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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SUNNI IDEOLOGY, CONTENTION AND THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ¹

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the emergence, development and trajectory of ISIS in Iraq through the lenses of Social Movement Theory. It deploys the political process model and outlines both structural and agency factors. The article argues that the Sunni regions of Iraq developed a separate political community after 2003, against the backdrop of the sectarian politics that the coalition of Shia parties that supported the al-Maliki government in Baghdad were perceived to be pursuing. The political process unfolded in three phases from 2003 to 2014. While Sunni political parties tried to compromise with the al-Maliki government in 2010, the latter's uncompromising stance created the context for more radical forces to come on the scene. In 2013, Baathists and Salafi-jihadists formed a revolutionary front, which led to a generalised uprising in the Sunni regions of the country. The article explains how ISIS was able to take advantage of the political opportunities on the ground and provides analytical insights for its transformation from an isolated organisation to a hegemonic revolutionary force.

KEYWORDS: ISIS, Iraq, Islamism, Jihadism, Salafism, Social Movements

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¹ I collected findings for this research thanks to the help of three special Iraqis who accepted to share with me their knowledge of the country in several and long Messenger conversations between 2019 and 2020. Khalaf al-Jabour is a trader from Azhililh (Al-Qayyarah) in the governorate of Mosul; Borhan Rauf is a journalist for a Kurdistan daily newspaper and political analyst from Suleimaniyya (Kurdistan); Ahmed al-Farabi is an employee of a public oil company in Baghdad and a youtuber specialised in philosophy. Khalaf lived through the events this article refers to. Borhan is an expert on ISIS and Ahmed is an inhabitant of Baghdad with a Shia cultural background and a special observer of the intellectual trends of his country. Interviewee were selected on the basis of their competence as local observers and geographical origin. The article includes also quotes from interviews with Andrea Plebani, an expert of Iraq (interviewed on 9 June 2020) and Mustapha Salim, *The Washington Post's* Baghdad bureau reporter (interviewed on 14 October 2020).

1. Introduction

On 29 June 2014, after seizing Mosul, the largest city of northern Iraq, the Salafi-Jihadi organisation called the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) announced the establishment of an Islamic state (or Caliphate), claiming authority over a territory larger than the United Kingdom's (Kaválek 2015: 2). This event sparked both concern and interest, especially because the declaration of a new state appeared to be more than the ephemeral action of armed fanatics. The Salafi-Jihadi group at the head of this project – simply known as Islamic State (IS hereafter) after the declaration of the state² – was not only an armed group, but had an ideology and a political programme that offered the Sunni Arab population of Iraq³ an alternative solution to Baghdad's state-building project.

Although in July 2017 the Sunni regions of Iraq returned under the formal authority of Baghdad, the question of the integration of the Sunni community into the post-2003 institutional setting remains open (Plebani 2017). After the fall of the Baath regime, Iraq, under US influence, saw the establishment of a national pact based on the division of the country into three political communities, a pact that the Sunnis initially refused (Dawisha and Diamond 2006: 93-94). Iraqi Sunnis were traditionally attached to a nationalist vision of Iraq based on pan-Arabism and were sceptical of the new national project Kurds and Shias subscribed to after 2003. With time, this particular nationalist political strand evolved into what can be labelled a proper "Sunni ideology". Because it was based on a national vision the other confessional communities in the country did not share, it became a type of nationalism that claimed to be "Iraqi", despite being almost exclusively "Sunni". In particular, it developed as an ideology that combined traditional Baath nationalism and Islamism with strong Salafi features, which I label in this article "Islamism-nationalism".

This combination shaped the ideological frame for the conflict between the Sunnis (considered as a political community) on one side and the Kurds and Shias on the other. As mentioned, the latter wanted to leave traditional Iraqi nationalism behind and they perceived "Sunni ideology" as the result of frustration for those who had held almost exclusive political power under the previous regime. In practical political terms and thanks to the communitarian divisions of power post-2003, the Kurds solidified their right to self-government within an autonomous territory, while Shia political parties took control of the central government in Baghdad. This was indeed a complete reversal of the balance of power that had existed under Saddam Hussein and it led to the clash between confessional communities.⁴

The Sunni community's exclusion from power created the conditions for a section of the Sunni population to imagine a separate state as an alternative political option to the sectarian division of power. For this to happen in practice, however, Sunni political actors had to be confronted, first, with the impossibility of integrating Iraqi political institutions and, second, with the emergence of a political actor proposing a coherent program of state-building and able to become sufficiently hegemonic to offer precisely such an alternative. Neither the existence of a separate Sunni ideology nor the existence of ISIS as a social and political actor are *per se* factors that can explain the achievement of a separate project of state-building. The political process that unfolded between 2003 and 2014 shows, on the contrary, that at specific junctures the integration of the Sunni parties into the new national project was a possibility and that ISIS was isolated, with many Sunnis

² The group was called in different ways since its inception in 2004 when it appeared as *Jamaa Tawhid wa Jihad* (JTWJ). In this article, I will use the name corresponding to the different stages of development of the group.

³ Sunni Muslims are the majority within the Kurdish population, but this group mostly identifies along ethnic lines. Thus, I use the label "Sunni" to refer to the Arab Sunnis of Iraq, and "Kurds" for the Kurds – be they Sunni or Shia.

