

# IRAQI GOVERNANCE REPORT

APRIL 2007

Issue 1

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

ANTHONY BORDEN

While the United States is engulfed in testy debate over the deployment of American troops in Iraq, Iraqis are arguing over the use of their own troops across the country.

In this issue of Iraqi Governance Report, the focus is on stability, and key choices the Iraqi administration is making to address this, the country's overriding concern.

Coinciding with the US "surge" in troops in Baghdad, the Iraqi military has increased its own deployment, including bringing several

This seems wise, as Kurdish fighters have a reputation for professionalism and efficiency, honed during guerrilla battles against Saddam Hussein. Sending Kurdish troops from the north to address security in the capital also underlines that Iraq is indeed one country, with one military.

But the potential for the engagement to fuel sectarian conflict is high, especially as a confrontation by the Kurds against Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army is possible. Urban warfare will be very different from that in the mountains, with grave risks both for the city dwellers and soldiers. Parents of soldiers from the north of Iraq are as concerned as those from Nebraska or New York.

Outside the capital, an investigative report exposes the reality of the government's attack on militants on the outskirts of Najaf earlier in the year. It was pitched as a successful assault on al-Qaeda militants bent on destroying holy shrines and killing Shia - and a demonstration of growing Iraqi military success.

In fact, the action appears to have been a partisan campaign against a renegade religious splinter group in an area where political and religious allegiances are largely one and the same. Rather than strengthen Iraqi security, it may be that US air support was in fact called in merely to settle scores.

These are the harsh choices of governance in Iraq today, none pretty. But the goal of this project is, through more information and debate among Iraqis, to strengthen transparency and responsibility, so that whatever the choices, the leadership is held to account.

Anthony Borden is IWPR Executive Director.

## SECURITY PLAN BRINGS SOME RELIEF TO BAGHDADIS

A month into the Iraqi/American operation, residents are already seeing benefits.

COMMENT BY HAMEED AL-MALIKI

On February 14, the Iraqi government and coalition forces in Iraq launched a new security operation to curb the daily violence in Baghdad. The size of operation required a surge of participating Iraqi and American troops, bringing the total number of soldiers and police officers to 90,000, including 20,000 additional US soldiers deployed in the capital specifically to participate in this operation.

Under the plan, Baghdad has been divided into operational sectors, limiting the ability of militias, terrorists and criminal gangs to move or transport weapons and ammunition. Checkpoints operated by joint Iraqi-American units also provide a system of checks and balances, restricting possible abuse of power and miscommunication with the local population.

Almost a month after its launch, the security plan for Baghdad is showing its first positive results: the number of unidentified murder victims found on the streets, which had been as high as 100 a day, has fallen considerably; car bombs and suicide bombings have also dropped significantly; families who escaped the sectarian violence are beginning to return to their homes; students are going back to their classes; weapons caches are being found and destroyed and many terrorist suspects have been arrested. It feels as though some degree of security is gradually returning to the capital's tense neighbourhoods.

The joint Iraqi/American security forces are acting in a professional and flexible manner. Whenever and wherever they face problems and challenges, their plans are adapted accordingly. The military commanders are also reaching out to the local communities and establishing ties and communication channels to improve the security and to minimise misunderstandings leading to unwanted clashes with the local population.

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The relative success seems to have prompted the military and political leadership to expand the scope of operations to cover Baghdad's suburbs and neighbouring towns and to extend the timeframe of operations to the end of the year. This new development has been welcomed by most Iraqis but also has raised fears of civilian casualties as the troops move into insurgent strongholds on the outskirts of Baghdad.

The visible political and security efforts have a positive impact on different aspects of life in Baghdad; a rise in the value of the Iraqi dinar against foreign currency and an upturn in trade at the Iraqi stock exchange market. The Baghdad municipality also seems to be more active in cleaning the streets, clearing up refuse and planting trees and flowers in public squares.

But despite the relative success of security and political efforts to curb the violence and bring security, criminals and extremists are continuing their campaign of destruction.

In a recent attack, Baghdad's oldest book market, Sooq al-Seray, dating back to Abbasid era, 800 years ago, was bombed and set on fire. The market has been the most important source of books, manuscripts and literature for many years in Baghdad. Its famous

restaurant, al-Shahbander Café, had been the meeting place for the intellectual elite of Baghdad, where Iraq's writers, poets, novelists, and actors met to discuss the latest literary matters, not far from Iraq's oldest library, Dar al-Hikma [house of wisdom], also dating to the Abbasid era.

But life goes on in Sooq al-Seray, in defiance of the fear and terror; and the al-Shahbander Café, damaged in the bombing, is back in business catering for its lifelong loyal customers who take huge risks to preserve Iraq's cultural life and advance the cause of freedom.

The question is whether the combined Iraqi and US "surge" will be maintained, and whether the benefits of the increased deployments in our dangerous capital will outweigh the continuing violence and resulting political pressures.

Hameed al-Maliki is a leading Iraqi political commentator.



## SHIA RIVALRY SPARKED BATTLE OF ZARQA

Iraqi officials claimed a major military victory over Sunni insurgents near Najaf last month. But official sources reveal that the alleged militants were in fact Shia members of a religious cult that the authorities wanted to get rid of - with the help of US air support.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT BY IWPR REPORTERS, NAJAF

**W**hen the "Battle of Zarqa" erupted on January 28 in the date palm orchards of Zarqa, 16 kilometres northeast of the holy city of Najaf, the conflict seemed clear.

Gunmen battling Iraqi and US forces in a fierce, day-long fight were, say the Iraqi government, a large group of Sunni militants affiliated with al-Qaeda en route to attack the holy shrines in Najaf and the high-ranking Marjaiya clerics, as well as Shia pilgrims, gathering for the ten-day religious festival of Ashura.

The group was heavily armed and even managed to shoot down a US helicopter, killing two American soldiers.

Sunni attacks on Shia pilgrims during holy days have occurred before. Thus the claim of government ministers in Baghdad and the Iraqi national security adviser, Muaffaq al-Rubaii, seemed plausible.

Najaf was about to be attacked by al-Qaeda elements, they claimed, and in an effort to avert the attack, "hundreds of foreign fighters" had been killed.

The successful assault thus seemed a major victory for the

embattled Iraqi government in its effort to assert authority, especially in Najaf which, along with US forces, had taken control over security in the holy city only the month before.

### SOLDIERS FOR WHOM?

But only one day later the picture looked quite different. The approximately 300 fighters killed in the battle turned out not to be Sunni insurgents as the government had claimed but Shia members of the little-known cult Jund al-Samaa, or Soldiers of Heaven. This religious sect was led by a man named Dhia Abdul Zahra al-Garawi, who claimed he was the Imam Mahdi, whom Shia believe to be the Muslim messiah.

So why were they attacked, and into what kind of battle did the Iraq government draw US forces?

When news of the group's sectarian affiliation emerged after the battle, official statements repeated the claim that the group was

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nevertheless intent on attacking Najaf. In short, even though it turned out that they were Shia, not Sunni, the group was still planning to decimate the Shia shrine, authorities claimed.

In a statement published by his office, Assad Abu Galal, the governor of Najaf, said that the militant group was planning an attack “to destroy the Shia community, kill the Grand Ayatollahs, destroy [pilgrim] convoys and occupy the holy shrine”.

Abu Galal said members of the cult were pretending to be farmers, but intelligence sources and pilgrims had provided information that the movement was religious “and we realised that something would happen during Ashura”. He insisted that “Syria, Saudi Arabia, Britain, the Emirates and the Ba'ath party were involved. They were planning to destroy Najaf”.

The statement also claimed that al-Garawi, who died in the battle, had his hair cut to make him look like one of the Twelve Shia Imams, blood descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The governor said the cult's leader “was well trained and educated” in Islamic affairs and that he had the sort of background and knowledge which would enable him to persuade some to believe that he was Imam Mahdi. The statement also claimed that al-Garawi had a British passport and that his group had been trained in Syria and Ramadi, in Iraq's perilous Anbar province.

According to the governor's account, eleven Iraqi soldiers were killed and 27 injured in the battle, while 300 members of the cult died, with 121 injured and 650 captured.

## GETTING RID OF A RIVAL

The deputy governor, however, tells a different story about the motive behind the security forces assault. Abdul-Hussein Abtan has told IWPR that the operation against the Soldiers of Heaven was less security related than an attempt to eliminate a perceived heretical group.

The assault against the Soldiers of Heaven in Zarqa was about “the honoured people of Najaf taking revenge on the heretic enemies of Shi'ism and thus the enemies of Imam Hussein”, the third of the Twelve Shia Imams. “This battle will last in the memories of Najaf and its residents throughout history for its importance to the future of our faith,” said Abtan.

Abtan said that the provincial government had discovered four months ago that “there is a cult-like organisation dominated by Ba'athists in Najaf and the southern provinces that attracts naïve and poor people. We checked the location of the group; the police commander himself did that, but found nothing abnormal. But later our sources told us that more people are joining the group”.

After a meeting of the local authorities, officials decided to attack the cult's base in Zarqa, but were surprised that there were so many members and that they were so well armed. In fact, the Iraqi forces were nearly overrun. In the end, the Soldiers of Heaven were crushed by repeated US air strikes, with fighter planes dropping 500-pound (225-kilogramme) bombs on their positions.

A source close to Najaf police, speaking on condition that he not be named, told IWPR that members of the group had been ordered by

the police to turn themselves in two hours before the assault. “But they didn't, so we attacked the area,” he said.

Although the governor of Najaf insists that the Soldiers of Heaven was planning to attack the city, security officials have told IWPR that they had no such information. However, they note that when they had earlier inspected the cult's base, they discovered it to be a heavily fortified compound surrounded by a two-metre deep trench network and sand-bagged firing positions. This was no make-shift encampment.

The claims by the governor that the group was heavily supported by several foreign countries and trained in Syria have not been substantiated, nor have the statements that al-Garawi had a British passport and that among the captured were former officers and doctors affiliated to the Wahhabi ultra-conservative Sunni ideology linked to Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda and Saddam's regime.

Nor have there been any signs of the “Lebanese, Egyptians and Sudanese” that allegedly were taken prisoner during the battle according to an Iraqi army officer.

Security personnel in Najaf told IWPR that they had information that the Soldiers of Heaven cult was planning to announce on the holy day of Ashura - the day when Imam Hussein was killed in the 7th century, the tenth and most important day of the festival - that the Shia messiah, Imam Mahdi, had returned, which would have led to chaos amongst pilgrims in the city and civil unrest in the rest of the country.

The security officials said that two of the Soldiers of Heaven had earlier been arrested in Karbala, not far from Najaf, so the cult decided to bring their plan forward by three days. On the morning they were planning to make their announcement, the security forces struck.

A source close to Najaf provincial council told IWPR that the main reason behind the Zarqa offensive was the concern of the governor, who was appointed by the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, that the Soldiers of Heaven might expand.

“First we thought that the Soldiers of Heaven are peaceful followers of al-Yamani [alias of Ahmed Ibn al-Hasan al-Basri, leader of another Shia splinter group which follow Imam Mahdi]. But we discovered that it was a militant organisation. SCIRI is worried that any new group like the Sadr movement could challenge SCIRI in Najaf and take control of the provincial council,” said the provisional council source.

So the main motive for attacking the Zarqa site, it seems, was to get rid of a rival Shia group with perceived heretical beliefs. The battle was not about security or protecting pilgrims in Najaf but rather the biggest episode of Shia infighting in Iraqi history.

