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Iraq: ISIS Executed Hundreds of Prison Inmates

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Gunmen from the Sunni extremist group Islamic State systematically executed some 600 male inmates from a prison outside the northern Iraqi city of Mosul on June 10, 2014, according to survivors' accounts. The vast majority of those killed were Shia.

After seizing Badoush Prison near Mosul, the gunmen from Islamic State, also known as ISIS, separated the Sunni from the Shia inmates, then forced the Shia men to kneel along the edge of a nearby ravine and shot them with assault rifles and automatic weapons, 15 Shia prisoners who survived the massacre told Human Rights Watch. The gunmen also killed a number of Kurdish and Yezidi inmates of Badoush Prison, the survivors said.

"The gruesome details of ISIS' mass murder of prison inmates make it impossible to deny the depravity of this extremist group," said Letta Tayler, senior terrorism and counterterrorism researcher. "People of every ethnicity and creed should condemn these horrific tactics, and press Iraqi and international authorities to bring those responsible to justice."

The mass summary executions amount to war crimes and most likely crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said.

ISIS fighters broke into Badoush the day they captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, which is 10 kilometers southeast of the prison. The gunmen herded up to 1,500 inmates onto trucks and drove them to an isolated stretch of desert about 2 kilometers from the prison, survivors said. The prisoners had been serving sentences for a range of crimes, from murder and assaults to nonviolent offenses.

The fighters separated out several hundred Sunni and a small number of Christian men and drove them away in trucks, the witnesses said. They then robbed and insulted the Shia and other remaining prisoners, marched them to a ravine, and forced them to form one long line along its edge. There, they made the inmates count their number in the line before opening fire. A survivor, A.S., described the death count:

They started by saying, "Each person raise his hand and say his number." I was number 43. I heard them say "615," and then one ISIS guy said, "We're going to eat well tonight." A man behind us asked, "Are you ready?" Another person answered "Yes," and began shooting at us with a machine-gun. Then they all

started to shoot us from behind, going down the row.

Human Rights Watch is withholding the prisoners' full names to protect them from possible retaliation.

Nine survivors Human Rights Watch interviewed said that they heard their fellow inmates at the end of the line call out numbers from the low 500s to 750. Five of them heard numbers between 615 and 680, while other survivors said the count went into the "hundreds."

Most people were shot in the head, the back and the side, said survivor H.K.:

A bullet hit my head and I fell to the ground, and that's when I felt another bullet hit my arm. I was unconscious for about 5 minutes. One person was shot in the head, in the forehead, it [the bullet] went out the other side, and he fell on top of me.

Before they started shooting, I managed to kiss the men on each side of me, because we knew we were going to die. After we said goodbye to each other, I took my daughter's picture and kissed it, and I prayed to God to save me for her, because I have no one else [to take care of her].

The gunmen returned for a second round of shooting when they saw one prisoner stand up, and only stopped when they ran out of ammunition, the survivors said.

"They were shouting, 'This is how we serve justice!' and, 'This one's alive, shoot him again!' witness F.S. said. "I got shot. Then I heard someone say, 'Let's leave, we're out of bullets.'"

Most of those shot fell into the ravine, the survivors said. The gunmen then set fire to brush in and around the ravine, and flames spread to the corpses.

The witnesses estimated that 30 to 40 prisoners survived, most by rolling into the ravine and pretending to be dead, or because they were shielded by the bodies of other prisoners who fell on top of them. Survivors said several men wounded by the shooting later died while trying to crawl or stagger away.

ISIS fighters drove the prisoners claiming to be Sunnis and Christians for about four hours to another desert location, one Sunni man who was among that group told Human Rights Watch. He was unable to identify the location but said some in the group believed it was in Iraq's Anbar province while others thought it might have been in Syria. The witness said that on the first evening ISIS fighters removed between 50 and 100 men from this group on grounds that they were Shia posing as Sunni. He said they did not return. Three days later ISIS fighters drove the others back to Mosul and set them free, he said.

