

IRAQI GOVERNANCE REPORT

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Security and Rule of Law

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

BY ANTHONY BORDEN

Of the six key indicators of governance and transparency, journalists may wish to claim freedom of speech as the most important. After all, it is the basis, in World Bank terminology, of "voice and accountability".

But in fact fundamental security is the starting point, especially in Iraq today. Without the basics of rule of law another World Bank criterion there can be no responsive governance or transparency.

The Iraqi government's recent Baghdad Security Plan, combined with the US government's military "surge", are intended to bring some order to the capital, and indications are that the US military will this early autumn be making a modestly positive report to Congress on the results.

Yet journalistic efforts to assess the status of safety and security in five key governorates around the country present a grim picture.

It is not just the violence: these reports underline the chaotic nature of political authority, whether in unregulated check-points in the capital, intense political rivalries in the south or the emergence of "instant" (and armed) ayatollahs in the twin religious centres of Karbala and Najaf.

Without a coherent and stable central government, all the other official and civil-society mechanisms which make up democracy are gravely undermined.

The security crisis in Iraq, then, is a crisis in authority with such poor political stability (a third of the World Bank governance categories), rule of law cannot take root. Impunity breeds only further violence, spreading fear and flight, as the refugee crisis spirals.

This summer, these dynamics became intensely personal for IWPR. In their efforts to enhance voice and accountability, two participants in IWPR's governance reporting project - Sahar Hussein al-Haideri and Arif Ali Flaith - paid with their lives. An irrepressible woman reporter, Sahar was openly assassinated on the street in Mosul, while Arif was killed in a random street explosion.

There can be no graver "negative indicator" for voice and accountability than the assassination of a journalist. And in considering all the fundamental criteria of governance, there can be nothing that more clearly underlines their interconnectedness or their urgency.

Anthony Borden is IWPR Executive Director.

IWPR is establishing the Sahar Fund to support journalists it works with in Iraq, Afghanistan and other crisis areas. To assist with this effort, see www.iwpr.net/sahar.html

BATTLING FOR
POWER IN BASRA

Exerting military clout and carving up lucrative businesses are the order of the day in southern Iraqi politics.

BY IWPR REPORTERS IN BASRA

The concrete walls that surround the Fadhila party's compound in Sharish, north of Basra city centre, resemble the barricades around the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad.

Last spring, fierce clashes erupted between Fadhila and the Mahdi Army, a paramilitary group loyal to radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Several people were killed on both sides and offices and buildings belonging to the two parties were destroyed.

Mediators from tribes and other political parties managed to end the fighting but as Abu Ali al-Baaj, a mid-level Mahdi Army commander, put it, "The tensions were not buried for good."

The reason for the battle was simple as the governing party in Basra, Fadhila had replaced the head of the local electricity department, who happened to be a Sadr supporter.

Behind the façade of democratic institutions such as councils and the police force, Iraq's second-largest city with about 2.6 million inhabitants, has fallen into the grip of competing militias who are as suspicious of one another as rival mafia families.

When the two militias began fighting over the post of electricity chief, the police force divided into factions which turned their weapons on one another. Police cars were used to transport militia members.

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The Fadhila party runs the provincial council of Basra and controls most of the government institutions there. It was founded after Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled in April 2003, and holds 15 seats in the Iraqi parliament. With leading Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Yaqubi as its spiritual leader, the party also features Basra's governor Mohammed al-Waili among its leading members.

Basra had so little to lose and so much to gain from the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime that, initially at least, it had all of the makings of a post-liberation success story.

The city had been neglected for at least a decade as punishment for its largely Shia population's support for the 1991 rebellion against Ba'ath party rule.

To ensure that this southern region was kept under tight control, nearly all of Basra's leaders subsequent to the revolt from the security services to party officials and city administrators were people appointed from Sunni-dominated central Iraq.

Basra has the only seaport and the largest oilfields in Iraq, but instead of returning to its past as an economic and cultural hub, untroubled by ethnic or confessional violence, it has instead become a symbol of the failure of the new political order.

Basra's political parties participated in the 2005 elections, and the British forces deployed here invested heavily in building up institutions including the security forces. When they handed power over to the locals, these parties were all that existed on the ground.

But both the parties and the official Iraqi security forces here have subverted all prospect of accountable governance.

Because the city is predominantly Shia, faith was not initially expected to be a major factor in local politics. But all the influential parties, including the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, the Sadrists, Fadhila, and more opaque movements, such as Tharullah (The Revenge of God), all claimed legitimacy on Shia religious grounds, and justified their often violent activities as requirements of the faith.

Any party that was backed by a militia and had the capacity to grasp power did so with impunity, sometimes behaving more like criminal gangs than political forces, and the gap between political and paramilitary activity was blurred. These political groups used the electoral process to participate in a system whose founding principles they wilfully ignored.

Once in power, they did not seek either to build popular support or to govern effectively. A combination of poor administration and widespread intimidation lost them significant public support. Instead, their power lay in their ability to provide a protection force or exact revenge.

In the end, it becomes difficult to introduce a democratic system if the leaders do not respect the underlying principles

such as public accountability, respect for minorities and fair elections.

As the London-based political analyst Ghassan al-Atiyyah, whose family originates from Basra, put it, "Without a date palm, you can't have dates. Without democrats, you can't have a democracy."

Except for electricity, which is delivered from neighbouring Iran and is now available about 20 hours a day, Basra's infrastructure has seen little improvement. The water supply is as bad as before the war, forcing the people to buy purified water. Refuse collection is worse than before, and rubbish is piling up in the streets.

Reconstruction work and healthcare, education and sewage treatment have seen very little progress. Local officials continually maintain that they are preoccupied with more pressing matters such as security, and that reconstruction is sacrificed as a result.

The dominant parties have little to offer in the way of programmes other than their rigid Islamist ideology. Women are forced under the veil, Basra's Christian community has left, and the parties spend much of their time blaming each other for the violence, corruption and mismanagement.

Madhi Army commander Baaj, for example, accuses Fadhila and governor al-Waili of delivering poor public services, presiding over corruption, and running a campaign of assassinations and abductions of members of rival groups. Although Basra is relatively secure by the standards of Iraq, police report that there are three to ten cases of killings and abductions by "influential actors" every day.

Baaj also accuses senior local officials of awarding tenders and contracts to relatives, and failing to ask questions when reconstruction projects are implemented poorly or late.

Fadhila member Abu Zaineb al-Edani, meanwhile, rejects claims that the party is responsible for violence.

Fadhila, he said, "is not engaged in sectarian violence and [population] displacement. We have refused to have a militia because that is something that cannot be controlled".

He insisted that the party was doing a good job of governing the province, "Basra is doing better than Baghdad in terms of security and public services because of the direct guidance from Yaqubi and the plans made by governor Waili, in spite of the obstacles and restrictions created by [certain] senior officials. They are part of a violent campaign against Fadhila, accusing the party of stealing money and oil."

According to Edani, rival Shia groups see Fadhila as a thorn in their side because it does not support their view that Iraq should be divided into federal units. "We're the only party that has a national agenda," he said.

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Yusif al-Musawi, secretary-general of the Islamist Tharullah party, agreed that there is "a heated dispute for control over the city", but blamed the governor and his political allies for the violence.

"Ninety-nine per cent of killings and abductions are perpetrated by the [local] authorities," he said.

Musawi says his party wants an efficient local government with staff appointed for their skills and abilities rather than according to sectarian quotas.

However, critics of Tharullah say it has built up a reputation for using force.

