The Long Game: Iraq’s “Tishreen” Movement and the Struggle for Reform

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Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of peace and development in Iraq. Founded in 1998, EPIC is headquartered in Washington, DC, with a field office in Erbil. The Center has a long history of working directly with civil society leaders and communities across Iraq to support vulnerable populations, monitor human security, and inform public policy. EPIC’s ultimate vision is a safe and prosperous Iraq in which all citizens live free from want and fear, and with dignity. The Center is currently focused on supporting Iraqi efforts to improve governance and human rights, promote peace and recovery in conflict affected areas, and combat climate change while mitigating its impact on vulnerable populations.

Cover photo: Students of Baghdad’s universities march to reject the nomination of Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi for the premiership, and condemn the occupation of Tahrir Square by Sadr’s “blue hats.” The march took place on January 26, 2020 in Baghdad, near the Ministry of Higher Education. (Azhar al-Rubaie)

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“If the electoral process fails to produce new faces or create a path for political reforms, then there will be a new Tishreen, maybe something bigger.”

– an activist from southern Iraq, focus group discussion

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Executive summary

Iraq’s victory over the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2017 has not brought the economic development and prosperity long demanded by ordinary Iraqis and long delayed by recurring conflict since 2003. Instead, Iraqis have watched their government spend billions of dollars on uncontrolled militias, patronage networks of an entrenched political class, an unproductive public sector, and public projects that too often fail due to corruption. By 2018, many Iraqis came to associate the deep-seated corruption and failures of their government with the muhasasa system—the ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangement that has characterized politics in Iraq since 2003.

Across central and southern Iraq, the rising power of militias that violate the rights of citizens with impunity, the collapse of basic services, and worsening economic conditions have made Iraqis feel less safe in their homes, more destitute in their livelihoods, and disrespected by their government. Meanwhile, in the Kurdistan region, economic setbacks since the September 2017 referendum on independence have highlighted the divisions, opportunism, and incompetence of regional political leaders. Iraq’s largely boycotted 2018 elections and subsequent government formation have deepened a crisis of confidence in the political system. This was not helped by the government’s failure to appropriately address credible allegations of widespread election fraud, which included a selective voter recount and a mysterious fire at Iraq’s largest storage depot for paper ballots. And after months of making and breaking transactional political alliances, the political actors struck a deal that ignored constitutional requirements in favor of distributing power and resources among themselves, and produced a weak government incapable of improving the lives of ordinary Iraqis.

In October 2019, widespread disaffection with the performance of Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s government boiled over in the form of massive protests across Baghdad and the southern provinces. Iraqis demanded an end to muhasasa-sanctioned corruption and called for jobs, better services, and decent living conditions. Then, under the banner “we want a homeland,” protests coalesced around a new demand: political reform through early elections under a fair electoral system.

These Tishreen (“October”) protests, a continuation of previous anti-government protests dating back to 2011, were more energetic, diverse, and effective than those of previous movements. The protests forced Abdul-Mahdi to resign and won a promise from his successor, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, to hold early elections, scheduled for October 2021.

For months the movement filled the streets of major cities with nonviolent protest, art, volunteerism, egalitarianism, and resilience. By remaining nonsectarian and cultivating a new, inclusive Iraqi identity, these protests
revealed a new face of Iraq, challenging stereotypes that had been accumulating since 2003.

Faced with this unprecedented challenge, government forces and their allied militias used excessive violence to save the status quo. Iran encouraged and aided the suppression of Iraqi protests to protect its allies and its interests in Iraq. Violence that killed hundreds of protesters on the streets, targeted killings of prominent activists, and forced disappearances, abductions, and torture have all taken a heavy toll on the pro-reform movement, eliminating some of its leading figures and forcing others into exile.

While violence, the pandemic, economic pressure, and a loss of momentum reduced public manifestations of the protest movement since early 2020, these factors have not completely suppressed it. The movement remained active and capable of mobilizing sizable protests in 2021, with the added focus of pursuing accountability for violence against fellow activists. The movement still enjoys wide support from the Iraqi public. In a nationally representative survey of Iraqis conducted by EPIC in June of this year, more than 70 percent of respondents said that they support the protesters and 31 percent said that they had participated in at least one protest since October 2019. The support is high even in the Kurdistan region, which had its own anti-government protests in 2017 and 2020, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling parties’ corruption and mismanagement, and even their very legitimacy to rule. Similar to the Tishreen protests in Baghdad and the Iraqi south, the focus of protests in Kurdistan had turned from demands for jobs to demands for systemic change and a replacement of the political class.

Within Iraq’s continuing pro-reform movement, there is remarkable determination and sophistication. Through focus group discussions and interviews, the authors of this report met activists who are realistic in their expectations about the time, resources, and sustained efforts required to move a reform agenda forward. Building on the movement’s experience and its successes, there is also widespread recognition of the importance of maintaining the moral high ground, educating the public and growing its support, advocating for human rights both in Iraq and with the international community, and protecting the movement’s inclusive national identity.

The worsening economic dysfunction and accelerating rise in unemployment have been at the center of Iraqis' grievances, and make the need for reforms all the more urgent. To create enough jobs for the country’s growing youth population (with roughly 500,000 young people entering the workforce each year), Iraq will need leaders who can transcend the previously established corrupt, transactional nature of Iraqi politics, and rally sufficient parliamentary and public support for difficult yet necessary political and economic reforms. Among the leading Tishreen activists interviewed for this report, there was a grim acknowledgement that the struggle for reform
would likely require a sustained effort across multiple election cycles. To that end, the Tishreen movement established several political parties in 2021, pursuing organized means for formal political action. Some of these parties, like the Imtidad (“Reach”) Movement, the Fao-Zakho Assembly, and the Nazil Akhoth Haqqi (“Coming to Take My Rights”) Movement, have candidates running for election. These groups may have a chance to gradually reshape politics in Iraq. EPIC’s survey results indicate that while nearly 65 percent of eligible voters were undecided or planning to not vote, Tishreen candidates held an overwhelming lead among decided voters. In fact, among respondents who described themselves as decided voters, 7 out of 10 were prepared to vote for candidates representing the protest movement.

However, at a moment when the movement enjoys strong public support, the activists still face a major dilemma. Ongoing violence and the abuse of power by established parties and their allied militias have pushed some Tishreen activists, including the prominent al-Bayt al-Watani (the National House) group, to boycott the very same early elections previously demanded by the movement as a whole. In their view, they do not want to bestow legitimacy on what they expect will be another flawed and fraudulent process.

With all these considerations in mind, this report explores a number of different scenarios that could emerge during and after the October 2021 election. An inhospitable electoral environment and low voter turnout would suggest that pro-reform candidates may make minimal gains in parliament, while traditional and militia-backed parties retain overall control. The latter have obstructed reform initiatives in the past and show no sign of changing their behavior regardless of the growing cost to Iraq's sovereignty, security, and development. Yet even if the movement is able to gain only a foothold in parliament, strong public pressure could create opportunities for its elected leaders to champion urgently needed reforms from within.

Indeed, with more than 82 percent of Iraqis stating that fighting corruption is a top priority, any continuation of “business as usual” in the next government would likely provoke renewed mass protests. Government and militias may attempt to suppress the movement with brute force, leading to further rights violations, instability, and conflict. Even then, the movement’s demonstrated resilience, determination, and broad public support may enable it to withstand the violence and continue the struggle to bring about change.

As a key part of Iraq’s political scene that, by all indications, remains active and no less determined than its opponents, the pro-reform movement warrants further study. Such study could further contribute to an understanding of how change may increasingly come to Iraq from the bottom up rather, than from the top down, through the agency of the Iraqi people and the assertion of their sovereignty.
Introduction

In October 2019, a broad-based protest movement demanding systemic reform in Iraq seized international headlines with mass rallies, marches, encampments, and civil disobedience in Baghdad and cities across southern Iraq. Activists dubbed their movement *Tishreen*, the Arabic word for “October.” Large crowds of primarily young people gathered at central public squares like Baghdad’s Tahrir (“Liberation”) Square and Nasiriyah’s Habboubi Square. Despite the largely peaceful, inclusive, and organized nature of the movement, the protests were met with unprecedented violence. Iraqi security forces and militias backed by Iran responded with excessive and unnecessary lethal force, killing hundreds of protesters and wounding many thousands more. And yet the Tishreen protests continued, week after week for months, forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s government and ushering in the interim government of Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi.

At the height of the protests, in late 2019, the Tishreen movement was so popular that everyone wanted to be seen as part of it, both young and old. Countless volunteers provided food, water, and even laundry services. Business owners donated money and supplies to sustain the protesters at Tahrir Square and other frontlines where they faced government security forces. Medical students set up first aid stations to treat the injured, brought in by poor “tuk tuk” drivers, who also ferried people to and from the square, often refusing pay. Expatriates who hadn’t been to Iraq for many years traveled to Baghdad to be, even briefly, part of the Tahrir spirit. Soccer players paid homage to the protests during matches. And, because the world was watching, politicians visited Tahrir Square to gain favor with the protesters. For some time, Tahrir Square was the place to be, where Iraqis could take a selfie to show they were part of something bigger than themselves. For an emerging democracy where six out of ten citizens are ages 25 or younger, it felt like a generation-defining moment.

During this new phase of civic participation, young activists transformed Tahrir Square into a vibrant enclave of protest and free expression—part celebration, part revolution. At what Baghadidis call the Turkish Restaurant, an unfinished building that overlooks the square and became home base for many protesters, meetings and political discussions took place. Messages on banners unfurled from the top-floor balconies of the concrete tower. Amidst the tents below were tattoo parlors, art galleries, and a pop-up library. Daring young men taunted and challenged security forces across the Jumhuriyah Bridge, making a sport of catching and extinguishing tear gas canisters. Beautiful murals celebrated Iraq’s millennia-long heritage, as well as new protest martyrs who fell fighting for Iraq’s future.

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Since then, intimidation and targeted violence against protesters, the effects of the pandemic, and the demands of daily life have all taken their toll on the protests’ momentum; today Tahrir Square is empty of tents and the site of only occasional protests. But Tishreen has forever changed Iraq. Iraqis on both sides of the struggle have come to realize the power of peaceful protest to cause change. Demands for accountability have become more organized, persistent, and far-reaching. And new political parties have emerged to translate the views and demands of Tishreen into electoral campaigns and, possibly, one day, policies.

This report sheds light on the most energetic indigenous movement to challenge the political class that has governed Iraq since 2003. This political class appears rigid, incapable and unwilling to engage in self-reform to correct its main shortcoming: that the Iraqi people no longer believe the current system represents their will and interests. As Iraqis’ confidence in elections to reform has waned—as evidenced by boycotts in 2018—the political system has become unsustainable.

The early post-2003 transition from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship to parliamentary democracy regarded inclusiveness and representation of every community as safeguards against a return to authoritarianism. An unintended consequence was the emergence of muhasasa: the apportionment of power among political parties that claim to represent these communities. With successive electoral cycles, leaders of these communities used their growing influence to maintain a strong presence in parliament, and used that power to control ministries, their budgets, contracts, and appointment decisions. Similarly, leaders often abused their power within their communities and beyond, creating an environment that arguably could be characterized as no less than authoritarian.

This led to patronage networks, to sustain party influence and profit. Partisan loyalty superseded merit, and accountability was lost as ministers and officials answered not to their bureaucratic superiors but to the party or militia that secured their appointment. Government contracts funneled billions of dollars into the coffers of politicians and allied businesses through kickbacks, overcharges, and sometimes projects that existed on paper alone.

3 The UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) characterizes Iraq as “authoritarian” according to its most recent Democracy Index. Each year, the index measures the “state of democracy” in 167 countries based on composite scores for pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture. On a scale of 1 to 10, Iraq received a score of 3.62 in 2020, down from 4.23 in 2014. According to the EIU, “authoritarian regimes are nations where political pluralism is nonexistent or severely limited. These nations are often absolute monarchies or dictatorships, may have some conventional institutions of democracy but with meagre significance, infringements and abuses of civil liberties are commonplace, elections (if they take place) are not fair or free (including sham elections), the media is often state-owned or controlled by groups associated with the ruling regime, the judiciary is not independent, and censorship and suppression of governmental criticism are commonplace.” Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?” https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020.
The Iraqi economy has also become unsustainable. Unemployment and poverty skyrocketed as growth of the economic pie—made primarily of Iraq's oil revenue—struggled to keep up with economic losses due to conflict, corruption, and the growing demands of a population increasing by a million people each year.

Through upcoming elections in October 2021 and beyond, the struggle between those advocating for reform and those fighting to preserve the status quo will continue to shape the future of governance in Iraq. How this process unfolds will have profound implications for Iraq and interested stakeholders.

Against this backdrop, the present report offers a close-up view of the protest movement: its beginnings, ebb and flow, current state of being, goals, methods, leadership, structure, obstacles, and possible future. The report incorporates findings from a wide range of sources and field research, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and a nationwide survey.

The first section addresses the social, political, and economic conditions that prevailed in Iraq as the country emerged from war with ISIS: the aftermath of the 2017 Kurdistan region referendum on independence, the rise of Iran-backed militia power, the decline of sectarianism, and growing popular frustration with services, especially in Basra. The section discusses some of the shortcomings of the 2018 election, and the growing gap in understanding between government and citizens.
The second section, the longest, addresses the protest movement that erupted in reaction to these conditions, and the response of the government, militias, and Iran. It also discusses the tumultuous relationship between ordinary protesters and Muqtada al-Sadr, the cleric and militia leader of the Sadrists, who for years has sought to be seen as the standard bearer of reform in Iraq. This section also explores the goals of the protest movement, how these goals were discussed and agreed on, and how the movement has sought to achieve them.

The third section addresses various obstacles to reform in Iraq. It considers examples of reform initiatives led by the governments of Haider al-Abadi and Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Additionally, it presents findings from interviews with key informants and focus group discussions with activists about what they see as the biggest obstacles facing them and their movement as they pursue their target reforms.

The fourth section, a collaboration with Rasha al-Aqeedi of the Newlines Institute, considers how the struggle between protestors and status quo forces is unfolding in cyberspace.

The fifth section explores a set of possible scenarios that may unfold after Iraq conducts its next election, scheduled for October 2021.

This report is not an exhaustive study of Iraq’s protest movement. Our hope is twofold. First, that by choosing to make the movement the core object of research, we might make a positive contribution to the growing volume of work on sociopolitical trends in Iraq. Second, that by contributing to a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of bottom-up change in Iraq, we might help the international community—including the United States and regional powers—to better recognize and respect the integrity and agency of the Iraqi people, both in determining their own future and exercising their country’s sovereignty.
Methodology

Supported by multivariate field research and analysis, this report focuses on the rise of Iraq’s pro-reform protest movement (known as the Tishreen, or “October,” movement), the movement’s aims and strategies, and the confrontation between Tishreen’s activists and supporters demanding systemic reform and the country’s political establishment resisting such change. In consideration of the complex nature and challenging context of the research, which included the ongoing pandemic, an iterative approach was taken.

Building on previous EPIC research, which included more than 20 hours of interviews with Tishreen activists and a 6-year archive of weekly monitoring reports on Iraq, the formal research for this project began in November 2020. Over the course of 10 months, EPIC conducted a literature review, 30 key informant interviews, 3 focus group discussions with 28 Tishreen and Kurdish activists from 10 of Iraq’s 18 provinces, and a nationally representative survey of public opinion in Iraq. EPIC hired a leading social media researcher to analyze online content during this time as well. Using the rich qualitative and quantitative data collected, EPIC’s research team has been able to draw significant conclusions, presented throughout the report.

Literature review. The EPIC team reviewed recent, relevant historical literature on Iraq, including articles, reports, and book chapters. Topics included the evolution of the post-2003 political system, and Iraq’s political parties, militias, tribes, foreign relations, and demands for reform. Desk research also considered key government documents, such as recent federal budgets of the Government of Iraq; the “White Paper for Economic Reform”; the public remarks and Twitter accounts of relevant international figures, Iraqi public officials, and militias; local and international media coverage of Tishreen protests and protests in the Kurdistan region; and reports prepared by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. The review was used to test and verify assumptions, and to create a baseline for the research.

4 The Iraq Security and Humanitarian Monitor (ISHM) is a weekly report on the latest political, security, economic, and humanitarian developments in Iraq, produced by EPIC since February 2015. A full archive is available at: enablingpeace.org/what-we-do/ISHM
5 Prepared by the Crisis Cell for Financial and Fiscal Reform and adopted by the Iraqi government in October 2020, the “White Paper for Economic Reform” outlines more than 200 reforms aimed at tackling Iraq’s immediate financial crisis. The country’s current deputy prime minister and minister of finance, Dr. Ali Allawi, is believed to be among the primary authors of the paper.
6 Relevant international figures include the leaders of foreign governments with active diplomatic missions in Iraq and the leaders or representatives of key regional and international bodies, such as the secretary general of the Arab League, the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Iraq, and the EU ambassador to Iraq.
Key informant interviews. Between November 2020 and August 2021, EPIC conducted 30 in-depth, directed interviews with a diverse range of experts and stakeholders, particularly those with deep knowledge of or recent direct experience with the Tishreen movement, including those aligned against it. Therefore, a majority of the interviews were conducted one on one with Iraqi civil society leaders and activists, current and former Iraqi public officials, Western officials with firsthand experience in Iraq, including recent U.S. ambassadors to Iraq, and Iraq-based journalists. Those perspectives were then compared with the perspectives of leading academics and policy analysts. Interview questions were designed to address specific research topics and to address emerging gaps in knowledge that were identified during the course of the research. When new developments in Iraq with relevance to the research occurred, fresh questions were added, and other questions were adapted based on what was learned in previous interviews. Taken together, the interviews provide a particularly rich set of empirical data, contributing to a clearer picture of the current situation in Iraq and expected future developments.

Focus group discussions with activists in Iraq. In mid-February 2021, EPIC’s field office convened three focus group discussions with 28 Iraqi activists and movement organizers. This part of the research required a considerable investment of time to identify and build trust with activists representing a diverse cross-section of the Tishreen movement in federal Iraq and with a distinct set of activists pushing for reforms in the Kurdistan region. While participants ranged in age between 23 and 58, the median age was under 30. The participants were divided into three groups, with one group comprising 8 activists from the Kurdistan Region (7 men, 1 woman), a second group comprising 9 activists from central and southern Iraq (4 men, 5 women), and a third group of 11 activists from central, southern and western Iraq (all men). The following table provides a breakdown of the geographic distribution of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulaymaniyah</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhi-Qar</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erbil</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maysan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najaf</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babylon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anbar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although data were not collected on LGBTI identification, no one appeared to identify as other than cis male or cis female.
By providing a safe and trusted environment, each group was able to meet for two 2-hour sessions and respond to a combination of 20 closed and open-ended questions. The activists discussed their objectives, the obstacles they had faced, and their personal expectations. The focus group discussions created opportunities to observe activists taking a deep dive in answering key questions facing the reform movement. The outputs were particularly valuable in generating a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the protest movements in Iraq and the Kurdistan region, and informed the conceptualization of likely future scenarios.

**Social media analysis.** EPIC commissioned Rasha al-Aqeeq, a senior analyst at the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, to use both qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine the use of social media in both organizing and suppressing protests. To analyze how the struggle between the Tishreen protest movement and status quo forces has played out in cyberspace, Ms. al-Aqeeq considered relevant social media trends to identify key influencers, messages, communication strategies, and perspectives on key actors. Particular focus was directed at how popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been used by Iraqi activists and those who either support or oppose them, including public officials, religious figures, and militias. Ms. al-Aqeeq then provided documented case studies on the social media activities of influential individuals on both sides of the reform protests.
National public opinion survey of Iraqi voters. In June 2021, EPIC conducted telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,068 eligible voters across Iraq. Using advanced survey software and Iraqi government data, the sample size was calculated to ensure a margin of error that does not exceed ±3% at a 95 percent confidence level.

The sample included a proportionate representation of Iraq’s 18 governorates (or provinces) based on each governorate’s share of the national population, estimated to be 39,127,900 as of 2019 according to the Central Statistical Organization (CSO) of Iraq’s Ministry of Planning. A near equal number of men and women were selected for interviews in each governorate based on the country’s male-to-female ratio of 1.01 (2020 estimate).

The primary objective of the survey was to measure how Iraqis of voting age perceive key actors and issues related to governance, demands for political and economic reforms, and the Tishreen protest movement that emerged in October 2019. The survey also measured public perceptions of the country’s electoral process and the political parties competing for votes, with an emphasis on the parliamentary elections held in 2018, and elections scheduled for October 2021.

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8 The selected sample size was 1,068 + 10% cushion to account for unreachable respondents and those who did not wish to participate. The survey ended when responses reached the target figure of 1,068.

9 According to the CSO, Iraq’s total population was estimated to be 39,127,900 as of 2019. EPIC also used data from the CSO to determine how Iraq’s population is distributed across the country’s 18 governorates.


11 Key findings are included throughout this report, and an annex of the survey’s full findings are available via EPIC’s website at https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_Survey_October_2021.pdf
Changing political and social trends in Iraq since the 2018 election

As the summer of 2017 turned to fall, Iraq was emerging triumphant from a bloody war to reclaim approximately a third of its country, which the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) had overrun in 2014. With the liberation of Mosul, Iraqi forces had decisively defeated an enemy whose global reach and atrocities had sent shock waves around the world.

But for ordinary Iraqis, victory didn’t bring the economic development and prosperity long expected, and long delayed by recurring conflict. With economic and living conditions continuing to deteriorate, citizens found themselves unable to hold back the frustration.
As the specter of violent conflict receded, public attention turned towards mounting evidence of failed governance, deep-seated corruption, and a cynical expediency that many Iraqis came to associate with *muhasasa*—the system of ethno-sectarian power-sharing that has characterized politics in Iraq since 2003.\(^\text{12}\)

By the end of 2017, more than 13 percent of Iraq’s active labor force was unemployed, a sharp rise from 2012.\(^\text{13}\) Among youth, ages 15 to 24, the rate was considerably higher, with one in four young job seekers out of work.\(^\text{14}\) Armed conflict had displaced more than 5 million Iraqis and contributed to a humanitarian emergency that put 8.7 million in need of assistance, including 1.9 million facing food insecurity, 5.4 million lacking proper water and sanitation, and 5.2 million considered at risk of post-conflict persecution.\(^\text{15}\) Along with livelihoods, education was also disrupted. In 2017, more than 3 million Iraqi children attended school “irregularly or not at all.”

In predominantly Sunni provinces where most of the fighting had taken place, the population breathed a collective sigh of relief at the end of ISIS’s occupation, which had turned their cities and towns to rubble. The rest of Iraq simmered with the public discontent that would soon rise up against political elites. Iraqis felt less safe in their homes, more destitute in their livelihoods, and less respected by their government.

### Conditions in the Kurdistan Region

At the same time, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was in the painful aftermath of the ill-fated referendum on independence that the local ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had pushed to hold in September 2017.\(^\text{16}\)

The federal Iraqi government and the governments of Iran and Turkey had all opposed the referendum, perceiving Kurdish self-determination as a threat to their territorial integrity. Iraqi government forces and Iran-backed militias pushed into, and captured, disputed territory that had been under Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) security forces’ control. The Kurdish leaders’ gambit not only failed to bring the KRI closer to independence but also resulted in a significant loss of the territory that had been under the KRG’s de facto control since 2003, and cut KRG oil production by half.\(^\text{17}\)

The Kurdistan region suddenly found itself under siege. The Iraqi government restricted airspace over Kurdistan, preventing international

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12 *Muhasasa taifiyeh*, literally, “sectarian apportionment.”
flights to its airports, and Iran closed its borders. Accusing then–president of the KRG Masoud Barzani of “treachery” for holding the referendum, Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, threatened to cut off vital trade with the region.  

