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IRAQ: BARWANA MASSACRE - BOTCHED INVESTIGATION, FAMILIES WAITING FOR JUSTICE

Government-backed Shi'a militias and security forces killed at least 56 – possibly more than 70 - Sunni Muslims in Barwana, a village west of Muqdadiya, in Diyala province, in the afternoon of 26 January 2015.¹ Fifty four witnesses – relatives and neighbours of 40 victims – told Amnesty International that members of militias and SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics, an elite force) and other government forces went to Barwana and called on the men to come out of their homes to have their IDs checked.² After the ID check, the men were told to go back home and some of the forces left Barwana, but some 15 minutes later militia and forces' members went house to house, told the men to bring their IDs, and led them away to different locations in the village. Shortly after, the villagers heard gunfire and screaming and after the perpetrators left, they found the bodies of their loved ones – shot dead, most of them handcuffed and some also blindfolded – in yards, fields, and other sites around the village. Nadia Jburi (not her real name),³ who lost 5 relatives in the massacre, including her husband and son, told Amnesty International:

“There were bodies everywhere. Tens and tens of bodies. Some by the rubbish dump, others in a field. I cannot forget the sight, heads exploded, contorted bodies, pools of blood. The children saw it too. The screams still ring in my head. It was unimaginable.”

The perpetrators, according to the witnesses, did not search the homes or question the families, and seemingly did not question the victims either, as they killed them almost immediately. Some of the victims, in addition to having been shot, also had deep cuts and one had several fingers amputated. Most of the victims were between 20 and 40 years old, but some were children, aged 16 to 17, and others were in their 60s.

Families of the victims said that most of the bodies were taken to a morgue in the nearby town of

¹ Most sources put the number of those killed in Barwana at 70 – 75. Amnesty International has documented 40 cases, most of them from families belonging to the Jburi tribe who lived in nearby villages but were sheltering in Barwana, and obtained credible information about 16 other victims, and received lists containing 15 other names of men also said to have been killed in the massacre, which it has not been able to verify to date.

² Relatives of the victims and other witnesses told Amnesty International that they mostly saw members of militias, wearing green and green and red bandanas and armbands, and SWAT government forces, and some said they also recognized members of the Muqdadiya police and of the army. According to the witnesses, those who led the men away from their houses, before the massacre were mostly militias and SWAT members.

³ All the names of the witnesses and the victims they refer to in their testimonies have been changed to protect the identities of those interviewed by Amnesty International because they fear for their safety. A list containing the real names of the victims appears at the end of this briefing.

Muqdadiya by the Muqdadiya police the following day and that it had taken them until the end of February to recover them for burial and that only the women had gone to collect and bury the bodies as the remaining male relatives were too scared of being targeted.⁴

Five of the victims were residents of Barwana while the rest were residents of villages in the nearby Sinsil valley who fled to Barwana between June and September 2014, after their villages fell under control of the armed groups calling itself the Islamic State (IS)⁵ and endured subsequent clashes between the IS and government forces and militias.⁶

The killings were possibly in revenge for the killings of members of Shi'a militias and government forces by the IS in previous days. Shortly before and after the massacre, army and militia spokesmen told the media that clashes with the IS in the Muqdadiya area had cost the lives of 58 to 70 men among their ranks – roughly the same number of those killed in Barwana.⁷

One of the forces leading the fight against the IS in the area has been the Badr militia, one of Iraq's most powerful Shi'a militias. On 29 December 2014, Hadi Al-Ameri, the Badr Brigades' Commander gave a video warning to the residents, saying:

“The Day of Judgment is coming very soon [...]. We warn all the families in the Muqdadiya area to leave. We will attack the area until nothing is left. Is my message clear?”⁸

On the day of the Barwana massacre he announced on state television: *“We managed, on January 25 and after three days' tough battle, to defeat the terrorists in northern Muqdadiya and we cleansed all the villages of Da'esh [The Arabic acronym for the IS]”⁹*.

