US-backed militias commit war crimes in Iraq

Bill Van Auken
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Shia sectarian militias, armed and backed by the Iraqi government, are committing war crimes against the country's minority Sunni population, including widespread executions, torture and unlawful detentions, according to a new report issued by Amnesty International.

"Shi'a militias have been abducting and killing Sunni civilian men in Baghdad and around the country," the report states. "These militias, often armed and backed by the government of Iraq, continue to operate with varying degrees of cooperation from government forces—ranging from tacit consent to coordinated, or even joint, operations. For these reasons, Amnesty International holds the government of Iraq largely responsible for the serious human rights abuses, including war crimes, committed by these militias."

What the report neglects to add, however, is that these same militias, which have engaged in wholesale ethnic cleansing operations in areas around Baghdad, Samarra, Kirkuk and elsewhere in Iraq, are among the only forces to have made advances against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has seized roughly one third of the country since last June. In key operations, including the September 1 retaking of Amerli, a predominantly Shia Turkmen town in northern Iraq, they have received close air support from the US military.

In the wake of the collapse of Iraq's US-trained army, the militias have taken on an even more dominant role, acting as the main ground force for the government in Baghdad and a key component in the US-led war on ISIS. They are increasingly exerting more authority than the official armed forces themselves.

Despite the Obama administration's stated objective of forming a more inclusive central government in Baghdad under the newly installed prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, the US intervention has only exacerbated the simmering sectarian civil war that has plagued the country, reviving levels of internecine slaughter not seen since the height of the US occupation in 2006-2007.

The government under Abadi has continued the reliance on the militias that prevailed under his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki. "By granting its blessing to militias who routinely commit such abhorrent abuses, the Iraqi government is sanctioning war crimes and fueling a dangerous cycle of sectarian violence that is tearing the country apart," Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's senior crisis response adviser, told the media.

According to one recent United Nations estimate, roughly 50 Iraqis are dying every day as a result of this violence, and this excludes the toll in the predominantly Sunni province of Anbar, which has seen heavy fighting. Among the many victims are those killed in indiscriminate bombing carried out by the ISIS against Shia neighborhoods in Baghdad and Sunni men targeted by the Shia militias.

The effect of the government's reliance on the Shia sectarian militias has been to drive large sections of Iraq's Arab Sunni minority—roughly 20 percent of the population—into an alliance with ISIS. This explains the ability of the armed Islamist movement to establish its control over virtually all of predominantly Sunni Anbar province.

The Amnesty report, entitled "Absolute impunity: Militia rule in Iraq," consists largely of harrowing personal accounts of abductions, killings and torture at the hands of both the militias and the Iraqi security forces that act with them.

The testimony includes that of family members of men abducted by the Shia militias at roadside checkpoints or in raids on workplaces and homes. In a number of these cases, the abductors extorted tens of thousands of dollars for the release of these men, only to kill them as soon as the ransoms were paid.

As the mother of one the victims, who was abducted together with his cousin at a checkpoint while driving the family's furniture from Tikrit to Baghdad, recounts: "A white car drove up and stopped near me and the men inside shouted 'yalla, yalla, the money.' I asked where is my son and they said 'they'll come now, after us.' They

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took the money and drove off towards al-Shu'la. I waited for an hour but nobody came. The following day a relative called to say that their bodies had been found in al-Shu'la and taken to the morgue. Both had been shot in the head. He was my only son, now I have nothing to live for."

Quoted in the Amnesty document is a member of one of the largest Shia militias, the Asaib Ahl al-Haq, manning just such a checkpoint north of Baghdad: "If we catch those dogs [Sunnis] coming down from Tikrit, we execute them; in those areas they are all working with Daesh [ISIS]. They come to Baghdad to commit terrorist crimes. So we have to stop them."

The two cousins who were murdered were fleeing with their families to escape the ISIS violence in Tikrit.

The report also recounts the mass abductions of young men during raids by the Shia militias on predominantly Sunni neighborhoods. This includes a June 6 raid on a neighborhood in the eastern part of Samarra in which 37 men were rounded up and summarily executed, apparently in response to ISIS fighters having made a brief incursion into the area and received some popular support.

Also indicted by the Amnesty report are the official government forces, which it says are guilty of systematic "torture and other ill-treatment" of Sunni men detained, often on no evidence, under Iraq's draconian Anti-Terrorism Law, which was imposed under the US occupation and has been used to repress Sunni opposition ever since. It was the use of this law that led to mass protests and even armed resistance among the Sunni population well before the ISIS offensive of last summer.

While the US government, its allies, and the Western media have focused enormous attention on the sectarian atrocities carried out by ISIS in Iraq, they have turned a blind eye to similar acts by the Shia militias, which have been documented on YouTube videos of beheadings, mass graves and charred bodies of Sunni Arabs.

The aim of these atrocities is sectarian or ethnic cleansing—to drive Sunnis out of areas inhabited by the majority Shia population. The web site *Iraq Oil Report* described the situation in the town of Tuz Khurmatu, about 55 miles south of Kirkuk, where Shia militias and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters have clashed recently after wresting the area from ISIS.

The Shia militias, according to the report, "have executed many Sunnis and chased others from their homes." It cited Kurdish officials as saying that "Shia militias are looting and burning homes belonging to Sunni families who fled… to prevent them from coming back," turning previously Sunni areas into "ghost towns." In some cases, bombs are placed at the doors of Sunni homes.

Similar accounts have come from Latifiya, a majority Sunni city just outside Baghdad, where Human Rights Watch found that the population has been reduced from 250,000 to 50,000 by a Shia militia siege that has seen hundreds of summary executions. It cited residents as saying that in many areas "most men have either been killed or have fled."

The *Financial Times*, in a September 26 article, reported: "In addition to cutting off water to vitally important irrigation canals, the Shia militias have bulldozed hundreds of homes and ordered residents to move out. The killings, several people said, have eased over the past week or two, but several days ago Shia militiamen arrived at a Latifiya vegetable market and arrested 104 people, releasing the Shia but keeping the Sunnis in detention. They have since disappeared.

"If you have ethnic cleansing, you will have civil war forever," Adnan Jenabi, a former Iraqi minister and Sunni tribal leader, who is now a member of the Iraqi parliament, told the *Financial Times*. "The people will fight each other until all of them are dead."

This is the reality of the so-called "war on terror" mounted by Washington and its allies in the Middle East. US policy has fueled the eruption of the entire region into bloodshed, backing Shia sectarian militias against ISIS in Iraq even as it has funneled arms and aid to Sunni sectarian militias in Syria, including ISIS itself.

The Iraqi Shia militias now serving as Washington's de facto allies were only recently fighting across the border alongside Syrian troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad, whom Washington is determined to overthrow. The only thing that is clear in this perverse policy is that US imperialism is prepared to carry out genocidal crimes and risk a far wider war in the violent bid to impose its hegemony on the oil-rich and strategically vital region.

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