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## **IRAQ WAR CRIMES: PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES TORTURE, ABUSE AND MURDER □ BY THE WRONG SIDE**

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07.06.2017

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News. Au (JUNE 6, 2017)

THE thought he would be filming heroes in action and recording the work of the good guys. But what unfolded in front of Ali Arkadys lens was gruesome, dark and not at all what he expected. The photojournalist was embedded deep in an elite unit of Iraqi soldiers in the fight against Islamic State.

But as the brutal and bloody war intensified, the line between the good guys and the bad guys got blurry.

Mr Arkady said instead of war heroes protecting the innocent from Islamic State, what he witnessed instead were sickening acts of torture, executions and abuse of suspected militants and civilians by the Iraqi army itself.

In total he compiled 400 photos and hours of videos and audio recordings revealing what amounts to war crimes committed by American-trained Emergency Response Division soldiers, the group fighting against IS.

In a series of confronting and very graphic images and clips published by the Toronto Star and ABC News, the 34-year-old reveals what really went on during the battle for Mosul between October and December last year.

The photographers images show men being strung up by their wrists, blindfolded and gagged.

In another video given to Mr Arkady, a man can be seen crouching on the ground with his hands tied behind his back. He gets up to escape but is shot nine times at close range.

In one picture, live wires and knives are held to the head of detainees while others capture soldiers brutally gouging eyes.

In another sickening clip, a man is strung up by his wrists with bottles of heavy water are placed on his back while he is interrogated.

Mr Arkady told the Star that some of the men justified their actions as a necessary evil in order to crush Islamic State.

They presented themselves as real Iraqi heroes, Mr Arkady said of his initial contact with the Iraqi forces. In those first three days in Fallujah, I saw it. They were brave. I saw it as Iraq coming together, finally, to win back the soul of the country.

But as he became deeper entrenched with the unit and accompanied the soldiers on raids, things to a dark turn. After witnessing acts of abuse, Mr Arkady says he was then forced by the soldiers to join in.

It was very bad. I am scared for my life, he told the Toronto Star. I had no anger against these men. But I hit them. Not very hard. Not very soft. Like in the middle.

Eventually sensing they would turn on him, he sent the photos to an agency via Skype who

advised him to escape to safety.

The reaction was swift. Mr Arkady received death threats after the images were published. He was forced to leave Iraq with his wife and daughter, 4. He is now in hiding.

Graphic content: [Click here to read the full interview with Ali Arkady.](#)

#### SOLDIERS BRAGGING COMPLETELY UNFILTERED

Human Rights Watch has reviewed the evidence and is intending to interview families of those captured.

HRWs senior Iraq researcher Belkis Wille said Mr Arkadys work appeared to suggest sectarian score-settling was taking place.

Ms Wille told news.com.au the emergence of the footage was very disturbing.

The images and videos released by Ali Arkady after his embed with the Ministry of Interiors elite Emergency Response Division show that the unit he was following engaged in the most horrific forms of torture and executions of six men they accused of having links to the Islamic State she said.

Not only that, the images show these men proud of the abuses they are inflicting, and even a willingness to have them captured on camera.

Ms Wille said while the images were shocking, they werent surprising.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, we have seen largely Shia armed groups including in Iraqs Federal Police, military, counter-terrorism service, as well as Shia militias, carrying out large scale abuses including destroying homes and forcibly displacing families, carrying out a campaign of arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, and rampant torture and executions, she said.

Ms Wille said the photojournalist was embedded with this ERD unit in the battle to retake Fallujah in May 2016, and through his time with them gained their trust.

That is why I think he was able to witness these abuses completely unfiltered, with the fighters even bragging about what they were doing to him, she said.

She said what he uncovered was far from what he expected to capture.

He thought he would be documenting a team of heroes fighting to save their country and fellow citizens from the clutches of ISIS, she said.

What he ended up documenting was the exact opposite – men engaged in the very practices that have driven mostly young Sunni Arab to join the ranks of ISIS for the past few years in Iraq.

According to her, US authorities have so far refused to comment on the issue.

The US has reacted to the revelations by emphasising that they have no role currently in supporting the ERD, she said. However, as the videos shot by Arkady and the unit itself show, ERD fighters are in possession of US-donated weapons, such as Humvee trucks and Carl Gustav anti-tank launchers.

Disturbingly, one of the men in the footage appears to speak with an American accent, however it is unclear if he is a US citizen.

In January, US President Donald Trump openly declared he believes torture works and would be willing to wage war against terrorists using techniques so brutal they were outlawed by the previous administration.

Ms Wille has other concerns. She fears this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We used to see videos and pictures like this more often in Iraq a few years ago, and I firmly believe that we are seeing them less these days not because there is less abuse, but because commanders have understood that it is best not to allow imagery of their abuses to surface, she said.

She said such abuse and torture was counter-productive. In the process of trying to break Islamic

State, the publication of images actually pushes people into the arms of the brutal regime.

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