Violence and Protest in South Iraq

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An Iraqi man during the beginning of the current wave of protests, in October 2019. Source: Wikipedia CC

The past month has seen a surge in protests in Iraq's southernmost provinces. Most of this protest activity has focused on economic issues and anger over faltering electricity and water supply. By contrast, the revolutionary protest politics of October 2019, led in the south primarily by student groups, appears to be faltering in its efforts to kickstart the movement.

In fact, the long-running sit-in camp at the Navy Roundabout in Basra – one of the symbolic centres of the October 2019 Revolution – has been largely dismantled in recent days. In part, this is due to counter-protests from local

residence and business owners who demanded the roads be opened up and normality restored.

Sporadic anti-protest violence from Iraqi police and armed groups continues, but not, so far, in the systematic pattern of repression that emerged during the chaotic protests in Basra in the summer of 2018. Nevertheless, the killing of civil activist Tahseen Osma by unknown gunmen in Basra on 14 August, servers as a reminder that violence remains a strategic tool, particularly against those involved in the October 2019 movement.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has stated his desire to change how Iraqi security forces (particularly the police) deal with protesters, and to rein in militias that are supposedly operating beyond state control. However, turning these words into reality has repeatedly run up against stiff resistance from within the country's security apparatus, particularly at the provincial level.[1]

Violence has also been used by protesters, both in self-defence and, at times, as an active part of protest strategies. (The majority of this protester-directed violence has consisted in property destruction, whereas anti-protest violence has resulted in hundreds of fatalities.)

Yet the dynamics of protest violence are not everywhere the same. In fact, they vary considerably from province to province, and also when comparing different phases of mobilisation over time. This article seeks to clarify and explain these variations.

The analysis draws on a dataset of approximately one thousand incidents of protest and protest-related violence. This data covers two phases of peak mobilisation, the summer of 2018 (July–Sept) and the October 2019 Revolution (Oct–Dec). To understand the patterns that emerge, it is necessary to contextualise this data within local politics, and particularly the politics of Iraq's security apparatus.

What does the data show?

Anti-Protest Violence

The data collected on Basra's summer of 2018 protests shows that Iraqi police units were the primary tool of repressive violence. However, a division of labour between the police and PMF/armed groups also emerged,

with the latter deploying more lethal and intimate forms of violence (direct fire, assassinations, and kidnappings).

As *Fig.1* illustrates, the transition to the October Revolution saw a further expansion of this repressive model. Police units were used more aggressively to prevent or contain protests, while PMF/armed groups expanded a campaign of assassination and kidnap. This involved greater use of violence outside of protest events, i.e. intelligence-led operations targeting activists at home or in transit. The data also shows that the part played by PMF/armed groups in anti-protest violence increased markedly between 2018 and 2019, despite strenuous denials by PMF leaders of any involvement in the violence.

Fig. 1

The pattern of violence that developed in Basra did not translate straightforwardly to other provinces from October 2019. As seen in *Fig. 2,* the dynamics of violence that characterised Basra took hold in Dhi Qar, but markedly less so in Maysan and Muthanna.

The ramping up of anti-protest violence in Basra and Dhi Qar is not explained by higher overall rates of protest, nor as a reaction to protester-directed violence. In fact, the data shows that protester-directed violence fell as a proportion of the overall rate of protests.

More importantly, protesters in Basra radically altered their tactics in 2019 and largely refrained from targeting government buildings, political parties, or PMF/armed groups (seen in the low levels of property destruction in the province, *Fig. 3*). By contrast, protesters in Dhi Qar systematically hit these targets. Nevertheless, the overall picture of anti-protest violence in the two provinces remained broadly similar. This is a strong indication that anti-protest violence has been neither reactive nor ad hoc, but proactive and systematic.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3 [2]

Protester-Directed Violence

Protester-directed violence declined during the Oct–Dec period when considered as a proportion of overall levels of protest activity. Most protester-directed violence involved property destruction, and this proportion increased during the October Revolution. The most significant

change from 2018 to 2019, however, was seen in target selection. More violence revolved around encounters between protesters and Iraqi police, while targets such as government buildings, political parties and PMF/armed groups receded.

