

Sectarian violence escalates in Iraq

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Bombings, killings and kidnappings are being carried out almost hourly in US-occupied Iraq. In the midst of the violence, the targeted killing of more than 40 Sunnis by Shiite gunmen in a Baghdad street this month stands out as a particularly brutal sectarian atrocity.

In the bloodiest street killings by militia in the capital since the US occupation, masked gunmen drove into the Jihad district and set up a roadblock on a main road on July 9. For several hours, the black-clothed men stopped cars in broad daylight, checked identification cards and murdered anyone with a Sunni name. Militia members also broke into nearby homes to kill the Sunni occupants and burn their houses.

Sad Jawad al-Azzawi, a Shiite shopkeeper, told Associated Press that he saw the armed men pull four people from a car and detain them by the road while they grabbed another five from a minivan. "After ten minutes, the gunman took the nine people to a place a few metres away from the market and opened fire on them," he said.

The calculated murder of Sunnis on such a large scale in a religiously mixed neighborhood is a further development in the escalating civil war in Iraq, which has spiraled since the bombing of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque in February this year. The killings are alleged to have been carried out by members of the Shiite Mahdi Army, led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in revenge for the bombing of the Zahra Shiite mosque in Baghdad, which killed at least eight people.

After the Jihad district slaughter, politicians in Iraq warned that the country might be on the edge of civil war after three years and three months of US occupation. Iraq's President Jalal Talabani said Iraq stood "in front of a dangerous precipice." Talabani's security advisor Wafiq al-Samaraie told Al Jazeera television that, "we are at the gates of civil war" unless "exceptional measures are taken."

The numbers killed in sectarian violence are now significantly higher than those killed by US, British, other coalition troops and the Iraqi army and police. The Jihad district killings have further fuelled communal hatreds and reprisal attacks. According to available reports, in the four days after the murders, another 140 Iraqis were violently murdered. In apparent revenge attacks on July 10, a car bomb near a repair shop in a poor Shiite area in Baghdad's Sadr City killed eight people and injured over forty. When crowds gathered to see the blast site, a suicide bomber detonated a second vehicle.

Later in the day, gunmen murdered seven on a bus in the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Amariyah in western Baghdad. On the same day in Kirkuk, in the north of Iraq, a suicide bomber killed five and wounded twelve when he attacked the office of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

On July 11, men seized an Iraqi diplomat who was driving near his Baghdad home while on leave from his Iranian post in the city of Kermanshah, which has a large Kurdish population. The same day, gunmen intercepted a minivan in the Baghdad neighborhood of Dora,

killing 10 Shiites. In a further attack, three cars full of men attacked a Saudi Arabian import/export company in western Baghdad, killing five.

In what is a common style of attack, suicide bombers struck a restaurant frequented by Iraqi policemen 100 metres from the fortified Green Zone entrance. Fifteen police and civilians died in the blast, according to US military sources. On the same day near Mosul, 10 policemen, who were part of an oil-protection force, were killed in clashes with insurgents.

On July 13, in a high profile incident, gunmen killed Iraq's national wrestling team coach in a failed abduction. Following this incident, kidnappers seized the head of Iraq's Olympic committee, more than 10 other sports officials and the president of one of Iraq's state-owned oil companies.

On July 16, 26 people were killed and 22 wounded when a suicide bomber targeted a cafe full of mainly Shiites in Tuz Khormato, a mostly Turkmen populated city 200 kilometres north of Baghdad. Members of the minority Turkmen population are known to follow both the Sunni and Shiite sects.

Recent figures confirm that the violence is spiraling. War-related deaths recorded by Iraq's Health Ministry have tripled from 334 in May 2004 to 1,154 in May 2006. According to figures obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*, 2,532 Iraqis were killed due to violence in May 2006. Baghdad's central morgue, which records separate deaths for the Iraqi Health Ministry, said it had received 1,595 bodies in June, a 16 percent rise since May.

"Everything has increased," said one official in the Health Ministry who spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* anonymously. "Bombings have increased, shootings have increased."

Almost 75 percent of those who died violently were killed in "terrorist acts," typically bombings, according to Health Ministry records. The records classify the remaining 25 percent of deaths as resulting from military clashes. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that a "health official described these victims as "innocent bystanders," many shot by Iraqi or American troops, in crossfire or accidentally at checkpoints."

In total, the *Los Angeles Times* has estimated that from the beginning of the US occupation in March 2003 to May 2006, at least 50,000 Iraqis have died violently. The figures obtained from the Baghdad morgue, the Health Ministry and other agencies underestimate the actual situation because of the poor reporting in many provinces.

Although the media largely concentrates on the sectarian violence, US, British and other coalition troops, as well as Iraqi troops and police continue to carry out arrests, shootings, aerial attacks, rapes, torture and other violent acts.

In the month before the latest suburban killings, US and Iraqi troops unleashed a security crackdown in Baghdad involving an estimated

75,000 troops and police. “Operation Forward Together”, which began on June 10, used humvees and Bradley fighting vehicles, along with air attacks, in an attempt to crack down on opponents of the US occupation and restore order in Baghdad. The operation included the imposition of a 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew on Baghdad residents and an 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. curfew on vehicle traffic.

