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Protests in Iraq: Beyond Despair

October 7 | Initial Observations

Over the past week, mass protests and riots have spread throughout Iraq's major cities. Reportedly, more than 100 protestors have been killed, and more than 6,000 have been injured.

This is **not the first time** such protests have broken out in Iraq – particularly in Baghdad and southern Iraq. And like before, most of the protesters are Shi'ites.

However, there are **two main differences** between past protests and the current wave:

1. The demonstrations are not initiated or coordinated by any political parties. They are being organized at the **grassroots** level, and **no clear leadership** has been identified.
2. The current outburst of rage reflects **deep despair**. **People have lost any hope** that the Iraqi political system can effectively address the needs of Iraq and particularly its **young generation**. The population of Iraq is about 40 million people. Over 60% are under 25 years old. The three largest groups in Iraq are Arab [Shi'ites](#) (65%), Arab [Sunnis](#) (20%), and Kurds (14% - most of whom are Sunni).

Three main issues fuel the demonstrations:

- **The Economy** 31% of Iraqis live below the poverty line. The unemployment rate is 35%.
- **Corruption** According to reports, USD 450 billion of Iraq's oil revenues have disappeared.
- **Iran** Iranian involvement and intervention in Iraq.

Reactions within Iraq:

- Most prominent Shi'ite leaders in Iraq are demanding that the government (formed only one year ago) dissolve itself. This includes: Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani – the most powerful and influential Iraqi Cleric in Iraq; the head of the largest political coalition in Iraq "*Saeroun*" (*Marching On*), Muqtada al-Sadr; and former Iraqi Prime Minister, Mahdi Abd al-Hadi. In addition to dismantling the government, they are also calling for new elections to be run under the supervision of the United Nations.
- On the other hand, Hadi al-'Amiri, the Shi'ite leader of the second-largest political coalition- "*Fath*" (*Triumph*), Chief of one of the largest PMU Shi'ite militias – "*Badr*," who is very close to Iran, attacked the protesters, calling them "mercenaries" (reflecting Iran's displeasure with the protests). Reportedly an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'ite militia called "*Khorasan*" used live ammunition to disperse demonstrations in the city of Basra in southern Iraq.

Iran is Very Concerned:

Iran is alarmed by developments in Iraq. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, said the protests are "*a conspiracy aimed to divide Shi'ites.*" Iran is deeply involved and wields tremendous influence in Iraq, to the extent that Iraq's internal politics, as well as its regional policies, are largely dictated by Iran. It is Iran's intention to control Iraq and use it as a platform to further the Mullah regime's interests. Iraq is very significant for Iran:

There is a Large Shi'ite Population in Iraq (particularly in Southern Iraq):

- The majority of Iraq Arabs are Shi'ites.
- Southern Iraq is, to a large extent, an Iranian protectorate.
- The holiest Shi'ite shrines are in Karbala and Najaf in southern Iraq.
- The shrines attract millions of Iranian pilgrims and are an important income source and economic driver for Iran.
- The tourism industry generated by the Shrines provides jobs for the Iranian people and consumers for Iranian goods.

The Economies are Closely Tied:

- Iraqi consumers are a significant audience for Iranian commodities.
- Iraq and Iran share sprawling oil fields.
- Iran provides southern Iraq with electricity.

Iraq is Platform for Iran to further its own interests:

Iran has built a **political** and **military** power base in Iraq that enables the Mullah regime to dictate Baghdad's domestic and foreign policy to further Iranian interests.

- **Iran cultivates Iraqi politicians who are in favor of Iranian intervention in Iraq.**
 - Today, the second largest political camp in Iraq known as *Al-Fath* ("The Triumph") Coalition is made up of political parties and politicians affiliated with Iran and support Iranian involvement in Iraq.
 - The Iranian-affiliated parties had a significant role in selecting Iraq's latest Prime Minister.
- **One of Iran's main channels of influence in Iraq is through a network of armed Iraqi Shi'ite militias operating within a framework called *Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi* – The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).**
 - The PMU is a government-sanctioned official military force, which operates in parallel to the Iraqi armed forces.
 - The major militias are trained and guided by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, serve Iran and use Iraqi territory to further Iran's interests.

