

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

by [Scott Peterson](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) An Iraqi truck driver knows 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 among Iraq's minority Sunnis, who once held power under Saddam Hussein but have been pushed aside and often targeted since the 2003 American invasion.

Iraq's Sunnis began a popular uprising in December 2012, and in June this year they helped Islamic State militants advancing from Syria seize control of swaths of their own country.

President Barack Obama's military strategy against the IS in Iraq may focus on U.S. air strikes 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 Haider al-Abadi to change the Shi'ite-first policies of his predecessor and address Sunni grievances.

Many Sunnis say the roots of discontent are obvious, from the indiscriminate bombing of Sunni areas by the Iraqi military to the detaining of thousands of Sunnis without charge. The result is support for groups as radical as the IS.

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

His father and brother, both truck drivers, were killed by Shi'ite militia in September 2006 after they were stopped at illegal checkpoints.

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 against U.S. and Iraqi forces.

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

"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.

Sunnis grievances expanded with what Human Rights Watch calls the government's "indiscriminate" use of barrel bombs in Fallujah last spring. After the IS moved into Iraq, from early June to late July HRW documented 17 Iraqi government air strikes that used barrel bombs and unguided air-dropped munitions on populated urban areas, all of them Sunni, leaving 75 civilians dead.

While many Iraqi Sunnis have been shocked by the sectarian violence and mass killings conducted by the IS in areas under their control, they are waiting to see if al-Abadi comes through on his promises of more inclusive rule.

"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, 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." —*The Christian Science Monitor*