

Bombs and politics in Iraq**No end in sight**

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Another "spectacular" raises doubts about American troop withdrawals

TWO car bombs that exploded on October 25th in the centre of Baghdad claimed the lives of at least 155 people and injured more than 700. The main targets were the Ministry of Justice and the office of the governor of Baghdad province. Almost simultaneously the explosions blew windows and their frames several hundred metres along Haifa Street, near the fortified Green Zone. Burst water mains flooded parts of the area, washing over charred bodies and through burned cars. This was the second such attack in two months and the bloodiest in two years. On August 19th bombs destroyed several government buildings, including the ministries of finance and foreign affairs, killing about 100 people.

Since then, a new sense of crisis has enveloped the Iraqi capital. The overall number of attacks has decreased in the past year, but spectacular assaults are on the rise. This is affecting politics. Elections are due in January and security is now a big issue. Within hours of the bombings, some politicians were pointing fingers. "Voters know these are manipulations by the Saddamists," says Ammar al-Hakim, the new leader of the largest Shia party. Many other Iraqis blame the same Sunni insurgents, including al-Qaeda and members of Saddam Hussein's former regime. On October 27th a group calling itself Islamic State in Iraq, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda in Iraq, claimed responsibility for the bombings, saying it had attacked "dens of infidelity" in the capital.

These big attacks undermine more than just stable government. Few foreign aid organisations have set up in Iraq so far and the United Nations is expanding its operations very cautiously. This week's gory pictures will hardly encourage them. The same goes for businessmen who went to last week's Iraq investment conference in Washington, DC, attended also by the prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki. A further casualty of the bombings are Iraq's neighbourly relations. Desperate to find culprits, Iraqis accuse Syria and Iran of complicity. They may share some blame, but the hysterical barbs of some politicians will make future co-operation difficult. Iraq will still need trading partners after the elections.

The latest bombings come at a fragile time in the pre-election timetable. As *The Economist* went to press, members of parliament were trying—and failing—to agree on a new election law, raising the prospect of a delay in the poll. If so, Mr Maliki would rule next year as a caretaker, creating more uncertainty. At the same time, the American army is continuing with plans to pull out. It hopes to withdraw 70,000 soldiers by August 2010, leaving a force of only 50,000 for another year. But doubts about the wisdom of this timetable are rising. Why not make sure peace works first?

After all, America's presence, now mostly hidden on bases outside the urban areas, is no longer antagonising Iraqis as it once did. This week's attacks were not against "infidel occupiers"; violence is increasingly a local affair. Iraqis are having to accept that bombings and assassinations may be with them for a long time, even if an all-out civil war can be avoided.

The sites of the latest attacks were symbolic. Haifa Street was in the hands of insurgents three years ago. American and Iraqi troops fought pitched battles to retake it in what turned out to be the start of the "surge" that eventually helped to improve security in much of Iraq. Before its residents could return, bodies were stacked up

like bales of hay along the tree-lined street. Now the cycle repeats itself, and maybe not for the last time.

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