After the massacre, the group's spokesman accused the Barwana victims of belonging to the IS and justified the killings:

⁴ At least 17 victims were buried the same evening in Barwana by relatives, and the remaining bodies were taken to the morgue in Muqdadiya by the police the following day.

⁵ Also commonly known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham).

⁶ Only one of the victims was not from the area, an Egyptian man who had lived in the area for over 30 years, working as labourer for local farmers. Barwana had a population of under 2,000, roughly two thirds of the resident Sunni Muslims and one third Shi'a Muslims. All the Shi'a residents and most of the Sunni residents left Barwana when IS fighters took control of much of the Sinsil area between June and September 2014. Residents of many of the Sinsil villages fled to Barwana, where residents said IS fighters were never based, though they made frequent incursions.

⁷ Al-Akhbar, “Iraqi forces retake villages as ISIS loses more territory in Syria”, 27 January 2015, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23412> (accessed 8 June 2015) and IBTimes, “Iraq: Shi'ite militia 'massacre 77 Sunni villagers' during Diyala offensive against ISIS”, 30 January 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-shiite-militia-massacre-77-sunni-villagers-during-diyala-offensive-against-isis-1485859> (accessed 8 June 2015)

⁸ Youtube, Hadi al-Ameri's words on the area of Muqdadiya, 29 December 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-osr7sXgUk> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2014).

⁹ Al-Akhbar, “Iraqi forces retake villages as ISIS loses more territory in Syria”, 27 January 2015, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23412> (accessed 8 June 2015).

"Those Barwana people who stayed belonged to the Islamic State...What were we to do? Throw roses to them, or kill them?"¹⁰

As information about the massacre reached the media, Iraqi officials gave contradictory responses. Lieutenant General Abdul Amir Al-Zaidi, Commander of the Dijla (Tigris) Operations Command who led the army operation in the Muqdadiya area, denied the allegations. "*Not a bullet was shot in Barwana,*" he told the news agency Agence France Presse (AFP), adding that 70 Iraqi forces were killed and at least twice that number of IS fighters in the Diyala operation.¹¹ However, on 28 January, Prime Minister Al-Abadi announced that he had ordered an investigation, a decision which was welcomed by the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq.¹²

In comments to *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper on 6 February, MP Hakim Al-Zamali, Chair of the Parliament's Security and Defense Committee, acknowledged the Barwana killings but raised doubts that the victims were civilians: "*But only 4 of those killed were Barwana villagers, the rest were from outside the village*",¹³ apparently suggesting that those who were not from Barwana were IS fighters. "*At this point we do not know whether those killed were armed fighters or innocents and we will need time to investigate fully*", he stated, adding that the Ministry of Health was conducting DNA tests to identify those killed.¹⁴ Also on 6 February the Iraq Press Agency reported that Prime Minister Al-Abadi had ordered the Commission of Inquiry into the Barwana Killings to follow up on the investigation in order to reach a speedy conclusion and bring the perpetrators to justice.¹⁵ On 20 March, al-Sumaria TV reported that the Parliament Speaker Salim al-Jburi had received the report of the Commission of Inquiry and submitted it to the Parliament's Security and Defense Committee.¹⁶

The contents of the report have not been made public. It is not clear, however, what the Commission of Inquiry or other investigators have done to identify the perpetrators and the victims, as none of the victims' families interviewed by Amnesty International in April had been contacted by the authorities, not even to give their testimonies and much less to provide DNA samples. The father of

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, "Pro-Iran militias' success in Iraq could undermine U.S.", 15 February 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqs-pro-iranian-shiite-militias-lead-the-war-against-the-islamic-state/2015/02/15/5bbb1cf0-ac94-11e4-8876-460b1144cbc1_story.html (accessed 8 June 2015).

¹¹ Mail Online, "Survivors accuse Shiite militia of Iraq village massacre", 29 January 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2931672/Survivors-accuse-Shiite-militia-Iraq-village-massacre.html> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2015).

