



Iraq: ISIS Abducting, Killing, Expelling Minorities

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 19 July 2014

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: ISIS Abducting, Killing, Expelling Minorities*, 19 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53cf79964.html> [accessed 4 August 2014]

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) is killing, kidnapping, and threatening religious and ethnic minorities in and around the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Since capturing Mosul on June 10, 2014, the armed Sunni extremist group has seized at least 200 Turkmen, Shabaks, and Yazidis, killed at least 11 of them, and ordered all Christians to convert to Islam, pay "tribute" money, or leave Mosul by July 19.

On June 29, ISIS abducted two nuns and three Christian orphans, whom it held for 15 days. Around that same time, ISIS issued orders barring Yazidi and Christian employees, as well as ethnic Kurds, from returning to their government jobs in Mosul, two regional government officials and a priest told Human Rights Watch.

Virtually all Turkmen and Shabaks - tens of thousands of families - have fled their communities near Mosul as a result of ISIS raids, in which the fighters seize local men and pillage homes and places of worship, residents of those villages said. Mosul's few remaining Christian families also have fled, local priests said.

"ISIS should immediately halt its vicious campaign against minorities in and around Mosul," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Being a Turkman, a Shabak, a Yazidi, or a Christian in ISIS territory can cost you your livelihood, your liberty, or even your life."

Local Shabak and Shia Turkmen representatives told Human Rights Watch that they have received reports from Sunni contacts that ISIS has killed many of the men taken prisoner. ISIS has summarily executed Shia captives several times in Iraq, for example killing soldiers en masse in Tikrit, 180 kilometers north of Baghdad, after taking that city on June 11. It reportedly killed at least 40 Shia Turkmen, including children, in four communities near the city of Kirkuk, about 100 kilometers southeast of Mosul, on June 16.

ISIS has also tortured some of its detainees, Human Rights Watch said. In June, ISIS captured 28 Yazidi border guards and held them hostage for ransom for up to 25 days. Two of those guards told Human Rights Watch after their release that ISIS repeatedly beat the Yazidis with guns and sticks, and called them "infidels."

On July 14, three days before it issued its decree on Christians, ISIS began placing marks on minorities' properties to designate them as Christian, Shia Shabak, or Shia Turkmen, and levying a "jihad tax" on the few remaining Christian merchants, Christian residents and religious authorities told Human Rights Watch.

The group seized the buildings of the Chaldean Catholic archdiocese and the Assyrian Orthodox diocese in Mosul on June 29, several residents, government officials, and religious leaders told Human Rights Watch. They said that ISIS took down or destroyed six religious and cultural monuments in the city, including a statue of the Virgin Mary and an Islamic grave site. ISIS also destroyed or damaged at least 13 Shia mosques and shrines in areas outside of Mosul between June 24 and July 2, they said.

Some strict interpretations of Islam prohibit the depiction of people or animals in statues and art, or worship at the graves of venerated people - a common practice in Sufi and Shia Islam - on the belief that Muslims should only worship Allah.

ISIS, which formed in April 2013 and on June 30 changed its name to Islamic State, has captured broad swaths of Syria and Iraq and claims that it is establishing a caliphate in the region. It is the latest of several armed extremist Sunni groups to have systematically killed and threatened Iraq's Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Shia Shabaks and Turkmen, and Yazidis, labeling them crusaders, heretics, and devil-worshippers, respectively.

Iraq's Christians are Assyrians, known as the Church of the East, or Chaldeans, an Eastern rite of the Catholic Church that broke away from the Assyrians. Yazidis, ethnically linked to Kurds, practice a 4,000-year-old religion that centers on the Peacock Angel. Shabaks have ethnic ties to Kurds, Turks, and Persians; the majority are Shia and the rest are Sunni. A majority of Turkmen, of Turkic ethnicity, are Sunni, and the rest are Shia.

