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A paralysed status quo: expect more protests and violence in Iraq

Between 1 and 11 October 2019, Iraq was gripped by a series of protests across the country that escalated as a result of pent-up popular dissatisfaction with the government of Adil Abdul Mahdi and a repressive response by Iraq's security forces. Demanding better basic services, better governance and less foreign interference, the protestors did not just insist on the wholesale replacement of the current Iraqi government, but called for a wholly different style of governance: away from Iraq's sectarian-based division of political positions for 'private' gain between competing elite-run, clientelist networks. The Ministerial Committee investigating the use of violence by Iraq's security forces reported 130 protestors to have been killed and 3,924 injured.¹ Yet, despite their scale and intensity, the protests proved ineffective, at least for now. There is little appetite among the Iraqi elite for radical political reform. And as long as the standoff between Iran and the US remains unresolved, the cost of repression remains low. It is for these reasons that things are likely to get worse before they get better. Nevertheless, the recent protests also have a silver lining.²

The relative calm that descended on Iraq after 11 October as the result of a slew of short-term official promises for reform and the approaching Shi'a commemoration of Arbaeen,³ was shattered once more on Friday 25 October. Large protests resumed in Baghdad and across the south of the country. At first glance, Iraq's current waves of protests are similar to those that have

occurred every year since 2010 against poor standards of living and livelihood prospects in a country rich in natural resources. Typically, protestors have demanded better basics: safe drinking water, reliable electricity, less corruption and more employment. This time around, though, the demonstrations featured a few new elements.

First, the protestors loudly voiced their disappointment in the performance of Iraq's nascent democracy and demanded the wholesale replacement of the government. Calls were even heard for military rule or a presidential system. These were accompanied by strong feelings against foreign interference in Iraqi domestic politics. The protests had a clear anti-Iranian slant at times, rejecting its interference in Iraq, which has become more obvious over the past

1 See: <https://twitter.com/hamzehkarkhi/status/1186593542229106688?s=21> (accessed 28 October 2019).

2 See also: Mercadier, S., *Irak - la révolution confisquée*, Orient XXI, [online](#).

3 Arbaeen marks the release of the family of Hussayn Ibn Ali, son of the fourth caliph, after he was slain on the battlefield of Karbala on Ashura in AD 680, and the end of the mourning of his death.

year as tensions with the United States have grown. No number of tweets by President Khamenei emphasising the religious bond between Iraq and Iran could disguise the fact that many Iraqis have had enough of the informal political – and especially military – links between the two countries.⁴

Secondly, the October protests spread across the Shi'a south of the country despite a Shi'a-dominated government being in power. This highlighted the extent to which many young people in Iraq feel their so-called representatives are part of the problem. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr – a leading Iraqi cleric-cum-politician – has a reputation for ensuring that his delegates participate in government while he himself sides with the protests when it suits him, as a means of applying extra-parliamentary pressure. A clear illustration of this is that the Sadrist were in charge of several government ministries intermittently between 2005 and 2018, including some responsible for service delivery, without any notable improvement.⁵ In addition, Iraq's Shi'a population had high hopes that they would be compensated for the sacrifices they made in the fight against Islamic State (IS). Instead, politicisation of the Popular Mobilization Forces – armed groups part of the security architecture of the Iraqi state – has helped ensure that livelihoods in Baghdad and the south have barely improved.

Thirdly, the recent protests were grassroots driven and lacked formal leadership. They were not organised by a particular political party and did not formulate a set of targeted demands that could be negotiated.⁶ This allowed for spontaneous mass mobilisation across Iraq in places as diverse as Baghdad, Nasiriya and Diwaniya, but without coordination. Finally, Iraq's religious

leaders took days to support the protestors and denounce the repressive violence, which highlighted their marginal role in the events and lost them credit.⁷

While the protests resumed after Arbaeen, our recent interviews in southern Iraq suggest that protestors will struggle to bring about the radical change they demand.⁸ Iraq's current political elite has no interest in deep reform. The government is based on a pragmatic deal between entrenched networks of power that use elections to obtain their share of public resources for private gain (positions, funds, contracts and the like) and to keep their constituency loyal. In response to the protests, Iraq's political elites appear to be pursuing a strategy that mixes repression with buying-off protestors off in a bid to prevent a real threat to their interests to develop. The number of dead and injured protestors is simply too high to have been accidental. All Iraq's ruling elites had to suffer was a good week of domestic and international condemnation while many dissidents and protestors had to flee Baghdad in fear of their lives.

