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Why Iraqis are joining ISIL: captured militants tell their stories

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April 30, 2015

His eyes covered with a checkered cloth and his hands shackled, he steps cautiously into the room, ushered by a member of the Kurdish intelligence service — the Asayesh.

The man, identified as HS, 30, was arrested by the Kurds at a checkpoint near Kirkuk in February. When interrogated, he confessed to working for ISIL and attempting to infiltrate the Iraqi military.

Once sat down and his blindfold removed, his eyes unleashed a fiery gaze.

As a young man, HS was part of Saddam Hussein's army. His livelihood was cut short when the Americans disbanded Iraq's armed forces after the 2003 invasion. His frustration soon turned to anger, and like many other unemployed soldiers, he joined the bloody insurgency against US occupation.

The Al Qaeda-inspired violence unleashed in Iraq after the second Gulf war was fuelled by the resentment of Iraq's defeated army.

Economic grievances, nationalist pride and religious fundamentalism fused together to create a plethora of terrorist outfits under the banner of extremism.

The diverse set of motivations drove HS to ambush US patrols, firing machine gun rounds and rocket-propelled grenades into passing convoys of Humvees under the cover of darkness.

“We fought the Americans because they were trying to take over our country,” he said.

But he rejected the notion that he was more of a nationalist than an extremist.

“No, I did it for God,” he said firmly, briefly casting aside his anxious deference towards his captors.

All the same, his personal “jihad” came to an abrupt end when he was kicked out of his terror cell for drinking alcohol.

In the years that followed, he struggled to make ends meet, and to feed his four children.

When ISIL surged across Iraq towards Baghdad last year, the group’s advance took them into his native Hawija province.

HS suddenly found himself a target of ISIL’s recruitment drive, and was soon pressed into their service.

While he admits driving fuel lorries for the militants, transporting petrol from Mosul to Hawija, he insists that he does not subscribe to ISIL’s murderous interpretation of Islam.

He subtly shakes his head when the Asayesh officer accuses him of being part of ISIL.

The terrorists threatened to kick him out of his home if he refused to truck petrol for them, he said. They followed up on their threat by taking his house and car when he left for Kirkuk in February. According to the Asayesh, he came to the city to join the Iraqi army as an ISIL operative.

Kirkuk was swiftly occupied by Kurdish Peshmerga forces when the Iraqi army was swept aside by ISIL, halting the militants’ advance and taking control of a city that the Kurds have always regarded as their own.

Kirkuk is not part of the Kurdish autonomous region, and the city’s ethnic fault lines were changed under Saddam, who sought to dilute the Kurdish majority with an influx of Arabs.

With ISIL recruiting heavily amongst Sunni Arabs, the city is a security headache for the Kurds, who have responded by establishing tight security controls. Arabs suspected of ISIL sympathies are swiftly arrested.

Interviews with other alleged ISIL militants held by the Kurds near Kirkuk show that while ISIL's brand of extremism may be what attracts foreign recruits, in Iraq, support for the militant group is often much less ideological.

Resentment, fear, and opportunism are simple but powerful factors that drive recruitment in ISIL.

SA, 46, was already a long time resident of Kirkuk when he was picked up by the Asayesh.

During interrogation, he admitted to being recruited by ISIL, who secured his loyalty with a series of cash payments totalling around US\$5,000 (Dh 18,365).