

POLICY BRIEFING

# Iraq's deadly spiral toward a civil war

## Abstract

In recent months sectarian violence in Iraq has escalated worryingly. More than 6 400 people have been killed across the country this year, half of them in the last three months. The Shia-dominated central government has failed to address the grievances of the Sunni minority and has responded to public protests with a heavy hand, leading militant Sunni groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant to gain ground. The situation is compounded by the dangerous spill-over from the civil war in neighbouring Syria.

Iraq matters for the entire Middle East. While the only real solutions to Iraq's problems are domestic, international actors can contribute to the process. The role of the European Union can be significant in consolidating the country's judicial and law enforcement authorities and in organising the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

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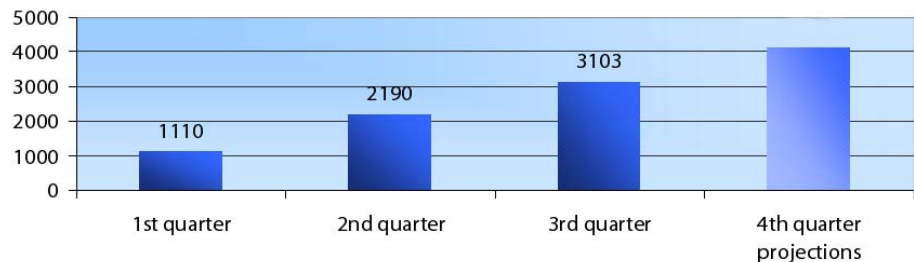
## 1 Escalating violence

More than 6 400 people have been killed across Iraq this year. This is the highest death toll since 2008.

In recent months violence in Iraq has escalated worryingly. More than 6 400 people have been killed across the country this year alone, according to monitoring group Iraq Body Count. This trend reverses the decline in sectarian violence of the past few years. Reports of massive bombings ripping through densely populated neighbourhoods and causing the deaths of dozens of innocent people have become commonplace. With the next parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2014, Iraq's situation is out of hand. Civilian deaths in particular are cause for alarm: more than 3 100 civilians were killed in the third quarter of 2013, compared to 2 200 in the second and 1 100 in the first quarter. The situation is likely to deteriorate if the country's political forces and religious groups do not tackle the problem.

**Figure 1:**  
Number of civilian deaths in Iraq in 2013

**Alarming trend of spreading of violence in IRAQ in 2013**  
Number of civilian deaths



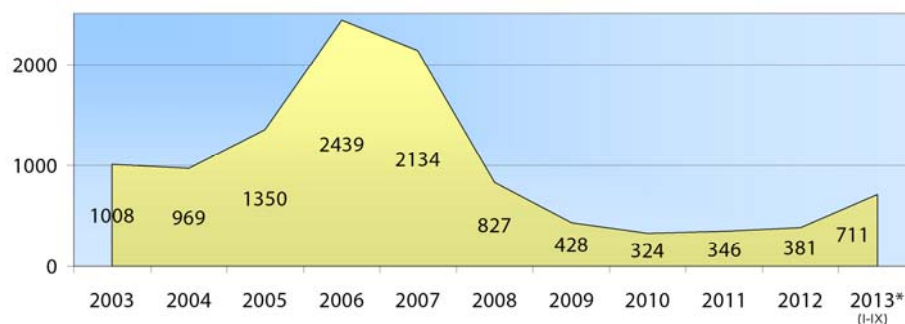
Terrorist attacks generally target Shia civilians.

The primary goal of terrorist groups is to spread fear, panic and instability throughout the country, among civilians as well as security forces and politicians. That goal was sadly fulfilled on 6 October 2013 in Tel Afar, a Turkmen Shia town in the north of Iraq: a suicide bomber attacked a police station (causing in no casualties) while another drove a truck packed with explosives into the playground of a primary school, killing 14 children and their headmaster. On the same day, another suicide bomber attacked a group of Shia pilgrims on their way to visit a shrine in Baghdad on the occasion of a religious celebration. This assault claimed lives of at least 14 people and wounded more than 30. The next day, dozens more lives were lost in attacks in various, mainly Shia, neighbourhoods in Baghdad.

Sunni militants are waging a campaign aimed at the country's Shia-dominated political establishment.

