

Mass Brawl Reflects "Culture of Violence"

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Baghdad street brawl over seemingly inoffensive remarks about the Pope highlights growing tendency among residents to resort to violence to settle disputes.

Ali Hussein, an Iraqi student, was one of millions worldwide who watched the televised funeral of Pope John Paul II last week. Moved by the event, Hussein commented to his friend, Ahmed Muhammed, "I sympathise with the Christians about the death of the Pope. I think he really was their spiritual father."

The response may not seem controversial, but in Baghdad, religious tensions run high. Muhammed disagreed with Hussein, and their argument turned into a fight. Muhammed punched Hussein, and soon afterwards, the families of both boys had joined in the brawl. Pistols and Klashnikovs were brought out, and rounds were fired into nearby houses. Three people were injured, and the police were called.

Haqqi Abdul-Kareem, an officer in the al-Sayidiyyah and al-Bayya' police district, confirmed the clash. "We received a call saying that there was a fight and shooting," he said. "We went to the location of the incident, but the quarrel had ended. We made enquiries, and found out that Ahmed Muhammed had hit Ali Hussein, and both families had become involved. The fight became a group event, and guns were used."

Abdul-Kareem says that a culture of violence has led to battles of this sort becoming commonplace in Baghdad. "This is a widespread problem as people are now solving their issues with violence, rather than resorting to the law," he said.

Rates for all crimes have increased in Baghdad since the fall of the previous regime and general lawlessness has led to a dramatic rise in gunshot deaths.

According to the central morgue in Baghdad, there were 470 gun-related deaths in July 2003, compared to ten in July 2002, the year prior to the invasion.

The easy availability of guns coupled with the ineffectiveness of the new Iraqi police appears to be fueling the problem.

Muhammed Hussein, investigations officer at Baghdad Police Station, concedes that residents take the law into their own hands because they have little faith in local and international law enforcers.

"They don't trust the Iraqi security apparatus. The Americans are a force here but they don't interfere in personal affairs since the Iraqis took over the security, and the citizens hate to see the Americans in their areas interfering in their affairs," he said.

Ali Hussein's father, Hussein Mashkur, who owns a shop selling electrical equipment, insisted that his son was not to blame for the brawl.

"My son is an educated person and I don't think the fight was his fault. He deals with people transparently and respects everyone. I have brought him up like that. We are living in a time of tolerance and democracy. I think love should prevail among all people including Muslims, Christians and other sects.

"The election of Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, as Iraqi president, shows that we are human beings who believe in pluralism and respect for others. As for the fight, we, the family, were right to interfere to defend our son. I think force is required in the new Iraq."

Ahmed Muhammed's uncle, Raf'at Abdul-Aziz, who works as a civil servant, said that, in hindsight, he could see that the issue had escalated beyond reason, but said that gun battles of this kind are only to be expected.

"After the fight was over and things had quietened down, we found out that our son was in the wrong and that the situation didn't require such violence," he said. "But nervousness and the tense situation in Iraq cause behaviour like this."

Ala' al-Amiri, a civil servant in the ministry of education, who lived nearby, said he tried to help sort out the dispute, but found himself caught up in it instead. "I was at home, and I woke up to the sound of shooting and shouting. I came out of my house and when I intervened, I was hit on the head with the butt of the rifle, and fell down. I don't even know what the fight was about," he said.

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Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

Focus: Iraq

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mass-brawl-reflects-culture-violence>