Human Rights Watch interviewed the 15 Shia survivors and four other former Badoush Prison inmates in semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, where they had surrendered or been picked up by local authorities after fleeing ISIS-controlled areas. The interviews took place in two prisons where the Iraqi Kurdish authorities were holding the men. Nearly all the Shia prisoners showed scars from bullet wounds or burns that they said they had sustained during the massacre.

The injured survivors had received medical care. All Arab survivors said they wanted to be moved to prisons outside of Iraqi Kurdistan because their relatives could not visit them in Kurdish-controlled areas. On October 23, the Kurdish Regional Government said the inmates had been transferred to other prisons that are run by the central Iraqi government still located in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Twelve of the inmates told Human Rights Watch that officials and guards at Badoush Prison had abandoned their posts the night before ISIS broke into the prison.

Neither Human Rights Watch nor Iraqi government officials have been able to access Badoush Prison or the alleged killing site because the area remains under ISIS control.

ISIS has systematically killed, abducted, and expelled Shia Muslims and religious and ethnic minorities during its military sweep through Iraq, and has forcibly married Yezidi women and girls to ISIS gunmen.

The day after the June 10 massacre, ISIS gunmen carried out a similar mass killing of Shia soldiers in the city of Tikrit, 225 kilometers south of Badoush. The group claimed to have executed 1,700 Shia troops in that killing and posted videos on the internet showing their gunmen shooting at hundreds of captive men.

A Human Rights Watch investigation that included analysis of satellite imagery found strong evidence that between 560 to 770 captives, all or most of them apparently Iraqi soldiers, died in that massacre, and did not rule out that many more had been killed.

Human Rights Watch also documented the apparent unlawful executions of at least 255 Sunni prisoners in six Iraqi cities and villages in June by Iraqi government forces, most of whom are Shia, and by Shia pro-government militia.

The United Nations Human Rights Council in September ordered a UN investigation into crimes committed by ISIS. That investigation should include the massacre near Badoush Prison to identify those responsible and ensure they are held to account, Human Rights Watch said. The UN investigation also should document major crimes by Iraqi government forces and Shia pro-government militias including indiscriminate airstrikes, mass executions of Sunni prisoners, and summary executions of Sunnis throughout the country.

The UN investigation also should examine whether the Iraqi authorities could have done more to protect the Badoush prisoners and Mosul residents from ISIS, Human Rights Watch said.

"While no amount of government negligence excuses the atrocities of ISIS, the authorities need to do all they reasonably can to protect Shia and others from being massacred," Tayler said. "In addition, the Iraqi authorities should as soon as possible transfer the survivors of this slaughter to prisons in areas of Iraq where they can have regular family visits."

Witness Accounts

Human Rights Watch conducted separate, individual interviews with 11 of the Shia survivors, the Sunni inmate who ISIS released, and three Badoush inmates - one Yezidi and two Sunni - who escaped capture the morning of June 10. All provided detailed and consistent accounts. Human Rights Watch interviewed four other Shia survivors together who also said ISIS segregated Sunni and Shia prisoners and killed the Shia.

The Shia and Sunni survivors said most of their family members could not visit them in Iraqi Kurdistan because of the risk of passing through conflict zones to reach them, and the Kurdistan Regional Government's restrictions on the entry of Arabs into Iraqi Kurdistan since ISIS seized large swaths of Iraq.

The witnesses' descriptions of the mass shooting were consistent with the findings of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, which concluded that ISIS had killed up to 670 Shia inmates of Badoush near the prison on June 10.

Guards Flee, ISIS Enters

The day before the attack, guards at Badoush Prison gave inmates almost no food, then fled in the middle of the night, said the survivors and the three other men who had been imprisoned in Badoush at that time.

At the time of the attack, the prison was holding more than 3,000 prisoners in two large cell blocks, one for major crimes and the other for lesser crimes, according to the witnesses, as well as prison and intelligence authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan who spoke with Human Rights Watch. The prison had a separate section for Yezidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities.

