



An alarming number of Iraqis killed "execution-style" last month has signalled an increase in targeted killings, according to the United Nations. In all, at least 7,157 civilians and 952 Iraqi security forces have been killed since January, and the overall death toll in Iraq so far this year has risen above 8,000, the UN said.

The bodies, usually dumped on the street and mutilated, have heightened fears that the country is sliding back toward all-out warfare between Sunni and Shia factions.

Even funeral processions have been targeted, like the one of the son of an anti-al-Qaida Sunni tribal chief northeast of Baghdad last week, which was attacked by three bombs and thus became the deadliest in a wave of attacks, Iraqi officials said on Sunday.

Nickolay Mladenov, UN's envoy to Iraq, has expressed his profound worry about the situation and the recent surge in execution-style killings that "have been carried out in a particularly horrendous and unspeakable manner".

Attacks have continued on a near-daily basis and political tensions remained high between Sunnis and the majority Shia who consolidated their power after the American military withdrew in December 2011.

The 2003 US-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated government has left the country in deep turmoil, with sharpened conflicts between the different religious communities, although the overall death toll is declining.

According to Eliana Nabaa, spokesperson for Mr Mladenov, the decline in the overall death toll is due to a shift in tactics, with fighters increasingly turning to targeted killings and a reduction in the number of bombings. "Bombings tend to kill larger numbers at any one time, whereas targeted killings usually kill the target and on occasion one or two others, hence the decline in numbers of casualties and rise in targeted killings," she [told](#) Al Jazeera News.

The rise in violence comes ahead of a general election which is due on April 30, and which will be Iraq's first parliamentary poll in four years. According to most experts, security measures will do little good unless the root causes like power-sharing are addressed.

A good example is oil-rich Kirkuk Province, which is at the heart of a power dispute between the central government in Baghdad and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north, ruled by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). In the centre of Kirkuk City, Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Sunni, Shia and Assyrian Christians all live together.

Iraq's healthcare system, already weak due to international sanctions following the first Gulf War in 1991, is struggling to cope with the sectarian violence. The American-led invasion in 2003 further eroded healthcare delivery to very low levels. Hospital staff and patients also complain about a lack of long-term psychological care.

WHO [estimates](#) that 35.5 percent of the population suffered from mental disorders in 2009; and only six percent of them received treatment.