

Iraq's tribes keep firm grip on weapons

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Baghdad // Powerful tribes in Iraq's south are refusing to surrender their heavy weapons, insisting their well-equipped private armies are vital for security given the weakness of government forces.

Senior tribal officials from three provinces admitted they were keeping formidable arsenals that include artillery, missiles, mortars, machine guns and even tanks, in defiance of the central authorities in Baghdad.

"The government is still weak and unable to provide security, it cannot handle the security situation and cannot protect our borders," said Sheikh Ahmed Gharnem, secretary general of the Arab Tribes Movement in Maysan province, which lies on the Iraq-Iran frontier.

"All of the tribes here agree they will not even consider handing over their heavy weapons until they see the government is strong. Saddam Hussein was not powerful enough to disarm us, so [prime minister] Nouri al Maliki certainly isn't."

Iraq's tribes have a long tradition of defying Baghdad and Maysan is particularly renowned as a centre of headstrong independence. After a campaign against Shiite militia groups in the south, which began with a major assault in Basra in March 2008, the government called on the tribes to disarm, saying they were only allowed to keep pistols and rifles for personal protection.

While some weapons have been handed over, many tribes have openly defied the request.

Unlike the officially endorsed Awakening, or Sahwa, movement in central Iraq, southern Shiite tribes were not co-opted into the national security apparatus and therefore never had formal status as armed units.

In Sunni areas, the Awakening Councils have recently complained of being forcibly disarmed and refused permits even for rifles, a stark contrast to the south where Shiite tribes apparently have little trouble holding onto their weapons.

In Nasariyah, Sheikh Ali Hussein Sejar said his tribe maintained a strong military force outside of official control, equipped with artillery, rocket launchers and heavy machine guns. They even have some old, mostly obsolete tanks.

"The government's request for us to disarm is normal. They want to prove to the world they are strong but, on the contrary, they are weak," he said. "My tribe is stronger than the Iraqi army in Nasariyah that's why we will not hand over our weapons. The Iraqi army doesn't make us. They don't want trouble."



An Iraqi Shiite fighter holds his weapon in front of a shop in Basra. **Essam al Sudani / AFP**

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Mr Sejar said his tribal fighters had battled US forces during the 2003 invasion and subsequently acted as the area's de-facto security force.

"We are more professional than the government in protecting civilians. We stop terrorists attacks here. We will keep doing that until the government is stronger," he said.

The comments reinforce remarks made last week by a senior Iraqi army officer, Lt Gen Babaker Zerbari, who warned his troops were not capable of taking over should the US military leave as planned by the end of next year. He said it would take another decade for the Iraqi army to be able to fill the resulting security vacuum.

Both the Iraqi and US governments have denied that is the case, insisting Iraq's forces are able to defend the country in the face of a deadly insurgency.

In Basra, Sheikh Mohammad Zeydawi, secretary general of the powerful independent tribal movement, said local tribes had not only kept heavy weapons but were modernising their armaments, the result of a "crisis of confidence" in the central government.

"The tribes," he said, "now have large arsenals, mortars, artillery, some have armoured vehicles. They are trying to update their weapons so that they can protect themselves given the fragile security situation."

Mr Zeydawi said old and unwanted weapons had been handed over to the authorities as a token gesture, but dismissed suggestions more lethal items should be given up.

"Of course we will not deliver the heavy machine guns, mortars or rockets," he said. "The tribes want to build up their arsenals and the government will not be able to convince them to do otherwise until we see the Iraqi army is able to properly handle the security file."

The interior ministry, which is overseeing the tribe disarmament programme, says there has been progress in collecting weapons but admits cooperation remains far from universal.

"Smaller missiles, rocket propelled grenades and mortars, things like that, are still in the hands of the tribes in the south," said Marwan al Igayli, himself a tribal leader and an official in the ministry of interior's tribes department. He said some of the southern tribal forces amounted to "small armies".

Maysan was a particular problem, Mr al Igayli said, with modern Iranian weapons being smuggled across the border and sold to tribes and militias throughout the country.

"The tribes in Maysan are stubborn. They were so under Saddam and that has not changed since," he said. "They don't believe in

the Iraqi government, the police or the army. They are still attacking government forces in Maysan. The tribal armies are dangerous.”

That lack of faith in central authority was underlined by tribes in Maysan, Nasariyah and Basra, all complaining Baghdad was unable to settle tribal disputes.

“Fighting between the tribes is happening a lot,” said Mr Sejar, the sheikh from Nasariyah. “Under Saddam Hussein, the government would send an official to mediate disputes over land or honour and stop the fighting. We don’t see that now. The government does nothing and so revenge killings, tribal wars spiral.

“That’s another reason no tribe wants to give up their weapons. When the government can enforce the law and protect the country, then we might hand over some of our guns, but not before then.”
