

December 2020

Executive Summary: Masarat Report

October Protests 2019: Visions, Demands and Compromise – The Rebuilding of Trust in Iraq

The study “October Protests 2019: Visions, Demands and Compromise – The Rebuilding of Trust in Iraq” conducted by Masarat from June to August 2020 examines the roots of the protest movements in post-2003 Iraq in an attempt to understand the collective awareness driving these movements all the way up to the October 2019 protests. For this purpose, 2000 Iraqis throughout the country (50% male and 50% female) have been interviewed, representing a sample of 500 supporters of the protests, 500 protestors, 500 Iraqis opposing the protests, and 500 Iraqis from various jobs in the legislative and executive branches. The study focused on the movements that grew in and around Baghdad following the relative security calm in 2009-2010, which was a key turning point for popular movements in Iraq. After the aforementioned calm, a set of demands crystallized around a common goal which is to pressure the Iraqi government to live up to its constitutional obligations and provide services.

A key factor that made the October 2019 protests different from previous movements was that it attracted specific segments from the Iraqi society that were not active in former protests. The participation of different segments and in varying degrees was reflected in the nature of each protest, particularly how peaceful or violent it was. The key demographic indicators of these segments were age, level of education, and income.

October 2019 Protest Movements

Younger people (ages 18-30) formed 66% of the sample of protestors surveyed for this study. 41% of those were former immigrants who returned to Iraq from abroad after failed attempts to remain in their new host countries. Only 2% of the surveyed sample did not complete their elementary education, which reflected a higher level of understanding of the objectives of the protest movement and how the protestors strategically managed the rallies and sit-in camps. Further, an important demographic that formed a sizeable portion of the protests were low-income citizens. The survey showed that the majority of protestors earned the lowest levels of income, and that a lot of them did not earn incomes reflective of their education levels or academic specializations.

For the government created after the resignation of PM Abdel Mahdi, only 41% of the sample said that the new government’s plan reflected their aspirations, 31% said that it somewhat did, compared to only 28% who said that it didn’t. This, however, does not reflect the lack of confidence the protestors have in the government’s promises. 42% of the sample said that they did not trust the government’s promises compared to 27% who say they did do and 31% who said they somewhat did. The protestors attributed their distrust in the government’s ability to fulfill its promises to foreign intervention and pressure on PM Kadhimi to meet certain foreign interests, particularly those of the United States, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states.

Aside to foreign intervention, the surveyed protestors highlighted a set of issues that they believed would prevent the government from meeting its promises. The top three issues that came up the most frequently were the militia’s control and influence over state institutions, the proliferation of weapons, corruption, and unemployment, consecutively. The protestors also highlighted six key issues that they believed the government should undertake in order for them to consider that their demands have been met. These are (1) Accountability for the killing of protestors, (2) Disarming of militias, (3) Cleansing state institutions from the influence

of militias, (4) Supporting the private sector to boost job creation, (5) Free and fair early parliamentary elections, and (6) Combatting corruption under an impartial judicial system. The study argues that, based on the survey results, what gave the October Protests movement its momentum was not political interference or the deteriorating economy, but rather the unforeseen levels of active participation from the younger generation, most of whom were raised in post-2003 Iraq. This was amplified by an unprecedented utilization of open media sources and platforms which facilitated a seamless flow of information, which in turn helped consolidate slogans and demands.

Through comparing survey results with activity on social media, the study condensed the slogans and demands raised in the protests into five main axes, (1) Economic, which mainly revolved around demanding better job opportunities and supporting local production; (2) Political/Populist, which varied considerably between the different cities and squares and ranged from nationalist rallying cries to politicized chants targeted at Iran; (3) Social/Cultural, which mostly focused on rejecting sectarianism, calling for a pluralistic society, criticizing traditional conservative values, and ending the militias' dominance over the state; (4) Rallying around unifying figures, which we saw with the popular embrace of Lieutenant General Abdel Wahab Al-Saadi, among others; (5) Political representation, which was reflected in the calls for fair and free early elections that deposes the post-2003 ruling elite.

The study also noted a retreat in the influence of tribes and tribal relations in the October Protests. The deterioration of social and economic conditions, accompanied by a mass migration from tribal homelands to the urban areas, resulted in tribe members distancing themselves from their tribal allegiances and even rebelling against their tribal obligations. In Nasiriya and Najaf, tribes failed to quell the protests; in some instances, they were accused of coordinating with security forces in certain armed attacks. This is indicative that public anger is not only directed at the government's failures, but at the social constructs of Iraq as well. It's noteworthy that the trend of weakened tribal allegiances did not necessarily extend to religious institutions. This is the case particularly with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani whose support to the protest movement spared him the ridicule directed at other religious figures on social media. This is an indicator that a boycott between the protests and religious institutions can be avoidable should the institution decide to harmonize itself with the rallying cries of the people.

The study claims that there are three main factors that will define the future of the protest movement, (1) The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns and movement restrictions; (2) The economy, particularly unemployment levels, public sector payrolls, and the impact of further protests on commercial life; (3) Politics, particularly the public approval of PM Kadhimi's cabinet and its continued appeal to protestors.

