



The 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council



Enforced Disappearances & Extrajudicial Executions in Iraq

Meet Ali Arkady, a Journalist who documents war crimes of Iraqi forces

25 September 2019, 12:00 - 13:00

Room XXI, Palais des Nations, Geneva



Iraqi photojournalist Ali Arkady was embedded with an elite unit of Iraqi soldiers, who he thought were the good guys, battling Daesh and fighting for a united and free Iraq. But as the battle against Daesh progressed, the Iraqi soldiers strayed from their mission and descended into the torture and murder of civilians.

Documented in Arkady's images are graphic scenes of Iraqi soldiers using knives, guns and live electric wires, among other methods, to torture and kill civilians. Video clips show suspects suspended and beaten, screaming their innocence.

Mr. Arkady's footage is clear evidence of the atrocities committed by Iraqi forces that EAFORD and GICJ have been reporting for many years to the UN human rights mechanisms.

Please join us at this event to learn more about the situation of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Iraq and to meet the person who was an eyewitness to numerous atrocities



Speaker: Ali Arkady



Moderator: Christopher Gawronski

Organizers: International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), International-Lawyers.Org and Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ)

English/Arabic translation will be available

International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD)



Meet Ali Arkady, a Journalist who Documents War Crimes of Iraqi Forces

United Nations - 25 September 2019

Speaker

Mr. Ali Arkady, photojournalist and filmmaker from Iraq. He has worked as an independent photographer since 2006

Moderator

Mr. Christopher Gawronski, Representative of the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD) and senior human rights officer at Geneva International Centre for Justice

Organizers

International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), International-Lawyers.Org & Geneva International Centre for Justice

Concept Note

Enforced disappearances and related crimes of torture and extrajudicial killing in Iraq are ongoing issues that have had insufficient attention paid to them by the international community and no genuine efforts made to address the problem. The government of Iraq has often claimed that such grave crimes are only committed by a few people acting independently and outside of the official command structure. Regrettably, this is not the case. Therefore, when violations are perpetrated on such a wide scale by official personnel in an armed conflict, these acts can amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.



This panel discussion featured Ali Arkady, a freelance photojournalist and war reporter from Iraq. His work spans ten years and ranges from documenting the day-to-day life of an orphanage in Baghdad to reporting from the frontline in the war against ISIS. Since 2014, he has worked with the VII Photo agency and several international media outlets. While embedded with an Iraqi Special Forces Unit fighting to recapture Mosul, Mr. Arkady witnessed systematic torture and execution of civilians. In this event, the journalist presented six war crimes he witnessed and documented between 18 October and 22 December 2016. EAFORD and GICJ have been reporting on such crimes for many years to United Nations bodies, especially the Human Rights Council.

Introduction and Presentations



Mr. Christopher Gawronski, the moderator, opened the side event by noting that enforced disappearances and the related crimes of torture and extrajudicial killing are so widespread and prevalent in Iraq today, that it is difficult to understate the scale of the problem. Since 2014, a lot has been reported about the horrific atrocities perpetrated by ISIS, or Da'esh, including kidnapping, torturing and executing countless people. He noted, however, that such behavior has not been limited to Da'esh fighters – it has been common to the militias operating across Iraq and even to the official military and law enforcement personnel of the country. He then introduced the speaker and warned the audience

that the speaker would present videos and images with disturbing and shocking contents.



Mr. Ali Arkady began his presentation by stating that his work spans ten years and ranges from documenting the day-to-day life of an orphanage in Baghdad to reporting from the frontline in the war against ISIS. The six war crimes and alarming cases that he has witnessed and documented, involve members of the Emergency Response Division (ERD) in Iraq, which sometimes referred to itself as the Rapid Response Division or Emergency Response Brigade. He explained that this unit is a mobile special operations force under the control of the Ministry of Interior and part of the Iraqi Federal Police.

Mr. Arkady mentioned a case that he documented concerning the mass enforced disappearances in Fallujah, where 643 people disappeared in one night on 3 June 2016. According to him, this was one of the most important cases of enforced disappearances in Iraq and that the organizers of the panel discussion had already brought this case to the UN Human Rights Council. He further emphasized that the report of this case, written by GICJ, led him to contact the organization. He then showed a video of the interrogation of a young man by the Iraqi Hezbollah Militia members where one of them mentions this mass disappearance and tells the young man that if he is guilty, he would be burnt alive.

