Islam as a point of reference for political and social groups in Iraq

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Abstract

Iraq occupies a special position in the general context of re-Islamization of Arab societies because of the US occupation and the absence of a viable state. The attempt to rebuild communities under the aegis of the United States led to a widespread withdrawal back into communities in which Islam plays a vital role. Sectarian identities were intensified, particularly because they built on layers largely secularized by years of a form of political life that had been partly dominated by secular or secularist parties (Communist Party, Baath party). It looks as if a secularized form of Islam, whose vocation is primarily to confer an identity and which has become impervious to any religious code, is likely to fuel the fighting, which is all the more inexpiable because each person believes that he is fighting for survival as a member of his community.

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The political landscape in Iraq in 2007 might suggest two things – that Islam has a monopoly of the bodies representing political persuasion and allegiances of identity in the Arab region and that the ethnic dimension is the primary concern in the Kurdish region. In the last parliamentary elections, in December 2005, the Shiites voted for the candidates of the United Iraqi Alliance, which brought together the Shiite Islamist parties that had the blessing of Ayatollah Sistani, and the Sunnites for the Sunnite candidates, most of whom belonged to the National Concord Front, which groups together the Sunnite Islamist parties, while the Kurds voted for the Kurdish parties. Thus the representation that was apparently

considered ''democratic'' was actually no more than a projection, a snapshot, of the demographic balance in Iraq, which comprises 55 per cent Shiites, the vast majority of whom are Arabs, 20 per cent Sunni Arabs, 20 per cent Kurds, who are also Sunnites, and a few minorities which account for no more than 5 per cent of the population. The lists of electoral candidates representing the cross-community parties, such as the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) or some former members of the Baath party, were defeated. Even worse, in the hope of gaining a seat, the ICP had to join forces with the ''CIA agent'', Iyad Allawi, within the Iraqi National List (Allawi, ICP), which gained 8 per cent of the votes. Saleh Mutlaq's Iraqi National Dialogue Front, which brings together the secular Sunnites, won only 4.1 per cent of the votes.[1] The ''democratic'' process thus merely aggravated community rivalry as every Iraqi citizen was referred back to his religious and/or ethnic identity. The process also accompanied the eruption of sectarian hatred between Shiites and Sunnites.

The origins of sectarian hatred

Iraq has experienced horrendous daily carnage and no one has seemed able to stop it. The sectarian war which pitted the Shiite majority against the Sunnites in Iraq assumed apocalyptic proportions after the attack of 22 February 2006. The mosque with the golden dome which contains the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Shiite imams in Samarra, the fourth Shiite holy city in Iraq, was partly destroyed in an attack for which the jihadists close to Al Qaeda claimed responsibility. However, anti-Shiism had been unleashed before that, claiming tens of thousands of lives. The sectarian war actually began on 29 August 2003 with the attack on Najaf which claimed the lives of 89 people, including Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim. The contact areas between the communities became invisible front lines. The response to random attacks took the form of mass abductions, followed by summary executions. Every morning, Baghdad gathered in its gruesome harvest of mutilated bodies. In 2006 that war forced more than half a million people to flee the mixed districts in Baghdad and the regions to the east of the capital, in the province of Diyala, where Arabs, Kurds, Sunnites and Shiites lived side by side. By the end of 2007, estimates put the number of internally displaced persons in Iraq at nearly two million.[2] Baghdad, where there had once been an even balance of Shiites and Sunnites, became 75 per cent Shiite following a violent Shiitization campaign. What was the source of the sectarian hatred? There is not one source but several, which need to be categorized by order of importance.

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1   See the certified results of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, available at http://www.ieciraq.org/English/Frameset_english.htm (last visited 17 December 2007).
2   See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, ''Total internally displaced population is estimated to be more than 2 million (as of September 2007)'', available at http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/B6C0B024031DFA0F802570B8005A74D6?OpenDocument (last visited 20 December 2007).

