

Sectarian rifts in Iraqi government intensify

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The kidnapping on November 14 of dozens of Sunni Arab employees at Iraq's higher education ministry and government threats to arrest a leading Sunni cleric have sparked another bloody escalation in sectarian violence across the country. Sunni political parties are under pressure to walk out of the "national unity" cabinet of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad.

Interior Minister Jawad Bolani announced on national television last Thursday that he had ordered the arrest of Harith Dhari, the head of the Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the main umbrella organisation of the Sunni clergy. Bolani declared the Sunni leader had been "inciting violence" by condemning Sunni tribes in western Iraq who had agreed to cooperate with the US occupation.

The announcement provoked furious denunciations. The warrant against Dhari was viewed as a sectarian attack, aimed at eliminating one of the most prominent Sunni spokesmen. Dhari is currently in Jordan so was effectively exiled by the threat.

Adding to Sunni anger, the warrant was issued just two days after the brazen raid on the Sunni-controlled higher education ministry, during which alleged Shiite militiamen, dressed in the uniforms of interior ministry police commandos, kidnapped dozens of Sunni employees in broad daylight. While Maliki's government is claiming that all the victims were released unharmed, Sunni politicians insist that as many as 80 are still missing.

Since the interior ministry came under the control of the Shiite parties in 2005, thousands of Sunnis—particularly former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party—have been seized and brutally murdered by death squads made up of men wearing police or Iraqi military uniforms. Militias of the Shiite parties, which have thoroughly infiltrated the US-created Iraqi security forces, are considered to be responsible.

AMS representative Mohammed Bashar Faidi gave vent to Sunni rage by declaring that the warrant against Dhari "represents the bankruptcy of a sectarian government" and accused Bolani—a Shiite politician—of "covering for militias that are killing the Iraqi people". Salim Abdullah Jabouri, a spokesman for the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front, declared that Maliki's government was "either weak, in collusion with the kidnappers or has lost control of the militias". Sunni clerics across Iraq condemned the threat against Dhari during last Friday's prayers.

Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, denounced the threat to arrest Dhari as "destructive to the national reconciliation plan" that led Sunni parties to join Maliki's cabinet. Under pressure from Washington, Maliki's Shiite coalition gave all parliamentary factions positions in the government. Members of the Sunni parties

hold ministries such as defence and higher education, as well as several minor posts.

Over recent months, the Bush administration has been pressuring the Shiite bloc to give an even greater role to Sunnis in the hope that it will lead a significant number of the Sunni insurgents to end their guerilla war against American forces. At the same time, the US is putting intense pressure on Maliki to sanction a crackdown against Shiite militias connected to parties in his coalition.

Maliki's failure to pursue policies of "national reconciliation"—a codeword for political overtures to the Sunni establishment and former Baathists—is one of the chief criticisms of the Bush administration and US commentators. There has been repeated speculation in the US and Iraq that the White House has prepared plans for the overthrow of the Shiite coalition and the installation of some form of military junta.

To prevent a Sunni walkout—and further recriminations from Washington—Maliki distanced his government from the threat to arrest Dhari. According to a revised statement, a warrant had not been issued and the Sunni cleric was simply being "investigated". A senior Iraqi Accordance Front leader, Ayad al-Samarraie, subsequently announced that the Sunni parties would, for the time being, remain in the government as Maliki had given a personal guarantee that Dhari would not be detained.

The kidnapping and Dhari episode, however, have aggravated the bitter divisions between Sunni and Shiite factions of the Iraqi elite. The discussions within the highly guarded Green Zone, where the parliament and US embassy are located, are largely irrelevant to the rival organisations that are waging a brutal sectarian war on the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

Associated Press reported on Sunday: "The numbers are staggering—in the past eight days, 714 Iraqis have fallen victim to the country's sectarian bloodbath. They've been beheaded, tortured and blown up while looking for work. They've been shot, kidnapped and felled by mortars. The number of killings in the past eight days is more than all but a few US states see in a year. Iraq's death toll has reached at least 1,319 already in November, well above the 1,216 who died in all of October, which was the deadliest month in Iraq since the Associated Press began tracking the figure in April 2005."

On Sunday alone, 112 people died. Car bombs were detonated in a Shiite district of Baghdad, killing 11 people and wounding over 50. The tortured bodies of 45 people, assumed to be the victims of Shiite death squads, were found dumped in various parts of the capital. A Sunni suicide bomber blew up a vehicle in the Shiite city of Hillah, slaughtering 22 day-labourers as they waited for work and injuring at least 40 others.

