
ISIL POSES THREAT TO IRAQ ONE MONTH AFTER 'LIBERATION'

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Barely a month after Baghdad declared victory over ISIL, the extremist group could still recapture areas of Iraq, especially near the border with Syria, experts and officials say.

Ali Al Bayati, a commander of the Hashed Al Shaabi paramilitary units which fought alongside Iraqi security forces in a gruelling battle against the group, said the Nimrud region of northern Iraq could "fall at any time because security there is fragile".

Last July, the authorities in Baghdad announced with much fanfare the "liberation" of nearby Mosul, Iraq's second city.

ISIL fighters who fled their former stronghold and took refuge to the west, in the vast desert towards the Syrian border, have since launched attacks on security forces and civilians, Mr Bayati said.

Hiding out in valleys and gullies as well as trenches dug before their ouster from Mosul, the fighters have built up stockpiles of arms, fuel, water and food.

More than 4,000 ISIL members have been arrested in Nineveh province since Mosul's capture, according to police chief Gen Wathiq Al Hamdani.

But Aed Al Louayzi of Nineveh's provincial council said several civilians have been robbed or killed inside the city itself, some by assailants disguised as soldiers.

He says the attacks have been the work of ISIL members from the areas of Tal Afar and Hatra, both towns also recaptured last year from the extremist group.

Hisham Al Hashemi, a specialist on jihadist movements, said Iraq's announcement in December of military victory "simply means that the [black] ISIL flag is no longer flying" over government buildings.

To counter the threat of an ISIL resurgence, "several operations have been carried out south of Mosul" with US-led coalition support to seize arms, said coalition spokesman Col Ryan Dillon.

Mr Louazi said that "geographically, the territory has been retaken... but not all the jihadists there have been arrested".

"We are in the same security situation as that which led to the fall of Mosul" back in 2014, which came after the extremists had seized control of some areas, he said.

To try to avoid past mistakes, Col Dillon said, "the coalition has trained Iraqi security forces to address the transition and future threats. We knew there would be a transition from fighting to policing".

The Hashed, which is patrolling the border with war-torn Syria, says it faces infiltration attempts by jihadists on a daily basis.

Although ISIL is also on the verge of overall military defeat in Syria, it surprised observers last week by announcing a comeback in the country's northwest.

In the Hawiyah area of northern Iraq, at least three civilians and a Hashed fighter have been killed this month, according to security sources.

They said around 60 jihadists have also died in fighting around Hawiyah, one of the last ISIL urban strongholds retaken by Iraqi forces.

On Monday, a twin suicide bombing in Baghdad cost more than 30 lives, prompting prime minister Haider Al Abadi to order security forces to "eliminate ISIL sleeper cells" and protect civilians.

But Mr Hashemi said the threat is more immediate.

"This concept of sleeper cells is a mistake. They are not sleepers, they are active," he said. "They are capable of mounting attacks and even of taking control of zones."

Kaynak/Source: