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Iraq: Investigate Abuses in Hawija Operation

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[Iraqi](#) villagers have accused units within the Iraqi government's armed forces of abuses in the ongoing battle to take the city of Hawija, Human Rights Watch said today. Units of the Popular Mobilization Forces (known as the PMF or Hashd al-Sha'abi) affiliated with the Badr Organization detained and beat male villagers in a nearby village and took away four men without telling the men's families where they were being taken or why, villagers told Human Rights Watch.

Because of the PMF history of gross abuses, including war crimes, in [previous operations](#), before the battle for the northern city of Mosul began in October 2016, United Nations senior officials and diplomats said that Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had made a commitment to the international community to keep PMF units out of Mosul, and away from the screening process. However, he has permitted the PMF to play a more prominent role not only in the fighting but also in [screening](#) and [detaining](#) people during military operations. The Iraqi government should uphold its commitment not to allow PMF or any other units with an abusive track record, including forces affiliated with the Badr Organization, to participate in screening or detaining anyone, Human Rights Watch said.

"Iraqi military forces are taking the law into their own hands, playing judge, jury, and executioner with captive ISIS suspects," said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "If Iraq wants to distinguish itself as a government run by the rule of law, it needs to rein in these abusive units."

On September 21, various Iraqi forces [began an operation to retake Hawija](#), 130 kilometers southeast of Mosul, and neighboring villages. Human Rights Watch visited a camp for displaced people south of Mosul on September 23, and separately interviewed five residents - three men and two women - from Sayhat Othman, a village 85 kilometers south of Mosul and 42 kilometers northwest of Hawija. The residents said that a mix of uniformed Badr Organization PMF forces and Federal Police officers, under the Interior Ministry, arrived in their village in about 20 military vehicles on September 21 at about 9 a.m.

The villagers emerged from their houses waving white flags, and an officer called on those affiliated with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) to come forward, villagers said. They said that four men surrendered, and the fighters took them out of the village. The father of one of the four told Human Rights Watch he then heard gunshots, while the other four people interviewed said they heard rumors that the men were shot and killed. The families have had no information about the men.

The Iraqi forces then separated the women from the remaining 25 men, they said. The women were confined in one of the houses. The Iraqi forces handcuffed and blindfolded the men, including the interviewees, put them in the military vehicles, and drove them a short distance to a building where they held them in a room for a day. The men interviewed said the fighters used their gun butts to beat the men when they arrived, and during their time there, they brought them food once and a small amount of water but did not let them use a bathroom.

They said the officers questioned the men as a group, asking who was affiliated with ISIS. The men interviewed remained handcuffed and blindfolded throughout so did not see where they were being held, they said. They showed researchers blisters and wounds around their wrists caused by the handcuffs, but were afraid to show the marks they said were on their backs because of nearby security forces in the camp. On the evening of September 22, the fighters put all the men on Transport Ministry buses used to transport displaced people and took them to the camp.

The women interviewed said the fighters took them and their children from the house they were being confined in to the local schoolhouse. The fighters held and questioned the women there for two hours about the identity of ISIS-affiliated villagers, and then loaded them on buses and took them to the same camp.

At about 9:30 a.m. on September 23, Iraqi Security Forces came to the camp and took 15 of the men from their village away again, without telling them or their families where they were taking them, the villagers said. The men had not returned by the time researchers left the camp. The families of the four men who had surrendered said they were afraid to ask or to notify any staff at the camp about their fate, fearing that the PMF would come back and "kill us," one said. They said that one of the men who surrendered is an amputee in a wheelchair, with weak eyesight, who worked in the local mosque under ISIS and cooperated with the group while they were in control of the area.

The PMF have no legal authority to detain anyone in Iraq and the units [deny screening or detaining anyone](#). Representatives have told Human Rights Watch that they hand over captured ISIS suspects to state security forces whose job it is to screen possible suspects. However, Human Rights Watch has documented that PMF groups, including units affiliated with the Badr Organization, have [screened](#), [detained](#), and [tortured](#) people during the military [operations](#).

Al-Abadi should rein in units carrying out such activities. Coalition partners supporting Iraqi forces in the battle against ISIS should report any PMF screenings or detention that their forces witness and urge Baghdad to end the practice.

Iraqi authorities should investigate all suspected crimes, including [torture](#), [extrajudicial killings](#), enforced disappearances, 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.

"Right now, the Iraqi government's attitude seems to be 'all hands on deck' for these last battles against ISIS," Whitson said. "While Iraqi forces do need all the help they can get, the government should not allow abusive forces to use this opportunity for even more abuse."

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