

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نياشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html)

## The hidden hand behind the Islamic State militants? Saddam Hussein's.

By Liz Sly

4/4/2015

When Abu Hamza, a former Syrian rebel, agreed to join the Islamic State, he did so assuming he would become a part of the group's promised Islamist utopia, which has lured foreign jihadists from around the globe.

Instead, he found himself being supervised by an Iraqi emir and receiving orders from shadowy Iraqis who moved in and out of the battlefield in Syria. When Abu Hamza disagreed with fellow commanders at an Islamic State meeting last year, he said, he was placed under arrest on the orders of a masked Iraqi man who had sat silently through the proceedings, listening and taking notes.

Abu Hamza, who became the group's ruler in a small community in Syria, never discovered the Iraqis' real identities, which were cloaked by code names or simply not revealed. All of the men, however, were former Iraqi officers who had served under Saddam Hussein, including the masked man, who had once worked for an Iraqi intelligence agency and now belonged to the Islamic State's own shadowy security service, he said.

His account, and those of others who have lived with or fought against the Islamic State over the past two years, underscore the pervasive role played by members of Iraq's former Baathist army

in an organization more typically associated with flamboyant foreign jihadists and the gruesome videos in which they star.

Even with the influx of thousands of foreign fighters, almost all of the leaders of the Islamic State are former Iraqi officers, including the members of its shadowy military and security committees, and the majority of its emirs and princes, according to Iraqis, Syrians and analysts who study the group.

They have brought to the organization the military expertise and some of the agendas of the former Baathists, as well as the smuggling networks developed to avoid sanctions in the 1990s and which now facilitate the Islamic State's illicit oil trading.

In Syria, local "emirs" are typically shadowed by a deputy who is Iraqi and makes the real decisions, said Abu Hamza, who fled to Turkey last summer after growing disillusioned with the group. He uses a pseudonym because he fears for his safety.

"All the decision makers are Iraqi, and most of them are former Iraqi officers. The Iraqi officers are in command, and they make the tactics and the battle plans," he said. "But the Iraqis themselves don't fight. They put the foreign fighters on the front lines."

The public profile of the foreign jihadists frequently obscures the Islamic State's roots in the bloody recent history of Iraq, its brutal excesses as much a symptom as a cause of the country's woes.

The raw cruelty of Hussein's Baathist regime, the disbandment of the Iraqi army after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the subsequent insurgency and the marginalization of Sunni Iraqis by the Shiite-dominated government all are intertwined with the Islamic State's ascent, said Hassan Hassan, a Dubai-based analyst and co-author of the book "ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror."

"A lot of people think of the Islamic State as a terrorist group, and it's not useful," Hassan said. "It is a terrorist group, but it is more than that. It is a homegrown Iraqi insurgency, and it is organic to Iraq."

The de-Baathification law promulgated by L. Paul Bremer, Iraq's American ruler in 2003, has long been identified as one of the contributors to the original insurgency. At a stroke, 400,000 members of the defeated Iraqi army were barred from government employment, denied pensions — and also allowed to keep their guns.

The U.S. military failed in the early years to recognize the role the disbanded Baathist officers would eventually come to play in the extremist group, eclipsing the foreign fighters whom American officials preferred to blame, said Col. Joel Rayburn, a senior fellow at the National Defense University who served as an adviser to top generals in Iraq and describes the links between Baathists and the Islamic State in his book, "Iraq After America."

The U.S. military always knew that the former Baathist officers had joined other insurgent groups and were giving tactical support to the Al Qaeda in Iraq affiliate, the precursor to the

Islamic State, he said. But American officials didn't anticipate that they would become not only adjuncts to al-Qaeda, but core members of the jihadist group.

*[Islamic State appears to be fraying from within]*

"We might have been able to come up with ways to head off the fusion, the completion of the Iraqization process," he said. The former officers were probably not reconcilable, "but it was the labeling of them as irrelevant that was the mistake."

Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliph, the former officers became more than relevant. They were instrumental in the group's rebirth from the defeats inflicted on insurgents by the U.S. military, which is now back in Iraq bombing many of the same men it had already fought twice before.