No ethnicization of religious identities

First, we are dealing with a civil war– that is, a war within one and the same society. There is a great difference between the ethnic identities in Iraq, which pit, for example, Arabs and Kurds or Turkmen and Kurds against each other, and the sectarian identities. Kurdistan is a patch that was sown by the former British mandatory authorities on to an Iraqi entity that is undeniably Arab. Entering Kurdistan from the Arab plains is like entering another country: everything is different – the language, the culture, the landscape and the climate. There is nothing of that kind of distinction between Sunnite and Shiite Arabs; with one or two exceptions, they are all Arabs, share the same culture that is permeated with Bedouin values – albeit with specific Shiite and Sunnite differences – and live in the same environment. There is no ethnicization of religious identities in Iraq as was the case in former Yugoslavia. The poorest people may well be Shiite but there are also wealthy Shiites. Nor can the current conflict be explained by reference to a simple economic and social divide as a dominant feature. Sunnites and Shiites speak the same Arab dialects and only their names are an indication of which is which – and even then, that is not always the case. A person called Juburi or Shammar, for example, may be a Shiite or a Sunnite. The Arab tribes that originally came from the Arabian peninsula and settled in the fertile plains of the Tigris and the Euphrates often have a Sunnite and a Shiite branch. In the regions with a Shiite majority, those tribes – which were all originally Sunnite – converted to Shia for reasons of regional solidarity, while others in the regions with a Sunnite majority remained attached to Sunnism.

A hierarchical tribal system and social divide

Iraq was the last major repository in the world of the nomadic invasions. Most of the Arab population in Iraq comprises newcomers and most of the Shiites were converted fairly recently (the last waves of conversions date back no further than the nineteenth century). Conversion to Shiism was favoured by a tendency to neglect the code of Bedouin values coupled with sedentarization. The men in the sedentarized or semi-sedentarized tribes experienced harsh subservience compared with the tribes which remained nomadic, the large camel-driving tribes, the lords of the desert. Traditional tribal egalitarianism was replaced by a relationship of violent submission in which the sedentary communities had to give the protection due to the nomads. From the moment when title deeds to the vast estates that had until then been common tribal property or belonged to the sultan of Istanbul were allocated to the leading tribal sheikhs, the peasants very quickly became real serfs within a new feudal system, in the European meaning of the word. The Ottomans and then the British were in charge of those policies which aimed to set up strongholds in a tribal world that was largely out of control. Shiism, which extols the struggle against oppression, offered an ideal and values that were in keeping with the sense of injustice of those tribes frequently considered as the personal property of the sheikh, just like agricultural land. The tyranny of the leading

sheikhs forced millions of landless Shiite peasants to emigrate to the large towns in the period from 1930 to 1960. Huge shanty towns took them in on the basis of regional bonds. Sadr City is the prototype of those districts that gave the tribes access to town life (although the old Sunnite and Shiite town centre inhabitants still consider them "outside the town"). There they formed the basis of the Communist Party before "returning" to the Shiite religious movement which led the struggle against European dominance in the early twentieth century. It is therefore a social divide that is characteristic of the hierarchical system of the Arab tribal world which is partly responsible for the opposition of Shiites and Sunnites. Yet that is not the only thing. Sight must not be lost of the fact that, in Iraq, tribal and regional solidarity is of prime importance. Sectarian identity is merely the outcome of regional solidarity. How else can one explain why other tribes that were subject to the same violence associated with sedentarization remained Sunnite in the majority Shiite regions?

Arab nationalism to exclude Shiites

The fact that for centuries they were a community dominated socially and excluded politically is something that the Shiites in Iraq share with the other Shiites in the Arab world. Their political exclusion did not start with Saddam Hussein. It goes back to the origins of the Iraqi state as it was established by the British mandatory authorities in 1920. The political system that was set up at the time seemed to be modern, and asserted no claim to sectarian shading of any kind, in contrast to the political sectarianism that was institutionalized in Lebanon in 1943. However, it was based on a secularized ethnic ideology – Arab nationalism – which was modelled on European forms of nationalism and used by Sunni elites as a means of excluding the Shiites, for whom – although they were also Arabs – being Arab could not be separated from Islam. At the time, the British mandatory authorities used the former Ottoman elites, which were attached to Sunnism, to assert its power, sanctioning the dominance of the Sunnites over the Shiites in the new state.

