

Retaking Ramadi is only the start of the mission

Peter Leahy, The Australian, January 5, 2016

The fact Iraqi government forces have been [able to retake Ramadi](#) from Islamic State is good news. It affirms the value of the Australian policy that Iraqi combat forces bear the brunt of the fight to retake their lost territory.

There is [no need for Australian boots](#) on the frontline. Australia should continue to provide air ground attack support, vital training support to Iraqi ground combat troops with the direct assault mission and targeting expertise at an appropriate distance from the frontline. This is Iraqi territory and it is their fight. After the disastrous performance of the Iraqis during the past two years they need to show resolve and fighting spirit. They will need to show yet more determination in the future as Ramadi is still not totally secure and there are more and larger cities, such as Mosul, to be retaken.

Just because Iraqi government forces are in Ramadi doesn't mean the task is over. We can be sure Islamic State will react to this loss. Ramadi will remain a dangerous and insecure place with some Islamic State forces staying behind to confound and degrade the Iraqi Army, returning population and civil authorities.

There are already reports of Islamic State militants dressed as Iraqi soldiers killing civilians in the city and diversionary attacks on Iraqi Army bases near Ramadi and in the vicinity of Tikrit.

The task now in Ramadi is to secure, hold, reoccupy and rebuild the city. There will be a huge amount of rebuilding to be done as the damage caused by thousands of air attacks is immense. The head of the Anbar Provincial Council has estimated 80 per cent of the city has been destroyed. The rebuilding task will take years and huge amounts of money and effort. This raises the fundamental question of whether the Shia majority government in Baghdad is prepared to allocate the funds required to rebuild the capital of the Sunni governorate of Al Anbar. Failure to do so will just confirm the sectarian nature of rule from Baghdad and further weaken the cohesion of the Republic of Iraq.

Then there are larger and more important cities to be retaken such as Mosul, which the Iraqi Prime Minister has made a promise to retake by the end of this year. This will be a harder task. It is a much bigger city and will need more troops, perhaps including Kurdish and Shia militia, which no doubt will generate further sectarian problems.

Islamic State has shown greater flexibility and adaptability than the Iraqi Army, so stand by for surprises and shocks, potentially across the whole of Iraq as Islamic State responds to the increasing threat. But at least we know some sections of the Iraqi Army are prepared to fight and, with training and support from countries such as Australia, they are up to the task.

But for those who may think the recovery of Iraqi cities such as Ramadi and Mosul somehow signals the end of the threat of terrorism, think again. In the fight against Islamic terrorists, lost Iraqi and Syrian cities are tactical issues. As can be seen clearly from attacks in Europe and the US, the terrorist ideology can exist without territory. As well, Islamic State is showing signs of diversifying into other weak and ungoverned states such as Libya and northern Nigeria.

While we have been captivated by the exploits of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, let's not forget the core problem of Islamic terrorism, which is a radical ideology advocated by mostly Salafists and Takfiris.

We also should remember Islamic State is not the only terrorist outfit and other radical groups exist across the globe. The prospective recapture of Iraqi territory does not signal the end of their ideology, which seeks sharia law within a global caliphate.

There are many terrorist organisations. The Australian government has listed 20 groups as terrorist organisations under the Australian Criminal Code. Many of these are in our part of the world. Similarly, the US has designated nearly 60 organisations as foreign terrorist organisations. Al-Qa'ida may be weakened but its intent remains clear and, with the focus on Islamic State, there is room for it to regenerate. By raising its head above the parapet and declaring a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State, an offshoot of al-Qa'ida, acted prematurely and arrogantly.

The real fight is how to counter the radical ideology. The announcement of a broad counter-terrorism coalition from the Saudis shows promise but it is still not clear what their aim is. It is also of concern that its declaration shows the first signs of battlelines being drawn between Shia and Sunni interests in the Middle East. Those battlelines were brought into stark contrast with the Saudi beheading of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and the intense Iranian reaction. There is much more to come in the schism between Sunni and Shia and in the global fight against terrorism.

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