

How to Prevent Sectarian Backlash from Baghdad Bombings

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Continued bombings could bring a devastating flood of sectarian attacks to Baghdad and delay the battle for Mosul, so the coalition should help Iraqis address the capital's longstanding vulnerability.

More than 100 people were killed on Wednesday in three separate attacks in Baghdad, with more than 165 wounded. The most devastating bombing, in Sadr City's Urayba Market, killed more than 25 women and children. After the attacks, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility and labelled Sadr City's two million residents as *rawafidh* (rejectors), signalling that everyone living there is a legitimate target including the women and children.

ISIL, also known as ISIS, has three aims in conducting such attacks -- a military one, a political one, and a sectarian one. ISIL is activating bombing cells around the capital as a response to battlefield losses to make the Iraqi Security Forces keep force levels up in Baghdad, denying greater investment of forces in battle zones. On the back of the recent protests in Baghdad this will keep the combined Iraqi Security Forces stretched thin and lacking capacity for the push into Mosul.

As a political tactic, these bombings look to further undermine the government during a period of political gridlock and show that the Iraqi state is a failed one not capable of protecting its citizens, and that democracy will not produce peace for Iraqis.

ISIL'S MESSAGE

ISIL is communicating that it can and will continue to horrifically disrupt life for Iraqis even if it loses all its territory, and that the Iraqi government, and any international forces, will be unable to prevent it from doing so. This same message will go to people in Syria and other areas in which ISIL has a presence, drawing a picture of bloody violence where innocent people are the victims in an attempt to spread fear, hatred, and anger.

The sectarian aim is clearly to start a cycle of revenge attacks in response to the idea that ISIL cells are in Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods -- though they are more likely to be coming from such areas immediately outside Baghdad. These latest attacks are unlikely to spur a return to the sectarian violence of previous years, and the anger is largely against ISIL and the security establishment, but a sustained bombing campaign will increase sectarian tensions.

Indeed we can already see the political reverberations of the attacks, which closely followed the overrun of Iraq's parliament and months of escalating anti-government protests. There is great discontent with Iraq's government, and these bombings may become a new focus for that discontent, as the cabinet reshuffle and government reforms are moving slowly and are easily disrupted.

The chronically divided Iraqi political scene is asking why the bombings happened and who is to blame, with some seeking to take advantage of the situation to settle scores. Some will criticise the prime minister or call for the removal of Interior Minister Mohammed al-Ghabban, who -- along with Defence Minister Khalid al-Obeidi -- has been praised for improving the performance of his ministry and forces.

DIVERSION OF MILITARY FORCES

Others will call for a diversion of the military forces allocated to the Mosul campaign to liberate Fallujah, next to Baghdad but probably not the source of the bombs that struck Baghdad on May 11. Already key figures from the Shia military force leadership such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis have sworn to further mobilise the Hashd al-Shaabi in Baghdad's security and promised to liberate Fallujah and secure Baghdad belt areas.

This comes at a time when the Iraqi forces responsible for the International Zone security are seen to have failed badly in preventing a breach of that area and allowing thousands of protesters to enter parliament. Though the frontline troops are well respected by the nation, the credibility of the Iraqi Security Forces in Baghdad is hanging by a thread. There will be pressure on the Iraqi government to ramp up arrests of Sunnis, use more sectarian profiling, and make further restrictions on the freedom of movement of Iraqis within their own country.

Any major city suffers terrorist attacks and no city will be fully immune from them. In the context of war-torn Iraq, Baghdad security has been improving, largely because ISIL has been forced to focus its efforts on the battlefields.

FIXING THE PROBLEM

As ISIL is forced to become a terrorist group again, fighting from the shadows, the counterterrorism challenge to Baghdad will return with a vengeance. In reality Baghdad is no better protected against this risk today than it was in 2012 and 2013, when ISIL mounted major multi-target simultaneous bombings every few weeks.

Checkpoints cannot cope with traffic levels -- incredibly they still use inoperative bomb detectors -- and corruption at these posts remains a problem. Plenty of ISIL collaborators -- new recruits, old militants who avoided prison, and those released or escaped from prison -- live in the Baghdad outskirts.

What is needed is a new Iraqi "surge," backed by the international coalition, to address the risk of strategic terrorist attacks against Baghdad, which could distract the government further, empower urban militias and delay the battle of Mosul. In the same way that the coalition helped Iraq to urgently address the risk posed by Mosul Dam, there is an urgent need for the coalition to help Iraq tackle the long-standing issue of Baghdad's vulnerability to bombings. As

Mosul Dam could bring a devastating flood of water to Baghdad, the ISIL bombings could yet bring a devastating flood of sectarian attacks and militia rule to Baghdad. Only by fusing the technology, planning and intelligence expertise of the coalition with Iraq's manpower and ground knowledge can the threat be brought under control before radicals on both sides undermine the capital.

Everyone knows the coalition could have done more to help Baghdad's defence in June 2014: this is a second chance, and whether the coalition takes the opportunity or neglects it, Iraqis will remember.

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