

Iraq hit by wave of terror attacks against Shia

More than 70 people were killed yesterday as suspected Sunni insurgents bent on dragging Iraq into renewed sectarian turmoil unleashed a wave of terror attacks against Shia pilgrims.



People inspect the scene of a bomb attack in Taji, north of Baghdad, July 2011 Photo: AP

By **Adrian Blomfield**, Middle East Correspondent

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Iraqi authorities reported 22 separate car bombings in Baghdad and seven other cities, exposing the fragility of the country's religious fault lines nine years after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The attacks, the second deadliest since the withdrawal of American troops last December, came as the Shia faithful gathered to commemorate the festival of Moussa al-Khadim, a great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and one of their most revered Imams.

The insurgents launched their attacks with apparent ease, despite heightened security, striking as early as 5am with a bomb that struck a procession in the town of Taji, north of Baghdad, killing seven people. But it was the capital city, as so often before, that bore the brunt of the violence, suffering ten bombings that killed at least 21 people.

One struck a Shia mosque, while a second was detonated by a refreshment tent in the Khadimiya mosque as pilgrims stopped for breakfast in the baking heat.

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"A group of pilgrims were walking and passed by a tent offering food and drinks when a car exploded near them," Wathiq Muhana, a policeman, was quoted as saying.

"People were running away covered with blood and bodies were scattered on the ground."

Two simultaneous attacks near a restaurant in the Shia city of Hilla, one carried out by a suicide bomber, killed 20 more. Many of the dead were police recruits travelling in a minibus ripped apart by the blast.

The attacks provided a grim reprise of the inter-communal violence that erupted in Iraq in 2006-7 when Shia pilgrims marking religious festivals were frequently targeted.

Reduced in number, and enjoying significantly less popular support now that US troops are no longer in the country, the insurgents are thought to lack the capability of returning the country to that bloody period, which claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Even so, they remain a threat. Wednesday's attacks brought this year's death toll from mass bombings to more than 420, with the vast majority of the dead coming from the Shia majority.

With many Sunni Arabs complaining of growing marginalisation at the hands of Iraq's Shia prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, some observers fear that the violence could worsen.

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