

Iraq's sectarian dilemma
By Salah Nasrawi, Al-Ahram Weekly
13 February 2013

As Iraq's Sunnis step up their protests against what they consider to be exclusion and discrimination by the country's Shia-led government, the struggle for power and wealth within the Muslim community is becoming more and more vicious.

The Shia majority, meanwhile, is increasingly feeling the challenge presented by the Sunnis, fearing that the goal of their angry and persistent protests is to wreck the Shia-led state.

Last week, a little-known Shia group unveiled plans to establish a new militia and vowed to exterminate Sunni extremists posing a danger to the Shias' hard-won power in Iraq.

The announcement, though rebutted by the government, underlined how much blood some Shias could be willing to shed in order to safeguard their political interests.

The Sunni-Shia divide in Iraq has had a long history, but it took its most vicious form after the overthrow of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime by the US-led invasion in 2003.

The creation of a federal state with a freely-elected government was an opportune moment for the majority Shias to take power in Iraq.

While the development was seen as a historic revival for the Shias after decades of marginalisation by the Sunni regimes that had ruled over modern Iraq since it was formed in the 1920s, the Sunnis have not been comforted by this new reality.

Some Sunnis resisted the changeover by force of arms, trying to ward off what they perceived as a historic defeat, while others resorted to peaceful and political means to reduce their losses and avoid a sectarian conflict.

Tensions have been mounting between Iraq's two Muslim sects since mid-December when Sunni protesters started weekly anti-government marches across Iraq.

Tens of thousands of Sunni protesters have been rallying after Friday prayers in Sunni-dominated cities and neighbourhoods against the Shia-led government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki.

The recent Sunni dissatisfaction with the government started with complaints about the government's failure to provide services and jobs and mistreatment by the Shia-controlled security forces. It ended with demands to change the post-Saddam political system, which Sunnis say has favoured the Shias.

Many Sunnis are now calling for the revoking of the US-orchestrated political process that they believe has empowered the majority Shias at their expense, pushing for a new constitution that they say should end their perceived neglect and marginalisation.

Some Sunnis have declared that they should secede from Iraq and seek their own autonomy.

However, the growing tensions and the sectarian slant that has accompanied the protests have been feeding the views of extremist Sunnis, who have threatened to move the uprising to Baghdad in an attempt to topple the government.

Plans for protesters to travel to Baghdad en masse on Friday were rebuffed by several Sunni leaders out of fears of friction with the Shias and the country's security forces.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has been waging a bloody campaign against the Shias and the government security forces, has urged the Sunnis to take up arms against the government and security forces.

Since the protests started, the terror group has waged a string of attacks that have killed dozens of Shias and members of the army and police forces.

As the protests' reservoir of supporters has rapidly increased, the escalating violence and anti-Shia rhetoric have raised concerns that the Sunni uprising could bring sectarian war back to Iraq amid a political crisis and a territorial dispute with the Kurds in the north of the country.

Al-Maliki has warned that the security forces won't maintain 'self-restraint and flexibility' for long and will act with an 'iron fist' if hostilities to the government and incitements do not cease.

Other Shia leaders have issued stern warnings that Sunni extremism could renew the sectarian strife that hit Iraq in 2006-2007. "If there is a civil war, most damage will be inflicted on the Sunnis," Sami Al-Askari, a top member of Al-Maliki's Daawa Party leadership has warned.

"It is idiotic to return to this experience again. Last time, there was the US army to protect [them], but today there is no US army," he said.

At the same time, the radical Iraqi Hizbullah Party has announced that it is setting up a hundreds-of-thousands-strong militia to fight against Sunni extremists.

Its leader, Wathik Al-Battat, said the militia, named the Al-Moukhtar Army, would help the government in its fight against Al-Qaeda and other Sunni groups. The militia is named after a seventh-century Shia rebel who led an abortive rebellion against the then Umayyad caliph in vengeance for the killing of the Shia leader Hussein.

Al-Battat said the party was setting up the militia because the security forces were incapable of fighting Al-Qaeda and other Sunni groups alone. "Have they been able to protect people in the streets against terrorist attacks," he asked in an interview with the Al-Mada Press online news site.

On Sunday, the militia put dozens of its fighters on display at a parade attended by some Shia politicians and representatives of the Lebanese group Hizbullah. Iraqi news outlets quoted the militia's spokesman, Abdallah Al-Rikabi, as saying that some 8,000 Shias had applied to join the militia in one Baghdad neighbourhood alone.

He added that registration was also going well in other Iraqi cities.

The group has claimed responsibility for a mortar and rocket attack on Saturday on a camp of Iranian exiles in Baghdad. The attack killed five members of the People's Mujahideen of Iran, or the Mujahideen-e Khalq. In an e-mail sent to media outlets, it warned that other attacks would follow.

Last year, the Iraqi Hizbullah Party warned that it would attack Kuwait with missiles if the Gulf emirate carried out plans to build a seaport close to disputed territorial waters in the northern tip of the Arabian Gulf.

It is widely believed that some Shia groups in Iraq, such as the Badr Corps and the Asaeb Ahel Hak, also have armed wings. To this list should be added the menacing Jaish Al-Mahdi, or Al-Mahdi Army, which is an affiliate of the Sadrist Trend of radical Shia cleric Muktada Al-Sadr.

Al-Battat has said many Al-Mahdi Army fighters have joined his militia, a claim denied by Sadrist officials.

Sunni reactions, however, have been interestingly mixed. While some Sunnis have called on the government to arrest Al-Battat and those who join his army on charges of terrorism, others have scoffed at the declaration as government propaganda designed to circumvent the protesters' demands.

Yet, it goes without saying that these militias can exploit and exacerbate Iraq's Shia-Sunni divide, challenging the government's legitimacy and the country's stability. They also suggest that any escalation might prove extremely difficult to control.

As a result of the Sunni-Shia civil war in 2006-2007, thousands of Iraqis were killed and nearly four million were forced to leave their houses and neighbourhoods because of the violence and seek refuge outside Iraq or elsewhere.

Today, the Iraqi government, army, police and judiciary have come under the control of the Shias, who are trying to remain in power by virtue of their majority in the parliament and also through political maneuvering and bribery, driving the Sunnis to rebel.

The prospect of a Sunni takeover in Syria following the expected collapse of the Alawite regime led by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad as a result of the ongoing uprising has also raised the stakes of a sectarian showdown in Iraq.

As a result, the rise of Sunni protests and escalations of sectarian tensions in Iraq could pave the way for a bloody confrontation that will have severe local and regional consequences.

All this leave Iraqi Shias and Sunnis with new dilemmas. While the Sunnis will keep trying to maintain a sectarian balance of power in Iraq, the Shias cannot be expected to compromise on their new empowerment.

However, it could still be possible to prevent a catastrophic sectarian war in the country by trying to strike a balance between the demands of the Shias and those of the Sunnis, a process that must be based on a fair distribution of wealth and power and demographic realities.

In addition, the two sides should struggle to find closure on many issues related to their past not by denial of the depth of its trauma but by acknowledging its extent and its impact on attempts to transfer Iraq's multi- ethnic society.

This could reduce the current tensions and prepare the ground for a new national contract that could be seen by both the two sects as a triumph for political reconciliation, nation-building and the rule of law.

Otherwise, the alternative is more violence, chaos and even the disintegration of Iraq.

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