Dozens of people come to the party's offices every day in the hope of getting their problems solved by the associated militia. Some may be seeking protection from other armed groups, while others may want to get a relative a job in the army or police.

When not dealing with such cases, Tharullah's men have a reputation for assassinating former Ba'ath party members and alcohol traders, or freelancing as hit men for the highest bidder.

In the absence of effective formal mechanisms for redress, militias such as that of Tharullah have become the main dispensers of justice and patronage.

Musawi said proudly, "We have even set up a social affairs office for tribal reconciliation, to mediate between competing tribes and clans in the region."

However, peace-building has a different meaning in Basra.

One Tharullah commander explained the tactics for defeating Fadhila in the next local election, which is supposed to be held by the end of the year. "I have told all city council members, 'You have to make a choice. You either vote against the governor or you die,'" he said.

The real conflict in oil-rich Basra is about who controls the resources. Illegal oil exports, which along with control over security and public resources, counts as the most important income source for all the parties, is carved up among them.

A fragile balance of power has evolved where Fadhila is in charge of the government's oil protection force and, with it, the oil production infrastructure and export terminals. The Sadrists dominate in the local police force, the facilities protection service and the Basra port authority. Together with the small Iraqi Hizbollah party, they also have a strong presence in the customs police force, while the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council dominates the intelligence apparatus and the well-equipped commando units that formally come under the interior ministry in Baghdad.

Compared with Baghdad, Basra may look calm, but even a slight shift in the precarious balance may lead to a surge in violence.

Basra officials and politicians are already preparing for a fierce battle for control over the province if local elections are not held soon.

While Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki is pushing for provincial elections to be held this year, a new electoral commission has yet to be formed.

Fadhila's rivals want an election sooner rather than later, and warn of dire consequences if this doesn't happen.

"We are prepared for the upcoming battle, and concrete barriers won't save them [Fadhila]," warned Sadrist leader Musawi. "If the elections aren't held, we will use force to kick Fadhila out."

Edani remained confident about the governing party's chances, saying, "Many people are certain that Fadhila will lose the next provincial elections, but they will get a shock as we have a wide [support] base and we will stay in power."

Whichever party wins, residents fear they will be the losers. Many say all they want is decent public services and accountable officials.

"The religious parties and coalitions plant fear and terror among people to make sure they keep their mouths shut," said Ahmed al-Hassawi, a traffic policeman. "This creates a terrorised community that can't hold officials accountable even when they make mistakes.

"I don't care about the name or approach of the party that runs the province my concern is what they will provide for my children and me."

However, Basra could be set for another bout of turbulence well ahead of any election. After Maliki dismissed Governor Waili, the Fadhila party threatened to mount protests on July 30. The protests were called off at the last minute, apparently after the party received assurances that Waili's replacement would again be drawn from its ranks rather than from some rival group.

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CHECKPOINTS - BAGHDAD'S RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Security-aware Iraqis try to minimise the risks as they negotiate their way through Baghdad.

BY IWPR REPORTERS IN BAGHDAD

If there is one thing that has become the defining feature of everyday life in Baghdad, it is the checkpoint.

They may be a familiar sight in other regional states where tensions run high, such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but checkpoints are nowhere as important as in Baghdad. The once-diverse Iraqi capital has become a patchwork of ethnic and sectarian divisions separated by concrete walls and countless checkpoints.

The number of official controls has skyrocketed since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003. Around 1,000 now exist in Baghdad, in addition to an unknown number of informal ones set up by various militias and outlawed insurgent groups.

The official checkpoints are run by the defence and interior ministries, and they are considerably better organised since the 2005 elections. Each government control is manned by five to ten soldiers or policemen armed with Kalashnikov rifles and equipped with armoured vehicles or four-wheel-drive cars. Some are permanent, while others are set up wherever the security situation requires.

The two ministries have divided the city's various districts between them. The defence ministry, regarded as a Sunni-led institution, controls the checkpoints in al-Karkh, the Sunni part of Baghdad on the west bank of the Tigris, while the Shia-led interior ministry is responsible for security in the majority Shia section of the city, Rusafa, which lies on the east bank of the Tigris.

Iraqi lawmakers have been critical of both ministries, accusing them of setting up checkpoints manned by personnel without proper training or equipment.

Shadha al-Abusi, a member of parliament from the Sunni-led National Accord Front, believes that neither the police nor the army checkpoints are capable of establishing order in the streets.

"They are powerless," he said, complaining that the security forces "don't follow a strict military law that holds them accountable when they make mistakes."

Mahmood Othman, a Kurdish member of parliament, blamed the poor performance of checkpoints on the absence of

intelligence information and modern bomb detection technology.

Despite such criticisms, officials maintain that the controls play an important part in demonstrating the government's authority on the ground, as well as helping to enforce law and order and ward off militant attacks.

"Their mission is to detect cars without [license] plates and put an end to militias that oppress people," said defence ministry spokesman Mohammed al-Askari.

The security forces are supposed to arrest known suspects and drivers who lack the proper documents or have broken the law in some other way.

Askari acknowledged that there were weak points in the system, including lack of training and low levels of literacy among soldiers and policemen. The defence ministry admitted in January that militia members had infiltrated its ranks, and that military law was not being used to punish personnel who broke the rules.

Ayad Ali, a 25-year-old interior ministry employee, serves at a checkpoint in Rusafa. He and his colleagues have no explosives detection technology and receive poor, if any, information on suspicious cars or people from their superiors. All they can do, he said, is double-check cars they think look suspicious. But, he said, "that is not enough to arrest wanted individuals".

Checkpoints are anything but popular in Baghdad. Although most people recognise the need for frequent security checks, many Baghdadis think the security posts do not make the capital any safer. Those who man them are often accused of causing more problems than they solve. The lengthy procedures create traffic jams, and civilians say they are molested while the real militants get through easily.

"These checkpoints are useless," said Abdul-Amir Mohammed, a 54-year-old taxi driver. "It's a mockery. People get delayed because the checkpoint staff don't know how to check people and don't have the equipment."

The checkpoints are a key element of the Baghdad Security Plan, or Operation Law and Order, which began in February and saw US and Iraqi forces deployed in a concerted effort to clear out extremists from the city, district by district. Once that objective has been achieved, the military maintain a constant

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presence on the ground, installing as many checkpoints as are deemed necessary in a given area. After this, the US forces are supposed to cede control to their Iraqi counterparts but remain in the background, ready to step in if needed.

Colonel Qasim Atta al-Musawi, spokesman for the Baghdad Security Plan, announced at a press conference that the government had imported bomb detection equipment, but so far it had not been used. In May, rumours spread that police were using fake detection equipment in the hope that this would deter insurgents from smuggling explosives.

Under the security plan, the men at checkpoints have been instructed to monitor all cars regardless of how they look, but also to keep an eye out for BMWs and Opels, still the preferred models for suicide bombings.

Stereotypical profiling seems to be weakening the impact of security checks. A BMW carrying young passengers will generally be stopped, but other cars often get through without any checks. However, a number of recent attacks have shown that the insurgents constantly change tactics. For example, to carry out an attack on Mustansiriyah University that left dozens of casualties in January, they used innocuous-looking Daewoo and KIA cars.

People in Baghdad are uncomfortable that many checkpoints are located close to shopping and residential areas, since they are often targeted by insurgents.

There have also been complaints about checkpoint officers asking for bribes. Parliamentarian Abusi recalled being stopped at a control in Karkh, where the security forces asked her and her guards for some ammunition.

“My guards were harassed five times at checkpoints even though they carry [ID] badges,” she said.

