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Iraq's Tishreen Movement: A Decade of Protests and Mobilisation

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Abstract:

The last decade has seen progressive waves of protest and mobilisation across Iraq. The country has failed in its attempts towards democratic transition, and conflict, social rupture, sectarianism, and the empowerment of armed nonstate actors have taken hold. The Tishreen movement that emerged in October 2019 is a culmination of citizen anger and smaller mobilisations over the years against the lack of service delivery and poor governance and has faced violent confrontation from state and nonstate actors. Despite the pandemic, the Tishreen movement remains potent and active both online and in public spaces. Iraq's youth – the driving force behind the movement – have set the country's people on a collision course with the state, the political infrastructure, and the security apparatus (formal and informal) that enforces it. The international community has an obligation to protect these young activists.

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Introduction

Iraq has endured a turbulent modern history, moulded by the US-led invasion in 2003 that unseated long-time dictator Saddam Hussein and put the country on a transition towards democracy. However, the last 18 years have seen the initial post-Saddam roadmap lose direction, succumb to external influence and violence by nonstate actors and eventually become beholden to continued cycles of conflict. While corruption has become an endemic problem, political paralysis has slowly set in, bringing governance to an almost complete halt.

The democratic process has decayed, deflated and flattened into a cyclical empowerment of a political class that reverts to sectarian rhetoric when all else fails, ignores demands for adequate public service delivery and fails to serve communities of changed demographics.

Mobilisation in different forms has been a potent part of a renewed attempt at democratic transition. In Iraq this has not always been driven by interested citizens who seek to improve their living conditions. Alongside unarmed protest, armed militant insurgents and widespread militias have joined the fray. The largest mobilisation of unarmed citizens, however, remains the October 2019 Tishreen movement (*tishreen* means “October”).

The unrest has massively affected the internal political dynamics and forced through a militarisation of society generally, even if first born out of dissent towards the US occupation of the country. The political and security vacuum during the post-invasion period as well as continued violence provoked the cultivation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and eventually the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the swift takeover of territory across parts of the country in 2014.

Until the outbreak of the Tishreen revolution, protests had been inherently political in nature and form. With obvious exceptions – notably the Basra protests of 2018 – periodic protests were defined by their political leaning or organisation and remained inherently a tool for political gain in both form and ideology. The “Sadr protests” of 2016 remain the most obvious of these. All this is not to say that the 2019 protest movement is deeply apolitical, rather that it is the first prolonged movement that has emerged independent of any political party or ideology. While this may not outlast a patient, corrupt and powerful political elite, it has proven a watershed moment for the post-2003 political order. Iraqi domestic dynamics are now being more pertinently scrutinised by the international community, including the European Union and the United States, through the lens of the civilian movement, the moment of revolution and the near-breaking point in the economy that has come with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic.

1. Protests in Iraq: 2011 to the present

The outbreak of protests in October 2019 came as a shock to outside observers. The prolonged nature of the movement and its generally non-sectarian message has endured, forcing a domestic reckoning between protestors, citizens and political representatives. However, the movement itself was not a sudden event, but rather a continuation and evolution of mass mobilisation as a form of dissent that has been part of the country’s political and social fabric for several years already.

While Iraq did not experience the kind of revolutionary wave seen in other parts of the Arab world in 2011, the Arab Spring by no means bypassed it.[1] The protests that engulfed the region were also present in Iraq, albeit with much less international focus as they did not bring about political change the way they did in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere. Ultimately, popular protests in Iraq in 2011 lacked the capacity to endure state-sponsored violence. The political establishment in Iraq was able to contain and dissipate protest anger with little to no concession.

In 2011, Iraq had already been rid of Saddam for almost a decade – removed by force by the US-led invasion and subsequent occupation in 2003 – and protests that decried the leadership of then-Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki lacked the type of single-form unity seen in other countries (like Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Egypt), which targeted one single personality as representative of the regime. The protests also remained comparatively small, when viewed in light of the events in Egypt's Tahrir Square or Tunisia's Avenue Habib Bourguiba. In addition, Iraq had already seen continuous forms of conflict since 2003, due to the anti-US insurgency and the formation of armed nonstate actors with political influence. The post-2003 order gave significant power to armed militias and political actors that formed armed groups either as an extension of their political power, or in support of it.[2] As a result, the protests that emerged in 2011 remained powerless and were violently put down, set amid a fatigued conflict narrative, growing Iranian influence and the start of the US retreat.[3]

In the years after 2011, Iraq saw periodic protests waves, most prominently the Sadr protests in 2016 and the Basra protests of 2018, before things came to a head with the October revolution in 2019.