The reversal of alliances in 2003

Half a century later, the Islamic revolution in Iran signalled political and social emancipation for the oppressed Shiite communities in the Arab world. Hezbollah in Lebanon is its most striking manifestation. In Iraq, however, the Shiites' desire for freedom paradoxically coincided with the US need to rely on an Iraqi stronghold. The year 2003 saw a reversal of alliances that had existed for nearly a century. For the first time a Western power addressed the outsiders under the former system – Shiites and Kurds – to make them the primary beneficiaries – or so they thought – of a new system based on "majority rule". By pretending to equate democratic majority and demographic majority, the United States actually confirmed a rule: an occupation power in Iraq can only survive if it pits the Iraqis against one another so that communitarianism, linked to the lack of true

sovereignty, then remains the only possible option. Political reconstruction builds on communitarian foundations at every level, locking Iraqi society in a inescapable downward spiral. As the supreme authority was foreign, the Iraqi actors – whether they were political or religious – gave precedence to negotiating with it for the sake of private interests, rather than striving to establish a new coexistence agreement between Iraqis. Moreover, the implosion of Iraqi society which followed went beyond the community divisions and affected both Shiites and Sunnites, who were split into a thousand regional and even district allegiances. Within the political system which keeps collapsing in pools of blood as we watch, the Sunni Arabs are condemned to be merely a minority without power or wealth in their own country – which they will never accept. It is that refusal which allowed the external factor to gain the upper hand in Iraq. The US occupation went hand in hand with the willingness of the international Sunni fundamentalist movement, which is close to Al Qaeda, to turn Iraq into a privileged battlefield in its war against the West. Americans and Al Qaeda are fighting each other in Iraq through interposed Iraqi communities. The war against the Shiites is also a war against the Americans. The emulators of Zarqawi in Iraq have unhoped-for space in that country. Their sole aim is to trap the Americans in that country and to prevent any political stabilization and especially any common front uniting Shiites and Sunnites against the occupation forces. To do so, it was horrifyingly easy to develop a strategy of chaos – a declaration of war against the Shiite "apostates", drawing on the stock of the traditional anti-Shiite representatives of Sunni fundamentalism and indis-criminate terrorism in the hope of achieving an incontrollable intermeshing of terror and reprisals. Having lit the fuse of sectarian hatred, the jihadists then only had to watch the blaze. Since 2003 more than 700 kamikazes, most of them Iraqi Sunnites, have given their lives – in many cases to kill fellow Iraqis who were Shiites.

The reaction of Shiites

The Shiites put up with this carnage for a long time without reacting. Or at least that is what it looked like on the surface. In fact, the murderous, destructive campaigns against the large Sunnite towns of Falluja, Ramadi, Samarra, Mosul and Tal Afar in 2004 and 2005 were carried out by the Coalition forces with the backing of Shiite soldiers. By infiltrating the police force and other security forces, the Shiite militias appropriated stillborn official institutions for their own benefit. At the same time there were calls for their clerics to exercise restraint. However, the principal architect of that restraint in the field, Moqtada al-Sadr, was caught up in the wave of sectarian hatred. With a base that had become the favourite target of the jihadists, he finally rallied the Shiite House in 2005, while his militias went beyond the abuse meted out by the death squads of the (Shiite) interior minister to the Sunnites, who were lumped together as *Takfiris* ("excommuni-cators", the name given by the Shiites to the partisans of Zarqawi). On 9 July 2006 militiamen from Muqtada's Mahdi Army stopped car drivers in the Baghdad district of Al-Jihad. Those with identity papers that sounded as if they were

"Sunnites" were taken away and executed. The same militias were involved in a Shiitization campaign in Baghdad, forcing Sunnites out of districts in which they sometimes represented 40 per cent of the inhabitants, as was the case in Al-Hurriya on the western bank of the Tigris. Given the current number of deaths, the blood price exacted became exorbitant and put a stop to any reconciliation in the short or medium term. However, partition based on sectarian affiliations was also unrealistic. Baghdad provides an apt illustration: despite the population movements, the single-denominational districts remain the exceptions. They are scattered and have no territorial continuity. The wall separating the communities in the district of Dora in south-eastern Baghdad cannot be cannot be given general application, even if the capital tends to put up fences.

