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The armed group Islamic State is holding hundreds of Yezidi men, women, and children from Iraq captive in formal and makeshift detention facilities in Iraq and Syria.

The group has systematically separated young women and teenage girls from their families and has forced some of them to marry its fighters, according to dozens of relatives of the detainees, 16 Yezidis who escaped Islamic State detention, and two detained women interviewed by phone. They said the group has also taken away boys and forced captives to convert to Islam.

"The Islamic State's litany of horrific crimes against the Yezidis in Iraq only keeps growing," said Fred Abrahams, special adviser at Human Rights Watch. "We heard shocking stories of forced religious conversions, forced marriage, and even sexual assault and slavery - and some of the victims were children."

None of the former or current female detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had been raped, though four of them said that they had fought off violent sexual attacks and that other detained women and girls told them that Islamic State fighters had raped them. One woman said she saw Islamic State fighters buying girls, and a teenage girl said a fighter bought her for US\$1,000.

The systematic abduction and abuse of Yezidi civilians may amount to crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said.

Interviewees said Islamic State fighters captured the Yezidis, members of a religious minority, during the group's offensive in northwest Iraq on August 3, 2014. In the first days, the group held the men, women, and children together. Islamic State then separated its captives into three categories: older women and mothers with younger children, in some cases with older men or husbands; women in their early 20s and adolescent girls; and younger men and older boys.

Islamic State has also detained at least several dozen civilians from other religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians and Shia Shabaks and Turkmen, representatives of those groups and relatives of detainees said.

The precise number of people being held is unknown because of ongoing fighting in Iraq and because the

vast majority of Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Shabaks and Turkmen fled to various areas across Iraq and neighboring countries when the group seized members of their communities. Dozens of captives have escaped but remain in hiding, Yezidi activists said.

In September and early October, Human Rights Watch interviewed 76 displaced Yezidis in the cities of Duhok, Zakho, and Erbil and surrounding areas in Iraqi Kurdistan. They reported that Islamic State was holding a total of 366 of their family members. The interviewees showed Human Rights Watch lists, identity cards, or photographs of relatives they said were imprisoned, or gave their names and other details. Many said they had sporadic phone contact with the prisoners, who had hidden their phones.

The two current detainees reached by phone, both women, and the 16 escapees - two men, seven women, and seven girls - said they had seen hundreds of other Yezidis in detention. Some said the number was more than 1,000.

One witness, Naveen, said she escaped in early September with her four children, ages 3, 4, 6, and 10, after a month in captivity. She said she saw Islamic State fighters taking Yezidi women and girls as "brides" from two buildings where she had been held - Badoush Prison near Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and a school in Tal Afar, a city to the west. Some fighters gave the women gold as a mahr, a dowry from a husband:

I saw them take all of them, about 10 young women and girls [on different days]. Some were as young as 12 or 13, and up to age 20. Some they had to pull away with force. Some of the young women were married but without children, so they [Islamic State] didn't believe they were married.

Days later, Naveen said, the captors allowed the newly married women and girls to return to the prison briefly:

They said, "They married us; we had no choice." They had gold they said they were given. Then they [the Islamic State] took them away again and they were crying.

One 17-year-old girl, Adlee, said a "big bearded man" had picked her from a group of young female detainees in Mosul and taken her and another captured girl to Fallujah in Anbar province:

I was cowering in a woman's lap. She spoke to me as if I were her daughter, telling me, "Don't be scared; I won't let them take you." But the man looked at me and said, "You are mine," and he quickly took me to his big military vehicle.

The fighter took the two girls to a house in Fallujah, west of Baghdad, she said. "They were hitting us and slapping us to make us surrender," she said. After two days there, the two girls managed to escape. "As much as we could, we didn't let them touch our bodies," she said. "Everything they did, they did by force."

A 15-year-old girl, Rewshe, who escaped on September 7, told Human Rights Watch that in late August, after she had been held for about three weeks, Islamic State forces transported her in a convoy of four buses to Raqqa, Syria, with her sister and about 200 other young women and girls, and detained them in a large house in the southern part of the city. The following day, a group of armed men came and took away 20 of the captives. Rewshe said the guards told her that the men had bought the women and girls.

The next day, Rewshe said, an Islamic State leader whom others called "emir" (commander) sold her and her 14-year-old sister to a Palestinian fighter with Islamic State. Rewshe said she did not see the exchange of money but the fighter told her with pride that he had bought her for US \$1,000. The fighter sold Rewshe's sister that night to another fighter, Rewshe said, and took Rewshe to an apartment on the outskirts of Raqqa. There she said she fended off the man's sexual attack and escaped through an unlocked door while he slept.

