



Bawader / Commentary, 25 November 2019

# The Rising Tide of Change in Iraq: An Assessment of the 2018 and 2019 Protests

→ Hashim Al-Rikabi



Iraqi protesters in Tahrir Square, Baghdad - October 2019 © Private



The stability and legitimacy of the post-2003 Iraqi state are undermined by the provision of poor basic services, soaring unemployment, and political paralysis. This has driven ordinary citizens towards waves of protests that peaked in August 2018 and re-surged again in October 2019, demonstrating that without addressing the underlying causes behind these protests, much larger and more aggressive protest waves may shock the system, again and again, threatening its existence.

The initial phase of the 2019 protests was similar to the first period of 2018 protests (April - June) in terms of their small scale, their focus on specific issues such as unemployment, and their largely peaceful nature. But quickly, within a few weeks, the 2019 protests escalated with protesters blocking key economic facilities and attacking government buildings and political parties' headquarters. This escalation mirrored the trajectory of the 2018 which also intensified over time, but what is striking is the speed with which the 2019 intensified and moved from socio-economic focused demands to demands for fundamental political reforms, including new elections. While the involvement of political actors was evident in efforts by politicians, such as Muqtada Al-Sadr, to try to ride the wave of protests as well as the crackdown on protests by armed elements of certain political parties, the 2019 mobilization has also shown the emergence of a new generation of protesters and the rising role of new social actors, such as professional groups.

The increasing frequency of protests since 2018 and their widening and deepening scope suggest that the post-2003 Iraqi governance model, with its stalemate between the different political actors, needs a fundamental new formulation that is able to renew trust in a reformed political system. The stalemate could either develop into genuine reforms to address the ills of the post-2003 political and economic system, away from ethno-sectarian politics, or descend into violence.

## A Typology of Iraq's Protests

Protests have rocked Iraq in different waves since 2015.<sup>1</sup> These protests can be broken down into two types: politically motivated and socio-economically driven. Politically motivated protests – usually based on grievances of political parties – tend to be centralized and limited to major urban areas (for instance, Tahrir Square in Baghdad), large in scale, and more periodic. Socio-economically driven



## Arab Reform Initiative

protests tend to be geographically scattered, issue-specific, and mobilized through social media networks.

Since 2003, political factions, including those represented in parliament and government, frequently resort to protests to express their demands beyond regular political channels. These protests are a tool used by political parties to mobilize their popular base, send certain messages domestically and regionally, and exert pressure on partners and rivals alike to increase their share of the pie or align with their agenda. For example, in December 2017, Sadrist protesters protested against President Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup> and supporters of the State of Law coalition party, led by former PM Nouri al-Maliki, protested against the Independent High Electoral Commission,<sup>3</sup> demanding the quick release of the results of the 2018 parliamentary elections.

Socio-economic protests have increased exponentially since early 2018 and are generally small, with dozens of unemployed individuals protesting in front of the headquarters of state ministries, and residents protesting in front of municipal administration offices against the lack of basic services. In such incidents, influencers on social media platforms, mainly Facebook, play the role of mobilizers and civil society activists and tribal leaders assume a representative role. However, the 2018 and 2019 waves of protest showed that the government does not bother to appease the protesters or heed their demands, until they escalate their measures, such as blocking key roads as in July-September 2018, following which the government responded by offering jobs and deploying serious efforts to enhance services.

## The 2018 Protests in the South

Basra was the focal point of the 2018 protests in the south. As an economic hub (most of Iraq's oil wealth comes from Basra) and the second-largest constituency for Shia political parties after Baghdad, Basra's protests were triggered by a mixed sense of entitlement and marginalization. The same sense of entitlement is echoed in surrounding areas in the south which feel that the wealth from their natural resources is not reaching them. Protests erupted in April 2018, and for the initial period that lasted until June, they were mostly small scale, peaceful and

3 The Rising Tide of Change in Iraq: An Assessment of the 2018 and 2019 Protests



## Arab Reform Initiative

focused on specific socio-economic grievances (such as unemployment).

