

Diwaniya City Profile

14th December 2007

Quote

"Iraq: it is a cursed country with a cursed history," Iraqi businessman

Facts & figures

Location: Capital of Qadisiya province, 115 miles south of Baghdad

Population: 420,000 (2002 est.)

Ethnicity: Arab

Religion: Shi'a Islam



History

The ancient civilisations of the Sumerians and then the Akadians arose in southern Iraq around the area of Diwaniya from about 3,500 BC onwards. These civilisations were famous for writing, music, their gods, and for agriculture. Diwaniya is 20 miles to the east of the Euphrates, and a branch of the river runs through the city. The Baghdad-Basra railway also runs through the city.

The area is well irrigated by the Euphrates, making it highly fertile and highly cultivated with rice fields, vineyards, orchards and palm trees. The city has a market for grains and dates. The city centre is very poor with endless alleyways of small mud brick houses.

The uprising against British occupation started in Diwaniya in 1920. The failed 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein also started here, but was met with violent retribution against many Shi'ite men and boys.

Recent Violence

On 28th August 2006 fighting erupted in Diwaniya between the Iraqi army and Muqtada al-Sadr's Shi'ite militia after the arrest of a militia leader. By the time a ceasefire had been called the following morning 50 people had been killed, including 7 civilians. On 8-9th October 2006 there was a further battle between the militia and the Iraqi and U.S. armies. Between 20 to 30 members of the militia were killed.

During 2007 the majority of killings have been the result of gunfire against targeted individuals, such as policemen, former Baath party officials, city officials and Iraqis working for the US military. In addition there have been a number of more major incidents such as clashes between al-Sadr's militia (or offshoots of this); two bombings by the US air force; and two roadside bombs – one on 11th August 2007 killing 4, and another on 17th October killing 7.

The US air force bombing in April 2007 of houses in a district of Diwaniya was part of a crackdown by the Iraqi and US armies against Muqtada al-Sadr's militia after numerous clashes since August 2006. The US military had identified someone carrying a rocket launcher, but the bomb killed six, including two children.

Up until August 2006 Diwaniya had been relatively calm by Iraqi standards. But by June 2007 the city had become dominated by the violence of competing Shi'ite militias. Some said that the calm was only surface deep, but now the quest for power and control of the city had surfaced with kidnappings and murders of Shi'ites by Shi'ites.



One group is al-Sadr's movement; the other is the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Al-Hakim's group is the majority on the provincial council, but al-Sadr's group is the most popular among the people. Hence the council cannot control the province. Both groups have had their militias infiltrate the police force, though it seems that al-Hakim's Badr organisation controls most of the police in the region.

In July 2007 a further 10 civilians were allegedly killed by a US air force bomb when the US military had identified militant rocket attacks. In August a roadside bomb killed the provincial police chief. Later in August at least 28 people died in fighting between the Iraqi Army and al-Sadr's militia.



By October 2007 the fighting between the two rival Shi'ite groups is said to have turned some parts of Diwaniya into battlefields. An attempted ceasefire between the two groups failed.

Later in October a total of 50 police officers including some from Diwaniya had arrest warrants against their name for alleged terrorist involvement. This highlights the degree of influence that the militias have within the police force.

By November it became clear that attacks on US forces were much reduced but fighting between the militias continued. A large scale police (and army) operation was launched to take back control of the 50% of the province that is run by the militias and put it back into the hands of the government. In the first week of the operation 126 suspects were arrested and large quantities of arms were recovered in Diwaniya. A large cache of ammunition was also found in central Diwaniya.



Power Struggle

During 2004 al-Sadr's Mahdi army was involved in major fighting against the US military. By 2006 al-Sadr was calling on his followers to cease fighting against the US and Iraqi army, which accounted for some of the reduction in violence in Iraq. Where violence has occurred al-Sadr has said it was because the Iraqi or US army had entered their areas. However not all of the Mahdi army were happy to stop fighting and over the last two years, a number of offshoots seem to be operating fairly independently of al-Sadr and continuing with attacks.



The power struggle is not just within the Mahdi Army as the incidents of violence listed above demonstrate. At stake is the desire to lead the Shi'ite people in Iraq, and Diwaniya seems to be one of the main battlegrounds for this. Al-Sadr's support has grown considerably among the poor and young of Diwaniya in the last two years, yet his group's representation on the provincial council is small. Their desire is to influence all facets of Shi'ite life in Iraq.

With the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organisation squaring up to each other in Diwaniya, one reporter has described the city as "the powder keg of Iraq". In the midst of the troop surge, the

Shi'ites are fighting each other instead. If Iraq is to move on from these years of violence and discover a positive future, then not only do the Sunnis, Kurds and Shi'a need to find a way of sharing a nation with each other, but the Shi'ites need to start by finding a way to share this one key city with their own kind.

Rice or Poppies

Another angle to the turf war (and maybe the cause of it) between the Shi'ite militias in Diwaniya is to do with control of the drug trade. Previously this had meant control of drug smuggling from the Iranian border to the Gulf nations. Now this is starting to move from drug smuggling to drug production. The famous rice crops of farmers along the Euphrates are starting to be replaced by poppies to produce opium. The militias are financing them, and as the police in the region are often controlled by the Badr organisation, then they are involved too.



How to pray

- Pray for an end to the militia war in Diwaniya
- Pray for an end to the drug trade and drug production. Pray for opportunities for people to earn an honest income
- Pray that Diwaniya would be a place of fellowship rather than jealousy or rivalry
- Pray that God would bring change to Diwaniya through the compassion and prayer of His people
- Pray that the Shi'ite people of Diwaniya would hear of the liberating love of Jesus
- Pray for new communities of believers to be started in Diwaniya and throughout the whole province

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