

“The security and military apparatus that was trained, armed, and strengthened in the fight against the Islamic State is now being used to repress political activism against the Iraqi regime.”

## Southern Discontent Spurs an Iraqi Protest Movement

ZAHRA ALI AND SAFAA KHALAF

Since the summer of 2018, the oil-rich Iraqi province of Basra has experienced a wave of protest in response to shortages of drinking water and electricity as well as high unemployment. This protest movement has faced harsh political repression, and some of its supporters have been killed, yet it has spread across the largely Shia southern part of the country. To understand this movement—its social, economic, and political dimensions and the reasons for its repression—it is important to explore the political dynamics that have restructured the country since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Post-2003 Iraq is characterized by political violence, militarization, sectarianism, corruption, and social and economic crisis.

The sectarian violence and political instability that embroil Iraq today did not simply occur spontaneously. They were foreseeable consequences of a set of policy choices made by occupation authorities and supported by the new Iraqi elite of former exiles brought to power by the toppling of the old regime. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the Gulf War (1990–91), the violent and repressive nature of the Baath authoritarian regime, and the general impoverishment brought on by sanctions imposed in 1990 by the United Nations Security Council had already torn the social and cultural fabric of Iraq. The end of Saddam Hussein’s long rule only pushed the process of social and political implosion to its extreme. Instead of “state building,” the invasion and occupation resulted in the destruction of the already weakened Iraqi state and a fragmented sense of Iraqi nationhood.

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The destruction of the state was engineered through the “de-Baathification” campaign launched by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and supported by the new elite. The dissolution of the Iraqi army and administration forced hundreds of thousands of qualified public servants and soldiers into unemployment. The process was used by leaders of the new ruling class to marginalize many Sunnis who had formed the social elite under the former regime, from university professors to bureaucrats. Perceived by the Sunni political leadership as a tool of discrimination, de-Baathification also deprived the new state of experienced personnel.

The US occupation administration integrated highly politicized Shia Islamist militias into the army. Paul Bremer, the former US diplomat who headed the CPA, put in place aggressive economic policies that infuriated Iraq’s business leaders, some of whom responded by funding the insurgency. Out of the legacy of Hussein’s regime, Bremer kept only the laws that restricted collective bargaining and trade unions. In September 2003, he introduced a set of laws that lowered corporate taxes from almost 40 to 15 percent, permitted foreign companies to own 100 percent of Iraqi assets, and entirely exempted corporations working with the CPA from taxation. Foreign firms, especially oil companies, were allowed to sign to leases or contracts that could remain in effect for forty years; foreign banks were favored with the same terms.

The occupation’s Transitional Administrative Law was supposed to be an interim constitution during the period of provisional governments, which lasted from 2003 until the adoption of the new constitution by a referendum in October 2005. The members of the Iraqi Governing Council, which served as the interim government from

July 2003 to June 2004, were chosen by the CPA according to ethnic, religious, and sectarian quotas—a rupture with the Iraqi political system that was based, at least in principle, on equal citizenship. The process was exclusionary and hierarchical: Iraqis were treated as advisers instead of as the real decision makers, and all the groups that had been critical of the invasion were excluded, such as the Sunnis and the Shia faction led by Moqtada al-Sadr, a politically influential cleric.

This process carried all the seeds of the failure of the state's so-called reconstruction. Since 2003, following the CPA's encouragement of a fragmented Iraqi identity based on ethnic, sectarian, and religious affiliations, the new political system has been defined by communal differences. Positions are reserved for representatives of the various communities. Under this communal quota system, the president must be Kurdish, the prime minister a Shia, the president of the parliament a Sunni, and so forth. This principle is applied to all ministries and institutions, including the security apparatus.

The US military's repression of uprisings against the occupation—especially in Fallujah and Najaf—and the rise of militias associated with political parties, benefiting from the power vacuum, all took a sectarian shape. The exacerbation of sectarian conflict reached its extreme limit during the 2006–7 civil war.

After the fall of Saddam, but even more so following the dreadful events of 2006–7, sectarian violence reorganized Iraq's society and territory. This is visible in the division of Baghdad into homogeneously Sunni and Shia neighborhoods, fragmented by concrete walls and checkpoints. Sunnis felt threatened by the rise to power of competing conservative Shia militias, the integration of armed Shia groups into the state's security apparatus, and the Shia Islamist parties' consolidation of central power, which allowed them to implement sectarian and discriminatory policies.