The journalist said that while documenting the siege of Fallujah in early 2016, he was embedded with a unit of the ERD under the command of Captain Omar Nazar and Corporal Haider Ali. He had portrayed them both as the liberators of Iraq, a Sunni and a Shi'a, both fighting side-by-side to rid the country of Da'esh. However, he had not yet witnessed how they arrested and tortured innocent civilians or how they kidnapped husbands and sexually assaulted their wives. Having gained their trust and the necessary approval for his documentation project from the commander — Thamir Muhammad Ismail al-Husseini — Mr. Arkady continued documenting the operations of the ERD around Mosul in October 2016. It was during that time he began to see and understand how the ERD operated.

Mr. Arkady began the main part of his presentation with six cases of war crimes: a case of torture that he witnessed, where a man named Ali was arrested in Hammam Al-Aleel while he was fleeing Mosul. Ali was brought to the headquarters of the Sniper's unit in Qabr Al-Abd and interrogated for three hours and then beaten by some soldiers. Mr. Arkady described how the Captain poured water on Ali, sat on his chest and suffocated him with a plastic sheet, while Ali's legs were kicking furiously. Ali was eventually allowed to return to his sister's house. Mr. Arkady said that he was encouraged to take pictures of the interrogation but ordered not to record any torture scenes.



In a second case, the journalist outlined how Captain Thamir Al-Duri received information about an alleged Da'esh sympathizer called Raad Hindiya who was then immediately arrested. Mr. Arkady described how the Captain pointed his gun at Raad, threw him on the ground, sat on his chest and told him he would die. The Captain was not sure whether Raad was a fighter or not, and finally they returned Raad to his family. However, shortly thereafter, Raad was arrested again and Captain Omar Nazar with Thamer Al-Duri, brought him to the ERD Special Forces headquarters. Arkady described how they hit Raad's legs with a hammer while soldiers were covering his face with

nylon. They choked Raad several times for another two hours and broke clay pots on his head. The journalist said that Raad Hindiya was transferred to the ERD Intelligence Unit headquarters, where Captain Omar accompanied Mr. Arkady to Raad's cell in the torture section where the journalist witnessed the deputy director of the ERD Intelligence Unit beating Raad's swollen legs with a wooden stick. Mr. Arkady concluded by saying he heard days later that members of the ERD Intelligence Branch murdered Raad.



Next, Mr. Arkady showed a video of a case in which three task forces under the ERD Intelligence Unit carried out a night raid with the aim of capturing a Da'esh member in Hammam Al-Aleel. The operation failed to find him, but later that night a man called Rashid Al-Mani was arrested instead. The video showed Captain Omar Nazar grabbing Rashid from his bed and pinning him against the wall, while his wife and children were crying. Then, Rashid was forced to recite the Da'esh pledge while being repeatedly punched in the face. Rashid did not know the pledge; therefore, Mr. Arkady mentioned that he was told to edit the video of this incident in order

to make it seem that Rashid had no problem reciting the pledge. Days after this violence, the Intelligence Unit arrested Rashid and took him to their headquarters. Mr. Arkady later learned from an Intelligence Unit soldier that Rashid had died under torture, even though both the soldier and Captain Omar had agreed that Rashid was

innocent. Furthermore, Mr. Arkady said that a few nights later, Captain Omar Nazar raped Rashid's wife who was not aware of her husband's death.



With reference to the fourth case, Mr. Arkady showed a video of Mahdi Mahmoud, a shepherd from Qabr Al-Abd, who was being held because a Federal Police officer filed accusations against him. The video showed Mahdi being gagged and hung by the wrists from the ceiling in the middle of a room, followed by harsh beating and shoves. The journalist emphasized that this was the first time he had been authorized to film and take pictures of a torture scene. Captain Thamer Al-Duri then interrogated Mahdi's son, Ahmed, while slapping him several times. Mr. Arkady said that Ahmed was allowed to go back home, but he was told that soldiers from the ERD Intelligence Unit executed Mahdi.

The fifth case that the journalist presented was about two brothers who were brought to the ERD base in Bezwaya. Mr. Arkady said that Ahmed Abu Fadhl told him that it was not necessary to interrogate the brothers as they were definitely Da'esh members. Mr. Arkady explained that Ahmed Abu Al

Fadl pushed his fingers into one brother's eyes and told him he would gouge them out, while in another room, a man called Ali Abdul Hussein, who spent time as the main liaison between U.S. forces and the ERD, was torturing the other brother. The liaison officer wore gloves to stretch, and eventually break, the brother's jaw. Mr. Arkady described that while the brother screamed in pain, the officer took a knife and pressed it behind the brother's ear and sat on his back. Mr. Arkady was later informed by Ahmed Abu Al-Fadl that the soldiers had killed the two brothers the next morning.



