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State Accompli: The Political Consolidation of the Islamic State Prior to the Caliphate

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the successful consolidation of the Islamic State movement within the Sunni insurgency in Iraq from 2003 to 2014. We rely on insurgent media releases, captured documents, and a declassified U.S. military study of the Sunni insurgency in Anbar to evaluate the Islamic State movement's complex relationship with its Sunni Arab rivals. We found the group moved through sequential stages of cooperative, competitive, and coercive consolidation to achieve hegemony in the insurgent field. Each phase of transition entailed organizational changes, including mergers, re-branding, and new structures. The movement's well-developed ideology and state-building project distinguished it from peers whose political agendas were too diffuse to establish lasting coalitions. The tribal Awakening that worked with the Americans to temporarily defeat the Islamic State of Iraq also badly splintered its rivals and failed to prevent the revitalization of the Islamic State movement, setting the foundation for its short-lived caliphate project.

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Beginning in 2003, dozens of militant groups formed to resist the American occupation of Iraq and its new government. By 2008, the threat from insurgents had subsided in a dramatic way in part due to the U.S. "surge" strategy and the Awakening (*sahwa*) tribal uprising (2006-2008).¹ This relative stability did not last, however, and in 2014 the Islamic State movement declared a caliphate after seizing large parts of Iraq's Sunni-majority provinces and territories in Syria.² The movement had survived and consolidated political power in Sunni Iraq six years after it appeared to have been defeated. How did this happen?

Our purpose in this study is to explain how the Islamic State movement achieved political consolidation of a diverse Sunni insurgency in Iraq. We demonstrate how the Islamic State movement progressed through sequential stages of cooperative, competitive, and, ultimately, coercive consolidation. It marked each transition with a new organizational structure and brand identity. These decisions were driven by the group's strongly held Salafi-Jihadist ideology, its desire to control territory for its state project, and the resonance that the narrative of an Islamic state had with some Sunni insurgents. We use public statements from the Islamic State and its rivals, as well as declassified U.S. military intelligence reports on the state of the Sunni insurgency in

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Anbar to build a thick description case study that traces the phases of consolidation leading up to the declaration of the caliphate.³ We also use group statements to propose a typology of the Sunni insurgent trends and trace how they competed for political power in the same period.

Our research does not find support for explanations that emphasize how ethnic defections or balancing behavior caused the defeat of the Islamic State movement.⁴ Instead, ethnic defection to the government caused its rivals to implode. Attempts in 2007 to build political coalitions to balance against the newly formed Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) failed to cohere due to their ideological incompatibility. Eventually, the changing political environment validated the political consistency of the Islamic State movement and punished those that collaborated and demobilized.

The Islamic State movement's progression through multiple consolidation modes served it well. It cooperated with others when it was small and weak; its decision to seek an external sponsor in al-Qaeda signaled a desire to compete for dominance; and its decision to control territory and establish a proto-state, however precarious, was a clear indicator of a coercive approach with hegemonic designs on Iraq's Sunni community. Despite embracing coercive consolidation, the Islamic State of Iraq maintained amicable relations with some rivals even as it worked toward a hegemonic caliphate. Our analysis challenges previous understanding of the group's relations with rival Sunni insurgents and inspires us to follow Staniland's exhortation that "political ideas ought to be central to the study of political violence, militias should be studied in direct dialog with other armed groups, and a traditional focus on civil war should be replaced by the broader study of 'armed politics.'"⁵

Ideological Trends and Coalitions in the Iraqi Insurgency

We introduce a new typology of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq based on ideological stances derived from public statements, manifestos, and strategic documents. Previous classifications—especially those used by the U.S. military—failed to understand the complexity of Sunni factional divides in Iraq.⁶ Our new typology builds on theoretical work by Hegghammer and Abu Rumman.⁷

Hegghammer differentiates Islamist groups by their goals. State-oriented socio-revolutionary Islamists seek to replace un-Islamic regimes with shariah-based governments. Irredentist Islamists fight against foreign occupation of their lands. Pan-Islamist jihadists participate in trans-national conflicts inspired by religious narratives to aid their coreligionists. Morality-oriented Islamists impose religious practices within their communities. Violent sectarians strive against rival sects for supremacy. These differences are not mutually exclusive; as Hegghammer notes, "violent Islamist actors work to promote several or all of these agendas at the same time."⁸ By focusing only on the rationales, Hegghammer ignores the ideological background of violent Islamist actors that is crucial to understanding both insurgent politics and the use of violence.

Abu Rumman contributes to our typology by explaining how a differentiation process that split previous cross-trend groups along ideological lines led to trend specific coalitions in 2006-7.⁹ Our typology, represented in [Figure 1](#), also shows six major

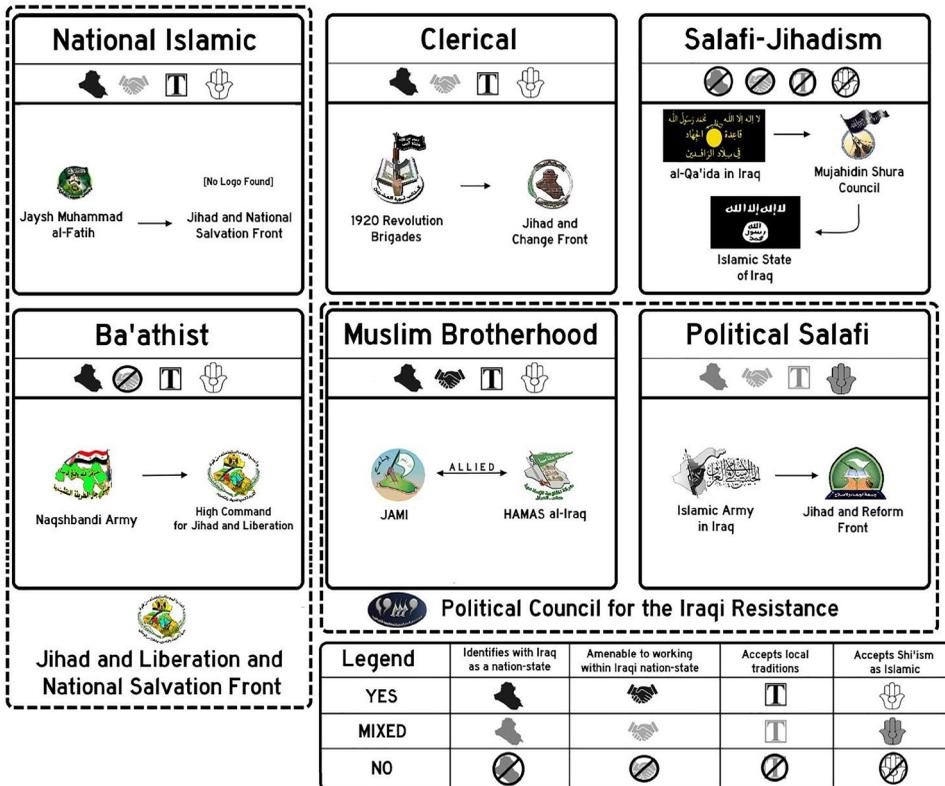


Figure 1. Categories of Sunni ideological trends and coalitions. We thank Aram Shabanian for his invaluable technical support.

groups as fixpoints of trend-specific coalition. Our revisionist findings recategorize Sunni insurgent groups into the following ideological trends:

- Salafi-Jihadists, combining pan-Islamist, socio-revolutionary, and sectarian thought
- Political Salafists who eschewed excommunication of non-Islamist regimes in the region and were more open to political participation than the revolutionary Salafi-Jihadists; they mostly took up arms in resistance to the occupation of Iraq and later Shiite dominance¹⁰
- Clerical Islamists associated with the Association of Muslim Scholars professing Islamism out of religious sentiment and resistance to occupation as a religious duty
- Militants linked with the most popular Sunni political party (Iraqi Islamic Party)—the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood
- National Islamic groups, comprised of conservatives from the Clerical and Muslim Brotherhood milieu who had developed a nationalist outlook and ties to the Baathists during Saddam Hussein’s Faith Campaign in the 1990s¹¹
- Baathists who used Islamist language in their revanchist campaign

We developed the respective trends by analyzing how each would have answered the following questions: ¹²

- Did it identify with Iraq as a nation-state?
- Was it amenable to joining the current Iraqi government if given concessions?
- Did it accept local religious traditions?
- Did it accept Shiism as a legitimate Islamic sect?

Group statements allowed us to categorize the trends (see [Figure 1](#)) according to their “conception of the ideal polity” as proposed by Gade et al.¹³ We constructed this ideal polity that insurgents fight to achieve along the lines of Jellinek’s theory of state—a clearly demarked territory whose people are ruled through power.¹⁴ The following analysis denote differing concepts of these aspects within the insurgency and explain the ideological background of these differences.

Territory

Salafi-Jihadists are pan-Islamists that are not constrained by national borders or nationalist identities.¹⁵ Consequently, most foreign fighters in Iraq joined groups within this trend and only Salafi-Jihadist groups operated outside of Iraq. All other insurgent trends identified as Iraqi first and could arguably be described as national irredentists as per Hegghammer.¹⁶ When discussing the territory of an envisioned state, this dichotomy falters as Sunni secession was clearly discussed in parts of the Political Salafi, Clerical, and Brotherhood factions.¹⁷

People

Like Salafi-Jihadists, Political Salafi groups displayed varying degrees of hostility toward Shiites.¹⁸ Salafi-Jihadists targeted Shiite combatants and civilians alike for ideological and strategic reasons.¹⁹ The Political Salafi trend, in contrast, portrayed its anti-Shiite feelings as anti-Iranian instead of sectarian but nevertheless took part in sectarian violence.²⁰ Furthermore, during the height of sectarian civil war in 2006-7, many Sunni insurgents radicalized with regard to their views on Shiites, thereby forming political homophily with, and permeability toward, Salafi-Jihadists.²¹

State Power

Ostensibly, the rejection of the new Iraqi state was shared by all insurgent trends and further justified as resistance against foreign occupation. A deeper analysis identifies only two trends—Salafi-Jihadists and Baathists—that were categorically opposed to working within the new nation-state. The Salafi-Jihadist rejection of the Iraqi nation-state was grounded in a general concept that “regard[ed] it as a heretical and artificial unit.”²² The Baathist trend was banned from political participation by law and rejected it as well.²³ Both of these factions had clear visions of a future state they would run: the former an Islamist state implementing Islamic law (*shariah*), the latter a return of the previous regime. In contrast, the Political Salafi, Clerical, and National Islamic trends published vague demands for an Islamic polity that shifted after the defection of more socio-revolutionary factions, eventually suggesting an openness to work with

the government. Unlike Salafi-Jihadists, these trends did not view the governments of Sunni Arab neighboring states as apostates for failing to rule with shariah and were therefore open to state sponsorship.