On June 9, most prisoners received only one piece of bread and no bottled water, the inmates said. One prisoner, H.O., said a guard told him the prison ran out of food because fighting had blocked the arrival of supply trucks from Mosul. As the sound of fighting grew louder that night, some witnesses said, the guards triple-locked the prisoners' cell doors. H.O. described the inmates' panic:

We couldn't even go to the toilet. Those of us who needed medicine, we started shouting and screaming because we were not getting our pills. There were about 50 of us in our cell, screaming. We were also shouting for water. We had only dirty tap water to drink. No one responded.

"We stopped seeing the guards after midnight - they ran," said another prisoner, A.J. He slid one hand against the other in a gesture of flight.

Before dawn, guards came to the Yezidis' cell, containing 90 inmates, and said they were leaving, said the Yezidi prisoner, R.K.

The guards had changed into civilian clothes. They told us, "Mosul has fallen to ISIS. Escape if you can." But the cell door was locked. It was chaos inside. We thought if ISIS enters they would behead us all, because in that section we were Christians, Kurds, Yezidis.

The former prisoners said they heard intense shelling overnight. Between about 6 and 8 a.m., they said, ISIS fighters broke into the prison and, assisted by ISIS members who were inmates, broke open the cell doors. Many prisoners who fled immediately, including R.K., managed to escape. But those who left around 10 a.m. found the prison surrounded by scores of ISIS gunmen, both on foot and in dozens of Iraqi police cars, Humvees and other military vehicles, which they assumed the fighters had captured from Iraqi government soldiers and police.

Human Rights Watch interviewed dozens of Mosul residents and law enforcement officials between June and September who said that Iraq's security forces had fled Mosul before ISIS entered the city.

ISIS Rounds Up Inmates

ISIS gunmen immediately began rounding up prison inmates who tried to leave and cordoned them inside the prison courtyard, 14 witnesses told Human Rights Watch. The gunmen also retrieved prisoners who were trying to flee on Route 1, the main road from the prison, the witnesses said.

"Anyone who tried to stop a car, ISIS would shoot at their feet," witness S.S. said. "If anyone had already gotten into a car, they stopped the driver and made the prisoner get out."

The ISIS forces were wearing clothes that ranged from track suits and dishdashas to all black or camouflage uniforms, the survivors said. Most of the gunmen were Arabs from Iraq, but some spoke Arabic with foreign accents, they said.

The fighters gathered as many as 1,500 inmates in the prison courtyard, the witnesses estimated. Two survivors said they saw the fighters summarily shoot and kill three or four prisoners in the courtyard who identified themselves as Shia.

The fighters also searched unsuccessfully for three prisoners, whose names they called out on a loudspeaker, three witnesses said. The gunmen then commandeered several trucks passing by on Route 1, witnesses said, including 18-wheel container trucks.

Some witnesses said they saw five or six trucks; others said they saw as many as nine. In late morning, they said - three prisoners interviewed separately estimated the time as around 11 a.m. - the fighters loaded the prisoners onto the backs of the trucks. "They said, 'We will take you home.' Then they forced us onto the trucks," witness F.S. told Human Rights Watch.

The fighters drove the prisoners along Route 1 to the Sham Gate, about 4 kilometers southeast of Badoush Prison, the survivors said. "They were showing us to the people passing by, pretending they had freed us from the Iraqi government," said survivor N.H. "The people were praising them for saving us."

But then the trucks turned back toward the prison, the survivors said, and after about a kilometer turned left into the desert on a road that was just tracks through the sand.

Two other inmates who had managed to escape when ISIS first took control of Badoush Prison told Human Rights Watch that ISIS gunmen had rounded them up with others on the roadside or in nearby Badoush village, and loaded them into trucks that also turned off Route 1 and into the desert.

After a short drive of what some survivors estimated as 800 meters to a kilometer from Route 1, the trucks stopped and gunmen ordered all the prisoners to gather by the side of the dirt track.

