

Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq: Between Reform and Revolution

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Introduction

A century after the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, the country's youth remain in search of a nation.¹ After a hundred years of rule under a monarchy, a republic, and a dictatorship, as well as multiple wars and foreign interventions, Iraqi society continues to search for stable and representative governance. Leading that search today are young Iraqi civil activists who protest en masse across the country in the squares of Baghdad and the southern governorates against endemic corruption, rising unemployment, foreign interference, and the failure of the government to provide the most basic services to its citizens. Although protests began in 2011, the October Protest Movement of 2019 is the largest and most persistent expression of popular dissatisfaction with the ruling elite in the modern history of Iraq. Consequently, activists deem the movement “Thawrat Tishreen,” or the “October Revolution.”²



¹ Iraqi protestors raised the slogan “Nreed Watan” (We want a homeland) in the October Protest Movement.

² In addition, the October Protest Movement is sometimes referred to as the October Uprising by some scholars. This report argues that whether it is a movement, a revolution, or an uprising is yet to be determined. Therefore, the protest is referred to interchangeably as the “October Protest Movement” (as a description) and as the “October Revolution” in reference to the name that protestors have selected for it, though it is not yet clear that it is a revolution in the definitional sense.

The protest movement of October 2019 has succeeded in forcing the resignation of former Prime Minister Adil Abd Al-Mahdi's government and setting a provisional date for early federal elections in June 2021. The movement itself has withstood a pandemic, persisting for months across central and southern Iraq.³ Its strength and its scope have shaken the political elite and have mobilized Iraqis to protest at unprecedented levels. However, whether this movement can be defined as a social revolution, a political revolution, or even an uprising is yet to be determined.⁴ The upcoming elections will reveal the extent to which the protesting class and Iraq's civil activists can turn their demonstrations into tangible political gains in the short-term.

This report argues that the protest movement emerged spontaneously and represents a novel kind of social movement in Iraq, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes civil society and activism. The role of traditional civil society—i.e. civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—was relatively minimal in driving the formation and trajectory of the movement. Rather, a new class of reformist civil society activists has emerged in Iraq.⁵ Second, nuancing the image of the protestors as revolutionaries seeking to overturn the system, a significant subsection of this new class of activists is pragmatic and working towards reform from within current institutions. Not only are these reformist activists democratic but they are also able to identify the aspects and institutions within Iraq that can be harnessed for political change. For this reason, these activists seek involvement in the political process as opposed to rejecting the current system and its institutions.⁶ Finally, the demands of the 2019 protest movement are markedly different from the past. They have evolved as the protest movement itself has persisted under repression by security forces and paramilitary groups. Additionally, the demands are shaped by a delayed coordination from civil society activists to streamline and unify the demands of the protesting masses.

³ Sajad Jiyad, "Struggling Iraq Faces Another Crisis in COVID-19," *Instituto Affari Internazionale*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/struggling-iraq-faces-another-crisis-covid-19>.

⁴ For a discussion of how the protest movement constitutes a revolutionary moment, see: Fanar Haddad, "Hip Hop, Poetry and Shia Iconography: How Tahrir Square Gave Birth to a New Iraq," *Middle East Eye*, December 9, 2019, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iraq-new-political-awareness-and-culture-have-been-formed>.

⁵ Zahra Ali, "Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of a 'New Civil Society,'" *London School of Economics Conflict Research Programme Blog*, October 3, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2019/10/03/protest-movements-in-iraq-in-the-age-of-new-civil-society/>.

⁶ This is not to discount the role of activists who seek revolutionary change and the overturn of the system. However, this report focuses on the significant reformist trend, which has been largely ignored.

Research for this report relies on several sources of data to understand the reformist protestors, including data provided by the Iraqi NGO Directorate;⁷ interviews with heads of registered organizations in Iraq conducted between 2016 and 2018; semi-structured and gender-balanced interviews with key protest leaders from Baghdad, Babil, Basra, Diwaniya, Karbala, Najaf, and Thi Qar conducted in September and October 2020; and finally, a body of secondary scholarship on the protest movement.

Protests in Post-2003 Iraq

“The protests were totally spontaneous. It was mass public anger as a result of accumulated bad politics and grievances in Iraq. What moved the street was Abd Al-Wahab Al-Sa’adi—the hero of Iraqis—was removed from his position...a lot of events, those with higher degrees demanding their rights were degraded...the decline of services...no clean streets, no public health, no health institutions...no electricity, no clean water. These grievances accumulated and led to a public protest. The role of activists was to incite people about when to go out and there was a mass flood. After protests, there was coordination. There were shared statements.”— male activist, Najaf.

Iraq has witnessed several major protest movements after 2003, starting with the protests of 2011 that began in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah.⁸ The eruption of protests in 2011 was part of a regional-wide protest movement in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring. In Iraq, these protests were fueled by citizen’s long standing economic and political grievances with the ruling elite over endemic corruption and a failure to provide basic services. The protests lasted months and involved thousands of Iraqis who mobilized under the slogan, “the people want to reform the system.”⁹ In 2013, anti-government protests broke out in the Anbar governorate, also in the spirit of the Arab Spring.¹⁰

⁷ The Iraqi NGO Directorate’s website can be found at <http://www.ngoao.gov.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=21>.

