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Apparently indiscriminate firing during fighting on October 16, 2017, in a town near Kirkuk involving the Kurdistan Regional Government's Peshmerga forces and various [Iraqi](#) government forces left at least 51 civilians wounded and five dead, Human Rights Watch said today. Iraqi forces in control of the town, Tuz Khurmatu, subsequently let civilians loot property unimpeded for at least a full day before taking action. Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government forces should take all feasible steps to minimize civilian casualties and prevent looting.

"Iraqi and Kurdish forces need to resolve the current crisis in ways that fully respects human rights and avoids harming civilians or their property," said [Joe Stork](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

Tuz Khurmatu, an ethnically mixed Kurdish, Turkmen, and Arab town in the disputed territories around Kirkuk, 65 kilometers south of the city, had been under the joint control of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) forces, the *Popular Mobilization Forces* (known as the PMF or Hashd al-Sha'abi,) and local police, and the scene of sporadic [clashes](#) over the last three years. Fighting again erupted on October 16, 2017, as Iraqi forces asserted control over the city of Kirkuk and other disputed areas. According to three medical workers at a Turkmen-run hospital, fighting on October 16 left five civilians dead, and 51 wounded.

Human Rights Watch spoke to three men wounded by apparent indiscriminate fire during the clashes. "Hamid," said that at about 3:45 a.m. he, his brother, and his mother were sitting in the living room of their home in a Turkmen neighborhood when, he said, "there were two blasts all of a sudden and I lost consciousness. I woke up at about 4:30 a.m. at the hospital, bleeding from my head and the left side of my torso."

When Hamid returned home that night, he saw two large holes in their living room roof. "I don't know why our house was hit," Hamid said. "There was no fighting nearby, nor any military installations that I know of."

"Nadim," a Turkmen living in another Turkmen neighborhood, said he was in his garden at 4 a.m. when a mortar landed next to him, hurling metal fragments into his right hand and leg. Nadim said that as the mortar landed, he saw an ongoing battle between Peshmerga forces and PMF about 300 meters from his home.

"Ammar," a Turkmen, lives in the same neighborhood, about 500 meters from the local headquarters of the Badr Organization, one of the most prominent PMF groups. Ammar said he and his brother were awakened at 5:30 a.m. by heavy fire. Just as they went outside, a projectile landed about two meters away. Metal fragments wounded Ammar's left hand and head, and both of his brother's legs. Worried about continued gunfire, they stayed inside their home until 11 a.m. before fighting in the area abated and their neighbor drove them to the hospital, he said.

Human Rights Watch was unable to determine if there were casualties among Kurdish or other civilians in Tuz. Four Tuz residents said the clashes were heaviest in the Turkmen neighborhoods because of the proximity to both PMF and KRG military and security installations. Two aid workers whose organizations work in camps for displaced families in Kirkuk said there was also fighting near Laylan 2 camp, 15 kilometers southeast of Kirkuk, killing or wounding two camp residents. Human Rights Watch was unable to obtain any specific civilian casualty numbers for other areas in and around Kirkuk.

On the morning of October 16, all remaining KRG forces and Kurdish residents fled Tuz Khurmatu. A resident said he visited the predominantly Kurdish northern neighborhood of al-Jumhuri, at around 4:30 p.m., and saw what he knew to be at least 10 Kurdish shops on fire. He saw two boys looting plastic building materials from another Kurdish shop nearby. He said three officers from the Iraqi Interior Ministry's Emergency Response Division were parked 20 meters away, watching the boys without intervening. A passer-by told him that the boys were taking revenge for looting and burning of Turkmen houses and shops by Peshmerga forces and armed Kurdish civilians in 2015 and 2016.

The resident said he saw a man coming from the direction of the shops in a car loaded with TVs, computers, and other electronics. The three Emergency Response Division officers waved the man past without questioning him. The resident said another civilian in the area had told him that at around noon he had seen a group of about 10 armed civilians in the same neighborhood looting homes but avoiding a few that had "Turkmen Shia" graffitied on them.

A United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) [statement](#) on October 19 said it had received allegations that about 150 homes were burned in Tuz on October 16 and 17 "by armed groups" and another 11 destroyed by explosives. In an October 17 news conference, Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi [acknowledged](#) incidents of abuse in Tuz saying he had given "strict orders to arrest anyone who endangers internal security, and attacks citizens, their property."

In the early hours of October 18, Ataf Najar, the local head of the Badr Organization, [publicly called](#) on all civilians in Tuz to stop looting, after which local police cordoned off the largest Kurdish neighborhood. The resident who had told Human Rights Watch about looting in one Kurdish area said he was unable to return to verify that looting had stopped.

Kurdish journalists and activists shared photos of the burned-out interiors of buildings with Human Rights Watch, saying they were from the city of Kirkuk. Human Rights Watch could not find any witnesses to the looting or burning of buildings in Kirkuk. Three international journalists who visited Kirkuk on October 17 and 18 told Human Rights Watch they had seen no signs of arson or looting inside the city. One said he saw a Peshmerga military base on the road to Erbil on fire, but did not know who had started it.

Iraqi authorities should investigate allegations of looting and destruction of civilian property and prosecute anyone responsible for crimes, and security forces should prevent any further looting, Human Rights Watch said.

Starting on October 16, Iraqi forces including PMF units retook other parts of the disputed territories under de facto KRG control since 2003, including Sinjar, Zummar, Rabia, Hasansham, Khazir, Dibis, Kirkuk, Taza Khurmatu, Jalawla, Khanaqin, and Mandali. The Peshmerga forces retreated after very limited engagements. Authorities should ensure the safety and security of the minority communities in these areas.

According to the United Nations, as Iraqi forces retook the areas an estimated [61,200](#) people fled their homes to stay with relatives in more stable areas, with some returning over the following days. Human Rights Watch did not identify any incidents of forced displacement.

On October 18, Iraq's Joint Operations Command, the Iraqi military's communications branch, issued a [statement](#) condemning coverage by two leading Kurdish outlets, Rudaw and Kurdistan 24, saying they had "continue to mislead public opinion and accuse the security forces of baseless accusations." The statement called on Iraq's Communications and Media Commission to monitor the outlets and bring legal action where their coverage has "threaten[ed] the civil peace."

Human Rights Watch has previously [raised concerns](#) over the media commission and its "mandatory" [guidelines](#), which unjustifiably restrict media freedom. The guidelines demand that media avoid making information about insurgent forces public and requires them to report on government forces only in favorable terms. Article 1 forbids media from broadcasting or publishing material that "may be interpreted as being against the security forces" and insists that they "focus on the security achievements of the armed forces, by repetition throughout the day."

"Lashing out against media unfavorable to Baghdad undermines the same authorities who are telling Iraqis they are protecting the rights of all of them equally," Stork said.

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