



Running Out of Options: Why Iraq's Elite Fails to Address Protest Demands

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Introduction

Baghdad after 2003 is often described as a city of two worlds. Following the U.S.-led invasion, Iraqi leaders – many returning after decades of exile – formed a new government. They did so while settling in what became known as the “Green Zone”, a 10-square-kilometer area that was isolated from the rest of Baghdad and most of Iraqi society. Leaders rarely ventured out to the “Red Zone,” the neighborhoods and streets of Baghdad, where basic services such as water and electricity continuously failed.

During the past seventeen years since 2003, Iraqis have repeatedly protested their exclusion from Iraq's political settlement – a settlement benefitting a narrow circle of political party bosses and their patronage networks. Protests have come in various forms. Faleh Jabar argues that the 2015-16 protest movement focused largely on demands for employment as well as basic services such as water and electricity.¹ The demonstrations that erupted in October 2019, however, became identified as a revolution because they drew upon a much broader cross-section of Iraqi society and called for the downfall of the political system. These latest protests featured a young and largely unemployed generation of Iraqis left out of the post-2003 political-economic system.

The way in which Iraq's political elites have engaged and responded to protests has also varied with each successive wave of demonstrations. In the past, Iraqi leaders quelled protests –albeit temporarily – by offering jobs, employing ideological symbols, and using calculated violence and intimidation. However, beginning in Basra in 2018 and Baghdad and southern Iraq after October 2019, leaders no longer had the financial means nor public buy-in to rely on economic incentives and ideological levers, and thus they began resorting primarily to violence. Overt, systematic violence against protesters ushered Iraq into a new chapter of state-society relations, leading many to refer to events from October as their revolution.

At the root of today's protests is a fundamental conflict between Iraq's elite and the majority of the population. Most often leaders – even those claiming to understand the protesters – offer nothing more than a paternalistic critique of protests. They argue that protests simply want jobs and, accordingly, can be bought off. Some have claimed in private conversations that today's protests are “a footnote” in the history of Iraq, and will quickly pass. Others point to the inability of protesters to form coherent principles as political amateurism. At the root of this problem is a friction difficult to overcome: the elite operates under a logic of party-based power-sharing to maintain the political

¹ Faleh Jabar, *The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics*, LSE Middle East Center Paper Series (25), 11 June 2018: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/>

system and grassroots protesters are unwilling to play by this logic and instead demand a new political system entirely.

A major victory for protesters came with the resignation of prime minister Adel Abd al-Mehdi. In his place, prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi promised to represent the demands of protesters. Kadhimi has brought onto his team several members of the civil society and what one might call 'influencers' within protestor networks. However, he too has been unable to move the government away from the use of violence – as the government is itself fragmented into myriad security forces with divergent command structures and agendas. During Kadhimi's tenure, despite his protest, Iraq's security forces have continued to kill, arrest, and threaten protesters.²

This piece analyses past and present elite responses to protests for insight into how Kadhimi can forge a better path ahead. It argues that the situation is not ripe for incremental reform, and that any real change would require Kadhimi to take a radical shift against the vested interests of the elite in the Iraqi state.

How Iraqi leaders dealt with past protests

Since 2003, the political elite has responded to demonstrations by relying on a mix of power levers – coercive, economic, and ideological.³ The party leaders have projected their capacity for coercive power through targeted assassinations, intimidation, arrests, and intelligence-gathering. They have demonstrated economic power through the extension of public sector jobs and services in exchange for support. And they have relied on ideological levers of control by employing a mixture of ethnic and sectarian identity politics, as well as democratic symbols, anti-Ba'athism, anti-corruption, and Iraqi nationalism. The underlying aim of this mixture of responses has never been to address the root causes that led to protests, but rather to limit and ultimately silence popular mobilization.

The example of 2011 is telling. As uprisings linked to the Arab Spring erupted throughout the Middle East region, protests also erupted in Baghdad and southern Iraq. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki quickly subdued and repressed these demonstrations by relying on the mix of economic, ideological and coercive measures. This response led to the temporary dissipation of the protests.

Economically, he promised to increase the government's monthly food rations by approximately \$12 per capita. He also offered more public sector employment, which rapidly increased during his second-term. At the beginning of Maliki's premiership,

² France 24 (Arabic), 27 July 2020: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20200727--مقتل-متظاهرين-اثنين-اثر-مواجهات-بين-محتجين-وقوات-مكافحة-الشغب-في-ساحة-التحرير-وسط-بغداد>

³ See Hazem Kandil's framework of social and institutional power. Hazem Kandil, *The Power Triangle: Military Security, and Politics in Regime Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

public sector employment made up 18 percent of state expenditure, but by the end of his reign, that number had risen to 27 percent.⁴

Ideologically, Maliki who had previously moved towards a rule of law nationalist discourse, returned to the sectarian discourse⁵ that emphasized anti-Ba'athism in order to create an external threat ominous enough to bring together the Shia population in Basra.⁶

Finally, Maliki deployed coercion. Tens of protesters were killed and scores wounded during the demonstrations. He employed a vast intelligence apparatus to intimate civil society activists, compelling many to flee to the Kurdistan Region or neighboring countries.⁷ The usage of violence was particularly pronounced in the Sunni Arab-majority areas, where Maliki sent his forces to violently suppress the 2011 *al-Harak al-Shaabi* protests. This suppression, based on Shia supremacy and a refusal to economically accommodate protests in these Sunni areas, helped fuel the ISIS insurgency and the eventual declaration of a Caliphate in Mosul.

