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IRAQ'S SUNNI POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS NETWORKS AND POLITICAL CHANGE: WHERE IS THEIR INFLUENCE?

POLITICAL ISLAM MOVEMENTS

IN THE SECOND WAVE OF **ARAB UPRISINGS**

الشرق
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

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Introduction

The October 2019 protest movement and Arab Sunnis

The Iraqi protests which started in Baghdad's central Tahrir Square in October 2019 and spread all the way south to the cities of Diwaniyah and Nasiriya, have shaken up previously politically unrivalled actors who had been dominating the post-2003 Iraqi political system.

These anti-government protests remained in Shia-majority provinces/governorates, while the inhabitants of Sunni-majority areas refrained from participating, fearing the protests would create a fertile ground for a resurgence of Islamic State (IS). Consequently, local Sunni governors prevented them from staging protests. This then limited the potential of comprehensively transforming the protests from sub-national protests, which lacked the widespread participation of the Arab Sunni and Kurdish sects of Iraqi society, to national protests which included all sects. As a result, Sunnis only participated in the protests in Baghdad despite a segment of Arab Sunnis in Iraq sympathizing with the protests in the south.

Beyond the sect-based approach, the broad anti-ethnosectarian dimension of the October 2019 protest movement generated a perception that these protests projected an 'Iraqi national will.' But rather than having a leadership which reflects clear demands and attitudes of such a will, the Shia-majority protest movement has remained diverse, leaderless, and in a state of flux.

Why is it important to assess the influence of Sunni political-religious networks?

Little is known about the political attitudes of the Iraqi Arab Sunni sect towards political change given their lack of visibility in the 2019 uprising. Therefore research is needed into Arab Sunni actors capable of (de-)mobilization, namely those who are inclined towards the status quo and likely to resist political change forcefully. Shia political Islamists and paramilitary actors were forced to adopt direct stances as the protest movement either empowered or challenged them. Similarly, their Sunni counterparts will be forced to take a stance if Arab Sunnis decide to take some sort of collective political action through street mobilization in the future.

Rather than investigating the attitudes of Arab Sunnis towards political change, this paper seeks to address the positioning of Sunni political-religious networks in and towards the Iraqi establishment, with the aim of being able to foresee their potential attitudes towards a popular mobilization similar to that of October 2019, if led by Arab Sunnis. The actors are described as network because they hybridly encompass both Sunni political Islam and religious proselytism which both play a role in the country's national politics, as well as a limited but visible presence in Iraq's fragmented security sectors. The term 'networks' is deployed in this paper because some of the actors project themselves via multiple institutional vehicles, rather than one singular organization.

Two dimensions can help explain the responses of Sunni religious-political networks and their capacity to respond to future political action in their sectarian components:

- 1:** The relative weights of Sunni religious-political networks within the Iraqi political architecture of the post-2003 system of sectarian power-sharing. Rhetorical responses by such actors can reflect their postures in a politically fluid scene which has dominated Iraq since the rise of the IS. Each actors' response can reflect the continuation of political alliances/rivalries or illuminate shifts in the aforementioned.
- 2:** The extent to which such networks could mobilize or demobilize their constituencies if needed for political action in the future. While Sunni

political-religious networks in Iraq possess less political, security, and financial power than those of their Shia counterparts, their alignments could be of importance for ruling Shia allies and/or rivals in major events and critical junctures. The alignment of Sunni actors with a certain Shia-led political camp has the potential of shifting balances.

Crucial alignment or support by Sunni political-religious networks can take the form of parliamentary voting alignments, cosmetic or genuine sectarian inclusion in electoral and parliamentary coalitions, religious propaganda in times of war, wartime recruitment efforts, and inter-/intra-communal mediation.

What shapes the responses of Sunni political-religious networks to political change?

The attitudes of Iraq's Sunni networks towards political change, whether in the case of the October 2019 protests or potential protests in Arab Sunni areas, are influenced by several variables:

- 1. Ideology:** A system of beliefs allows us to understand the behavior of these networks in major events and critical junctures because it plays a defining role in their identity politics, even if in very broad terms. For example; considering the influence of ideology in the case of Iraq's rising quietist Salafis and Sufis might be more important than in the case of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), as the latter places increasingly less emphasis on religion in its discourse, whilst quietist trends emphasize a religious discourse which backs the status quo.
- 2. Governance legacies:** Over the past two decades, politicians from Sunni political-religious networks, as in the case of the IIP, were part of local governance as elected representatives in consecutive provincial councils and were criticized by segments of Arab Sunnis for their inability to create jobs and reduce the central government's heavy-handed anti-terrorism tactics, namely arbitrary detentions. Despite this, the IIP contributed to the protest movement in Anbar but failed to protect it, making the party an unlikely trustworthy actor for protesters if future protest movements develop in Arab Sunni areas.