Even if an interest existed among a sufficient mass of Iraq's political elites in the type of reform that can produce better governance outputs, there is little capability to make it happen. The bureaucracy required for enacting reform would need to be put in place first. For example, the protests put Iraq's fragmented security architecture to the test, and it failed miserably. According to one interviewee, about a dozen security organisations played a role, with very little coordination between them and poor internal command and control. Thus, two hours after the Prime Minister solemnly banned live fire on national TV, protestors were once again shot at.

4 Mamouri, A., *Iraqi government seems powerless against protesters even as 'unknown' snipers take toll*, Al-Monitor, [online](#), 2019.

5 For a backgrounder: Mansour, R. and M. Clark, *Is Muqtada al-Sadr good for Iraq?*, War on the Rocks, [online](#), 2016.

6 Fantappie, M., *Widespread Protests Point to Iraq's Cycle of Social Crisis*, Brussels: ICG, [online](#), 2019.

7 Mamouri, A., *Sistani calls for justice as Iraqi protesters bleed*, Al-Monitor, [online](#), 2019.

8 The authors conducted a series of interviews in Karbala, Hilla and Baghdad between 5 and 11 October 2019.

The above notwithstanding, neither a coup nor a revolution is likely to be feasible or effective in Iraq's current political and security configuration. The country's four parallel security forces – the Iraqi Army, Popular Mobilization Forces, Counter Terrorist Services and Peshmerga – make it fairly coup-proof. In addition, Iraq is an emergent democracy run by clientelist networks of power that are too diffuse to overthrow. There is no dictatorial palace to storm. Perhaps more importantly, there is no coherent, relatively untainted platform or alternative leadership to take over from the current one. The overthrow of the 'ancien régime' merely offers the prospect of an uncertain revolution-after-the-revolution, with all its potential for violence and sectarian strife.⁹

What needs to happen to meet protestors' demands – namely culling the public sector payroll to generate public funds for investment, deregulating the Iraqi economy to stimulate private entrepreneurship, attracting more non-Western investment (e.g. Turkish or Chinese that is less risk averse) and reducing corruption – is unlikely to materialise in the short term.

In brief, popular expectations that the quality of life would improve after the sacrifices made in the fight against IS have vastly outstripped the elites' willingness and capability to deliver, busy as they have been in maximising their own power in Iraq's post-IS political landscape. Although few political systems undertake deep reform without shocks that change the elite's outlook,¹⁰ the deep cycles of violence that Iraq has gone through since the 1980s suggest looking for peaceful ways to make political change happen this time around.

Comparative research indicates that non-violent civil resistance campaigns have a decent track record in this regard.¹¹

A strategy to consider for Iraq's protestors, and the grassroots organizations associated with it, is to transform their protests into a prolonged campaign of civil resistance that voices demands as peacefully as possible under clearer leadership, for example through sit-ins at the offices of notably corrupt politicians and social media campaigns highlighting corruption. If this campaign included the painstaking work of building a cross-sectarian, Sadr-like network of grassroots mobilisation for political reform to compete in the 2022 elections, pressure could go hand-in-hand with giving existing parties a real run for their money. It will be a long game with many fouls, but it is one that every society seeking to better itself must at times engage in. Discretely supporting such a campaign under the banners of political plurality, human rights and good governance would make a real contribution to Iraq's development.

9 Coalitions of disparate actors that team up to achieve a shared negative goal tend to fall apart once it has been achieved, often triggering a power struggle between them. Consider the Iranian revolution or post-2011 Syria.





10 For case studies: Diamond, J., *Upheaval: How nations cope with crisis and change*, London: Allen Lane, 2019.

11 For instance: Chenoweth, E. and M. Stephan, *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

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