

Iraqi forces testify to atrocities

Militant fighters in Iraq have long boasted of how brutally they treat foes. Now some Iraqi forces say they are paying them back



SELF DEFENCE: The Baghdad-based police officer who showed Reuters this video, which appears to show soldiers desecrating the corpse of an extremist fighter, said their action was “very normal”.

REUTERS/YOUTUBE

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The video shows a male corpse lying in the dirt, one end of a rope tied around his legs, the other fastened to the back of an armoured Humvee.

Men in Iraqi military uniforms mingle by the vehicle. Someone warns there might be a bomb on the body. One hands another his smartphone. Then he stands over the body, smiles, and offers a thumbs-up as his comrade takes a photo. The Humvee starts to move, dragging the dead man behind it into the desert.

The short video was shown to Reuters last week by an Iraqi national police officer. It captures what appear to be Iraqi soldiers desecrating the corpse of a fighter from the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), a group reconstituted from an earlier incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq.

"This is very normal," said the Baghdad-based police officer, who has many friends now fighting around the Sunni city of Ramadi. "Our guys get killed at the hands of al Qaeda. Why don't we do the same to them? This is self-defence."

Almost three months after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki declared war on Sunni militants in Iraq's western Anbar province, the fighting seems to have descended into a series of brutal atrocities, often caught on video and in photographs by both militants and Iraqi soldiers.

Iraqi soldiers say they are bogged down in a slow, vicious fight with ISIL and other Sunni factions in the city of Ramadi and around Falluja. They describe a hellish world in which Iraqi forces are running low on tank shells, lack aerial cover, are short of armoured vehicles, and have been hit by high casualties and desertion rates. More than 380,000 people have fled their homes to escape the fighting, according to the United Nations.

Sunni militants regularly post videos and photos of executions and torture of government troops. Now, according to the police officer, an army officer, a general and an Iraqi Special Forces member, some Iraqi



ACCEPT THIS SACRIFICE: This video, posted online by ISIL followers, appears to show the execution of Iraqi soldiers and has been circulated by angry soldiers and pro-government activists.

REUTERS/YOUTUBE

“It is a field reaction, no more, no less... The soldiers are finishing off the wounded militants, shooting them many times to express their anger.

Senior general

Baghdad

troops have begun replying in kind, carrying out extra-judicial executions, torture and humiliations of their enemy and posting images of the results online.

The images and disturbing accounts from Anbar are testament to the sectarian fervour sweeping Iraq. The security forces, who are mostly Shi'ite, and the Sunni militants often see themselves as players in a larger regional and sectarian battle. The brutalities are in turn deepening those divisions and risk turning Iraq's Sunni region into a permanent battlefield. Already the fighting is bleeding into the civil war in neighbouring Syria.

A senior general in Baghdad acknowledged that soldiers working for Iraqi counter-terrorism units, or Special Forces, had

carried out extra-judicial killings but called them isolated cases. He blamed the killings on a lack of training for new soldiers rushed out to replace wounded and slain colleagues.

"It is a field reaction, no more, no less," said the general. Like most of the Iraqi officials who spoke to Reuters for this story, he declined to be identified. "Usually, this happens when there is a military confrontation. The soldiers are finishing off the wounded militants, shooting them many times to express their anger."

He said the last case he knew of occurred just over two weeks ago in Khalidiya, a town near Ramadi, where Special Forces killed several ISIL members.

A spokesman for the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service strongly denied the accounts of executions.

"Allegations of executing unarmed terrorists are baseless and false. I think the victory our forces achieved has annoyed those who are issuing such accusations and forging videos in a way that smears our forces' reputation," said spokesman Sabah al-Noumani. "We are holding our soldiers

accountable if they violated the simplest rules of engagement. We will not accept any violations.”

The interior ministry, which has police stationed in Ramadi, told Reuters it took the allegations seriously. “If some mistakes happened, or human rights standards were violated during one of the battles, keep in mind it is not systemic,” said spokesman Sa’ad Ma’an. “If it happened, whoever committed it will be investigated, held accountable and sent to a military court.”

The U.S. government has rushed nearly 100 Hellfire missiles, M4 rifles, ammunition and surveillance drones to the Iraqi military since the start of fighting in January. The Obama administration has also started training Iraqi Special Forces in Jordan. Before the U.S. military withdrawal in late 2011, the military trained, equipped and conducted operations with Iraqi Special Forces.

Told about the alleged executions, a U.S. embassy official said: “Such allegations should be investigated by the (government). If confirmed, those responsible should be held accountable.”