3. Repression legacies: Actors past experiences with episodes of violence, leaders' personal relations, emotions and memories, all influence major decisions and may have a more decisive effect than ideology in critical junctures, such as each actors' stance on the October 2019 protests. Key examples are the legacy of Iraq's civil war in the mid-2000s and the repression of the Anbar protest movement between 2012-2013 which unfolded as an upheaval in the Arab Sunni heartlands in Iraq against repressive policies. The Anbar protests were in turn seen to be inspired by the Arab uprisings of 2011 and these episodes of sectarian violence and repression were a turning point in reconstituting the political consciousness of many Arab Sunnis in Iraq, in both the public and political class.

4. Economic fragility: The extensive physical destruction of cities and villages under the rise and fall of IS, the continuing crisis of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and even their hasty returns, all contributed to the emergence of economically fragile and traumatized Arab Sunni communities. In the short-term, this means that there is little public appetite and capacity to organize protest movements, including by tribes, religious parties and networks. Any potential repression of Arab Sunni protests will produce further economic fragility.

5. Intra-congregational competition: Between Sunni political-religious networks, this has had a direct impact on their political positions and rhetoric towards major political events. Religious endowments are the sphere in which networks which are part of the political system compete to gain legitimacy, religious, and political influence. Networks belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, quietist Salafis, and quietist Sufis compete to control endowments.

The more Sunni networks are able to develop strong relations with governing political parties and paramilitaries in Baghdad, the more they are likely to be able to gain access to religious platforms. This access lengthens the time span of administering them and therefore ensure that rivals do not manipulate these platforms in religious and political rivalries. Harith Hasan explains the political importance of endowments:

“Mosques and shrines are key nodes of public gatherings, giving those in charge of them platforms to disseminate their messages and assert themselves in the religious domain. They often have facilities that can be used for commercial purposes or as real estate, and they receive donations and charities from pilgrims and philanthropists. Together with other endowments, they generate revenue that provides the authorities that control them with the means to sustain themselves. Some, especially the shrines of Shia imams and leading Sunni figures, also boost the social status and religious authority of those supervising them.”¹

Political competition for control of Sunni endowments in Iraq is part of a wider rivalry over who religiously guides the Sunni component through the position of the Mufti. In Iraq, there are currently three entities claiming entitlement to issue fatwas, an authority that should be assigned to a single religious entity. These entities are: 1) The Office of the Sunni Endowments (OSE) through the Committee of Fatwa and Religious Guidance. 2) The Iraqi Jurisprudential Congregation (IJC). 3) *Dar al-Ifta*, ‘House of Fatwa’, which is headed by the Salafi cleric Mahdi al-Sumaida’i. The dominant political classes are likely to be interested in seeing a fragmented Sunni institutional horizon in which no supreme religious authority can pose a political danger to the government.

These five variables shape the thinking of Sunni networks towards the utility of any political change in the country in a range of ways. Importantly, a network will not back popular protests if doing so will lead to disadvantageous political reshuffling between networks. The decline in popular backing for a religious role in the political arena over the past years in Iraq probably means that Sunni secular-leaning parties pose an increasing challenge to religious networks. Maintaining a margin of popular support for these networks and staying in the political system then requires delicate maneuvering towards constituencies, protest movements, and political allies “which the latter are likely” to be hostile to genuine political change. The outlook of such maneuvering can be foreseen in the political trajectory of Sunni networks .

