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Youth Revolution or Identity-Forming Movement?

An Anatomy of Mass Protests in Iraq

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The emergence of a common Iraqi identity has always been hampered by the great heterogeneity in the population. However, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have united in repeated protests, the largest since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Meanwhile, the elites are attempting to hold on to as much of their power as possible.

Repression and Government Crisis Following Protests

In a crisis-ridden country such as Iraq, popular protests against the ruling elite are no rarity. In the last few years, protesters have focused primarily on improved state services (especially water, power, and healthcare), but in many parts of the country, corruption has also been an issue. What triggered the unrest that began on 1 October 2019 was the demotion of Iraqi General Abdel-Wahab al-Saedi, a hero of the war against the so-called Islamic State (IS) who was highly respected by the population. For many Iraqis, he is a symbol of the fight against corruption and nepotism. For the majority of Iraqis, state humiliation of a person of integrity such as al-Saedi was emblematic of the country's corrupt ruling elites, which ruthlessly divides resources amongst itself and has long since lost sight of the common good. Moreover, many also suspected that Iran was behind the incident.¹

Sajad Jiyad, a renowned Iraqi political expert and long-standing cooperation partner of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, describes the beginning of the wave of protests as follows: "The atmosphere was part carnival part defiance, as thousands of young people congregated to call for change. For many that participated it was an opportunity to congregate with like-minded people and feel some power was being retaken from an older, unrepresentative political class that they did not identify with. Protestor demands evolved from those mainly based around economic issues to becoming more maximalist including a complete change in the government."² To judge by number of participants (across the country, hundreds of thousands took

to the streets every day) and proliferation, the protests are the largest since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and remain in the tradition of the 2015 and 2018 protest movements.³

For months, demonstrators occupied the central squares and transportation arteries. In the heart of Baghdad, at Tahrir Square, they set up a tent city and blocked the bridges over the Tigris. The protesters repeatedly attempted to penetrate the so-called Green Zone, the government district of the capital, and were driven back forcibly by security units. Streets throughout the country saw clashes between demonstrators and police. Tuk-tuks became a symbol of revolt, and their drivers became the secret heroes of the protest movement. They transported material and demonstrators to the thick of the clashes at the hotspots, or helped them to retreat. Pop culture symbols also gained popularity: for instance, the American blockbuster movie "Joker", which was released at the beginning of October 2019, was seen as an analogy for the rebellious Iraqi youth.

Besides the announcement of a few reforms, the state apparatus' reaction was repressive. Security forces attacked participants in the mass demonstrations and used live ammunition as well as tear gas and rubber bullets. Many protesters reported that it was not only Iraqi security forces that were opposing them, but also armed personnel from Iran. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) numbered the dead at 490 and the wounded at 7,783 after a period of eight months.⁴ Other reports speak of as many as 600 dead and around 20,000 wounded.⁵

From the point of view of the demonstrators, the protests against the rulers were partially successful. In November 2019, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who had been in office for only a little more than a year, was forced to announce his resignation. But this step plunged the country into a six-month governmental crisis. Iraqi President Barham Salih tasked three candidates in a row with forming a government. After the first two failed to gain the support of the Iraqi parliament, a majority finally approved Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as the new prime minister in May 2020.

Yet, even after the new government was formed, the protests continued. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out, and strict movement restrictions were introduced, the protests reduced in size. The effects of the pandemic, falling oil prices, and the disastrous public finances caused the situation in Iraq to worsen further. In the summer of 2020, protests broke out again despite the new government's promise of reforms and continuing fear of the virus.⁶

Membership of a certain population group often gives individual citizens certain privileges, which is reflected in the country's political system.

This article sheds light on the forces driving the wave of protests and points out the key individuals and groups. Central motivations are poverty, lack of prospects, insufficient governmental services, and corruption. But how relevant is the protest, and how broad is its support? Are these primarily youth protests, or are the demonstrations, which can be observed throughout almost the entire country, the expression of a new Iraqi self-image that could bring about lasting change?

The Iraqi Mosaic

The emergence of a common Iraqi identity has always been impeded by the great heterogeneity of the population. King Faisal, the first ruler of Iraq, said in 1917,

“There is still – and I say this with a heart full of sorrow – no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions [...] connected by no common tie [...] prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever.”⁷

The various ethnic and religious identities are of paramount importance in Iraq. Membership of a certain population group often gives individual citizens certain privileges that are reflected in the country's political system.

The majority of Iraqis (about 70 per cent) consider themselves Arabs. Among the minorities are the Kurds (17 per cent) and the Turkmens (three per cent). The differentiation according to religion may be even more significant. The Muslim majority (95 per cent) is split up into Shiites (65 per cent) and Sunnis (35 per cent), and there are other minorities such as Christians and Yezidis. Additionally, large parts of society continue to be organised according to tribal structures.⁸ This makes for a complicated mosaic.

Hybrid Identities Made up of Religion, Ethnicity, and Milieu

Membership of various denominations and ethnicities results in a number of milieus, communities, and hybrid identities.

The terms “religious” and “ethnic” identity do not merely describe the religious or cultural traditions of a population group, but serve primarily to differentiate between that group and others. In the Iraqi context, these categories are often instrumentalised and politicised in the pursuit of political interests.

The milieus are by no means hermetically separated from one another, but have many regional and social overlaps. After all, people come into contact not only in their religious or ethnic communities, but also, always and everywhere, in many other areas of life – be it at work, clubs, trade unions, cafés, and so forth. Nor are religious groups internally homogeneous, for

instance as regards issues of domestic and foreign policy.

The Political System, a *Perpetuum Immobile*

Iraq's political system has, since 2005, been based on ethnic and religious proportional representation: According to the constitution,



Right in the middle of it: Tuk-tuks became a symbol of revolt, and their drivers became the secret heroes of the protest movement. Source: © Thayer al-Sudani, Reuters.

political offices are distributed to certain parties and religious groups according to a quota system (*muḥāṣaṣa*). The Iraqi president is always a Kurd, the prime minister a Shiite, and the speaker of the Council of Representatives, a Sunni. One ministerial position is reserved for a Christian and one for a Turkmen. The quota system applies to all levels of public office, from

the top ministry official (Director General) to the lowest functionary in the security apparatus. Membership of a group defined by ethnicity or religion thus forms the basic principle of the political order.⁹

Iraq's political reality differs from a democratic understanding of politics, in which the will of





Mismanagement and political failure: One of the most oil-rich countries in the world is incapable of caring for large sections of its population. Source: © Essam al-Sudani, Reuters.

the voters is represented in parliament, and thus in the system of government. Individual ethnic and religious groups have taken advantage of the denominational system to divide up offices amongst themselves even before the election process. This cements the status quo, prevents competition, and hinders decisions in the interest of the population or a majority thereof. The frustration of the Iraqi population is expressed, for example, in low voter turnout, which was only 44.5 per cent for the parliamentary elections of 2018.¹⁰

Of course, it is not just the filling of offices and posts that are thus arranged, but also access to resources. Moreover, politicians and government officials circumvent accountability by

appointing relatives or political supporters to positions within the scope of their responsibilities – often regardless of qualifications. Members of a specific group thus attempt to get as much as they can (government services, social safeguards and jobs etc.) from the part of the system allocated to their community instead of contributing to society as a whole. The system's institutionalised divisions favour clientelism, nepotism, and corruption. This pattern also flows into the economy, which is not characterised by a state of free enterprise, either.

The majority of the population suffers, but the members of the political elites and their supporters profit from the omnipresent agreements, which also protect them from legal investigation.



This results in a system that is resistant not only to transparency, but also to long-term reform. Young Iraqis desirous of becoming politically active are usually denied access to important positions. The quota system thus creates a political and societal *perpetuum immobile*.

By its very nature, the ethnic-sectarian system results in great centrifugal forces that decisively impair the formation of a common Iraqi identity. Many Iraqis do not view the state, but above all the leaders of their own communities, as their sovereign.

