



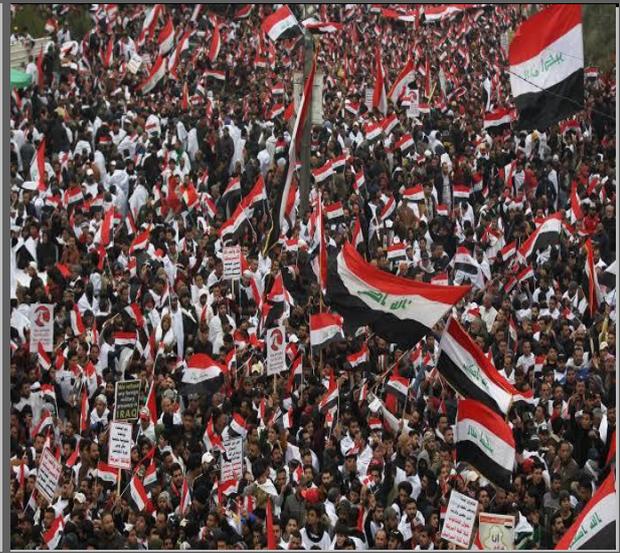
PROTESTS IN IRAQ: AN ASSESSMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In October 2019, large-scale protests erupted across Iraq. Tens of thousands of people, angry over corruption, maladministration and rising unemployment (which reached 8% in 2018, according to the World Bank), have occupied the streets in Baghdad and the south of the country. The Iraqi government has tried to appease the protesters by promising reforms.

Demonstrations against the corrupt elite are not new in Iraq. In 2016, Iraqis raided government headquarters or as they are known the 'Green Zone'. In 2018, there were large scale outcries at the poisoning of over 100,000 people due to polluted water and lack of sanitation facilities. Overall, the demands have been similar to what they are today - economic and political reforms. However, even in the face of these regular rallies, little progress has been made. Despite increased oil revenues and relative peace post 2003, the government has been incapable of handling the high poverty rates and the ever increasing unemployment. To this day, the areas devastated by war remain dilapidated.

The Iraqi government announced a set of new measures on October 21, pertaining to job creation and training.¹ When this did not work, security forces tried to subjugate the protests through use of force. So far, around 500 people have been killed and more than 25000 have been injured.² So far, neither strategy has worked. If anything, the imposition of curfews and internet blackouts has

¹ Government of Iraq, "Iraqi Government Announces New Initiatives on Job Creation, Training," *Government of Iraq*, January 12, 2020.

<https://gds.gov.iq/iraqi-government-announces-new-initiatives-on-job-creation-training/>

² "Iraq: Anti-Government Protesters Denounce pro-Iran Crowds," *Iraq News | Al Jazeera*, January 2, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/iraq-anti-government-protesters-denounce-pro-iran-crowds-200102144314331.html>

further aggravated the situation. The state of affairs reached a climax on November 29, 2019 when Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, demanded a change in government. Against this background, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, Iraq's prime minister said he would step down. The Iraqi parliament approved his notification on December 1, 2019, stating that he would carry on as caretaker prime minister till a replacement was found.

The issue of the spate of unrest lies somewhat in how the present government is set up. Post the descent of Saddam Hussein, the administration has been dominated by parties based on ethnicity and sect, bolstered by the quota system which assigns political positions in accordance with ethnic and religious denomination. This has encouraged patronage and resulted in the rise of a small group of elites. Even Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi was indebted to the Shia groups which had helped appoint him and so could not go against them. According to Transparency International, Iraq is the 12th most corrupt country in the world.³ It is estimated that \$450 billion of oil revenue has been subject to embezzlement since 2003.⁴

The current displays of dissent have brought about some important changes. Apart from the Prime Minister's resignation, Iraq's President, Barham Salih has also promised to draft a new electoral law. This will allow independent contestants a better opportunity at winning seats. Once this is put into operation, the move would transform Iraq's eighteen provinces into numerous districts and will elect one legislator per 100,000 people.⁵

Even though economic and political setbacks are at the core of all dissent, anger has also been directed at Iranian influence over the government. The removal of commander Abdul-Wahab al Saadi by the Prime Minister in September 2019 triggered resentment as he was thought to be purging out corruption within the army, particularly Shia militias with close links to Iran. This brought into question the legitimacy of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU). The PMU was formed in 2014 to consolidate different armed groups in the fight against Daesh. It is an official military unit of the Iraqi military, as well as part of the Iraqi parliament.