## HIERARCHY OF MARTYRDOM

The nature of the new political elite that came back from decades of exile is also central to Iraq's problems. It was dominated by Kurds and Shia. Having been consigned to the margins by the Baath regime, they had their own experiences and collective memories of the nation. Their claims of victimhood and demands for compensation for the

marginalization and oppression they had suffered contributed to a redefinition of Iraqi nationhood. The idea of belonging to an ethnosectarian group that suffered from the repression of the Baath regime has evolved into an ideology of *mazlumiyya*—victimhood—and, for some, revanchism.

The *mazlumiyya* ideology also shapes the new state's official narratives. The Baath regime is depicted as having been driven by bloody communalism—both ethnic and sectarian. In the post-2003 context, it is rare to find more nuanced viewpoints and narratives that are not built around glorifying the Iraqi opponents of the Baath regime.

The area that is today Iraqi Kurdistan developed its own political agenda, with narratives and symbols of Kurdish nationhood and the failed Kurdish uprising in 1991. In Arab Iraq, the sectarian divide has only deepened. A Shia revival emerged with narratives of victimhood, affirmation of independent political and religious history, and shows of force. Shia rituals and symbolism have become prominent. The Baath regime never banned these

rituals, but controlled Shia religious institutions. Shia religious authorities can now deploy their influence independently of the state. Shia pilgrims from all over the world are coming to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and to other Shia shrines, turning

these rituals into mass events attended by millions of people. Meanwhile, the Sunni population has lost its symbolic majority status (though it should be noted that the Baath regime only privileged specific tribes and clans) with the moves by the Kurds and Shia from the margins to the center of political power.

Most of the new regime's welfare measures favor families of the *shuhada* (martyrs). But the hierarchy of martyrs and the different levels of citizenship associated with it by the former regime have been totally revised in post-2003 Iraq. Victims of the Baath regime are entitled to land and financial compensation for their losses and exile; victims of the sectarian conflicts can apply for more modest compensation.

The new political elite that returned from exile decided that the first order of *shuhada* would be composed of those connected with the ruling Shia elite who died fighting against Iraq in the Badr Brigade alongside Iranian forces during the 1980–88 war. Those who died in Iraqi prisons under the Baath regime are considered martyrs of the second

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order. Families of the martyrs of Saddam's era—those who died or were imprisoned while fighting for Iraq against Iran or in the First Gulf War—are now excluded from privileges.

Thus the new regime created a new hierarchical structure according to its own vision—tinted by ethno-sectarianism—of who is a good or bad citizen. However, this hierarchy of citizenship, despite being presented as redressing past injustices suffered by the Shia population, mainly benefits the members of the Shia political elite in power since 2003. The Shia south has been completely neglected and denied compensation.

### GROWING EXASPERATION

In Iraq, the impact of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings was at first more visible in the Kurdish region, especially in Sulaymaniyah, where the Maidani Azadi movement followed its Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts by demanding more democratic and transparent governance, expressing discontent with the autocratic hegemony of the two main Kurdish parties. In the rest of Iraq, during Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's first term from 2006 to 2010, there were no mass protests because the country was engaged in a sectarian war; the opposition to the new political system was mainly an armed insurgency. It was only during Maliki's second term that protests started.

February 25, 2011, was called the “Day of Rage.” Thousands took to the streets. Security forces killed 20 demonstrators, but the government agreed to set a 100-day deadline to implement a list of reforms under pressure from the Sadrist and the protesters.

The 2014 conquest by the Islamic State (ISIS) of parts of northern Iraq including Mosul, the country's second-largest city, intensified discontent with the government. Ordinary citizens, civil society, and women's rights activists launched grassroots protests on July 31, 2015. These protests quickly turned into a massive popular movement—supported even by the most prominent Shia cleric, Ayatollah Sistani—that demanded radical reforms. Across Iraq, from Basra to Baghdad's Tahrir Square, this movement expressed citizens' growing exasperation with the corruption and mismanagement of the post-2003 governments. For many, the state's failures have been epitomized by a lack of public services and frequent electric-

ity outages. Some demonstrators contended that the new regime's corruption and sectarian politics were directly responsible for the formation and spread of ISIS.