In the last case, Mr. Arkady described an unofficial night raid conducted on 19 December 2016. A task force arrested Ahmad Hamid Atta and two other men. He said that they were brought blindfolded and hands tied behind their back to Captain Omar Nazar at the Special Forces Headquarters. The Captain had ordered the men to be stripped naked and that was the last the speaker, Mr. Arkady, saw of them. He later learned from Abbas Hassoon that Abbas had raped Ahmad and that this was common practice.

Mr. Arkady finished by saying that the cases of war crimes he witnessed were only a fraction of the acts committed by the Emergency Response Division. ERD soldiers and

officers carried out executions, violent crimes and sexual abuse with the approval of the highest ranks of the Emergency Response Division. He also noted that none of the victims, accused of having connections with Da'esh, were ever given a trial. He explained that although his evidence has been published and the Iraqi Interior Ministry has acknowledged some of the crimes committed by Iraqi forces, none of the soldiers or officers whose acts he documented have been charged or punished in any way. Instead, many of them have been decorated and promoted.

Questions and Answers



Based on the available time, there was an opportunity for questions from the audience. One member of the audience asked if the speaker thought his efforts to publicize these crimes had made, or will make, a difference. Mr. Arkady answered that he believed if civil society organizations work together, in the long-term, we will have an impact through the important role of reporting and cooperating with the work of monitoring bodies to detect, assess, and prevent torture, and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment. For example, working with the Human Rights Council and UN Treaty Bodies reinforces NGOs capacity for action.

Another person asked, given the photos seen and the whole situation, how did the journalist become part of the ERD? Was he part of the personnel? And, how could he live after seeing those situations? Mr. Arkady said that when people want to work deeply on an issue, they need to be there. After witnessing the abuse, torture and grave violations, he then decided that documenting these war crimes was his duty. Since going public with this information, he has been threatened along with his family and friends, but, overall, he was proud of his work and proud to be Iraqi. He stressed that he had originally wanted to investigate who were the people behind Da'esh and who were the government forces. However, by the end of his investigation, he came to realize that the government forces were also killers, considering they are misusing their power and authority to kill innocent people, abuse children, and continue their sectarian revenge.

A third question was about the shocking photos and videos of torture victims. The speaker stated that the photos and videos show that not only Da'esh but also the government is guilty of systematic war crimes that demand prosecution, as well as, highlight what's behind some of the current crippling political and human rights situation in Iraq. She said that this was contrary to all the news and information she had seen about the fight against Da'esh. Nevertheless, she asked Mr. Arkady if he thought there was a difference, as far as the abuse, torture, and killing of Iraqis is concerned, between Da'esh and the government. Mr. Arkady responded saying that when Da'esh came to Iraq many people suffered, but it was clear that they used violence and they did not hide it. However, the atrocities committed by government forces against civilians was unexpected and hardly investigated. Such violence was part of their training, including methods and techniques that Iraqi forces learned from U.S. special forces...(we see interrogator Ali Abdul Hussein pressing a knife beneath the ear of a detainee and saying he learned this technique from American soldiers). Arkady concluded that both sides were guilty and that considering what he has seen on social media, Iraqi forces use similar practices as Da'esh.

Then, someone made a point that comparing Da'esh with Iraqi forces seemed strange. He also remarked that the panel presented only one side of the scenario in Iraq. In response to this, the moderator noted that the crimes of Da'esh have been extensively reported in the media and are being fully investigated by a special United Nations

team. However, the side of the story presented by Mr. Arkady is not often told or publicized, so the organizers wanted to focus on this lesser-told story.

“Some of the men showed bravery,” Arkady said. “Some have bullet wounds all over their bodies and they keep fighting. That was the story I wanted to tell – until it all began to change. Then, deep down, I started to hear another voice, showing me another way... I didn’t know what the voice was at first. But through time it became clear to me that it was the voice of my fellow Iraqis.”

Watch the full side-event online

Warning: some images may be graphic

Enforced Disappearances, Extrajudicial Executions and Other War Crimes in Iraq



The poster is for a side-event titled "Enforced Disappearances & Extrajudicial Executions in Iraq". It features a photograph of two men, Ali Arkady and Christopher Gawronski. The event is part of "The 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council". The speaker is Ali Arkady, a journalist who documents war crimes of Iraqi forces. The moderator is Christopher Gawronski, a senior human rights officer at the Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ). The event took place on 25 September 2019 at the United Nations in Geneva. The organizers are the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (IAFORD), International-Lawyers.Org, and the Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ).

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Moderator: Christopher Gawronski: Senior human rights officer at Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ)

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Watch the full side event online in [English](#) or [Arabic](#)

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