⁴ For a discussion of the analytical categories of "confessional", "sectarian" and "communal" see Haddad's (2011) excellent book.

actually fighting against it. Between Sunni inclusion into the post-2003 institutions and ISIS popularity among the Sunni population, there is in fact an inversely proportional relation. During the different phases of the political process, ISIS went through periods of strategic revision and learned from its defeats that it had to adapt to the local context if it wanted to make its plan convincing and acceptable.

This article challenges received wisdoms about ISIS and looks at it as a social movement to be understood within its context. A considerable amount of literature – more policy-oriented and journalistic than academic – has been devoted to ISIS/IS and a gap in the understanding of the phenomenon still exists. Scholars and policy specialists have focused their attention on the global dimension of the phenomenon (Gerges 2017; Bishara 2018; Abu Haniyya 2018), examining it through theories of terrorist studies and political violence (Byman 2015; Stern and Berger 2015; McCants 2015) or insurgency (Whiteside 2016; Ryan 2015; Kalyvas 2015). Although some authors discussed the influence of the Iraqi context (Weiss and Hassan 2016; Benraad 2015; Brown 2015; Cockburn 2015; Hashim 2014), there is no in-depth study about the relation between the movement and the Sunni Iraqi context, as if ISIS/IS were almost an alien phenomenon to the local Iraqi ideological environment.

In order to bring this connection to the fore, it is necessary to understand ISIS/IS against the backdrop of the political process that unfolded in Iraq between 2003 and 2014, focusing in particular on the development of ISIS/IS's strategy of Iraqization and the development of a "Sunni ideology". More specifically, this article examines the rise of ISIS/IS within the theoretical frame of the political process model borrowed from Social Movement Theory (SMT) and builds on it through a number of innovations. First, the concept of political process is employed more broadly than in traditional political opportunity structures and includes the ideological factor (Wiktorowicz 2004:14), which, in this case, is what I call the "Sunni ideology", i.e. a particular worldview developing in the Sunni political community as a reaction to Iraqi politics post-2003. Second, agency is also taken into account and, in particular, the focus is on ISIS/IS strategy of "Iraqization", which is an organisational rational choice emerging from the experience of past defeats for the jihadi movement. The movement's political document issued in 2010 is particularly significant in this respect, especially the section dealing with the movement's relationship with local Sunni tribes (Strategic Plan 2010).⁵

Finally, the way in which the communitarian categories – Sunni, Shias and Kurds – are used in this article should be clarified. While the existence of communitarian politics is the reality of the politics of the country after 2003, a too narrow definition of communitarian categories as the primer identifier of the individual political behaviour may be problematic. This is why they are here used as categories similar to the Weberian ideal-types, to be considered as epistemological generalisations.

2. The political process and Sunni ideology

The dynamics of the political events occurring between 2003 and 2014 are significant for the understanding of the way in which the identity and ideology of the Sunni community of Iraq were shaped, and how this ultimately affected the rise and success of ISIS. This general timeframe can be sub-divided into three phases, each exhibiting a specific attitude of the Sunni community

⁵ In 2010, ISI produced a booklet outlining their strategic plan for the new phase. The full title of the book is: *Khoutah Istratijiya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq* (A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq). Since the plan does not have an author, I simply quote it as "strategic plan". The quote is based on the Arabic version available at: <https://ketabonline.com/en/books/17969/read?page=1&part=1>. The translation in English is by the author.

towards the broader Iraqi environment. The first phase (2003-2005) is characterised by a military insurgency against the American occupation – the first insurgency – whereby the Sunnis clearly rejected the post-2003 political order. The second phase (2006-2010) is characterised by a complete reversal of the situation, whereby the majority of the insurgency groups active during the first phase allied with the central government and the US against the Salafi-Jihadis groups. In this second phase, Sunni political parties participated in elections and endeavoured to join state institutions – the phase of integration. The third phase is characterised by a second armed insurgency (the second insurgency) that followed a popular civilian campaign – referred to as revolution by the protagonists – against the sectarianism of the Al-Maliki government. This third phase ended with ISIS/IS declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014.

The political process model, as used in SMT theory, determines the causal structural factors behind the actions of political and social actors. It creates in fact political opportunities or constraints with respect to which a Social Movement Organisation (SMO) makes its strategic choices. This article however expands on the concept of political process to include the formation of a Sunni ideology as part of those structural factors that have an impact on the practical framing of the actors' agency and finally on the outcome of the political process itself. In other words, while the political junctures explain how and why a certain strategy is successful, they say nothing as to why that particular option (in our case the Islamist/Salafist one) becomes credible and accepted.

The article first outlines the political process, relating it to the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion of Sunni political actors. Second, it emphasises political (Sunni) community-building as a response and a reaction to it. Those two factors together – inclusion/exclusion and Sunni community-building – determine the framing of a particular ideological view: the Sunni ideology. Those two factors represent the background of ISIS political action and strategy.