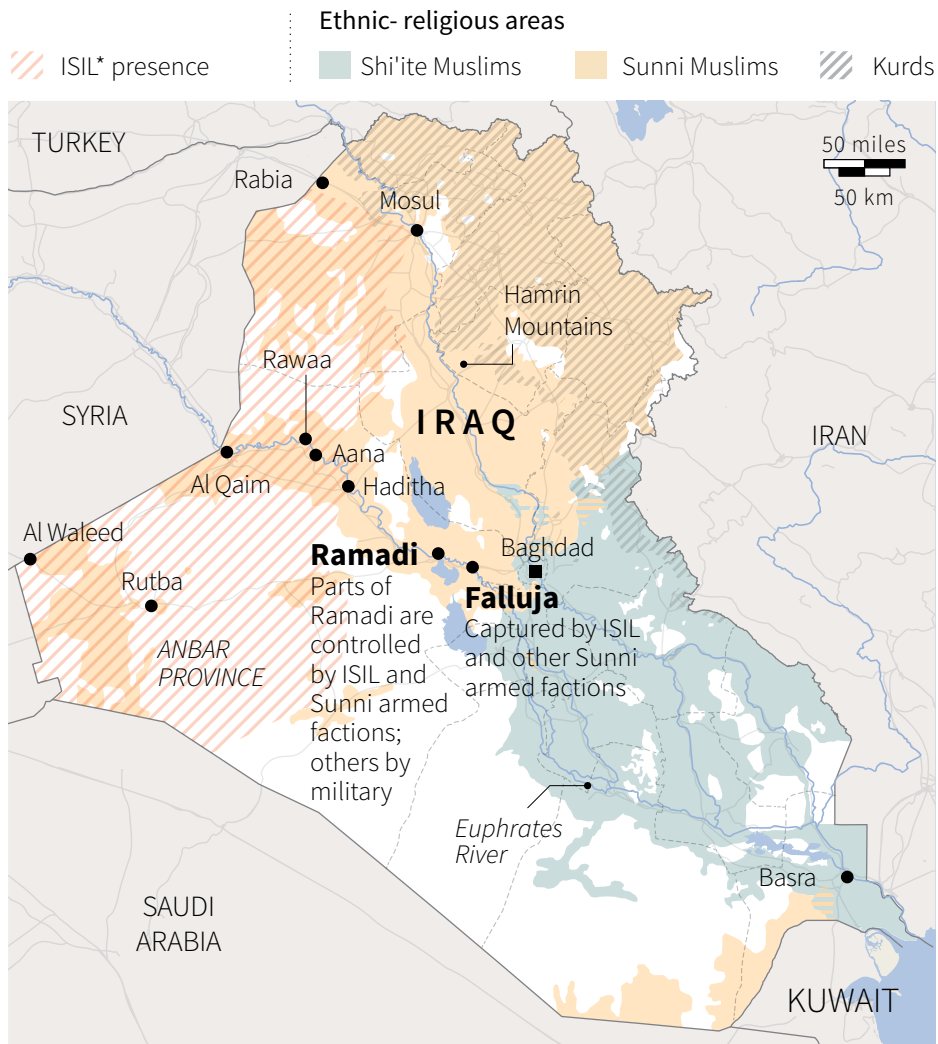
Reuters could not independently verify the images posted on the Internet, some of which were made available by Iraqi security personnel; others are to be found on public social media websites popular with the army, special forces and police.

THE STANDOFF

Ramadi and Falluja first erupted in protest in December 2012. Iraq’s Sunni minority has long accused the security forces of torture and other abuses; Sunnis were also frustrated about joblessness and the jailing of thousands of Sunni men and women on terrorism charges. The movement spread across the Sunni region to the west, north and east of Baghdad.

Prime Minister Maliki and his deputy Saleh Mutlaq, a Sunni, presented a package to address Sunni grievances last spring, only to have rivals block it in parliament.

Al Qaeda’s presence in Iraq



*ISIL: the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), a group reconstituted from an earlier incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Sources: M. Izady – Gulf/2000 Project; Columbia University; Reuters

The insurgent group ISIL, energised by its successes in Syria, then exploited an incident in which Iraqi security forces, reacting they said to gunfire, shot dead at least 50 unarmed protesters. ISIL launched a blistering campaign of suicide and car bombings that made last year Iraq’s deadliest since 2008.

By late December 2013, the government had begun fighting back, targeting Ramadi

and Falluja, which quickly became war zones.

In Ramadi, the Iraqi Special Forces – which fall under the command of the prime minister’s military office – have fought their way to a tentative hold on the city centre. But rank-and-file Iraqi soldiers struggle to defend ground that the elite counter-terrorism forces have seized. One day the Golden Division, the most prominent of

Iraq's Special Forces, takes land and hands it to the army. The next, Sunni rebels push them back.

