

Iraq Court Sentences Sunni Leader to Death
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BAGHDAD—Dozens of Iraqis were killed and wounded in a barrage of bombings and assassinations across the country as a court here sentenced a fugitive vice president to death in absentia for allegedly ordering and bankrolling previous sectarian-motivated attacks and killings.

Sunday's attacks, which started at daybreak and continued past nightfall, hit more than a dozen towns and cities and targeted mainly the country's security forces and majority Shiite population.

Five car bombs parked in several congested and impoverished Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad were detonated starting at about 7:30 p.m. local time bringing the overall toll from Sunday's mayhem to more than 60 killed and 360 wounded according to a Ministry of Interior official.

Many saw the verdict against Tariq al-Hashemi—a prominent Sunni politician who has professed his innocence and has been sheltered by the Sunni Islamist-led government in Turkey since April—coupled with Sunday's attacks as emboldening those among Iraq's Sunni minority who see violent confrontation rather than politics as the only way to regain powers lost to the Shiite majority after the U.S.-led ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime more than nine years ago.

The conflict in Syria, where Sunni insurgents backed by powerful Sunni states such as Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are fighting an Iran-allied and Shiite-linked regime, has added to the sense among many Iraqi Sunnis that this is their moment, too.

"These attacks come within the context of the strategy of the forces of terror to exploit the internal and regional political climate," said Iraq's Ministry of Interior in a statement about Sunday's attacks.

The ministry said the attacks were "obvious sectarian targeting to foment discord" by Sunni militants linked to al Qaeda, who had vowed in July to topple the Shiite-led government. There were no immediate claims of responsibility for Sunday's attacks, but a group calling itself the Free Iraqi Army had promised in a statement posted on Sept. 1 on a website bearing its name to avenge the government's execution last month of 26 people, most of them Sunnis, for terror-related offenses.

The group inspired by the Free Syrian Army, the loosely linked grouping of local militias and army defectors fighting the Syrian regime, said in its founding statement in July that its priority was to "confront and push back" Iran's influence in Iraq.

The Central Criminal Court of Iraq, which was created after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, issued the death sentence Sunday against Mr. Hashemi and his son-in-law Ahmed Qahtan, who also isn't in the country, for the alleged killing of a lawyer and an Iraqi army officer and his wife, said Abdel-Sattar Bairakdar, spokesman for Iraq's judicial authority. Mr. Bairakdar said he expected further verdicts against Mr. Hashemi and his associates for their alleged role in more than 150 bombings and assassinations between 2005 and 2011.

There was no immediate reaction from Mr. Hashemi, but one of his aides reached by telephone in the Turkish capital Ankara said "the verdict was a pure political decision."

The current charges against Mr. Hashemi first emerged in televised confessions by his bodyguards aired days after the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq in December. At the time Mr. Hashemi and his allies from the Sunni-dominated political grouping known as Iraqiya said the charges were part of a political vendetta by Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In May the international police organization known as Interpol issued an arrest warrant for Mr. Hashemi, but Turkey refused to extradite him fueling further tensions between Mr. Maliki and Ankara.

"The timing is very bad," said Abdul-Rahman al-Obeidi, a Sunni tribal leader from the northern city of Kirkuk affiliated with Iraqiya about the Hashemi verdict. "It will be exploited by many people, including Sunnis, who see no value in power sharing [with Shiites]; for sure this is their chance."

The oil-rich city of Kirkuk with its volatile mix of ethnic and sectarian groups was among the areas worst hit in Sunday's bloodshed.

Eight people were killed and 30 others wounded when a car bomb targeted job applicants gathered in the parking lot of the government-owned North Oil Co., according to local police officials. The victims, all male, were being considered for positions with the oil police force.

Meanwhile, 11 members of the Iraqi army including two senior officers were killed in a complex attack involving assassinations and roadside bombs at a checkpoint in a remote farming area north of Baghdad that was previously a stronghold for Sunni insurgents.

Gunmen carrying silencer-equipped pistols first attacked the checkpoint overnight Sunday killing four soldiers who had been resting in a trailer house on the side of the road, according to an officer with the same unit speaking on condition of anonymity. Before leaving, the assailants planted bombs around the checkpoint that were detonated when other members of the army unit arrived at the scene hours later.

In a video clip posted on the Internet last month, the al Qaeda-linked group known as the Islamic State of Iraq boasted the exploits of its "silencer lions." The chilling footage, which couldn't be independently verified, showed gunmen with their faces digitally masked attacking several Iraqi army checkpoints in the province of Diyala, north of Baghdad, and killing soldiers in their sleep with silencer-equipped guns.

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