

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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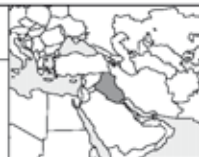


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Introduction

Iraq today is a country facing numerous humanitarian crises, as well as war. Four years after the departure of US troops, the country is fighting for its own survival. Within this context, internet freedom, rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, and liberal sexual expression might seem like low priorities. However, as this report will demonstrate, they are all connected; the lack of such freedoms are actually symptomatic, if not a by-product, of a collapsing state.

It is an understatement to say that Iraq is a country in the grip of fear and violence. In 2015, the country is divided into three separate areas of contention, with multiple forces vying for control. The Kurdish north with its own regional government has been a semi-autonomous area since the end of the first Gulf War, when the UN declared a no-fly zone across the northern region, protecting the Kurds from Saddam Hussein. The national government holds its power in Baghdad and has control of much of southern and central Iraq. However, large swaths of the country in the north, west and centre are controlled by the Sunni Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), otherwise known as Daesh, the Arabic acronym for *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa' al Sham*. ISIL considers the Kurds infidels¹ and the Shiites apostates.²

Advocates for LGBT and sexual rights in Iraq face overwhelming oppositional forces, including online and offline death threats. Various crimes related to sexuality, including the massacre of gays, “honour killings”, forced marriages, sexual slavery, and female genital mutilation (FGM) are facts of life in many parts of the country.

In Iraq the extremists are possibly more effective than liberal activists in using the internet to promote their cause. This report examines Iraqi sexual freedom and its connection to the internet, focusing on the deplorable situation in three regions of Iraq with three separate stories – two concerning LGBTs and one about women’s sexual rights in Kurdish Iraq.

In central and southern Iraq, the government has invited Iranian Revolutionary Guards as well as local Shiite militia to handle the war efforts.³ Shiite militia and fanatics are beyond the control of the central government.⁴ In their hunt for suspected gay men, they have taken to the internet. In areas under ISIL, extremists are using the internet to terrorise anyone opposing them. Their postings of terrifying executions of those suspected of being gay are used to maintain their brutal reputation. The third story here concerns Kurdistan, where many humanitarian NGOs can still operate. There, the NGO Wadi is helping Syrian and Iraqi refugees. In particular, Wadi is providing psycho-social support and food aid to Yezedi women and girls, who were formerly ISIL captives and sex slaves. Wadi is using the internet to appeal for international help in their efforts.

Political context

Iraq today is on the verge of collapse – a weak sectarian central government must deal with an ally in Kurdistan with its own territorial ambitions, while both face a hostile Islamic caliphate. Although ISIL originated in Iraq and has Iraqi leadership, it holds its power base in Syria and declared its capital to be the Syrian city of Raqqa. The Iraqi army has simply been ineffective in fighting ISIL and at the time of writing, ISIL forces are only a few kilometres from Baghdad.

Iraqi Kurdistan was long considered a relatively peaceful and safe region, but since the 2014 ISIL incursions into its territory and the April 2015 bombing of the United States (US) Consulate in Kurdistan’s capital Erbil, the Kurds are in crisis. In

1 Köver, C. (2014, 11 August). Europe Is Still Pondering What to Do in Iraq. *Vice News*. <https://news.vice.com/article/europe-is-still-pondering-what-to-do-in-iraq>

2 Martin, P. (2014, 26 June). Explainer: Shia-Sunni divide and Iraq’s deadly sectarian war. *The Globe and Mail*. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/sunni---shia-divide-explained/article19337058

3 Reuters. (2015, 26 May). Iraq Shi’ite militia take lead in campaign to reverse Islamic State gains. *Reuters*. www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/26/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN0B0K520150526

4 Habib, M. (2015, 14 May). Whose Side Are They On? *Niqash*. www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5009

mid-2015, however, the Kurdish state had halted the further advance of ISIL into its territory. Its Peshmerga troops seem to be an effective force against ISIL so far.⁵ Kurdistan has even taken over oil-rich Kirkuk, long controlled by the central government but claimed by Kurdistan. For many Kurds, an independent country of Kurdistan is an achievable outcome of the current conflict.