Mapping the main Sunni Political-Religious Networks in Iraq

A. The Iraqi Islamic Party: A lengthy decline

The IIP is a political party subscribing to the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has re-emerged as the dominant political representative of Iraq's Arab Sunnis since 2003. However, the IIP and the Muslim Brotherhood have separated institutionally in 2010, and the later renamed itself 'Harakat al-Adl wa al-Ihsan' in 2017. The party was established in 1960, in part to fill a political gap left when the Iraqi Communist Party was banned, and it received the blessings of Iraq's supreme source of religious imitation for Shi'ites, Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim.² After Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr became Iraqi President in 1968, the IIP was repressed and the party froze its activities in 1971. However, a segment of party members did not comply and continued to operate clandestinely under the banner of *Haraket al-Shabab*, 'The Youth Movement'.³

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, members of the IIP reestablished the party in exile and built contacts with Shi'ite opposition entities, namely the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.⁴

Shortly before Iraq was invaded by the USA and its allies, the IIP refused to take part in the 2002 London conference for Iraq's opposition. Nevertheless, the party took part in the post-invasion administration of Iraq and was represented in the Governing Council of the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA).

Muhanad Seloom describes the IIP's participation in the Governing Council as "a departure from its bottom-up beliefs and created a divide between the IIP and its Sunni electorate."⁵ In a televised interview in 2017, the former Secretary General of IIP, Ayad al-Samarrai, explained his approach: "The Islamic Party believes in peaceful resistance because it permits the establishment a broad national front. If the occupier did not accept withdrawal, at that time this front innovates instruments; among which armed resistance is an option."⁶

In contrast to IIP's post-invasion political engagement, many of Iraq's Arab Sunnis, who went from being the country's rulers to being ruled over, chose armed resistance against US forces and the CPA in the form of numerous militant groupings. Conversely, between 2003-2011, the IIP assumed senior positions in Iraqi administrations, such as Vice President, Speaker of Parliament, ministers, and deputy Ministers.⁷

In an effort to consolidate his power, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki subjugated and undermined several of his Arab Sunni rivals in the political system. Among a series of incidents of alleged politically-motivated prosecutions, al-Maliki ordered the arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi in 2011, before ordering Iraqi Special Forces to raid the office of and arrest Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi's in 2012. Both were former IIP leaders accused of corruption.

These arrests were one of the key turning points in shaping sectarian and center-periphery relations in Iraq. Arresting al-Issawi, who hails from a strong tribe in Anbar Province, sparked upheaval which started with sit-ins in the western province of Anbar in 2012, before spreading eastwards all the way to Diyala and northwards to Kirkuk and Ninewa.

The IIP backed the upheaval for several reasons, many of which pertained to its loss of political power over the years prior, notably in provincial councils. While the IIP re-emerged in the post-2003 period thanks to a Sunni boycott of elections, its power was eroded towards the end of the decade as the party performed poorly in governance. It was arguably perceived by a segment of the Arab Sunni component as a contributor to the sectarian violence of 2005-2007, as well as the political challenge posed by the tribal-led 'Sunni Awakenings' which defeated al-Qaeda, and emerging Sunni secular political currents⁸.

All of these factors led to the substantial erosion of the IIP's political power, both on a national and local level. This was clear to see in the 2010 parliamentary elections in which its *Jabhat al-Tawafuq* alliance gained just 6 seats, compared

to 43 seats in the 2005 elections,⁹ and in the 2009 provincial elections, in which the IIP performed poorly in both Anbar and Ninawa. However, it performed comparably better in Baghdad, Saladin, and Diyala.¹⁰

In Anbar, and the epicenter of the upheaval, the IIP sought to rebuild its political capital and form consensus in the Arab Sunni component by shaping the protests through its youth and religious networks.¹¹ Sunni clerics contributed to Arab Sunni areas through sermons at Friday prayers. Apart from Abdul Malik al-Saadi, a cleric with great influence in alignment with the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI), the role of clerics in mobilization was primarily linked to the IIP's growing influence in the religious institutional horizon in the post-2003 period.

After the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs was abolished in August 2003 and split into three offices for the Shia, Sunni, and minorities, the IIP moved to exert influence in the OSE by appointing Adnan al-Dulaimi and then Ahmed Abdel Ghafur Al-Samurai.¹²

The IIP also contributed to the establishment of the AMSI in 2003 as a religious authority for Sunnis, followed by *Majlis Ulama al-Iraq* (the Council of Iraqi Scholars) in 2007. The latter was another vehicle for mobilizing Sunni clerics and a source of religious imitation for Sunnis after AMSI became too political and drifted away from the IIP.

