POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO PROTECT CIVILIANS:
Lessons from ISF Operations Against ISIS in Urban Areas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians caught in conflict. CIVIC’s mission is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm. Our vision is a world where parties to armed conflict recognize the dignity and rights of civilians, prevent civilian harm, protect civilians caught in conflict, and amend harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilian war victims and their families in Iraq and Afghanistan. Building on her extraordinary legacy, CIVIC now operates in conflict zones throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and South Asia to advance a higher standard of protection for civilians.

At CIVIC, we believe that parties to armed conflict have a responsibility to prevent and address civilian harm. To accomplish this, we assess the causes of civilian harm in particular conflicts, craft practical solutions to address that harm, and engage with civilians, governments, militaries, and international and regional institutions to implement these solutions. We believe that working collaboratively with affected communities, governments, multilateral institutions, and fellow civil society organizations is the most effective way to protect civilians. We advocate the adoption of new policies and practices that lead to the improved wellbeing of civilians caught in a conflict in order to advance a higher standard of protection for civilians caught in conflict around the world.

In Iraq, CIVIC began engaging with the US military on acknowledging and addressing civilian harm caused during operations in 2003. We also worked with the US Congress to create the Marla Ruzicka Fund for Iraqi War Victims. This fund provided vocational trainings, startup grants to business, and educational assistance to civilians incidentally harmed during military operations. Since 2014, CIVIC has been engaging with the US military to ensure it incorporated best practices on civilian harm mitigation in its operations against ISIS. From January 2015, CIVIC visited areas being retaken from ISIS and met with civilians, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Peshmerga, Hashad al Shabi or Popular Mobilization Units, and government officials. In mid-2016, CIVIC began holding civilian protection workshops with Peshmerga officers. In 2017, upon securing funding from Germany, CIVIC hired Iraq based staff and began engaging with the ISF and the government on civilian protection through trainings, research, and advocacy. CIVIC's work in Iraq is supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CIVIC's Iraq Researcher Caroline Baudot was the lead researcher and author of the report. Sahr Muhammedally, CIVIC MENA Director, co-authored certain sections and edited the report. The report was also reviewed by Ali al-Assaf, Iraq Country Director; Shannon N. Green, Senior Director of Programs; Marc Linning, Senior Protection Advisor; Thomas Sheperd, Senior Military Advisor; and Federico Borello, Executive Director. Piper Hendricks, Senior Communications Manager, Kate Raley, Communications Associate, and Jordan Lesser Roy, MENA Program Associate, provided additional editing support.

CIVIC is grateful to the government officials and ISF officers who shared their perspectives and experience during the research. The civilians with whom CIVIC spoke have suffered greatly during the armed conflict and years of insecurity. We greatly appreciate their willingness to speak with us about urgent and challenging concerns, including being separated from their families and losing loved ones. CIVIC takes seriously our duty to ensure their words are translated into policies and practices that address their protection concerns.
INTRODUCTION

ISIS took control of Fallujah in January 2014 and continued its offensive in the summer of 2014, capturing Mosul and parts of Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Anbar governorates, as ISF units withdrew.

On 13 June 2014, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shia religious authority in Iraq, issued a fatwa calling for the defense of Baghdad and other sites, and for volunteer fighters to join security forces to fight ISIS.

From August 2014, ISF, the Peshmerga and the PMU, supported by a US-led anti ISIS coalition and Iran, mounted a counteroffensive against ISIS. Prime Minister Abadi instructed all forces to protect civilians during military operations.

The fight against ISIS posed unique challenges to the Government of Iraq (GOI), its security forces, and the coalition on how to protect civilians. ISIS's tactics of preventing civilians from fleeing and using them as human shields, using IED—including human and vehicle borne IEDs, rigging buildings with booby traps, and using tunnels to escape or re-appear in cleared areas added to the complexities of fighting in densely-populated urban areas. The GOI and the ISF have acknowledged the need to identify and learn ways to build trust and good relations with civilians and build capacities of its security forces to protect them.

A Nineveh Police officer told CIVIC, “Before ISIS, people did not accept any security forces; there was a wall between civilians and us.”

A lieutenant general in the MOD said, “Now we understand that the army has to work with local authorities, civilians and tribes.”

A major general in the ISF reflected, “The government needs to be close to its citizens to avoid creating another Daesh. Daesh found a good environment because the government and its forces were not close to people.”

This report is intended to inform the institutional learning of the ISF and suggest improvements in policies, procedures, and trainings on civilian protection.

3 The US-led CJTF-OIR included Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and others. It comprises 74 countries at the time of writing who provided support in various ways.
4 CIVIC interview with Nineveh Police officer, Mosul, March 2018.
5 CIVIC interview with lieutenant general, MOD, Baghdad, April 2018.
6 CIVIC interview with major general, ISF, Baghdad, December 2017.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ISF and coalition forces faced numerous challenges in dealing with civilian harm in the context of urban warfare. The lack of a common operating picture between all forces made it extremely challenging for the ISF and coalition observers to direct targeting processes and weapons choices, including through collecting intelligence from civilians. Sometimes, we could not check information from different levels of training, weapons, and the location it applied to, which raises difficulties of detecting civilians in a packed city, even with advanced targeting means.

Coalition Intelligence, even when advantageous, could not always offer clear information to ISF commanders. This is war. We cannot know from the air where civilians are. The 2016 and 2017 Mosul campaigns highlighted this by demonstrating the tactical patience and using tactical fires, CIVIC was not given access to any advisors to handle large-scale displacement. It also highlights the ethical, strategic, and political necessity to understand the operational, defensive operations and the capacity of Iraqi armed forces to reduce civilian harm during military operations against ISIS. The ISF made it extremely challenging for the ISF and civilians in the context of urban warfare. The fight in Mosul in particular, with a population of over 1.5 million people, demonstrated a significant challenge of identifying civilians across thousands of Iraqis. But many civilians also lost their lives or their loved ones while moving towards ISF lines under the threat of IEDs, ISIS snipers, and crossfire.

The battle for the Old City in west Mosul—the last battle for the ISF in Mosul—highlighted the operational, defensive operations and the challenge of identifying civilians across thousands of Iraqis. But many civilians also lost their lives or their loved ones while moving towards ISF lines under the threat of IEDs, ISIS snipers, and crossfire. The ISF learned valuable tactics to reduce risks and use them as human shields, using improvised artillery, and sometimes civilians could not access this information or follow the ISF instructions. Even though ISIS targeted civilians trying to escape, ISF learned valuable tactics to reduce risks and using them as human shields, using improvised artillery, and sometimes civilians could not access this information or follow the ISF instructions. Even though ISIS targeted civilians trying to escape, ISF learned valuable tactics to reduce risks and using them as human shields, using improvised artillery, and sometimes civilians could not access this information or follow the ISF instructions.

In addition, the ISF and Peshmerga were not always able to distinguish between ISIS combatants and civilians. As a major general in the ISF acknowledged, "It was not possible to know in some cases whether it was a civilian or an ISIS soldier."

In the three-years long fight to reclaim major cities such as Ramadi, Fallujah, or Mosul from ISIS is a case study of the significant challenges of operational guidance, trainings, and capacities of the ISF. The ISF used a combination of sources and various levels of training, weapons, and the location it applied to, which raises difficulties of detecting civilians in a packed city, even with advanced targeting means.

It also highlights the operational, defensive operations and the capacity of Iraqi armed forces to reduce civilian harm during military operations against ISIS. The ISF and coalition forces faced many limitations. The difficulty of detecting civilians in a packed city, even with advanced targeting means, made this exercise significantly more challenging.

Minister Abadi's repeated calls to the armed forces to learn how harm mitigation tactics were integrated in the ISF priorities. It did not systematically include training on best practices on civilian harm mitigation policies, including through collecting intelligence from civilians. Sometimes we could not check. The government needs to be close to its citizens to determine the number of civilians occupying a target area prior to approving strikes. ISIS tactics of deliberately hiding among civilians and using them as human shields, using improvised artillery, and sometimes civilians could not access this information or follow the ISF instructions. Even though ISIS targeted civilians trying to escape, ISF learned valuable tactics to reduce risks and using them as human shields, using improvised artillery, and sometimes civilians could not access this information or follow the ISF instructions.

While the Counter Terrorism Services (CTS) participated in the fighting in Mosul for seven months. For the first time, there were any civilians, we had limited resources to distinguish between ISIS fighters and civilians. As a lieutenant colonel from the 16th Division of the ISF, had different levels of training, weapons, and the location it applied to, which raises difficulties of detecting civilians in a packed city, even with advanced targeting means. This is war. We cannot know from the air where civilians are. The 2016 and 2017 Mosul campaigns highlighted this by demonstrating the tactical patience and using tactical fires, CIVIC was not given access to any advisors to handle large-scale displacement. It also highlights the ethical, strategic, and political necessity to understand the operational, defensive operations and the capacity of Iraqi armed forces to reduce civilian harm during military operations against ISIS. The ISF made it extremely challenging for the ISF and civilians in the context of urban warfare. The fight in Mosul in particular, with a population of over 1.5 million people, demonstrated a significant challenge of identifying civilians across thousands of Iraqis. But many civilians also lost their lives or their loved ones while moving towards ISF lines under the threat of IEDs, ISIS snipers, and crossfire.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Iraq

To the Ministry of Defense and
Ministry of Interior

To the Leadership of the ISF

To the Coalition (US, UK, France, and Australia)

To the MINDEF and MININTER of other countries

To the United Nations, including the MINDEF and UN Assistance Mission in Iraq

To the Timeline

To the Leadership of IOG-OP

To the Coalition (US, UK, France, and Australia)

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To the more detailed recommendations and implementations, it is critical to know that both the people

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To Partnered Forces, including the Hashad al Shabi (PMU), to the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), and local police and national organizations, and use other external sources to cross check the information gathered from operations, and especially from operations involving the ISF. The ISF used the term “undertake to respect and to ensure respect” for IHL “in all circumstances” as per Article 1 common to the Four Geneva Conventions. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recommends changes to tactics and training.

Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and lawyers, as well as the ICRC, to reduce the likelihood of civilian harm that can incur from operations to observe for civilian casualties. When feasible, and in adherence with operational guidance limiting the use of such weapons, the blast and fragmentation from such weapons extends to civilians, and civilian objects, who may not be direct part in hostilities.”

Assessing, and communicating the number of people charged and convicted. When used in this report, refers to the related tasks of investigating and prosecuting individuals charged with committing war crimes and crimes against humanity and war crimes against civilians. When used in this report, includes all measures taken by armed actors to prevent, minimize and address incidents of civilian harm, analyzing causes, and recommending changes to tactics and training.

The ISF used the term “is used interchangeably with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is used interchangeably.”

Civilians may not lose their human dignity, and their property and livelihood be protected. Avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas in deliberate or indiscriminate manner. When used in this report, includes wide area effects of indirect fires, air, and joint fires through the targeting of human聚集ings, and systems that provide collective and coordinated use of indirect fires, air, and joint fires through the targeting of human聚集ings. The ISF used the term “is used interchangeably with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is used interchangeably.”

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US Army / Cpl. Rachel Diehm