

(Huffington Post) Four days after the official US troop presence ended, Baghdad has been struck by bombings that are a reminder that for ordinary Iraqis the horror continues.



Soft, unprotected civilian targets were hit by co-ordinated, simultaneous attacks that were likely planned prior to Shi'a Prime Minister Maliki's Monday decision to order the arrest of Sunni Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi. The Western press has focused on the potential for larger sectarian bloodletting, the reality is that this bombing fits into a fairly predictable pattern of violence that has been largely ignored by the media. Indeed the average monthly death toll in Iraq exceeds 300 and kidnappings, bombings and shootings are daily occurrences.

The Iraqi security forces are now some 650,000 strong and according to US military trainers becoming more competent by the day. With this in mind a combination of manpower, equipment and checkpoints (in addition to reconciliation efforts that I will come onto) have reduced the frequency of attacks against religious sites and ceremonies, government institutions and in particular against the security forces themselves.

Instead Al Qaeda and disenfranchised groups have focused on less frequent but more deadly attacks. In the wake of multiple bombings, including two suicide attacks, in the capital on 12 October, Major General Qasim al-Musawi, spokesman for Baghdad Operations Command, told the Associated Press: "Every three months or so, Al-Qaeda mobilises all its resources to launch such attacks in one day to say that Al-Qaeda is still able to attack and threaten security posts." The most significant surge in attacks this year came on 15 August, when a series of car bombings across Iraq killed more than 80 people. An Al Qaeda statement was subsequently released to jihadist websites announcing the beginning of a campaign of attacks to avenge Bin Laden and its own slain.

A key factor behind the continued endurance of 'anti-government' groups in Iraq is the incomplete incorporation of the Sons of Iraq into the state. The strategy to 'flip' the Sunni insurgency was a key factor in reducing violence as part of the US 'surge'. In October US spokesman in Iraq Maj Gen Buchanan told me that "the original Sons of Iraq number was 100,000 and about 50,000 have transitioned, leaving 50,000 left spread across nine provinces and not all Sunni. The Iraqi government is concerned with their transition". However a senior Iraqi politician contested these figures, telling me that the militias "are now being sidelined and marginalised. Only 20% have been incorporated into the state".

If 80% of the Sons of Iraq have not been incorporated it should not come as a huge surprise to see them choosing to target the state (and its citizens) as a consequence. The fall out between Maliki and Hashimi only exacerbates the tensions between the sectarian elites that is filtering down to groups willing and able to act with devastating consequences.