

Protests in Iraq:

Have They Gone Past the Point of No Return?

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Photo by Murtadha Sudani - Anadolu Agency

- What are the main reasons behind the ongoing protests?**
- Who are the protesters and what are they demanding?**
- To what extent does the Islamic Republic of Iran have an influence in Iraq?**
- How do regional and international actors address the political situation?**
- What are the possible scenarios after the Prime Minister's resignation?**

Introduction

Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, many Middle Eastern states have faced massive public protests aiming to shift the political system towards democracy. While several countries were dragged into civil wars and political instability, some countries such as Lebanon, Algeria, Iran and Iraq are still witnessing the same process. Particularly, demonstrations in Iraq have become a significant issue. Since the beginning of October 2019, widespread unrest has engulfed Baghdad with thousands of demonstrators protesting the regime due to a high unemployment rate, lack of services, and rampant corruption. The Shia-majority population revolted against the pro-Shia government which has had a close relationship with Tehran. Iran's vast influence in Iraq and its high involvement in the protests made Iraq once again a conflict zone in the US-Iran feud. The country has also become an arena of the power struggle among regional and international actors who want to benefit from the political uncertainty.

While the protests continue at full steam, the death rate increases every day due to the excessive use of force by the Iraqi security forces and unidentified attacks on protesters. The people on the street, who are largely under 30, have demanded the resignation of the government, chanting ["We do not want this corrupt government"](#). The death toll has reached [more than 400](#) and 15,000 people have been wounded in the mass uprisings despite [the United Nations' call](#) to end the use of lethal force by Iraqi security forces. Until very recently, there was no substantial policy change from the government's side except [President Barham Salih's statement](#). He announced that Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi is willing to resign if political parties agree on his replacement. He also promised to [draft a new electoral law](#) that would make it possible for young people to join the political process. On the 1st of December, the [Iraqi Parliament accepted PM Mahdi's resignation](#), which came after [Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's call](#) in parliament to reconsider their support for the government. Mahdi's resignation was welcomed by the protesters; however, they remain determined to end the sectarian-based political and social system in Iraq.

This policy outlook aims to analyse the core issues behind the protests, the people's demands and the level of participation, from an empirical perspective. Considering the significance of Iraq's position in the Middle East, this study examines the responses of regional and international powers. Last but not least, it assesses possible scenarios that can result from the recent demonstrations with respect to Iraq's future.



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Underlying Reasons for the Protests

In recent years, Iraq has witnessed protests of varying sizes in different parts of the country. [Last year, Basra](#), an oil-rich but impoverished city in the south, saw massive demonstrations against the government due to the lack of services. Currently, the country is confronting its most significant protests since the fall of former president Saddam Hussein, which could be a critical juncture for the political system in Iraq. However, instead of grasping the essence of the issue, the current government has tried to maintain the status-quo by ignoring people's demands. Empty promises made by the government have aggravated the citizenry as they are fed up with a litany of previous broken commitments. There are many different reasons behind the public anger against the government, but the most critical factors are sectarian-based governance, long-term corruption and the lack of basic services.

Since the US invasion in 2003, Iraq has been governed by the system called 'ethnic-power sharing', which was initiated by Washington and produced a divided country from the outset. During the rule of Nouri al-Maliki, the former Prime Minister of Iraq between 2006-2014, the power of sectarianism was engrained in the system by having a Shiite prime minister, a Kurdish president and a Sunni speaker of parliament. This state-sponsored sectarianism has also fragmented the society at large, which was convinced [by the idea that Iraq did not have a national identity](#). After years of conflict and instability, the last federal elections in 2018 were considered the beginning of a new era in Iraq. However, [a substandard voter turnout \(at 44.52 per cent\)](#) exhibited that Iraqi people did not consent to the governance of the same political elite that had ruled the country since 2003. The sectarian-based political factions were more apparent in these elections than the previous ones in 2005, 2010 and 2014. Five Shia coalition parties, two Sunni blocs, four Kurdish parties, and many Iraqis comprising of mostly Sunnis and Kurds boycotted the elections because of the ethno-sectarian blocs and dissatisfaction with the political parties.

The division of society made some groups' hands stronger to increase their power. Saairun Alliance, headed by Moqtada al-Sadr who is a Shia cleric and leader of Saraya al-Salam militia group, [gained 54 seats](#) as the winner of the elections. The party was followed by [another coalition 'Fateh Alliance' with 47 seats](#), led by Hadi al-Ameri. He is the commander of the Badr Organization, one of the largest groups inside the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units) paramilitary forces. These results once again disappointed the Iraqi people as they preserved sectarianism. After the elections, the formation of the government took five months; a signal of the political turbulence in the country. Moreover, the Shia parties' close connection to Iran ascertains the claims of Iran's invisible hand in Iraqi politics. Some political parties follow orders coming from the Iranian Supreme Leader rather than representing the Iraqi people.