Disturbed by Washington’s surprising disinterest in intervening, KDP leaders resorted to a significant shift in policy. First, they sought to pursue stronger relations with Iran and its Iraqi allies—the pro-Iran factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had been instrumental in bringing about the October 2017 Kurdish defeat in Kirkuk. Second, the KDP threatened to reconsider its relations with Washington in favor of a different benefactor, namely Moscow.


19 Iraqis commonly describe factions that are loyal to Iran and its supreme leader as walaie (“loyalist”).

This political setback and its economic repercussions ignited protests against corruption and mismanagement among the political class in the Kurdistan region. Protests took place in Sulaymaniyah, which has traditionally enjoyed a more open society and tolerance for dissent under the political authority of the historically left-leaning Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) than the area under its conservative counterpart, the KDP in Erbil.

The protests revolved around a mix of demands. There were tangible economic demands concerning basic services. Civil servants' salaries had not been paid for many months, and in some cases, up to three years. There were also political demands calling for an end to the quarter-century duopoly of the KDP and the PUK. As one protester put it, they were “angry at the injustice of ruling parties in the region that seized control of all aspects of [public] life.” By the time of the referendum, it was not just the parties’ actions that were in question, but their very legitimacy to rule. For example, KDP leader Masoud Barzani had been occupying the presidency of the Kurdistan region for months beyond the expiration of a two-year emergency extension to his second term, which had ended August 19, 2015.

The PUK’s response to the protests was unusually violent. At least six people were killed by security forces. Authorities in Sulaymaniyah cracked down on media outlets sympathetic to the protesters, raiding and shutting down the offices of NRT (Nalia Radio and Television), a media network owned by the leader of one of Kurdistan’s opposition parties.

By the time of the [Kurdistan Region’s independence] referendum, it was not just the [ruling] parties’ actions that were in question, but their very legitimacy to rule.

The referendum’s aftermath prompted Iraqi Kurds to question the judgement of their political leaders. There was a public exchange of recriminations between the PUK and the KDP over who was more to blame for their mutual setback. KDP leaders flatly accused the PUK of treason for conspiring with the Iranians and the Iraqi federal government to surrender Kirkuk. Leaders of the PUK and the Gorran party, who had vacillated between opposing and supporting the referendum, later blamed the KDP’s Masoud Barzani for the “catastrophe” that befell the region in its aftermath.

Economic conditions

Public opinion surveys after the territorial defeat of ISIS showed greater pessimism about the country among southern Iraqis and those in the Kurdistan region than among their counterparts in areas that had been liberated from ISIS. A majority of the formal Iraqi security forces and militias sent to fight in Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, Anbar, and Ninewa hailed from southern Iraq. Casualties were high, and especially among these volunteer forces, who largely lacked proper armor and other protective gear, training, and heavy weapons as they faced a determined and well-organized enemy.

Despite their great sacrifices, ordinary Iraqis in the southern provinces saw no improvement in living conditions after the war, fueling disappointment and resentment toward the ruling class.

Simultaneously, political corruption wasted billions of dollars on projects that failed to deliver any public benefits to Iraq’s people. Since the 2007 inception of the National Investment Commission, which facilitates investment in the country, only 500 projects have been completed out of 2,400 projects licensed. Another 800 projects remain unfinished, while 970 were shown to be fictitious projects that never got started. One notable eyesore in Baghdad wasted $146 million over a decade, leaving behind a dump in lieu of an urban development project.
In 2017, the last year of major combat against ISIS, Iraq’s Ministry of Planning estimated that the country’s poverty rate had increased from 22 percent in 2014 to 30 percent in 2016. In 2017, Iraq had earmarked 22.6 percent of its federal budget for defense and security spending. Only 3.8 percent was allocated to the health sector, in which health institutions had been neglected across periods of sanctions, armed conflict, and political corruption for more than three decades. Despite the end to the war with ISIS, spending priorities hardly changed in subsequent years; this underscored the gap between political elites’ responsiveness to the needs of ordinary Iraqis and their own interests. Consecutive budgets benefited the political class and their patronage networks significantly more than they did the majority of Iraqis.

The 2018 federal budget imposed a hiring freeze, which might have seemed to be a reasonable step to rein in spending in Iraq’s bloated public sector. The bill, however, also paid 1,993 parliamentary employees an average of nearly 162 million Iraqi dinars (IQD) per person, which at the time amounted to about $137,000. By comparison, the lowest-paid public servants received less than IQD 6 million ($5,000) per year. The 2019 federal budget authorized IQD 2.6 trillion ($2.2 billion) for the PMF, including IQD 499 billion ($422 million) for armaments and 6,500 new jobs in Samarra—slots that benefited the Saraya al-Salam militia of Muqtada al-Sadr—while maintaining a hiring freeze on all other government institutions.

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The growing power of militias

With the ISIS “caliphate” defeated, the next step involved the demobilization of tens of thousands of militia fighters who had joined to fight ISIS after entire divisions of the Iraqi army, weakened by desertions, poor command, low morale, and corruption, had melted away.

Then–prime minister Haider al-Abadi attempted to extend government control over dozens of militias that had proliferated and expanded as the PMF during his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki’s last weeks in office. Abadi was supported in this by members of the Global Coalition against ISIS, and by Iraq’s top Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani. The latter called for these militias to be absorbed into formal Iraqi security institutions.36 It had been a fatwa (religious edict) issued by Sistani in June 2014 that had encouraged young Shia men to take up arms against ISIS.37 While the fatwa urged those who could fight to “enroll in the security forces,” it was also exploited by Iran-backed militias to justify their own presence.38

Leaders of powerful militias with close ties to Iran, like the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, were determined to resist demobilization. Instead, they worked to translate the popularity of their volunteer fighters, and admiration for their sacrifices, into political power by competing in the 2018 election.

These militias, and others that didn’t formally engage in politics, like Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Kataib al-Imam Ali, capitalized on their newfound status to gain illicit economic benefits. The collection of illegal taxes at checkpoints on roads between the KRI and the rest of Iraq became an important source of income, as militias took on a more permanent role in security operations in newly liberated areas.39 Militias also engaged in confiscation of property, looting of public and private property, and other forms of extortion that stifled economic recovery and created growing resentment among local populations.

Militias’ profiteering spread into southern provinces too. Iraqis increasingly complained of hay’at iqtisadiya, offices representing the economic interests of a particular militia or powerful party that mushroomed inside government ministries and provincial governments. During the first year of Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s term in office, militia power grew rapidly, along with impunity for their crimes and human rights violations against Iraqi citizens, turning popular opinion against the militias and Iran for backing them.

37 Friday sermon delivered by Sistani’s representative in Karbala, June 16, 2014: https://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24918/.
In the most brazen examples, militias effectively supplanted the state in exercising authority. After Iraqi forces liberated Jurf al-Sakhr, an agricultural suburb southwest of Baghdad, from ISIS control in late 2014, Kataib Hezbollah depopulated large parts of the area, turning them into an exclusive zone that even Iraq’s formal security forces could not enter. This militia later used Jurf for illegal activities far outside their mandate as an auxiliary force of Iraq’s formal military. In a particularly shocking example, Kataib Hezbollah attacked Iraq’s neighbors from within Iraqi territory, including through long-range drone attacks on oil installations in Saudi Arabia in 2019.40

During the summer of 2019, a series of explosions struck bases and weapons depots used by PMF factions close to Iran. Iraqis seemed to care less about whether the explosions were accidental or caused by Israeli airstrikes. Public anger fixed on two things. First was the disregard for civilian lives shown by the reckless storage of explosives in residential areas. Second was the purpose of their storage, to advance Iran’s foreign policy goals, which served as a painful reminder of the state of subservience to Iran brought on Iraq by these militias.41

Iraqi militias were coming into increasing friction with government forces and ordinary civilians, often emerging from violent interactions with arrogant impunity. Iraqis would sometimes respond to this situation with gallows humor. The phrase “only shot the lower limbs” mocked how militia leaders downplayed gun violence against civilians or security forces.42

In one high-profile incident, militiamen loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr killed the commander of the Iraqi security forces brigade protecting the prime minister at a checkpoint near Samarra.43 The senior officer was trying to reach the city, under the control of Sadr’s militia since late 2014, ahead of a planned visit by Abadi. There were no legal consequences.

41 In this segment of his show, political satirist Ahmed al-Basheer mocks the militias’ explanations of what caused the weapons depots explosions, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQMNb2iFmFU.
42 In this segment of his show, political satirist Ahmed al-Basheer breaks down Qais al-Khazali’s account of the deadly confrontation between Iraqi policemen and members of his militia, https://twitter.com/dw_arabic/status/990281993744248832?lang=en.
The problematic 2018 elections

Frustration with the political establishment led to a large-scale voter boycott of the 2018 parliamentary elections, resulting in the least popular elections in Iraq’s democratic experiment to date. Official figures cited turnout at 44.5 percent of eligible voters, a figure that many observers consider to be inflated. Even if accurate, the number represents a significant drop from the 60 percent recorded in the previous two elections, and a far cry from the 70 percent recorded in December 2005.44

The physical displacement of millions of Iraqis during armed conflict with and occupation by ISIS may have prevented hundreds of thousands from voting in the northern provinces, but its impact on overall turnout was limited when compared with other factors. Ninewa, which bore the brunt of fighting and displacement, had one of the highest voter turnout rates in Iraq.

In central and southern Iraq, where voter turnout fell to 33 percent in Baghdad and 40 percent in Basra, two factors interacted with public disappointment with the political class to drive turnout below the national average.45 First was a shift in the attitude of the Najaf clergy toward elections. In a sermon on May 4, 2018, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani summarized what was on the mind of many Iraqis. He argued the futility of voting given underlying conditions similar to if not even less favorable than in previous elections. He stated that elections can lead to “satisfactory results” only under certain conditions: a fair election law, competition based on policy not identity, and the prevention of foreign manipulation. Sistani contended that “failures” of previous elections were the “natural result” of failing to meet these conditions. The cleric accused the political class of “abusing power… spreading corruption and squandering public funds in unprecedented manners… granting themselves the privileges of large salaries and allowances, and failing to carry out their duty of serving the people.”46 Sistani informed his followers that participating in elections was “the right of every citizen” and that “there is no need to exercise this right unless [the citizen] is convinced” of the national interests of the country being served.

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The second factor was a significant decline in sectarian feelings among ordinary Iraqis. The experience of war with ISIS had the unintended consequence of reducing sectarianism. In the spring of 2017, public opinion surveys showed that approximately 86 percent of Iraqis outside the Kurdistan region thought the fight against ISIS “helped unify the people of Iraq.”47 The crisis also brought Iraqis from different communities closer together, as host provinces absorbed millions of internally displaced persons. A volunteer culture emerged. The Ashura mawakib, volunteer teams that traditionally fed and served pilgrims on their way to Shia shrines, found new purpose in serving fellow Iraqis fleeing war. Recent years also saw a rising tide of wa’i fardi (“individual consciousness,” a departure from communalism) among Iraqis in the educated middle class. By 2018 Iraq, especially Baghdad, was showing signs of a cultural renaissance driven by civil society. Initiatives like Ana Iraqi Ana Aqra (“I am Iraqi, therefore I read”) became popular annual events spanning multiple provinces.48

When it comes to the decline of sectarianism, “the most important, decisive turning point is Daesh,” according to Iraqi pollster Munqith Dagher.49 “On the Sunni side, Daesh represented a message, warning them that extremism would lead us to the [destructive] Dawlat al-Khilafa or Dawlat al-Khorafa.”50 The second message for the Sunnis was one of national solidarity. As Munqith explains: “[Sunnis] saw all Iraqis come to fight in their areas... to help liberate them from the nightmare they were living.” For Iraq’s Shia, the main lesson from the war was that, “they can’t keep Iraq together without Sunni approval... The sectarian policy that was used in Mosul led to Mosul’s fall and the deaths of our sons when they went to liberate it. Do we want to repeat this?”

49 Daesh is the Arabic acronym for the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.”
50 This is a play on words (khilafa = “Caliphate,” khorafa = “myth”). Authors’ interview with Munqith Dagher in March 2021.
“As ‘victimhood’ goes out of fashion and the perceived external threat recedes,” argued late sociologist Faleh Jabar, “the politicisation of sectarian identity becomes less effective and rivalry sets in over the representation of each community – Shia, Sunni or Kurd.” In the 2018 elections, the result of these dynamics was greater fragmentation of former sectarian and ethnic alliances, which put on display the dirty laundry of the parties as they turned on one another. It also reduced voter interest in voting by identity. In southern Iraq, this disinterest can be heard in a protest chant, popular since 2015: bism il-deen bagona al-haramiyah (“in religion’s name, the thieves robbed us”).

Within the political class, too, there has been a marked decline in sectarian rhetoric. That change is attributed to the rise of moderate Sunni and Shia politicians, the weakening of the Sunni establishment, and undisputed Shia dominance in Baghdad—the latter putting an end to speculations, and two civil wars, that sought to displace the Shia from power. But there is a key difference between the political class and ordinary Iraqis. Among the former, the decline in sectarian rhetoric as a foundation for political alliances simply gave way to a more unrestrained form of transactional politicking.

Outcomes of the 2018 elections
Unfortunately, low voter turnout in 2018 meant that voters who supported the parties that relied on established patronage networks or ethnic/sectarian identity as their voter base represented a disproportionately higher number of actual ballots cast than their demographic weight would have predicted.

Low voter turnout also hurt parties that relied less on identity to mobilize voters. This included the reform-touting Gorran party in the KRI, and Haider al-Abadi’s Nasr (“victory”) coalition. The Nasr coalition highlighted the liberation of cities from ISIS, restoration of federal control over the disputed Kirkuk, and the initiation of economic and political reforms during Abadi’s first term. These platforms failed to persuade enough voters to overtake the competition. Gorran, which literally means “change” in Kurdish, was unable to have a tangible impact on governance after four years in parliament. Meanwhile, Abadi’s failure to improve services, control the militias, and overcome political resistance to reforms undermined the Nasr coalition’s appeal to voters. The result was that Gorran lost four of the nine seats it had in parliament, while the KDP and PUK expanded their gains. In the rest of Iraq, Sadr’s followers and the militia-backed Fatah Alliance each won more seats than Abadi’s Nasr. Abadi’s only consolation was winning the vote in Ninewa, where the victory over ISIS continued to resonate.

Foreign diplomats who observed the 2018 elections noted that election security appeared to focus on just one external threat. As explained by former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman: “The army and federal police were very concerned with perimeter security looking outward... what no one was looking at were attempts at voter suppression or those that wanted their voters to come out to cast votes but not those of their competitors. That was true of the groups aligned with the PMF and with the PUK or KDP in the KRI. But groups like the Nasr coalition didn’t have the discipline within their base to bring their people to the polls in big numbers.”  

Setting aside the political outcome of these elections on government formation, the electoral process, its results, and the handling of their aftermath did great damage to public faith in the legitimacy of the political process. A thick cloud of distrust hovered over the election results, as allegations of widespread fraud and reactions to these allegations spilled into the public space. In the KRI, virtually all opposition parties considered the results to be fraudulent; fighting broke out between the PUK and the Gorran party, the main rivals in Sulaymaniyah, in what later became known as the Battle of Zargata Hill. 

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53 Authors’ interview with former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman.
In Baghdad, a government investigation pointed to what former prime minister Haider al-Abadi called “dangerous violations” in the initial count, carried out with electronic devices. In fact, the integrity of the elections was undermined months before any votes were ever cast. The political blocs in parliament changed the way members of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) were selected to make sure they each had a man inside IHEC to protect their interests. In October 2017, the parties voted to approve those commissioners in a method that was typical of *muhasasa*. Parliament voted to approve the candidates in a one-package deal, leaving no room to scrutinize the credentials or character of individual candidates, and reflecting an uneasy understanding among the parties that they must approve one another’s candidates. As such, the Shia political blocs led by Nouri al-Maliki, Muqtada al-Sadr, Hadi al-Amiri, and Ammar al-Hakim nominated five members, the PUK and Gorran nominated two, and Sunni parties—the Islamic Party and al-Hal (“the solution”)—nominated the other two. Despite reports of irregularities and suspected fraud, IHEC and the election winners spent weeks pushing against demands—including those of parliamentarians who had lost their seats—for a recount of ballots before finally acquiescing. To oversee the recount, the election commissioners were temporarily replaced by nine judges named by Iraq’s Supreme Judicial Council.

The value of the recount, which didn’t change the results, soon came into question. Two days after parliament approved a full manual recount, a fire broke out at warehouses that held nearly half of the ballots cast in Baghdad. Then, instead of carrying out a full recount, the new IHEC made the process less transparent by instructing that the recount would only include those polling stations affected by official reports or complaints of alleged fraud. This ensured that the recount would, at best, capture only those cases of fraud that came to the attention of election monitors. The fire and the selectivity of the recount took away any real chance of ascertaining what actually happened.

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While these unsettling events unfolded, the IHEC board of commissioners was engaged in its own game of recriminations. A bizarre episode unfolded when Saeed Kakaie (a commissioner and member of the counter-fraud group in the IHEC) said the electoral commission had violated proper procedures, and failed to look into a gross mismatch between data transmitted via satellite and data stored on the memory chips of ballot-counting machines, namely at voting centers in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. The electoral commission had purchased 70,000 of the devices under a $135 million agreement with the South Korean company Miru Systems. He claimed that his colleagues rebuffed his demands for a manual recount because they feared the process would expose the failures of the counting machines. The IHEC responded by accusing an unnamed political party of threatening Kakaei and his family and forcing him to negotiate for two additional parliamentary seats in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. The party in question is understood to be Gorran, which had nominated Kakaie for his IHEC position. Kakie also said the IHEC sent his staff home and barred his guards from entering the IHEC offices. The exchange concluded with a recorded video in which Kakaie apologized to the other commissioners, absolved them of any wrongdoing, and accused “instigations in the media and political pressures” for his earlier actions. This raised suspicions that either the IHEC commissioner’s early claims of fraud were false and politicized, or true and that his subsequent apology had been made under duress.

The main casualty in all of these election-related disputes was the people’s trust in the validity of Iraq’s electoral system, as it should exist as a credible means to exercise democracy. When EPIC conducted a nationwide public opinion survey in Iraq in June 2021, more than 60 percent of respondents said that they believed the 2018 election did not reflect the will of the Iraqi people (see Figure 1). The highest rates of this response were in Karbala, Najaf, and Sulaymaniyah, followed by Baghdad and Diwaniyah.

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Transactional politics

The 2018 election results shook some of the assumptions about Iraq that prevailed in U.S. and international policy circles. Contrary to expectations, Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fatah Alliance, formed around pro-Iran militias under the PMF umbrella, came in first and second respectively, relegating the coalition of incumbent prime minister Haider al-Abadi to third place.

Group think had led to some exaggerated assessments of Abadi’s prospects against his opponents at the ballot box. Analysts noted his successes in leading Iraq’s effort to defeat the Islamic State and restore faith in the military, stabilizing the economy after the shocks of 2014, and bringing the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk back under Baghdad’s control after checking the Kurdish push for independence.

But policy debate had focused too much on those achievements and prominent public figures, without due attention to significant shifts in public attitudes. The disconnect in thinking between the prime minister and the electorate grew wider with increasing resentment over corruption, woefully inadequate basic services and economic opportunities, and an overall sense that militias and ruling political parties were treating most Iraqis—who have no ties to patronage networks—as second-class citizens in their own country. It is no wonder that *nreed watan* ("we want a homeland") would become one of the most iconic slogans used by Iraq’s protesters after October 2019.

The rapid making and breaking of alliances during and after the government formation process in the second half of 2018 exposed the absence of principles among the political elite. Abadi entered an embarrassing alliance with Fatah, which included militias he had criticized and accused of abuses and corruption throughout his first term, only to be abandoned within hours. Abadi’s coalition also suffered from the defection of his former national security adviser, Faleh al-Fayadh, who took 14 parliamentary seats with him, adding to the growing coalition representing the militias. The movements between coalitions were chaotic, reflecting the ease with which politicians created and severed allegiances. “I had one MP [member of parliament] jump from Nasr to another coalition and back, and then he left again and returned back, all within three days,” an aide to Abadi recalled.


66 Authors’ interview with Naufel al-Hassan, the chief of staff for former prime minister Haider al-Abadi.
Similarly, puzzled Iraqis watched as Hadi al-Amiri, the Badr militia leader who for decades fought against the Ba‘ath party and Sunni Arab militancy, shook hands with Khamis al-Khanjar, the Sunni Arab financier who for years called militias like Badr sectarian murderers, and had once used terms like “revolution” and “liberation” to describe ISIS’s seizure of Mosul.67

Dealings within the Sunni Arab political sphere were just as scandalous. “At some point they forgot I was there and started talking about what they wanted to do… I felt like I was in an episode of The Sopranos,” said one U.S. diplomat as he described the environment in which a group of mostly Sunni politicians discussed their options for alliances with Shia parties.68

Backroom deals finally broke the post-election stalemate, producing compromise on a new president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament, but the outcome was misunderstood within policy circles in Washington and Europe. Early analyses mischaracterized this perceived breakthrough as evidence that Iraq’s political process was “slowly moving away from the post-2003 ethno-sectarian dealings” toward decisions based on “perceptions of competency and ideology.”69 In reality, sectarianism had merely given way to transactional politics within a new framework of Iranian regional dominance.

67 Khamis al-Khanjar praises the ISIS occupation of Iraqi cities as liberation during an interview with al-Arabiya’s al-Hadath channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=nBGAATjxZ8.
68 Authors’ interview with former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman.

Figure 1. Perceptions of Iraq’s 2018 election

“At some point they forgot I was there and started talking about what they wanted to do... I felt like I was in an episode of The Sopranos.”
One of the shortcomings of policy debates on Iraq has been a focus on individual actors; time after time international policy has placed far too much faith in the strength of individual candidates for key positions, as “Iraq’s last” or “best” hope. This focus has diverted attention away from entrenched interests that have continually derailed attempts at genuine reform, and away from structural flaws that allow those entrenched interests to control the political system. It has also overlooked the activities and potential of civil society, including social movements, to bring about bottom-up change.

Observers hailed the compromises that led to the appointment of President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi as a “new start for Iraq.” Some suggested that Salih and Abdul-Mahdi could “change the system.” Yet within a year on that government’s watch, terrible damage occurred to the country’s future prospects as a democracy and to U.S.-Iraq relations: Iran-backed militias gained freedom to attack U.S. personnel and allies with impunity; hundreds of civilian protesters were killed; promised reforms failed to materialize; and Abdul-Mahdi endorsed a nonbinding resolution to expel U.S. forces from Iraq.

Basing policy decisions on personalities is less a problem of misjudging individuals than of misunderstanding the system. As a former American envoy to Iraq put it, “It is traumatic that we missed the Iranian project to dominate Iraq.” Many also failed to see the growing determination among many Iraqis to risk everything to resist that project.

