

Basra Security Breakdown

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Violence on the rise as rival Shia parties vie for power.

Basra residents are concerned that this southern city has effectively been engulfed by civil war as the security situation continues to worsen there.

In Iraq's second-largest city, lucrative oil resources as well as political dominance are up for grabs, and the power struggle has led to a breakdown in security and governance, according to residents and political analysts interviewed by IWPR.

University professors, army officers, Muslim clerics and community leaders have been targeted in assassinations in recent months. While some of the attacks are on Sunni Arabs and former Baath party members, others appear to involve internecine strife between militias aligned with rival factions and political groups.

As a result of the violence, security has been left in tatters, and even the presence of 8,000 British troops has not stopped the violence.

The violence increased rather than decreased after the new Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki declared a month-long state of emergency on May 31. Within days of his announcement, at least 35 people were killed and dozens more injured in a bloody attack in the city public market and a shooting at a Sunni mosque.

"The government's measures turned Basra into a time bomb that might explode at any moment," said Ibrahim Irebi, a 38-year-old civil servant. "We're living in tough circumstances, and these new measures haven't helped stabilise security."

Some believe Basra has been on the edge for several months. While the majority Shia city seemed calm compared with other Iraqi cities engulfed in sectarian violence, Shia clerics as well as members of the Sunni Arab community have been murdered, and many of the latter have fled.

Salam Radhi, managing editor of al-Nas magazine in Basra, said the current political infighting is deeply rooted in the rivalries among various Shia parties.

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, and Fadhila are the strongest Shia parties in this part of Iraq, and are seen as the primary forces competing for political power and control over Basra's oil.

Although Basra is rich in oil resources, most of the population is still impoverished because of the years of oppression by the Baathist regime, which was hostile to Shia political aspirations. Oil smuggling out of Basra, Iraq's largest port continues to cripple Iraq's fragile economy.

Both parties are accused of ensuring that only their own supporters get jobs, particularly in oil-related

industries. Fadhila pulled out of negotiations on the Iraqi cabinet when its demand to control the oil ministry was turned down.

"Partisan and personal interests have played a major role in complicating this crisis, which has deepened as accusations and blame are traded with regard to the deteriorating security situation, and interference in security matters," said Radhi.

Radhi believes Baghdad's intervention "has not been successful" in solving the political crisis caused by rising violence and a breakdown of relationships among parties in Basra.

"Some inefficient officials should have been fired," he said. "Security committees that failed should have been replaced by new ones that were able to handle the situation, and independent, [Iraqi] nationalist figures should have been put in charge of administrating the province."

The Iraqi army has been deployed in Basra and checkpoints abound throughout the city. But on June 3, a car bomb ripped through Basra's main market, killing an estimated 28 people and injuring about 70.

Ahmed Riyadh, 18, was selling juice when the explosion occurred. "There was a loud noise and suddenly everything was covered in dust and I felt something hit my leg," he said. "Many people were killed. My friend was martyred when was hit in the head. I couldn't save him or do anything."

A provincial council official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that shortly after the market bombing, the government received intelligence that militants were hiding around Al-Arab, a Sunni mosque.

Police and army units raided the mosque and came under fire, he said. The security forces killed seven men inside the building, and lost two of their own men. The official said weapons, Iraqi National Guard uniforms, explosives and communication devices were found in the mosque.

A man captured in the operation admitted that he was preparing a car bomb for an attack in the city centre on June 4, said the official.

But Abu Mohammed, a 45-year-old Sunni man living nearby who did not give his full name, said there were students studying in the mosque when the raid happened "because they didn't have electricity at home".

Early on the morning of June 6, serious fighting erupted between British troops and militants in Basra's Shia majority Karmat Ali suburb after a British convoy was targeted in the area.

The central government's declaration of a state of emergency in Basra met with some hostility from local politicians. A statement by Basra governor Mohammed al-Waili, who is also head of the Fadhila party, said the move was politically motivated and a ploy to deflect attention from the worsening security situation in Baghdad and other provinces.

But provincial council member Abdul-Hasan Nasir, of the Hizbullah party, welcomed the intervention, saying it "will help to create relative, though not complete, calm".

Basra residents appeared to share this cautiously optimistic view.

Saad Aydan, a 20-year-old university student, said that even though security was tight at Iraqi army checkpoints, "we still feel safe with [the army] here. We hope that Maliki won't leave Basra to the mercy of parties and officials that will lead us into the abyss".

Wisam al-Hasani, a 27-year-old housewife, said Baghdad's intervention was long overdue.

"We're afraid to go to the market or hospital because of this volatile situation," she said. "The government should have intervened a long time ago, not after matters became so tense."

Asir al-Asadi is the pseudonym of an IWPR trainee journalist in Basra.

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