

# Sectarian warfare grips Iraq

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Escalating violence in Iraq has led to the deaths of at least 179 people since Tuesday, the highest death toll since the withdrawal of US troops at the end of 2011.

The re-eruption of the sectarian strife that broke out under the US occupation testifies to the devastation wrought by the US-led invasion of Iraq and Washington's whipping up of ethnic and sectarian tensions. It is also an extension of the on-going US proxy war in neighbouring Syria, in which it is backing ultra-right Sunni forces tied to Al Qaeda.

Since December, Iraqi Sunnis, including those with ties to forces active in Syria, have been protesting discrimination, arbitrary arrests, detention and the execution of oppositionists by the Shi'ite-led coalition government of Nouri Al-Maliki. They are particularly opposed to the sweeping anti-terrorism law they claim targets them for being members of Al Qaeda or of the Ba'ath Party of former President Saddam Hussein. They have called for Maliki's resignation.

Hundreds of thousands have been locked up for years, many without charges, in prisons run by sectarian militias. More than 1,400 people face execution.

The government's reliance on dictatorial methods is bound up with the rising level of unemployment and seething discontent over the lack of electricity, water and sanitation, and the failure to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by US sanctions and war. This is despite the fact that oil production grew by 24 percent last year, with Iraq overtaking Iran to become the oil producer, after Saudi Arabia, in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

This violence follows armed raids by government troops on a Sunni camp in Hawija, near Kirkuk, 170 kilometres north of Baghdad, four days after militants attacked a military and police checkpoint, seized weapons and killed a soldier. Ensuing clashes left 53 people dead, including three soldiers.

Sunni protesters in Anbar and Nineveh provinces

have called for a general strike and there has been a wave of armed clashes beyond Hawija, killing dozens more. Gunmen tried to storm army posts in the nearby towns of Rashad and Riyadh, killing 13. In Ramadi, Anbar's capital, protesters threw stones at a military convoy and set army vehicles ablaze. In Fallujah, about 1,000 people took to the streets chanting, "War, war." Armed clashes broke out and there were three attacks on Sunni mosques.

In Suleiman Beg, between Baghdad and Kirkuk, government forces used helicopters against Sunni gunmen who took over a police station. A military spokesman said the army had made a tactical withdrawal "so we can work on clearing the region, corner by corner."

At least ten policemen and 31 Sunni gunmen were killed in armed clashes in northern Iraq after Sunni gunmen seized control of the eastern part of Mosul. It took three days for the army to regain control after prolonged gun battles.

In eastern Baghdad, at least eight people were killed and 23 more wounded when a car bomb exploded.

Insurgents attacked a pipeline carrying oil from Kirkuk to Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Kirkuk is the subject of a bitter dispute between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government, which wants to include it in its autonomous region. A crowd of mourners in Kirkuk numbering in the thousands chanted, "Death to Maliki" and "Revenge to the agents of Iran."

Some Sunni sheikhs have joined with clerics, declaring that the government has crossed "red lines." They are calling for activists to arm themselves and attack the army, security forces and government collaborators.

Two Sunni ministers in Maliki's coalition government have resigned over Hawija, adding to the string of defections, including a boycott of his government by Kurdish ministers.

Maliki has blamed the current unrest on Al Qaeda and “remnants of the Ba’ath Party for creating a rift.” He had earlier called the protesters’ demands “stinking and sectarian”, but on Thursday adopted a more conciliatory stance, saying “their demands were legitimate.”

He offered some concessions, including changes to anti-terrorism laws targeting the Sunni community, and announced an inquiry into the Hawija clashes under the chairmanship of the Sunni deputy prime minister Saleh al-Mutlag. He said the families of those killed and injured in Hawija would be compensated.

The upsurge in violence comes just days after the April 20 provincial elections, themselves characterised by violence against candidates, mainly of the Sunni al-Iraqiya coalition. Fourteen of its candidates were assassinated. It won 91 seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, two more than Maliki’s State of Law coalition.

Car bombs went off at rallies and meetings, killing dozens. In the mainly Sunni provinces of Anbar and Nineveh, the government postponed the elections, now set for July 4, with no date set for the disputed province of Kirkuk. Elections will be held in the three Kurdish provinces in the autumn.

Maliki heads a corrupt, unpopular and isolated government, made up of shifting coalitions, parties and factions that are constantly splitting and fighting over influence and sinecures.

Preliminary results of Saturday’s provincial elections testify to the government’s isolation. Official estimates claim that 50 percent of the electorate voted, small itself, but local monitoring networks claim that the real figure was 37 percent. In some provinces, voters found that their names were not on the electoral list, which is still based upon the ration card system issued by the Saddam Hussein regime, as there has been no comprehensive census for years.

Maliki’s State of Law coalition appears to have won a reduced majority, winning 20 fewer seats and possibly eight of the twelve voting provinces, including Baghdad and Basra provinces. His Sunni allies did not increase their vote, while Shi’ite areas gave their votes to independent politicians.

Incapable of resolving the vast socio-economic problems besetting Iraq, the neo-colonial regime in Baghdad, installed by Washington and supported by

Iran, is focused on dividing and oppressing the Iraqi working class. Maliki has concentrated power in his own hands, holding the defence and interior posts, and used the anti-terrorist laws against his Sunni rivals, whipping up sectarian tensions to divide the working class.

A key factor is the on-going sectarian war for regime-change in Syria that has pitted Sunni Islamist militias against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi’ism. This has been sponsored, financed and supplied by Iran’s Sunni Gulf rivals, and also Turkey, at Washington’s behest.

They also fear that Maliki, whose installation as prime minister was sanctioned by Washington, is too close to Tehran. They are acutely conscious of the seething discontent among their own increasingly embittered populations, many of whom are Shi’ite, who have not shared in the ruling families’ oil- and gas-based wealth.

Iraqi Sunni Islamist fighters linked to Al Qaeda of Iraq have long played a prominent role in the Syrian civil war, sending Jihadi fighters through Anbar province. The Al-Nusra Front, the largest and most effective anti-government fighting force in Syria, recently openly swore allegiance to Al Qaeda in Iraq. At the same time, some members of Iraqi Shia militias are fighting for the Assad government.

The Maliki government has refused to join in the demands for Assad’s ouster, earning the enmity of the Sunni monarchies.



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