The compromise government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi had to work under the gun of two rival coalitions, with support from neither. It was a government in which powerful blocs, not the prime minister, decided most cabinet appointments. Two main figures emerged to become power brokers, to represent the interests and power of the Fatah and Saeroun blocs in Abdul-Mahdi’s cabinet. The Sadrist Hamid al-Ghazi became the secretary general of the Council of Ministers, and Badr’s Abu Jihad al-Hashimi became the premier’s chief of staff. Meanwhile, the outsized role of foreign powers in guiding the selection of the next premier fed the sense of resentment toward those external actors—primarily Iran and to a lesser extent the United States—and the political parties that had enabled them.

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72 Authors’ interview with former U.S. ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey.
73 A former minister in Abdul-Mahdi’s cabinet said: “In summer of 2018, people wanted to redo the elections. The parties were scared and brought a consensus prime minister. Abdul-Mahdi agreed [to take the role] on the condition that he could pick four ministers on his own.”
74 In this clip, Iraqi political satirist Ahmed al-Basheer dissects an interview in Qais al-Khazali and explains how a successful candidate for the premiership must come from a pool of individuals acceptable to both Washington and Tehran: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2178425745017238.
Abdul-Mahdi’s weakness as a compromise candidate with no party backing meant that his government’s proposed reforms failed to gain traction. Even the few ministers he was allowed to pick, particularly for the ministries of health and electricity, found themselves under pressure from entrenched interests that intended to continue profiting from those ministries. Within less than one year, Health Minister Alaa al-Alwan resigned. Alwan attributed his resignation to attempted extortion by political forces, impeding his ability to manage the ministry. Some Iraqis believe Alwan’s fate was sealed by the Sadrists, who long controlled the Ministry of Health and benefited from its more than $1 billion in annual purchases, including the procurement of $15 million in vaccines for $92 million, among other wildly inflated contracts.

Abdul-Mahdi’s speeches about combating corruption remained just speeches. They also may have had the unintended consequence of feeding public discontent, by highlighting the extent of ongoing corruption and promising far more than he could deliver.

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The water crisis in Basra and 2018 protests

While the political class negotiated shares in the future government, a serious storm was brewing in the south; the main force behind it was access to clean water, or the lack thereof.

The year 2018 was particularly rough for Iraqis in the south. Drought had caused massive damage to the local economy and livelihoods by disrupting agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry. Authorities were forced to suspend the cultivation of rice and other water-intensive crops. The main oil refinery in Basra—the country’s largest surviving facility after the war with ISIS and militia looting had destroyed the Baiji complex—was shut down due to water scarcity. The salinity level there increased to 25,000 ppm (25 times the safe maximum), according to Iraq’s Ministry of Water Resources, rendering the water in the Shatt al-Arab waterway unusable.

The water shortage, rising salinity, and pollution in Basra also took their toll on public health. An estimated 118,000 people got sick during the summer of 2018. Unexplained delays in a major water project that was meant to meet Basra’s water needs in fact made conditions worse for Basrawis. The government had launched the project in 2014 with the aim to complete it in two years, yet by July 2020 it was still struggling to award contracts for the project.

The water shortage in southern Iraq was accompanied by an Iranian decision to halt supplies of electricity to Iraq as temperatures soared, making living conditions unbearable for the majority of people who couldn’t afford electricity from private generators.

Since at least 2015, southern Iraq has seen recurring protests, with people demanding jobs, services, and an end to endemic corruption that has consistently left Iraq near the bottom of Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. It ranked 169 among 180 nations listed in 2017.

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Such poor conditions in the summer of 2018 precipitated a new wave of protests; these erupted in Basra on July 8 as citizens demanded decent services. The killing of a protester by security forces unleashed more protests; these would be the most destabilizing Iraq had seen since 2003. Protesters burned the offices of political parties and militias. They also sacked the Iranian Consulate, expressing the growing resentment toward Iran in Iraq’s predominantly Shia south. Surveys showed that the percentage of those who considered Iran “a real threat to Iraqi sovereignty” had more than doubled, from 25 to 58 percent, between 2016 and 2018.86

Within a week, protests spread to the Babylon, Maysan, Karbala, Dhi-Qar, and Muthanna provinces, and parts of the capital. Demonstrators vented anger over unemployment and poor basic services, primarily electricity and water.

The protests of 2018 also had a strong political dimension. The menace of militias was particularly hard felt in the south, where a security vacuum had been left as security forces pursued ISIS northward. The space thus opened for organized crime, tribes, and militias to set up offices and supplant the government, becoming a major source of grievance. Basrawis resented the militias and tribal gangs that were supplanting a local government that was weak, corrupt, and beholden to Iran. The protesters viewed Tehran as the enabler of both militia abuses and local political corruption, and considered the militias responsible for the Iraqi state’s subservience to Iran.

The Basra protests did little to change the approach of the political class to governance. Conditions during the first nine months of 2019 brought still more disappointment to ordinary Iraqis. Vaunted anti-corruption initiatives floundered and failed to apprehend any suspects of consequence, while assassins and kidnappers targeted prominent activists, organizers, writers, and lawyers sympathetic to protesters with apparent impunity. Floods ravaged communities across the country, fires destroyed crops, and to say that oversight of basic services was left in the hands of the incompetent is a serious understatement.

88 Subservience to Iran was a theme that activists repeatedly raised during focus group discussions the authors organized in the course of research for this report.
92 Iraq’s former transport minister, infamous for remarks about alien spaceports in ancient Iraq, is still a member of the Parliament’s Services Committee.
The pursuit of new pathways to power by the pro-reform movement

The sparks, beginning, and escalation
A huge new wave of mass anti-government protests, the largest since 2003, erupted on October 1, 2019. These protests began in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, the central Baghdad landmark that had served as the platform for numerous protests since 2003. The protest action quickly spread to every one of Iraq’s eight southern provinces, starting with Dhi-Qar, which would become the “second capital” of the “Tishreen revolution.” There were also more cautious, smaller demonstrations in the central and northern provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din.93

From the beginning of October 2019, protesters’ anger focused on political parties in power and their backers in Iran. In Najaf, protesters torched offices of the Dawa and Hikma parties and tried to storm the Iranian Consulate. In Maysan, protesters torched the office of the Islamic Supreme Council, and in Wasit and Babylon, crowds stormed local government buildings.

Without specific political demands, the protests began as a general rejection of the political class that dominated the government but failed to address the people’s basic needs for safety, livelihood, and dignity. The outpouring of public anger emerged out of accumulated and growing grievances since 2003, which reached critical mass in late 2019. On the one hand, there were daily chronic frustrations: poor basic services, crumbling infrastructure, government corruption, and unemployment. On the other hand, there were serious frustrations with the manner in which the political class and armed militias treated the people. One male activist from Baghdad recalled that: “Our problem was not with Adil Abdul-Mahdi, but with those in power: the ‘sulta’ that came through the conferences in London and Salah ad-Din [and] the sectarian apportionment...”94 [Dozens of] Shia and Sunni militias control arms, money, trade, and political decisions. That’s why on October 1 we didn’t demand removing Abdul-Mahdi. We said we want a homeland. We want demilitarization and to change the parliament and constitution.”95

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94 These refer to the Iraqi opposition conferences organized ahead of the U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.
95 The Arabic word sulta (“authority”) has gained a negative connotation among Iraqis who use it to refer specifically to the oppressive exercise of authority by the political elites and armed factions.
According to EPIC’s nationwide survey conducted in June 2021, more than 82 percent of respondents named corruption as one of the main problems facing Iraq (see Figure 2).

The survey also showed that nearly one out of four Iraqis saw unemployment as the main grievance that mobilized the October protests. Corruption under Iraq’s *muhasasa* system followed closely behind, listed as the primary catalyst by more than one out of five respondents. The chronic “lack of basic services” and “weak rule of law” were cited as the most important drivers by 17.2 percent and 11.8 percent of respondents respectively (see Figure 3).

Based on conversations with activists, along with rhetoric used within the movement, activists viewed the new iteration of pro-reform protests as a continuation of those started in 2011, which had been inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions across the region. In more immediate terms, they pointed to two specific events that reignited protests.
The first event was a government crackdown in late September 2019, when anti-riot forces surrounded college graduates who had organized weeks-long sit-ins near the offices of the prime minister in Baghdad to demand employment.\textsuperscript{96} Footage of government forces using batons and water cannons to beat back young graduates, including women, inspired widespread outrage. The second event, in the same week, was the sudden dismissal of Abdul-Wahab al-Asadi, a popular general who led Iraq's elite counter-terrorism troops in the successful fight to liberate Mosul from ISIS.\textsuperscript{97}

By reinforcing popular belief that those in positions of power have little respect for the citizens they govern, and that the country was increasingly becoming a place where corruption is rewarded and good deeds are punished, these incidents set the stage for mass mobilization of protesters. One activist described how the events spurred him to action in September, when he worked with colleagues to distribute leaflets calling for a “day of action” on October 1 during a popular soccer match in Baghdad. While this indicates some degree of organization, the gatherings were also largely spontaneous, and organizers admitted the size of the crowds were beyond their expectations.\textsuperscript{98}

**The response**

Government response to the October 1 protest was both tactically violent and politically inept. The government deployed riot police and other elements of the formal security forces, who blocked off roads and met protesters with a range of weapons to deadly effect. In addition to traditional crowd-control methods using rubber bullets, batons, and water hoses, government forces also fired live ammunition above and into masses of civilians.\textsuperscript{99} By the end of the first week of protests, at least 110 people had been killed and some 6,000 injured by government forces.\textsuperscript{100}


\textsuperscript{97} Lawk Chafuri, “Iraq Removes Military Commander Who Defeated ISIS on the Ground,” Rudaw, September 28, 2019, \url{https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/28092019}.


\textsuperscript{99} At least 14 were killed during the first two days of protests; The New York Times, “"Just Give Us a Country: Thousands in Iraq Protest Corruption,” \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/world/middle-east/iraq-corruption-protests.html}.

In addition to the indiscriminate brutality witnessed at the main protest sites, there was near-immediate targeting of activists and others who volunteered to provide first aid and other logistical support. Basra saw the first reported targeted assassination after October 1, when gunmen murdered activists Hussein al-Madani and his wife Sarah in their home, after the couple had spent a day providing first aid to protesters affected by tear gas.¹⁰¹

News of abductions of women activists, like volunteer medic Saba al-Mahdawi, rippled through Iraqi society, intended to instill fear of the dangers to be faced by women actively supporting protesters.¹⁰² Yet the large-scale participation of women in subsequent protests, including women-only marches, sent clear messages of defiance.¹⁰³

Government also sought to disrupt protesters’ ability to organize actions. By the second day of protests, authorities had imposed curfews and shut down social media sites like Facebook and services like WhatsApp.¹⁰⁴ Protest organizers used ingenious ways to work around these communication hurdles. For example, some activists report they communicated through the chat function on the video streaming service Cinemana, Iraq's equivalent of Netflix.

There were also efforts to punish media outlets sympathetic to the protesters. On October 5, armed men thought to be members of Iran-backed militias ransacked the offices of multiple news networks in Baghdad, including NRT, TRT, Dijla, and al-Arabiya. In addition, security forces carried out targeted intimidation and arrests of journalists throughout that first week.

The government’s political response included efforts aimed at appeasement. The prime minister attempted to calm the situation by promising jobs, funds, and quick fixes to corruption and lack of services. In a televised address on October 3, Abdul-Mahdi promised the Iraqi people that he would put an end to corruption in two weeks and do his best to address the protesters’ “rightful demands and... every legitimate request.” Abdul-Mahdi’s speech, peculiarly delivered before dawn, acknowledged some of the key ailments of political life in Iraq, namely the sale of public offices, but appeared out of touch with events on the ground, and perhaps therefore did more to provoke the protesters than to calm them. He told Iraqis that “today, there are no barriers to prevent the people from making their voices heard.” This claim sounded especially hollow after government forces had killed at least 21 unarmed Iraqis and maimed 100s for making their voices heard. Abdul-Mahdi also alleged that the protests were at least partially mobilized around ulterior motives, and alluded to attempts to politicize the protests “and hijack their legitimate demands,” even though at that point there was no evidence to suggest the protests were anything but genuine displays of popular discontent.

Abdul-Mahdi warned that “today we are between two options: having a state or having no state.” That statement, while true in the minds of most Iraqis, underscored the gap between the government’s understanding of reality, which saw the explosion of public anger as the anti-state force, and the protesters’ perspective, which saw militia-protected corruption as the main threat undermining the state.
Within the first week of protests, Abdul-Mahdi had released two “reform packages” that promised a laundry list of initiatives intended to contain widespread protests and assuage public discontent. He started on October 6 with a 17-point plan that included affordable housing initiatives, new welfare programs, small business programs, debt forgiveness on agricultural land, and more jobs in the security ministries. He followed that two days later with a second plan that included stipends for students, vocational training for the unemployed, and programs to distribute agricultural land and channel jobs and small contracts from government projects to unemployed youth and youth-owned businesses. This package also called for the establishment of provincial committees to monitor the implementation of these reforms and report back to the prime minister within three months.

109 https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1180808431386690588
Finally, on October 9, he promised transparent investigations into officers who used live ammunition against protesters, material compensation for victims’ families, and the immediate release of those wrongfully detained. The government’s actions to deliver on these promises failed to meet expectations. This was especially true in relation to investigations into security forces, which failed to expose the perpetrators, and led to no real change in tactics employed against protesters.

Iran, and the escalation in violence
Sensing the threat protests posed to its interests and allies in Iraq, Iran’s regime responded quickly to the unrest. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called the protests an “enemy plot” intended to cause conflict between Iran and Iraq. Backing words with action, Iran dispatched General Qassim Soleimani, who commanded the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, to Baghdad a day after protests started. Soleimani set about coordinating plans to quash the demonstrations with deadly force. By the third day of demonstrations, the death toll among protesters began to climb rapidly as snipers—whose identities could not be confirmed but were believed to be acting on orders from militia leaders, began hunting down protesters. Grisly footage from that period shows that gunfire often targeted the head and neck. Indeed, the Iraqi government’s own investigation later confirmed that 70 percent of fatalities were caused by gun shots to the head or chest.

Iraqi government statements reinforced belief that the formal chain of command had lost control over events unfolding on the streets. Iraq’s defense minister admitted in a November interview that a “third party” was opening fire on protesters and security forces alike. The minister claimed the government arrested 200 individuals involved in this scheme, but declined to name the “undisciplined factions” that deployed the shooters on the streets.

112 https://twitter.com/ar_khamenei/status/1180922272051603283.
113 AP report citing Iraqi security official who said Soleimani told Iraqi officials “We in Iran know how to deal with protests...This happened in Iran and we got it under control.” Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Joseph Krauss, “Protests in Iraq and Lebanon Pose a Challenge to Iran,” AP News, October 30, 2019, https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-qassim-soleimani-ap-top-news-tehran-internatio
After a tense two-week pause in protest activities out of respect for the annual Arbaeen pilgrimage, anti-government marches and rallies resumed on October 25, with thousands taking to the streets in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, Basra, and other cities. Government forces responded with a new, deadly weapon that inflicted gruesome injuries and fatalities; heavy tear gas canisters fired directly at protesters. The excessive use of force during the first week of protests hadn’t achieved its intended purpose. Instead of suppressing the movement, it had invigorated it. Protest chants glorifying martyrdom, first used in Basra a year earlier, became popular, including *inmoot ashra, inmoot meeyah, ani qaful al qadhiyah* (“ten of us die, a hundred die, we are fixed on the cause”). These chants, along with conversations with activists, suggest that the struggle was becoming very emotional. The horrific deaths of unarmed protesters—particularly young people—at the hands of government and militia forces deepened their commitment to and identification with the movement, while hardening their resolve to demand government accountability.

During this new phase of action, protesters established a permanent presence at Tahrir Square and its surroundings. They transformed the area into a vibrant enclave that was part festival, part battlefront. At the so-called Turkish Restaurant, a building that overlooks the square and that became a base for protesters, meetings and discussions took place. Messages on banners unfurled from the top-floor balconies of the building. Daredevil young men taunted and challenged security forces across the Jumhuriyah Bridge; they made a sport of catching and extinguishing tear gas canisters. They also suffered heavy casualties. Militias and government forces used excessive violence, including tear gas, rubber bullets, sound bombs, and live fire to disrupt the protests, killing at least another 100 Iraqis and injuring some 5,000 in a matter of days. At the square itself, activists erected tents where they held political workshops, displayed art, and read poetry. “Many young men tell me they realized they have rights they did not know about until they got to the square,” one journalist who covered the protests recalled. Countless volunteers provided food, water, first aid, and even laundry services. The protests received a major boost of popular support when, on October 27, thousands of high school and university students walked out of school to join the protests in Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Maysan, and al-Qadisiyah, ignoring Abdul-Mahdi’s orders for schools and offices to run uninterrupted.

118 Authors’ interview with Azhar al-Rubaie.
Seeing that protesters were still undeterred, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, then–de facto leader of the PMF, threatened that the paramilitary force would intervene to defeat what he described as a “foreign-connected conspiracy exploiting the protests to plot against Iraq.” Iran, meanwhile, reinforced its efforts to preserve the status quo. General Qassem Soleimani returned to Iraq, and intervened in a meeting between Muqtada al-Sadr, who supported removing Abdul-Mahdi, and Hadi al-Amiri, who had previously expressed a vague willingness to work with Sadr. Soleimani pressured Amiri to continue his support for Abdul-Mahdi and abstain from cooperating with Sadr in identifying a replacement.

What followed was a change in the patterns of violence against protesters. Militants carried out deliberate unprovoked assaults that killed and maimed dozens at a time. In Karbala, on October 30, masked gunmen opened fire and killed 18 people and injured 100s more in an overnight attack, both unprovoked and excessive. Another bloody episode followed on November 28–30, after protesters burned Iran’s Consulate in Najaf for the third time. In the subsequent crackdown, more than 40 Iraqis were killed in Nasiriyah and Najaf. This was followed by the infamous Sinak massacre on December 6, when unidentified militiamen drew knives and opened fire on a gathering of protestors in and around the Sinak Garage, a five-story parking garage adjacent to Baghdad’s al-Khilani Square north of Tahrir Square. The militiamen killed between 29 and 80 civilians and injured another 137 with complete impunity as security forces vacated the area.

120 https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=45&v=4Gip6mafYkY.
Yet, despite the terrible violence directed at protest sites and the targeting of specific activists and supporters, the protests continued week after week for months and remained largely nonviolent and independent. This allowed the movement to retain its moral high ground and popular legitimacy in Iraq. As a result, the terrible sacrifices were not without gain. Mounting pressure on the government from the public, international community, and the Najaf clergy gave the protesters some of their biggest achievements. Within the second half of November, parliament began discussing a new election law presented by President Salih.125 By the end of the month, Abdul-Mahdi had submitted his resignation and it was accepted by parliament.

**Previous analytical approaches**

The 2019 protests differed from previous expressions of public discontent with the performance of Iraq’s political class. They were larger in scale, involved a broader swathe of the population, fostered a new and unique Iraqi identity, developed a roadmap for political change, and produced political organizations, such as student unions and political parties.

In this section we look at existing literature analyzing previous Iraqi protests, as well as the early stages of the current movement that began in October 2019.

In a 2018 paper, the late renowned Iraqi sociologist Faleh Jabbar explained how Iraqi communities, especially the Shia, were shifting “from identity politics to issue politics.”126 Jabbar argued that this shift resulted from weakening bonds of ethno-sectarian identities in the general public. Since corruption and poor service delivery don’t target ethnic or religious identity, the rise of issue-based political discourse affects the public across ethno-sectarian divides. The popular chant bism il-deen bagona al-haramiyah (“in religion’s name, the thieves robbed us”) demonstrates what Jabbar described as a “strong propensity” for Iraqi Shia to reclaim their identity from the Shia Islamist establishment that had come to dominate the Iraqi state after 2003.

In an insightful paper, the Carnegie Endowment’s Maha Yahya explains how poor services and living conditions mobilized Iraqis in 2015 and 2016 to express their frustrations with systemic failures based on ethno-sectarian power-sharing.127

Those earlier protests did not go so far as to push for radical change in the country’s political structure. They also failed to propose clear measures to realize reform. Dr. Yahya argues that the convergence of several unfavorable factors allowed Muqtada al-Sadr to hijack the movement, which caused its eventual collapse. Such factors included weak coordination among the movement’s many organizers, an inability to build bridges with protest movements in the Kurdistan region, and intense pressures brought on by war with ISIS.

As the 2018 election approached, a number of analysts argued that Muqtada al-Sadr was moving away from his legacy as a radical militia leader embroiled in sectarian bloodshed toward a nationalist persona essential for political reform. Some interpreted Sadr’s new choice of allies, namely the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), as evidence he was turning away from sectarianism and moving toward “championing antipoverty and secular-oriented politics.”

Benedict Robin-D’Cruz explores skepticism about cooperation with Muqtada al-Sadr within Iraq’s “civil trend” (an umbrella term used to describe a movement comprising secular parties and activists that seek to be the alternative to Islamist parties), and the divisions that cooperation with Sadr created among the groups comprising the civil trend. Robin-D’Cruz concludes that “many civil trend actors saw the ICP’s alliance with the Sadrist as a strategic disaster, a betrayal of the civil trend’s identity and purpose. They feared the Islamists would hijack the protest movement and use it to their political advantage.”

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Subsequent events in 2019–20 dispelled any doubts about what was behind Sadr’s changing rhetoric, or expectations of his potential as a reformer. Later sections of this report will in fact demonstrate how Sadr also exploited the 2019 protests for partisan gain, and how he returned to street thuggery to suppress non-Sadrist protesters who objected to his political designs. In later writing, Robin-D’Cruz and Renad Mansour underline that “Sadr’s leverage with Iran depends largely on... his ability to mobilize and de-mobilize protesters. In other words, for Sadr, the protest movement became a bargaining chip, which he seeks to trade with Iran to shore up his future position in what he expects to be Iran-dominated Iraqi politics.”

Writing a month after the October 2019 protests began, Harith Hassan argues that the protest was “a confrontation and a negotiation between the old language of ‘sects’ and a new language of citizenship and social justice.”130 The protests, writes Hassan, did not constitute a Shia revolt; it was a movement in which Shia clerics played a marginal role, if any, even though the protests were geographically concentrated in Shia areas. The non-sectarian identity of the protests was born out of a realization that the “multi-sectarian oligarchy—which is dividing the spoils among its key patrons—is, in fact, the ‘Other’ that resists their demands.” This realization, concludes Hassan, could lead to the development of “cross-sectarian solidarities” among disaffected Iraqi groups.

In an illuminating article, Fanar Haddad observes that the culture of “solidarity, inclusivity and self-help that has sustained Tahrir Square is itself a major achievement.”131 Haddad argues that the “cultural output of Tahrir Square and the round-the-clock grassroots effort that goes into sustaining its occupation” has showcased the rise of a new political culture detached from the era of Saddam Hussein and early stages of the new political system. Generational dynamics are at work, Haddad argues, pointing to the young Shia Iraqis who make up the majority of protesters. To this group, “Shia rule” is neither a dream pursued after Saddam’s overthrow, nor a fragile gain under Ba’athist or ISIS attack. Instead, it is the “only reality they have known,” with all its dysfunction and frustrations. Despite the energy around Tahrir Square, the movement has not reached the level that allows it to disrupt daily life in the rest of the capital. But even if the movement doesn’t meet the criteria for a genuine political revolution, Haddad emphasizes, it has been “undoubtedly a revolutionary movement that has already achieved a cultural revolution.”

