

Iraq: Evidence of war crimes by government-backed Shi'a militias

Amnesty International

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Shi'a militias, supported and armed by the government of Iraq, have abducted and killed scores of Sunni civilians in recent months and enjoy total impunity for these war crimes, said Amnesty International in a new briefing published today.

Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq provides harrowing details of sectarian attacks carried out by increasingly powerful Shi'a militias in Baghdad, Samarra and Kirkuk, apparently in revenge for attacks by the armed group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS). Scores of unidentified bodies have been discovered across the country handcuffed and with gunshot wounds to the head, indicating a pattern of deliberate execution-style killings.

“By granting its blessing to militias who routinely commit such abhorrent abuses, the Iraqi government is sanctioning war crimes and fuelling a dangerous cycle of sectarian violence that is tearing the country apart. Iraqi government support for militia rule must end now,” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Response Adviser.

The fate of many of those abducted by Shi'a militias weeks and months ago remains unknown. Some captives were killed even after their families had paid ransoms of \$80,000 and more to secure their release.

Salem, a 40-year-old businessman and father of nine from Baghdad was abducted in July. Two weeks after his family had paid the kidnappers a \$60,000 ransom, his body was found in Baghdad’s morgue; with his head crushed and his hands still cuffed together.

The growing power of Shi'a militias has contributed to an overall deterioration in security and an atmosphere of lawlessness. The relative of one victim from Kirkuk told Amnesty International:

“I have lost one son and don’t want to lose any more. Nothing can bring him back and I can’t put my other children at risk. Who knows who will be next? There is no rule of law, no protection.”

Among the Shi'a militias believed to be behind the string of abductions and killings are: 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Brigades, the Mahdi Army, and Kata'ib Hizbullah.

These militias have further risen in power and prominence since June, after the Iraqi army retreated, ceding nearly a third of the country to IS fighters. Militia members, numbering tens of thousands, wear military uniforms, but they operate outside any legal framework and without any official oversight.

“By failing to hold militias accountable for war crimes and other gross human rights abuses the Iraqi authorities have effectively granted them free rein to go on the rampage against Sunnis. The new Iraqi government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi must act now to rein in the militias and establish the rule of law,” said Donatella Rovera.

“Shi'a militias are ruthlessly targeting Sunni civilians on a sectarian basis under the guise of fighting terrorism, in an apparent bid to punish Sunnis for the rise of the IS and for its heinous crimes.”

At a checkpoint north of Baghdad, for instance, Amnesty International heard a member of the 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia say: “If we catch ‘those dogs’ [Sunnis] coming down from the Tikrit area we execute them.... They come to Baghdad to commit terrorist crimes, so we have to stop them.”

Meanwhile, Iraqi government forces also continue to perpetrate serious human rights violations. Amnesty International uncovered evidence of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, as well as deaths in custody of Sunni men detained under the 2005 anti-terrorism law.

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