The Sadr protests saw the occupation of the parliament building and parts of the ultra-protected Green Zone in Baghdad in response to parliament inactivity.[4] Led by the powerful Shia cleric/politician/militia leader Muqtada al Sadr, thousands of his supporters descended upon the institutional buildings to protest the decision-making process in the formation of government. As a figure, Muqtada has carefully and coherently manipulated citizens and political elites alike over the years to further his political project and fulfil his own personal ambitions.[5] Buoyed by arguably the largest civilian constituency of any major political group, Sadr has managed to become the most effective spoiler of the political process. This has been exacerbated in recent years as his constituency support translates into more and more representation in parliament.

The protests themselves were driven by growing anger over corruption within the political system and the disconnect between political elites and the general population. While they were without a doubt politically driven, they reflected genuine dissent and dissatisfaction with the political system. This is a sentiment that has only grown over the decade and has expanded beyond political figures and their constituencies to take hold in society.

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[1] Marina Ottaway and Danial Anas Kays, "Iraq: Protest, Democracy, and Autocracy", in *Carnegie Articles*, 28 March 2011, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/43306.

[2] Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq: The Clerics and the Militias", in *The New York Review of Books*, 13 October 2015, https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/1822.

[3] James Jeffrey, "Behind the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq", in *Washington Institute Policy Analysis*, 2 November 2014, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/4454.

[4] Jennifer Williams, "The Political Crisis Rocking Baghdad and Why It Matters for the War on ISIS", in *Vox*, 19 April 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/4/19/11451550.

[5] Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?", in *The Century Foundation Reports*, 1 May 2018, https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq.

Further protests that occurred during 2015/16 were overshadowed in large part by the ongoing war against ISIS that had forced the country's population into a form of complete submission: not just to the Iraqi political order and its armed extensions, but also continued and re-emerging foreign intervention and continued proxy wars as well as a strong and mobilised militant insurgency. The war against ISIS saw the formation of an international coalition, led by the United States (including NATO allies), and increasing involvement of Iran's military. By late 2017, when then-PM Haider Abadi declared the war "over" with the retaking of Mosul from ISIS, the country had emerged from its most violent conflict in 18 years broken, weak and facing near collapse. At the peak of the war over six million citizens were internally displaced. To date, over 1.5 million people remain (officially) displaced, although the unofficial number is believed to be much higher.[6] Entire towns and cities were almost entirely destroyed and are yet to be rebuilt, including Mosul, the country's second-largest city, as well as major parts of the disputed territories, like Hawija, Sinjar, Ba'quba and many others.[7]

While the 2016 protests were led by Sadr and fuelled by dissatisfaction with Abadi, the 2018 Basra protests following the May 2018 elections were of a very different nature.[8] Arguably resulting in the derailment of Abadi's attempts to secure a second term, the protests that rocked Basra – and the country – for months, would appear (with hindsight) to have set in motion the spark that would later erupt in the 2019 Tishreen movement.

In the summer of 2018, facing excruciating power cuts amid soaring summer temperatures, mass protests broke out across the province.[9] These protests were less politically aligned than the Sadr movement, and the country was unable to contain the sustained anger coming from the protestors, exacerbated by the continuation of the violent response by the state (including tacit support of armed nonstate actors) in response to the demonstrations. Mirroring smaller protests that broke out in 2015, rather than the 2016 Sadr movement, the 2018 protests proved to be the tipping point for the use of mobilisation as a political tool harnessed by citizens. Fuelled by testimonies of the suffering in Iraq's poorest province (despite holding over 95 per cent of its oil wealth), videos, reporting and media focus helped bring the plight of citizens to the fore. While during that period anger remained localised to Basra, the sentiment was harnessed across the country, which allowed the protests to remain powerful in the face of government confusion, political paralysis and no leading authority to respond to demands. Similar tactics have been deployed since 2019.

[6] As of 31 December 2020. See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) website: *Iraq*, https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq.

[7] Building Peaceful Futures, *Conflict Analysis. Sinjar and Hawija, Iraq*, Erbil, Save the Children Iraq, 2019, https://www.australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/library-contents/conflict-analysis-sinjar-and-hawija-iraq-2019.

[8] Isam al Khafaji, "Iraq 2018 Elections: Between Sectarianism and the Nation", in *Bawader*, 12 July 2018, https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=2948.

[9] Matthew Schweitzer, "Protests in Southern Iraq Intensify, Is Instability to Follow?", in *IPI Global Observatory*, 24 July 2018, https://theglobalobservatory.org/?p=18022.

