



Iraq: Pro-Government Militias' Trail of Death

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 31 July 2014

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Pro-Government Militias' Trail of Death*, 31 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53df9ad54.html> [accessed 5 August 2014]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Government-backed militias have been kidnapping and killing Sunni civilians throughout Iraq's Baghdad, Diyala, and Hilla provinces over the past five months. The killings and abductions mark a serious escalation in sectarian violence at a time when the armed conflict between government forces and Sunni insurgents is intensifying.

Human Rights Watch documented the killings of 61 Sunni men between June 1 and July 9, 2014, and the killing of at least 48 Sunni men in March and April in villages and towns around Baghdad, an area known as the "Baghdad Belt." Witnesses and medical and government sources said that militias were responsible in each case. In many cases, witnesses identified the militia as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous), commonly referred to as Asa'ib.

"The government seems to think that if people blame militias for killings it can wash its hands of the matter," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa director. "In fact, the government needs to rein in these militias and call a halt to killing people just because of their sect."

As the government has lost control over large portions of the country in the wake of an offensive by the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS, now renamed the Islamic State) and allied Sunni insurgents, Prime Minister al-Maliki has been forming new security forces made up of militias and is taking little or no action as they kill people, Human Rights Watch found. The government should hold those responsible for these killings to account.

In March, media reports said that Prime Minister al-Maliki had met with senior security advisers and told them that he would form a new security force consisting of three militias to police Baghdad - Asa'ib, Kita'ib Hezbollah, and the Badr Brigades, which is run by Transport Minister Hadi al-Ameri. A government official who provides national security advice to the prime minister's office told Human Rights Watch in June that while Asa'ib fighters "take orders" from the militia's military leader, Qais al-Khalazy, "ultimately they're loyal to Maliki, who gives Qais orders."

In four of the killings documented by Human Rights Watch in Baghdad, in June and July, witnesses said that men in civilian clothing driving military vehicles without license plates kidnapped the victims, who were all Sunni males ranging in age from their early 20s to late 50s, from the Sha'ab, Baya'a, Za'afaraniyya, and Ghazaliyya neighborhoods. In each instance, their bodies were found a few hours or days later with bullet wounds to their heads. In another instance in June, two men in civilian clothing, with their faces loosely covered, drove up to a well-known café in the Sha'ab neighborhood and shot the two Sunni owners in the head in front of café customers and in view of a military checkpoint 10 meters away, a witness told Human Rights Watch.

Baghdad's forensic medical authority confirmed three other killings in Baghdad that Human Rights Watch had documented through interviews with witnesses and relatives of the dead men. Three forensic doctors told Human Rights Watch they believed militias carried out the three killings, based on what they said was a similar pattern of killing and their observations of militia activity in Baghdad.

Witnesses Human Rights Watch interviewed said that Asa'ib conducts illegal "arrests" in numerous areas in Baghdad and Diyala provinces. One man described to Human Rights Watch how Asa'ib fighters kidnapped him from a mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhood in west Baghdad. He said had he not convinced his kidnappers he was Shia "that would have been the end of me." When they released him, they identified themselves to him as members of Asa'ib. The sister, wife, and father of another kidnapped man, a Sunni, described how they witnessed militiamen take the man from his shop in a mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhood, on May 28. They said he has been missing ever since.

Sectarian killings have markedly increased since ISIS took over Mosul on June 10. "Sunnis are a minority in Baghdad, but they're the majority in our morgue," a doctor working in the Health Ministry told Human Rights Watch. He and three other doctors said the number of Sunnis in the morgue who died violent deaths had increased significantly since June 10.

In nearly all the cases Human Rights Watch documented, witnesses described men who dressed similarly and used the same tactics. Without exception, everyone Human Rights Watch interviewed said they believed militias, particularly Asa'ib, were responsible and that they "control" security forces in areas of Baghdad and Diyala provinces. Two government officials with knowledge of security forces separately told Human Rights Watch that the government pays militiamen who now control security forces in many areas throughout Iraq.