2.1 The post-2003 political process

The first phase of the political process began with the overthrow of the Baath regime and the Bush administration's establishment of a roadmap for a political transition to democracy. The American governor Paul Bremer was selected head of the 'Coalition Provisional Authority' (CPA) on May 2003. In July of the same year, Bremer appointed a 25-member interim advisory body - the Iraq Governing Council (IGC) – chosen according to a system of communal representation (*muhasasa*) (Katzman and Humud 2015: 2). In January 2005, elections for a constitutional assembly were held and a new interim body was elected. During the same year, a new constitution was drafted and approved by referendum in October, followed by new legislative elections held in December. While this process was meant to be inclusive, the opposite occurred, as Sunni political organisations largely refused to join the process, which they considered illegitimate. To them, the country was in a state of military occupation, with the consequence that it was the duty of all the Iraqis to resist it (Pfiffner 2010: 76). From the Sunni point of view, the withdrawal of the American forces was the prerequisite for any political process to start. The consequence was that many Sunnis engaged in open armed resistance while the Shia (with the initial exception of the movement linked to the cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr) and Kurds backed the American sponsored political process.⁶ Sunni rejection of post-invasion institutional arrangements was manifest during the 2005 provincial elections and constitutional referendum. First Sunnis largely boycotted the

⁶ In this first phase, the Shia political community's attitude towards the American occupation varied. The Sadr movement, in particular, engaged in an armed resistance against the American troops and also engaged into a battle against the Al-Maliki government between 2006 and 2008. There were also attempts of convergence between the Sunni resistance and the Sadrist movement. It eventually failed after the first Sunni sectarian attacks on Shia shrines in 2006.

elections (International Crisis Group 2013: 8) and then they participated in the referendum with the objective of defeating the provisions of the new constitution. All the Sunni majority-regions did indeed vote against the constitution, with the highest percentage of no vote in the Anbar province, the epicentre of the resistance (Al-Qarawee 2014).

The situation began to change by the end of 2005. First, the position of radical refusal of the political process proved difficult to hold on the long term and, second, nationalist Iraqi groups clashed with the radical jihadist organization *Jamaa Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad* (JTWJ) and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The Jordanian jihadi leader, who had trained with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, came to Iraq to pursue the international jihad against the Americans. While he was accepted as part of an Islamist international network, mobilised in defence of Muslim lands during the first months of the resistance, his extremist actions and ideas ended up alienating most of the local Iraqi insurgent factions. Eventually, Sunni political parties ended the insurgency against the state and joined the political process. The legislative elections at the end of 2005 triggered a new political phase and by the beginning of 2006, Iraq was set on a course based on a new constitution and democratic representative institutions with the participation of all communities.

The second phase was characterised by the Sunni political parties' endeavour to join the political process and the attempts of these social and political forces to bargain for a share of power with the central government. A key indicator of how Sunnis changed their political behaviour was the abandonment of armed resistance on the part of most groups. In fact, they joined a coalition of tribal militia in the Sunni Awakening (*Sahwa* in Arabic) against AQI. This coalition saw the coming together of tribal groups, former resistance militias, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and even the Americans (Hussein 2007: 4). Another clear indication of this new Sunni integrationist attitude was the setting up of the inter-sectarian electoral list *Al-Iraqiyya* (headed by the Shia secular politician Ayad Allawi), which won the majority of votes in the 2010 legislative elections and was therefore expected to lead the government. Both the military alliance and the political participation in an inter-sectarian political initiative were evidence that the Sunnis could and wanted to integrate the political process if an opportunity for inclusion was given. The *Sahwa* coalition for example was based on the understanding that the Sunni insurgents and the tribal forces would be allowed to integrate the official military bodies of the state. Former army Baathists who wished to reintegrate their previous positions dominated the resistance groups (notably the "1920 revolutionary brigades" and "the Islamic army") and they expected to reach an agreement with the central authorities on this point after having fought against AQI. For its part, *Al-Iraqiyya* was expected to be very influential in parliament and its electoral success should have led it to form a government, providing the Sunni community with a degree of influence and creating therefore a communal balance of power. However, the Al-Maliki government failed to keep the promise of integrating the *Sahwa* forces into the regular SIF and, in addition, was also able to create a front of Shia parties that allowed him to keep power, notwithstanding his electoral defeat in favour of non-sectarian *Al-Iraqiyya* (Wicken 2013: 6). Most of the Shia parties acted out of fear at the possibility of a Sunni-dominated government. This was evidence that, notwithstanding *Al-Iraqiyya* initiative, communal/sectarian dynamics still dominated Iraqi politics.

The third phase of the political process began with the departure of the American troops in 2010-2011⁷ and the beginning of the Arab uprisings. The wave of contestation against the Assad regime in neighbouring Syria encouraged popular demonstrations against Al-Maliki's rule, which was considered equally authoritarian and sectarian in the Iraqi Sunni heartlands (Brown 2015). The response of the central government was violent and uncompromising and the lack of solidarity of the Shia population rendered the confrontation a conflict between the Sunnis on one side and a

⁷ The withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq was completed on 18 December 2011.

Shia-biased central government on the other (International Crisis Group 2013). The ideological harsh attitude and predatory behaviour of Shia militias towards the Sunni population increased the latter's feeling of frustration, which was compounded by Al-Maliki's continuous refusal to fulfil the promises of integrating the Sahwa fighters and former Baathists into the official armed forces (Al-Qarawee 2014). Al-Maliki continued to pursue a policy of quasi-personal power and kept control of the three security cabinets (Katzman and Humud 2015: 20). Moreover, he used the Justice and Transitional Commission to punish his political rivals, almost all of them Sunni politicians. This triggered a cycle of Sunni protests and government's crackdowns, peaking in 2013 with a general mobilisation in Sunni areas against the central authorities (Katzman and Humud 2015: 21).⁸ These conflictual dynamics between the Sunnis and the central government increased sectarian tensions and finally led to the failure of Sunni integration into the post-2003 national pact. The non-violent campaigns for democratisation that unfolded between 2012 and 2013 remained limited to the Sunni areas of the country. The attitude of the Al-Maliki government of looking at any Sunni protest movement as the sign of the latter's nostalgia for the former regime and/or as infiltrated by "terrorists" reflected the Shia and Kurdish widespread prejudice towards the Sunnis.⁹ The outcome was, first, a generalised mobilisation in the Sunni areas of the country against the central government and, later, the successful ISIS campaign of declaration of the Caliphate.

