

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Recruited Children as Fighters From Camp for Displaced People

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(Erbil) [Iraqi](#) government-backed Hashad al-Ashari militias detained and beat at least 22 men from two villages near Mosul. The militias also recruited at least 10 children in a camp for displaced people as fighters against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

[MENA-Iraq-Mosul-Hashad-Abuses-Nov-2016](#)

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Hundreds of men arrive at Hasansham camp for displaced persons after being screened by Iraqi Security Forces. 2016 Belkis Wille/Human Rights Watch

Civilians in ISIS-held territory in and around Mosul are asking themselves what will come next. The answer to that question should be greater respect for human rights, said [Lama Fakihi](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. For some civilians who have come under the control of Hashad al-Ashari militias, however, the change in guard has not meant protection from rights abuses.

On October 17, 2016, the Iraqi central government and Kurdistan Regional Government authorities, with the support of an international coalition, started military operations to retake Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, which ISIS captured in June 2014. The Hashad al-Ashari, made up of local Sunni fighters, have joined the fight and are playing a role in Mosul military operations against ISIS. They are being paid by Baghdad's Defense Ministry, two militiamen and two military analysts in Iraq told Human Rights Watch.

On October 21, 2016, the Hashad al-Ashari Fares al-Sabawy militia occupied Douizat al-Sufla, 48 kilometers southeast of Mosul, after ISIS pulled out, arresting more than 50 men and holding them in an abandoned house in the village, a local resident told Human Rights Watch. The local resident said that at least two of the men had been beaten. Some others were moved to another site and have not returned home.

On October 30, members of the same militia detained 20 residents of a neighboring village, Tal al-Sha'ir, after ISIS pulled out, also moving them to another village and beating them, two brothers who were among those held said. They said the men were rescued by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), who ensured they were no longer beaten by the militia and freed some of them, but took no action against the group that had detained and beaten them.

The Iraqi authorities should investigate any alleged acts of torture and cruel and inhuman treatment in custody and charge those responsible for war crimes, including anyone with command responsibility who should have known about the crimes and failed to take all reasonable measures to prevent them.

Civilians in ISIS-held territory in and around Mosul are asking themselves what will come next. The answer to that question should be greater respect for human rights. For some civilians who have come under the control of Hashad al-Ashari militias, however, the change in guard has not meant protection from rights abuses.

Lama Fakihi

Deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch also documented three recent cases in which children were recruited as fighters from Debaga camp for displaced people, 40 kilometers south of Erbil. One of those recruited said that he was among eight fighters under age 18 in a group taken from the camp. Human Rights Watch [documented](#), in October 2015, that some Popular Mobilization Forces militias, who are allied with the Iraqi military, also used child soldiers in fighting ISIS forces.

All security forces and armed groups should abide by international law and respect the absolute ban against torture and ill-treatment, and demobilize any fighters under age 18, Human Rights Watch said. The ban against torture and ill-treatment is one of the most fundamental prohibitions in international human rights law. No exceptional circumstances can justify torture. Iraq is a party to key international treaties that ban torture under all circumstances, even during recognized states of emergency, and require investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

The United Nations [Optional Protocol](#) on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which Iraq ratified in 2008, prohibits national armies and non-state armed groups from recruiting and using children under 18. As parties to the conflict, the United States and other coalition members conducting airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq should pressure Iraq's government and Iraqi militias to end child recruitment, immediately demobilize children, work to reintegrate them, and appropriately penalize commanders responsible for recruiting children, including those who volunteer.

The US should press the Iraqi government to ensure that the troops they are supporting don't have fighters under 18 in their ranks, *Fakihi* said. The battle for Mosul should not be fought with children on the frontlines.

Douizat al-Sufla

Douizat al-Sufla was taken by ISIS in June 2014. It is part of a group of villages known as Qatial-Sabaween a sector of the Sabawy tribe and the majority of local residents are part of the Sabawy tribe.

On October 21, the forces of Fares al-Sabawy came to the village. Human Rights Watch interviewed 10 local residents who said that about 12 militia fighters patrolled the village for four days, and that residents did not try to flee.

Ammar, a resident and distant relative of Fares al-Sabawy who spoke to Human Rights Watch over the phone, said that he saw a group of about seven fighters arrest at least 12 local males, including one who was 17, on the day they arrived; at least six more on the second day; and about 40 over the next two days, holding them in the abandoned home of a villager.

Ammar said he was in a market located opposite the abandoned home on the first day at about 7 p.m. when he saw a 38-year-old man arrested that day leave the building with dried blood all over his clothes. Avoid that house, if you get stuck inside you will be beaten, the man warned as he passed Ammar. Ammar said the man went home and had been too frightened to leave his house or speak to Ammar again.

Ammar saw another man, age 36, detained and released two days later. Ammar said he had blue bruises on his arms, but did not inquire about what caused the bruises.

On October 25, Ammar heard from one of the fighters that they had moved the detainees to a school in Saydawah, a village 1.5 kilometers away. They were apparently rescued by ISF but some are still being held.