Another central issue is the long-standing corruption, which people were protesting against from the very beginning of the demonstrations. According to [Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2018](#), Iraq is ranked as the 168th country from 180 listed countries, classified as highly corrupted. Alongside the sectarian-based patronage system, corruption has caused inequality leading to poor service delivery and an enormous waste of public funds. As the [fourth-largest oil exporter](#) among OPEC members, Iraq's largest economic revenue comes from crude oil, but the revenue feeds groups of oligarchs instead of being invested in the public interest. Therefore, people are exasperated with the concentration of wealth in the hands of a [corrupt political elite](#) who strive to maintain the status quo. Since 2003, [\\$320 billion has been stolen](#) through contracts to fill individual pockets and spread patronage.

Iraq still has derelict, post-conflict infrastructure that has brought problems in providing vital services such as employment, education, water, electricity and healthcare. Because of rampant corruption and a patronage system with ill governance, a vast majority of the young population has struggled with unemployment for a long time. According to [the World Bank](#), the youth unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group is 16.52% in 2019; and it is much higher when it comes to the young population under 30. While the jobless population blames corruption and mismanagement, the Iraqi government claims that the unemployment problem originates from long periods of conflict against Daesh. Notably, the true cause seems different from what the government has been reiterating. According to the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#), this young population has been left on the side-lines by being excluded from formal jobs despite their educational background. In addition to the high unemployment rate in the country, many Iraqis have limited access to clean water, electricity and primary healthcare services. According to UNICEF, 3.3 million children require humanitarian assistance, including education, access to water and sanitation. 22.5 per cent of the

population lived under poverty in 2014, and the rate has even doubled to 41.2 per cent in Daesh-occupied areas as reported by the World Bank.

All these issues have become a common thread amongst the people protesting against the government. At the beginning of the protests, people took the streets with the demand of the fulfilment of basic needs. After the second month of demonstrations, people are now saying that they will not go home until the government collapses and new elections are announced.

Who are the Protesters, and What Do They Demand?

Unlike previous small-scale demonstrations, these protests have been unique in terms of their intensity in different parts of the country. Hundreds of thousands of people, composed of largely Shia Iraqis, have poured into streets throughout Baghdad against a Shia-dominated government. Protesters have centred in the Jumhuriya Bridge, which leads to the Green Zone where the government and diplomatic offices are located. Also, [thousands of protesters in southern provinces such as Dhi Qar, Maysan, Diwaniyah, Basra, Muthana, Babil, Najaf, Karbala and Wasit governorates](#), where Shia Arabs mainly reside, have gone out on the streets to demand regime change.

The greater share of demonstrators consists of young people [under the age of 25, a segment that equals almost 60 per cent of the Iraqi population](#). This new generation has grown up during the ensuing chaos of the US invasion in 2003, when the country's integrity was dismantled after the dissolution of the Iraqi army. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, youth have been living in the system based on sectarian divisions. In contrast with the previous generation who complained about Shia oppression, young protesters fight for a total collapse of these sectarian lines. Similar to youth mobilisations in Tunisia and currently in Lebanon, Iraq's new generation dreams of a new society where every segment is represented in politics. They think that presently no politician or party fulfils or represents their rights and demands. They demand a just government, free from any group's domination, and a social system based on citizenship and equal rights. They ['want a new Iraq'](#) to end the corrupted government and transform the system. Iraqi people are exhausted of having to pay bribes for everything ranging from getting a job to any essential services. Some protesters say that they fight not only for themselves, but for future generations because ['there is no future in Iraq'](#).

In this regard, protesters said that [the resignation of the](#)

[Prime Minister would not be enough](#); it is just a step leading up to the desired collapse of the kleptocracy. People do not pay heed to statements of snap elections without a systemic change, because they have lost their faith in the ballot box after the last federal elections in 2018. During his one-year administration, PM Abdul Mahdi promised several times to solve fundamental problems of the country. The government's failure to fulfil promises disappointed Iraq's populace once again, with PM Mahdi's vague reform statements not realistic in any way to satisfy the protesters. Presently, Iraqi streets are full of demonstrators who are celebrating Mahdi's resignation, but concurrently also sceptical about the next steps of the parliament.



