

At least 31 killed in double suicide blast

THE STAR 16/07/2018
MS. 23

Latest attack casts doubt on Iraq's claim of victory over IS

BAGHDAD: A double suicide bombing killed at least 31 people in Baghdad in the second such attack in the Iraqi capital in three days, testing authorities who have declared victory over extremists.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack yesterday, although most such attacks in Iraq are the work of the Islamic State (IS) group.

The bombing comes after Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government declared victory over IS last month and as the country gears up for parliamentary elections.

"Two suicide bombers blew themselves up in Tayyaran Square in central Baghdad," said General Saad Maan, spokesman for the Joint Operations Command, which includes the army and the police.

Abdel Ghani al-Saadi, health chief for east Baghdad, reported "31 dead and 94 wounded".

Tayyaran Square is a bustling commercial centre and a place where day labourers gather in the early morning waiting for jobs. It has been the site of deadly attacks in the past.

Security forces cordoned off the scene of the bombing as ambulances gathered in the area, an AFP journalist said.

Abadi held an emergency meeting with the Joint Operations Command and intelligence officials after the bombing, his office said, asking them to "eliminate IS sleeper cells and protect the secu-

rity of civilians".

Analysts have warned that IS would increasingly turn to such attacks as it was pushed underground after losing territory spanning the Iraq-Syria border.

Last month, the government announced the "end of the war" against IS, which had been expelled from the Baghdad region and urban areas of Iraq that it controlled.

However, extremist elements remained active.

On Saturday, a suicide bomb attack near a security checkpoint killed at least five people in northern Baghdad. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for that bombing.

The bombings come as Iraq gears up for elections in May.

Abadi has said he will stand for re-election in the parliamentary polls as the head of a new coalition.

Abadi's newly created Victory Alliance will compete against the State of Law bloc of Nuri al-Maliki, his predecessor and a key rival who now holds the post of vice-president.

Abadi was little known when he became premier three years ago, after Maliki ceded power to him in August 2014 amid IS' sweeping offensive across the country.

Since taking over, Abadi has also rebuilt the armed forces and taken back disputed areas in the north from the Kurds, dashing their hopes for independence.

— AFP