And indeed many Iraqis appear to agree that the protests’ impact was social in nature. Nearly one out of two respondents to the June 2021 EPIC survey thought the protests’ biggest achievements were in changing social conditions: reducing sectarianism, advancing equality, and creating openness toward new ideas (see Figure 4).

The Tishreen movement’s goals

During a series of focus group discussions convened in early 2020, EPIC invited 28 activists from across Iraq, organized in three groups, to respond to questions about the goals of the pro-reform protest movement, how these goals evolved over time, and how the protest movement in their respective areas came to agree on those goals.

These discussions reflected that there was more agreement on the big picture or final outcome than there was on the particularities of their economic, much less political, demands. The discussions, as later sections will discuss in detail, also reflected a lack of cohesive vision for what the movement can do to realize those demands.

Responses reinforced the idea that the movement has claimed an identity based on the protection of rights; hence the first and most important slogan used by protesters was nazil akhth haqqi (“[I’m] coming to take my rights”). The goal was to bring people together, to unite them, over the loss of their rights and their desire for a homeland where all can live in dignity. As one male activist from Karbala put it: “Protesters saw the people in agreement on one goal in that they want a homeland that is safe, inclusive, and supportive.”

There was general agreement that the demands expressed by the pro-reform protest movement evolved quickly after October 1, expanding from spontaneous actions denouncing corruption and demanding jobs and services, to focus on a number of political goals. Discussants often pointed to the government’s “stupid” reaction and use of excessive force as a main factor pushing protesters to demand the resignation of Adil Abdul-Mahdi and accountability for perpetrators of violence. Discussants acknowledged that calls to end the regime lacked clarity.

The main goals around which there was clear consensus were better job opportunities and basic services, an end to foreign interference in Iraqi affairs, an end to economic control by establishment parties and armed militias, greater representation for marginalized groups, including young people, an end to the muhasasa system and corruption, and the establishment of a state monopoly over arms.

“Protesters saw the people in agreement on one goal in that they want a homeland that is safe, inclusive, and supportive.”
Discussants appeared to agree that specific political demands crystallized at a later stage of the protests. These included: a new, truly independent IHEC; a fair election law that allows all Iraqis to participate; constitutional amendments (a point often raised without elaboration); early elections; reform of the federal court system; and the abolition of provincial councils.

Some activists pointed out a synergistic relationship between an older, politically educated generation of protesters focused on advancing political change and a younger generation yearning for a better life. As one female activist from Baghdad stated, “There were poor, deprived young men who didn’t know much about laws and governance systems. These guys supported older activists who understand governance and have a voice through the media or speak at the protest squares. So we have people demanding an end to poverty and people making demands concerning democratic practices and principles.”

With regard to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focus group discussants from the region highlighted a set of demands that revolved around financial transparency, and the need to require the region’s ruling political parties—the KDP and PUK—to follow the law. Namely, activists listed security sector reform, protection for freedom of expression, independence of the judiciary, labor laws, and protection from the arbitrary withholding of wages. Underscoring the perception of widespread use of security forces by political actors for personal gain, one male activist from Erbil noted: “There is a Peshmerga ministry but not only do the parties have their own armed forces, even individuals within the PUK and KDP have their own brigades which they use to protect their interests.”

Another point of consensus was on the need for budget transparency and the right to obtain information. Discussants complained that ordinary parliamentarians don’t even know how much revenue each region receives or the expenses it incurs; this data is restricted to an exclusive group of senior party officials. The abuse of public funds is perceived to be so rampant that a male activist from Erbil exclaimed that: “The [government] institutions have become a milking cow for the parties.”

More generally, discussants said they want to see an end to partisan exploitation of the executive and parliamentary institutions. Political parties must uphold the law and public interest when running government affairs, and not serve party interests. One male activist from Erbil argued that ruling parties have been selective in enforcing the law, doing so only when it suits their interests: “The region doesn’t enforce the law except when it comes to dealing with protests. The protest law creates obstacles that make it hard to obtain permits from security agencies.”

“There is a Peshmerga ministry but not only do the parties have their own armed forces, even individuals within the PUK and KDP have their own brigades which they use to protect their interests.”
The movement’s composition and reach
Following the U.S.-led removal of the Ba’athist regime in 2003, the rights and grievances of the individual were superseded by those of the community. In the name of preserving stability and defending the state, Iraq’s political parties consistently favored partisan gains over meritocracy. But a growing number of Iraqis, as shown most clearly in the nationalist and non-sectarian slogans used by young people in protests, have increasingly refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the sect as all important. They want to see change in the rules of the political game, and a new criteria for determining who is worthy to lead and govern the country.

A multi-generational social movement has risen to challenge the political establishment that has greatly benefited from traditional pathways to power to accumulate significant wealth and influence. Much of this movement is comprised of young Iraqis who never experienced tyranny under Saddam Hussein firsthand. They were instead exposed to a world of wealth and success beyond Iraq’s borders, and they questioned why similar opportunities have not been available to them in Iraq. Azhar al-Rubaie, a journalist who has covered protests in Basra and elsewhere, observes: “[These] young guys are not afraid like [older generations] were under Saddam... they directly confront corrupt officials and tell them ‘you are corrupt, you should resign!”

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132 Authors’ interview with Azhar al-Rubaie.
The greatest numbers of protesters are young men from the poorer districts of Baghdad and the southern provinces. Many are unemployed or underemployed, while college and high school students represent another large contingent. Some are “tuk tuk” drivers, who have carved out a role for themselves as the quasi cavalry of the movement, ferrying wounded and dead protesters to hospitals, and transporting supplies and people to and from the main protest sites, often refusing pay. These poor young men have been joined by large numbers of young graduates and some middle-age professionals, including lawyers, doctors, journalists, and business owners. Overall, the activists we spoke with estimate that 90 percent of all recent protesters are under the age of 25. The movement enjoys a broad membership, and broad support among the Iraqi public. More than three out of ten respondents to EPIC’s June 2021 survey said they had participated in at least one protest activity to demand jobs, services, or government reform since October 2019. Of those, 71 percent were between 18 and 35 years old (see Figure 5).

While young people make up a large percentage of the protesters, support for the Tishreen movement is not restricted to their generation. Impressively, 7 out of 10 respondents reported that they support the protesters, and only 1 out of 20 voiced opposition to the protest movement (see Figure 6).
The Sadrists
Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist trend's relations with the Tishreen movement have vacillated over time. Sadr first engaged the movement through passive support. On October 2, while Sadr and his followers kept their distance from the movement, he condemned the violence against protesters. There are indications that Sadr did not make his decision to actively support the protests until October 15, when he instructed his followers to join an anti-corruption protest. The language Sadr dictated to his followers suggests that he intended to use the protests to serve his own political priorities: “no no to America, no no to Israel, no no to corruption.”

But Sadr, it appears, was a step behind. A Baghdadi activist said that Sadr’s followers joined the protest in a deliberate manner only “after they lost 30 martyrs near the Kindi hospital who were killed by snipers. The families, who are part of the Sadrist trend, went to Muqtada and he authorized it. He said, go and I’ll support you.”

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133 https://twitter.com/Mu_AISadr/status/1179438809378935888
134 https://twitter.com/Mu_AISadr/status/11844842181106800.
One former minister in Abdul-Mahdi’s cabinet believes that Muqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim, and Haider al-Abadi “initiated the protests” for political gain. According to that official, “They wanted the Central Bank and Oil Ministry, or else they threatened to topple the government... October 25 was not a coincidence, it was a deadline.” 136 Indeed, shortly after protests resumed, Sadr called on Abdul-Mahdi to resign. While Sadr was actively supporting the protests at that point, there is no evidence that he had any role in planning them.

Setting aside pressure from victims’ families, Sadr found an opportune moment to build leverage against his rivals in the Fatah Alliance and against Abdul-Mahdi, to reshape the government in his favor. For years Sadr had been exploiting popular demands for reform to expand his influence in government at the expense of his rivals under the guise of replacing corrupt officials with “technocrats.” 137 Activists’ need for protection from government and militia oppression gave Sadr an opportunity to attach himself to the protest movement, as he had done in 2015–16, when “the Communists needed the Sadrists, needed the protection of the Sadrists, more than the other way around.” 138

136 Authors’ interview with a cabinet minister in Abdul-Mahdi’s government.
138 Authors’ interview with Robert Ford, former deputy U.S. ambassador to Iraq.
During the first several weeks of the 2019 protests, Sadr’s followers provided much-needed support for the activists, including food, protection, and additional protesters. Activists noted that “the Sadrist were one of the first to set up mawakib to serve the protests logistically.”

But by mid-November 2019, relations began to sour. Sadr admonished protesters for harassing “the diplomatic missions of non-occupying states,” a clear reference to Iran, and accused activists of being paid agents of “American colonial agendas.” Sadr’s timing couldn’t have been worse; his statement came on the heels of a new escalation in government violence that killed up to 22 people from November 8 to November 13. Protesters criticized Sadr in their chants, using a modified version of one of his own catch phrases, starting in Basra and Dhi-Qar. Shali’ qali (“remove them [corrupt politicians] by the roots”) became shali’ qali wilgalha wyahom (“remove them by the roots, including the one who coined this phrase”).

Amid the chaos unleashed by the January 3, 2020, assassination of Iranian General Qassim Soleimani and deputy chief of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Sadr’s followers, known as “blue hats,” attacked and took control of the Turkish restaurant, the protesters’ bastion overlooking Tahrir Square and an important symbol of the Tishreen movement. On January 4, the “blue hats” began using the captured restaurant as a stage from which to put forward the names of potential prime ministerial candidates favored by Sadr.

Sadr burned his last remaining bridge with protesters on February 1, when he and his rivals in the Fatah Alliance agreed to nominate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi to be the next prime minister. Sadr said that “the people,” not the political parties, chose Allawi. To support that claim, he needed to sideline the non-Sadrist protesters. The following day, Sadr issued orders to his followers to begin opening roads and public spaces occupied by protesters, and to prevent closures of schools and government buildings. Bands of Sadr’s “blue hats” clashed with protesters in Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, and Hilla.

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139 Refers to al-mawakib al-Husseiniyah, the organized groups that commemorate the martyrdom of Shia Islam’s most revered figure with solemn processions and services for fellow pilgrims.
141 Tweet by Muqtada al-Sadr, November 13, 2019, https://twitter.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/1194543130927865857/photo/1.
143 Footage from a protest in Basra, November 18, 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1hjfPYlj8s.
146 https://twitter.com/MuAlSadr/status/1223896218784477184.
As those events unfolded and the news spread, the uneasy entente between the Tishreen movement and Sadr was replaced with outright enmity. This diminished the momentum of the protests in two ways. First, the purely human mass of Sadrists was removed from demonstrations. And, second, once again mainstream protesters were left dangerously exposed to government and militia violence.

As a student union activist from Baghdad describes it, “The civil side was clearly led by the students’ union. At the same time, there were a lot of Sadrists in terms of numbers. We rallied 1-3 times a week, but Sadrists were there at all times. They also had a role in physically protecting protesters during the Sinak attack and others.”

Decision-making within the Tishreen movement

*mahhad qadha thawra shababiya*

("no one led it, it's a youth revolution")
– popular chant of the October protests

The Tishreen movement presents itself as leaderless. At the same time, there are prominent members and organizers who influence large numbers of individuals within movement ranks. To what extent it exists, Tishreen’s leadership is dispersed, both at the local and national level, with different leaders representing different factions and demographics.

The scarcity of high-profile figures can be attributed to a number of considerations in the minds of movement organizers. First there is physical security. Against a backdrop of regular killings and kidnapings, leaders may prefer to keep a low profile, to reduce the risk of being targeted by government security forces and militias. Indeed, some of the movement’s prominent figures, from Safa al-Sarrai to Ehab al-Wazni, became known to most observers only after they had been killed. Conversations with media-savvy activists have revealed that they are also attuned to the threat of “character assassination” by the so-called electronic armies of political parties, and how this affects not only individuals but the reputation of the movement as a whole. This issue will be discussed more thoroughly in the fourth section of this report. In addition, there has been a conscious commitment to egalitarianism across the movement, a theme often expressed by the movement’s street artists and writers, including many women.\(^{149}\) The first edition of its newspaper *Tuk Tuk*, for example, makes the argument that an absence of clear leadership is a source of strength, as it eliminates wasted competition for prominence and power.\(^{150}\)

Findings

In the focus group discussions convened by EPIC, all of the participants described decision-making processes that were based on spontaneous informal discussions, a show of hands, and informal public meetings. The decision-making process was, in their view, notably messier in Baghdad due to the numerous groups, classes, and powers involved, which meant it was prone to disruption or interference by outsiders, such as Sadrists.


\(^{150}\) The first edition of *Tuk Tuk* can be found here: [https://www.aljumhuriya.net/sites/default/files/ttk_lid_llw.pdf](https://www.aljumhuriya.net/sites/default/files/ttk_lid_llw.pdf).
Discussants often pointed to the universal nature of their demands in bringing various groups together. Reflecting on his experience with protests since 2015, one male activist from Babylon said that when he talked to activists from other provinces, he “found an unusual level of agreement. When we go to Najaf or Karbala or Baghdad, we see the same demands that we want being made there too. This is because the demands are known and the young people have a high level of awareness. The agreement happened without mechanisms.”

These discussions also pointed out the role of collective memory, of past demands and grievances, dating back to 2011, in shaping the contours of current protest demands. In the words of a male activist from Dhi-Qar: “There was a buildup from 2011 to 2018; in each demonstration and [phase of the] protest movement there was a group of demands. These demands accumulated and were later consolidated into the specific demands of Tishreen.”

The exact steps of the decision-making process may have varied from one group to another, from one area to another, but there were still common threads. This is how a female activist from Baghdad described the process: “In the beginning, the mechanisms for coordination were nonexistent. People were concerned that those who join ‘tanseeqiyat’ would go negotiate with the government, get a job and abandon us. Later on, decision-making was informal. When a slogan is raised, we’d look at the level of support and [based on that we decided to] either go with it or ignore it.”

At the protest squares, groups of friends, colleagues, and neighbors often met in their own tents to discuss problems, demands, and ideas for reforms; then they dispatched representatives to meet with representatives from other groups. These would in turn organize meetings to discuss matters and reach decisions through a show of hands. These coordination groups facilitated discussions but had no power to impose their ideas on the collective.

Tanseeqiyat is a term used to describe groups of individuals that coordinate the actions of other protest groups in a certain area or community.
Demands were either “active,” reflecting activists’ thinking on plans to affect change to address grievances that had built up over time, or “reactive,” reflecting responses to current developments, such as rejecting a political candidate, or demanding the release of a kidnapped colleague.

Social media played a significant role in broadcasting decisions to the general population of the movement’s supporters. “When a hashtag acquired substantial support, it showed that there was consensus around it and so we’d adopt that hashtag,” said one male activist from Baghdad.

Physical structures also played a role. During early stages of the protests, protesters controlled the Turkish Restaurant building at Tahrir Square, turning it into a de facto base. They famously used this building as a giant concrete billboard from which they unfurled banners imprinted with slogans, and their latest decisions or demands.

Figure 7. Survey respondents’ perceptions of protesters, by province
Discussants from Iraq’s southern provinces pointed out that Iraqi communists played a prominent role in communicating movement messages because their education and experience better positioned them to compose long statements articulating complex ideas.

The pro-reform movement in Sunni and Kurdish provinces

The locations of the 2019–20 protests have led some observers and non-Shia Iraqi politicians, at least initially, to view them as a Shia uprising against a Shia government. While most protesters are indeed from the Shia community, this characterization is misleading for two reasons. First, the movement’s messages have been consistently non-sectarian. They criticize the government and political actors for being corrupt and incompetent, and for perpetuating sectarianism for political gain, regardless of their religious affiliation. Second, the protest movement also enjoys support in predominantly Sunni areas, but protests in these areas have been suppressed by authorities, and self-policed by a community long battered by sectarian conflict and fearful of being labeled ISIS sympathizers. In Mosul, and more so in Anbar Province, local authorities have arrested and beaten activists who spoke on social media to mobilize protests in solidarity with those in Baghdad and the south. Activists from these areas, therefore, resorted to sending delegations to Baghdad to express their solidarity.153

This tendency among many in the Sunni community to try to preserve the relative, post-ISIS tranquility in their provinces may be only temporary, argues Iraqi pollster Munqith Dagher, who conducted numerous polls during and after the ISIS occupation of Sunni provinces. “So far, they [Sunni Arabs] still have the fear of ISIS, but this won’t last long. This is like what happened to the Shia after the occupation. They were happy, they thought things would get better... This relief phenomenon happens when you go through bad circumstances, then these are lifted, [and] you feel relief. But this will fade. It faded among the Shia and it will fade among the Sunnis.”153

Survey results pointed to high levels of support for protesters across all provinces (see Figure 7).
When asked about their feelings toward the protests in the south and the prospect for similar protests in the KRI, participants in focus group discussions unanimously voiced their support for the protesters in other provinces and their approval of Tishreen’s demands. A male activist from Erbil explained: “As activists in Kurdistan, we supported the Iraqi protests because some of the demands are the same as ours... the most important one is to limit or restrict the parties’ hold on power, and their use of public funds and authority for their narrow interest. The second one is regional interference in Iraq’s affairs, and more important than all of this is to live with dignity.”

Most focus group discussants in the KRI applauded the achievements of the protest movement in federal Iraq, namely forcing a change of government, and pushing for new election law. They were more divided about the utility of protest as a catalyst for change in their own region. Nevertheless, a small majority did express belief that protests are necessary for political change in the KRI as well. To drive that point home, a male activist from Sulaymaniyah declared, “Protests are like oxygen to democracy, and so [they] are necessary to any democratic experiment... The quiet in the KRI is the quiet before the storm.”

The rest, however, were skeptical of the utility of protests in the political context of their region, arguing that they would only serve to give the dynastic parties excuses to use violence to stifle dissent. It was interesting to hear these discussants emphasize the importance of location as a key variable in determining the impact of protest. They pointed out that action in the KDP-dominated zone, which includes Erbil and Duhok, would be far more significant than similar action taken in Sulaymaniyah. As one female activist from Sulaymaniyah put it: “One protest in Erbil changes the whole equation.”
Protests were limited to areas in and around Sulaymaniyah because KDP authorities had used preemptive threats of arrest to curtail public assembly elsewhere in their zones. In May of 2020, KRG security forces moved to prevent teachers in Duhok Province from taking part in a planned protest to demand payment of delayed salaries. Security forces arrested dozens of teachers who had turned out for the protest, and at least eight journalists. Authorities reportedly also arrested more than 100 journalists, activists, and teachers from the KDP-ruled Bahdinan region—where Duhok is located—between August and November 2020. Some of the accused protest organizers were later sentenced to years in prison on “espionage” charges in trials far removed from due process. Defendants were beaten, threatened, and their lawyers were denied access to the case files.

The KRI, as events later in 2020 demonstrated, is not immune to unrest, any more than Baghdad or Nasiriyah. On December 3, 2020, protests engulfed several towns in the KRI’s Sulaymaniyah Province. These protests were initially comprised of teachers demanding their October and November salaries. The teachers were later joined by other civil servants and unemployed youth. These events showed similar patterns to protests in southern Iraq. Activities started peacefully and were motivated by specific grievances. Then a violent government response, with security forces firing tear gas and live ammunition, transformed the protests into an expression of broader frustration with political elites. Protesters set the offices of the KDP, PUK, and Gorran parties on fire, and burned down buildings belonging to the Ministry of Education. The ensuing violence by security forces left at least eight people dead and dozens injured.  

Authorities also cracked down on news outlets sympathetic to the protesters, and banned “unauthorized” demonstrations across the region, threatening violators with arrest. Mirroring tactics used in Baghdad in 2019, authorities in Sulaymaniyah also restricted internet access and access to social media platforms.

In the past, teachers’ protests had been peaceful, noted Sulaymaniyah’s representative in the Iraqi parliament, Sarkawt Shamsulddine. “I think the spark was the use of violence in Sulaymaniyah against teachers... that day when teachers tried to go to the city center, they faced a brutal response... [B]ut the grievances have always been there... to mobilize the disenfranchised to show their anger and disappointment with the government.”

Like the 2019 Iraq protests, recent protests in the KRI have underscored a generational factor. “The demography was different,” observed Christine Van Den Toorn, who taught for years at the American University of Iraq–Sulaimani (AUIS). The protesters were “younger, more violent compared with previous years when weekly protests were mostly employees trying to get paid... This reflects popular disillusionment that’s been snowballing since 2003 and accelerated with the referendum.”

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156 NetBlocks reported that the internet was disrupted in Sulaymaniyah during protests, December 7, 2020. https://twitter.com/netblocks/status/1336213883053163200?s=20.
The waning

As 2020 wore on, jubilant mass rallies disappeared, replaced by intermittent actions by smaller numbers of particularly fearless activists. The first anniversary of the “October revolution” passed, government forces had reclaimed Baghdad’s Tahrir Square and Nasiriyah’s Haboubi Square, the epicenters of movement activism. But the underlying grievances that had energized the nonviolent mass uprising did not change, and violent suppression of protests by government forces and militias only added more grievances.

In fact, it took a global pandemic and a great deal of bloodshed to sap the energy of the mass movement. UN reports state that militias and government forces killed nearly 500 peaceful protesters on the streets during the first seven months of protests. This death toll does not include killings of targeted activists away from protest sites, nor does it include scores of assassinations, abductions, and other violence that subsequently targeted prominent activists and government critics throughout the second half of 2020 and 2021.

Other factors also contributed to the apparent weakening of the movement.

In January 2020, the White House ordered a drone strike that killed General Qassim Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis near Baghdad’s airport. This development embroiled the movement in a geopolitical game for which they were not prepared. In the following weeks, Iran-backed militias reached an agreement with Muqtada al-Sadr to support a candidate to become the next prime minister; they were ready to engage in negotiations to divide control of government posts. As the protest movement became an obstacle to that division of bounty, the militias and Sadr linked Washington’s violation of Baghdad’s sovereignty with the movement as a tool of “American subversion.” They choreographed a renewed assault on the activists. Afraid for the safety of their loved ones, family members pressured many protesters to lay low.

Few attacks on activists and supportive voices received attention outside Iraq. One was the July 6, 2020, assassination of Hisham al-Hashimi, a security analyst who supported the protests. Shootings, bombings, kidnappings, and torture have been more common than international headlines would suggest. The nature of the targets and methods employed in these attacks point to campaigns of intimidation by powerful militias and Iranian agents determined to prevent organized opposition from threatening their positions.

UN reports state that militias and government forces killed nearly 500 peaceful protesters on the streets during the first seven months of protests.

EPIC’s weekly monitoring reports of security incidents in Iraq reveal a continuous stream of bombings, drive-by shootings, and other attacks throughout the second half of 2020 and the first of 2021. The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights counted 81 attempts on the lives of anti-government activists and journalists since October 2019. Of the 34 who were killed as of May 2021, one in three was targeted since Mustafa al-Kadhimi took office with the declared mission of holding the killers of protesters accountable for their crimes.

Activists from Baghdad, Basra, Dhi-Qar, Najaf, and Maysan have said that militia attacks and threats forced many of their colleagues who had been instrumental in organizing protests against Islamist parties’ rule to abandon their provinces or leave the country altogether. According to Talal al-Hariri, founder of a political party named the October 25 movement, “The tax we pay for secularism is huge. I had to leave Baghdad because of this. We are facing an Iranian arsenal.”

