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Eliminating the Protests? The Motives and Circumstances of Basra Assassinations

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Iraqis mourn next to the coffin of Iraqi female activist Reham Yacoub who was killed by unknown gunmen in central Basra in August 2020. © EPA-EFE/STR



Since the youth-led uprising known as the “October Revolution” of 2019, the southern governorates of Iraq in general, and the city of Basra in particular, have been witnessing a string of assassinations and physical liquidations of civil activists and media workers. These crimes raise questions about the motives of the assailants, the parties behind them, as well as the circumstances in which they took place, and which seem to be organized and coordinated and do not care about the strong national and international condemnation. This paper seeks to shed some light on this phenomenon and its repercussions for Iraq.

This paper does not point the finger to any parties that could be involved in the string of the assassinations. It simply highlights different public views and interpretations commenting on these assassinations, including those that claim the activists were killed because they were “agents” of the United States of America or pose a serious competition to the traditional political players in the forthcoming elections, or the killings were acts of intimidation amidst fears of an outbreak of protests again in the streets.

Basra: Corruption and the anti-corruption protests

Basra is the third-largest city in the Republic of Iraq after Baghdad and Nineveh, it has the largest oil wealth, which makes it the hub of the Iraqi economy. However, corruption files are topping the list of its numerous problems, starting with the smuggling of oil and its various derivatives through professional and organized smuggling networks, said to have a direct link with armed militias connected to the official parties of the legislative, executive and judicial authorities and – directly or indirectly – to the “Shiite” parties.

The spread of smuggling in Basra dates back to the period after the fall of the previous regime (2003) when the weak rule of law had prevailed and the federal authorities were overwhelmed by their accumulated problems. This opened the door widely to the local groups to manage the oil smuggling operations before the armed gangs and influential parties enter the scene. This is due to the distance of the city from Baghdad and the growing influence special groups exerted in it. Various sources showed that more than 40 armed factions and about 10 political



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parties in Iraq are making illicit gains from oil smuggling from southern Iraq as Basra is the capital of its extractive and export industries. Leaks from official reports also mentioned the involvement of 10 political parties in the government in the smuggling operations through high-profile officials loyal to them in the ministries of oil and interior and the customs, with the help of armed factions through their zones of influence.

Despite the promising financial potential of Basra, it suffers from poverty, unemployment, and lack of public services. Its streets are filled up with piles of garbage and sewage water, and entire neighbourhoods have no access to drinking water or electricity. Worse still, the city has turned to a breeding ground for corruption and armed parties and militias over the past few years.¹

This harsh reality has fuelled popular anger and led to continuous demonstrations over the past few years protesting against what they called financial and administrative corruption and the deteriorated public services. The protests also escalated, in some cases, to demand the dismissal of the present governor, Asaad al-Eidani, who was nominated by the Shiite parties for the post of the Prime Minister following the resignation of Adel Abdul Mahdi.²

Basra City and the October revolution

The city of Basra activists and youth took part in the demonstrations that erupted in October 2019. While the Basrawi activists dubbed this movement “The Iraqi Revolution,” others in Najaf, Maysan, and Muthanna preferred to call it “The Awareness Revolution.”³

The October popular mass movement was supported by many Basrawi parties, with the unemployed holders of higher degrees in the forefront, who demanded they get employment in the public sector.⁴ During the protests, many Basrawi demonstrators were injured or killed, which forced the authorities to pledge to provide 10,000 jobs to the city’s youth to placate their anger. The protests also witnessed the burning down of several state buildings and the Iranian consulate, with fingers of accusation pointing to the demonstrators or the corrupt government people who burnt the buildings to destroy any evidence of their illegal activities. Typically, public institutions have been set on fire a few moments before

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the demonstrators' break-in.⁵

Physical liquidations in the wake of the October protests

The security situation for civil activists and media workers involved in the youth movement worsened following the October protests. The systematic crackdown led to the assassination of nine activists in August 2020 in the three governorates of Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar.⁶ The crackdown was preceded by the physical liquidation of prominent activists in Basra, the southern cities, and even in the capital Baghdad as well as the killing of some 487 protesters and the injuring of more 7.715, most of them young men.⁷ Iraqi writers and academics have publicly accused the Iranian militias or those affiliated with the authorities of the Supreme Leader of Iran for these killings.⁸

The starkest liquidation operations in Basra:

Basra governorate is among the regions that top the list of assassinations of activists and killings of demonstrators. Official investigations have yet to uncover any facts. Activists say that the assassinations are the acts of an underground organization experienced in killings, backed by influential parties, and has gained extensive experience over the past years to silence opposing voices.⁹ The UN representative in Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, provided a similar assessment in her briefing to the UN Secretary-General on 26 August 2020.¹⁰

