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Secular Istanbul provides respite to Iraq's gays Young Iraqi gays find safe haven in Turkey



Iraqi gays enjoy living in Turkey, a secular Muslim country, where they do not feel their lives are at risk

ISTANBUL (Reuters)

Iraqi gunman warned Ameer they would kill him for working with the United States military. Then he received a more chilling death threat -- for being gay -- so he sold his home in Baghdad and fled to Turkey.

Now the 28-year-old from a middle class family shares a small apartment in Istanbul with five other gay Iraqi men, exiles from a wave of intolerance, and says for the first time in his life he can express his sexual orientation in public.

Homosexuality is banned almost everywhere in the Middle East, but conditions for gays and lesbians in Iraq have become particularly dangerous since the rise of religious militias after U.S.-led forces removed Saddam Hussein six years ago.

"I could be tracked down and killed if I would say I am gay," Ameer said. "But here in Turkey we are treated as humans and we have rights, which is not the case in my country."

In Baghdad, he led his life in secret, without the knowledge of his family. In a country where homosexual acts are punished with up to seven years in prison, only his closest friends knew he was gay.

Ameer had stayed on after relatives fled Iraq's sectarian violence, living in a Shiite Muslim district and working for the Americans in the capital's heavily-fortified Green Zone.

Then the death threats started.

Sermons condemning homosexuality were given by clerics at Friday prayers in Sadr City, a sprawling Shiite slum, where six gay men were found murdered in March and April, four of them with Arabic signs

reading "pervert" on their chests.

One local official, who declined to be identified, described the other two as "sexual deviants" and said the men had been killed by their tribes to restore their families' honor.

Sadr City is a bastion of support for fiery anti-American Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mehdi Army militia. The Mehdi Army has frozen its activities in the past year and Iraqi government forces have retaken control.

Many young men who might have cut their hair short and grown beards when religious gangs controlled much of Iraq now dress in a more Western style as government forces patrol the streets.

As a result, some are accused of being homosexual.

Ameer, who left Baghdad in June 2007, had an asylum request approved after three interviews at the United Nations headquarters in Ankara. He hopes one day to join relatives in the United States.

"Friends and cousins in the United States have told me I will enjoy the gay life there, and that I won't be embarrassed by this issue any more," he said.

For now, he is enjoying living in a secular Muslim country where he does not feel his life is at risk every day. He survives on the little money family members send him, while his flatmates earn about \$500 a month washing cars.

"We have no more fears of threats here," said one of Ameer's friends, Safwan. "I would think 100 times before ever returning to Iraq."