Widad Mohammed, a 50-year-old housewife, was travelling in to Amman when her car was stopped at a checkpoint close to Ghazaliya, west of Baghdad. The security officer asked the driver to give him a teapot he noticed in the car, but the driver refused, stating that he needed it for his passengers.

The security officer yelled at the driver and beat him over the head.

“He threatened to confiscate the car as a suspect vehicle, so the driver paid him off so as to put an end to it,” recalled Widad.

At nightfall when the city goes under curfew, the number of officers manning security posts decreases because the risk of attack is higher.

“I was shot when our checkpoint west of Baghdad was attacked at night,” said Khalil Mohammed, an 18-year-old national guardsman. “The insurgents usually attack us when it gets dark.”

The shortage of men at night makes it easier for insurgents to plant roadside explosive devices and car bombs.

The success of the security strategy is challenged by the barely-concealed mistrust and rivalry between the defence and interior ministries. Often it seems they are in conflict rather than cooperating with one another.

A source close to the defence ministry told IWPR that the two institutions compete to deploy more troops than each other. This, he said, “has a negative effect on their performance and weakens coordination”.

The source blamed the rivalry on sectarian feuding.

Both ministries refused to comment on how decisions are made regarding the location and staffing of their checkpoints. In some instances, the presence of forces from both ministries at one location has created problems, and on occasion this has led to armed skirmishes.

An employee of the defence ministry anonymously said that last January, fighting erupted between the National Guard and a police unit at a checkpoint when the latter refused to follow directions given by the military.

Hussein Jasim, a resident of Ur neighbourhood in eastern Baghdad, recalled an incident in January before the security plan came into operation that suggested a degree of complicity between security forces and paramilitary groups.

The incident began with a convoy of 11 cars full of militants arriving in the neighbourhood, and firing mortars at other areas.

Jasim said the attackers told people to stay at home, adding, “They told us they were shooting at the Americans, but in reality they were mortaring civilians in Silekh, a Sunni neighbourhood.”

When the militants heard that United States troops were approaching the area, they dispersed and hid in nearby houses.

However, when they realised it was not an American but an Iraqi patrol, they re-emerged and talked to one of the officers, telling him that they were from Shaab, another Shia area, and he let them go without any trouble.

“How did they pass through three checkpoints without being stopped or investigated?” asked Jasim.

A hostage who survived being kidnapped by an armed militia also suggested that police collaborate with groups which abduct civilians and hold them to ransom.

The man, who has a business making soft drinks, and asked not to be named for fear of reprisals, said he was kidnapped a few months ago at the Jamila wholesale market. The militants who seized him put them in the trunk of their car, which drove off and then stopped after a while.

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“A policeman at a checkpoint opened the trunk but closed it again, as if he didn’t see me,” he said. “I was later released in return for 25,000 US dollars.”

In the general atmosphere of mistrust, ad hoc mobile checkpoints pose the biggest risk to members of the public, as it is impossible to gauge who is waiting there – real security forces, Sunni insurgents or Shia militiamen. To complicate matters, the men in uniform could be genuine policemen, but operating in cahoots with one of the militias. Or it could be Sunni insurgents disguised as security forces.

Marwan, a Baghdad journalist who requested that his last name not be used, remembers driving through the embattled quarter of Dora, south of the capital, with three friends.

”Suddenly we saw a checkpoint manned with police in front of us, and we were afraid we’d be killed because we were all Sunnis,” he said. ”But the men were Sunni jihadis [insurgents] in disguise, looking for real policemen to kill. We had to show our IDs, and they let us go.”

When the Baghdad Security Plan came into effect, people appeared to gain more trust in the checkpoints, and cooperated by passing on information to them. But this positive attitude quickly changed as residents realised that some of the official security posts had been subverted by various militias. There were growing complaints that police at the checkpoints were cooperating with the Mahdi Army, the Shia militia aligned with firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Thousands of people have been killed by Shia and Sunni death squads for belonging to the wrong group, and moving through the city these days is like Russian roulette.

This is especially true for people whose names clearly identify them as belonging to a particular group, such as the typically Sunni Omar, or Ali, a common Shia name.

Nearly everyone driving around Baghdad carries two sets of identification with them – their real ID and a fake one. One identifies them as Sunni, the other as Shia. Showing the right document can save their lives.

This art of disguise goes further, so that people arm themselves with an array of paraphernalia which they can whip out as appropriate when they approach a checkpoint.

For example, a Sunni driver coming up to a security post he believes is under Shia control should not only have the right ID to hand, but should also push in a tape playing Shia religious songs and turn up the volume. He should hang a picture of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the most revered figure in the Shia faith, from the rear-view mirror.

He might also slip on the large silver ring worn only by Shias, especially those considered to be descendants of the Prophet, and perhaps carry a “torba”, the round piece of clay that Shias often place on their foreheads when they bow down in prayer.

These and other handy tips are given on the Iraqi Rabita website, designed to advise Sunnis on how to get through Shia checkpoints. The site offers a 12-step plan for Sunnis to disguise themselves, including making sure their house is equipped with a poster of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad, a copy of a Shia prayer book, and a set of black clothing as worn by Shia to commemorate special religious occasions.

Sunnis are also advised to brush up on the dates of birth and death of the succession of 12 imams who are central to the Shia branch of Islam. They can learn the right phrases, such as how to curse Yazid, the Sunni caliph whose army killed Imam Hussein in the seventh century. If all else fails, tip number 11 provides an exit strategy, ”It is okay to claim that you were previously a Sunni but that you saw the light later and became a Shia.”

Ammar, a young Sunni merchant, has been boning up on Shia practice as a matter of survival.

”I’ve even started surfing Shia websites – although I don’t like them – to learn how to recite the 12 imams of the Shias, in the right order of succession,” he said. ”I have heard that they will ask for them at the checkpoints to see whether I am a real Shia.”

Ammar keeps a “latmiya” – a sad Shia chant about the 12 imams as one of the ring tones in his cell phone, so that he can activate it in majority-Shia neighbourhoods.

In such surreal conditions, even the vigilantes sometimes get confused.

Haki Ismael is a Shia who works as a security guard at a government ministry, but because he lives in Amiriyah, a mostly Sunni neighbourhood, he would show his fake Sunni ID when he was in the area.

Ismael was recently abducted by members of the Mahdi Army in the mistaken belief that he was Sunni. Luckily for him, he speaks with the accent typical of Shias from southern Iraq, and the armed men finally relented and let him go.

Dawood, a Sunni construction engineer, had a similar lucky escape when he was stopped by Sunni militants on the western outskirts of Baghdad.

”They asked me a lot of questions and kept me talking for half an hour. They weren’t interested in the answers so much as my accent,” he said. “Obviously I sounded sufficiently ‘Sunni’, so they let me go.”

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UNHOLY WAR IN KARBALA

A self-made ayatollah with his own army exemplifies the fragmented politics of the main Shia towns and the inability of government to rein such figures in.

BY IWPR REPORTERS IN KARBALA

When Saddam Hussein's regime fell in April 2003, the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf overnight became the focus of great hopes and fears all at once.

Under Saddam, Iraq's Shia majority was repressed, their political and religious aspirations crushed and their clerics kept firmly under the control of the state. With the arrival of the United States-led coalition, the clerical establishment in the twin cities was back centre stage. Najaf and Karbala were seen as key to winning the battle for Shia hearts and minds at least that is what Washington hoped, Tehran feared and many Iraqis believed.

The general perception seemed to be that a central order would establish itself among Iraq's Shia community and would exercise control over the different shrines and the "hawzas", the Shia colleges or seminaries.