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And justice remains distant. Iraqi authorities have opened multiple investigations into the excessive use of lethal force, assassination of activists, and other clear violations of human rights, but arrests have been few. Investigations have failed to identify the perpetrators in dozens of incidents, including large-scale assaults in which the role of militia leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr are hardly hidden. The justice system appears to have been more effective at prosecuting protesters than prosecuting the perpetrators of crimes against them. In June 2021, a court in Najaf sentenced two protesters to life in prison. The young men were somehow convicted in connection with a February 5, 2020, attack perpetrated by Muqtada al-Sadr’s followers on protesters in Najaf, in which the “blue hats” shot and killed eight people. None of Sadr’s followers was prosecuted.

164 Sadr’s aide Salih Mohammed al-Iraqi praised the November 27, 2020, assault by Sadr’s followers on protesters in Nasiriyah’s Haboubi Square: https://twitter.com/salih_m_iraqi/status/132612841697062888.
Some assassinations targeted the families of slain activists when their relatives became vocal in pointing fingers at certain militias they suspected. Perhaps the most damning example is the assassination of Ahmed al-Hiliji, father of Maysan activist Ali Jasib Hattab, who was disappeared in October 2019. For months, Hiliji accused an Iran-backed militia called Ansarullah al-Awfiya of disappearing his son and pleaded with Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to help him.167 On March 10, 2021, two gunmen on motorcycles shot and killed Hiliji as he was leaving a memorial service for another assassinated Maysan activist.168

For many activists the violence and threats have been crippling: “We have not been able to translate our position into organized political action,” one activist said in December 2020. Among other risks, “one cannot become a candidate [to run for election] because of threats and attacks by the electronic armies.” This is a reference to “smear and incitement” campaigns that Iran-backed militias have organized on social media platforms. There was also “fear that the militias will repeat what al-Qaeda did in Ninewa [in targeting candidates].”169

Azhar al-Rubaie, a journalist from Basra, doesn’t believe violence will ultimately stop the movement. Protest leaders, he said, “have faced bullets and threats ... and they expect more of this if they run for public office. ... [T]hey don’t fear more violence and [know] the road is not paved with rose petals.”170

While government and militia violence, including the targeted killing and intimidation of activists, has certainly taken a toll on activists’ ability to organize, many in the Tishreen movement are defying the risks and continuing to quietly organize. Members of the Baghdad Students Union—formed to organize student protests in the fall of 2019—interviewed for this report said that they remain determined to mobilize networks of students and recent graduates across Iraq to create an alternative to the establishment parties. Indeed, by early 2021, groups of protesters had begun forming political parties to institutionalize their political activity and prepare for the next election.171

169 Referring to a series of attacks on electoral candidates ahead of the 2014 election, when ISIS was on the rise.
170 Authors’ interview with Azhar al-Rubaie.
How activists want to achieve their goals

Discussion about mechanisms by which the reform movement could achieve its goals showed that at least a sizable minority of participants spent more time thinking about what changes they would like than how to achieve them. Several discussants used vague language about public or international pressure as means for achieving their goals. A few highlighted anecdotes about successful interventions on behalf of protesters by social or religious leaders as examples that activists could build on. And some repurposed core demands, such as establishing a state monopoly over arms, or removing oligarchs from power, as mechanisms for achieving other reforms.

Most discussants agreed that protesters need to be politically organized to be more effective at advancing the reforms they seek. But opinions were split as to whether that meant they should also compete in elections. A minority vehemently opposed running for office as candidates; they viewed political organizing as limited to creating an organizational framework through which young Iraqis can express their vision for their country.

But the majority argued that the movement must establish a presence within parliament if it wants to effect genuine change. They pointed out that participating in elections to send representatives to parliament who could subsequently advocate for political reform was the logical conclusion of movement actions. One male activist from Basra observed that this approach was the logical path given the movement’s goals and means at its disposal: “When the movement’s thought leaders moved away from the idea of bringing down the regime—which is not possible and there are some against it—this led to presenting the election law. That means the goal is political participation, because the highest authority in the country is the parliament through which you can amend the constitution and approach change.”

Most discussants agreed that winning public support inside Iraq and engaging the international community were also crucial to pressuring Iraq’s political class to listen to their demands. From the perspective of one male activist from Karbala, “There is nothing as effective as mobilizing public opinion, especially using Twitter hashtags. When we focused on a certain issue like finalizing the election law and built strong public opinion around it, the next day the channels talked about it and politicians said they’d meet to do it. It had a real impact.”

A minority was in favor of forcible intervention to effect radical change, either by military coup, or persuading the international community to change the behavior of “politicians who came on the backs of tanks.”

172 A common way to refer to former exiles who returned to Iraq after 2003 and assumed power through the various establishment parties.
The movement’s views on parties, alliances, and elections

In focus group discussions, activists were divided about how to best politically engage with elections and traditional parties, but working with the walaie (“loyalist”) groups (i.e., militias and parties with close ties to Iran) was a clear redline.

Discussants agreed that the protest community as a whole was divided over whether they should participate in elections. “The community that opposes the [existing] political system is clearly divided as to whether we should participate or not,” explained a male activist from Baghdad.

Almost all of the discussants favored participating in elections (as voters) and stated that boycotting elections was counterproductive and dangerous. That view was best articulated by a female activist from Baghdad who declared: “Look at the Sunni boycott [of elections in 2005]. What did that achieve? Look at the last election. Turnout was weak but the government was formed nevertheless and stayed for four years.”

A few dissenting voices argued in favor of boycotts. They worried that casting a vote would legitimize an inevitably fraudulent outcome in favor of establishment parties. A male activists from Baghdad argued: “No one can deny the role that the 2018 boycott played in making public anger boil and push [the street] towards protesting in 2019. The biggest mistake activists made in 2018 was participating in the political process.”

Most participants agreed that barriers to entering the political process and running for office were high. A minority of discussants saw this as justifying temporary alliances with existing parties to win office, and then relying on their own local base of support to pursue reform in line with the goals of the movement. More widely accepted among the discussants was the view that reformers should run for office as independent candidates or by forming new parties, rather than explore alliances with select existing parties. As one male activist from Baghdad put it: “October, with the blood of the martyrs, forced a change in the equation for the new election system. We need to enable the independent who’s well known in their district to rise and represent their district.”

173 Most Sunni Arabs boycotted the national assembly elections in January 2005. The move allowed Shia and Kurdish representatives to dominate politics during the transition period, most notably in drafting the constitution.
Participants stated that most political parties engage in corruption, but made a distinction between irreconcilable groups diametrically opposed to reform, and reconcilable ones that could ostensibly be nudged toward reform. Discussants espousing this view mentioned Haider al-Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim as potential allies, and strongly rejected any contact with the Sadrists or parties close to Iran or affiliated with militias, using the umbrella term \textit{walaie} to describe undesirable factions or parties.\footnote{In subsequent conversations, other activists pointed to growing amity between activists and certain political figures who are seen as independent minded and reform oriented. Independent MP Faeq al-Sheikh Ali and former Najaf governor Adnan al-Zurfi appeared to be gaining popularity in early to mid 2021.}

Subsequent interviews with activists involved in electoral campaigns revealed at least partial disagreements. A Baghdadi activist involved in the campaign of a fellow activist, who plans to compete in the election with support from former Najaf governor Adnan al-Zurfi, affirmed that other Tishreen parties endorsed such arrangements. He confidently expected groups like al-Bayt al-Watani to support his colleague’s candidacy and treat the campaign “like their own.”

Hussein al-Ghorabi, who leads al-Bayt al-Watani, the most prominent of protester-led parties, contradicted this view, stressing that “this political class, as a whole, is the same. They are either oppressing Tishreen and any dissenting opinions, or they are taking part [in the oppression] by remaining silent... Adnan al-Zurfi, Haider al-Abadi, and Ammar al-Hakim possess seats in parliament. What are their efforts to stop the shedding of Iraqi blood? And what are their efforts to correct the path of the democratic process? We hold them responsible. Certainly, the Tishreen youth, if they want to compete in the election, they will go with a coalition of Tishreen forces only...”\footnote{For EPIC’s full interview with Hussein al-Ghorabi, see EPIC, “Iraqi Activists and the Difficult Decision to Boycott Elections,” July 7, 2021, \url{https://enablingpeace.org/iraqi-activists-and-the-difficult-decision-to-boycott-elections/}.}

In the KRI, most focus group discussants favored participating in elections as voters but opposed the idea of forming new political parties as a means to influence politics. Instead, they argued, “we have enough parties.” The preferred path was to take advantage of the new electoral system and advance independent candidates to run in elections. The discussants were referring to the new election law parliament finalized in November 2020. The law ends the Sainte-Lagué method of distributing parliamentary seats based on proportional representation, the designation of 18 province-sized electoral districts for Iraq, and the use of closed and semi-open “party lists,” all of which benefited larger parties and gave party leaders varying degrees of control over which candidates won seats in past elections. Instead, the next election will feature non-transferable votes, individual candidacies, and 83 smaller districts, with each district represented by three to five seats in parliament.\footnote{Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iraq Ratifies New Election Law, Paving Way for Early Vote,” AP News, November 5, 2020, \url{https://apnews.com/article/baghdad-iraq-elections-laws-bd122c013a0c-3c537793805d78377576a}.}
The movement’s views on the authoritarian option

One of the recurring themes in our focus group discussions about political attitudes among Iraqi youth is that many young people have developed nostalgia for an idealized version of efficient authoritarianism.\(^\text{177}\) Marsin Alshamary, a post-doctoral researcher on Iraq, has pointed out the underlying reasons for this nostalgia. Poor education, poverty, and other daily reminders of the failures of the current political class continue today, “So this feeling is not going to change.”\(^\text{178}\) Iraqis who were not exposed to the horrors of life under Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship can be attracted to the idea of a strong ruler to stomp out the lawlessness and corruption that characterize Iraq’s failing democracy, with its dispersed and quarreling power center.

Focus group discussions organized by EPIC in early 2021 attempted to test the responses of Iraqi activists to this proposition. The question “Should the movement support a strong leader who can crack down on corruption and militias and can rebuild state institutions even if he/she violates some democratic principles?” elicited reactions ranging from absolute opposition to cautious agreement.

A small majority argued that a leader prone to violating democratic principles would be inherently incompatible with the pro-reform movement and its goals; therefore the latter could not possibly endorse the former. “I think it’s not possible for the protest movement to support such a person because we support the project that can achieve our demands, and this definitely won’t be dependent on one person,” said one male activist from Baghdad. Another male activist said the idea of empowering a potential authoritarian in exchange for stability and prosperity was “like asking me if I could live in China. No, I cannot live in China.”


\(^{178}\) Authors’ interview with Alshamary in January 2021.
A sizable minority said this type of leader could be beneficial for Iraq in the short term while the country rids itself of militias and foreign interference and proceeds to solidify its institutions. “A leader may need to do things at the expense of democratic principles because the situation and society need certain decisive measures to put them back on track. They need force,” said one female activist from Baghdad. Another female activist from Karbala argued that, “we could support such a person for only four years while we fix things, and after that we pick someone else.”
Obstacles to reform

Since 2003, Iraq has been trapped in an unvirtuous cycle, which has stunted the country’s development and its ability to realize the full potential of massive natural resource wealth, a young and dynamic population, and a geo-strategic location. At the center of this cycle is politically sanctioned corruption perpetuated by cynical political elites bent on accumulating wealth and power. These political actors maintain a power-sharing system that protects their interests by awarding support with a share of government offices and resources. They use patronage to reward loyalists and preserve their political standing. They are joined by militias, which exploit the weakness of government to generate profit, suppress dissent to preserve a system that enables them to operate with impunity, and expand the influence of their allies beyond national borders.

Iraq’s protest movement emerged to challenge this unvirtuous cycle. As discussed in previous sections, the main political demands articulated by protesters have included: an end to corruption, establishment of state monopoly over arms, an end to Iraq’s subservience to its powerful neighbors, and the creation of a level playing field in the country’s stumbling democratic process. In the context of Iraq, protesters see anti-corruption as the gateway to improved services, fair distribution of government jobs, and a private sector free from exploitation by political elites and their allied militias.

During the first half of 2021, at least eight political groups emerged from the Tishreen pro-reform movement to create organized frameworks to express and advance the movement’s views. The list includes: Al-Bayt Al-Watani (the National House); the Fao-Zakho Gathering; the Iraqi Union for Labor and Rights; the Nazil Akhuth Haqi Democratic Movement; the Democratic Socialist Movement; the Tishreen Front; al-Med al-Iraqi Movement; and the Imtidad Movement.

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Underscoring the main obstacles to political reform through elections, these parties warned after a meeting in April 2021 that they would not participate in elections that are unlikely to be safe, free, and fair. These new parties agreed to delay any final decision on their participation until just weeks before election day, to give the Iraqi government and the international community more time to create a safe environment. Hussein al-Ghorabi, who leads al-Bayt al-Watani, insisted at the time that “electoral justice is absent amid the exploitation by ‘sulta’ powers, Saeroun and Fatah, of their influence and use of [state] budget funds, in addition to the unlawful use of weapons.” Ghorabi and his colleagues appealed to the United Nations to “play a real role in preparing for fair elections.” Some of these parties would later boycott the election, as will be discussed later in this report.

**Violence, impunity, and boycott**

The May 8, 2021, assassination of prominent activist Ehab al-Wazni in Karbala and the botched government attempt to prosecute his suspected killer are but one example of militias’ widespread impunity for attacks on activists.

More than four out of ten Iraqis who participated in EPIC’s June 2021 survey pointed to government or militia violence as the main obstacle facing protesters (see Figure 8). Directly related, another 13.5 percent of respondents identified “infiltration of the protest movement by militias and political parties” as the chief obstacle. That was followed closely by lack of political experience (9.6 percent) and insufficient support from the public (10.3 percent).

For some Tishreen activists, al-Wazni’s assassination put an end to the debate, at least for now, about whether they should run in upcoming elections. Several protester-led political groups, most notably al-Bayt al-Watani, decided to “completely boycott the political system.” MP Faeq al-Sheikh Ali, a Tishreen ally, also withdrew his candidacy.

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185 [https://twitter.com/faigalsheakh/status/1391395226166004865](https://twitter.com/faigalsheakh/status/1391395226166004865).
There are two important points to observe here. First, the boycott is not universal. A number of important protester-led political parties, such as Imdat and Nazil Akhoth Haqi, have not joined the call to boycott and continue to campaign. Second, interviews with activists revealed differing interpretations of what a boycott means in practice. One Baghdadi activist helping candidates run for parliament argued that a “boycott doesn’t mean we won’t go and vote, it means we reject the conditions... because there is no safe environment for the candidate nor the voter.” The activist added: “We can’t compete with the militia candidates. The moment you present your ideas, they liquidate you.”

But Husein al-Ghorabi of al-Bayt al-Watani offered a different response; boycott means boycott. “There are primary prerequisites for establishing a democratic system. In Iraq, this term and this concept are greatly distorted. There is no democracy in the presence of these weapons... These parties are engaged in the exploitation and corruption of political money. Therefore, we are looking for the primary prerequisites of this political process before we go [and participate].”

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187 A term often used in Iraq to describe money that is illicitly obtained (through corruption or foreign sources) to finance political campaigns, buy votes, or pay bribes to secure public office.
While al-Bayt al-Watani has announced that it will not participate in the upcoming elections, the party is no less active in challenging the political system. Ghorabi outlined his party’s four “cornerstones” of activities to include: (1) the organizing of a national conference that brings together civil trend and Tishreen representatives to “provide the political alternative”; (2) efforts to strengthen the protest movement and explore “other forms of pressure”; (3) legal efforts to “appeal the constitutionality” of the political process; and (4) conducting advocacy and collecting information to expose the extent of human rights violations.

Similar views were articulated by the Communist Party in an article by Jasim al-Hilfi. Mr. Hilfi said the boycott aimed to expose “the ruling elites’ isolation from the people and ... further strip them of any legitimacy. In doing so, it will lay the groundwork for a broad popular opposition that strives to open up an alternative path to change.” The boycott’s purpose, Hilfi adds, “Is to put public pressure on the ruling elite in order to create better conditions.”

Findings (central and southern Iraq)

During the focus group discussions convened by EPIC, all 20 participants from federal Iraq agreed that the threat posed by militias and foreign interference, namely Iran’s, was the greatest obstacle to translating the energy and ideas of the protest movement into organized political action, which could advance demands for political and economic reform and better living conditions for all Iraqis.

In addition, money in politics was a top concern for most activists; they pointed out that lack of transparency in political party finances allows establishment parties to abuse public funds, and to use illegal foreign funds, to finance lavish campaigns and gain unfair advantage. Related, several participants highlighted the high financial burden facing activists seeking to establish political parties or register as independent candidates to run in elections.


Experience and connections matter too. Several participants mentioned that activists who want to enter politics for the first time are at a serious disadvantage. They are trying to navigate a field dominated by political operators with many years’ experience since 2003, with allies in critical government institutions. These allies have influence over the outcomes of political competition, especially in the judiciary and with the IHEC. Emerging protester candidates and protester-driven political organizations lack experienced human capital and connections at government institutions. Key informant interviews also offered anecdotal information about the infiltration of the IHEC by political parties and how that had added barriers to entry. In Anbar, for example, where the IHEC office is under the influence of Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi, people aspiring to run for office repeatedly faced hurdles when attempting to register their candidacy.190

Finally, a small number of participants noted that disagreements within the protest movement about whether to engage in politics and how to do so have sometimes led to damaging recriminations and thereby undermined the movement’s strength.

Findings (KRI)
Discussants from the KRI focused on the nature and role of the dominant parties, the KDP and PUK, as the primary obstacles to political reform. Participants used terms like “Stalinist” and “totalitarian” to describe the parties’ exercise of power in quashing dissent. “The [existing] political parties are the biggest problem in the region because they allow the ruling families to interfere in every part of the government,” explained a male activist from Sulaymaniyah. “The judiciary is not independent and the ruling families have paramilitaries that answer to this official or that [official’s] son. This weakens the rule of law and keeps the people afraid.”

These activists blame the dynastic and tribal structures of the KDP and PUK, as the two parties maintain their authority above all other considerations, even at the expense of the region’s future. A male activist from Sulaymaniyah added: “The new generation of the ruling families is more cruel and more despotic at home, but they try to appear more open to the outside world.”

190 Abdulaziz al-Jarba, who directs al-Tahrir Association for Development, relayed the experience of an acquaintance from Anbar who decided to run for office. “He was unable to do so because every effort to register failed. Every time the IHEC office came up with excuses... He is now supporting protests... He wanted to help. But because Halbousi is controlling IHEC in Anbar, he is being prevented from running for office. There are other guys like him whose way is blocked by influential incumbents and so they become opponents of the entire system.”
Some discussants asserted that the two political parties control most media; they have invaded civil society by supporting dozens of entities that promote their own narratives, enabling them to steer public debate both in the press and in segments of civil society. Capturing that view, a male activist from Erbil declared: “The greatest obstacle is the totalitarian mentality for running the country... Even the media is 80 percent run directly or indirectly by the parties. They create public opinion. They also created hundreds of social institutions.”

Discussants also blamed the legacy of civil war in the 1990s for the absence of unified political, administrative, and security institutions in the region. They described the KRI’s “yellow” and “green” territories as two separate entities, united in name only.191

Similar to their counterparts in federal southern Iraq, activists in the KRI pointed at foreign interference as sustaining the status quo and the dominance of the KDP and PUK. They noted that this was particularly true during elections; some discussants suggested such interference has helped the ruling parties shift election results in their favor.

191 The Erbil/Duhok zone under KDP control and the Sulaymaniyah zone under PUK control are known as yellow and green, respectively, because of the colors of the parties’ flags.
Conversations with opposition politicians echoed some activists’ descriptions of the KRI’s political environment as a “police state.” When the opposition MP Sharkawt Shamsulddine was asked how he is able to finance himself [as a political entity] and protect himself, especially in the KRI, he painted a rather bleak picture. According to him, the PUK and KDP hire 40,000 spies and spy on all the [other] political parties for themselves, not for the state; the official intelligence apparatus is used for the benefit of the PUK and KDP. Finance and infiltration make it difficult to operate as an independent political party.\(^{192}\)

**Voter turnout and the electoral system**

In both individual interviews and focus group discussions, several activists expressed hope that the new electoral system, with smaller districts and non-transferable voting, would help voters get to know candidates better and give independent candidates a fighting chance.\(^{193}\) Earlier systems, of proportional representation and party lists, disadvantaged small parties, and gave party leaders significant control over which candidates won seats.\(^{194}\) This yielded lawmakers who owed their party leaders more than their constituents, and produced parliaments in which there was little, if any, accountability.

Some believe that the electoral system Iraq adopted in 2005 was instrumental in cementing the *muhasasa* system. The proportional representation and closed list system produced a parliament that “became a decision-making body of [half a dozen] oligarchs to whom all MPs owe allegiance for winning their seats,” one Basrawi activist argued.

MP Shamsulddine agreed, stating, “What do you expect of a candidate who got only 500 votes and won through the party [list]? They are disconnected from the constituency and are run by people outside parliament. Future MPs will be more connected with the people, and people will know who represents them. In a small district you can’t escape [scrutiny].”\(^{195}\)

The new election law parliament adopted in November 2020, which features individual candidates and non-transferable voting, will be “better than the Sainte-Laguè system,” argued activist Talal al-Hariri. “You can work and achieve tangible results in a small district. ... [T]he larger districts were vulnerable to political money and fraud.”

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192 Authors’ interview with MP Sarkawt Shamsulddine.
194 The 2010 and 2018 elections were run via an open list system; this gave voters the right to pick specific candidates, but votes not assigned to a specific candidate went to candidates in their order of appearance on their respective party lists. The 2005 election was run via the closed list system in which voters chose lists instead of individual candidates. This gave party leaders, who decided the order of candidates on their party lists, much greater control over who was going to win.
195 Authors’ interview with MP Sarkawt Shamsulddine.
Voter turnout will become a critical battleground between status-quo forces and the pro-reform movement as Iraq approaches its next elections. Restrictions on movement and related economic pressures caused by the pandemic, voter apathy, and the IHEC’s limited capacity—including its capacity to update voter records and issue millions of new biometric voter cards—foreshadow low voter turnout. During one-on-one interviews, activists expressed concern that a repeat of 2018’s low voter turnout would give establishment parties—with their easy-to-mobilize, patronage-funded bases—the ability to dominate the polls once again.

The IHEC’s efforts to update biometric voter data records, and youth interest in voting, have been less than reassuring. By the end of the registration period on April 15, 2021, the electoral commission had completed biometric registration of about 15 million eligible voters out of a total of over 25 million. Another 5 million had received short-term electronic voter cards, while a full 3 million had filed to register but won’t be eligible to vote. According to election officials, most of those deemed ineligible were youth born after 2001 for “failing to update their electoral records.” That has only added to the skepticism among young people about the elections. A male activist from Najaf explained: “We also have a problem with IHEC delaying registration. We have people born in 2001, 2002, and 2003 who have become eligible to vote but IHEC hasn’t issued voter cards for them or registered them biometrically... 60-70 percent of them are Tishreen supporters.”

