



CONTINUED SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN IRAQ LEAVES SCORES DEAD

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Baghdad was rocked by a series of attacks Tuesday, dashing hopes that a curfew and calls for restraint by religious leaders would end days of sectarian violence that threatens to push the country into all out civil war.

The violence was prompted by the bombing a week ago of the Askariya shrine in Samarra, a city north of Baghdad. Even though no one was killed, the bombing was seen as a symbolic attack on the country's majority Shiite population.

The mosque, also known as the Golden Mosque, is one of Shiite Islam's holiest sites. "One cannot overemphasize the blow to Shiaism of the destruction of the shrine," Vali Nasr of the Council on Foreign Relations told the NewsHour.

"This was an attack on the very existence, on the very meaning of Shiaism."

The bombing of the Golden Mosque is believed to be the work of al-Qaida in Iraq, and is seen as an effort by terrorists from other countries – such as Iran, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to destabilize the country and put pressure on efforts by Iraq and the United States to create a national unity government.

History of sectarian tension in Iraq

Even though Sunnis are a minority group in Iraq (about 35 percent of the population), under Saddam Hussein and his largely Sunni Baath political party, they dominated the country and held powerful positions at all levels of government.

In addition to the majority Shiite Arabs (about 60 percent of the population) and Sunni Arabs, Iraq also has Kurds and Christians. Historically, there has always been tension among these groups.

When the United States invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam's government, the Sunni leadership was wiped out.

Some say the U.S.-led Provisional Authority aggravated sectarian tensions when they adopted a policy of de-Baathification – removing many of the Sunni elite from positions of power and replacing them with Shia leaders who could legitimately claim to represent the majority of Iraq's population.

The Sunni Arabs resented the appointments and as a result, boycotted the political process created to form an Iraqi constitution and early elections.

As a result, Sunnis did not get to influence the constitution and Shiites and Kurds now dominate the newly elected leadership positions in the country.

Sunnis felt threatened and marginalized by the new government.

Many began to support attacks against the U.S.-led coalition forces and more recently against Iraqis cooperating with U.S. efforts.

Call for a national unity government

Recently, the United States has been urging Iraqi leaders to bring the Sunnis back into the political process in hopes that a more inclusive government will quell the violence.

“Iraqis voted but they voted, unfortunately, along sectarian lines. And to deal with this problem, they need to form a national unity government, and that's what we are encouraging,” U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad told the NewsHour.

However, democracy has not come easily for many Iraqis.

Despite his concerns over the Sunni-led insurgency, Jalal Talabani, the newly elected president of Iraq, recognized that excluding Sunni Arabs from the political process was a mistake.

“We need a national unity government that must not be in the control of one group or list or nationality,” Talabani told the International Herald Tribune. “We must have consensus to work together, give everyone a share. It's the new game and we did not learn that yet.”

But the surge in sectarian violence that followed the attack on the Golden Mosque will make forming a unity government a difficult task.

Even so, the United States is determined to move forward.

“Success in Iraq will have huge positive implications for the future of this region and the future of this region is extremely important for the future of the world, for the security of the American people,” Zalmay told the NewsHour.

In a press conference to address sectarian violence, Zalmay said that the next Cabinet ministers “have to be people who are nonsectarian, broadly acceptable and who are not tied to militias” run by political parties and warned that if they are not they risk losing U.S. support.

“We are not going to invest the resources of the American people and build forces that are run by people who are sectarian.”

-- Compiled by Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra

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