But these expectations proved badly mistaken. Today no one force neither the Iranian-influenced clerics nor the Iraqi nationalist scholars is in full control of Najaf and Karbala. Instead, there is constant turmoil as different factions struggle for power. The Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, the Badr militia of Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir al-Hakim, and the followers of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, regarded as Iraq's supreme Shia authority, all compete for influence.

Amid the anarchy, a new kind of Shia leader emerged which no one had anticipated, and which now represents a serious threat to the rule of law in the most important Shia religious centres: self-appointed clerics who combine the might of armed militias with an almost messianic sense of purpose.

The best known Shia figure who has gone his own way since 2003 is Muqtada al-Sadr, who has made a name for himself despite lacking the scholarly clerical credentials of his father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, whose murder in 1999 was reportedly ordered by Saddam's administration. Muqtada has built up a substantial following with the backing of his Mahdi Army and his firebrand style of rhetoric.

Then there is Farqad al-Qazwini, who set up his own hawza after being cast out of the Najaf seminary. Another self-declared leader challenging the rule of law in Karbala was Dhia

Abdul-Zahra al-Garawi, who headed a group called the Soldiers of Heaven, and was killed with 300 of his followers by US and Iraqi forces near Najaf at the end of January.

The most powerful of the "instant ayatollahs" in Karbala is Sayyid Mahmud Hassani al-Sarkhi. No figure better symbolises the fragmentation of order and institutions in the Shia strongholds.

Many people in Karbala regard him as a serious threat to security and stability, and accuse him of being behind several successful and attempted assassinations of Shia scholars and clerics who criticised him.

Despite the allegations against him, the security forces have been unable some would say unwilling to detain him and put an end to his activities.

Largely unknown prior to 2003, Hassani has risen remarkably high. He presides over the Sadiq Hawza with more than 500 students in Karbala, leads the Walaa (Loyalty) political party, and commands between 15,000 and 20,000 followers in various southern provinces of Iraq, as well as an armed militia.

His followers have clashed repeatedly with Iraqi security forces as well as with supporters of other ayatollahs.

In August last year, seven people died as the Iraqi military tried to raid his offices, but abandoned the attempt as the violence spread to nearby towns. Although he is wanted by the government as well as the US military, and is deeply disliked by all other influential Shia parties, no one has dared take him or his militia on since then.

Sarkhi's followers react badly to criticism of their leader. In remarks on Iranian TV in June 2006, cleric Sheikh Ali al-Gorani disputed Sarkhi's claims to be a "marja" a source of authority on matters of Shia Islam and a representative of the Mahdi, the "hidden" 12th imam who Shia believe will return one day as a messiah. In response, Sarkhi's followers demonstrated in several Iraqi provinces and attacked Tehran's consulate in Karbala, breaking all the windows and dragging down the Iranian flag.

Typically of the new style of cleric, Sarkhi did not make his way up through the Shia hierarchy, and simply declared himself an

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ayatollah a title normally reserved for learned senior scholars in the hawzas. Not only that, but he has gone on to claim that he is better informed than other ayatollahs.

The nearest thing to an official biography, written by one of his students, say he gains his honorific title “sayyid” as a descendent of the Imam Ali’s family, the most noble lineage possible in Shia Islam.

Born in the Hurriyah district of Baghdad in 1963, Sarkhi graduated in engineering from Baghdad University in 1987, and entered the Najaf Hawza in 1994, when the revered Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr was in charge. Friends claim that the grand ayatollah invited him to join the most advanced group of scholars, while others assert he did not complete his studies.

Whatever the truth is about his scholarly qualifications, Sarkhi declared himself an ayatollah and a marja whose word should be followed just four years later, in 1998. Sadr promptly dismissed him from the hawza.

Just before fall of Saddam’s regime, Sarkhi was briefly held at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Kadhim al-Abbadi, an expert on Grand Ayatollah Sadr’s life and work, is dismissive of Sarkhi.

“Sarkhi is an impostor,” he told IWPR. “I debated with him for two hours in his office in Najaf after 2003, and he had no answers to my [religious] questions.”

Sarkhi’s book, entitled Solid Thought, disputes the thinking of five senior Shia scholars and concludes that he has a more profound understanding of faith matters and therefore exceeds them in rank.

Other clerical leaders are as dismissive as Abbadi. None of the marjas have commented on his book or responded to his comments, clearly regarding him as not worth a response.

“Sarkhi is untrustworthy and Sayyid Sistani has never responded to him, because he is too high in rank to answer such a twisted man,” said Kifah Wahab, the head of the Izza religious school in Karbala and a supporter of Ayatollah Sistani.

There may be little sympathy for Sarkhi among the established clergy, but that has not stopped him winning large numbers of followers, mainly among young people.

Some believe he is deputising for the long-awaited Imam Mahdi.

Ahmed al-Sayid, a representative of Sarkhi’s office in Karbala, says most of his followers are former members of the Mahdi Army. They left the younger Sadr’s group, he said, “because we were unhappy about following a leader [Muqtada] who is not a marja, and prefer to follow a thinker and commander like Sayyid Hassani al-Sarkhi”.

It is unclear who is funding Sarkhi’s movement. Although Ahmed al-Sayid insists the major source consists of donations from the large numbers of followers, others suspect Iranian or Syrian influence.

Although Sarkhi’s followers claim he is against Iran having a presence in Iraq, the precise nature of his relationship with Tehran remains unclear. His thoughts have been translated into Persian and are taught at the religious centre in Qom.

In late 2006, he told supporters that the US presence was a threat to Iran, whose own involvement in Iraq was intended only to allow it to remain aware of the nature of a possible American strike against it.

It is perhaps symptomatic of conditions in Iraq that his questionable claim to stand among the ranks of the ayatollahs, his isolation among other major Shia groups, and the warrants that have been issued for his arrest, have not been enough to stop Sarkhi’s inexorable rise.

Ahmed Jafar, a professor at Baghdad University’s research centre, sees the apparent impunity enjoyed by figures like Sarkhi as symptomatic of the failure of governance in Iraq.

“The decay of government power and order and the continuous fragmentation of Iraq have made it increasingly difficult to hold figures like Sarkhi accountable and bring them to justice,” he said. “No one is there to stop them.”



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MOSUL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DWINDLES

Many go abroad to escape the threat of violence, while others seek refuge in the countryside around Mosul.

BY SAHAR AL-HAIDERI IN MOSUL

They have been threatened because of their Christian faith, their distinctive clothing and their success in business. They have been killed because of a controversy over a cartoon. They have fled to wherever they can find a minimal amount of safety to Iraqi Kurdistan, abroad to Syria, or just to the countryside outside their city.

The Christians of Mosul can recite one horror story after another. Once a solid, middle-class community in this northern city, thousands of them have fled their homes under threat from militants. Their churches have been bombed, their clergy murdered, and community members regularly face threats and kidnappings.

The story of Mosul's Christians is not dissimilar to that of millions of other Iraqi citizens who live in a state of fear. But their religion makes them especially vulnerable, in a city where governance and the rule of law are non-existent, allowing criminal gangs and Islamic militant groups such as al-Qaeda to intimidate and kill with impunity.

"Life has become difficult in Mosul," said Ilham Sabah, a Christian attorney who wears the veil because she fears she would otherwise be killed. "The militants threaten Christian women. They set them on fire or kill them if they refuse to wear Islamic dress as Muslim women do.

"We only have one choice, and that is to flee Mosul and the hell created by the militants."

