

# Capital punishment

## Baghdad's deteriorating security situation

Militant violence in Baghdad significantly increased during 2013. **Meda al Rowas** investigates the relationship between this violence and sectarian divisions, and examines the risks for a further deterioration in security in 2014.

### ► KEY POINTS

- During 2013, Baghdad experienced the highest proportion of car bomb, improvised explosive device (IED) and suicide attacks in Iraq, with 609 of the 3,351 attacks in Iraq up to the end of November taking place in the province.
- Likely contributory factors to the violence afflicting Baghdad are the prevalence of numerous sectarian fault lines within the city, and the ease of access from and proximity to predominantly Sunni provinces such as al-Anbar and Salaheddine.
- Counter-terrorism operations are unlikely to succeed in improving the security situation in Iraq without broad reconciliation between the central government and Sunni tribes.

The bodies of 18 people were discovered outside the Iraqi capital Baghdad on 29 November 2013. The victims had been abducted from the city and executed. This was the latest in a series of violent incidents during 2013 that highlighted Baghdad's position at the epicentre of a rising tide of insurgent violence that is afflicting the country.

This position is illustrated by figures from IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC), which show that of the 3,351 attacks that took place in Iraq up to the end of

November 2013, 609 took place in Baghdad province, with 73 of those in November alone. During the January to November period, the attacks in Baghdad province resulted in more than 1,800 deaths.

The heightened militant violence is occurring despite intense counter-terrorism operations in northern, western, and central Iraqi provinces. This is primarily being driven by rising anti-government and anti-Shia sentiment among the Sunni population, which is enabling Sunni insurgents to maintain almost daily attacks on security forces, government officials, and assets in the provinces affected, and almost daily vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) or IED attacks in Baghdad.

### Sectarian motivations

Sunni resentment, which was initially directed at Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki personally, is now being directed at the Shia population more generally. Growing sectarianism among tribes is creating a benign operating environment for insurgents in northern, central, and western Iraqi provinces. There is little chance of reconciliation between the government and Sunni tribes taking place before Maliki's current term ends in 2014 because of the depth of the divisions between them. Without such broad reconciliation, security operations within and around Baghdad are unlikely to succeed in reversing the surge in insurgent attacks observed in the capital during 2013.

Even if Maliki is replaced as prime minister following the Council of Representatives (federal parliament) election currently scheduled for April 2014, Shia political parties – either Maliki's State of Law Coalition, or less likely, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) – will probably remain the key political blocs governing the formation of the next cabinet. Neither party is likely to meet Sunni demands sufficiently and bring about a broad reconciliation with Sunni tribes over the coming year, regardless of whether Maliki is replaced by another Shia prime minister.

The next cabinet is unlikely to make the political concessions needed (for instance the reversal of current 'de-Baathification' legislation and amendments to the counter-terrorism law) to effect a broad reconciliation with Sunni tribes. Even if it were to make these concessions, it would still probably take at least six to eight months before existing tribal defence militias, currently opposed to the government and protecting mass Sunni protest sites, could be integrated into the Awakening Council ('Sahwa' militias) or be otherwise paid off.

The US-backed Sahwa militias, initially formed in Al-Anbar in 2005, played a major role in the belated success of the US-led counter-insurgency campaign. The militias drew their ranks from Sunni tribes who had been turned by the US military away from support of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Currently, the Sahwa militias' co-operation with Maliki, who has become their reluctant and wary

paymaster, is likely to sustain fragmented and subsequently ineffective tribal backing.

### Counter-terrorism operations

Widespread arrest campaigns undertaken by the Iraqi security forces are further alienating the Sunni constituency in Iraq. The Sunni affiliation with AQI and its affiliated jihadist front organisations like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has resulted in mass arrests and aggressive security operations in Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad, and to a lesser extent in the southern city of Basra, alongside extensive security checkpoints and movement restrictions around Sunni regions. For example, on 28 August 2013, the ministry of defence announced that it had arrested nine militants and more than 300 suspected militants. The government has been announcing smaller scale arrests on an almost daily basis. Similarly, despite announcing the deployment of 400,000 security personnel across Iraq before the Eid religious holiday on 14 October, almost daily attacks persisted in Al-Anbar, Babil, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salaheddine provinces, and multiple VBIEDs were detonated within Baghdad in the run-up to the holiday.

A deteriorating security situation in spite of counter-terrorism operations involving mass arrest campaigns is reinforcing the perception among Sunni communities that the insurgency is being used by Maliki's government as a pretext for discrimination against Sunnis, with the intent of furthering their political and social marginalisation. This

dynamic is increasing public sympathy for armed resistance against the Shia government and subsequently creating an easier operating environment for insurgent groups.

