

Dozens killed and wounded as sectarian bloodshed escalates in Iraq

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Over the past week, waves of sectarian bombings and shootings have torn into Iraq, hitting victims throughout the country.

Yesterday, at least 14 people were killed in three separate attacks. Two roadside bombings 100 miles north of Baghdad in Tuz Khurmato led to the deaths of nine people. Twenty-four were injured. Further north, in the town of Hawija, two adjacent homes were stormed by militants who shot and killed six family members before bombing the buildings and getting away.

Shiites from Iraq and neighboring countries are undertaking an annual pilgrimage to the Iraqi city of Karbala for Arbæen—a Shiite Muslim holy day, marking the fortieth day of mourning for the death of the Prophet Mohamed’s grandson, that falls on December 23 this year. Pilgrims have provided an easy target for suicide bombers targeting Shiites, and increased government security has done little to diminish the bloodshed.

The day before, at least 46 people were killed and 100 others were wounded in attacks throughout Iraq. A former Reuters reporter who has worked for the Iraqi media as well was killed along with his son in the blast that killed at least 16 and wounded 31 in a southern Baghdad neighborhood on Thursday. Mohanad Mohammed was the seventh journalist to be killed in the country in less than three months.

Two additional attacks targeting Shiites in areas south of Baghdad killed at least 16 people and wounded 18 others, including children and an elderly woman who was rushed to Yarmuk Hospital in Baghdad, her face covered in blood.

In yet another attack on Thursday, uniformed militants reportedly shot and killed a Sahwa militiaman, his three children and his wife and brother-

in-law after breaking into their house in the Abu Ghraib area west of Baghdad.

The Sahwa militia was funded by the US military and the Iraqi government and was composed of Sunni tribesmen. Starting in 2006, they patrolled neighborhoods and fought other Sunni insurgents and members of Al Qaeda. Sahwa militia members are now a frequent target of other Sunni militants, who view them as traitors. Yesterday, four more militia members were injured in two separate attacks in the Sharqat area, north of Baghdad.

Altogether, more than 8,000 people have been killed in sectarian violence in Iraq this year—levels not seen since 2008 and the end of the “surge” of US occupation troops into the country. In November, 948 people were killed in violent attacks throughout Iraq; ninety percent of the victims—852 people—were civilians.

Ten years after Washington invaded Iraq, based on lies that Iraq threatened the world because it had weapons of mass destruction, and waged a war that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the sectarian conflicts stoked by the US occupation of Iraq and the resulting devastation of Iraq continue to have tragic consequences.

When the US ultimately supported an Iranian-backed, Shia-led government in Iraq, it faced increasing opposition not only from Sunni layers around the remnants of Saddam Hussein’s old Baathist party, but also from Sunni Islamist fighters. According to a 2007 study, 60 percent of the fighters and suicide bombers in Iraq came from Sunni-majority countries—Saudi Arabia and Libya—by way of Syria.

The increase in sectarian violence in Iraq this year is, above all, a result of the US policy of stoking a proxy war in neighboring Syria, where the US has armed Al Qaeda allied Sunni rebels in an effort to take down

President Bashar al Assad's regime.

Prime Minister Maliki pointed to the role of Al Qaeda in increasing instability in the country during his visit to Washington this October, saying "Terrorists came back to Iraq when the situation — or the conflict started in Syria."

In particular, the Al Qaeda splinter group called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) received support from US allies and built up strongholds on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border.

ISIS is working to establish control of several Iraqi provinces and claims a large portion of Iraq's western desert. Al-Qaeda moves militants and supplies across the Syrian-Iraqi border unhindered. Its base of support is reportedly growing within the Iraqi Sunni community in response to government repression. In Iraq, it has also managed to carry out several successful jailbreaks, including an attack on the Abu Ghraib jail that led to the freeing of hundreds of prisoners.

Tensions between Sunni elements and the Shia-dominated government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki installed by Washington led to protests in Iraq at the end of last year. Thousands took to the streets and met with repression from the government, which—fearing a civil war along Syrian lines—punished entire Sunni districts.

This has led to an escalation of violence on both sides. In April, the army shot and killed 53 protesters at Hawija. The Iraqi regime has executed over 160 people on terrorism charges this year.

The bloodshed in Iraq now continues even though US regional tactics have shifted, at least for the time being, away from a direct military assault on Syria toward efforts to cut a deal with Iran and Syria, as Sunni Islamist forces in Iraq flush with weapons and cash provided by US allies continue to launch assaults on Shiites and government forces.



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