This year's spiral of violence in Iraq has been largely the result of a Sunni militants' campaign aimed at the political establishment dominated by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Shia supporters. The Iraqi government and its security forces have been unable to stop the bloodshed. In fact, the struggle for power in Iraq involves more complex divisions than simple sectarian ones. Yet in such times of rising tensions, political interests and issues of identity meld into a highly polarising and provocative language that runs along sectarian lines.

**Figure 2:**  
Average monthly number  
of violent civilian deaths



Source: [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org)

Baghdad and the regions with sizeable Sunni population are the regions most affected.

While the number of civilians killed every month in violence remains far below the number registered in the bloody 2006-07 years, it has also doubled since the withdrawal of American troops in 2011.

The region of Baghdad has been the hardest hit by the current wave of violence, followed by Ninewa, Diyala, Salah ad-Din and Anbar. However, violence is spreading throughout the country. On 28 September, Iraqi Kurdistan – an autonomous region in the north previously largely spared of bloodshed – was the site of a terrorist attack, occurring right in the centre of its capital Erbil. In the overwhelmingly Shia provinces in the south of the country, on the other hand, the security situation is much better... at least for the time being.

## 2 Iraq's complex patchwork of ethnicities and religions

The latest census was carried out in 1987.

Iraq's demographic landscape is extremely complex, and there are no reliable numbers, as the latest census was been carried out 1987. No new census has been planned, largely because political tensions divide the Sunni and the Shia in several central regions, and the Kurds and Arabs in the disputed territories in the northern part of the country.

**Figure 3:**  
Main sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraq.



Source: United Nations, with additions by the Policy Department, DG Expo

Shia Muslims constitute some 60-65 % of Iraq's 30-million population.

According to official statistics from the Iraqi government, 97 % of the country's population is Muslim, with Shia Muslims alone accounting for 60-65 % of Iraqis. The Shia are predominantly Arab but also include some two million Turkmen, an unknown number of Fali Kurds and a small number of Circassians and other ethnic groups. The south of the country is overwhelmingly Shia, and Shia are also heavily present in the capital. In the south of the country, people are generally poorer than in the capital, though the security situation is better.

The Sunni represent about a third of the population.

The Sunni represent 32-37 % of the population and are mainly Arab or Kurdish.

The remaining 3 % of the population non-Muslim, with largest groups composed of Christians (800 000) and Yezidis<sup>1</sup> (some 500 000). Many minorities have left Iraq in the years since the US-led invasion of the country<sup>2</sup>.

### 3 Reasons for the vicious circle of violence

#### 3.1 The government's failure to respond to Sunni grievances

The Iraqi government has grown deaf to the grievances of the Sunni minority.

The instability in Iraq is driven primarily by domestic politics, and the origins of the current crisis run deep. The Iraqi government, dominated by Shia politicians, has grown deaf to grievances from the Sunni minority, and Prime Minister Maliki has become increasingly authoritarian. Adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy, Maliki has marginalised Sunni political forces, leaving them without effective political representation and with few alternatives to insurgency. As described by the non-governmental organisation the International Crisis Group, 'the demonstrations and the repression [...] have further exacerbated the [Sunni] sense of exclusion and persecution'<sup>3</sup>.

The government has targeted senior Sunni politicians.

Iraq's chaotic and violent year started with a raid by the Iraqi government's security forces on the home of former Sunni Finance Minister Rafi' al-Issawi. In December 2011, Issawi had launched a boycott of the cabinet, along with most fellow ministers from the cross-sectarian Iraqi National Movement (*Iraqiyya*). The movement had provided a vehicle for the representation of Sunni Arabs in the 2010 parliamentary elections, when it reflected a new mood of anti-sectarianism in Iraq, and could claim to represent both Sunni and Shia as well as some minorities<sup>4</sup>. Since that time, *Iraqiyya* has declined as a political force due to its deep internal divisions.

Internal divisions within the Sunni political leadership allowed militant groups to gain ground in Iraq.

The raid on Issawi led to protests in several Sunni-populated provinces (Anbar, Ninewa and Salah ad-Din). Isolated demonstrations also took place in majority-Sunni areas of Baghdad, particularly Adhamiyah, although security forces intervened promptly.

The cleavage between factions of national-level Sunni politicians widened as the protests continued and as Prime Minister Maliki continued to

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<sup>1</sup> Yezidis are a Kurdish religious group, who represent an ancient religion linked to Zoroastrianism and Sufism which live primarily in province of Ninewa.