Mosul is the capital of Nineveh province, and has been home to Christians of the Assyrian, Chaldean, Armenian and Catholic churches for more than millennium. Now they are being driven out en masse.

Christians "are the weakest of the weak", said Joseph Kassab, originally from Mosul and now executive director of the Chaldean Federation of America.

"The extremists there are highly active... they want to empty Mosul of Iraqi Christians," he said.

There are no accurate demographic statistics for Iraq, but most estimates indicate there were between 800,000 and one million Iraqi Christians in Iraq in 2003. A 2005 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, on non-Muslim religious minorities in Iraq said that most of the

Christians were from Nineveh province, although substantial numbers lived and worked in Baghdad.

UNHCR reported last year that about 24 per cent of the Iraqi refugees in Syria, which borders Nineveh province, were Christians. In addition, about 1,720 Christian families have fled Mosul for the relative safety of the Nineveh Plains outside the city, according to a Christian human rights advocate in the province who requested anonymity out of concern for his security. Thousands of Christians from Baghdad and other parts of Iraq have also fled to the plains.

Christians, many of whom were successful entrepreneurs and professionals, were some of Iraq's first refugees.

Community leaders in Nineveh province have faced increased threats in the wake of the furore created by a Danish newspaper's publication last year of caricatures making fun of the Prophet Mohammed and linking Islam with terrorism. A controversial speech by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2006, which many Muslims perceived as anti-Islamic, also made Christians a target.

By mid-October, a bomb had killed nine people in an Assyrian neighbourhood of Mosul, and Syriac priest Paulos Iskandar was beheaded after being kidnapped by a militant group. His abductors demanded at least 250,000 US dollars in ransom and also that he post signs on his church apologising for the Pope's remarks, according to the Assyrian International News Agency. They killed him two days after his abduction.

The murder sent shock-waves through Mosul's Christian community,

The violence has not abated since Iskandar's gruesome murder. Father Ragheed Ganni, a Chaldean Catholic priest at the Church of the Holy Spirit, and three of his deacons were gunned down in Mosul in June following a Sunday service. Ganni had been threatened and his church bombed prior to the attack.

The four were shot dead when their vehicle was pulled over by armed gunmen. The militants then rigged the car with explosives, and it took several hours before a bomb-disposal unit arrived to defuse the charges.

Less high-profile kidnappings, threats and killings of

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Christians rarely make the news, but they occur almost daily. The Assyria National Assembly tracks violence against Assyrian Christians in Iraq, and the daily online log of murders and other violent acts includes a plethora of kidnappings targeting Mosul's Christians.

Many Christians are kidnapped for ransom because they are successful businessmen, although most have fled or shut down their operations in Mosul since 2003.

In one case last month, the assembly reported that Dawood Qoryaqos Hermis Farfash, a father of five, was carjacked and abducted in Mosul's al-Tahreer district. Earlier this year, Dawood was kidnapped in the same area and released after his family paid a ransom of 3.5 million Iraqi dinars, or about 2,800 dollars.

The frequent attacks on churches and clergy have kept many away from services. Mosul used to have 23 churches, but many are no longer open and Christians often opt to practice their faith in secret, according to the human rights advocate.

"Life was better under Saddam," said a 35-year-old Christian businessman in Mosul who asked not to be named because he feared retaliation by militant groups. "I used to go out socially and was well-respected, but not any more. In the past, there was law and order, but now nothing stops the extremists or criminals."

This man, a lifelong Mosul resident, lives in a neighbourhood where Christians are in a minority, and says most of his friends are Muslims. His brother left Mosul after his child was kidnapped and he himself was threatened earlier this year.

Mosul's long history of religious and ethnic coexistence has not, however, disappeared because of the violence.

"I and many of my friends and colleagues hurt just as much when a Christian is murdered as when a Muslim is killed," said Salim Abdul-Wahad, a Muslim teacher in Mosul.

Kassab and the Christian rights advocate both said the security problems stem from a lack of government control over the province as a whole and Mosul in particular. Kassab said the province is so chaotic that it is often unclear who is attacking whom, or why. Christians may be specifically targeted by Islamic extremists, he said, but the perpetrators could also be criminal gangs or militias affiliated with political parties.

"Everyone is subject to violence," said Kassab. "[The security forces] can't function, they can't provide safety and security very well in general. So how are they going to safeguard a minority in the community?"

He said the security forces were "busy protecting themselves, protecting their establishments. It's hard to protect everyone in that area, and they don't have the resources, either".

Michael Youash, project director for the Washington-based Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, which advocates on

behalf of Iraqi religious minorities, says the United States has not done enough to defend minority rights in Iraq even though many of the smaller religious groups supported the US-led overthrow of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"America has shown with abundant clarity that it's not willing to lift a finger on this issue," he said.

Christians from Mosul and other parts of Iraq such as Baghdad have fled in droves to the Nineveh Plains, which many Assyrians consider their homeland. There are other minority groups Turkoman, Yazidis and Shabaks living in this area, which consists of the Tel Kaif, al-Hamdaniya and al-Shikhan districts to the southeast, east and north of Mosul. The area borders on the Dohuk and Erbil provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan.

"The Nineveh Plain is a bit of an oasis in terms of safety, and the main reason is because the communities really do know each other," said Youash. "Even with the new arrivals, they tend to know each other."

The number of internally displaced persons, or IDPs, seeking refuge in the Nineveh Plains rose to more than 10,000 families five months ago, including 1,000 from the Shabak community. Nineveh province has nearly 90,000 IDPs, the second-largest for any province in the country, according to a July report by the International Organisation for Migration.

The largely agrarian plains have remained fairly safe for Christians and other minorities. They are partially controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, which is dominant in Erbil and Dohuk.

Assyrians claim the Kurdish government and the KDP have discriminated against them, including confiscating land and disenfranchising Christian voters in the 2005 elections. The Kurdish government would like to incorporate much of the Nineveh Plain into its area of rule, but many residents want to create a special administrative area of their own there.

"There isn't necessarily a special solution for Christians, because any solution needs to address all political, security and economic concerns through Iraq," said the human rights activist. "But Christians want their own autonomous region with the Shabak and the Yazidis in the Nineveh Plains."

Youash agreed, saying, "This is what's needed to save these people."

Advocates for a special territory run by minorities on the Nineveh Plains cite the Iraqi constitution, which guarantees administrative rights for minorities such as Turkoman, Chaldeans and Assyrians.

If momentum gains for a minority-run area in Nineveh, it will probably be fiercely opposed by the Kurds and perhaps other political groups.

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Still, Youash and other Assyrian advocates are lobbying for US support for the plan and more support for the plains region. The over 82,000 Assyrians living in the US have formed a formidable lobby.

The US Senate is currently considering a bill that would give 10 million dollars in aid to help religious minorities in the Nineveh Plains. It has already passed in the House of Representatives.

Unless they have security backed up by strong governance, the Christians of Nineveh fear they will disappear altogether.

"Most of us have fled abroad, and this is a serious concern," said Mosul resident Afram Abdul-Ahad, who lost his small restaurant and some family members because of targeted

violence against Christians. "We're worried about the future of Christians in Iraq."

IWPR correspondent Sahar al-Haideri was murdered in Mosul, her home city, in June. IWPR Middle East editor Tiare Rath and an IWPR correspondent who did not want to be identified contributed additional material to this report.



KIRKUK TENSIONS RISE AS FATEFUL BALLOT NEARS

Looming referendum to decide Kirkuk's future fuels sectarian violence in this mixed city.

