

The Sunni front and the Iraqi crisis

Nicola Pedde

Who's sharing Sunni' territory

The Iraqi Sunni community is quite heterogeneous – as well as the Shiite – and since the fall of Saddam Hussein there has been a progressive localization of the various groups in the geographical areas where their leaderships are traditionally rooted.

This is the result of the stifling role of the Shia's political administration, but it also reflects the traditional territorial roots of most of the political and confessional groups in the region.

The June 2014 crisis highlighted the role of ISIS and its ability to penetrate into the western and central regions of Iraq, although this is actually just one of the many political and social realities of the Sunni's fabric in the region and in Iraq.

The majority of the Sunni forces has found a formula for political and ideological cohesion in the waves of anti-government protests occurred from 2011, sharing the common feeling of hostility toward the central institutions in Baghdad, and in particular towards the oppressive and stifling anti-Sunni politics of Prime Minister al-Maliki.

The Army of the Men of the Naghsbandi Order (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa an-Naqshbandiya - JRTN) is probably today the most important element of organized opposition within the Sunni community. It is decidedly modest the confessional profile of the group, whereas its cohesive element lies instead in the doctrine of the Baath Party and the Pan-Arab nationalism. Former general Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri – once one of the leading exponents of the armed forces of the regime of Saddam Hussein – is believed to be the commander of the organization, which is mostly located in the provinces of Nineveh, Salahaddin and Divala, where tribalism can assure further rooting.

The JRTN and ISIS have often clashed on Iraqi territory, especially with regard to the administration of justice and the application of the Sharia law, which the group under al-Douri strongly oppose.

The General Military Council of the Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR) has been recently established, and it collects an heterogeneous group of individual activists and organizations. The Council's ambition is to become the armed wing of the Iraqi Sunni opposition, regrouping the entire ideological spectrum of the protest. Among them, the majority is composed by non-Islamist activists, with a strong tribal identity and only minimally willing to compromise with the sectarian forces, also present in the group, although less relevant.

The Council is dominated by a small group of former soldiers of Saddam Hussein's army, who insists on being recognized as an element of an armed non-sectarian and confessional faction, in contrast with the excesses of ISIS and in no way subordinates to them.

The Council declared to control with its forces the city of Mosul, Fallujah, Salahaddin, Biji and Ramadi, although the effective control of these centres is difficult to assess, being more complex and articulated.

The Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI), operating since 2003 and led by former members of the armed forces of Saddam Hussein, was characterized since the beginning by a clearly distinct position with respect to the groups of the Baathist and those of confessional inspiration.

The IAI's coagulant force was primarily nationalism, characterized by a strong pragmatism and by an ability to reshape its objectives in accordance to the reality on the ground. No wonder that many of its members, having previously fought tenaciously against the American forces, have then joined organizations funded by the United States (such as the Awakening Councils) used as anti-jihadist.

The Awakening Councils have been set up and funded with the direct support of the United States, and composed of representatives of the Sunni tribes. The element of cohesion of the Councils – structured on a plurality of distinct fighters groups, autonomous among them, but connected by a common command line – was the fight against the spread of proselytizing jihadism and Al Qaeda in northern Iraq.

The initial project concerned the gradual integration of the forces of the Councils (approximately 100,000 men) within the reconstituted Iraqi national armed forces, with equal dignity in roles, and full integration of the commanding line with that expressed by the Shia majority government.

The project of integration, however, has been disrupted by the political inability of al-Maliki and the departure from the country of the U.S. military forces, while further fuelling a growing resentment toward the central institutions. Which had been transformed into an open opposition since 2012.

The commander of the Councils' military forces, Ahmed Abu Richa – who has been accused of being a terrorist by the government of al-Maliki in 2014 – opted to side with the government's forces after the arrival of the ISIS on the Iraqi territory.

None of these organizations actually has a real and predominant Islamic connotation, and for that reason does not agree with the ISIS neither the goals nor the political and religious aims. Nevertheless, some of these organizations have seen the impact force of ISIS as a valuable tool for achieving objectives otherwise difficult to reach, accepting its entrance on Iraqi territory.