<sup>2</sup> See the report 'Iraq's Minorities and Other Vulnerable Groups' by the Institute for International Law and Human Rights, October 2013, for more details on the situation of the minorities in Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group: Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State, Middle East Report N°144, 14 August 2013

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state)

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Wicken: Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis, Middle East Security Report II, May 2013, available at <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>



Religious and tribal leaders, provincial politicians and civil activists are emerging as leaders of the protest movement.

Sunnis claim that they are discriminated against by the central government.

The protests have been largely peaceful, but there have been some clashes with security forces.

manoeuvre against Sunni leaders. In turn, this division allowed the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant<sup>5</sup> and the militant Sufi and neo-Baathist *Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia* (JRTN) to advance stronger claims for the leadership of the protest movement and to advocate for violent uprising and armed confrontation with the government's forces and the Shia population. The majority of Iraqi Sunni Arabs do not support these organisations, but the growing discontent among Sunnis creates opportunities for militant groups to expand their presence in the country.

The increasingly splintered Sunni political scene in Iraq has led religious and tribal leaders, provincial politicians and civil activists to compete for influence and prominence. Senior Sunni clerics, such as Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, have emerged as key figures among those who claim to represent the protesters. Black and white flags bearing the Islamic creed<sup>6</sup> in anti-government protests demonstrate that there is a strong Islamist feeling within the Sunni population. The flag of al-Qaeda has not often appeared.

Many Sunni grievances are longstanding. This is true, for example, of the Sunni insistence that the government cease invoking Article Four of the Counterterrorism Law to conduct mass arrests in predominantly Sunni areas. Many Sunnis have also demanded the repeal of the Accountability and Justice Law of 2008 which governs de-Ba'athification<sup>7</sup>. Protesters have pointed to the lack of sectarian balance within the state and security forces and to the inequitable allocation of government's resources to southern (Shia) and central (Sunni) provinces.

This year's attacks have been better coordinated, more frequent and more geographically dispersed than previous incidents. The protests have been largely peaceful, but there have been several exceptions, most notably the clashes with Iraqi security forces that have taken place since the spring of 2013 in Hawija, Fallujah, Mosul and Ramadi. These clashes demonstrate the wider potential for violence and radicalisation. An incident in the centre of Fallujah in late April 2013 was followed by clashes between al-Qaeda gunmen and security forces in the suburbs of the city. Since public protests began in April, the civilian death rate has risen each month except for June.

### 3.2 Spill-over from Syria

Cross-border Sunni terrorism has gained momentum in Iraq and

Iraq shares a porous 600-km border with Syria, and the civil war in there — itself a dangerous conflict with sectarian undertones — has spilled across the border. Sunni jihadist factions are operating and recruiting openly in

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<sup>5</sup> الدولة الإسلامية في العراق و الشام

<sup>6</sup> لا إله إلا الله مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ 'There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.'

In Shia Islam, the creed is expanded with the addition of a phrase concerning Ali at the end. 'and عليّ وليّ الله'

<sup>7</sup> De-Ba'athification is an Iraqi government's policy. Its objective is to remove all public sector employees affiliated with the Ba'ath Party (ruling party under Saddam Hussein's regime) from their positions and to be banned from any future employment in the public sector.



Syria.

both countries.

Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups control many areas near the Syrian border. Since Al-Qaeda elements in Iraq and Syria merged in April to form the Islamic State, the group is believed to have become the strongest jihadist group fighting the regime of Syria President Bashar al-Assad. Al-Qaeda's global leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, ordered the merger dissolved, but cross-border Sunni militancy has instead become stronger in Iraq and Syria since last spring. In July 2013, the Islamic State carried out a successful military-style assault on the Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq, freeing hundreds of convicts, including senior members of the organisation.

## 4 From sectarian violence to civil war?

The restoration of Shia militias could ignite even more violence.

Despite the Iraqi government's assertions that its security forces can secure the capital, the gravely deteriorating security situation demonstrates that the Iraqi armed forces and police are not in control. Some senior Iraqi Shia politicians have demanded protection for the Shia in Sunni-majority areas and called for recreating Shia militia groups to defend Baghdad. The Iraqi government, for its part, has denied that it has any such plans. Such a paramilitary force would likely include groups who played a major role in the 2006–07 sectarian strife. Rearming those militias would lead to even more violence.