BY IWPR REPORTERS IN KIRKUK

Sectarian conflict in oil-rich Kirkuk has increased as Kurds, Arabs and Turkoman vie for control of the city and its resources ahead of a referendum to decide whether it should become part of the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Iraq.

Residents of Kirkuk nicknamed "Little Iraq" because nearly all of the nation's ethnicities and religions are represented here say they are being targeted by rival sectarian political groups.

The intimidation and violence is such that Sunni and Shia Arabs do not dare to go to Kurdish neighbourhoods; Kurds avoid Arabs; and Turkoman and Christians rarely move from their areas.

Kirkuk's major religious and ethnic groups blame one another for the violence that has increased ahead of the referendum, which will determine whether Kirkuk and some disputed territories close to Mosul will be governed by the Kurdish Regional Government, KRG, or the central authorities in Baghdad.

The constitution stipulates that the ballot should be held by the end of this year.

Representatives of some ethnic minority groups say they are being marginalised by Kurdish-led local authorities and are

ready to take up arms to prevent Kirkuk becoming part of the Kurdish region.

Turkoman officials say several businessmen from their community have been killed, abducted and blackmailed by Arab extremists. Kurds, and particularly Kurdish parties, are regularly attacked by the militants, while Arabs claim to be threatened by what they say is a repressive Kurdish regime that controls much of the northern province.

Many are calling for the referendum to be postponed to avoid sparking further conflict.

Kirkuk has not always been so diverse. It used to be predominantly Kurdish and Turkoman, and also had smaller Arab and Assyrian Christian communities. But in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein engineered a major demographic change when he forced thousands from the two main communities to leave the city and replaced them with Sunni and Shia Arabs.

Today, Kurds hold 26 of the 41 seats on the Kirkuk provincial council, while Turkoman have nine and Arabs six.

Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, approved in 2005, makes provision for the so-called "normalisation" of Kirkuk. This calls for Arabs settled under Saddam to return to their home provinces, while Kurds and Turkoman who were expelled are to be allowed to come back.

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Kurds are now returning to the city en masse to reclaim their properties as part of a repatriation programme, which is overseen by a committee comprising representatives of the central government, the KRG, Kurdish parties, Arabs and Turkoman.

But normalisation has not really taken place as intended, creating divisions, as the political graffiti on the walls of Kirkuk demonstrate. The slogans “Kirkuk is Turkish forever”, “Kirkuk is Kurdistan’s Jerusalem” and “Kirkuk is for all Iraqis” are plastered on party offices across the city.

The divisions reflect the ongoing struggle for Kirkuk’s identity. Tensions have increased since the fall of Saddam’s regime in 2003, with minority groups claiming that Kurds are determined to control Kirkuk, which they claim is historically a Kurdish province.

Arabs and some Turkoman are opposed to a Kurdish takeover. Many also object to the way in which the normalisation process is being implemented.

They claim the Kurdish authorities are offering financial incentives for Kurds to return to Kirkuk, bolstering their numbers and possibly ensuring Kurdish control of the city in the referendum.

In the spring, the government agreed to give Arab settlers about 15,000 US dollars plus a plot of land in their places of origin if they returned voluntarily.

If, as a result of the referendum, the province is incorporated into Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a very real danger of full-scale violence breaking out here.

“The implementation of Article 140 may escalate violence in the area, and it will result in plunging Kirkuk’s residents in particular and Iraq in general into a new river of blood,” a statement by Sunni and Shia Arab tribes warned earlier this year.

Independent observers confirm Kurdish claims that it is Arab extremists who are mainly responsible for the ongoing violence such as bombings and attacks that primarily target civilian and Kurdish institutions.

Sunni Arabs in the Iraqi cabinet oppose Kurdish control of Kirkuk, as does neighbouring Turkey, which regards itself as the guardian of Iraq’s Turkoman minority and is hostile towards the KRG.

While Shia Arabs and Kurdish groups are allies in Baghdad, Shia parties fear a political backlash from their own followers if they are seen to be handing over Kirkuk, believed to have 60 per cent of the country’s oil reserves, to the Kurds.

Kakarash Siddiq, director of the Kirkuk office of the Article 140 committee, said that few Arabs have applied to return to their provinces of origin. He believes Sunni extremists have warned Arab settlers not to leave the city.

Arabs are in an unenviable position, as they face intimidation from extremists among them and are have been targeted, along with Turkoman, by Kurdish security forces, whom they accuse of physical abuse and illegal detentions.

In 2005, The Washington Post reported that Kurdish police and security units had kidnapped hundreds of Arabs and Turkoman as part of a “concerted and widespread initiative” by the two leading Kurdish parties “to exercise authority in Kirkuk in an increasingly provocative manner”.

Khalid Awad, a 53-year-old Sunni Arab resident of the Huzeyran neighbourhood, said that innocent Arabs are being arrested by Kurdish officers.

”I can’t move around freely during the day, and at night when I’m at home I fear raids by Kurdish security forces,” he said. ”They arrest people and hold them for a couple of months in prisons in [Iraqi] Kurdistan.”

But Kurds have similar fears themselves. In the Kurdish neighbourhood of Rahimawa, north of Kirkuk, Sama Jawhar, a 32-year-old Kurd, says he rarely goes to Arab majority neighbourhoods. “I am afraid of abduction by Arab militants,” he said.

Representatives of the Arab Advisory Council, a Sunni Arab association in Kirkuk, say that if the Iraqi government does not curb Kurdish domination and the detention of Arabs in Kirkuk, “we will begin detaining and abducting Kurds”.

Abdul-Rahman Munshid al-Assi, the head of the council, said that when the Americans leave, Arabs will fight to ensure that Kirkuk is not incorporated into the Kurdish region.

“We know [the Kurds] are strong economically and have a militia, but we won’t surrender. We will defend Kirkuk, and clashes can be expected the moment that the Americans withdraw,” he said.

Assi said that while he welcomed Kurds returning to Kirkuk, he opposed them doing so simply to drive up their numbers. He says he was also against the removal of Arabs, insisting Kirkuk is a city for all Iraqis.

Rebwar Talabani, a Kurdish representative in the Kirkuk provincial council, dismissed Assi’s threats as “useless, fiery statements”, warning that the Kurds would resort to violence if the normalisation process is obstructed.

”Kurdish properties were confiscated by Arabs for years. [Kurds] are waiting for justice and the rule of law, and if they don’t get it they will resort to arms,” he said.

Some Turkoman parties have now allied with the Kurdish parties, which have pledged to guarantee their rights if the Kurds take control of Kirkuk.

Other parties, such as the prominent Turkish-funded Turkoman Front, back the Arabs against the Kurds. Ali

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Mahdi, head of Turkoman committee in the provincial council, said his ethnic group forms part of the wider Turkish nation.

"If the Kurds force Kirkuk to join [Iraqi] Kurdistan by force, I am the first one ready to fight," he said.

He asserts that not all the Kurds who have moved to Kirkuk since the fall of Saddam are originally from the city. "The Kurdish parties give money to any Kurd who is ready to go back to Kirkuk to ensure that Kirkuk is Kurdish," he said.

But Foud Masoum, the head of the Kurdish bloc in the Iraqi parliament, denies these allegations.

"No Kurdish families, Iraqi or non-Iraqi, who don't originate from Kirkuk have been settled in Kirkuk," he said. "I challenge any party to present the name of a single person brought in from outside Kirkuk who was not originally from Kirkuk."

To vote in the referendum, residents must show documents proving they are originally from Kirkuk.

Masoum said that many former residents of Kirkuk are reluctant to return. "We face a problem of Turkoman and Kurds from Kirkuk, who are currently living in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah and refuse to return to Kirkuk because of the security situation. They are demanding financial incentives to return to their homes," he said.