Both the main Shia groups in the region, SCIRI and the Sadr movement, are afraid of new rivals, which explains why the head of the Sadr office in Diwaniya, Haydar al-Natiq, accuses the Soldiers of Heaven of being supported by elements anathema to the Shia, such as al-Qaeda, the Wahhabis, Saddam loyalists, foreign armies and even the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service.

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## THE TWELFTH IMAM

Al-Garawi, the Soldier of Heaven leader, had acquired a following who believe wholeheartedly that he was Imam Mahdi. This following was cultivated largely on account of a controversial book he wrote, *Judge of Heaven*, which argues that he is in fact the hidden twelfth imam of the Shia, who is supposed to return one day to restore peace and justice to the world.

IWPR obtained a copy of the 416-page book which bears the portrait of al-Garawai on the cover, his face shrouded by a divine white light. Since late December 2006, the book has been circulated in Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniya, Basra and Kut.

The book challenges the traditional stories about the bloodline and identity of the Shia messiah as described in Shia literature. Al-Garawi rejects the Shia notion that the Muslim messiah is the son of the Eleventh Shia Imam, Hasan al-Askari, claiming instead that he, as the son of the first and greatest Shia imam, Ali Bin-Abitalib, is the long-awaited saviour. Al-Garawi claims that a fertilised egg from Fatima, the wife of Ali Bin-Abitalib, was stored in heaven and then implanted in his mother's womb forty years ago.

“The book provides a lot of detail rejecting the idea that the [Muslim messiah] is Mohammed Ibn al-Hasan al-Askari,” said Sheikh Abu Qasim al-Asai, a prominent member of the Asad tribe in Karbala. “But if the son of Imam Ali [al-Garawi] is alive how come so far no imam has ever mentioned that fact [in any Shia religious scripture]?”

Al-Natiq, from the Sadr office in Diwaniya, says he knew al-Garawi, but wasn't aware that he was the leader of Soldiers of Heaven “until his name and photo was released by the government”.

He says the claim of al-Garawi is scientifically impossible but even as a religious belief it has no support in the scriptures. “There is no credible Shia story about this. No doubt this man was idiot,” he said.

The Sadr official said al-Garawi came originally from Hilla and was imprisoned by Saddam Hussein in Abu Ghraib prison in 2002 for being a member of a Shia messianic group, the Mahdawiye, a movement that believes Imam Mahdi is alive.

According to al-Natiq, during his time in prison, al-Garawi was “an eloquent speaker. During the day he preached about religion while at night he gambled and refused to provide any explanation of his religiously unacceptable behavior.”

He said al-Garawi was not following Sharia law as interpreted by any of the Grand Ayatollahs, which is a religious requirement in Shi'ism. “He was paving the way for his current claim and was trying to get other inmates to believe in Imam Mahdi - although he didn't claim he was him. I have heard he told his followers that Imam Mahdi will appear in 2006 or 2007. He distorted religion and tried to gain support from naïve and simple Shiite people,” said al-Natiq.

Whatever the merits of al-Garawi's claims, there is no foundation to the government's assertion that his group included foreign

extremists. When Iraqi security forces examined the bodies of dead members of the cult at Zarqa they found only poor Iraqi Shia and curiously the corpse of a former Baathist poet, famous for praising Saddam. His participation in the cult surprised people who knew him, as they claim he was an alcoholic and never believed in Islam as way of life.

The battle of Zarqa, then, appears not to have represented a crushing blow to Iraqi insurgents and a demonstration of the increasing professionalisation of Iraqi military and security forces. Instead, it may only demonstrate the continuing politicisation of the use of official force in Iraq, as well as the significant risks of the US military being drawn into murky internal disputes it cannot hope to comprehend as events unfold.

As for the Soldiers of Heaven, the cult has been dealt a severe blow. But at least its members can console themselves with the notion that their fate mirrors the old Shia story of a small group of true believers being killed by overwhelming force of the enemies of Islam.

During the Zarqa battle, some members of the cult repeatedly tapped into the radio frequency of the Iraqi police, repeating an ominous message, “Imam Mahdi is coming! Imam Mahdi is coming!” Yet at the end, nearly all of them were dead - with no sign of the Muslim messiah.

This report was produced by Iraqi reporters in Najaf and Baghdad, with editorial coordination by Christoph Reuter, IWPR's international trainer for investigative reporting.



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# HEADING HOME TO UNCERTAINTY

Iraqi returnees find it difficult to resume their old lives.

HUSSEIN AL-YASSIRI, BAGHDAD

**A**li Tofiq, 29, didn't want to leave Iraq for Syria, but he felt he had no other option. He hoped to start a new life with his family but things did not go according to plan.

A former army officer, Tofiq lost his job when the army was dissolved in 2003 and became a taxi driver. In March last year, he sold his car and all his family furniture to scrape together the money to take his wife and four children to Syria.

However, nine months after emigrating, he was still without a job. He had run out of money and felt he had no choice but to return home to Iraq.

Since he cannot afford to rent a house of his own, Tofiq and his family live with his parents in al-Ilam in eastern Baghdad. Their only source of income is Tofiq's meagre pension of 55 US dollars a month.

Over the past year, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families have fled to escape the sectarian violence that has engulfed the country. According to the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR, around 1.8 million Iraqis have left the country since 2003 and around 1.6 million have been internally displaced. The majority have settled in Syria and Jordan.

For many who fled abroad, the relief of escaping civil war did not last. Soon the frustration of not being able to make a living set in. Job opportunities for refugees are limited in Syria and Jordan, where a special work permit is required. These countries also frequently change visa and passport regulations with the aim of reducing the influx of refugees.