⁸ Marina Ottaway and Danial Anas Kaysi, “Iraq: Protest, Democracy, and Autocracy,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 28, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/03/28/iraq-protest-democracy-and-autocracy-pub-43306>.

⁹ Faleh Jabar, “The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,” *London School of Economics Middle East Centre Paper Series*, No. 25 (June 2018): 30.

¹⁰ Liz Sly, “Arab Spring-Style Protests Take Hold in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/arab-spring-style-protests-take-hold-in-iraq/2013/02/08/f875ef7e-715f-11e2-b3f3-b263d708ca37_story.html.

Anti-establishment protests erupted in the city of Basra in 2015, fueled predominantly by economic grievances over lack of basic services, poor governance, and environmental disasters. The protests slowly spread to other cities in the south in the summer, when grievances are stoked by high temperatures, electricity outages, and water shortages.¹¹ Protests erupted again in Basra in 2018, also driven by economic grievances.¹² Some scholars and observers argue that these protest movements are distinguished by being Shi'a dominated and against a Shi'a-led state. These observations over-emphasize sectarian divisions in Iraq and drown the nationalistic rhetoric of the protests themselves. Moreover, they paint sect-based identity and nationalism as being mutually exclusive, which is an overly simplistic view of identity.

While observers may argue these were sect-based protests due to the minimal participation of Iraqis from majority Sunni governorates, some protestors argue that the limited presence of Iraqis from these governorates stems more from the impact of the conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; also referred to as "Daesh") rather than from sectarian differences, as described by an activist from Najaf:

In my opinion, the Sunni society is oppressed, just emerging from a devastating war, in addition to people's fears of the return of Daesh if there is a security vacuum. The powers in Baghdad would call them Daesh and would oppress them, we were lucky that our friends in the West did not do this [protest].¹³

The grievances voiced by demonstrators in the 2019 protest movement echoed those of previous protest movements: high unemployment, corruption, poverty, and a lack of public services, specifically water and electricity. At the same time, the October Protest Movement had unique proximate causes that triggered demonstrations and sustained the protest movement from one critical juncture to the next. The initial trigger was the hosing of graduate students by security forces in September 2019, which elevated public anger.¹⁴ This incident

¹¹ Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," 30.

¹² Marsin Alshamary and Safwan Al-Amin, "Who to Blame for the Protests in Basra, Iraq?" *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/14/who-to-blame-for-the-protests-in-basra-iraq/>.

¹³ Author interview with activist from Najaf.

¹⁴ Katherine Lawlor, "Iraq Warning Intelligence Update: 'October Revolution' Anniversary Protests Set to Resume," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 30, 2020,

was followed by the unpopular demotion of Staff Lieutenant General Abd Al-Wahab Al-Sa'adi, a national hero from the war against ISIS.¹⁵ These events culminated in the eruption of organized protests on October 1, 2019, which grew in size and momentum when protestors were killed within the first nine days.¹⁶

Though the protests took a brief hiatus for the Arba'een Pilgrimage in mid-October, they returned on October 25, 2019, and continued under extreme violence.¹⁷ On November 29, 2019, Prime Minister Adil Abd Al-Mahdi resigned under pressure from protestors and the religious establishment.¹⁸ As the political elite squabbled over candidates for Abd al-Mahdi's successor, the protest movement took a hit on January 3, 2020, when the United States assassinated Major General Qassim Suleimani of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, at the Baghdad International Airport.¹⁹ The assassinations plunged Iraq into uncertainty over fears that Iraq would become a battleground for an American-Iranian proxy war. As part of the aftershocks, protestors were accused of affiliation with the United States.²⁰ This accusation was not new for some civil activists and organizations, who are often accused of promoting foreign agendas as a result of accepting foreign funding.

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraq-warning-intelligence-update-%E2%80%9COctober-revolution%E2%80%9D-anniversary-protests-set-resume>.

¹⁵ Bassem Mroue, "Iraq's Removal of Counterterrorism Chief Sparks Controversy," *Military Times*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/09/29/iraqs-removal-of-counterterrorism-chief-sparks-controversy/>.

¹⁶ "Iraq: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters>.

¹⁷ Alissa Rubin, "'All of Them Are Thieves': Iraqis Defy Security Forces to Protest Corruption," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/25/world/middleeast/iraq-protests.html>.

¹⁸ Alissa Rubin and Falih Hassan, "Iraqi Prime Minister Resigns in Deepening Political Crisis," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/world/middleeast/adel-abdul-mahdi-resigns-iraq.html>.

¹⁹ Michael Crowley, Falih Hassan, and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qassim Suleimani, Commander of Iranian Forces," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>.

²⁰ Zahra Ali, "Iraqis Have Been Holding Peaceful Mass Protests. The U.S. Strike and Its Aftermath Are Undermining That," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/10/iraqis-have-been-holding-peaceful-mass-protests-us-strike-its-aftermath-are-undermining-that/>.

Classic Civil Society in Iraq: Past and Present

“Civil society organizations had dialogues and conferences, they taught people to understand their duties and their freedoms in the country.” – male activist, Najaf.

