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With ISIS, ideology more important than territory

PETER LEAHY THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM September 23, 2016

The impending loss of more Islamic State territory in Iraq doesn't signal the end of the war on terror. Yes, it is good that Islamic State is losing ground and the people of Iraq are liberated from their murderous rampage. However, the strength of Islamic State comes from the radical Islamist ideology it follows, not the territory it claims or its army in the field.

Modern theories of warfare emphasise the importance of headspace over battlespace. It's what people think that is important. With an ideology as intense and deadly as that followed by the radical Islamists, territory means little. They will simply take their ideology elsewhere or other groups will emerge. No doubt we will face many more radical Islamists on many more battlefields in the future.

As Islamic State loses territory, expect it to disperse and shift its attention to elsewhere in Iraq, to Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and other places across the globe. It will adjust tactics to attack our homelands with small group and lone-wolf offensives and bury themselves deeper in the internet.

The likely collapse of the caliphate in Iraq will be a setback for Islamic State but it will not dim the desire of radical Islamists for a global caliphate under sharia law.

Their view is that they are engaged in a cosmic battle between good and evil and if it takes a thousand years then it takes a thousand years.

Some view the establishment of the caliphate under the breakaway group we now call Islamic State, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as premature and presumptuous. It was certainly against the more cautious approach of al-Qa'ida, which at one stage counselled al-Baghdadi to tone down the violence. Al-Qa'ida's plan was to establish several small emirates, then to move to a caliphate once it had a firm base. There is no reason to expect that it has changed its mind.

Don't forget that al-Qa'ida remains a significant threat in many parts of Africa and the Middle East and retains influence in parts of Asia. It has an active and growing presence in Afghanistan, where it has links with the Taliban. Al-Qa'ida is the patient one, its ideology remains unvanquished and it is the group with a focus on the "far enemy", which includes us.

Here in Australia, we should be prepared for attacks such as those called for in the new Islamic State magazine *Rumiyah*.

The call for action was chillingly specific — “Brunswick, Broadmeadows, Bankstown, and Bondi ... at the MCG, the SCG, the Opera House, and even in their back yards”.

Our security forces will have to be at the top of their game.

Back in Iraq, the biggest challenge will be to recapture Mosul, the country’s second largest city, still firmly under Islamic State control. Islamic State is far from a broken force and it will test the Iraqi army as it moves on Mosul.

This much anticipated attack probably will begin soon but much will depend on the ability of Iraq to put its army in the field and sustain it through the bitter street fighting that will be needed to expel Islamic State from Mosul. Then the city will have to be rebuilt.

It used to be that national power was derived from the strength of a state’s military forces, economy, resources, territory, population and diplomacy. Not so any more. Islamic State and al-Qa’ida possess few of these things yet they are a significant threat and we are expending significant amounts of blood and treasure to protect ourselves from them.

What are we to do? We are already doing a lot, but clearly we can’t slacken off.

Offshore, we need to maintain the effort on supporting frontline states under immediate threat and, no, this doesn’t mean large numbers of combat boots on the ground. The present training and specialist support role in Iraq is a good model to follow. So is the role the RAAF is performing over Iraq and Syria. This matching of intelligence capabilities with lethal force from aircraft could, in time, be enhanced by the addition of the armed unmanned aircraft announced in the recent defence white paper.

At home we need to continue with the strategy of preparing, preventing and protecting. We should step up efforts to deny the internet to the radical Islamists as a means of recruiting and propaganda. Just shut them out of it. The tentative steps to develop a countering violent extremism program in Australia need to be intensified and enhanced. For those who left Australia to fight for Islamic State we should categorically deny them the right to return to Australia. If we have no choice other than let them return it should be straight to indefinite imprisonment.

It used to be that victory was achieved when we invaded the enemy’s territory, defeated its army on the field of battle, occupied its capital and subjugated its people. This won’t happen with Islamic State and the radical Islamists. We need to think differently about victory.

In this battle of ideology victory is unlikely to be absolute. It may just look like achieving a position where we can stop most bad things happening to us and we are able to live our lives relatively securely.

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