

National Guard Abuses Anger Public

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Commanders of new force insist they will root out troublemakers.

The US-backed and trained Iraqi National Guard is facing allegations of misconduct and ill-discipline.

Commanders of the nascent force - which replaced the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps after the transfer of sovereignty on June 28 - insist that its members behave professionally, but admit there are some "troublemakers" within its ranks.

In recent weeks, there have been a number of complaints about guardsmen beating and abusing members of the public.

Farook Shamran, an investigator at a police station in the al-Beya'a suburb of Baghdad, says he was not only beaten up and accused of being a terrorist by guardsmen, but also alleges that they stole a large sum of money from his vehicle.

"My brother-in-law and I were arrested by guardsmen who broke into our house one night. I showed them my police ID but they beat us both and then arrested us. We were in custody for two days, during which time they beat us again and accused us of being insurgents," he said.

He says he was then handed over to the Americans who held him for almost three weeks, but the treatment he received from them was courteous and respectful.

"Eventually, I was released, but when I got back to my car, which the guards had kept the key to, I discovered they had taken the money I had left there. Almost 2,000 US dollars and two million Iraqi dinar [1300 dollars] had gone missing," he continued.

"It was stolen money we had recovered from a gang we arrested, and technically it belongs to the government.

"I tried to follow up on the incident and get an explanation but no one would talk to me. This isn't a police force - it's a bunch of thugs in uniform. Unless the government sorts this out quickly, the National Guard will become useless and corrupt."

In another incident, Doctor Bashar Ali, an orthopedist at al-Kindi hospital in Baghdad, said guardsmen tried to force him to treat one of their colleagues ahead of other more serious cases.

"They told me to ignore everyone else and treat their colleague first. When I refused they started to slap and punch me. Other staff had to intervene to prevent them arresting me," he said.

While the behaviour of some guardsmen has provoked anger, there are those who say that even their appearance raises doubts about their professionalism.

“It’s as if some of them want to be like the Americans, but you can tell the Americans are professional and well trained,” said Jamal Jasim, a traffic policeman.

“Their uniform looks quite like the US military’s and they’ve started wearing black sun glasses and cutting their hair really short too. They also try to act like them, holding their rifles with their fingers on the trigger and using sign language rather than talking.”

Responding to allegations of misconduct among his staff, Major Qais al-Husseni, assistant commander of the al-Rashid battalion, said the majority of guardsmen are professional and behave appropriately, but admits there are some troublemakers.

“Yes, we have a few elements whose behaviour is unfortunate, but we are in the process of forming a new recruiting committee to ensure that only suitable candidates are chosen,” he said.

“We have fired a number of guards for mistreating citizens and there are disciplinary procedures in place to deal with this when it happens.

“But you have to understand the situation. Men who were corporals under the old regime are [now] suddenly promoted to colonels. Some people don’t deal with this transition very well.”

While senior guardsmen insist they will clamp down on indiscipline, some are not convinced.

Members of the municipal council in the Baghdad neighbourhood of Al-Rashid, who recently had a run in with guardsmen carrying out over-zealous searches of council members entering a meeting, said they weren’t confident the situation would improve.

“We asked for guardsmen to come and provide security for a meeting we were having. But the lieutenant on duty was incredibly rude to the people they were searching,” said Jacob al-Mosawi, a council member. “Even Saddam’s henchmen didn’t talk like that to normal people.”

Mosawi said his colleagues complained to guard commanders, who said they were appalled by what had happened and would take necessary steps to stamp it out. “But,” said Mosawi, “As far as we can see, nothing has changed.”

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