During individual interviews, activists said that they believe the registration process has disproportionately favored establishment parties, who “use government offices and mosques” to update the records of their followers. A female activist from Baghdad said in December 2020 that most establishment party loyalists had already obtained their voter cards, and she expressed frustration that ordinary people did not learn the lessons of 2018. She accused the establishment parties of disrupting efforts by civil society organizations to educate eligible voters about the need to update their voter registration.

There are also concerns that powerful parties may use out-of-date records to create fraudulent ballots to inflate results in their favor. While voters may use the older electronic voter cards to vote, many Iraqis view them as suspect; UNAMI considers the biometric cards a “valuable contribution to the integrity of elections and, accordingly, an important and urgent task for IHEC.”

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 Recognizing the dual threat of boycott and fraud, activists involved with new parties said that they have invested most of their effort in voter education. Baghdad activist Talal al-Hariri explained that “seventy percent of our efforts are about [voter] education for mobilization... [The 2018] boycott in fact aided fraud. People must participate. If you don’t vote, the [government] parties will steal your vote. We’re educating people that elections are critical and can produce change.” Being displaced from their hometowns makes the activists’ job in organizing election campaigns and communicating with their constituents even harder. “We have nothing but social media,” Talal emphasized. “[Working] on the ground, it’s difficult. We are seeing some success, though.”

EPIC’s public opinion survey conducted in June 2021 sheds light on Iraqis’ general attitudes toward upcoming elections. Results suggest that the potential for a voter boycott is real. Survey results showed that almost 44 percent of respondents believed the next election won’t be free and fair, and more than 34 percent said they didn’t plan to vote in the next election (see Figure 9).

Among respondents who said they participated in protests since 2019, the inclination to boycott was slightly weaker, at 28 percent. Despite this considerable ambivalence toward the elections, candidates affiliated with the protest movement appeared to have a strong edge over the competition. Protester-led parties or other candidates representing Tishreen were six times more popular than traditional parties among respondents who planned to vote (see Figure 10).
As asked about the biggest obstacles to voting, 30.6 percent of respondents said that the election would be fraudulent, 15 percent said that their vote wouldn’t make a difference, and 15.9 percent said that they didn’t support any current candidates. Concerns about fraud were noticeably higher among respondents in the KRI, reaching 37 percent (see Figure 11).

Recent government attempts at reforms
The first section of this report sheds light on some of the problems that have haun ted the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi and frustrated hopes for post-ISIS reforms. In this section we look at recent government attempts to enact reforms that challenge entrenched interests, and how those interests have reacted to them. These experiences of the governments of Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Haider al-Abadi illustrate the limitations they faced, limitations that would very likely face others attempting to institute future reforms.

Encouraged by popular demand and support from the Najaf clergy, Haider al-Abadi embarked on a reform program that included a large-scale cabinet reshuffle,198 efforts to restore confidence in security forces, and a crackdown on corruption in 2015 and 2016. Abadi’s government had a vision based on helping “the liberating provinces before the liberated provinces.” This vision reflected an understanding that the liberating provinces, which paid the highest price in blood and fighters, could be the next flashpoint areas. There was concern that if young men who fought ISIS returned from the fronts to poor services and no jobs, they would become a destabilizing factor.199 The program was designed to include reforms in customs, banks, electricity, and other “pillars of the economy.”200

199 Authors’ interview with Naufel al-Hassan, former chief of staff to Haider al-Abadi.
200 Authors’ interview with al-Hassan.
Parliament passed the cabinet reshuffle, but none of the rest of the program, as it faced strong opposition from entrenched interests. This opposition was spearheaded by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. In 2016, parliament moved and sacked Abadi’s finance and defense ministers, respectively, in what appeared to be preparation for sacking Abadi himself; first they struck the government’s Sunni and Kurdish support. Beyond parliament, government officials were either indebted to parties that opposed reforms, or supportive of reforms but lacking the skills and expertise to assist. Even seemingly mundane programs, like an initiative to use smart meters and tariff collection to promote the sustainability of electricity services, failed to win sufficient political support. This initiative failed because it raised the ire of powerful actors who benefitted from continued local reliance on neighborhood generators and from Iraq’s dependence on Iranian imports of electricity.

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201 Authors’ interview with Naufel al-Hassan, former chief of staff to Haider al-Abadi.
Figure 11. Greatest obstacle to voting in the next election

A senior government official at the time said, “We had a good experiment with tariff collection in [the Baghdad neighborhood of] Zayouna, and wanted to replicate this.” Lamenting what happened next, the official continued, “A Friday preacher in Basra encouraged people to not pay tariffs, telling them that no state in the world charges its citizens for electricity. The preacher called on people to cut the roads if the government insisted on tariff collection.”

Douglas Silliman, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq at the time, stated that the failure of the metering experiment in Basra suggested that people were making money from electricity, and that “a lot of the local generators business fell into the hands of the militias and parties.”

Another obstacle to reform was a disconnect between top-level Iraqi decision-making and policy implementation at the managerial level. In June 2018, a frustrated Abadi complained to G7 ambassadors during a conference in Germany, wondering “how come your countries are not investing here? I need you to help develop Iraq.” The diplomats gave a near unanimous response that his government refuses to sign implementation contracts with their companies. “We go through MoUs and understandings but then when matters reach the legal department of a ministry someone throws a wrench into the process.”

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202 Authors’ interview with al-Hassan.
203 Authors’ interview with former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman.
204 Authors’ interview with Silliman. MoU = memorandum of understanding.
There is growing attention in Iraq and among analysts to the role that senior bureaucrats below the ministerial level play in approving and managing government contracts, and, in turn, corruption. A corrupt director general, for example, can award a contract to a company affiliated with his political party chief at an inflated cost and help shield that contract from investigations. This realization has caused political parties to prioritize getting a large share of these senior positions assigned to their loyalists during the past two government formation negotiations, sometimes over cabinet-level appointments. Political parties envy Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa party, which they accuse of hoarding up to 80 percent of these “special grade” appointments; they have been pushing to get their share of these lucrative positions.205

Nouri al-Maliki took advantage of his two terms in office (2006–14), and the political crises during his administration that led Sunni and Kurdish parties to withdraw from the cabinet and parliament.206 He exploited that vacuum to appoint hundreds of ambassadors, directors, deputy ministers, and heads of commissions on an acting basis. The decline of Dawa’s power after the 2018 election enabled Saeroun and Fatah to apply pressure on Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi to replace hundreds of Maliki’s appointees with their own loyalists. Efforts by Abadi’s Nasr coalition to entrust the task to an expert committee failed to gain traction.207 After taking office, Kadhimi replaced dozens of senior directors as part of a sweeping plan to root out corruption by refilling some 6,000 positions.208 Two batches of personnel changes in June and September 2020 didn’t seem to please any of the major political parties, while protesters regarded the changes as a continuation of muhasasa.209 Although it is unclear how Kadhimi made the replacement decisions, there are claims that the replacements happened under pressure from Muqtada al-Sadr to benefit his loyalists.210

The political blocs now want this settled; they added a provision in the 2021 budget requiring the government to make formal appointments to fill these positions.211 The problem is that the parties want to end Dawa’s domination of these positions, only to replace it with muhasasa.212

Beyond replacing problematic holdovers from previous administrations, Mustafa al-Kadhimi tasked his deputy and finance minister Ali Allawi with preparing the government’s flagship blueprint for economic reform. When the resulting white paper appeared in October 2020, some observed it didn’t account for the inseparability of Iraq’s economic and political problems. Harith Hassan, who has written extensively on Iraq’s governance and socioeconomic challenges, notes that dealing with Iraq’s core problem as being financial is “wrong, because it’s political. [It involves] special grades, contracts, appointments, etc., so you can’t do economic reforms without political reforms... The parties won’t accept the paper... All they care about is winning elections, and they hate reforms because they’d be unpopular.” This led him to conclude, “You need a strong government that can clash with the entrenched interests and negotiate from a position of strength. Kadhimi does not have enough power, so the space for action is constrained.”

Iraqi analyst Ahmed Tabaqchali agrees that institutional problems and political opposition to reform—demonstrated by parliament’s tepid reception of the white paper—mean that Baghdad will inevitably face an uphill battle in advancing the white paper’s agenda, or any ambitious reforms. “Hardly anything has happened and not much will happen” in the near term as a result of the document because, Tabaqchali notes, the institutions tasked with taking action are weak, threatened by reforms, and compromised by political interests.

Other prominent, enduring factors reducing any impetus for reform are Iraq’s dependence on oil revenues, and the resulting lack of political will to pursue potentially painful and unpopular change, particularly any steps to shrink the public sector or reduce subsidies. As oil revenue returned to pre-pandemic levels, initial panic caused by the crash in prices in early 2020 was replaced by shortsighted confidence that Iraq would survive this economic crisis without drastic change. But numbers paint a grimmer picture. Iraq’s population is growing by nearly a million people each year; up to 5 million young people will enter the workforce before the end of the decade. Against this backdrop, the deficit “is increasing like a credit card bill, exponentially, not linearly. The million people you can’t hire today will become 4 million later.”

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213 Authors’ interview with Harith Hassan.
214 Authors’ interview with Ahmed Tabaqchali.
216 Authors’ interview with Naufal al-Hasan.
In all of the interviews and conversations conducted for this report with analysts, former officials, and Tishreen activists, the consensus was overwhelming. Iraq needs to take bold action to reduce the size of its government payroll, increase funding for infrastructure development, protect important programs from corruption, and free the economy, both private and public sectors, from the grip of armed actors. Short of that, Iraq’s economy faces even more intense balance-of-payment crises. The next crisis raises the question of when, not if, as the white paper’s authors note in their assessment.217

The muhasasa system and the zero-sum calculations of political elites are at the core of Iraq’s dysfunction and its imperviousness to reform. Emphasis on power-sharing in Iraq gave rise to “governance by consensus,” in which all important parties must accept a new policy for it to pass.218 While this system may have served as strong defense against tyrannical aspirations by one politician or community against others, it has demonstrated major drawbacks.

Iraq’s political system fails to advance reform because to accept reform often means surrendering resources, power, and influence, and assuming a more vulnerable position. Moreover, there is no guarantee that rivals would allow reform to detract from their wealth and power, nor that they would refrain from taking advantage of a counterpart’s willingness to compromise.

218 There have been very few exceptions related to the KRG’s share of the federal budget.
The reluctance to support reform may be less about politicians’ recognition of problems than about their unwillingness to make hard decisions to solve them. Increasingly, Harith Hassan has observed, “There’s more awareness among the parties about the unsustainability of Iraq’s economic reality, but there’s a lack of long-term vision and political will to do anything about it. Individually, political elites may agree [that Iraq’s economic condition is unsustainable] but they think it will be OK after Covid and oil prices bounce. They also still think in zero sum terms: that every call for change is an attack on them. Why take from me and not from them? Why give this to them and not us?”

Shortly after taking office, Kadhimi set his sights on stopping wasteful spending, by targeting people who receive multiple salaries from the government, often to do nothing. Those in question were the so-called Rafha group, former residents of the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia who fled Iraq after the Gulf War. This group, which initially numbered around 3,000, includes people who participated in the 1991 Shia uprising against Saddam Hussein. They enjoy close relations with Shia Islamist parties that dominated the Iraqi government after 2003. The beneficiaries had become a lightning rod for public resentment, after a 2013 law granted those who spent any time at Rafha lump sum payments, followed by monthly salaries and other benefits such as scholarships and free health care abroad. These benefits cover even children born in Rafha, and family members who survived former residents, expanding the number of beneficiaries to some 40,000. A cabinet decision to prevent members of this group from receiving more than one paycheck was met by angry protests, backed by the Dawa party and PMF factions. Ultimately, parliament refused to support the cabinet measure to slash these salaries.

The Dawa party and Iran-backed militias also fought to block investment programs that could threaten business interests involving foreign benefactors. Imports of fruits and vegetables from Iran, often banned to protect domestic production, are believed to generate great profit for militias that charge money to allow the contraband to enter Iraq. Because of skyrocketing costs—in 2017, Iraq allegedly imported $4 billion worth of tomatoes and watermelons from Iran—these imports have also raised suspicions that their use is a cover for smuggling billions in hard currency into Iran.

219 Authors’ interview with Harith Hassan.
In October 2020, Iraq considered a deal with Saudi Arabia to turn hundreds of thousands of acres in Iraq's western and southern deserts into agricultural lands. The deal would have benefited the Sunni Anbar Province and the Shia Muthanna Province, two of Iraq's poorest. Pro-Iran groups launched a coordinated public relations campaign to derail the deal. The campaign included simultaneous attacks on Kadhimi's government, spearheaded by Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali, and echoed by their supporters. Maliki denounced the deal as cover for Saudi “occupation.” Deploying a mix of anti-Zionist and environmentalist rhetoric, Khazali said the Saudi investment was part of a plan for “normalization with Iraq’s eternal enemy,” and a threat to Iraq’s groundwater reserves. These accusations were joined to a social media campaign employing “electronic armies” with accounts that spewed hundreds of tweets a day, each with the Arabic equivalent of #Saudi_investment_is_sabotage.

Militias' attempts to control the economy reached bizarre levels of micromanagement in 2021. In March, Iraqi militant faction Rab’Allah paraded through the streets of Baghdad, brandishing machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, accompanying calls by militia-affiliated MPs to reverse the December 2020 government devaluation of the dinar.

The 2021 budget allocations suggest that events from 2019 to 2020 have hardly changed the priorities of Iraq's political class, nor its perception of Iraq's needs or its means. These numbers reflect a determination to continue “business as usual,” and to continue funding items that are the elite’s priority, namely “hiring more people to satisfy special interests.”

In one glaring example, the 2021 budget allocated more money to the Sunni and Shia waqf departments (the offices managing religious endowments and mosques) than to the country’s agriculture and water resources ministries combined. The waqf departments, which add negligible, if any, tangible services to the public, were slated to receive IQD 1.1 trillion (approximately $760 million). Meanwhile, the ministries in charge of water and agriculture would get only IQD 966 billion (approximately $665 million), amid looming drought.

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228 Authors’ analysis in November 2020 of the hashtag in question.
230 Authors’ interview with Ahmed Tabaqchali.
Leaders of Iraq’s parliamentary blocs appear determined to continue this pattern until the country’s coffers are exhausted. Iraqi politicians also look for ways to find more money, like taking loans. As described by MP Sarkawt Shamsulddine, they try to survive the next two or five years, without giving much thought to what may happen as a result in the next 10 or 20 years.\(^{232}\) Borrowing, observers argue, is meant to “expand the room available for corruption… You see action on borrowing but no action on [reviving] agriculture.”\(^{233}\)

Lack of accountability in spending money, earned or borrowed, makes the situation even worse. On paper, the 2021 budget says the government employs 3,263,834 people. But in reality, “the government has no idea.”\(^{234}\) These statistics reflect the number of people “they think they pay,” because neither the government nor individual ministries have central databases of their own employees.\(^{235}\)

This problem of transparency is nowhere starker than in the PMF budget. In defense spending, which has remained disproportionately high, there is evidence that patronage and benefits to powerful militia leaders continue to take priority over actual needs and a return on investments. The amount allocated to the PMF was nearly IQD 3.3 trillion ($2.25 billion), five times more than the funds allocated to Iraq’s best fighting force, the elite Counter Terrorism Service. It remains unclear how many PMF fighters receive pay and how much they receive, and there is growing resentment among former fighters and the families of fallen fighters who have seen paychecks stop and promises of benefits disappear.\(^{236}\)

According to former prime minister Haider al-Abadi, there were no more than 60,000 actual fighters while he was in office, even though the government was paying salaries for as many as 150,000.\(^{237}\) Gunmen assassinated the PMF finance administrator days after he shared information about an emerging embezzlement scheme with Abadi.\(^{238}\)

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232 Authors’ interview with MP Sarkawt Shamsulddine.
233 Authors’ interview with Iraqi journalist Azhar al-Rubaie.
234 Authors’ interview with Ahmed Tabaqchali.
235 Authors’ interview with Ahmed Tabaqchali.
The passage in 2021 of another budget that largely mirrors the spending patterns of its predecessors demonstrates ongoing limitations on the current prime minister’s ability to advance policy reform. As MP Sarkawt Shamsulddin said, Sadr and PMF leaders can mobilize people; former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has power and networks to mobilize MPs. Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi’s strength is that he can bring people together, and Masoud Barzani controls his people. In contrast, Mustafa al-Kadhimi “is a nice guy, but has none of those powers and he’s unable to take bold decisions” to take on entrenched interests.239

Iraq has dug itself into a deep financial hole and faces tough economic dilemmas. As political elites expanded their patronage networks to win support, spending on salaries grew at the expense of investment in infrastructure, already riddled by decades of neglect, poor management, and corruption. Inadequate infrastructure and weak rule of law mean the private sector has no foundation on which it can grow, to create enough jobs to provide alternatives to an impoverished public grown desperately dependent on government jobs and subsidies.

Iraq is in a catch-22. As the government’s recent white paper has acknowledged, the country needs to reduce payroll spending to balance its budget, and to free resources to invest in infrastructure that can power a vibrant private sector. This requires political and popular buy-in, and neither has yet been forthcoming. Reducing spending is a tough pill to swallow—especially for politicians primarily concerned with the next election. They want to keep funds flowing to serve their interests, both directly and indirectly. Reducing spending is also seen as suspect by Iraqis who don’t trust the political class to use savings for any purpose other than further enriching themselves. Demands for employment were heard long before the October 2019 protests started, and they have remained after the protests peaked and waned. As the protests’ one-year anniversary approached, a common slogan of college graduates camped out near government ministries was, “We won’t leave until we are hired.”240

239 Authors’ interview with MP Sarkawt Shamsulddin.
240 https://twitter.com/Observer46664/status/1316326368905506816.
“Militias control all the movement of money and business in the country. There’s hardly a business today that isn’t owned or extorted by militias or the economic committees of parties.”

This focus on jobs, while understandable, pushes some observers to see many of today’s protesters as no less “transactional” as the political parties they oppose. As one economist put it, “They want jobs... They say: I’m against you, but hire me.”

The movement’s views on economic reforms

Iraq’s economic dilemmas were also reflected in the responses of focus group participants to questions about whether they would support reducing the size of the public sector by a government that appears serious about reform. Nearly all participants from federal Iraq said they favored reducing both the size of the bloated public sector and the government’s role in economic activity. But they raised one big caveat. The vast majority of informants made their support conditional: the government must first provide alternatives for job seekers, by helping the private sector grow to offer well-paying jobs. A male activist from Maysan passionately agreed, declaring, “Prepare a safe environment, prepare capital, and young people will on their own start to question the idea that their source of income is [government] appointments.

Discussion group participants also recognized that this is easier said than done, because powerful parties and militias continue vying for control of the private sector too. A male activist from Baghdad explained, “Militias control all the movement of money and business in the country. There’s hardly a business today that isn’t owned or extorted by militias or the economic committees of parties.”

241 Authors’ interview with Tabaqchali.
A small minority of discussants opposed shrinking the public sector. This group argued that the main problems were low productivity and the government’s inability to put public sector potential to use. They argued that the solution was to invest more in non-oil areas of the public sector and to give its employees “real work to do.”

A female activist from Baghdad said, “This requires careful study. We graduate thousands, so where do they go? Graduates have been protesting, so continuing the hiring freeze is not practical. If we shrink the public sector, unemployment will rise because civil servants are the engine of the economy. Our only option is to restructure [the sector]. You have agricultural engineers and you have land, so farm the land. You have mechanics, so make them operate the factories.”

Focus group discussion participants from the KRI were notably skeptical about the private sector’s ability to become a viable alternative to the public sector. A male activist from Erbil said, “People here have a bad experience with privatization. They don’t want to privatize the public sector. Older civil servants should be retired and new graduates appointed instead. The KRI has five classes of graduates who have not seen appointments.”

Some discussants argued that the ruling parties in the KRI dominate both sectors of the economy, to the extent that, “The market is monopolized by the ruling parties.” A male activist from Sulaymaniyah continued, “We don’t have a private sector, we have a partisan sector under a different name.”

Here too, there were voices calling for “fixing” the public sector, to make it work, rather than reducing its size. A female activist from Sulaymaniyah pointed out, “The public sector is a mess because there are so many appointments without any prior programming or plans. Last year employees received five salaries in a whole year. I’m not for shrinking the sector but in favor of hiring economic experts to help solve this crisis.” Whether in the KRI, Baghdad, or elsewhere in Iraq, the greatest problem is not the individual militiaman or Peshmerga fighter but the political party or militia leader who recruits him. These actors are always looking for opportunities to generate profit to the extent that, “you can’t open a profitable coffee shop in Baghdad without getting noticed and forced to share.”

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242 Authors’ interview with MP Sarkawt Shamsulldine.
Asadi retorted that Karbouli and his partners had been, “stealing from the state for seventeen years” and “should not envy us for a few checkpoints” or the revenue they generate.

At times, members of the political class can take it all just too far for ordinary Iraqis to bear. In a 2020 televised conversation, PMF commander Ahmed al-Asadi and influential Sunni MP Mohammed al-Karbouli casually exchanged jabs about who was stealing more from the state. When Asadi complained that the PMF was trying for two years to raise its fighters’ salaries, Karbouli offered to finance an entire PMF brigade, “if they would let him control just one of the checkpoints” under their control. Asadi retorted that Karbouli and his partners had been, “stealing from the state for seventeen years” and “should not envy us for a few checkpoints” or the revenue they generate.243

Reform from within the political class will remain extremely difficult so long as there’s significant public money to be divided among the political elite. As described by Robert Ford, former deputy U.S. ambassador to Iraq, this situation “probably won’t get fixed until the oil money starts to run out and the economic situation gets really dire, or a new political force arises [to shake up the system]... Oil in Iraq is really a curse, because they can use it to lubricate the system, but it ends up wasting a lot of time... between agriculture and oil Iraq could become very prosperous.”244 The problem is the money keeps flowing, while time is running out. Analyst Ahmed Tabaqchali outlines the problem: “Even last year [when prices crashed] oil brought in $45 billion and it cost us $10 billion we paid the oil companies. In a good year we can make $60–70 billion. Of course one day you can bring in $60 billion from tourism, but that’s gross revenue, you have to pay people and there are costs. It’s difficult for them [politicians] to do the right thing. But we don’t have time because our population is growing. It will be 50 million in no time.”245

243 https://www.instagram.com/p/COhezQaCB6pH/?igshid=7csk3pvy76k
244 Authors’ interview with Robert Ford, former deputy U.S. ambassador to Iraq.
245 Authors’ interview with Ahmed Tabaqchali.
Iran has a strong interest in protecting the status quo in Iraq

Strategically, Iran wants to prevent Iraq from becoming a threat to its territorial integrity. The two countries share a bitter history in the 1980–88 war, which Iran dubbed “sacred defense.” That conflict was life-shaping for Iranian leaders, including General Soleimani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The 2003 regime change in Iraq opened the door for Iran to capitalize on relations with former Iraqi opposition figures to build influence in Iraq. The removal of archenemy Saddam Hussein eliminated one strategic threat, while creating a new one—a heavy U.S. military presence right next door. It also created opportunities for additional economic and security gains. Iran established hard power capability inside Iraq by aiding militias against the U.S. presence. Tehran's influence grew stronger across Iraqi institutions in the following years by supporting Nouri al-Maliki. This power allowed Iran to mitigate major crises throughout the past decade. Starting in 2011, Iraq became a bridge in Iran's campaign to support Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. Iraq later became an outpost from which to threaten Saudi Arabia and Israel. Sanctions further fueled Iran's dependence on Iraq. Iranian officials have repeatedly touted goals and plans to expand the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq.\textsuperscript{246} Iranian goods from cucumbers to air coolers to cars flood the Iraqi market, and that trade provides hard currency and space for money laundering.\textsuperscript{247}

While the killing of General Soleimani and PMF deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis caused disruption in Iran's ability to control and coordinate the actions of its various allied militias in Iraq, those militias maintain the ability to wreak havoc on civilians who criticize their actions or pose a threat to their hold on power. The militias have also retained the ability to frustrate and retaliate against any attempt by the Iraqi government to enforce compliance with national policies and interests, such as preventing attacks on diplomatic missions and U.S. personnel supporting Iraqi forces at the invitation of the Iraqi state.