Diverging interpretations of what a shariah polity would look like contributed to factional divides. The Salafi-Jihadist trend, committed to reforming Muslim society according to literalist views, sought to change local traditions that it considered religiously unacceptable.²⁴ This is especially true for the Islamic State of Iraq.²⁵ The Political Salafi trend were also theoretically opposed to these practices, but did not make the forcible implementation of proper practices a priority.²⁶ The Clerical trend was less interested in altering religious behavior originally shaped by its discursive power and instead sought to affirm its traditional authority against new rivals within Iraq's Sunni communities.²⁷

Elections became the dividing line among insurgents. Salafi-Jihadists were ideologically predisposed to excommunicate candidates, party members or even individual voters for participation in democracy, which they considered heretical.²⁸ Their ideological position was not necessarily shared by other trends, but they nonetheless rejected elections under the U.S. occupation.²⁹ In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood trend did not reject democratic participation and aligned itself with the Iraqi Islamic Party that sought representation in the parliament.³⁰

The Islamic State Movement: Three Phases of Consolidation

The consolidation of the Islamic State movement took place in three distinct phases, beginning in 2003 and culminating in 2014. In contrast, Iraqi factions outside of the Islamic State movement began consolidation in 2007. Cross-trend groups would split around the question of system integration through elections or negotiations in 2007, with some coalitions formed to participate in the political process as a means to counter the hegemonic ambitions of the Islamic State of Iraq.

The Islamic State movement began as a small but powerful militant group in 2003, but its status quickly changed in late 2004 as it evolved into an al-Qaeda affiliate. It transformed once again into a proto-state in 2006 by merging with some of the Salafi-Jihadist groups. This evolution was not an effort to deceptively rebrand itself as the American military often claimed, but a genuine effort to consolidate the Salafi-Jihadist trend under one banner.³¹ At each inflection point, the Islamic State movement changed its attitude toward rivals as depicted in [Table 1](#).

Phase I: Cooperative Consolidation (2003–2004)

Analysis of the Sunni militant milieu in the post-invasion period reveals limited commitment of members to group ideology. Insurgent groups included members of different ideological trends who shifted membership based on political realities.³² This permeability across Sunni Arab factions eased tacit cooperation between the varied trends.

Adherents of the old regime dominated the early insurgency, absorbing most of U.S. attention, but the capture of Saddam Hussein at the end of 2003 fueled defections to Islamist trends.³³ Nationalist groups like Jaysh Muhammad funded by Baathists slowly

Table 1. Phases of Islamic state movement consolidation.

Phase	Timeframe	Name	Mode	Outcome
Cooperative consolidation	May 2003 to Oct 2004	Tawhid and Jihad Group (TWJ)	Cooperation: open to cross-trend cooperation Competition: Salafi-Jihadist groups, mostly Ansar as-Sunnah Coercion: none	Recruitment from Iraqi Salafi-Jihadist networks
Competitive consolidation	Oct 2004 to Oct 2006	Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)	Cooperation: open to inner-trend cooperation Competition: Salafi-Jihadist and Political Salafi groups, mostly Ansar as-Sunnah Coercion: collaborating tribal actors, local stakeholders	Consolidation of many Salafi-Jihadist groups in the MSC coalition
Coercive consolidation	Oct 2006 to April 2013	Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	Cooperation: only mediation Competition: Salafi-Jihadist, Political Salafi, and Clerical groups Coercion: Brotherhood, Clerical, and Political Salafi groups	Evolution from MSC coalition to a unified proto-state
Coercive consolidation	Apr 2013 to June 2014	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	Cooperation: none Competition: none Coercion: groups from all trends including other Salafi-Jihadist	Achievement of hegemony

radicalized to form a National Islamist hybrid.³⁴ During this transition, two cross-trend groups rose to prominence in 2004: the 1920 Revolution Brigades and the Islamic Army in Iraq. The 1920 Revolution Brigades were led by former regime members aligned with Harith ad-Dari's Association of Muslim Scholars—which controlled religious endowments.³⁵ The group also had ties to the Iraqi Islamic Party—the Muslim Brotherhood returned from exile—which supported coalition presence and planned to participate in politics.³⁶ The Islamic Army in Iraq was a large group led by veterans of the former regime's military who professed Salafi beliefs, and included a visible faction of Salafi-Jihadists.³⁷

When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established Tawhid and Jihad (TWJ) in Iraq, it was small and largely foreign to the country. This would change rapidly as Zarqawi's lieutenants recruited from Iraqi Salafi networks percolating under the regime for decades.³⁸ In its fifth statement published in May 2004, Zarqawi announced the merger of his group with al-Jama'a as-Salafiyya al-Mujahida.³⁹ In addition to this early merger, individuals from the allied Salafi-Jihadist group Ansar as-Sunnah began defecting to Zarqawi during this time.⁴⁰ The group—originally named Ansar al-Islam—had hosted members of Zarqawi's Herat-based followers after their ouster from Afghanistan in its territories in Northern Iraq.⁴¹ Despite, or maybe because of these defections, collaboration continued between the two groups.