An increasingly conducive operating environment is improving recruitment for ex-Baathists and jihadist groups such as AQI and Ansar al-Islam, and is probably allowing insurgents greater freedom of movement. Insurgents in the northern Sunni provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salaheddine have demonstrated a substantial improvement in the sophistication of their attacks, probably as a direct result of ISIL's presence in Syria and co-ordination with other Syrian jihadist groups. For example, on 4 December, suicide bombers targeted the police intelligence building in Kirkuk, and gunmen, supported by sniper fire, then seized it and exchanged fire with security forces. At least six people were killed in the attacks, and nearly 50 were injured. A VBIED also targeted the adjacent five-storey Jawaher Mall in Kirkuk, causing substantial damage. The sophistication and duration of this and similar attacks in Salaheddine province during the same week demonstrate that insurgent groups are successfully establishing secure base camps where they then recruit and train people, and plan and co-ordinate attacks.

Operations involving Awakening Council forces have also failed to reverse the insurgency or contain the spread of attacks into southern predominantly Shia provinces such as Karbala, Najaf, and Wasit. On 1 July, the formation of a joint Sahwa militia force

between Shia Karbala and Sunni Anbar provinces was announced, under the name of 'Desert Eagles', to secure Shia international pilgrimage routes, the Nakhil desert, and the Ain Tamar district.

Nevertheless, despite heightened security measures during the Shia Ashura festival, 27 people were killed in a VBIED attack targeting the pilgrimage route between Baghdad and Karbala on 13 November. VBIED attacks in those provinces recurred on at least a monthly basis during 2013.

### Focus on Baghdad

The sustained attack campaign in Baghdad is unlikely to subside during 2014, with multiple VBIEDs likely on at least a monthly basis in certain neighbourhoods.

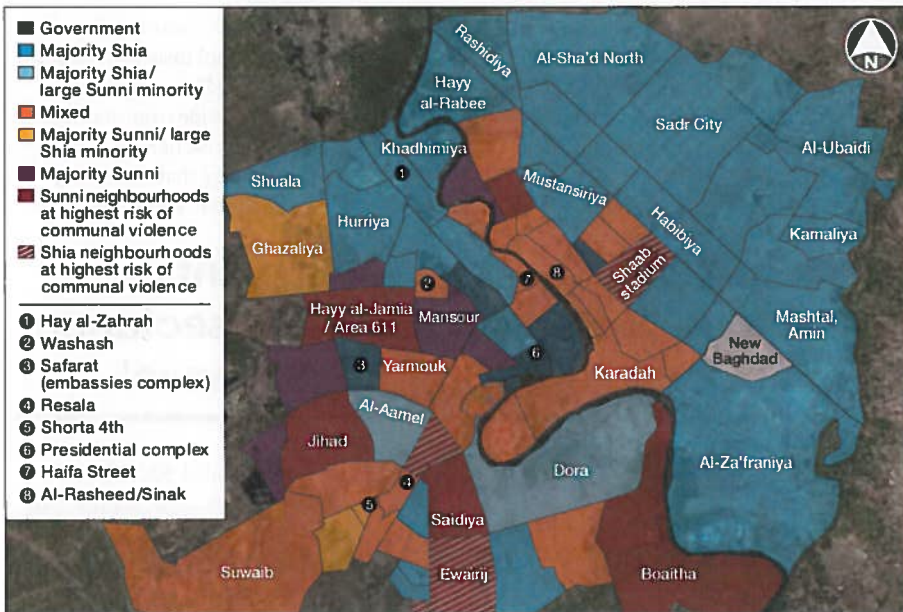
Baghdad has become a focal point for attacks due to the prevalence of numerous sectarian fault lines within the city and its political importance. Mixed neighbourhoods and proximate Sunni and Shia neighbourhoods enable insurgent groups to plan and stage localised attacks within the city; these groups range from Sunni jihadist operatives and ex-Baathists to supposedly dissolved Shia militias such as the Mahdi Army or Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

IED and suicide attacks by Sunni insurgent groups have focused on military targets, government officials, Awakening Council members, Shia religious sites, Shia pilgrimage routes, and soft targets such as markets and restaurants. It is also likely that the current level of IED attacks is being facilitated by at

