

SECTARIAN POLICIES IN IRAQ, THE MAIN CAUSE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S RISE

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ABSTRACT

THE YEAR 2014 MEANT A PARADIGM CHANGE WITH REGARD TO GLOBAL JIHADIST TERRORISM. A NEW TERRORIST-ISLAMIC ENTITY OVERRANKED THE REFERENCE ORGANIZATION IN THE FIELD UP TO THAT TIME, NAMELY AL-QAEDA, AND CHANGED THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN A REGION ALREADY FULL OF HISTORICAL TENSIONS AND DEEP CONFLICTS. IT WAS THE ISLAMIC STATE TERRORIST ORGANIZATION WHICH SUCCESSFULLY MADE THE TRANSITION FROM A CLANDESTINE TERRORIST ENTITY OR CELL TO THE DE FACTO TERRITORIALISATION OF POWER BY TAKING OVER LARGE TERRITORIES IN IRAQ AND SYRIA, IN THE SUMMER OF 2014. THE INITIAL MILITARY SUCCESSES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE AGAINST THE IRAKI SECURITY FORCES WERE FAST. IRAQ REPRESENTED THE BET AND THE FIEF OF THE ISLAMIC STATUS. NEVERTHELESS, THE IRAKI ARMY HAD BEEN TRAINED AND FINANCED BY THE AMERICAN ARMY SINCE 2003. THEN, HOW WAS IT POSSIBLE FOR AN ENTIRE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE TO BE TAKEN DOWN BY TERRORIST GUERILLAS CLEARLY DISFAVOURLED STRATEGICALLY? THIS IS THE QUESTION WHOSE ANSWER WE ARE SEARCHING FOR AND THERE WILL BE AN ANALYSIS OF THE FACT THAT THE ISLAMIC STATE'S VICTORIES WERE NOT ONLY MILITARY, BUT THE INITIAL AND IMPORTANT ONES WERE RELATED TO THE SOCIETY.

KEY WORDS: TERRITORIALISATION, EXPLOIT OF SUNNI ALIENATION FEELING, CONFESSIONALISM, APARTHEID REGIME, BAGHDAD – A CAPITAL ONLY FOR SHIA'S.

INTRODUCTION

The research hypothesis here has been supported by the adoption of a confirmatory strategy; because one is wondering how much contribution has the Islamic State elite's prior knowledge of the internal vulnerabilities of the Iraqi society had for the repeated military success. Thus, the research does not start with the idea that they might have been exploited in their initial

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phase in the psychological manner of the feelings of segregation and alienation of the Iraqi Sunni community, policies that have intervened after 2003, but it is speculated that such feelings or tensions were well-known to caliphate decision makers and their analysis and fruition were the foundation underlying military success. Which were those exploitable tensions and vulnerabilities specifically, and why did their survey and knowledge give an organization that was employing guerrilla tactics in the first phase and was working on the militia-related logic, a strategic advantage that was translated into a military plan by defeating the Iraqi security body in two cities of strategic importance: Fallujah and Mosul, as well as in most of the Sunni area of Iraq (the central-Western area, mainly the province of Anbar)?

When talking about the tensions within the Iraqi society and how they favoured the success of and fuelled the force of the Islamic State, it is imperative that the historical knowledge of these tensions should be known, which implies a foray into the recent history of Iraq, at least. If until 2003, the power in Baghdad was exercised by the Sunni component of the country in a discretionary way (Saddam Hussein and his close circle members were Sunni from the Al-Takriti tribe), the United States' defeat of the regime in 2003 placed power on the Shiite side, the major Islamic confessional component of the country. The overthrow was followed by the revanchism of the new elites over the former privileged Sunnis, and the governance and power policies were reserved for the Shiite elite and its clients through a twisted patronage system where ministries are influence fragments reserved to a particular part of a community, a client of political leaders. In order to understand this phenomenon, the recent work of Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS - the Jihad Army*, and the work of Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State - ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, have been indispensable. Along with these works, another author who precisely captures the clientele system in Iraq between 2006 and 2014 is Jean Pierre-Luizard in his work: *Daesh Trap*.

