

Abu Ghraib, Oct 22 (AP) - The Baghdad suburb of Abu Ghraib, best known for its infamous prison, sits close enough to Baghdad's airport that you can see the control tower in the distance. It's an enticing potential prize for Islamic State militants.

For now, this Sunni-dominated town remains beyond their grip, despite recent reports to the contrary. Markets buzz with shoppers and young women in colorful clothes and headscarves walk freely through the streets.

That's thanks in large part to the support of local Sunni tribal leaders who fought against extremists in the past are vowing to do so again. But to win the fight, they also need to combat long-held feelings of discrimination and what residents feel are arbitrary detentions and disappearances that continue to fuel resentment against the country's Shiite majority.

New tanks and checkpoints have left Abu Ghraib more militarized in recent weeks. At some checkpoints, Associated Press journalists on a recent visit saw heavily-armed volunteers in black ski masks standing alongside the military, quizzing locals and checking vehicles.

A report by Amnesty International last week said Iraq's Shiite militias have abducted and killed scores of Sunni civilians with tacit government support in retaliation for Islamic State group attacks. Tens of thousands of militiamen wear military uniforms but operate outside any legal framework and without any official oversight, it found.

Arrests by those purporting to be government forces continue too, residents and outside observers say.

"The military harasses us all, but there is nothing we can do so we are forced to keep quiet," said Abu Ghraib resident Umm Mohammed, who agreed to be identified only by her nickname for fear of reprisals. She said her 22-year old son Omar has been detained, allegedly by the Iraqi military. She insisted he had no connection to the Sunni militant group.

Donatella Rovera, senior crisis response adviser at Amnesty International, said it's often unclear whether people are taken by militias or by security forces, and that there have been reports of local residents being rounded up in Abu Ghraib.

Families are reluctant to speak up, and it's hard to find defense lawyers to handle cases, "so detainees can be temporarily disappeared for quite a long time," she said.

That complicates efforts by influential tribal leaders to keep the militants at bay.

Sheik Khalil Ibrahim Haidan, a local tribal elder, insists Abu Ghraib will never fall to the Islamic State group. He believes the town's dark past has taught its citizens the dangers of flirting with the country's radical elements.

"There is no place here for Daesh or anyone else," he said, using an Arabic name for the Islamic State group.

After the revelation of prisoner abuse at the hands of U.S. troops following the 2003 invasion, Abu Ghraib became the scene of brutal insurgent attacks.

Al-Qaida in Iraq, which eventually would morph into the group now known as Islamic State, targeted tribal leaders opposed to its ideology throughout Iraq's Sunni heartland in the years that followed.

Many of the Sunni tribesmen eventually fought back. Members formed ad hoc militias known as Sahwa, or Awakening Councils. The movement was supported by the American government, which sought to empower locals entrenched in some of the insurgent group's biggest strongholds.

A similar community-driven national guard is now envisioned by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi

and his new government, with the support of the U.S.-led coalition.

But many Sunni tribes have not been won over. In the vast western province of Anbar, some 5,000 tribesmen are currently on board with government efforts to take part in the fight against the Islamic State group, which includes arrangements for arms and financial compensation.

With tribes often numbering 30,000 to 40,000 people, the effort is has a long way to go.

Back in Abu Ghraib, Iraqi troops and militants regularly exchange mortar fire just west of town as the militant group works its way around Iraq's Sunni-dominated, western Anbar province.

The U.S. said Sunday that it expanded airstrikes in Sunni-dominated Anbar, targeting a berm near the Fallujah Dam which, in May, had been used by Islamic State militants to flood areas east of Fallujah - including Abu Ghraib - and in turn, slow any military offensive.

At least 12,000 families in the Abu Ghraib area lost crops and livestock and were displaced from their homes by those floods. Some 11,000 were left in desperate need of food, clean water and other assistance, according to the UN.

The destruction bolstered the tribes' resolve.

"All of the tribes are so closely knit and would not tolerate the fall of their city to any outside force," said Sheikh Hamza Mohammed Ali, another elder in al-Zoba tribe.

Even so, residents worry about how long the town can hold out.

"We are very scared," Umm Mohammed said. "We keep receiving information that (Islamic State fighters) are close, that they entered the city. But then I go out into the street and see that everything is still ok for now. May Allah protect us."