**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Iraqis fleeing IS-held areas face torture, disappearance and death in revenge attacks**

Paramilitary militias and government forces in Iraq have committed serious human rights violations, including war crimes, by torturing, arbitrarily detaining, forcibly disappearing and extrajudicially executing thousands of civilians who have escaped areas controlled by the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS), said Amnesty International in a new report published today.

The report *‘Punished for Daesh’s crimes’: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces* exposes the terrifying backlash against civilians fleeing IS-held territory, raising alarm about the risk of mass violations as the military operation to recapture the IS-held city of Mosul gets underway.

The report is based on interviews with more than 470 former detainees, witnesses and relatives of those killed, disappeared or detained, as well as officials, activists, humanitarian workers and others.

“After escaping the horrors of war and tyranny of IS, Sunni Arabs in Iraq are facing brutal revenge attacks at the hands of militias and government forces, and are being punished for crimes committed by the group,” said Philip Luther, Research and Advocacy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“Iraq is currently facing very real and deadly security threats from IS, but there can be no justification for extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture or arbitrary detention.

“As the battle to retake Mosul gets underway, it is crucial that the Iraqi authorities take steps to ensure these appalling abuses do not happen again. States supporting military efforts to combat IS in Iraq must demonstrate they will not continue to turn a blind eye to violations.”

The report highlights widespread revenge attacks and discrimination faced by Sunni Arabs suspected of being complicit in IS crimes or supporting the group. Many were displaced during major military operations in 2016 across the country, including in Falluja and surrounding areas (in the governorate of Anbar), al-Sharqat (Salah al-Din governorate), Hawija (Kirkuk governorate) and around Mosul (Ninewa governorate).

The predominantly Shi’a militias involved in abuses, known as the Popular Mobilization Units, have long been backed by the Iraqi authorities, which have provided them with financial support and weapons. They were officially designated part of the Iraqi forces in February 2016.

The government’s responsibility for these violations cannot be ignored and states supporting or participating in the ongoing military effort to combat IS in Iraq should have rigorous checks in place to ensure that any support or equipment they provide does not contribute to abuses.

***Mass abductions, killings and torture***

Amnesty International’s research reveals that war crimes and other gross human rights violations were committed by predominantly Sh’ia militias, and possibly government forces, during operations to retake Falluja and surrounding areas from IS in May and June 2016.

In one shocking incident at least 12 men and four boys from the Jumaila tribe who fled al-Sijir, north of Falluja, were extrajudicially executed after they handed themselves in to men wearing military and federal police uniforms on 30 May. Men and older boys were separated from the women and younger children before being lined up and shot dead. At least 73 other men and older boys from the same tribe were seized a few days earlier and are still missing.

Militias also abducted, tortured and killed men and boys from the Mehemda tribe who fled Saqlawiya, another town north of Falluja. On 3 June, some 1,300 men and older boys were seized. Three days later, more than 600 of them were transferred to the custody of local Anbar officials bearing marks of torture on their bodies.

Survivors interviewed by Amnesty International said they were held at an abandoned farmhouse, beaten with various objects, including shovels, and denied food and water. One survivor said that 17 of his relatives were still missing, including his 17-year-old nephew. Another of his relatives had died, apparently as a result of torture.

“There was blood on the walls… They hit me and the others with anything they could lay their hands on, metal rods, shovels, pipes, cables… They walked on top of us with their boots. They insulted us, and said that this was payback for the Speicher massacre [in which some 1,700 captured Shi’a cadets were summarily killed by IS]… I saw two people die in front of my eyes,” he told Amnesty International.

A local investigative committee set up by the Governor of Anbar concluded that 49 people captured from Saqlawiya were killed – either shot dead or burned or tortured to death – and that 643 others remained missing. The government announced that investigations had been opened into the incident and arrests carried out, but has not disclosed any detailed information about findings or those detained.

The abductions and mass killings near Falluja are far from isolated incidents. Across the country, thousands of Sunni men and boys who fled IS-held territory have been forcibly disappeared by Iraqi security forces and militias. Most went missing either after handing themselves over to pro-government forces or were seized from their homes, camps for internally displaced people or at checkpoints or on the streets According to one local parliamentarian, since late 2014 members of the Hizbullah Brigades have abducted and forcibly disappeared up to 2,000 men and boys at the al-Razzaza checkpoint, which separates Anbar and Karbala governorates.

“The Hashd [militias] took our men away saying this was payback [for IS abuses],” said “Salma” (name changed to protect her identity), whose husband was seized at the al-Razzaza checkpoint with his two cousins in January 2016 as they fled IS rule.

“Iraqi authorities, whose complicity and inaction in the face of widespread abuses have contributed to the current climate of impunity, must rein in militias and make clear that such serious violations will not be tolerated. They must impartially and independently investigate all allegations of torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions,” said Philip Luther.

“Failure to do so will allow a vicious cycle of abuse, repression and injustice to continue and raises serious fears about the safety of civilians still in Mosul.”

***Torture and abuses in detention***

All males fleeing areas under IS control considered of fighting age (between roughly 15 and 65) are subjected to security screening by Iraqi authorities and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government to determine if they have links to IS. But the process is opaque and often deeply flawed. While some are released within days, others are transferred to security forces and detained for weeks or months in horrific conditions, without access to their families or the outside world, and without being referred to court.

The report reveals how security forces and militia members routinely torture or otherwise ill-treat detainees at screening facilities, unofficial militia detention sites, and facilities controlled by the Ministries of Defence and Interior in Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala and Salah al-Din governorates.

Detainees told Amnesty International they were suspended in stress positions for long periods, given electric shocks, beaten brutally or were taunted with threats that their female relatives would be raped. Many said they were tortured to “confess” or to provide information on IS and other armed groups.

Former detainees held by the Kurdish security forces (Asayish) in Dibis, Makhmur and Dohuk in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq also said they faced torture and other ill-treatment.

One man described being tortured at a facility controlled by Iraqi armed forces and intelligence near the village of Hajj Ali in June 2016 where more than 50 people were held in one room and subjected to repeated beatings:

“They beat me with a thick cable on the soles of my feet. I saw another detainee having a cigarette extinguished on his body. A boy of about 15 had hot wax poured on him. They wanted us to confess to being *Daesh*.”

Iraqi courts have a history of relying on coerced “confessions” to convict defendants of serious charges in flagrantly unfair trials – often sentencing them to death. So far in 2016, at least 88 executions have been carried out mainly on terrorism-related charges. Dozens of death sentences have been handed down and some 3,000 people remain on death row.

**Background**

The findings of this report were shared with the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities on 21 September. No response has been received from the Iraqi authorities. The Kurdish authorities responded largely denying Amnesty International’s findings.

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been forcibly displaced by Iraqi government forces and the Peshmerga (Kurdish armed forces), as well as militias, since mid-2014. Many are barred from returning to their homes, purportedly on security grounds or face arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on their freedom of movement. Often they are confined to camps with little prospect of gaining livelihoods or accessing essential services.

Public Document

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**For more information, an embargoed copy of the report or to arrange an interview please contact:**

Sara Hashash, MENA Media Manager on sara.hashash@amnesty.org or +44 (0)20 7413 5511

Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 (0)20 7413 5566 or out of hours: +44 (0) 777 847 2126 email: press@amnesty.org twitter: @amnestypress

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK