

Sectarian conflict worsens in Iraq

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A wave of attacks in a number of Iraqi cities this week has left around 70 dead and 200 injured.

The attacks, mainly aimed at Shi'ite Muslim areas, took place amid intensifying sectarian conflicts as different factions of Iraq's political elite battle for power on behalf of their various regional backers.

On Monday, there were 18 car bomb attacks on towns and cities in Iraq's mainly Shi'ite southern region and Baghdad's Shi'ite-populated districts. In Baghdad, car bombs exploded in several markets and car parks, the worst hitting Sadr City, a Shi'ite stronghold in the east of the capital. Another car bomb exploded in Mahmudiya, 20 miles south of Baghdad, killing four people. At least seven people were killed in two explosions in Kut, southeast of Baghdad.

There were two explosions near a market in Iraq's second city, Basra, that killed 3 people and wounded 14, while another in the city of Smawa in Muthanna Province killed 6 people and injured 19.

The northern city of Tikrit saw an attack on a house belonging to an army officer, killing one person and injuring two more.

Bombings and shootings across Iraq on July 25 left at least 28 people dead. A few days earlier, car bombs in central Baghdad killed 9 people and injured 17, part of a wider campaign of violence that left at least 46 people dead in and around the capital.

Government security forces have set up road blocks in Baghdad to stop and inspect vehicles for explosives, leading to long lines and difficulty in moving around the city. While no group has claimed responsibility for these deadly attacks, they are widely believed to be the work of al-Qaeda's Iraq branch, known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, formed by a merger of al-Qaeda's Syrian and Iraqi branches.

In addition, some of the attacks appear to be the work of Shi'ite groups.

The Interior Ministry blamed al-Qaeda and accused it

of deliberately stoking tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites. "The country is now facing a declared war waged by bloody sectarian groups that aim at flooding the country with chaos and reigniting the civil strife," it said.

According to the United Nations, more than 2,500 Iraqis have died since April, the highest level since the sectarian civil war of 2006-2007, bringing to at least 4,000 the number of deaths since the beginning of the year.

According to the monitoring group, Iraq Body Count, more than 750 people have been killed and many hundreds injured in July—most of them since Ramadan, which started on July 10. This is the highest monthly death toll since the withdrawal of US forces at the end of 2011.

Sectarian violence mounted after the attack by Iraq's security forces on a protest in the northern town of Hawija in April, killing 53 people and injuring 150 more, in the run-up to the provincial elections, following a raid on an army position.

The attacks have left the security forces of the Shi'ite-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki unable to cope. This is despite the nearly US\$25 billion spent by Washington training and equipping the more than a million strong security forces.

This was highlighted by the massive raids, organised by al-Qaeda, on Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons that led to the escape of about 800 prisoners from Abu Ghraib. In an announcement on July 22, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant warned of its intention to mount the operation, which it called "Breaking the Walls". Following the raid, the group declared that it had freed its members. It is believed that the group's minister of war, Adnan Ismail Najim Abdullah al-Dulaimi—also known as Abdul Rahman al-Bilawi—was one of those who escaped.

The raids involved shutting down the electricity

supply to the notorious Abu Ghraib prison that encompasses a 345-acre site, firing more than 100 mortar shells from various directions, and suicide bombs and car bombs at the prison's gates. Prison inmates rioted, and the Interior Ministry said that in the ensuing violence, 8 members of the security forces were killed and 14 injured, in addition to 21 inmates killed and 25 injured—figures believed to be an underestimate.

A security official said some of the escaped inmates, senior members of al-Qaeda, were heading for Syria to join insurgents fighting to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Clearly, the raids on the heavily fortified jails could only have been carried out with the widespread support, not to say corruption, of the security forces. This has led to fierce infighting among Maliki's Shi'ite-dominated government coalition as to who was responsible for this debacle.

Maliki has been unable to push his legislative programme through parliament. The different factional groupings have refused to agree to a new law that should have been ratified years ago requiring greater transparency about the financing of political parties. Elections set for 2014 will be held under the existing legislation.

Parliament has refused to pass a new media law, which critics say severely hampers freedom of the press, because of differences over whether the regulatory body should be a private- or public-sector body. The Information Crimes Law has also been held up. It would severely restrict freedom of speech, prevent the dissemination of information and impose harsh sentences on journalists.

The reform of the Iraqi dinar denomination to shore up Iraq's weak currency has also been put on hold. The current rate is 1,100 dinars to one US dollar, an indication of the soaring inflation and economic dislocation the Iraqi people have been subjected to over the years of sanctions, war and occupation and which the neo-colonial Iraqi regime has done little to redress. The proposal to drop three zeros from the bank note has come up against fierce resistance.

The economic situation has deteriorated as a result of a fall in oil production and revenues, due largely to the targeting of oil installations, pipelines and repair crews by Sunni insurgents.

The internal political tensions and the resurgence of

sectarian strife are bound up with the growing regional conflicts, stoked by the United States. Maliki and his Shi'ite bloc have had close relations with the Shi'ite regime in Iran and have come under mounting pressure from Washington's anti-Iran campaign in the region.

Iraqi Sunni groups, supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, have close links with the rebel forces dominated by Syria's al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda and other Jihadist groups seeking to topple Assad, an Iranian ally.

The recent setbacks of the Western-backed forces at the hands of Syrian government forces backed by Lebanon's Hezbollah have raised the likelihood of a full-scale intervention by Washington and/or its regional proxies.

All the Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish elites are stoking sectarian and ethnic divisions in an effort to divide the Iraqi working class and rural poor and prevent a unified political struggle against every faction of Iraq's corrupt ruling class. They are all fighting to control as much territory as possible so they can benefit from the sell-off of oil contracts to the transnational oil corporations, leading to the possible breakup of the country.

The semi-autonomous Kurdish regional government has signed 50 agreements with overseas corporations, including key contracts with Turkey, and is planning to ship oil directly to Turkey via a new pipeline due to come into operation in October. Some provincial governments are following suit. The Provinces of Wasit and Salahaddin have finalised independent deals with international companies.



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