The division into three phases of the post-2003 political process shows the evolution and dynamics of Sunni politics. During the first phase, Sunni insurgent groups and parties consciously fought against the political process, while in the second phase there were evident signs of Sunni political parties' willingness to find a compromise and integrate state institutions. The same was true for non-jihadist insurgents. The Al-Maliki government however was not keen to accept Sunni rapprochement and played the sectarian card to exclude Sunni concerns and demands.

2.2 The Sunni community and the development of an "Islamist-nationalist" ideology

The creation of different political communities according to an ethno-sectarian divide was the result of the national vision that prevailed after 2003 in occupied Iraq. This vision was based on the Kurdish and Shia narrative of persecution – a narrative that the American administration supported (Al-Qarawee 2014). While the Kurds were interested in a federal state project and therefore focused on governing their own autonomous territory, the Shia political parties aimed for control of the central government. This led to the setting up of a (non-official) confessional political system whereby political institutional positions were divided according to the demographic confessional balance.¹⁰

While Sunnis political forces opposed in principle this process of communitarianisation, they developed their own communitarian identity in response to it. Sunni nationalists had no qualms in joining a common front of resistance with the Shia cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr during the first phase of the political process in the name of Iraqi nationalism, but the "salafisation" of the Sunni fight and the sectarian turn of Zarqawi-led "jihad", which targeted Shia civilians and shrines, created a profound chasm between the two communities. Such chasm in turn contributed to the development

⁸ The political instability following the Syrian civil war benefited the organisation of ISIS's military campaign in 2013. This article however does not deal with it in details because it focuses on ISIS/IS as an Iraqi local phenomenon, and it therefore focuses on ISIS/IS' local environment.

⁹ Interview with Ahmed and Borhan.

¹⁰ The President of the Republic is a Kurd, the Speaker of the Parliament a Sunni, the Prime Minister – the most influential institution – a Shia. Informally, Iraqi demographic estimates suggest that two-thirds of Iraqis are Shia and the rest are Sunni and other minorities. Ethnic Kurds are 4,700,000 out of 40,194,216 of the total population (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015).

of two opposite narratives regarding the past, present and future of Iraq. The Sunnis were not only seen as nostalgic for the old regime but also anti-democratic, because they appealed to the use of “terrorism and did not accept the political democratic game”.¹¹ For its part, the Sunni narrative centred on the denunciation of sectarian and religious Shia groups’ occupation of state institutions, especially the security forces. Sunnis felt that in Baghdad power was in the hands of a “religious Shia state”.¹² The domination of Shia parties in national politics created indeed a new context. They were not only traditionally well-organised, but most of them were also based on religious (or radical communitarian) ideologies.¹³ This created the perception among the Sunnis of a “shiization” of the country.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, whereby the country was divided in communities and the central government dominated by Shia parties, the feeling of “Iraqeness” was weakened. Moreover, the Sunni community’s relation to power saw a dramatic shift. From being the proud holders of Iraqi nationalism – based on the Baathist, pan-Arabist ideology of the former regime – the community was reduced to the status of minority. In response to this new situation, the sentiment of being a separate Sunni community grew and a specific Sunni ideology came to characterise the political view of many of them. This was based on a mix of traditional Arab nationalism and Sunni religious awakening: “Islamism”.

In its early days, Islamism had been the creation of Saddam Hussein’s propaganda. Saddam faced a loss of legitimacy after the Kurdish and Shia uprisings that followed the first Gulf War of 1991 and Islamism consisted in transforming the definition of the nation (Iraq) into religious (Sunni) terms (Rabkin 2018). While Baath nationalism was originally secular and centred on ethno-pan-Arabism, this changed in the 1990s and became religious (Sunni)-sectarian. In the early 1990s, the regime’s official ideology began to emphasise Islamic references.¹⁵ Most importantly, it began a religious campaign called the faith campaign *Hamlah Al-Imaniyya* headed by Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, vicepresident and deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and later on key figure in the Baathists’ resistance organisations (Fink and Leibowitz, 2006: 2-3).

While at this time Islamism was more a sentiment the regime attempted to instil to widen its popularity and legitimacy than a clear-cut ideological programme, in the post-2003 Iraq it became the ideological weapon of the Sunni resistance against the occupation first and the response to the Shia sectarianisation of politics later. This ideology came to reflect the feeling of frustration of the Sunni population and defined the ideological framework of its identity as political community. Two ideological trends – nationalism and Islamism/Salafism – converged to substantiate such an ideology. In spite of the apparent contradiction in this merging, it came to form an ideological worldview opposed to the Kurdish and Shia communities.

Two important political personalities of the Sunni resistance well represent the connection between the two souls of this ideology: Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri and Harith al-Dhari. The former was not only, as mentioned, the head of the faith campaign during the Saddam Hussein regime, but also a central figure of the “Islamist trend” within the Baath party. The latter was a Muslim cleric at the

¹¹ Interview with Ahmed.

¹² Interview with Khalaf.

¹³ Traditional Shia parties are the Dawa Party and the ISCI (Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) historically known as SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq).