**LEADERS**



**Abu Musab  
al-Zarqawi**



**Abu Omar  
al-Baghdadi**



**Abu Bakr  
al-Baghdadi**



**Abu Ayman** Most

Islamic State leaders were officers in Saddam Hussein's Iraq View Graphic  
Most Islamic State leaders were officers in Saddam Hussein's Iraq  
Shared traits

At first glance, the secularist dogma of Hussein's tyrannical Baath Party seems at odds with the Islamic State's harsh interpretation of the Islamic laws it purports to uphold.

But the two creeds broadly overlap in several regards, especially their reliance on fear to secure the submission of the people under the group's rule. Two decades ago, the elaborate and cruel forms of torture perpetrated by Hussein dominated the discourse about Iraq, much as the Islamic State's harsh punishments do today.

Like the Islamic State, Hussein's Baath Party also regarded itself as a transnational movement, forming branches in countries across the Middle East and running training camps for foreign volunteers from across the Arab world.

By the time U.S. troops invaded in 2003, Hussein had begun to tilt toward a more religious approach to governance, making the transition from Baathist to Islamist ideology less improbable for some of the disenfranchised Iraqi officers, said Ahmed S. Hashim, a professor who is researching the ties at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

With the launch of the Iraqi dictator's Faith Campaign in 1994, strict Islamic precepts were introduced. The words "God is Great" were inscribed on the Iraqi flag. Amputations were decreed for theft. Former Baathist officers recall friends who suddenly stopped drinking, started praying and embraced the deeply conservative form of Islam known as Salafism in the years preceding the U.S. invasion.

In the last two years of Hussein's rule, a campaign of beheadings, mainly targeting women suspected of prostitution and carried out by his elite Fedayeen unit, killed more than 200 people, human rights groups reported at the time.

The brutality deployed by the Islamic State today recalls the bloodthirstiness of some of those Fedayeen, said Hassan. Promotional videos from the Hussein era include scenes resembling those broadcast today by the Islamic State, showing the Fedayeen training, marching in black masks, practicing the art of decapitation and in one instance eating a live dog.

Some of those Baathists became early recruits to the al-Qaeda affiliate established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Palestinian Jordanian fighter who is regarded as the progenitor of the current Islamic State, said Hisham al Hashemi, an Iraqi analyst who advises the Iraqi government and has relatives who served in the Iraqi military under Hussein. Other Iraqis were radicalized at Camp Bucca, the American prison in southern Iraq where thousands of ordinary citizens were detained and intermingled with jihadists.

Zarqawi kept the former Baathists at a distance, because he distrusted their secular outlook, according to Hashim, the professor.

It was under the watch of the current Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, that the recruitment of former Baathist officers became a deliberate strategy, according to analysts and former officers.

Tasked with rebuilding the greatly weakened insurgent organization after 2010, Baghdadi embarked on an aggressive campaign to woo the former officers, drawing on the vast pool of men who had either remained unemployed or had joined other, less extremist insurgent groups.

Some of them had fought against al-Qaeda after changing sides and aligning with the American-backed Awakening movement during the surge of troops in 2007. When U.S. troops withdrew and the Iraqi government abandoned the Awakening fighters, the Islamic State was the only surviving option for those who felt betrayed and wanted to change sides again, said Brian Fishman, who researched the group in Iraq for West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and is now a fellow with the New America Foundation.



**U.S. Army Maj. Kathleen Perry watches as Maj. Gen. Tensin Hamid, the police chief for Iraq's Salahuddin province, signs a document denouncing the Baath Party at the police headquarters in Tikrit in May 2003.**

Baghdadi's effort was further aided by a new round of de-Baathification launched after U.S. troops left in 2011 by then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who set about firing even those officers who had been rehabilitated by the U.S. military.

Among them was Brig. Gen. Hassan Dulaimi, a former intelligence officer in the old Iraqi army who was recruited back into service by U.S. troops in 2006, as a police commander in Ramadi, the capital of the long restive province of Anbar.

Within months of the American departure, he was dismissed, he said, losing his salary and his pension, along with 124 other officers who had served alongside the Americans.

"The crisis of ISIS didn't happen by chance," Dulaimi said in an interview in Baghdad, using an acronym for the Islamic State. "It was the result of an accumulation of problems created by the Americans and the [Iraqi] government."

He cited the case of a close friend, a former intelligence officer in Baghdad who was fired in 2003 and struggled for many years to make a living. He now serves as the Islamic State's wali, or leader, in the Anbar town of Hit, Dulaimi said.