Last month, hundreds of Iraqis gathered in front of UNHCR's Damascus office to register with the refugee agency, because their visas had expired and they were afraid of being deported by the Syrian authorities.

But there are a significant number of people who, after many months of struggling to make ends meet, have given up and decided to go back to Iraq. They decided they would rather live with the threat of violence than without money far from home.

It is rare that returnees can simply pick up their old lives. Many sold their homes before leaving Iraq, and others have found their properties have been seized by militia members or insurgents while they were gone.

Dureid Hasanen, 40, spent six months looking for a job in Syria but came to grief because he lacked proper documentation. "Some of the jobs required special papers to accredit my Iraqi study certificate, and that is a complex and long process in Syria," he said.

When he ran out of money and could not cover his living costs any longer, he had no choice but to return to Iraq.

"Most of the Iraqis I know could not find jobs in Syria," he said.

And the government at home has little or nothing to offer to those coming back. Hamdia Najaf, acting minister for immigration and displaced people in Iraq, said returnees are not the ministry's priority at the moment.

"The ministry is new and we have insufficient manpower," she said, adding that they also lack the funds to deal with the increasing number of displaced people. "We have to direct our attention, help and services to those who are internally displaced."

However, she promised that the ministry would open offices in neighbouring countries to help Iraqi refugees.

At least for the children of the returnees there are open doors, and they are welcomed back in their schools.

"Every student has the right to study in our school," said Hana Jawad, headmaster of al-Basra preparatory school in Baghdad. "They only need to bring documents from the school they were attending before."

Few things have remained the same for the children of Saifadeen Mahmood from Mansoor, who returned to Iraq with his family after several months in Jordan. But at least they are back in their old school a hint of daily routine in their otherwise uprooted lives.

Hussein al-Yassiri is an IWPR contributor in Baghdad.



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# BAGHDADIS KEEP A LOW PROFILE

Residents fearful of the murderous gangs roaming their streets are careful not to draw attention to themselves.

HUSSEIN AL-YASIRI, BAGHDAD

**M**ahmood, 30, is a car dealer, but drives around Baghdad in a battered old vehicle, while newer, more expensive models gather dust in his garage.

He likes to be as inconspicuous as possible after he narrowly escaped with his life while heading home in his Mercedes Benz. A gang tried to rob him and opened fire as he sped away, some of the bullets hitting the car.

With murder, kidnapping and burglary a daily feature of Baghdad life, people like Mahmood choose to take their own precautions rather than rely on the police or other security forces for protection.

For women, the perils of being on the street on their own are such that they always try to ensure that they're escorted by a male member of their family or join up with a group of people when they go out - if they go out at all.

Parents who still send their kids to school pick them up after class. Those who do not have a car hire busses to ferry the children home, but not before making sure they can trust the driver not to hand them over to kidnapping gangs.

Sumaiya Faruq, 12, wears the hijab along with the standard blue school uniform for girls when she attends her primary school in the tense neighbourhood of Dora in the south of Baghdad. She used to walk to class but now her parents pay a driver 60,000 Iraqi dinars (40 US dollars) per month to take her and her sister to school.

Even though she's escorted, Sumaiya worries about being held up at one of the many bogus checkpoints set up by militants across the city or being blown by a roadside or car bomb. "I'm terrified

whenever I go to school," said the little girl.

Joseph Yousif's son Nabil, 18, was kidnapped last year on his way home from school. Fortunately, the kidnappers were stopped at a police checkpoint. Officers found the boy unconscious in the trunk of the car.

Since then, Nabil has been escorted to school by two guards, members of the three-man-security team Yousif hired to protect his family for 900 dollars per month. The men, all Shia, were recommended to Yousif, a Christian, by a friend and until now have proved to be loyal to their employer. In other cases, guards have colluded with criminals to commit crimes against the families they're supposed to be protecting. "Thank God so far I have had no problems," said Yousif.

The journey to school is so dangerous that teachers have grown used to classes where only half or less of their students turn up. They permit parents to decide for themselves whether it's safe enough to let their kids go to school.

Caution is the watchword: don't make a journey unless you absolutely have to and if you do try to be as inconspicuous as possible, something Baghdadis have learnt to do very well. No one wears fancy clothes or jewelry - and expensive cars and top of the range mobile phones are a rare sight.

Fahwa Faysal, a lawyer, stopped driving her BMW out of fear of attracting unwanted attention. And instead of visiting the main shopping centres in downtown Baghdad she now only goes to stores in her immediate neighbourhood. She's also changed her appearance,

dispensing with fashionable clothes for more modest attire and a veil.

People go to such lengths to conceal their wealth and status that they leave their jobs and homes.

Goldsmith Salah Hasan, 32, used to live in Mansoor, a once upmarket neighbourhood in western Baghdad. After his 18-year-old son was kidnapped and released for a ransom of 35,000 dollars, Hasan rented a house in a less affluent neighbourhood, sold his BMW and new Toyota Camry, buying two old cars instead, and opened a small electrical appliance shop.

Those who work for the Iraqi security forces or for the multi-national forces have to be particularly vigilant as they are a prime target of kidnappers and death squads who view them as collaborators.

Omar Mahmood, 34, from Baghdad, who serves as an officer in the Iraqi army in the south, told his family and neighbours that he works as a taxi driver.

"I have had to hide my occupation for a long time," he said. "Under Saddam, we were proud of joining the army. But now we are afraid of even keeping our military uniforms at home."

Sarmad Aziz, 28, works as a translator for American troops, sometimes sleeps at his military base. When he's at home, he keeps his gun next to him at all times, rarely sleeping more than two hours, as he's fearful that someone might burst into the house. And when he goes to work, he always uses a different route.

Aziz Ala, a social researcher at the ministry of labour and social affairs, believes that unless something is done to curb the criminal gangs that roam the streets of Baghdad, they could in time take over.