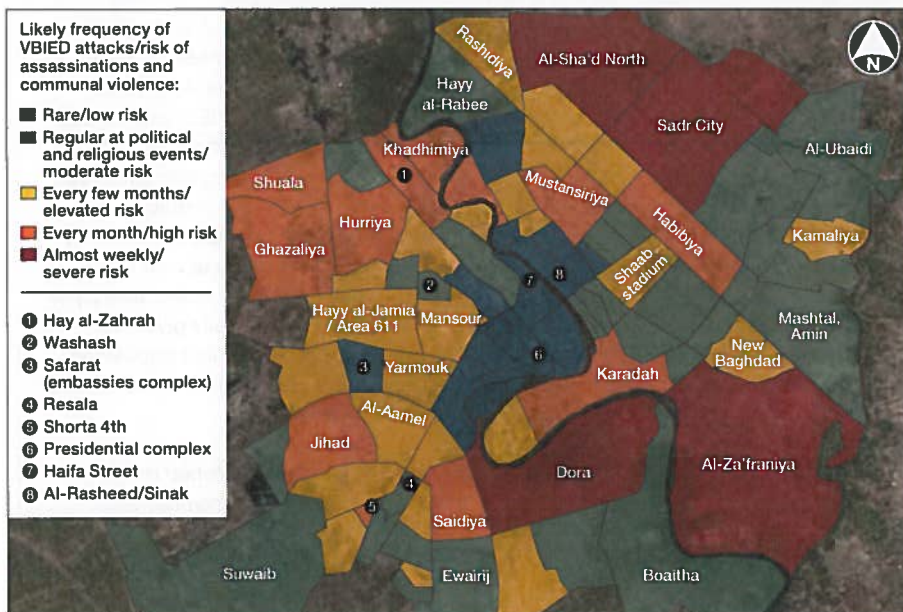


An Iraqi man inspects the aftermath of a bombing in Baghdad's al-Jadidah district, a mixed area under the control of Shia militias, on 7 October 2013. During 2013, Baghdad experienced the highest proportion of car bomb, improvised explosive device (IED), and suicide attacks in Iraq.





This map depicts the sectarian population distribution across Baghdad. This is based on data collected from social media monitoring, Iraqi forums, location of Shia and Sunni mosques, past sectarian maps published before the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, and local media reports.



This map evaluates the relative level of violent risk across Baghdad's neighbourhoods. The risk scores, assigned on a scale of 1-5, address the relative level of risk from VBIED attacks, militia fighting, and incidents of communal violence over 2014. The scale is relative to the overall risks within Baghdad, as opposed to other cities, countries, or regions. Accordingly, the lowest score of 1 still carries a moderate risk of assassinations and incidents of communal violence.

least low-level insider assistance from among the ranks of the security forces.

Communal violence is likely to grow over the coming year and incremental sectarian cleansing is likely within Baghdad. Sunni insurgent attacks are still the highest source of risk in the city. However, low-level sectarian murders – targeting civilians indiscriminately rather than individual officials – as well as

more organised sectarian attacks by gunmen, are likely to increase around sectarian boundary areas in the city. South Baghdad neighbourhoods such as Al-Bayaa, Boathia, Ewairij, and Saidiya, and those in western Baghdad such as Hayy al-Jamia, Jihād, and Al-Khadra, are at highest risk of sectarian raids and communal violence. For example, before 2006 the Saidiya neighbourhood was a

predominantly Sunni area and was occupied for the most part by Baathist officers from the era of Saddam Hussein's presidency. Although the neighbourhood is still largely Sunni, it now also has a large and growing Shia minority. It has been subject to an incremental government-supported anti-Sunni campaign, with regular raids by security forces and mass arrests on terrorism charges. The neighbourhood now hosts a growing number of Shia mosques, Sadrist offices and periodic unofficial parades by Shia militias. Although this was not a target for IED attacks in 2013, the changing demographic in the historically Sunni neighbourhood will probably result in a rising frequency of militant bomb attacks and skirmishes between Sunni and Shia gunmen over the coming year.

The Jihad neighbourhood is the first area where intimidation of Sunni residents was reported in 2013, probably reflecting the area's strategic location near Baghdad airport and the current Iraqi Army/former US 'Camp Victory' complex. Former mixed neighbourhoods in Baghdad are currently mostly divided into separate Sunni and Shia zones. During February, fliers signed by the Shia militant group Kataib Hizbullah's 'Mukhtar Army' were posted in Jihad warning Sunni residents they were considered the "enemy" and should leave or face grave consequences.

Kataib Hizbullah's general secretary Wathiq al-Battat announced the formation of the Mukhtar Army to the Iraqi media on 4 February 2013, and described it as an armed militia "to support Prime Minister Maliki, pursue Baathists, and fight Sunni terrorists". Although the government denounced its formation as an armed militia and issued an arrest warrant for al-Battat, it took no other action. Like its Lebanese namesake, it is very likely that the group is supported by Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and the US government has alleged such co-operation.