The statements of current and former female detainees raise serious concerns about rape and sexual slavery by Islamic State fighters, though the extent of these abuses remains unclear, Human Rights Watch said.

The stigma surrounding rape in the Yezidi community and the fear of reprisal against women and girls who disclose sexual violence could in part explain the low number of first-hand reports, Yezidi activists said. Even acknowledging capture by Islamic State can put women and girls in danger, they said. Scarce services for displaced Yezidis who have undergone trauma, including sexual assault, also may limit options for women and girls to report sexual violence, as well as their willingness to do so.

Islamic State fighters also took boys from their families, apparently for religious or military training, three escapees and a Yezidi human rights activist interviewing escapees said. One 28-year-old man who escaped, Khider, said he watched his captors separate 14 boys ages 8 to 12 at a military base Islamic State had seized in Sinjar:

The older brothers of those boys became so scared. They asked, "Where are you taking them?" They [Islamic State fighters] said, "Don't worry, we will feed and take care of them. We will take them to a base to teach the Quran, how to fight, and how to be jihadis."

Khider said the fighters forced him and other captives to convert to Islam, including in a mass ceremony in which he participated with more than 200 Yezidi men, women, and children whom the group had driven to Syria:

They made us recite the shahada [Islamic creed] three times. ... Even the little children had to recite it, anyone who was old enough to speak. ... The Yezidi people were crying and scared. They asked us, "Is there anyone who does not want to convert to Islam?" Of course we all kept silent, because if anybody refused, he or she would be killed.

Human Rights Watch is withholding or changing the names of all interviewed captives, former captives and their relatives, and withholding the locations of most interviews and places of detention, for their protection.

For accounts by survivors and area residents, please see below.

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Background: Expulsions, Killings, and Abductions

More than 500,000 Yezidis and other religious minorities have fled Islamic State attacks in northern Iraq since June, most to the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, according to the United Nations and regional officials.

During its wave of assaults in and around Sinjar that began on August 3, Islamic State fighters killed scores or even hundreds of male Yezidi civilians, then carried off their relatives, the United Nations and local and international human rights organizations reported. Human Rights Watch interviews with Yezidis who fled these attacks, including more than three dozen witnesses to the mass killings of civilians, support those reports.

Since capturing Mosul on June 10, Islamic State has systematically targeted Iraq's minority communities of Yezidis, Shia Shabaks, Shia Turkmen, and Christians. It ordered Christians in the city of Mosul to convert to Islam, pay a tax as non-Muslims (jizya), flee, or face "the sword." Human Rights Watch has documented how Islamic State and other extremist Sunni groups have abducted, expelled, or killed Yezidis and other minorities before the June assault.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the High Commissioner for

Human Rights reported on October 2 that, based on "local sources," Islamic State was holding up to 2,500 Yezidi civilians, mostly women and children. Iraqi human rights activists gave Human Rights Watch similar estimates.

Members of one Yezidi group documenting violations gave Human Rights Watch a database with 3,133 names and ages of Yezidis they said Islamic State had kidnapped or killed, or who had been missing since the Islamic State assaults of early August, based on interviews with displaced Yezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan. The list included 2,305 people believed to have been abducted - 412 of them children. Thirty-one of these people were also on the lists given to Human Rights Watch by relatives of the detained.

Detention of Other Minorities

The vast majority of Islamic State prisoners are Yezidis, but the group has captured smaller numbers of other religious and ethnic minorities, according to community leaders, human rights activists, and interviews with relatives of detained people. A leader of the Shia Shabak community said he had a list of 137 men who were missing since Islamic State took control of their areas east of Mosul in August. Another Shabak activist said the group was holding up to 150 Shabaks.

Human Rights Watch separately interviewed four Shia Shabak men who, in total, said Islamic State fighters had captured 17 of their relatives between June and August. One of the men said the group took five of his sons on July 3 from the village of Omar Kan near Mosul.

Human Rights Watch in July reported Islamic State's roundups of scores of Shabak and Shia Turkmen men near Mosul, many of whom remain missing and are presumed dead by community leaders. The group has also detained a smaller number of Iraqi Christians, according to Christian activists in Iraqi Kurdistan.

One Christian woman from the predominantly Christian town of Qaraqosh in northwest Iraq told Human Rights Watch that on August 22 Islamic State fighters forced her and the few other remaining Christians in the town to leave. As they were forced onto a bus, one fighter forcibly took away her 3-year-old daughter, she said. A man who witnessed the incident, interviewed separately, corroborated her account.

Detention Conditions

Islamic State forces are detaining people in multiple locations, most in the northern cities of Mosul, Tal Afar, and Sinjar, but also in smaller Iraqi towns such as Rabi'a, near the Syrian border, and in areas the group controls in eastern Syria, according to the two current and 16 former detainees, as well relatives of detainees and local and international human rights activists. They said the group is holding prisoners in schools, prisons, military bases, government offices, and private homes. Some relatives of detainees said they had received complaints of scarce food and water.

To evade detection and air strikes, Islamic State has moved its captives from place to place, packing them into trucks and buses, the escapees and relatives said. "We were sitting on top of each other" during one trip, said Naveen, the mother of four.

Conditions were just as crowded in some of the improvised detention facilities, escapees and relatives of those still held said. Ghazal, a 17-year-old who escaped, described conditions at a hall in Mosul where she said the group took her at the start of her 22-day detention:

There were so many people that we couldn't move, and some of the children couldn't breathe very well. There were old women and young children. We were so crowded we were sleeping on top of each other. We had no beds, no blankets.

Speaking by phone in September, one detained woman held in a private house told Human Rights Watch that Islamic State guards did not allow the captives outside. "We can't leave the houses," the woman said.

"Sometimes we sneak out to see what's going on, but whenever we see them coming, we immediately run back inside. If they saw anyone outside, they would kill them."

Relatives of detainees said their family members told them their locations during phone calls. The current and former detainees told Human Rights Watch and their relatives that they knew their locations from road signs and other markers.

Escapees and the relatives of those still detained said that Islamic State fighters had allowed many detained families to keep and use their phones for calls to relatives. Other detainees told their relatives that they hid their phones and used them surreptitiously. At times, Islamic State members have provided phones for detainees to speak with their families, they said.

Some detainees called frequently but others had called only once or twice. Several families interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had heard from detained relatives recently, but others had not heard from their relatives at all or in more than a month.

Extended Families Abducted

Some family members of detainees told Human Rights Watch that Islamic State members had rounded up dozens of their relatives at once, including grandparents and mothers with newborn infants. Khider, the man held by Islamic State for eight days, said the group had taken 72 of his relatives and forced them to drive in their own cars to a school in Syria where they were imprisoned.

A man from another village near Sinjar said Islamic State was holding 65 of his relatives, 17 of them children. He showed Human Rights Watch the list of names. A third man showed Human Rights Watch a list of 37 detained relatives, 23 of them children, whom he said Islamic State had seized all together.

In one room of a schoolhouse sheltering displaced Yezidis in Duhok, one family gave Human Rights Watch the names of 42 relatives they said the group had seized on August 3 in a town in Sinjar district. Islamic State fighters killed 16 immediately and imprisoned the remaining 26 - all women, girls and young children, including two infants - only one of whom escaped, the family members said. When one of the family elders asked the children in the room how many of them had a father who was killed by Islamic State, more than 20 stood up.

Taking Away Boys and Girls

After separating captives into groups, Islamic State in some cases took away young boys and girls, seven escapees said. Naveen told Human Rights Watch that she saw the group's fighters take away all boys ages 10 and up:

In Badoush prison I also saw them take away boys. They said they were taking them for religious education. From my room, they took six or seven boys. All of the boys they took were about 10 or 11. I dressed my [10-year-old] son like a girl to hide him.

Rewshe, the 15-year-old girl who said she escaped from Islamic State detention on September 7, said fighters had held her in four different locations prior to her transfer to Syria, including a period in Badoush prison in Mosul with hundreds of other Yezidi men, women and children. At some point between August 22 and 24, she said, she watched from the prison courtyard as Islamic State fighters took more than 100 boys, some as young as 6, from their mothers:

They took the small boys from their mothers. If the mothers refused, they grabbed the children by force. They slapped protesting mothers, shot their guns in the air, and said, "We'll kill you if you don't [let your children go]."

Layla, 16, said Islamic State fighters seized her with her mother and 13-year-old sister from the Sinjar

area on August 3. The fighters first took away her mother, then her sister, and then took Layla to a house in Rabi'a, where a man locked her up and forced her to cook and clean for him, Layla said.

First, Layla said, Islamic State fighters transported the three of them, along with hundreds of other women and girls, in a bus convoy to Mosul, with black banners flying from the vehicles. A few days later, the fighters took away all the older women, including her mother. Layla cried as she described her 22-day ordeal:

They took my mother right from my hands. I tried to stop them but they took her by force. I have no idea what they did with her. They took other women around the same time the same way. All those left in the hall were young ladies. I wished I were dead.