These religious minority groups, concentrated in the Nineveh Plains surrounding Mosul, have been historically marginalized. Many of their communities are now flashpoints in the ISIS battle against Iraqi government forces. ISIS and its extremist Sunni precursors have largely targeted Shabaks and Turkmen who are Shia, not Sunni.

The laws of war ban all parties to a conflict from targeting, intentionally damaging, seizing or destroying religious, cultural and historic properties, provided they are not used for military purposes. Freedom of belief and religion itself is a fundamental human right, and under international law there can be no derogation, or partial suspension or repeal of the right, in times of conflict or state of emergency. Under the laws of war the convictions and religious practices of civilians and all detainees must be respected. Discrimination on the grounds of religion is strictly prohibited.

Murder of civilians, taking hostages, and the torture or killing of detainees, including captured combatants, as well as pillaging, constitute war crimes.

ISIS has also targeted Iraqi police and security forces, many of them Shia, ordering them to "repent" at designated mosques in Mosul and the nearby city of Tal Afar for following state law rather than Sharia (Islamic law), or face death. Under that threat, hundreds of security officials and soldiers have "repented," local residents told Human Rights Watch. But a relative of one Mosul policeman told Human Rights Watch that he fled instead after learning that two of his fellow police officers, both Shia, were found dead in late June in Mosul even though they had "repented" a few days earlier.

In late June and early July, ISIS seized 15 to 20 Sunni military officers or leading members of the banned Baath Party of former President Saddam Hussein, two regional government officials and three local activists told Human Rights Watch. ISIS released some of them but it has also taken in dozens of other former military officials and Baathists for hours of questioning, the two regional officials said.

The detained Sunnis included Gen. Waad Hannoush, once a top commander under Saddam Hussein, and Saifeddin al-Mashhadani, a Baathist whom the US included on its list of "most-wanted" Iraqis following its 2003 invasion of Iraq, the two officials and Reuters news agency reported.

Baathists, who are largely secular, and former military officials under Saddam Hussein supported the ISIS takeover of Mosul at first and may have helped curb the group's abuses in the area, several opposition regional government officials told Human Rights Watch. Indeed, ISIS initially told Yazidis and Christians that they were "welcome" in Mosul and had "nothing to fear" from ISIS, members of the two communities told Human Rights Watch. The group's abuses against minorities - though on a lesser scale than the violations the group has committed in neighboring Syria - and its roundups of ranking Baathists since then suggest fractures in the local Baathist-ISIS alliance.

ISIS should immediately cease its campaign of kidnapping, killing, and seizing or destroying the property of religious minorities, Human Rights Watch said. Regional Sunni authorities and members of other Sunni armed groups allied to ISIS should also press the group to stop its targeting of religious minorities and desecration.

"ISIS seems intent on wiping out all traces of minority groups from areas it now controls in Iraq," Whitson said. "No matter how hard its leaders and fighters try to justify these heinous acts as religious devotion, they amount to nothing less than a reign of terror."

Please see below for more information.

Human Rights Watch spoke with about 40 regional government and religious officials, residents, witnesses, survivors of ISIS targeting, local human rights activists, and journalists during a two-week trip to northeast Iraq in June and July, 2014. Many of the interviews took place in Yazidi and Christian communities or areas where displaced Shia Turkmen and Shabaks were receiving shelter. Others spoke with Human Rights Watch by telephone.

83 Shia Shabaks Kidnapped; 7 Bodies Found

Between June 13 and July 10, ISIS rounded up at least 83 Shia Shabak men from villages on the eastern outskirts of Mosul, according to two Shabak members of a regional committee formed to investigate the men's fate, as well as relatives of five men. Seven of the men were later found dead and the rest remain missing, the committee members and relatives said.

The first roundups of Shabaks took place from June 13 to 23. During that time, ISIS kidnapped at least 11 Shabak men from Gogjali, a village two kilometers east of Mosul's eastern perimeter, and three nearby communities, Paratapa, Bazwaya, and Tubruq Ziyara, the government official and local Shabaks said. Another six Shabak residents remain unaccounted for and relatives suspect ISIS also took them, they said.