Tal al-Shaeir

On October 30, fighters from the same militia came to the village of Tal al-Shaeir, 2.5 kilometers away from Douizat al-Sufla, Ahmad, a 27-year-old laborer, and his brother Ayman, 26, also a laborer, told Human Rights Watch separately on the phone. They said they knew the fighters personally and that the brothers were distant relatives of Fares al-Sabawy. The fighters knocked on their door and told them all the men in their family had to gather in front of the local school because a team of National Security Service (NSS) officers were there to screen the men of the village.

They said that they, their 15-year-old brother, and about 400 other men and boys from the village gathered in front of the school with at least 50 of Fares al-Sabawys fighters. The fighters called out 23 names, including the 3 brothers, loaded the 23 onto two trucks, drove them to Douizat al-Sufla, and held them in a house. They said the fighters released three males, one of whom had a relative in the ISF and one of whom was 15, then confined the rest in a room that was about 3-by-4 meters. Despite what the fighters said, the NSS officials never appeared for the screening.

Ahmad said that at roughly 1:30 p.m., he saw a man he knew personally enter the room holding a metal cable. He said:

He pointed at the face of me and my brothers, who were standing together, with the cable and said, We will deal with you. Then he started humiliating us with slurs about acts they would do to our mothers, our sisters.

Ahmad said that he and his brothers had previously come to blows with some of the Fares al-Sabawy militia fighters who assaulted them. They said they had grown up in the area with them and that they had fought over a car accident that killed the brothers uncle. Ahmad said that neither he nor his brothers had any links to ISIS.

Guards at the home then blindfolded and handcuffed all 20 men and took them to the school in Saydawah. As they marched the group into the school, Ahmad said that he was hit, punched, and slapped.

Ayman could tell from voices in the classroom that there was another group of prisoners in the room when they entered, who were shuffled out as his group was brought in. He said he heard one fighter say, Tonight at midnight we will come back and beat you.

A few hours later, the brothers heard a group of guards enter the room and then Ayman felt metal cables and a metal pipe being used to beat him. He said he also felt seven electric shocks. He said the beating lasted roughly two hours.

The men left but returned at 11 p.m. Fighters started beating Ahmad, who said he almost lost consciousness twice and lost count of how many times he was beaten. They did not beat Ayman a second time. After an hour, the brothers heard one of them yell, The army has arrived, and the beatings stopped.

Fifteen minutes later, they heard a new group enter the room, and Iraqi army officers removed their blindfolds. The officers asked the group, Why are you here? Who brought you? Are you ISIS? Have you been mistreated? The group said they had no affiliation with ISIS and that the Fares al-Sabawy forces had been beating them.

The ISF cleared them out of the room, without punishing or chastising the Fares al-Sabawy forces, as far as the brothers saw. They drove the groups of detainees from both villages, 46 in all, to a house in the village of al-Makuk 10 kilometers from Douizat al-Sufla and 2 from Tal al-Shaeir that the officers were using as a base. Ahmad said the soldiers gave them water and treated them well.

The next morning, October 31, the soldiers transported Ahmad and seven other men from Douizat al-Sufla from the house in al-Makuk to a base for the Peshmerga, the Kurdistan Regional Governments military forces, in the village of Salahiyah, about five kilometers from Saydawah, and from there to another Peshmerga base in Makhmour, 18 kilometers to the southeast. There, he said, Asayish, which are Kurdish security forces, interrogated the men, checked their identity cards, and then released him back to his village. He did not know if the others were released.

On the same day, Iraqi officers told Ayman and the rest of those still held in al-Makuk that transporting the rest of them to Makhmour would take too much of their time and that they would send paperwork there for a judge to sign for the release instead. On November 7, officers released him, his younger brother, another villager from Tal al-Shaeir, and three more from Douizat al-Sufla. He said that in all, 10 men had returned home to Tal al-Shaeir but that as of November 7, the soldiers were still holding 18 men from the 2 villages at the house in al-Makuk.

According to a recent Amnesty [report](#), Fares al-Sabawy forces also unlawfully detained, publicly humiliated, and tortured or otherwise ill-treated men and boys in al-Makuk.

Child Soldier Recruitment

During a Human Rights Watch visit to Debaga camp on October 28, a man from Nimrud, 30 kilometers southeast of Mosul, said that the Hashad al-Ashari Farsan al-Jubour militia, led by commander Ahmad al-Jubouri, had recruited two boys from his village as fighters a 16-year-old about four months ago, and a 14-year-old in early October. He said both boys told him they had been recruited in the camp.

A 17-year-old from Nimrud told Human Rights Watch that he had arrived at the camp on October 16, and within five days had registered to join a militia he did not know which one. He added his name to a list that fighters were passing around, and said that of the 31 names on the list before his, which included age, eight were younger than 18:

I am joining because this camp is miserable. I want to leave and make money. But since I have signed up, they havent deployed me yet, I am still waiting.

In August, witnesses and relatives [told Human Rights Watch that Hashad al-Ashari militias recruited at least eight other boys](#) from Debaga camp between March and August 2016.

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