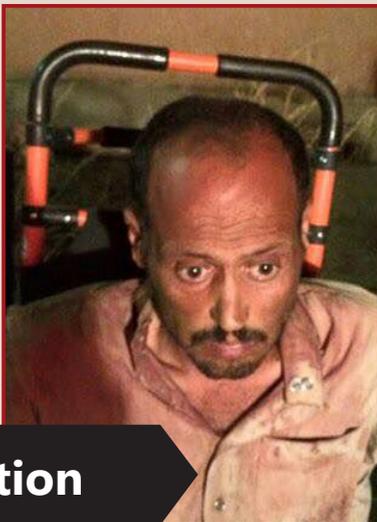




NO LIBERATION WITHOUT TORTURE

Government militia men
perpetrate string of rights
abuses in Saqlawiyah



Introduction

Nearly two and a half years after it fell into the grasp of the Islamic State (IS), the city of Fallujah has finally been recaptured by pro-government forces. The victory comes one month after Iraqi premier Haidar Al Abadi launched 'Operation Retake Fallujah' (ORF) – also referred to as 'Operation Breaking Terrorism'.

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Except for a few pockets of resistance, government forces – accompanied by militias serving under The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – have almost secured the entire city. The scale of destruction suggests that it may take years before residents can be returned home to their city. Residents have been

flooding out of western city; the first saw the displacement of 30,000 people. A week since 'victory' was announced, a further 850,000 people have been rendered homeless by the havoc wrecked in latest military campaign. Until the city is rebuilt, temporary tent-cities in Anbar will serve as their homes.

The growing number of destitute families is one of several concerns borne out of the last month of lethal combat. Notwithstanding Abadi's reassurances that militias would remain on the sidelines of the battle, these very groups have visibly fought at the front, and have now worked their way into the heart of Fallujah. Their

flags have been cited inside the western city, and their involvement has been widely noted, as well as their crimes.

Along their way through liberated towns and villages, militiamen have been arresting thousands of Sunni males, but without good cause. The government has defended the detention of these men on grounds of security checks, which have resulted in violent attacks against unarmed civilians. The line that distinguishes 'civilians' from 'combatants' has been entirely erased by these pro-government outfits, indiscriminately targeting a defenseless community.

Credible reports conducted by human rights organizations and FRB demonstrate that mass atrocities have been perpetrated by militia groups that work under the auspices of the PMF.

Crimes of the nature they have committed, undermine the moral responsibility of state forces in their responsibility to protect civilians. As long as these crimes continue unchecked, every victory secured by state forces, against IS, will be tarnished.

The earliest evidence of these atrocities arose days after Saqlawiyah's liberation on June 4. The physical consequences of torture on the bodies of men that have been released, as well as video recordings and testimonies published by online by activists and humanitarian agencies, is enough evidence to expose that crimes against humanity have been performed by state-backed and Iranian equipped militias.

Eye witnesses told FRB that militiamen had inflicted untold horrors on the men men they had detained from Saqlawiya and Garma.

Following the feat at Saqlawiyah, thousands of Sunni men fell into the custody of Shia militia fighters who spirited them away to secret locations. Hundreds more are missing still. The government claims that all men fleeing IS-controlled territories must be cleared, but also cautioned that they must be treated lawfully. Quite the opposite has been happening.

Without guaranteed protection, Iraq's Sunni's grow more distrustful than ever of their government's ability to curb violence against them. For them, Abadi's insistence



about minimal militia involvement has come to be viewed as little more than a deceitful promise. The reality of the situation reveals a wanton disregard for the rule of national and international law. Two days after the battle to reclaim Fallujah began, highly disturbing allegations were voiced by Aws Al-Khafaji – commander of Abi Fadhl Al Abbas militia; 1 of the 40 militia groups the PMU commands. He accused all of Fallujah's inhabitants of being terrorists, boasting of the 'opportunity to cleanse' Iraq from the 'tumour', referring to Fallujah city. No hate-speech charges have been filled against Al-Khafaji for his remarks.

