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Iraq mustn't be cowed by bombings

Yesterday's attacks damage Maliki's record on security, but in the elections runup, terrorists can't be allowed to set the agenda

At least 110 people were killed and hundreds more injured yesterday when five near-simultaneous bombs struck Baghdad. In typical fashion for a country of painful ironies, yesterday's attacks came in the aftermath of the Iraqi parliament's passing of a long-debated election law. With elections set to take place in March, few should have been surprised that Sunni extremists struck once again in an attempt to hurt the country's Shia-dominated government.

What is significant is that Arab Iraq's security problem reflects its political problems and also the geopolitical realities. There is, among Iraq's neighbours, no enthusiasm for a stable and democratic Iraq – Iraq still remains at the mercy of the intentions of its neighbours, who continue to be complicit in facilitating attacks in the country. Iraq, one could say, has become a contaminated cocktail of regional neighbours' ideological and geo-strategic aspirations; a battleground between the Sunni Arab world and Shia Iran. The equivalence of a turf war between the country's political and ethno-sectarian groups does not help.

Political reconciliation at the top, and resolution of outstanding territorial and constitutional disputes can help to remedy all this but only when Iraqi politics truly starts to cross ethnic and sectarian boundaries.

At yesterday's Iraq Petroleum conference in London, where investors and officials outlined the future of Iraqi oil, the underlying theme was one of understanding and perspective; understanding, that is, of Iraqi energy, politics, and security, which is lacking among foreigners as well as Iraqis.

Many will, therefore, be quick to attribute blame for yesterday's atrocities to Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and his government; he is, or was hoping to, run on a security platform. Indeed, the buck does stop with the prime minister, but these bombings began long before Maliki came to power and are likely to go on after him.

Observers may also suggest the bombings can be attributed to Maliki's failure to incorporate Sons of Iraq fighters – who were essential in the fight against al-Qaida – into public sector jobs. Granted, by isolating these Sunnis you add yet another element of uncertainty into the pre-election environment. But the state is unable to handle the huge demand for public sector jobs, especially since it has such a weak private sector.

There is also something abhorrent, and wrong in principle, with determining the future of these members around a "pay me or else" basis. That fails to send the right message to others in Iraq who share the same, sometimes worse, problems and concerns.

Perspective also dictates that we bear in mind the fact that attacks in Iraq are in an overall decline; that despite the sinister intentions of domestic and external actors, the terrorists, as one security expert mentioned at yesterday's conference, no longer strike at will but at chance; and, finally, that the Iraqi people continue to remain as resilient as ever.

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