In order to understand the nature of the protest movement, it is important to distinguish its features from the traditional civil society structure in Iraq. Traditional civil society refers to associational and voluntary groups that exist outside of the state apparatus. In the modern history of Iraq, civil society encompasses groups such as charities, cultural organizations, advocacy groups, and professional associations and syndicates.

While CSOs in Iraq today enjoy relative freedoms, Iraqi civil society has for years been stifled. For decades, the Ba’athist state prohibited citizen-cultivated associations and instead planted Ba’athist alternative organizations in schools and universities to regulate civil life. The Ba’ath party directed its attention to taking over interest groups, as well as shaping the interests of youth through various party programs, such as rewriting curriculum and ending private education.²¹ Historians and scholars of modern Iraq agree that the totalitarian regime subsumed civil society in its erasure of the line between party and state.²²

By 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), under the aegis of the United States, passed Order 45,²³ a directive that opened up the space for civil society. The directive required both local and foreign organizations seeking to operate in Iraq to register with the Ministry of Planning. At first, many of the organizations that sought registration were international NGOs focusing on humanitarian and relief efforts in the country. After prodding by the U.S. government, organizations that focused on human rights, democracy, women’s rights, and electoral reform also began to seek registration.²⁴ The efforts of the U.S. government to open and expand civil society in Iraq constituted a broader American policy of

²¹ Ofra Bengio, *Saddam’s World: The Political Discourse in Iraq*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²² Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1987); Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

²³ See: https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/regulations/20031201_CPAORD45.pdf.

²⁴ Larry Diamond, “What Went Wrong in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 23, 2019, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2004-09-01/what-went-wrong-iraq>.

“civil society engineering” in the Middle East, which mistook the Western link between civil society and democratization for a global panacea.²⁵

Civil society in Iraq today is governed by the Iraqi NGO Directorate, a governmental organization under the direction of the Council of Ministers Secretariat (COMSEC). According to Iraq’s April 2010 NGO law, NGOs are required to register with the directorate.²⁶ In fact, the law defines establishment as registration. The law also gives organizations complete freedom in funding and in association, though the NGO Directorate itself provides no funding. Furthermore, the law limits the state’s ability to monitor an NGO through auditing and deems any attempt to subvert an NGO, such as by shutting it down or restricting its funding, as an action that can be taken to court. At the same time, Iraqi civil society activists have contested the burdensome registration process.²⁷ In most interviews conducted with the heads of CSOs, activists complained of “routinized bureaucratic procedures” that they found to be cumbersome and time-consuming.



²⁵ Amy Hawthorne, “Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 1, 2004, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2004/03/01/middle-eastern-democracy-is-civil-society-answer-pub-1463>.

²⁶ For an English translation of the NGO law, see the translation provided by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL): Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Registration is the only way for an organization to be legally recognized as an NGO in Iraq, which is essential to its operation, particularly when interacting with potential donors or partners. The majority of CSO founders interviewed for this report stated that the main reason behind their decision to seek registration was the need “for official and legal legitimacy.” However, it is conceivable that an organization fitting the description of a CSO can exist, in theory, without being registered with the NGO Directorate. In other words, the NGO Directorate’s registry is a reflection of registered organizations, not necessarily all existing ones. According to the registry, organizations registered in Iraq are classified into the following categories: advocacy (i.e. women’s affairs, human rights, environmental affairs, and democracy); charity and humanitarian (i.e. children and orphans aid, humanitarian assistance, and special needs); cultural, research, and academic; development (i.e. public services, health, education, youth, and sustainable development); and hobby and professional (i.e. media, syndicates, etc.).

The most popular types of CSOs in Iraq are humanitarian (484 registered CSOs), cultural (412 registered CSOs), and human rights (375 registered CSOs). Nearly three-fourths of Iraqi CSOs are dedicated to charity, advocacy, or development work. In the south of Iraq, the empirical setting of this report and where protests have predominantly taken place, CSOs are organized along similar lines. These classifications pertain to official CSOs in the form of NGOs. However, the definition above encompasses non-registered organizations and gatherings, as well as social movements.²⁸

Although many of the leaders of the October Protest Movement have long participated and even overseen CSOs, it is inaccurate to conclude that these organizations formed the basis of the 2019 protest movement. During the October 2019 protests, these organizations played a more supportive function by offering training and logistical assistance to protestors. As the following sections argue, the October Protest Movement was a social movement that emerged spontaneously and pushed the boundaries of what constitutes civil society.

²⁸ Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*.