Socioeconomic Imbalances

The Iraqi economy is characterised by mismanagement, inefficiency, great income inequality, and a structural inability to innovate. It also suffers from a greatly bloated public sector that requires large government subsidies. In 2019, 47.5 per cent of Iraq's budget went to pay government employees.¹¹ By comparison, the European Union used just 9.9 per cent of its budget for this purpose in 2017.¹² Because the private sector in Iraq is relatively small (37.5 per cent of gross domestic product), many citizens seek employment and a living in public service. 60 per cent of the Iraqi workforce is employed in this sector.¹³ Entrepreneurship is slowed down by high bureaucratic and legal hurdles. In the Ease of Doing Business Index published by two World Bank economists, Iraq ranked 171 out of 190 in 2019.¹⁴

Insufficient investment in the power infrastructure has led to frequent power outages and widespread contamination or shortage of drinking water.

In addition to financing the public sector, the Iraqi government spends large sums on paying off the national debt of about 125 billion US dollars (58.5 per cent of GDP).¹⁵ Rampant corruption exacerbates the deficit, since it robs the

state of important income. Additionally, Iraq is extremely dependent on oil, which makes up 85 per cent of government revenue.¹⁶ Yet, instead of diversifying and supporting the private sector, especially construction and services, for example, the government maintains its focus on the oil industry.

Debt and mismanagement lead to an enormous budget deficit: the education and healthcare sectors are underfunded, as are the water and power supplies, which can no longer be adequately guaranteed in large parts of the country. Insufficient investment in the power infrastructure has led to frequent power outages, and in many places drinking water is contaminated or not even available in sufficient quantities.¹⁷

The official unemployment rate is 12.8 per cent (2019), but estimates put it much higher.¹⁸ What is certain is that 33 per cent of those below 30 were out of work in 2019, although relatively many young Iraqis are well-educated and capable of performing demanding work.¹⁹ But there are not enough employment opportunities for them. This has led to a persistent brain drain and to the erosion of the middle class.²⁰

The pressure on the labour market and the education system is increasing because of the enormous population growth – about one million per year. Today, 40.1 million people live in Iraq – 40 per cent of them below the age of 16, which means that they were born after Saddam Hussein's fall. This demographic development exacerbates the scarcity of resources: 22.5 per cent of Iraqis live below the poverty line. One of the most oil-rich countries in the world is thus incapable of caring for large sections of its population.

Members of all ethnic and religious groups suffer from this failure of the state, and this suffering has, in turn, almost become a unifying element in Iraq. Already since the mass protests of 2015, demands for reform were aimed not only at the *zu'ama'* (Arabic for leaders – of certain ethnic or religious groups or parties) of the group in question, but at the entire ruling class and the system.

The Entire System Is the Problem

The mass protests of 2019/20 have two decisive characteristics: First, especially in Shiite areas and the metropolitan areas of central and southern Iraq, it is a true grassroots movement that has not allowed itself to be co-opted politically by any established group.²¹ Second, the involvement of young female demonstrators is significantly high – considering the low levels of female political participation in Iraq.

The demonstrations and actions are organised primarily through social media (Twitter and Facebook), but clubs and trade unions also play an important role in their implementation. Amongst other things, they help with such items as food supply and first aid to the injured.²²

The demonstrators' demands vary, but can be divided into the following two main categories: security and the political system.

Security

The brutality of the security forces and pro-Iranian militias surprised the demonstrators. The demands for state inquiry and justice for the dead and wounded have become essential requisites of the insurgency. It will be a significant measure of the new government, since the prime minister's credibility depends on it to a great extent.

Besides economic and political demands, the demonstrators had originally called for a reform of the security apparatus. They were concerned about the government's monopoly on the use of force and the role of the so-called Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, *al-ḥašd aš-ša'bi* in Arabic).²³ The Iraqi executive does not have complete control of the PMF. During the protests, the pro-Iran units of the PMF acted with particular brutality against the protesters. They mixed with security forces and used live ammunition at times.²⁴ It has not yet been conclusively determined who is responsible for this – that is, who gave the order. The demonstrators therefore demand that the PMF be subsumed entirely

into the structure of the Iraqi security forces, and thus be placed under formal governmental authority.

The Political System

As outlined at the beginning of this article, corruption in Iraq is ubiquitous because it is anchored in the system.²⁵ After the resignation announcement by Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi in November 2019 – a partial success for the demonstrators – they focussed their demands on provincial government reform.²⁶ The perception of many Iraqis is that regional structures do not counteract the power of the central system in a positive manner, but instead form a further level of mismanagement and corruption.²⁷

Protesters demand that the political and economic influence of the US and Iran will be reduced.