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'Bloodbath' in the Streets of Iraq

After two months of unrest, the number of impacted protesters increases each day because of the security forces' brutal crackdown. Instead of paying attention to people's demands in the streets, the Iraqi government has chosen to squash the protests with the use of lethal force. Iraqi security forces and unknown groups use live bullets, heavy tear gas canisters, and smoke grenades against the peaceful demonstrators holding Iraqi flags. More than 400 people have been killed, and nearly 15,000 people injured. Amnesty International has called the security forces' response as a ['bloodbath'](#) and has urged the Iraqi government to protect its people's right to live. 29 November was one of [the bloodiest days](#) when more than 50 people were killed by the security forces in Baghdad and southern provinces of Najaf and Nasiriyah. Apart from killings, beatings, and arbitrary detentions, unidentified armed groups have [abducted many activists](#) that were helping injured protesters during the uprisings. An unknown masked assailant killed one of the well-known Iraqi activists Hussein Adel Madani and his wife Sara Madani in Basra. Iraqi security forces and intelligence have actively tried to erode the networks among protesters with detentions and abductions.

Non-participant Iraqis?

Even though youth in Sunni-majority regions complain about similar problems, they haven't participated in the protests due to [concern over accusations of affiliation with Daesh](#). Since the declaration of the end of Daesh in Iraq in December 2017, the Sunni population in previous Daesh captured areas have been charged with being Daesh members or supporters. Thousands of people have been taken into custody with incorrect reports and information, and [Hashd members have threatened them](#) with having to pay thousands of dollars to clear their names. While Sunni Arabs have these fears and concerns, the Kurdish population in the north are anxious about a different set of problems. In recent years, Kurdish people have also joined [mass uprisings](#) against the administration because of corruption and unemployment. However, today, most of the population consider [the situation better than the south](#). Contrary to the demands of Shia protesters, they are concerned about [losing their rights and jeopardising the autonomy of KRG](#), in the possibility of the rewriting of the Iraqi constitution. Therefore, it seems that protests will continue to take place in Shia-majority areas, with other groups remaining silent as long as their well-being is preserved.

"Iran Out! Iran Out!" People against Iran's Fingerprints

The protesters reject Iran's growing influence in Iraqi politics and security since 2003. They accuse the Iranian government of exploiting Iraq in the pursuit of their interests. The demonstrators protested outside the Iranian consulate in Karbala in the evening of 3rd of November by chanting ['Iran out, out!'](#) and burning the Iranian flag. Protesters are seen throwing [their shoes at portraits of Ali Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani](#), as they did against Saddam Hussein's portrait many years ago. During the demonstrations in the Shia holy city of Karbala, [unidentified masked shooters](#) opened fire against protesters in 29th October, leaving 18 people killed and hundreds injured. This incident reinforced the rumours that Iran-linked groups are involved in the attacks in Karbala. Protesters blame Iran-backed forces like Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU) for the violence and the killing of peaceful protesters, with Hashd al-Shaabi also [deploying snipers on Baghdad rooftops](#) to target them. Lately, protesters stormed the [Iranian consulate in Najaf](#) and set fire to the building on 27 November.

Iran's growing influence in Iraq is an indisputable fact, but their involvement in the protests has exposed the significance of their role. For example, at the beginning of the up-

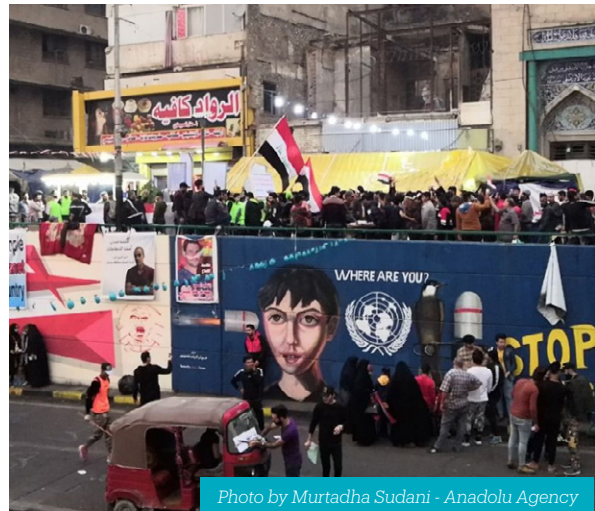
risings, Muqtada al-Sadr tried to convince his rival Hadi al-Ameri to force PM Abdul Mahdi to leave office. However, [a secret meeting in Baghdad in 30th of October by Qasem Soleimani](#), commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, changed the course of events. Soleimani asked al-Ameri and his militia leaders to support PM Abdul Mahdi in order to prevent the dismissal of the Prime Minister. His direct intervention proved Iran's influence at such levels and their ability to destinate Iraq's future and keep Iran's interests preserved. After Soleimani's visit, the level of violence has increased considerably with unknown men and militia groups regularly opening fire on protesters. According to [Amnesty International's recent analysis](#), a substantial part of lethal projectiles such as tear gas and smoke grenades are manufactured by the Defence Industries Organization of Iran.

