

How an Iraqi widow's resistance became a symbol of hope

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) When Khalid Ismael got a desperate call from an army friend saying militants had surrounded him and five other soldiers, Ismael's mother didn't hesitate. Alia Khalaf al-Jabouri ordered Ismael to take his sister and drive through 30 miles of enemy territory to rescue them.

The sister was there for a reason: the extremists known as the Islamic State weren't stopping vehicles with women.

"I told Khalid 'you have to go—Iraq needs its sons,'" said al-Jabouri, known as Um Qusay.

While the town would eventually save 850 soldiers from IS, Um Qusay went above and beyond the role played by townspeople in sending her children on the dangerous rescue mission and then sheltering 64 soldiers in her home.

Um Qusay and the townspeople are Sunni Muslim; the soldiers menaced by IS were mostly Shi'ite. And in Um Qusay, a poor widow and member of the Jabouri tribe whose husband and oldest son were killed by IS, the country has found a symbol of self-sacrifice.

In June 2014, after taking over the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, IS rampaged through late dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, slaughtering more than 1,700 young army recruits and dumping their bodies into mass graves or in the river in the worst single massacre by the extremists.

Seeing IS execute fellow soldiers, the group of 850 fled the Speicher military base and found themselves trapped on the other side of the river from al-Alam with the jihadists closing in. Members of Um Qusay's Jabouri tribe ferried them in rowboats to safety while fighters provided covering fire from the bushes.

Thirty miles away further down the Tigris River, the group of six soldiers was in even more danger.

Dozens of families in al-Alam sheltered the soldiers for 16 days while the town fought off IS. The town later surrendered after IS captured and held hostage dozens of families. But before they let the fighters in, townspeople made sure that 400 of the Iraqi soldiers got out alive. The Jabouris fled in order to escape reprisals.

It would take months of fighting by the Popular Mobilization Forces, a mostly Shi'a militia, along with Iraqi troops to expel IS from al-Alam.

A reward and a request for blessings

A year on, Um Qusay's photo is on billboards on the entrance to the town. After it was liberated, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi brought her to Baghdad to thank her and gave her \$15,000 in cash and gold.

A steady stream of visitors comes to Um Qusay's office in an empty house lent to her by the city council. In a reception area, she greets tribal leaders and military officials who come to thank her, ask what the community needs, and even ask for her blessings.

"Um Qusay emerged at a very difficult time to try to ease sectarian tension by her actions and her sacrifice," said Ali al-Sudani, a Shi'ite cleric from Baghdad who is her office director. "In spite of her poverty, she took care of a huge number of soldiers."

She has a new nickname among some: Tawa'a, a seventh century woman from southern Iraq revered by Shi'ites for sheltering an envoy of Imam Hussein.

Despite her humble roots—she never attended school and married at 13—Um Qusay displays the confidence of someone born to high office. She steps away from receiving tribal leaders in a cavernous reception room to record a flawless video greeting to the PMF on the anniversary of the liberation of al-Alam. A young man accompanying a delegation of sheikhs from Najaf stands up to recite a poem he has written in her honor.

At a celebration nearby, the crowd parts as she walks by in a gold-trimmed black abaya. Children run around the sunlit parade ground as Sunni fighters from the PMF, Shi'ite military officials, and women line up to take selfies with her.

Unpaid soldiers fighting Islamic State

But along with the fame come huge responsibilities, she said. The office is funded by donations, including aid she distributes to the needy. Her own sons, who rejoined the Iraqi army and police to fight IS, have not been paid for a year.

“People come to me if they want government jobs or they want to return to their police jobs,” she said. “People who have nothing to eat come to me.”

When PMF militiamen prevent displaced families from returning to their homes, she vouches for the families and mediates to allow their return.

While U.S.-backed Iraqi security forces have taken back territory from IS, the group remains a threat across northern and western provinces. And Iraq’s economy is struggling amid low global oil prices.

Iraq’s tribal system still carries more weight than government laws or even the judicial system. Tribes have played a crucial role in the battle against IS—and al-Qaeda before it.

More than a decade of civil strife has divided many of the Sunni tribes. Some have supported the militants against what they believe is an illegitimate Iraqi government; others have joined the fight either as tribes or with government forces.

The Jabouri confederation is one of the biggest in Iraq and like most also contains Shi’ite tribes.

In 1991, after Saddam put down a failed uprising after Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait, dozens of army officers from al-Alam were executed for treason.

“That is why some of the tribes hate us,” said Rafid Ismael, another of Um Qusay’s sons.

While the Jabouris returned to largely intact homes after al-Alam was freed, others from tribes in surrounding villages have not had such a smooth return.

The militias have barred some from returning because they suspect them of IS sympathies; others found their homes were destroyed in the fighting.

Behind Um Qusay’s newfound fame is an indomitable will. When she was seven, her father was shot dead after he rejected a cousin of Saddam Hussein as a suitor for

her sister. At 13, Um Qusay filed a lawsuit against her brother after he demanded she marry a much older man.

A cousin from her clan, whom she had never met, attended the court session and said he would marry her.

Two years ago, just before the capture of Tikrit, her husband was in a field picking mushrooms with Um Qusay's oldest son and a cousin when IS fighters shot them and then ran over them with a truck.

Um Qusay's daughter Mayada, a seamstress, shares her mother's iron will, her family said.

"I wasn't afraid because I felt if I died I would be sacrificing myself for these people, and the only thing in my mind was to bring them safely to our house," Mayada said, speaking of the rescue mission in 2014.

Although Khaled and Mayada went to fetch the six soldiers, he makes clear that Um Qusay was behind it.

"It was my mother's idea," he said. "If all Iraqis were like her, there would be no IS."