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DOFJ: 8/2003

Gay in Iraq: Soldiers and civilians facing tough times

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correspondences.

But it is not only discharge that J.R.'s partner faces if the truth is revealed. He also faces violence. "In the 82nd," J.R. explains, "if it gets out, you're going to get beat up. That threat is always there because of the amount of homophobic remarks made in the barracks."

Last year, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network reported that both gay discharges and reports of anti-gay harassment reached record levels. In 2001, 1250 troops were fired for being gay, lesbian or bisexual and 1075 complaints of anti-gay harassment were reported.

According to a report released in March 2004 from SLDN, those numbers have dramatically changed.

As the United States military continues to wage war in Iraq and Afghanistan, discharges of lesbian and gay military personnel plummeted 17 percent in 2003.

Conduct Unbecoming, an annual review of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law, finds that gay-related discharges fell to 787 last year, down from 906 in 2002. The 2003 figures mark a 39 percent decrease in discharges since 2001, the year before current conflicts in the Middle East began. The number represents the fewest gay discharges since 1995 and perhaps a growing acceptance of gays serving in the military.

Iraqi gays

For gay and lesbian Iraqi civilians, the outcome of the U.S.-led invasion isn't likely to be any rosier than life was under the Hussein dictatorship.

Homosexuality is punishable by death in Iran, Iraq's more conservative neighbor. Iraq, however, had no sodomy laws and an age consent of 18, at least until three years ago. Hussein, who had previously run a socialist-styled secular dictatorship, began to cave into fundamentalist Shiite pressure. He created a new law that implemented the death penalty for homosexuality.

Gays and lesbians in the Muslim Middle East in general face ominous persecution across the board, particularly in places like Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, though a scant few countries like Lebanon and Syria have laws which are rarely enforced. Jordan and Turkey have no sodomy laws whatsoever.

There is little communication from LGBT folk in Iraq, save a few anonymous testimonials on the Gay Middle East website (gaymiddleeast.com) and on another now infamous sight called "Where's Raed?" (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com) that includes the thoughts of an Iraqi gay man who calls himself Salam Pax. Although his real name is unknown, it has been confirmed that he is a 29-year-old Baghdad architect who lived as a teenager in Europe. His writings provide a disturbing portrait of a city under siege. Before the invasion began several of his entries detailed persecutions against gays in Iraq. These days his writings focus mainly on U.S. occupation and Muslim extremists.

New constitution

Although the interim constitution that was approved for Iraq in March is described as one of the most liberal in the region, there is no indication that any consideration is being given to LGBT civil rights. It is also unclear whether or not the law put in place by Hussein will still be enforced.

Gay journalist and Arab American Mubarak Dahir, who writes commentaries for publications like *Q-Notes* and *Southern Voice*, among others, told the *Washington Blade* he is pessimistic about the prospects for meaningful improvements for gays in Iraq. "To think any government change in the short term will secure the rights of gays and lesbians in Iraq is unbelievably naïve," Dahir said.

The U.S. government has no official position on gay rights in Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell and the Bush administration have stated they believe a democratic government in Iraq will lead to human rights protections for "all people," according to State Department spokesperson Jo Anne Prokopowicz.

An official with the Iraqi National Congress, a U.S.-backed Iraqi exile group said that he believes it is too early in the game to assure protection for LGBT folk. "It will take a few more years before we can address that question," Mazin Youssef said.

Ramzi Zakharia, an official with the Gay & Lesbian Arab Society, echoed Youssef's sentiments. "Change must occur through a truly grass roots democracy, not from a top-down government imposed by the United States."

Article four of the new Iraqi constitution reads as follows:

"The system of government in Iraq shall be republican, federal, democratic, and pluralistic, and powers shall be shared between the federal government and the regional governments, governorates, municipalities, and local administrations. The federal system shall be based upon geographic and historical realities and the separation of powers, and not upon origin, race, ethnicity, nationality, or confession."

Those words have made many Iraqis enthusiastic about the future of their country. Just the first line in article four, however, easily belies that enthusiasm.

"Islam is the official religion of the State and is to be considered a source of legislation."

The fact remains that, once the U.S. leaves Iraq, it could fall into the hands of anti-gay Shiite clerics. "Saddam, however bad he was, had a secular government," Zakharia offered. Pax has expressed his reservations about the emergence of a majority Shiite controlled Iraq on "Where's Raed?"

"If anyone went to the streets now and decided to hold elections we will end up with something that is scarier than Khomeini's Iran."

Like much of the fundamentalist Islamic-controlled Middle East, the future for Iraq's LGBT population looks decidedly bleak.

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