Yet the waves of bombings persist and violence spreads further into Shia- and Kurdish-dominated regions, Shia militias may well reappear. Civilians would have to pay a heavy bill in the bloodshed that would follow.

A political reconciliation between the government and Sunni politicians appears unlikely.

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq (SRSG), Nickolay Mladenov, has called upon all political leaders in the country to strengthen their efforts to promote national dialogue and reconciliation.

While only a political solution involving political, religious and military leaders from all sides would prove effective, it is highly unlikely that Prime Minister Maliki will be willing to reach a political solution with Sunni leaders. The feelings of Iraqi citizens – who rightly dread the grave effects that violence may have on the country's socio-economic situation – is apparently low on the Iraqi political agenda.

## 5 Eleventh hour to avoid civil war

### 5.1 Domestic solutions

Iraq could play an important regional role, but is too entangled in its domestic troubles.

Iraq matters for the entire Middle East. The country is located at the geographic and strategic crossroads of the 'Shia axis', running between Iran and Syria, and the 'Sunni coalition', between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. With a population of about 30 million, Iraq has the world's fifth-largest proven oil reserves. Historically the country has served as an important centre for Islamic and Arabic cultures. If unified, stable, democratically ruled and self-reliant, the country could act as a force for moderation in the region. For the

moment, however, Iraq has become internally ungovernable and unable to assume any role as regional leader.

The government's policy of targeting prominent Iraqi Sunni leaders does not help to counter the threat of militant groups.

The downward spiral of Iraqi politics poses not only domestic problems, but a threat to regional stability. The current government's practice of targeting prominent Iraqi Sunni leaders, such as former Vice-President Tariq Hashemi and former Minister Issawi, rather than treating them as allies, is a short-sighted strategy. This self-interested political game increases Sunni discontent and greater security problems, spawning anti-government violence and insurgency, including the threat of the Islamic State and other militant groups.

Iraq has a democratic constitution but no functioning institutions.

After the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq's constitution was considered the most democratic in the entire region. In 2010 Iraqis elected a representative parliament. Unfortunately, political infighting has prevented Iraq from becoming a model of a functioning democracy for the rest of the region. The country instead serves as an example for conservative forces in the region and advocates of the 'Arab exception', who argue that the only workable political choices for Iraq – and Arab countries in general – are authoritarian government or chaos.

Cooperation is needed between the capital and the provinces.

To address the grievances from the various regions and minorities of Iraq, the central government should cooperate with the relevant provincial councils, whose legitimacy was recently reaffirmed in elections. Province-wide ceasefires and a coordinated fight against terrorist groups should be a top priority. This would require restraint on the part of government security forces, as well as a more cooperative attitude from local officials and opinion leaders than those they currently adopt.

Confidence in the political process has to be restored.

Confidence in the political process must also be restored. Sunni religious and political leaders should form a united platform and distance themselves from militant groups. The government should assume its responsibilities and address longstanding issues (see Section 3.1) and ensure that southern (Shia) and central (Sunni) provinces are allocated government resources in an equitable manner.

Legislation should be passed to create the second chamber, the Council of Union, consisting of representatives from Iraq's regions.

Under the Iraqi constitution approved in 2005, legislative authority is vested in two bodies, the Council of Representatives and the Council of Union. The Council of Representatives (*Majlis al-Nuwwab*) consists of 325 members directly elected by citizens for four years. The second chamber, the Council of Union (*Majlis al-Ittihad*), will consist of representatives from Iraq's regions. Its precise composition and responsibilities are not defined in the constitution, and the Council of Representatives has not yet passed legislation on this second chamber. In the long run, the Council of Union could prove to be a useful channel for the regions to influence federal legislation.

## 5.2 The international community's sticks and carrots

No country in the region and no international power wishes to see Iraq fracture along ethnic or religious lines.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki owes his position partly to the US, which can still exert pressure on him.

Iran cooperates on a wide range of issues with Iraq.

Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni but is wary of the insurgency being led by militant groups.

Following a period of chilly relations, there has been a recent rapprochement between Ankara and Baghdad.

The US has a fair amount of leverage on the Iraqi government. The Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation<sup>8</sup> between the United States and the Republic of Iraq covers a wide range of political, economic, cultural and security issues. The US could apply conditions to its assistance to Iraq's counter-terrorism and defence programmes as a means of placing pressure on the Iraqi government.