Social Movements and New Civil Society in Iraq

Social movements are informal mass movements seeking political, social, or cultural change.²⁹ In this sense, the October Protest Movement can be described as a social movement by the name of “Thawrat Tishreen,” or the “October Revolution.” Although by political science standards the October Protest Movement does not constitute a “revolution,” the name “October Revolution” has grown to represent an idea or a movement. As one Baghdad-based activist described, “Tishreen is a state of being. It is neither a place nor a time.”³⁰

Sidney Tarrow points out that social movements are inevitably political acts, an important point in the case of Iraq, where the insertion of social movements into political networks occurs in two ways.³¹ First, political parties have politicized the protest movement. One respondent described her time in the Turkish restaurant, a well-known locus of the October Revolution, as follows:

We entered the [Turkish] restaurant and we wanted to clean all the floors and we got a lot of donations. One of these donations, I felt like it was a politician wanting our support in the future. The other thing [to mention], every floor was controlled by one side. I went to either 10 or 11 or 13, I do not remember which floor, I remember [one group] controlled it. I started a conversation with them...then I realized a lot of politicized figures entered the protests.³²

The Sadrists were amongst the most noticeable political group in the protest squares,³³ but many protestors spoke of overtures made by other political actors. Protestors spurned some of these attempts, such as the visit of Speaker of the Council of Representatives Mohammad

²⁹ Tilly, *Social Movements*.

³⁰ Author interview with female activist from Baghdad.

³¹ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³² Author interview with female activist from Baghdad.

³³ For more on the role of the Sadrists, see: Muhammad Al-Waeli, “The Future of the Protest Movement in Iraq,” *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, February 5, 2020, <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2020/02/05/the-future-of-the-protest-movement-in-iraq/>; Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, Mac Skelton, and Zmkan Ali Saleem, “Why Iraq’s Protesters Won’t Go Home: 10 Voices from the Movement,” *Middle East Centre*, March 3, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/03/03/why-iraqs-protesters-wont-go-home-10-voices-from-the-movement/>.

Al-Halbousi to Al-Nisour square,³⁴ which protestors criticized as “show-business”³⁵ and a “childish media appearance.”³⁶ Overtures by current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi were met with less criticism, but also raised concerns for some activists. This trend continued with the visit of the head of the National Security Agency Abd Al-Ghani Al-Asadi to protestors in Najaf in October 2020, which some activists condemned as a publicity stunt.³⁷

Second, on the anniversary of the protest movement in October 2020, many of the elite activists turned to the formation of political parties after being galvanized by al-Kadhimi’s proposed date for early federal elections in June 2021.³⁸ In interviews conducted for this report, activists who were uninterested in creating and joining parties expressed a desire to back protest-based political parties, support free and fair elections as volunteers, and vote and encourage others to vote.

Perhaps the greatest signal of political change as a result of the October Protest Movement is the transformation of some of the boycotters into voters. In May 2018, many Iraqis chose to boycott the federal elections, resulting in both a historic low voter turnout³⁹ and the formation of a government they later chose to protest. While the boycott movement spread widely in 2018, activists interviewed for this report were split unevenly between those who had boycotted and those who had voted for smaller civil parties that did not make it to the Council of Representatives. Although the interviewee sample for this report neither represents the protest movement nor the Iraqi public, the sentiments expressed by those interviewed reflect the points of view of a particular set of elite Iraqi activists who have a sophisticated understanding of democracy. This view recognizes that “Iraqis have a paper in their hands [voting] that other people in the region lack. They should invest in it.”⁴⁰

³⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rU9txDpCliA>.

³⁵ Author interview with male activist from Nasriya.

³⁶ Author interview with male activist from Najaf.

³⁷ Government of Iraq, *Iraq’s Parliament Approves Government Programme*, May 7, 2020, <https://gds.gov.iq/iraqs-parliament-approves-government-programme/>.

³⁸ See: <https://twitter.com/IraqiGovt/status/1289517609889591299?s=20>.

³⁹ Renad Mansour and Christine Van den Toorn, “The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?” *Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics*, July 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/03/the-2018-iraqi-federal-elections-a-population-in-transition/>.

⁴⁰ Author interview with male activist from Nasriya.

The “Tansiqiyat” and the Role of Civil Society in the Protests

“The slogans and the values that they [CSOs] raised over years...people in Iraq make fun and accuse them of being all talk [and no action]...but these slogans became basic values with people.” – female activist, Baghdad.

The October Protest Movement was centered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square with significant nodes in Nasriya, Najaf, and Basra. Protests then spread to other southern governorates, including Babil, Diwaniya, Karbala, and Maysan. Activists traveled between the governorates throughout the protests, with those from the south regularly visiting Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Although demonstrations erupted across the country, the media focused its coverage on Tahrir Square in Baghdad and Habubi Square in Nasriya, Thi Qar, as these two cities witnessed disproportionate levels of violence and government-backed repression compared to other governorates. Activists also described the protest movement as having a veneer of spontaneity, but of being otherwise organized in two ways: first, the October Protest Movement is a culmination of years of activism; second, activists relied on existing networks of communication between elite civil society activists.