Tehran's involvement in the Iraqi protests arises from their concerns that it may create a domino effect in Iran. Massive uprisings against the Iranian regime have already taken place in different parts of the country. After the government increased [the price of gasoline on the 15th of November](#), people marched in the streets to protest this decision. While there have been dozens of Iranian people killed in the protests, [IRGC stated](#) on Monday that they would use any means available to quash the unrest. They also said that the demonstrations were fuelled by the United States, having labelled Iraqi protesters with similar accusations of being pawns of the United States and Saudi Arabia. A typical reaction of Tehran, Iran's Supreme Leader [Ali Khamenei has also claimed](#) the protests in Iraq and Lebanon were financed by the US and Gulf countries' intelligence services.

Very recently, [a special report of the Intercept](#) showing leaked Iranian intelligence revealed Tehran's vast network of influence in Iraq. According to these documents, many of Iraq's foremost political, military, and security officials have had a secret relationship with Iran, such as PM Abdul Mahdi and former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Iran gained had the upper hand in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, and boosted its sphere of influence during the war against Daesh.

Regional and International Power's Response

While the young Iraqis are chanting 'No America, no Iran' slogans and standing against any foreign intervention, big powers are keenly observing the situation. [The US government has stated](#) that they are 'closely monitoring the situation' and urged the government to pay attention to the legitimate demands of the Iraqi people. The Trump

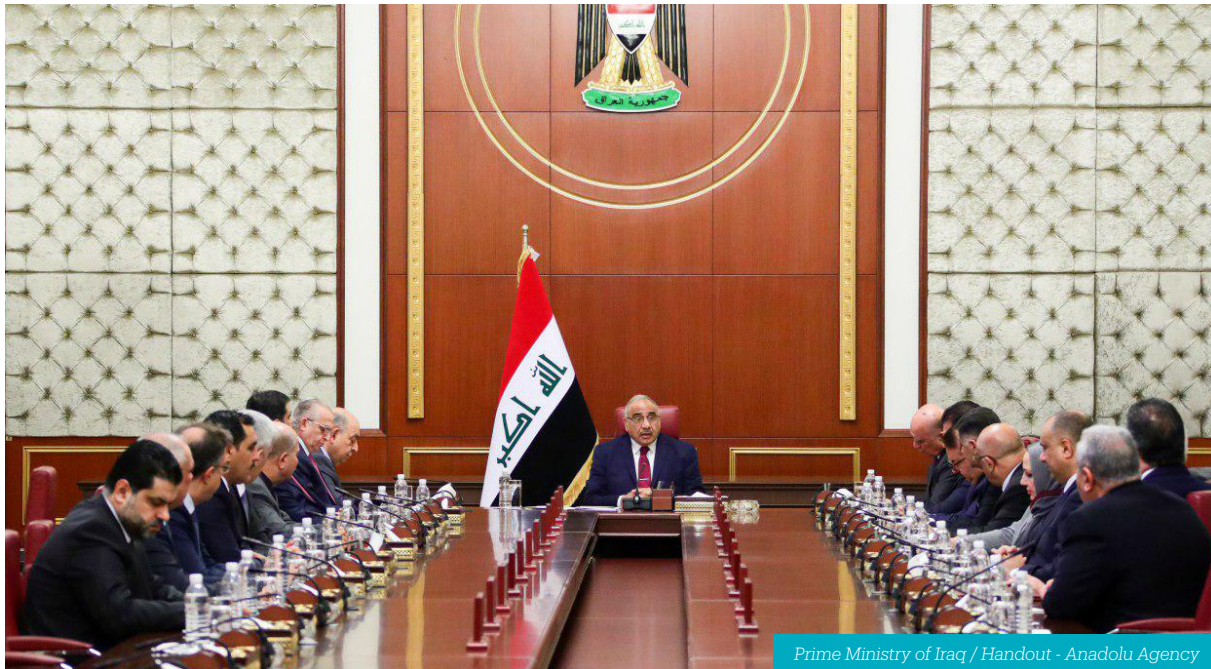


Administration [called early elections](#) in Iraq to stop the violence and fulfil President Salih's promise. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [commented on Iranian meddling](#) in Iraq's affairs by targeting Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei. He also stated on Monday that the United States is ready to impose [sanctions on Iraqi officials](#) that are found to be corrupt and those responsible for the killings of peaceful protesters.