July 2018 was a turning point where summer heat coupled with worsening electricity cuts – especially after Iran decided to suspend its portion of national power supply of 1000 MW of electricity in early July due to funds it was owed by Baghdad – pushed Basrawis into large-scale demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> Protests also intensified in other southern provinces with hundreds of protestors storming the PetroChina facilities in al-Kahla, in neighbouring Maysan province, on 13 July 2018, while others closed roads around the home of the mayor of al-Khidir district in the Muthana province on 16 July, and others rallied in Umm Qasr on 15 July.<sup>5</sup>

This trend was sustained and strengthened during August and September because of acute water shortages, which worsened already endemic tribal disputes over water distribution, and the contamination of drinking water resulting in 118,000 poisoning cases amongst Basra residents.<sup>6</sup> This situation was compounded by other systemic problems, such as high unemployment rates affecting hundreds of thousands of youth, and the government's decision to freeze public sector recruitment despite the lack of job opportunities in the private sector.

Protestors were mobilized through Iraq-based influencers on social media who determined the location and date of the demonstrations. Gatherings occurred in front of government buildings and locations essential for economic activity, such as main highways, border crossings, and oil fields. Then, protesters escalated their measures by cutting off roads and storming government buildings to pressure the government to respond to their demands.

The existing evidence suggests that the 2018 protesters did not have specific links to political parties or a particular political agenda, as they were initially engaged in scattered, local demonstrations in response to frustrations over lack of services and jobs. As protests grew in numbers and came to dominate political discussions, tribal networks and civil society organizations played a role in coordination and representation. This does not mean that certain political actors did not attempt to hijack the protests by burning the headquarters of their political rivals, which then responded by launching a campaign of co-optation and intimidation of prominent figures of the protest movement, such as the assassination of Dr Suad Al-Ali in Basra on 25 December 2018.<sup>7</sup>

4 [The Rising Tide of Change in Iraq: An Assessment of the 2018 and 2019 Protests](#)



## The 2019 Protests

While protests wound down in October 2018, the protest movement did not really die down and regular, small-scale protests became a common feature in southern and central Iraq in 2019 as shown in Table 1 below. The rise in the number of protests in 2019 highlights the fact that more people are willing to protest and make their voices heard, and that such protests continue to enjoy wide support in society – an observation confirming a finding from a National Democratic Institute poll conducted from August to October 2018, where 76% of respondents indicated that they supported the protests.<sup>8</sup>

Protests intensified in October 2019 in Baghdad and provinces in southern and central Iraq due to the accumulation of grievances, as security forces had hosed down female PhD holders protesters using hot water cannons on 25 September, and the prime minister demoted, a few days later, the Commander of Counter-Terrorism Services, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wehab al-Saadi, who enjoyed broad popularity due to his prominent role in the fight against ISIS. Hence, a social media campaign to protest, launched by Iraqi influencers who live abroad, received significant support, where hundreds protested in Tahrir Square in Baghdad as well as in Southern provinces. However, the government’s decision to crackdown on protests, cut off the internet, and impose road curfews, had the effect of transforming what was a centralized, peaceful protest into scattered, violent rioting in the outskirts of Baghdad and the South. The al-Abra'een pilgrimage – a major religious occasion for Shi’a who commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Al-Hussein, grandson of Prophet Muhammed – and government promises to investigate violence calmed protesters for two weeks. This first wave of protest (1 to 9 October) resulted in the of 157 protesters killed and 5,494 wounded, including amongst the security forces.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1: Protest Incidents in the South (April 2018 – October 2019)<sup>10</sup>**

Date/Province	Basra	Thi-Qar	Muthanna	Maysan	Wassit	Total	Violence Killed
---------------	-------	---------	----------	--------	--------	-------	-----------------



# Arab Reform Initiative

## About the author

### Hashim Al-Rikabi

Hashim Al-Rikabi is Assistant Lecturer at the University of Kufa. He has a Masters Degree in Comparative Politics from Western Illinois University, United States. He writes on good governance and rule of law for multiple platforms, including Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, and 10001 Iraqi Thoughts.

## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

[arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)

[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)



© 2019 by the Arab Reform Initiative.  
To view a copy of this licence, [click here](#)