Iraq: violence continues and sectarian divide widens

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In the aftermath of the destruction of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra on February 22, a wave of sectarian killings between Shiite and Sunni Muslim factions is continuing unabated in Iraq. After hundreds of deaths last week, at least 75 people were killed on Tuesday, another 26 killed on Wednesday and 36 more yesterday.

Iraqi government troops, police and interior ministry police, who are viewed by many Sunnis as little more than Shiite militiamen wearing uniforms, have come under repeated attack. A joint army-police checkpoint near Samarra was attacked yesterday. After killing six Iraqi soldiers and four police, the gunmen burnt their bodies—a deliberate act of desecration. An interior ministry policeman was killed in an ambush as his unit drove through Amariyah, one of the major Sunni suburbs of Baghdad, while four police were gunned down in Mosul.

Bombings by Sunni extremists are also indiscriminately targeting Shiite civilian areas. A bomb yesterday destroyed a minibus in the densely populated Shiite suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, killing five people and injuring 10. A suicide bomber on Tuesday blew himself up at a petrol station in the Shiite district of New Baghdad, leaving at least 23 dead and 51 wounded.

Shiite militiamen loyal to the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr or aligned with the Badr Organisation of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIRI) have taken over the streets in Shiite suburbs of Baghdad and predominantly Shiite cities across southern Iraq. Roadblocks and barriers have been flung up. Police and army units are reportedly making no attempt to curb the militias or are openly working alongside them.

The Shiite militias are blamed for ongoing attacks on Sunni civilians and religious sites. Two bombings on Tuesday in Hurriya, a Sunni suburb of Baghdad, severely damaged a Sunni mosque, killed at least 25 people and wounded 43. The same day, bombs hit the mosque in Tikrit where Saddam Hussein's father is buried.

Sunni leader Sheik Ahmed Abdul Ghafour al-Samaraie told journalists yesterday that Shiite attacks had killed 45 Sunni clerics or mosque workers since the bombing of Al-Askariya. He claimed that 37 Sunni mosques had been destroyed and 86 more damaged. Shiite militiamen, he alleged, were still occupying six other mosques.

There are conflicting reports regarding the number of deaths since the mosque bombing, but some reports place the number at well over 1,000. The *Washington Post* published an account based on a first-hand visit to the main Baghdad morgue on February 27, where workers told its correspondents that 1,300 bodies had been brought in since the sectarian killings began.

The journalists wrote: "Hundreds of unclaimed dead lay at the morgue at midday Monday—blood-caked men who had been shot, knifed, garroted or apparently suffocated by the plastic bags still over their heads. Many of the bodies were sprawled with their hands still bound—and many of them had wound up at the morgue after what their families said was their abduction by the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militia of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr."

Shiite prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari denounced the *Post* report as "inaccurate" and an "exaggeration". Jaafari, however, is closely aligned with Sadr, whose movement is one of the largest factions in the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which controls the current transitional government. Sadr has denied that his organisation carried out mass killings but every report coming from Iraq describes those attacking Sunnis as black-clad youth—the typical attire of the Mahdi Army. Most of the Sunni mosques that were damaged are only a short distance from Sadr City.

In the main, the American military has stood aside, carrying out normal patrols but not attempting to deploy into Sadr City or other Shiite areas where the Mahdi Army and other militias have mobilised in force. Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Martin-Hing, a spokeswoman for the US military, told a Tuesday press briefing: "It was Iraqi Security Forces and Iraqi police in the lead, providing for protection of the people. We were basically in support of them and ready to assist if they needed our assistance."

Sunni leaders have accused the Iraqi government forces of allowing the attacks on Sunni areas. The Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) issued a statement yesterday calling for the deployment of Sunni militias. The statement declared: "Our brothers in all areas must protect their mosques as the government has failed to do so." The Iraqi Islamic Party publicly denounced Jaafari and his government as being "in collusion with the criminals who have gone too far in

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destroying God's houses and igniting riots".