Falluja, meantime, is surrounded by Iraqi troops but held by Sunni groups - ISIL, angry tribes and insurgent factions. Al Qaeda-linked groups have terrorised Iraq's Shi'ite majority since 2003.

"Maliki says that he is controlling Anbar ... but I am challenging any official to come visit Ramadi," said Sheikh Rafei Mashhin al-Jumaili, an anti-government fighter from Garma, a Sunni rebel hotbed. "The sons of tribes are fighting."

Western diplomats and Iraqi officers say that until Ramadi is secure, Iraqi troops will be unable to marshal an effective fighting force to enter Falluja and avoid being pinned down in both cities.

"Can they get ISIL out of Falluja, Ramadi and the surrounding area or does the conflict just become a sort of trench warfare that goes on indefinitely?" a Western diplomat asked. "You've got a standoff where nothing is really moving."

In the absence of territorial gains, the conflict is becoming more vicious by the day.

"KEEP TRAMPLING THEM"

A Special Forces soldier on a break in Baghdad this month showed Reuters images on Facebook that are popular with the Iraqi military. The photos showed what he said were dead ISIL fighters in Ramadi. One was splattered in blood. Slogans boasted that the Iraqi forces had "trampled on ISIL's sniper rats."

Just back from the front, the soldier - hair dirty, voice tired - used his smartphone to pull up another Facebook picture of a soldier standing over a corpse. The dead man's body was splayed out in black jeans, his arms stretched above his head in the dirt. A slogan read: "The Golden Division keep trampling them."

"Whoever we capture now as a terrorist we kill him on the spot except for someone



FALLUJA FIGHTERS: ISIL militants and other Sunni groups hold Fallujah. REUTERS/STRINGER

“Let people be angry.
We are defending Iraq.”

Special Forces soldier

Baghdad

we want to investigate,” the soldier said matter-of-factly.

“I’ve watched dozens executed.”

The soldier flicked to a picture of a friend shot dead in Ramadi, dressed in his green Iraqi uniform, and fell silent. He said he saw 62 dead soldiers carried back to Baghdad one week; 40 the next.

He pulled up another picture on Facebook. This one showed an ISIL fighter’s face mutilated by a bullet hole. He pointed to the AK on the ground by the fighter and said: “After we kill them, then we plant the weapon by his side.”

The slang term the soldiers use for executions is “article five terrorism”, the soldier said and the Facebook pages show. It’s a play on Article Four Terrorism, a clause in the actual legal code that allows the security forces to arrest people on a blanket terrorism charge.

“Article Four is to arrest and Article Five is killing,” said the soldier, grinning at the

logic of the slang.

Iraqi army soldiers know about ISIL’s videos of executions and of dead Iraqi soldiers, he said. He described his peers as tired and wanting to fight back. “Whoever ISIL captures, they execute him, so we are doing the same.”

Commanders don’t want to know, he added. Nobody asks questions.

“We believe it is correct because they (the militants) are Kuffars (Infidels),” he said, explaining the views of his brothers-in-arms. “It is the right thing to do. All of the military is doing it.”

The soldier said he didn’t care if this caused scandal. “Let people be angry,” he said. “We are defending Iraq.”

“THROWING OUR FLESH TO THE DOGS”

The militants are just as brutal. In one video posted online by ISIL followers and then circulated by enraged soldiers and pro-government activists, a militant cocks his pistol over a line of soldiers kneeling on the floor.

A voice is heard: “I beg oh God accept this sacrifice. Accept it from us. Oh God, accept it from us.”

The militant pulls the trigger; a soldier



THE FALLEN: Iraqi security personnel carry the coffin of a soldier killed in Ramadi, December, 2013. **REUTERS/ALAA AL-MARJANI**

slumps and the other soldiers tremble. The militant shoots again. Another gunman joins in and then a final one, shooting each soldier in turn. The screen goes black.

Now some Iraqi troops have adopted the same tactics.

An officer in an Iraqi army unit assigned to Ramadi since February said he first suspected the killings were happening within weeks of his arrival. He had been sitting at a lunch with officers from the army and the Golden Division, who have borne the brunt of casualties. “They were saying, ‘We are suffering huge losses. We want to terrorise the terrorists. We want to smash and break their morale.’”

Soon after, the officer said, he witnessed his first execution: Two young men, blindfolded and hands tied, were brutally kicked and then shot by rank-and-file Golden Division members.

“I asked the soldier, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ The soldier said, ‘Sir, if they catch us they will cut us to pieces and throw our flesh to the dogs. At least we are not doing the same thing. We are only giving them bullets.’”

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