

Sunni Militants Issue Religious Edicts in Mosul

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Terrified residents are forced to comply with puritanical Islamic laws as insurgents tighten their grip on the city.

Scattered stones are the only remnants of a famous statue that stood in a Mosul square, in the northeastern part of the city. The sculpture in the al-Zihour area used to show a group of women carrying jars on their shoulders, before insurgents reduced it to dust last month.

The campaign against the public display of what they see as non-Islamic art is part of a wider operation by Sunni insurgents to try to establish an Islamic state in Iraq. As a stronghold of Sunni insurgents, about 400 kilometres north of Baghdad, Mosul is the intended capital of this so-called Islamic Emirate, comprising the provinces of Salahaddin, Anbar, Diyala, Baghdad and parts of Wasit and Babel.

To implement their agenda, the extremists have set up what they describe as a ministry of war that issues leaflets and announces campaigns, such as the one launched in November against public statues, which they claim were symbols of paganism.

Over the past few months, Mosul has been one of the most volatile cities in Iraq. Militants have conducted suicide attacks, planted roadside bombs against Iraqi and US troops and assassinated police officers, translators and journalists. Local authorities have been forced to impose a curfew.

The statues under threat were erected in the city during the 1970s and include those of ancient artists such as the Arab poet Abi Tammam and the singer of religious songs Mullah Othman al-Mosulli.

Brigadier-General Sa'eed Ahmed al-Juburi, a spokesman for Mosul police, told IWPR that "a group of foreign terrorists" had planted bombs under the destroyed statue during the curfew.

He says he's dumbfounded by the destruction. "Do these statues work with police? Were they translators for the Americans or members of the dissolved Ba'ath party?" he asked. "Those terrorists are a bunch of idiots."

Extremists have started to interfere in all aspects of daily life in Mosul. A recent leaflet called upon owners of clothes shops to cover the heads of manikins on display.

Many have complied with the demands, covering the figures with plastic bags. Shopkeeper Mutaz Ahmed, 30, protested, "I don't know where these groups came from. They want to take us back 1400 years. But if you want to stay alive, you have to obey their orders."

Several public baths have been forced to close after extremists banned the use of soap, claiming that it didn't exist under the reign of the Prophet Mohammed 1400 years ago.

The leaflets prescribe in detail how to live, eat and behave, according to ultra-conservative Islamic principles. Some orders seem rather absurd, such as banning restaurants from preparing a mixed salad of

cucumbers and tomatoes because one is male and the other female.

But people are taking them seriously out of fear. Khalaf Khalid, who runs a restaurant, has started to serve tomatoes and cucumbers in separate dishes. "We obey them because they threatened to blow up the restaurant and kill us if we didn't," he said.

"They dictate even the way we eat. Tomorrow, they will even dictate how we sleep with our wives. It's unbearable and the government should do something about Mosul."

Even the city's Christian minority is not spared the Islamists edicts, with women compelled to wear long Islamic dresses and headscarves.

Christian lawyer Elizabeth Ramon, 30, recalls how Islamists stopped a relative of hers and poured burning acid on her skirt. They pulled her by her hair and threatened to behead her next time they caught her without a long skirt.

"It is going from bad to worse," said Ramon. "All my relatives have left Iraq, and we will join them before we lose our lives at the hands of these extremists."

Speaking from his prison cell, Mohammed Taha, one of 68 militants arrested in October for an attempt to overthrow the local authorities, told IWPR that the main aims of his group was ending the US occupation; bringing down the current government; and implementing Sharia law.

Azhar Abdul-Hamid, assistant professor of education at Mosul University, believes that the extremists are largely poorly educated, ignorant people who don't understand Islam or the Koran.

"They never read a book and use Islam to denounce good Muslim people, " said Abdul-Hamid.

In a city seemingly ruled by extremists, the University of Mosul has emerged as a rare enclave of freedom. There, female and male students talk freely to each other, and no violence or threatening behaviour has been reported.

Mayada Akram, a student at the College of Economics and Administration, calls the extremists "stone-headed Islamists" who want women to wear the hijab, stay at home and raise children. "We are going backward hundreds of steps a day."

For Salim Abdul-Baqi, a social researcher at a women's centre in Mosul, the extremists "believe in the Islam of an era when people were living in caves" and cannot cope with modern life. He accuses them of double standards, "Why do they drive new cars instead of riding camels used [at the time of the Prophet Mohammad]?"

Khalid Ahmed, a police officer investigating the militants' actions, says that they intend to blow up the famous Al-Hadba minaret, one of Mosul's ancient landmarks. On a recent visit to Mosul, the Iraqi deputy prime minister Salam al-Zawbai warned them not to touch the landmark. He promised residents that the

government would use “an iron fist” against those who tried to destabilise Iraq.

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