

Iraq arrests spark mass protests

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The rounding up of bodyguards and aides to one of Iraq's most prominent Sunni politicians has sparked mass protests that have blocked the country's principal trade route to neighboring Syria and Jordan.

Thousands of protesters turned out for the fifth straight day on Thursday, manning barricades that blocked the highway outside of Ramadi, the capital of the predominantly Sunni Al Anbar Governorate in western Iraq. Many chanted "The people want to bring down the regime," the same cry taken up in Egypt and Tunisia, this time directed against the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Demonstrators carried banners, including one that read, "We warn the government not to draw the country into sectarian conflict."

An earlier demonstration in the city of Fallujah was violently broken up by security forces. Larger protests are expected on Friday.

The protests began last week after troops detained bodyguards and aides of Finance Minister Rafie al-Essawi while searching his home and offices on December 20. The government has claimed that it arrested only ten of the minister's bodyguards on charges of "terrorism." But Essawi, a member of the secular, Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc, charged that over 100 people connected to his staff were rounded up by what he said was a "militia force" controlled by Maliki's supporters.

It appears that the discrepancy arises from the fact that only the bodyguards were subjected to formal arrest, while the others were essentially subjected to extra-legal detention and interrogation.

Addressing Maliki in a statement to the Iraqi media, Essawi said, "You are a man who does not respect partnership at all, a man who does not respect the law and the constitution, and I personally hold you fully responsible for the safety of the kidnapped people."

The finance minister told Associated Press that

Maliki was deliberately seeking to stoke sectarian conflicts between the Sunni and Shia populations. "These practices are aimed at drawing the country into a sectarian conflict again by creating crisis and targeting prominent national figures," he said.

The incident was essentially a replay of a similar crackdown carried out a year ago, on December 19, 2011, the day after the last US troops ended the more than eight-year American occupation of Iraq. Then the target was Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, also a Sunni member of the Iraqiya bloc.

Hashemi's bodyguards and aides were also rounded up. One of them died from torture after being imprisoned for three months. Others were tortured into giving forced confessions. The government charged Hashemi and his son-in-law with responsibility for 150 terrorist attacks between 2005 and 2011 and with employing his bodyguards as a death squad. Denying the charges, they sought safety first in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish zone and subsequently in Turkey. Both men have been sentenced to death multiple times in absentia.

Maliki has claimed that he has nothing to do with the latest arrests, which he says are the work of prosecutorial and judicial authorities. The reality, however, is that he has turned these branches of the government into his pliant tools as he has systematically worked to monopolize power. In addition to prime minister, Maliki holds the posts of acting defense minister, acting interior minister and acting national security minister.

In an ominous statement, Maliki accused his opponents of pushing "the whole country toward sectarian strife" and urged them not to forget the period of internecine civil war unleashed by the US war and occupation "when we used to collect bodies and chopped heads from the streets."

Sunni demonstrators in Anbar stressed that they had

not come into the streets solely over the latest arrests and had demands that included the release of detainees, particularly women, from the government's jails. Dissatisfaction with the Maliki government is widespread, stemming from its repressive actions as well as its failure to provide jobs and basic services or rebuild infrastructure demolished by the US war on Iraq.

The move against al-Essawi came just after Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), suffered a stroke and was flown out of the country to Germany for medical treatment. Talabani has functioned as a mediator, attempting to settle political disputes between the government and the Sunni-led opposition, on the one hand, and, on the other, the government of the autonomous Kurdistan region headed by regional president Massoud Barzani.

Before he fell ill, Talabani was attempting to negotiate a peaceful solution to growing tensions between the Maliki government and Kurdistan, which have seen Iraqi troops and the Kurdish *peshmerga* militia facing off against each other in disputed territory in the north of the country. In addition to the disagreement over the borders of the largely autonomous Kurdish northern enclave, Baghdad and the Kurdish administration are sharply at odds over who controls the region's oil wealth.

The Maliki government has threatened to go to war against the Kurdistan government if it goes ahead in implementing a contract with Exxon Mobil to drill for oil in the disputed territory on the southern edge of the Kurdish region.

Fueling all of these conflicts is the sectarian civil war that has been fomented by the US and the other Western powers across the border in Syria, pitting Sunni Islamist militias against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ism.

The Maliki government has refused to join in the demands for Assad's ouster and has forged close ties with Iran, Syria's main ally in the region.

At the same time, Turkey, which is at the forefront of the war for regime-change in Syria, has assumed the mantle of the defender of the Iraqi Sunnis. It has also established close relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, even as it carries out a relentless war against its own Kurdish

separatist movement, the PKK, including bombing its positions inside Iraq. This peculiar tactical alliance between Ankara and the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq has likewise aligned the Iraqi Kurdish leadership with the Syrian "rebels" and the Sunni monarchical regimes that are supporting them.

While the Obama administration has unsuccessfully pressed the Maliki government to interdict what it claims are Iranian air shipments of arms to the Syrian government, it has maintained a discrete silence on the dictatorial methods of Maliki and his government's gross violations of basic democratic rights.

Having overseen his installment as prime minister under the US occupation in 2006, Washington backed the extra-legal maneuvers that allowed him to stay on in that position after the March 2010 election. That vote gave the largest number of parliamentary seats to the Iraqiya bloc led by Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite politician who preceded Maliki in the prime minister's post, having served as one of Washington's stooges in the Coalition Provisional Authority established after the US invasion of Iraq.

In the wake of the 2010 election, Washington helped to broker the so-called Erbil agreement, a three-way deal that was supposed to result in power-sharing between the Iraqiya bloc, Maliki's State of Law coalition and the Kurdish leadership. This pact, however, has remained a dead letter as Maliki attempts to consolidate a dictatorial regime.

The prospects for these escalating internal tensions spiraling out of control and producing yet another civil war are sharply heightened by the Syrian conflict. Iraqi Sunni Islamist fighters linked to Al Qaeda of Iraq are playing a prominent role in the US-backed war for regime-change, while some members of Iraqi Shia militias have also reportedly crossed the border to fight on the side of the Assad government. The prospect of the border separating Iraq from Syria containing this armed conflict seems highly unlikely.



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