Epitomising the clear angst over the mismanagement of governance and lack of service delivery, powerful images of the effects of contaminated water resources, lack of fuel and electricity and the decrepit state of the province sustained protests throughout the political process of government formation in the months following the 2018 elections.[10] The power of the Basra protests took on new resonance. Whilst protests against a lack of service delivery are not uncommon, notably in the summer owing to increasingly unbearable temperatures, the 2018 movement built from there. That the epicentre of protest was the southern province of the country – heavily Shia-dominated – was not lost on the protestors, and the targets of their anger quickly spread from the government, to Shia political figures, and beyond towards the Iranian regime.[11] Such a message has resonated and grown during the 2019 movement, which has forced a political reckoning for the elite as the South rages.

Following the May 2018 parliamentary elections, the talks over possible government coalitions were officially halted as anger in Basra raged. With immediate support for their plight coming from the most trusted leader, Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, and other "opposition" politicians, the protests effectively brought down the Abadi government and any opportunity for the suggested Abadi-Sadr coalition to take power.

The moment also set a precedent that has since defined the political process: the appointment of unelected "technocrats" to top executive positions, as public trust in political representatives has all but disappeared. As political factions could not agree on which party leader should get the opportunity to form a government, and with leaders attempting to distance themselves from protest ire, technocrat Adel Abdel Mahdi (AAM – a former minister of Finance and deputy PM under Maliki), was appointed PM in a negotiated settlement, facilitated by Sistani.[12]

The moment also proved an inflection point for the state institutions, as a civilian-led parliament ceded authority to the religious authority of Ayatollah Sistani, who took on a more overt political role that continues to this day.[13] Sistani's political influence has increased – whether intentionally or as a consequence of events – thereby turning him into a seemingly apolitical kingmaker.

Over the years, the general theme of protests in the country has revolved around poor governance and the lack of job and economic opportunity for Iraqis. Messages centred around poor public service delivery have defined civilian relations with political leaders, mired in sectarianism and corruption. But the 2019 protests that brought about the Tishreen movement have been the least sector-specific wave the country has witnessed in the last decade.[14]

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[10] Glada Lahn and Nouar Shamout, "Basra's Poisonous Water Demands International Action", in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 14 November 2018 https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/15623.

[11] "Iraq Protests: Demonstrators in Basra Storm Iran's Consulate", in *Deutsche Welle*, 7 September 2018, https://p.dw.com/p/34W9o.

[12] Suadad Al-Salhy, "Rival Iraqi Factions Make Coalition Deal and End Al-Abadi's Prime Minister Hopes", in *Arab News*, 13 September 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1371716.

[13] Harith Hasan, "The Subtle Power of Sistani", in *Diwan*, 14 November 2019, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346.

[14] National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Iraq: We Want a Homeland. Key Findings of Qualitative Research Conducted in Five Provinces in Iraq: Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Erbil, and Nasiriyah. December 2019–February 2020*, September 2020, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Iraqi%20Protests%20Research%20Report_EN.pdf.

In the period between the summer of 2018 and the outbreak of protests, Iraq witnessed a lack of political direction on a scale not seen in the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation. A new form of government immobility set in, with an unelected prime minister, who had no civilian constituency and lacked any coherent security sector support and religious authority. AAM was effectively a "sitting duck" PM, nominated by political leaders with the largest majority in parliament – who remained on opposite sides of the political fray – arguably for no other reason than to provide a new scapegoat for Iraq's ills.

As a result, the parliament has failed to address the lack of legitimacy of government in failing to agree on anything from budgetary reform to more consequential social and political reforms. In addition, the transfer of power to Iranian-backed militia groups in parts of the country liberated from ISIS created massive social fractures and remains an unrecognised problem to this day. Arguably, the sentiment of the 2018 protests has never waned – rather paused in the early period of AAM's premiership, and as anger grew the movement expanded, capturing a significant part of the country and exploding in the form of Tishreen.

Viewed as part of the "Arab Spring 2.0", Iraq's Tishreen revolution has – as noted – been incorrectly viewed by many as a sudden Arab uprising moment. Instead, it has resulted from years of low-level mobilisation in protests against poor governance, lack of democratic progress and armed insurgency. The message of the Tishreen movement has focused much more on the entirety of the political elite, armed nonstate actors who now form politically represented militias, continued and increasing influence of Iran on those militia groups[15] (and by extension the political process), all amidst a decaying post-conflict landscape, active drivers of conflict and stagnant development.[16]

The movement has remained largely non-sectarian, despite the fact that protests rage across the majority Shia-populated South and political leaders continue to attempt to infiltrate and co-opt the movement, using sectarianism as a way to break it. Muqtada al Sadr's attempts to do so stand out as the most consequential example of this. The movement has brought together most of Iraq's social classes in a majority youthful movement ranging from school students to young unemployed citizens. Women play a large and consequential part, with female activists forming an integral part of the calls for social change including a domestic violence bill, an early marriage bill, and greater access to education for girls.

Besides the lack of services or poor governance, the message from the movement, "we want a country", has focused on corruption within the political class and seeks the complete overhaul of the post-2003 political order.[17] Whilst previous iterations focused on a particular manifestation of poor governance (lack of electricity, access to jobs), the defining message from the movement is that citizens want ownership and agency over their country and how it is governed. The broader message of the revolution remains the overhaul of sectarian division of power, the end of institutionalised corruption and the reversal of far-reaching power transfers to armed nonstate actors.

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[15] Ranj Alaadin, "Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq", in *Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefings*, December 2017, http://brook.gs/2jZ9CP8.

[16] Hafsa Halawa, "The Forgotten Iraq", in *MEI Policy Papers*, No. 2020-7 (March 2020), https://www.mei.edu/node/80974.

[17] Zahra Ali, "Iraqis Demand a Country", in *Middle East Report*, No. 292/293 (Fall/Winter 2019), p. 2-5, https://merip.org/?p=79032.

In a post-2003 order, where cycles of conflict have ravaged many parts of the country, Iraq's physical infrastructure is literally collapsing. Where it does not exist, millions have been displaced, either into a cycle of UN registration and state-controlled camps or unofficial displacement absorbing themselves into new communities in different parts of the country in an attempt to start over. Physical violence, sexual assault and financial extortion are daily realities for millions – especially women – including at the hands of the state. Homes demolished in 2014 are yet to be rebuilt. Teachers and doctors from war-ravaged cities have disappeared into a self-sufficient cycle of international humanitarian aid support, likely never to return to public sector practice. For those who have remained in their areas of origin, or those who attempt to return, parts of the country still resemble the days of the height of conflict against ISIS, almost entirely untouched by state or local authorities. The war has officially been over since 2017, but in reality, war is very much a daily experience for millions of Iraqis.

Protests have been tempered throughout 2020 as the covid-19 pandemic ravaged the country.[18] In the early period of a national curfew, some protestors chose to remain in public squares like Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Protests were sporadic but remained, while a great number of activists moved their activities online. A large part focused on the pandemic and ensuring social awareness of the healthcare risks, supporting civil society, while the online space became a locus for intellectual political debate on the definition of identity, what forms of constitutional principles could be advocated for, and the ongoing debate on whether to participate politically or not. That specific debate has taken on significance with the announcement of early elections, set for October 2021, but possibly delayed to 2022, and has forced decisions on whether to engage and form political parties or remain a potent civilian force through mobilisation.[19] Ultimately, however, the movement remains active, and has become a significant part of the political calculation, with an opportunity to define a new phase for the country's post-Saddam trajectory and democratisation.

2. National political dynamics and the Tishreen movement

The last decade in the country has been widely defined as the decade of increased terrorism – marked by the war against ISIS – and fractured relations with the West (namely the United States), while Iran's influence has increased. However, domestically, the country should be more appropriately viewed from the perspective of a slowly decaying political infrastructure, fuelled by the normalisation of political corruption and the effect of conflict on the impact of sectarian narratives and messages in the public and political space. This has, as a result, provided the space for manifestations of violence and protest that have sadly become routine.

The Tishreen movement, however, is a watershed moment for the country.[20] While the movement has remained inherently non-sectarian, the translation into the political space of almost all protest movements/mobilisation since 2011 remains of sectarian nature. The author's own field research in 2018 revealed a fatigued and disenfranchised public neither energised nor driven by sectarian politics or the narrative parroted by politicians in the country, which for the most part has manifested itself in consecutively diminishing voter turnout.

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[18] Youssef Cherif, Hafsa Halawa and Özge Zihnioğlu, "The Coronavirus and Civic Activism in the Middle East and North Africa", in Richard Youngs (ed.), *Global Civil Society in the Shadow of Coronavirus*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2020, p. 21-26, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/83142.

[19] Cathrin Schaer, "Iraq's New Protester Parties Plan to Change the Country", in *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2021, https://p.dw.com/p/3oHOz.

[20] Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Why Iraq's Protesters Won't Go Home: 10 Voices from the Movement", in *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 3 March 2020, https://wp.me/p3Khxv-2iu.

Those invested parts of the electorate clearly lack a desire to make their voices heard at the ballot box. Their right not to vote, however, continues to empower the same political actors who have brought the country to its knees, albeit now depending on much smaller constituencies. It is also an example of the lack of opportunity and diversity in the political landscape, whereby disenfranchised voters have no alternative options.