This same toolbox – a mixture of violence, ideological appeals, and the extension of patronage – was subsequently employed by the Haider al-Abadi government in the 2015-2016 protests.⁸ In both cases, the state and ruling parties managed to consolidate control and quiet down protests.

How the elite reacted to the October 2019 protests

In the context of the 2019-2020 demonstrations, the toolbox of responses has been significantly reduced. With the economy collapsing under the global depression of oil prices, the political elite no longer has the access to cash necessary to expand public sector jobs to any meaningful degree. To prevent unemployment from rising beyond the current total of 3 million, the government would need to generate hundreds of thousands of new jobs annually across the public or private sectors.⁹ With private sector growth negligible, currently the actual job growth number does not exceed

⁴ *Iraq Economic Monitor, Spring 2018: From War to Reconstruction and Economic Recovery*, The World Bank, 19 April 2018: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/771451524124058858/pdf/125406-WP-PUBLIC-P163016-Iraq-Economic-Monitor-text-Spring-2018-4-18-18web.pdf>

⁵ Fanar Haddad, *Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 January 2016: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>

⁶ Al-Maliki Announces the Arrest of Hundreds of Baathists, Al-Jazeera (Arabic), 29 October 2011: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2011/10/29/الملكى-يعلن-اعتقال-مئات-البعثيين>

⁷ Al-Mada Paper (Arabic), 1 November 2011: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=56700>

⁸ For more on the 2015-16 protest movement, see Jabar 2018

⁹ Von Der Goltz et al, *Jobs in Iraq: A Primer on Job Creation in the Short-Term*, The World Bank, 15 June 2018: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/255111529495871846/Jobs-in-Iraq-A-Primer-on-Job-Creation-in-the-Short-Term>

50,000 jobs per year.¹⁰ Over the next 5 years, there will be more unemployed people than those receiving payments from the public sector¹¹. Youth unemployment is at 50 percent.

Likewise, years of failed governance and the erosion of public trust have rendered this same political elite ideologically bankrupt in the eyes of the public. Shia leaders cannot hide behind rhetorical appeals to Shiism, anti-Baathism, or democratization without confronting widespread public skepticism. The political party-dominated media outlets have pushed the narrative that demonstrators are backed by foreign powers seeking to undermine the state. Yet, participation in Iraq's protests has come from across the social spectrum, including people who were part of the bureaucracy of the state. Moreover, 17 years after the 2003 invasion, the new generation have only known an Iraq run by the Green Zone elite.

In general, the political elite no longer enjoys widespread public buy-in and cannot simply resort to ideological appeals to sect. In a series of surveys conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in central and southern Iraq, the data revealed that Iraqis had moved away from sectarian forms of political identity. From March 2014 to April 2018, the number of Iraqis preferring a party that represented multiple ethnicities and sects increased by 32 percent.¹²

With economic and ideological levers of power removed, the political elite has increasingly relied almost entirely upon coercion. Many protesters in the Shia-majority south were stunned that their own political leaders and co-religionists were willing to use live rounds against them in full view of the regional and global media. The use of large-scale violence set a precedent in Baghdad and the south – a practice that many protesters believe cannot be reversed. Leaders have targeted their own base, with teargas canisters aimed deliberately to maim and kill and snipers targeting protesters with hunting rifles. Over 600 died in the violent crackdown, with an additional 30,000 wounded.¹³ The ruling elite has relied upon anti-terrorism laws to incarcerate hundreds of demonstrators as well as curfews and internet blackouts to prevent protesters from organizing.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid and comments from a senior official of the Iraqi Ministry of Finance.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *NDI Poll: Parliamentary Elections: A New Turning Point for Iraq, February-April 2018*, NDI, 12 July 2018: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Poll%20-%20Feb-April%202018%20%28English%29.pdf>

¹³ *Iraq: Protest Death Toll Surges as Security Forces Resume Brutal Repression*, Amnesty International, 23 January 2020: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iraq-protest-death-toll-surges-as-security-forces-resume-brutal-repression/>

¹⁴ Omar Sirri and Renad Mansour, *Surviving on Violence: Iraq's Political Elite*, Mada Masr, 10 November 2019: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2019/11/10/opinion/u/surviving-on-violence-iraqs-political-elite/>

The party leaders hope that a silent majority, the millions of Iraqis who have not yet joined the protests and continue to benefit from the public purse, ultimately do not want to see a collapse in the political system. Their violent response is premised on dealing with the dissent of a small section of disaffected youth. However, a Chatham House Iraq Initiative public survey shows that a majority of respondents across the country remains sympathetic with protesters. Of the over 1000 respondents, 28 percent claimed that *all* protests are justified and another 60 percent claimed that *most* protests are justified with a small number of spoilers. Only two percent of the population believes that all protesters are spoilers.¹⁵

Many in the ruling elite, however, perceive the problem as primarily being a security one and so their response has focused on state control of the public space and discourse. The vast scale of the latest round of protests suggests that this silent majority may not be as large as the party bosses hoped.

Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Protest Trajectories

Unable to endure indefinitely, past protests in Iraq have taken different trajectories following the end of mass demonstrations. The sociological profile of the protesters and the elite's response to demonstrations influence the trajectory of the post-protest phase. Faleh Jabbar argues that the 2015-16 protests were essentially a middle class movement which gained political coherence and durability through the involvement of both the Sadrists and the Communist Party.¹⁶ Prime minister Haider al-Abadi responded to the demonstrations in a manner that legitimized the parties backing the movement, as the government promised reforms and employment. Accordingly, these parties swiftly converted this momentum into electoral gains with the creation of the al-Sairoon electoral coalition, which won the 2018 election.

Today the profile of protesters and the nature of the elite's response suggest a very different trajectory. The protests of 2019-2020 are comprised largely of unemployed, disaffected youth with no allegiance to a political party.¹⁷ Low oil prices and inflated government spending is pushing the state towards bankruptcy, meaning the elite is unable to pay for new jobs or even maintain the current bloated public sector. Iraq has

¹⁵ Survey Results are to be published as part of the Chatham House Iraq Initiative: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/middle-east-and-north-africa-programme/iraq-initiative>

¹⁶ Ibid - footnote 1.

¹⁷ Sajad Jiyad, Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar, Global Partners Governance, October 2020: <https://gpg-wp-media.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Economic-Drivers-of-Youth-Political-Discontent-in-Iraq-The-Voice-of-Young-People-in-Kurdistan-Baghdad-Basra-and-Thi-Qar.pdf>

the highest birth-rate in the region, meaning that more citizens are coming into the job market without the hope of public sector employment.¹⁸

For Mustafa al-Kadhimi, then, the key will be to devise a coherent strategy that can regain his government some measure of public buy-in. To do so, he will have to address the roots of the structural problems that sent protesters to the streets in the first place, rather than attempt to form a new party to co-opt a protest movement that is neither coherent in terms of leadership nor ideologically unified.

Kadhimi has attempted to win public support through pro-reform appeals and gestures. He has appointed advisors such as Kadhim al-Sahlani, who has in previous years been close to protesters. He has also used executive authority to appoint protestor allies in government positions. Behind the scenes, he has extended protection to activists in danger – a practice he began as the head of National Intelligence. Yet, he has also allowed the political parties that put him in power to continue their unaccountable politics and revenue generation, and violence against dissenters continues. In this way, Kadhimi has positioned himself as partly in both camps, but not completely in either.

This strategy has revealed a harsh reality: While some signs suggest Kadhimi hopes to build support for another term in the premiership, the political reality is that he can neither (1) win an election by gaining the public disenfranchised vote and increasing voter turnout nor (2) win the approval of the political parties to form another government. Neither side is completely satisfied with Kadhimi thus far. As such, it is unlikely that this government will remain in the same way following another government formation process.

With another term as premiere being exceedingly unlikely, the Kadhimi government should focus less on political survival and more on leveraging its remaining political capital in the year ahead. He should use public demands to articulate a clear and coherent reform agenda that tackles corruption across the board, rather than picking and choosing easy targets and allowing political allies to continue rent generation. This ambitious agenda would face immense pushback from the vested powers in the Iraqi state, and Kadhimi would have to resign to the fact that these parties will not accept him as prime minister again. But, this would represent a meaningful move

¹⁸ The World Bank estimated in 2017 that unemployment was around 34.6% (57.7% for females and 30.8% for males). Youth unemployment is 34.6%: 57.7% for females and 30.8% for males. Labor force participation of youth (ages 15-24) has dropped markedly, from 32.5% to 27.4%. *Annual population growth (%) Middle East and North Africa*, The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW?locations=ZQ>

towards structural reform with a recognition that the political system in Iraq is past the point of incremental fixes.

However, if the Kadhimi government is unwilling to pursue this type of more radical reform, or if re-election is indeed a primary objective, then at the very least the administration should protect protesters. This incremental approach – which to date has not succeeded in post-2003 Iraq – could serve as a band-aid to provide safety for activists and ensure a degree of free speech. It will not, however, reform Iraq's broken political system. It is up to Mustafa al-Kadhimi to decide whether he is willing to risk his career to attempt a new bold course, or whether he wants to maintain the current system with slight modifications in order to prolong the status quo.

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