

P3: To be gay in Iraq today is to be automatically removed from any of the rights of citizenship, and even life.



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Killing emos, and the future, in Iraq

Youths identifying with the 'emo' music subculture are among the martyrs of the Arab world's revolutionary wave.



After several killings, many young Iraqi fans of emo music now avoid public identification [AP]

Irvine, CA - With everything else plaguing Iraq today - continued sectarianism, rampant corruption, irregular electricity, barely functioning healthcare, ten years' worth of depleted uranium shells (courtesy of the US occupation) causing cancer and birth defects - hardcore Shia militants have decided that the gravest threat to Iraq comes from the small (but growing) number of fans of the genre of post-punk music known as "emo".

In the past several weeks, an unknown number of young Iraqis [have been murdered](#) - in cold blood - reportedly because of their supposed love for emo, a genre of hardcore rock that emerged in Washington, DC, in the late 1980s and early 1990s and known originally as "emotional hardcore" or "emocore". Emo is distinguished from other forms of hardcore by its more "pop" sound and its lyrical focus on emotional, expressive or confessional lyrics.

"Imagine the appeal of metal in a war-torn, occupation-torn and terror-torn country such as Iraq."

Critics of the genre consider the music effete, or feminine, as it lacks the hard and supposedly masculine edge of more traditional punk, hardcore or heavy metal.

A history of attacks on rock 'n' roll

Attacks on young people in the Muslim world because of their taste in music is neither new nor unique to the region. So-called "extreme" forms of heavy metal, hip-hop, punk and hardcore music have long been popular, not merely in the West but globally - precisely because the anger, despair and intensity of the music reflects the tumult of emotions and uncertain identities that define adolescence and young adulthood in every culture.

The Middle East is a particularly welcoming environment for these types of music because young people across the region have suffered the pain and ravages of war, authoritarian and social oppression with particular ferocity. As a founder of the Moroccan metal scene put it: "We play heavy metal because our lives *are* heavy metal."

If that's how the kids feel in Morocco, imagine the appeal of metal in a war-torn, occupation-torn and terror-torn country such as Iraq (or its neighbour Iran, which boasts far more developed [metal](#) and [hip-hop](#) scenes than Iraq). We can see first-hand how relevant the music is in Iraq from one of the most powerful scenes of the documentary "[Heavy Metal in Baghdad](#)", which brought the plight of Iraq's small but powerful metal scene to the world's attention. Pointing to the violent cover art of an Iron Maiden CD, "Death on the Road", one of the members of the band [Acrassicauda](#), which was featured in the film, said: "This is what life looks like here." Another member explained: "If I didn't play drums as hard as I can, I would kill somebody."

Until now, it was largely metalheads who faced the most extreme ire of conservatives in the Muslim world. The genre's reputation for "Satanism" and debauchery have long since made it a lightning rod for attacks by Christian conservatives in the West. In recent decades, it has been attracting similar attention from religious and political leaders in the Muslim world. In the 1990s and early 2000s, "Satanic metal" scares saw scores of metalheads arrested, beaten, prosecuted and threatened with execution by their countries' religious and political establishments.

With their focus on violence, war and corruption, hardcore metal and hip-hop were natural channels for young people in the Arab and Muslim world to express their anger at their countries' patriarchal, repressive and sclerotic political and social systems. Whether it was [Indonesia in 1998](#), [Tehran in 2009](#), [Tunis in 2010](#) or Cairo a few weeks later, metalheads, rappers and punks anticipated and could be found at the front lines of most of the major political upheavals of the past decade and a half in the Arab and larger Muslim world.

Indeed, the anger, despair and emotion so effectively channelled by these genres of music are the same anger, despair and emotion that drove Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself on fire, and that drove hundreds of thousands of young Tunisians, Egyptians, Bahrainis, Yemenis, Libyans and others into the streets against such great odds.

Toleration, but within limits

Even before the Arab Spring, metal and hip-hop had become increasingly tolerated in countries such as Morocco, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, earlier this year a group of young punks in Indonesia's Aceh province, which is governed according to a strict interpretation of Sharia, [were arrested](#), had their heads shaved and were sent for "re-education" with the goal of "saving them" and keeping them from "shaming their parents".

But this is nothing compared with the horrific practice of "death by blocking" ("*mawt al-blokkah*") - smashing cinderblocks onto each side of a person's head, which was allegedly used to kill the Iraqi emos.

Why is it that emos are under such fierce attack?

First of all, there is a chance that the number of actual murders based on supposed affiliation to emo music is well below the numbers offered by the media, which vary from well under two dozen to almost 100 victims. Indeed, according to a Human Rights Watch [report](#), several of those killed were heavy metal musicians, while young women were severely beaten merely for "dressing fashionably".

According to one source in the Iraqi police, the actual number is likely well under a dozen, although that number is probably low. Even this number represents a horrible crime. What's worse, it's a crime that was motivated at least in part by the Iraqi Interior Ministry's accusations that the emo community engaged in Satan worship and other "immoral activities". The ministry allegedly created a special police task force to "hunt" them, clearly setting the public tone that legitimised violence by extremist Shia.

