
ISIS BOMB AIMED AT SHIITE PILGRIMS IN IRAQ KILLS AT LEAST 80

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ERBİL, Iraq □ At least 80 people, many of them Shiite pilgrims on their way home to Iran, were killed on Thursday when an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated a truck filled with explosives at a roadside service station in southern Iraq, local officials said.

The devastating attack came two days after Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi applauded the security forces for protecting the millions of Shiites who have flowed through southern Iraq in recent days for what many consider the worlds largest religious pilgrimage, larger even than the hajj in Saudi Arabia.

In years past, the annual rite known as Arbæen, a commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a revered seventh-century Shiite figure, was a frequent target of Sunni extremist groups like the Islamic State and its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Until the bombing on Thursday, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility in a statement, the event had been carried out safely. That was seen as a success for Mr. Abadi and the military, and was hailed as a sign that the government could keep pushing a major offensive against the Islamic State in Mosul, while protecting pilgrims in the south.

Thursdays bombing, in Hilla, a city south of Baghdad, shattered that illusion. The Islamic State clearly remains a potent force, both on the battlefields of Mosul, where fighters are putting up a last stand against Iraqs elite counterterrorism forces in eastern neighborhoods, and in its ability to carry out more traditional guerrilla attacks.

For nearly six weeks, tens of thousands of Iraqi security force members have been fighting in northern Iraq to retake Mosul, the countrys second-largest city and the last stronghold of the Islamic State in Iraq.

Government forces have found themselves bogged down, fighting house to house in dense urban neighborhoods, and many civilians have been killed.

A victory in Mosul could represent the end of the Islamic States control of territory in Iraq. But the bombing Thursday was a stark reminder that the group will most likely revert to its roots as a guerrilla insurgency and continue to carry out terrorist attacks across the country.

The bombing was the deadliest in Iraq since an explosives-filled truck blew up near a shopping mall in Baghdad in July, killing at least 300 people in the worst terrorist attack in the capital since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

That attack alarmed American officials, who worry that efforts to help the Iraqis defeat the Islamic State in Mosul will be squandered if civilians around the country are terrorized by suicide bombings. In recent months, the United States has rushed intelligence advisers and new drones to Iraq to counter car bomb attacks in Baghdad and the south. Before Thursday's bombing, there had been a noticeable decline in the numbers of attacks.

Falah al-Khafaji, the head of the provincial security committee in Babil Province, where the bombing occurred, said that at least 80 people had been killed and that dozens more had been wounded. Mr. Khafaji said early reports suggested that the bomber had followed a bus of Iranian pilgrims and then detonated his explosives in a crowded parking lot at a gas station-restaurant complex, setting fire to a number of vehicles and fuel tanks.

Kaynak/Source: