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A prominent group within the [Iraqi](#) government-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), detained and beat shepherds, including a boy, from a village near Mosul on November 3, 2016, on suspicion of Islamic State (also known as ISIS) affiliation, Human Rights Watch said today.

Victims and witnesses said that members of the League of the Righteous (*Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*), detained 10 shepherds and hit at least five of them, in some cases repeatedly, including the boy. The shepherds, who had fled the village of Aadaya, were stopped and held in the village of Ghazeel for several hours. The fighters released them but stole about 300 sheep, the village's entire flock.

"Civilians fleeing ISIS are already risking their lives to get to safety," said [Lama Fakihi](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Government forces should be doing all they can to protect and assist them, not abuse and rob them."

Human Rights Watch visited a camp for displaced people south of Mosul, on November 15, and interviewed 10 residents of Aadaya, 35 kilometers southwest of Mosul, who fled their homes along with the entire population of about 500 people, on the morning of November 3, after an airstrike damaged a few buildings. The area is still under ISIS control, but ISIS fighters did not prevent the villagers from leaving.

The residents said that the whole population walked 10 kilometers south before reaching fighters who identified themselves as al-Tufuf Bridge, a small force within the PMF located in al-Tassa village. Villagers said the forces searched the group and checked their identity cards, then loaded them onto cars, and drove them south toward the Jadah camp for internally displaced people. The group of 10 shepherds continued on foot with the 300 sheep from the village.

When the villagers in the cars reached [Ghazeel](#), seven kilometers further south, at about 2 p.m., they came across a group of League of the Righteous fighters, who identified themselves and had their forces' logo displayed on flags and badges. Five men from the group told Human Rights Watch they heard the fighters accusing the group of being ISIS-affiliated and saying they would

detain or kill them. An al-Tufuf Brigade commander intervened and ordered the League of the Righteous fighters to let the villagers through, which they did, the villagers said. The cars arrived at Jadah camp, 65 kilometers south of Mosul, at about 4 p.m., the villagers said.

Three men and two boys, aged 14 and 15, said they were among the 10 shepherds who had remained with the sheep. They said they arrived at Ghazeel on foot at about 4 p.m., where six League of the Righteous fighters surrounded them and forced them into the yard of a nearby abandoned house. Two guards questioned them one at a time inside the house. The shepherds said the guards asked them whether they were ISIS-affiliated and whether they knew of other ISIS affiliates. The 15-year-old said that during questioning, one of the fighters slapped him on the back of the head. Another man, age 40, said they slapped his cheek once during the questioning. The others said they were not beaten during this initial questioning.

The two guards then moved five of the detained men to a second nearby house, and kept the other five, including the two boys, in the yard of the first home with the sheep. The guards and four other fighters then questioned the men taken to the second house, bringing them out for questioning one by one. One, age 20, said that he was the first taken outside. For about 15 minutes the fighters accused him of being ISIS and asked him the same questions about ISIS affiliation again as they hit him with their hands, kicked him to the floor, and shot a bullet over his head.

Another, age 22, said he was the last to be taken out for questioning. As six fighters questioned and accused him for about an hour, he said, they pushed him to the ground, then beat his feet with a stick. Then they stood him up, bound his hands behind his back and continued to beat his legs and feet with a stick, he said. He said he felt at least three electric shocks to his hands. His eyes filled with tears as he said that the fighters also "did things to my body." He did not want to elaborate.

After the beating he could no longer walk and so the fighters got three of the other villagers to carry him to a truck, where they covered his leg with a blanket. The fighters ordered the other men and the boys into the truck and drove them to Jadah camp. The fighters kept the sheep, and the men were afraid to ask why, or how to get them back. The theft of the entire flock left the villagers with nothing.

When they got to the camp around 8 p.m., the 22-year-old said, he was rushed into an ambulance and from there to a clinic at the camp, where doctors told him his left foot was broken. Human Rights Watch saw his cast. Doctors asked him how he broke his foot but he would not tell them, fearing retribution, he said.

The shepherds Human Rights Watch interviewed said that another one of the men taken to the second house, who Human Rights Watch was not able to interview, appeared to be in pain in the car and said fighters had beaten his legs. He was also taken away in an ambulance. They said that the other two men in the group taken to the second house did not show any signs of abuse.

All security forces and armed groups should abide by international law and respect the absolute ban against torture and ill-treatment, Human Rights Watch said. The ban against torture and ill-treatment is one of the most fundamental prohibitions in international human rights law. No exceptional circumstances can justify torture. Iraq is a party to key international treaties that ban torture under all circumstances, even during recognized states of emergency, and require investigation and prosecution of those responsible. Torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity are war crimes.

Parties to an armed conflict are prohibited from pillaging, or forcibly taking private property belonging to civilians in an area it has taken over from an adversary, for their personal use, and it constitutes a war crime.

Iraqi authorities should investigate all suspected crimes, including pillaging, [torture](#), [murder](#), and other abuses, committed by members of any side in the conflict, in a speedy, transparent, and effective manner, up to the highest levels of responsibility. When evidence of criminal responsibility emerges, prosecutions should follow. Those conducting such criminal investigations and making decisions about prosecutions should be independent of those being investigated, outside any military chain of command and free from political interference in their decisions. The authorities should ensure the safety of all witnesses.

"Civilians fleeing ISIS are abandoning almost all they have to escape," *Fakih* said. "It is inexcusable that fighters are robbing them of the few assets they are able to leave with."

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