

Bombings, death sentence stoke sectarian tensions in Iraq

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A nationwide terrorist bombing campaign combined with the handing down of a death sentence for an exiled Sunni vice president threaten to reignite the deadly sectarian tensions that erupted during the US occupation of Iraq.

Sunday saw some of the bloodiest violence since the withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq in December 2011, with car bombs and other attacks claiming lives in over a dozen cities, from the port of Basra in the south to Kirkuk in the north.

The total death toll in the attacks was put at over 115, with three times that many injured. Among the deadliest and boldest of these strikes was a pre-dawn attack on an Iraqi Army post in Dujail, a small, predominantly Shi'a town about 30 miles north of Baghdad. The attack, which included a suicide car bomber as well as gunmen, killed 11 soldiers while leaving seven others wounded.

Another car bomb exploded outside Kirkuk, a tense city disputed by Kurdish and Arab factions. Its target was a crowd waiting in line to apply for jobs as police with the state-run Northern Oil Co. Eight of the recruits were killed and another 30 wounded.

In Nasiriyah, a Shi'a-dominated city in the south, bombs went off near the French consulate and a local hotel.

In many cases, the attacks were aimed at Shi'a mosques, cafes and crowded marketplaces.

While there were no immediate claims of responsibility for the bloodshed, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki quickly blamed the violence on Al Qaeda of Iraq and other Sunni extremist groups, saying that they were bent on "sectarian pursuits and sedition."

Later, the Al-Qaeda front group, the Islamic State of Iraq, posted a statement on the Internet asserting that

the attacks were in retaliation for a "campaign of extermination and torture of Sunni Muslim detainees" in Iraqi jails.

Heightening sectarian tensions even further, an Iraqi court handed down death sentences Sunday for Iraq's exiled vice president Tariq al-Hashemi, one of the country's most prominent Sunni politicians, and his son-in-law. They were found guilty, in absentia, of allegedly killing a lawyer as well as an Iraqi army officer and his wife.

Prosecutors claim that Hashemi bears responsibility in some 150 attacks between 2005 and 2011. They accuse him of using his bodyguards as a death squad and have cited confessions by some of these guards. Hashemi has countered that the confessions were false and extracted under torture.

The Maliki government issued its arrest warrant for the vice president on December 19, 2011, the day after US troops were pulled out of Iraq.

The case encapsulates the sectarian divisions that are growing ever more explosive in Iraq. Hashemi responded to the arrest warrant by fleeing to the Kurdish north of the country, which is run as a virtually autonomous region. Kurdish regional president Massoud Barzani, sharply at odds with the Maliki government over the Kurds' assertion of autonomy and its striking of independent deals with foreign oil companies, refused to turn the vice president over to Baghdad authorities.

From the Kurdish region, Hashemi went on to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and finally Turkey, where he has been given public recognition and protection. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has posed as a defender of Iraqi Sunnis.

At a press conference in Ankara, Hashemi described

the trial in Iraq as a “kangaroo court.” He told reporters, “While reconfirming my absolute innocence and that of my guards, I totally reject and will never recognize the unfair, unjust and politically motivated verdict, which was expected from the outset of this ridiculous trial.”

Meanwhile, Iraq’s Kurdish President Jalal Talabani issued a statement criticizing the verdict against Hashemi and warning that it posed a serious obstacle to national reconciliation. “It was regrettable that the judicial decision against him was issued at this particular time,” Talabani said. “He is still officially in office, which could become an unhelpful factor that... may complicate efforts to achieve national reconciliation.”

The verdict serves as the final nail in the coffin of the so-called Erbil agreement. This three-way deal was brokered by Washington in an attempt to break the protracted political deadlock that followed the March 2010 parliamentary elections in which Hashemi’s secular and largely Sunni Al-Iraqiya Alliance, led by Iyad Allawi, gained two more seats in parliament than Maliki’s State of Law Coalition. Signed by these two factions as well as the Kurdish Regional government, it was supposed to allow Maliki to pursue a second term as prime minister in exchange for a power-sharing agreement that would supposedly weaken the power of the prime minister’s office.

Instead, Maliki has taken direct personal control over both the defense and interior ministries, while using the judiciary to bring the charges against Hashemi. After initially boycotting the government following the arrest order against Hashemi, Iraqiya and other opposition parties have vowed to remove Maliki through a parliamentary vote of no confidence.

Dramatically intensifying the slide toward renewed sectarian conflict in Iraq is the ongoing sectarian civil war across the border in Syria that is being fueled by the US, Western Europe, Turkey and Saudi Arabia with the aim of bringing about regime-change in Damascus and strategically weakening Iran.

The same Sunni jihadists who are waging a terror campaign against the Shia-dominated government in Iraq are fighting inside Syria to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad, who is a member of the minority Alawites, an offshoot of Shiism. These groups

have been significantly strengthened by arms, money and logistical aid from the Western powers, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the monarchical gulf states.

At the same time, tensions between Washington and Baghdad have sharpened over the closer ties established by the Maliki government with predominantly Shi’ite Iran in the wake of the US military withdrawal. Washington has charged that Iraq is allowing Iran to use its airspace to fly military supplies to the Syrian regime.

The Iraqi government, which has refused to join with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in demanding the ouster of Assad, rejected the US charge, insisting that there was “no evidence” that the Iranian flights included anything more than food and humanitarian aid.

The *New York Times* last week cited a US official as saying that there are reliable reports that “Iraqi Shiite militia fighters, long backed by Iran during its efforts to shape events inside Iraq, are now making their way to Syria to help the Assad government.” The Iraqi government has warned that Sunni jihadists from Iraq are going into Syria to aid the so-called “rebels.”

The sectarian conflict unfolding in Iraq is the product, on the one hand, of the devastation unleashed upon that country beginning with the 2003 US invasion and, on the other, of the catastrophe currently being orchestrated in Syria.

What becomes increasingly clear is that in its reckless drive to foment sectarian conflict in order to topple the Assad regime in Syria and pave the way for an assault on Iran, Washington and its allies are creating the conditions for a regional conflagration spilling across Syria’s borders into Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East.



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