Some accuse the Kurds of trying to gain complete control of the area at all cost.

Mahdi compares the Kurds to the Baath party, accusing them of trying to assume absolute power, and suggests the US military is sympathetic towards their goals. "The American troops and consul [in Kirkuk] take a lenient view of the Kurdish attitude to Kirkuk," he said.

While he insisted that Turkoman support the constitution, he proposes that the referendum should be postponed for a couple of years and Kirkuk be made a federal province under the United Nations in order to prevent Kurdish domination.

The Iraqi army, in cooperation with US-led multinational troops, has already prepared a security plan for Kirkuk for the referendum period, said General Anwar Hama Amin, Kurdish commander of the Iraqi army in Kirkuk.

"We will stand against any violent acts by any ethnic group," he said.

It remains unclear whether a plebiscite will be held by the end of 2007.

Shia parties, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's loyalists and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, as well as leading Sunni Arab parties in Baghdad, are against staging the ballot by the deadline, fearing that it will deliver the province into Kurdish control.

The US Iraq Study Group, meanwhile, recommends that it be postponed for a year, warning that it could spark violence in the province. Turkey too has called for it to be put back, drawing the ire of Kurdish officials.

In March, the Iraqi newspaper Azzaman reported that the referendum would be delayed beyond 2007, following an agreement between Turkey and Iraq during a visit to Ankara by Iraqi vice-president Adel Abdul Mahdi.

But Bahruz Galali, a representative of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, said in an interview that it would go ahead as planned. "We're not thinking about postponing it," he said.

Meanwhile, as the parties squabble amongst themselves, Kirkuk residents feel increasingly vulnerable.

"Party and government officials are creating a tense security situation in the province," said Abdul-Hadi Awwad, a 46-year-old Sunni Arab.

"Arabs, Kurds, Turkoman and Christians in Kirkuk have lived together for ages, but party and government leaders are breaking their unity."

Although Sabah Ali, a 32-year-old Kurd, insists that party rivalry has not succeeded in dividing the population.

On July 16, following a horrific car bombing, hundreds of Kirkuk residents flooded into hospitals to donate blood after urgent requests for donations were broadcast via loudspeakers.

"I donated blood to a Turkoman injured in the explosion without thinking about his ethnicity or religion," said Ali. "In the end, he is my compatriot and a human being."



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IRAQI KURDISTAN FACES TROUBLE ON TWO FRONTS

The Turkish army makes warlike noises while Sunni extremists stage hit-and-run raids along the border with Iran.

BY FAZIL NAJEEB, MARIWAN HAMA-SAEED AND CHRISTOPH REUTER

While sectarian violence and extremist acts dominate daily life in many areas of Iraq, the Kurdish Region enjoys relative stability and safety but threats loom from the north and south.

The three Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah are much more stable than the rest of Iraq. Bomb attacks are rare—the last one occurred on May 9 in front of the ministry of interior in Erbil, killing 14 people. There are very few cases of kidnappings and no internecine killings or ethnic cleansing.

In many respects, the Kurdish Regional Government, KRG, has managed to establish de facto autonomy, which is questioned less and less by other political groups in Iraq although the apparent plan to expand the Kurdish area to include Kirkuk and disputed areas around Kirkuk, Mosul, Mandali and Sinjar remains controversial.

One of the main reasons for the relative peace here is the tight control exerted over the region by the Asayish, the Kurdish security services.

For instance, Arabs fleeing the violence in the south are searched prior to entering the Kurdish Region, to ensure there are no insurgents amongst them. And only once they have passed other security checks can they be registered.

But Arab extremists seeking to smuggle themselves into Iraqi Kurdistan pose less of a threat than militants based across the border in Iran, who are blamed for bomb attacks in the region.

An Asayish officer told IWPR that “elements within the Tehran regime” sponsor cross-border raids by Sunni extremists and supply them with weapons.

These extremists are often referred to as members of Ansar al-Islam, a radical group linked to al-Qaeda which was active in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan for a number of years. Its followers were either wiped out or dispersed by the American military in 2003, but the name is still commonly used as a tag for Sunni militants.

The Asayish source says that although there are many facts pointing to Iranian support for the militants, this is rarely raised in public in case it jeopardise relations between the KRG and Tehran.

“Asayish knows of many cases of Iran helping the [the extremists], but doesn’t talk about it because it might compromise ties between the KRG and the Iranian government,” he said. “[Kurdish officials] don’t accuse Iran directly for political and economic reasons.”

The militants have attacked Kurdish members of the Iraqi army along the Iranian border east of Sulaimaniyah.

But the head of the army’s border guard force in Sulaimaniyah province, Ahmad Dskarayy, insists there is no evidence to suggest that Tehran is helping the infiltrators.

Dskarayy complains that the 500 border guards he has at his disposal are not enough to keep the extremists at bay. “We have told the Iraqi government that we need 2,000 more, but they have not responded,” he said.

Ismat Argooshy, head of Kurdish security forces in the area, admits that extremists are penetrating the frontier. “There is no country in the world whose borders have not been violated by smugglers. Kurdistan has the same issues and along with the smugglers, terrorists also come in,” he told IWPR.

Complicating matters, says IWPR’s Asayish source, is that some border guards are bribed by the militants to turn a blind eye when they lay a roadside bomb. The troops may even stage incidents themselves, he said, in order to make the government aware of the risks they face and lobby for higher pay.

But by far the biggest danger the Kurdistan Region is facing comes from Turkey. The Turkish chief of staff, General Yasar Buyukanit, has threatened several times to invade Kurdistan, not only to destroy the Kurdish Workers Party or PKK which has resumed its attacks on Turkish forces from its mountain bases in Iraqi Kurdistan—but also to prevent the KRG from taking over Kirkuk.

In the last few months, the Turkish army has shelled Iraqi northern border areas in all three Kurdish provinces. Dohuk and Erbil provinces have borders with Iran and Turkey, and Sulaimaniyah is within range of Turkish artillery. Some residents of villages in these areas have fled and there have been reports of casualties.

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There appears to be no solution on the horizon. The KRG has shown no will to confront the PKK. And although US officials have repeatedly promised Ankara that it will tackle the Kurdish rebels, they seem to have turned a blind eye to their activities, as the American military has been preoccupied with the dire security situation elsewhere in Iraq.

While the Turkish authorities have so far held off from intervening in Iraqi Kurdistan, the threat has not gone away. There are already several thousand Turkish troops in the border region, deployed there following an accord between Ankara and Saddam Hussein's regime under which Iraqi and Turkish troops were allowed to move a few kilometres into each other's territory to hunt down rebels.

The Turkish troops are based close to Dohuk province and in a triangular area between Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister, who is a Kurd, told a press conference on July 9 that Turkey has deployed 144,000 troops along the frontier.

To reduce the risk of a direct confrontation with its NATO ally, America has pulled its troops out of Iraqi Kurdistan a decision made following a meeting between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul on May 27, where a possible outbreak of Turkish-Kurdish hostilities was discussed.

On May 30, US commanders and Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, signed an accord transferring security responsibility for the region from Coalition forces to the Kurdish Peshmerga. American troops were hurriedly pulled out of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah, but remain in force in and around Kirkuk.

While Iraqi Kurdistan faces threats from Turkey and Iran, it is itself accused of provocative actions and abuses in disputed areas outside the region. These are nominally controlled by the Iraqi federal government, but militarily in the hands of Kurdish militias.