¹⁴ The Sunni inhabitants of Baghdad (Arabs or Kurds) accuse the Shia militias to aim at turning Baghdad into a “Shia city”, by pushing Sunni inhabitants out. Reports by witnesses on this are numerous; I have talked to several witnesses during my field visit in Iraq in 2019 who confirmed this narrative. For further details, see also the 2013 International Crisis Group report.

¹⁵ Example of this was the introduction in the national flag of the religious logo “allah wa akhbar”.

Faculty of Arab Literature in Baghdad during the faith campaign. After 2003, al-Duri became the charismatic leader of the former Baathists and al-Dhari the most outspoken voice of the resistance, playing the role of coordinator between Salafists and Baathists. Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri was the key figure of Islamo-nationalism; two of the most important resistance groups in the Anbar province – the “1920 revolutionary brigades” and “the Islamic army”, as mentioned (formed in majority by former Baathists) – respected his leadership. He would become an even more important figure during the third phase of the political process when he led the Naqbashandi sufi organisation and coordinated joint-actions with ISIS during the occupation of Mosul, as we will see later. The cleric Harith al-Dhari was instead the most charismatic leader in the Muslim Scholars Association (MSA) and as such the symbol of the religious trend of the Islamo-nationalist resistance (Rabkin 2018).

The development of a Sunni community with a separate identity and featuring an Islamo-nationalist ideology should not lead us to consider however the creation of a separate Sunni state, as proposed by ISIS, as an inevitable outcome. The two major political forces representing this trend, the Islamic Iraqi party (IIP) and the MSA, adopted changing positions over time with regard to the integration in Iraqi political institutions (Fuller 2003: 8). The first sponsored the concord front (*Jabhat Al-Tawafuq*), a coalition that included secular nationalists, former Baathists, tribal sheikh leaders and various personalities that stood against the sectarian/communal institutional model through the legislative elections of 2005 (Al-Qarawee, 2014). The second – a gathering of Salafists, Salafi-jihadists and former Baath party members – easily integrated the electoral process once the armed resistance ended (Meijer 2005). While the IIP seems to have had a more integrationist attitude and the latter a more rejectionist one, much of the evolution in one direction or the other depended on the evolution of the political process.

3. ISIS’s “Iraqization” strategy between constraints and opportunities

The political process evolved eventually in such a way that Sunni political organisations and the Sunni population more generally despaired of integrating the political institutions in Baghdad. Moreover, the sectarian Shia policy pursued by the central government, particularly emphatic under the Al-Maliki premiership, made “Islam nationalism” a proper ideology for an alternative state-building solution. However, such a context created necessary but not sufficient conditions. In order for the political process to “reward” ISIS, it was still necessary for the group to have a viable strategy adapted to the context and able to take advantage of the 2013 favourable political juncture. In this section, the article examines the way in which the jihadi organisation changed in the midst of the political process, evolving from being a foreign body to become integrated into the Iraqi social context; from having a program of Islamic state-building largely rejected by Iraqi-nationalist factions to absorb nationalism into its Salafist strategy.

3.1 The “Iraqization” of ISIS between governance and popular support

The first phase of the jihad in Iraq, roughly corresponding to the first phase of the political process as described above, was contradictory. In the beginning, it was the work of a small group of foreign *mujahedeen* (fighters), mostly coming from outside the country, who gathered around the charismatic figure of Zarqawi. He came to Iraq leading the JTJWJ and joined the fight in Falluja in 2003 and 2004.¹⁶ This group initially seemed similar to other *mujahedeen* Iraqi resistance groups, which used both jihadi and nationalist slogans (Acun 2014: 6). The homegrown organisations born out of the resistance against the American occupation tended however to be Iraqi nationalists (mostly former Army members) and opposed the separation of the country into regional entities, which they saw as part of an international conspiracy to divide the Arab *umma*

¹⁶ JTJWJ was founded in Jordan in 1999 and integrated into the Iraqi insurgency in 2003.

(Al-Qarawee 2010). The JTJWJ, which had become in 2004 the Al-Qaeda Iraqi local branch, AQI,¹⁷ was interested in the governance of the territories under its control and it did indeed start implementing a separate strategic plan of action directed towards the creation of a revolutionary front whose aim was the creation of a new state ideologically shaped by the Salafi version of Islam. In this respect they were not necessarily interested in Iraqi territorial unity. AQI was producing a shift in the strategy of the resistance because it was not interested in integrating the Iraqi institutions and because it acted in an exclusivist manner in that it forcibly imposed its rule on the local tribes, refusing to share power with the other insurgency groups. The jihadi strategy was also criticised for the excessive use of violence, specifically against the Army and security forces recruiters and Shia civilians (Hafez 2007).

Between 2005 and 2006 the political juncture changed (phase II) and the Iraqi Sunni groups of the insurgency progressively turned their back to the jihadis, who became a completely separate faction. This encouraged the latter to advance their strategy more clearly and “present themselves as an alternative to the existing Sunni leadership in Iraq” (Al-Sishani, 2014). In January 2006, the movement organised a Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC) in the form of a coalition of Salafi-Jihadi forces (Lister 2014). This initiative was looked at with suspicion by many resistance groups; more so after the transformation of the MSC into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The establishment of ISI on 15 October 2006 proved indeed premature and found the opposition of most of the Sunni population that stood behind the Sahwa movement (Lister 2014).