One will see that the Iraqi army trained and financed by the United States crashed before the Jihadi militants in four days, in the second most important city in Iraq, Mosul. Mosul was chosen as a case study herein for several reasons: a) it was here that the entire Iraqi social, political, military architecture showed its fanatical vulnerabilities. Fragility emerged as a strategic vulnerability by undermining the national capacity of exerting one of its core functions; the exercise of sovereignty within its borders. b) it is the moment the classic paradigm of a terrorist organization changed in the mentality of the international environment. A radical, fundamentalist, religious entity claimed, assumed and declared its status of state, that is, the depositary of the management mechanisms of a certain territory, based on the sovereignty conferred by the divine right in this case.

1. SECTARIAN POLICIES IN IRAQ AFTER 2003

In the summer of 2014, within one hundred days, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (or the Islamic State) transformed the political dynamics in the Middle East. The Jihadi militants mingled religious fanaticism and military expertise to get rich and unexpected victories against the Iraqi, Syrian, or Kurdish armed forces. The basic idea in those early victory stages was the domination of the Sunni opposition in the governments of Iraq and Syria; as it expanded from the Iraqi borders with Iran, into Iraqi Kurdistan, up to the peripheral areas of Aleppo. The ambition to form a state proclaimed by what was just a small Jihadi Salafist group took by surprise all local and international actors. The incredible territorial expansion achieved in record time and the war

declared on the countries in the region and to the "faithless" powers quickly gave the "ISIS" phenomenon a global dimension.³

Iraq and Syria are disintegrating themselves from within because the various constituent communities: the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Alawists and Christians are fighting for their own survival against the Islamic State, and some against one another. Thus, the same thing happened in the two countries: country decomposition and territory dismantling on confessional and communitarian grounds. The Islamic State knew how to exploit the structural differences underlying the disintegration process; because if in Iraq the Islamic State militants conquered the majority of Sunni Arabs, the Sunni community in Syria remained and is still divided among several loyalties such as the opposition, independent militias or Salafist groups hostile to the Islamic State and in a territorial and economic competition with it⁴.

Due to the fact that the Islamic State first operated in Iraq and that the first major conquests, Fallujah and Mosul, were there, there will firstly be an analysis of the historical conditions in Iraq which made the victories of the Islamic State in the summer of 2014 possible. The Islamic State gained so much influence and acquired such a military and financial force because it knew how to maximize its profits as a result of two interconnected events which are the two great reasons that allowed the Islamic State to reach its peak form between 2014-2015. This refers to the 2011 Sunni revolt in Syria, as an episode of the Arab Spring, and the alienation of the Sunni Iraqis by a Shiite exclusive government in Bagdad⁵.

1.1 EFFECTS OF THE ARAB SPRING IN IRAQ

The protests launched by the Sunni Iraqis in December 2012, inspired by the Arab Spring and perceived by the Arab Iraqis as the possibility of putting an end to endemic corruption and political exclusivity in their country, were peaceful at first. They were intimidating to the government because they brought together tens of thousands of people whose claims meant political suicide to the regime. The lack of concessions from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki combined with a forceful feedback from public order bodies resulting in victims among the protesters turned the peaceful manifestations into armed resistance. It was not the fault of one person, but the fault of the system in which Maliki operated and led for quite some time.⁶ The sectarian policies allowed an alliance between the Islamic State and seven Sunni militant groups, formerly enemies of the Islamic State, because they pushed the Sunni population towards the Islamic State. When you have the perception that your own government regards you as an enemy and you no longer trust its institutions to defend or represent you, you start looking for an organization that promises to fight for you. This was the case for many Iraqi Sunni communities: the Islamic State was perceived to be the most viable evil. The Islamic State then strongly received power from the Sunni Iraqi Arabs by concluding a new social agreement with them according to which they were recognized as security providers for the respective community.

³ Pierre Jean-Luizard, *Capcana Daesh, Statul Islamic sau întoarcerea istoriei (Daesh Trap, Islamic State or Return of History)* (Iași: Polirom, 2015) 10.

⁴ Jean-Luizard, *Capcana Daesh (Daesh Trap)*, 110-119.

⁵ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State,, ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, (New York: Verso, 2015) 27.

⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security", *Congressional Research Service*(October 28, 2009): 11-14, accessed July 20, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL31339.pdf>

2. THE FALLUJAH EVENT, DESERTION

In January 2014, the Islamic State occupied Fallujah, West of Baghdad, a city famous for its ample US military presence ten years before. Within a few months afterwards, they occupied Mosul and Tikrit (Sadam Hussein's birthplace). Although the Islamic State project had already existed since 2012-2013 (and there were connections and relations of some terrorist cells within Iraq, yet operating at a fairly low scale), it became more visible with the occupation of the Iraqi city of Fallujah.⁷ It was then when the Islamic State took an important city from under the control of a government that proved incapable of taking it back. The "parade" of militants in Humvees captured from the Iraqi army and the black flags on government buildings were a symbol of the sense of political failure.