These developments mean there is a high risk of armed Shia militias deploying on the streets in Baghdad's Shia neighbourhoods again during 2014. This would be a response based on the local Shia communities' perception that formal security forces are proving ineffective at stopping insurgent attacks targeting Shia neighbourhoods within Baghdad. Sadrist leader Muqtada al-Sadr announced the restructuring and redeployment of the command structure of the Mahdi Army to the outskirts of Baghdad on 28 November; he also banned his supporters from using



the moniker 'Mahdi Army'. This followed his expulsion of members of the Mahdi Army who staged a military parade in Diyala province on 26 November. Sadr's actions are probably intended to avoid direct military confrontation with Maliki's security forces or armed Shia militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the newly formed Mukhtar Army, which Sadrists believe is backed by Maliki.

Sadr probably calculates that if the Mahdi Army were to confront rival armed groups in Baghdad, Maliki's security forces would use that as a pretext to not only defeat the Mahdi Army, but also to weaken the Sadr Movement's ability to mobilise in the run-up to the April 2014 election, in which Sadrists will run against Maliki's State of Law coalition. Sadr probably also assesses that he is more likely to gain political influence by opposing violence rather than by entering a military battle against Maliki, which he would be likely to

lose. Nevertheless, fighting between Sadrists and Asaib Ahl al-Haq supporters recurred in Baghdad during 2013. Despite his announcement, Sadr most likely does not have full control over individuals that use the Mahdi Army name (Asaib Ahl al-Haq itself split from the Sadr Movement in 2006) and can do little

control access to Shia neighbourhoods. However, given that Sunni insurgent attacks predominantly targeting Shia neighbourhoods are unlikely to subside over the coming year, there is also a high risk of Shia militias visibly re-emerging during that time. Shia neighbourhoods around Al-Aamil, Hurriya,

## 'Baghdad has become a focal point for attacks due to the prevalence of sectarian fault lines and its political importance'

to rein in his supporters and stop skirmishes from recurring in 2014.

So far, the government has been successful in preventing Shia militia groups such as the Mahdi Army and Asaib Ahl al-Haq from seeking to protect Shia areas and overtly

Khadhimiyah, New Baghdad, Sadr City, Shuala, and Al-Za'faraniya are at highest risk of inter-militia fighting. If the Mahdi Army is formally reinstated, this will probably trigger outright confrontation with security forces and Asaib Ahl al-Haq militiamen.

### Conclusion

Jihadist groups such as AQI and ex-Baathists are succeeding in reviving a Sunni insurgency by exploiting growing discontent among Sunni tribes. Sunni grievances are rooted in their perceived marginalisation and discrimination by the Shia sect more generally, as well as the Shia-dominated Baghdad government, in which Maliki has taken personal control of all the levers of power. Indiscriminate arrest campaigns by Iraqi security forces, such as the operations in August in which over 300 suspects were detained, are also further alienating the Sunni constituency, which is in turn helping to bolster recruitment and increase the freedom of movement of insurgent groups.

Unless the government succeeds in facilitating a broad reconciliation with Sunni tribes, counter-terrorism operations are unlikely to reverse the surge in insurgent activity and capability observed during 2013. The reconciliation scenario would at least require amendments to the de-Baathification and terrorism laws, amnesty for those detained under these laws, a halt to mass arrests in Sunni provinces, or even substantially expanding Sunni political representation in parliament and the next cabinet. However, these are all unlikely prospects over the coming year.

The insurgent campaign against Shia targets and neighbourhoods, including

Shia pilgrimage routes, mosques, and public spaces, is likely to be sustained in Baghdad throughout 2014. The government's failure to protect the Shia communities in Baghdad also poses a high risk of armed Shia militias being deployed back on the streets in the capital's Shia neighbourhoods. This scenario would probably trigger turf wars between different armed groups, where the neighbourhoods of al-Aamil, New Baghdad, Hurriya, Khadhimiyah, Sadr City, Shuala, and Za'faraniya would be at highest risk because they are mixed or predominantly Shia. In addition to Sunni insurgent attacks, spontaneous communal violence is likely to grow over the coming year, especially in neighbourhoods with changing sectarian demographics such as al-Baya', al-Jihad, al-Khadra, Boathia, Hay al-Jamia, New Baghdad, and Saidiya.

Finally, Maliki-backed 'Sahwa' tribal militias are unlikely to curb a growing Sunni insurgency across the country, which will probably incrementally erode the state's control over the predominantly Sunni provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salaheddine. This development is likely to improve the opportunities for Sunni jihadists to plan and co-ordinate attacks in provinces such as Karbala, Najaf, and Wasit, as well as deeper into Iraq's predominantly Shia south, towards Basra.

Although the frequency of such attacks will probably increase, jihadist attacks in southern provinces are likely to be limited to low-capability IED and VBIED attacks on Shia targets in public spaces and commercial property, alongside occasional assassinations of officials and security forces. Jihadists are unlikely to develop the capability to launch large-scale attacks on energy assets and ports in southern Iraq, especially given the region's predominantly Shia population and hardening sectarian divisions across the country. ■

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