The period between 2006 and 2009 was a near-total defeat for the jihadi political strategy and it corresponded to the highest point of Sunni parties’ integrationist strategy, which led to the electoral experience of the *Al-Iraqiyya* list in 2010, as previously outlined. The importance of this political juncture is in that it shows that the Sunni population was not necessarily against the integration in the new Iraqi institutions. The organisation of the Awakening Councils was moreover evidence that Sunni society was trying to negotiate a new social contract with Baghdad (Alaaldin 2018:15-16). While tribal groups did throughout Iraqi history always act in opportunistic fashion, in the sense that they traditionally tried to bargain with the central government (McCallister 2005), the participation in those councils of most of the groups that had initially joined the resistance against the Americans was a blow for the jihadi strategy. Key was the role of the former Baathists who now supported the *Al-Iraqiyya* list because they trusted the chance to be reintegrated into the national armed forces and regain their job if the list performed well at the polls (Al-Qarawee 2014).

While the central government missed this important opportunity to integrate the Sunni community,¹⁸ ISI began revising its strategy and developed a new strategic plan (Strategic Plan, 2010). Although AQI’s transformation in ISI after Al-Zarqawi’s death in 2006 did not lead necessarily to a decrease in the use of violence, the movement became more serious about building a social base of support. It did so through two strategies. First, it integrated more Iraqis into the organisation’s higher ranks (Iraqization). Second, it rooted its strategy into the local context, in particular by changing its attitude towards local tribes. As a consequence of the first decision, more Iraqi jihadi activists integrated the highest ranks of the organisations with a particular important presence of former Baathists (Cronin 2015: 4). The “Iraqization process” began right after Al-Zarqawi’s death in June 2006. The Al-Qaeda Central (AQC)’s delegate in Iraq, Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, left Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi to hold the position of chief (*amir*) after the first Islamic State declaration on 15 October 2006. Ministers were appointed to form a ruling cabinet. While Al-Muhajir kept for himself the strategic position of Minister of Aar (he shared the leadership with Omar Abu Bakr), all the other ministers were Iraqis (Abu Haniyya 2018). This process was

¹⁷ The Arabic original name is *Tandhim qaidat al-jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn*, known in English simply as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

¹⁸ Interview with Plebani.

strengthened after 2010 with the integration of former Baathists in the military and security wings (Ibid.). In regard to the second decision, the Strategic Plan specifically pointed out the importance of developing a more inclusive policy towards tribal groups (Strategic Plan: 14). After 2010 and the appointment of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi as new leader, a new phase indeed began. According to Al-Sishani (2014) “the group was shocked by the armed opposition of the Sunni Awakening Councils” and the plan drawn in the booklet is relevant to understand the strategy and tactics the movement used in the following stage of state building. The Strategic Plan is a booklet thought of as the movement’s political program for the new phase that followed the American withdrawal from Iraq. ISIS’s poor understanding of the social influence of tribes in the period between 2006 and 2009 was perceived internally as the main cause of the group’s defeat. Although the book refuses to say so outright, it spends most of the introduction dealing with it, indirectly confirming the impression that this matter had become a central focus of concern within the jihadi movement (Strategic Plan: 7, 12-13). Thus the plan calls for the participation of local tribes in the process of state building and shared governance to be realised through the establishment of “jihadi awakening councils” (Ibid.: 37).

The author of the Strategic Plan considers the tribal social system to be central in Iraq and argues that its co-optation would be the instrument through which the movement can gain a social base and obtain local support. The project of state building needs the people’s “approval and participation” in order to “achieve the loyalty and attachment of the public to the [Islamic] state and their association with it” (Ibidem: 38). Taking the social organisation of local tribes into consideration had the advantage of making governance more effective and consensual. Through the system of the councils, the people “will be part of the Islamic State through participating in the protection of their areas [...], and thus the acceptance of the state and the integration of all the people will be greater and greater” (Strategic plan: 38), turning them into participants in the process of construction of the state. This system of governance makes people’s ideological adherence to the project of the Islamic state secure and provides a more effective military strategy (Ibid.: 39). To put it more explicitly, it is about “bringing society to the core of the Islamic state building process” (Ibidem: 38).

3.2 The political juncture and the ISIS’ revolutionary strategy

ISIS was able to learn from the failed experience of declaring a state in 2006 without having built a consistent political alliance with the other insurgency forces or a social base. Moreover, during that political juncture, the momentum was in favour of an integrationist strategy that most Sunni political forces followed. Baathists at the time were still hoping to be re-integrated into their former position as a reward of their support to the government’s security campaigns against ISI. The political juncture changed dramatically in the third phase (2011-2014) and ISIS was able to impose its plan of declaring an Islamic state. Both the abovementioned ISI/ISIS’s strategic changes and the political opportunities of the new phase determined this spectacular outcome.

This political juncture is characterised itself by three stages. In the first, between 2011 and 2012, the protests in the Sunni region were dominated by mostly non-violent campaigns against al-Maliki’s rule to which the prime minister reacted with a repressive attitude (Ottaway and Kaysi 2011; Lovotti and Proserpio in this Special Issue). In the second period, during the year 2013, the “Sunni movement” became an insurgency and was led by the Naqbashandi, a group dominated by former Baathists strictly linked to a grassroots social and tribal network, especially strong in the provinces of Mosul, Tamim and the area around Tikrit. The third phase, starting in December 2013, lasted until the occupation of Mosul in June 2014 by the insurgency. Hereby there saw the coming onto the scene of ISIS, which allied with the Naqbashandi to pursue the military operations that led the two groups, in a short time, to reach Mosul from the Anbar province. Finally, once in Mosul and with most of the Sunni regions under the control of the insurgency, a competition began

between ISIS and the Naqbashandi for the rule of the territory. ISIS imposed itself as the strongest force on the scene and, after getting rid of its competitors, declared the Caliphate (Katzman and Humud 2015).