However, this picture changes radically when Basra and Dhi Qar are compared as separate cases (see Fig.5). From this perspective, a clear divergence between the two provinces in terms of protest tactics comes into focus. Protesters in Dhi Qar were responsible for the majority of all violent incidents in which government buildings, political parties or PMF/armed groups were targeted.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

The comparatively low levels of protest-related violence in Maysan are partly a reflection of the province's smaller size (in population terms), but also the lower stakes of political competition in the province owing to Maysan's relative lack of economic resources. This means competitive political dynamics are less intense.

Compounding this characteristic is Maysan's status as a Sadrist stronghold, with the movement enjoying high levels of support amongst the general population as well as a preponderance of power at the executive and administrative levels. This resulted in fairly unique dynamic between protesters, political authority and security forces in the province, partly explaining why interactions between ISF and protesters in Maysan have been less violence.

In fact, little protest violence in Maysan was recorded because violence around protests in the province was so quickly escalated into intra-militia engagements (not classified as protest violence) between the Sadrists and rival PMF group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). The intensity of Sadrist-AAH conflict in Maysan eventually spilled over into Basra and Dhi Qar, resulting in a string of assassinations targeting Saraya al-Salam figures in these provinces.[3]

By contrast, in Basra the stakes of political competition are far higher, due mainly to the province's oil economy. Consequently, the political and security landscape in Basra is more intensely contested, and the resulting fragmentation of the province's political field is a key driver of protest violence.

At the same time, Basra's security apparatus has also become more integrated with the PMF and particularly the latter's two key centres of power – Badr and, to a lesser extent, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (prior to the latter's assassination). This continuity between the ISF (primarily the police forces) and PMF groups explains in part both the high intensity and systematic character of anti-protest violence in Basra. (Although not explored here, a similar characteristic of the political-security nexus in Dhi Qar helps explain why violent dynamics look so similar to Basra's.) It is important to consider the distinct effects of these two factors – fragmentation and consolidation – to understand Basra's dynamics of violence.

The fragmentary factor is most important for understanding protest violence in relation to the Sadrist movement. The Sadrists are well-represented amongst Basra's youth and poorer neighbourhoods. Consequently, they constitute a significant bloc of the province's protesters. [4]

Estimates vary, but interviews conducted by the author indicate a rough figure of 30-40 percent Sadrist representation within the protest movement's base.

However, unlike in Maysan, the political makeup of Basra's security apparatus results in a markedly different dynamic between Sadrist protesters and security forces. Moreover, the Sadrists are one of several factions who compete for power in the province's political, economic and security fields. Consequently, a portion of Sadrist protest violence is a function of the movement's competition in these fields, i.e. it is mechanism of threat, pressure and leverage within intra-elite competition.

By contrast, PMF dominance within Basra's security apparatus helps explain the broader model of systemic violence in Basra. This refers to the division of labour between Iraqi police and PMF/armed groups in anti-protest violence (outlined above). Rather than being an effect of fragmentation, this pattern of violence is shaped by it having a more consolidated and coherent set of actors, with a more unified strategic purpose, as its point of origin.

For example, the police formation directing most of the anti-protest violence in Basra (in both summer 2018 and the October Revolution), has been the police Shock Forces (*quwwat al-sadma*).[5]

The Shock Forces are unique to Basra (in other provinces protests are handled mainly by Anti-Riot and, to a lesser extent, SWAT units who mainly conduct arrests). The unit was created in 2018 out of Basra Emergency Police Battalions and were intended initially as a specialist force to tackle narcotics and tribal disputes. However, the Shock Forces were repurposed in summer 2018 by Basra Governor Asaad al-Idani as the front-line unit for dealing with protests.

The unit's commander, until very recently, was Ali Mishari al-Muhamadawi. Mishari is closely affiliated to Badr and has also been accused of being a member of Kata'ib Hezbollah. Meanwhile, the IP members who make up the Shock Forces – drawn from Basra's Emergency Police Battalions – contain a not insignificant number of PMF fighters who were operational around Samarra during the fight against Islamic State.

