



Iraq: ISIS Advance Threatens Civilians

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 12 June 2014

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: ISIS Advance Threatens Civilians*, 12 June 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/539ea0d14.html> [accessed 5 August 2014]

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The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) has taken over many areas of Iraq, including parts of Mosul and towns in Salah al-Din province.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented crimes committed by ISIS in other areas of Iraq and Syria, including car and suicide bomb attacks in civilian areas, summary executions, torture in detention, discrimination against women, and destruction of religious property. Human Rights Watch has found that some of these acts may amount to crimes against humanity.

"The possibility that ISIS will repeat the atrocities it has committed in other parts of Iraq, and impose the same intolerant and abusive rule as it has in Syria, is deeply troubling," said Nadim Houry, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "But the Iraqi government needs to deal with the situation without the brutal tactics for which civilians elsewhere in the country have long been paying a heavy price."

In fighting ISIS and seeking to regain control of Mosul and other lost areas, Iraq's government should take all feasible measures to protect civilians, including not indiscriminately attacking civilian areas and ensuring civilians safe escape routes. While many Mosul residents fled the city, at least four people told Human Rights Watch that security forces prevented them from leaving.

On June 10, 2014, after ISIS took over key areas of the city, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki appeared on the state-owned Iraqiyya channel asking parliament to declare martial law. He called on all Iraqis to "carry weapons and fight ISIS," after reports that hundreds of soldiers had deserted and that the security forces had "collapsed." On June 11, Maliki announced the formation of a "reservist" army to fight ISIS, and centers opened in Basra, Najaf and other largely Shia areas to accept volunteers.

On June 9, after four days of fighting with government forces, ISIS took control of the western area of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, including its airport and the governor's office. Since then, ISIS has also taken over the town of Sharqat, in Salah al-Din province, and parts of Beiji, including an army barracks, a police station, and a power station that serves Baghdad, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk.

Human Rights Watch has not been able to investigate ISIS's actions in areas it has controlled since June 10, but media reports indicate that ISIS has kidnapped a Turkish consul, 24 of his consular staff in Mosul and the governor of Salah al-Din; and killed 15 soldiers in Kirkuk.

"I don't feel safe at all," one Mosul resident told Human Rights Watch. "I fear ISIS, they might kill me for any reason: because I worked as a government employee ... if they notice that I don't go to the mosque and pray as they want everyone to, [or] if my beard isn't long enough."

In May, before ISIS gained control of Mosul, Human Rights Watch had documented numerous abuses against local civilians by the group in the city and surrounding areas over the previous six months. These included 10 summary executions, two kidnappings, several attacks on journalists, and enforced taxation of local businesses. In ISIS-led operations in Syria, Human Rights Watch has documented systematic rights abuses including the intentional targeting and abduction of civilians. In Syrian areas under ISIS control, Human Rights Watch documented the imposition of strict and discriminatory rules on women and girls as well as the active recruitment of child soldiers with schooling campaigns and public events. On May 29, according to accounts from first responders and local Kurdish officials, ISIS forces entered the village of al-Taliliya near Ras al-`Ayn in northern Syria without resistance and executed at least 15 civilians, including seven children.

Human Rights Watch has also documented numerous abuses by government forces in their fight against ISIS and other anti-government armed groups in Anbar province and other areas throughout the country. Government security forces and pro-government militias have targeted civilian objects, used barrel bombs to attack residential areas, and illegally detained, tortured and extrajudicially executed an unknown number of people since the conflict in Anbar began in January.

Mosul residents reported to local media that security forces apparently carried out indiscriminate attacks in residential areas throughout the city on June 6, 7, and 8, after ISIS initially tried to take the city in the early morning hours of June 6.

Maliki's creation of a reservist army and incorporation of Shia militias into security forces risks further abuses, Human Rights Watch said. Based on Human Rights Watch interviews with more than 20 residents of towns around Baghdad, in the area known as the Baghdad "Belt," these militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and Kata'ib Hezbollah, conducted indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas, and have carried out numerous kidnappings and summary executions of Sunnis in the towns of Buhriz, Mada'in, and al-Heetawy, among others.

A Kata'ib Hezbollah fighter told Human Rights Watch on June 10 that members of the militia were taking part in the fighting in Mosul, and that three militia members had been killed. Human Rights Watch has not been able to independently confirm whether militias are fighting in Mosul or, if so, who ordered their deployment. But the government should not support or use armed groups responsible for widespread or systematic abuses, and risks being complicit in any further abuses if it does.

Iraqi authorities should protect civilians from indiscriminate attacks, arbitrary detention and summary executions, Human Rights Watch said.

All sides, including ISIS, government authorities and security forces in central Iraq and the Kurdistan region, should permit rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians in need. All sides also need to take all feasible steps to evacuate the civilian population from the vicinity of military objects.

The US, which has been a key supporter of Iraq's government, including providing weapons to the Iraqi army, should ensure that its military support is not used in violation of international humanitarian law or for serious human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch said. The US should

confirm that its equipment is not used in indiscriminate attacks or attacks targeting civilians, or to support pro-government militias that have committed widespread violations against civilians during a government offensive to retake areas in Anbar and Baghdad provinces.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) should publish as early as possible initial findings on any abuse committed in connection with the recent offensive, with a view to identify those responsible, as a means to advance accountability.