Every Friday, demonstrators gathered in the main public squares of Iraq's big cities, including Najaf, Nasriyah, and Basra, and echoed the slogans of the protests in central Baghdad: “*Bi-ism il-din baguna al-haramiyya*” (In the name of religion we have been robbed by looters) and “*Khubz, huriyya, dawla medeniyya*” (Bread, freedom, and a civil state). The protests were launched by ordinary citizens unaffiliated with any political party, along with civil society activists and parts of the left, especially the Iraqi Communist Party—a member of its leadership committee, Jassim al-Hilfi, became a leading figure in the movement.

The Sadrist movement joined the protests too. Sadr himself took part in a sit-in that started on March 18, 2016, in front of the concrete walls surrounding Baghdad's Green Zone, which contains the main central government buildings and foreign

embassies. Many civil society and women's rights activists were critical of the Sadrists' involvement and possible hijacking of the popular movement, but others took a more nuanced view. Hanaa Edwar, a prominent women's rights and civil society

activist and head of the Iraqi Al-Amal Association, a nongovernmental organization, has argued that Sadr's participation pushed his large social base among the Shia poor into non-sectarian activism revolving around more inclusive notions of citizenship and rights.

Pro-government thugs armed with sticks and knives routinely attacked protesters. An assault on a demonstration held on February 12, 2017, which was organized by civil society groups under the umbrella of Tahalef al-Islahiyun—the Coalition of the Reformers—left ten people dead, including a police officer, and hundreds wounded. The demonstrators denounced corruption and called for the abolition of the ethnosectarian quota system as well as reform of the electoral law to give more weight to nonsectarian, small, and secular parties.

The voter turnout rate in the May 2018 elections appears to have been even lower than the officially announced 44.5 percent, reflecting the strength of a boycott involving many of the youth who participated in the protest movement that began in 2015. Many of the leading political figures

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since 2003, including those considered “secular” or nonsectarian, performed poorly in the elections.

Economic factors, along with persistent violence and insecurity, may explain the general exasperation of the population and the decline of the political elite. The poverty rate is over 20 percent, and about a quarter of the labor force is unemployed or underemployed, especially women and youth. This is despite Iraq’s oil resources, which yielded \$40 billion in revenue in the first half of 2018.

Since the May 2018 elections, Iraq has experienced a new wave of mass protests that started in the oil-rich province of Basra. Spreading across the Shia south, this protest movement has shown its determination to keep its distance from formal political groups and any centralized organization. It is composed predominantly of young men, and its slogans go beyond the call for functioning state services. Chanting “There is no homeland!” and “No, no, no to parties!” the protesters demand radical political change.

### **BASRA’S TOXIC WEALTH**

It is not surprising that Basra, a port city of some 2.5 million people, would be the epicenter of discontent and protest against the Iraqi government. In addition to shortages of drinking water and electricity and high unemployment, Basra also suffers from pollution, inadequate sanitation, and health problems.

Iraq exports more than 4.3 million barrels of oil per day, of which 3.5 million are extracted from Basra. Iraq is almost totally dependent on Basra’s oil and gas resources to finance its budget, including the 17 percent allocated to the Kurdish region. According to the Ministry of Planning, less than 5 percent of oil revenue is allocated to Basra.

Basra’s electricity, water, sewage, and communications systems need complete reconstruction. But austerity measures implemented by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in the name of containing corruption allowed the further deterioration of public services and infrastructure.

Basra’s temperature reaches nearly 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, making it one of the hottest places on Earth. Its drinking water is polluted and contains high salt levels. Foreign oil companies are intensifying extraction and expanding onto land that had been dedicated to agriculture. The decline of the agricultural sector is further reducing job opportunities at a time when the province is mired in an unemployment crisis.

Due to the decline of state support and rapid population growth, Basra has become a reservoir of unemployed youth who are turning their anger and frustration against the central government and the political system. The government’s attempts to contain the protest movement only fuel it. When the demonstrations started, Abadi promised Basrawis that the government would create 10,000 new jobs; 300,000 candidates applied. The Finance Ministry soon announced that these new jobs could not be created after all, citing budgetary limitations.

Basra’s oil deposits represent 59 percent of Iraq’s total. The province produces the equivalent of \$60 million per day. The extraction of this extraordinary wealth releases tons of toxic emissions that many link to a proliferation of cancers. Some 15 to 20 cases of child cancer are reported every day in one of Basra’s precarious hospitals; the province’s health infrastructure is terribly lacking. Cancer screening and treatment facilities are dealing with a shortage of drugs and struggle to cope with the growing number of patients.

