

Honour Killing Sparks Fears of New Iraqi Conflict

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The Yezidi minority has so far stayed well out of Iraq's internecine battles, but violence with their Muslim neighbours has escalated following the murder of a girl who apparently converted to Islam.

Bashiqa, a small town sitting in lush green hills east of the city of Mosul, used to be regarded as an island of peace and stability while vast areas of post-Saddam Iraq were plunged into civil war.

Home to a population that is 70 per cent Yezidi - members of an old sect that is neither Muslim nor Christian - Bashiqa was spared the sectarian and ethnic strife between Arabs and Kurds, radical Sunnis and Shia that plagued surrounding areas. People from Mosul would drive the 25 kilometres to Bashiqa to have picnics and to enjoy the tranquility of a little town where Yezidi temples, Muslim mosques and Christian churches stand in close proximity, presenting a rare image of tolerant coexistence.

Until April 7, that is. On that day, a furious mob stoned a 17-year-old girl to death while bystanders applauded and filmed the killing on their cell phones.

Her crime? Duaa Khalil Aswad, a Yezidi, had run away from home because she had fallen in love with a Muslim boy. It was not the first love story of its kind, nor was it the first "honour killing" in a region where women are subject to strong social restrictions and face severe punishment for disregarding family, tribal or religious traditions.

Such cases can no longer be covered up as easily these days, because of pressure from local women's activists - but they rarely cause a stir.

Duaa's case was different. This killing has had much wider impact - unleashing widespread inter-communal strife in a formerly peaceful area, which has resulted in at least 20 deaths and the threat of more violence.

In addition to fears of a new ongoing conflict between Yezidis and Muslims, the case highlights the absence of rule of law, and the acceptance that family disputes should be dealt with by relatives rather than outsiders from the judiciary, even when the resolution involves murder. At least one eyewitness said members of the security forces stood by and did not intervene as Duaa was stoned to death.

TRADITIONAL TABOOS LEAD TO MURDER

The story began when Duaa, a second-year student at the Fine Arts Institute in Bashiqa, fell in love with her neighbour, Muhannad, the owner of a nearby cosmetics shop. Muhannad used to wait for Duaa after her college classes, and her parents were aware of the relationship.

The Yezidis are ethnic Kurds who practice a unique religion that incorporates elements of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, as well as drawing on Islam and Christianity. Dismissed by some as "devil-worshippers", the Yezidis have coped with such misperceptions by keeping themselves to themselves, while seeking not to antagonise other communities.

One hard-and-fast rule of Yezidi tradition is that marriage outside the faith is not permitted. To circumvent this, Duaa reportedly asked Muhannad to elope with her, but he refused, saying that Muslim tradition recommends that both families give their blessing to a marriage.

Finally, Duaa decided to convert to Islam so that she could marry Muhannad. She informed her parents, who were not pleased, but did not take any action to stop her. They appear to have regarded her decision as a domestic matter, and not one for the wider community.

When her tribe learned of her conversion, the girl took refuge with a Yezidi cleric, a common practice when people fear retribution. She stayed in the cleric's home, and her parents begged him not to surrender her to anyone, according to Mustafa Muslim, a grocer in the town.

On April 7, Aswad's uncles came to the cleric and told him that the family had forgiven the girl and wanted her to return with them.

"She thought they had really forgiven her, when she was going to her death," said Muslim. "She was wearing a black skirt and a red jacket with her hair in a pony tail."

After just a few yards, Duaa was surrounded by 13 of her cousins, together with a large crowd of other Yezidis.

"They started kicking and punching her, pulling her hair and forcing her to the ground," said Muslim, who

witnessed the event. "She was shouting for help. Her father tried to get to her but the people stopped him."

In a subsequent interview with a local TV station, the father said he had sent his brother to bring the girl home, but had no idea that a group was waiting to kill her.

A brutal execution lasting two hours followed, most of which was filmed on mobile phones. The footage, which circulated first among Mosul residents and later on the internet, showed the girl on the ground surrounded by a frenzied crowd. Young men beat and kicked her, first throwing small stones and then fetching bigger ones and large concrete bricks.

The girl, bleeding heavily, desperately tried to protect her face with one hand and cover her naked legs with the other after her dress was torn. After a while, she stopped moving. As she lay still, the cheering crowd continued to throw stones at her.

Later, her killers took her body to the outskirts of town, burned it and buried her remains with those of a dog, to show they regarded her as worthless and dirty.

A post mortem showed that Duaa died of a fractured skull and spine.

According to the police chief in Mosul, most of the killers were members of Duaa's extended family - mainly cousins and their friends.

Several local people interviewed subsequently by IWPR reporters expressed support for the stoning, and only a few said it was wrong.

Eyewitness Samir Juma, a teacher, said policemen as well as some Peshmerga soldiers belonging to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, stood and watched the killing without attempting to intervene.

The KDP seeks to control Bashiqā. Although it lies outside the self-governing Kurdish region of northern Iraq, the Mosul area is among the territories which could be transferred to that region in a referendum due later this year.

Police in Mosul say four people have been arrested in connection with the murder and two more are still on the run. All the suspects are relatives of Duaa.

Muhannad has fled the town.

MUSLIM OUTRAGE LEADS TO REPRISALS

The secluded nature of Yezidi society has enabled this small community to remain neutral in the face of growing tensions between Sunni and Shia groups.