The fall of Fallujah was a powerful blow to the Iraqi government and a significant symbolic impact victory for the Islamic State.⁸ The fact that after ten years when about two trillion dollars⁹ were invested, Fallujah fell into the hands of some jihadist militants, showed the outrageous mismanagement of the financial and military resources by the Iraqi authorities. The Iraqi army had five divisions waiting in Anbar province and all of them suffered significant losses, totalling around 5,000 dead and injured, and another 12,000 deserted. Within the five divisions sent to recover Fallujah, the effects of corruption were felt in the Iraqi army: the soldiers had insufficient bullets, the food rations were few and inadequate, and, paradoxically, the vehicles were constantly lacking fuel.¹⁰

The Islamic State's mode of operation shows once again that military 'adventures' were not the basis of the organization, but it was the thorough strategic planning done by people who very well knew the sectarian dynamics of Iraq. The success of the Islamic State was not military (successful military campaigns are a means to the Islamic State, not an end in itself), although victory also ensured a profitable image to it, setting up for being the armed avant-garde able to expel the Iraqi army from several cities or territories.

3. THE ISSUE OF FEAR IN THE IRAQI SOCIETY

From 2003 to 2008, during the American occupation, a confessional war between the Sunnis and the Shiites destabilized the social layers and the entire Iraqi society as a whole. The reconciliation of the mainly Sunni alienated communities in Iraq¹¹ and Syria¹² proved to be much

⁷ Jean-Luizard, *Capcana Daesh (Daesh Trap)*, 11.

⁸ Sinan Adnan, Aaron Reese, "Beyond The Islamic State: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency", *Institute for Study of War, Middle East Security Report*, no. 24(October 2014): 12, accessed August 15, 2017,

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⁹ Daniel Trotta, "Iraq war costs U.S. more than \$2 trillion: study", *Reuters*, March 14, 2013, accessed July 13, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-war-anniversary/iraq-war-costs-u-s-more-than-2-trillion-study-idUSBRE92DOPG20130314>

¹⁰ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 55.

¹¹ The total Iraqi population is 39,192,111 million according to an estimate in 2017. This number refers to the total population without subtracting the refugees who no longer live in Iraq. Of this total, the Arabs are 75-80%, the Kurds are 15-20% and others are 5%. For Muslims who are 99% of the population, 60% are Shiites and 40% are Sunnis, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, the World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

¹² 74% of the Syrian Arabs are Sunnis, and the Alawis, Ismails and Shiites are 13% of a total of 18,028,549 people, according to an estimate in July 2016. The number is Syrias' total population, of which 90.3% are Arabs, and the

easier theoretically than practically. Many Sunni people who lived and are currently living under the Islamic State did not like their new rulers and they were frightened by them. But the fear of the Islamic State governance was not as great as the one felt of the Iraqi army, the Shiite militias and the Kurds in Iraq, and of the Syrian army and the pro-Assad militias in Syria. That was an important landmark in the strategy of the Islamic State of recruiting from among young Sunnis.

To some tribal leaders or Sunni communities (especially from the traditional Sunni centres of Iraq, such as the cities and villages of the Anbar province), the Iraqi army was perceived as an occupation army under the orders of Baghdad power led by Shiite Nouri al-Maliki. Throughout 2013, the Sunni Iraqis' dissatisfaction with Baghdad policies was firstly manifested through peaceful protests that took over the Arab Spring slogans. However, one thing is less well-known to Western public opinion, namely that the Iraqis' protests were often repressed with the same brutality as those of the Syrian population back in 2011 and 2012 by the Bashar al-Assad regime. The executions without trials, the feeling that the state police is omnipotent, and the policies perceived by Baghdad¹³ as hostile, made it possible in the summer of 2014 for the Islamic State to be regarded as a liberating army in Fallujah, Tikrit and Mosul. The Islamic State took full advantage of the anti-Baghdad feelings of the Sunni community and, as already mentioned, was one of the basic pillars that supported the military and political efforts for the Islamic State to reach such a high scale in 2014-2015.¹⁴ The Jihadists were most aware of the al-Maliki government's corruption and constantly portrayed him as unable to efficiently manage Anbar province administratively because Baghdad was the prisoner of a confessional vassal system, whereby what was given to some had to be taken away from others, including in terms of political representation. Gradually, more and more sceptical or enthusiastic local players became convinced by the Islamic State that the Iraqi state was impossible to reform, that it was an American colonialist construction, just like all the countries in the region.