The aftermath of a June 2020 debacle in which Kadhimi ordered the arrest of Kataib Hezbollah operatives suspected of firing rockets at U.S. targets in Iraq is a case in point.248 Kadhimi was forced to release them, literally under the guns of hundreds of militiamen. In a show of solidarity, Asaib Ahl al-Haq issued an unprecedented threat against the prime minister. Qais al-Khazali scolded Kadhimi, reminding him that he was in office because of a political compromise, that he must know the limits of his mandate. Khazali went on to tell Kadhimi that no prime minister before him dared to stop attacks on U.S. forces by “resistance factions,” and that to avoid “trouble” he should turn a blind eye, using the colloquial term ghallis, meaning “let it pass.”249 A similar demonstration of Iraqi government weakness played out a year later when the Kadhimi government apprehended Qasim Musleh, a PMF commander widely believed to be behind the assassination of Ehab al-Wazni and other activists. PMF fighters first surrounded the Green Zone to pressure Kadhimi to release Musleh. Although Kadhimi resisted the pressure and kept Musleh in custody for two weeks, the case was handed over to a judge with ties to the PMF, who ordered Musleh to be released.250

While Iran-backed militias are not a cohesive monolith, they are not entirely separate actors either. The militias are similar to a mob family that has several sons. They have the same enemies, the same interests. At the same time, to paraphrase the words of an expert on the subject, they are arrogant, they each want a bigger share, they compete, they have jealousies. They are brothers, but there’s competition and even betrayal among them. But this competition doesn’t reach the level of causing the family to collapse.251

EPIC’s June 2021 survey found that 56.8 percent of respondents believe that Iran would have the most influence on upcoming elections, followed by the United States at 34.1 percent, and the United Nations at 6.3 percent (see Figure 12).

When asked about whether this influence would be beneficial or harmful, a staggering 88 percent said Iran’s role would be harmful, compared with 60 percent for the United States and 30 percent for the United Nations (see Figure 13).

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250 Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, “Iraq Releases Iran-Linked Militiaman in Blow to Efforts to Check Impunity.”
251 Interview with Hamdi Malik, an expert on Shia militias with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
Iraq’s social media landscape and the Tishreen movement

In recent years, social media has emerged as the leading tool of coordination for most of the world’s political and social movements, and Iraq is no exception. Since the February 25, 2011, protests that were largely inspired by that year’s Arab Spring, Iraqi activists have utilized various social media platforms to organize, shed light on government failures and human rights violations, share photos and videos of protests, and discuss Iraq’s political and social realities. This section aims to describe Iraq’s social media landscape in relation to the October 2019 protest movement, and how various groups have used various platforms to organize and spread their messages. These groups include protesters and other activists, as well as defenders of the status quo, such as militia supporters and other movement antagonists who have been employing increasingly aggressive abuses online, including slander and direct threats of physical violence.

Despite the insurgency, sectarian violence, and instability that came after a U.S.-led invasion forcibly ended the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, free speech became possible. The increasing availability of digital technology facilitated political debate on the internet that was embraced by a large segment of Iraqi society. Forums and chat groups gained popularity as a way for Iraqis of all ages to meet and engage with people inside and outside the country. One of the first forums was Kitabat (now a website), which hosted articles and commentaries on conditions in the country. In 2005, Kitabat published the first article by Shalash Al Iraqi, the pseudonym for a satirical writer who later gained significant popularity in Iraq by addressing some of the country’s most dire political and social concerns through comedy.252

Today, 25 million Iraqis use one or more social media platforms.253 The number accounts for approximately 70 percent of internet users in Iraq and represents 62 percent of the entire population.254 With increasingly fast internet and growing availability of WiFi services at public venues, access to social media has improved, allowing more users to sign up for a range of platforms.

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YouTube

The leading social media website in Iraq by use is YouTube. The video uploading and viewing platform accounts for approximately 70 percent of all social media use in Iraq. There are no verified statistics on the percentage of entertainment consumption within that high percentage of use, as many Arabic-language TV stations now broadcast their productions on YouTube channels. Because access to YouTube does not require an account, determining the number of users active on YouTube for political purposes is difficult. During and after the October 2019 protests, though, thousands of YouTube accounts shared footage of brutal crackdowns on protestors in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square and other protest sites in southern Iraq. Songs and video montages were produced in support of the protest movement or “revolution” as many preferred to describe it. Support for the protests poured into the comment sections of these accounts by the hundreds. Anti-protest accounts also generated content criticizing activists and accusing them of treason, but these received fewer views and less attention.

YouTube has not been a primary platform for organizing protest activity. While performing artists and rebroadcasts of TV segments supporting the protests received the highest number of views in October 2019–related content on YouTube, protesters and other activists largely stayed away from the platform. One reason could be the high-speed internet and bandwidth required to upload videos. Another could be the censoring on YouTube that would likely see the removal of violent content. Instead activists shared videos through phone apps like WhatsApp and Telegram where content is not censored.

256 Irfaa Sawtak’s research database accessed by the authors: https://www.irfaasawtak.com/.
257 For instance, political talk shows, debates, and programs like Ahmed Al Basheer’s “Jumhuriyat Al Basheer” average 1–2 million views, and singer Ghassan al-Shami’s song “Bayn Al jisir wil Saha” had 16.4 million views as of July 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7oEoXVWr7c&t=8os.
Facebook

There are 26 million registered Facebook accounts in Iraq, comprising 61 percent of the population and making Facebook a very powerful social media platform for debating and discussing ideas in Iraq.\(^\text{258}\) Even taking into consideration inactive and spam accounts, the number of people who sign in and post, share, and comment on the platform is considerably high. The daily usage of Facebook in May 2021 accounted for approximately 25 percent of all social media activity in Iraq.\(^\text{259}\)

Facebook gradually became mainstream in Iraq by 2006. Inspired by early adopters like Shalash al-Iraqi, writers, thought leaders, and journalists began sharing their content via Facebook. Social media was not only used by those seeking political reform and constructive debate. Thousands of accounts and pages promoting sectarianism and violence also appeared, often causing enough controversy to become notable. As Facebook introduced video and audio options, Iraqi usage grew further, and activists widely utilized the platform to spread their messages. Facebook played a major role in organizing the 2011 protests, which were inspired by the Arab Spring—another grassroots protest movement that swept through various states in the region and relied extensively on Facebook for organizing activity and spreading messages. Facebook quickly replaced forums such as Yahoo chat rooms and Kitabat as the intellectual hub for Iraq’s political conversations online. The ease with which Facebook pages can be created and the platform’s paid promotion model also made it attractive for politicians and militias. The term “electronic armies” became widespread during Iraq’s fight against ISIS, when several hundred pages and accounts surfaced to support then–prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The page “Iraq’s Revolution” was founded in 2016 to organize that year’s protest activities and document human rights violations against protesters and other aggression by security forces, such as unwarranted arrests.\(^\text{260}\) That page was initially public, but organizers soon began to recognize the need for greater discretion and moved the discussions to private spaces using direct messaging or chat functions. The page still hosted opinions and comments for and against protests. The October 2019 protests were initially organized and promoted via private groups and pages that called on Iraqis, particularly youth, to gather at Tahrir Square. Hundreds of pages have emerged since October 1, 2019; these have been dedicated to documenting and sharing developments concerning protests, and hosting political discussions. Most of the groups creating this content have been private due to security concerns.

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\(^\text{258}\) NapoleonCat, “Facebook Users in Iraq,” May 2021, https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-iraq/2021/05. The statistic on internet users counts unique IPs registered with service companies. Facebook accounts refers the number of active or inactive profiles and pages located in Iraq.


\(^\text{260}\) Iraq’s Revolution page on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/110616790471920/about.
Facebook Case Study: The Brothers Page

The Brothers Page (Al-khw’a Al-Nadheefa) is a social political page that encourages tolerance and constructive debate among diverse groups in Iraq. The page was established in 2006 amid a rise in sectarian violence in Baghdad, and has since amassed more than 3 million followers. As of the time of writing, the page averaged 15–25 posts per day, with daily interactions (comments, shares, likes) numbering between 500,000 and 1 million. An average post generates more than 2,000 comments and shares, which is among the highest rates of interaction in Iraq. The Brothers Page has covered popular protests in the country, using mostly original footage recorded by its eight administrators, who are based throughout Iraq, and by its volunteers. Two of the administrators, the twin brothers Hassan and Hussein Raham, are among the most influential and prominent reform activists in Baghdad.

Hassan and Hussein Raham were born in Sadr City, Baghdad, in an underprivileged family. From a young age, the brothers were passionate about journalism. During the battles to retake Mosul from ISIS, the twins accompanied Iraq’s counter terrorism service lieutenant general, Abdul-Wahab al-Saidi. They avoided contact with militias, and focused their coverage on the human face of battle, which won them many followers. The Raham twins played a major role in mobilizing support for the October 2019 protests via their personal social media accounts and the Brothers Page. As the protests progressed, the Brothers Page published footage from inside the tent area in Tahrir Square, where they dwelled for several months as journalists and frontline protesters. When Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned in November 2019, the brothers welcomed his resignation. They called for protests to continue, while giving prime minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi time to deliver on his promises and implement his reform agenda. Hussein Raham criticized Muqtada al-Sadr for initially refraining from endorsing Kadhimi.261 The twins also publicly supported activist and former Sadr aide As’ad al-Naseri, who renounced the Sadrist movement during the October 2019 protests. In March 2020, after a series of online threats of violence against the brothers, a mob of suspected Sadrist attacked Hussein Raham with knives, leaving him severely wounded. After the attack, the twins went into hiding, and have since relocated to the Kurdistan Region. They occasionally visit Baghdad and the south, and continue to support protests and publish updates on the security situation in Iraq and various social issues on the Brothers Page, which remains highly popular.

**Instagram**

The fastest-growing social media platform in Iraq today is Instagram. There were more than 13 million users as of May 2021, most under the age of 35. The live streaming service on Instagram made it a favorite among protesters. Instagram became the go-to platform for international media seeking the perfect picture to document the October protests as many young Iraqi photographers showcased their talents through creative shots capturing the cultural aspects of the October movement, the violent crackdown, and moments of loss and grief. The most prominent protest photographer is Ali Dabdab, whose work has been featured in various major media outlets. Dabdab gained nearly 100,000 followers as he utilized Instagram to share his visual documentation of the protests. In November 2020, Dabdab announced that he was selling his photography equipment to protest the restrictions and harassment that photojournalists face in Iraq. After allegedly receiving threats, Ali Dabdab left Iraq and now lives between Turkey and Bulgaria. Reflecting on his experience in documenting the protests, Dabdab said he “was introduced to a generation that made me feel proud of our youth and proud to be an Iraqi.”

**Twitter**

Twitter lags behind Facebook in Iraq, and is often deemed an “elitist” platform. Nonetheless, Twitter use has grown in Iraq as a direct result of the October 2019 protests. Both activists and their adversaries have taken great interest in formulating hashtags and achieving top trend status. One reason behind the growing interest in Twitter in Iraq could be the realization that it reaches global audiences, particularly English speakers, faster than other platforms. Political enthusiasts like the direct back-and-forth conversations that Twitter facilitates as a means to get ideas across. What Twitter lacks in reach to mainstream Iraq it makes up for with more serious conversations and relatively high-profile accounts.

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262 NapoleonCat, “Instagram Users in Iraq.”
265 “Trending” is a term that most social media platforms use to describe the most popular topics at a given time. A top trend can be a word, a phrase, or a hashtag that is mentioned by a significant number of users during a short period of time.
After the initial days of the October 2019 protests, there was a noticeable uptick in the Iraqi Twitter sphere, in both English and Arabic. Many used hashtags such as #IraqiProtests and nreed watan (“we want a homeland”). These hashtags and tweets were significant to Middle East experts who use Twitter, including the British data analyst Marc Owen Jones. Jones observes hashtag trends on Twitter to expose inauthentic campaigns that are paid for or that aim to defame a target. Jones concluded that more than 1,000 Twitter accounts had been created with their location set as Iraq between October 1 and 3, 2019. He concluded through analyzing users of certain hashtags that this activity related to the October protests was most likely a coordinated effort by Saudi Arabians to exploit the turmoil in Iraq and push an anti-Iranian narrative. The use of hashtags to amplify political talking points is neither new nor unique. Pro-Russia groups have done this for many years. During the Trump administration in the United States, fake accounts using stolen profile pictures were created to inflate numbers of Trump supporters.

Jones’ conclusions were partially true, but he failed to investigate the reasons how and why so many accounts were created. Journalist Steven Nabil, who has more than 1.5 million followers on his verified Facebook page, encouraged protesters to join Twitter on October 1. Nabil emphasized the importance of using Twitter to support the protests through his Facebook and Telegram pages, and promoted the hashtag #Save_the_Iraqi_people. Jones did not analyze this hashtag. Instead, he based his analysis on another hashtag, #al-Iraq Yantafidh or #al-Iraq Tantafidh (“Iraq rises / uprises”), that was used mostly by non-Iraqis. He also highlighted accounts that have been active on Twitter since 2012, which would often change handles and pictures, and presented these as representative of the average protest supporter. Jones did not reply to Iraqis who stated they had only joined Twitter since October 2019 with the sole purpose of reaching a wider audience to raise awareness about violence against protesters.

266 “We want a homeland” became the core slogan of the reform movement.
269 https://t.me/StevenNabilIraq?fbclid=IwAR3OHJZyOZOPALS0XUn2UhzxmdExfzmRhqil6McMqVldfMx3yozvLWJfUeFuX.
Jones’ threads were retweeted and amplified by certain pro-Iran journalists, like Sharmine Nawrani and Rania Khaleq, who were openly against the protest movement, describing it as an American attempt to undermine Iranian influence in Iraq. Framing the October protests as an American-instigated movement denies the agency of Iraqis and dismisses the genuine grievances that led to mass protests. Jones also based some of his conclusions on analyses that dismissed relevant context. For example, he suggested that the new accounts were most likely created outside Iraq because the government had shut down internet service. The government was successful in cutting off internet providers, but had no control over mobile phone companies like AsiaCell and Zain. He overlooked the fact that most Iraqis rely on their mobile phones for internet access, and mobile companies did not restrict service during the first days of protests in October 2019. Although Jones’ analysis dismissed the Iraqi social media activity around the protests as fake, for Iraq’s English-speaking activists who use Twitter, Jones’ work underscored the importance of being seen and heard as a genuine grassroots movement.

Of particular utility in that regard, Twitter allowed the international press to communicate directly with Iraqi protesters more than other platforms. Some notable activists, like Ali al-Mikdam and Amir Hazim, appeared on documentaries about the protests with Vice News and Popular Front. But status-quo forces also used Twitter to spread misinformation and verbally attack protesters. Ali al-Mikdam was one of many activists accused of being a spy. Pro-militia accounts released a video last year that accused Mikdam of collecting a salary from the U.S. Embassy. During a brief visit to Baghdad on the evening of July 9, 2021, Mikdam’s friends and family lost contact with him. He was found the next day, after being released by unnamed captors, whom he said tortured and questioned him about an article he wrote that criticized Iran-backed militias. Pro-militia accounts on Twitter accused him of staging his own kidnapping for attention and to get a visa to any Western country. Mikdam allegedly sought to emigrate from Iraq in 2020 following a string of threats to his life and an accusatory video circulated by pro-militia accounts.

Overall, Twitter has had a significant impact in raising awareness among the international community about the protests and violence against activists in Iraq since October 2019. Its use of English and the speed with which a tweet can go viral sets the platform apart from others. One noteworthy example is a thread written by then-17-year-old Teba, a high school student from Baghdad. Inspired by a famous TikTok video that exposed China’s mistreatment of the Uighurs, Teba tweeted two selfies with the caption: “How I cleared my skin. A thread.” Teba noticed that tweets about skin care got attention, and once her tweet had a significant number of retweets and likes, she began her thread: “Now that I have your attention, there are protests going on in Iraq.” Teba explained who the protesters were, what they wanted, and the brutal crackdown they faced. The thread received more than 17,000 retweets and 25,000 likes, the highest protest-related tweet to date. Posts published by other Iraqis inside Iraq, whether on Facebook or Instagram, have not approached such numbers.

Case Study: Talal al-Hariri
The story of activist Talal al-Hariri offers an example of how the protest movement has affected social media debates, and how those, in turn, have shaped public discourse in Iraq. In 2020, Hariri announced his candidacy for parliament on behalf of his bloc, “the October 25 movement.” Other activists quickly criticized his choice of party name because it could deceive voters into believing the protest movement had organized under a single electoral bloc. Hariri defended himself, arguing that “October 25” represented an overhaul of social norms and a movement far bigger than the protests themselves. As such, it could not be monopolized by any particular actors. Hariri’s opinions, which he expresses primarily on Twitter, are not popular among social conservatives in Iraq and may not reflect the concerns of most Iraqis. His statements on Palestine, gays, and women have been rebuked by many activists in public debates on Clubhouse and through Twitter exchanges. Although Hariri ultimately ended his candidacy, his brief attempt created a new space for controversial ideas as he gained exposure and support, however little, from the public. Some social media reactions to Hariri’s ideas were openly supportive, while others opted to express their support privately to avoid backlash or harsh criticism from others. Such discussions of social taboos would have been impossible without social media because conventional Iraqi TV stations shy away from such topics. At the same time, expressing controversial views on foreign, Western-funded stations often associates one with a foreign agenda.

277 Talal al-Hariri’s conversation on Clubhouse in February 2021.
278 Hariri is supportive of reconciliation with Israel and harshly critical of Hamas. He is also very supportive of LGBTQ rights and promised to include these in his electoral agenda.
279 One prominent activist told the author he endorses Hariri’s ideas but believes mainstream Iraq is not yet ready for these discussions.
Telegram’s Tweet Bank

Realizing the success activists have had using Twitter to raise awareness of the protest movement, a pro-militia campaign was started on the chat app Telegram around October 2019. This was used to prepare daily tweets and hashtags against activists and their supportive media figures, such as comedian Ahmed al-Basheer and journalist Steven Nabil. The tweets and hashtags also expressed support for “the Hashed and the resistance.”

Those behind the account, called the “Tweet Bank,” select 1–3 hashtags and prepare 20–30 tweets daily. The account then advises its subscribers to spread these hashtags and tweets, leaving time between one tweet and the next to evade Twitter’s algorithms. Within an hour, a selected hashtag can become a top trend in Iraq. Most of the accounts propagating Tweet Bank’s content use pseudonyms and generic profile images of militia leaders and Iranian religious figures. The Twitter accounts using the Tweet Bank channel on Telegram also include real militia supporters and bots.

The Tweet Bank has generated hundreds of hashtags aimed at discrediting protesters as traitors and U.S. spies. Hashtags such as abna’a al-safarat (“sons of embassies”) and al-Joker al-Ba’athi (“the Ba’athist Joker”) trended for days during and after the October 2019 protests.

One of the most vicious hashtag attacks created by Tweet Bank targeted Mary Mohammed, a young activist from Anbar. Mary had served as a paramedic in Tahrir Square during the first month of the 2019 protests, and she documented violence against protesters on her now-deleted Instagram account. On November 12, 2019, Mary’s brother said his sister had been kidnapped, but within hours, Mary’s family denied the news, leaving her friends and fellow activists confused. After three days, Mary’s brother said his sister was safe in Erbil without explaining his previous statements. Mary gradually resurfaced on social media but refrained from expressing any further support for the protests. In 2020, a video surfaced showing a confused-looking Mary confessing to sexual activities with a Sunni sheikh. Within hours, the hashtag ikhwat Mary (“Mary’s brothers”) was trending on Twitter in Iraq, as pro-militia accounts began accusing the activist of prostitution, and the entire protest movement of debauchery. Days later, a tearful Mary appeared on camera claiming she had been tortured and forced to record the confession under threat. She said her captors forced her to lie on camera that she had engaged in sexual activities with several Sunni politicians and sheikhs, and threatened to release the recordings and kill her if she ever rejoined the protests. Since Mary’s ordeal, female participation in the protests has significantly dwindled, as evident in documented footage of subsequent protests.

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280 Journalist Steven Nabil, a TV reporter in Los Angeles for al-Hurra, was subjected to derogatory character assassination in several hashtags that not only accused him of being a spy, but slandered his family and reputation.

281 Al-Hashed al-Shabi is the Arabic term for the popular mobilization forces. Pro-Iran militias like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq use the term “resistance” to describe their anti-U.S. operations and rhetoric.

282 The Tweet Bank can be found here: https://t.me/TB_MMF.

283 A bot is an account that is generated and tweets according to schedule. A real person may also open an account using a fake name and profile picture.

284 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVT5s_HdGc4.
The electronic armies

Electronic armies are essentially troll accounts created for the purpose of spreading certain messages online to serve a specific entity or purpose and/or cyberbully those who oppose them. They are different from software-generated bots in that real people run the accounts; one such person may control several accounts at a time. The term *electronic army* was widely used for the first time in Iraq in 2013, when hundreds of Facebook profiles and pages emerged in support of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Electronic armies were not a major concern before the most recent protests because they did little more than post messages to support certain politicians. But electronic armies became a problem for protesters when their mission expanded to include incitement and slander.

In November 2019, the late Iraqi terrorism expert Dr. Hisham al-Hashimi told colleagues he discovered a “militia media cell” tasked with launching directed social media attacks on the accounts of activists and supporters of the protest movement. Hashimi compiled a list with the names of suspected cell members and shared it with prominent activists. The media cell, according to Hashimi, had direct connections to Iran’s Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. According to Hashimi’s list, the head of the cell was Agha Shahini, a member of the IRGC, and his deputy was Qassem Qaseer, a Lebanese supporter of Hezbollah. The cell’s editors and staff included many Iraqi social media figures, political commentators, and journalists, such as Ahmed Abdul-Sada, Mazen al-Zaidi, Ahmed Hatif, Ali Marid al-Asadi, and Najah Mohammed Ali. According to Hashimi, this cell was responsible for creating electronic armies to attack the October protest movement and to associate its supporters with foreign embassies. Hashimi believed that the campaign was not run by volunteers, and that staff were financially compensated.

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285 One of the authors of this report has seen the list and confirms that it was sent by Hisham al-Hashimi.