Overcoming a taboo

Prior to 2003, the tensions between Sunnites and Shiites were a taboo subject for many Iraqis. To refer to them was considered inappropriate – particularly if a Westerner did so. Of course, censorship was an aspect of the regime of terror inflicted on the nation by Saddam Hussein, but the matter went beyond that. Many Iraqis in exile were also averse to that distinction being made between Iraqis. The occupation aggravated a latent recurrent conflict, lending it the dimension of an inexpiable combat, in which the Iraqis were divided up according to their sectarian and ethnic identity. This illustrates clearly that, in a conducive context, identities – which change by definition – can always crystallize suddenly around a particular aspect. People cannot live without an identity, but that identity can also become a prison and a fearful weapon when forces oppose each other and are all the more impossible to placate because each of them believes it is fighting for survival. Between the impossibility of reconciliation and the impossibility of partition, Iraq ran the risk of continuing its descent into hell, while the international community looked on in a powerless state of paralysis.

Salafism in Iraq – a newcomer?

That extreme sectarian polarization corresponded to the "return" to Islam – more especially in its Salafist form – of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq. Salafism in Iraq goes back a long way. Abu al-Thana al-Alusi (1802–54), Nu'man al-Alusi (1836–99) and Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (1857–1924) – all members of a famous family of Sunni *sayyid* from Baghdad which opposed the Ottomans – were the first to demonstrate a local allegiance to reformist Islam. They took a stance on behalf of the Wahhabites who braved the situation in the Arabian Peninsula. Having initially given a warm welcome to the Young Turks in the name of the struggle against despotism, the family swiftly turned against them. The positive approach of the forerunners of Kemalite secularism, who also turned out to be easily offended Turkish nationalists, made it difficult for them to find common ground with the partisans of a "return" to the Islam of their pious Muslim ancestors

(*salaf*), a new credo put forward by the Muslim reform movement. In Baghdad Muhammad Bahjat al-Athari (1902–96) then became the herald of that religious and political trend through his numerous publications, particularly those on the Alusi. Sheikh Muhammad al-Alusi, head of the current Islamic Bloc, is the great-grandson of Abu al-Thana al-Alusi. Another Alusi, Mithal al-Alusi, advocates reconciliation with the Shiites.

A recent movement with ancient roots

In the late 1940s Iraq imported the Egyptian model, establishing the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Iraqi Salafism evolved along more intellectual and more elitist routes, that were less directly political than in Egypt. Its influence in Iraq remained weak. Aware of their minority situation in that country, the Sunni Arabs actually avoided dividing themselves into religious and secular groups and concentrated their efforts on safeguarding their hold on the state established in 1920 by the British mandatory authorities.

Therefore, despite its ancient roots, Salafism is a late movement in Iraq compared with Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian or Saudi Salafism. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Islamic Liberation Party have never had significant support from the Sunni Arabs in Iraq. For nearly a century, the Sunni Arab elites were more the bearers of ideals that were secularist (military reform) or distinctly secular (Baath). Taken up as a result of a sectarian reflex of self-defence, their position did not favour the emergence of a strong fundamentalist movement similar to what was happening elsewhere in the region. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, the small fundamentalist movement among the Sunni Arabs had strong links to Saudi Arabia. That was the case of the Islamic Bloc of Sheikh Muhammad al-Alusi, which was founded in 1970 and is close to the pro-Saudi Muslim Brotherhood. Another wing of the Muslim Brotherhood – the Iraqi Islamic Party, which tended to view Saudi Arabia with hostility – had privileged connections with Sudan. Among the Kurds, Salafism developed as a result of the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Although it was Sunnite, the movement maintained links with Iran. That initial marginalization of Salafism did not prevent the emergence of a new religious language among all the leaders of the Sunni Arab community in Iraq. Why?

