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A deadly spiral of sectarian violence - a year on from IS onslaught on Iraq

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The full extent of the horror that has unfolded across Iraq over the past year is revealed in an interactive story map published by Amnesty International today, detailing the plight of Iraqi civilians caught in a deadly spiral of horrific crimes by the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) and brutal revenge attacks by the now dominant government-backed Shi'a militias and government forces.

Within the story map, the organization is publishing two briefings, which contain its findings on two massacres carried out in January 2015 apparently to avenge IS crimes: the massacre of at least 56 [Sunni Arab men - possible more than 70 - in Barwana](#), a village in Diyala province, by Shi'a militiamen and government forces, and [the killing of 21 Sunni Arab villagers](#) in the Sinjar region by members of a Yezidi militia.

“The heinous crimes of the IS have been met by growing sectarian attacks by Shi'a militias, who are taking revenge for IS crimes by targeting Sunni Arabs. ”

Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Advisor

“Iraq has been engulfed in a deadly spiral of violence since the IS overran large parts of the country a year ago. The heinous crimes of the IS have been met by growing sectarian attacks by Shi'a militias, who are taking revenge for IS crimes by targeting Sunni Arabs,” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Advisor, who has spent much of the past year in Iraq documenting war crimes and other gross violations of human rights.

“With perpetrators from the IS and from powerful Shi'a militias mostly out of reach of the law, civilians have no one to turn to for protection and victims have no access to justice.”

To view the story map in a separate window use this link: <https://bit.ly/amnestyiraqis>

Since IS captured Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, on 10 June 2014, the group has unleashed a reign of terror, carrying out mass summary killings, sexual violence, abductions and torture – targeting Shi'a Muslims and religious and ethnic minorities.

“The story map highlights a plethora of appalling violence by all sides that has heightened sectarian tensions and taken an unimaginable toll on civilians from all communities, marking a dark chapter in Iraq's history,” said Donatella Rovera.

In one such attack in Barwana, dozens of women and girls described to Amnesty International how their male relatives and neighbours were seized from their homes and shot dead in cold blood on 26 January 2015 by members of Shi'a militias and government forces. Their bodies, many handcuffed and blindfolded, were found littered around the village, suggesting they were victims of execution-style summary killings amounting to war crimes.

“There were bodies everywhere. Tens and tens of bodies. Some by the rubbish dump, others in a field. I cannot forget the sight, heads exploded, contorted bodies, pools of blood. The children saw it too. The screams still ring in my head. It was unimaginable,” said Nadia, whose husband, son and son-in-law were among those killed during the attack.

Other residents described how gunmen, some of them believed to be from the Badr militia – one of Iraq's most powerful militias, which had been battling IS groups in the area for weeks – went door to door, taking the men but not searching their homes or questioning their relatives. Most of those killed were young men between the ages of 20 and 40 but the dead included children and elderly people.

A 17-year-old boy and his 21-year-old brother, who was married with a newborn baby, were also among those killed.

Their mother described the attack to Amnesty International:

“I heard shooting and screaming. When [it] stopped I went out and found my boy's body by the rubbish dump... He had a big hole in the head, his brain was spilling out... He was just a child, he was only 17.”

The massacre followed the killing of members of Shi'a militias and government forces who had been battling IS groups in the surrounding areas for weeks, and bears the hallmark of a revenge attack.

“Those who committed this massacre seemingly went to the village with the intent to kill Sunni Arab men; they did not search the victims' homes or question their relatives,” said Donatella Rovera.

Shi'a militias, supported and armed by the government of Iraq, have carried out similar attacks across Iraq, abducting and killing scores of Sunni civilians with total impunity and in some cases forcibly displacing entire Sunni communities.

Despite commitments by Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi to open an investigation into the Barwana massacre, six months later there are no signs that any steps have been taken to hold accountable those

responsible for the killings.

Another apparent revenge attack, which took place in the Sinjar region, illustrates the devastating consequences of the IS's campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Yezidi minority – whose members were abducted en masse last year, with men summarily killed in their hundreds and women and girls raped and forced into sexual slavery.

In a revenge attack on 25 January 2015 members of a Yezidi militia attacked two Arab villages, Jiri and Sibaya, killing 21 residents and looting and burning homes. Virtually not a single house was spared. Half of those killed were elderly or disabled men and women and children. Forty others were abducted – 17 of whom are still missing. Residents said some members of the Peshmerga and Asayish security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) were present at the time of the attack but did not try to stop them.

The father of two of the victims, a 15-year-old boy and his 20-year-old brother from Jiri, told Amnesty International that his sons were shot dead and their bodies dumped in a nearby Yezidi village. Their younger brother, who is just 12 years old, was shot four times in the back, chest, arm and leg but miraculously survived.

Nahla, a 34-year-old mother of five from Jiri, described how her husband and son had been shot dead in cold blood and even her baby had a narrow escape – a bullet pierced the blanket she had wrapped him in as she carried him in her arms.

In the nearby village of Sibaya most of those slain were elderly, or men and women with disabilities who were unable to escape. Two children were also killed.

“We could not imagine the assailants would target the old and the sick but they did,” said one man describing how his 66-year-old father was shot dead in his wheelchair.

“It is deeply troubling to see members of the Yezidi community, who have suffered so much at the hands of the IS, now themselves committing such brutal crimes,” said Donatella Rovera.

“These misguided attempts to take justice into their own hands and take revenge on entire communities have only brought more tragedy and suffering on civilians.”

While KRG authorities and Peshmerga forces have attempted to keep Yezidi and Arab communities separate to prevent further attacks, no investigations into the attacks on Jiri and Sibaya appear to have been carried out.

“Looking back at the carnage and chaos that has taken hold in the year since the IS takeover, the picture that emerges is of an Iraq more fractured and bitterly divided than ever and rival factions hell-bent on destroying each other, with no regard for who is actually a fighter or a civilian,” said Donatella Rovera.

“The Iraqi authorities must do their utmost to diffuse sectarian tensions by bringing to justice perpetrators

without discrimination. Victims need to know that those committing war crimes and other serious violations will be held individually responsible – whatever their religion or ethnicity or position. Without an end to impunity, Iraqi civilians will remain trapped in a deadly cycle of sectarian violence, with entire communities – rather than individual perpetrators – paying the price.”

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