"If the state continues to turn a blind eye to these crimes, uncontrollable organised crime could take hold, dominating our daily lives and politics."

Hussein al-Yasiri is an IWPR trainee journalist in Baghdad.



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# BAGHDAD WARY OF KURDISH DEPLOYMENT

The presence of Kurdish troops in Baghdad raises hopes of stability but also fears of Kurd-Shia confrontations.

BASIM AL-SHARAA, BAGHDAD

The deployment of Kurdish brigades in Baghdad neighbourhoods controlled by followers of firebrand Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr has prompted hopes that the forces will bring peace, as well as fears that the move will stoke ethnic and sectarian tensions.

Around 3,000 Kurdish soldiers are deploying in Baghdad as part of the new security plan, which got under way this week. It's the first time Kurdish troops have been sent to the city in such numbers.

On Friday, February 16, full-scale battle broke out in the southern city of Basra between British forces and the Mahdi Army militia, which is loyal to al-Sadr, raising the possibility that such all-out fighting may soon be seen in Baghdad.

For the past four years, relations between Kurds and al-Sadr followers have been sensitive at best. This is partly because the Sadr movement opposes federalism and article 140 of the Iraqi constitution calling for normalisation in the ethnically mixed and oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Normalisation refers to returning Kirkuk to its state before the Saddam regime, which imported Arabs and expelled Kurds. Many Sadrists believe the policy is being used to drive out Arabs and Turkomen.

Mahdi Army commander Abu Ammar al-Sujad said he was concerned that deployment of Kurdish troops in the city might cause problems "because of the hate the Kurdish leaders have for the Sadr movement and its followers".

"I still remember that in the Najaf offensive [of April 2004] ... most of the Iraqi army snipers were Peshmargas [Kurdish Fighters]," he said.

The Iraqi army and US forces launched a huge offensive on the holy Shia city of Najaf in 2004, vowing to destroy the Mahdi Army.

In January 2007, a Sadrism delegation visited the capital of the Kurdish region of Erbil for the first time. Kurdish officials say the purpose of the visit was to clear-up misunderstandings on federalism and Kirkuk.

While there was no official change as a result of the meeting, observers say it was an important sign that both sides are intent on diffusing tensions.

Others insist the Kurdish troops will be a positive force.

Abdul-khaliq Zangana from the Kurdish Alliance bloc in the Iraqi parliament says he is shocked by the way media portrayed the

Kurdish deployment. Journalists have been largely pessimistic about the move, saying it will lead to greater violence.

Zangana is at pains to point out that the Kurdish forces are loyal to the Iraqi army.

"The Kurdish troops are a part of the Iraqi army and they are under the command of the Supreme Commander of the Iraqi Armed Forces, the prime minister Nouri al-Maliki," he said.

The Kurdish units will not take sides in the sectarian violence and only fight factions and help restore stability, he says.

Mohammad al-Sa'di, a Mahdi Army commander in the al-Huria neighbourhood of west Baghdad, rules out a confrontation between the Kurdish troops and the Shia forces, adding that the two sides have not clashed militarily in the past.

Sa'di warns against using Kurdish soldiers to crack down on the Mahdi Army, saying such a move would only increase ethnic tensions.

Sa'di also says the Mahdi Army has received instructions from al-Sadr himself not to confront Iraqi and American forces "whatever the situation".

However, the Mahdi Army will fight the Kurds if they take sides in the ongoing sectarian struggle, he says. Most Kurdish troops are Sunni.

"We will force them to leave ( the al-Sadr stronghold Sadr City) as soon as possible" if that happens, he said.

Being drawn into ongoing ethnic and sectarian strife is one of the Kurds' biggest fears.

"The troops might become a part of the sectarian violence that is occurring between Sunnis and Shias," said Mahmood Osman, another Kurdish Alliance deputy. "This would complicate the security problem even more."

Osman called on the Kurdish leadership to reconsider its decision to send troops to Baghdad, describing the deployment as "dangerous and disastrous".

In an effort to explain the Kurdish forces' mission, the Iraqi government's spokesman Ali al-Dabagh says it is a standard procedure to use Iraqi troops under the ministry of defence's command.

"Those Kurdish soldiers have voluntarily joined the Iraqi army and the Iraqi government has the right to send them anywhere," he said.

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The Iraqi ministry of defence refused to confirm or deny that Kurdish troops would be asked to take on the Mahdi Army.

"The military plan is top secret and neither the Iraqi government nor the military commanders will reveal it," said Mohammad al-Asskary, a ministry spokesman.

The public is as divided as the politicians.

Ahmad Sadiq, 35, an employee in the ministry of health from Sadr City, says the Kurdish soldiers will help restore peace and stability to the capital.

"Their presence will fill in the gap in some of the areas where there is not a big enough Iraqi Army presence. The deployment of the Kurdish troops in the areas controlled by the Mahdi Army will help to free up Iraqi army units to crack down on Sunni insurgents in other hot areas," he said.

"Most government forces can't operate effectively in Mahdi Army controlled areas because they are accused of favouring the Mahdi Army. But the Kurdish troops will play a neutral role."

In contrast, many in the Kurdish community in Baghdad are shocked by the news. Adnan Mohammad, 40, a Kurdish resident of Baghdad, says he is very concerned.

"The participation of the Kurdish troops will have a big negative impact on our security, especially if these troops take on the Mahdi Army," said Mohammad, adding that the Mahdi Army might retaliate and make Kurds the newest victims of ongoing sectarian and ethnic violence.

Hashim Hassan, an analyst at the University of Baghdad, meanwhile, questions the effectiveness of the Kurdish troops.

"The expertise that the Kurdish troops have gained from fighting militants in the Kurdish region will be useless in Baghdad," said Hassan.