The demonstrators demand a re-organisation of the entire political system. They are calling for quick new elections and a reform of the electoral system so that independent candidates have a better chance of being elected in future. A first step was the Iraqi parliament's compliance with this demand at the end of December 2019. One change is that voters will no longer vote for a list, but for individuals, allowing greater precision in voting for certain candidates. Another is a restructuring of the constituencies. But more than half a year after the parliament's decision, the political parties are still negotiating about the precise number of constituencies, and their borders.²⁸

Young and disillusioned: The involvement of young female demonstrators is remarkably large.

Source: © Essam al-Sudani, Reuters.



At the end of July 2020, the prime minister made a public declaration of the date for the preponed elections – 6 June 2021. This puts pressure on the political parties to agree quickly on the points cited above, and to set a date for the parliament to disband. Moreover, an electoral commission must be set up to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections. It will be a long road, since the legal, logistical, technical, and financial framework must be created or clarified beforehand.

Finally, protesters demand that the political and economic influence of the US and Iran be greatly reduced. Their slogan is “an Iraq of Iraqis for Iraqis”.²⁹

The severity of the protest waves prompted the implementation of some of their demands. The fulfilment of further demands may well first require overcoming the religious and ethnic proportional representation system, while maintaining pressure in the form of street protests. In other words: the entire system is the problem.

A Middle Way in Mesopotamia?

The ethnic and religious elites naturally oppose such far-reaching changes, for, as described, this could endanger their status, power, and sources of income. The brutal violence used against the demonstrators was likely an expression, on the part of the system representatives,



of their willingness to defend it. This willingness can also be observed in the restrictions on the work of journalists and members of civil society. For instance, the kidnapping of human rights activist Saba al-Mahdawi in November 2019 attracted great attention. Al-Mahdawi was released a few days later, but dozens of protesters were murdered by masked men who may have been members of pro-Iranian militias. The targeted killing of political analyst Hisham al-Hashemi in Baghdad on 6 July 2020 is another indication of the brutality with which these militias seek to silence critical voices.³⁰ Furthermore, especially at the start of the protests, great efforts were made to prevent reporting, as indicated by closure of news and television broadcasters and, at times, internet blackouts throughout the country.³¹

Certain political actors could, however, pursue a long-term strategy that would incrementally open the way to reforms. Iraqi experts emphasise that the events of recent months have undoubtedly shaken the political elites, and that the resilience of the protest movement could change the status quo over the long term.³²

A new flare-up involving more bloodshed can only be prevented if the various sides are prepared to compromise.

The influential cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Sairoon movement, Iraq's largest political faction, has shown that even representatives of the traditional elites can be ambivalent in their actions: the "blue caps" (Arabic: *al-qubba'āt az-zarqā'*), an unarmed intervention force belonging to his movement, were first deployed at the very front of the protests to protect the demonstrators, but Sadr himself recalled them at the end of January 2020 and called for his followers to leave the protest camps. Some of the "blue caps" then turned on

protesters, while other members of his movement remained with demonstrators, in violation of their instructions. Finally, Sadr ordered the "blue caps" back to support the protest.³³

The New Prime Minister as Mediator

Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi himself raised Iraqi citizenship to a new standard at the end of June 2020, emphasising that membership of an ethnic or religious group is a thing of the past.³⁴ This demonstrated at least verbal solidarity with the protest movement. Whether his words will be followed by deeds is to be seen in the coming months. The new prime minister has also surrounded himself with advisers close to the protest movement, and upon coming to power, his government announced several ambitious projects, especially an inquiry into the excessive use of force against the demonstrators, and the financial compensation to families of the victims. Moreover, many protesters have been released from police custody since May 2020. As a symbolic gesture, Al-Kadhimi also restored the beloved General Abdel-Wahab al-Saedi to his post. To which extent this has helped Al-Kadhimi's reputation within the protest tents cannot yet be determined. Large parts of the movement still consider him part of the ruling elite, and reject his election. Even as a non-partisan head of government, he, like his unsuccessful predecessor, is dependent on the support of political factions.³⁵

All of those involved must realise that a new flare-up of mass protests, and in the course of this, further bloodshed, can only be prevented if the various sides are prepared to compromise. Muqtada al-Sadr indicated a middle path in a tweet, in February 2020. Referring to demands of past protests, in which the demonstrators had called for a liberal Iraqi society following the American model, the cleric retorted that Iraq would become "neither a Kandahar nor a Chicago".³⁶ The elites will attempt to hold on to as much of their power as possible, and may blaze an Iraqi trail between Western liberalism and religious authoritarianism.