Voters who do engage with the electoral process, remain loyal – insofar as they vote – to the sectarian divisions that exist. Therefore, it is predicted that not only will any attempts at political formation of the protest movement fail at the ballot box, but that voter apathy and a continued drop in voter numbers will define the post-Tishreen elections.[21] Any failing of political actors formed out of the movement will be capitalised on by the entrenched political parties, even if their predictable failure is a result of the behaviour of the political elite itself in curbing opportunity, outfunding and outmanoeuvring a young movement, and manipulating the process to their benefit, namely electoral legislation and voter education.

Political elites are organising – individually and collectively – to challenge the authority of the protest movement, at the expense of any form of improved governance or progress on the agenda of moving the country forward.[22] Having delegated authority to a second unelected government when it appointed former intelligence chief, Mustafa Al Kadhimi, as prime minister, the political elites continue in their attempts to avert the wrath of watchful protestors and citizens, shifting responsibility to the new prime minister, and by extension culpability for a continued failure to respond to the array of demands and needs.

The entrenchment of this political entitlement is lost on a younger civilian population and drives protests made up of large swathes of society who have known little else but the post-2003 political system. For most Iraqis, Saddam Hussein is a leader who defines their parents' and grandparents' lives, but not their own present time. The shifting regional demographics that have seen young adults and teens overtake their seniors as the most representative of society carries with it a disconnect of identity among Iraqi communities.[23] 2003 is no longer just the line in the sand that defines a pre/post-Saddam Iraq politically. It extends into the social fabric, defining political identity and social cohesion factors that now navigate opposition to the current political order.

In other words, young Iraqis are no longer drawn by the argument of how much worse off the country was under Saddam. In some quarters, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't" does not apply. As a result, within small parts of the protest movement calls for a return to strongman/authoritarian rule can be heard.[24] It is a sign of the level of desperation, frustration and anger harboured towards the current elite. That military rule may steer the country in a better direction is more an indictment of just how colossal the failure of governance is now, than it is proof of any loyalties or love for a bygone dictator (or another one in the future).

[21] Erik K. Gustafson and Omar Al-Nidawi, "Iraqi Protesters' Perilous Journey to the Ballot Box", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 22 March 2021, https://www.mei.edu/node/82608.

[22] Samir Sumaida'ie, "The Hijacking of Democracy: The Role of Political Parties in Iraq", in *Wilson Center Viewpoints*, 8 April 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/105840.

[23] Asha Amirali, "The 'Youth Bulge' and Political Unrest in Iraq: A Political Economy Approach", in *K4D Helpdesk Reports*, 11 November 2019, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14815.

[24] Pesha Magid, "Angry Iraqis Demand New Government", in *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/07/angry-iraqis-yearn-for-military-rule-again.

And that is not to speak of unchecked militia groups. The protest movement faces violent repercussions in its attempt to organise, with assassinations of young protestors a daily occurrence. Militia groups exercise power, authority and control over massive parts of civilian life in the country. Building on now years of governance and security control in the liberated parts of the country (post-ISIS), militias now thrive, increasing their presence and power across the country. All the while, they remain unchecked.[25] Transparency and accountability are at the heart of protestors' calls for a new country, and yet armed nonstate actors have only furthered their entrenchment in the political system and the state's security architectures.

Civilians have been left unprotected, ungoverned and ignored. The current political class remains ignorant of the ongoing erosion of its power and mandate. For those civilian leaders supportive of or led by militia groups, it remains a myth that they yield significant power or control. Beyond their own direct spheres of economic corruption (and some might argue even within), power has become beholden to violent actors, now that violence has been given the space to direct the political landscape.[26] The country is now led by militia groups and their leaders – whether it be al-Sadr and his civilian movement, which masks his armed militia in the first instance, or the plethora of Iranian-backed militia groups that make up the broadly defined Hashd al Shaabi.

It is a definition that extends, too, to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its leadership.[27] Rather than a tussle for influence among militia factions sponsored by proxy states and actors, therein lies a familial war, where armed groups have become an inherent part of the formal security architecture for the autonomous region and illiberal "democracy" is practised by unsustainable power-sharing agreements between the ruling families.[28]

The Tishreen movement has exposed the ongoing political collapse in a more direct fashion than even the war against ISIS had done. The targeting of young, innocent and unarmed protestors, journalists and academics by Iranian-backed militia groups in the south of Iraq, or the KRG officially in the Kurdistan Region, is merely an example of the "entitlement to power" concept, upon which the post-2003 order has been built. The movement has also grown beyond the public spaces occupied by protestors. Whether in agreement or not, it has propelled a new discourse amongst the population, and rooted itself at the heart of political discussion. It has also become its own "catch-all" phrase or response, in the face of continued anger at the lack of development and opportunity in the country.

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[25] Hassan Hassan, "How Iraq's Top ISIS Scholar Became a Target for Shiite Militias", in *Newlines Magazine*, 4 October 2020, https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-man-who-knew-too-much-why-shiite-militias-killed-iraqs-finest-isis-scholar. At the time of writing, dozens of young male and female activists have been targeted and assassinated by Shiite militias, with no accountability to date for any of the killings.
[26] Katie Bo Williams, "Militias in Iraq Provide Security, Wield Political Power, and May Be Tearing the Country Apart", in *Defence One*, 2 March 2021 https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/03/militias-iraq-provide-security-wield-political-power-and-may-be-tearing-country-apart/172390.
[27] Jenna Krajeski, "How the War with ISIS Has Exposed Kurdistan's Internal Divisions", in *The Nation*, 6 April 2015, https://www.thenation.com/?p=117302.
[28] Kawa Hassan, "Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts a Sultanistic System", in *Carnegie Papers*, August 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/61026.

In response to the movement itself, and the national message that has resonated across all parts of the country, security forces – whether formal or not – have engaged in an intense crackdown. In addition, a widespread discrediting campaign continues, and the political elite has emerged from the pandemic seeking to reassert its control over the political system. Amended electoral laws appear nonsensical, and certainly not more equitable or representative than previous laws, the unspoken cloud of constitutional reform remains ignored, while the government attempts to temper daily anger and violence by forming hapless investigation committees.[29] The poor pandemic response and failed attempts at economic reform serve as examples of the failures of the country's political system and its elite, as well as the human toll of continued corruption and securitisation of the state.[30]

Whether or not the Tishreen movement continues in physical form in the same way that it was created is irrelevant. Citizens' opposition towards the ruling class has been a mainstay feature across the entire country for most of the last decade and will continue to be so in the years to come.[31] With little to no humility or political courage among them, the political elites will likely continue to crack down on the movement in a futile attempt to put out the fires of anger and disillusionment, resulting in more violence, continued instability and increased security threats against the population and the government alike.

3. The Tishreen movement and geopolitics

Since the initial taking of territory by ISIS in 2014, Iraq has become awash with weapons and proxy actors. US and allied presence in the country – which had all but disappeared in 2011 following disagreement over a continuation of the State of Forces Agreement between the United States and Iraq – morphed into the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", while Iranian-backed militia groups gained legitimacy in fighting militants both alongside and independent of the state's security forces. Concurrently, Kurdish PKK-aligned actors in Syria have provoked a Turkish military response in the disputed Ninewah Plains (namely Sinjar), and Israel continues to expand its military response to perceived Iranian threats with periodic attacks in Iraqi territory. Since the war ended and ISIS territory was regained, continued threats and attacks from militia groups against US outposts leave the threat perception of war between Iran and the United States constantly fluctuating.

Domestically, Baghdad and Erbil remain ideologically split over how to counter the myriad of security threats, leaving a vacuum that has resulted in this new playground for an array of actors. Iraqis continue to bear the toll of these continued stand-offs. As civilian politicians all but cede control to armed nonstate actors in the most critical areas of state governance and security architecture, there is little ability to manoeuvre the country out of this quagmire – and certainly not without external support and security prowess.

[29] Falih Hassan and Jane Arraf, "Fire at Baghdad Hospital Packed with Covid Patients Kills at Least 82", in *The New York Times*, 25 April 2021, https://nyti.ms/3aEH19i.
[30] Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Dire Fiscal Crisis", in *Sada*, 2 November 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83108.
[31] Harith Hasan, "Iraq Protests: A New Social Movement Is Challenging Sectarian Power", in *Middle East Eye*, 4 November 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/80256.

The defining feature of the geopolitics in Iraq remains the tensions between Washington and Tehran. During the four years of a reactive and unarticulated policy from the Trump administration, Iraq was seen as mere collateral damage in invoking the “maximum pressure” campaign against the Iranians; the buffer by which direct conflict could be averted but where confrontation between the parties could continue.

The EU played – and still plays – a nominal role, which has perpetuated the general perception of it as a supportive and trusted but powerless ally. EU member states have their own independent foreign policy priorities which determine the level of their engagement militarily in Iraq in support of the broadly defined US mandate. The lack of direct EU representation within the hard security environment also adds to the broader confusion, potent in Iraq, between the authority of member states versus that of Brussels. The United Kingdom (no longer a member of the EU), remains the most ardent of these partners, while other members of the Five-Eyes (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) have joined a number of EU members states in providing support. More recently the NATO mission in Iraq has sought to expand its presence, although this has been widely interpreted as a cover by which the United States can continue its slow withdrawal from the country.