¹² Ahram Online, "Iraq PM orders probe into Diyala massacre allegations", 29 January 2015, <http://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/2/8/121677/World/Region/Iraq-PM-orders-probe-into-Diyala-massacre-allegati.aspx> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2015).

¹³ *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, "Government forces not responsible for Diyala village massacre: official", 6 February 2015, <http://www.aawsat.net/2015/02/article55341185/governemnt-forces-not-responsible-for-diyala-village-massacre-official> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2015).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Iraq Press Agency, "Abadi calls on the Commission of Inquiry to identify the perpetrators of the Barwana massacre and bring them to justice", 6 February 2015 <http://www.iraqpressagency.com/?p=120767&lang=ar> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2015).

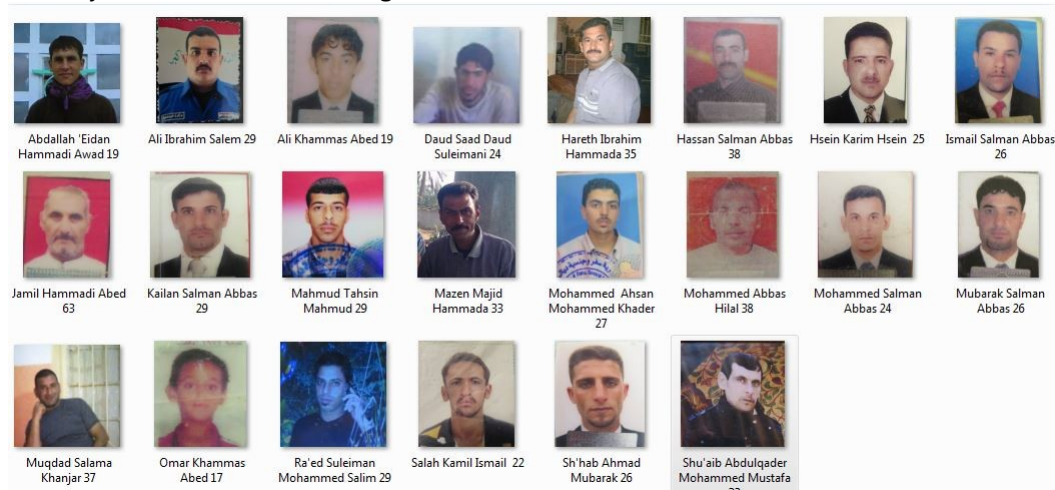
¹⁶ Al-Sumaria News, "Parliament speaker officially receives the report on the Barwana massacre", 20 March 2015, <http://goo.gl/XmAb1H> (in Arabic, accessed 8 June 2015).

five men who were killed in the massacre told Amnesty International:

“I don't know about the investigation. We heard that some parliamentarians and government officials visited Barwana but nobody came to ask me about how my sons were killed”.

The families were not informed of any other steps undertaken by the investigators.

Amnesty International wrote to the Iraqi authorities on 22 May 2015 requesting information about the findings of this Commission of Inquiry or of any judicial investigation that may have been carried out. No response was received at the time of writing. The killings in Barwana are serious violations of international humanitarian law and constitute war crimes. The Iraqi authorities should ensure that the allegations are promptly, thoroughly, and independently investigated and ensure that those responsible are held accountable. Countries which provide military assistance – including weapons and training – to the Iraqi forces must put in place robust oversight mechanisms to ensure that any equipment they provide is not used to commit human rights abuses and not diverted to other parties who may use it to commit human rights abuses.¹⁷



Some of the victims of the Barwana massacre © Amnesty International

Iyad Jburi, his son, son-in-law, and two relatives

Nadia Jburi told Amnesty International that on 26 January she was at home with her husband, four daughters, two sons, son-in-law, and grandchildren. She said the Mokhtar (village chief) had informed the residents that the army would come and check the IDs of men in the village. Shortly thereafter, large groups of men, some in uniforms, and some in civilian clothes, whom Nadia believed were militias, arrived to the village, checked the men's ID in the centre of the village, and told them to go back home. But then two men, one in uniform and one in a black t-shirt and military

