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## THE PROTESTS IN IRAQ

### CORRUPTION AND FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN THE FIRING LINE

*Recent large-scale protests in Iraq reveal deep dissatisfaction with the political elite and the dysfunctional system of governance. The protests could pose a threat to Iran's foreign policy, whose channels of influence lie within parts of the Shia political elite in Iraq.*

The protests in Iraq that have lasted several weeks show no signs of subsiding, despite the estimated death toll of more than 420 people, in addition to 17,000 or more injured. While protests are nothing new in Iraq, their magnitude and duration have been unprecedented.

The Iraqi governance structure was established in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003, with the aim of addressing the composition of the Iraqi society. Based on a principle of power sharing, it divided the posts of president, prime minister and speaker of parliament between the Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis respectively. However, this not only reduced the complexities of societal conflict to an

ethno-religious dispute, but also created fertile ground for political corruption. According to Transparency International, Iraq is now the 12<sup>th</sup> most corrupt country in the world. Despite having the fifth largest crude oil reserves in the world, the government struggles with providing basic services and infrastructure for its citizens.

The governance system further favours the selection of people based on their political affiliations rather than their merits, and has led to the state budget being allocated to the three groups, each encouraging informal patronage. Lawmakers have tried pushing for increased spending in their own constituencies, roughly equating to

the south for Shiite and the north-west for Sunni. Policies such as the petrodollar allocation introduced in 2011 significantly benefit oil-producing governorates, which mainly are located in the south. For example, in addition to receiving ten times more in the Governorates' Development Programme in 2016, Al-Basra governorate was allocated nearly 25 times the amount of petrodollars compared to Ninewa.

The governance system unintentionally provided leeway for Iran's political and security influence in the country. First, the de-Baathification policies transferred power from Sunni to Shiite political groups to reflect the general demographics of the country

with approximately 70% identifying as Shiite. Although not established in the power-sharing quota system, the convention has been to have a Shia prime minister, in whom most of the power is vested in comparison to the other leadership positions.

Second, the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 created a power vacuum, which gave Iran room to influence internal politics in Iraq more directly as well as for ISIS to gain territory. The earlier funding and arming of Shiite groups during the US-led occupation shifted the internal power dynamics, which Iran was able to build on post-withdrawal.

Third, the fight against ISIS offered Iran the possibility to expand its security and political leverage in Iraq. Due to the failure of the regular Iraqi army units to push back against ISIS, Shia militia groups under the umbrella of Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) played a decisive role in the liberation wars, which later legitimized them as becoming part of the Iraqi security forces. After ISIS was officially declared defeated, some PMU groups rebranded themselves and ran in parliamentary elections through political coalitions such as the Fatah Alliance, which won 47 out of 329 seats in parliament. Thus,

armed confessional organizations were strongly tied to politics.

In this regard, the fact that most of the current demonstrators are, in fact, Shiite shows that foreign interference has reached a tipping point. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is the burning of the consulate of Iran in the city of Najaf. The demonstrators have been demanding changes to the electoral law and the overthrow of the post-2003 political system, where Iran would risk losing its established political influence.

In contrast, the northwestern Sunni-dominated parts have been cautious about expressing support due to the risk of them being labelled “ISIS sympathizers” by the security forces.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the demonstrators, especially young people, have disavowed sectarian identities and emphasized national Iraqi unity instead. Since the legitimacy of the political elite rests on and reinforces ethno-religious divisions and Iran’s channel of influence builds on certain Shia factions, the nationalist and trans-confessional messages threaten both the domestic political elite and Iran’s gateway of influence.

Although there has been no clarity as to who is responsible for the violence, three observations

linking Iran to the repression of the protests are in order. Firstly, the commander of the Quds forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qassem Suleimani, has been involved in official meetings with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, and there have been reports about an Iranian troop presence in the protesting areas. Secondly, particular factions of the PMU Shia militias loyal to Iran, such as the Hezbollah Brigades and Khorasani Brigades, are said to be mobilized on the ground. Thirdly, pro-Iran religious militant groups affiliated with religious parties or politicians, such as the Badr Organization and the Khazali network, have openly challenged the demonstrators.

Looking ahead, major concessions to the demonstrators are still unlikely and the political parties will probably only end up reshuffling a few people in leadership positions. Such minor concessions are, however, unlikely to appease the demonstrators, who demand more substantial reforms. Without a political solution, intimidation tactics against the protesters may increase and the spiral of violence continue.