



October's Protests: A threat to the Iranian influence in Iraq

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Strong dissatisfaction arose in the beginning of October in Iraq. The demonstrations appear as a consequence of the lack of social opportunities within the society as well as the rampant corruption that affects the whole country. Moreover, the Iranian influence over Iraq, mainly through the support of Shia militias and political formations, further intensify the existing tensions. The protests started in Baghdad and quickly spilled over southern Iraq; a region traditionally neglected by the government in

terms of services and employment. The unrest also expanded to the rest of the country, reaching Mosul in the north.¹

Notwithstanding its intensity, what defines the unprecedented nature of these protests relies on its spontaneous, politically-independent and non-sectarian features². Sadly, as the protests has spread around the country, so did the repression. The death toll has reached more than one hundred, while six thousand protestors have been injured as the security forces fired with live ammunition against the crowds.³

By challenging the precarious position of Prime Minister ‘Ādel ‘Abd Al-Mahdī, such protests might result in the redefinition of the Iraqi political landscape. Moqtadā Al-Şadr quickly expressed his solidarity with the demonstrators by demanding the resignation of the government.⁴ His political formation, Sā’irūn, has acquired considerable influence in Iraq through the abundant use of nationalistic, anti-Iranian, anti-corruption and populist discourses.⁵ Capitalizing on the recent unrest, Al-Şadr has called Sā’irūn to suspend its parliamentary activities.⁶ Such a move was quickly followed by the Sunni group National Axis Alliance.⁷

A reconfiguration of Iraq’s political alignment may occur at the expense of the Iranian interests in the region. Therefore, the anti-Iranian sentiments expressed in the demonstrations appear as an unwelcomed challenge in the eyes of Tehran. Such embarrassment is tangible, especially when looking at the reactions among Iranian officials. The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Khāmenei was prompt to condemn the recent unrest by stating on twitter: “*Enemies seek to sow discord but they’ve failed & their conspiracy won’t be effective.*”⁸ ‘Alā’ ed-Dīn Borūġerdī, Member of the Iranian Parliament, denounced the protests as being the result of a plot orchestrated in Riyadh and Washington.⁹ Such conspiracy narratives were embraced even in Iraq. Fāliĥ al-Fayyāḍ, chairman of al-Ĥaşd al-Şa’bī, an Iraqi Iran-backed paramilitary force, denied the legitimacy of the protests, explicitly referring to it

¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/least-72-dead-calls-grow-iraqi-government-resign-over-protest-response>

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests/death-toll-climbs-unrest-spreads-in-iraq-in-days-of-protests-idUSKBN1WI0II>

³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/new-tactics-subdue-iraqs-popular-demonstration>

⁴ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/irak-pres-de-100-morts-en-5-jours-le-gouvernement-irakien-deborde-par-la-rue>

⁵ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/moqtada-al-sadr-le-chiite-irakien-qui-naime-pas-liran>

⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/least-72-dead-calls-grow-iraqi-government-resign-over-protest-response>

⁷ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/least-72-dead-calls-grow-iraqi-government-resign-over-protest-response>

⁸ <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khamenei-says-iraq-protests-conspiracy-by-the-enemy-/30203072.html>

⁹ <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/440877/Iranian-MP-U-S-Saudi-Arabia-behind-recent-unrest-in-Iraq>

through the term “coup d’etat”.¹⁰ Such strong stances against the demonstrations raise the very question of the repression. Indeed, several anonymous sources have accused the masked men who carried out the attacks against the media which covered the unrest, as being Iran-backed militias.¹¹ In a similar vein, the snipers that targeted the demonstrators from the rooftops seem to be affiliated to Iran-backed groups.¹²

Exerting some degree of control in Iraq is of vital importance for the Iranian regime, especially in a context of heightened tensions in the region. Baghdad is an instrumental part of a military strategy of asymmetric warfare. In the perspective of a conflict, Iran shall mobilize its militiamen in order to put pressure on the US interests in Iraq as retaliations. Because of this, Iran is unlikely to tolerate any further decline of its influence in Iraq.

¹⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hashd-al-shaabi-vows-stop-rebellion-against-iraqs-government-protests-continue>

¹¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/armed-groups-raid-offices-media-outlets-iraq-covering-protests>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-iran-snipers-exclusive/exclusive-iran-backed-militias-deployed-snipers-in-iraq-protests-sources-idUSKBN1WW0B1>

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