A resident of Baghdad's Dora neighborhood told Human Rights Watch that Abdullah Zilal al-Jibbouri, a student in his final year of high school, was kidnapped and killed on June 17. Abdullah's family told the resident that the last they knew of him he had been driving from Dora to the majority-Shia neighborhood of Baya'a to take his final exams.

A forensic doctor told Human Rights Watch that al-Jibbouri's body arrived in the morgue on June 18. Residents in Hay al-Amal, a majority-Shia neighborhood next to Baya'a, had found his body, the doctor said. He died of a single gunshot wound to the head. "We don't know who killed him," the doctor said, "We can't tell from the kind of bullet because many people have the same weapons. But there is a heavy Asa'ib presence in street 60 and in the entrance to Abu Sweer in Dora. Everyone knows who is doing this." The Dora resident told Human Rights Watch his area is "full of Asa'ib" and that they frequently "drive by in pickup trucks waving their guns around to intimidate [Sunnis]."

Government officials and Iraqi media have reported mass executions of Sunnis in Hilla, in Babel province, and Muqdadiyya, in Diyala province. On July 9, police found the bodies of 53 men, all bound and shot in the back of the head, north of Hilla. A government source and the brother of one of those killed told Human Rights Watch that an Asa'ib message claiming responsibility was

found next to the bodies when police found them. The government source and the brother of one of the victims said that Asa'ib kidnapped the men on about June 11, killed them, and then dumped their bodies in a ditch in north of Hilla approximately one week before they were found.

Murder is a crime against humanity when committed in a widespread or systematic manner as part of a policy of either a government or organized group to commit the crime. Crimes against humanity are international crimes, meaning that those who can be held accountable include: those who commit the crime; those who order it, assist, or are otherwise complicit; and military and civilian commanders who knew or should have known their subordinates were committing the crimes and fail to take reasonable measures to prevent them.

Given the risk that military assistance provided to the Iraqi government may be used to support the militias, governments that are helping Iraq militarily should halt further such aid until the Iraqi government ends support for militias like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kita'ib Hezbollah, and the Badr Brigades, and takes steps to hold their leaders and members accountable, Human Rights Watch said.

"These reports of militia murders, often in plain view of security forces, indicate a pattern of sectarian killing that appears to be government-sanctioned," Stork said. "The takeover of state security by militias is a sure sign that the remnants of the rule of law in Iraq are falling apart."

Rise of Militias as Security Forces Collapse

In April 2014, Reuters reported that in order to combat the growing Sunni insurgency in Iraq, Prime Minister al-Maliki planned to deploy militias in a new security force, "Sons of Iraq," consisting of the Shia militias Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Brigades, and Kita'ib Hezbollah.

Of these, Asa'ib is the strongest, according to a government source. Al-Maliki has incorporated Asa'ib fighters into both army and police forces, he said.

Human Rights Watch spoke with an official in the Tourism Ministry who said he has "many friends" who are Asa'ib fighters. He said that they sometimes tell him of their "kills" and that their power has grown significantly in recent months, particularly since June 10, when ISIS fighters took over Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city.

"Asa'ib is not just kidnapping people in Ma'alif, Ameriyya, Ghazaliyya, Kahdraa', Dora, and Saidiyya," said the man, referring to majority-Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad. "A good friend, a member of Asa'ib in Diyala, told me that when they're in the company of military and the police, they [Asa'ib] give the orders. Al-Maliki gives them jurisdiction over the security forces to do whatever they want."

"Before they were just around, now they are high-ranking officers in the military," he said. "They really don't care about hiding dead bodies anymore because they're authorized to kill. So they'll shoot people and just leave them where they lay."

He said that one militia member told him that on July 7 he had killed a Sunni from Radwaniyya, an area consisting mostly of farmland adjacent to Abu Ghraib, because they believed him to be a terrorist. "My friend said they go after specific targets," he said:

In Zeidan [Diyala province], for example, it's a "hot" zone, so they capture people they suspect are terrorists and torture them. The regular Sunnis, the innocent ones, they let go, he told me. But they kill the ones that confess to be [members of] Da'esh [ISIS] and leave their bodies right there.

