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Iraqis Demand a Country

Zahra Ali *In: 292/3 (Fall/Winter 2019)*



Chanting “We want a country,” the youth-led protesters of Iraq are demanding nothing less than a new country as the uprising goes beyond narrowly defined political demands concerning electoral politics and legal reforms.

Iraq’s uprising began in early October 2019 when thousands of young men took to the streets of Baghdad. They were protesting the government dismissal of a popular army commander who had led the fight against ISIS—Iraq’s counterterrorism chief, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi—whose removal was widely seen to be at the behest of corrupt

politicians, possibly linked to Iran. The public outrage at al-Saadi's dismissal underlined the growing chasm between the people and the ruling political elite amidst ongoing anti-government protests over unemployment and dismal public services, which protesters linked to pervasive corruption and failed sectarian governance. In the following weeks, a spontaneous and leaderless protest movement quickly spread across the country, developing a strong presence in Iraq's Shi'i-dominated central and southern provinces, including cities such as Najaf, Karbala, Nasryia and Basra.



Demonstrators use a tuk-tuk to carry a wounded man during ongoing anti-government protests in Baghdad, November 4, 2019. Thayer Al-Sudani/Reuters

Initial demands for properly functioning state services—such as the supply of clean water and provision of electricity—and disgust with widespread corruption quickly led to more radical demands, such as an end to the sectarian political system and calls for a revolution. Protesters chanted the 2011 Arab uprising's familiar demand, "The people want the fall of the regime" but also added more Iraqi-based slogans such as "There is no homeland" and "We want a country."

The remarkable scale of millions of Iraqis rising up in largely peaceful protest across the country has been matched by remarkably violent repression: more than 500 people have been killed and more than 15,000 wounded by government and paramilitary groups using live ammunition, machine guns, stun grenades, anti-riot tanks and military-grade tear gas.

[1] The Iraqi government has also imposed media, Internet and telecommunication blackouts, as well as curfews. Many protesters have been threatened, intimidated, arrested, beaten up, kidnapped and even assassinated by security forces.

Despite the repression, protesters have remained committed to non-violent civil disobedience. The protests are led by the youth and the disenfranchised, including many women—aided by ubiquitous tuk-tuk taxi drivers from lower-class neighborhoods—but its ranks have also been joined by Iraqis from all backgrounds and regions across the country. Unions, syndicates and students of all levels have been on strike and many are calling for civil disobedience.

The unprecedented size and socio-economic diversity of the uprising indicates not only a widespread rebellion against toxic and unequal living conditions and corruption, as found in other regional uprisings, but also a rejection of the ethnosectarian political system—the *muhasasa* system—imposed on Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, which controls Iraq's growing oil-wealth surpluses. Chanting "We want a country," the youth-led protesters of Iraq are demanding nothing less than a new country as the uprising goes beyond narrowly defined political demands concerning electoral politics and legal reforms. The uprising also challenges dominant conservative societal norms and it is developing new codes of conduct and a new sense of belonging and inclusive community-building through collective action and organizing.

Demanding a Civic State

After suffering through the 2003 US invasion and the ensuing civil war, Iraq

has witnessed waves of popular civil and political protests since 2009 throughout the country. In addition to protests in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Sunni majority al-Anbar region exploded in massive protests in 2012–2013 against sectarian repression and exclusion, which were violently repressed by the former Prime Minister Nouri al-*Maliki's* government. It is only since 2015, however, that an unprecedented escalation of popular protests has mobilized a new generation of Iraqi youth and a much wider cross-section of its population across sect and class.

The 2015 Iraqi protests were launched by mostly young, educated men under 30 years of age from the lower middle class who are primarily educators, teachers or state employees. Starting in July 2015, their weekly Friday protests expanded from tens of thousands of protesters throughout the country to almost a million participants at their peak. The protesters denounced corruption and demanded a functioning welfare state for redistributing Iraq's extensive oil wealth to its citizens and improving its deficient public services. What was novel and important, however, was that protesters called out sectarianism through chanting slogans such as *Bis mil-din baguna al-haramiya* (In the name of religion we were robbed by looters) and advanced the desire for a social order based on *madaniyya* (which could be translated as civic mindedness) as the basis of their struggle. The concept of *madaniyya* expresses a fundamental rejection of the *muhasasa* system established in 2003 by the US occupation, which determines political representation based on communal identities (religious, ethnic or sectarian). The protests were expressed as patriotic with widespread flying of the Iraqi flag, and against all foreign influence, particularly that of Iran, in the country.