¹⁷ Countries reportedly providing military assistance (including some or all of the following: weapons, munitions, other military equipment, training, direct participation through air strikes against IS targets) to the Iraqi government include: Albania, Australia, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Iran, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, United Kingdom, United States.

trousers, returned to her home. She said:

“They asked for the men’s IDs and told my husband, aged 64, my son, 36, and my son-in-law, 34, to bring their ID and follow them. They did not say why. They did not take my youngest son who is still a child. It was about 3.30pm. After a short while, we heard shooting and shouting. We were petrified. It went on for 20 to 30 minutes. We could not go out because the militias were around; we were scared. Then the militias’ vehicles left and soon after we heard women crying and we went out. Other women were coming out of the houses to look for the men. In the courtyard of an empty house four houses away from my home, I found the bodies of my husband, my son and son-in-law, and many others.

My husband had been shot in the back of the head and my son in the right side of his head, abdomen and chest, and had deep cuts on his face and neck. My son-in-law had a huge hole in the head, his brain spilling out, and bullet wounds and cuts to his chest, abdomen, pelvis and thighs. Their hands were tied behind their back with pieces of cloth. My husband was also blindfolded.

There were many other bodies in small groups around the courtyard. I counted 36 but I think there were others. Most had their hands tied behind their backs and some were blindfolded.”

Nadia said that, in another place in the village, she also found the bodies of two other relatives, both men in their mid-40s.

Five brothers from the Jburi family

Among those killed in the massacre were five brothers from the Abbas family, aged between 25 and 39. Sari Jburi, a relative of the five told Amnesty International:

“The militias and the SWAT called all the men to assemble in the centre of the village to have our IDs checked. They spoke to us in an insulting manner. Then they told us older men – six or seven of us – to go. I went back home and waited for the boys to come back. Given the militias’ behaviour, I expected that they would humiliate them, but I did not imagine that they would commit such a massacre, that they would kill them all. Hsein left seven children orphans, Khalil and Matar one child each. Our family has been destroyed. We knew in advance that the army was going to come to check our IDs and we didn’t try to run away or hide, because we had nothing to hide. We were not worried because we have done nothing wrong.”

The mother of one of the men said that she found the bodies of her son and his brothers in a nearby empty house:¹⁸

“After the shooting and the screaming of the men there was silence. Then the armed men left and the neighbours started to come out and I went out and followed them to an empty house nearby where I found my son and his four brothers lying dead in the courtyard. They were blindfolded and had their hands tied behind their backs. There were many other bodies next to them; more than 20 others. Some were lying face down, others on their back, or contorted; some had part of their heads missing. I can’t describe the horror; I’ve

¹⁸ The men have different mothers as their father has four wives.

never seen anything so horrific, so inhumane. I just don't know why they did this."

Sari Jburi said that in June 2014 the five men's father took his wives and younger children to a refugee camp in the north, while he, one of his wives and his older sons and their wives stayed in their village to look after their cows and goats until the end of September 2014. Then, as clashes between the IS and Shi'a militias and government forces intensified in the Sinsil area, they all fled to Barwana.

Abed Jburi, aged 17, and his brother Abbas

Samia Jburi lost two sons in the massacre: 17-year-old Abed and 21-year-old Abbas, who was married with a new-born boy. She told Amnesty International:

"Five or six men dressed in black and carrying machine guns and sticks came to the house and told my sons to bring their IDs and go with them. They were all masked except one, who people said is from Abu Sa'id, a village near Muqdadiya. After a short time, maybe 15 minutes, I heard shooting and screaming.