The prisoners were not certain of the exact route and distances to the killing site, and some gave slightly different accounts of how they got there. All said they were not from the area and were in shock during the drive. One Iraqi human rights investigator said other Badoush inmates who escaped on June 10 told him that ISIS also killed Shia prisoners in two other nearby locations that day.

Sunnis Separated from Shia

Once in the desert, a group of 20 to 40 gunmen then separated the Sunni Arabs from the prisoners of other sects or ethnicities, according to 12 Shia survivors and one Sunni witness.

A bearded man in a dishdasha appeared to be in command, several witnesses said. Six said they believed the man was Afghan because of his accent and the cut of his robe. They said the gunmen called the man Hajji, a title of respect. Witness M.R. described the "Afghan man's" orders:

He was sitting in a police car and calling out to us on a loudspeaker. He said, "the Sunnis must stand on one side. The Shia, Kurds and Yezidis must stand on the other. If I find out that a Shia is among the Sunnis, I'm going to cut off his head with a sheet of metal."

During quick interrogations by the gunmen about their beliefs, names, hometowns and other details, about half of the men identified themselves as Sunni. The gunmen loaded these men onto four or five trucks and drove them away, the witnesses said. Three witnesses said those driven away included up to 100 Shia prisoners posing as Sunnis.

H.K. said the fighters placed about 15 to 20 Kurds and Yezidis with the group of Shia men, including two Yezidi boys who had been held in the juvenile section of Badoush Prison. Another prisoner said a Christian man was also among those segregated from the Sunnis.

About half the fighters stayed and guarded the several hundred prisoners who remained, the survivors said. "Brothers, don't worry. You'll have a reunion with your family," witness S.S. remembered one of the captors saying. The gunmen told the prisoners that they were in discussions with the Iraqi authorities about exchanging them for Sunni prisoners held by government forces, three survivors told Human Rights Watch.

Insulted and Robbed

ISIS fighters insulted the remaining prisoners, using religious slurs and accusing the Shia of subservience to then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the survivors said. Then the fighters robbed them.

"They took everything from us - money, watches, rings, identity cards," A.J. said. "The moment they made us give up all of our possessions, I knew they were going to kill us."

By this time, the prisoners said, they felt faint, having received no food or water for almost 24 hours. The fighters had told the prisoners they were taking them to get food and water when they turned into the desert, witness S.S. said, but on arrival told them: "You'll have water in paradise."

At about noon, the survivors said, the gunmen ordered the Shia and other remaining captives to walk in pairs for several meters from the side of the desert track to a half-moon-shaped ravine about 2 to 4 meters deep. The gunmen made the prisoners kneel in a single line along the ravine's curved rim.

ISIS shot dead the first inmate after he fell, said A.S., who had been next to the man:

He was so tired and weak from hunger and thirst that he started to slide down into the ravine. They ordered him to come back but he waved with his hands, refusing. One of the ISIS men said, "Kill him." So the other ISIS members shot him in the side and then in the neck.

The gunmen, at least two of whom wore masks, made each prisoner in turn call out his number in the line, from one end to the other. Five survivors said they heard the prisoners or the gunmen call out numbers between 615 and 680. Three others said they heard the count go up to the low 500s, and one man said he heard the number 750.

Many of the gunmen were young and "some were nervous," said survivor N.H., who said he was number 106. Others seemed pleased, he said, including one who joked at the end of the count, "It's a nice-size herd."

Several survivors said they saw a man filming the events with a video camera. No video of this massacre has been posted online.

"Let's Kill Them All Together"

Three witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the gunmen appeared to be receiving orders on two-way radios and were at times uncertain about how to proceed. "First, they said they would kill us two by two," survivor N.H. said. "Then they said, ten by ten, and then they said, 'kill them all together.'"

Survivor S.S. said he heard the gunmen discussing whether to behead the prisoners:

One put his knife to an inmate's neck, planning to cut his throat, but the other guy said, "There are too many and we're not enough, so let's kill them with bullets." So he went to the first one and he fired several shots into his back. Then they opened fire on all of us.