286 Abdul-Sada went on public TV on several occasions where he accused Hisham al-Hashimi of having close ties to the United States Zaidi is a well-known journalist and openly anti-protest and pro-Iran commentator. Hatif is a screenwriter and pro-Iran intellectual. Asadi is a hardcore Maliki supporter known for his sectarian tendencies and incitement against Sunni Iraqis. Ali is a pro-Iran political commentator.
Case study: Dr. Reham Yacoub

Dr. Reham Yacoub was a well-known social figure in Basra who rose to prominence during the 2015 protests. As one of the first women to actively participate in Basra’s civil society and protests, she became recognizable as a voice for change and reform. As her activist presence grew, so did the impact of her activity on social media. She participated in Basra's 2018 protests as well and encouraged other young women to join. On several occasions during the 2018 protests in Basra, she led groups of women at protest venues. As a result, she received numerous death threats and accusations of treason, which compelled her to ultimately end her political activism. Reham then focused on empowering women through health and fitness. She owned and managed a gym and encouraged women to turn to sports and physical activity to improve the quality of their lives. Reham was not publicly active during the recent protests, but a new wave of death threats targeted her again. The threats were driven by Facebook posts dating back to 2018 in which a slain photographer for the Popular Mobilization Forces, Ahmed Mahna, accused Reham of befriending the American consul in Basra. Mahna encouraged his followers to expose Reham and other “traitors.”  

In August 2020, Reham was gunned down in her car on her way home from the gym. While thousands across Iraq mourned Reham, pro-militia accounts still called her a traitor.

Clubhouse

The new debate app Clubhouse quickly gained popularity among young Iraqis eager to find a place in the political conversation. The May 25, 2021, protests, following the assassination of activist Ehab al-Wazni, were largely organized by Baghdad activists on Clubhouse, with input from diaspora groups who arranged smaller gatherings in solidarity in European cities. These protests aimed to press the government to expose those behind the assassination of activists and to bring them to justice. After the death of an 18-year-old protester, several leading activists, such as Basra journalist Muntazer Bakheet and Hisham al-Mozani, announced via Clubhouse that they would not advocate for further protests. Instead, they said they would focus on political organizing, and persuading the international community to monitor elections and the safety of electoral candidates.

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287 Ahmed Mahna was killed by Kataib Hezbollah near Tahrir Square in Baghdad in December 2019. It is believed that his killing was accidental and that—at the time—he may have been trying to pass himself off as an activist.
288 These activists are based in Baghdad and are less prominent on social media. As of the time of writing, both had relocated to the Kurdistan region after death threats and physical attacks from unidentified assailants.
289 Interview with an activist who was involved in the discussions in June 2021.
The Curtailment of Freedoms and Safety Online

Social media platforms have provided a space for Iraqis of all ages to voice their opinions and concerns about the country’s political, social, and economic conditions in the years since the 2003 regime change. The younger generation that came of age in post-Saddam Iraq has little recollection of stability and security, but also enjoys a degree of freedom of speech and expression unknown to previous generations of Iraqis.

With the proliferation of communications technology and a new openness to the world, young Iraqis have joined global peers in fighting for their right to a better quality of life. Inspired by the Arab Spring in 2011, social media became a tool to call for protests and to exchange ideas among Iraqi activists. Nonetheless, these platforms are no longer safe for most activists inside Iraq, as militias continue to target activists with impunity. Electronic armies and militia supporters monitor, follow, and attempt to expose the physical location of activists. Many prominent activists have left Iraq, but those who remain no longer use these platforms to organize activities to the same effect as during the 2015–19 period. While some campaigns are spread through Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms, the organizers are now largely Iraqi diaspora groups that support the reform movement, but are not its core. Activists and former protesters continue to use social media platforms to discuss and criticize the failures of the Iraqi state, but not as freely as they did just a few years ago. As one female Iraqi activist put it, “We look over our shoulders if we criticize too harshly or call out militia leaders or Muqtada al-Sadr.”

A few Iraqi youth relax in the Homeland Youth Encampment at Baghdad’s Tahrir Square. The youth were there to help the protesters by “cleaning around”. Baghdad. Jan. 14, 2020. (Hawre Khalid)

290 A good example of this trend is the “End Impunity” global rallies that took place in cities around the world on July 18, 2021.
291 Authors’ interview with activist In June 2021.
Future scenarios

This report considers three scenarios that could unfold in Iraq after the next election, whether that takes place in October 2021 or later, in 2022. These scenarios span the spectrum of possible levels of success by the pro-reform movement in altering the political equation in Iraq.

We expect that these scenarios will take place under application of the new electoral law that parliament passed in November 2020. The law got rid of proportional representation, 18 province-sized districts, and party lists used in past elections. Instead, the next election will feature non-transferable votes, individual candidacy, and 83 smaller districts involving 3–5 representatives each. We assume that security conditions will remain relatively unchanged. The scenarios also assume that an election boycott will not be universal, and the decision to boycott elections could be reversed by some or all of the potential candidates under the Tishreen banner.

Scenario I: The movement achieves considerable (or complete) success in displacing established parties from government institutions, and gains effective control of policy-making mechanisms

Conditions

This scenario envisions high voter turnout, allowing the movement to achieve a significant victory (90 seats or more) in the next election. Electoral victory would be followed by the successful translation of electoral gains into political power. Through negotiations and post-election alliances with reform-friendly political powers, pro-reform MPs would lead the largest parliamentary bloc and gain a decisive role in forming the next government and shaping key government institutions.

Focus group findings on policy priorities

We asked focus group participants about the policy initiatives that they thought should be the movement’s top priorities if it were in control of government. More than half said that establishing a state monopoly over arms and abolishing illegal militias must be the top priorities for movement representatives in government. This was followed very closely by policies to improve the economy, namely through action to empower the private sector and protect investments and businesses from militia extortion and partisan interference.

292 Number selected to mimic the number of seats won by the top winners in Iraq’s 2010 and 2014 elections.
Voicing the prevailing view in the room, a male activist from Baghdad declared, “The priorities are preserving state dignity and establishing a monopoly over arms, protecting freedoms and developing the intelligence service to end foreign interference while protecting friendly foreign relations, vetting senior officials and director generals at state ministries. Most of the corruption happens because of directors who stay even when governments change... Encourage investment, support agriculture and the private sector and industry to diversify the economy.”

Ending foreign interference, initiating a full review of the constitution, and enacting laws to protect civil liberties were top priorities for a third of participants. Slightly less than a third listed electoral and political party reform as their highest priorities. A male activist from Baghdad explained the reasoning, “The most important part is amending the constitution to effect change in the political system... Next is changing laws that govern political life, on top of which is the federal court law and the [political] parties law. [There are] laws that regulate economic conditions in the country, like the investment law and the law that creates an entity that monitors federal revenue... There is also the problem of electing governors after the provincial councils have been dissolved.”

A quarter of participants said improving the delivery of public services, namely education, must be the top priority of the reform movement in government.
A minority opinion raised an interesting argument about whether constitutional amendments were the right means by which to initiate reform. An activist from Basra explained, “Let’s implement the constitution first then talk about amending it. Implementing it requires laws that were not written. First of which is a constitutional law for the supreme federal court so it can hold them [lawmakers] responsible for enacting other laws. [We need] laws that implement what the constitution says about political parties. It’s all in the constitution but there’s no court to hold them accountable.”

Findings on establishment response

When discussants were asked how they expect the establishment parties to respond to this hypothetical change in power, more than half of the discussants said that they would expect militias and establishment parties to escalate threats and violence against movement representatives. A male activist from Dhi-Qar said, “If the protest movement gets to power there will be violence. [Hakim] al-Zamili said that if Sadrists don’t win the premiership then it’s because there was fraud. Second, the PMF includes armed factions that openly answer to Iran. These factions hold sulta and have patronage networks that bring money, power, and media. The Iranian interference won’t allow any attempts to reform this Iraqi system. Iran considers Iraq an economic lung that is indispensable under any circumstance.”

One out of four participants said they expect militias and establishment parties to use methods other than violence to try to regain power, to avoid the economic cost of fighting a civil war. Movement antagonists would try to adapt to their reduced status using a combination of persuasion, coercion, and political maneuvering to undermine the movement’s newly established hold on government institutions. One male activist from Basra agreed, “They may play along to protect their interests. It’s irrational for them to damage their interests by going towards a coup or violent action.”

293 Hakim al-Zamili is a powerful aide to Muqtada al-Sadr, with a history of running death squads during the sectarian violence after the 2003 regime change.
Another quarter of participants said they expect a sudden loss of power to militias and establishment parties would deliver a fatal blow that disrupts their ability to mount a coherent recovery. “If we have the authority, money and military, the parties will be defeated within months. They are not invincible,” said a male activist from Maysan.

Most of the respondents espousing this view argued that militias and establishment actors derive power from exploiting public funds and institutions. The loss of resources, combined with a strengthening of state institutions, would strip them of the power to buy support. A male activist from Baghdad preparing to run in the elections said, “What matters is to establish a state of institutions, not based on the culture of revenge… We can’t repeat the same mistakes of the ruling class. Their reaction will be based on how we act. If you use a policy of containment, you won’t make them enemies. When there are economic reforms more will benefit than the few whose interests will be harmed… You will take away their audience… There will be very few people [around the parties] and these can be contained.”

**Survey findings**

More than 30 percent of respondents to EPIC’s June 2021 public opinion survey reported the view that the ascendance of pro-reform candidates would lead to less corruption and a decline of *muhasasa*, and around 27 percent thought it would lead to economic and service improvements, and (see Figure 14). But survey results reflected mixed views about how militias and establishment parties would respond to losing power. Almost 25 percent said they would use violence to reclaim power, while just under 17 percent thought militias would actually become weaker.
Implications/outcomes
If the establishment decides to use violence to stage a return to power and overthrow an elected government, Iraq could descend into another civil war. To reduce this risk, the new reformist leadership would be wise to provide a soft and safe exit for the deposed oligarchs to disincentivize violence. To mitigate the chance of backlash from Tehran, the government should explore diplomatic efforts with Iran, in coordination with the U.S. and international community, to manage expectations.

Likelihood
This scenario is hypothetically possible. In the survey EPIC conducted in June, almost one out of four Iraqis said they would cast their votes for candidates representing the protesters and broader Tishreen movement. Less than 4 percent said they would vote for establishment parties, and under 2 percent said they would vote for candidates endorsed by the incumbent Mustafa al-Kadhimi (see Figure 10). However, one out of three said they don’t intend to vote at all, and three out of ten were undecided, leaving considerable room for those figures to change. Nevertheless, if 34 percent of eligible voters fail to show up at the polls, as suggested by the survey, then the eligible voters who said they would turn out and vote for the movement’s candidates would comprise more than one out of every three votes cast.\(^{294}\) If that occurs, the movement’s candidates would stand to win up to 120 seats, regardless of what undecided voters end up doing.

\(^{294}\) \( \frac{25}{100} \times 100 = \frac{X}{100} \times 66 \Rightarrow X = 2,500/66 \Rightarrow X = 37.8. \)
However, at this point, there are strong indicators that this scenario is particularly unlikely. Indeed, only 12 percent of respondents said they expect Tishreen candidates to win the most seats, compared with 30 percent who believe the traditional parties will prevail (see Figure 15).

There are several considerations that support this skepticism. First, some parties representing the movement have threatened to boycott the election and withdraw their candidates from competition. Second, that boycott may lead to a wider boycott among independent voters and the movement’s likely supporters. Low voter turnout would favor the parties that have loyal, easy-to-mobilize bases that rely on patronage and ideology: PMF, Islamists, and ethno-centric parties that use patronage networks, military power, and resources to capture a disproportionate number of votes. Third, pro-reform candidates who decide to run individually with the support of moderate existing parties and political figures—such as Abadi, Zurfi, Hakim—will suffer from the boycott and suffer potential reputational damage from associating with establishment parties. Fourth, winning a plurality of seats does not guarantee the right to form a government, as the 2010 case of Allawi and Maliki demonstrated. Fifth, Iran will use persuasion and coercion to push the parties on which it has influence to sideline the pro-reform bloc. Therefore, the presence of large numbers of pro-reform candidates in parliament is unlikely to produce a pro-reform government.

**Scenario II: The movement achieves limited success in wresting control of important state institutions from established parties, but gains enough power to stay alive and relevant**

**Conditions**

This scenario envisions moderately high turnout leading to pro-reform candidates winning a moderate number of seats (20–30) in parliament. This would be sufficient to entitle movement representatives a seat at the negotiating table without becoming a dominant player. As is usual in Iraq, the prime minister would likely be a compromise candidate. This would be the case again, since no party is expected to win an outright majority. This scenario could also unfold as a possible variation of Scenario I, in which the movement wins a plurality of seats but protracted post-election negotiations force the movement to share control over government institutions with establishment parties in order to form a government and avoid a political vacuum.

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295 Iyad Allawi’s party won a plurality of seats in parliament in the 2010 election (91 vs. 89 for Maliki’s coalition), but the incumbent Maliki, aided by Iranian support and U.S. ambivalence, outmaneuvered his rival to win a second term.

296 The number is selected to mimic the number of seats won by second-tier blocs in Iraq’s 2018 election.
**Survey findings**

Public opinion was split about the implications of this scenario. Just under 27 percent of respondents thought the movement’s elected representatives would be able to form an effective political opposition bloc in the next parliament, and 19.4 percent thought this scenario would enable gradual political reform. But an almost equal percentage (27.9 percent) thought they would have no influence at all, and almost 17 percent thought the movement’s MPs would become corrupt themselves (see Figure 16).

**Implications/outcome**

This scenario could lower the temperature and give Iraqis more time to resolve their governance crisis. It could present an opportunity to achieve gradual change and reform with less risk of provoking a violent reaction from status quo forces. A government in which reformists are one of several powers but not the dominant one would be less threatening to the establishment than a government dominated by reformists. This arrangement is unlikely to cause a radical shift in policies, but could create a new force in parliament—a third bloc besides the Sadrists and the blocs representing the Iran-backed militias. These pro-reform representatives could form a political base for a like-minded prime minister, and help push gradual reforms through parliament.

As discussed in earlier sections, the problem with Iraq's last three governments was not that the prime ministers didn't want to initiate reform; quite the opposite. The problem was in the weak political support they enjoyed, the effective resistance offered by entrenched interests, and, from 2014 to 2017, the pressure of war.

Movement representatives in parliament would face a big test. Their voters would expect them to make a swift and positive difference. Even with willingness among political leaders to make limited concessions in the interest of avoiding another political crisis, individual parties/factions would offer opposition every step of the way, whenever proposed reform threatened to undermine their interests. Movement representatives may appear as if they have failed, or worse, abandoned their principles after they began to enjoy the perks of political office or to seek compromises to achieve incremental steps. Anti-reform powers would likely make an effort to discredit and delegitimize the movement representatives.
Likelihood
This scenario is plausible. Even if important Tishreen parties boycott the election, a modest number of Tishreen candidates may reach parliament on their own or with the help of moderate establishment parties. The decisive factor would be these representatives’ ability to come together and coalesce into an effective bloc and avoid being divided and co-opted.

Scenario III: The movement fails to achieve any control over government institutions and policy-making mechanisms, leading to its fragmentation and collapse

Conditions
This scenario envisions two possible precipitating conditions. First, movement candidates win a significant portion—up to a plurality of parliamentary seats in the next election. However, movement representatives fail to translate their presence in parliament into effective political power. Through negotiations and post-election alliances, establishment parties would retain a decisive role in forming the next government and shaping the government institutions. Second, an election boycott allows establishment parties to retain full control of parliament and denies the movement a foothold.

Findings on how the movement should respond
The vast majority of participants in focus group discussions said the protest movement would regroup, reorganize, and resume its protest activity in opposition to a new establishment-dominated government. A male activist from Dhi-Qar said with confidence, “The trajectory is clear. In 2011 there were barely enough protesters to fill a bus. In 2014, the protests were bigger. In 2015 there were even more. In 2016 there were a million people and protests involved several provinces. Then 2018 was the largest, then Tishreen was the crowning. If the electoral process fails to produce new faces or create a path for political reforms, then there will be a new Tishreen, maybe something bigger.”
Expectations for the force with which the protests would continue varied widely. While some participants expected the protests to continue with less intensity, others speculated that protests would restart with vigor but dry up shortly afterward. Yet others said the protests would continue with significant intensity, culminating in inevitable conflict between “the street” and the government due to the “irreconcilable” nature of their differences. A small number of discussants, one out of five, said they expect conditions under the next government to provide less impetus for protests. Activists holding this opinion argued that the electoral system with smaller districts means that new elected officials will have to moderate their behavior and display more accountability toward their constituents. These constituents, in turn, would be more likely to focus on improving their living conditions than on political reform.

A male activist from Maysan explained: “Their [MPs from establishment parties] policies will be different, because they will be voted in by their districts and will have to answer to the district and their voters. We saw in Amara that representatives started to go back to their bases after the protests, to the people who voted for them, to listen to their needs. Their work is changing even though it’s still the same cycle. We wouldn’t be able to resume [protests] with the same momentum.”

Survey findings
With EPIC’s national survey, responses to this scenario exhibited less uncertainty about its implications: less than one out of four responded, “I don’t know.” More than four out of ten said the militias would become more powerful, and one out of three thought foreign interference would increase if establishment parties were to dominate the next government. A third of respondents also thought the economy and public services would worsen, and similar numbers said they expected protests to escalate (see Figure 17).

Implications/outcomes
If the establishment parties and militias remain in power, they are likely to continue to exploit public funds and power to serve their financial interests and maintain their patronage networks. They would avoid pursuing reform that they perceive to undermine those interests. Public spending and waste would remain high, corruption would continue to undermine infrastructure development, and the private sector would remain vulnerable to militia extortion, partisan exploitation, red tape, and the whims of bureaucrats. The combination of these factors—continuation of business as usual, suppression of the protest movement, and less pressure to enact reforms—would mean that Iraq would face a growing gap between revenue and financial obligations. Competition among oligarchs for diminishing resources would increase, Iranian interference would increase, and political fragmentation would increase. Ultimately, Iraq could descend toward failed state status.
Likelihood
The first part of this scenario (failure to control government institutions) is quite likely given all the obstacles discussed earlier in this report. Even if the movement makes substantial electoral gains, it is expected to face stiff opposition as it seeks to achieve control over government institutions and policy-making mechanisms. However, the second part of the scenario (fragmentation and collapse) appears less likely given the movement’s demonstrated ability—as evidenced by the May 25 protests following the assassination of Ehab al-Wazni, and the July 18 #EndImpunityInIraq rallies—to mobilize mass support despite nearly two years of concentrated suppression by its antagonists.297

The outlook
This is a struggle between two very different but equally determined sets of opponents. On the one hand, a weak showing in October would appear unlikely to cause the reform movement to collapse, at least not right away. The movement has demonstrated resilience and an ability to regenerate momentum after setbacks. Without improvement in governance during the next parliamentary cycle, there would be more resentment toward the political class, and living conditions would inevitably provoke more protests. The crowds of protesters would grow significantly over time as Iraq’s population outgrows the oil-dependent public sector’s ability to provide for everyone. Last year alone, 1.25 million Iraqis were born.298 By the end of this decade, the population is expected to exceed 50 million, adding 5 million young Iraqis to a workforce starved for jobs.299 These young people aspire to live like their peers elsewhere in a world to which they are increasingly connected. They no longer accept overused arguments by politicians invoking Saddam’s dictatorship, the U.S. occupation, the al-Qaeda insurgency, or regional conspiracies to justify poverty, crumbling infrastructure, corruption, insecurity, and foreign interference. They have the tools to share their ideas and, over the last two years, have gained experience formulating advocacy plans and mobilizing people in their support.

297 The fact that protesters in southern Iraq directly called out Iran as the power behind the militia violence without concealing their identities suggests a very high level of risk tolerance among activists, including women. See video https://twitter.com/saladhakaniarmy/status/1392308240115482369.
Movement activists are already preparing to deal with the aftermath of what they think is the likely scenario if the establishment doesn’t change its ways. As discussed earlier, leading groups within the movement, like al-Bayt al-Watani, envision four elements of action in response to what they consider an unfair political competition: (1) bringing together Tishreen representatives and secular parties to “provide the political alternative”; (2) strengthening the protest movement and exploring “other forms of pressure”; (3) legal efforts to “appeal the constitutionality” of the political process; and (4) information and advocacy to expose human rights violations.

On the other hand, establishment parties are also likely to continue their efforts to co-opt or neutralize the movement. They may offer money to attract popular figures, and they may seek to sideline, intimidate, or eliminate those unwilling to compromise. On the streets, state forces and militias can be expected to continue to protect the interests of the establishment. This expectation is informed by militia rhetoric concerning “contingency plans” in case the movement rejects the outcome of elections. Asaib Ahl al-Haq says Fatah’s supporters must be united and ready to suppress post-election protests by “the jokers” should they respond with protests to an electoral victory for Fatah.300

From that point, repression could lead to pacification of the movement, forcing it underground. Alternatively, it could restart the cycle that began with the 2018 election, with one important difference. Both sides have now gained experience dealing with one another, and each has stronger feelings about the need to defeat the other. The next round, if it begins, would likely be more intense and more violent, and the stakes would be higher.

Conclusion

Important lessons can and should be drawn from the rise of Iraq’s most recent protest movement and related events since October 2019.

First, the protest movement represents a new and critical actor in Iraqi politics. It is neither static nor uniform but diverse in composition, dynamic in strategies, and nuanced in methods. These qualities have given the movement strength, but also contributed vulnerabilities. It therefore deserves to be thoroughly studied and understood by both Iraqi and international policy circles. Because it enjoys wide support among the Iraqi people, the movement’s current power and future potential to shape events and outcomes in Iraq must not be underestimated.

The protests that began in October 2019 changed politics in Iraq in several ways. This is the first indigenous movement since the foundation of the modern state of Iraq a century ago in 1921 to reclaim agency for the people, independent of regional and international power struggles. The movement has introduced a powerful degree of public scrutiny, which means government action—and inaction—can no longer go unnoticed. It has demonstrated a capacity to mobilize mass support behind causes and grievances at home, and paid a heavy price for this activism. And it has become more effective at gaining the attention of external actors and, to some extent, bringing international pressure to bear on the federal government, and the politicians and militias that seek to maintain the status quo.

Events since October 2019 have also challenged common wisdom and stereotypes about Iraq. The unifying messages of the protests heralded the end of all-powerful sectarianism, and made a strong argument that 

muhasasa

is unnecessary to hold Iraq’s diverse communities together. The movement demonstrated that an Iraqi national identity is not a hypothetical construct. It is a living and active force among millions, especially Iraq’s younger generations, who are open to the world, and who reject the identity politics that long dominated the sociopolitical discourse. The movement also exposed worsening conditions in Iraq, which challenge the long-held perception in some policy circles that reconciliation, compromise, and alliances among the old rivals can still secure national stability. The movement has insisted that the time to replace 

muhasasa

with equal opportunity and rule of law has come; the power-sharing system that was thought necessary to keep Iraq together is the very reason Iraq is now falling apart.
A sound framework for understanding Iraq cannot afford to ignore the role of this grassroots movement; it cannot afford to maintain exclusive focus on Iraq’s old political elites or their interests, positions and calculations. Foreign actors across the globe, from Tehran to Washington, should take heed.

In law enforcement and the justice system, hospitals and schools, financial institutions and foreign relations, governance in Iraq is in dire straits. Far-reaching political and economic reform in Iraq is both crucial and feasible. Iraq’s upcoming elections may not promise much immediate change, but they are not the only means through which Iraq’s citizens can push for that change.

Observers should resist the temptation to view this election or that candidate as the “last chance” or “only hope” for putting Iraq on the path to effective reform. Without any hard power, the recent protest movement forced political elites to change a government and revise the election system; it has become a force that reminds politicians and Iraq’s citizens that accountable governance must begin somewhere. The struggle for reform is generational; while it can be slow and incremental, its ultimate impact is profound.
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