With extremist militias of both denominations coming out into the open, and the sectarian divide widening, the situation is volatile. Mortar shells are regularly being exchanged in Baghdad across the Tigris River, which separates predominantly Sunni suburbs from Shiite ones. The *Washington Post* reported on March 1 that Shiites from majority Sunni villages north of Baghdad had been ordered to leave their homes or be killed by Sunni death squads.

Iraqi political leaders of all shades have pledged to do everything they can to prevent further violence. However, the fault-lines of a bloody civil war are evident in the bitter battle that is developing over the make-up of the next Iraqi government.

The Shiite UIA won 130 of the 275 parliamentary seats in the December 15 election—more than double the number of any other coalition or party—and has made clear its intention to dominate the next cabinet. Last month, a close vote by the UIA legislators resulted in Jaafari being selected to continue as prime minister.

On Wednesday, however, the Sunni-based bloc in the parliament, the Kurdish nationalist alliance and the supporters of former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi met and issued a statement declaring that they would not accept Jaafari. They have threatened to nominate their own candidate for prime minister and seek to split factions away from the Shiite alliance unless the UIA chooses someone else. If the three formations form a bloc, they will have 133 seats.

Allawi, a former CIA asset, directly articulates Washington's new-found opposition to Shiite fundamentalist parties that have links to Iran. US criticism of the UIA has coincided with its increased denunciations of the Iranian regime.

Sunni parties blame Jaafari for allowing the activities of Shiite militias and death squads operated by the SCIRI-controlled interior ministry. The Kurdish parties view him as puppet of the Sadrists who reject outright Kurdish ambitions to incorporate the oil-rich city of Kirkuk into their northern Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

The Shiite alliance responded to the ultimatum by declaring it would not change its choice of Jaafari. A spokesman for the Sadrist movement declared the ultimatum to be "flagrant interference" and that "none of the politicians can impose their will on the people".

The result is an impasse. In the complex constitutional arrangement drawn up between the various Iraqi factions and the US occupation, the president and two vice-presidents chose the prime minister. This presidential council, however, is elected by a two-thirds majority in the parliament. With the parliament bitterly divided between the two rival camps, the entire US-constructed political process appears to be collapsing. Three and a half months after the election there is no new government and little sign that one is going to be formed anytime soon.

The instability is already having ramifications beyond Iraq's borders, as neighbouring states consider how they will respond if full-scale civil war breaks out.

On Tuesday, Jaafari visited Ankara and met Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey, which has repressed a national struggle by its Kurdish minority for decades, is deeply suspicious of the Kurdish mini-state that exists in northern Iraq. A civil war in Iraq would most likely result in the separation of the KRG from the rest of the country, with Kurdish militias seizing control of Kirkuk and the northern city of Mosul. Turkish politicians have threatened to invade to prevent the further expansion of Kurdistan, out of fears it would ultimately seek to annex the Kurdish areas of Turkey.

Jaafari's visit may have been intended as a direct threat to the Kurdish nationalists. In a breach of protocol, he travelled without notifying the current president of Iraq, Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani. Talabani responded to Jaafari's visit with a scathing public denunciation, declaring: "Al-Jaafari has no right to enter into talks or discussions with other countries while talks on forming a new government are still underway."

The prospect of civil war has provoked alarm in Washington. US National Intelligence Director John Negroponte told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday that a civil war in Iraq could draw Saudi Arabia and Jordan in on the side of Sunni Arab factions and Iran on the side of the Shiite bloc.

The US military is preparing to react with brute force. Major General Rick Lynch issued a blunt warning in response to the mobilisation of Sadr's militia yesterday, declaring "we are not going to allow him to take charge of security of any area across Iraq". An American armoured brigade in Kuwait has been placed on alert to deploy into southern Iraq. The Marine Corp reported yesterday that a marine unit that was preparing to leave the Middle East has been ordered to disembark in Kuwait "to serve as a ready reserve force in support of combat operations in Iraq".

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