Although many activists described the participation of NGOs in the protests as minimal, many pointed to a hidden role of traditional civil society in the October Protest Movement. They explained that CSOs introduced basic values, such as freedom of speech and women’s rights, to Iraqi society. “Even if our reality is terrible, people have started interacting with these values that these organizations have for years worked on via training and workshops,” activists described.⁴¹

These activists highlighted in particular the impact of capacity building workshops offered by CSOs, which cultivated skills of activism among the new generation in recent years. However, other protestors criticized NGOs for remaining largely uninvolved in the protest movement, accusing some of issuing only statements out of fear of retribution due to their reliance on the state. In particular, activists in Basra explained that government criticism of CSO participation in the 2018 protests in the governorate deters NGOs from further participation in demonstrations. The state could make access to funding difficult for a CSO by revoking its registration, thereby stripping the CSO of its legal status. Most activists interviewed for this

⁴¹ Author interview with female activist from Baghdad.

report maintained ties to an NGO, including as leading members or founders. They emphasized that CSOs felt exposed due to their registration with the NGO Directorate:

Local organizations in Basra mostly distanced themselves from protests because they were worried about their interests. In 2018, some organizations supported protests and they were accused of being foreign agents. “In my opinion, I did not see any role for them in the [October] protests.⁴²”

Activists also described their dissatisfaction with the role of international organizations in supporting the protest movement. Much of their criticism was directed at the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and at its Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert. Activists accused UNAMI of prioritizing mediation over justice. “We used to get killed in front of international organizations and their speech was very weak. The tear gas canisters were going through our heads, and they weakly criticized. Their speech should have been more serious,” an activist described.⁴³ The only international organization that routinely received praise from activists was Amnesty International, whose reports on the protest movement were cited by nearly every protestor interviewed for this report, despite the detailed reports later released by UNAMI.⁴⁴

As stated above, traditional civil society, whether local or international, played a minimal role in the October Protest Movement. Despite their positive contributions to Iraqi society, traditional civil society groups were not at the forefront of the protests. Instead, the October Protest Movement has elucidated the emergence of new mass movements and activist

⁴² Author interview with female activist from Basra.

⁴³ Author interview with male activist from Basra.

⁴⁴ UNAMI reports and statements on the protests: “United Nations Iraq - UN: Accountability for Human Rights Violations during Peaceful Protests Is Key,” *United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq*, August 27, 2020, http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=12778:un-accountability-for-human-rights-violations-during-peaceful-protests-is-key&Itemid=605&lang=en; “United Nations Iraq - UNAMI Condemns Killings of Activists in Basra, Urges Stepped up Efforts to Ensure Accountability,” *United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq*, August 20, 2020, http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=12730:unami-condemns-killings-of-activists-in-basra,-urges-stepped-up-efforts-to-ensure-accountability&Itemid=605&lang=en; “United Nations Iraq - UN Representative Hennis-Plasschaert Deplores Use of Hunting Guns, Renews Call for Protection of Demonstrators,” *United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq*, February 17, 2020, http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=11855:un-representative-hennis-plasschaert-deplores-use-of-hunting-guns,-renews-call-for-protection-of-demonstrators&Itemid=605&lang=en; “United Nations Iraq - UN Strongly Condemns Attacks by Armed Entities on Peaceful Protesters,” *United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq*, December 7, 2019, http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=11610:un-strongly-condemns-attacks-by-armed-entities-on-peaceful-protesters&Itemid=605&lang=en.

networks that are distinct from NGOs, which constitute the classic form of what is considered Iraqi civil society. This new form of civil society is represented by different collectives, including, but not limited to, elite activist networks, protest-tent groupings, and governorate-level organizations. This report uses the term “*tansiqiyya*” (plural: *tansiqiyyat*) to define these collectives, which roughly translates into “coordination unit(s).” Critically, these *tansiqiyyat* formed in late October and early November 2019 and did not create the protest movement, but were rather strengthened and emboldened by it.



ALi Dab Dab

The *tansiqiyyat* of the October 2019 protests facilitated the development and deepening of friendships amongst activists across governorates. Moreover, the shared trauma of losing friends to fatal injuries caused by police deployment of tear gas canisters, kidnappings, and targeted killings has strengthened the ties of the activist class. In interviews, many activists explained that the protests of October 2019 were spontaneous and uncoordinated, save for the designation of dates for demonstrations. The mass participation and the escalation in size was neither organized nor expected. In fact, veteran activists who had participated in protests in 2011, 2015, and 2018 at times described their surprise at the historic participant turnout. Some even expressed concern that they would not be able to recreate the scope

and size of the October Protest Movement, which proved to be a valid concern as the number of protestors in October 2020 was lower than anticipated.⁴⁵

Soon enough, the lack of centralized leadership in the October 2019 protests became apparent. Many elite activists interviewed for this report bemoaned the lack of central leadership and unified demands, stating that sometimes the squares “contradicted each other” because “the demands were all over the place.”⁴⁶ Some of this confusion stemmed from the geographic spread of the squares. Certain squares, like those in Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, and Nasriya, were considered more important, while others in Karbala or Diwaniya were almost forgotten, which “created miscommunication” and was “nearly a point of weakness for the protests,” according to some activists.⁴⁷

Throughout the protests, activists organized the demonstrations and dispersed information through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter. However, increased violence and targeted assassinations has made private communication and coordination amongst activists more difficult. Some activists interviewed for this report fled their home governorates and traveled to neighboring ones. Others who had more resources traveled further, including to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) or abroad. They expressed concern over the current security situation in which armed groups continue to target them for their participation in the demonstrations. Most respondents have received threats and operate cautiously, which can restrict their participation in upcoming elections and protests. Despite these challenges, the October Protest Movement produced a new type of associational life: that of the *tansiqiyyat*. It is these groups that will potentially organize future protests and whose members will run for office in upcoming elections.

⁴⁵ “Iraq opens Tahrir Square, epicentre of revolt in Baghdad,” *Agence France-Presse*, October 31, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201031-iraq-reopens-tahrir-square-epicentre-of-revolt-in-baghdad>.

⁴⁶ Author interview with male activist from Baghdad.

⁴⁷ Author interview with female activist from Baghdad.

The Regional Distribution of the Tansiqiyyat

“It [the protest movement] was spontaneous on October 1, there was no coordination, coordination began after October 25. Coordination happened because of the protests.” – male activist, Basra.

Although the term *tansiqiyyat* can refer to various types of protestor groupings, it commonly refers to those at the city level. As previously mentioned, the protest squares and the *tansiqiyyat* of Baghdad and Basra represented the central protest nodes and the leading activist class. Basra has long been the seed of protest movements in Iraq given the proclivity of Iraqis in the governorate to erupt in grievance-based demonstrations every summer over the lack of basic services, such as water and electricity that are exacerbated by high temperatures. However, in October 2019, Tahrir Square in Baghdad was the focal point of the protest movement and the square that civil activists from other governorates visited most often. These visits created networks, transported ideas and material resources, and fostered friendships among protesting classes.

In the October Protest Movement, Nasriya also served as a central protest node and was distinguished from other protest sites for its ties to Tahrir Square in Baghdad as well as, its social affinity to the smaller squares of the south, influencing and communicating with those in areas like Amara, Diwaniya, Hilla, and Karbala. Najaf is distinguished for its proximity to the religious establishment and for the willingness of its activist class to seek their support. In fact, most activists interviewed for this report, particularly those from Najaf, highlighted the importance of the Friday sermons in the protest movement and the degree to which civil society activists sought mediation and support from religious leaders. Although many activists expressed that they had little interest in Friday sermons prior to the protests, they equally described a sudden commitment to listen to them after the protests began. Civil activists from Najaf, more so than those in other governorates, maintained ties to the religious establishment and understood how to effectively coordinate and communicate with religious leaders throughout the demonstrations.

The distribution of mass demonstrations led by civil society activists in the October Protest Movement indicates that the core group of activists were predominantly based in Baghdad and Basra, with strong relationships to those in Nasriya and elsewhere in the south. What further distinguished Nasriya and Najaf from other protest nodes was the large number of

demonstrators who populated the cities' squares. Additionally, the October Protest Movement slightly differed in scope and geographic concentration from previous movements due to the shift in a central protest node of the south from Basra to Nasriya, due mainly to Nasriya's rich history of political activity.

The geographic spread of the *tansiqiyyat* reveals the development of an activist class in areas with a strong traditional civil society: Baghdad, Basra, and Najaf. At the same time, large masses of demonstrators emerged in areas with longstanding economic and political grievances. Elite activists formed networks across the south post-hoc, but old networks only existed among those who were members of traditional civil society, and who attended workshops, conferences, and trainings together. These were the activists who articulated the demands of the October 2019 protest movement.

The Evolving Objectives of the Protest Movement

“After the violence and repression, we added justice for the protestors, preventing foreign intervention, keeping arms to the state. We now want to release those who have disappeared and have been arrested. The only thing we saw is early elections, this is the only thing we saw [accomplished]. The other things have not been accomplished.” – female activist, Najaf.

In the nascent stages of the protest movement in early September 2019, the demands of protestors mirrored those of previous movements, which called for the provision of basic services and greater employment opportunities. By October 25, 2019, protest demands were streamlined into a roadmap that called for legislative reform of Iraq's electoral law, specifically the division of governorates into smaller electoral districts or voting constituencies; legislative reform of Iraq's law of political parties to prevent parties from running on unified lists and instead allow Iraqis to elect individual lawmakers; and early, free, and fair elections. The demands grew and evolved in the months that followed as a result of unprecedented violence and government repression of protests, which led to greater coordination and more unified demands among protestors.

Today, these demands have been overshadowed by a more pressing issue: seeking justice for protestors who were killed in 2019 and 2020 and releasing protestors who remain in arbitrary and unlawful detention for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. In addition, activists have emphasized the need to

preserve the state monopoly on preventing violence and diminish the authority of armed groups who continue to carry out abuses with impunity.

With the exception of the proposed date for early elections in June 2021,⁴⁸ activists are dissatisfied with the performance of al-Kadhimi's government, describing it as a "government of obstacles and not reform."⁴⁹ Despite their criticism of al-Kadhimi's performance,⁵⁰ the majority of activists interviewed for this report expressed a willingness to give him a chance to implement early elections on the conditions that the government conducts free and fair elections with international oversight, implements a new electoral law, and seeks justice for those who were killed.⁵¹ The protestors' participation in these elections will occur through voting, mobilizing others to vote, supporting individual candidates, and forming protestor political parties, though the formation of these parties are still in their nascent stages due to delays caused by security concerns.

