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Kurdistan Region of Iraq: 350 Prisoners 'Disappeared'

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More than 350 detainees held by the Kurdistan Regional Government in the [Iraqi](#) city of Kirkuk are feared to have been forcibly disappeared, Human Rights Watch said today.

Those missing are mainly Sunni Arabs, displaced to Kirkuk or residents of the city, detained by the regional government's security forces, the Asayish, on suspicion of Islamic State (also known as ISIS) affiliation after the regional forces took control of Kirkuk in June 2014. Local officials told Human Rights Watch that the prisoners were no longer in the official and unofficial detention facilities in and around Kirkuk when Iraqi federal forces regained control of the area on October 16, 2017.

"Families in Kirkuk are desperate to know what has become of their detained relatives," said [Lama Fakih](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "The secret, incommunicado detentions raise grave concerns for their safety."

On November 7, dozens of people [demonstrated](#) in Kirkuk, demanding information on their [relatives](#) allegedly detained by Asayish forces, which triggered a [statement](#) from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to investigate the disappearances. On November 8, following the demonstration in Kirkuk, Azad Jabari, the former head of the security committee of Kirkuk's provincial council, reportedly [denied](#) that Asayish forces had carried out any disappearances. He blamed the disappearances on US forces previously present in Kirkuk, saying most of the files of the missing dated from 2003 to 2011 and were not more recent.

However, Kirkuk's acting governor, Rakkan Said, and a Kirkuk police chief told Human Rights Watch that several days after the protest, Asayish forces handed over to Iraqi federal forces in Kirkuk 105 other detainees first held in Kirkuk and later transferred to facilities in Sulaimaniya. Governor Said said that the Iraqi prime minister's office also sent a delegation to Kirkuk to further investigate. Human Rights Watch was unable to reach delegation members about their findings, but suspects that the number of detainees disappeared by KRG forces is much higher.

On December 12, a member of the Kirkuk branch of Iraq's Human Rights Commission told Human Rights Watch that families submitted complaints to the commission against Kurdistan Regional Government authorities about the disappearance of at least 350 other men whom the Asayish had detained in and around Kirkuk.

On November 12 and December 17, Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 people who said they had witnessed identifiable Asayish forces detain 27 of their relatives, all Sunni Arab men, between August 2015 and October 2017 in Kirkuk or south of the city. The witnesses said that they had not been able to communicate with their relatives since their arrest, had received no official information about their status and whereabouts, and were concerned about their whereabouts since the Iraqi officials could not locate them.

Um Ghazi went to court in Kirkuk to obtain information on her husband's whereabouts based on CCTV footage showing the Asayish detaining him in Kirkuk while he was walking on the street with a friend in March 2017. After conducting a search, the court said it had not been able to locate him in any detention center in the city.

In all 27 cases discussed with Human Rights Watch, relatives said they had asked local Asayish or police forces about their relatives but never received an official acknowledgement of the detention or information about where their relative was being held or why. In some cases, family members said they were able to obtain information from informal channels indicating that their relatives were being held by the Asayish in other parts of the Kurdistan Region.

The relatives of four of the disappeared said that over the last month, newly released detainees held in [al-Salam military base for Kurdistan Regional Government Peshmerga military forces](#) in Sulaimaniya, where Asayish forces run a number of informal detention facilities, contacted them to say they had been held in the same cells as their relatives.

The wife of Faisal Sultan Hamed said that four armed men in black Asayish uniforms had arrested her husband at their home in Kirkuk at midnight on December 12, 2015. She said the family had tried to locate him during the past two years but that Asayish forces would not provide her with any information. In mid-November 2017, a man newly released from al-Salam military base called her husband's brother and said that he had shared a cell at the base with her husband. He said that Hamed had given him his brother's phone number and asked him to let his brother know he was alive.

Youssef Shebir Mustafa said that at 3 a.m. on May 28, 2016, three Asayish officers broke into his home and arrested his two adult sons and his cousin who lived next door. Since then Mustafa has received no official information about their status or whereabouts from the Asayish. "A friend of a friend recently said he heard all three were being held in al-Salam military base, but another said he heard they were in Chamchamal federal prison [in Kurdistan]," Mustafa said. "Frankly, I just don't know where they are and I am worried sick."

On December 18, Human Rights Watch contacted Dr. Dindar Zebari, chairman of the KRG's High Committee to Evaluate International Organizations' Reports, and asked for information on the current number and whereabouts of people detained by KRG forces in Kirkuk. He has not responded.

Enforced disappearances occur when a person is arrested or detained by officials or their agents and the authority refuses to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty, or to reveal the person's fate or whereabouts.

Kurdistan Regional Government authorities should work with the Human Rights Commission's list of complaints to help families of the 350 people identify the status and whereabouts of their relatives. They should urgently notify the families of all those being detained where they are being held, and on what grounds. They should allow for family communications between the detainees and their families.

The authorities should investigate all suspected crimes, including enforced disappearances, by Asayish and Peshmerga forces in a prompt, transparent, and effective manner, up to the highest levels of responsibility. When evidence of criminal responsibility emerges, prosecutions in accordance with international standards 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.

"When forces whisk away hundreds of people without explanation, it's no wonder that their families have serious concerns for their safety," Fakih said. "It is the Kurdistan Regional Government's responsibility to immediately provide information on their relatives' fate or whereabouts, and to end the practice of disappearances."

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