



## transcending sectarianism and pursuing change: **an “Iraqi Autumn” ?**

Dimitris Papanikolaou \*

***The October 2019 protests that took place in Iraq resulted in hundreds of casualties and thousands of injuries reported. The protesters mainly reclaim dignified life conditions, higher employment rates and a political system liberated from corruption and external interference. The identity of the protests is not the usual one and the nature of the protesters’ demands also seems to be changing. The authorities had a spasmodic response launching an excessive wave of violence and exposing the government. However, various state and non-state actors participated in the protests and contributed each one in its way.***

\*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

The latest protests in Iraq that started on October 1st, 2019, caused more than 300 casualties and 8,000 reported injuries. Although Adel Abdul Mahdi, the Prime Minister (PM), came into power for less than a year, Iraqi people do not seem willing to give him a grace period. Iraqis have yet to witness any progress and believe that the government has failed to deliver on its promises. The scale of the protests and the rapidity of their escalation show that people are exasperated by the sociopolitical status quo and consider massive protests as the only efficient means to potentially achieve a change.

Their main demands are: more access to basic services such as electricity and potable water; more job opportunities; and the tackle of corruption within the political environment that has been characterizing post-2003 Iraq due to both internal and external factors. The protesters are not satisfied with the identity based – quota governance system (muhasasa) that has been applied, from 2003 to this day.

The protesters' demands are not unsubstantiated. During the previous years, Iraq gradually overcame the wreckage left behind after the civil war and the war against the Islamic State (IS) and found revenue from increased oil prices, resulting in a slight increase in its GDP in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the Iraqi government did not manage to capitalize on these fortunate developments. On the contrary, almost 17% of the economically active population is underemployed and youth unemployment rates stand at 25%. As for the corruption, Iraq is placed at the 168th position out of 180 states, according to Transparency International.<sup>2</sup>

Many factors distinguish the 2019 Iraqi protests from previous ones. First, the government's rash reaction and the use of live ammunition by the security forces, raising the death toll and causing many injuries. Second, Mahdi's administration declared curfews, elevated the army alert, blocked 75% of internet traffic and shut down media stations.<sup>3</sup>

The scarce presence and coverage of the Iraqi media during the protests is also an interesting issue. The stance of the media during the entire post-Saddam era never exteriorized the country's situation and always attempted to isolate Iraq from the rest of the world so as not to expose the country's corruption levels. Therefore, Iraqi media opted not to cover the unfolding protests.<sup>4</sup>

Both state authorities and the media were underprepared to deal with the nature of these protests. This explains the spasmodic reactions of the security forces and the famine coverage from the media. They are both designed to cope with sectarian and ethnic conflicts, but not with protests by mainly Shia people against a mainly Shia government.

However, the protests managed to put a lot of pressure on the government and to lead them to announce some agile reforms, a cabinet reshuffle, as well as an investigation panel to examine the provenience of the excessive violence and bring the actors responsible for the casualties into justice. As a result, 61 officials have been discharged.<sup>5</sup> In late October 2019, President Barham Salih announced that Mahdi was willing to resign if a replacement could be found and called for elections.

It is also worth mentioning the contribution and the positioning of some other actors to the unfolding of the protests which made the situation even more complex.

Regarding political and religious actors, Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani blamed Mahdi's government for the atrocities and has been supporting the protesters all along. It is worth mentioning that Sistani is trying to distance himself from the government, as he has often raised suspicions of being the mastermind behind post-2003 Iraq's political framework. Prominent politician and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, on his side, called other parties to support his proposal of discharging Mahdi's government.<sup>6</sup>

Moving on to another, equally important, issue, the external influence has been unfailingly present in the Iraqi political process after the US-led invasion and Iraqi people could not overlook this fact.

A noteworthy anti-Iranian sense has been accompanying the latest protests all over. Iraqi people are getting annoyed by the Iranian influence in their country's politics and the interference of Tehran in its national affairs. Many anti-Iranian chants have been heard from the demonstrators, who finally attacked the Iranian consulate in Karbala in early November, showing further irritation by Tehran's intervention in Iraq's politics.

One of the facts that kindled the protests was the government's decision to discharge Abdul Wahab al-Saadi – regarded as a “war hero” due to his large contribution during the war against IS – from the 2nd position of Iraq's Counterterrorism Service in late September.

Many Iraqis think that Iran lies behind al-Saadi's dismissal. Tehran would not approve a high-grade official who would not be submissive to its directions, particularly one that underwent military training by the US forces. In addition, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) members considered that his presence could undermine their influence in Iraq. It is a fact nevertheless, that Mahdi lately was trying to regain control over the PMU. Ad interim, the Tehran-backed PMU seems to continue closely to follow the situation in Iraq, as long as demonstrators and government both look unwilling to cease.<sup>7</sup>

During the protests in Baghdad, unidentified, masked snipers have been spotted opening fire indiscriminately. These fighters are likely to be Irani-aligned militias acting on their own, or reporting straightly to their superiors, in any case, they were not acting as per the Iraqi government's orders. The intervention of these unidentified elements, queries even more state authorities' power over externally-backed actors such as militias which are not hesitant to even use legitimate violence within the Iraqi state.<sup>8</sup>

October 2019 protests in Iraq showed us many emerging particularities. The protests are against the post-2003 political process in Iraq, the muhassasa system and all the actors who were part of it. The demonstrators do not reclaim any sectarian or ethnic privileges, but a dignified life with access to basic vital services and opportunities to develop within a state, free of corruption.