- PMU bases store Iranian weapons and short- and long-range rockets and missiles.
 - The PMU ignore the Iraqi government's official neutrality policy regarding the war in Syria. Just like Iran ordered Hezbollah – against Lebanese policy - to fight in Syria to do its bidding, PMU units are sent to Syria for the same purpose - to save Assad and to secure and expand Iranian control and influence in Syria
 - As part of Iran's goal to secure the land bridge, the PMU control the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing, allowing Iranian convoys of weapons and militants to cross from Iraq into Syria.
 - Accumulative information suggests that at least once, under Iranian orders, the PMU fired missiles from Iraq to Saudi Arabia.
- **The Iranian Corridor:**
 - Iran's goal is to be the regional superpower.
 - Iraq is key to that hegemonic vision.
 - One of the cornerstones of Iran's strategy towards this end is to establish and control an Iranian-controlled land corridor that stretches all the way from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea.
 - The Iranians need to control Iraq to establish and maintain the corridor.
 - Without Iraq, there is no corridor.
- **The Axis of Resistance:**
 - Iraq is a critical part of "The Axis of Resistance." A powerful web of allies and proxies developed and sponsored by the Iranians to help Iran achieve its regional and global goals. The Axis of Resistance is:
 - The Assad regime in Syria
 - Hezbollah in Lebanon
 - Palestinian terror organizations in the Gaza Strip including, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees
 - The Houthis in Yemen
 - The PMU In Iraq. (Today Iraq has the largest number of Iranian-backed militias in the region.)
- **Teheran Concerned Protests Might Evolve into Civil War:**
 - The Expansion and escalation of the riots might develop into a civil war in Iraq – a scenario not welcomed by the Mullah regime.
 - The disintegration of Iraq might force Iran to directly step in to secure its proxies and its control - a move which the Mullah regime would like to avoid for the following reasons:
 - Getting embroiled in a war in Iraq is a burden Iran's economy - crumbling under US heavy sanctions - cannot handle.

- The Iranian people are getting increasingly angry at the regime's eagerness to spend money on their militant proxies to further their hegemonic aspirations and to incite, chaos, bloodshed, and violence across the region while Iranians at home are becoming increasingly impoverished.
- One of the reasons the Mullah Regime has been so successful in expanding its influence throughout the region is because they use non-Iranian proxies to do their bidding while they are safe in Teheran. Direct military involvement in a war in Iraq will cause a massive Iranian death toll. Iranian soldiers coming back home in coffins will further fuel the anger and discontent of the Iranian people with the Mullah regime.
- ISIS emerged in Iraq in the Summer of 2013. This was a very fortuitous event for Iran. The Mullah regime - with the blessing of the Iraqi government and the silent consent of the international community – moved its military forces into Iraq "to fight terror." Such circumstances do not exist today. The Iranian regime will find it difficult to find excuses to enter Iraq, which will be supported by the Iraqi and the Iranian people.
- Under the banner of "fighting terror," Iran has also entrenched itself in Syria. The majority of Syrians are Sunni. Assad is 'Alawite, a minority (which is a distant branch of the Shi'ites) who has ruled Syria for the last 50 years. Iran justified its involvement in the war in Syria by saying Assad had invited Iran to help fight "Sunni militant terror groups." That argument cannot be duplicated in Iraq because an Iraqi civil war will primarily involve Iraqi Shi'ites. Iran will not be able to argue that it was invited by a predominantly Shi'ite Iraqi government to fight "Shi'ite terror groups" in Iraq.

