

More than 200 dead in Baghdad's deadliest day of bombings

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Sectarian warfare in Iraq further escalated on Thursday after more than 200 people died and at least 250 were wounded in Baghdad, in the deadliest single day of attacks since the US invasion in 2003.

A coordinated series of car bombs ripped through Sadr City, creating havoc in crowded marketplaces and intersections of the working class Shiite suburb, which is the stronghold of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his militia—the Mahdi Army. According to police, the first suicide bomber struck at around 3.15 p.m. at a checkpoint leading to the area. Two other suicide car bombs and two unattended car bombs followed in rapid succession. Mortar shells also struck the area.

“The car bombings destroyed dozens of other vehicles, scattered charred and mangled bodies and sent flames and thick pillars of smoke into the air. Frenzied crowds clawed through the wreckage, pulling bloodied bodies from trapped vehicles and taking them away in wooden carts,” the *New York Times* reported. “Residents and Shiite militiamen flooded the streets, firing assault rifles into the air, shouting epithets against Sunni Arabs, the American authorities and the Iraq government, and vowing revenge.”

The carnage in Sadr City followed an attack on the Health Ministry earlier the same day. Several mortar rounds hit the building followed by fire from gunmen stationed on the tops of nearby buildings. Hundreds of employees were kept pinned down as security guards attempted to keep the attackers at bay. Health Minister Ali al-Shemari is one of al-Sadr's supporters and the ministry is widely regarded as a Sadrist bastion.

In a live interview on Iraqi TV, Deputy Health Minister Hakim Zamili accused Iraqi soldiers of doing nothing to stop the attack. “We can see the terrorists through the windows, moving freely. Nobody is stopping them,” he said. A spokesman Qasim Yahia

Allawi later accused the Iraqi army of not responding to calls for assistance during the three-hour siege. The attackers only dispersed after US helicopters finally reached the area.

The assault is the latest in a series of attacks on the Health Ministry and its officials. Zamili narrowly escaped an ambush on Monday when gunmen attacked his convoy, killing two of his guards. The previous day, another Shiite deputy health minister, Ammar al-Saffar, was seized from his home. His fate is still unknown.

The cycle of sectarian attacks and reprisals by rival Shiite and Sunni militias has intensified since the bombing of the Al-Askariya mosque in the city of Samarra in February. But there is every reason to believe that Thursday's large-scale slaughter in Sadr City is not simply part of the ongoing violence. Like the attack on the mosque, it is a deliberate provocation aimed at inflaming sectarian hatreds and heightening the atmosphere of political uncertainty and instability. While extremist Sunni militia may well have been responsible, in the current political climate nothing can be ruled out, including the possible complicity of US occupation forces.

The bombings took place amid an intense debate within the Bush administration and American ruling circles over the future course of the US occupation. The bipartisan Iraqi Study Group headed by James Baker and Lee Hamilton is widely expected to recommend, not a reduction, but a substantial increase in the number of US troops in Iraq with the aim of imposing “stability” in Baghdad in particular.

The prime target of such a move is no secret. The Bush administration has been pressuring the puppet Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki for months to endorse a massive crackdown on the Shiite militia, particularly the Madhi army in Sadr City. Al-

Sadr, while indicating his willingness to accommodate to the US occupation by participating in the US-backed government, has nevertheless repeatedly called for a timetable for US withdrawal. His social base among working class Shiites is deeply hostile to the US presence and the devastation it has wrought.

The discussions in Washington about Iraq have been accompanied by numerous hints that the Maliki government may have to be removed if it refuses to follow US dictates. Maliki is based on a Shiite coalition that includes the Sadrist who hold 30 parliamentary seats and a number of important ministries. He has been reluctant to permit a massive military operation against Sadr City, which would only result in a further erosion of Shiite support for his government.

Maliki is due to fly to Jordan next Wednesday for direct talks with President Bush. The main purpose of the meeting can only be to issue an ultimatum to Maliki to take action against the Shiite militia or face the consequences. Whatever the prime minister decides will plunge his government—which is completely dependent on US political, economic and military support—further into crisis.

In the wake of Thursday's bombings, the Sadrist movement has issued its own ultimatum to Maliki: cancel the trip to Jordan, or it will withdraw support for the government. On Friday, Saleh al-Iqaili, a pro-Sadr parliamentarian, angrily blamed the US presence in Iraq for the attacks, saying: "The occupation forces should shoulder the full responsibility for these deeds, and we call on them to end their rule in Iraq by withdrawal or at least setting a timetable for withdrawal."

Al-Iqaili went on to warn: "If the security situation does not improve, as well as the issue of basic services, and if the prime minister does not retreat from his intent to meet the criminal Bush in Amman, we will suspend our membership in the Iraqi parliament and the government." In his Friday sermon, al-Sadr reiterated his call for a timetable for US withdrawal and made an appeal to Sunni cleric Sheik Harith al-Dhari to issue a religious edict outlawing the murder of Shiites.

Desperate to contain the situation, President Jalal Talibani, a Kurd, appeared on TV, with the country's Shiite and Sunni vice-presidents, to make a joint appeal for calm. The government imposed an indefinite curfew on Baghdad and closed the capital's airport to civilian aircraft. But the measures had little effect as Shiite

militia carried out reprisals yesterday on Sunni neighbourhoods—including on several mosques. In a particularly gruesome attack, it was reported that six Sunnis were seized, doused in kerosene and burned alive as they left Friday prayers.

The chief responsibility for this sectarian bloodbath rests with the Bush administration. From the outset, the illegal US occupation of Iraq based itself on Shiite and Kurdish parties and encouraged the persecution of the Sunni minority, on which the Saddam Hussein regime rested. Having provoked a determined Sunni armed resistance, the US is now seeking to incorporate sections of the Sunni elite into the Baghdad government as a means of undermining Sunni insurgents.

Far from creating a "national unity" government, the US encouragement of communal politics has fuelled sectarian tensions and turned Baghdad into a battleground of rival Shiite and Sunni militias. Having generated a sectarian nightmare, the Bush administration is exploiting the situation to justify not only the continuing US occupation, but preparations for a bloody military crackdown in Baghdad. The pretext could well be provided by continuing the recent provocative forays by the US military into Sadr City.



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