

Iraq slides toward civil war

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Heavy fighting erupted Thursday between Iraqi government troops and Sunni militants who seized large parts of Fallujah and Ramadi, two cities in Iraq's western Anbar province that were at the center of the armed resistance to the US occupation a decade ago.

The renewed fighting came as figures released by the United Nations and other agencies indicated that the 2013 death toll in Iraq has risen to its highest level since the US military "surge" of 2007-2008.

The United Nations put the number of Iraqi civilian lives lost to violence last year at 7,818, with another 1,050 members of the security forces killed over the same period. Another estimate by the British-based group Iraq Body Count (IBC) put the civilian death toll at 9,475.

In releasing the UN's estimate, the head of the UN mission in Iraq, Nickolay Mladenov, said: "This is a sad and terrible record which confirms once again the urgent need for the Iraqi authorities to address the roots of violence to curb this infernal circle."

Noting that last year's death toll was roughly equivalent to that of 2008, Iraq Body Count pointed out that the 2008 figure "represented a decline in violent deaths (down from 25,800), whereas now it represents an increase; it has more than doubled since last year, when the recorded civilians deaths were 4,500."

IBC added that "If current violence levels continue unabated throughout the coming year, then 2014 threatens to be as deadly as 2004, which saw the two sieges of Fallujah [by the US military] and Iraq's insurgency take hold."

The violence and fatalities have soared since last April, when the Shia-based government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered a violent crackdown on a Sunni protest camp erected in the northern town of Hawija, resulting in the deaths of roughly 50 civilians.

A similar crackdown on Monday against a protest encampment in Ramadi touched off the upheavals that

left that city, Fallujah and several smaller towns largely in the hands of antigovernment insurgents.

In a crude attempt to defuse popular opposition, Maliki followed Monday's dispersal of the protest camp, in which at least 10 people were killed, with an apparent concession to one of the protesters' demands, announcing Tuesday that he was removing army troops from Sunni population centers in Anbar and leaving security to the regular police.

By Wednesday, however, heavily armed militants laid siege to police stations in Ramadi and Fallujah, releasing at least 100 prisoners, grabbing weapons stocks and burning a number of buildings. For the most part, the police abandoned their positions without putting up a fight.

Maliki then reversed his earlier decree and ordered the reinforcement of army units in the area, which prepared to lay siege to the towns, with artillery shelling parts of Fallujah by Thursday and air strikes reportedly carried out against both that city and Ramadi.

"Half of Fallujah is in the hands of ISIL [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] and the other half is in the control" of armed tribesmen, an Interior Ministry official told the AFP news agency. He said that in Ramadi there was a similar situation, with some areas controlled by ISIL and others controlled by tribesmen.

AFP quoted one of its correspondents in Ramadi as saying he witnessed "dozens of trucks carrying heavily armed men driving in the city's east, playing songs praising ISIL" and carrying "black flags of a type frequently flown by ISIL."

ISIL, a Sunni Islamist militia movement linked to Al Qaeda, has become one of the main components of the "rebels" fighting in the Western-backed war for regime-change in neighboring Syria. Having seized control of territory in northern Syria, it has proven capable of moving forces back and forth across the Syrian-Iraqi

border to stage car bombings, assaults on military and police units, and sectarian attacks. Its stated aim is the establishment of a Sunni Muslim caliphate spanning both countries.

Maliki had seized upon the actions of the ISIL forces as a pretext for violently suppressing the wider Sunni protest movement that has been provoked by the Baghdad government's sectarian bias, which has resulted in political marginalization and repression against the Sunni population.

This has included the persecution of Sunni politicians and their aides as "terrorists." On the eve of the latest crackdown, security forces raided the home of parliament member Ahmed al-Alwani in Ramadi, arresting him and killing his brother and five guards. The move prompted the resignation of 44 members of parliament, most of them Sunni.

Issuing an ultimatum last month for the dispersal of the protest camp, Maliki described it as "the headquarters for the leadership of Al Qaeda."

This self-serving government narrative seeks to obscure the fact that Maliki's own sectarian policies have fueled bitter resentment within the Sunni population, driven by lack of services, indiscriminate "terror" raids, imprisonment of thousands without charges, and a de-Baathification program that has been used to expel public workers from their jobs.

The pretense that the government is simply engaged in a war on Al Qaeda terrorism has been utilized to secure backing from both Iran and Washington. The latter recently ordered shipments of Hellfire missiles and other advanced weaponry to the Iraqi security forces. Some of these missiles were reportedly used Thursday in the government assault on Fallujah.

New acts of violence were recorded elsewhere in Iraq as the military confrontation shaped up in Anbar. A suicide bomber detonated a pickup truck filled with explosives on a crowded commercial street Thursday night in Balad Ruz, about 45 miles northeast of Baghdad. At least 19 people were killed in the blast and 37 were wounded. Such attacks have become a daily occurrence, targeting both Shia and Sunni populations.

The Iraqi people are paying the terrible price for more than a decade of US imperialism's predatory wars and colonial-style aggression. The eight-year American occupation claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, while imposing a political system that utilized

sectarianism as a means of dividing and conquering the country's population. The Maliki regime is the product of that system.

Now, the US-instigated sectarian civil war in neighboring Syria has provided a new and powerful impulse for civil war in Iraq itself, with Washington's allies, Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf monarchies, providing material aid to Sunni Islamist fighters on both sides of the border, even as Washington itself continues to prop up the Maliki regime with military aid.



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