained for three hours the film crew of Russia Today’s Arabic TV channel, Rusiya al-Yaum, as they tried to film a segment related to the attacks on emos. Security forces confiscated their footage even though the channel had a permit to film in downtown Baghdad.

A report by Al-Sharqiya TV on March 7 said that men in civilian clothes brutally beat two young women in public in al-Mansour district because of their “fashionable clothing.”

People perceived to be gay, lesbian, transgender and effeminate men told the rights groups that they feel particularly vulnerable. In 2009, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and IGLHRC [documented a pattern of torture and murder by Iraqi militias against men suspected of same-sex conduct](#) or of not being “manly” enough. Iraqi authorities did nothing to stop those killings. Iraqis perceived to be gay, lesbian or transgender live in fear because of the atrocities committed as part of the 2009 campaign. Many members of the community have gone underground.

A 22 year-old gay man in Baghdad told the international rights groups that anonymous callers made death threats on his phone on March 11. The callers described a friend of his whom they had kidnapped and brutally beaten days earlier, saying that was how they got his number. They told him that he would be next. He has since cut his hair and does not leave his house for fear of being targeted.

“When the news started spreading about emos, the threats and violence against gays increased,” he said. “They are grouping us all together, anyone who is different in any way, and we are very easy targets.”

On March 15 the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, a non-profit organization that provides legal assistance and safe passage to Iraqis facing severe persecution, told Human Rights Watch that in the past week it had conducted interviews with 23 young Iraqis, most of whom had cut their hair short and were in hiding after receiving death threats and harassment because they were perceived to belong to the emo or LGBT communities. The interviewees also reported that 10 others perceived to be in those communities

had been killed since mid-February.

“The Iraqi Ministry of Interior’s inaction and denial of the ongoing campaign to punish people seen as non-conformists threatens everyone who is different, including those who defy traditional notions of gender and sexuality,” said Jessica Stern, director of programs at IGLHRC. “The government needs to ensure the safety of all Iraqis, not amplify the threats against those already being targeted.”

Unlike the 2009 killings, the recent campaign has generated strong condemnation within Iraq. A statement by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a leading Shia spiritual leader, who referred to the targeted killings of emo youth in Iraq as a threat to the nation’s peace and order, was a positive development, the groups said. According to Ayatollah Sistani’s representative in Baghdad, Shaikh Abd al-Rahim al-Rikabi, “those targeted killings are terrorist acts.”

On March 8, several members of the Iraqi parliament demanded a police investigation into the killings and unequivocally condemned the violence. The parliament speaker, Usama Najaifi, said in March 13 statement that the “phenomena of assassinating some young people – those who are described as Emo – by some groups in the name of reforming society, entrenches a culture of violence and terror ... and a violation of law and a crime.”

“At best the response of the Iraqi Interior Ministry is completely inadequate, at worst it condones the violence against emo youth,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International. “Iraqi authorities should unequivocally condemn the attacks, investigate any killings and protect anyone in danger.”

For more information, please contact:

Amnesty International:

Said Boumedouha is available for interview in English or Arabic: +44 (0) 20 7413 5566 or press@amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch:

In Beirut, Rasha Moumneh (English, Arabic): +961-71-323484 (mobile); or moumner@hrw.org

In Toronto, Samer Muscati (English): +1-647-977-4543; or muscats@hrw.org

In Washington DC, Joe Stork (English): +1-202-612-4327; or +1-202-299-4925 (mobile); or storkj@hrw.org

In Amsterdam, Boris Dittrich (Dutch, English, German): +1-917-535-3863 (mobile); or dittrib@hrw.org

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission:

In New York, Jessica Stern (English): +1 917 355 3262; or jstern@iglhrc.org