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Iraq: Scores of Men Imprisoned in Schoolhouse

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Iraqi government-allied troops arbitrarily detained at least 100 men in late April 2017, in some cases torturing them during interrogations, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch interviewed three men from al-Hadar, a village 90 kilometers southwest of west Mosul, who were detained by the Popular Mobilization Forces (known as the PMF or Hashd al-Sha'abi) and two local officials who had knowledge of the detention operations in the area. The men said the fighters detained them as they fled their homes because of the fighting, and held them for up to 15 days in a school building and in one case a home in an area solely under PMF control. Their captors interrogated them about possible Islamic State (also known as ISIS) links, and in two cases beat them with thick metal cables, before releasing them and a small number of other detainees. Other detainees told them they had also been beaten during interrogations.

"Given the previous track records of PMF abuse in the area of screening and detaining local men, Baghdad should treat these findings with the gravest concern," said Lama Fakih, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Authorities should do all in their power to ensure that families fleeing the fighting around Mosul are able to get to safety, not tortured in secret facilities."

Human Rights Watch heard similar accounts from other men fleeing the fighting earlier in 2017 and raised the issue with the government, but the detentions and abuse seem to have continued. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi should issue a decree banning screening and detention by the PMF and hold those who have committed abuses accountable.

One man, "Hassan," said that his family and a group of others fled al-Hadar, which was under ISIS control, on April 25, for a camp for displaced people run by the PMF. After two days there, he and 10 of his relatives were then taken to a building they said was a school and held there in a room, along with about 40 others from their village. His family group was interrogated for a week, then released.

Hassan and the other two men interviewed said that they were able to determine that they were being held in a school by speaking to fellow prisoners and guards, and by lifting their blindfolds. A government official from Tal Abta told Human Rights Watch that the PMF held the men in the Tal Abta Janubia primary school and provided the GPS coordinates. The official said that his office had documented the names of 100 men from the area who the PMF had detained as they fled, over the same period, based on calls from their families.

Ali Al-Ahmadi, director of al-Hadar district, told local media outlets on May 1, that the PMF had detained at least 160 people upon their arrival at camps for people displaced by the fighting. The same reports said that the governor of Mosul was calling for a high-level emergency session to discuss these detentions.

Earlier in the Mosul operation, Human Rights Watch documented cases of the PMF arbitrarily detaining, torturing, and executing civilians. Following a Human Rights Watch report, the PMF Commission issued a statement in early February denying that its forces had screened or detained anyone. The statement said the PMF hands over captured ISIS suspects to state security forces who have a mandate to screen suspects.

But in a meeting on February 6, a PMF Commission representative told Human Rights Watch that in limited circumstances they do detain people captured on the battlefield for at least short periods before transferring them to Iraqi authorities with a detention mandate. One man the PMF had detained for eight days and an aid worker confirmed that.

Iraqi authorities should only allow those with the requisite legal authority to screen people. The authorities should ensure that anyone detained is held in a recognized detention center accessible to independent monitors, and granted their due process rights under international and Iraqi law. All detention should be based on clear domestic law, and every detainee should be brought promptly before a judge to review the legality of their detention. Iraqi law requires authorities to take detainees before an investigative judge within 48 hours.

Human Rights Watch has also documented that Iraqi forces, including PMF forces, have used schools for security or military purposes such as for screening and as detention centers. Such use of schools can delay the re-opening of the schools to teach and provide other services to children, and damage classrooms and equipment. Iraqi forces should avoid using schools except as a last resort, when no other facilities are available.

The United Nations Convention against Torture, which Iraq ratified in 2011, obliges member countries to investigate and prosecute torture and to compensate victims.

"While there may be grounds to detain some people fleeing the fighting who are suspected of criminal acts under ISIS's rule, they have to be given their rights under Iraqi law," Fakih said. "That includes the right not to be ill-treated."

Detainees' Accounts

"Hassan"

"Hassan" said that on April 25, when the village of al-Hadar, where he lived, was still under ISIS control, his family and about 15 others managed to escape in several cars. The convoy spent two nights out in the desert just north of al-Hadar, before unidentified security forces arrived and told the families to go to Jarbua, a PMF-run camp for displaced people, 30 kilometers north of Tal Abta.