Alongside military engagement, the United Nations has kept an oversized presence in Iraq since 2003. The UN has never sanctioned a peacekeeping operation (DPKO). Nevertheless, the UN’s Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) has been present for over 18 years, has spent and still spends billions of dollars to implement a variety of programmes, geared towards the sustainable development of the country and the success of its democratic transition. UNAMI’s presence includes the large presence of over ten UN agencies including UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, UNEP, UNFPA and others. The civilian form of international intervention has also paved the way for an array of international NGOs, development partners and donors to entrench themselves into the governance of the country. The EU-Iraq strategy alone totals some 600 million euros in aid that includes humanitarian support to immediate conflict zones.

UN political missions of this nature are never intended to last for decades, nor to entrench themselves so deeply in a post-conflict political landscape. Their presence is predicated on an invitation by the host country. Considering its outsized presence and arguably minimal impact, there is an argument to be made that UNAMI (and by extension the plethora of development actors and donors in the country) has itself become an integral part of the government and the post-2003 political order.

The Iraqi government derives its international legitimacy from the continued presence and funds of these international partners, even when the ruling class invoke corruption as a way to bypass the constitution, corrupt the judiciary, divert power to armed nonstate actors or use force to crack down on civilian mobilisation. This extensive international presence in Iraq for almost two decades has resulted in the successive evading of criticism for alleged human rights abuses amid a continued shrinking of the civic space that invites parallels with the region’s worst perpetrators such as Egypt’s military regime, or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman.

Yet, the Tishreen movement has still emerged despite all these barriers to its mobilisation. International partners have rightly supported the civilian movement and disavowed the significant state-sponsored violence seen against protests as a result. However, conditional diplomacy or support has not yet figured into any form of material response from international actors.

Meanwhile, the region is shifting towards a more authoritarian and securitised landscape, arguably now bearing the fruits of the US-sponsored, securitised post-9/11 Western foreign policy. While many rightly note that this policy spearheaded the US-led invasion into Iraq in 2003, the long-term effect of the policy writ large has been to securitise foreign policy engagement to the extent that all bilateral engagement in the MENA region became tied to security interests and hard security goals and outcomes. The result in Iraq has been catastrophic, and while there is now a fundamental discussion on the recalibration of that bilateral engagement in Washington, it remains tied to a binary argument of troop withdrawal vs. "forever wars". There is little attempt to innovate or shift US foreign policy away from the securitised language and nature of its implementation that has defined it for 20 years. Nor are there any material attempts from the new Biden administration to differentiate security goals and priorities in Iraq, as they relate to its policy towards Iran.

While the Tishreen movement remains an inherently Iraqi movement, it is one that takes place amid the ruins of the Syria conflict and at a moment when regional geopolitics is shifting irreparably in a post-ISIS, post-Trump Middle East. Iran remains in many ways in control of Iraq's hard security (through powerful militias in control of large swathes of the territory), and the international community (which includes both NATO and EU member states) remain beholden to a US policy that cannot decipher the difference between Iran and Iraq.[32] As this ongoing stand-off protracts, Turkey gains further military confidence, building on its presence in Syria and Libya to capture parts of a vacuum in Iraq and expand its regional project.[33]

Furthermore, while deprioritised by many, the heightened suspense brought about by a lack of sustainable peace between Erbil and Baghdad not only plagues the country's development but is a root driver of the instability that exists in the country. The KRG continues to utilise its smartly outsized diplomatic presence to invoke power that it does not, by definition and constitution, have. And Baghdad resorts to exerting its power by force to the detriment of the KRG, for the most part for no other reason than the fact that it can. Constitutional amendments remain the "bogey-man" that no one wishes to discuss – politicians and intelligentsia alike – and the United States and its allies continue to act upon a non-existent binary logic created by the post-2003 order that pits Erbil against Baghdad, that erodes the sum of Iraq's parts rather than approaching the country as a whole.

Domestic politics and civilian relations therefore play out in a securitised theatre of numerous proxy actors and interests, with little regard to how the country itself may develop. The Tishreen movement is continuously analysed through this lens of proxy involvement and broader geopolitical significance from international and domestic actors, which removes agency from its members and arguably absolves the international community of the need to respond. It can be said that protestors are fighting not only their leaders but also the international community, which implicitly continues to embolden their behaviour.

