

The Shi'i Revolution in Iraq: A Retrospective

Ofra Bengio

On July 8, 2018, mass protests erupted in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. These protests have continued unabated for two months, gaining traction throughout Shi'i dominated cities in the south and even reaching Iraq's capital, Baghdad. Participants called the demonstrations an *intifada*, and they have been among the most serious in the history of Iraq, in terms of their scope, duration, and the number of casualties. By mid-July, 14 people had died and hundreds were wounded, and this included both protesters and security forces.¹ During September, at least 12 more protesters and members of the security forces were killed. Protesters blocked roads, briefly took control of the airport in Najaf, launched rockets at Basra's airport, and set fire to city hall, and the offices of all Shi'i parties and the headquarters of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (the "Popular Mobilization Forces", PMF), the pro-Iranian Shi'i militias. Some demonstrators denounced Iran and burned pictures of the Iranian Islamic Revolution's revered leader, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.² Recently, protesters even set fire to the Iranian consulate in Basra.³

The protests in Basra were catalyzed by Iran's decision to stop the flow of electricity to the city, on the grounds of non-payment of Iraq's debt. This occurred in July, during the torrid Iraqi summer in which temperatures in Basra reached as high as 48 degrees Celsius. July, because of its scorching heat, is known in Iraq as a month filled with fateful historic events. This includes the 'Abd al-Karim Qasim-led coup against the Hashemite monarchy on July 14, 1958, as well as the successive coups by the Ba'th Party on July 17 and July 31, 1968, and the anti-corruption protests against the Haider al-'Abadi's government on July 15, 2015. The recent protests may have been unprecedented in scope, but they did not come out of the blue. Indeed, since the overthrow of Saddam Husayn's Ba'th regime in 2003, there have been many mass protests, particularly in recent years. What were their underpinnings?

Fifteen years have passed since the events of 2003 that led to the rise of Iraq's Shi'i majority to power, after hundreds of years of Sunni hegemony in the Mesopotamian region.⁴ But this tectonic change did not fulfill the expectations of the Shi'i masses, who actually have experienced a sharp deterioration of their economic, social, and security conditions. Iraq under Shi'i leadership faced serious challenges from the very beginning and they only grew worse over time. These challenges have included governing inexperience, even if "Shi'is on behalf of..." had served in previous Sunni-led governments; and the proliferation of Shi'i parties, groups, and organizations in the so-called "Shi'i house" (*al-bayt al-Shi'i*), which led to fierce power struggles that damaged the government's always fragile unity. At the same time, the Sunni-Shi'i rift deepened after the U.S. stripped the Sunnis of power in 2003, as part of its de-Ba'athification policy. Resulting Sunni disillusionment fueled the rise of the Islamic State and increased violence and insecurity within Iraq.⁵ However, Iraq's biggest challenge was its unbridled corruption, resulting in its being ranked as one of the most corrupt states in the world.⁶

Indeed, the scourge of corruption has spread throughout the state's governing institutions: the judiciary, bureaucracy, parliament, police, and military. The corruption in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was so bad that it led to its sudden collapse in the summer of 2014 in the face of a much smaller number of Islamic State fighters, leading to the loss of control over one-third of Iraq's territory.⁷ Economic and financial corruption led to a shortage of electricity, despite Iraq's position as one of the world's leading oil exporters. Another serious problem was the high rate of unemployment, especially in the oil-producing city of Basra where foreigners held most of the jobs in the oil industry. As to the education and health systems, as well as other essential public services, they suffered a severe regression in comparison to the Ba'ath period of rule.⁸

The protesters blamed Iraq's woes on the political parties, the politicians, and the religious elites who used public money to enrich themselves and to buy support.⁹ The demonstrators voiced several slogans to express their discontent, such as: "In the name of religion the thieves robbed us."¹⁰ In this context, it is interesting to examine Ibrahim Musa, an Iraqi columnist, who, in a recent article, spoke out against the corruption that spread among Iraq's leaders. Musa called on them to use former Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, as a role model. In the article, Musa describes Golda Meir's modest lifestyle throughout her political career and her material sacrifices for the sake of her people and her country. He ends this article with an appeal to Iraqi leaders: "Do not be less [modest] than Golda Meir."¹¹

