

Homophobia and Human Rights in Iraq

Ali Hili

Editor's Note: Ali Hili, from the gay rights group Iraqi LGBT [1], received a standing ovation from 250 delegates when he addressed the Faith, Homophobia and Human Rights conference in London in February. The conference had the support of 52 sponsors, including the Home Office, religious organisations, trade unions, LGBT groups, secular campaigners and ethnic minority agencies. The editors thank OutRage! for permission to reproduce Ali's speech.

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I speak on behalf of Iraqi LGBT – an underground network of LGBT activists that we have established inside Iraq. Our members – and all Iraqi LGBTs – are at daily risk of execution by the Shia death squads of the Badr and Sadr militias. Members of these militias have infiltrated the Iraqi police and are abusing their police authority to pursue a plan to eliminate all homosexuals in Iraq. This is happening with the collusion of key ministers in the Iraqi government.

The Badr and Sadr militias are the armed wings of the two main Shia parties that control the government of Iraq. These governing parties – particularly the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq – are complicit in the widespread execution of Iraqi LGBTs.

What is happening today in Iraq is one of the most organised and systematic sexual cleansings in the history of the world. Attacks have escalated into unprecedented levels of homophobic violence, including targeted assassinations. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) has recently, for the first time, confirmed that there are organised campaigns to kill gays in Iraq. These killings are taking place on the order of Iraq's Shia leaders. The UNAMI Human Rights Office recently reported that it was 'alerted to the existence of religious courts, supervised by clerics, where alleged homosexuals would be 'tried,' 'sentenced' to death, and then executed.'

One of the self-appointed religious judges in Sadr City believes that homosexuality is on the wane in Iraq. 'Most [gays] have been killed and others have fled,' he said,

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insisting that the religious courts have ‘a lot to be proud of. We now represent a society that asked us to protect it not only from thieves but also from these [bad] deeds [same-sex relationships].’

Iraq’s government strongly criticised the UNAMI report on human rights abuses; condemning it for discussing issues that are considered taboo in Iraqi society, such as homosexuality, and the systematic murder of LGBTs.

‘There was information in the report that we cannot accept here in Iraq. The report, for example, spoke about the phenomenon of homosexuality and giving them their rights,’ said Mr al-Dabbagh (a spokesperson for the Iraqi regime). ‘Such statements are not suitable to the Iraqi society. This is rejected. They (the UN) should respect the values and traditions here in Iraq.’

I will give you just one example of the homophobic terror Iraqi LGBTs are facing. Five activists in Baghdad were discovered in a safe house and abducted at gunpoint on 9 November last year. Nothing has been heard of them since then. It is feared that death squads operating within the Iraqi police may have murdered them. The kidnapped men all were members of our group Iraqi LGBT. For the previous few months these activists had been documenting the killing of lesbians and gays, and relaying details of homophobic executions to our office in London. I have no doubt that they were targeted – not just because they were gay – but also to stop them exposing to the outside world the anti-gay pogrom that is happening in Iraq today.

The Iranian Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is the world leader of Shia Muslims, clearly states that gays and lesbians should be executed. This gives direct religious sanction to the murder of LGBTs by the Badr and Sadr death squads. Sistani is giving the killers divine authority.

In spite of the world unity against the unlawful war on Iraq, the United States and its allies, including the government of the United Kingdom, chose to go ahead with the invasion of Iraq and cause the deaths of so many innocent lives.

The everyday loss of innocent lives in Iraq does not seem to matter to the western media today, especially when the victims are minorities like LGBTs.

The urgency now is to protect LGBT people in Iraq. We need action by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and

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by other international aid agencies and human right organisations. The UNHCR is failing to support Iraqi LGBTs who have fled to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. It should be providing them with shelter and subsistence. It should be giving them travel documents, so they can seek refuge in safe western countries. So far, this is not happening.

The West, which caused much of the current chaos in Iraq, should be giving refuge to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Iraqis. Right now, the US and Britain are turning down asylum claims by Iraqi LGBTs.

We need funding to enable our activists inside Iraq to continue to document the killings, acquire more safe houses, and to assist LGBTs to escape to neighbouring countries. We are working closely with OutRage! Please send a donation payable to OutRage!, with a cover note stating that it is 'For Iraqi LGBT.' I would like to take this opportunity to thank Peter Tatchell and OutRage! for all the help that they have provided Iraqi LGBT so far.

Finally, we Iraqi LGBTs will not allow ourselves to be exterminated like rats. We are determined to fight for our rights in the new Iraq. With your help, we can defy the religious fundamentalists and win our place in a free and democratic nation.

Ali Hili is a gay refugee from Iraq, and Middle East Affairs spokesperson for the UK-based LGBT human rights group, OutRage!

Notes

- [1] Iraqi LGBT (<http://iraqilgbtuk.blogspot.com/>) is an autonomous and independent organisation, run by Iraqi refugees in the UK and Iraqi LGBTs based inside Iraq. OutRage! has assisted Iraqi LGBT with start-up funding, media contacts and banking facilities.