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Iraq Blames the Islamic State's Victims

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As the Mosul operation approached, the Iraqi security forces were concerned not only with the Islamic State fighters they would face on the battlefield, but the people trying to escape the extremist group's grasp. The Nineveh Operations Command, the military body leading the operation, informed aid workers that the plan was to screen everyone fleeing areas under the jihadi group's control to determine if any were Islamic State "infiltrators" who needed to be detained. Prior to the battle, aid workers asked what criteria these screeners would be using. The military wasn't forthcoming at the time — and things have only gotten more worrisome since the operation has gotten underway.

Last week, I interviewed 13 men and women fleeing Islamic State-held territory, all of whom said that they were searched at checkpoints manned by the Iraqi military and Kurdistan Regional Government's Peshmerga, where their identity cards were taken and run through a computer. The interviews and subsequent conversations provide evidence that some citizens who have gone through these screenings have been detained arbitrarily and mistreated, or worse.

Thousands of men and boys have [already been detained](#) indefinitely by Iraqi security forces under vague allegations of being affiliated with the Islamic State. I have met with families of a small number of men being held; none of them had heard from their loved ones who, in most cases, had no idea where they were being held.

Some of those detained at these checkpoints seem to have died in custody. A journalist called me two days ago from the front lines and [repeated a conversation](#) she had with a soldier at an Iraqi military checkpoint. He told her he was beating anyone coming through the checkpoint whom he suspected of being affiliated with the Islamic State to get them to confess.

He proudly told her that over the last few days he had executed two men right on the spot after he concluded that they were indeed Islamic State fighters. This amounts to a clear war crime.

I spoke, a few days ago, to people who had successfully made it through Kurdish Peshmerga checkpoints. The fleeing residents with whom I spoke said that after their initial checkpoint screenings, all men and boys age 15 and over were separated from their families and underwent a second round of investigations at a screening center run by Kurdish security forces. A mother told us that after 18 days inside the screening center, her son disappeared and she has no idea where he is.

Aid workers with access to the screening centers told me that military and security forces have between five and seven lists of names of suspects, submitted by various ethnic and religious communities, including Yazidis, and that the security forces are screening the people against these lists.

This rings true with what Yazidi leaders, the minority community brutally attacked by the Islamic State, told me. In a meeting we held last month on Sinjar Mountain, the home of the Yazidi community in northwestern Iraq, one said their community had pulled together a list of all the Arabs "who betrayed us to ISIS." These were often neighbors living in shared villages for decades, who, the Yazidis said, told Islamic State fighters when they arrived which families were Yazidi. Other groups have apparently provided similar lists.

While I can fully understand the desire to bring Islamic State fighters to justice, this system is extremely dangerous. It could allow for a system of revenge — one not based on actual evidence of individuals committing a crime — to fester. It is not inconceivable that neighbors who did not get along for years, or who eyed each other's land, might use the lists to settle old scores. While a neighbor's hearsay is enough to trigger investigations into someone, it is much more dangerous in the current context: One's name on a list can mean disappearing or being executed on the spot, before any investigation occurs.

In addition, it is important to remember that Islamic State recruitment has benefited from years of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances of the Sunni Arab population by pro-government forces. The expansion of these policies will fuel the same extremist group that Iraqi forces are now trying to fight.

Iraqi authorities need to prioritize respect for the rule of law as part of their war against the Islamic State. Their record so far provides plenty of reason for concern. The prosecution of alleged Islamic State members accused of participating in the massacre of hundreds of army recruits near Tikrit in 2014 ended in the execution of 36 men after [seriously flawed trials](#).

In the operation to retake Fallujah in May, meanwhile, members of the Popular Mobilization Forces, the paramilitary coalition loyal to the Iraqi government, [beat men](#) who had been taken into custody; tortured, summarily executed, and forcibly disappeared over 600 [civilians](#); and mutilated corpses. In at least one instance, Iraqi Federal Police officers took part in these crimes. They also separated hundreds of men from their families under the guise of security screenings — apparently, simply because they were all members of a certain tribe — then took them away. There has been no news about their fate.

Those invested in eliminating the Islamic State should also be interested in bringing an end to the abuses that have fueled the extremist group's recruitment efforts. They should call on the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraqi authorities to immediately make public the number of people detained at checkpoints or screening centers, the legal grounds for their detention, and the number of people subsequently charged and convicted.

Even after Mosul is liberated from the Islamic State, Iraq will face the difficult task of building a new political order which prevents the extremist group from rising from the ashes. That process should begin now — by ensuring no terrorism suspects are ill-treated, tortured, or summarily

executed, and that all detainees are brought quickly before a judge to assess the legal and factual basis for their detention. This small step will go a long way in ensuring that the Mosul operation does not become yet another example of mass abuse that Islamic State supporters can use to rally support.

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