

# Bombings in Iraq intensify sectarian tensions

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At least 72 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in sectarian bombings in Iraq on Thursday. The attacks coincide with a deep political crisis that has produced a de facto split in the “national unity” government between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shiite coalition and the largely Sunni Iraqiya alliance.

The first explosion took place in Baghdad early Thursday morning in the working class Shiite suburb of Sadr City. Explosives strapped to a motorcycle were detonated near a group of day labourers. Two more bombs exploded as rescuers were taking the wounded to a nearby hospital. In all, nine people were killed and 35 wounded. An hour later, two car bombs exploded in squares in the Baghdad neighbourhood of Kadhimiya, leaving 15 dead and 31 injured.

The deadliest attack took place as Shiite pilgrims were waiting to pass a checkpoint in Nasiriya on their way to Karbala to celebrate the upcoming Shiite holy day of Arbaeen. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest, killing 44 people and wounding dozens more, including several Iraqi army officers.

No organisation has claimed responsibility as yet, but the bombings bear the hallmarks of Sunni sectarian fanatics, possibly Al Qaeda in Iraq. The attacks are the worst since December 22, when 63 people were killed and nearly 200 injured in bombings that targeted mainly Shiite areas of Baghdad.

Sectarian rivalries in the Iraqi ruling elites came to a head late last month when Iraq’s Judicial Council issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, for instigating terrorist attacks on Shiite officials. Prime Minister Maliki also sought a parliamentary no confidence motion to oust Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Muldaq, the head of a Sunni-

based party.

The Iraqiya coalition responded by boycotting the parliament and its ministers walked out of the Maliki cabinet. In a prominent comment in the *New York Times* last week, three Iraqiya leaders accused Maliki of seeking to form “an authoritarian one-party state” and appealed to the US to intervene “to help create a successful unity government.” (See: “Call for US intervention into Iraqi crisis”)

Hashemi has gained sanctuary in the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which has refused to hand him over to the central government authorities. The standoff has only heightened tensions between the Maliki government and the Kurdish leadership, which no longer has the direct protection afforded by the US military occupation of Iraq.

The Obama administration has, publicly at least, continued to support the Maliki government, while appealing for talks to resolve the conflict with Iraqiya. US Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey declared this week that the Iraqi judiciary was making “a serious effort” to conduct “a free and fair and just investigation” into the allegations against Hashemi.

However, US officials have expressed concerns about the Maliki government’s ties with Iran. The *New York Times* yesterday highlighted Maliki’s apparent welcoming of a Shiite militia, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, into the political arena. The group, a breakaway from the organisation of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, is accused of carrying out attacks on American troops and receiving training from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Behind the scenes, the US is undoubtedly using its

still considerable presence in Iraq to pressure Maliki to distance himself from Iran and make significant concessions to Sunni leaders. The last US combat troops left Iraq late last year, but Washington maintains one of its biggest embassies in the world in Baghdad with some 17,000 diplomats and advisers. US officials will be deeply involved in the intriguing and manoeuvring in Iraq that not only involves Iran, but also US ally Saudi Arabia and NATO member Turkey.

Iraq has become a hotbed of regional rivalries. Saudi Arabian enmity towards Maliki was spelled out in a 2007 WikiLeaks cable that reported Saudi King Abdullah describing the Iraqi prime minister as “an Iranian agent.” Saudi Arabia, which regards Iran as a dangerous regional rival, has refused to set up an embassy in Baghdad and deliberately sought to exclude Iraq from regional bodies such as the Gulf Cooperation Council.

A McClatchy Newspapers article last month dealing with Saudi antagonism towards the Maliki government reported that Saudi Arabia had provided funds to Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi to contest Iraq’s national election in March 2010. When the outcome produced a protracted political deadlock, Saudi Arabia offered to mediate in November 2010—a move that was welcomed by Allawi, but rejected by Maliki.

Turkey is also deeply involved in Iraq. It is the largest source of investment in the Kurdish north of Iraq, but is also concerned to prevent the Kurdish region from encouraging Kurdish separatism inside Turkey itself. The Turkish government also acted as a patron for the Iraqiya bloc in 2010 despite Ankara’s economic and political ties with Iran.

Over the past year, Turkish relations with Iran have deteriorated as Ankara, with Washington’s encouragement, has sought to exploit the Arab Spring to extend its regional influence. Turkey’s backing for anti-government organisations in Syria seeking to oust Iranian ally President Bashar al-Assad has further soured relations.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Tehran on Thursday in a bid to ease growing regional

tensions. Before he left, Davutoglu warned: “Some circles are inclined to start a cold war around Sunni-Shiite tension [in the region], which would have an impact for decades to come.” Amid a sharpening US confrontation with Iran in the Persian Gulf, the foreign minister also transmitted an invitation from European Union foreign policy coordinator Catherine Ashton for the resumption of international talks with Iran on its nuclear programs.

Just as it fuelled sectarian tensions inside Iraq to divide popular opposition to the US occupation, Washington is exploiting the wider regional rivalry to undermine Iranian allies such as Syria’s Assad and encourage an anti-Iranian coalition throughout the Middle East. These moves feed into sectarian Sunni animosities, promoted particularly by Saudi Arabia, against “Shiite Iran.”

In Iraq, as the bombings on Thursday demonstrate, these sectarian tensions have the potential to trigger civil war. At present, Washington is pressing Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki to compromise, but the US attitude could rapidly change if he fails to do so and forges closer ties to Iran. In that event, sectarian violence could provide the pretext for a renewed US intervention to shore up its strategic and economic interests.



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