

Iraq 'on the cusp' as spike in brutal sectarian violence threatens civil war
By Lincoln Archer
5 July 2013

Iraq is "on the cusp" of collapsing into civil war, the United Nations' chief of human rights in the country has said, after months of brutal sectarian attacks which are more viciously divisive than the violence seen five years ago that left tens of thousands dead.

The death toll in Iraq has spiked since April, with more than 2,200 people killed. Latest figures show militant attacks ramping up in markets, cafes, soccer stadiums and other civilian targets, as well as Shia mosques and religious centres.

Scroll down to see our visualisation of the recent death toll in Iraq. Use the filters to see which groups are being targeted as the death toll spikes.

Francesco Motta, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq's chief of human rights, has told ABC News Online the sectarian viciousness of the attacks is worse than the bloody 2006/2007 conflict which prompted the so-called "surge" of US troop levels.

"People characterised the violence in 2006, 2007, 2008 as a sectarian conflict but actually this conflict is becoming more sectarian. This is becoming really divisive on a sectarian level," he said.

"We're getting increasing reports that people are being targeted as they're leaving places of worship ... and this is really worrying because this is going to produce a counter-reaction. You're starting to see retaliation and this threatens a real sectarian division which will become irreparable."

Previous patterns of large-scale, headline-grabbing atrocities are being replaced by a constant barrage of savage murders aimed at ethnic minorities.

"For example in the last month we saw an attack on some bottle shop owners here in Baghdad - 11 of them were summarily executed at point-blank range. They happened to be [Yezidis](#)," Mr Motta said.

"Whether they were executed this way because they were running alcohol shops or because they were Yezidis, the savagery of the attack suggests it was carried out by extremists. This type of thing is becoming increasingly common."

He has said while the spike in deaths is not yet as bad as 2006/2007, when "even the government stopped counting", the levels of anger and mistrust among sections of the community, along with a protracted political stalemate and infiltration from the civil war in Syria are increasing support and radicalisation among extremist groups.

"Iraq is standing on the cusp of something that potentially could be very, very bad. This is the cross-roads we're at and where it will go is really hard to predict," he said.

The grim reality of life in Iraq

Francesco Motta outlines the impact on everyday Iraqis of the growing violence:

My own staff constantly worry about their children - where their children are. You know, if their children are five minutes late home from school, the panic sets in because people want to know where their kids are.

People frequently have to leave for home early in the day to make sure they can be there for when their children come home or to escort their children home.

One of our staff the other day was on his way home and happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and a bomb went off in the street, a car bomb went off and blew him to the ground, severely wounded him.

And that's the randomness of it - you can just be in the wrong place at the wrong time and find yourself, or people you know, a victim of the violence.

According to UNAMI figures, 6,700 Iraqis died in 2008. The death toll for the first half of 2013 is 3,200, a rate on track to equal the levels of that time. Already there have been 100 deaths reported in the first few days of July.

And with Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, starting next week, there could be even worse still to come.

"We always see spikes of violence when we see religious festivals. We do expect to see another spike in violence during Ramadan," Mr Motta said.

"It started out bloody already this month. I would predict that Ramadan will also be a bloody time in Iraq, unfortunately for the ordinary Iraqi citizens who don't want a return to this violence."

Deadlock, division and Syria at heart of problem

Widespread demonstrations have been held for months across the country, driven largely by a Sunni population which feels alienated by the Shia-dominated government. Anti-terror laws which allow indefinite imprisonment are used to discriminate against Sunnis, they claim.

In Syria, the Sunni-dominated rebels are fighting loyalist forces largely made up of Shia and backed by Shia nations in the region. "There's a number of extremist groups in Syria who are very well armed who have been getting a lot of support from extremist groups who were already based in Iraq," Mr Motta said.

"In Syria we're seeing a lot of minority groups being increasingly targeted by extremists - the same thing is happening here."

Tensions have persisted in a swathe of territory in northern Iraq that Kurdish leaders want to incorporate into their autonomous three-province region over Baghdad's objections.

Meanwhile the national government remains locked in a political impasse, with basic services still lacking and infrastructure in disarray. Moderate leaders are being sidelined.

Mr Motta has said there is still time to avert Iraq's disintegration, but only if its leaders summon the political will to act.

"It's not inevitable that we will reach that point (of all-out civil war) but urgent steps have to be taken to address a whole range of issues in order to make sure these grievances don't eat away at the remaining stability that the country has," he said.

Snapshot: civilian deaths in Iraq

Month	Deaths
June	685
May	963
April	595
March	229
February	418
January	319

Source: [UNAMI](#)