The major disputed area is Kirkuk, but there are other contested districts such as Shingar in Ninewa province, Khanaqeen in Diyala and Tuz Khurmatu in Salahaddin province. These disputes are a consequence of the Saddam government's manipulation of administrative boundaries in the north with a view to curbing Kurdish territorial ambitions and reducing the number of ethnic Kurds and Turkomen in Kirkuk.

Some minorities living in the disputed areas, such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Yezidi and Shabak, who are often targeted by Arab extremists, also complain of harassment and persecution by Kurdish security personnel.

"They are intimidating us because they want to take our land by force," said Hunein Kaddo, a member of parliament from the Shabak minority, who speak Kurdish but regard

themselves as a distinct group. "The Arabs want to kill us, and the Kurds feel free to oppress us as well."

The Kurdish security forces are accused of singling out those living in the disputed areas who oppose apparent Kurdish annexation plans.

A report by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, published in July 2007, is heavily critical of the way the Kurdish military deal with people they detain.

Human Rights Watch found that in the vast majority of cases, those held by Asayish were not charged, granted access to lawyers nor brought before an investigative judge. The report said there was no method by which prisoners could appeal their detention or be brought to trial within a reasonable period of time.

The human rights group found several cases where detainees remained in behind bars after being acquitted of serious offences or completing their sentences. Most had no knowledge of their legal status, how long they would continue to be held, or what was to become of them.

Detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch spoke of a wide range of abuses, including beatings with cables, hosepipes, wooden sticks and metal rods. They also described how Asayish officers put them in stress positions for prolonged periods, and kept them blindfolded and handcuffed continuously for several days at a time.

The vast majority of detainees to whom Human Rights Watch spoke also reported that they were held in solitary confinement for extended periods.

Asayish rejected the findings of the report, claiming the accusations had no foundation.

In the latest incident blamed on Kurdish security forces, an Assyrian farmer, Fadi Nazar Jarjis Habash, was reportedly shot and killed while riding his tractor.

Eyewitnesses said he pulled his vehicle over when a Peshmerga unit of the Iraqi army approached, but they opened fire as they passed, killing Habash. "These KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party] Peshmerga make a mockery of the Iraqi army," said one eyewitness. "Their uniform is that of the Iraqi army but the badge on their lapels is that of Kurdistan."

Although they were on an Iraqi army mission when the incident occurred, the assailants joined a KDP delegation which visited the victim's family to express their condolences.

Fazil Najeeb and Mariwan Hama-Saeed are IWPR contributors. Christoph Reuter is an IWPR trainer.



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SECURITY EFFORTS FOUNDER

Rule of law ranges from the inadequate to the non-existent.

COMMENT BY CHRISTOPH REUTER AND SUSANNE FISCHER

Despite the recent substantial reinforcement of British and American forces in Basra and central Iraq respectively, security in the country only temporarily improved, and the gruesome daily litany of suicide bombings, mortar attacks, targeted killings and ethnic cleansing continues.

In July, at least 1,759 Iraqis were reported killed, a more than seven per cent increase over the 1,640 who are said to have died in June, according to estimates by the Associated Press.

Among the dead were civilians, government officials and members of the Iraqi security forces. The figures are considered only a minimum, and the actual number is thought to be higher with many killings going unreported.

Coalition forces are barely able to prevent the emergence of autonomous zones openly controlled by militias. The ongoing sectarian violence has created an extremely threatening climate. People feel they may be kidnapped or killed at any moment.

The security disaster is having a devastating effect on civilians, reconstruction efforts and economic activity. One out of three Iraqis is in need of emergency aid, according to a recent report by Oxfam.

A full-scale civil war looms. For the time being, United States forces are too strong to let this happen, yet they are too weak to prevent the daily killings. Or as a former member of the US administration in Baghdad put it, "We can only slow down the escalation. But we cannot prevent it, nor can we bring peace."

The Iraqi security forces, seen by the US government and many external observers as the key to pacifying the country and guaranteeing order, are seen by large parts of the population as part of the problem. A number of army units appear to be controlled by Shia parties and are believed to be deeply involved in the sectarian violence.

Many Iraqis feel that there is no such thing as an independent, non-sectarian government acting for the benefit of the whole country.

At the end of July, the Accord Front, the largest Sunni Arab bloc in central government, announced the resignation of its six ministers. One of the reasons given for the withdrawal was the

failure of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to respond to a Sunni request to include all groups represented in the government in a concerted attempt to tackle the deteriorating security situation.

"The government is continuing with its arrogance, it is refusing to change its stance and has slammed shut the door to the meaningful reforms needed to save Iraq," said Rafaa al-Issawi, a leading member of the Accord Front.

Apart from three calm northern provinces under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government, the situation now is as volatile as it ever has been in the last few years. Internecine fighting and ethnic cleansing campaigns continue in central Iraq, while Shia militias battle for power and resources in the south.

The reports by IWPR journalists in six key regions show that the rule of law ranges from being woefully inadequate to effectively non-existent.

The arm of the law is not long at all in Iraq. The government in Baghdad has little or no influence on security in Mosul, Basra and Karbala, three of the most troubled cities.

Mosul, which was represented through 2003 and the first half of 2004 as a model for Coalition-assisted reconstruction efforts, has turned into a battleground as horrific as Baghdad. As our story about the persecution of Christians reveals, minorities cannot hope for any protection or support from central or regional government. They are on their own, and many see no remedy but to run for their lives and flee the country.

Our story about Shia infighting in Basra gives some insight into the power dynamic in this important southern city. Several local forces vie for control, but at the same time try to maintain some stability so as not to undermine oil production and public investment from which they all profit through smuggling, corruption and looting.

Nominally, Basra is controlled by British forces, but they have never been able to stop the rise of the militias. Instead, they saw the very forces they trained and equipped turn into criminal gangs, using police facilities as torture centres and kidnapping and killing their opponents.

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The rivalry that fuels Shia militia violence in Basra and other southern regional centres such as Amara and Diwaniyah is often evident in central government, with Shia politicians unable to reach compromise amongst themselves on sensitive issues, let alone with their Sunni coalition partners and opposition groups.

IWPR's story from Kirkuk, an ethnically diverse and oil-rich city in the north, shows how residents are being persecuted as rival political groups compete for supremacy. The people interviewed said implementation of a repatriation process has fuelled ethnic conflict, and this has worsened ahead of an upcoming referendum to decide whether the province should be governed by the Kurdish Regional Government or the central Iraqi authorities.

Even in the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, nominally under the control of the traditional Shia clerical hierarchy, anarchy has led to the emergence of self-appointed ayatollahs such as Sayyid Mahmud Hassani al-Sarkhi, who features in another story in this report. These clerics, who are not accepted by the Shia religious establishment, use their militias to acquire influence.

Our story about checkpoints in Baghdad illustrates the schizophrenic approach adopted by civilians negotiating their way through the innumerable controls in the city. They have to decide within seconds whether to identify themselves as Sunni or Shia, as picking the wrong identity could mean summary execution.

It remains to be seen whether the country will break up along sectarian lines or whether it can somehow be reunited. It is certainly doubtful whether Kurdistan could be reintegrated into a centralised state.

Meanwhile, more than four million people, including a high proportion of the technical, political, cultural elite, have either left the country or fled to more secure areas zones in Iraqi Kurdistan and the south.

This brain drain will make it even more difficult to build up strong institutions, the rule of law and good governance in Iraq.

Christoph Reuter is an IWPR trainer. Susanne Fischer is the IWPR Middle East Programme Manager and has been working in Iraq since fall 2003.





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-Shahbander: 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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