In an interview with Iraqi State Television, al-Kadhimi claimed that the government had completed its investigation of the killing of 560 protestors, in addition to prominent civil activists and the security analyst Husham Alhashimi, and that he is waiting for the appropriate time to release the findings of the investigation.⁵² Al-Kadhimi previously promised that a committee of nonpartisan judges would lead the investigation, stating that patience and time were required to uncover the truth. In a statement detailing al-Kadhimi's new government program, the government states that his program "underscores the government's commitment to protect the right to peaceful protest" and to "pursue and hold accountable law breakers."⁵³ Despite these commitments, al-Kadhimi has yet to publicly disclose the findings of the investigation, either because he is waiting closer to the election date for political goals, or he simply does not have the political capital to hold the perpetrators accountable.

⁴⁸ The prime minister can only propose a date for early elections, which has to be ratified by the Council of Representatives.

⁴⁹ Author interview with female activist from Baghdad.

⁵⁰ Marsin Alshamary, "Six months into his premiership, what has Mustafa al-Kadhimi done for Iraq?" *Order from Chaos, The Brookings Institution*, November 13, 2020.

⁵¹ Author interview with female activist from Najaf.

⁵² The interview can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=or5VSLr_1rs.

⁵³ Government of Iraq, *Iraq's Parliament Approves Government Programme*, May 7, 2020, <https://gds.gov.iq/iraqs-parliament-approves-government-programme/>.

While having been in office for six months, pressure on al-Kadhimi continues to mount.⁵⁴ On the other hand, many activists expressed approval of Iraqi President Barham Salih, who has been in office since October 2018. In particular, activists praised him for blocking certain unpopular prime minister designate candidates, including Basra's current governor, Asaad Al-Eidani. Other activists, however, described President Salih's role as limited by the position he holds or designed to preserve his own political standing.

Activists and Political Involvement

“That we refused to participate in the political process...this was the biggest mistake of the protestors. Our system is democratic, even if we have elections that are not clean...the elections are what rules. Tomorrow if we go to [the] Green Zone and burn it, we still cannot get rid of the sovereignty of elections and the government. The biggest mistake is that we did not get involved in politics. It was a radical thought, it was really wrong.” – male activist, Basra.

The disaggregation of political participation into direct and indirect political activism helps understand the extent to which activist networks and new types of civil society are willing to get involved in political life, despite their dissatisfaction with most members of the political elite. When interviewed about their willingness to help existing political parties reform their agendas, activists consistently refused to cooperate with these groups, oftentimes citing their 17 years of perceived failure.⁵⁵ Some protestors describe overtures made to them by the current political elite, including al-Kadhimi. Although some protestors described a willingness to meet with the Prime Minister, their overall rhetoric during the protest movement denounced these figures. Interestingly enough, officials who were involved in attempts to form a government after Prime Minister Adil Abd Al-Mahdi's resignation said that during their meetings with prominent protest figures, some protestors were willing to accept, and later obtained, employment with the new government.⁵⁶

Some protestors view Iraqi political parties in two prisms:

There are two types of political parties in Iraq: loyalist, armed, Iranian-backed parties with money. They are corrupt...The other side is moderate...they are not completely one hundred

⁵⁴ Ali Al-Mawlawi, “Can the White Paper Deliver on Economic Reform?” *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, October 14, 2020, <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2020/10/14/can-the-white-paper-deliver-on-economic-reform/>.

⁵⁵ Author interview with male activist from Basra.

⁵⁶ Inside Iraqi Politics, “A Prime Minister From the Shadows,” *Inside Iraqi Politics*, September 24, 2020.

percent clean, they are somewhat corrupt, but they tried to build a state...for example, al-Kadhimi's current government, [Haider Al-Abadi's] Nasr Coalition, Faiq al-Shaikh Ali...these represent the other side, the state building side. One side supports the state, the other side does not support the state. I would help the first group.⁵⁷

Activists rejected both types of political parties and instead expressed a willingness to work for the government. In interviews conducted for this report, activists seemed eager to accept another hypothetical role: advising the government on electoral law reform, a core demand of the October Protest Movement. While protestors reject the current prominent political parties, they are much more pragmatic about their interaction with the Iraqi government overall.

In addition, nearly all activists expressed not only a willingness but also an eagerness to vote in the next elections. This includes protestors who boycotted the 2018 elections because they doubted its validity and were dissatisfied with their choice of candidates. When interviewed about their participation in the next elections, activists stated that the sacrifices made during the October 2019 protests were reason enough to cast a vote in the upcoming elections. As a female protestor from Baghdad stated, "We gave our friends, our blood, we cannot sit at home. I will certainly participate—because why did I do all of this?"

At the same time, some activists warily explained that they were involved in the formation of protest-based political parties, but that these parties' members feared for their lives given the reprisals taken by paramilitary groups and security forces against activists. "How can we feel safe to market our new political parties with these armed groups roaming? Amidst all this killing and threatening and kidnapping?" an activist from Baghdad stated.⁵⁸

The willingness of activists to engage in politics reveals that the elite activist class seeks to reform the political system, rather than to overthrow it completely.⁵⁹ The struggle between calls for reform and calls for revolution is reflected in the current divisions among protestors. Those who identify with the revolutionary activist class plan to continue protesting in the squares under the classic Arab Spring slogan of "the people want to topple the regime," while

⁵⁷ Author interview with male activist in Najaf.