In 2011, when a movement of non-violent protests against the al-Maliki's rule became widespread in the Sunni regions of the county, ISIS was not yet an important political actor. In order for the latter to gain momentum, it was necessary for the political Sunni forces to realise that their previous strategy of inclusion had reached an impasse. Between 2011 and 2013 the political process escalated into an overt confrontation between Sunni organisations and the government (Katzman and Humud 2015). The key incidents that triggered the second insurgency occurred in the months of April and December 2013: the first in Hawaija (Tamim province) and the second in the city of Ramadi (Anbar province). On 23 April 2013, the ISF stormed a protest camp in the town of Hawaija, killing 40 civilians. This event was a watershed because it represented the moment when the Sunni protest movement changed into a militarised insurgency with the aim of overthrowing the government (Katzman and Humud 2015: 13). In December 2013, new protests occurred in the Anbar province with Ramadi as the epicentre. The Al-Maliki government overreacted once more and ordered the arrest of the Sunni protest leader and the MP Ahmad Al-Alwani (Sowell 2014).¹⁹ Leaders of the Sunni insurgency proclaimed this insurgency as the "revolution" of the Sunni people against the Al-Maliki sectarian government. The scenario was similar to that of the first insurgency of 2003-2005 although this time the uprising was directed against Baghdad. Ali Hatem Al-Suleimani, the Chairman of the Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries of Iraq (MCTRI) proclaimed: "the popular revolution will continue until the Nouri Al-Maliki government resigns and an interim government of independents are formed" (Acun 2014: 7). Most of the Baathist militants returned to the battlefield while the tribes split again between those supporting the uprising and those favourable to the central government.²⁰ As during the first insurgency, the population formed popular committees imbedded in local social networks and under a revolutionary platform. While not all the actors of the uprising had a radical solution to the crisis in mind, those organisations that took the lead of the movement advocated clearly the overthrow of the government.²¹

At this particular juncture, Islamo-nationalism became the main ideological frame of the revolt and took on separatist features. Baathist Iraqi flags were shown on the street while ISIS gained

¹⁹ This was just the last of a series of repressive measures against major Sunni leaders. On 12 December 2011, Al-Maliki issued a warrant against Tarek Hashimi. The following year, on 18 December, he sent the police to the Finance Minister's home (Rafi Al-Issawi). A firefight broke out between the latter's bodyguards and the police agents. Although Al-Issawi escaped, 10 of his bodyguards were killed. Rafi Al-Issawi was a well-known Sunni leader from Anbar and he found refuge and solidarity among the tribes of the regions (Katzman and Humud 2015: 21).

²⁰ Much has been written about the relations between the Dulaim confederation and ISIS. According to Khalaf, the confederation was split into two blocs: those in favour of ISIS and those supporting the government. There were indeed tribes opposed to the central government since 2003, because they belonged to the networks of power built by Saddam Hussein and were therefore marginalised after his fall. Tribes like Albu Ajeel and Albu Nasser and the Jubuor tribal confederation of the Saladin governorate gained considerable privileges in providing men for the security apparatus at the time of Saddam (Dawod, 2018). Most of the men of these tribes were de-mobilised with de-baathification laws (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield 2016: 5). Others joined between 2012 and 2015 (Dawod, 2018: 28). In addition to these opposition tribes, many others previously belonging to the Awakening councils defected and joined those supporting ISIS in part because of disenchantment with the al-Maliki government and in part because of ISIS successful propaganda campaign.

²¹ Among the Anbar insurgency, the Anbar Tribes Revolutionary Council (ATRC) was more inclined to defend the civil population against the Shia militias than to the overthrow of the government.

control of Ramadi and Falluja (the two towns symbolising Sunni resistance against the Americans) in January 2014 with the participation of jihadi militants, local tribal fighters and defectors from the Iraqi Army. The MCTRI, which included the Naqbashandi movement *Jaysh Rijal al Tariqa al Naqshibandia* (JRTN)²² and the former salafi-jihadi umbrella organisation Mujahideen Shura Council of Abdullah Al-Janabi, was the leader of the revolutionary front (Sowell 2014). Salafist and Baathist components were this time unified and enjoyed the considerable support of local tribal groups (Katzman and Humud 2015: 13-14).