Of massive implication in these failings is the inability to materially understand the far-reaching impact of Tishreen and its message, which has resonated across the country and embedded itself into the psyche of ordinary Iraqis – whether they support the movement or not. Tishreen has wrongly been deduced as a Southern movement against a Shia-led majority in Baghdad. In truth, the movement is inherently about Iraq's identity, the direction of its development and the lack of human security, amid a failure to support democratisation and equitable representation and rule of law in a country now deeply divided as a result.

[32] Omar Al-Nidawi, "The Real Cost of US-Iran Escalation in Iraq", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 27 January 2020, https://www.mei.edu/node/80824.
[33] Washington Kurdish Institute, *Ending Turkish Occupation of Iraq – It's Now or Never*, 6 October 2020 https://dckurd.org/?p=15944.

Conclusion

Over the last 18 years, colossal mistakes have been made in Iraq. The United States has squandered many opportunities to perfect an imperfect path towards successful democratic transition, while the Iraqi political class has stolen, embezzled and thrived on its access to the country's riches. Sectarian divisions, the war against ISIS and the massive influence Iran has over relatively small, but hugely powerful and significantly violent nonstate groups have created a vicious cycle of constant instability, human insecurity and national deprivation. The ongoing tussles – political, social and security – between the central government and the KRG have widened the vacuum of power, which has been filled by militias. The country is filled with political elites beholden to no one but themselves and dependent on each other for their own survival. The need to change the country's future is not only urgent, but also growing ever more elusive.

On its current path, in the near term Iraq is on its way to another conflict. With no international power or actor to directly blame or divert attention to, the risks of a deep, protracted, ugly civil war are very real. Iraq remains deeply scarred by the experience of recent decades – in conflict or under sanctions – and is now governed by the power of a gun. The country is awash with weapons, with civilian communities now armed to the teeth. Conflict that would likely see militia groups pitted against their own people, coupled with a dramatic economic collapse, could define dynamics in Iraq for many years to come, and preclude any positive development away from the 2003 political order and towards a more orderly democratic transition.

Iraqis' grievances are so many, so common and so relentless that they continue to overtake each other. There has never been an independent or internationally sanctioned peace process in the country, and the need for one is urgent. The result of this continued instability and lack of progress on any form of reconciliation is millions of Iraqis displaced through war and marginalisation, and a shifting demographic that is more a result of conflict and security threats than it is a youth bulge. It is a complete failure to provide services from running water, to schools, to human security. It is human rights abuses on a daily basis, including the violent assassination of young, unarmed civilians. It is cracks in the social fabric that run so deep, with layers of grievances from different communities – all just as valid, all superseded by the newest grievance – that have created a never-ending cycle of distrust, "red-flag" conflict drivers and disenfranchisement on the part of all citizens.

The international community – those who seek the positive and sustainable development of Iraq – requires a desperate and prioritised reset. This means a deeper, positive and supportive approach to Tishreen and its members, alongside an obvious and clear acknowledgment of the failings of the government and its international partners in recent years. The governance and public service delivery issues remain papered over through the support of hundreds of local and international NGOs, international donors and billions of dollars in development aid, but this approach is insufficient and only aiding the negative trajectory of the country.

The Tishreen movement should be openly and actively supported. This can be achieved through material support to its organisation, activity and awareness raising or education. Impartial media, created by this younger generation that is mobilising, should be harnessed, and promoted through the support provided to civil society actors. Its expansion and the carrying of its message should be emboldened by international partners who should never fail to ensure that the protection of civic space, gender equality and rights, and governance are the priority discussion points in bilateral engagements.

Here the EU, having less military investment in the country, can act first, pushing the international community to consider and impose sanctions against a broad swathe of political and security actors in response to human rights abuses, corruption and the subversion of democratic development. UNAMI should revisit its mandate, reduce its presence and reconstitute its development assistance in the wake of continued corruption. The United States and its NATO allies should condition security support on the political courage of politicians to confront and address militia activity in the country. While the international community cannot themselves change the country and Iraqi politics, their presence and outsized power mean that domestic pressures will not fall solely on the shoulders of a young, civilian protest movement or religious figures such as Ayatollah Sistani.

To say the current political system has failed may seem sensationalist. But the country's trajectory is one that denies Iraqis their civil and human rights and legal and physical protection. The international lens by which Iraq is viewed, in a post 9/11 securitised landscape, itself denies civilians a right to self-determination, marginalises minority communities, imposes risks of deadly proportion on those who seek to actively be engaged, and eventually will destroy a country of millions. If the moral duty and values-based agenda purportedly promoted by the international community to ally with the Tishreen movement, support the country and engage in meaningful reconciliation is not a sufficient call to action, then the drivers of new conflict should act as a powerful warning of what is to come if no action is taken.

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