A political crisis within the country's dysfunctional government served as the backdrop of the recent protests. The disenchantment with the political leadership was evident in the May 12, 2018 elections, in which only 44.5 percent of eligible voters participated. The "al-Nasr" coalition, led by Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi, only won third place, despite his government's success in defeating the Islamic State and the West's massive support for him. Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that his coalition won 42 seats, 'Abadi's own list won only six seats.¹² The public distrust was also manifest in the serious allegations of election fraud. This led to a recount in several polling stations and delayed the formation of the new government for several months.

In the aftermath of the May election, five Shi'i blocs jockeyed for control over the distribution of the government "pie." These five groups were: *Sairun* ("Alliance Toward Reforms") led by Muqtada al-Sadr (54 seats); the "*Fath Alliance*" headed by Hadi al-'Amiri, the commander of the pro-Iranian Shi'i militias (48 seats); Haider al-'Abadi's *Al-Nasr* coalition (42 seats); *Dawlat al-Qanun* ("State of Law") coalition led by former Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki (25 seats); and *al-Hikma* ("National Wisdom") coalition headed by 'Ammar Al-Hakim (19 seats). The political conflict revolved around choosing the person to fill the role of prime minister and the nature of the new government's orientation and character. Would they continue the *Muhassasa* system, the sectarian-based quota system, opt for a technocratic government, or perhaps form a Shi'i majority coalition? The Shi'i parties, when tallied in combination, won a clear majority of the seats in the parliament, but the rifts between them prevented them from forming a majority Shi'i government. The only alternative for the Shi'i parties seemed to be forming a coalition government with either the Iraqi Kurds or the Sunnis or both. Simultaneously, Muqtada al-Sadr, who is positioned to play the role of kingmaker in the new government, presented forty demands for its establishment, some of which were that the prime minister should be independent and that it would be a technocratic government. In the meantime, he sharply criticized Iraqi politicians who wanted to divide the country's treasures between them, warning that "Iraq will soon become uninhabitable...because it has no water, no electricity, no money and no borders."¹³

The formation of the Iraqi government was further complicated by the competition for influence between the United States and Iran, with each state trying to dictate the outcome of the composition of the new government and its orientation. The United States supports a coalition headed by 'Abadi, while Iran wants a coalition led by 'Amiri. At the time of this writing, the struggle continues with no clear-cut result in the offing. However, even when a government is formed the deep schisms between the Shi'i parties may further hinder its

functioning. The competition between the United States and Iran may also undermine the governing capacity of any new Iraqi government.

The timing of Iran's July decision to stop the flow of electricity to Iraq - the eve of the re-implementation of U.S. sanctions on Iran - suggests that Iran wanted to send a message to the U.S. that pressure on Tehran would backfire in Iraq. Indeed, one of the consequences of the U.S. reimposing sanctions on Iran was severe damage to Iraq's tourism industry, which relies on Iranians visiting the Shi'i holy sites of Najaf and Karbala. Iran's response to sanctions led to two contradictory results in Iraq. On the one hand, there was an increase in the voices opposing Iranian involvement in the internal affairs of Iraq; and on the other hand, the Iraqi parties and groups supported by Iran became more determined to resist the U.S. sanctions.