Sunni residents found the bodies of five of the Gogjali men several days after they were taken, in isolated areas of eastern Mosul, all shot in the back of the head, the committee members and two relatives of the slain Shabaks said. Relatives arranged with local Sunnis to bring the bodies out because the relatives feared they would be killed if they entered Mosul to retrieve the bodies.

Human Rights Watch spoke to two relatives of three of those victims. One relative said that ISIS kidnapped two of his relatives at a checkpoint on June 14 as they were taking supplies to other relatives who had fled Mosul. He said another Gogjali resident witnessed the men's capture and informed the family.

"Four days later, we heard they had been killed and dumped at Al-Karama cemetery," on the eastern edge of Mosul, the relative said:

We cannot describe how these bodies looked when we received them. Really they have been killed in a brutal manner. One of them was shot in the back of the head. I don't know how many bullets but many. The younger one, he was shot in his back and the back of his head. And it appeared they had smashed his hands with a block.

The bodies of the three other Shabaks from Gogjali were found in the same cemetery or other abandoned areas of Mosul, their relatives said. They included a 30-year-old baker, whose relative told Human Rights Watch that gunmen in a Humvee and two civilian vehicles took the man away on June 15 after accusing him of taking weapons from a government military base. The vehicles bore ISIS's trademark banners that bear the Islamic creed, "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God." The relative said neighbors standing nearby told him what happened next:

One of the gunmen said, "These guns are public property. You should give them to us." He replied, "I don't have any guns. I am just a baker." They took him away in their cars. Three days later his body was found in the Al-Karama cemetery. When we were finally able to get his body back, we saw that he had been shot in the back of the head.

At dawn on July 2, about 60 vehicles, including ISIS-confiscated police cars and army trucks, rolled into the village of Omarkan, another predominantly Shia Shabak village, about 12 kilometers east of Gogjali, said a local witness, a regional government official and a relative of a local man whom ISIS had taken that day. The vehicles carried fighters in military uniforms and dishdasha, a traditional men's dress; some wore masks, and at least two vehicles bore ISIS black banners, the witness and regional official said.

The fighters called out the names of Shia Shabak men, rounded up 35 of them, and pillaged the homes of Shia Shabaks, the witness said. The fighters also set fire to the local Shia shrine of Imam Abbas, and damaged the Ahmad Idris mosque, which was under construction, the three sources said.

Before taking the local men later that morning, the fighters told all Shia families to leave before Friday prayers two days later, on July 4, the local witness said. He said that he escaped the roundup because he happened to be at the home of a neighbor who is not a Shia Shabak:

I heard them call my name but since I was not in my house I did not come out. They made chaos in the village. They were shooting in the air, going from home to home. They went to my house and broke and stole a lot of things. They took around 100 sheep and cows from one prominent family. They took seven new cars also, and Kalashnikovs and other arms from army members and political party members. They were very happy when they found these arms.

They said, "Shia Rafidah [a perjorative term for Shia Muslims], you shouldn't be living here, leave by Friday." Before they left they tried to make people chant, "Islamic State! Islamic State!"

All 250 Shia Shabak families in the village fled immediately, the three sources said.

On or around July 5, residents discovered the bodies of two more Shabak men in an isolated area of al-Hawi, an ISIS-controlled village about 12 kilometers northeast of Mosul, the two Shabak

committee members said. The men were from the nearby village of Jiliokhan and had been missing for five days, they said.

75 Shia Turkmen Seized; 2 Bodies Found

Since June 23, ISIS has kidnapped at least 75 Shia Turkmen from the villages of Guba and Shrikhan and the city of Tal Afar, according to regional government officials, local activists, witnesses, and relatives of the missing men who spoke to Human Rights Watch.

ISIS carried out a violent, three-day kidnapping and pillaging spree in Guba and Shrikhan, adjacent farming villages five kilometers north of Mosul that began on June 23. The group kidnapped at least 40 Shia Turkmen, dynamited four Shia places of worship, and ransacked homes and farms, according to nine displaced residents, two local activists, local journalists and a regional government official. All 950 Shia Turkmen families fled the villages on the orders of ISIS. On June 28, Human Rights Watch documented the attacks.