N.H. said that when the gunmen started shooting, "I thought, 'Am I already dead?' Images of my family flooded my mind. I started reciting the shahada [the Islamic creed that begins, 'There is no God but God...']." Meanwhile, the survivors said, some of the gunmen were also chanting the shahada, and shouting, God is great!

"It was as if we were all the same," N.H. said, alluding to the simultaneous prayers of both captives and captors. "But they were killing us."

A group of about 17 prisoners who were close to the end of the line managed to flee when the shooting began, one of them, A.J., told Human Rights Watch:

They started shooting at us. Some of my friends were killed or shot. A bullet grazed my head. ISIS was surrounding us, but some were in front of us and they were afraid their bullets would shoot their own people, so they had to drop behind us. When we saw that we kept running. I fell many times.

A.J. said he lay flat on the ground as ISIS members in cars scoured the desert for survivors. "I heard two gunshots. After ISIS left I saw two of my friends' dead bodies. I kept running until I reached a street. I

saw a car and flagged it."

As the gunmen sprayed the line of kneeling men with bullets, the dead and wounded tumbled into the ravine, the witnesses said. Most of the witnesses said they survived by rolling into the ravine along with the dead.

But after shooting at everyone in the line, the gunmen descended into the ravine as well, survivors said. Survivor A.O. said the men shot him and a friend from prison who lay next to him:

My face was down in the sand. I heard the footsteps of the ISIS guy, he was standing over me and he shot the man lying next to me in the head. He shot me too but the bullet hit my right forearm. I heard death gasps. I felt something coming under me. It was warm. It was the blood of my friend Haider. I took some of that blood and put it on my face and head so that if they came back they would think I am dead.

Survivor A.S. told Human Rights Watch that he used a small knife he had managed to conceal from the fighters to cut his own head and neck so that the blood would make it appear that he had been shot. After the gunmen left, he said, he raised his head:

I saw one body without a leg, another with his head blown apart. One man went up a nearby hill to see where ISIS was. One of their [ISIS's] cars saw that guy so they turned around and came back. We fell back to the ground. They started to shoot at us again. Then one of the men from ISIS told the others, "Let's leave. We're out of ammunition."

Burning the Massacre Site

After the killings the gunmen set fire to brush on the ground and piles of brush, the survivors told Human Rights Watch. The flames spread quickly and began engulfing several of the freshly killed men, they said.

Survivor M.A. said he saw 12 ISIS gunmen, 10 with machine-guns and 2 with AK-47 assault rifles, making the final rounds:

The ravine was in an agricultural area that had been recently harvested. The remains of the harvest was food for cattle, and it burns just like gasoline. They shot at the ground and it lit the area in front of us. The fire spread quickly. They even set fire to the harvest on the hill. We were surrounded and isolated.

M.A. said the gunmen shot and burned him when they set the fire:

They used a piece of wood to light the fire. They used it as a torch to burn the dead bodies and to see who was dead and who was alive. When they approached me, one of the Da'ish [ISIS] terrorists told someone that I was still breathing, so after I got shot in my arm, they shot two more bullets into my leg.... When it was my turn, they set my right leg on fire. But I had to withstand the pain so they wouldn't know that I was still breathing. When they saw that I didn't move, they told each other that I was dead. Then they burned the person next to me.

M.A. showed Human Rights Watch bullet wounds in his thigh and arm and a burn scar on his ankle that he said were from the attack. He and the authorities at the prison in Iraqi Kurdistan where Human Rights Watch interviewed him said he had undergone five rounds of surgery for the wounds.

Only 30 to 40 Survivors

Only about 30 to 40 prisoners survived the shooting, the witnesses said. They included three Yezidis and one Christian, according to survivor S.E.

The survivors described seeing prisoners die hours later from their wounds because they were too weak to escape. "The sun was so hot," said M.A. "Those who didn't die from the shooting or the fire, they died

- Extrajudicial executions
- Freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment
- Prison or detention conditions

- [Terrorism](#)