Recommendations for US Policy vis-à-vis the current situation in Iraq:

The current events in Iraq offer the West an opportunity to curb the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and to restore the Iraqi government's authority gradually. While at the same time, weakening the Iranian military and political power bases in Iraq. (For more on this, please read my upcoming article: *Part 3*: Alarms on the Lebanese – Israel Border might be Last Wake-up Call for Western Leaders. Preemptive Actions to Prevent a Wide-Scale War in The Middle East*).

The point person the US can use for this purpose is Iraq's National Security Advisor Falih Al-Fayyadh. Fayyadh is also the Head of the PMU and the head of a relatively new (2017) Sunni political party called 'Atta. Fayyadh went to the US and met with senior US officials in DC in early October to discuss the security situation in Iraq. Fayyadh's father is the leader of a major, politically powerful tribal coalition in Iraq called Abu Amar. Reports indicate that Fayyadh is interesting in restraining Iran's intervention in Iraq. Reportedly, Al-Fayyadh, recently fired his deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, known to be very close with Iran. The difference of opinion vis-a- vis Iran's intervention in Iraq is apparently the background for Fayyadh removing his deputy.

Heading For Civil War?

Demonstrations in Iraq have the potential to evolve into a civil war. It is no wonder Iraq's most influential figure – Grand Ayatollah Ali al – Sistani urged the Iraqi government to seriously and address the demands of the protesters "before it's too late". It is likely the protests will continue and will expand and that more protestors will be killed. The riots are concentrated in southern Iraq. The Shi'ite tribes of southern Iraq are massively armed. They will not tolerate the killing of their sons by Iraqi police - let alone police reinforced by Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias – for long. Eventually, they will use their weapons. This scenario could rapidly deteriorate into an Iraqi civil war.

Iraq is the fifth-largest oil producer state in the world. It could and should have been heaven - but it is hell. Greedy and corrupt politicians have looted the country's wealth. The tribal culture which lauds weapons and military prowess has flooded the country with weapons. Tribal norms, values, ethnic, and tribal loyalties are paramount and undermine the authority of the state. And the Iranian Mullah regime, with a keen understanding of the complex fabric of Iraqi society, has sophisticatedly and cynically taken advantage of Iraq's illnesses to enhance its influence in Iraq.

Following the outbreak of the current demonstrations in Iraq, Bahraini intellectual Sawsan al-Shaer [wrote](#) an article in which she said the following. " *Sooner or later, the Arab people of the four Arab Capitols controlled by Iran's proxies (Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and San'aa) will kick out Iran, and the Arab traitors who sold their homeland to Iran are facing a dark fate. Their punishment will be a lesson for the next generations.*"

Iraq seemingly has reached a point that it is damaged beyond despair. The current wave of rage reflects this chapter in Iraq's troubled history. The protests in Iraq are very significant and have the potential to an impact reaching not only for Iraq but also for the region. A civil war in Iraq could potentially jeopardize Iran's Shiite Crescent vision. A civil war in Iraq could weaken Iran's power base in Iraq, and as a result, disrupt Iran's land corridor plan. That concern is the reason the Mullah regime and its proxies in Iraq rushed to condemn the riots in Iraq.

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For More Information on Iraq, please read the following articles:

- July 2019 [Belly Dancing in Baghdad](#)
- June 2019 [A Significant Nomination in Iraq](#)
- June 2019 [Critical Day in the Arab \(Persian\) Gulf](#)
- January 2019 [Increasing Probability for Large-Scale Collision Between Israel & Iranian Proxies in 2019](#)
- October 2018 [Iran Can't Fulfill Its Hopes of a Shia Corridor Without Iraq](#)
- September 2018 [Post-Election Iraq: A Spinning Whirlpool](#)
- August 2018 [Will Iran Deepen its Intervention in Iraq?](#)

[*Alarms on the Lebanese-Israeli Border Might be Last Wake Up Call for Western Leaders \(Part 1\)](#)

[*Alarms on the Lebanese-Israeli Border Might be Last Wake Up Call for Western Leaders \(Part 2\)](#)