

Slaughter and ethnic cleansing accelerates in Iraq

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The new Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, declared this week that a “government of national unity” would be announced over the weekend, comprising representatives of all the various ethnic and sectarian factions represented in the parliament. For the mass of the Iraqi people, both the event and the talk of unity will be meaningless. Thousands of people are being slaughtered every month in a vicious civil war between the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the US puppet government and rival Sunni Islamic militias.

There has been no let-up in the frenzy of reprisals and counter-reprisals that followed the destruction of a major Shiite mosque in February, and the massacre of hundreds of Sunnis by Shiite militias in retaliation.

Sunni extremists are conducting a campaign of indiscriminate terror against the Shiite population. On Sunday, six Shiite mosques were bombed in and around the predominantly Sunni city of Baquaba. The next day, a bus to Baquaba was pulled over by armed men. In front of their horrified Sunni colleagues, five Shiite teachers were dragged from the vehicle, lined up and shot in the head. On Tuesday, five people were gunned down in the car park of a Baghdad Shiite prayer hall. As a crowd gathered around their bodies, a car bomb was detonated, killing another 14 people and wounding 33. The following day, at least five roadside bombs were exploded in Shiite suburbs, killing at least four people and wounding an unknown number more.

Shiite death squads are murdering hundreds of Sunni Iraqis who they consider to be sympathisers of the anti-occupation insurgency or the former Baathist regime. The main Shiite organisations being blamed are the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Mahdi Army militia of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Even according to official figures, at least 762

people were killed in Baghdad during April. While the majority of victims were Sunnis, others—such as liberal intellectuals, gays and liquor sellers—were killed because their lifestyle, beliefs or occupation were anathema to the religious fanatics.

Many of the victims have been seized from their homes or the streets by men dressed in the uniforms of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi police and interior ministry commandos. Before they were killed, many were hideously tortured. An editorial in the Iraqi journal *Azzaman* noted on May 8: “These killers are not satisfied to kill their victims and then pass their bodies to their bereaved families... The killers have currently immersed further into sadism and criminality. They now slit the throats of their victims, dig holes into their bodies and dump them on the piles of garbage dotting Iraqi cities.”

Residents of Sunni districts of Baghdad live in such fear of the police and interior ministry forces that they have formed their own militias or requested protection from Sunni guerilla groups. At other times, Sunni leaders have appealed to Iraqi army units made up of Sunni Arabs or ethnic Kurds to defend them. The majority of Iraqi Kurds follow the Sunni branch of Islam. Army units reportedly joined with a Sunni militia in the suburb of Adhamiya last month to fight off Shiite police and militiamen they alleged were coming into the area to destroy a mosque.

The sectarian divisions within the US-trained and equipped Iraqi security forces led to another open clash last week in Balad—a predominantly Shiite city. Kurdish troops based outside the town who were taking a wounded soldier to the hospital were stopped at gunpoint by members of a largely Shiite unit. The Kurds opened fire, killing at least one of the Shiites. While the confrontation was rapidly brought to an end,

an Iraqi officer told the *New York Times*: “There is a big sensitivity to Kurds in this place. The people in Balad are very Shia. They don’t like to have Kurds in this place.”

Although the violence is most intense in Baghdad, it is taking place across Iraq. In cities and towns across the country, people living in areas where their religious denomination is a minority are coming under both psychological and physical pressure to move out. At least 100,000 people, mainly Shiites, have been forced to flee from their homes by death threats.

In Basra, Iraq’s second largest city, which has a predominantly Shiite population, the Sunni minority has lived in terror since the US invasion. Hundreds have been murdered. In a report that journalist Steven Vincent filed with *Mother Jones* last July—before he was murdered for documenting the activities of Shiite death squads—a young woman told him: “To be a Sunni in Basra today is a crime.”

The killing in Basra is now taking place at a level that rivals Baghdad. A defence ministry official told the *Independent* this month that one person is being assassinated every hour—more than 600 a month. SCIRI and rival Shiite factions are fighting one another for control of the provincial and city governments, while at the same time continuing a bloody campaign of vengeance against Sunnis and former members of the Baath Party.

US imperialism bears full responsibility for the ethno-religious divisions and bloodletting. From the time of the 2003 invasion, the US has pursued a divide-and-rule policy. It encouraged Kurdish nationalists and Shiite fundamentalists to collaborate with the occupation on the promise they would be able to supplant the Sunni Arab ruling elite that the Baathist regime had rested upon. Above all, the US occupation has offered them a small share in the wealth that will be plundered when Iraq’s massive reserves of oil and gas are opened up to American and other international energy corporations.

Most of the oil and gas reserves are in the predominantly Shiite south and in areas of northern Iraq that Kurdish nationalists claim. The new constitution that was adopted last December, therefore, established the mechanisms for the de-facto partition of Iraq into three or more “regional” governments that would have control over all new energy production in

their territory. The three northern provinces of Iraq are already ruled by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which has signed a number of contracts with foreign companies to begin drilling for untapped oil.

The calculations underlying the constitution are nothing less than murderous. While oil and gas will eventually be pumped from relatively stable regions in the south and north, Kurdish and Shiite security forces will assist the US military to brutally repress the majority Sunni population in Baghdad and the central and western provinces. The slaughter now taking place across the country is the inevitable, and predictable, consequence.



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