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The Islamic State (ISIL): Strengths and weaknesses

Said Shehata,

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The best way to confront the Islamic State group in Iraq is to undercut its sources of recruitment and support, by dealing with perceived marginalisation among Iraqi Arab Sunnis

The Islamic State can be put in its place. But Iraq and the international community need to take quick action against this group and expose its atrocities before it is too late.

More attention and focus have been paid to the group, until recently known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), since their attacks on and control of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. But the international community is reacting, as usual, late in tackling the danger of the Islamic State, led by Omar Al-Baghdadi.

Tens of thousands of Christians, Yazidis and others fled fearing the advance and atrocities of Islamic State troops. How could 10,000-15,000 fighters control large swathes in Syria and Iraq? This article will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Islamic State group, in order to put its influence and danger into perspective.

There are several elements of strength to the group. First, the marginalisation of Iraqi Arab Sunnis and desperation of their leaders to reach reconciliation with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki was the main factor in the unexpected victory of the Islamic State group over the Iraqi army in Mosul. The Iraqi army collapsed quickly, which puts question marks over the

structure and efficiency of this army. The Islamic State gave hope to the Sunnis in Mosul, but committed atrocities and crimes against minorities, especially Christians. The Islamic State lives on the frustration and misery of others.

Tarik Al-Hashimi in interview with this author a few days after ISIL entered Iraq said that it could be defeated by the Arab Sunni tribes as Sahawat (the Awakening Council) defeated Al-Qaeda in 2008. However, he added that the Islamic State defended the cause of the Arab Sunnis and they were a minority amongst the rebellion of marginalised Arab Sunnis against the regime of Al-Maliki.

Second, the Islamic State group has been using the social media, such as Twitter hashtags and YouTube, to spread fear amongst ordinary citizens as well as military and security forces. They slaughtered innocent people, put videos of the carnage on YouTube, and this frightened people and forced them to flee their homes.

Bishop Mar Nacidemos Daoud Sharaf, the head of the Assyrian Orthodox Church in Mosul and Kurdistan, told me in interview what happened to Christians was genocide and ethnic cleansing.

In addition, they have used social media to recruit new jihadists from Europe and the West, as well as to solicit rich donors in Gulf countries. It is estimated that the Islamic State has \$2 billion at its disposal.

Third, the Islamic State gained heavy weapons and artillery from the Iraq army when they seized Mosul in June. Those weapons helped them to make advances beyond Mosul and recently control Qaraqoush, the largest Iraqi Christian town.

Kurdish troops, known as the Peshmerga, withdrew and then Yazidis and Christians fled other villages and towns. The Peshmerga asked for help and finally US warplanes attacked the artillery of the Islamic State, which might hold back its advances towards Irbil. But to what extent is the US administration willing to go to diminish the firepower of this group?

On the other hand, there are weaknesses that might play a big role in the downfall of the military power and presence of the Islamic State. The mixed composition of its members might weaken it. It consists of elements from the ex-Iraqi army and desperate Sunni tribes — especially from Ramadi and Fallujah, that witnessed violence and clashes between Sunni tribes and the Iraqi army earlier this year — along with others. Once Iraqi Sunni Arabs leave the Islamic State group, it will lose its main supporters in Iraq. This can happen if Baghdad's ruling Shia groups put Iraq before their narrow political goals. Iran is the only country that can ensure that this happens.

In addition, the Iraqi state and the West should use social media in a psychological war against the Islamic State. If this is efficiently used, this will put pressure on some Islamic State elements who might defect away from the group. Exposing Islamic State atrocities and the damage done to innocent people could sway people from supporting the group financially, or becoming new recruits.

Moreover, the air force can be used to destroy the heavy weapons of the Islamic State. This will limit its military capabilities and reduce its danger. The Iraqi air force, with American support, can change the balance of power against the ground. American warplanes started this operation, but it should be continued.

Finally, the Islamic State is an exaggerated phenomenon and can be tackled and put in its real place. Listening to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and other jihadists from the West, such as the UK, shows their simplistic message and their use of people's misery and feelings of marginalisation to spread their ideology. A strong and moderate religious discourse in response, and exposing their atrocities, can weaken them.

The international community and Iraqi politicians need to wake up and move against this radical group before it is too late. There should be no more killing and ethnic cleansing of minorities, such as Christians. The main factor to stop this radical group, at least in Iraq, is getting the Sunni tribes on board and tackling their marginalisation. We saw what happened in 2008 when Al-Qaeda was expelled from Iraq. It is not easy to repeat this experience, but the voices of innocent people are louder than the political differences in Iraq, and the hesitancy of the international community to end the current crisis, at least in Iraq.