On June 29, a relative of two of the kidnapped men told Human Rights Watch that his relatives' bodies had been found three days earlier in a valley two kilometers north of Guba:

They were shot in the back of the head. One of my relatives, who went to get the bodies, told me he saw 10 more bodies on the side of the road in the same valley, but he did not dare stop to look at them to see if they were our relatives and neighbors from Guba and Shrikhan.

The displaced residents told Human Rights Watch they heard from the few remaining villagers, all Sunni, that ISIS said they had killed many of the others who had been taken, but that in most cases the villagers had not been able to locate the corpses.

In Tal Afar, a predominantly Shia Turkmen city 50 kilometers west of Mosul, 35 Shia Turkmen have disappeared since ISIS captured the city on June 16, according to an activist, a local journalist, and six relatives of ten missing men. Many of those captured were local law enforcement officials, the sources said.

In one family, four missing Turkmen were Iraqi policemen and one was a government soldier, two relatives said. On June 26, acquaintances called the family to tell them they had seen the five men inside a Sharia court that ISIS had created in Tal Afar, but the men had not been seen since, one relative said.

A local human rights activist and a journalist from Tal Afar said ISIS had set up a Sharia court in the city's castle, a compound that previously housed an Iraqi government counterterrorism unit where pro-government gunmen shot dead at least 51 Sunni prisoners hours before ISIS captured the city. ISIS had also designated two mosques at which former security officials were required to "repent" for having worked for the state, they said. The journalist said ISIS was going street-to-street with lists of names, checking for anyone who had worked with the police, the military, or the counterterrorism unit.

Another Turkmen resident of Tal Afar told Human Rights Watch his brother and four nephews disappeared on June 20 while trying to flee to the west along a road on which ISIS had established multiple checkpoints. He said one of the missing men was an Iraqi soldier, one was a teacher, and the others ran a photocopy service.

"Every time the phone rings we think someone is calling to say they are dead. Please, please, help us find our missing relatives," the man said.

Between June 25 and July 2, ISIS destroyed nine Shia mosques and shrines in Tal Afar, the journalist, activist, and other residents said. Since ISIS took over the city, more than 90 percent of the local Shia Turkmen - at least 125,000 people - have fled, two regional officials said.

51 Yazidis Seized, 2 Killed, 21 Still Held or Missing

Since June 10, ISIS has kidnapped or captured at least 51 Yazidis across Iraq, more than half of them members of security forces and the rest civilians, according to four Yazidi community leaders and activists. They said ISIS had summarily executed at least 2 of the captives, both national guardsmen, and released 27 other Yazidis, all but three for ransom. The other 21 Yazidis remained missing.

Yazidis are among Iraq's most marginalized groups. Many work as farmhands or border guards.

The vast majority of the Yazidis were captured in or around Sinjar, a predominantly Yazidi town 125 kilometers northwest of Mosul, and in Mosul, while nine were taken from elsewhere in Iraq, they said.

On June 13, heavily armed ISIS fighters in military vehicles bearing the group's signature black banners seized several dozen border guards, including 28 Yazidis and 12 Shia Arabs, during clashes outside Ba'aj, near Syria's northwest border with Iraq, according to the Yazidi community leaders, activists, and two border guards who were later freed.

ISIS freed all of the Sunni border guards immediately, the two former captives said. Twenty days later, it began releasing 24 Yazidis in small groups over five days in exchange for a ransom payment totaling nearly US\$1.2 million, the community leaders said. The four other Yazidi border guards remain captive and the fate of the 12 Shia border guards remains unknown, they said.

The two freed Yazidi border guards told Human Rights Watch that ISIS held the prisoners in a former military hospital in Al-Shadadi, a town the group controls in Syria about 50 kilometers from the Iraq border, and subsequently in Tal Hamees, another Syrian town about 125 kilometers further north. The two former prisoners said that for the first several days their captors beat them - including when they first captured and handcuffed them - and that after the beating stopped, the captors insulted the prisoners' religion. One freed border guard said:

They hit us with sticks, batons and military belts all over our bodies. They called us infidels, atheists and Rafidah.... Every day they invited in Chechens, Afghans, and other foreigners speaking languages that we did not recognize. They would tell them, "Here are the Yazidi infidels." Sometimes they would whip us and slap us as they did that. It was as if we were in a zoo, being shown to all these strangers.

If the captives asked a question ISIS did not like, the prisoners would get "a push or a violent beating," he said. Once, he said, ISIS left a Syrian soldier in the Yazidis' cell overnight. "They had broken all his fingers," he said. "We were afraid to speak with him. He moaned in pain."

The worst abuse took place during the first 13 days of captivity, before ISIS learned it would receive ransom payments for the captives, the two freed border guards said. "We spent 13 hard days - every day felt like a month of time, of fear, and looking over our shoulders day and night," said the second freed guard.

The second freed guard said the captors also included Tunisians, Pakistanis, and Europeans, most of them bearded and dressed in traditional dishdasha, but that most were Iraqi. He said that one of the ISIS members, who served as the local "emir," would "curse" Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia, and ask, "How is it that Yazidis serve in his armed forces?" The freed border guard said that he replied, "We served in the army because we have no other way to make a living."

On June 13, the day ISIS kidnapped the border guards, two Yazidi members of the Iraqi National Guard disappeared while stationed at government buildings in Mosul, a Yazidi leader and a relative of one of the two men said. The two men were from a village outside Sinjar.

Ten days later, a Sunni contact informed the men's families that the two men's bodies were in the Mosul morgue and helped them retrieve the bodies. The men had been shot in the head, execution-style, the relative said. The relative and Yazidi community leaders blamed ISIS for the killings, noting that ISIS controlled Mosul at the time the two men disappeared.

On June 20, ISIS kidnapped two friends - a boy and a young man - and an olive-oil merchant at a Mosul checkpoint as they were about to drive to their home village of Bashiqa, about 25 kilometers east of the city. ISIS held the three incommunicado at two detention centers in and near Mosul before releasing the boy and his friend on June 29 and the merchant on July 5, without demanding ransom.

The merchant told Human Rights Watch that ISIS "beat me with sticks and guns" during his first three days of captivity. The boy, 16, told Human Rights Watch that he and his 19-year-old friend were not physically abused or threatened, but that they were terrified that they might be harmed simply because they were Yazidis:

When they checked our identity cards they said, "You are Yazidi. What are you doing in Mosul?" We said, "We just wanted to come into the city." They said, "Okay, come with us." At first we thought maybe they would just take us to court and let us go. But as time passed our fear became greater that we might not get out of there.... When they finally let us go, they told us, "Don't come back to Mosul again."

The prisons bore ISIS black banners but the captors told the boy and his friend, "Do not call us Da'ash," using the Iraqi acronym for ISIS, which Iraqis consider pejorative: "They said, 'We are mujahideen [warriors defending Islam], we are here to protect your country and your home.'"

Christians Threatened, Kidnapped; Properties Marked, Seized

Starting July 14, two local Christian authorities told Human Rights Watch that ISIS had painted a number of homes in Mosul with the letter "N" for Nasrani (Arabic for Christian), as well as the phrase, "Properties of the Islamic State." In some cases ISIS took over the homes, they said. Christian websites posted photos of two of the properties. ISIS painted some homes of Shia Turkmen and Shabak during the same period with the letter "R" for Rafidah, they said. At the same time, ISIS members began telling local Christian merchants they would have to convert or pay a "jihad tax" to remain in Mosul.

ISIS also ordered Christians to attend a meeting with them on July 16 in Mosul to discuss the "status" of Christians, but Christians refused, an Assyrian party leader from the city told Human Rights Watch.