During its inchoate stage, TWJ cooperated openly with other insurgent groups in the city of Fallujah in Anbar that defied the U.S. during the spring and summer of 2004. The city was controlled by a representative council known as the Mujahidin Shura Council of Fallujah, whose head—Abdullah al-Janabi—was a local religious scholar with Sufi leanings and a member of the Clerical trend.⁴² TWJ fighters participated in this coalition and took part in both Fallujah battles against U.S. forces. A cleric from a Sufi milieu leading these Salafi-Jihadists in an anti-U.S. coalition clearly shows that cooperation with ideological rivals was accepted in the early Islamic State movement.⁴³

Phase II: Competitive Consolidation (2004–2006)

AQI adopted all modes of consolidation during this period. It cooperated with some Salafi-Jihadists, competed with other insurgent groups, and coerced those Sunnis interested in system integration. However, competitive consolidation was the dominant mode in this phase.

The dynamics of the Sunni insurgency changed after the Second Battle of Fallujah, which was a serious setback for the wider insurgency. The destruction of the city led some to reconsider the costs of resistance. The disastrous results stemming from the Sunni boycott of the January 2005 elections, led some insurgents to consider political participation. This brought them into conflict with Zarqawi's Salafi-Jihadists—who had just pledged allegiance to Usama Bin Laden and were now known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁴⁴

Pledging loyalty to al-Qaeda marked the group's choice to adopt a competitive mode of consolidation, as external support brought improved resourcing and cemented its commitment to pan-Islamist ideology. This in turn led to a change in behavior toward insurgent who flirted with political integration. Within the Salafi-Jihadist trend, Bin Laden's endorsement immensely boosted Zarqawi's legitimacy. This manifested in the first consolidation of Salafi-Jihadist groups under the banner of AQI. Starting in March 2005, several smaller groups pledged allegiance to the group.⁴⁵

The declaration also produced major defections from other groups, as Ansar al-Sunnah lost several high-ranking leaders and hundreds of men to AQI.⁴⁶ The U.S. military declassified history of the insurgency in Anbar reported that members from the Islamic Army in the town of al-Baghdadi and Jaysh Muhammad in Fallujah defected in large numbers to AQI in 2005 and linked this to Zarqawi's improved access to global funding and online propaganda networks.⁴⁷

AQI's political victories were mitigated by the growing influence of democratic politics and the institutional integration of Sunni Arab elites. The Sunni boycott of the January 2005 elections predictably froze them out of power and gave Shiite political groups influence over security forces and lucrative patronage networks, a mistake the Sunni elite would not repeat. In contrast to the January election of constitutional delegates, the December 2005 general election saw both a high Sunni turnout (80%) and polling stations guarded by the Islamic Army in Iraq, which viewed elections as a hedge to ensure some Sunni representation in a government it was ostensibly trying to overthrow.⁴⁸ The big winner was the Iraqi Islamic Party; its *Tawafaq* (harmony) slate won 44 seats, and Sunnis won control of six ministries in the new government.⁴⁹ Insurgent support for the election was a blow to AQI's efforts to keep Sunnis from political integration and led to intra-insurgent violence during 2005.⁵⁰

A front called the Ramadi Shura Council dominated by Jaysh Muhammad used the January election debacle to lead an uprising against the "criminals dishonoring the insurgency by killing Iraqis," but increased coalition raids suspended the infighting. AQI took advantage of the lull and began assassinating supporters of the Ramadi Shura Council, which had been formed by the 1920 Revolution Brigades' founder Mohammad Latif.⁵¹ Latif himself was targeted for assassination according to one captured AQI document, and he fled the country.⁵² As a result, Jaysh Muhammad lost fighters opposing political participation to the splinter group Jaysh al-Haqq, an AQI

associated group.⁵³ In al-Qaim, the Albu Mahal tribe, angry over the killing of a tribesman working for the coalition, rose against AQI. The uprising was brutally suppressed by Zarqawi, who personally oversaw the effort.⁵⁴

The U.S. effort to recruit Sunni Arabs into security forces was another wedge between groups in the insurgency. Some like the Albu Nimr tribe from Ramadi saw enlistment as a jobs program, as well as exerting influence over local security forces. An AQI campaign against police recruiting stations led to the creation of the Anbar People's Committee, a precursor to the *Sahwa* tribal awakening, but this was violently uprooted by watchful AQI leaders in Ramadi. The growing insurgent infighting in the city led commanders of the 1920 Revolution Brigades to put together a coalition of anti-AQI vigilante groups, despite the group's embrace of resistance to occupation.⁵⁵ AQI eventually rooted them out of Ramadi and established control of the provincial capital that would last until mid-2007.⁵⁶

Letters from AQI rivals prompted a personal response from Ayman al-Zawahiri, Usama Bin Laden's deputy, who gently reprimanded Zarqawi in mid-2005 and implored him to build a broad insurgent alliance. Zawahiri was advocating for cooperative consolidation with the Clerical trend—embodied by the Association of Muslim Scholars and affiliated groups like the 1920 Revolution Brigades—in an alliance comparable to the one formed between al-Qaeda and the Taliban Movement.⁵⁷ This letter fell on deaf ears after the infighting in Ramadi; Zarqawi complied with his superior's wish to build a coalition, but it would not be a broad one.

On January 15, 2006, AQI announced the formation of a body called Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq (MSC)—the second major consolidation of Salafi-Jihadist groups.⁵⁸ Zarqawi had gathered six likeminded groups—some more extreme than AQI—under one banner. The U.S. military, which disparaged MSC as an artificial front for AQI, missed the significance of the growing Iraqi character of the movement. One of the leaders who joined, Iraqi national Abu Abdullah al-Juburi, would announce the future phase of consolidation as the new spokesman.⁵⁹

Other insurgents had finally taken steps to engage in negotiations as persistent reports about talks between the U.S. and insurgents surfaced. Talks were held in Amman from January to March 2006.⁶⁰ One commentator claimed that several insurgent groups met to discuss the possibility of a political solution leading to a Sunni autonomous region within a confederal Iraq, aiming to implement shariah and hoping for protection by Sunni-Arab neighbors. He identified Abdullah al-Janabi and Amin as-Sab'i—leader of the Islamic Army—as participants and alleged that the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Iraqi Islamic Party were heavily involved. Similar details can be found in the previously mentioned AQI situation report to the Shura council.⁶¹

The hoped-for reconciliation ended with Zarqawi's bombing of the al-Askari shrine on February 22, 2006. The ensuing sectarian clashes pitted Shiite militias against Sunni insurgents of all trends.⁶² MSC denied responsibility for the attack, but there is evidence it was committed by Zarqawi associates in order to deprive the resistance of any political support for reconciliation.⁶³ Zarqawi had argued since 2004 that only the pressure of a full-blown civil war could prevent Sunni insurgent groups from eventually joining with the government, and the Askari bombing made it so.⁶⁴

Despite publicly denouncing the bombing, insurgent groups outside of the Political Salafi and Clerical factions began openly collaborating with MSC.⁶⁵ In areas hard-hit

by Shiite reprisals, ties between different insurgent trends strengthened. The Islamic State movement had achieved further consolidation of the Salafi-Jihadist trend through coalition building and prevented the defection of competing trends from the insurgency as part of the competitive phase of consolidation.

Phase III: Coercive Consolidation 2006–2014

The Islamic State movement pivoted to a coercive consolidation strategy with the announcement of a proto-state in 2006, seeking to harvest its gains against rivals in the competitive phase. The Islamic State movement still competed for insurgent fighters and resources, but this period featured coercion as a primary tool of consolidation. It preemptively declared a shadow government, attempted to govern in the open, and violently suppressed rivals when they refused to cooperate with its state project.

The fall of 2006 witnessed the third pro-government tribal uprising against the Islamic State movement when Abdul Sattar Abu Risha announced the Anbar Salvation Council in August. This move was widely understood to be the result of an increasingly powerful MSC encroaching on tribal informal governance and illicit activities.⁶⁶ Sensing changes in the political environment, MSC moved quickly to proclaim a new coalition called Hilf al-Mutayyibin. This merger with three other groups marked the third consolidation of the Salafi-Jihadist trend, including the even more rabidly anti-Shiite group Jund as-Sahaba as well as unidentified tribal leaders who had come together “to lift the oppression of the Sunni people, afflicted by the spiteful rejectionist [Shiites] and the Crusader occupiers.”⁶⁷

The subsequent proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq aimed to develop a new shared group identity as a shariah state in the Sunni majority regions of Iraq.⁶⁸ The new state was framed as a Sunni homeland, in response to the rise of the Kurdish north and Shiite south. This unilateral step, taken without consultation, surprised rivals as well as its sponsor al-Qaeda.⁶⁹ ISI now openly made a bid for hegemony, asking “all Muslim fighters and scholars of Iraq, tribal leaders and the generality of Sunnis to pledge allegiance to the Leader of the Faithful, the eminent shaykh Abu Umar al-Baghdadi.”⁷⁰ Bestowing this caliphal title on its new anonymous leader foreshadowed the movement’s later claim for global dominance.⁷¹

In his first speech, the freshly-minted head of state claimed unification was at hand, as “tens of brigades and thousands of fighters from our brothers in Jaysh al-Mujahidin, the Islamic Army, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, Ansar as-Sunnah and others” had since joined ISI, along with “seventy percent of the tribal leaders.”⁷² The proclamation of an exclusively Sunni polity was designed to appeal to the holdout Salafi-Jihadists and others increasingly radicalized by the sectarian civil war, and resonated with advocates of shariah. Still, it was clear Abu Umar’s claims of defections from the rival Political Salafi and Clerical trends were exaggerated.⁷³

The formation of ISI was a direct political attack on those working toward a “treasonous project” of negotiations that Baghdadi had alluded to in his speech.⁷⁴ The permeability of ISI toward ideologically-attuned defectors had, at the same time, made it easier for ISI rivals to moderate their discourse and move closer toward political integration. The impact of an improving U.S. counterinsurgency effort against ISI, and

ISI's inability to protect Sunnis from predatory Shiite death squads encouraged defections to the U.S. side.⁷⁵ Caught between the increasingly coercive ISI and Shiite militias, some Sunni insurgent factions aimed for a political settlement to protect Sunni areas in exchange for halting attacks on the U.S.⁷⁶

A watershed moment catalyzing one group's turn against ISI was the killing of the younger Harith al-Dari—a commander in the 1920 Revolution Brigades, son of a tribal leader of the Zawba' clan, and nephew to the older Harith ad-Dari of the Association of Muslim Scholars—in March 2007.⁷⁷ Dari's role in the shadow war against ISI is unknown to us, but ISI targeted him and a growing number of individuals and factions that it suspected of having joined the Awakening councils. This included non-militants—Iraqi Islamic Party politicians and Association of Muslim Scholars members—that could facilitate dialogue between insurgent factions and the U.S. Dari's death led to an angry statement by his group that nonetheless failed to name ISI as the guilty party.⁷⁸

