**Iraq Emo Killings Raise Alarm**

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BAGHDAD -- Young people who identify themselves as so-called Emos are being brutally killed at an alarming rate in Iraq, where militias have distributed hit lists of victims and security forces say they are unable to stop crimes against the subculture that is widely perceived in Iraq as being gay.

Officials and human rights groups estimated as many as 58 Iraqis who are either gay or believed to be gay have been killed in the last six weeks alone – forecasting what experts fear is a return to the rampant hate crimes against homosexuals in 2009. This year, eyewitnesses and human rights groups say some of the victims have been bludgeoned to death by militiamen smashing in their skulls with heavy cement blocks.

A recent list distributed by militants in Baghdad's Shiite Sadr City neighborhood gives the names or nicknames of 33 people and their home addresses. At the top of the paper are a drawing of two handguns flanking a Quranic greeting that extolls God as merciful and compassionate.

Then follows a chilling warning.

"We warn in the strongest terms to every male and female debauchee," the Shiite militia hit list says. "If you do not stop this dirty act within four days, then the punishment of God will fall on you at the hands of Mujahideen."

All but one of the targets are men.

It's not clear why the killings have stepped up in recent months. Many Iraqis are religiously conservative and have struggled against the western influence that has infiltrated their once-closed society in the wake of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

Like many places in the Muslim world, homosexuality is extremely taboo in Iraq. Anyone perceived to be gay is considered a fair target, and the perpetrators of the violence often go free. The militants likely behind the violence intimidate the local police and residents so there is even less incentive to investigate the crimes.

Emo is short for "emotional" and in the West generally identifies teens or young adults who listen to alternative music, dress in black, and have radical hairstyles. Emos are not necessarily gay, but they are sometimes stereotyped as such.

To Iraqis, "Emo" is widely synonymous with "gay." John Drake, an Iraq specialist for the British-based AKE security consulting firm, said Iraqi Emos are getting their hair cut so they aren't immediately identified, and therefore targeted, in the wake of the new threats.

In the southern Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, a mostly-Sunni area, 35-year-old Hassan is afraid to leave his home. He plans on cutting his shoulder-length hair soon, but fears that his hormone-injected breast enhancements will be detected if he is stopped and patted down at one of the ubiquitous security checkpoints across the city.

"Today I went out of my house with a friend but we were severely harassed – some people told us that we need the double blocks," said Hassan, referring to the cement blocks that attackers use to beat people. "I was scared so we returned home to hide."

Hassan's friend, a man who identified himself as 26-year-old Mustafa, called the recent hate crimes "the strongest and deadliest campaign against us."

Hassan said he is gay but does not consider himself an Emo. He and Mustafa agreed to talk on condition that only their first names be used for fear they would be attacked if identified.

One of Hassan's friends, Saif Raad Asmar Abboudi, was beaten to death with concrete blocks in mid-February in a case that terrified gay Iraqis and panicked human rights watchdogs. "I feel very sorry for him," Hassan said.

A Feb. 18 police report all but closes the case on Saif's killing. It shows an initial investigation was completed and "the reason for the incident is unknown at the moment because the criminal is unknown."

An Interior Ministry official said 58 young people have been killed across Iraq in recent weeks by unidentified gangs who accused them of being, as he described it, Emo. Sixteen were killed in Sadr City alone, security and political officials there said. Nine of the men were killed by bludgeoning, and seven were shot. No arrests have been made.

All officials spoke on condition of anonymity, as did many of the people interviewed for this article, in fear of violent reprisals.

The Quran specifically forbids homosexuality, and Islamic militias in Iraq long have targeted gays in what they term "honor killings" to preserve the religious idea that families should be led by a husband and a wife. Those who do not abide by this belief are issued death sentences by the militias, according to the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, a human rights watchdog group. The same militias target women who have extramarital affairs.

"There is a strong wave of campaigns by clerics against homosexuals now," said Ali al-Hilli, chairman of Iraqi LGBT, a human rights group based in London that provides two safe houses in Iraq for gays. "The police do not provide protection for them."

He said an estimated 750 gay Iraqis have been killed because of their sexual orientation since 2006.

Iraqi lawmaker Khalid Shwani, a Kurd, said targeting Emos because of their alternative lifestyles reflects an a growing intolerance of Iraqis' civil rights.

"Those people are free to choose what they wear, or to believe in, or how they choose their clothes or the way they think," Shwani said. He called on parliament to address the issue.

"The Emo of today could be any person tomorrow who tries to follow a specific way of living," he said.

The killings have drawn so much attention that even hardline Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr weighed in Saturday, calling Emos "crazy fools" and a "lesion on the Muslim community" in a statement on his website.

However, al-Sadr did not condone the violence, telling his followers "to end the scourge of Emo within the law."

Iraq's government has been wary about the Emo allure among its youth for months.

An August 2011 letter from the Education Ministry urges schools to crack down on what it considered abhorrent behavior, including allowing camera phones in school "because students would use it for dirty movies," says the letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press.

Similarly, it prohibited students from leaving their classes during school hours "for any reason, because they might gather in the nearby cafes or coffee shops to practice dirty activities."

The letter attributed the social atrocities to "Emo, which is an infiltrated phenomenon in our society began to appear in some of our schools."

Iraqi police squads who are specifically assigned to protect social minorities say they are almost powerless to stop the threats against gays and Emos. One officer assigned to the so-called social abuse squads said police are meeting with clerics to ask for help in urging the public against killing what he described as "the Emo or the vampires or Satan worshippers."

The police official said he had no statistics to show how prevalent the violence is.

"It is true that there have been killings in Sadr City targeting these young men," he said. "It is not right to end their lives in this manner."