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From the Los Angeles Times

Iraqi civilian deaths plunge

U.S. credits troop buildup, but residents and observers say homogenization has brought relative calm.

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BAGHDAD — Iraq's civilian body count in October was less than half that at its height in January, reflecting both the tactical successes of this year's U.S. troop buildup and the lasting impact of waves of sectarian death squad killings, car bombings and neighborhood purges.

October also marked the lowest monthly death toll for American troops, 36 fatalities, since March 2006, when 31 were killed, according to icasualties.org.

American commanders credit the buildup, which reached full strength in June, with slowing sectarian bloodshed.

They say the decision to send 28,500 more troops to Iraq has made a difference by allowing them to send soldiers to live on the fault lines between Sunni Arab and Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad, and to conduct sweeping offensives in provinces east and south of the capital against strongholds of Shiite Muslim militias and Sunni militants linked to foreign insurgents.

But others say that the picture is more complicated than that because those seeking to cleanse their neighborhoods of rival religious sects have largely succeeded. The civilian death toll plummeted nationwide in the last two months; the toll was 2,076 in January but 884 in September and 758 in October, according to the Iraqi Health Ministry.

"Everyone in our neighborhood is Sunni, even the birds flying above us are Sunni," said Mohammed Azzawi, a resident of the once mixed district of Ghazaliya.

A year ago, his street was a battleground between Shiite and Sunni militants. Now it is segregated between its Shiite northern tip and its Sunni south.

Moreover, American forces have felt it necessary to make tacit deals with groups that have been involved in the sectarian cleansing, and many Baghdad residents who have not been killed have fled. The number of people displaced internally in Iraq has risen to 2.25 million, and an additional 2 million have left the country.

"Certainly the presence of [U.S.] soldiers in insecure neighborhoods in Baghdad could stabilize the neighborhood, resulting in less violence and fewer people fleeing the neighborhood," said Dana Graber Ladek, Iraqi case officer for the International Organization for Migration. "In addition, as neighborhoods become homogeneous, violence is likely to decrease and fewer people are likely to flee these areas."

American military leaders say that Iraq and its capital, where much of the sectarian violence has taken place, are significantly safer than during the height of Shiite-Sunni warfare last year -- although even at its reduced level, the violence takes a toll of nearly 200 deaths a week.

"What happened this time is we stayed . . . so now the people said, 'Hey you're staying,' and once they see we're staying with Iraqis and the Iraqis [army and police] are staying with us and getting much better and treating the people with dignity and respect, they start coming forward with tips," said Brig. Gen. John Campbell, U.S. deputy Army commander for Baghdad.

At the same time, with an Iraqi government that remains riven by sectarian strife, the future remains unclear, American authorities acknowledge.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker suggested last week that Iraqi national leaders might consider following the example of local leaders. He acknowledged that Iraqis have not turned the corner on the sectarian war that erupted full-tilt in February 2006 when Sunni militants blew up a Shiite shrine in Samarra.

"People just aren't confident yet that that's definitively, conclusively over. And I think it's going to be awhile before they do," Crocker told reporters. "If I were one of them, I'd certainly feel that way."

American strategies include pushing the Iraqi government to improve basic services and create jobs.

Despite professed optimism, Campbell admits that he has fought to rein in a sectarian agenda during the American troop buildup. Early on, Campbell struggled to stop Shiite government officials from giving direct orders to arrest Sunni targets.

Until six or seven months ago, Campbell was being handed target lists by Iraqi security officials that contained only Sunnis. In reaction, he

stormed out of a few meetings.

"I'm sick and tired of having just Sunni targets," he said. "The next week I had Sunni and Shia. Every week since then there has been sort of a balance of Sunni and Shia."

Campbell said that since Americans put Iraqis' feet to the fire, Iraqi security commanders have started to police their own. Even so, an Iraqi national police unit, active in the mixed district of Sadiya on Baghdad's strategic southeastern rim, was recently removed after repeated allegations of attacks against Sadiya's Sunni population.

The relative calm has come in part through the U.S. military's willingness to work with former Sunni insurgents to fight foreign extremists as well as to work tacitly with the moderate elements of radical Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army militia to stabilize neighborhoods.

Baghdad's Rashid district, for example, was once an area with a majority Sunni population. After years of violence, its population is about 70% Shiite.