Indeed, regardless of the actual number of victims, it's doubtful all of them would have classified themselves as emos; that is, as hardcore fans of the genre. The bloody photos of the murdered young men that are circulating around the internet feature the kinds of clothing that young men in the Arab world who are trying to look fashionable have long worn. And their haircuts, while particularly styled, were not far outside the norm for young Arabs.

An Iraqi friend pointed out to me: "I have two brothers in the police, including the police intelligence. They dress like this and one has the same haircuts as the emos. No one has bothered them." And yet, as a report by al-Arabiya makes clear, there is a [growing emo subculture](#) in Baghdad. In fact, there are a growing number of stores in Baghdad that openly sell rock 'n' roll merchandise, including, until the wave of killings, emo-related paraphernalia.

The fact that stores are opening across Baghdad that cater to rock 'n' roll tastes is a testament to the real, if slow and unsteady, process of normalisation in Iraq - residents of Baghdad still don't have regular access to electricity, but until last week they could buy the trademark emo skull on a t-shirt. And it is precisely this process of slow normalisation, of seeming "Westernisation" without the direct interference and presence of the US occupation, that is so frightening various elements of Iraqi society with the means and willingness to stigmatise, ostracise and attack anyone who threatens their perception of what a proper Iraqi should look like, and how he or she should behave.

In a conservative society, few behaviours or identities are more threatening to the keepers of public morality than perceived homosexuality. Especially in a culture in which men and women spend so much time segregated by gender, the need to police the boundaries between homosocial and homosexual becomes a central focus of government and social action in order to preserve the social order.

Yet the attacks on suspected homosexuals has much less to do with their sexual orientation than it does with power and control. Indeed, in more than half a dozen years of attacks on suspected gays in Iraq, [attackers have raped](#) the gay men they attacked for being gay, a phenomenon that is not at all uncommon and is related to the similar types of sexual violence visited upon prostitutes, who have also been the victims of police death squads in Iraq.

A leading Iraqi gay activist describes the situation today: "The government has declared war on sexual minorities. They are trying to rally the streets of Baghdad. Yesterday and the last six or seven days - we have videos and films of those patrols - with a megaphone, they're saying: 'If anyone who has any information about anyone who is a pervert, an infidel, part of the homosexual network, you have to declare it or you face consequences.' Anyone who harbours anyone who is, according to them, an illegal citizen, will face consequences."

"For many conservative Muslims - like Christians - being homosexual is a behaviour, and thus can be changed."

To be gay in Iraq today is to be automatically removed from any of the rights of citizenship, and even life. As one Iraqi blogger pointed out, during Baathist rule, similar language was deployed against Communists. In either case, the condemned group became the mechanism for

continually testing the fidelity and loyalty of the community as a whole.

The discourse of the government, the various militia and the ultra-conservatives who support them, centres on the supposed "poisoning" of the still-fragile and only partially reanimated Iraqi social body. And so emos and gays are accused of being deviant and abnormal (*shuzzuz*, which also means homosexual), being "weird" and "strange" (*gharaba*), engaging in Satan worship, drug use, and even the sucking of blood and biting off the heads of babies.

The similarities with the Nazi discourse on Jews is too obvious to ignore. And yet, while some fanatical Iraqi Shia, like their Sunni Salafi counterparts, might indeed hate gays with a pathological intensity, the larger dynamic in which such hatred is supported and even promoted is quite different. And before we blame this on some inherent backwardness or violence within Islam, a similar discourse operates in Uganda based on supposedly Christian moral imperatives, and, with only somewhat less intensity in the US Bible Belt.

First of all, as for many conservative Christians, many conservative Muslims consider homosexuality an identity and a chosen behaviour and thus can be changed (unlike one's ethnicity or religion, which is permanent). And so, in several "night letters" that featured the names of suspected gays and emos who were threatened with execution, local militia declared: "We strongly warn you, to all the obscene males and females, if you will not leave this filthy work within four days, the punishment of God will descend upon you at the hand of the mujahideen ... If you do not get back to sanity and the right path, you will be killed."

There is at least the chance to repent, similar to the extremist Salafi discourse surrounding their attacks on Copts and other Christians, which also often involves calling on them to convert to Islam as the best solution for their situation.

In fact, the whole process can be understood as one of disciplining a community which, with the slow emergence from a decade of war and opening up economically and culturally (especially through the internet) to the outside world, has unprecedented options for shaping identities - and, through them, religious and political beliefs - outside the control of, and potentially opposed to, the interests of the current Shia leadership, whose performance in government has been defined by corruption, a lack of democratic accountability, and a failure to rebuild the country in any meaningful sense.