4. CAUSES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S RAPID VICTORY IN MOSUL

The Islamic State's victory in Mosul was a major surprise not only to the international community but also to the Islamic State itself. "Our enemies and friends are all dismayed," said Abu Mohammed al-Adnani,¹⁵ spokesman for the Islamic State at the time. Rare cases have existed in history when an enemy of about 6,000 people managed to intimidate and decisively defeat a 1-

Kurds, Armenians and others are 9.7%. Moreover, the numbers show the number of Syrians without separating the migrants or refugees, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, the World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

¹³ Norman Cigar "Iraq's Shia Warlords and Their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options", *United States Army War College Press, Strategic Studies Institute*, (June 2015):35, accessed September 23, 2017, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1272.pdf>

¹⁴ After 2015 and especially since 2016, there has been a decline in the combat efficiency and ability of the Islamic State. The 2014 and 2015 period was the peak of the organization. Since 2016, one argues, the decline has slightly occurred. The Iraqi army has decreased and the special troops have taken over the strategic initiative; at the time of writing this paper, the Islamic State had an almost insignificant presence in Iraq, being removed from Mosul. In Syria, the center of the Caliphate power, Raqqa, is under constant threat and pressure both from the north, by the Kurds, and from the perspective of constant bombings and a strong revival of government forces.

¹⁵ Abu Mohammed al-Adnani was the spokesman of the Islamic State and a character belonging to the organization's elite, being the second in the Islamic State hierarchy after Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi. On the 30th of August 2016, the Islamic State announced his death which was claimed by several factions, but the US State Department confirmed on the 12th of September 2016 that Adnani had been killed in the province of Aleppo following an American air strike.

million people¹⁶ security force, plus the army divisions in the Anbar province. What made this seemingly formidable military result possible, was the at least tacit support of the Sunni population who regarded the Islamic State as an instrument to put an end to Baghdad's oppression. Another major factor was the lack of discipline and the endemic corruption in the Iraqi army. It was not just in the army, but it was a constant element of the system and it occurred where there were interests that could generate profit or influence, and a major sector of those two elements was oil. Iraq is an oil country, and hydrocarbons extraction revenues have not ceased to grow since 2003.¹⁷ Oil revenue was, in the hands of various governments, an instrument with which they have bought the loyalty of their local clients and provided their military services to the clans.

The critics of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki say that he has allowed Iraqi oil to be monopolized by a criminal caste made up of politicians, parties and other dignitaries. The way Maliki might have consolidated and retained his power would be by allocating oil exploitation agreements to his close associates or enemies to gain influence over them. Thus, the government could not reform the system because it would have hit the leadership mechanism itself. The institutions responsible for fighting corruption have been systematically marginalized and intimidated. Under the Shiite government led by Maliki, the party-, family- or community-based patronage system decided who was allowed to receive a job or not; which has gradually contributed to the political and economic marginalization of the Iraqi Sunni community, and the marginalization began after the fall of Saddam Hussein.¹⁸

4.1 THE BATTLE FOR MOSUL, JUNE 2014

The crucial calendar date was the 10th of June 2014, when the Islamic State captured Mosul after just four days of fighting. It is worth analysing the weak resistance of the Iraqi army against the attacks of the Islamic State in Mosul. The Iraqi army was made up of 350,000 soldiers at the time and had absorbed \$ 41.6 billion since 2011. However, the soldiers ran away from the Islamists after four days of shy resistance.¹⁹ On the 6th of June 2014, the Islamic militants began their attack on Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. They had a great victory: about 1,300 Jihadi militants defeated 60,000 Iraqi military personnel including the local and federal army and police in Iraq. This number disparity must be analysed more closely in the context of endemic corruption in the Iraqi security system. Only one in three soldiers was present in Mosul those days, the others were paying half of their benefits to senior officers to be on permanent leave.²⁰ At theoretical level, Mosul was then defended by 25,000 men, soldiers and policemen. In reality, there were no more than 10,000 people in the field, and most of them were ghost soldiers.

