

Amara unrest strains plans for unified Iraq

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A radical Iraqi militia group stormed police stations in a bid to take over the southern provincial capital of Amara on Friday, in a move that threatens to set back British plans to hand over control of the area to local security forces.

Fighters from the Mahdi Army, a movement that is nominally loyal to the Shia radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, seized and demolished three police stations, news agencies quoted witnesses and police as saying. Others patrolled the streets and commandeered police vehicles or set up checkpoints on the outskirts of town. At least 15 people were reported killed. The fighting, which appears to be a feud between rival Shia factions, comes amid US attempts to force the government of prime minister Nouri al-Maliki to clamp down on militia activity. Complicating the situation is the fact that a number of seats in Mr Maliki's Shia-led coalition are occupied by politicians loyal to Mr Sadr.

The Iraqi government dispatched an emergency delegation to Amara, a town of 75,000 people, headed by Shirwan al-Waily, minister of state for national security, and also reinforced army units in the region.

"We're still studying the situation [in Amara] and trying to figure out exactly what's going on," Tony Snow, White House spokesman, said.

Rival groups reportedly clash frequently in Maysan, the lawless province of which Amara is the capital, although Friday's fighting appeared to be far larger than any previous incident. According to wire reports, the fighting broke out after a high-ranking policeman affiliated with another militia, the Badr Brigade, was killed by a roadside bomb, and his family kidnapped the teenage brother of the Mahdi Army's local commander.

The fighters, however, reportedly withdrew from some of their positions after an envoy from Mr Sadr negotiated a temporary ceasefire.

The BBC reported that the British Ministry of Defence said UK troops in the area could intervene if the Iraqi government requested it.

The fighting threatens to disrupt British plans to complete the handover of the four Shia-majority provinces in their area of responsibility to local authorities. British and other coalition forces had already pulled out of two of the four provinces in their zone in June and September and withdrew from Amara in August.

A key criterion for full withdrawal would be the ability of local security forces to maintain control of the province themselves, without falling back on foreign troops or the Iraqi army.

Conflicts between Shia militias are also blamed for a surge of lawlessness in the first half of this year in the neighbouring governorate of Basra, the fourth province in the British zone.

The Mahdi Army is also blamed for much of the sectarian killing that has left thousands dead in Baghdad and central Iraq in recent months, although US officials say much of the militia has fractured into smaller cells that do not necessarily answer to Mr Sadr.

The Amara upheaval provides a further sign that the main ethnic and sectarian blocs are not only warring against each other but are fractured internally as well.

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