

Iraqi parliament bombing: a sign of deepening crisis

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The bombing inside the Iraqi parliament last Thursday has underscored the deepening quagmire created by the US-led invasion and occupation. Four years after American troops entered Baghdad, nowhere in the country—including the heavily fortified and guarded Green Zone where the huge US embassy and Iraqi government offices are also sited—is invulnerable to attack.

Details of the bombing remain sketchy. The initial death toll was revised sharply downwards on Friday from eight civilians to just one—Mohammed Awad, a Sunni legislator belonging to National Dialogue Front. More than 20 people were injured, including seven other parliamentarians, when the bomb detonated in the café area just outside the main hall around 2.30 p.m.

A suicide bomber was apparently responsible, but it remains unclear how he was able to penetrate the multiple layers of security required to enter the Green Zone and then the parliament building. According to a BBC report, there are up to eight separate checks for visitors entering the parliamentary zone, which may include body searches, sniffer dogs and various scanning devices. Before entering the parliament a visitor must be met outside by his or her sponsor.

As a symbol of the detested US occupation, the Green Zone has been previously attacked by insurgent groups. Late last month UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon was shaken by a mortar round that landed inside the Green Zone near the building where he was holding a press conference. On March 23, Deputy Prime Minister Salam al-Zubaie was hospitalised after a bomb exploded near his compound at the edge of the Green Zone. Several weeks ago two “suicide belts” were reportedly found in the zone.

An organisation calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq claimed responsibility for the latest bombing in a web

site statement, hailing “a heroic knight” who “managed to infiltrate into the midst of the apostates of the so-called parliament”. Several parliamentary canteen workers have been held for questioning.

The US military immediately sought to play down the high profile attack, claiming that the Bush administration’s “surge” strategy in Iraq was working. Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno told the media that progress is “not about one or single events; it’s about an overall feeling of security in your neighbourhood.” He highlighted the fact that the US military had established 26 joint security stations and more than 21 combat outposts across the capital to provide “a continuous presence”.

However, if the Green Zone, which is sometimes referred to as the “ultimate gated community”, is not secure, then the US efforts to carve up Baghdad into separate, secure neighbourhoods are even less likely to succeed. Just hours before the attack on the parliament building, a huge truck bomb destroyed the Sarafiyah bridge across the Tigris River in Baghdad, killing at least six people. Odierno conceded that last Thursday was “frankly ... a bad day, a very bad day.”

President Bush immediately denounced the parliament bombing as an attack on “innocent people and a symbol of democracy”. But the claim is absurd. The fact that Iraqi parliamentarians are only able to meet behind layer upon layer of US security testifies to their lack of popular support. The main qualification for the job is their willingness to accept the ongoing US occupation, which is opposed by the vast majority of Iraqis who blame the US for the systematic repression, sectarian warfare and nightmarish social conditions.

A day after the bombing, parliament met last Friday in what was trumpeted in the international media as “a show of defiance”. Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi

told the assembled parliamentarians and TV cameras: “The more they [the insurgents] act, the more solid we become. When they take from us one martyr, we will offer more martyrs. The more they target our unity, the stronger our unity becomes.”

Behind this façade of unity, however, the parliament, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the state apparatus are all deeply divided. Ministries, militias, security guards and even intelligence services are organised on the basis of party and sectarian loyalties. A Sunni suicide bomber could only penetrate the Green Zone with assistance from the inside. According to several reports, he may have been a guard for a Sunni parliamentarian.

The bombing provoked immediate recriminations. Mustafa al-Hiti of the Sunni-based National Dialogue Front blamed a “conspiracy” by Shiite-dominated government organs to weaken parliament and target Sunni lawmakers. Shiite parliamentarian Sheikh Jalaleddin al-Saghir declared that the attack should be a “wake-up call” to Sunni politicians that they are being targeted by Sunni extremists along with Shites.

Nassar al-Rubaie, head of the parliamentary bloc loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, criticised the US military for lax security. “The occupation forces are in charge of security in this area. But no one dares to hold them responsible for this issue,” he said. “The problem of the occupation is not inside or outside this hall, it is for all Iraqi people. Why don’t we hold them completely responsible?”

Last week, the Sadr movement organised a huge anti-occupation protest in the southern city of Najaf to mark the fourth anniversary of the US capture of Baghdad. Hundreds of thousands marched behind banners declaring “Down with Bush, Down with America” and burned American flags, giving vent to the widespread anger, frustration and opposition among the population as a whole.

Yesterday Sadr responded to the Maliki government’s refusal to set a timetable for US withdrawal by ordering his six loyalists to quit the cabinet. The decision was a carefully calibrated manoeuvre aimed at accommodating mass anti-US sentiment and distancing the Sadr bloc from the deeply unpopular government, while avoiding a direct confrontation with Maliki and the US. The Sadrists have made no move to pull out of the ruling Shiite

coalition or from the parliament.

Nevertheless, the withdrawal of the Sadrists ministers, like the bombing of the parliament building, is one more sign that the puppet regime on which the US occupation has rested is reaching the point of collapse.



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