In 2012, the IIP managed to push the Iraqi Parliament for the ratification of a law to establish the IJC, a semi-governmental Sunni religious institution for religious imitation, consisting of 10 members shared equally by Sufis and Salafis. Eventually it was headed by Ahmed Hassan al-Taha, a Salafi cleric who contributed to the foundation of the AMSI. The idea of setting up the IJC came from the 'Council of Iraqi Scholars,' which is close to the IIP.¹³

The Iraqi government's crackdown on the upheaval in 2013 took a toll on the IIP and its influence over the Sunni religious horizon, particularly in the politics

of Iraqi's Sunni endowments. Ahmed Abdel Ghafur Al-Samurai, the IIP-linked head of the OSE, was removed from office because of corruption and replaced by Abdel Latif al-Humaim, a cleric described as being on good terms with the Iraqi government.¹⁴

The IJC was not only squeezed financially by the government when it received its budget from the OSE,¹⁵ but also deprived of its legal right and responsibility to present the Prime Minister with nominees to head the OSE, when al-Humaim was appointed to the position against the IJC's will.¹⁶

The IIP continued to lose political power and also suffer more internal fissures when, in 2017, the former General Secretary of the party Salim al-Jbouri, left and set up his own party.¹⁷ Following the parliamentary elections of 2018 the IIP had just three members of parliament after a further three members split from the IIP. However, a senior party member was chosen for the ministry of planning and the party forms part of the *al-Aqd al-Watani* alliance which is headed by Falih al-Fayyadh, the head of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).

A year after the 2018 elections, another round of splintering took place highlighting the party's weakening cohesion and declining political influence in state institutions. This contributed to the gravitation of the IIP from an Arab Sunni political force seeking a partnership with Iraq's Shia political constituencies on equal footing, to heavily relying on these constituencies for its political survival over the course of just a decade.

Moreover, the Gulf crisis of 2017 may have pushed the IIP further towards the political classes allied with Iran as Qatar became closer to Iran. The personal background of Rashid al-Azzawi, the current General Secretary since late 2019, undoubtedly influences the party's direction towards Iran. He self-exiled in Iran, was influenced intellectually by Iran's Muslim Brotherhood movement, is a fluent Farsi speaker and later became the Iran portfolio chief in the IIP as he enjoys a good working relationship with the Islamic Republic.¹⁸

Being part of a parliamentary coalition with close ties to Iran provides the IIP with access to various militant actors who influence Iraq's security scope. In February 2020, a meeting took place between al-Azzawi and a spokesperson for *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, a paramilitary group widely seen as Iran's top-tier proxy in Iraq. The meeting's agenda included discussing the demands of the October 2019 protesters.¹⁹

Contrary to the Anbar protest movement in 2012 and 2013, which the IIP openly supported while armed with youth and cleric networks, the party has adopted a cautious position with regards to the October 2019 protests.²⁰ While al-Azzawi spoke out in support of the protests in the media, the party has not released a statement. According to one account, the incumbent party leader al-Azzawi is not interested in confrontation and is "more interested in rebuilding the party internally."²¹ However, party members and its support base took part in the protests in their own individual capacities.²²

Nonetheless, the IJC, which is perceived as a religious entity close to the IIP, released a five-point statement in November 2019 in which it cautiously endorsed the October 2019 protests. The statement called for; the protests to be peaceful, the government to be reformed, detainees to be released, the fate of the forcibly disappeared to be disclose and for the government to reconstruct destroyed areas.²³ Despite maintaining a politically critical position, the IJC has taken a less radical stance towards the political establishment compared to the 2012-2013 period in support of the Anbar protest movement, when its clerics took part in popular mobilization and shutting down mosques.

The Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq: A failed 'Marjiya' project

The trajectory of the AMSI intersects with that of the IIP, but its power and influence declined before the IIP's. The AMSI is a religious leadership project which was briefly backed by the IIP following the US-led military invasion of Iraq to establish a unified religious leadership for the Sunnis, as a counterpart

to the *Marjiya* in Najaf. The AMSI was established five days after the invasion as an umbrella organization for Sunni clerics to lead the Sunni community by shaping the its political vision²⁴.