A week later, the troubled relations between ISI and some rivals came to the forefront with the Islamic Army pushing back against ISI's hegemonic ambitions. The Islamic Army rejected ISI leader Abu Umar's accusations in a recent audio message that it had links to the Baath party, the Muslim Brotherhood, regional intelligence, and Saudi-Arabia.⁷⁹ The group reserved its right to negotiate with anyone, and accused ISI of trying to force others to pledge allegiance, killing the younger al-Dari, members of the Islamic Army, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Ansar al-Sunnah, JAMI, and leaders in the Association of Muslim Scholars.⁸⁰

Despite the rancor directed at ISI, the leaders of the large insurgent groups stayed clear of the tribal rebellion because of its sponsorship by U.S. forces. Consequently, waves of rank-and-file members voted with their feet and defected to the Awakening. In response to this crisis in the spring of 2007, resistance trends coalesced into trend-specific coalitions (in chronological order):

- Jihad and Reform Front (JRF) as a Political Salafi coalition⁸¹
- Unnamed coalition of the Muslim Brotherhood⁸²
- Jihad and Change Front (JCF) as the Clerical coalition⁸³
- High Command for Jihad and Liberation (HCJL) as the Baathist coalition (a front for JRTN)⁸⁴
- Jihad and National Salvation Front (JNSF) as National Islamic coalition.⁸⁵

The major factor delineating the new coalitions, and interrebel conflicts, centered on perceptions of the legitimacy of reconciliation negotiations. The emergence of trend-specific coalitions caused fractures in most groups. Salafi-Jihadist hold out Ansar al-Sunnah splintered when the Americans released one of its leaders, Abu Wail, under the condition that he would lead his group to reconciliation and negotiation. Abu Wail formed his own group "Ansar al-Sunnah—The Shariah Committee" in April, while the main group subsequently reverted to its original name Ansar al-Islam to avoid being associated with collaboration.⁸⁶

Likewise, the 1920 Revolution Brigades lost its pro-negotiation members who were close to the Iraqi Islamic Party and who went on to form HAMAS al-Iraq in March.⁸⁷

In contrast, the Islamic Army's leadership took a pro-negotiations course, which caused opposing members to form Jaysh al-Furqan in July.⁸⁸ Correspondingly, Jaysh al-Mujahidin's anti-negotiation faction named itself Jaysh al-Mujahidin fil-Iraq and publicly rejected the formation of JRF.⁸⁹

The Jihad and Reform Front and the Muslim Brotherhood alliance further consolidated in October of that year as the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR).⁹⁰ The supra-front was meant to represent the Iraqi resistance in talks with the U.S. or the Iraqi government, a step that once more fostered group instability.⁹¹ The large ideological gap between the trends in PCIR is most likely explained by foreign sponsor coordination, as evidenced by JRF and the Brotherhood alliance both forming within days of each other just prior to armed clashes between ISI on the one hand and the Islamic Army, and HAMAS al-Iraq on the other hand erupting in different parts of the country in May.⁹² One case that caught western media attention was former Islamic Army member Abu al-Abd, who fought ISI in al-Amiriyah arm-in-arm with U.S. forces.⁹³ U.S. internal reports reveal even higher-level contacts with Islamic Army leaders.⁹⁴

The Awakening's Amiriyah sprouting—far from tribal strongholds—was cited by jihadist supporters as proof the JRF was “creating” Awakening councils outside of Anbar.⁹⁵ ISI's ally Ansar al-Islam made a similar claim regarding Abu Wail, seeing his release as part of the alleged JRF conspiracy to fight ISI and other Salafi-Jihadists.⁹⁶ This pattern did not hold for all of Iraq though; in other areas, Islamic Army fighters cooperated with ISI against members of Jaysh al-Mujahidin who were accused of being part of an Awakening council in 2008.⁹⁷

The Clerical trend coalition, which had opposed talks, tried to take a middle ground in the infighting that exploded because of ISI's new coercive approach. The second major group within JCF, Jaysh al-Rashidin, continued to collaborate with ISI and publicly supported the group against accusations of killing other insurgents.⁹⁸ The 1920 Revolution Brigades also repeatedly rejected any accusation of working with the U.S., and blamed “Awakening” attacks against ISI in Diyala on the splinter HAMAS al-Iraq.⁹⁹ Still, ISI confidently alleged that the 1920 Revolution Brigades were fully participating in the Awakening, in collusion with its former members.¹⁰⁰ Declassified U.S. operational updates report direct collaboration with the group in Diyala province, confirming that JCF insurgents fought ISI regardless of the Clerical coalition's official stance. Interestingly, the U.S. was under no illusion that this alliance was anything other than temporary.¹⁰¹

Unlike ISI, the various coalitions could not achieve an internal consensus on a single political objective or structure and suffered from endless defections. PCIR, a cross-trend umbrella, nearly succumbed to the vast ideological differences between its members, and by early 2008 Jaysh al-Mujahidin and Jaysh al-Fatihin left PCIR and JRF.¹⁰² Jaysh al-Mujahidin was especially vocal, disavowing other members as part of the Awakening.¹⁰³ Arguably, these hardline groups within the Political Salafi coalition had only been interested in a temporary respite in fighting with the U.S. to concentrate on the sectarian civil war. Others, like the Brotherhood trend, saw this as an opportunity to close ranks with its political counterparts in the Islamic Party, working in the new Iraqi state.

