

# Rape Accusation Reinforces Fears in a Divided Iraq



Ceerwan Aziz/Reuters

A woman with her son in a hospital, after he was wounded in a car bombing Tuesday in southern Baghdad.



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By [MARC SANTORA](#)

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BAGHDAD, Feb. 20 — The most wicked acts are spoken of openly and without reserve in [Iraq](#). Torture, stabbings and bodies ripped to pieces in bombings are all part of the daily conversation.

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Rape is different.

Rape is not mentioned by the victims, and rarely by the authorities. And when it is discussed publicly, as in several high-profile cases involving American soldiers and Iraqi women, it is usually left to the relatives of the victim to give the explicit details.

So when a 20-year-old Sunni woman from Baghdad appeared on the satellite television station [Al Jazeera](#) on Monday night with a horrific account of kidnapping and sexual assault at the hands of three officers in the Shiite-dominated Iraqi National Police, people across the country were stunned, some disbelieving, others horrified, but all riveted.

Almost immediately, Shiite leaders lined up to condemn the woman, calling her charges propaganda aimed at undermining the new security campaign. Sunni politicians offered the woman their support. Whatever the truth of the accusation, though, it played to sectarian fears on both sides.

For many Shiites, the charges appeared to be an attempt to smear them and attack the Shiite-led government; for Sunnis, the woman's account only highlighted what they already believed to be true — that the Iraqi government cares little for justice and promotes a Shiite agenda.

Bitter exchanges between politicians of various sects were relayed to millions on television, interspersed with clips of the woman telling her story, her face veiled, just the tears in her eyes visible.

The Americans, who have advisers working with the Iraqi National Police, found themselves caught in the middle without answers. The woman said the Americans had rescued her from the officers and gave her medical treatment. The American-backed, Shiite-led government

said the Americans would show the woman's claims to be false.

The American military said only that it was investigating the charges.

That was also the first response of Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#), who issued a statement soon after the woman appeared on television on Monday, promising a full investigation and the most severe punishment for anyone involved.

Only hours later, however, Mr. Maliki reversed himself. His office released a second statement after midnight, that one calling the woman a liar and a wanted criminal and going on to praise the officers involved.

"It has been shown after medical examinations that the woman had not been subjected to any sexual attack whatsoever, and that there are three outstanding arrest warrants against her issued by security agencies," said the second statement. "After the allegations have been proven to be false, the prime minister has ordered that the officers accused be rewarded."

The government did not elaborate on the statement or say why the prime minister had so quickly reversed himself. His office only said that "known parties" had been responsible for the allegations.

But in siding with the security forces, Mr. Maliki threatened to only heighten the tensions surrounding the already highly charged case. His government also released the woman's name, which is not being published by The New York Times.

Sunni politicians rushed to her defense, accusing the government of revealing its true sectarian bias.

The case “should not be dealt with on a sectarian basis,” said Saleem Abdullah, a spokesman for the Tawafiq bloc of Sunni parties, which helped the woman come forward. “She is a sister for all Iraqis.”

He went on to say the government’s handling of the issue could undermine its credibility in directing the security crackdown.

With fears of violence pervasive throughout the country, many Iraqis stay inside their homes whenever they can. Satellite television is their connection to the outside world and, just as often, their own country. On the two most prominent channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, they would have heard the woman telling her story over and over.

If she made up the story, it was an elaborate piece of propaganda and the contradictory statements by the Iraqi government only added to its power.

The woman was lying on a bed as she was interviewed, a blue blanket pulled up nearly to her chin. She had a light pink scarf covering her hair and a black scarf covering her face.