The visible presence on the ground of ideologically oriented Baathist forces gave the “revolution” a flavour of old nationalism. Baathism – understood as a diffuse Iraqi nationalist identity based on Arab-Sunnism – is still an important ideology and is represented by a connected network of people partly linked to former Baath party’s members.²³ While it is impossible to establish their real weight, in regions like Kirkuk, Mosul and Salah al-Din, Baathism is imbedded in local social and tribal networks.²⁴ After 2013, they formed a powerful core of the insurgency and fused with the Sufi group Naqbashandi, popular in the region of Mosul and Kirkuk (Home Office 2016; Arango 2014). This type of Baathism was based on a form of Islamo-nationalism, in the sense that the Sunni nationalist sentiment was strong and it was not in contradiction with radical ideological Islamism or Salafism. The Salafist and nationalist frame of the uprising was therefore clear and particularly well represented by the leadership of Izzat al-Duri, the JRTN’s head. Most notably, Salafists and Baathists represented a unified revolutionary front at the 2013-2014 juncture. The situation had therefore dramatically changed when compared to the first insurgency. The jihadi forces had in 2006 split from the rest of the resistance front and formed a separate revolutionary front (the Mujahideen Council). The same forces that had opposed it, gathered together in the Military Council (MCIR). The novelty of this juncture was that most Sunni political forces were now sceptical of integrating state institutions. The political process had created the conditions for a revolutionary outcome, with ISIS playing a hegemonic role within a larger front. The last phase of the insurgency at the beginning of June proved ISIS revolutionary strength and skills as the most powerful of the insurgency forces and the only one with a coherent and clear plan of action. Backed by the Naqbashandi troops, it swiftly occupied most of Anbar and Ninawa and penetrated Mosul during a campaign that lasted less than 10 days (Arango 2014). The military success of the campaign determined the shift of the leadership within the revolutionary front, as ISIS pushed the Baathists in a second rank (Windrem 2014). It was not only victorious militarily but also ideologically and strategically. Ideologically ISIS had been able to absorb Islamo-nationalism and strategically it had a clear plan of action and a political objective, namely the declaration of an Islamic state. Paradoxically, this was in fact a more realistic option compared to the other Sunni political forces that wanted to overthrow the government in Baghdad. Such a revolutionary front could never legitimately take the power in Baghdad where the political and communitarian balance had changed since 2003. The creation of a new state on conquered lands seemed therefore a more attractive and feasible proposition.

After the occupation of Mosul, a joint administration of the city was tested for a while. Several meetings were held among the different forces. Rumours of an internal struggle between Baathists

²² It was an aggregation of 78 tribes and clans, in addition of thousands of militias. It was formed in December 2013 as the armed wing of the “revolution”. This and the JRTN were in fact semi-official former Baathists forces (Acun, 2014: 7).

²³ Interview with Borhan.

²⁴ It is impossible to assess their real political weight, because the party is officially forbidden. Two of the people interviewed for this article (Khalaf and Borhan) hold contrasting views on the matter. According to the latter, Al-Basra News (<http://www.albasrah.net/>) is the website of reference for those aiming at reviving Baathism.

and ISIS circulated (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield 2016).²⁵ ISIS had however gained consensus in Mosul that had discretely controlled in the years following the American withdrawal in 2011²⁶ and ISIS finally imposed its will and eliminated rival groups. On 29 June 2014, once it took complete control of the city, ISIS declared the establishment of a new state (Caliphate) becoming the Islamic State-embodied.

ISIS had acted as a revolutionary vanguard organisation by first joining a revolutionary front with several other forces and then imposing on the latter its own political solution (Whiteside 2016).²⁷ Like “the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Communist Party in China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers in Iran” had already done in the last century, ISIS took advantage of an insurrection or a civil war (Walt 2015: 43) to achieve its objective.

4. Conclusion

This article analysed the experience of a Salafi-jihadi organisation (JTWJ-ISI-ISIS-IS) that developed in Iraq between 2003 and 2014. ISIS has been identified as the most violent of the jihadi organisations and most of the literature has examined it through the lenses of guerrilla warfare, terrorism or apocalyptic Salafism (Barron and Maye 2017). ISIS has indeed represented for some time the most radical branch of the Salafi-jihadi movement. However, most academic studies have not sufficiently explored the “local” nature of the movement and its political strategic behaviour. Contrary to the dominant literature, this article focused on the political dynamics and mechanisms that created the conditions for ISIS to implement its political program. In so doing, it highlighted the importance of the context in determining the outcome of the organisation’s strategy.

The activists’ mechanisms of contention and the political context are factors that Social Movement Theory has examined for decades and the purpose of this article was to apply them to the dynamics of contention ISIS was the protagonist of. In particular, the article used the political process model, following the tradition of SMT (McAdam, et al., 2004). The article thus shows how both structures (such as political opportunities) and the movement’s agency (strategic adaptation to the context) were crucial factors in explaining the movement’s mechanisms of political choices.

While the application of SMTs to Arab societies and to Islamist and Salafist movements is not a novelty, there was no study looking at ISIS as a social movement. The aim of this study was therefore to contribute to both the literature on Salafism and SMT. By using the latter for the understanding of the specific case of ISIS, this article achieved a number of objectives. First, it highlighted the role the political process played in determining the development of a separate Sunni political community and the sectarianisation of Shia politics. Second, it emphasised the role “Sunni ideology” played in determining the relevance of the “Islamist-nationalist” option to solve the political impasse Sunnis found themselves confronted with. Third, it showed the way the various political and social actors related to the jihadi organisation and how this had an impact on ISIS

²⁵ The following statement is particularly telling: “prior to the announcement of the Caliphate, residents started noticing tensions between more nationalist Iraqi groups and ISIS militants. The Iraqi nationalists and more moderate organisations started hanging up banners on city streets, and the more Ba’athist elements started playing Saddam-era songs that greatly angered the ISIS fighters, who viewed Saddam Hussein as a secular, anti-Islamic force” (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield 2016: 14).

²⁶ Interview with Mustafa Salim. The relative consensus that ISIS enjoyed in this region can also be explained, according to Mustapha, by the fact that this area of the country was historically the place of residence for most of the former Baathist security personnel.

²⁷ Whiteside (2016) interestingly compares the Vietnamese revolutionary guerrilla to ISIS.

strategy. This article however also contributed to the enrichment of SMT by looking at the case of ISIS, a movement well outside the western confines that have characterised SMT studies so far.

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