Mosul was an important symbol to the Islamic State because it was the place of many families who joined the Iraqi army during Saddam Hussein's leadership, who traditionally used to

¹⁶ The Iraqi security forces comprised one million people in 2014; 350,000 soldiers and 650,000 policemen, respectively.

¹⁷ Michael Weiss, Hassan Hassa, *ISIS. Armata Jihadului (Jihad Army)*, (Bucharest, Corint, 2016), 39-43.

¹⁸ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 33.

¹⁹ Ned Parker, "Inside the Fall of Mosul", *Reuters*, October, 14, 2014, 6-7, accessed in July 25, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report/special-report-how-mosul-fell-an-iraqi-general-disputes-baghdads-story-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>

²⁰ Doctor Mahmoud Othman, a member of the Iraqi Parliament, spoke in 2013 about the Iraqi corruption and regarding the army, he said that people paid money to join the army, to benefit from stable wages, but they are investors, not soldiers.

choose the defence minister from that city. The Islamic State, in its rise, used a great deal of images, myths and symbols to attract as many potential supporters of its cause as possible. The Iraqis knew that about Mosul, they knew that Mosul provided the defence minister in the Ba'athist Party and represented (or had represented) the Sunni power that was feeding Saddam's army. By capturing Mosul, the Islamic State also wanted to demonstrate that they would take on the role of the "defence minister" for all the Sunnis under the oppression of Shiite Baghdad. As brutal as they were, the militants of the Islamic State were, to many of the Sunni people in Mosul, preferable to the government forces led by the Shiites of Nouri al-Maliki.²¹

Those in the Islamic State had been careful not to attract the Sunni local community against them, at least in 2014, until they strengthened their power. As there was a vulnerable point in Mosul's governance by the Islamic State; namely that Mosul is a traditional, but not a religious city, and the authority of the Islamic State and the cordiality they showed to the "Sunni brothers" in Mosul changed over time, ending up in public executions, executions without trials, all against the Sunnis who were out of the very restricted pattern of the conduct imposed by the Islamic State. Those things took place throughout 2015 and in early 2016, during which a few Sunnis who managed to escape from Mosul told about their daily lives and the perpetual pressure created by the Islamic State governance and the exorbitant taxes.

CONCLUSIONS

The fabulous rise of the Islamic State ensued from the organization's ability to materialize (and to create the impression that it is) the shock force of a general Sunni riot. It is very likely that the offensive undertaken by the Islamic State in the summer of 2014 meant the end of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, following the post-Saddam model of 2003. It will be necessary to recreate the Iraqi political map both at a national level and at the level of Baghdad as a centre of power. The lack of political dialogues with the Sunnis and returning to an al-Maliki-like situation after the removal of any Islamic State presence in Iraq will only mean the physical removal of some Jihadist militants. Keeping to this scenario, the elements that gave the power to the Islamic State in the first phase are preserved. An exclusive government led by the Shiites, the Sunni communities' perceptions of being excluded from the political life, being disadvantaged in the economic life and alienated in the social one will remain the ingredients of success for any Salafist-Jihadist organization that will claim to fight for bringing such situations to an end. When the hatred against the Shiites will reappear, it will not be long before an infusion of weapons and militants occurs from the outside, the conflict will be stratified and re-stratified, and Iraq will again be at the zero point. The balanced management of the post-Islamic State situation in Iraq through a serious political dialogue between the Shiites, the Sunnis and the Kurds will be absolutely necessary so that history will not repeat itself.

The Islamic State's offensives were successful from the military perspective due to the presence of the officers of Saddam's army in his command positions. These were military men who accumulated military experience in the war with Iran between 1980-1988, during the occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and during the battles with the Americans in 1991 and 2003. The disintegration process of Iraq, in parts distinct from Shiite, Sunni or Kurd regions was emphasized by the presence, as well as by the elimination of the Islamic State from certain territories, which

²¹ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 17- 36.

will now be claimed by the various participating parties according to their military contribution in the elimination of the Jihadists.

As far as Iraq is concerned, reconciliation with the Sunni community is vital. The Baghdad government must get rid of the image that Baghdad acquired after the confessional war in 2000 as the siege of the Shiite power in the country. Many Sunni people are sceptical at least regarding Baghdad's democratic and national governance intentions. Through dialogue and compromise on both sides, diplomats and politicians need to rebuild the image of Baghdad, as a Shiite bastion and Shiite power centre at the core of the Iraqi power.

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