The AMSI advocated the boycott of elections in the post-2003 political system until the US-led coalition scheduled a withdrawal. This was famously reflected in the platform's campaign to boycott the 2005 Iraqi elections.^{25*26} The exception to this was its campaign in the same year to vote 'no' to the referendum on the new constitution in which Arab Sunnis had had little involvement in formulating and drafting.²⁷ The peak of AMSI influence in Iraq was between April 2004 and March 2005 when it was able to direct the electoral behavior of Arab Sunnis.²⁸

Having practically boycotted the political process, AMSI was a supporter of armed resistance against the US-led occupation. However, allegedly the US military in Iraq saw the AMSI as a middleman for brokering deals between it and Sunni paramilitaries.²⁹ For example, Abdul-Salam al-Kubaisi, a former IIP member who joined the AMSI, established an armed group named *Jaish al-Rashideen*.³⁰ The AMSI allegedly enjoyed strong links to the Islamic Army of Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. Warm relations between the AMSI and Sunni armed resistance factions led to the establishment of the *al-Majlis al-Siyasi li al-Muqawama al-Iraqia*, 'The Political Council for Iraqi Resistance', in October 2007.³¹

To achieve all-inclusivity, the AMSI used a nationalistic discourse mixed with Islamism. During the first battle of Falluja in 2004, the AMSI organized a cross-sectarian rally at the *Umm al-Qura* Mosque in Baghdad which it used as its headquarters,³² and according to one account, 200,000 participants took part.³³ The AMSI also utilized its network of mosques across the country to collect in-kind and financial support for the inhabitants of Falluja during the city's siege in 2004.

However, an Islamist tone mixed with sectarianism increased over time at the expense of the nationalistic tone when Iraq's sectarian politics came to the fore after 2006. Heightening sectarian tensions led to the breaking of the bond between the AMSI and the Sadrists, who had spearheaded Shia armed resistance when both sides were coordinating politically.^{34 35*}

On the Sunni front, the gap between the AMSI and the IIP increased as the former's influence surged in political and religious terms because both claimed to represent the Sunni community, but particularly given their divergence on post-2003 political participation and on federalism in Iraq. Regardless, the gap was deeply rooted in the dispute over the establishment of the AMSI itself.

The first meeting of the AMSI was hosted by an IIP member at the time, Abdul-Salam al-Kubaisi, which the IIP maintains is proof that the AMSI evolved thanks to the IIP.³⁶ According to one account, the IIP was behind the idea of establishing the AMSI, but the umbrella organization deviated from the course planned by the IIP in terms of choosing the platform's president.³⁷ In contrast, the AMSI leadership disputes the claim that its rival was the driving force behind its foundation.

Accused of stoking sectarianism and violence, an arrest warrant was issued against al-Dhari in 2006.³⁸ This was ensued by the OSE's confiscation of the AMSI's headquarter office in the *Umm al-Qura* Mosque in 2007.³⁹ Thus depriving the AMSI of its network of mosques which it relied on to mobilize its constituencies.

Despite its establishment as a non-governmental institution, the AMSI had more influence than the OSE over Arab Sunnis, albeit the latter amassed greater financial power. The OSE's confiscation of the AMSI's headquarters symbolized the shift in balance of power in the IIP's favor. The AMSI continued to operate albeit from abroad in Jordan, where al-Dhari had relocated.

In an interview with Al Jazeera Channel in 2007, al-Dhari said that upon AMSI's establishment in 2003, its general secretariat was comprised of thirteen

members and its consultative council was comprised of forty-five members but by 2007 only half of the leadership could convene due to various difficulties.⁴⁰ Despite previous disagreements with *al-Qaeda* in which the AMSI called it a terrorist organization,⁴¹ a controversial statement by al-Dhari in support of the organization resulted in a boost in al-Dhari's portrayal as a supporter of terrorism, which led to his widespread discrediting.⁴²

The weakening of the AMSI meant that Sunni paramilitary groups were gradually losing an outspoken political front to defend them and whilst al-Dhari's relevance to the paramilitary groups continued, it was in decline. In June 2009, a number of Sunni paramilitaries mandated al-Dhari to speak on their behalf.⁴³ In April 2006, months before al-Dhari's arrest warrant was issued, the AMSI had set up the *Al-Rafidain* news channel in Cairo.⁴⁴ While the AMSI's strength and influence declined after the Iraqi authorities and US-led occupation chased the association and its general secretary out of Iraq, it continued to be vocal in its propaganda against the Iraqi government.