When the shooting stopped, I went out and found my boy's body by the rubbish dump at the beginning of the village, about 250 meters from our house. He had a big hole in the head, his brain was spilling out, and he had a large, deep cut on the neck. He was just a child, he was only 17. There were other bodies lying nearby. I then found the body of my other son in another part of the village in an animal pen. His head was completely smashed at the back, as if he had been struck with a heavy object. Next to him were eight other bodies.

No mother should ever have to live through such horror."

The boys' father, who was working in another town at the time of the massacre, told Amnesty International that at about 3.30 or 4pm on the day of the massacre, a man called him from his older son's phone and said, "We have killed your son", and then hung up.

Mutilated bodies of two cousins

Nada Mohammed, who lost her 28-year-old son Majid and 52-year-old cousin Khider in the massacre, told Amnesty International that at first two men in military fatigue with green-armbands went to her house and asked her about the presence of IS fighters in the village:

"I told them 'they did not come to our house and I did not see them'. They asked me why we didn't inform the government that IS fighters came to the village and I told them that there was a large army barrack with tanks right next to the village and they would surely know more about these things than me. They left and shortly after two SWAT members came and told my son and my cousin to follow them. Not much time passed and I heard repeated shooting nearby. I went out into the yard to see what was happening but several men standing outside motioned me to go back inside. Some were dressed in black, two with balaclavas, and two others had green headbands with 'Oh Hussein!' written on it in red. After they left and neighbours started to come out of their houses I also went out. I found my son's and my cousin's bodies in the yard of a nearby house. Majid had been shot in the back of the head and had two deep cuts, one vertical on the right side of his chest and one horizontal across his abdomen. Khider had been

shot in the face and the right side of his face was completely destroyed, and four fingers were missing from his right hand".

Two twins and their brother

Marwan, his twin brother Ali and their brother Adnan were among those killed. Marwan's sister-in-law, Sara Ahmad, told Amnesty International:

"From my window I saw Marwan, his two brothers, and their father being led away from their house across the alley by some soldiers and militias in black uniforms and military fatigue. There were others milling around. After, there was a lot of commotion for about half an hour or so, shooting, shouting, crying. After it finished, I went out with the other women and we found their bodies in the courtyard of a house nearby. All three had been shot in the head and Adnan also in the chest. I couldn't bring myself to look closely. There were many other bodies around and neighbours were covering them with blankets. I did not see their father, I thought he had also been killed but then I learned he had been released."

The men's father told Amnesty International that after checking his ID and that of his sons the militiamen and soldiers told him to go back home but kept his sons. *"When I walked away I had no idea that it would be the last time I saw my sons alive"*, he said.

Marwan's wife, Nadia Ahmad, told Amnesty International that she had given birth a few days earlier and was still in hospital in a nearby town on the day of the massacre: *"My husband was eagerly awaiting the arrival of our baby but now the baby won't ever know his father"*, she said.

Mohammed Dahman

Baldia Mehri, a mother of two young children, told Amnesty International about the killing of her husband, 31-year-old Mohammed Dahman. She said that the family had fled to Barwana in June 2014, when IS fighters had taken control of the nearby village where they lived. On 26 January, she explained, four men came to their home, two in black uniforms, masked, and two in military fatigues. She said:

"They told my husband to bring his ID for checking. It was about 3pm. After about an hour. I heard shooting and screaming very close to my home. I went out but as soon as I stepped out the soldiers and militiamen who were in the street told me to go back inside. The gunfire and screaming continued for half an hour or an hour; I don't know exactly.

Then silence fell and after the militias drove off I went to the nearby house from where the noise had come and I saw lots of bodies, but did not find my husband. It got dark and we could not go on searching, so I went back home.

We found his body the following morning in a field on the outskirts of the village. His t-shirt was pulled over his head. He had been shot in the head. Eight other bodies were next to his. He was just 31. Nobody has given me any reason for killing him."