The three forensic pathologists told Human Rights Watch they had seen a noticeable increase in violent deaths in Baghdad in the past three months, particularly of Sunnis. "Every day we receive 8-10 [cases of] violent deaths, almost all Sunnis, most of them shot in the head," said one doctor.

"The numbers have only increased since Mosul. They are always shot with pistols and always through-and-throughs [meaning the bullets pass directly through the body], so it's difficult to tell the caliber of bullet or precise weapons used."

These latest reports of government-sponsored militia kidnappings and killings indicate that government-affiliated militias are targeting Sunnis in and around Baghdad and in Diyala province for kidnap and murder, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch conducted research in April that documented how militias, sometimes in tandem with the federal police or army, killed at least 48 men in the "Belt" towns and villages of al-Wardiyya, Jisr al-Diyala, al-Heetawy, Tarmiyya, and Abu Ghraib in March and April. In Buhriz, a town in Diyala, media reports and Human Rights Watch interviews with witnesses indicate that militias, along with security forces, killed at least 30 people in a single day. A Health Ministry doctor told Human Rights Watch in July:

Asa'ib is trying to cleanse [the "Baghdad Belt"] of Sunnis - we are constantly hearing reports of killings in towns in the belt: al-Mada'in, Latifiyya, Yousifiyya, Abu Ghraib. The pattern is always the same: armed men enter areas with only one entrance, with a checkpoint manned by police or army. They drive in, kill people, and drive out, and the security forces never do anything.

The forensic pathologists told Human Rights Watch of numerous other killings they believe militias had carried out. Human Rights Watch was unable to confirm the identities or affiliations of those responsible.

During the week of June 30, they said, the morgue received the bodies of 23 Sunnis from Muqdadiyya, a town south of Baghdad in the "Baghdad Belt" area where there has been considerable sectarian conflict. "It appeared to be a mass execution of tribal sheikhs, because they were all killed at the same time during a meeting," said one doctor. The doctor said the killings matched a pattern of killings in the area that began in March. "Many times the bodies don't come here, because their families are too scared," he said. "But when they do, it's always the same - groups of Sunni men shot in the head."

On June 22, the morgue received the bodies of three Sunni men from Hay al-'Amal, a butcher, his son, and an engineer, the forensic doctors said. "They were tortured," said one doctor, "and there were hematomas all over their bodies. The butcher's family told me that the militia that took them asked them for ransom and the family paid it, but they shot them anyway."

Forensic doctors said that many of the bodies of Sunnis shot to death that arrive in the morgue come from Saidiyya, Dora, Ghazaliyya, Shoa'la, Washash, and Mansour, areas throughout Baghdad that are "under the control of Asa'ib." "The bodies are shot the same way, found the same way," the doctors said. "The militias have become so strong they don't care about hiding their executions anymore. Many of the bodies stay here for weeks because their families are too scared to come pick them up, since Asa'ib watches this neighborhood."

Killings in Mixed Sunni-Shia Areas of Baghdad

In late June, Human Rights Watch interviewed the family of a Sunni man kidnapped on May 28 by men in civilian clothes eight hours after police released him from official custody. The man's sister and wife said they witnessed his arrest and subsequent kidnapping. His sister said:

My brother owned the shop next door.... [T]wo weeks before the [April 30 parliamentary] elections, police came at night and took him. They didn't say why. They kept him in the fourth battalion police station for 13 days without charge. Of course, they beat and tortured him, he told us when they released him. He said they used a Taser to put electricity on his arms and beat him in his face - the usual. They were asking him about his neighbors and friends, they didn't accuse him of any crime.

He was home for about eight hours when six or seven men in civilian cars without license plates pulled up in front of his shop. They wore dark civilian clothes and they covered their faces. Two of the men came into our house, carrying weapons. They didn't say very much, just searched the house and said, "Where is [name omitted]?" Four men went into the shop, found him, and took him. Of course, they were Asa'ib - how else could men with weapons and no license plates get past the checkpoint?

The man's sister told Human Rights Watch that they had "searched all over" for him, but were no longer sure he was alive:

We heard he was back in the fourth battalion police station, but when we went there they said he had been transferred to Kadhimiyya [a prison complex in Baghdad]. When we went to Kadhimiyya they told us he's been moved to General Security. When we went to General Security they told us he was in Kadhimiyya. Who knows?

The family said that shortly before the parliamentary elections at the end of April the militia began "taking so many people, all Sunnis, from this neighborhood." The kidnapped man's wife and sister said they knew three other people militias had abducted after elections. One was in his early 20s, in his fourth year of college. The other two were around 50, close to their relative's age. "It's becoming common," they said, "and always the same story. Six or seven men with their faces covered came in the evening and took them from their houses."

The man's sister said:

Now everyone is scared. I know of six or seven people who have left the country because they say they are scared Asa'ib will take them. I want to leave, but I can't because I have to take care of my father. Do you see how he's sitting now, facing the door? He sits there every day, all day, looking out the front door, waiting for [my brother] to come back home.

Another neighborhood resident, a government employee, said a militia runs an informal detention center in the neighborhood:

Militias are taking people, but obviously they're doing it with the blessing of the security forces. There is only one exit and one entrance to this neighborhood and they are both manned by federal police checkpoints. How could trucks full of armed men with their faces covered come in and out without the police knowing? Everyone, including the security forces, knows where the prison is. Even the security forces are scared of them.

On July 2, Human Rights Watch interviewed an electrician from a majority Shia neighborhood in west Baghdad. He estimated that his neighborhood is at most 20 percent Sunni and said that "[militias] now control [the neighborhood]." Sunnis in his neighborhood and other nearby majority Shia neighborhoods pretend to be Shia, he said, "because if they don't they will be killed or kicked out by [militiamen]."

He said that on June 11, the day after ISIS took over Mosul, he was walking to an adjacent neighborhood at about 4 p.m. to do electrical work in a friend's house when a taxi pulled over and offered him a ride. "When he dropped me in [the next neighborhood] he didn't want to take money from me, which I thought was strange," the electrician said. But as soon as the taxi pulled over, two cars, a white Land Cruiser and a brown Opal, positioned themselves in front and behind the taxi:

They came up to the taxi and told me "Come with us." So I got out of the car.... They put me in the Opal and told me, "You should behave. We have nothing to do with you, we just need to ask you a few questions and then we'll take you home." They handcuffed and blindfolded me.

After that, he said, they drove for about 10 minutes. When they stopped, he could see out of the bottom of his blindfold that he was in front of a small stream of water in a desert area, and saw five men wearing civilian shirts with camouflage pants carrying AK-47s and pistols. One was wearing a dishdasha, a traditional men's dress. He said:

I heard one of them refer to me, saying, "Yes, this is him." I said, "What do you mean 'that's him?'" but they didn't answer me. One of them picked up the phone and said, "Bring the rest so they can see him." Then four or five groups of men came in four or five cars. Each time a car came, they would drag me in front of these people and show me to them. No one said anything the whole time.

The electrician said he told the men he is Shia, but one of them accused him of faking his identification document to make it look like it came from a Shia area. While still handcuffed, they questioned him repeatedly about Sunni neighborhoods, who he knew there, and how often he went there:

The whole time they were insulting me, "You are Qaeda's dog, you Sunni." They hit me on the back, and dragged me across the sand by my collar. They accused me of being in "Omar's Army" [a reference to a revered figure in Sunni Islam] and wanted me to count down the name of the 12 imams in order, to prove I was Shia. I didn't know the names so I pretended that I suffer from a head injury and have brain damage. But I told them the names of several Shia people I know in [the neighborhood] and told them to check me out, that they would tell them I am Shia.

After that, he said, he heard one of the men say to others that he was not "one of us" and to "throw him away." "They took me to some ditch next to a canal and I knew they were going to kill me," he said. He said he stayed in the ditch for about four hours, bound and afraid to try to leave. "I could smell rotting dead bodies," he said.

