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Iraq: Militias Recruiting Children

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[Iraqi](#) government-backed militias have recruited children from at least one displaced persons camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to fight against Islamic State forces. All security forces and armed groups should abide by international law and demobilize any fighters under age 18.

Witnesses and relatives told Human Rights Watch that two tribal militias (Hashad al-Asha'ri) recruited as fighters at least seven children from the Debaga camp on August 14, 2016, and drove them to a town closer to Mosul, where Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are preparing for an offensive to drive the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, from the city. The Hashad al-Asha'ri, made up of local Sunni fighters, are expected to [play a key role](#) in Mosul military operations, while the government may order the mainly Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces to stay out of the Mosul fighting.

"The recruitment of children as fighters for the Mosul operation should be a warning sign for the Iraqi government," said [Bill Van Esveld](#), senior children's rights researcher. "The government and its foreign allies need to take action now, or children are going to be fighting on both sides in Mosul."

Human Rights Watch has documented that ISIS has [extensively recruited](#) and deployed children in its forces.

Debaga camp, 40 kilometers south of Erbil, currently [houses](#) over 35,000 people displaced in the fighting between government forces and ISIS. Two people living in the camp since March told Human Rights Watch that at least two militia groups engaged in the fighting against ISIS are entirely made up of camp residents. They said that these two militias, commanded by Sheikh Nishwan al-Jabouri and by Maghdad al-Sabawy, the son of the recently deceased commander Fares al-Sabawy, have been recruiting from the camp for months. Their trucks have been arriving empty, and driving away filled with men, and in some cases, boys.

The two camp residents said that two very large trucks arrived in the evening of August 14 and took away about 250 new recruits, at least 7 of them under age 18, to join Sheikh al-Jabouri's forces. Witnesses and other camp residents said that all the men and boys volunteered to join the

militias. An aid worker who was on the road saw the two trucks heading to Hajj Ali, a town about 46 kilometers from Debaga and 7 kilometers from the front lines with ISIS. They contacted local aid workers in Hajj Ali, who confirmed that the group had arrived there, stayed for one night, and then went on to join a militia nearby.

Several children in the camp gave the name of one 16-year-old boy who had left with the group, and said there were others.

A second aid worker, who has monitored developments around the planned Mosul operation, said that the transfer of recruits from the camps was part of the militias' plan to reinforce their forces near the front line, with apparent approval from the Iraqi government. He said he had seen men wearing ISF uniforms in Debaga camp a few days before the August 14 transfer and that near the front lines, militia members fought in Security Force uniforms.

ISIS attacks have displaced many people who are now in the camps from areas in Iraq's Makhmur district, which the group ruled [brutally](#) for 21 months, beginning in 2014. Iraqi forces retook the area in March 2016. Some of those interviewed said they had witnessed militias recruiting children from the camps at other times recently.

One camp resident said that he fled to Debaga from Khabata, in Makhmur district, once Iraqi government forces retook the village. Ten of his sons had joined a militia on March 5, days after they arrived in a displaced persons camp. One of his sons, currently with a group of about 350 fighters, is 15 or 16 years old, he said. Another son who was born in 2001 "went along too but they sent him home because they said he was too young." He described two other militias that were recruiting in the camps. One, based in Hajj Ali, "is taking anyone who wants to come from the camps," he said.

His 20-year-old son said that the men in his group fight for "one week then get a break at home for one week, back and forth. We are fighting alongside the ISF, and our salaries are paid by Baghdad, we are basically part of the Iraqi military." They receive 447,500 Iraqi dinars (US\$375) per month, he said. Since he joined in March, four men from the group had been killed in action and 45 wounded, he said.

The United States has provided substantial military support to the Iraqi government, in addition to leading airstrikes on ISIS. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) that Iraqi Shia militias also used child soldiers in fighting ISIS forces.

The United Nations [Optional Protocol](#) on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which Iraq ratified in 2008, prohibits national armies and non-state armed groups from recruiting and using children under 18. As parties to the conflict, the US and other coalition members should pressure Iraq's government and Iraqi militias to end child recruitment, immediately demobilize children, work to reintegrate them, and appropriately penalize commanders responsible for recruiting children, including those who "volunteer."

"The US should press the Iraqi government to ensure that the troops they are supporting don't have fighters under 18 in their ranks," Van Esveld said. "The battle for Mosul should not be fought with children on the front lines."

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