A wave of assassinations and kidnappings targeting Shiite politicians is also taking place. Ali al-Adhath, a senior leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Maliki's choice as Iraq's UN representative, was murdered in his house on Saturday. His wife was also killed. On Sunday, armed men took the Shiite deputy health minister, Ammar al-Saffar, from his home. His fate is unknown.

The carnage continued unabated on Monday, with over 90 people reported killed, including 60 in Baghdad. One of Iraq's leading comedians, Walid Hassan, whose program has satirised the US occupation and its claim of bringing "democracy," was murdered as he tried to fight off attempted kidnappers. University lecturers were gunned down in the capital and the northern city of Mosul. In a second attack on leading figures within the health ministry, assailants attacked a convoy protecting a second Shiite deputy health minister, killing two of his bodyguards. Another Shiite parliamentarian narrowly escaped a roadside bomb.

The Shiite Sadrist movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr controls the health ministry. The attacks against it are, with little doubt, acts of revenge by Sunni extremists. Elements of the Sadrist Madhi Army militia have been accused by Sunni parties of carrying out the kidnappings at the education ministry.

Over the weekend and on Monday, US and Iraqi government troops carried out night-time raids into the stronghold of the Madhi Army, the predominantly Shiite working class suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, ostensibly searching for the kidnap victims. None were found.

US operations against the Mahdi Army have caused sharp rifts between the Maliki government and Washington in recent months. The Sadrists are Maliki's main support base within the Shiite coalition. Earlier this month, he ordered the US military to dismantle roadblocks erected around Sadr City as part of searches for a missing American soldier.

The sectarian violence is the direct outcome of US policies since March 2003. In the initial stages of the occupation, the Sunni population was subjected to mass repression in an effort to suppress any resistance from supporters of Hussein's regime to the US takeover. The US occupiers initiated a program of "deBaathification," encouraging Shiite parties in the US puppet government, such as SCIRI, to persecute former members of the Baath Party. Sunni extremists responded to their political marginalisation by killing Shiites, unleashing the vicious cycle of revenge now taking place.

The consequences of Iraq's disintegration along sectarian lines were summed up in the grim testimony to the Congress last week by Defence Intelligence Agency director Michael Maples and CIA director Michael Hayden.

Maples described the situation as "an atmosphere of fear and hardening sectarianism which is empowering militias and vigilante groups, hastening middle class exodus, and shaking confidence in government and security forces". Hayden declared that the "longer this goes on, the less controlled the violence is, the more the violence devolves down to the neighbourhood level... The centre disappears and normal people acting not irrationally end up acting like extremists". The sectarian conflict, he said, is "descending into smaller and smaller groups, fighting over smaller and smaller

issues, over smaller and smaller pieces of territory".

Maples said the violence was driven by "an intra-Arab struggle to determine how power and authority will be distributed". In a pointed reference to the tensions being created by US pressure for concessions to the Sunni establishment, Hayden warned that the Shiite parties—who experienced decades of repression at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime—were determined to keep their grip over the new Iraqi state. Their fear of a "return to Baathism is almost palpable".

For the Iraqi people, the current state of affairs constitutes a living hell. More than 600,000 have been killed, millions maimed or traumatised, over 1.6 million driven from their homes and an entire society brought to the brink of collapse.

For the American ruling elite, which aspired to use the Iraq war to reorganise the Middle East and its oil under US domination, the outcome of the invasion is a disaster. After three and a half years, instability has prevented any real progress toward opening up Iraq's oil resources to US energy conglomerates. Some 150,000 troops are tied down by the anti-occupation insurgency in Iraq, mass antiwar sentiment has developed among the American people and the US position on the world stage has been eroded.

The criminality of the entire US enterprise in Iraq is epitomised by the "change of course" now being discussed in Washington. To salvage US interests, plans are being made to kill even more Iraqis. Just weeks after an election in which the American people repudiated Bush's war policies, military planners and politicians are exploiting the sectarian nightmare created by the US occupation to justify a substantial increase in US troop numbers and a campaign to "stabilise" Baghdad.

Translated out of clinical military jargon, the term "stabilise" means a bloody operation to destroy the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militias. These are viewed as the main obstacle to forcing the Maliki government to agree to a US-dictated settlement with Sunni elements of the anti-occupation insurgency.

The repeated US incursions now taking place into Sadr City portend the operation's beginning. In a November 20 press conference in Baghdad, US general William Casey declared that while Maliki was seeking to disarm Shiite militias, "there's going to be those elements that are irreconcilable, that aren't going to be able to work through the political process, and those will be dealt with in a kinetic manner with direct action".

The following day, US and Iraqi troops, backed by helicopter gunships, clashed with the Mahdi Army and killed two men and a six-month old baby during the third nighttime raid in four days, sparking fury across the Shiite suburb.



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