

Massacre of emos in Iraq goes to core of a damaged society



*Moqtada al-Sadr, right, and the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani have both condemned the killings.
Photograph: Stefan Zaklin/EPA*

This killing campaign – targeting women and men, with children the preferred victims – has a grimly familiar paranoia

Hassan – it's not his real name – had a heavy metal band with two other twentysomethings. The [raucous music](#) represented rebellion, and in [Iraq](#) there was plenty to rebel against: occupation, poverty, patriarchal families – ample impetus to anger. The band made an album, but nobody would touch it; their songs and their look, people said, were satanic. Hassan uploaded a video to YouTube, and included the band members' names. Five days ago, the other two musicians were killed on the street. Hassan is in hiding; he's almost too terrified to speak. "Why are they doing this to us?" he asked me. "Why?"

A new killing campaign is convulsing Iraq. The express targets are "emos", short for "emotional": a western-derived identity, teenagers adopting a pose of vulnerability, along with tight clothes and skewed hairdos and body piercing. Starting last year, mosques and the media both began raising the alarm about youthful immorality, calling the emos deviants and devil worshippers. In early February, somebody began killing people. The net was wide, definitions inexact. Men who seemed effeminate, girls with tattoos or peculiar jewellery, boys with long hair, could all be swept up. The killers like to smash their victims' heads with concrete blocks.

There is no way to tell how many have died: estimates range from a few dozen to more than 100. Nor is it clear who is responsible. Many of the killings happened in east Baghdad, stronghold of Shia militias such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteous). Neither, though, has claimed responsibility. Iraq's brutal interior ministry issued two statements in February. [The first](#) announced official approval to "eliminate" the "satanists". [The second](#), on 29 February, proclaimed a "campaign" to start with a crackdown on stores selling emo fashion. The loaded language suggests, at a minimum, that the ministry incited violence. It's highly possible that some police, in a force riddled with militia members, participated in the murders.

It's logical to compare this to the militia campaign against homosexual conduct in 2009, [which I documented for Human Rights Watch](#). Hundreds of men lost their lives then. Gay-identified men have been caught up in these killings as well, and Baghdad's LGBT community is rife with fear. Yet there are

differences. The current killings target women as well as men, and children are the preferred victims. It's not quite true to say, as some press reports have suggested, that "emo" is just a synonym for "gay" in Iraq. Rather, immorality, western influence, decadence and blasphemy have come together in a loosely defined, poorly aligned complex of associations: and emo fashion and "sexual perversion" are part of the mix. Nobody cares much about disentangling the concepts, least of all the killers. All that matters is that all those things are bad.

Slaughtering children is monstrous. Yet the underlying paranoia is grimly familiar. Forty years ago, the [sociologist Stanley Cohen developed the concept of "moral panics"](#): moments when social change grows so intense that it can no longer be addressed, or even described, in debate or through the political process. Instead, anxieties erupt in collective scapegoating. The public singles out "folk devils" to incarnate unwanted tendencies, and take the blame. His case study was the hysteria around mods and rockers, 60s youth subcultures. But there have been plenty of examples before and since in the developed west: panics over drug use (think kids cut loose with spending money), or child abuse in day care centres (think mothers moving into the workplace and leaving infants behind), or women in hijab (think a newly multicultural Europe and its discontents). The list goes on.

Youth deviance, though, is a leitmotif of many panics. Kids don't just symbolise social change; they are it, embodying the unmanageable future. Visions of their out-of-control escapades sum up transformations in communities and economies that are too strong to resist, too rapid to comprehend. Emo, moreover, adds an extra twist: gender. It's all about boys showing vulnerability in unmanly ways, girls flashing an unfeminine and edgy attitude.

In fact, moral panics over emos, gender and culture have multiplied in recent years. [Russia](#) debated a law banning emo dress in 2008. [Mexico](#) saw anti-emo riots the same year. Saudi Arabia arrested emo girls in 2010, accusing them of "imitating men". More broadly, several of Iraq's Gulf neighbours – Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE – have cracked down on women wearing "masculine" clothes, or on men dressing like women.

Iraq is a devastated society with a broken political process and a fractured public. It's been through violent traumas with little control over its collective fate. The death and disappearance of thousands of men recast gender roles; the influx of consumer goods and cultures discombobulated values. It's ripe for recurrent moral panics, scapegoating marginal groups. The anxieties are the same as have historically been seen in other societies, including the UK. But in Iraq, panic carries a gun.

There is one sign of hope. Prominent political figures, including members of Iraq's parliament, have called for an investigation of these killings. Amid mounting public attention to the crimes, Moqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Shia leader, condemned them. This indignation, even if insincere, is radically different from the silence that shrouded the anti-gay massacres of 2009.

This suggests that it's not just wrong, it's counterproductive to call these murders "gay killings", as some have done. Gays are among the victims, but the fears fuelling the violence go beyond sexuality. It's important that Iraq begins to have a debate about difference. Iraqis need to discuss why the horrors of the last four decades have made otherness seem intolerable. They must ask why politics focuses not on problems and solutions, but on enemies and guilt. The questions go to the core of a damaged society. The corpses of dead children demand not just justice, but answers.