The American and Iraqi forces have already failed to defeat the militias and insurgents, he pointed out. Besides, many Kurdish soldiers do not speak Arabic and don't understand Arabic culture very well, which may well make it hard to quell the violence in volatile neighbourhoods, says Hassan.

"This is a war of intelligence not troop numbers," he said.

Basim al-Sharaa is an IWPR contributor in Baghdad.



## BAGHDAD AWAITS NEW SECURITY PLAN

Officials say they've learnt from mistakes made in previous military operations.

ZAINEB NAJI, BAGHDAD

The Iraqi authorities are set to launch a new security crackdown in the country's strife-torn capital, which will involve the deployment of tens of thousands of Iraqi and American troops in a joint effort to bring stability to the city.

Politicians across the political divide have broadly welcomed the move, which appears to be a big improvement on previous attempts to pacify Baghdad both in terms of resources and coordination.

However, some Sunni residents of the city fear that they may be targeted in the operation, which will see security forces deploying in Shia and Sunni neighbourhoods across the capital.

According to official figures, 6,000 people have fallen victim to violence in Baghdad in the past two months alone; and 100,000 families have been displaced since the bombing of the Holy Shrine in Samarra in February 2006, an incident that triggered a surge in ethnic violence.

It is not clear when the plan, announced by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the first week of January, will come into force, but

some claim the opening shots of the campaign have already been fired with joint Iraqi and American military operations against armed Sunni groups and former members of the Ba'ath party in early- and mid-January in the notorious Haifa Street area of central Baghdad.

Under the plan, Baghdad will be divided into ten districts, each under the authority of an Iraqi commander, given the right to take action without the need to consult his superiors. At the same time, the government will promote the security plan inside and outside parliament in order to counter its critics.

A major obstacle to improving security in Iraq has been the unreliability of the security forces, which have often turned out to be closely affiliated with the militias and other armed groups they're supposed to be combating.

Preparations for the new security plan thus included recruitment and training of new troops who over the past two months have been carefully selected and checked for connections that might compromise their loyalty to the state.

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“Iraqi troops that will conduct the operations are new troops, trained to be loyal to the state,” said Abdul-Khaliq Zangane, member of the Iraqi parliament for the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan.

About 30,000 Iraqi troops are to be deployed in the capital, including three brigades from the northern Kurdish provinces and one from the south. In addition to that, 20,000 US troops will back up Iraqi troops in Baghdad and in the western province of Anbar.

The new plan follows a number of similar security crackdowns that have been criticised by Sunni members of parliament as being “sectarian and biased” and which, they say, led to an escalation in the number of Sunni and Shia civilian casualties, expulsions and kidnapping.

Maliki's foreign affairs advisor, Mariam al-Rayis, says the new plan is likely to succeed because, firstly, it has the backing of the Americans and Iraqis and, secondly, the ministry of interior and defence are working together. Previous plans are deemed to have failed because such support and cooperation was lacking.

Another reason for optimism is that troops will deploy in neighbourhoods to keep rival factions apart - in the past security forces would move in and then leave after dealing with incidents - and will have the backing of Iraqi intelligence.

While senior officials are doing their best to promote the plan, some parliamentary deputies are more cautious about what Iraqi can expect.

Lawmaker Abbas al-Bayyati, of the Shia Unified Iraqi Alliance, believes the move will deliver results by next summer, while Shadha al-Abusi, from the Sunni National Accord Front, says that it has to show its effective first before any decision can be made about its duration.

In general, though, members of parliament are broadly supportive of the security initiative.

“We support this plan and will work for its success if it's going to put an end to the chaos, insecurity, expulsions and killings,” said Zangane.

“We support it if it is...different from previous plans,” said Abusi. “The government should act neutrally and impose law and order on all [citizens] and in every volatile neighborhood.” There is a lot at stake, she said, and if this plan fails, the government should resign.

Ordinary Sunnis in Baghdad, however, are divided over the plan, with some relieved that their neighbourhoods may at long last become secure, while others are suspicious of the Shia-dominated government's intentions.

Zais Awad, 34, an engineer from the Sunni neighbourhood of Mansur, welcomes the new plan and hopes that the government will “work hard on security in Baghdad and make the city as safe as it was before the American occupation”.

However, Omar Abdul-Aziz, a 24-year-old Sunni student from the Adhamiya district, is afraid that it represents “a new sectarian plan to eliminate Sunnis” as the parties in control are Shia, Kurds and Americans.

Zainab Naji is an IWPR contributor in Baghdad.



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## KURDS RELUCTANT TO SEND TROOPS TO BAGHDAD

Decision to deploy Kurdish troops in Baghdad as part of new security plan is unpopular in the north.

FRMAN ABDULRAHMAN & FAZIL NAJEEB, SULAIMANIYAH

Since Tuba Ali's son Sarko left Sulaimaniyah for Baghdad last month to take part in the new security plan for the capital, she rarely misses a television news bulletin, anxious for the latest on the troubled city.

Ali, 48, says she is very upset that her son is getting involved in the campaign to end Baghdad's sectarian violence. "Kurdish forces should not have been deployed [there] because we don't have anything to do with the.. city," she said.

A 3,000-strong contingent of Kurdish troops will form part of the Iraqi army deployment in the city, but Kurds in the north are not happy about their involvement. They say restoring stability to Baghdad is not their concern and fear they may be dragged into a sectarian conflict.

So far, Kurds - who comprise about 17 per cent of Iraq's population - have stayed out of the predominantly Sunni-Shia conflict ravaging the capital and much of the country.

The Baghdad military operation, involving tens of thousands of US and Iraqi troops, is the latest attempt to deal a blow to the insurgents and militias that are holding the city to ransom.

Azmar Abdullah, 27, a soldier from Sulaimaniyah, told IWPR just before leaving for the capital that he would go wherever his commanders told him, but had reservations about the Baghdad mission.