The AMSI was part of the Anbar protest movement and attempted to influence the course of protests⁴⁵ in a similar way to several other Sunni actors with stakes in the protest scene. Moreover, the protest movement led to a rapprochement between the AMSI and the IIP.⁴⁶ The *Al-Rafidain* news channel's coverage of the protest movement motivated the Iraqi government under former Prime Minister al-Maliki to request Cairo to shut down the channel in 2014.⁴⁷

The death of the AMSI's General Secretary Harith al-Dhari in 2015 marked the ultimate decline of the association in Iraq because its power hinged on his charisma and network of contacts which enabled constituencies to be mobilized.⁴⁸ In the aftermath of al-Dhari's death, a dispute between his son Muthanna al-Dhari and Jamal al-Dhari erupted over the latter's advocacy for political participation. Muthanna emerged from the dispute victorious, whilst Jamal left the AMSI and established 'The National Project'.⁴⁹

Moreover, in spite of the popularity boost the AMSI enjoyed as a result of its support for the Anbar protest movement, its anti-political participation discourse

has remained unrevised and intact since the association's establishment, and therefore its relevance has decreased significantly, especially after the withdrawal of the US-led military occupation in 2011.⁵⁰ The AMSI remains criminalized by the Iraqi government and according to one account, the influence of the AMSI over Iraq's Arab Sunni component is currently very weak.^{51***52}

The AMSI sees the 2019 October protest movement as an opportunity to weaken the Iraqi establishment which it radically opposes. AMSI's platforms through its secretary general and the al-Rafidain channel have been vocally supportive of the movement. Having been against both the US military presence in Iraq and Iran's regional influence, Muthanna al-Dhari sees the protest movement as an opportune moment to advocate anti-systemic change to shake the political system and push out foreign influence.

B. The rise of Quietist Sufis and Salafis

The AMSI's subsiding influence and the contraction of the IIP was gradually paralleled by the rise of religious networks with strong links to growingly influential Iraqi Shia paramilitaries, especially those in the Iran-led regional axis of resistance. The rise of Abdul Latif al-Humaim to the OSE in 2015 marked the shift in balance of power among Sunni political-religious networks to advocating politically quietist religious discourse which backs the dominant political authority, i.e. quietist Salafis and Sufis. Consequently, these movements have been varyingly critical of the October 2019 protest movement.

These two religious currents were active following the invasion in 2003 but some of them went through transformations, notably the Salafis. The Iraqi government, under both former prime ministers Nouri al-Maliki and Haidar al-Abadi, sought to balance the AMSI and the IIP with quietist Sunni movements, not only to counterbalance the two entities which were seen as contributing factors to destabilizing Sunni areas, but also to play a role in de-radicalization in Sunni areas during and following the fall of IS.

In contrast to Shia seminaries in Iraq which historically operated beyond the state and its financial coffers, Sunni religious institutions operated as part of the state. Given this condition of dependency, the Iraqi government's policy has been, informally, to not allow a single Sunni religious network to dominate the religious institutional horizon. Instead it aims to keep networks in a perpetual state of competition, in which most of them continue to rely on state patronage to sustain their presence.

i. *Jamaat Ulama al-Iraqi* 'Grouping of Iraqi Scholars' (GIS)

The GIS is a Sufi-leaning platform established in Amman by Abdul Latif al-Humaim in 2007 with the aim of countering sectarianism in Iraq and advocating a religiously unitary discourse by bridging gaps between the followers of Islamic doctrines.⁵³

The roots of the GIS can be traced back to a platform named *Tajamo al-Wihda al-Islamiya*, 'The Grouping of Islamic Unity', which was established in Basra after 2003. It was then renamed *Tajamo Ulama wa Muthaqafi al-Iraq*, 'The Grouping of Iraqi Clerics and Intellectuals', and later developed into the platform that al-Humaim inaugurated in Amman.⁵⁴ The GIS gained prominence in the Iraqi media thanks to the second leading figure in the platform, Khaled al-Mulla, an outspoken cleric who headed the Basra branch of GIS and later became the head of the platform, replacing al-Humaim.

With the rise of IS, al-Mulla floated the idea of setting up a militia named the *Saraya al-Difa al-Watani*, 'The Battalions of National Defense', to combat the organization, however, al-Mulla's ambition did not materialize.⁵⁵ Establishing such a force would have probably increased the political leverage of GIS in intra-Sunni rivalries. Al-Mulla became a vocal Sunni voice supportive of the PMU in its war against IS. Several militant groups under the PMU supported al-Mulla as a moderate Sunni voice and he frequently appeared in high-profile meetings along with politicians linked with the PMU.