Iran has a strategic partnership with Iraq. Relations between the two governments are close, and trade between the two countries flourishing. Iran's new, more conciliatory president may take a more constructive approach to Iraq's development than did his predecessor. The cooperation between the two countries is developing rapidly, especially in the field of energy. Iraqi Defence Minister Saadoun al-Dulaimi visited Tehran in late September 2013 to sign a bilateral defence agreement with his Iranian counterpart, Hussein Dehqan.

As a leading Sunni regional power, Saudi Arabia also has a potential – but underexploited – role to play in Iraq. On the official level, relations between the two countries are currently poor, in part because of personal animosity between the leaders. Saudi Arabia has not opened an embassy in Baghdad since the withdrawal of American troops, which the Saudis vehemently opposed. While the Saudis are concerned about the safety of the Sunni minority in Iraq they are also wary of supporting the group for fear of being perceived as helping al-Qaeda. If Iraq's sectarian conflict worsens, however, the Saudis may well align themselves with Sunni religious and tribal leaders. In any case, direct contacts between Baghdad and Riyadh should be established at the intergovernmental level, and the prevailing personal rancour should be overcome.

Iraq's relations with Turkey, the other main Sunni power in the region, have come under serious strain over the last decade. As analysts have noted, 'the Iraqi Kurds draw closer to Ankara, and Baghdad seems to drift further away'<sup>9</sup>. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) initiated a rapprochement with Turkey in 2007 as a means of balancing Iranian influence in Iraq and of countering Baghdad's centralising tendencies. To implement this strategy, the KRG offered Turkey important economic incentives. The presence of the terrorist People's Defence Force of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the north of Iraq, from which the PKK stages attacks against Turkey, constitutes a serious stumbling block in Turkish-Iraqi relations. The effects of the civil war in Syria have more recently drawn the two countries' central governments closer to one another, as demonstrated by high-level bilateral meetings.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/iraq/216651/US-IRAQ/us-iraq-sfa-en.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans: Turkey's changing relations with Iraq - Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Policy Focus 122), October 2012  
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/PolicyFocus122.pdf>

The European Union has less direct leverage in Iraq but is an important partner to the Iraqi government in consolidating rule of law.

EU-Iraqi relations are governed by a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 2012. Currently pending ratification, the agreement's key provisions include cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, human rights, science and technology, energy and the environment.

The PCA also provides for regular political dialogue on bilateral, regional and global issues in areas of shared interest. Three joint committees are already functional under provisional arrangements: trade, energy and human rights and democracy. These committees will all meet in the fourth quarter of 2014.

The mandate of the European Union Integrated Rule of Law Mission for Iraq (EUJUST LEX-Iraq) expires at the end of 2013, after which the mission is likely to be drawn down.

The European Union Integrated Rule of Law Mission for Iraq (EUJUST LEX-Iraq)<sup>10</sup> is a civilian crisis management mission conducted under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Following the fourth extension of its mandate, EUJUST LEX-Iraq will run until 31 December 2013. The objective of the mission is to provide training to Iraqis working for three main components of Iraq's state apparatus – the police, prisons and judiciary. It is important to continue cooperation with Iraq and support the establishment of stronger institutions in the field of justice and home affairs.

The extension of the mission beyond 2013 is pending a decision of the Council. Even if approved, the mission is likely to be reduced, as the EU wishes the Iraqi authorities to take over responsibilities in the draw-down phase of the mission.

The EU supports the electoral process in Iraq ... and its support is particularly needed for the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

The EU has been one of the largest donors supporting the Iraqi political and electoral process, having contributed over EUR 94 million since 2004, including with the deployment of an electoral assessment team for the general elections in March 2010.

The EU should maintain its engagement and ensure that the country's parliamentary elections can be held on schedule (pending the adoption of a new election law) and properly organised and monitored. Only free and fair elections can deliver a strong democratic mandate to a new government.

In the period leading up to the elections, legitimate demands by protestors must be recognised and addressed to prevent Iraqi Sunnis from withdrawing from the campaign. All Iraqis need credible avenues for political expression to dissuade them from turning to violent alternatives. Iraq's myriad economic and social problems, the weakness of its state institutions and its endemic corruption cannot be tackled if the main preoccupation remains the spiralling sectarian violence. Iraq's global and regional partners can help Iraq's domestic political forces bury the hatchet.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.eas.europa.eu/csdp/missions-and-operations/eujust-lex-iraq/>