"This is a useless war because you don't know whom you will fight and how they will confront you," he said. "They are invisible enemies."

Kurds believe their soldiers will be up against it in the capital because they're unaccustomed to fighting in urban environments and are considered American collaborators by the insurgent groups.

Brigadier Anwar Dolani, chief of the Sulaimaniyah units in the army, said he was not optimistic about the security plan, but felt Kurds should take part, nonetheless. "I'm not happy with going to Baghdad, because Ba'athists and terrorists will accuse us of fighting Arabs and will encourage people to hurt us," he said.

The Kurdish commander said his troops have not been told what they will do in Baghdad, as the authorities have kept details of the plan secret to prevent it being sabotaged by insurgents and militia groups.

"We will do our best not become a part of the sectarian war," said Brigadier Dolani, "We are the Iraqi army and we are going to protect all Iraqis: Kurds, Sunni and Shia."

Nonetheless, there remains unease within Kurdish military ranks about the mission, and there have been reports of desertions. Kurdish commanders dismiss these accounts, but IWPR has been able to speak to one deserter.

"I deserted as soon as I heard the rumour [about Kurdish troops being sent to Baghdad] a month ago," he said. "I don't believe in a war that has no benefit for the Kurds."

He also believes that the Kurds will fare no better than US troops in bringing stability to the capital. "American soldiers failed despite all their resources," he said.

But Rebwar Kareem, professor of political science at the University of Sulaimaniyah, said that Kurds have a duty to serve in Baghdad because "they are part of the country".

Kareem feels its important for Kurds to show that they are prepared to protect Iraq, warning that not doing so will reflect badly on their community. He says the Arab media will be quick to criticise them if their commitment falters, and insists that those who suggest that Kurdish soldiers not go to Baghdad are divorced from reality.

Ali, though, believes that her son may end up making an unnecessary sacrifice. "I'm afraid my son will die for a place that no Kurd wants to give his life for," she said.

Frman Abdulrahman & Fazil Najeeb are IWPR contributors in Sulaimaniyah.



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# GOVERNORATE PROFILES

The Iraqi Governance Reporting project is focusing on six governorates, which were chosen as representative of Iraq's diverse political, ethnic and sectarian composition. A survey of governance in these regions will be published in subsequent issues.

## BAGHDAD

### LOCATION

Baghdad is located in central Iraq. The Tigris River divides the city into two parts: al-Karkh and al-Rasafa. It's bordered by Diyala in the east, Salahaddin in the north, Anbar in the west and Babil in the south.

### POPULATION

The Baghdad population is estimated at six million, two-third of which lives in al-Rasafa - on the eastern side of the Tigris. Most of the population has tribal origins, many with roots in the Shia south and the Sunni west. Declining numbers of minorities - namely Christian, Jews and Mandaeis - live in some central parts of the city. As a result of the current wave of sectarian-related expulsions, al-Rasafa is becoming increasingly Shia and al-Karkh more and more Sunni.

### ECONOMY

Iraq has long been ruled by a socialist dictatorship, with a centrally planned economy. All the country's major companies are based in the capital, with most relying on government contracts and subsidies. The majority of the population works in government ministries and administrations. Yet unemployment rates remain very high.

### POLITICS

Baghdad is the focal point of the insurgency and the inter-Iraq conflict. While all the country's political groupings are represented in the city, just a few control the majority of the capital's resources and municipalities. The city council is dominated by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI. However, other actors such as the Mehdi Army militia, the Islamic Party of Iraq and a few other groups de facto control various sectors of Baghdad.

## BASRA

### LOCATION

Basra is the southern province of Iraq. Its capital Basra is the second largest city in Iraq and the country's main port. The city is located along the Shatt al-Arab waterway, near the Persian Gulf. Another important city is Umm Qasr. The province borders with Kuwait in the south and Iran in the east.

Due to its location on the heavily contested Shatt al-Arab waterway, Basra was hard hit by Iranian forces in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war.

### POPULATION

The estimated population of the province is 2,600,000, with a Shia Arab majority. The Sunni Arab minority is declining as sectarian-related expulsions escalate.

### ECONOMY

Basra's economic base is the petroleum industry, with many oil refineries built in the city since 1948.

It's also an important agricultural area, particularly for date production - although harvests have suffered over past decades as a result of insect plagues and war damage. During the Iran-Iraq conflict, orchards were turned into battlefields. Only four million trees have survived - quarter of the original number.

### POLITICS

After the first Gulf War in 1991, Basra was the site of major revolt against Saddam Hussein's regime. The uprising was crushed, with the loss of many lives.

Today, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, the Sadrist Movement and its military wing, the Mehdi Army militia, and the Fadhila party are the strongest Shia groups in this part of Iraq.

They are seen as the primary forces competing for political power and control over Basra's oil. Some analysts even talk of a Shia civil war, waged by competing militias, raging in the city.

Although Basra is rich in oil resources, most of the population is impoverished because of years of oppression by the Ba'athist regime, which was hostile to Shia political aspirations. Oil smuggling out of Basra, Iraq's largest port, continues to cripple the country's fragile economy.

According to security experts, one of the key determinants of power in southern Iraq is the ability of militias to control the illegal oil trade. Literally billions of dollars worth of oil has been smuggled out of the country for sale at inflated prices on world markets - the profits bagged by local political and criminal factions. One of the consequences of this illicit business is that Islamist militia influence has grown tremendously strong.

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## GOVERNORATE PROFILES

### KIRKUK

#### LOCATION

Kirkuk is located in the north of Iraq, 250 kilometres northeast of the capital Baghdad, bordering Sulaimaniyah to the east, Erbil to the north and Salahaddin to the west and south.