At about midnight, a man came to the ditch and returned his identification documents and told other men to take him home. The electrician said his Shia neighbors saved his life:

[A neighbor] told me later that someone came and asked if he knew me and he told them I am Shia. The same thing happened to [another neighbor], who is always in the pool hall. He also told them I am Shia. When they let me go, they said "We are Asa'ib. Sorry for this, if you need anything just let us know."

The day after they kidnapped him, he said, he saw men he believed to be Asa'ib kill the muezzin, the man who performs the call to prayer, in a nearby Sunni mosque.

On June 12 at about 2 a.m. I saw two men wearing black civilian clothes, with their faces covered, go into his house. They were carrying AK-47s. Three other men stayed in front of the house. My house is the highest house in the neighborhood and I live on the top floor, so I have a view of the whole neighborhood. I didn't hear any gunshots, but after a short time the muezzin's house was on fire. Then I saw the three cars when they left: one was a brown Opal sedan, another was a Land Cruiser, and I don't know the name of the third. They were the same cars that they used when they kidnapped me. The next morning, my neighbors told me that the muezzin's family fled after the men killed him in front of them.

The electrician said that as a result of the Asa'ib's terror tactics, three families have left his neighborhood after receiving death threats from the group. Asa'ib kidnapped a Sunni woman who lived behind his house and held her for several days before releasing her in exchange for the family's promise to leave the neighborhood, he said:

I know a lot of other people who have been kidnapped: an engineer named Mohamed - Asa'ib came to his house in [name withheld] neighborhood, and interrogated him for hours. A man named Siraj, also living in [the same neighborhood], told me he got "caught by Asa'ib" but didn't

tell me what exactly happened. Both of these things happened the same time they took me, right after Mosul.

He said that SWAT forces and militia members killed three of his wife's cousins in the days preceding his interview with Human Rights Watch. They killed one after taking him from a mosque in Baghdad's Sleikh neighborhood, and the other two in Ba`aquba, the capital of Diyala province.

"These things have been happening for a long time, but got a lot worse after June 10," the electrician said. "It's a common understanding in the neighborhood that they are militia and so no one can do anything to them." He said that the militiamen pass through the army checkpoint at the entrance to his neighborhood without being stopped. "There is only one entrance to [my neighborhood] and the army controls the checkpoint. Within the neighborhood there are also four observation points where policemen sit. I have never seen them do anything to the militiamen."

He said that "Sunni people became very scared" after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's leading Shia cleric, issued a fatwa calling on Iraqis to volunteer to fight ISIS. They fear the fatwa has given authority to Shia to kill Sunnis on the grounds they are supporters of ISIS.

Regarding a separate incident on June 16, Human Rights Watch interviewed three residents of Sha'ab, a mixed-sect neighborhood that they characterized as having a "heavy Asa'ib presence." One resident said he witnessed two men he said were Asa'ib members shoot and kill two Sunni brothers, Omar and Fakhry, owners of a neighborhood café:

At around 10:30 p.m. I was about to enter a market next to the café when a small yellow Saiba [Iranian-made cars frequently used as taxis] drove up to the café and parked in front. It was crowded. Two men got out of the car, walked into to the café, brought Omar and Fakhry out in front, and shot them each twice in the head. The people in the café and street were just watching. The 11th division army checkpoint is just 10 meters away, but they didn't even bother to use silencers.

The witness told Human Rights Watch that despite their proximity the soldiers "didn't do anything." After 10 minutes neighborhood residents volunteered to take the bodies to the hospital. "I'm scared to find their families for you, and of course, no one will say they are Asa'ib, they are too scared," he said:

But everyone knows that Asa'ib controls Sha`ab [neighborhood] and that they are the only people capable of doing something like this. They hang out in the Sha`ab police station, they're always bearded, wearing civilian clothes with camouflage pants. When you see a convoy of civilian cars full of men carrying weapons like PKCs [machine guns], it's obviously Asa'ib.