But tradition, in this case the taboo on inter-faith marriages that applies among Yezidis and Muslims, created an atmosphere in which violence against transgressors became socially acceptable. In the case of Duaa's murder, it paved the way for reprisals by angry members of the surrounding Muslim community, and potentially a growing sectarian conflict.

Duaa's case is not the first time conversion and marriage prohibitions have led to violence. A few months before she died, a family killed their daughter because she had converted to Islam. They shot her with a single bullet to the head, and little attention was paid to the case.

Two months before Duaa's death, a Yezidi man from Shekan, a village near Bashiqā, eloped with a Muslim girl. The girl was later found beheaded, allegedly by Muslims from her own village, and several Yezidi houses and religious sites were set alight.

These incidents may help explain why the killing of Duaa escalated so swiftly into bloodshed between Muslims and Yezidis.

On April 22, gunmen stopped a bus carrying workers from a textile factory in Mosul. All the Muslims on the bus were released unharmed. So were the Christians - a community who these days are a common target for Sunni extremists. Instead, the attackers took the 23 Yezidi workers to Mosul's Nur neighbourhood and summarily executed them.

A Yezidi baker and three of his workers were killed in Mosul on April 26, and two Yezidi policemen were killed three days later.

In Mosul, Duaa was described by angry Muslims as "our martyred sister" as they vowed retaliation.

At the same time, Yezidis were beaten up and kicked out of their jobs and college dormitories not only in Mosul but also in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah - the three major towns of the Kurdish region.

In Erbil, the owner of the Mergasur Hotel confirmed that up to 50 young men attacked the building and tried to beat up Yezidi workers who were living there. He closed the doors and called the police.

PUK Media, a Kurdish internet news outlet, reported that many Yezidi workers were leaving their jobs and returning to their villages for fear of retaliation. In Erbil, Yezidi students from the Mosul area left for home after some were injured in an attack on their dormitory.

IWPR was told that some Muslim residents of Bashiqa had been threatened and told to leave town.

FAITH OR TRADITION?

One contentious issue which may at first sight seem of little relevance, but which may determine the dynamics of Yezidi-Muslim conflict, is the argument over whether Duaa was stoned to death for converting to Islam or for losing her virginity before marriage.

Sources close to the girl's family claim that she did not convert to Islam, but wanted to run away with Muhannad, and it was this that provoked her cousins to punish her.

A hospital autopsy confirmed she was a virgin.

IWPR was told in Bashiqa that the reason police did not intervene during the killing or take action immediately afterwards was that they believed Duaa was guilty of "immoral behaviour", in other words, of breaking a taboo prescribed by social tradition, rather than changing faith.

Only when police heard that Duaa might have been killed for abandoning Yezidism did they issue arrest warrants.

The supreme religious leader of the Yezidis, Tahsin Saeed Ali, condemned Duaa's murder as "a heinous crime".

He sought to downplay the inter-faith implications of the case, asserting that Duaa was killed because of "old traditions", implying that the motivation was social mores rather than religion.

POLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In the complex political context in Mosul and the surrounding Nineveh region, speculation is rife that Duaa's murder was really a plot by one of Iraq's political factions. Some of the conspiracy theories seem to be coming from opposing factions seeking to capitalise on the incident. These theories abound despite the fact that the suspects are all relatives of the dead woman, rather than outsiders.

Mosul is the administrative centre of Nineveh governorate, but many Kurds aspire to reassign the town and adjoining areas to the self-governing Kurdish region. Under article 140 of the Iraqi constitution of 2005, a vote has to be held by the end of 2007 to decide whether disputed areas with mixed populations - principally Mosul and Kirkuk - should be annexed to the Kurdish region.

If the key "swing vote" between Kurds and Arabs in Kirkuk is held by the Turkoman, the Yezidis around Mosul could play a similar role. The majority of Yezidis live close to the current boundary, and they are believed to be divided on the issue of annexation.

Some Bashiqa residents interviewed by IWPR were convinced that the incident was in some way orchestrated by pro-annexation groups trying to push the Yezidis to side with the Muslim Kurds in a vote to determine the area's future.

"It was fabricated to urge people to take the side of Kurdistan," said Assim Khalil, a Yezidi civil servant, adding that he believed Kurdish politicians wanted to heighten fears of radical Islamists among the community.

A local Kurdish politician, Ghayyath Soorchi of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, countered with the claim that "Baathists and insurgents" were involved in the killing.

Yet more scope for conspiracy theories was created by the circulation of leaflets purporting to be from the "Islamic State of Iraq" and offering protection for any Yezidis who wanted to convert to Islam.

UNEASY PEACE

Meanwhile, a joint force of police and Iraqi army soldiers has been sent to cordon off Bashiqa to ward off reprisal attacks on either side.

Women's groups and other NGOs staged a demonstration outside the Kurdish parliament to protest against the murder of Duaa and to call for changes to civil law and curbs on the influence of religious and tribal leaders.

Other voices calling for moderation were hard to hear above the recriminations, in an area that until recently was best known for peaceful coexistence.

Edo Bashar, a Yezidi and a former civil servant, was outraged by a killing ostensibly committed in the name of his community.

“Such penalties are unacceptable,” he said. “No Yezidi religious text prescribes such a punishment. People in the modern world will view the Yezidis as a racist and unforgiving people lacking in either intelligence or reason. Barbarism is no way to uphold a religion.”

This article was compiled from the reports of a number of IWPR contributors in Iraq.

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