#### POPULATION

With around 800,000 inhabitants, the province is considered a melting pot of Iraq's different ethnicities and religions. While there are no reliable statistics on their size, many of the groups lay claim to the city of Kirkuk and/or the province.

The current composition of Kirkuk is believed to be a mixture of Kurds, Turkomans, Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans and other smaller minorities.

#### ECONOMY

Kirkuk is an oil and water rich area. Considered to have 10 billion barrels of oil reserves, it has been the subject of multiple conflicts between ethnic groups attempting to control the city and its oil fields. At the moment, oil production in the region is estimated at 800,000 barrels a day.

#### POLITICS

While sometimes referred to as "Little Iraq" because of its diverse population, its various communities are often at odds, and believe the area, in particular the city of Kirkuk, is a powder keg waiting to explode.

Political parties in Kirkuk, most of which represent ethnic or religious groups, are battling for control of the city and its surroundings.

Kurdish slates won five of Kirkuk's nine parliamentary seats in the December 2005 elections, and they hold the most seats on the provincial council.

Saddam Hussein's regime had tried to reduce the Kurdish and Turkoman presence in the area by moving significant numbers of both communities out of the city and replacing them with mainly poor Arabs from the south. During this "Arabisation" process, an estimated 275,000 Arabs were settled in Kirkuk between 1981 and 2002. Many were Shia from the south who were forced north by Saddam Hussein. For the past three years, the Kurdish Regional Government has been fighting to gain total control over the city.

An important date for Kirkuk is the referendum that is due to be held on December 7, under the provision of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, to determine whether it will be part of the Kurdish region. It seems that the Kurds want to create a fait accompli by

attempting to ensure that their community will be in the majority by the time of the referendum. For instance, Kurds who once lived in the area are being encouraged to return. But many of those who have come back are unhappy because they are still waiting for housing and financial assistance.

At the same time, there are big concerns that local Arabs, who were brought to Kirkuk under the Arabisation policy, might be kicked out.

The city of Kirkuk is divided into Arab and Kurdish quarters, with mixed areas amongst the most volatile.

### KARBALA

#### LOCATION

The city of Karbala is 105 kilometres southwest of Baghdad in southern central Iraq. It is surrounded by citrus and palm tree orchards on three sides. To the northwest are the towns of Ramadi and Hilla. East of the city is Babil province, and to the west the western desert. The holy cities of Najaf and Kufa are its southern neighbours.

#### POPULATION

The population of Karbala is estimated at 950,000, with a Shia Arab majority and a sizable Persian minority.

#### ECONOMY

The city is a major religious tourism destination. Millions of pilgrims from around the world and Iraq itself visit the holy Shia shrine of Imam Hussein every year, generating business opportunities and jobs. The economy of the city has been severely affected by the number of extremist attacks on the holy shrines and pilgrims.

#### POLITICS

There are three major political factions in the city: the Dawa party led by the Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki dominates the city council. Its rivals are the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, and the Islamic Labour Party.

A key figure of influence is Grand Ayatollah Sistani who controls the holy shrines.

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## GOVERNORATE PROFILES

### NAJAF

#### LOCATION

Najaf is 160 kilometres southwest of Baghdad.

#### POPULATION

About one million people live in Najaf, half of them in rural areas, where they cultivate rice, vegetables and dates. The majority of the inhabitants are Shia Arabs. There are some small communities of foreigners - including Pakistanis, Afghans and Saudis - who study at the Najaf Hawza (Religious School of Najaf).

#### ECONOMY

Just like Karbala, Najaf depends mainly on religious tourism, agriculture and some minor industries. Recently, many hotels and restaurants to host Shia pilgrims from all over the world have been built, and an airport is under construction.

Despite the huge influx of tourists and pilgrims, unemployment remains high.

#### POLITICS

Najaf is seat of Grand Ayatollah Sistani who is considered to be the supreme religious leader of all Shia around the world. There are four other grand ayatollahs based in Najaf and a number of political parties. But Sistani is the real authority in the city.

Officially, the city council is dominated by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, but the Mehdi Army militia is said to have a sizeable presence. Supporters of both have clashed several times over the holy shrines in the city, currently under Sistani's control.

### ERBIL

#### LOCATION

Erbil province is located in the north of Iraq between the Upper and Lower Zab rivers and is bordered by Iran to the northeast and Turkey to the north.

#### POPULATION

The majority of the 1.5 million population is Kurdish. Minorities include Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkomans and Arabs. Around 30 per cent of the population lives in rural areas.

#### ECONOMY

Erbil is the capital of the Kurdistan region and the seat of the regional government and parliament. As such, the majority of the city's workforce is employed by the regional government. In addition, Erbil has become a safe haven for investment in Iraq. Investors from around the world are said to be pouring money into the city.

According to the Kurdish Regional Government, Erbil has drawn six billion dollars worth of foreign investment over the past three years. These investments cover a variety of economic activities, ranging from oil production to housing and major infrastructure development. At the moment, the Erbil housing market is the most expensive in Iraq.

#### POLITICS

Erbil is dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Party and as the capital of the Kurdish region it is directly supervised by the Kurdish Regional Government, despite the existence of a city council and a mayor who is mainly responsible for safety and security.





The Institute for War & Peace Reporting is an international not-for-profit organization supporting peace and democracy through free and fair media.

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For further information contact Iraq Programme Director Ammar Al-Shahbender: [ammar@iwpr.net](mailto:ammar@iwpr.net)



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IWPR-US  
1325 G Street NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC  
20005  
+1 (202) 449-7663

IWPR-Europe is a charity registered in England and Wales.

IWPR-EUROPE  
48 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8LT  
+4420 7831 1030

IWPR-Africa is a Section 21 not-for-profit organization registered in Johannesburg.

IWPR-AFRICA  
PO Box 3317  
Parklands  
Johannesburg 2121



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