



The current situation in Iraq

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This analysis aims at underlining the economic and political crisis in Iraq that led to widespread protests around the country since October 2019. The government's inability to deliver basic services to society has created a series of protests with demands for better living conditions. The Iraqi security forces and armed militias are using extreme force to tackle the demonstrations with many protesters injured or killed. Hence, the question that presents itself is how foreign interventionism affects the country's society and sense of security, as well as its economy.

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The escalation of the competition between regional and international powers was followed by the Iraqi demonstrations of October 2019, which, in turn, led to the formation of a new government during a period of economic, political and health crisis. However, the demonstrations continued with demands related to better living and economic conditions. Security forces and Iran-backed militias groups responded with violence against protesters and activists. At the same time, the Iranian intervention and the sporadic Islamic State attacks played a key role regarding the country's instability.¹

The socio-economic situation in Iraq

Iraq's socioeconomic crisis escalated during previous years, furthering the problems in the political system. In a country with 60% of its people under the age of 25 the youth unemployment rate is over 36% and the poverty rate could climb to 40% in Iraq during 2021.²

One of the main reasons behind the Iraqi economic crisis is the oil exports dependence. With 45% of Iraq's GDP coming from oil, the price drop directly affected the country's fragile and oil-dependent economy. The low prices and Iraq's adherence to OPEC effectively decreased the country's income. The oil revenue of Iraq in 2019 was about 78,5 billion dollars, conversely to the 49,3 billion estimated for 2020. To make matters worse, the country's financial pressure was further increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this lack of financial fluidity engineered a high unemployment rate in combination with unpaid salaries.³

The energy sector of Iraq has been problematic following decades of war and budget mismanagement which was supposed to restore the country's electricity infrastructures. To make matters worse, the financial crisis also impacted electricity shortage. In essence, the government, lacking income, was unable to deliver the planned electricity projects.⁴ Furthermore, the dependence on Iranian energy remained a looming issue. After the US sanctions against Iran, Iraq had to start finding alternative solutions to its imports of Iranian electricity and gas.

In parallel to the financial crisis, Iraqis had to deal with a corrupted political system, economically and politically dependent on Iranian interference. The Iraqi Shi'a political elite, the Prime Minister and Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr were accused by the protesters of serving personal and foreign interests. For almost two decades, Iran had been placing proxies in key government roles within the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Interior, the Popular Mobilization Forces and the National Security Council. Hence, Iranian interfering in domestic policy had been considered by the protesters to be against Iraqi interests.⁵

The violence against the protesters

Numerous protesters took to the streets regarding the country's economy during 2019 with many demonstrations following also in 2020. While the protesters expressed the will of most of the population, they lacked a political or religious leader to represent and lead them. Nonetheless, these demands for economic reform and social justice were formed via the failure of the political system to ensure that the living conditions of the Iraqi people were maintained.⁶

The protests were located mainly in Baghdad, Basra and other regions of southern Iraq, with widespread participation from Shiites and some Sunnis, young people, students and unions of various trades and professions. It is of note that protests were shown support early on from the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Al-Hikma Movement.

Another crucial issue which persists is the handling of civil rights such as freedom of expression and peaceful protest. Iraqi security forces and paramilitary groups used extreme force against the protesters, leading to injured and the loss of life. At least 560 protesters died during the protests while

according to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, only 64 are related to protesters and activists. Several sources state the protesters as the cause of kidnappings on December 2019 since, activists and journalists known from the authorities for their significant role were targeted. It seems that these actions are connected to the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Iran-backed militias such as Asa'ib ahl al-Haqq and Kata'ib Hizballah.⁷

After the 2019 demonstrations, PM Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned, making way for Mustafa al Kadmini, a Prime Minister with a different political view. He plans to reshape the political and financial structure of Iraq. Kadmini's efforts were focused on handling the consequences of the financial crisis. Furthermore, he attempted to mitigate Iranian political interference in order to regain control over Iraqi society.

External intervention

On the one hand, as a regional power, Iran, underlined its clout by organizing and funding different militias groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq. In addition, Prime Minister Kadhmi attempted to shift the balance of power in regard to Iran by limiting the Iranian electric power imports and other goods. Furthermore, he regained the control of Iraqi Security forces by replacing commanders associated with Iran such as Dhi Qar Crisis Cell Commander General Jamil al-Shammari. Kadhmi's efforts threatened the long-term Iranian strategy of creating a client state controlled by political and militias proxies. To that effect, a possible political and economic independence of Iraq could create a future regional Iranian competitor close to its borders.⁸

On the other hand, the United States military is still present in the country with 3,000 troops, despite promises of evacuation.⁹ The United States aim at eliminating Iran's proxies but also at controlling the remaining ten thousand IS fighters. The main priority for the US seems to be to stay in such a strategically important state, to eliminate Iran's expansive policy and the IS threat, as well as to ensure a stable flow of the country's petroleum exports, as Iraq is still the third largest oil exporter worldwide.¹⁰

The Islamic State has lost most of its territory and bases within the country since 2017. Nevertheless, IS fighters still plan to regain their power through various attacks on Iraqi forces. For instance, near the West of Baghdad, the Islamic State ambushed tribal forces, killing eleven people. In such an unsafe environment, families are forced to leave displacement camps in order to find new accommodation during the winter, through an ongoing deadly pandemic and sporadic terrorist attacks. The Iraqi's government response during this entire crisis was the execution of the Iraqi prisoners linked with the terrorist organization. According to the 2005 counterterrorism law, the prisoners linked with the IS face the death penalty. As a result, UN experts and Amnesty demand the stay of executions since there are no fair trials and some studies estimate that there are about 20,000 prisoners with terrorism related charges linked with the Islamic State.¹¹

Conclusion

Iraq has not yet been able to get a handle on the catastrophic results of the IS war. It is an unstable, vulnerable state with a government that has proven unable to follow through with the country's reconstruction process. The economic crisis pushed the limits of the Iraqi system, effectively leading to protests within the country. Moreover, the militias use violence against the protesters in order to suppress the demonstrations. The current situation is even more complicated because of foreign interference, as regional and international powers are trying to assert their control on the quasi dependent and weakened country for their own interests. One could go as far as to say that without a political miracle the country could be facing total collapse.

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