Securing the area has meant coming to an understanding with the same militia responsible for expelling the Sunnis, American officials acknowledge.

"It's the reality of western Rashid," said Army Lt. Col. Patrick Frank, whose battalion is responsible for the area. "Everyone we deal with is" a member of the Mahdi Army, he said.

Frank has sought a truce with what he views as the movement's moderate wing and praised what he sees as its positive role in guarding outdoor markets and managing trash collection. At the same time, he said, he has continued to target its radical elements.

His willingness to engage the Mahdi Army through its intermediaries helped lead to a reconciliation agreement last month between Sunnis and Shiites in Rashid's Jihad neighborhood. A small number of families from both sects have slowly started to return to their homes, said Dr. Anas Zaidi, who attended some of the reconciliation talks but no longer lives in Jihad.

For Shiites in neighborhoods across Baghdad, many still see the militia, not the government, as their legitimate defender.

In New Baghdad, Mohammed Ashraf, 28, described sectarian cleansing as the heavy price of safety. "It's a popular Shiite neighborhood and therefore it's only natural that they shall prevail. They work in coordination with both the Iraqi police and army," Ashraf said. "Sure there are some negative aspects in them, but the positive ones outweigh those, such as providing essential services and security to the people."

The Mahdi Army has turned the west Baghdad neighborhood of Hurriya into a haven for Shiites driven out of nearby Sunni areas like Adil during last year's sectarian cleansing. The local militia had also expelled its own Sunni population. Now the Mahdi Army rules the area in cooperation with the U.S.-sponsored neighborhood council.

"Did you hear of stealing cooking gas, tanks, cars or motorcycles in the Shiite areas? There is none. It never happens. It is very rare. This is because of the Mahdi Army," said resident Hazim Muhsin.

And in the largely Sunni enclave of Ghazaliya, residents say the protection they receive from American troops has made a world of difference. Where Shiites were forcibly and bloodily evicted, Sunni men now stay outside till 10 or 11 p.m., sitting in lawn chairs. The light spills outside from a barber shop open late. One night, a string of cars from a wedding party drives down the street, passengers honking their horns.

"I expect to live in Ghazaliya the rest of my life. This is our home," Azzawi said. "Now that it is pure Sunni, it is better for us.

"Now the Americans are with the Sunnis and against the Shiites," he said.

The dangers of ceding power to armed groups has also become clear in the Sunni neighborhood of Amiriya, where the Americans forged a partnership in June with residents and former insurgents known as the Amiriya Revolutionaries fighting such foreign-inspired insurgent groups as Al Qaeda in Iraq. What U.S. officers have hailed as a success -- and a model that has spread to other neighborhoods -- has left some Sunnis worried that they are at the mercy of thugs parading as freedom fighters.

"Those who deal directly with the people are the Revolutionaries. We have trust in them but not 100% because we don't know what they have inside them or what they will do tomorrow," said a resident, who was afraid to give his name. "Some of the Revolutionaries have taken over houses abandoned by Shiites who left."

Even Campbell expressed some doubt about what would happen with the Revolutionaries' leader, Abu Abed, an ex-member of the Islamic Army insurgent group.

Abed has played the role of sheriff in Amiriya. If there is a problem, for instance a tenant refuses to pay his rent, Abed will resolve it. But as the Americans draw up plans to add 12,600 police officers in Baghdad, many of them from Amiriya, it remains unclear what Abed's intentions are. Will he join the government system or stay outside?

"I've talked to Abu Abed. We say, here is the deal. . . . You've got to do something as part of the government. You ain't gonna be no mercenary. He understands that. I don't know what he wants to do yet," Campbell said.

Some who have emerged relatively unscathed from the violence are pessimistic.

Ahmed Shakir, an 18-year-old high school student in west Baghdad's Yarmouk neighborhood, has taken advantage of the perks of the U.S. buildup. The young Sunni has played basketball at night outside. He has visited marketplaces as far away as east Baghdad's Sunni Adhamiya district.

But he has no faith in the future. He predicts the country will be divided between "Shiitestan" and "Sunnistan."

This summer, his three best friends' families left for Syria.

"I can't leave Iraq," he said. "Most of my friends, we hear about Iraqis who left the country, how they are living in humiliation. What options do I have?"

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