Baghdad's medical forensic authority confirmed that they had received the bodies of Omar and Fakhry in the early morning hours of June 17, and that each bore two bullet wounds in their heads. The forensic authority declined to provide the men's last names.

The witness described the men who killed Omar and Fakhry as bearded, wearing civilian clothes, one a t-shirt and one a button-down shirt and both in camouflage pants, and that their faces were loosely covered by scarves. His description matches numerous residents' reports of the attire of militia members they have seen at checkpoints alongside the police and army, or while conducting parades through their neighborhoods. Since June 10, Human Rights Watch researchers have seen men dressed in clothes that residents ascribe to militias, carrying rocket-propelled grenade launchers and automatic weapons, who appeared to be manning checkpoints along with security forces throughout Baghdad.

Mass Killings of Sunnis in Babel: 53 bodies Found Near Hilla

On July 9, police announced they had found 53 bodies in a ditch in an area north of Hilla. Their hands were all bound and they all had gunshot wounds in the head. Human Rights Watch interviewed a government official with professional knowledge of the case, who also said he personally knew several of the dead. He said the bodies had been in the ditch for at least three days and were extremely decomposed, in most cases preventing identification.

On July 10, Human Rights Watch spoke with a local man Abu Abdulrahman, who said his brother was most likely among the dead. He said that he heard from witnesses that on about June 11, armed men in civilian clothing raided a small vegetable market called Um Weilha, between al-Haswa and al-Muasayib, north of Hilla, where his 36-year-old brother was shopping. Abu Abdulrahman said that several people who were at the market told him they saw armed men "take everybody" from the market:

They told me the men took between 110 and 120 people. That area is 70 percent Sunni and 30 percent Shia. The armed men released the Shia captives, and released people from the Beni Sa'id and al-Masa'oud tribes [small Sunni tribes] - these people are very poor. After that my tribe and I tried to talk to [the released people] ... but they were almost all too terrified to talk to us. One said he witnessed them segregating Shia from Sunnis, and witnessed the kidnappers, who he called Asa'ib, torturing some of the detainees. We also tried talking to the division commander and police chief and some tribal leaders met those two to ask them to intervene and work on releasing them, but they refused to do anything.

Abu Abdulrahman said that police told him that when they found the bodies they were lying next to a sign that read, "These are the ones from Um Weilha vegetable market." Police sent the bodies to a morgue in Hilla hospital, Abu Abdulrahman said. He added:

Asa'ib are at the gates of the hospital. Families in the area with missing relatives are too afraid to go to the hospital and check if their relatives are among the dead, because they fear they'll end up dead next to whoever they came to pick up.

Four men went to recover a dead body a while ago and were killed themselves. Another woman I know had to pay US\$20,000 to recover the dead body of her husband.... I'm scared to go and get my brother's body. The only ones who can recover bodies are the ones who have influence [with the militias] or can pay.

A government official told Human Rights Watch that all of the 53 people killed near Hilla were men from the Sunni Albu Mustafa, Janabi, and Alwani communities, and gave Human Rights Watch the names of 17 of those killed. He said that due to the advanced state of decomposition of their bodies, their families were only able to identify them from broken bones or other unique characteristics. The names of the 17 are: Wa'el Adnan, Sa'oud Fawaz, Haqi Ismael, Ismael Falah, Natiq Mushir, Mohamed Sa'id, Ahmed Yousif, Abdulrahman Yousif, Haitham Ismael, Hassan Thou'ban, `Omar Taha, Abulhaleem Thamer, Harith Rassam, Othman Haqi, Radwan Ismael, Mohammed Mai'en, and Hussain Thou'ban.

Copyright notice: © Copyright, Human Rights Watch

Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

All countries

Clear

Search

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Countries

- [Iraq](#)

Topics

- [Armed groups / Militias / Paramilitary forces / Resistance movements](#)
- [Internal armed conflict](#)
- [Protection of civilian persons in time of war](#)
- [Security forces](#)
- [Security situation](#)
- [Shia](#)
- [Sunni](#)
- [Terrorism](#)