The political deadlock that prevented the formation of a new government and the growing momentum of the street demonstrations led the senior Shi'i religious figure in Iraq, Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, to publicly support the protesters and call for the swift establishment of a technocratic government led by a "strong", "courageous", and "determined leader" who would fight corruption.¹⁴ He also hinted his opposition to 'Abadi's second term as premier. At the same time, Sistani warned of escalating non-violent protests if necessary reforms were not carried out by Iraqi politicians.¹⁵ Sistani's support, which has been repeated several times since the second week of the demonstrations, was a boon to protesters, who have increased the scope of their demands from electricity, utilities, and employment related issues to the firing and prosecution of corrupt members of provincial councils and other state bodies.¹⁶

In Basra province, where the protests originated, there were even more far-reaching demands. The province's leaders have long sought to achieve autonomy. As early as 2009, they asked the central government to conduct a referendum on the establishment of an autonomous district similar to the Kurdish region. They claimed that the Basra province has continuously been marginalized and not received adequate services (both under the Ba'th and since 2003), despite the fact that the province provides three-quarters of Iraq's oil revenues.¹⁷ These calls for autonomy were repeated in 2010, in 2013, and during the new wave of demonstrations in July.¹⁸ To be sure, however, the prospects for achieving autonomy are low.

Iraq's weakness has allowed its neighbors, namely Turkey and Iran, to undermine the vital water and electricity systems of the state.¹⁹ Since the water resources of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers are located in Turkey, with several tributaries in Iran, the two countries exploited this fact to build dams for their

own needs and purposes. The problems of water supply dates back to the 1970s when Turkey, Syria, and Iran, started building dams, leading to a reduction in the amount of water flowing into Iraq by 50 percent in 2018. For its part, the Iraqi government did nothing to prevent its neighbors from implementing these devastating policies. Thus, Iraq, the land of the two great rivers is suffering from a shortage of water, including drinking water. The most severe problem is in Basra, where hospitals have already treated 17,500 people for chronic diarrhea and stomach ailments over the past two weeks, after they became ill from drinking polluted water.²⁰ Furthermore, severe desertification has rendered vast areas of Iraq's agricultural land unusable, particularly in the Shi'i dominated south. Iraq, which at earlier times in history had been the granary of the Middle East, has been forced to import 70 percent of its food from its neighbors, Turkey and Iran, and from other sources.²¹ Desertification has destroyed the livelihoods of many Iraqi farmers, who have lost their income and become unemployed, leading many of them to join the popular demonstrations.

In retrospect, the Shi'i led government in Iraq has led to a series of paradoxes. First, the latest round of demonstrations was initiated by Shi'is against a Shi'i led government, even though it was Iraq's Sunnis, who lost their hegemony and became marginalized in post-2003 Iraq. The Sunnis did not participate in the Shi'i demonstrations of July 2018, notwithstanding the fact that their situation in the country had almost continuously deteriorated since 2003. Second, although the post-2003 change in Iraq's system of government has provided the Shi'is with more accurate proportional representation in government, and was meant to strengthen the democratic process, good governance is still lacking. Third, despite the country's vast array of oil and water resources, the gap between the ruling elite and the population at large has deepened, and the Iraqi people remain mired in one of the highest levels of poverty in the world.²² Fourth, while the U.S. and its allies sought to keep Iraq united and independent, they have achieved precisely the opposite. Iraq is now dependent more than ever on both the U.S. and Iran for the very establishment of its government, not to speak of other domestic and foreign policies. In conclusion, Shi'i majority rule in Iraq has not led to the functional and prosperous state its new leaders had promised. By all standards, Iraq may be considered a failed state.

[Ofra Bengio](#) is a Senior Research Fellow at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies \(MDC\)](#), [Tel Aviv University](#).

**This article is a translated and edited edition of an article that was originally published in the MDC's Tzomet HaMizrachHaTichon ("The Middle East Crossroads") on September 5, 2018. The editorial team at Tel Aviv Notes would like to thank Tzomet's Editor, Esther Webman, for making the original article available for publication here.*

***Benjamin Yoel rendered the translation from Hebrew to English.*

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at <http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."

¹ There were those who called it the "Hunger Intifada" or the "[Bread and Freedom Intifada](#)"; "[Iraq protests leave 14 dead in two weeks](#)," *al-Arabiya*, July 23, 2018.