Moreover, under al-Mulla, the GIS presents itself as inter-communal mediator. This, for example, includes claims that thanks to his connections with the former Prime Minister al-Maliki, al-Mulla made efforts to return Sunni mosques to its administrators after they were harassed and forced out [by Shia movements] between 2013 and 2015.⁵⁶ However, al-Mulla's warming relations and increased visibility with Iran-linked Iraqi Shia paramilitaries has made him unpopular among segments of Arab Sunnis.

When GIS' former head al-Humaim became the head of the OSE, al-Mulla sought to play a role in Iraq's Sunni endowments by administering the endowments of two key districts in Baghdad; Rasafa and Karkh. This, however was not achieved for unspecified political reasons.⁵⁷ The GIS has representatives in the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, and in late 2019 it said that it had plans to expand its regional presence to Kirkuk and Anbar.⁵⁸

A less known quietist Sufi platform than GIS, but equally influential, is the *Majlis Ulama al-Ribat al-Muhammadi*, 'The Council of Scholars of Rabat Mohammedi', (CSRM) based in the city of Haditha in Anbar. Its religious influence extends southwards to Falluja, Anbar's second key city after Ramadi. CSRM was established by the Sufi cleric Abdul-Kader al-Alussi and according to some accounts it has helped facilitate the arming of the al-Jaghaifa tribe by the PMU to fight against IS, which ambushed Haditha. The CSRM's leadership is connected with the PMU's ideological guidance directorate and plays roles pertaining to de-radicalization, such as in the case of the deputy of al-Alussi.⁵⁹

The CSRM's representation in the PMU, explains in part its open alignment with the Iran-led regional axis of resistance in the media. The GIS and CRSM say that they enjoy warm relations and constantly coordinate their activities.⁶⁰ This is due to both their Sufi leanings and their strong relations with Iran-aligned Iraqi Shia paramilitaries, as well as the Iranian establishment itself.

ii. 'House of Fatwa' of Mahdi al-Sumaida'i

While Salafism in Iraq has recently been almost exclusively associated with IS, quietist Salafism is a rising trend in Iraq which receives support from dominant ruling parties. The Salafi cleric Mahdi al-Sumaida'i represents this trend in Iraq and presents himself as the Mufti of Iraq, a position he deems on par with the *Marjiya* of Shia in Najaf.⁶¹ Moreover, with the rise of IS, al-Sumaida'i established a paramilitary group named *Quwat Ahrar al-Iraq*, 'The Forces of Iraqi's Freeman', to combat the organization. The paramilitary now operates as part of the PMU as the brigade numbered 86.

According to several accounts, at the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq, al-Sumaida'i was a Salafi with a sectarian leaning who took part in the AMSI. According to al-Sumaida'i, he left the AMSI as he disagreed with the platform and established the 'Shura Council for Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah' to unify Sunnis through a single platform. Backed by the entity as his constituency he also established the 'House of Fatwa' in September 2003.⁶² Al-Sumaida'i puts his founding of the House of Fatwa in the succession line of other houses of fatwa which were abolished during the last century.

According to al-Sumaida'i, following the abolishment of the Ottoman era fatwa house, another house of fatwa was reestablished in 1952 but abolished by the Ba'ath Party in 1976, with the Ministry of Endowments replacing it with an appointed Mufti.⁶³ Al-Sumaida'i was detained between 2004-2009, and after his release he left for Syria, assuming the role of Iraq's Mufti until he returned to Iraq in 2011 and received former Prime Minister Maliki's blessing via the brokerage of Lebanese Sunni religious figures close to Hezbollah and Tehran.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, several Sunni political-religious networks in Iraq do not recognize al-Sumaida'i as Iraq's Mufti.

The House of Fatwa is based in *Umm al-Tubul* Mosque in Baghdad, a large complex of endowment institutions. In the complex, the leadership of *Quwat Ahrar al-Iraq* is stationed and the deputy commander of the militant group is the personal secretary of the Mufti,⁶⁵ reflecting the interlinking religious

and security roles. However, the House of Fatwa and the militant group say there is a total separation between both entities.⁶⁶ The House of Fatwa is also running a radio station from the complex which covers Baghdad and its outskirts, with an additional plan to set up a television channel.⁶⁷

Al-Sumaida'i claims that he was behind the appointment of the OSE's previous head, al-Humaim.⁶⁸ However, when the OSE reported a meeting between al-Humaim and al-Sumaida'i in October 2018 on its website, it did not name the latter as Iraq's Mufti.⁶⁹ One report claims that al-Sumaida'i sought to replace al-Humaim and become the head of the OSE in 2018 after the latter was accused of corruption, however al-Humaim remained in his position.⁷⁰

While being allied with Iran-linked Shia parties binds a group of Sunni networks together, some of them remain in competition. For example, al-Sumaida'i says that the directorate of Karkh's endowments is part of the complex of *Umm al-Tubul* Mosque,⁷¹ which is the same directorate GIS sought to be in charge of, but failed to acquire.