Conclusion: Iraqi Society Is Shifting

There is no doubt that the protests are not a mere youth movement. Although the insistence and despair of the younger generation, which makes up the bulk of the protest movement, are decisive driving forces for its strength and resilience, the majority of all classes, religions, and ethnicities identify with the movement's fundamental demands. Even those who stay away from the protests as they fear reprisals from political leaders, such as loss of jobs or privileges or violence from security forces and pro-Iranian militia, agree in principle with the protesters' goals.

It is true that the predominantly young demonstrators feel alienated from the political elites. However, much broader swathes of the population also no longer feel represented by these elites. A majority is disillusioned and has lost faith in the politicians, their will to reform, and their problem-solving abilities. It can therefore be assumed that this protest movement will be a lasting one. There could be demonstrations until the government's reforms show positive effects, i. e. until people's living conditions are noticeably improved, or at least until credible steps are taken to change the system. Until there is change from which the majority of Iraqis benefit, continued unrest is to be expected.

The protests have already contributed to the implementation of initial reforms and set others in motion. Whether all the demands will be realised also depends on factors that Iraq cannot directly influence: the ongoing economic crisis is currently exacerbated by the drastic drop in the price of oil and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, there is the conflict between the US and Iran, which is largely being carried out on Iraqi soil. The overlapping regional and global crises cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. How these multifaceted problems affect the protest movement and its demands therefore remains to be seen.

The demographic factor, on the other hand, may well be an advantage for the protest movement.

After all, the rebellion is also a youth protest; most young Iraqis identify with the uprising, and are likely to continue to call for the realisation of its objectives in future. The influence of older generations and elites, in contrast, will gradually wane.

There is no doubt that the protests have enhanced a feeling of common national identity, and thus contributed to the development of an Iraqi self-image that strives to overcome ethnic and religious lines of separation. Therefore, these protests are more than a mere youth revolt. Although the majority of protesters on the streets are not yet 30 years old, the demands formulated are likely to change society as a whole in the long-term, across all age groups and ethnic-religious divides. However, this change has only just begun, and the various interests and political players have the power to undo all that has so far been achieved.

Iraq is not yet a truly unified nation, and its national identity is not yet fully developed. The protest movement shows that the sum of the individual demands creates a possible basis for the development of such an identity upon which the nation can build in the future. One thing is certain: Iraqi civil society is at the very beginning of a long and difficult road.

-translated from German-

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- 32 See n.2.
- 33 Robin-D'Cruz, Benedict/Mansour, Renad: Iraq in Transition: Competing Actors and Complicated Politics, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Mar 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3gQCr8V> [9 Aug 2020].
- 34 Mustafa al-Kadhimi in a speech to media representatives on 25 June 2020. Quoted in Mahdi, Usama 2020: Iraqi security forces storm Kata'ib Hezbollah headquarters and close the Green Zone, *Elaph*, 26 Jun 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/33TbDRO> [9 Aug 2020].
- 35 A new alliance was formed on 30 June 2020: the "Alliance of Iraqis", which explicitly supports Al-Kadhimi. The alliance consists of 32 representatives of various political factions (Al-nasr Coalition, National Path bloc, Resolution bloc, Hikma movement). *Utacal Risk Services* 2020, No.28, pp. 5–6.
- 36 Al-Sadr, Muqtada 2020: Iraq won't be Kandahar and it won't be Chicago, via Twitter, 13 Feb 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2XSKgU1> [9 Aug 2020]. The cleric also made it clear that he would countenance neither a liberal state in the Western model – for which he used same-sex partnership as a symbol – nor religious fanaticism along the lines of Kandahar or ISIS.