

Anger erupts in Iraq over Baghdad bombings

James Cogan
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Four more bombings on Wednesday by suspected Sunni fanatics have left Shiite districts of Baghdad in a state of grief, shock and outrage against the US military and the Iraqi government, which claimed the current US-led security crackdown against Shiite militias would not leave the population vulnerable to attack. In one of the bloodiest days of the occupation, more than 200 people were killed and over 250 wounded.

Massive bombs were detonated at a checkpoint in Sadr City, the working class stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and in a busy market in Sadriya. Smaller explosions occurred outside a hospital in the upper-class Shiite suburb of Karrada and on a bus in Rusafi, one of city's main retail districts before the 2003 invasion. In each case, the objective was to indiscriminately kill as many Shiite civilians as possible.

Until the Bush administration announced its Baghdad "surge" in January and declared it would crackdown on Shiite militias, all of the targeted areas had been defended to some extent by the Mahdi Army. However, on the urging of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Moqtada al-Sadr ordered his fighters to go to ground in order to avoid clashes with the US military.

Sunni extremists, embittered by the rise to power of Shiite sectarian parties since 2003, have taken advantage of the militia stand-down over the past two months to carry out repeated sectarian atrocities.

In Sadr City, a suicide bomber was able to exploit US security measures directed against the Mahdi Army. He detonated his explosives-filled car while waiting in a queue of vehicles to pass through a recently erected check-point. At least eight cars were destroyed, 35 people killed and another 75 wounded. One of the US "security stations" that have been established in the Shiite working class district over the past month was less than 200 metres away.

In Karrada, a car bomb left parked outside a hospital was exploded at noon, killing 11 people and wounding 13. The blowing up of a bus in Rusafi killed four and wounded six.

The largest death toll on Wednesday was caused by the bombing of a market in the predominantly Shiite suburb of Sadriya. At least 140 people were killed and another 150

wounded. The number of dead made it the single worst suicide bombing since the US occupation began.

The final death toll will be far higher than 140 however. The World Health Organisation reported on Tuesday that Iraq's hospitals are so dysfunctional that "70 percent of all critically injured patients with violence-related wounds die in emergency and intensive care units due to a shortage of competent staff and a lack of drugs and equipment".

Many of the dead and wounded were low-income day labourers, employed to rebuild the shops and businesses that were destroyed by the bombing of the same market on February 3, in which 137 people were killed. Wednesday's massive car bomb was detonated at 4 p.m. at an intersection near a market exit where the labourers queued at the end of the work day for buses and taxis to go home.

A number of waiting vehicles were incinerated. A witness told Reuters: "I saw dozens of dead bodies. Some people were burned alive inside minibuses. Nobody could reach them after the explosion. Women were screaming and shouting for their loved ones who died." A shopkeeper said: "The street was transformed into a swimming pool of blood."

Adding to the terror, a sniper operating from the adjacent suburb of Fadhil, where Sunni extremists are known to be active, opened fire on rescuers seeking to give assistance to the wounded. According to witnesses cited by the *New York Times*, at least three people were gunned down. Nervous Iraqi government troops inflicted more casualties, opening fire on a taxi that sped past taking wounded people to hospital.

Survivors and rescue workers vented their anger against American and Iraqi troops deployed on the scene, pelting them with rocks. Crowds chanted "Down with Maliki". Journalists heard a man scream: "Where's Maliki? Let him come and see what is happening here." Others shouted: "Where's the security plan? We are not protected by this plan."

The US military's crackdown on the Mahdi Army was also condemned. A merchant told the *Guardian*: "How is it that everyone knows where these killers are coming from, yet nobody can do anything to stop them?" A Mahdi Army

commander stated: “Washington calls us the greatest threat to peace in Iraq, but who is defending our citizens from Al Qaeda and the *takfiris* (Sunni sectarian extremists)?”

The outpouring of anger highlights the reasons for the resignation of six members of Moqtada al-Sadr’s political movement from Maliki’s cabinet on Monday.

The Sadrists derive their support from the Shiite working class and urban poor in Baghdad and southern Iraqi cities, who are overwhelmingly hostile to the US occupation. Since ending a short-lived uprising in 2004, however, Sadr’s movement has played a pivotal role in supporting pro-occupation Shiite parties, including Maliki’s Da’wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The Sadrists have channelled working class opposition behind the Shiite-dominated Maliki government, promising it would improve living standards, guarantee security and set a clear timetable for the withdrawal of the despised foreign forces.

Less than 12 months after they helped form Maliki’s government, it has become untenable for the Sadrists to claim that the US puppet government can meet any of the aspirations of the Iraqi masses. To hold onto their own social base, they have been compelled to somewhat distance themselves. The Sadrists still form part of the ruling Shiite coalition and remain in parliament.

The purpose of the US occupation is not “democracy” but to ensure that the Iraqi government, regardless of who heads it, is subservient to the long-term US objectives. In defiance of the will of the overwhelmingly majority of Iraqis, Washington is demanding the sell-off of the country’s state-owned oil industry and the sanctioning of permanent American military bases that will facilitate US acts of aggression against Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Bush administration has insisted that the Maliki government push the necessary legislation through the Iraqi parliament to provide a figleaf of legitimacy for the US agenda. If Maliki fails, the White House has made little secret of the fact that it will replace him with a military strongman who will. The US escalation announced in January is aimed at physically repressing every potential current of opposition, with the growing Mahdi Army at the top of the list.

As a consequence, Shiite districts such as Sadr City are now facing incursions by US troops as well as increased attacks by Sunni extremists such as Wednesday’s bombings. At the same time, there is a humanitarian and social catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands of people have died under the occupation and the number climbs by the hundreds each week due to the US operations and sectarian atrocities. The economy is in ruins and unemployment is 50 percent. As many as two million people have fled the country, while

another two million have been forced to flee from their homes.

In horrifying figures published on Tuesday, the World Health Organisation estimated that 80 percent of the population does not have effective sanitation or sewage; 70 percent have no clean water; 40 percent have no access to public food distribution; chronic malnutrition affects 21 percent of children; and preventable illnesses such as diarrhea and acute respiratory infections cause two-thirds of deaths among children under five. Working class areas are the worst affected.

Responding to the rising popular anger, Sadrist leaders issued scathing condemnations of the occupation following Wednesday’s bombing. Nassar al-Rubaie, one of the ministers who resigned at the beginning of the week, declared that Sunni extremists “target everything that has life in Iraq—universities, schools, neighborhood centres, markets, gas stations and bus stations—but the occupation forces and the government stand still, doing nothing, and let the terrorists play”.

Sadr’s spokesman, Abdul Razaq al-Nadawi, stated: “The Iraqi government is incapable of establishing security as long as occupation forces are still present. We are pessimistic and afraid of the coming days, because Iraqis are getting fed up. And when nations are provoked, governments cannot stop them.”

The pent-up hostility among Shiites against the US occupation and the government is clearly reaching breaking point. An estimated one million people assembled in the city of Najaf on April 9 to take part in an Iraqi nationalist rally called by Sadr to demand the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country. Between 20,000 and 30,000 took part in a Sadrist protest in Basra last week to demand the resignation of the provincial governor over the appalling living conditions that face the population. Media reports suggest that Sadr loyalists would win control of most of the south if elections were ever held for the provincial governments.

Four years of brutal US occupation are creating the conditions for a looming political confrontation between the Iraqi masses and the occupiers.



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