The 2015 protests were related to other initiatives and mobilizations mushrooming in Iraq at the time, especially among the youth who were experimenting with creative new forms of activism such as organizing a

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Valentine's Day celebration in Baghdad's downtown Tahrir Square to foster love and peacebuilding and the *Ana Iraqi Ana Aqraa* (I am Iraqi and I read) campaign that placed books on sidewalks and parks to promote a culture of reading. Many who launched these initiatives participated in the 2015 protests.

The core of the 2015 protesters grew up during the bloody sectarian civil war and in a country that lacks basic public infrastructure and where state institutions are structured by corruption and the nepotism of political parties. For this generation of protesters, the Islamist political elite, with its sectarianism and corruption, is responsible for the social and political crisis in the country. Thus, Islamism and identity-based political formation have been increasingly rejected. There is an important generational gap between the activists born in the late 1990s and the ones born earlier: The younger activists are more radical in their demand for change and their rejection of the political regime, elites and the system altogether. Expressions of a "Saddam nostalgia" are even noticeable among the generation who never experienced life under former dictator Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime.[2]

Rejecting the System in Basra

The leadership of the 2015 movement, however, belonged to the older generation—mainly men with former activist experience and affiliated with civil society or political organizations such as the Iraqi Communist Party.

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The Shi'i Islamist Sadrist movement also quickly appropriated the protests and forged an alliance with secular parties and individuals. This development turned the protest into a reformist movement that created an electoral list that ran in the 2018 elections. I conducted fieldwork during these protests, and interviewed several young activists who had initiated the protests in Baghdad and who later boycotted the election of 2018 due to a strong sense of betrayal by the Sadrists and the older activists who took leadership of their movement. The sociologist Ali Taher al-Hamoud argues convincingly that the 2015 protests were the protest of a middle class seeking to assert itself after decades of silence.[3] The end of the United Nations sanctions against Iraq in 2003 saw the re-emergence of this class that had been previously destroyed by the economic crisis and successive wars.

But the next wave of protests that erupted in 2018 in Basra—an oil-rich province from which most of Iraq's wealth is extracted but which suffers from a severe lack of public infrastructure and non-existent basic services—went further than those of 2015. Protesters refused formal leadership and avoided political parties and any centralized organization. They were largely composed of educated and non-educated young men whose demands went far beyond calling for *madaniyya* against the sectarian *muhassasa* to rejecting the entire political system and calling for a functioning state that could provide for all its people. It is from the Basra protests that the now commonly heard slogans such as “No, no to Political Parties” and “We want a homeland” began to circulate in Iraq.

Basra province represents an extreme version of Iraq's major socio-economic challenges that Omar Dewachi calls the “toxicity of everyday survival” and which includes a proliferation of cancers and ill-health in the absence of state infrastructure, health, education and other public services.[4] Basra is also where many economically distressed and war-displaced populations have resettled, creating tensions between locals and those newly arrived.[5] Basra's demonstrations developed into massive

protests of the poor and the dispossessed but with no centralized organization, which allowed security forces to repress it more easily. As an act of protest and an attempt to contain popular anger, Basra's provincial council voted to declare its autonomy from the central government. The council also rejected the government's blocking of the legal quota of \$5 per barrel of oil that should be provided to the province to enable it to build its infrastructure and services.[6]

From Protest to Revolution

The 2019 protests are following the Basra model in their form and demands. Wider than a lower middle class seeking to assert itself, this uprising is about the poor, the disempowered and the marginalized demanding a new system. Those who initiated the rebellion are still at its core—the street merchants, the underpaid waiters, those who carry heavy boxes in the markets and the tuk-tuk drivers who are literally the heroes of this uprising (carrying the wounded to the hospital and driving the protesters from one point to another to get around the roadblocks). Their ranks also include many young men who fought ISIS in Mosul and came back after the fight to grinding poverty and joblessness. These millennials and disenfranchised often claim that they have “nothing to lose” and that they would “prefer to die in Tahrir than from poverty and despair.”

The bloody repression of peaceful protests—more than 150 were killed and thousands wounded by live ammunition by mercenaries and security forces in the first week—has only exacerbated the protests and pushed more people into the street. As a result, the millennials and disenfranchised at the core of the movement have been joined by a much larger segment of the population, which includes the middle class, high school and university students and the professional and workers' unions. Demonstrations have been augmented by workers' strikes and civil disobedience against the curfew imposed by the authorities around the country.

