

# IRIN

## *Worrying signs for Iraq's stability as USA pulls out, 23rd December 2011*

Every day, the bleak concrete blast walls circling Baghdad's northern neighbourhood of Adhamiya trigger flashbacks in the mind of Sahib Awad Maarouf of the violence which plagued Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion.

"It annoys me and others to see them every day," said Maarouf, a 69-year-old Sunni construction engineer. "They serve as a reminder of the US occupation, the violence we witnessed over the past years and a source of worry for our future," he said.

As US troops withdraw from Iraq, capping a nearly nine-year war, the future of the battered nation has been thrown into doubt by fears that Iraqis are still not ready to handle their future alone.

The stakes are high in a country with more than 1.2 million internally displaced people and another 177,000 Iraqis registered as refugees in neighbouring countries – a symbol of the lingering humanitarian dimension of the conflict.

More than 20 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line. An estimated 2.1 million Iraqis are undernourished: on average, they spend more than one third of their total expenditures on food, and nearly three quarters of the population depend on a public distribution system as their primary source for wheat flour. The vast majority of the population does not have electricity 24 hours a day; and access to clean water is still limited in rural areas.

In 2009 there were about 140,000 US troops in the country. Today there are only 200 - to train Iraqi security forces and protect US diplomats.

In 2007, Maarouf, a father of four, was abducted by Sunni militants belonging to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a group which controlled many of the Sunni areas at the height of the insurgency. He was freed after about 24 hours when he paid a US\$80,000 ransom.

His son was shot in his left leg by thieves who tried to steal the money he withdrew from the bank for the ransom.

Yet, he still sees these blast walls - many erected to prevent Shia and Sunni militants from attacking each others' neighbourhoods - as a "heavy" legacy of the war weighing on Iraqis' hearts.

A resurgence of sectarianism?

Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime in 2003, Iraq's two main Muslim sects, Shias and Sunnis, have been at loggerheads. Iraq's majority Shia community has dominated political life in Iraq, leaving many Sunnis feeling marginalized.

Violence between members of the two sects killed tens of thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands more, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. The tit-for-tat killings stopped in late 2007, only after US forces pushed tens of thousands of their troops into the streets with Iraqi forces to chase down militants.

On 19 December, one day after the last US troops withdrew, sectarian tension rose when Iraq's Shia-led government issued an arrest warrant for the country's Sunni Vice President, Tariq Al-Hashimi, over "terrorism" charges described by some Sunnis as politically motivated. The arrest warrant followed a round-up of hundreds of former Baathists amid concern they would try to regain power after the departure of US troops.

The Sunni minority has accused Shia political factions - mainly the prime minister's Dawa Party - of trying to remove all their political rivals to gain absolute power over the political process.

"The government has spoiled our joy over the troops' withdrawal," said Sunni businessman Laith Younis from the northern province of Ninevah. "The timing means the consequences of the withdrawal will be grave," the 34-year old father of three added.

#### Incapable security forces

Despite a sharp decrease in violence since the height of sectarian warfare from 2006 to 2007, Iraq is still fragile, and has not resolved many politically explosive issues that could lead to renewed fighting.

There are persistent fears that Iraqi security forces are still not capable of handling the security challenges on their own. That could lead to a resurgence of Sunni militant groups, mainly Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has suffered major blows since 2007 because of the US presence.

On the flip side, the top US General in Iraq, Lloyd Austin, has warned that Shia militias, namely the followers of firebrand cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, will seek to climb the stage again by trying to create "a government within a government", similar to Lebanon's powerful and Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement.

In a sign that more violence may be in the offing, militants have upped their attacks against civilians and military attacks since 24 November, claiming the lives of at least 56 people and injuring dozens of others.

The most brazen attack came on 28 November when a suicide car bomber managed to enter Baghdad's fortified Green Zone, which houses the parliament, key government offices and foreign embassies and is supposed to be one of the country's most secured areas.

"I have fears inside me mainly over the training and arming of our security forces," said Saied Jassim Moussa, 54, a Shia who heads the Baghdad-based Peoples' Institution for Democracy Culture.

"Politicians should distance themselves from security so that security forces can work independently," Moussa added. "I believe that Iraq's main problem is with the politicians and their struggle for power."

Iraqi officials have acknowledged that shortcomings still exist in terms of protecting their skies and borders, and mostly important in intelligence gathering.

Lt-Gen Babakir Zebari, the Ministry of Defence's chief of staff, told the Special Inspector-General for Iraq Reconstruction that his military will not be ready to fully provide for its external defence until 2020 to 2024.

Fawzia Al-Attia, a professor of sociology at the University of Baghdad, said the US administration should have prepared the stage for this day.

"Until now, security is absent. Citizens still suffer from bad security and stumbling economy, industry and agriculture," Al-Attia added. "The US should have found ways to give a bright picture for their support after toppling the previous regime to rebuild this society," she said.

### Ethnic tension

The country faces another threat in the north, where ethnic Kurds want to annex territory to their northern self-ruled region. Former President Saddam Hussein had tried to play with the demographics of several provinces in the area to make Arabs the majority. A plan to redraw the borders was adopted after the US invasion, but a referendum for the people in these disputed areas - due to take place in 2007 - never happened. On some occasions, Kurds took over some of these areas by moving in their troops and only withdrew after US military mediation.

Kurdish Kirkuk resident Ibrahim Salam Raheem said the US forces should have solved the issue of the disputed territories before their withdrawal.

"They didn't do anything in this regard and they just left the issue as it is. The conflict between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen will be increased," the 35-year old employee in the Oil Ministry's Oil Products Distribution Directory said. "The situation is getting worse day by day and it will be disastrous in the future."

Also on the table is the expected meddling in Iraq's internal affairs by its neighbours.

Iraq's Sunni community and the USA accuse Shia Iran of training and financing Shia militias and securing their interests in the region through Shia politicians harboured in Iran during the Saddam era. Meanwhile, Shias accuse Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey of supporting Sunni militants and financing Sunni political parties.

Some senior Iraqi politicians, including the parliament speaker Osama Al-Nijaifi, have worried outside meddling could rise in post-pullout Iraq. "Iraq now suffers from weakness points and whenever neighbouring countries see that Iraq is weak and can't protect its borders and internal security they will interfere more," he told a press conference in October.

"It is our future"

Still, many Iraqis acknowledge that the US withdrawal had to come sooner or later.

"If you want to learn how to swim you have to get into the swimming pool by yourself - not only take lessons outside it," said Jamal Tawfiq, a 44-year old father of three from Baghdad.

"Keeping US troops more years in Iraq means complicating our problems more and more," he said. "It is our future and we have to build it."

"It is an exam for Iraqis and it could be a tough one," added Ameer Hassan Al-Fayadh who lectures in politics at the University of Baghdad.

"The best way to deal with [the post-withdrawal challenges] is for influential political groups to set their differences aside and work together."