Little has been reported about the operation. However, on June 12, Multinational Force Iraq spokesman Major General Bill Caldwell said that after 48 hours of the ongoing operation, coalition forces had conducted “140 company and above level operations.” Without mentioning civilian casualties, Caldwell said “32 anti-Iraqi elements were killed and 178 detained.”

Despite the operation being touted by the US as a measure by the new Iraqi government to restore order and end the violence in Baghdad, the murders and security situation has worsened.

Following the Jihad district murders and the obvious failure of “Operation Forward Together”, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld flew into Iraq on July 12 for crisis talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and members of his Cabinet.

Rumsfeld tried to put a positive spin on the situation as Bush administration claims of progress in Iraq—that democracy is flourishing, that the government is one of national unity and that the Iraqi security forces are becoming a credible force—are being exposed as transparent lies.

Trying to downplay the prospect of more US troops in Iraq before the upcoming Congressional elections, Rumsfeld told the media that the problems were primarily a “political task” not a military one. He said that the Iraqi government would have “to engage in a reconciliation process” between Sunnis and Shiites.

Addressing the media with Rumsfeld, General George Casey, the senior US commander in Iraq, admitted that there had been a recent “spike in violence here in Baghdad” and that the US may need more troops in the city. Casey’s comments are revealing, given that he knows that talk of increased troop numbers will be damaging to the Republican Party ahead of the November elections. Casey could not deny the need for more troops, because he is well aware that Bush administration claims that Iraqi forces are gradually taking over security are totally unreal. Earlier, Rumsfeld admitted that the number of US troops in Baghdad had recently grown from 40,000 to about 55,000.

Iraq’s prime minister sounded a fatalistic note when referring to his “national reconciliation plan”, which is aimed at co-opting leaders of opposition and insurgent groups to submit to the US-led occupation by participating in the US-backed Iraqi parliament. Maliki said the plan was Iraq’s “last chance” to dampen the violence. “If it fails, I don’t know what the destiny of Iraq will be,” he told an assembled group of Iraqi politicians.

The day before Rumsfeld’s visit, US ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington that Iraq was not facing civil war, but acknowledged that “Operation Forward Together” had failed in its objectives.

Khalilzad made some revealing comments about the nature of the violence. “A year ago, terrorism and the insurgency against the coalition and the Iraqi security forces were the principal source of instability,” he said. “Particularly since the bombing of the Golden Mosque in February, violent sectarianism is now the main challenge. This sectarianism is the source of frequent tragedies on the streets of Baghdad.”

But it is precisely the US occupation that has generated the escalating sectarian violence. Although Washington denies paying, arming and training ethnic militias, the US military has worked with Shiite and Kurdish militia groups in its violent crackdowns against Sunni areas that are supporting the anti-occupation forces. Military and political sources have long acknowledged the US backing of militia and commando units. In June 2005, for example, Thomas X Hammes, a former Marine officer and counterinsurgency expert spoke to the *New York Times* about the link. “Our policy [in Iraq] is to equip those who are the most effective fighters. [These commando units] may be a marriage of convenience and ultimately may be absorbed into the army or disbanded.”

It is worth noting that the civil war is seen as a desired outcome by sections of the ruling elite in the US. In March, influential director of the neo-conservative Middle East Forum, Daniel Pipes, argued that civil war in Iraq would create a US strategic advantage because it would “reduce coalition casualties” as Iraqis “fight each other”.

Whether the Bush administration has consciously stoked civil war or not, its policies have had that effect. In order to form a basis for rule in Baghdad and the south, the US has encouraged Shiite clergy and fundamentalist movements. In the north, it is supporting Kurdish nationalist political parties and militias. The minority Sunni population, which formed a large portion of the ruling elite and middle class under the Iraqi Baathist government, has been hit by a general decline in living standards. By pitting different religious and ethnic groups against each other in the context of ever-worsening conditions for the majority of ordinary Iraqis, the US government has fostered ethnic-based tensions and animosities.

The claim that the parties that make up the US puppet regime in Iraq, which are linked to ethnic based militia and rely on the support of figures like Moqtada Al-Sadr, can create national unity was shown to be bogus within months of the government’s formation. The main Sunni Arab political group, the Iraqi Islamic Party, which holds 44 of the 275 seats, boycotted parliament after Tayseer Najah al-Mashhadani, a politician in the bloc, was abducted in Baghdad on July 1 by Shiite militiamen. Many Sunni politicians have accused the Shiite political parties of supporting militias and stacking government security forces with ethnic militia members.

These divisions erupted again in the aftermath of the Jihad killings, when Iraq’s deputy Prime Minister Salam al-Zubaie, a Sunni, accused the Iraqi security forces of facilitating them. “There are officers who instead of being in charge should be questioned and referred to judicial authorities,” he told Al Jazeera television. Underscoring the fierce divisions that plague the so-called government of national unity, the prime minister’s office responded by saying that al-Zubaie’s comments “do not represent the government’s point of view.”



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