In December 2019, protests of a very different nature erupted in Iraq. While the October protests were an unpremeditated movement, the ones in December were organized by the Kataib Hezbollah - an armed force which is part of the PMU. On December 31, a crowd attacked the US Embassy in

³ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2018," *Transparency International*.
<https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

⁴ "Poverty, Resentment of Corruption among Engines of Continuing Protests in Iraq," *The Arab Weekly*, January 19, 2020.
<https://theArabweekly.com/poverty-resentment-corruption-among-engines-continuing-protests-iraq>

⁵ "Officials, Activists: 2 Iraqi Protesters Killed in Baghdad," *The Sacramento Bee*, January 17, 2020.
<https://www.sacbee.com/news/nation-world/article239399368.html>

Baghdad.⁶ They were protesting against the US strikes which had resulted in the death of 25 members of the Kataib Hezbollah.

Events at the start of the new year threatened to overshadow the protests in Iraq.

These included the killing of General Qasem Soleimani, a senior Iranian commander on January 3, 2020 and retaliatory ballistic missile attacks by Iran on January 8, 2020 on bases which host US and coalition troops. The war between the US and Iran have raised concerns that Iraq might become a battle ground to third party warfare. Protestors now demand that both the United States and Iran cease interference in Iraq's affairs. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament voted to end the presence of all foreign troops on Iraqi soil. In response, the Trump administration has threatened to freeze Iraq's account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York which holds almost \$3 billion of mainly Iraqi oil revenue.⁷ On January 23, 2020 President Salih met President Trump at the World Economic Forum in Davos where both leaders agreed on the need for further US military role in Iraq. On the contrary, thousands of followers of populist Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr gathered in Baghdad on January 27, regarding his calls for a "million-strong" march to demand US troops leave the country.

Iraq is still recovering from the 2003 US occupation, and afterwards, the fight against the Islamic State. Mr Abdul-Mahdi's resignation was not the endgame for the protests. Rather the beginning of new ones. However, the October protests have been somewhat relegated in the aftermath of the renewed US-Iran power play. At the moment, the Iraq parliament is more focused on American presence in Iraq than on the reforms demanded by the demonstrators. In a country which is OPEC's second largest oil producer and produces 12% of the world's oil reserves,⁸ consistent upheavals and rioting are a matter of concern. A possible approach to appease the protests would be to form an anti-corruption coalition before the next elections. This may ensure that perversion of national resources is kept in check.

There is no doubt that a new sense of nationalism has united Iraq's young generation. For them, the problem is the post-Saddam system of patronage rife with corruption which continues to affect their

⁶ "Protesters Attack U.S. Embassy in Iraq, Chanting 'Death to America'," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/world/middleeast/baghdad-protesters-us-embassy.html>

⁷ "Trump Administration Warns Iraq Could Lose New York Fed Account If US Troops Forced to Leave: WSJ," *CNBC*, January 11, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/11/trump-administration-warns-iraq-could-lose-new-york-fed-account-wsj.html>

⁸ "Iraq Is Pumping Record Oil, Creating a 'Fully-Blown Migraine' for OPEC's Cutting Plans," *CNBC*, September 6, 2019.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/06/iraq-is-pumping-record-oil-disrupting-opecs-production-cutting-plans.html>

daily lives. The recent protests have shown that there is a demand for cross ethno-sectarian movements.⁹ For any government in Iraq to succeed, it is important that rhetoric which calls for a fair and equitable system be followed by action. This is essential because traditional parties, which call for the same mandate, such as the Sadrist Movement have been unable to perform in the past. Iran and the US have already exchanged open fire which means the conflict between the two sides will now continue to simmer in the shadows for a while at least. It is high time that the Iraqi Government untangles itself from being a third party battleground and gets its act together. Until that time, Iraq is well on its way to becoming another Yemen.

Postscript: On February 1, 2020, former Iraqi Communications Minister, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi was appointed as prime minister-designate till future elections. However, he too has been denounced by protestors as being a compromised candidate.

⁹ "Tensions on Iraqi Soil Likely to Overshadow Anti-Government Protest Demands," *SIPRI*, January 9, 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/tensions-iraqi-soil-likely-overshadow-anti-government-protest-demands>