⁵⁸ Author interview with male activist from Baghdad.

⁵⁹ Marsin Alshamary, "Analysis: Iraqi Protesters Will Likely Push Forward Despite Violence," *The World from Public Radio International*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-02-07/analysis-iraqi-protestors-will-likely-push-forward-despite-violence>.

others who identify with the reformist activist class plan to participate in early elections. This incongruity in visions for change among demonstrators is one of the challenges that the protest movement faces as they seek to harness political change in future demonstrations.



Future Challenges

In addition to the division of the Iraqi protest class between the revolutionaries and the reformists, there are two other challenges that Iraqi protestors must address. First, the deteriorating security situation as a result of government-backed repression of protests poses challenges for future demonstrations. Second, Iraqi protestors must determine how to effectively enter the political arena to seek change. On the one hand, the law on political parties makes it difficult for protestors to form political parties.⁶⁰ As one protestor stated, political parties require monetary support and seek benefactors, including wealthy individuals, international organizations, and foreign governments.⁶¹ Some of the activists interviewed for

⁶⁰ Lina Musawi, "How the Iraqi Parties Law Enables Electoral Corruption," *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, August 11, 2020, <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2020/08/11/how-the-iraqi-parties-law-enables-electoral-corruption/>.

⁶¹ Author interview with male activist from Nasriya.

this report explained that the process to enter the political establishment will take years, if not decades, and will involve winning more seats over time in the Council of Representatives.

However, protestors should recognize that running for office is not the only way to invest the social and human capital of the October Revolution. Rather, protestors should consider their ability to influence politics through lobbying and other means. The protest movement has revealed that activists now think of the protests as a means of accountability similar to that of elections. At the same time, civil society leaders recognize that protests are a unique opportunity that should be harnessed for political change.

Accordingly, this report recommends that protestors consider other forms of political activity. For example, protestors can work on improving Iraq's policy institutions, think tanks, and media outlets. Many protestors complained that Iraqi media is biased. "There is no clear and honest media in Iraq. It is either loyalist, leaning towards the East like Ghadeer and Afaq. Or it leans to the West, like Al-Hurra," one activist described.⁶² Like political parties, media establishments and think tanks also require financing, and all three are necessary components of a healthy democracy.

The policy recommendations for the government are clear. First and foremost, government authorities need to provide better security for activists in order to protect them from targeted assassinations and other human rights violations committed by security forces and paramilitary groups. Al-Kadhimi has repeatedly emphasized the need to bring all arms under the control of the state and has even attempted to reign in some paramilitary groups.⁶³ Second, the Iraqi government should be transparent about the result of electoral reforms, including the division of Iraq into smaller electoral districts, and the process through which these reforms can be achieved. To achieve this goal, the government and international organizations can support traditional civil society in continuing efforts at capacity building and holding public awareness workshops to increase public political literacy. Additionally, in order to encourage electoral participation and assuage fears of electoral meddling, the government should involve activists in discussions of electoral reform. Further research is required to explore the details of how to accomplish these goals.

⁶² Author interview with male protestor from Basra.

⁶³ Tamer Badawi, "Kadhimi's Push Against Iran-Supported Paramilitaries," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 16, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82716>.

Conclusion

This report has shed light on several understudied and underspecified aspects of the October Protest Movement, particularly as it relates to civil society. In conceptualizing civil society in contemporary Iraq, it is useful to distinguish between traditional associational life—professional syndicates, cultural organizations, and charities, among others—and networks of activists united by shared values. Moreover, it is important to recognize that new civil society—encapsulated by the *tansiqiyyat*—is largely engendered by classic civil society. On the surface, traditional civil society played a minimal role in the protest movement. Instead, a new protest class of civil activists, deemed the reformist class, played a much more prominent role. The reformist protest group, composed of the elite activist class who are members of civil society and who have a history of participation in protest, are the visible leaders of the protest movement who are reform-oriented and not in search of revolution. However, this new class of civil activists were trained and empowered by classic organizations. In this way, the old protesting class has crafted the new one.

The new class of reformist activists are distinguished by their pragmatism, their willingness to work within the political system in order to reform it, and their commitment to democratization. These activists have expressed an interest in forming political parties and participating in early elections.⁶⁴ However, they are hindered from doing so by the deteriorating security situation, in which civil society activists are increasingly being intimidated, harassed, and even assassinated by paramilitary groups. In order for these activists to direct their energies towards political activity, they need protection and security reassurances from the government and accountability for crimes committed.

At the same time, the protest movement includes a large base of popular demonstrators who demand revolution and regime change and who lack the training and rhetoric of the professionalized advocate class. In October 2020, when the protests were expected to resume on the one-year anniversary of the October 2019 protests, it became clear that this latter group had diminished in size, perhaps because the activist class has turned its attention towards political activity. Regardless, the demands of protestors—whether reformist or

⁶⁴ Raghad Kasim, “Renewed calls for demonstrations on October 25 in Iraq come with hurdles,” *Atlantic Council*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/renewed-calls-for-demonstrations-on-october-25-in-iraq-come-with-hurdles/>.

revolutionary—have been shaped and will continue to be shaped by the response of the state.

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