The seemingly impotent central government is widely seen as favouring the Shiites over the Sunnis,⁶ a policy that drove many Sunnis to join ISIL. Baghdad's regular army is toothless. Its soldiers have not stood their ground, evident in its collapse in the face of the advancing ISIL forces. Baghdad is depending on the support of its Iranian ally, specifically their Revolutionary Guard fighters, as well as on the Iraqi Shiite militia. The Shiite forces at times appear to operate as a state within a state and their brutality is outside the control of the central government. With so many different actors in the power struggle, many believe⁷ the country is on the edge of descending into anarchy.

Sexual rights and the internet in Iraq

In this context, it is hard to analyse the activism by those fighting for sexual and LGBT rights within Iraq. Those who have access to the internet and use it to promote freedom or human rights risk being killed. Even reporting about these issues poses a great danger as increasingly journalists are being targeted. Iraq is one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist.⁸

Advocacy for sexual and associated political rights, whether online or offline, presents great dangers for activists. From the Shiite militia in central and southern Iraq to the Islamic State in the north, extremists hunt for LGBTs,⁹ as well as advocates for sexual rights.

Internet freedom is not guaranteed in Iraq, nor is sexual freedom. The Global Justice Project in Iraq writes: "Contrary to some international media re-

ports, homosexuality per se is not illegal in Iraq."¹⁰ However, violence against sexual minorities or anyone advocating sexual freedom is rife, and the authorities take little action to stop such atrocities – even the police abuse and rape gay men.¹¹ In Iraq, anything outside the patriarchal norms is deemed unacceptable. Women who want freedom in choosing a partner as well as anyone who wants same-sex relationships could be subjected to so-called "honour killings" – murders performed by a relative to preserve the honour of the family.¹²

Internet access has only crept up marginally recently, with 9.2% of the population able to get online.¹³ But having access does not equate to having online freedom. In 2014, the Iraqi Ministry of Communications sent out an order to internet service providers (ISPs) to shut down internet service in five provinces and block virtual private networks (VPNs) – which allow web users to disguise their geographical location – and social media access in the rest of the country. The Iraqi government wants to block propaganda from the Islamic State, but in doing so it stifles any sort of dissent and non-conformist ideas. Following this censorship, Iraqis starting tapping Tor, which allows users to surf the web anonymously as well as access blocked sites, and usage of Tor jumped tenfold.¹⁴

Given the limited internet access that ordinary Iraqis have, why would Shiite militia, ISIL militants and Kurdish activists take to the internet to advocate their positions? They are in fact speaking to audiences largely outside Iraq. They know that international broadcasters such as CNN and BBC will pick up on their internet postings, and that, in turn, they will likely be replayed on Iraqi airwaves.

Violence continues unabated against the LGBT community and anyone advocating sexual liberation. In 2012, the Dutch government opened its country to any LGBT Iraqi who seeks asylum, recognising that no part of the country is safe for the LGBT community.¹⁵ The International Gay and

5 Silverstein, K. (2015, 13 May). How America's Chickenshit Foreign Policy Has Betrayed the Kurds. *The Observer*. observer.com/2015/05/how-americas-chickenshit-foreign-policy-has-betrayed-the-kurds-a-major-enemy-of-isil

6 Habib, M. (2015, 14 May). Op. cit.

7 Cockburn, P. (2014, 15 October). Iraq's Descent into Chaos. *CounterPunch*. www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/15/iraqs-descent-into-chaos

8 Reporters Without Borders. (2015, 11 May). Mounting Deadly Danger for Journalists in Iraq. en.rsf.org/iraq-mounting-deadly-danger-for-11-05-2015,47877.html

9 Hayden, S., & Oakford, S. (2014, 20 November). Caught Between the Islamic State and Shiite Militias, Gays Are Dying in Iraq. *Vice News*. <https://news.vice.com/article/caught-between-the-islamic-state-and-shiite-militias-gays-are-dying-in-iraq>

10 Global Justice Project: Iraq. (2009, 21 May). Homosexuality and the Criminal Law in Iraq. gjpi.org/2009/05/21/homosexuality-and-the-criminal-law-in-iraq

11 BBC News. (2012, 11 September). Baghdad's persecuted gays have nowhere to hide. BBC News. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19525133