Of the assassinations that marked the Basra scene after October 2019, one can note the following:

Hussein Adel and his wife Sara

When the October 2019 protests erupted, the bodies of cartoonist Hussein Adel Madani and his wife, Sara, were found in their house in the Jenin area in the centre



of Basra. Gunmen fired three bullets at Hussein and one bullet to Sara's head before fleeing the scene.¹¹ Sara, aged 24, was known in the Basra demonstrations for providing first aid to the injured and later led women's marches during the protests. Hussein was known for his active participation in the demonstration. According to their close friends, they were repeatedly pursued by gunmen affiliated with influential factions in Basra, which forced them to travel to Erbil and Turkey, before they returned to Basra due to the difficult financial situation.¹²

Ahmed Abdul-Samad and cameraman Safaa Ghali

On 10 January 2020, Ahmed Abdul-Samad and his cameraman, Safaa Ghali, were gunned down in their car by unknown assailants, while they were driving away from the sit-ins in the centre of Basra.¹³ Ahmed Abdul-Samad was active in publishing and broadcasting strongly critical comments on corruption files and the deteriorating situation of Basra because of the control of militias and clans. He also condemned the spread of the drug trafficking and the violation of the law in his work as an office manager and TV reporter for the NRT Arabic between 2016 and 2018, and then through his work for the Iraqi broadcaster Dijlah TV (funded by the Sunni businessman Jamal Karbouli). In addition to his TV work, Abul-Samad used to broadcast his criticism and comments on the Basra situation live on Facebook and other social media channels during and before the October Revolution to criticize the Basra situation, and, therefore, became a valuable source of information for observers outside the city.¹⁴ Hours before his death, he posted a video condemning the arrest of civilian demonstrators (compared to the authorities' reluctance to deal with the pro-Iranian demonstrators against the US consulate) and accused a "third party" of waging a crackdown against demonstrators, stressing that his cause is the cause of the country, echoing the well-known slogan of the October Revolution.¹⁵

Tahsin Osama (Tahsin al-Shahmani)

Activist Tahsin Osama was assassinated in Basra in mid-August 2020 after he received 32 threatening phone calls, of which he informed the security authorities,



according to his family. Osama is the father of four children. He graduated from the industrial middle school and worked in setting up and maintaining internet towers through a company he founded and named after his daughter (Shams al-Basra). However, he was so active in the Basra protests from the very beginning and also travelled to other governorates to participate in the protests.¹⁶ Despite the formation of a high-level security committee to find those who killed him, the perpetrators are still at large.¹⁷

Reham Yacoub

According to her family, Reham Yacoub, a 30-year-old sports coach who used to run a sports gym, was shot dead on 19 Augusts 2020 by unknown gunmen while she was in her car, after returning from her gym with her sister and her friend, who is also doctors.¹⁸ Video clips posted on social media show Reham leading protests and chanting influential slogans that stir patriotic feelings among protesters, most prominent and influential of which is: “I am loyal to my homeland, who are you?” where protesters would repeat after her “who are you?”¹⁹ Observers said the “you” referred to gangs loyal to Iran instead of being loyal to the homeland.²⁰

Reham Yacoub introduced herself on her social media accounts as a PhD student at the College of Physical Education and Sports Sciences, a lecturer at Basra University, owner of a sports gym, specialist in fitness training, a researcher in nutrition science, producer and host of a programme on Radio al-Rasheed FM. She was an influential activist and a source of inspiration for the protesters.

Attempt to assassinate three activists in one go

Unknown gunmen attempted to assassinate activists, Abbas Sobhi, Fahd al-Zobaidi, and Loudia Rimon, in one go on 17 August 2020. A video that documented the attempt shows the gunmen relaxed when approaching the activists' car. They would have succeeded had it not been for the quick reaction of the driver.²¹ Sources, activists, and video clips of the operation reported that two gunmen got off a car and fired heavily at the car of the three activists when it stopped at the



Kout Al-Hajjaj intersection in central Basra. The gunmen fired more than 15 bullets towards the activists' car. Abbas Sobhi and Loudia Rimon were injured and taken to the hospital, while Fahd al-Zobaidi, who was driving the car, was unharmed.²²

The motives and goals of the perpetrators of Basra assassinations

After the assassination of the activist Osama al-Shahmani, the Deputy of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the commander of the Marja', Hamid al-Yasri, made a public announcement on 14 August 2020 where he attributed the reason for the assassinations in Basra and other Iraqi governorates to the activists demanding the peoples' rights. He mentioned that the murderer will attend the funerals of the victims, will carry their coffins, and "the mufti will drink a flask of blood on their toast."²³

However, activists of the city confirmed even before the October 2019 protests erupted the existence of parties that aim to track those who oppose the reality of Basra to assassinate and get rid of them.²⁴ Participating in demonstrations, demanding political and economic reform, and limiting loyalty to the homeland are the factors linking all those who were assassinated or subjected to murder attempts. The assassination of Reham Yacoub opened the door to accusations against those who are loyal to Iran. This was based on existing incitement of violence against the activist and her colleagues by an Iranian agency that is affiliated to Mehr News Agency, the Iranian Islamic media organization. The agency accused them of having relations with diplomats at the US consulate in Basra and working for a network that serves US interests in the region. Those accusations were published in a report by the agency with photos of the activist and videos of her activities taken from her social media accounts.²⁵

The Iranian open accusation against the activist went further and tackled the role of the "US agents" in creating problems between Iraq and Iran, backed with financial support from Saudi Arabia and its ambassador, as a part of what the agency called the plan to "divide Iraq according to Joseph Dunford's project into two regions or three regions, according to Joseph Badin's project".²⁶ A year after the agency's report, Reham received a threatening phone message accusing her of



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working for the US and warning her of looming death adding that the location of her apartment and gymnasium are well known.²⁷

Also, Al-Ahed TV, affiliated to the pro-Iran Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq faction, published a video inciting violence against the activist, showing her in the company of the US Consul in Basra.²⁸ Moreover, Kazem Al-Sayyadi, the Shiite Parliament member, frankly repeated the accusations Reham Yacoub was working for the USA even after she was killed and despite the strong public condemnation of her assassination.²⁹

In addition to accusations of being an agent, other explanations say that the latest assassinations are meant to convey implicit messages for the US that Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who was most cherished by Washington, has no power over the Iraqi situation and is not in control.³⁰

However, other observers think of three possibilities as the most prominent reasons behind the recent rise in assassinations. First of all, the murder attempts against the prominent civilian opposition figures are related to the fears of the parties allied with Iran that they will enter as competitors in the forthcoming elections.

The second explanation is that the wave of assassinations represents a “factional revenge” in retaliation for the steps of Mustafa al-Kadhimi to control the border crossings, which has seriously damaged the economic interests of the militias, especially in Basra. Another explanation sees the assassinations as a pre-emptive approach to curb the possibility of a return of the demonstrations for the anniversary of the Iraqi October protests³¹).

Brigadier General Yehia Rasool, the spokesperson for the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, suggested that fight against corruption and the latest directives of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces to control the crossings and ports are the reason behind the string of assassinations that have taken place lately in Basra.³²

Although Iran and its affiliated forces represent the core of the accusations related to the latest assassinations,³³ other interpretations and analysis point out the attempts of the armed groups to make Basra governorate out of the government



control to benefit from its wealth to finance their military and other activities and support their political and media institutions in the light of the deterioration of their economic sources after the dismissal of the former government. This analysis is accompanied with accusations of “the sharing of interests” between Asaad al-Eidani, the current governor of Basra, and armed factions to dismiss the government of Baghdad and to play the card of establishing a dependent region for Basra.³⁴

Asaad al-Eidani, the current governor who is also a member of the Iraqi National Congress, somehow managed to neutralize Basra from the October Protests and was seen chasing protesters himself in 2018. Activists accuse him of recurrent violent practices against the protesters amidst talks about accusations against him are linked to the conflicts over the position of the governor of Basra that is taking place among rival political parties; al-Eidani has held the post of the governor of Basra since August 2017 when al-Abadi was prime minister.³⁵

The pro-Iran circles and their media platforms often overlook the news regarding the assassinations of activists and the killing of protesters. Instead, they accused the US and Israeli Intelligence Services of funding those assassinations and recruiting the perpetrators, as claimed by Qais Khazali, Secretary-General of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and training them in Jordan. Khazali made those accusations during a speech aired on TV in the Ashura commemoration and denied the “resistance” links to the assassinations as part of foreign agendas.³⁶

Conclusion

The southern governorates, especially oil-rich Basra, are witnessing a wave of activist assassinations that seems to be coordinated and organized. The accusations and analysis by the pro-protesters communities are pointing the fingertips at armed groups that depend on oil smuggling and to parties seeking the independence of Basra to exploit the sources of the city to fund the activities of the armed groups and other wanting to get rid of the activists who may turn into competitors in the coming elections. This assassination campaign has psychologically impacted the activists and sent chilled Iraq's civil society, especially with the failure of the government to reveal any clues about the



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assassinations. It is even more likely that the city will witness a spree of violence and assassinations ahead of the forthcoming election and the ragged battle between the armed groups and the authority of Prime Minister al-Kadhimi.



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