

Islamic State: Iraqi leaders created the problem and can end it, say Sunnis

by [Scott Peterson](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) An Iraqi truck driver knows just how Sunni militants are created in Iraq—he nearly became one.

Mohamed Abu Abed's account of suffering at the hands of Iraq's Shi'ite-dominated security forces and government over the years echoes repeatedly among Iraq's minority Sunnis, who once held the reins of power in Iraq under Saddam Hussein but have been pushed aside and often targeted since the 2003 American invasion.

With the word "injustice" often on their lips—and the cases of thousands of Sunnis detained without charge on their minds—Iraq's aggrieved Sunnis began a popular uprising in December 2012. They called the Baghdad government "enemy," and in June this year helped Islamic State militants advancing from Syria seize control of swathes of their own country.

President Barack Obama's military strategy to "degrade and destroy" IS in Iraq may focus on US airstrikes, hundreds of American military advisers, and revamped Iraqi armed forces working alongside Kurdish and Shi'ite militias.

But to be successful, Obama has emphasized, it will also require steps by the new government of Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to change the Shi'ite-first policies of his predecessor and address Sunni grievances that have festered for years.

From the indiscriminate bombing of Sunni areas—Abadi this weekend ordered the Iraqi military to halt such airstrikes on civilian areas—to large numbers of languishing detainees, many Sunnis say the roots of discontent are obvious, and have resulted in support for groups as radical as IS.

"One hundred million percent, the [Iraqi] government created this problem," says Abu Abed, a truck driver from Abu Ghraib west of Baghdad, who asked that his nickname be used.

For this mustachioed Sunni with worn sandals and thinning hair, the list of sectarian grievances goes back years, and has accumulated into deep distrust of fellow Iraqis from the country's Shiite majority.

Abu Abed's father and brother were killed by Shiite militiamen, for example, during a period of severe sectarian bloodletting in September 2006. Both truck drivers, they were stopped at illegal Mahdi Army checkpoints, and their bodies were at the morgue the next day with bullet holes to the head. Abu Abed says he narrowly escaped the same fate.

Military sweep

Then in late 2006 Abu Abed was picked up with 34 others in a sweep by Iraqi military units of his neighborhood in Abu Ghraib, which along with nearby Fallujah was the heart of a Sunni and Al Qaeda insurgency that battled American and Iraqi forces.

The military found nothing incriminating at Abu Abed's house but took him away anyway, he says. He was beaten hard the first day, accused of being an insurgent but never charged, and held for 2-and-a-half years. Inside prison, he says, he heard the screams of those being tortured, and just as often heard the vows of Sunni detainees that, once out, they would join the insurgency and exact revenge.

"For sure, I would have joined them," said Abu Abed, except that the killings of his father and brother left him in charge of caring for their families—a higher priority than fighting back.

"The majority [in prison] were innocent. . . . They vowed revenge, and most joined the insurgents," said Abu Abed. "I knew them and saw them do it."

The same dynamic persists today, and has built up especially since protests erupted across Sunni provinces in late 2012, sparked by the arrests of the bodyguards of the Sunni Finance Minister and a number of women.

By late January 2013, the Al Qaeda umbrella group Islamic State in Iraq—the precursor organization that would later join its Syrian brethren and eventually declare an IS caliphate—called on Sunnis to take up arms against the Shiite-led Iraqi government.

That same month, at a prayer protest of hundreds of thousands across Sunni cities, men who had scars on their wrists and ankles from long detention and wanted an end to sweeping anti-terrorism laws, spoke to the *Christian Science Monitor*.

“The officer said, ‘I will torture you if you don’t admit you attacked checkpoints,’ ” one young man told the *Monitor* then. He said he was beaten and shocked with electric cables and hung from the ceiling, his hands cuffed behind him.

Barrel bombs

That storyline is common enough among Sunnis, whose grievances have expanded since then with what Human Rights Watch calls the government’s “indiscriminate” use of barrel bombs in Fallujah last spring.

Further, after IS moved into Iraq, from early June to late July, HRW documented 17 Iraqi government airstrikes that used barrel bombs and unguided air-dropped munitions on populated urban areas, all of them Sunni, leaving 75 civilians dead.

Last Thursday alone, some 14 barrel bombs were dropped on Fallujah, killing 22 civilians, according to a hospital source quoted by Reuters. And on Friday, three more died in an airstrike in the Sunni city of Ramadi, the agency reported.

While many Iraqi Sunnis have now been shocked by the sectarian violence and mass killings conducted by IS in areas under their control, they are waiting for their own grievances to be addressed by Abadi, who assumed the premiership last week and has promised more inclusive rule.

Ali Hatem Suleiman, leader of the Sunni “tribal revolutionaries,” announced on September 11 that he no longer supported IS because of their violent, sectarian ways. He also said that neither American planes nor the Iraqi Army can push back IS.

“The problem is bigger: Why is IS here? Why are some Sunnis joining?” he asked at a press conference in the Kurdish north of the country. “Because of the sectarian policy of the government and the oppression this [Anbar] province faced. When Sunnis are feeling their rights are preserved, I think IS will no longer be here.”

Inclusiveness promise

The IS incursion got that message to Baghdad, which was paralyzed when jihadist fighters crossed from Syria, seized Mosul, and Iraq's own expensive, US-trained military forces crumbled before the onslaught.

Abadi has presented a "model" example of inclusiveness, but implementation will be key, says a senior Iraqi government adviser who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of his post.

"Iraqis are optimistic, but they have their concerns [about] some of the ministers joining the government, because they are not . . . representing the change that they are looking for," the adviser said.

It is incorrect to use the term "Sunni revolution," adds the adviser, "because now Sunnis are the victims, they are suffering at this moment . . . they are besieged [by IS]."

Sunnis from Abu Ghraib say they are waiting to see if Abadi comes through on his promises, such that they notice a positive difference in their lives.

"I don't care if our leader is a Sunni or Shi'ite—or even Jewish—as long as they are just," says Abu Rahman, an unemployed Sunni builder wearing traditional robes from Abu Ghraib, who asked that only his nickname be used. "We've felt a very violent political and economic injustice. What is our crime? We are just Sunnis."