A policeman and three relatives

Ali Jburi, a 30-year-old policeman and his two uncles, Wissam, 32, and Abed, 30, were also among the victims of the massacre. Ali's wife, Raja' Jburi, told Amnesty International:

“Ali and his two uncles went out of the house because the army had called for all the men to go have their ID checked. I saw them being led away by some SWAT. Then the SWAT came to the house and took my 18-year-old brother and brought him back. They did so twice, each time they only kept him for few minutes. Then we heard shooting and loud screaming coming from a nearby house. It lasted about 20 minutes or so. When the commotion stopped we waited in the house. I was scared that the militias would come and take my brother, or kill him. After a while, we heard noise from the neighbours in the street, women wailing, so I figured it was safe to go out. Some of the neighbours pointed to a house which was only one house away from my home. There, in the yard, I first found my husband. He was lying face down with his hands cuffed behind his back. He had been shot in the left side of his head, his left flank, and the palm of his left hand. Two fingers were missing from his right hand and he had a deep cut in his left hand. Nearby, I found our two uncles, Wissam and Abed. They had been shot in the head. They were both handcuffed but I don't know if they had been blindfolded and someone had already uncovered their faces, as people were looking for their relatives. Also, in the same courtyard, further away was the body of my cousin Aref Jburi. He was older, and has 6 children. He too had been shot in the head. I did not see his body as it had already been covered with a blanket.”

The father of Aref Jburi, who was 48 and a father of six, told Amnesty International that in the summer of 2014, when IS militants took over the area around his village, Aref sent his wife and children to a refugee camp. Aref himself went to Barwana with the cows which remained the family's only source of income.

BACKGROUND

Men from Sunni communities in and around areas where the IS has been operating, or where it has imposed its control, are often suspected of collaborating with the IS and many have been targeted by Shi'a militias and security forces. In the past year, these militias and forces have killed hundreds of Sunni men in collective massacres and individually with utter impunity, in apparent acts of revenge for the heinous crimes committed by the IS, and have used such crimes as a pretext to forcibly displace Sunni communities.¹⁹

Most Sunni residents of areas recaptured from the IS by Shi'a militias remain unable to return to their homes – explicitly barred from returning, scared of reprisals, or because their homes and property have been destroyed (some by members of the IS or as a result of the fighting, but most by the militias after the fighting had ended).

Shi'a militias have existed in Iraq for decades, but most established themselves after the US-led war in 2003. Their role increased at the height of the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian strife of 2006-2007, when the Shi'a militias and al-Qa'ida, as well as other Sunni armed groups, used to target each other's communities as well as US forces.

¹⁹ For more details see: Amnesty International, *Iraq: Absolute impunity: Militia rule in Iraq*, 14 October 2014 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE14/015/2014/en/> (accessed 8 June 2015).

The past year saw an unprecedented rise in power and prominence of the Shi'a militias, who filled a void left by an almost wholesale collapse of the Iraqi army and security forces in the face of the advance of the IS. After the IS had overrun large areas of Iraq in mid-2014, brutally and systematically targeting Shi'a and minority communities,²⁰ the Shi'a militias became the main force willing and able to fight the IS, halting its advance in certain areas and recapturing territory in others.²¹ They thus gained unprecedented power and legitimacy.

After the IS overran Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, on 10 June 2014, Iraq's supreme Shi'a religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, issued a religious edict (fatwa) calling men of fighting age to take up arms against the IS.²² Volunteers were supposed to be part of a new loosely defined *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Units/Forces, PMU/PMF), a volunteer force, not governed or regulated by any specific legal or institutional framework, but in practice they joined existing or newly-created militias, operating outside any legal framework. Militias acted independently of each other, though at times coordinating to varying degrees or operating alongside other militias and/or army and security forces on the battlefield or at checkpoints.²³ Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and of the Lebanese Hizbullah armed group have also been operating alongside Shi'a militias on the ground. Though not part of the Iraqi armed or security forces, Shi'a militias receive weapons, munitions and other military equipment from certain quarters of the Iraqi government.²⁴

