

MIDEAST REGIONAL CHESS GAMES FOR STRONG PLAYERS: THE CASE OF ISIL

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The conduct of two separate airstrikes in Syria, led by the United States and Russia respectively, comes as part of a strategy to defeat and degrade the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in pursuance of revisiting the international response to the Syrian conflict. The prolonged neglect of the conflict in Syria has admittedly created power vacuums, paving the way for extremist groups to gain and control territory. The prospect of de facto territorial divisions is a reported reality with territory under control of ISIL; territory held by the Assad regime; and territory controlled by enclaves of diverse fighter groups.

ISIL is deemed to be an existential threat to Arab and Muslim states as well as to religious minorities and western countries. In fact, its military victories in Syria and Iraq make it the first Sunni extremist group to control territory, enhancing its ability to recruit fighters, acquire wealth and additional territory, and project a global end-state. ISIL's declared goals are to defeat Damascus, capture Baghdad, take Mecca, destroy the Kaaba, and ultimately capture Jerusalem. Also, as publicly declared, it plans to turn its attention to Asia, the West, and the United States. According to the ISIL map of the world, as released by British *Daily Mail* on 30 June 2014, a five-year plan entails the group's expansion to the Middle East, North Africa, parts of Asia, the Balkans and European countries such as Greece, Austria, Cyprus, Italy and Spain. It is in this context that security services of Arab and European countries compare the current situation to pre-9/11 Afghanistan.

At a time when no one is confident that ISIL will be defeated quickly or easily, a series of questions emerge and are related to the group's standing with most prevailing the following: What is ISIL's ideology? Where does the financial support and military equipment come from? Why people join ISIL? What are the main policies of containment?

ISIL's military inspiration and ideology began with the rise of Wahhabism in Arabia in the late 18th-early 19th century, culminating in 1804 in the destruction of the Shia shrine cities of Karbala and siege of Najaf. The religious promulgations of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, are grounded in legitimate Islamic symbolism, jurisprudence, and Quranic readings, and this is the reason why so far no single religious leader or institution has countered effectively the ideological claims of ISIL.

Notably, ISIL claims that worship of idols and shrines like the Kaaba and Islamic prophet Muhammad's gravesite have replaced worship of Allah and thus must be destroyed. Evidently, ISIL's declaration of war is against enemies considered as posing a threat to Sunni Islam, namely the West, Shi'a Muslims including the Assad regime, and the regional monarchs who have failed to defend Sunni Islamic values.

When it comes to ISIL's military equipment, its weaponry is largely US-manufactured, and the group has also soviet-designed T-72 tanks captured from the Iraqi army, and helicopters, but no pilots. It is noteworthy that the Iraqi military was easily defeated by ISIS because of the military's poor training, more as a police than a military force, lack of adequate military campaign experience, and the replacement of Sunni officers by untrained and unskilled personnel. ISIL is not a single, unitary force but rather six or seven separate groups operating under a common banner. Its ranks include ex-Baathists, Naqshbandi fighters, Ansar al-Sunnah, Kataib al-Fateh, and other factions. The group reportedly generates revenues, which contribute to the expansion of recruitment, through exports of unprocessed and often contaminated crude oil at about 30% of the market value for a profit of about \$1 million a day, and through the maintenance of a low level of natural gas production from seized fields near Kirkuk.

ISIL's success in recruitment lies in its ability to create a new "tribe" with common cause and goals. Foreign fighters joining ISIL come from diverse backgrounds, and the majority appears to be well-educated and from middle class backgrounds, not the lowest stratum of society as many suppose. There are multiple reasons people join ISIL, such as the search for affinity, personality qualities or characteristics such as inclination for violence and sadism, adventure, financial motivation, the success in depicting rival groups as too lenient, especially in contrast to Al-Qaeda, and solidarity with Syrians. Social media remains an important means of advertising and recruiting. For example, many foreign fighters use VK.com, the Russian version of *Facebook*, because it is neither blocked nor censored.

Factors that account for ISIL's territorial successes lie in frustrated Sunni tribes and politicians who continue to support the group's efforts to advance through Iraq and Syria, the existence of weak military and civilian institutions, a power vacuum in eastern Syria and western Iraq, and rising sectarianism. It is argued that, in the long-term, ISIL could not sustain its current level of territorial successes given that the group's 30,000 fighters could not govern 8 million people without being able to provide basic services, such as electricity and water. It is estimated that it is for this reason that the group employs "spectacular violence" as means of boosting its ability to remaining in power.

For an effective ISIL ideological containment, Arab and western governments need to work with local communities, local leaders and families towards the same goal which is the cease of the killing of innocents. Educational reform and "people-to-people" contacts are keys for the de-radicalization of people and prevention of jihadist recruitment.

A central role also needs to be played by moderate religious authorities, when it comes to the battle of ideas, to counter ISIL extremist arguments in the media. Additional policies in containing ISIL efforts to recruitment can include (a) the development of a strategy to prevent ISIL from sustaining itself through energy sales by publicizing and sanctioning governments and companies doing business with ISIL; (b) Enforce the legislation that has been passed in 30 countries that bans ISIL; and, (c) Offer education and the right to work for refugees in the region. Notably, a significantly high number of Syrian refugees in camps have not attended school for the last three years, thus creating an eventual pool of young people ripe for recruitment as the next generation of fighters by radical Islamists.

No doubt that a regional and international consortium is the only way to invalidate ISIL's narrative towards youth, debilitate the group by targeting its financial resources, and retake ISIL-controlled areas. Because as it is aptly highlighted by American former senator John Ashcroft: "*If necessity is the mother of invention, it is the father of cooperation*". Time is definitely of essence for the consortium's players to genuinely effectively cooperate like never before...