Based on the above, the study presents a series of recommendations for both the government and the protestors:

- (1) The government needs to capitalize on the popular support it currently enjoys to act swiftly in combatting sectarian power-sharing schemes and to take solid steps towards disarming militias;
- (2) The protestors should take into consideration the exceptional situation the country is in and to manage expectations on what a cash-strapped highly-indebted government can or cannot do to revitalize the economy;
- (3) The government needs to bluntly address the issue of public sector hiring and should stop using government spending to appease people, especially in funding projects that do not provide with any tangible benefit to the country;
- (4) The protestors should understand that it is nearly impossible for the government to combat corruption, disarm militias, and create jobs all at the same time and that they would be better off reaching temporary compromises;
- (5) The protestors' demand in calling for early parliamentary elections is not in their best interest unless they organize into political parties immediately;
- (6) The government has already received multiple offers of international economic support that it should capitalize on to bolster the economy and create jobs;
- (7) Both the government and protestors should factor in the regional and international interests into their calculations because any wrong signaling that the country is leaning towards one international party against another could result in dire consequences for everyone in the country.

Examining Opposition to the Protests

While surveying a sample of 500 Iraqi citizens who were opposed to the protests movement, the study focused on a group of demographic indicators to understand the reasons behind their negative views. The age group falling between 31 and 45, which formed the highest percentage of people opposed to the protests at 41.6%, attributed their disapproval of the protest movements to the violent nature of the manifestations (34%) and to their belief that protests inhibit the democratic process (47%) and disrespect the electoral outcomes (19%). The second biggest demographic among those who opposed the protests, the 18 to 31 age group, which is at the same time the driving force behind the demonstrations, said that they opposed the protests because it disrupted their academic pursuits and wasted their academic year (56%) or that it disrupted their businesses and affected their livelihoods (41%).

People with the highest levels of education registered the lowest rates of opposition to the protest movements. People with a middle school or a high school education formed the majority of those opposed to the protests at 62.7% while people with an elementary or no education at all formed 35% of those opposed. Only 2.3% of those opposed to the protests had a college degree or higher. The correlation between lower education levels and higher opposition rates might reflect a lower awareness of the role of protesting as a tool of political change and achieving reform.

Employees of the public sector formed the majority of those opposed to the protests at 85% compared to only 15% of the private sector employees and only 5% of unemployed people. This is indicative of the fact that the majority of public sector hires in Iraq are supporters of the traditional parties and have most likely received these jobs because of their political allegiances. As such, they see the protests as a threat to their political and ideological stances, as well as a threat to the corruption and profiteering without which they would have no jobs. The majority of those opposed to the protests believed that the protestors were acting as foreign agents (58%) or as deceived troublemakers (32%). This might be the outcome of a widespread systematic campaign carried out by many media platforms controlled by political parties across the political spectrum. It resulted in a defamed image of the protests among the more dogmatic segments of the Iraqi society which believed that the protestors are acting on behalf of foreign interests aiming to destabilize their country. The media campaign reinforced the cognitive biases among these segments of society and helped discredit the movement in the eyes of many more. The same trend also emerged with the survey question about the killing of protestors, where the two highest ranked answers were that the killings were part of a fake news/misinformation campaign or that they were due to infighting between protestors and that security forces were being blamed for it.

Rebuilding Confidence

The above findings reflect the political changes in post-2003 Iraq which have produced a fragmented society along political, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal fault lines. With each episode of escalation, the fragmentation of society intensified and, with that, the trust between society's different components disintegrated. The political, socio-economic, and security crisis that the people had to go through, with the absence of any effective role from the state, fed to this cumulative erosion of confidence between people, both as individuals and as groups. The Iraqis also have low levels of trust in the state and its institutions. The political parties in power have abused the system to divide the state's institutions and resources amongst themselves, through the power sharing schemes of 'Muhasasa' (a quota system), introduced to Iraq after 2003. This resulted in underperforming and dysfunctional institutions that the Iraqis see as unreliable in delivering the required services or providing a sense of safety. The Iraqis' lack of confidence in the state also extends to the legislative, judicial, and security authorities, whom they see as subpar and driven by the interests of certain political parties rather than public interest. However, public support for PM Kadhimi is very high, despite the exceptional circumstances the country is going through. According to the survey, the confidence in Kadhimi's cabinet is driven by the belief that he doesn't work on the behalf of any party's interest (69%) and trust in his leadership capabilities to steer the country to safety (22%).

Conclusion

The study concludes that rebuilding confidence, whether between the people and the state or amongst the people themselves, should be of highest priority. Trust will not return in bulk but rather gradually and in stages. The study highlights a set of recommendations to focus on to achieve the above objective, namely, (1) A high-level government plan to promote a sense of shared citizenship and rule of law as a prerequisite for rebuilding trust between members of the community; (2) Enlisting civil society organizations, academic and cultural institutions, religious authorities, and media in the confidence-building measures; (3) Supporting civil society efforts in developing the capacities of minority groups; (4) Promoting the concept of equal rights and duties between the different groups and fighting all facets of superiority and discrimination; (5) A fair redistribution of wealth, power, and influence, and prioritizing merit over all other measures; (6) Collaborating with media outlets to fight hate speech and prevent inciting violence; and (7) Developing new academic curriculums that promote values of coexistence in a pluralistic society.

The main findings of the Masarat study were compiled by Karim Khalifeh, Project Manager of KAS Syria/Iraq-Office.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Gregor Jaecke
Head of Office Syria/Iraq
European and International Cooperation
gregor.jaecke@kas.de
www.kas.de/de/web/syrien-irak



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>