While several arrests have been made against four men for the murder of 47 Sunni men, investigations that the political establishment has launched remain shrouded in secrecy.

of state backed militia forces in and around Fallujah makes it incumbent on Abadi to deliver justice to the families of innocent men killed savagely by militia forces, and to return the hundreds of missing men. The responsibility cannot be placed on hold any longer. It is time for the Iraqi government, with assistance from humanitarian organizations, to address the periodic complaints its Sunni community have



Out of an estimated 1,000 of the men that were kidnapped, 605 were released on 6 June. The remaining men are feared dead. The survivors FRB interviewed recounted harrowing tales of butchery, summary executions, and multiple kinds of torment, including rape and mutilation. One man described how he and others were 'forced to urinate in water bottles, and drink from them' to remain hydrated. Another man was allegedly forced to consume the blood of a friend of his that militias had murdered before him. Critical injuries were inflicted on others, beaten with sharp knives, cables, and metal pipes.

Once again, civilians are bearing the brunt of the war against IS. The involvement

expressed. The proceedings of it's investigations must be transparent and findings must be made public.

The following report has been compiled from information provided by eye witness accounts, personal testimonies, in addition to photographic and video evidence that archives the breadth and scale of savagery enacted against civilians. Criminal behavior of the kind reported to FRB undermines any advances made by professional Iraqi armed services, and risks sowing new seeds for future instability worse than the current situation Iraq is in.

Violence in Saqlawiyah

Recently reported criminal behavior performed by Iraqi forces and auxiliary PMF falls within a much larger trend of the misuse of security powers. Despite wide-scale recognition of their crimes, their heavy-handed tactics and unfiltered violence continues. A video leaked on June 9 shows a procession of blind folded men, accompanied by PMU soldiers, where one voice can be heard saying an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.

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The blind folded inhabitants which appear in the video, as survivors have lived to confirm, are Sunni residents for Saqlawiyah lined up in a manner mirroring the Speicher massacre in which IS brutally murdered Iraqi Shia cadets. Some were transported in trucks to abandoned house just outside of Saqlawiyah where torture was carried out, before being moved onto Tareq camp (Al Mazraa) where several massacres reportedly took place on June 2. This suggests that a thirst for punishment and revenge is shared among some members working under the PMU umbrella force.

According to anonymous source, a police officer who was present at the time of these massacres proceeded to inform the ministry of Defense but his testimony fell on deaf ears. At the time, defense minister Khaled Al Obaidi was out of Iraq, gathering regional support for the Fallujah Campaign. With no response from Mr. Obaidi, the officer turned to the Mhamda tribe, relaying information about violations perpetrated against their community. By 11pm, local timing, Sunni MPs in government rallied themselves to collectively call for an end to the killings. Surviving civilians were loaded back into trucks at 2am, crossing the Bzaibiz bridge where they were hosted by the Albu Issa. Shortly after then were transported to Amariyat Al Fallujah in the south to await medical treatment.

The first allegations against Shi'i (Iranian backed) militias surfaced on June 3, in the area of Saqlawiyah. A recently published Human Rights Watch report stated it 'received information alleging that members of the Federal Policy and PMF...had executed more than a dozen

civilians from the Jumaila tribe fleeing Sajar', north of Fallujah. On the same day Saqlawiyah was liberated – June 4 – (10 kilometers on northwestern edge of Fallujah), PMU forces started to separate the men of the northwestern town from their women and children.

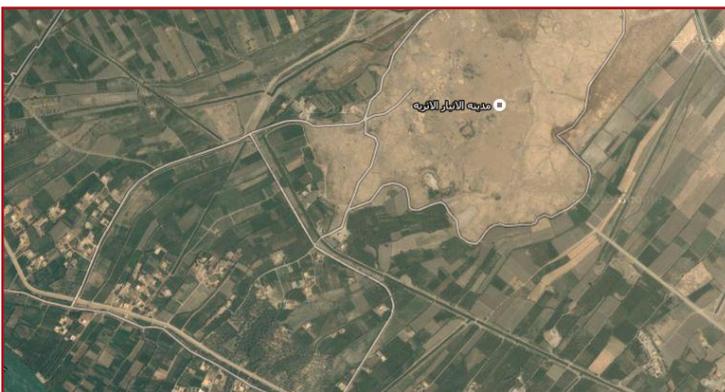
A week earlier on May 31,, the United Nations Refugee agency, UNHCR issued a statement in which is acknowledged the arrest of '500 men and boys over 12 years old'. The same statement defends the right of the Iraqi state forces to detain men for security clearing. One week after it's publication, news of serial torture and massacres against the same men militia's seized occupied news headlines.

