

Iraqi Troops "Betrayed" Into Defeat, Capture

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"Our commanders departed from the base and left us alone," says soldier who evaded death at ISIS's hands.

Iraqi soldiers who escaped the summary killings that followed the capture of an army base near Tikrit have described their ordeal, and claimed that their own officers made them give up without a fight.

On June 12, a day after seizing the Camp Speicher base, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used Twitter to announce that it had "exterminated" 1,700 Iraqi soldiers. It later posted still images and video of its forces killing unarmed captive combatants.

Soldiers who escaped the base told IWPR they were ordered by own commanders not to put up a fight as ISIS advanced on the army base in June.

One soldier, who asked to be known as S., recalled troops arriving at Camp Speicher from the surrounding countryside with news of defeat after their officers abandoned them on the battlefield.

"We lost track of many troops, including my brother who serves with the 1st Regiment of the federal police," he said. "Government troops took away all their weapons and equipment when they arrived in the Sulaiman Beg area east of Tikrit."

"We resolved to fight ISIS and never allow the insurgents to control [Camp Speicher]," S. said. "But on the second day, we were taken by surprise as our commanders departed from the base and left us alone."

Now without leadership, the rank-and-file men in S's unit lost all will to fight, and decided to melt away themselves, choosing a minor road to escape detection.

Another survivor, Nabil Hadi, believes the Iraqi forces were betrayed by their commanders.

"The insurgents were driving small pick-up vehicles and carrying light machine-guns while we used to have tanks, armoured vehicles, heavy machine guns and planes, which should have been more than enough to defeat ISIS," he said, lying in a hospital bed recovering from a wound inflicted in fighting around Tikrit.

Other soldiers from Camp Speicher told IWPR they were given 15 days' leave the day before ISIS captured the base.

Among them was Private Qasim Najib Rahman, who was captured and badly injured by ISIS militants soon afterwards.

"After the 15-day leave, the next order we received was to remove our uniforms and put on ordinary clothes," he said.

He and others in his unit were then ordered to leave the camp on foot.

On the main road, they soon ran into large numbers of ISIS fighters who were waiting for them, and who had already captured dozens more. The captives were forced to lie face down on the ground, tied and blindfolded.

They were then put into vehicles and driven to an impromptu "courthouse" where ISIS members questioned them and divided them into two groups – Sunni and Shia.

Qasim witnessed how the insurgents beat some of their Sunni captives unconscious, but took the Shia ones away and returned without them. He guessed they were being summarily executed. As a Shia from Diwaniyah province, he realised he would need to make up a story if he was going to survive.

"I claimed I was a Sunni from the Arab Jobur area of south Baghdad," he said, describing how his captors used differences in the Muslim prayer rites to identify who was not Sunni.

"They asked me to do the call to prayer, which I did. Then they asked me to perform the ablution – disaster struck, as I made a mistake. They started beating me and broke five ribs, my right arm and my leg," he said.

Qasim escaped the fate of other Shia by telling the ISIS "judge" his father was illiterate and never taught him the prayer rituals properly. As a result, he was sent off with a batch of Sunni prisoners for further questioning.

After four days in agony from his injuries, Qasim was released under an amnesty which ISIS leader Abu Bakir al-Baghdadi issued to captive Sunni soldiers.

The amnestied soldiers were given money for their journey and a special password which allowed them to pass unharmed by ISIS forces.

“We were blindfolded and left on the main street,” Qasim said. “They told us that if we were stopped at an ISIS checkpoint, we could just say we were ‘friends of Abu Sulaiman’ or ‘friends of Abu Nabil’ and we could pass safely.”

When Qasim got home, many local families with relatives serving at Camp Speicher came to the house with photographs to see whether he recognised them and could shed any light on their fate.

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