The dramatic drop in violence following the ISI defeat in Anbar and Diyala by 2008, at the hands of U.S. and Awakening forces, ushered in a sense of optimism over

reconciliation between the Sunni insurgency and the Iraqi government.¹⁰⁴ This sense was quickly dampened by the Nur al-Maliki government's overt suspicion of the Awakening Councils as armed factions outside of state control who were now organizing politically to challenge Maliki's Sunni partners.¹⁰⁵ Government persecution and arrests of important figures within the Awakening further soured the fragile relationship.¹⁰⁶ The impending departure of the Americans would leave the unstable alliance between tribal actors and former insurgents in an untenable position.¹⁰⁷

By the end of June 2009, U.S. troops completed their withdrawal from Iraqi cities in accordance with the U.S. Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq.¹⁰⁸ The absence of American soldiers on the streets deprived groups from the Brotherhood and Clerical trends—who had always been reluctant to target fellow Iraqis in the security forces—of both targets and *raison d'être*. In anticipation of this shift, JCF combined with several non-JRF Political Salafi groups and chose Association of Muslim Scholars general secretary Harith ad-Dari as their spokesman in ensuing talks with the Iraqi government.¹⁰⁹

With few exceptions, the American withdrawal to rural bases was the trigger leading to widespread demobilization of Political Salafi, Clerical, and Brotherhood groups. The slow disappearance of the mainstream insurgency embodied by the coalitions of these three trends narrowed the scope of the insurgency to those ideologically committed to overthrowing the Iraqi government: Salafi-Jihadists and Baathists. Individuals from the demobilizing trends interested in continuing the insurgency were left with these two options.

The National Islamic trend also suffered; the more religious parts of this trend operated in a milieu that overlapped with the Clerical and Brotherhood trends. When this milieu turned away from violence, those intent on fighting drifted toward the Baathist trend. In June 2009, Jaysh Muhammad joined HCJL, and the rest of JNSF followed in November, merging with HCJL under a new name: Jihad and Liberation and National Salvation Front (JLNSF).¹¹⁰

A similar dynamic played out in April 2010 when a faction of Jaysh Abi Bakr as-Siddiq—a Salafi-Jihadist group with close links to Political Salafi groups—joined ISI.¹¹¹ Controversy over the ISI claim led to an acknowledgement by the former that there had been negotiations with the recently deceased Abu Umar, and some members had secretly pledged allegiance to ISI.¹¹² The statement is the only primary source confirming ISI's use of secret oaths in other groups, something U.S. intelligence reports also observed, noting that some AQI leaders maintained multiple group memberships as an effective consolidation tactic.¹¹³

When splinter factions from demobilizing coalitions of the mainstream insurgency announced their intent to continue fighting in 2010, they had no measurable impact on the ground.¹¹⁴ ISI in the meantime developed a new internal strategy document that prioritized tribal engagement and winning what it predicted was a critical phase of political competition with its Sunni rivals in the post-occupation period.¹¹⁵ A key component of this strategy was the assassination of over 2,000 Sunni Awakening members as part of the group's "campaign against the traitors."¹¹⁶ To reinvigorate the group's sectarian wedge strategy, it sustained a long-term suicide bombing campaign, annually targeting Shiite pilgrims, killing over one hundred of them every year from

2008 and 2012.¹¹⁷ When U.S. forces left Iraq in December 2011,¹¹⁸ ISI showed off its staying power with a new series of bombings.¹¹⁹ The uptick of terrorism overshadowed an important development in 2011; true to its ideological dedication to pan-Islamism, ISI exploited the uprising against Bashar al-Assad by covertly expanding into Syria under the name Jabhat al-Nusrah.¹²⁰

The departure of the Americans coincided with Maliki's first moves against his Sunni political rivals.¹²¹ The rise in sectarian tension—in no small part fueled by ISI bombings—saw Sunni militants kill several Iraqi police in the Hawija protest site, leading to a government crackdown that killed scores of protesters in the spring of 2013.¹²² This spark inspired revenge attacks and heated rhetoric by Sunni community leaders as well as previous insurgents, including PCIR and JCF who began remobilization.¹²³ A second government raid on a protest site in Ramadi in December 2013 led to a full-blown uprising against the Iraqi government.¹²⁴

The aspiring insurgency of 2013-14 saw the public reappearance of some insurgent factions from the Political Salafi trend, including the Islamic Army and Jaysh al-Mujahidin. Former members of Clerical or Brotherhood groups were also involved, but many were no longer interested in their old group identities. Most Clerical and Brotherhood affiliated groups failed to reestablish themselves as the sectarian uprising did not fit the Iraqi nationalist narratives of these insurgent trends. Former members were divided between resisting Maliki and hoping for better treatment by possible replacements should the prime minister's governing coalition collapse.¹²⁵ In contrast, Political Salafi groups with their embedded anti-Shiism and their history of targeting Iraqi security forces could easily rationalize the new conflict.

Instead of groups and coalitions as we saw in 2003 and 2007, the new insurgents organized in local revolutionary or tribal councils. Many of those councils—some of whom also organizers of protests beforehand—were front groups for the Baathist JRTN.¹²⁶ The surprising new strength of the Baathists was largely due to its steadfast embrace of resistance to the government both during and after the U.S. withdrawal. Having kept its forces on the field, JRTN did not have to rebuild and had an improved regional presence in the Sunni majority areas of Iraq.

