

Alia Khalaf al-Jabouri, Iraqi widow, becomes symbol of self-sacrifice

by [Jane Arraf](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Alia Khalaf al-Jabouri, a poor Iraqi widow, has become a symbol of self-sacrifice and transcendence of Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

In 2014 her son, Khalid Ismael, got a desperate call from an army friend saying militants had surrounded him and five other soldiers.

"I told Khalid, 'You have to go—Iraq needs its sons,'" said al-Jabouri, known as Um Qusay, whose husband and oldest son were killed by the extremists known as the Islamic State.

She told her daughter, Mayada, also to go on the 30-mile journey through enemy territory to rescue the men, knowing that IS militants weren't stopping vehicles with women.

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

The residents of al-Alam, who are mostly Sunni Muslim, would eventually save 850 soldiers, who were mostly Shi'ite. Um Qusay sheltered 64 soldiers in her home.

The town later surrendered to the IS. After it was liberated, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi brought her to Baghdad to thank her and gave her \$15,000.

Um Qusay's photo is on billboards at the entrance to the town. A steady stream of visitors comes to her office in an empty house lent to her by the city council. Though Um Qusay never attended school and married at 13, she carries herself with confidence as she greets tribal leaders and military officials who come to thank her, ask what the community needs, and ask for her blessings.

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 the 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.”

Some liken her to Tawa’a, a seventh- century woman from southern Iraq revered by Shi’ites for sheltering an envoy of Imam Hussein.

“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.”