The following day, ISIS circulated a decree in Mosul that noted the failure of Christians to attend the meeting. The decree formalized three options for Christians in the "Caliphate of Nineveh" (ISIS's name for Mosul): convert to Islam; pay a "jizya," a special tax paid by non-Muslims to an Islamic state; or leave by noon on July 19. If Christians fail to comply, "then there is nothing to give them but the sword," said the decree, which was shared with Human Rights Watch by local Christians and posted on Christian websites.

The decree bore ISIS's black logo and said the expulsion date was set by "Caliph Ibrahim" - a reference to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed leader of ISIS.

On July 17 and 18, some Christians fleeing Mosul reported that ISIS stole their gold, jewelry, or other valuables at checkpoints, two local Christian authorities told Human Rights Watch.

Long before taking Mosul, ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups were taxing many government and private businesses, including those of Sunnis as well as Shias, Yazidis, and Christians.

However local priests and government officials said the new taxation appeared to specifically target Christians.

Human Rights Watch spoke with one Christian merchant who said two men who identified themselves as "Islamic State" came to his cellphone shop on July 14 and told him he would have to pay US\$200 to \$250 a month to keep open his store, "because you are not a believer." The merchant said he initially tried to argue with the two men, although one was armed:

I told them, "I already have permission to run this shop." They said, "Your permission expired - that was Maliki's permission." One of them took my hand and said, "Take my advice, pay the tax or do not open your shop after today." I told them, "Okay, let me check with my father on that." Later that day I took all of my mobile phones and accessories out of the store and I left town.

On June 29, ISIS kidnapped two nuns, ages about 40 and 60, three Christian orphans, including a 12-year-old boy, and two 20-year-old women, three Christian religious authorities and two acquaintances of the nuns told Human Rights Watch. ISIS released the nuns and orphans on July 14.

A priest from the region, who was briefed by local Catholic authorities on the case, told Human Rights Watch that ISIS seized the nuns and orphans as they were buying gasoline in Mosul. He said the nuns and orphans were about to drive to Talkaif, a town eight kilometers northeast of the city that has sheltered Christians and other minorities since the ISIS takeover.

The priest said the elder nun, who ran the Maskanta Chaldean Church orphanage in Mosul, was on the phone when ISIS fighters kidnapped her from s al-Sa'a neighborhood:

She was buying fuel at a gas station. She was talking on the phone with another nun and was telling her, "The people here say the so-called revolutionaries [a reference to armed Sunni groups in Mosul] have run away." As soon as she said that, the line went dead. We heard later that the terrorists took her at that very moment.

On June 29, the day the nuns and orphans were kidnapped, ISIS seized the Mosul properties of the Iraqi Chaldean Catholic archdiocese, the priest and Emil Shimoun Nona, the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul, told Human Rights Watch. The same day, ISIS also occupied Mosul's Church of St. Ephrem, the seat of the Syriac Orthodox archbishopric, Christian religious officials said. Archbishop Nona said that the gunmen arrived at the Chaldean archdiocese compound in the morning:

Four cars came to our seat. Each car carried three gunmen, most with masks. They broke open the doors and took some small statues from inside the property and broke them outside. They took control of the premises and they placed their black banners on the roof and the entrance. They told neighbors, "This is our property, don't touch it."

ISIS also removed a statue of the Virgin Mary from the grounds of al-Tahira church near Imam Mohsen mosque, one of the mosques that ISIS has been using for Muslim "repentance" ceremonies, one religious and one civil society source told Human Rights Watch. The statue is one of five symbols of Mosul's cultural and religious heritage that ISIS has desecrated, according to residents, regional government and religious officials, and photos posted on social media.

The militants also destroyed an Islamic grave site known as the Grave of the Girl [Qabr al-Bint], where women pray for fertility. ISIS toppled a statue of Abu Tammam, a 9th century poet who converted from Christianity to Islam, removed part of the tomb of Ibn al-Baytar, a 12th century Arab philosopher, and removed a statue of Othman al-Mousuli, a 19th century composer, but did not destroy them.

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