12 El, K. (2012, 9 March). Iraq: Homosexuals in Iraq Face Honor Killings Too. *Infidels Are Cool*. infidelsarecool.com/2012/03/iraq-homosexuals-in-iraq-face-honor-killings-too

13 World Bank statistics: data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2

14 O'Neill, P. H. (2014, 18 June). Iraq Internet censorship boosts Tor usage tenfold. *The Daily Dot*. www.dailydot.com/politics/iraq-internet-censorship-tor

15 Potts, A. (2012, 14 July). The Netherlands opens its doors to LGBT Iraqis. *Gay Star News*. www.gaystarnews.com/article/netherlands-opens-its-doors-lgbt-iraqis140712

Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) produced two reports in 2014 which documented the atrocities against LGBTs in Iraq.¹⁶

While sexual identity/freedom and internet access may seem like unrelated problems, they are in fact related in the context of overall violence and a collapse of the rule of law. There cannot be effective online advocacy of sexual freedom because of the severe censorship issues in the country. Few dare to speak up because the authorities will not protect them. Shiite militia operate at will without constraints imposed by the central government. The Shiite militia sometimes punish people suspected of being gay the same way as the Sunni Islamic State – they throw them from great heights to kill them.¹⁷

There are in fact numerous Shiite militant groups, composed of volunteers from different Shia sects and neighbourhoods. The central government has at times sought to limit their influence and in 2014 created the Popular Mobilisation Units (*Hashed al-Shaabi*), an umbrella group for the different, mostly Shiite, militia groups.¹⁸

These Shiite armed groups have also been widely criticised for war crimes, from assassinations and summary mass executions to kidnappings and extortion.¹⁹ In Baghdad, the militia use the internet to find gay men to hunt and kill them.²⁰ Sometimes they pose as homosexuals to ferret out gays.²¹ They take photos at the executions to intimidate others. They know these images can get online without the perpetrators being prosecuted because, as mentioned, the policemen are also known to torture and rape gays.²² Coming out to family members and friends can lead to ostracism or being betrayed to the militia. Family members also kill gay relatives to preserve the family's "honour". Sometimes just

looking effeminate is enough to get one killed. In recent years, these militiamen hunted and killed young men identifying as "emos" because their long hair and Western fashion make them "unmanly".²³

Places of safety

Human rights groups have a hard time protecting LGBTs in Iraq. There are few places for LGBTs to hide, as even the one safe house set up for this purpose in Baghdad can only hold three people.²⁴ Although there are Iraqis who have used the internet to push for gender and sexual freedom, in a country where coming out could be a death sentence, advocacy for sexual rights appears to be next to impossible.²⁵ The Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) in Baghdad has publicly defended the rights of LGBTs in Iraq on Iraqi TV, but such on-air advocacy appears to be uncommon. Founded by Amir Ashour, the group IraQueer finds alternative ways to fight for the sexual and human rights of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people in Iraq and has members throughout the country. They offer training to other activists and use social media, blogging and internet news to push for these changes. Reporting on the atrocities against LGBTQs in Iraq, their website www.iraqueer.org lets the wider world know of developments in the country.

The Iraqi NGO Wadi, based in Kurdistan, has publicised the persecution of LGBTs. Working on the issue of LGBT rights is, however, not a focus of Wadi. On the broader issue of sexual rights, Wadi has been effective in protecting women in fighting against FGM, forced marriages and honour killings. Sexual liberation must surely also include one's right to choose a sexual partner as well as freedom from sexual abuse. Sadly, women who make their own sexual choices are sometimes killed by their relatives. There are no accurate statistics but such killings are thought to be one of the leading causes of death for women in Kurdistan.²⁶

Wadi builds women's shelters as well as offering aid to Yezedi refugees, some of whom were former captives and sex slaves held by ISIL. The Yezedis are a minority in Iraq who adhere to an ancient religion considered satanic by ISIL and are therefore an open target. Many of these Yezedi women have been greatly

16 IGLHRC. (2014, 19 November). Exposing Persecution of LGBT Individuals in Iraq. iglhrc.org/content/exposing-persecution-lgbt-individuals-iraq