² "[Iraq protests: What you should know](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 22, 2018.

³ "[12 dead in Basra as rockets fired at airport and Iranian consulate torched](#)," *The Telegraph*, September 8, 2018.

⁴ Some estimate that the Shi'a in Iraq make up more 55% of the total Iraqi population.

⁵ Iraq is ranked 4th on the list of most dangerous countries in the world. [MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD 2018 – RANKED](#), June 16, 2018.

⁶ For example, in the 2014 corruption rankings, Iraq ranked 190 out of 195 countries. Anti-Corruption Resource Center, Iraq Overview of Corruption and anti-Corruption.

⁷ [GAN business anti-corruption portal](#), Iraq, June 2017.

⁸ An Iraqi journalist claimed that the education, health, transportation, housing and other systems are almost destroyed, and the poverty rate is above 30% and inflation at about 20%; Adnan Hussein, "[How \(in the name of religion\) were Basra's oil revenues used? \[Arabic\]](#)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 6, 2018.

-
- ⁹ Refer to [this](#) on the corruption status and its implications in Iraq: Economic Freedom, Iraq 2018.
- ¹¹ Ibrahim Mousa, "[What religion are you, gentlemen?](#) [Arabic]," *Bas News*, July 25, 2018. It is important to note that Golda Meir's biography is a popular book in Iraq.
- ¹² Geneive Abdo, Nussaibah Younis, and Michael Knights, "[Iraq, Iran, and U.S. Strategy: A Trip Report](#)," *Policy Watch* 3001, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), August 10, 2018.
- ¹³ Baxtiyar Goran, "[Muqtada al-Sadr sets out 40 conditions for electing new Iraqi PM](#)," *Kurdistan24*, July 31, 2018; "[Sadr sets a deadline for meeting his conditions and intends to form a bloc to save the nation](#) [Arabic]," *al-Hayat*, August 10, 2018.
- ¹⁴ There were even calls against Sistani himself since he didn't publicly declare his support for the demonstrations from their first week; Mustafa Habib, "[Why Iraq's anti-government protests may be doomed to fail](#)," *Niqash*, August 2, 2018.
- ¹⁵ "[Sistani sets the agenda for the next government, warning of escalating street protests](#) [Arabic]," *al-Hayat*, July 27, 2018 ; Hussein Dawud, "[Sadr and Maliki are competing for Sunni and Kurdish support](#) [Arabic]," *al-Hayat*, August 7, 2018.
- ¹⁶ Hussein Dawud, "[Iraqi protesters increase their demands, calling for the dismissal of provincial council members](#) [Arabic]," *al-Hayat*, August 4, 2018.
- ¹⁷ "[Vote on autonomy for Iraq's Basra struck out](#)," *Reuters*, January 20, 2009.
- ¹⁸ Aso Fishagi, "[In Southern Iraq, Basra Threatens Autonomy](#)," *Rudaw*, November 15, 2013; Paul Iddon, "[Basra has every right to be its own region. Will Baghdad let it?](#)" *Rudaw*, July 27, 2018; Benjamin Isakhan and Peter E. Mulherin, "Basra's bid for autonomy: Peaceful progress toward a decentralized Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 72:2 (Spring 2018), 267-285.
- ¹⁹ In an interview with an Iraqi activist who requested to remain anonymous, he claimed that Iran had turned Iraq into its landfill.
- ²⁰ Patrick Cockburn, "[Why the world should care about what is going on in Basra](#)," *CounterPunch*, September 11, 2018.
- ²¹ Patrick Cockburn, "[Catastrophic drought threatens Iraq as major dams in surrounding countries cut off water to its great rivers](#)," *Independent*, 2 July 2018.
- ²² Iraq is currently ranked fourth in the world in oil production. Yet 23% of the population is below the poverty line. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), World Fact Book, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html>