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Situation Assessment | 20 October 2019

# Iraq Protests: between Public Demands and the State Response

Unit for Political Studies

## Iraq Protests: between Public Demands and the State Response

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The first week of October saw a wave of widespread protests in the Iraqi capital as well as in several southern provinces and the Middle Euphrates region. Dozens of people have been killed and thousands of wounded, after being subjected to an unprecedented wave of repression. These events have raised many questions about the state's ability to control militias, and about the future of the political system that emerged after the US invasion in 2003.

## The Call to Protest

In September 2019, anonymous pages on social media surfaced with funded advertisements calling for large demonstrations against the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi. Although the political forces that usually organize such protests distanced themselves from these invitations, many found them hard to believe. Qais al-Khazali, the leader of the “Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq” movement, one of the largest factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), issued a statement in late August, warning of demonstrations starting in early October, accusing Israel, the United States and Arab forces, of being behind them.<sup>(1)</sup>

Several factors combined to encourage protesters to take to the streets on 1 October. Last month, doctors and other unemployed graduates as well as soldiers discharged from service, and other groups staged protests. Consequently, when the protest movement began in early October in Tahrir Square in the centre of Baghdad, it was joined by the existing demonstrations from various sectors.

## Al-Saadi's Dismissal

The escalation of mobilization on the streets at the end of September was accompanied by a complex political atmosphere and growing disputes within the PMF, between factions affiliated with Iraqi forces, and factions loyal to Iran, against the backdrop of attacks on PMF weapons stores and mutual internal and regional accusations over responsibility.<sup>(2)</sup> The general public opinion has emerged from this reluctant for Iraq to take any side in the conflict between Iran and the United States.

The tensions have increased following the sudden decision of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi, as commander-in-chief, to transfer one of the most prominent commanders in the battles against the ISIL, Lieutenant General Abdel-Wahab al-Saadi, from his position as a senior commander in the elite forces and the counterterrorism apparatus, to the ministry of defence, which means stripping him of his military role and putting him in a desk job, a step-down for a senior officer.

Al-Saadi represents a broad cross-section of Iraqis, as a symbol of the rise of national sentiment across sectarian divisions. His role emerged at the moment the army regained its status after the setbacks

<sup>1</sup> “Video / Qais Khazali predicted the demonstrations .. 'Know my words!'”, Iraqi Observatory website, 3/10/2019, last accessed, 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2J4s16S>.

<sup>2</sup> “Iraq's Dilemma: The Uncertain Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces,” Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 9/9/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2o2NENB>.



2014 that left it powerless to ISIL fighters and in need of support from the armed factions whose sources of arms, training and financing as well as their participation in the conflict in Syria arouses public suspicion. al-Saadi's dismissal a few days before the protests became an additional motivation for rage and mobilization. Pictures of him have been spotted in Tahrir Square, accompanied by slogans accusing Iran of being responsible for the decision to get rid of him. This was reinforced by statements by PMF leaders accusing al-Saadi of conspiring to incite the demonstrations.<sup>(3)</sup> The prime minister exacerbated the situation by claiming that army officers were rebelling against foreign embassies,<sup>(4)</sup> leaving the impression that al-Saadi could be part of an attempted military coup to topple the corrupt political class, which resonates among a prominent segment of demonstrators who are resentful of the authorities.

## A Shift in Demands and a New Generation of Protesters

The security threat posed by ISIL since the summer of 2014 stole the limelight for many issues with the economy and services in Iraq and addressing these problems and claims of government neglect has been repeatedly postponed. But the end of the war and the defeat of ISIL and the significantly more stable security situation since 2018 has brought these issues to the forefront, amid general frustration about the possibility of real reforms. It has highlighted the call to overthrow the entire political class, which was reflected in the Basra protests in autumn 2018, where signs of a new generation of protesters took shape.

Although the demonstrations in Basra, like their predecessors throughout Iraq, focused on the failure of the administration, development, the lack of services and corruption, they went beyond these issues in terms of expressing the demands of the general public away from the agendas of political forces and parties. It was noted that these protests did not enjoy the support or participation of any political parties, including those on the left. Iran was also blamed for interfering in Iraq and supporting armed factions that have become part of the parliament, government and security services. The masses of protesters attacked the headquarters of these parties and factions, burned them and removed symbols and posters in support of the Iranian Revolutionary Leader Ali Khamenei, eventually attacking and burning the Tehran Consulate in Basra.

The Basra protests set a precedent represented by the recent demonstrations in Baghdad and the Middle Euphrates; political parties and forces remained absent, their headquarters were attacked, and the crowds were overwhelmingly made up of young people (16 to 30 years old), who are characterized by their lack of adherence to the sectarian and tribal system. This new generation is not aware of or interested in the political conflict that prevailed under the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein's regime and they were born in a period where the world opened up to the spread information and social media, leaving them more affected by global transformations and more aware of other languages and cultures.

<sup>3</sup> Delshad Dalawi, "Iraqi Official Reveals Iran's Plan to Control the Army," Al Ain News, 29/9/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2VZGsyd>.

<sup>4</sup> "Iraq: al-Saadi Confirms his Transfer to the Ministry of Defence on the Order of Abdul-Mahdi," Asharq Al-Awsat, 30/9/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2VWzEBH>.