Layla said the fighters then transferred her and her sister to a building with a large hall in Mosul, where they held them with about 200 young women and other girls. There, she said, fighters would come in to choose a woman or girl to take to their house:

Every night the armed guards would say, "The mujahidiin have arrived!" They would enter the hall and pick those they desired, sometimes with force, other times just by pointing at them. When we asked the guards what was happening, they would say, "They are taking them to help the mujahidiin at their houses." I became very afraid. My body started shaking. All night long I held my sister's hand in one of the corners of the hall.

Over the next several days, Layla said, the fighters bused her and her sister, along with several other girls and young women, to Tal Afar, then back to Mosul, then again to Tal Afar, telling them on that trip, "You will be going to Tal Afar to serve the mujahidiin." There, the Islamic State held them with about 100 other girls and women who had been transferred from several different locations, she said. One girl was "crying all day," she said.

A few days after they were taken to Tal Afar, Layla said, the fighters took away her 13-year-old sister, saying they were sending her to a fighter in Rabi'a. A few days after that, Layla said, some men drove her and Shireen, 17, to Rabi'a as well and locked them in a house to clean and cook for two fighters. The two fighters "carried many weapons, machine-guns and hand-grenades, and binoculars and multiple mobiles," she said.

The following day, Layla said, she and Shireen stole one of the men's cellphones, and called relatives, who gave them directions to the home of people they knew in Rabi'a. The girls slipped out a back door with a faulty lock.

Shireen said she had no memory of her last two days of captivity in Rabi'a. "I lost my mind. I don't even know how I got here," she said from a shelter in Iraqi Kurdistan. Her one memory of the escape, she said, was of the other teenage girl who had been captured with her "carrying me out on her back."

Forced Marriage

Seve, a 19-year-old woman who escaped in late August, told Human Rights Watch that she watched Islamic State fighters shoot and kill her husband before capturing her on August 3 outside their village near Sinjar. She said the fighters then took her to a house in Mosul, where they forced her and several other young women and girls to marry them in group "weddings." She described several group weddings, including the one in which she was "married" to a fighter:

It was supposed to be a wedding party. They were tossing sweets at us and taking photos and videos of us. They forced us to look happy for the videos and photos. The fighters were so happy; they were firing shots in the air and shouting... There was one woman from Kocho who was very beautiful. The leader of the fighters took her for himself. They dressed her up like a bride.

Seve said the fighter who "married" her took her to a house where "he told me he would teach me about Islam." At the house, she said he tried unsuccessfully to rape her:

His name was Zaid. He tried to take me [sexually] by force. I told him, "I will not marry you. I am already married." The man got angry with me and said, "I will sell you to a Syrian man. ... I will kill you."

Seve said a few days later she managed to escape from the house while the fighter was asleep.

Navi Pillay, the then-United Nations high commissioner for human rights, stated in August that her office had received reports from two families that Islamic State members had raped two boys. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported in August that it had gathered "appalling accounts of killing, abduction and sexual violence perpetrated against women and children," including one from a 16-year-old girl who said Islamic State fighters had forced her and other women and girls to provide sexual services under a forced marriage.

Sales of Women and Girls

Rewshe, the 15 year old, was one of three escaped women and girls who told Human Rights Watch about Islamic State fighters selling female captives. She explained in detail how a fighter in Raqqa, Syria, said he had bought her for US \$1,000, and how guards said fighters had bought 20 other women detained with her.

Naveen, the woman who said she escaped Islamic State captivity with her four children, said the group detained her for about 10 days in the end of August at a school in Tal Afar with more than 1,000 other people. She said she saw men whom she called "friends" of Islamic State come to the school and buy young women and girls, without specifying how many women and girls were taken away.

Seve, the 19 year old who escaped, said that one night on or around August 14, Islamic State fighters took away 26 young women and teenage girls from the house in Mosul where they were being held. The men said they had come from Syria and were taking the women "to sell them in the Syria slavery market," Seve said.

According to the United Nations, a teenage Yezidi girl reported that Islamic State fighters abducted hundreds of women and eventually transferred them to the town of Ba'aj, west of Mosul. The girl told the UN that various fighters had raped her several times, and that then the fighters sold her in a market.

Risk of Suicide

Khudaea, a Yezidi man, told Human Rights Watch that in early September he received a desperate call from his captive 19-year-old sister. It was the sister's first call since Islamic State captured her on August 3:

She said a young fighter who had been guarding her gave her his phone and told her, "Call your family and tell them, 'This is my last message, because I am going to be married by force to this fighter.'" She told us, "I just want to see you one last time and then I will kill myself."

The woman escaped before the marriage took place, Human Rights Watch later learned from a family member.

Relatives of a 16-year-old Yezidi girl, Fatee, who had been married for two months when Islamic State fighters captured her on August 3 in Sinjar district, said they received a similar call at the end of August. The girl's sister, Khansee, told Human Rights Watch that the family learned Islamic State had captured Fatee when they called her husband's phone on the morning of August 3:

A man answered the phone. He said he killed my sister's husband and took my sister. We heard nothing

for 27 days. We thought she was dead. We called many, many friends and relatives but no one had heard from her. Then one day she called. She said, "If they try to force me to convert to Islam I will kill myself." We have not heard from her since then.

Humanitarian aid workers in Iraqi Kurdistan told Human Rights Watch that three Yezidi women who said they had escaped Islamic State detention had attempted suicide in camps for displaced Yezidis since early August, and that one of them had succeeded.

Yezidi custom forbids marriage to people of other religions. In describing to Human Rights Watch the forced marriages of female relatives held by Islamic State, many Yezidis made reference to Du'a Khalil Aswad, a 17-year-old Yezidi girl whom a mob of Yezidi men stoned to death in 2007 for seeking to marry a Muslim youth. A video of the "honor killing" circulated on the Internet.

The killing of Aswad sparked reprisal attacks on Yezidis by some Sunni extremists, Yezidi community leaders said. Two recently escaped female Yezidi prisoners told Human Rights Watch that their captors said they were holding them "to avenge Du'a."

Escapees and relatives of those captured or killed said they had received almost no medical services or counseling since fleeing Islamic State military advances. Regional authorities and medical staff working in the camps and shelters for displaced people that Human Rights Watch visited expressed frustration at the lack of medical aid.

Forced Conversion

All seven people who escaped Islamic State captivity said the group's fighters had pressured them to convert to Islam. "You will be safe if you convert," one woman said fighters repeatedly told her. People whose relatives were held captive also said their family members had told them over the phone that they were being forced to convert.

Khider, the 28-year-old Yezidi man, said Islamic State members forced him and other captives to pray five times daily and recite the shahada (the Muslim creed) multiple times during his detention in Syria and in northern Iraq. He showed Human Rights Watch a video that Islamic State recorded and posted on militant websites of the forced conversion of about 100 Yezidi men in which he was forced to participate. "They forced us to shake hands with them and said, 'Welcome, you are brothers,' but it was propaganda," Khider said.

Salim, the father of another captured Yezidi man, Jirido, pointed out his son in the same video. Salim said Islamic State had captured Jirido on August 3 when he went to his hometown in the Sinjar area to help his wife and her family. On September 3, Salim said, Jirido called him from a building in a village near Tal Afar where he said Islamic State was holding him, and the father asked to speak with one of the guards.

"I asked him to take me instead of my son," Salim recalled. "He said he's not authorized to arrange that but he'll ask his emir [commander]." Salim said he later spoke with the commander who spoke Arabic with a foreign accent. "He said I must give them two daughters for my son," Salim recounted. Salim said he refused.

International Law

Under international law, crimes against humanity include the crimes of persecution of a religious group, unlawful imprisonment, sexual slavery or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity when committed in a systematic or widespread manner as part of the policy of an organized group. Some specific abuses against civilians committed by members of Islamic State, as an armed group in a conflict, may amount to war crimes if committed with criminal intent, such as violence to life and person, including cruel treatment, and outrages against personal dignity.

Forced marriage violates the right to freely consent to marriage as set out in article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 10 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

Recommendations

Islamic State should immediately reunite children with their families, end forced marriages, stop sexual abuse, and release all civilian detainees. International and local actors with influence over the group should press for those actions, Human Rights Watch said.

The United Nations Human Rights Council on September 1 ordered a UN investigation into serious crimes by Islamic State. That investigation should be prompt and thorough, and expanded to include serious abuses by Iraqi state forces and allied Shia militia.

Iraq should become a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to allow for possible prosecution of crimes such as war crimes and crimes against humanity by all parties to the conflict. The authorities could give the court jurisdiction over serious crimes committed in Iraq since the day the ICC treaty entered into force, on July 1, 2002.

Local and international humanitarian agencies working in Iraqi Kurdistan, including United Nations agencies, should increase medical and counseling services for displaced people who fled Islamic State military advances. Agencies should pay special attention to the needs of survivors of sexual violence, who should receive comprehensive post-rape care. These services should place a high priority on victims' confidentiality and privacy in line with international standards, and should provide them in a manner that does not reinforce stigma or expose victims to reprisal.

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