The UN Security Council should call on all parties to respect international law and to put human rights violators on all sides on notice that they could face sanctions. The Security Council should demand that the government of Iraq cease abusive tactics and hold abusers accountable.

"The last decade in Iraq has shown time and time again that offensives that alienate civilian populations set the ground for future battles," Houry said.

For more information on the ISIS takeover of Mosul and other areas, please see below.

ISIS takeover of Mosul and other areas

Residents told Human Rights Watch that 400 to 500 ISIS fighters attempted to take control of Mosul on June 6. They deployed in western areas of the city, killing at least four riot policemen and three soldiers, and in the south, where five suicide bombers stormed an arms depot, killing 11 soldiers, according to an account government security sources gave to Reuters. On the evening of June 6, according to the Reuters report, these sources claimed that "90 percent of Mosul was back under government control."

Three days of clashes between militants and government forces ensued, including an attack on a Mosul school on June 7, in which the school was "directly targeted by mortar fire," UNICEF said in a statement that did not say who fired at the school. Iraqi health officials reported that 17 people were killed in the attack, but did not specify how many were children or whether they were killed inside the school.

Human Rights Watch viewed a video that shows the bodies of at least a dozen men, women and children. According to the CNN report, the video was taken immediately after the attack on the school reported by UNICEF. A voice off-camera says they died in a government mortar attack, and shouts, "Show them.... See these children? See what's left from the mortar attacks? They are targeting women, and these dead children."

In the early morning hours of June 10, ISIS seized western areas of the city. A Mosul resident told Human Rights Watch, and a report released by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) indicated, that ISIS fighters took over banks and municipal buildings, and opened the Badoosh prison, releasing 2000 to 3000 prisoners. A resident of eastern Mosul told Human Rights Watch that friends living in western Mosul who witnessed the takeover told him that ISIS fighters were "protecting banks and other government facilities such as hospitals, water and electricity plants ... they are acting as if they are a real state." ISIS also took control of the Shirqat area and six other villages in Salah al-Din province, he said.

A Ramadi-based journalist told Human Rights Watch that after establishing itself in the western part of the city, ISIS announced it was "accepting volunteers" and offered a weapon to any volunteer to "maintain order" in Mosul while the group proceeds with its announced plan to take over the provinces of Salah al-Din, Diyala, Kirkuk, and eventually Baghdad. Six residents of Beiji, a city in Salah al-Din province, told Human Rights Watch that they fled the city on June 10 when ISIS arrived and appeared poised to take over an oil refinery in the city. ISW reported that ISIS seized a power station in Beiji that serves Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk.

"I don't feel safe at all," the Mosul resident told Human Rights Watch. "I fear ISIS, they might kill me for any reason: because I worked as a government employee ... if they noticed that I don't go to the mosque and pray as they want everyone to, [or] if my beard wasn't long enough." He did not know whether ISIS had killed any civilians or soldiers since it took over the western part of the city.

Another Mosul resident told Human Rights Watch that as of June 10, he had heard that ISIS had killed "only five or six people" who stole police cars to sell them later or sell them as parts, and killed an army colonel named Rayan, who was a former SWAT officer based in Mosul.

Two other Mosul residents told Human Rights Watch they feared the government's response. Between June 6 and June 8, according to Mosul residents and local media reports, the government carried out what appeared to have been a series of indiscriminate attacks. Helicopters fired on residential neighborhoods in the city using mortars and rockets, killing an unknown number of civilians, including women and children, according to a CNN report. Human Rights Watch has not been able to ascertain whether there were ISIS fighters in the areas Iraqi forces attacked.

Rudaw, an opposition Kurdish news agency, said that, "[Mosul] officials reported ... Iraqi army units aimlessly shelling populated areas for days," while ISIS "carried out most of its attacks ... in Mosul's west bank and the city center." On June 10, two Mosul residents told Human Rights Watch that they fled the western area of the city after ISIS took control because they feared imminent random shelling by government forces.

Based on statements from three residents to Human Rights Watch and numerous media reports, security forces have prevented people from fleeing Mosul. One resident of eastern Mosul told Human Rights Watch that security forces "detained" his family with dozens of others at the al-Ashiq checkpoint, near Tal Afar, for hours before the families gave up and decided to try to find another route out. "They told us they would not let us pass 'until they got their orders about what to do with us,'" he said.

In a tweet on June 10, Rudaw showed a photo of what the agency said were "several Iraqi soldiers and people of Mosul" drowning as they tried to cross the Euphrates into the Kurdistan region.

The resident told Human Rights Watch that thousands of people have fled to the eastern part of the city, while others without family ties in the east tried to leave Mosul:

I saw thousands of people stuck near Mosul's dam, and living in the open or in the road ... security forces prevented me and my family, along with many others, from crossing the Mosul dam. After that we made up our mind to head out for [the nearby city of] Dohuk but on the way, people told me that Dohuk is not allowing anyone in ... We all agreed to return to our homes, that it was better to die there than in the road.

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