Mobilising a dangerous constituency

Indeed, while gays in Iraq are almost completely outside the bounds of society, they are not outside enough for the state itself to engage in the summary murder of suspected homosexuals. But they are outside enough for government officials and some religious figures to use the threat they supposedly pose to mobilise poor and uneducated young militiamen, who have known little but oppression and war, to do their dirty work for them, under

the guise of protecting their community from a mortal threat. As several Iraqi commentators have pointed out, deploying these gangs for such activities is one way to keep them occupied, and ensuring their anger and discontent is not directed at more appropriate targets, while using the "defence of society" to gain even more wealth and power. An English-language Iraqi [blog post](#) put it most succinctly: "Then we will figure out why this man killed the emo ... and we can tell the masses that he killed them because it makes money..."

If there is an underappreciated aspect to the sad story of Iraq's emos, it is the complex network of relations and conflicts between Iraq's political and religious elites, the various militia and gangs under their control, and the still fuzzy shape, function and boundaries of the post-occupation Iraqi state. The still-tenuous state has yet to capture a level of hegemony that would allow it to claim a legitimate monopoly of both force and political loyalty. The confusion its lack of authority can produce is revealed by none other than the once-radical and now largely co-opted Muqtada al-Sadr.

In response to the spate of attacks, al-Sadr pronounced on his website that emos were "crazy and fools ... a plague on Muslim society". Nevertheless, he cautioned that "those responsible should eliminate them through legal means".

But this is, of course, precisely the problem - there is no effective law in Iraq today, in good measure because of the way religious-cum-militia leaders such as al-Sadr shaped the post-occupation political environment. With so much wealth and power up for grabs, and the ethnic and sectarian divide still defining the country's political life, the most useful "state" for most political actors is one whose boundaries with other social, political and economic actors are both porous and able to be reshaped as necessary by the governing elite.

Human rights and martyrs in a fuzzy state

While such a fuzzy state has clear advantages for those at the centre to gain control of as much power and resources as possible, at some point a functioning political system with a more definite shape and lines of power will have to take shape - if the country is to achieve a level of socio-economic development that will satisfy the basic needs and aspirations of its young population. As one of Iraq's most shrewd political operators, al-Sadr clearly knows this, which is why he calls on "responsible" parties - that is, those officially sanctioned by the government - to "eliminate" the threat of emos and homosexuals rather than the kind of militia gangs who helped facilitate his rise to power.

"If there is one silver lining in this tragic situation, it is the growing role of human rights discourse as a weapon for society to fight against such extra-legal violence."

The problem with a more well-defined state for many holders of extreme views is that it offers citizens better protection for their basic human, political and civil rights. Such a state would not only find it harder to "eliminate" people merely for dressing strangely or even being gay, it would also circumscribe the ability of

upstarts such as al-Sadr to overstep the power of more traditional leaders such as Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who are not directly part of the emerging political system, and who forcefully condemned the killings as an act of terrorism, and who, along with Ayatollah Mohammed al-Yakoubi, called for dialogue and "advising of the youth".

And so it's not surprising that, soon after al-Sadr's comments became known, one of his assistants clarified them, saying that "in this issue and in all such problems we always use peaceful and educational methods to correct any wrongdoings. We are not connected in any way to those groups allegedly responsible for killing those young people".

Even al-Sadr has to distance himself from unsanctioned violence in order to maintain his position as a legitimate political player in Iraq's emerging post-conflict order.

If there is one silver lining in this tragic situation, it is the growing role of human rights discourse as a weapon for society to fight against such extra-legal violence against even its most marginal members. A look at the Arabic-language Iraqi coverage of the emo affair reveals that everyone from Iraqi parliamentarians to religious leaders is

using the discourse of human rights as a marker to fight back against the current violence against emos and "non-conformists". Iraq's Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights has become involved in the affair, while one MP, Safia al-Suhail, [called on](#) the committees on human rights, security and defence to work together with the interior minister to investigate and stop the killings.

It is hard to underestimate the consequences of this struggle for the future of Iraq. What is clear, however, is that the metalheads, emos, gays and other young Iraqis who are the victims of this horrible violence are unwitting participants in a much larger struggle over the future of their country. By their willingness to put their lives at risk - and in too many cases, lose their life - merely for the right to exercise their freedom of identity and cultural expression, these young people have earned the right to be considered among the martyrs of the democratic revolutionary wave still sweeping across the Arab world.

Update: As this article went to press, I was contacted by a prominent Iraqi blogger who has closely followed the killings of rock fans and gays in his country. He informed me that just in the past two days - which happen to be the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of his country - many more people have been killed, including two girls - just because "they liked pop and punk. The people are terrified by the brutal killing. They mixed attacks on the emo youth and gays, so people have no idea what is the difference, and it [has become] a social attack on any one with long hair or who listens to western music".

The blogger agreed that these attacks were directed by forces in and outside the government who stand the most to lose by any greater opening of Iraq to the outside world, which would lead to greater exposure of their own abuses, corruption and criminality, and which would offer people options for a future aside from their own narrow vision.

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