17 MADRE. (2015, 21 January). IGLHRC and MADRE Statement on Men Allegedly Executed for Sodomy by ISIS in Iraq. www.madre.org/page/press-releases-217/news/iglhrc-and-madre-statement-on-men-allegedly-executed-for-sodomy-by-isis-in-iraq-990.html

18 Al-Kadhimi, M. (2015, 12 March). Will Sistani be able to control popular mobilization forces? *Al-Monitor*. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iraq-sistani-righteous-jihad-fatwa-popular-mobilization.html

19 Amnesty International. (2014). *Absolute Impunity: Militia rule in Iraq*. www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/absolute_impunity_iraq_report.pdf

20 Burke, J. & Sarhan, A. (2009, 13 September). How Islamist gangs use internet to track, torture and kill Iraqi gays. *The Observer*. www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/13/iraq-gays-murdered-militias

21 CNN. (2009, 6 May). Gay Killings in Iraq. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDor6NDGSnU>

22 BBC News. (2012, 11 September). Op. cit.

23 IB Times. (2012, 13 March). Fear as Death Squads hunt Iraq Gays and 'Emos'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=li_d3ZqXqHW

24 BBC News. (2012, 11 September). Op. cit.

25 IGLHRC. (2014). *When Coming Out is a Death Sentence: Persecution of LGBT Iraqis*. www.madre.org/uploads/misc/1417532210_ComingOutDeathSentence_Iraq.pdf

26 Dosky, B. (2013, 17 March). My Broken Dream for Iraqi Kurdistan. *The Observer*. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/17/broken-dream-iraqi-kurdistan

traumatised physically and mentally. Some have been systematically raped, physically tortured, and suffer from unwanted pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted diseases. Wadi provides psycho-social assistance as well as hygienic supplies, medicine, clothing, cooking supplies, and plastic covers for shelter.

Wadi is one of the first organisations on the ground to offer assistance to refugees fleeing ISIL. It currently assists 102 families residing in a compound and has three female-led mobile intervention teams (MITs). Given that Yezedis live in a deeply conservative society, they are often reluctant to discuss problems with outsiders. Because of this issue, Wadi has a policy to embed locals in MITs. Each team consists of two women, one of whom is Yezedi. They find that this approach facilitates interactions with Yezedis.²⁷

The international spotlight: The good and the bad

One way Wadi funds its humanitarian work is through international appeals online where donors can offer funding through direct bank transfer and PayPal. Thomas von der Osten-Sacken, the German co-founder of Wadi, noted that an online appeal for funding was particularly helpful in their efforts to help Yezedi women. Wadi also understands that its online campaigns reach a broad international audience and that when the international press covers stories about its humanitarian work, it drives visitors to the Wadi website and results in donations.

At the other extreme, ISIL also knows that their postings online get noticed by international media. Their “news” distributed via online videos and postings on social networks are covered or rebroadcast by international media outlets, serving as effective recruitment ads. Earlier this year, they uploaded photos of suspected gay men being pushed to their death from a tower.²⁸ One such gay person who survived his fall is nonetheless stoned to death.²⁹ Another report indicates that ISIL fighters pose “as gays to lure homosexuals to their death.”³⁰ As

mentioned, because of the limited internet access within Iraq, one can conclude that these internet postings have an international audience. Perhaps more so than rival extremist groups, ISIL has been effective in their international recruitment via online postings. Their extreme brutality differentiates the ISIL brand from other Islamists who are merely just fundamentalist. *The Guardian* reported that “videos showing British and American hostages being murdered by Islamic State fighters are stirring support among foreign jihadis who are excited by a new confrontation with the west.”³¹ US officials have warned that ISIL’s social media campaign is sophisticated and its recruitment “sells adventure, with murder and mayhem as fun.”³² ISIL would not exist without international recruitment, as half of its fighting force are foreigners, with an estimated 4,000 from Western nations.³³

