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Gay Living in Shadows of New Iraq



Joao Silva for The New York Times

Gay men and a woman in a Baghdad park. In a city where sexual freedom once flourished, gay men and lesbians face persecution.

By CARA BUCKLEY

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BAGHDAD — In a city and country where outsiders are viewed with deep suspicion and attracting attention can imperil one's life, Mohammed could never blend in, even if he wanted to.

Mohammed, 37, has been openly gay for much of his adult life. For him, this has meant growing his hair long and taking estrogen. In the past, he said, that held little danger. As is true throughout the Middle East, men have always been publicly affectionate here.

But, at least until recently, Mohammed and many of his gay friends went one step further, slipping into lovers' houses late at night. And, until the American invasion, they said, Iraqi society had quietly accepted them.

But being openly gay is not an option in the new [Iraq](#), where the rise of religious extremism has left Mohammed and his gay friends feeling especially vilified.

In January, a [United Nations](#) report described the increased persecution, torture and extrajudicial killing of Iraqi lesbians and gay men. In 2005, Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah [Ali al-Sistani](#), issued a fatwa, or religious decree, calling for gay men and lesbians to be killed in the "worst, most severe way."

He lifted it a year later, but neither that nor the recent ebb in violence has made Mohammed or his friends feel safe. They yearn to leave Iraq, but do not have the money or visas. They agreed to be interviewed on the condition that their last names not be used.

They described an underground existence, eked out behind drawn curtains in a dingy safe house in southwestern Baghdad. Five people share the apartment — four gay men and

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one woman, who says she is bisexual. They have moved six times in the last three years, just ahead, they say, of neighborhood raids by Shiite and Sunni death squads. Even seemingly benign neighborhood gossip can scare them enough to move.

“We seem suspicious because we look like a cell of terrorists,” said Mohammed, nervously fingering the lapel of his shirt. “But we can’t tell people what we really are. A cell, yes, but of gays.”

His hand drifted to his newly shorn hair. He had lopped it off days earlier. There had been reports of extremists stopping long-haired men, shearing their hair and forcing them to eat it.

It is impossible to say how many gay men and women face persecution in Iraq. According to an Iraqi gay rights group, run by a former disc jockey in Baghdad named Ali Hili who now lives in London, 400 people have been killed in Iraq since 2003 for being gay.

Set against the many thousands of civilians and soldiers killed in the war, the number is small. But for Mr. Hili, and Mohammed and his friends, it is a painful barometer of just how far Iraq has shifted from its secular past.

For a brief, exhilarating time, from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, they say, gay night life flourished in Iraq. Whereas neighboring Iran turned inward after its Islamic revolution in 1979, Baghdad allowed a measure of liberation after the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

Abu Nawas Boulevard, which hugs the Tigris River opposite what is now the Green Zone, became a promenade known for cruising. Discos opened in the city’s best hotels, the Ishtar Sheraton, the [Palestine](#) and [Saddam Hussein](#)’s prized Al-Rasheed Hotel, becoming magnets for gay men. Young men with rouged cheeks and glossed lips paraded the streets of Mansour, an affluent neighborhood in Baghdad.

“There were so many guys, from Kuwait, from Saudi Arabia, guys in the street with makeup,” said Mr. Hili, who left Iraq in 2000. “Up until 1991, there was sexual freedom. It was a revolutionary time.”

Then came the Persian Gulf war, and afterward Saddam Hussein put an end to nightclubs. Iraq staggered under the yoke of economic sanctions. While antigay laws were increasingly enforced, Mohammed and Mr. Hili said they still felt safe. Homosexuality seemed accepted, as long as it was practiced in private. And even when it was not tolerated, prison time could be evaded with a well-placed bribe.

The American invasion was expected to usher in better times.

“We thought that with the presence of Americans, life would become paradise, that Iraq would be Westernized,” Mohammed said. “But unfortunately the way things were before was so much better than where we are now.”

One night shortly after Saddam Hussein fell, American soldiers burst into the apartment that Mohammed shared with his two brothers. They were looking for insurgents, but took one look at Mohammed, with his long hair and shapely body wrapped in a robe, and teased him, he said.

“What are you, a lady man?” he remembered them barking. “A boy? Or a girl?” They turned to one of Mohammed’s brothers, “Who is this?” they asked, “Your girlfriend?”

The news raced through Mohammed’s building. “All my neighbors came to know that I was gay,” he said. “My brother said, ‘Mohammed, leave the house; you can’t live here anymore.’”

He rented another apartment, and was soon joined by some gay friends. They moved nine months later, after suspicious neighbors began to talk. Nine months after that, they moved again. They came to rely on remittances sent by Mr. Hili, who raises money for

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them in London.

Mr. Hili taps a network of acquaintances in Baghdad to ferret out safe houses, and pays extra for landlords to alert him to possible trouble. He says he supports about 32 people.

Few work, though one of Mohammed's roommates, Amjad, who is 33 and has manicured eyebrows and feathered hair, said he sometimes sleeps with an older man for money. "He loves me, but I hate him," Amjad said. "He is jealous and ugly."

One of Mohammed's friends, a 25-year-old law student named Rafi, said he was especially desperate to get out of Iraq. It is a sentiment shared by millions of Iraqis, but Rafi believes his future here is especially bleak. The influence from Iran is growing, he said. And in Iran, homosexuality is often punishable by death.

"I want to get out, but not just out of Iraq, out of the Middle East," Rafi said, "to a country that has respect for human rights. And for us."

He paused, casting his eyes downward. "It will never be possible here."

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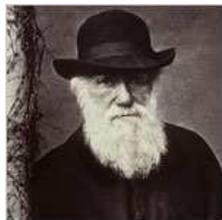
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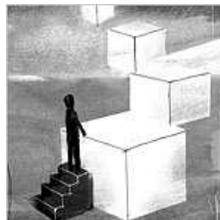
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