"I last saw him in 2009. He complained that he was very poor. He is an old friend, so I gave him some money," he recalled. "He was fixable. If someone had given him a job and a salary, he wouldn't have joined the Islamic State.

"There are hundreds, thousands like him," he added. "The people in charge of military operations in the Islamic State were the best officers in the former Iraqi army, and that is why the Islamic State beats us in intelligence and on the battlefield."

The Islamic State's seizure of territory was also smoothed by the Maliki government's broader persecution of the Sunni minority, which intensified after U.S. troops withdrew and left many ordinary Sunnis willing to welcome the extremists as an alternative to the often brutal Iraqi security forces.

But it was the influx of Baathist officers into the ranks of the Islamic State itself that propelled its fresh military victories, said Hashem. By 2013, Baghdadi had surrounded himself with former officers, who oversaw the Islamic State's expansion in Syria and drove the offensives in Iraq.

Some of Baghdadi's closest aides, including Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, his deputy in Iraq, and Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, one of his top military commanders in Syria, both of them former Iraqi officers, have since reportedly been killed — though Dulaimi suspects that many feign their own deaths in order to evade detection, making its current leadership difficult to discern.

Any gaps however are filled by former officers, sustaining the Iraqi influence at the group's core, even as its ranks are swelled by arriving foreigners, said Hassan.

Fearing infiltration and spies, the leadership insulates itself from the foreign fighters and the regular Syrian and Iraqi fighters through elaborate networks of intermediaries frequently drawn from the old Iraqi intelligence agencies, he said.

“They introduced the Baathist mind-set of secrecy as well as its skills,” he said.

The masked man who ordered the detention of Abu Hamza was one of a group of feared security officers who circulate within the Islamic State, monitoring its members for signs of dissent, the Syrian recalled.

“They are the eyes and ears of Daesh's security, and they are very powerful,” he said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

Abu Hamza was released from jail after agreeing to fall into line with the other commanders, he said. But the experience contributed to his disillusionment with the group.

The foreign fighters he served alongside were “good Muslims,” he said. But he is less sure about the Iraqi leaders.

“They pray and they fast and you can't be an emir without praying, but inside I don't think they believe it much,” he said. “The Baathists are using Daesh. They don't care about Baathism or even Saddam.

“They just want power. They are used to being in power, and they want it back.”

‘They want to run Iraq’

Whether the former Baathists adhere to the Islamic State's ideology is a matter of debate. Hashim suspects many of them do not.

“One could still argue that it’s a tactical alliance,” he said. “A lot of these Baathists are not interested in ISIS running Iraq. They want to run Iraq. A lot of them view the jihadists with this Leninist mind-set that they’re useful idiots who we can use to rise to power.”

Rayburn questions whether even some of the foreign volunteers realize the extent to which they are being drawn into Iraq’s morass. Some of the fiercest battles being waged today in Iraq are for control of communities and neighborhoods that have been hotly contested among Iraqis for years, before the extremists appeared.

“You have fighters coming from across the globe to fight these local political battles that the global jihad can’t possibly have a stake in.”

Former Baathist officers who served alongside some of those now fighting with the Islamic State believe it is the other way around. Rather than the Baathists using the jihadists to return to power, it is the jihadists who have exploited the desperation of the disbanded officers, according to a former general who commanded Iraqi troops during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He spoke on the condition of anonymity because he fears for his safety in Irbil, the capital of the northern Iraqi region of Kurdistan, where he now resides.

The ex-Baathists could be lured away, if they were offered alternatives and hope for the future, he said.

“The Americans bear the biggest responsibility. When they dismantled the army what did they expect those men to do?” he asked. “They were out in the cold with nothing to do and there was only one way out for them to put food on the table.”

When U.S. officials demobilized the Baathist army, “they didn’t de-Baathify people’s minds, they just took away their jobs,” he said.

There are former Baathists with other insurgent groups who might be persuaded to switch sides, said Hassan, citing the example of the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, usually referred to by its Arabic acronym JRTN. They welcomed the Islamic State during its sweep through northern Iraq last summer, but the groups have since fallen out.

But most of the Baathists who actually joined the Islamic State are now likely to have themselves become radicalized, either in prison or on the battlefield, he said.

“Even if you didn’t walk in with that vision you might walk out with it, after five years of hard fighting,” said Fishman, of the New America Foundation. “They have been through brutal things that are going to shape their vision in a really dramatic way.”