Iraqi government officials have maintained that the Shi'ia militias are in fact no longer militias as they operate under the banner of the PMU/PMF, though this is not borne out by the manner in which the militias have been seen operating on the ground. On 7 April 2015, the Council of Ministers

²⁰ See for example, Amnesty International, *Northern Iraq: Civilians in the line of fire*, 14 July 2014, http://www.amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/northern_iraq_civilians_in_the_line_of_fire.pdf; Amnesty International, *Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State's systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq*, 2 September 2014, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/mde140112014en_0.pdf; and Amnesty International, *Escape from hell: Torture, sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq*, 23 December 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2014/12/iraq-yezidi-women-and-girls-face-harrowing-sexual-violence/> (all accessed 8 June 2015).

²¹ Similarly, the Iraqi army's withdrawal from northern Iraq left the Peshmerga forces of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in control of the whole northern sector – far beyond the areas hitherto administered by the KRG. For more information about the Peshmerga see for example: International Crisis Group, *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, 12 May 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf> (accessed 8 June 2015).

²² Ayatollah al-Sistani subsequently issued an "Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields", 12 February 2015, <http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25036/> (accessed 8 June 2015), which, if obeyed, could significantly curb some of the worst abuses perpetrated by some militia members.

²³ Each militia group has its own leaders, weapons, funding, headquarters, flags, logos, uniforms, and communication platforms. Leading figures of some of the more powerful militias have served as ministers in the Iraqi government or in other official positions. For example Hedi Al-Ameri of the Badr militia was Minister of Transport. Some of the main militias have a political branch.

²⁴ Vice News, "US Starts Sending \$1.6 Billion Worth of Promised Arms to Iraq – But Who Will Get The?", 6 June 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/us-starts-sending-16-billion-worth-of-promised-arms-to-iraq-but-who-will-get-them> (accessed 8 June 2015).

announced that “*all ministries and state institutions were ordered to deal with the PMU/PMF as an official body reporting to the Prime Minister and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, who assumes command and control of the PMU/PMF*”.²⁵ The move came in the wake of the controversy surrounding the conduct of the fighting for the recapture from the IS of the city of Tikrit and surrounding areas by a combination of militia and government forces, backed by air strikes from the US-led coalition.²⁶

It remains to be seen whether this step will lead to the establishment of concrete mechanisms to hold these militias accountable and ultimately make any difference to their conduct. At the time of writing this had not been the case. On the contrary, after the IS routed the security forces in Ramadi and overran the city in May, Prime Minister Al-Abadi called on the Shi’a militias – which up to then had been discouraged from participating in military operations in the predominantly Sunni Anbar region – to join the operation to attempt to recapture Ramadi and surrounding areas.

²⁵ Also see: Searching 4 Dinar, “Iraqi government decisions in the regular session of the fourteenth for 2015”, 7 April 2015, <https://search4dinar.wordpress.com/2015/04/07/iraqi-government-decisions-in-the-regular-session-of-the-fourteenth-for-2015/> (accessed 8 June 2015) and; Prime Minister Dr. Haidar Al-Abadi, “PM Al-Abadi Chairs Meeting of Public Mobilization Leaders”, 9 April 2015, <http://pmo.iq/pme/press2015en/9-4-20152en.htm> (accessed 8 June 2015).

²⁶ Some of the militias participating in the operation to recapture Tikrit publicly stated they were opposed to any US role. However, when the operation appeared to be stalling, the Iraqi government called for US air strikes, and the US requested that the militias be pulled back, which in turn prompted more hostile reactions from some militias. In the event, the militias were never withdrawn from the area, though their presence was kept more low-profile. When Amnesty International visited Tikrit and surrounding areas in the second week of April, most of the area was under the control of the Badr militia, while the *Asa’ib Ahl-al-Haq* (League of the Righteous) militia had just evacuated the town of al-Dour a few days earlier. Though a very small number of policemen were present in Tikrit, al-Dour and surrounding areas, they obviously had neither the means nor the clout to be in control of the area.