Civilians living under ISIL’s rule can only fight back covertly. Some have taken to the internet to tell the world what is happening under ISIL occupation. The website Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently³⁴ has activists from within Raqqa secretly reporting on what is happening there because no journalists can operate in the area. Their site has reported on the execution of gays, as well as ISIL members posing as gay men to trap and kill real gays.³⁵ The Facebook page Mosul Eye reports on life and death inside an occupied city with anonymous postings by informants.³⁶ These postings are useful to the coalition forces trying to defeat the Islamic State.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the US strategy to fight ISIL remains largely ineffective. Unsurprisingly, General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, criticised US President Barack Obama by blasting the US for having not done a “damn thing” to stop ISIL’s advance on Ramadi.³⁷

27 Wadi website: en.wadi-online.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1163&Itemid=171

28 Siegel, J. (2015, 16 January). In Graphic Photos and on Twitter, ISIS Members Record and Tout Executions of Gay Men. *The Daily Beast*. www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/16/in-graphic-videos-and-on-twitter-isis-members-record-and-tout-executions-of-gay-men.html

29 Gerdes, S. (2015, 3 May). ISIS stone ‘gay’ man to death after he survived being thrown off a roof. *Gay Star News* www.gaystarnews.com/article/isis-stone-gay-man-death-after-he-survived-being-thrown-roof030515

30 Fox News. (2015, 12 May). Death hug: ISIS fighters reportedly posing as gays to lure homosexuals to their death. *Fox News*. www.foxnews.com/world/2015/05/12/death-hug-isis-fighters-reportedly-posing-as-gays-to-lure-homosexuals-to-their

31 Booth, R. (2014, 14 September). Isis videos ‘excite’ group’s supporters. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/14/isis-videos-excite-groups-supporters-david-haines-syria

32 ABC News. (2015, 7 May). How US Officials Say ISIS Uses Social Media to Recruit. abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/us-officials-isis-social-media-recruit-30892920

33 Weaver, M. (2015, 14 April). Her Majesty’s Jihadists. *The New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/her-majestys-jihadists.html?_r=0

34 www.raqqa-sl.com/en

35 Mohammed, A. (2015, 25 April). The ISIS Hug of Death for Gays. *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently*. www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=1022

36 <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mosul-Eye/552514844870022?fref=nf>

37 Karimi, N. (2015, 25 May). Iranian Revolutionary Guard leader says US has ‘no will’ to fight Islamic State group. *The Globe and Mail*. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/iranian-revolutionary-guard-leader-says-us-has-no-will-to-fight-islamic-state-group/article24586423

He added that his country has been more effective in countering ISIL than the US has been.³⁸

Iraq is a country that is falling apart. The persecution of LGBTs and the deprivation of the sexual rights of women are symptoms of a failed state. When there is no one capable of protecting the persecuted, the state ceases to function properly. With multiple regions and factions vying for control, the breakdown in the rule of law in Iraq cannot be separated from the lack of internet freedom and the persecution of LGBTs and women.

This is not an optimistic report. While it is hard to imagine how an extremist group like ISIL can sustain itself and maintain power over the long term, Iraq is unlikely to find peace until the different sectarian and ethnic groups can live with each other. A possible scenario is the breakup of Iraq into three states: Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shiite Arab.³⁹ But until peace comes, fighting for sexual rights and internet freedom takes a back seat to struggling for daily survival.

Action steps: What are the options?

In an anarchic environment where the national government has little control over the spiralling violence, activists are in a precarious situation with few options.

Activists working in Iraq for sexual freedom need to hide their identity. For now it must be a semi-underground movement to protect the safety of the activists. They need to tell the world what is happening there using the internet or sending SMS text messages.

If possible, they should work with international agencies as well as sympathetic locals to advocate for the rule of law. They should provide updates and news to international NGOs who can help them feed the news to the global press. These NGOs in turn can pressure governments around the world to respond to the humanitarian crisis.

Lastly, whenever possible, they also need to circumvent internet censorship with the use of software like Tor.

38 McDonnell, P., & Mostaghim, R. (2015, 25 May). Iran slams U.S. over comments on Iraqi troops fighting Islamic State. *The Los Angeles Times*. www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-us-iran-islamic-state-20150525-story.html

39 Trofimov, Y. (2015, 26 March). Iraq Inches Toward 3-Way Split. *Assyrian International News Agency*. www.aina.org/news/20150326173302.htm

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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