The exclusion of the Sunni Arabs

The cause is to be found in the exclusion of the Sunni Arabs. The collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein was a traumatic experience for Sunni Arabs in Iraq. Not that they had been unshakeable in their love for a regime which had severely repressed them in turn during its final years. However, there was huge fear of retaliation by those who had been excluded from power: the Kurds and especially the Shiites. Finally, the end of Saddam was not merely the end of a regime and a government. It was also the end of the Iraqi state, which had been established by the British in 1920 and which the Sunni Arab elites had always considered as their

own exclusive property. It should be recalled that in 2003 the United States had been uncertain what course to take. Was it to recycle the existing political and military elites and rebuild the political system, placing power exclusively in the hands of the Sunni Arabs? Or should it choose the former opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein – in a word, the Shiites and the Kurds who had been excluded from power under the former political system? Orphaned by a state that had always defined their horizons, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq found themselves in the previously unknown situation of a terrifying void – as there was no longer a state to uphold, where were they to turn?

Nonetheless, it seems that a large number of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq were ready to mourn a system which had always served them but which they clearly saw as having run its course. There were a few weeks of uncertainty in May 2003. However, the vicious circle of mistakes made by the occupation army followed by reprisals took on a new guise in June; the Sunni Arabs felt that they were not being represented in the political reconstruction of the country. That feeling grew further when the Iraqi Governing Council was formed on 13 July 2003.[3] The Sunni Arabs had four representatives on the Council: Adnan Pachechi, Naser Chaderchi, who had just returned from the United States, Ghazi al-Yawer, one of the Shammar sheikhs, and Muhsin Abd al-Hamid of the small Iraqi Islamic Party. None of them could take advantage of. On 1 September an outsider, Kamil al-Gaylani, became Finance Minister in the first government cabinet, meaning that the Sunni Arabs had gained hold of the most important ministry. It was of little importance, as the Sunni Arab community in Iraq was already falling apart.

The entry of external players

Here and there focal points for the expression of grievances began to be identified – Ba'quba, Falluja, Tikrit, Balad and Mosul, where clashes multiplied. The provinces of Al-Anbar and Salah al-Din had lost the most when Saddam's regime collapsed and the army was dismantled. Deprived of the state that they had dominated for nearly a century, the Sunni Arabs were also deprived of the Arab nationalist ideologies of which the Iraqi regime was one of the last bastions before it finally collapsed. In the local areas, only the imams in the mosques were left, with the tribes, to take control of towns and districts. The dismantling of the Iraqi army had sent tens of thousands of officers home and they placed their knowledge at the service of the guerrilla forces. The resistance movement was local, which was its strength.

That context allowed new external players to take the stage. Contrary to US accusations, under the regime of Saddam Hussein the only real link with Al Qaeda in Iraq was Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), which emerged in Kurdistan in 2002. Ansar al-Islam stemmed from the merger of Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam), a group that had broken away from the Islamic Movement in

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3   See Coalition Provisional Authority, Iraqi Governing Council, available at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/governing_council.html (last visited 20 December 2007).