Tahrir Square in Baghdad—the most visible locus of mass protest—and public squares of cities all over Iraq have been transformed into inclusive spaces ruled and managed by the population. In Baghdad, the abandoned building commonly called the Turkish Restaurant in front of Tahrir square is the rear base of the uprising and has been renamed Uhud Mountain in reference to the prophetic battle of Uhud between the early Muslims and their Qurayshi Meccan enemies. Although protesters differ on tactics and strategies—with some insisting on maintaining Tahrir and the streets around it as spaces liberated from corrupt and sectarian state powers while others try to cross the bridges that lead to the Green Zone where state power resides—protesters are developing new and creative modes of organizing.

This new uprising features revolutionary modes of action and expression that go beyond any previous protest movement in the country. Its inclusivity is unprecedented: from young women of all classes who feel safe and comfortable in these new spaces and participate in the uprising at all levels from the front line to cooking and providing medical care to the wounded, to the participation of differently able individuals, as well as those living in precarious and informal housing. Protesters are developing original ways to express a sense of belonging to the country and proposing creative modes of sociability that transgress social and political hierarchies. These new practices include the founding of a journal named Tuk-Tuk to celebrate the heroic role of tuk-tuk drivers and their leadership, a new radio channel, the distribution of free food, the establishment of a free medical and psychological unit and the offering of all kinds of free services (from drugs to hairdressing). The protesters are, in effect, establishing new state forms by organizing public services such as street cleaning and re-painting, as well as the restoration of public monuments and the beautification of public spaces through original art and design. They are not only demanding, but actually making a country.

Arrayed against this unprecedented protest and demand for a country are

the forces of the ruling elite's political system, which are leading the violence and repression. Iraq has no strong centralized state or regime, but rather a militarized elite that developed after 2003 and which became further normalized and armed since the war against ISIS in 2014. The authorities, paramilitary forces and militias connected to the political elite, backed by Iran, are those primarily responsible for killing, beating, threatening and intimidating demonstrators, civil society activists and journalists. Moreover, armed violence is not only the prerogative of paramilitary groups, militias or even the state. It is also widely practiced by the biggest social actor after the state—tribal leadership. The war against ISIS further increased the militarization of Iraqi society and the distribution of weapons: Soldiers are now back to civil life and weapons have been widely distributed beyond state security forces.

Beyond Issue Politics

The post-2003 ethnosectarian system of Iraqi elite politics that was established by the US-led occupation authorities has been dominated by what Nancy Fraser terms a “recognition” paradigm, in which ethnosectarian identity politics were imposed from the top and institutionalized.^[7] Previous Iraqi protest movements rejected this paradigm, instead advancing what Faleh Jabar calls “issue politics” dominated by a “redistribution” paradigm—most clearly illustrated by the fact that these protests, while national, were primarily intra-sectarian in which mainly Shi'i citizens were protesting against the Shi'i political elite.^[8]

The current uprising, however, goes beyond issue politics and economic redistribution, though those are central concerns. It is, more broadly, a revolt of Iraqi youth that has even reached Sunni areas of the country, in addition to its major presence in central and southern Iraq. Through grassroots, collective organizing and the production of new spaces in Tahrir square and elsewhere, young Iraqis are challenging dominant societal norms and hierarchies, including religious and gender norms. The widespread participation of young women in this uprising highlights how

the demand for economic redistribution is as central to the protesters as the demands for social freedom indicated by the slogan, "We want to live a life." This new Iraqi generation is connected to the outside world through social media and the Internet, and it does not share the traumas nor the symbolic social and religious limits of previous generations. It is a generation that is creating new imaginaries of belonging and new modes of civic and social life. It is demanding a country.

ENDNOTES

- [1] According to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights.
- [2] Marsin Alshamary, "Authoritarian Nostalgia Around Iraqi Youth: Roots and Repercussions," *War on the Rocks* (July 25, 2018).
- [3] Ali Taher al-Hamoud, "Beyond Basra's Events: Problems and Possible Solutions," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman (February 2019). [Arabic]
- [4] Omar Dewachi, "Toxicity of Life and Everyday Survival in Iraq," *Jadaliyya*, August 13, 2013; and Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford University Press, 2017).
- [5] Ali Taher al-Hamoud, "Sociology of Protest: Reading Civil Protest in Iraq After July 31, 2015," *International Political Magazine*.35-36 (2017), pp. 705–732. [Arabic]
- [6] Zahra Ali and Safaa Khalaf, "Southern Discontent Spurs an Iraqi Protest Movement," *Current History* 117/803 (2018), pp. 338–343.
- [7] Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 1/212 (1995).

[8] Faleh Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," *London School of Economics, Middle East Center Paper Series* (2018).

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