Village elders with whom FRB spoke told us that an estimated 1,000 males, predominantly from Mhamda tribe, were spirited away to secret locations on June 4. While some have been released and are currently being held at Amariyat Al Fallujah, 300 have not returned. Another tribe whose men have disappeared without a trace is the Bekarra tribe.

Head of Bekarra Tribe, 55 year-old Sheikh Jawwad'

"It was June 4 when militias first entered our town. They came with megaphones – Badr brigades and Asa'ib Ahl Haq – the league of the unjust – and their men ordered us out of our homes. Residents surrendered unarmed, because not a single civilian so much as owns a weapon. First they separated the men and women. With them they had four mechanical earth diggers that dug out an enormous hole, that ran several meters deep into the ground. Everyone stood back bewildered. They blind folded and handcuffed the men, before hurling insults and charges of aiding IS their way. The first batch of 68 people they accused, were thrown into the trench they had dug, buried alive. In protest some of mothers and wives threw themselves in the trench. The remaining men (aged between 12 and 50 were) taken to unknown locations. 35 other men were also burned alive by these militia'".

Burial Site



Saqlawiyah is not the only site nearby Fallujah where unlawful killings reportedly happened. The men of Garma and Al-Azraqiyah have suffered a similar fate. FRB was able to obtain three interviews with men that were tortured during their unlawful detention by armed state forces.

**Testimony from survivor,
Yousif Shukr Mahmoud:**

"We thought the army was coming for us, it's on that basis that we came out. When we did come out we realized it was not the army. We appeared before militias. We had faith that we would be well treated by the army had they of greeted us, but the moment we saw militias we felt afraid. They were wearing camouflage uniforms but carrying militia flags. Some of them had beards, others didn't – they weren't uniform. To begin with they gave us water, but then they hung us and beat us with metal rods, then left us on the ground.

The following morning they brought a truck and loaded us onto it, filling it up way beyond its capacity – bodies upon bodies. The abuse started the minute we set foot on the truck, we were kicked as we made our way on. They instructed us to keep our heads down and to stay sitting, so we could not identify the location of where we were being taken. They drove for an hour and a half. The lorry stopped. People requested water which they were denied. When they brought out water

it was one bottle with a hole pierced through its bottom which they sprayed into our mouths.

The guard sat on top of the truck, said you will not see your families till we avenge those killed in the Speicher massacre, and our martyred men in Saqlawiyah and Si'chr. 'Only then will you be returned back to your families' he said. We imagined he was just trying to frighten us, but the reality turned out as he spelled out. We heard the wailing and screaming of men tortured in the house we were taken too – our fate will be like theirs we told ourselves.

They took us to a house, made up of six, five or more rooms. Each was packed full of people. That's where they beat people with water hoses, wire cables, and shovels. If you so much as ask for a bottle of water you will be humiliated and insulted till the point where you cannot respond. If you do, consider yourself dead. Before my own eyes I saw four men beat a man to death.

They picked him and took him out, not sure where."



Another survivor explained that orders were issued from Baghdad not to release any of the men from Al Garma, Saqlawiyah, Azragiyah and Fallujah. Torture was enacted also to extract false confession.

Mamhoush Al Naji described his experience:

"They laid us down on the car floors. With no space, we were piled on top of each other. He stood on my chest, then started stamping with all his weight. He broke my ribs, crushed my stomach, and pressed his boot hard against my neck. They beat us with metal pipes."

Conclusion

The presented findings throw a flood of light on serious violations carried out by auxiliary government forces against defenseless civilians. The allegations recounted by the men FRB interviewed are serious enough to warrant independent and transparent investigations. The government claims it has launched its own but the details of those enquiries remain shrouded in secrecy. Torture, as the reports demonstrate, is likely to happen in situations when men in their thousands are detained without good cause. Ill-treatment and brutality against civilians can be prevented if the government introduces oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability if crimes of the nature described above are committed. Any individual guilty of any crime should appear before a court. Even in the context of war, the due process of law and respect for human dignity should not be disregarded.

The government does not need law and order in the country to be maintained by unregulated militia. As many as 60 militias operate inside Iraq today, stoking fears and sectarian tensions nationwide. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi has a responsibility towards his people and must ensure justice for the latest victims of militia crimes.