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Iraq/Kurdistan Region: Men, Boys Who Fled ISIS Detained - After Passing Security Screening, Taken from Displaced People's Camps

(Erbil) – [Kurdistan Regional Government](#) (KRG) forces are detaining men and boys who have fled the fighting in Mosul even after they have passed security clearances, Human Rights Watch said today. The KRG forces have detained over 900 displaced men and boys from five camps and the urban area of Erbil between 2014, when people fleeing the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) began arriving, and late January 2017. Detainees were held for up to four months without any communication with or update for their families.

Human Rights Watch interviewed the relatives of eight of these men and boys who had been taken from one of the camps on suspicion of affiliation with ISIS. Human Rights Watch also interviewed the relative of a displaced man detained by National Security Service officials at a checkpoint. The relatives said that KRG and Iraqi forces did not inform them of their detained relatives' whereabouts or facilitate any communication with the detainees.

"Displaced families told us they had trusted the security screening process and assumed their loved ones would be back within a day or two," said [Lama Fakih](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Now, months later, some of those same families are telling us that they would rather have stayed in Mosul and risked dying in an airstrike than to have their husband or son disappear."

In one case, KRG forces in December 2016 detained a homeopathic doctor who told them that he had been forced to treat ISIS troops. Asayish, KRG security forces, officers initially questioned and then released him in November, after a neighbor of the doctor, who was in the same camp, told the KRG forces that the doctor was innocent of any alliance with ISIS. His wife went to the Asayish office in the camp to ask about him, but said an officer told her, "Go away and stop asking about him."

In another case, the Asayish took a 14-year-old boy, Mahmoud, in mid-November after picking up his 22-year-old cousin, who had the same name as someone allied with ISIS. When the authorities realized the name mix-up, they freed the cousin but kept the 14-year-old. She said that when the officers came to take Mahmoud, she heard one officer asking the rest why they were taking such a young kid. "Since we have been at the camp, whenever he had to go to the bathroom, he asked me to walk him. He is a young, scared kid. I am so worried about him," she said, crying. This was only one of three times Asayish officers in the camp picked up the cousin because of his name.

And in a third case, the Kurdish authorities detained a young man who had gone to the camp marketplace in November to try to buy a cellphone. When his father tried to find out what happened to him, he was told: "Don't ask, if he didn't do anything wrong, then he will be fine. If he did do something wrong, then stop asking."

Human Rights Watch gathered reports of over 900 detentions from various sources, including camp-based actors, local communities, and camp residents. It was unable to verify how many of the detainees are still being held by KRG officials, whether any of them were allowed to communicate with their family members, and whether the families were informed of their whereabouts in any cases. Human Rights Watch has previously documented 85 other cases in which [relatives of terrorism suspects](#) said they were [in the dark](#) about the [fate and whereabouts](#) of [relatives detained by KRG](#) or Iraqi forces from camps and local communities. Detainees were held for up to four months without any communication with or update for their families.

Iraqi and KRG authorities should make efforts to inform family members, either directly or indirectly via local police or camp management, about the location of all detainees. The authorities should make public the number of fighters and civilians detained, including at checkpoints, screening sites, and camps during the conflict with ISIS, and the legal basis for their detention, including the charges against them. KRG authorities should ensure prompt independent judicial review of detention and allow detainees to have access to lawyers and medical care and to communicate with their families.

On October 17, 2016, the Iraqi central government and KRG, with the support of an international coalition, [announced the start of military operations to retake Mosul](#), causing over 150,000 residents to flee their towns and villages. Many ended up in camps for displaced people under the control of Asayish.

In late January 2017, Human Rights Watch spoke to 10 relatives and witnesses in the Khazir camp, 35 kilometers west of Erbil, who said they had all fled Mosul in November and December 2016. During their journey, they had been screened for possible ISIS-affiliation at multiple locations, including Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) checkpoints, and upon arrival at the camp by Asayish, and were cleared. But they said that weeks or months later, security forces took the six men and two boys from inside the camp, between two days and two-and-a-half months before Human Rights Watch spoke with the families. They all said that they did not know where the men and boys are being held and that they had not been able to contact them, despite their efforts to request information from the Asayish officers at the camps, who told them to stop asking about their whereabouts.

In addition, one man who fled Mosul with his cousin, "Faris," in early January 2017, said that National Security Service officials detained Faris at an Iraqi military checkpoint. The man said that one of the Iraqi security forces at the checkpoint was an old acquaintance of theirs, but had fallen out with them many years before when he had refused to let Faris marry his younger sister. The man who fled Mosul said the other man pointed to Faris and told the National Security Service officials that he was affiliated with ISIS, at which point they detained him, leaving his cousin no other choice but to leave for the camp. He and Faris's sister said they had heard nothing official about his whereabouts since then, and that he never had any affiliation with ISIS.

Enforced disappearances, which occur when security forces detain and then conceal the fate or whereabouts of a detainee, placing them outside the protection of the law, are violations of international human rights law, and can be international crimes. Depriving detainees of any contact with the outside world and refusing, when asked, to give family members any information about their fate or whereabouts can be indications that detentions are enforced disappearances.

Dr. Dindar Zebari, chairperson of the KRG's High Committee to Evaluate and Respond to International Reports, provided Human Rights Watch with [an explanation of KRG security force screening and detention processes for displaced persons](#) in late October. He stated that KRG authorities are committed to informing the families of detainees of the process and status but, "due to a lack of personnel and financial resources this task may at times be a difficult one."

"Iraqi and KRG authorities should make sure that their efforts to keep civilians safe from ISIS attacks don't undermine basic rights," Fakih said.