### **GEOPOLITICS OF WATER**

Global climate models predict that the southern Euphrates River valley will face chronic drought in the next two decades. But geopolitics has already worsened the water crisis in Basra province. In the past 10 years, Iran has diverted several rivers that cross into Iraq, resulting in severe water loss.

The diversion of the Alwand and Karun rivers had drastic effects on agricultural land in Basra, Wasit, and Diyala. In 2011, the Iranian government approved a project to build 152 dams. Tehran progressively diverted the Karun, which flows directly into the Shatt al-Arab, the river on whose banks Basra is located, and constructed its biggest dam on the Karkheh, which flows into the marshes shared by Nasriyah and Basra, and is crucial to maintaining their level of fresh water. Fifteen dams were constructed on the Karun alone.

Iran also released salted drainage water that flooded parts of the border area in Basra province. In November 2017, the salted water coming from Iran reached unprecedented levels, threatening to overtop a dike that was built during the Iran-Iraq War.

This overflow reached Basra when it was already struggling with high levels of salinity, desertification, loss of agricultural land, and hydrocarbon pollution. The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights reported more than 20,000 cases of poisoning related to the pollution and high

salt levels in the water. The scarce and precarious health infrastructure in the province has struggled to deal with the crisis. The Iraqi agricultural sector reports that Iranian saline overflow caused severe damage to the area around the Shatt al-Arab, including farmland.

In June 2018, Iran launched another provocative measure, cutting Basra's expensive electrical supply. (Iran had been supplying electricity to Iraq due to its damaged infrastructure.) Tehran claimed that Iraq had not paid its bills and that its debt had risen to an intolerable level. In any case, Basra's inhabitants had to endure an electricity cut in the middle of the hot summer.

Some argue that Iran was sending a warning to the United States, which had just announced that it would pull out of the international Iran nuclear agreement and reimpose harsh economic sanctions to prevent Tehran from exporting its oil. Iran may have sought to show it had the ability to provoke a revolt in Basra that could have led to the toppling of the pro-US prime minister, Abadi, who was already weakened by the May election results.

Instead, protesters stormed the Iranian consulate and Iranian-run oil facilities as well as the offices of Iran-backed political parties in Basra. They burned down the consulate, chanting "*Iran barra, barra, Basra tabqa hura*" (Iran out, out, Basra will remain free).

### MILITIA RULE

For the past several years, Iraqi security forces and militias led by members of the political elite have violently repressed protests in Basra. A 27-year-old father of three, Hayder al-Maliki, was killed in June 2010 in Basra's city center. Muntather al-Hilfi, 17, was killed in July 2015 in a township north of Basra. Both were unemployed and peacefully demonstrating for electricity and other basic services. Their deaths provoked the local population to take to the streets and led to the spread of massive protests across the country.

On July 8 this year, a group of young unemployed men gathered around the foreign oil companies' offices in the north of Basra to assert their right to jobs. The Iraqi security forces violently repressed the demonstration, killing a 26-year-old father of three, Saad Al-Mansuri. Basra residents responded with protests, which spread to other major cities in southern Iraq.

Iraqi authorities underestimated this latest wave of protests. They assumed that it would, like the previous ones, fade away under state pressure. However, the situation took a dramatic turn: a dozen protesters have been killed at the hands of the security forces and various armed groups, and more than 600 wounded. Hundreds have been arrested, and many have been abused before being released.

To repress peaceful protesters, tear gas imported from Europe, tanks, and armored vehicles have been used by the national police and the American-trained antiterrorism forces that were deployed against the Islamic State in Mosul. The government even cut the Internet and the telecommunications system for more than a week in July. While Abadi promised to prosecute the demonstrators' killers, the Interior Ministry described the protests as "serial sabotage." Through its media channels and statements, the Iraqi political elite has depicted the protesters as "saboteurs" led by "foreign agents" or Baathist affiliates, without offering any proof for these accusations.

On September 25, Suad al-Ali was shot dead in Basra in broad daylight. She was president of the Basra-based al-Weed al-Alaiami for Human Rights, a civil society organization dedicated to rights advocacy and social justice, and had participated in the peaceful protest movement. Other human-rights activists and lawyers who support the movement have been targeted, including the lawyer Jabbar Mohammed Karam al-Bahadli, who was killed on July 23 after petitioning for the release of protesters detained by the security forces.