Kurdistan (IMK), with the armed group led by Mullah Krekar, a former IMK military commander and a veteran of Afghanistan. The emergence of a fundamentalist movement in Kurdistan is linked to the traditional leadership crisis as expressed through the two main Kurdish parties. Those parties represent families which also derive their legitimacy from their link with a brotherhood form of Sufism that shapes Kurdish society. However, the emergence of mini-states, the one under the aegis of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), and the other under the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), changed the situation – from then on, those who had been excluded from the Kurdish political system had no choice other than to adopt a position opposed to the local authorities, which were becoming more and more strongly territorialized. It was therefore not a war between ''secular'' and religious Kurdish parties but rather the violent restructuring of societies set against emerging tribal states. The brutality of the PUK's campaigns against Jund al-Islam in 2001 finally convinced a good number of combatants that no peace could be attained with the Talaban's militias. That is how Ansar al-Islam came into being. A large number of its members had left for Afghanistan in 1999. When they returned in 2002, they were accompanied by several hundreds of combatants of all nationalities who had been forced out of Afghanistan by the collapse of the Talaban regime. They settled in the Hawraman mountains, to the east of Halabja, on both sides of the border with Iran. When war broke out in 2003, joint operations by the US special forces and the PUK *peshmergas* put an end to that safe haven. Evicted from their mountain hideaway, the combatants of Ansar al-Islam scattered throughout the country. In the Arab-Sunni region they quickly found fresh support. Finally, there were those whom the Iraqis called the ''guests of the regime'' of Saddam Hussein. The secular left-wing and Arab nationalist opponents had gradually been replaced by Islamists hunted down in their country. In 2003 a number of recruits joined them in the name of a worldwide jihad against the United States.

The ''return to Islam'' by Sunni Arabs

The current ''return to Islam'' by Sunni Arabs, and particularly to its Salafist variant, had been preceded by the return of Saddam and a number of Sunnites to Islam as a result of the war between Iran and Iraq and the sectarian war within Iraq, of which it was the extension. At that point in time, the Baath party was no more than an empty shell, put to death by Saddam himself. From being a cross-sectarian party, it had turned into a Sunnite party, then into an ideological cover for Saddam Hussein's ruling clan. In the name of Sunni solidarity, the Muslim Brotherhood gave their backing to the ''secular'' Saddam against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Islamic Iran. Saddam went through a transformation during the war with Iran. Going back on his professions of Baath secular faith, from then on the Iraqi leader stressed ''his'' Islam as opposed to that of Khomeini. Saddam declared himself a believer, sporting a genealogy which made him a descendent of the Prophet, adding *Allahu akbar* to the colours of Arab nationalism in the Iraqi flag, and multiplying gestures indicating a re-Islamization

of society (prohibition of alcohol in public places, a decree reversing certain rights obtained by women).

The evolution of the Sunni Arab community, like that of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, raises a question – are we not witnessing the end of nearly a century during which secularizing ideologies were predominant in that community? Just as Sati' al-Husri (1880–1969), the theoretician of pan-Arab nationalism, transferred to Arab nationalism in the 1910s without encountering any opposition from Ottomanism, did not Saddam Hussein change from secular Baathism to a form of Islam that was being called for more and more? That would be evidence of a permanent situation in Iraq – in order to escape from their minority status, the Arab-Sunni elites in that country always have referred to the predominant ideologies in an Arab world that was mainly Sunni. By exchanging their Arab nationalism for Islam, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq are demonstrating a belated alignment with the other Arab countries. When Arab nationalism was at its height, it was their point of reference. Today, when it has been succeeded by a fundamentalist form of Islam, the Arab-Sunni Iraqis are ultimately merely pursuing a course that has always been theirs by now taking Islam as their point of reference. In the context of Iraq, the "conversion" of the Sunni Arabs to Islam is also the outcome of the rise of sectarian tension. For a long time the Islamic movement was synonymous with Shiism in Iraq. From now on, there were to be two Islamist movements at war with each other.

The Sunni guerrilla movement and Islam

The Sunni guerrilla movement is taken to mean the armed resistance of various groups (Baathists, nationalists, anti-Shiite Sunnites, Sunni or Salafist Islamists of Ansar al-Islam, foreign combatants associated with Al Qaeda, criminal gangs). The guerrilla movement emerged in opposition to the US occupation and the current political process with a dimension that is increasingly sectarian. The "Iraqi resistance", as it calls itself, or "anti-Iraqi forces", as the majority Shiite government and the Americans call it, takes every possible course of action open to it – assassination attempts, ambushes, snipers, rockets, sabotage, aircraft attacks, kamikazes, killings, kidnappings and beheading. A 140-page report by Human Rights Watch denounced the numerous violations of human rights of which the movement is guilty.[4] The United States accused Syria, Iran and some Muslim non-governmental organizations of providing the movement with logistical support.