The protesters do not intend to bring down Mahdi, but any political leadership, regardless of titles. This time, it is not a Sunni revolt against a mainly Shia regime. Sunnis do not participate in the protests and do not wish for them to be labeled as sectarian. Aside from being mainly unfurled in Shia regions, they neither can be considered as merely Shia protests.

During 2018, there were already indicators that the nature of the protests in Iraq would transition from “identity” to “issue” motivated.<sup>9</sup> The protests do not have a specific religious, class, ethnic or sectarian background and represent a cross-section of the Iraqi society that outpaces and gradually leaves behind such differences. This time, the protesters' message consists of criticisms towards all post-2003 political regimes that go beyond sectarian divisions and aim to establish a cross-sectarian solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

Iraqis no longer believe in achieving a political – systemic change via institutional means. The protest culture that characterizes Iraqi people is evolving, going beyond identity motivations and more against the muhassasa system and its conservators.

The protestors, on their part, showed some characteristics that could, in the long term, reduce their impact. The absence of an organizational structure and a consolidated message can reduce the lifespan of the movements and in many cases, can expose them to instrumentalization by both internal and external, state or non-state actors.

Perhaps by maintaining momentum and the engagement of civil society, the protestors could capitalize on their impact.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, seeking existing or emerging potential leaders that embrace the same ideas and could represent their voices at an institutional level, might lead to seizing more crucial roles within the Iraqi sociopolitical context.

On the basis of that, Iraqi people may aspire to gradually achieve more changes in sectors such as infrastructure, education and media – among others. In addition, seeking to establish fruitful relations with other states on equal terms, could potentially promote changes and reforms instead of undermining the state's integrity and giving rise to protests against foreign interference.

The protests in Iraq keep escalating and the demonstrators do not seem willing to relinquish their ground. If the Iraqi government remains unable to enter a new reshaping process and apply drastic reforms immediately, it should get ready to deal with new groups of protesters – some of them perhaps even armed – in order to keep the situation under control.<sup>12</sup>

# REFERENCES

All links accessed on November 10, 2019

1. The Economist, "Iraq's government seems powerless to halt protests in the Shia heartland", (10/10/2019) <https://econ.st/2MtrQUW>
2. World Bank, "Iraq Overview", (01/04/2019) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview> and Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2018" <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>
3. Kaválek, Tomáš, "Violent Protests Hit Iraq Weakening Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahd", Prague Centre for Middle East Relations (PCMR), Policy Paper vol. 1 no. 1, 2019
4. Al Jazeera, "A platform for the Iraqi people and the protests", (13/10/2019) <http://bit.ly/33LFJDM>
5. Al-Saadi, Amir, "61 Iraqi officials sacked over protests", Anadolu Agency, (16/10/2019) <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/61-iraqi-officials-sacked-over-protests/1615776#>
6. Mamouri, Ali, "Sistani calls for justice as Iraqi protesters bleed", Al Monitor, (16/10/2019) <http://bit.ly/2C8oNvb> and Mamouri, Ali, "As anti-Iran sentiments rise, protests erupt in Iraq", Al Monitor, (01/10/2019) <http://bit.ly/2JMDTL8> and Alkhshali, Hamdi, "Iraq on edge after al-Sadr calls for removal of prime minister", CNN, (30/10/2019) <https://cn.it/2Cepe7e>
7. Mamouri, Ali, "As PMU gets involved in Iraqi protests, rumors about military coup spread", Al Monitor, (04/11/2019) <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/iraq-protests-karbala-baghdad-iran.html>
8. Reuters, "Exclusive: Iran-backed militias deployed snipers in Iraq protests – sources", (17/10/2019) <https://reut.rs/2PcnSBZ> and , "Iraq Protests: between Public Demands and the State Response", Situation Assessment, Unit for Political Studies, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, (20/10/2019)
9. Mansour, Renad, "Challenges to the Post-2003 Political Order in Iraq", The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Ui Paper No. 8, 2019
10. Fantappie, Maria, "Widespread Protests Point to Iraq's Cycle of Social Crisis", International Crisis Group, (10/10/2019) <http://bit.ly/32tsZBi> and Hasan, Harith, "Iraq Protests: A New Social Movement Is Challenging Sectarian Power", Carnegie Middle East Center, (04/11/2019) <http://bit.ly/371NibR>
11. McCaffray van den Toom, Christine and Alkadiri, Raad, "Can Iraq's Revolution Succeed? Reflections from a Protest Movement at a Crossroads", Middle East Centre Blog, LSE, (07/11/2019) <http://bit.ly/2O7Vej7>
12. Mansour Renad, "The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq" The Chatham House, (08/10/2019) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/basra-blueprint-and-future-protest-iraq>