

Bombings heighten sectarian tensions in Iraq

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Bombings ripped through sections of Baghdad on Thursday, killing at least 63 people and injuring nearly 200. The attacks, which mainly targeted Shiite Muslim areas, took place in the midst of intensifying sectarian conflicts, as different factions of the Iraqi elite battle over political and economic power in the wake of the departure of US combat troops.

One of the deadliest attacks was from a suicide car bomb near the central government's Integrity Commission building and the Christian Nuns Hospital, which killed 25 people and injured more than 60. The combined death toll from the bombings made Thursday the deadliest day in Iraq in more than a year.

The bombings followed moves by the Iraqi central government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who heads the dominant Shiite Muslim bloc in the parliament, to politically destroy several prominent Sunni politicians.

On Monday, Iraq's Judicial Council issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq Al-Hashemi, charging him with coordinating bombing attacks and running an assassination squad to target Shiite officials. Maliki is also seeking a parliamentary no-confidence vote to oust Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Muttaqi, the leader of a Sunni-based party.

Fuelling sectarian tensions, Maliki immediately suggested that his Sunni rivals were culpable for the blasts. He stated: "The timing of the crimes and the choice of their areas confirms again to all those in doubt the political nature of the objectives that these people want to achieve." No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, though media speculation has focused on the Sunni-dominated groups associated with Al Qaeda.

Hashemi has taken refuge in the northern Kurdish region and publicly charged Maliki with seeking to consolidate dictatorial control over the country,

comparing him to Saddam Hussein. Iraqiya, the main Sunni-based parliamentary formation, is boycotting parliament and its ministers have walked out of Maliki's cabinet. The so-called "national unity" government established last year under US pressure has effectively collapsed.

The Kurdish leadership is defying Maliki's demands that they hand Hashemi over. The Kurdish establishment has its own conflicts with the central government, mainly over control of oil-rich regions and the authority to sign contracts with foreign companies.

Earlier this month, President Obama declared that with the departure of American combat troops the US was "leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people".

Nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, the United States has not left Iraq. It retains a 15,000-man embassy in Baghdad, with CIA operatives and an army of private mercenaries. Tens of thousands of US troops are based in neighbouring states such as Kuwait and Bahrain, ready to intervene if necessary to assert US interests.

The political crisis now unfolding is the direct product of the US invasion and near nine-year occupation, during which sectarian divisions were consciously fomented in a policy of divide-and-rule. The US occupation regime elevated Shiite and Kurdish sections of the elite at the expense of the Sunni elements who dominated Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. The ensuing tensions reached a high point in 2006 and 2007, with daily bombings and rampant killings by death squads slaughtering tens of thousands of people, both Shiite and Sunni.

The country has been left crippled and fractured. Over one million people lost their lives and more than 4.7 million have been turned into refugees or internally

displaced persons—in large part due to sectarian violence. The social infrastructure has been decimated, and the majority of the population faces chronic unemployment and poverty.

In light of the revolutionary movement in Egypt and popular unrest across the region, sectarianism and communalism are being frenetically promoted by the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish elites in order to divide the Iraqi working class and oppressed. It is a conscious attempt to channel social discontent into reactionary and fratricidal hatreds and conflict, in order to prevent a unified political struggle against every faction of the venal and corrupt ruling class.

The Sunni establishment has openly turned to promoting a de-facto partition of the country in order to regain a degree of the power and privilege they once held. Two predominantly Sunni-populated provinces, Salahaddin and Diyala, are demanding the same autonomous status as the Kurdish north, raising the possibility of the country fracturing into sectarian- and ethnic-based enclaves. Before he was accused of terrorism, Hashemi had been vocally supporting Sunni autonomy, which the Shiite parties oppose.

The internal tensions within Iraq are entwined with the growing regional conflicts, stoked by the United States. Maliki and his Shiite bloc have close relations with the Shiite regime in Iran. They feel threatened by the growing anti-Iranian campaign in the region led by the US and other imperialist powers. The Iraqi Sunni groups, which are supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, have developed ties with the opposition in Syria, which is seeking to oust the government of Bashar al-Assad, an Iranian ally. The uprising within Syria is rapidly approaching the point of a full-scale civil war, with the European powers and the US siding with the anti-Assad opposition.

The major factor propelling the US invasion of Iraq and its intrigues through the Middle East—control over oil—is also at work in the conflicts within the Iraqi establishment. The different factions, all of which collaborated with the US occupation, are battling for as much influence over territory as possible, so they can benefit from the sell-off of oil contracts to transnational energy corporations.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north, which is currently protecting Hashemi, has signed a number of contracts with foreign companies, provoking furious opposition from Maliki's government. The Shiite parties are insisting that only the central regime in Baghdad, which they dominate, has the authority to auction off the country's natural resources.

In October, US energy giant ExxonMobil signed an agreement with the KRG for natural gas exploration in the Kurdish north. The Maliki government responded by threatening to cut Exxon off from other agreements in the southern part of the country. Last week, during a trip to the US, Maliki met personally with Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson and apparently reached an agreement that the company will sign a new contract that involves the central government.

The British newspaper *Independent* reported on Sunday that Exxon is seeking to purchase the Kurdish-focused Gulf Keystone Petroleum company. Other companies, including Chevron, have indicated an interest in pursuing oil deals in the north. In the majority Sunni western province of Anbar, the local elite are raising ever more strident calls for autonomy as it becomes clear that the Akaz gas field, being developed by South Korean transnational KOGAS, contains vast reserves. Three more production contracts in the field are scheduled to be auctioned off in March 2012.

As rival ruling cliques wage their struggle, the great danger is that the sectarian and ethnic hysteria being used to try and align sections of the population behind them devolves into a murderous civil war.



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