Similar dynamics can be seen further up the chain of command. Here, power has conglomerated in a nexus between Governor Idani and Basra's Chief of Police – Rashid al-Fleih, who is strongly backed by Badr (and was also instrumental in bringing in Mishari as head of the Shock Forces).

The Idani-Fleih relationship has succeeded in shifting the balance of power in Basra's security apparatus away from the Iraqi army and towards the police. The result has been the sidelining of Qasim Nizal al-Maliki, the Commander General (CG) of Basra Operations Command (BaOC) (technically the most senior security position in the province who should have operational control over the police). Maliki is rumoured to have refused a request from Governor Idani in late October 2019 to deploy Iraqi Army units against protesters in Maqil in Basra City.

In the last few weeks, Maliki has moved into retirement. The new BaOC CG is Maliki's deputy, Maj. Gen Akram Saddam Midnef. The new CG has a low political profile, but his background as former acting CG of Diyala Operations Command strongly suggests he has good working relations with Badr. As an internal promotion, his elevation further indicates that this is a move designed not to upset the status quo.

Consequently, the theoretical boundaries between Iraq's security forces, political parties, and the PMF are not born out in reality. The division of labour between police units and PMF/armed groups in anti-protest violence should not be understood as a form of tacit cooperation between state and non-state forces. This depiction obfuscates the continuities between the PMF and Basra's security apparatus.

This picture of the political-security nexus in Basra helps explain why anti-protest violence continued to intensify, even as civil activists and student groups in province succeeded in redirecting protests into more peaceful channels. These same activists and students bore the brunt of the campaign of assassinations, kidnapping and arbitrary arrests. As they struggle to reignite their movement, the targeted slaying of Tahseen Osama shows that the system of repression is ready to strike back.

This blogpost introduces the Conflict Research Programme–Iraq's project 'After the Uprising: Post-Mobilisation Strategies in Southern Iraq', led by Principal Investigator Benedict Robin-D'Cruz.

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[1] For example, Kadhimi personally directed a robust response by ISF to the shooting of protesters by guards at the offices of Basra militia Thar Allah in May 2020. However, the arrests of Thar Allah militiamen, and the seizure of their offices, were overturned shortly after. Statements made at the time by Bara Chief of Police Rashid al-Fleih suggested that he considered the militiamen to have been acting in self-defence, and strongly indicated that resistance within the provincial security apparatus played a role in unravelling Kadhimi's strategy. By contrast, the recent incident involving ISF abuse of teenager Hamid Saeed in Baghdad resulted in the sacking of Law Enforcement Forces Command. The latter is a new police formation established by Adil Abd al-Mahdi and tasked with handling protests. The contrast is illustrative of the limits on the PM's power in Baghdad versus Basra.

[2] **Mass casualty:** violence that results in five or more injured or killed.
High intensity/lethal: violence that results in injury or fatality, and kidnap incidents.
Low intensity/intimidatory: violence judged to have not had lethal intent, e.g intimidatory small arms fire (SAF), or an IED emplaced to detonate without causing casualties.
Building infrastructure: violence that targets physical infrastructure not people.
Arrests: arrests reported during protest incidents.

[3] These began with a Sadrist attack on AAH offices in Maysan on 25 October. Multiple attacks on Saraya al-Salam militiamen followed in Maysan, Basra and Dhi Qar. The pattern of attacks persisted until the 5 February 2020 assassination of Abu Muqtada al-Izairjawi (Saraya al-Salam) outside his home in Amarha (Maysan), and the 6 February assassination of Hazim al-Helfi (Saraya al-Salam) on Muhammad al-Qassim road in Basra. The dissipation of this violence likely reflected intense mediation efforts by

IRGC following the assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020.

[4] 'Sadrists' here refers to a broad category that encompasses Iraqi youths with a *Sadri* orientation rooted in social class, familial and tribal networks, and not necessarily integrated into the organisational-institutional structure of the Sadrist movement.

[5] Due to its negative reputation in Basra, the Shock Forces have recently been renamed the 'Duty Force'.