This unlikely marriage of interests then arises from the common need to free the territory from the presence of Baghdad's government forces, resulting in a political and military project of dubious resistance and characterized by an highly explosive potential. While Sunni combatant organizations aim at territorial consolidation and the establishment of political and administrative autonomy, ISIS forces are characterized by regional ambitions greatly fuelled by violent sectarianism.

ISIS has arisen from the evolution of some Iraqi jihadist organizations linked to Al Qaeda, and it has always been characterized by a high degree of autonomy and independence. Thus, its operational and political programs have been consequently quite distinct from those of the other al-Qaeda inspired forces, provoking contrasts and direct conflicts within the context of the conflict in Syria.

ISIS's Islamist and jihadist connotation is coupled with deep organizational skills and strong economic capacities, which had transformed in a few years the organization into one of the most ambitious and financially solid. With strong regional ties within the Salafi context, but also with a very well defined individual agenda, poorly pluralistic in terms of operational synergies.

For these reasons, the divergences among ISIS and the other regional Sunni organizations already emerged during the first phases of the operations on the central-western Iraq, showing the nature and the size of the future problems that will characterize the difficult coexistence of these heterogeneous armed organizations. With whom ISIS shares almost nothing, if not the immediate objective of defeating the forces under the command of al-Maliki's Shiite government.

Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri and the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order

The Naqshbandi's is one of the oldest and most famous Sufi brotherhoods, and intentionally Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri recalled its name to create what today is, without any doubt, one of the most efficient and capable political and military organizations of the Sunni Iraqi context.

With a bounty of 10 million dollars pending on his head, and an almost certain death sentence in case of capture, al-Douri had to move with caution in these last eleven years. And if he is still alive today – an issue on which many show scepticism – this is because he can count on the capacity and efficiency of the organization known as the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, or Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa an-Naqshbandiya - JRTN .

Born in 1942 in Dawr from a poor family, al-Douri has joined the Ba'ath party when he was very young, rapidly becoming a leading member of the organization serving for a long time as principal assistant of Saddam Hussein. Trusted by the Rais – al-Douri never betrayed him – he was compensated with growing positions within the administration of the State, up to the rank of Vice President and Deputy Secretary of the Revolutionary Command Council of Iraq.

Grown intellectually and professionally within the system of the Baath Party, al-Douri has never shown any particular interest or attention to religion, or mysticism, until the fall of the regime. Once entered into hiding, on the contrary, and after taking full control of the JRTN, he changed its attitude giving the organization an aura of mysticism and assuming the role of Sheik himself, in a mixture of religious spirituality, Sufi mysticism and tribal tradition.

Although officially active only since 2007, the JRTN has a longer and articulate history. Its exact origin is unknown, but most of the sources collected in Iraq seem to agree that the organization is active since the late Eighties.

Originally formed as an organization similar to a modern Masonic fraternity, in its first ten years of life represented the instrument of political and economic power of al-Douri, without having any ideological connotations and by drawing its adherents mainly within the ranks of the officers of the Republican Guard.

Membership in the JRTN, at the time of the regime, allowed its members to gain professional and economic benefits, thanks to the large flow of public money used by al-Douri for the consolidation of

the organization. Which remained, however, numerically small until the early years of the following decade.

With the worsening of the international crisis that affected Iraq in 2003, and understanding al-Douri the imminent escalation, the ranks of the JRTN were increased with the arrival of younger elements from the Republican Guard, which soon after had been able to provide the organization with an efficient and well-trained fighter component.

The JRTN remained virtually inactive until the death of Saddam Hussein in December 2006, when it took action in an attempt to counter the growing role of the political and military Shiite groups, in order to regain part of the territory and reaffirm the role of the Baath Party.

With a localisation in the provinces of Nineveh, Salahaddin and Divala, the JRTN has shown an high pragmatism in the past few years of operation, engaging in order to be consistently recognized as an indigenous and non-jihadist force, but at the same time entering into agreements and cooperating with some of the most infamous Islamist organizations. Which has been delegated in order to carry out the most controversial and less popular actions. But eventually condemned by JRTN itself, and militarily crushed in order to gain population support.