## Beyond a Hunger Revolution

Events in Basra last year and in Baghdad, the middle Euphrates and the south this October, can be considered a new generation of Iraqi protests that go further than the demand for services, economic reform and squeezing out corruption. Instead, they are characterised by a deep sense of belonging to an emerging Iraqi nationalism nurturing the belief that political independence from any regional and international axis is the gateway to indispensable changes. These changes are necessary to achieve the rest of the demands and will pave the way for political reform that seems impossible under an externally controlled political class and the sharing of any wealth gained between armed factions and religious groups.

In this context, the popular rally around dismissed commander al-Saadi can be interpreted as solidarity with a symbol of Iraqi patriotism, who has defeated ISIS and seeks independence from Iranian interventions.

## The Response to Protests

The ruling Shi'i political elite, especially those affiliated with Iran, treated these protests as an existential threat to its rule, accusing the demonstrations of being a foreign conspiracy against Shi'i leaders, while knowing that the protests took place in Shi'i provinces, and most of the participants are Shi'is. This reinforces the position of the official Iranian authorities, who took the unusual step of quickly accusing the demonstrators of being part of a conspiracy.<sup>(5)</sup>

The gravity of these accusations is elevated considering the number of demonstrations concentrated in the densely populated and predominantly Shi'i neighbourhoods of Baghdad, and other important southern Shi'i provinces such as Najaf, Dhi Qar, Diwaniya and Muthanna.

As the party implicated in the repression belongs to the same sectarian identity of the protesters, the scale of the repression is remarkable; many protesters have been wounded or killed, while activists have been targeted by snipers and subject to a campaign of mass arrests, even in Basra, which did not participate in these demonstrations despite being described as Iraq's protest capital. The fact that the ruling Shi'i elite have treated the protests as an existential threat explains the intensity of the suppression. This marked a paradigm shift in the repression and violence of the post-2003 power, in addition to arrests, internet censorship, and restriction of movement, which has revealed to many that the government's abuses of power trumps the relative freedom gained after 2003.

## Who Fired the Shots?

Government and party attitudes have been dominated by confusion after the unusually high scale of casualties in the October protests. Each day of the six demonstrations yielded higher numbers of

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5 "Khamenei Breaks his Silence on Demonstrations in Iraq: Enemy Plots Will Not Divide Us," CNN Arabic, 7/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <https://cnn.it/2MykOhM>.



dead and wounded, forcing the government to recognize the existence of unknown snipers and ask the public to help identify them, sparking a wave of ridicule and anger. Although there is no official death toll, according to forensic figures, it is estimated at 160 dead and more than 6,000 wounded.<sup>(6)</sup>

Accounts about the perpetrators of these shootings, emerged from the public. Many spoke of masked armed factions while others described the presence of Iranian forces shooting at the demonstrators. The operations command indicated the presence of unidentified snipers,<sup>(7)</sup> reinforcing the hypothesis of a security breach in a way that absolves the government of responsibility for the security decision, by attributing it the presence of uncontrolled militias who do not answer to the Prime Minister. Yet Faleh al-Fayyad, a national security adviser, appeared in a speech accusing foreign powers of organizing the demonstrations and speaking in a way that suggests that the conspiracy he was describing forced the government to fire shots, while threatening retribution.<sup>(8)</sup> The prime minister appeared more cautious his accusations, saying only that security forces and protesters had used violence mutually, before changing the subject swiftly by making promises of financial grants and jobs.<sup>(9)</sup> The President of the Republic, Barham Salih, acquitted the security authorities of any responsibility for the use of violence, and talked about criminals who committed a security breach and must be indicted.<sup>(10)</sup>

Although a subsequent speech by the prime minister completely ignored the president's position, the religious authority (the Marja') agreed in their Friday sermon with the president's position and accused criminal groups of being responsible for the murders and shootings, adding that this happened in front of the security forces, so that there the government had no way to evade an investigation. The supreme authority, Ali al-Sistani, in the words of his spokesman in the Friday sermon in the city of Karbala, said that a two-week deadline seems reasonable for an official investigation revealing the true culprit behind the unprecedented killing and wounding of demonstrators.<sup>(11)</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result of intense violence and government actions, the protests subsided, but they have probably not yet ended. The problems that motivated these protests remain unanswered. Social media platforms are hosting calls for major demonstrations on the first Friday after Arba'een; 25 October.

6 "Iraq: More than a Hundred Dead and 6,000 Wounded in Demonstrations and the Government Declares 'Social Measures' to Calm the Situation," France 24, 6/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2pB517z>

7 "Exclusive: Iranian-Backed Factions Deployed Snipers in Iraq protests" Reuters, 17/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/33QI68L>.

8 "Head of PMF vows 'conspirators against Iraq' will fail", Al Jazeera Net, 7/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2P1iwZV>.

9 "Salaries for the Poor and the Release of Detainees ... Iraqi Prime Minister Addresses the Protesters," Al Jazeera Net, 3/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/35OONJR>.

10 "Iraq: President Barham Salih Calls for National Dialogue Without 'Foreign Interference'," France 24, 7/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2N0xXio>.

11 "Nas Publishes the Full Text of Sistani's Statement on the Government's Crackdown on Demonstrations," Nas News, 11/10/2019, last accessed 20/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2VXltei>.



For the first time in the history of the protest movement in Iraq, social media platforms have become an important mobilization tool. Excessive repression by the authorities and extrajudicial executions were exposed through hundreds of videos filmed on mobile phone cameras and circulated on social media platforms. Significantly, the protest movement went beyond the usual slogans, to political demands for regime reform or even change, by calling the protests a “revolution” or “uprising. Consequently, Iraq is witnessing the most important events in the course of the Iraqi protest movement since 2003.