From Iraqi to Islamic and sectarian resistance

In this insurrection movement, the Baathists were soon outdone by the Islamists. However, to the north and the west of Baghdad the activities of Saddam's former

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4   Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Insurgent groups responsible for war crimes", report, 3 October 2005, available at http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/10/03/iraq11804.htm (last visited 20 December 2007).

fedayeen, the former Republican Guard and the former Baathist intelligence services continued. On 13 January 2007 the Interior Minister, a Shiite, warned against the Return Party (Hizb al-'Awda), a revival of the former Baath party, after the executions of Saddam and Barzan. Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the last surviving dignitary of the fallen regime, who is still on the run and is presumed to have taken refuge in Syria, is said to be the inspirational force behind it.

However, most of the former Baathists have ''converted'' to Islam. In other words, while preserving their structures, they have adopted a religious language, that being all the more easy to do since Saddam Hussein had inaugurated that re-Islamization in the early 1980s as a result of the war against Iran. They may be classified as Islamo-Sunni insofar as their language is primarily sectarian and characterized by a virulent anti-Shiism. As members of that movement, reference may be made to Jaysh al-Taifa al-Mansura (the Army of the Victorious Sect), Saray al-Jihad (Jihad Brigade), Kata'ib al-Ghuraba' (Brigades of the Exiles), Kata'ib al-Ahwal (Brigades of the Apocalypse), the Brigades of Monotheism, Jaysh Muhammad (Army of Mohammed) and Jaysh al-Rafidayn (Army of Mesopotamia). The Islamic Army in Iraq, which also groups together former members of the Baath party, must be added to that list. That group, which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood but not Salafist, initially used language similar to that of Al Qaeda before distinguishing itself from that group by an Iraqi approach to the conflict, which was not in line with the internationalist vision of the ''foreign combatants''. Ishmael Jubouri, one of its leaders, said that he welcomed all Iraqis without distinction. The Islamic Army in Iraq, which is responsible for numerous kidnappings, in particular that of the French journalists Malbrunot and Chesneau, has executed some of its hostages. It called for people to vote against the Constitution.

The Islamic Sunni movement brings together the Brigades of the 1920 Revolution, close to the Sunnite clergy, as well as other groups such as Al-Raya al-Soda (Black Flag). The Committee of the Ulamas, which is headed by Harith al-Dari and is firmly established in the province of Al-Anbar, is their religious point of reference, even if that organization does not call for armed combat.

Finally, there is the jihadist movement linked to Al Qaeda. The Majlis Shûra al-Mujahidin (Mujahidin Shura Council), established on 15 January 2006, became the ''Islamic State in Iraq'' in October 2006. It is an umbrella association of six organizations, in which Al Qaeda in Iraq rubs shoulders with Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna (Army of the Partisans of the Sunna). The latter organization, which is well established in northern and central Iraq, includes Kurds and has direct links to the ''foreign combatants'', Al Qaeda and what remains of the Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam, which held sway in Halabaja before being dislodged from there by the militias of Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It is one of the three groups to have kidnapped foreigners and beheaded them in front of a video camera. In Falluja, Omar Hadeed, an Iraqi citizen who had connections with international Islamism, was the local representative of Al Qaeda before he was killed by the united tribes of the al-Anbar Salvation Council in 2007.

Let us recall that the Sunni Islamists also have seats in the government – the Concord Front, established on 20 October 2005 for the elections, is a coalition of Adnan Dulaymi's General Congress of the Iraqi People, the Iraqi Islamic Party of Tariq al-Hashimi, the vice-president who succeeded Muhsin Abd al-Hamid in 2004 (he called for people to vote against the Constitution before being won over to it), well-established in Mosul, and the Iraqi National Dialogue Council of Khalaf al-Ulayyan. The Front won 44 seats out of 275, with 15.1 per cent of the votes.[5]

Localism first

What distinguishes the Sunni insurgents from one another? The Baath party has ceased to exist as a single-party state, but has maintained networks of supporters. Those networks have been placed at the service of the "resistance" by using an Islamic vocabulary. Is there a difference between Baathist resistance and Islamic resistance? Is not the Islamic Army in Iraq merely a cover for the Baathists?