Quwat Ahrar al-Iraq is key to the prestige and leverage of al-Sumaida'i as a Mufti because it aims to project both his ability to mobilize constituencies and deploy the quietist discourse in support of the political establishment to other actors. Al-Sumaida'i describes putting *Ahrar al-Iraq* in proximity to Shia militant groups close to Tehran, as an Islamic resistance movement, a description used mostly, if not exclusively by anti-US Shia paramilitaries. Al-Sumaida'i says Iran has backed the militant grouping and according to the militant group's leadership, it has 4000 personnel stationed in Anbar, Saladin, Ninawa, Baghdad, and Basra.⁷² However, several sources and reports say this figure is exaggerated.

Al-Sumaida'i was a staunch opponent of the Anbar protest movement which he saw as an important reason for the rise of IS in Arab Sunni areas. Moreover, he was an advocate for the dispersing of the protest movement, something he was harshly criticized for by political constituencies supportive of the movement.

Conclusion

Sunni political-religious networks in Iraq hail from fragile communities which have endured many years of war against Salafi Jihadist extremism, corruption, and marginalization. Today, these networks have less influence compared to the past decade. As their power has declined, along with a decrease in public support of a role for religious leaders in politics in Iraq, Sunni secular and tribal political movements, especially from Anbar and Saladin, have been able to strengthen their positions in Baghdad.⁷³

The AMSI was unable to regenerate a politically relevant discourse acceptable to wide Sunni segments. Although several Sunni armed resistance groups with links to the AMSI were successful against the US-led occupation, several of these groups were involved in sectarian violence and terrorism which eroded the platform politically. As the power of the AMSI rested upon the charisma and power of its first secretary general, his death dealt an irreversible blow to the platform. The AMSI used the October 2019 protests as an opportunity to increase its anti-government propaganda.

As the AMSI declined and was even banned in Iraq, the IIP became politically empowered as there was no potent network rivaling it, yet it also declined over the years. The IIP lacked the popularity of the AMSI, however the former was well organized and pragmatic which allowed it to survive politically and influence the course of events in some critical junctures. The IIP filled high-ranking state positions. The failure of the IIP backed-Anbar protest movement has squeezed the party and pushed it into the orbit of Shia political constituencies allied with Iran, despite the IIP being known to have good relations with Tehran for some time.

The rise and fall of IS, the mistakes of the AMSI and IIP, and sectarian violence stoked by politically active religious elements has not given the rising class of quietist Salafi and Sunni currents the power to fill the void left by the AMSI and the IIP declines.

However, Salafis, Sufis, and the OSE under al-Humaim have been making inroads to an extent because they provide an alternative narrative to extremism, but

importantly because they rest upon financial resources. As poverty has increased over the past years, and is anticipated to continue to do so in the coming years, the rising Sunni movements are extending their influence by expanding their social safety nets. Although an alternative to extremism, the heavy reliance of these movements on state patronage alienates a broad segment of Arab Sunnis from the middle class.

An uprising in the Arab Sunni heartlands is unlikely in the short-term, but rising poverty levels, and the proliferation of armed rogue elements might spark protests in the medium-term. Also, a rising IS insurgency will inhibit protests as both peaceful protesters will neither want to help create a security gap to boost an insurgency, nor give a pretext to state authorities to repress a protest movement.

Facing a potential Arab Sunni protest movement, IIP will be in a delicate situation because it does not have the political leverage to support it. At the same time, advocating against it will require a willingness to lose its already minimal public appeal, and as the IIP did not officially support the October 2019 protest movement, a neutral standing will also be counted as hostile.

In contrast, the AMSI will fervently support such protests, if not even help organize them, in line with its position on the October 2019 protests. However, if the protests are led by middle class youth, the AMSI is an unlikely ally because its discourse and mixed legacy will not be appealing.

The quietist Salafi and Sufi trends are very likely to be hostile to any Arab Sunni protests with their position in line with their staunch support of the ruling Shia political parties. These in turn will not tolerate an Arab Sunni-led protest movement.

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