

**For Immediate Release**

## **Iraq: Key Concerns for Impending Mosul Battle**

*Role of Abusive Armed Forces, Treatment, and Screening of Detainees*

(Beirut, October 6, 2016) – The [Iraqi](#) government should make a commitment to prevent any armed forces implicated in laws of war violations from participating in planned operations against the extremist armed group Islamic State (also known as ISIS) in Mosul, Human Rights said today in a [letter to Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi](#).

Those prohibited from participating should include elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a group of armed forces allied with the government known as the Hashd al-Sha'abi. The government should also ensure the protection of fundamental rights and nondiscrimination in security screenings and detention of people detained during the Mosul operations. Up to [1.2 million civilians are estimated to remain in Mosul](#), Iraq's second largest city, which ISIS captured in June 2014.

“Civilians in Mosul have suffered under ISIS rule for more than two years and will need support if the city is retaken, but risk reprisals instead,” said [Lama Fakih](#), deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch. “The last thing the authorities should allow is for abusive forces to carry out revenge attacks in an atmosphere of impunity.”

In the most recent operation against ISIS, to retake Fallujah in May 2016, Human Rights Watch [research indicates](#) that members of the Popular Mobilization Forces and in at least one instance Iraqi Federal Police officers [beat men](#) taken into custody; tortured, summarily executed, and forcibly disappeared civilians including children; and mutilated corpses. Human Rights Watch has previously reported widespread abuse by the Popular Mobilization Forces, including the [intentional destruction and looting](#) of civilian property in al-‘Alam, Amerli, al-Bu‘Ajil, al-Dur, and parts of Tikrit after retaking territory from ISIS in March and April 2015.

Al-Abadi should prevent armed forces under his command or control who have been implicated in laws of war violations, including the Badr Brigades, the Hezbollah Brigades (Kata'ib Hezbollah), and other groups within the Popular Mobilization Forces, from participating in planned operations to retake Mosul. The authorities should take steps to protect civilians fleeing and in camps from revenge attacks.

Human Rights Watch documented the recruitment of child soldiers by two government-backed tribal militias (Hashad al-Asha'ri) participating in the fight against ISIS. The Iraqi government should stop working with armed groups that recruit child soldiers and those that have failed to demobilize them.

The Iraqi authorities should [hold fighters and commanders](#) in the Iraqi security forces and militias accountable for any abuses committed during military operations and make public the results of investigations into these abuses.

In light of [violations in previous operations](#) to retake territory from ISIS, Human Rights Watch has also provided al-Abadi with recommendations to prevent abuses during any

screening and detention processes linked to the Mosul operation. If Iraqi and allied Kurdish forces set up centers to screen people who leave Mosul, only Iraqi Security Forces or Kurdistan Regional Government forces should operate them, not abusive armed forces. Authorities should ensure that the screening process is limited to a period of hours, and that anyone held longer is treated as detained and entitled to all protection of detainees under Iraqi and international law. No one should be presumed to be ISIS-affiliated or otherwise suspected of criminal activity based only on gender, age, religious sect, or tribal name.

Human Rights Watch noted with concern that under Iraqi law, the age of criminal responsibility is nine. If authorities screen children leaving Mosul and suspect that they were recruited or used as child soldiers by Islamic State, their treatment should focus on rehabilitation and social reintegration, not detention or prosecution.

The Iraqi authorities should promptly inform detainees of any charges against them and provide them with an opportunity to promptly challenge their detention before an independent judicial body, as required under Iraqi law. The authorities should allow independent protection monitors access to all screening and detention centers.

Since the Fallujah operation, al-Abadi's government [has refused](#) to make public any information on the number of people killed and detained during and after the operation despite numerous requests from Human Rights Watch. The authorities should make public the number of fighters and civilians killed or detained as a result of the conflict with ISIS, and the charges brought against those in detention.

"Iraqi officials operating the screening centers and detention facilities should appreciate how vulnerable fleeing civilians will be, and treat them with care, respect, and the presumption of innocence," Fakihi said.

**For more Human Rights Watch reporting on the upcoming Mosul operation, please visit:**

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/31/iraq-ban-abusive-militias-mosul-operation>  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/24/iraq-protecting-civilians-key-mosul-battle>

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