In fact, all of them are former members of the Baath party, which explains the ongoing use of Baathist vocabulary ("Arab unity", etc.). However, drawing on Islam is not opportunistic. It is illustrative of the conversion to Islam of elites that were previously secularized and non-religious, a phenomenon which is, moreover, not unique to the Sunnites. It is the establishment in the local environment that is the main distinguishing criterion. The "resistance" would thus be more Muslim in Al-Anbar and Diyala, and more Baathist in Salah ad-Din (Tikrit) and Mosul.

However, another dividing line has assumed a growing importance – the evident clash between the internationalist objective of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Iraqi objective of the Sunni insurgents. The Iraqi insurgents and the "foreign combatants" have become divided – the indiscriminate anti-Shiite terrorism directed against civilians, the imposition of Islamic standards and, in particular, the bloodshed against members of breakaway tribes under Al Qaeda orders are matters that have led to widespread resentment. The statement in which Zarqawi anathematized the Shiites and which was then broadcast on 14 September 2005 in a verbal message on a jihadist website – "in retaliation", he said, "for the massacres in Tal Afar"[6] – was accompanied by murderous attacks on Shiites. As the first signs of a split, in December 2005 the Iraqi Sunni insurgents warned Al Qaeda not to attack the polling stations during the elections. In early 2006 Zarqawi fled to Diyala, where he was killed in June that year. In 2006 the tribes began to fight Al Qaeda in Falluja and in Al-Qa'im, close to the Syrian border. In liaison with the tribes, the networks of former Baath adherents mobilized against Al Qaeda in Al-Anbar. The United States then intervened in order to turn this split to its advantage; it was the policy of the Awakening Movements (Harakât sahwa) and the Salvation Movement (Harakat inqadh) in Al-Anbar, then the Sunnite districts of Baghdad, of Salah al-Din, and ultimately of Diyala. The same logic applied

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5   For the results see above, note 1.
6   Tal Afar was portrayed as an "Al Qaeda stronghold" under the leadership of Musab Al Zarqawi.

everywhere: as the United States does not have the capacity to control the Sunni areas, why not give power to the Sunni tribal militias by providing them with the logistical support needed to flush Al Qaeda out of their areas? The new US strategy with regard to the Sunni Arabs has paid off in the short term – Al Qaeda saw itself driven out of the most densely populated areas and there was a marked reduction in the violence. The language of the united tribal sheikhs set out to be more Iraqi nationalist than Islamist. However, it is known that calling on tribal affiliations has never been able to save a political system in Iraq – no more in the Ottoman era than under the British mandate; the tribes were not the bearers of a political aim and their propensity for reversals is proverbial.

Conclusion

It can be seen that in the general context of the re-Islamization of Arab societies, Iraq is in an exceptional position because of the US occupation and the absence of a viable state. The attempt to rebuild communities under the aegis of the United States led to a widespread withdrawal into communities in which Islam plays an essential role. The implosion of Iraqi society conferred on the local actors a previously unparalleled importance that was illustrated in Shiite circles by a growing number of allegiances (Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI), the Dawa party, the Sadrist movement, which was in turn divided into the supporters of Muqtada, the Virtue Party and others) and in Sunni circles by the numerous guerrilla groups which were established primarily in local areas. Sectarian identities were intensified, particularly because they built on layers largely secularized by years of a form of political life that had been partly dominated by secular or secularist parties (Communist Party, Baath). Many elites became secularized in imitation of the Iraqi Shiite Vice-President, Adel Abd al-Mahdi. Today a representative on the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, close to Tehran, al-Mahdi is a former Arab nationalist who converted to Marxism and then to Islamism. It looks as if a secularized form of Islam, whose vocation is primarily to confer an identity and which has become impervious to any religious code, is likely to fuel the fighting, which is all the more inexpiable because each person believes that he is fighting for survival as a member of his community.