After they spent two nights at the camp, Hassan said, at around 9 p.m., a group of fighters with PMF badges rounded him up, along with 10 of his relatives, blindfolded them, then drove them to another location where they were held in a room of a large building. When he was able to, he said, he pulled down his blindfold quickly because his hands were bound in front and saw that he was in a room with about 40 other detainees, all from al-Hadar.

After seven days, guards released him and the other 10 men detained with him without explanation, he said. Throughout his detention, he said, the same guards moved him in and out of the room with the other detainees for interrogation, asking why he had remained living under ISIS, whether he had joined ISIS, and for names of ISIS fighters. Hassan said he was blindfolded throughout his captivity but said that he was held and interrogated by fighters with southern accents whom he thought were from the PMF.

"Ahmed"

"Ahmed" said that on the morning of April 26, as Iraqi forces began an operation to retake al-Hadar, more than 60 other families fled the area in cars. Six were families from al-Hadar and the rest were families previously displaced by the fighting, mostly from villages in Tal Abta district, just to the north, he said. When they were about six kilometers north of the village, they reached a base of a large number of fighters carrying flags identifying them as belonging to the PMF unit Ali al-Akbar Brigade (Liwa Ali al-Akbar), with fighters from southern Iraq.

The fighters made them wait for several hours, then checked the men's identity cards. By then it was evening, and the fighters told them it was too late to take them to the nearest camp, which they said was at least 40 kilometers away. They told the families to stay in their cars or erect tents, he said.

At midnight, Ahmed said, he was standing with five of his relatives, including his brother, by their cars when three Ali al-Akbar fighters with PMF badges approached them and said they needed the men to come with them so they could interview them about their area. Ahmed said that the PMF fighters blindfolded him and his relatives, drove them for about five minutes, and then held them in a school, where the fighters detained them for 10 days. His hands were bound in front, so he was able to slip off the blindfold on various occasions. Ali said he saw guards bringing in about 90 men, who told him they were from al-Hadar.

For four days, Ahmed said, guards with southern accents whom he thought were PMF interrogated him blindfolded in a separate room once each day, asking why he had joined Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and beating him for about 10 minutes each time with thick metal cables. Ahmed said that twice the guards held a plastic bag over his head until he lost consciousness. He said he insisted he had not joined any extremist group. After four days of abuse, he asked the 40 or so men held in a room with him if they had confessed and all said they had, to stop the abuse, Ahmed said. He said all his relatives told him the guards also beat them with thick metal cables.

The next morning, Ahmed said, he confessed to being affiliated with ISIS. Later that afternoon, he was again brought into a separate room and a man who sounded different from his interrogators asked if his confession was true, and he admitted it had not been.

While the PMF held them, he and the other two detainees said they were only given one cup of water and limited food every day. The guards moved Ahmed among three rooms. In two he estimates there were a total of another 40 detainees, with one room full of men he did not recognize as from al-Hadar, and about 50 from al-Hadar in the other. After the other man questioned him, Ahmed said, guards loaded him and 11 other men, including his brother and other relatives into cars and drove them to a house about two hours away, where they were held in the same room and interrogated separately for another two days. At that point, guards with the same southern accents as the Ali al-Akbar fighters brought in 20 to 30 men from al-Hadar whom Ahmed recognized as also having been held at the school. One said that PMF fighters had bused all 90 to the house together.

That night, guards with southern accents took him and 10 of the other men, including four of his relatives, to al-Hadar village and let them go. They eventually made their way to displaced camps in Jadah, 54 kilometers northwest, where they rejoined their families. As of May 17, he said, his brother was still in detention.

An official from the area working on the detainees' release told Human Rights Watch that the house the PMF detained the men in was referred to as Yaseen's house.

"Kareem"

"Kareem" said he fled al-Hadhra on April 26, with about 10 families to a nearby village. The next day, they drove 40 kilometers to a PMF checkpoint. Four PMF fighters with badges checked the men's identity cards. The fighters selected him and seven other men, blindfolded them, and bound their hands, then drove them to a nearby large building. Kareem said the building held many other prisoners but he was unable to count because he was afraid he would be caught if he lifted his blindfold.

He said he was held for 15 days and that guards interrogated him daily about ISIS affiliation and beat him with thick metal cables. An older man from his village held with him died from an illness that predated his detention. Kareem said he did not want to speak about what the guards had done to him, but he had visible bruising and scarring around his wrists and up his right arm when he spoke to Human Rights Watch, two days after he was released.

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