

## Another step back

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Clashes over oil in the south may bring intra-confessional tensions again to the fore in Iraq, writes **Nermeen Al-Mufti**

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Last Saturday, 2.5 million Iraqis gathered in Karbala, 160 kilometres south of Baghdad, to celebrate Ashura, a festival marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Mohamed's grandson. As crowds went about the business of celebrating, US helicopters circled overhead and nearly 42,000 Iraqi troops stood watching, mindful of the bloodshed of last year. Thankfully, the day ended peacefully in Karbala, if not in other parts of Iraq.

In Kirkuk, two explosive charges were set off during the Ashura celebrations, though with no reports of casualties. In the dominantly Shia town of Shuala, National Security Adviser Muwaffaq Al-Rubaie was detained for sometime by "groups linked with foreign forces."

Street clashes were reported in the dominantly Shia cities of Basra and Al-Nasiriya, where combatants said to belong to the Soldiers of Heaven brigade exchanged fire with gunmen from the Mahdawiya Movement -- a group banned two weeks ago by Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the country's top Shia cleric. Calm has been restored to both cities, but police sources say that 126 were either killed or wounded. Basra's police chief said that security forces hunted down gunmen in the neighbourhoods of Al-Jumhuriya, Al-Judayida and Al-Zahraa, seizing one of their safe houses.

Sources in Al-Nasiriya said that a senior army officer is believed to have helped the gunmen, and may have plotted with them for the occupation of the Emergency Brigade Command Centre. Eyewitnesses say that the 10th Division of the Iraqi Army is now in control of the area situated between Nile and Uruba Streets. Heavy police deployment is also reported in Al-Salihiya. An official source says that 29 were killed, 22 wounded and 19 captured of the gunmen affiliated with Ahmed Al-Yamani.

Speaking at a news conference in Baghdad, Al-Rubaie said that the armed group that clashed with security forces in Basra and Al-Nasiriya was a "misguided group that has strayed from the tenets of Islam." Among the detainees were two teenage girls who had joined the group and were firing at crowds celebrating Ashura, police sources said.

It all boils down to oil. A senior Iraqi officer said that the armed groups involved in recent clashes were attempting to control oil facilities in the south. The newspaper *Al-Hayat* quoted a military commander as saying that members of an "armed group" had briefly occupied an oil installation belonging to the South Oil Company -- one of the largest petroleum corporations in Iraq -- before Iraqi police expelled them.

"One of the suspects, having been arrested by the police in Basra, admitted that a similar group in Al-Hella was planning attacks similar to those mounted in Basra and Al-Nasiriya," the commander added.

Emergency Brigade commander Staff Major General Naji Al-Jabiri and Major General Zamel Rumeid were both killed in Al-Nasiriya by gunmen when Mahdawiya Movement fighters attacked the police intelligence centre in Al-Nasiriya with light- and medium-calibre weapons, police said.

However, Al-Sharqiya TV aired a taped message in which a spokesman for the Mahdawiya Movement contested police reports. The spokesman claimed that the media was only reporting one side of the story. He added that hundreds were arrested, including children, during the recent incidents. The spokesman added that the movement's leader, Al-Yamani, has nothing to do with the group named Soldiers of Heaven. The Mahdawiya was a peaceful movement that upheld humanitarian causes and was opposed to sectarianism, he stated.

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker warned that Iraq's security might deteriorate once again. Although the situation improved considerably last year, the ambassador said, Nuri Al-Maliki's government had failed to use this achievement to improve other aspects of life in the country.

One day before the Ashura celebration, the Sadr current hinted that it might take up arms once again. Reasons for the "suspension" of activities of the Mahdi Army were no longer valid, in view of the recent clashes in Basra and Al-Nasiriya, officials of the Sadr current said.

The statement followed clashes in Al-Diwaniya between police and gunmen believed affiliated with the Sadr current. Salah Al-Obeidi, spokesman for the Sadr current, told the AFP that the government had failed to dismiss "criminals" from police ranks. Nonetheless, Al-Obeidi cautioned restraint. "We tell the Mahdi Army that we are committed to a policy of peace and to legal and reasonable ways of protecting our rights," he said.