And it is with a similar strategy that JRTN has matured the particular - and brief - relationship with ISIS in early 2014.

The circumstance that favoured the conditions for a synergy of such a nature was the revolt of the population after the massacres of the Sunni city of Anbar, in the first months of the year, and the following arrival of ISIS' militants in northern Iraq.

Al-Douri, pragmatic and cynical at the same time, had been supportive for the the mass impact of ISIS in the conquest of Mosul, promoting the role of jihadist forces and taking advantage of their military capability also during the occupation of many towns and villages in the central and western regions of the country.

Soon after, however, both the JRTN forces and those of the other major jihadi organizations have clearly stated their positions, provoking an atomization process in the capacity of exercising territorial control. In some cases entering in direct contrast with the jihadist groups, in other operating under a sort of forced coexistence, characterized by a dubious capacity of survival.

The goal of the Sunni non-Islamist forces today is to exercise control over its territory, aiming at an autonomist or federalist agreement with the next central government in Baghdad. The objective of the forces of ISIS and other jihadist groups is on the contrary that of consolidating control of the territory, in order to increase the capacity to expand sectarian strife on the regional dimension. Targeting without any doubt in the direction of Jordan and Lebanon.

Objectives and political goals in stark contrast to those of Baathists groups, and then doomed to collide in a short period of time in a purely national Sunni perspective.

According to the recent history of the JRTN and many other Iraqi fighters organizations, it is then not unlikely that these may define direct agreements with central authorities in Baghdad, provoking an anti-jihadist reversal of the front. But this could happen only if a broader political agreement is made with a wiser government, different from the disastrous one headed by al-Maliki.

The strength and the political significance of the Sunni fighters organizations is today greatly increased by the presence and the role of the Kurds, whose contribution is at this point impossible to be ignored in an overall political and institutional redefinition of Iraq.

Marching toward Baghdad?

Without any doubt, one of the objectives of ISIS is the collapse of the central government in Iraq, and the possibly the conquest of the capital by their own militias. It is however unlikely that this goal could be shared and supported by most of the non-jihadist militias.

The relationship among ISIS and some of the Sunni fighters' groups in Iraq is nothing more than a temporary partnership, justified by the short-term objectives of each of the actors involved. Even within the local components historically closer to jihadism – as for example the seven tribes of Anbar – it is not hard to find positions and objectives largely different from those of ISIS. Making the medium and long term framework stability unlikely.

At least three different strategic conceptions coexists at the moment within the Sunni groups. The first, on a regional scale, is supported by ISIS, which considers Iraq as part of a much larger system, and where the real goal is the capacity to control a wide strip of land that includes Syria, Iraq, Jordan and

Lebanon. The second is that of the Iraqi jihadists, who sees in the fight against Shiites throughout the country the only solution to end the abuses suffered since 2003, and that therefore considered necessary to re-impose a Sunni domination over the country. The third, and to date probably the wider, is that of those who believes that a negotiating capacity with the Shiites must be won on the field, in order to impose an autonomist or federalist solution to balance the power of the Shia majority.

This third component, therefore, sees in Baghdad the territorial limit of military operations, and the political target to develop a negotiation phase which could favour for the first time the Sunni community to operate from a point of strength in the achievement of its priorities. And, ideally, to allow a restoration - even if partial - of the role of the Baath Party.

The higher risk of clash, therefore, will be determined by these so heterogeneous goals of the various Sunni groups. Jihadists consider the territorial element as a mere operating environment, aiming at the wider political and religious project of the caliphate. And this concept, at least to date, should be achieved with a complete victory on the "Shiite heresy".

On the other side, Baathist ideology - which Westerners have largely undervalued - is still highly rooted among the Sunnis of Iraq, being systematically inculcated in the years of the regime, and still represent the bastion of independence and the safeguarding of the interests of the Sunni community. The Iraqi territorial element is dominant for this group, which certainly sees its counterpart in the Shiite community as hostile, however considering this hostility not as sectarian, but essentially political. The objective of the Baath is therefore to dominate the Shia, not to eradicate them in religious terms.