Their deaths indicate the intensity with which this movement has been repressed. Protesters have faced a widespread campaign of surveillance and arrests. The security and military apparatus that was trained, armed, and strengthened in the fight against the Islamic State is now being used to repress political activism against the Iraqi regime. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly criticized the government's abuses, which are often hidden under the guise of antiterrorism operations.

The Iraqi regime is structured by militarization. Armed groups and militias deeply embedded in the sectarian and corrupted political elite that came to power in 2003 have been institutional-

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*The new political system is based on communal divisions.*

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ized as part of the government's security services since their involvement in the anti-ISIS campaign. The normalization of these groups, such as Hadi al-Ameri's Iran-backed paramilitary Badr Organization, Qais al-Khazali's League of the Rightous, Ammar al-Hakim's Ashura Brigades, Kataeb Hezbollah, and Sadr's militia, was reinforced through their participation in the parliamentary elections this May. Leaders of paramilitary forces and militias are now members of parliament despite being responsible for the intimidation, kidnapping, and killing of civil society activists and many other human rights violations in Mosul and elsewhere in Iraq. Some of these groups have also participated in the civil war in Syria, backing the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

In Basra, Iran-backed militias linked to the Iraqi political elite are competing with each other for control of the province's rich resources. A system of cronyism dominates public administration. Jobs and resources are distributed in exchange for allegiance. As a result of the monopoly of state resources by these militias, young unemployed men, seeking to escape poverty and a desperate future, enlist as fighters or are drawn into criminal operations. The proliferation of drugs such as crystal methamphetamine among Basra's youth has led many into the underground economy.

There are now around 100 such militias in the country. But the Iraqi government, instead of strengthening the civilian side of the state and preventing the militarization of society, allocated a stipend to 122,000 armed men in paramilitary groups in its 2018 budget. At the same time, it announced a hiring freeze in government employment, citing a shortage of resources.

When British troops arrived in Basra in 2003, they attempted to purchase stability by forging alliances with militias and disbursing around 70 million pounds (\$90 million), which was supposedly intended to pay for infrastructure. Instead, this money went to finance political parties and armed factions. The British, who governed the province until the end of 2007, committed a very dangerous mistake by subsidizing these armed groups, hidden under local shell companies. They became the powerful militias ruling Basra today.

As an act of protest and an attempt to contain popular anger, members of Basra's provincial council sent a petition to the central government this July, calling on it to grant the province autonomy—the latest in a series of such petitions since

2003. The council is also protesting the government's failure to implement an agreement that was supposed to guarantee Basra its fair share of oil revenue, insisting that these funds should be returned to the province to enable the rebuilding of its infrastructure and services.

## CITIZENS DISUNITED

This time, the protests in the Shia south have not spread to the Sunni provinces, many of which have been devastated in the course of the many military campaigns from the 2003 invasion to the war against ISIS in Mosul and other cities. Millions of inhabitants, living either in camps or in terrible conditions at home, fear the stigma of being associated with "terrorism" and the threat of repression if they dare to participate in demonstrations. Nor has the protest movement inspired a following in Iraqi Kurdistan despite the economic crisis afflicting the region.

What has also distinguished this wave of protests from the one that began in 2015 is that it is led by ordinary citizens and not by any organized civil society groups and political parties. The lack of a centralized organization in a way has made the work of repression easier for the security forces. In 2016, when the protest movement composed of organized civil society groups, part of the Iraqi left, and Sadr supporters broke into Baghdad's Green Zone and entered the office of the prime minister and the parliament building, the authorities did not use force against them.

The May election results further institutionalized militias and paramilitary forces. The formation of the new government involved the same old political figures negotiating the distribution of ministries. Although Abadi was replaced as prime minister by Adel Abdul Mahdi, thanks to a compromise with the Sadrist alliance, Mahdi too is a member of the Shia Islamist elite that came to power under the US-led occupation in 2003.

As long as the same corrupt sectarian elite dominates political life in Iraq, the repression of radical social movements will continue with total impunity. This repression is justified and made possible by the political economy and mechanisms of the "war on terror." Activists are being targeted and marginalized, and no structural changes are likely to occur in Basra. The political elite in Baghdad—behind concrete walls and checkpoints—is still utterly disconnected from the social realities of the rest of the population. ■