

Shia infighting in south threatens troop withdrawal

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Iraqi government officials and religious leaders moved over the weekend to broker a settlement in a dispute between rival Shia groups in the southern provincial capital of Amara. The town was overrun on Friday by fighters of the radical Mahdi Army militia.

They acted as violence continued across the country yesterday. A bomb killed nine people in a central Baghdad market as the holy month of Ramadan, which traditionally sees a surge in violence in Iraq, came to an end. At least nine people died in clashes between rival Shia and Sunni groups south of the capital and at least 15 police recruits were killed by gunmen in the Iraqi city of Baqouba.

Although the initial crisis in Amara appears to have eased, the fighting, which killed at least 24 people, does not bode well for hopes that southern provinces could be turned over from British to local control. It also threatens to revive a conflict between rival Shia groups which has proved violent in recent years.

The central government dispatched a security team to the southern province, while the interior minister Jawad al-Bolani on Saturday paid a visit to Moqtada al-Sadr, the radical Shia cleric to whom the Mahdi Army is nominally loyal. Mr Bolani praised Mr Sadr for "seeking to calm the situation" and indeed his intervention appears to have been a key factor in convincing Shia militiamen to stand down.

However, Mr Sadr's influence over his loose-limbed movement is increasingly in doubt. And while his personal prestige may be sufficient to compel his followers to back down from a single high-profile confrontation, it may not dissuade them from participating in smaller attacks in the future.

The fault line that erupted into violence on Friday in Amara - rivalry between local branches of the Mahdi Army and the other leading militia in the south, the Badr Organisation - runs through other southern towns such as Nasiriya and Basra. Large-scale fighting between Iraqi security and Sadrists had broken out in August in the neighbouring provincial capital of Diwaniya, prompting a crackdown by US forces earlier this month and a battle in which 30 militiamen were killed.

The Badr's parent organisation, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, has been more active in electoral politics than the Sadrists and has stronger representation on local councils and police forces.

The Sadrists have a powerful grassroots movement and have twice participated in big uprisings. Splinter groups have waged a long-running battle with British troops, possibly supported by branches of Iran's security forces.

The latest violence broke out when a Badr-affiliated police officer was killed by a roadside bomb and relatives of the local Mahdi Army commander were arrested.

Similar smaller-scale conflicts are likely to become more frequent after Friday's violence. The incident will probably complicate US-UK plans to withdraw troops, both from Maysan, the southern province of which Amara is the capital, and from the country as a whole.

Many Iraqis fear that withdrawal will lead not only to full-scale Sunni-Shia civil war but also to a Shia-on-Shia conflict.

The government's call for Mr Sadr to restrain his followers may increase its dependence on the radical cleric.

Washington has been pressing Nouri al-Maliki, the prime minister, to step up operations against Sadrist commanders accused of sectarian killings. But Mr Maliki, while allowing some raids, has blocked others.

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