One of the other countries observing the protests in Iraq is Russia. While many foreign diplomats have abandoned the country for security concerns, the Russian embassy has stayed open. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Baghdad and Erbil in October despite ongoing protests. Interestingly, the visit's aim was not a diplomatic mission, but seemingly more of [a business meeting](#) as participants were from Russian oil and gas companies. Moscow's main ambition is to protect bilateral trade relations with Iraq. Hence, Russia has emphasised its [non-interference principle once again in Iraq and has urged](#) Baghdad to exercise restraint vis-a-vis the mass demonstrations.

Saudi Arabia also keeps a watchful eye on the protests in Iraq as its archenemy Iran is already involved in the situation. Riyadh stands in the same position as Washington by showing its support for the Iraqi people and calling on the Iraqi government to end the crackdown. Saudi Arabia has taken advantage of the Iraqi protests to discredit Iran, [by portraying the Islamic Republic as an imperial project](#) to colonise Iraq and other countries in the Middle East.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) [proposed a roadmap](#) including immediate, short-term and long-term measures to deal with the crisis. The UNAMI mentions 'release all peaceful demonstrators in accordance with the law' and 'full investigation and punishment of excessive use of force and cases of abductions' as measures in the proposal. The proposal also includes electoral and security reforms, as well as measures to fight corruption.



The Road Ahead

As the widespread protests entered their third month, the government attempted to stall protesters with vague statements to suspend the PM's resignation. Ultimately, the Iraqi government did take the step in accordance with the demands of the people; however, uncertainty remains. The protesters do not have any intention to leave the streets, since they see Mahdi's resignation as a 'first step' in a process that requires systemic change.

President Salih has promised snap parliamentary elections, but hasn't given any timeline for the vote. Henceforth, which step the government will take next is an issue of concern. [According to the Iraqi constitution](#), the government will function as a caretaker government for 30 days to address only urgent issues until a new government is elected. Within this period, a political alliance should be created for nominating a candidate to form a new government. Since there is no political bloc in the parliament as the majority, it will most likely take weeks to nominate a new Prime Minister. The government and political actors will have the opportunity to find real solutions in order to end the political deadlock, yet any scenario that postpones dealing with the root causes of the crisis is no longer acceptable to the young Iraqi citizenry.

The government's primary responsibility should be the protection of the life and rights of its people. However, different actors have directly targeted protesters for their benefit. As different forces inside Hashd al-Shaabi are involved in protests to suppress the demonstrations, the level of violence will escalate and make it difficult to conclude the crisis. In fact, the problem arises from complexity within Iraqi security forces because of the government's decision

to merge all forces under the state authority. Some factions of Hashd such as [Asaib al-Haq have threatened the demonstrators](#) saying that the faction would take revenge since its headquarters was torched during the protests.

The protesters' main goal is to transform the political system in Iraq, but the government has never given a signal that they are responsive as they prefer to maintain the status quo. Therefore, it is clear that the protesters will not stop after Mahdi's resignation. Now, the question of who the successor of Mahdi will be is one of the most critical matters. Even though some party leaders awaited his resignation behind the scenes, the Iraqi people will not approve their candidacy because of the parties' sectarian lines.

Additionally, any foreign intervention seems unlikely because it may exacerbate the situation. The United States' interference might stir up the Iranian side to take more severe action through its proxies. A US-Iran rivalry, which is already ongoing in Iraq, will only deepen the quagmire in the country. On the other hand, Washington's announcement imposing sanctions on corrupted Iraqi individuals does not seem probable in changing the government's position. There is not enough pressure on the Iraqi government to take necessary action, since any consensus of the international community has not surfaced except for the UNAMI's plan.

The only reasonable option is to listen to the Iraqi people's legitimate demands towards a 'new Iraq', with a system that can address issues like the high unemployment rate, the lack of services, and pervasive corruption. The government must be transparent and shoulder the responsibility to fulfil its commitments. The process will depend on how the government chooses to respond, but it is a fact that Iraq will no longer be the same.