Like JRTN, ISI had stayed in the field and built its strength since its 2007 defeat, embracing veteran leaders returning from ill-advised prison amnesties and prison breaks during a campaign christened *Breaking the Walls* by new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi between July 2012 and July 2013.¹²⁷ The prison breaks, defections from the Political Salafi trend, and the uptick in foreign fighter flow swelled ISI's ranks.¹²⁸ Its increased expansion in Syria forced the group to fight in two directions after 2011, but it also saw synergistic advantages of its cross-border activities, namely access to new manpower and lucrative resources.

In April 2013, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi retroactively acknowledged the group's expansion into Syria and announced a forced merger with his unruly comrades in Jabhat al-Nusrah under the name Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹²⁹ The intervention by al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri incited ISIS to break with its former partner.¹³⁰ Controlling territory for the first time since 2007, the group now targeted other Salafi-Jihadists as it neared the end game of consolidation. With the recent experience of almost losing its Syrian franchise in mind and concerned about a

possible al-Qaeda endorsement of its rival, ISIS moved to crush its former ally Ansar al-Islam—who at this point openly labeled ISIS as an “extremist aggressor.”¹³¹

In January 2014, ISIS made its move, deploying in large numbers and coopting the violent protestors who had taken up arms against Iraqi security forces.¹³² The combination of local armed uprisings and blitz attacks by ISIS units forced Iraqi security forces out of several urban areas. When ISIS conquered Mosul in June 2014, sub-units of Ansar al-Islam acted as force multipliers in an ad hoc collaboration.¹³³ Other regions saw similar defections of insurgents to the winning horse.¹³⁴ The ideological decision to participate in the Syrian civil war paid dividends for ISIS, with its battle-tested force and the renewed influx of foreign fighters. Wildly outgunning other insurgents, it strong-armed Ansar al-Islam to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹³⁵ The other major player—the Baathists of JRTN—proved no match and were driven underground.¹³⁶ Having completed its quest for hegemony of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq (and parts of Syria), the Islamic State movement could now turn its attention to consolidating the global Salafi-Jihadist trend at the expense of its former sponsor al-Qaeda.¹³⁷ The declaration of the caliphate would be a strong advantage in this new competition.

Conclusion

This study explains the Islamic State movement’s successful political consolidation and hegemonic position in the Sunni insurgency in Iraq by 2014. The group saw early success in the post-invasion period cooperating with other trends under a loose front, but its discomfort in this mode and ideological calling to tie the conflict in Iraq into the global jihad motivated it to compete with larger and more powerful rivals for dominance. Its explosive success through 2006, coupled with the routinization of the movement, encouraged Zarqawi’s successors to present its rivals with a *fait accompli*—a proto-caliphate requiring allegiance from all—and marked the beginning of a long coercive phase of consolidation.¹³⁸

In response to this observable shift, ISI’s rivals formed coalitions around the biggest groups of their respective ideological trends. After ISI’s battlefield losses against both tribal and former insurgent Awakening councils during the Surge, outright interrebel conflict tapered off significantly. The U.S. withdrawal saw many of ISI’s rival insurgent coalitions (except the Baathists) demobilize and move toward reconciliation with the government. This shift ironically created its own regenerative dynamics for ISI, as uncompromising insurgents defected in droves rather than join a government suspected of colluding with Iran. This influx into ISI coincided with the return of many of its veterans from prison as the U.S. left and turned over its last high value detainees to an Iraqi government that inadvertently released many irreconcilables.¹³⁹ When the Islamic State movement announced its expansion into Syria, and once more openly controlled territory, its final phase of coercive consolidation showed increasingly violent means of subduing weaker and uncooperative rivals who refused to join the movement, including former Salafi-Jihadist allies who had previously been exempted from aggression.

American intelligence reports highlight the incessant defections of resistance foot soldiers to the Islamic State and its predecessors during the competitive phase as a result of the latter’s sectarian wedge strategy, which owes much of its efficacy to the

brutality of Shiite death squads that permanently altered the sectarian demographics of Iraq's capital city.¹⁴⁰ The permeability of the boundaries across Sunni Arab insurgents facilitated the growth of the Islamic State movement by absorbing rank and file members while keeping its ideology intact. The MSC coalition was kept stable through reserving leadership positions for veteran Salafi-Jihadist ideologues.¹⁴¹

The Islamic State movement, as a revolutionary actor in a region populated by brittle and hostile regimes, eschewed state sponsorship. Unlike its rivals, many of whom had varying (but opaque) levels of state sponsorship, its ideology made compromise with the Iraqi state or participation in the Westphalian system of states impossible. Instead, it leveraged al-Qaeda's global influence, funding networks, and propaganda platforms to kick-start its own global insurgency.¹⁴²

Ideology is a key driver for the strategic choice to accelerate sectarian civil war, embrace of a globalist agenda, and seek territorial control. Our revised understanding of how ideology impacted political consolidation for the Islamic State movement suggests that our categorization of Islamist trends in post-occupation Iraq not only explained competition amongst Sunni resistance groups, but is generalizable to other Islamist-influenced conflicts. Hence, we argue ideological composition must be considered when explaining this group's—and any Islamist insurgent group's—policy and coalition building efforts in multiparty civil wars.

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Craig Whiteside is employed with the U.S. government. His views are his own.

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