

## The Dangerous Lives of Undercover ISIS Informants

Meet the Small Group of Middle Eastern Men Willing to Risk Everything to Help Destroy the Islamic State.



By Igor Kossov

ERBIL, Iraq — Everyone in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, is aware of the warplanes that have killed the commanders of the Islamic State and decimated its weapon factories and training centers while flying tens of thousands of feet over the city, largely impervious to the threats beneath them. A far fewer number know about the undercover all-volunteer army of informants operating in Islamic State-held territory, who risk torture and death every day to relay intelligence to the Iraqi and coalition forces that operate those planes.

"Usually, our guys in Mosul called after midnight for five seconds, before taking out their SIM card. Islamic State militants have banned phones that actively communicate with the outside world via cellular networks. Anyone caught anyone using a SIM card is usually executed.

Rashidi said these civilians usually receive no compensation for their covert work and supported the fight because "they love their land."

The informants typically provided their information to the Kurdish or Iraqi forces, who would then pass it to the anti-Islamic State coalition. A former lieutenant in the Iraqi Army and a captain in the Peshmerga focused on infantry intelligence who goes by the pseudonym Sorxan Rekani said he recruited and worked with seven informants and that Italian, German, and U.S. officers, operating on their information, would then use drones to conduct additional reconnaissance or strike the targets directly. Coalition spokesman Col. John Dorrian confirmed the international alliance receives its target lists from civilian informants, among other sources.

The informants declined to be identified by name, fearing reprisals against their families by Islamic State sleeper cells. They provided only their agent numbers, by which they were known to the coalition. They are all currently in Iraq outside of Islamic State-held territory, where they live in homes that Rekani helped them find. Their former handler also tried to get them cash assistance but was unsuccessful; he said the coalition told him if informants were rewarded with money, they would start selling information to the highest bidder.

As a generator repairman, he had the opportunity to travel throughout the city, covertly learning about Islamic State checkpoints and gatherings. He also noted movements of Islamic State trucks and warned the coalition in advance of the movement of large convoys, making them easy targets for airstrikes. Agent 40, who worked as a taxi driver during the Islamic State occupation, as perhaps his "best source." Beginning in 2015, he wrote detailed reports that helped the coalition destroy 14 major targets, including a meeting of Islamic State leaders, a militant court, and several car bomb assembly plants.

Rekani told Agent 40, an Arab from Mosul, to check out certain locations in advance. Agent 40 found others on his own. "For example, if I saw many nice cars in some position, I would park nearby, walk around, and see," he said. "Sometimes I'd pick up some passengers who would tell me what was going on." Occasionally he drove militants and overheard their conversations.

"I was afraid, of course, but I had to do something," he said. "I had to help my people."

By his count, the information he provided led to the deaths of 87 Islamic State members, including high-ranking officials. To confirm the strikes and sate his own curiosity, he took mobile phone video of almost every one of the strikes while his son drove the car.

This practice eventually caught up with him. Islamic State fighters conducted a surprise inspection of Agent 40's house and found his wife using a forbidden phone. They waited for him to return and then promptly arrested him, beat him, and shoved him in a cell with seven other men. After they went through the phone and saw the videos he took, they sentenced him to execution.

As he sat there waiting to die, the building quaked, and one of the walls exploded into pieces from an airstrike on an adjacent building. Through the smoke, Agent 40 saw four Islamic State bodies sprawled on the ground. He and six fellow prisoners made their escape through the hole caused by the airstrike — he believes the eighth prisoner was killed.

The informant fled Mosul to Qayyarah, and then to Shirqat, where he was eventually reunited with his family. To this day, he doesn't know whether the airstrike was accidental or a deliberate attempt to free him. Rekani said he does not know either.

Agent 44, also a taxi driver, was able to avoid such close calls in Mosul by hiding his SIM card inside the fruit he collected from his orange tree. His job meant that he spent a great deal of time around the mechanic shops of eastern Mosul. He seized the opportunity, gathering information on the hidden munitions plants in the area.

"I would go up to the mechanics' area and ask about strange people working there and what my colleagues said. Then I would go to the factory site and confirm with my eyes," the informant said. One of his neighbors worked inside one of the plants and passed him the information.

Agent 44 was most proud of discovering a swimming pool where close to 50 Islamic State fighters trained during the evenings. Thanks to his chats with a pool employee, he told the coalition exactly when and where to strike the target in order to erase dozens of fighters from the conflict.

All three agents said they did their best to prevent civilian casualties but could not claim with 100 percent certainty that their work didn't cause innocent deaths. Rekani and Rashidi said drones would usually surveil targets provided by informants, to confirm that they were indeed Islamic State positions. The jihadi organization, however, has a long-standing practice of using human shields and recruiting workers from the local populace. It's impossible to know how many nonmilitants would have been present at the time of a given airstrike.

When asked if they would do it again, all three agents said without hesitation that they would, despite the fact that they never got any payment or official acknowledgment for their role. Helping defeat the Islamic State was its own reward. Still, Agent 40 was happy that the most absurd parts of the experience were over. He said he had found it ever more difficult to keep a straight face while attending mosque on Fridays, which the Islamic State mandated. When the militants called on God to defeat their enemies, Agent 40 made a different prayer.

## What is Wahhabism? The Reactionary Branch of Islam from Saudi Arabia Said to be 'the Main Source of Global Terrorism'

Wahhabism has become increasingly influential, partly because of Saudi money and partly because of Saudi Arabia's central influence as protector of Mecca.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, members of the Saudi ruling class have applauded Wahhabism for its Salafi piety - i.e. its adherence to the original practices of Islam - and the movement's vehement opposition to the Shia branch of Islam.

In the 1970s, with the help of funding from petroleum exports and other factors, Saudi charities started funding Wahhabi schools (madrassas) and mosques across the globe and the movement underwent "explosive growth".

The US State Department has estimated that over the past four decades Riyadh has invested more than \$10bn (£6bn) into charitable foundations in an attempt to replace mainstream Sunni Islam with the harsh intolerance of its Wahhabism. EU intelligence experts estimate that 15 to 20 per cent of this has been diverted to al-Qaida and other violent jihadists.

The movement now has worldwide influence inspiring the ideology of extremists worldwide.

### A short history of Wahhabism



Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab

Founded by Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-92), it stresses the absolute sovereignty of God. Ibn Abd al-Wahab also rejected any reliance on the intercession of Mohammed and denounced pilgrimages to saints' tombs, declaring that their domes or shrines should be destroyed.

As an opposer of innovation, he advocated a return to what he saw as the purity of the first generation of Islam, the salaf and the teaching of any school of law. His ideas were deeply influenced by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyah (1263-1328), who saw the state as an adjunct of religion and opposed discursive theology. Ibn Taymiyah also branded the Mongols of his day as kafirs (unbelievers), even though they professed the main tenets of Islam. In this, he has been imitated by modern Islamist movements which excommunicate those who profess Islam without following it rigorously. These ideas were further developed in the twentieth century by Sayyid Qutb.

Wahhabists enforce public attendance at prayers, forbid shaving and the smok-

ing of tobacco. Their mosques are plain. By the middle of the 18th century, they dominated the Arabian peninsula with the political support of the Al Saud, the family that to this day rules through a monarchy.

In 1925, the Wahhabists seized Mecca, but the state has continued to allow pilgrims of all Muslim traditions to observe their rites during the hajj. Even so, the Interior Ministry funds the religious police, who seek out illegal alcohol and ensure shops are shut during mosque time.

Since the 1980s, unemployed young people have been attracted to neo-Wahhabist groups embracing salafiyah, the ideology of primitive Islam, who seek social justice as well as the imposition of Koranic punishments.

***In July 2013, Wahhabism was identified by the European Parliament in Strasbourg as the main source of global terrorism.***

### Wahhabism today

The exclusivism of Ibn Taymiyah combined with the use of violence advocated by modern ultra-Wahhabists such as Al Qaeda, Isil and Boko Haram, have now given rise to cells of activists outside Saudi Arabia, ready to commit terrorist outrages such as the ones seen in Beirut, Paris, Brussels and Lahore.

Its ironic that Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali seemed to warn against the rise of extremism in Kitab Al Fitan — a compilation of hadiths (Islamic tradition) relating to the end of times, put together by prominent scholar Nuyam bin Hammad in 229 AH.

***The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, condemned Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), insisting "the ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way".***

**In it Imam Ali recalled the Prophet saying:**

***"If you see the black flags, then hold your ground and do not move your hands or your feet. A people will come forth who are weak and have no capability, their hearts are like blocks of iron. They are the people of the State (literally the people of Al Dawla), they do not keep a promise or a treaty.***

"They call to the truth but they are not its people. Their names are (nicknames like Abu Mohammed) and their last names (are the names of town and cities, like Al Halabi [and now al-Baghdadi]) and their hair is loose like women's hair. (Leave them) until they fight among themselves, then Allah will bring the truth from whoever He wills."



Men study at a madrassa in Dhaka Bangladesh

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