

The Evolution of Iraq's Protests: Excessive Force Pushes Protesters to Adapt

by [Maryam Alhassani \(/experts/maryam-alhassani\)](#)

Feb 4, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ttwr-alahtajajat-fy-araq-qwt-mfrtt-tdf-almhtjyn-aly-altkyf\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Maryam Alhassani \(/experts/maryam-alhassani\)](#)

Maryam Alhassani is a student at The George Washington University, focusing on Peace Studies, conflict resolution, journalism and mass communication.



Brief Analysis

Iraq's trifecta of unemployment, lack of public services, and corruption has been a prime motivating force fueling [Iraq's months of protests](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/protests-in-iraq-against-domestic-corruption-and-iranian-influence>). And since the protests began, the young Iraqi protesters who took to the streets have discovered a fourth point of contention: the elite's lack of accountability and willingness to suppress protests rather than effect change. These young Iraqi protesters have proven partially successful in demanding political change, triggering the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mehdi. Yet government violence against protesters continues to face the protest movement; just this past weekend, the withdrawal of protection from Iraq's powerful [Shia](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/polling-insights-on-iraqs-shia-revolt>) cleric Muqtada al-Sadr made protesters' camps more vulnerable, with several [protesters shot dead](#) (<https://www.dw.com/en/iraqi-police-kill-demonstrators-in-crackdown-on-protest-camps/a-52146801>) by security forces as they attempted to clear the camps.

The dramatic use of force—killing 600 and injuring 12,000—that characterized the early days of the protests, has continued until the present day and in turn shaped the demonstrations' form and demands. One of the more remarkable aspects of the Iraqi protest movement has been the protesters' ability to adapt to pressure and evolve the protest movement in order to continue its momentum in spite of the Iraqi government's repeated efforts to suppress the movement.

On an ideological level, the repeated use of violence by the Iraqi Security Forces against legitimate demands for reform, along with the lack of response from the government, has led to a complete loss of faith and trust in the totality of the governmental system and constitution. Each new death emphasizes the reality that the hairline fracture in Iraq has finally led to a break that can only be mended by the people.

Protesters have set the tone that they will not leave the streets and have made their demands clear: the establishment of a new government that is independent from foreign influence, government institutions funded internally and implement just laws, accountability for criminal acts within the government, and the end of foreign militias in Iraq. Or, simply put, these Iraqi protesters want a homeland.

Imposing Silence: the First Wave of Protesters

Frustration with the Iraqi government, especially among Iraq's rapidly growing youth demographic, is not a new phenomenon. Accusations of corruption during the most recent [Iraqi elections in 2018](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/electoral-reform-whats-really-needed-in-iraq>), along with the large summer protests in Basra that same year, both highlighted an increasing popular rejection of the status quo. Eventually, Iraqis again took to the streets in early October and have effectively been protesting since, with a pause for the important Shia holiday of Arbaeen. During these protests, thousands of young Iraqis came to the streets to demand the removal of Adel Abdel Mehdi from his position as prime minister.

Government armed forces responded with [tear gas, spraying down demonstrators with hot water, rubber bullets](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6AsCbUMJiY>), and live ammunition. Hundreds were killed and over 6,000 were injured during this first wave. Alongside brute force, the Iraqi government attempted to stem the flow of information by blocking parts or all of the internet. Hours after the initial protests, the government [blocked a variety of apps](#) (<https://www.accessnow.org/amid-massive-anti-government-protests-a-near-total-internet-shutdown-in-iraq/>) and subsequently shut down the internet entirely, a tactic that has been employed intermittently to weaken protester coordination and prevent official attacks and abuses from being recorded. The internet blackout in turn allowed [militia men](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-iran-snipers-exclusive/exclusive-iran-backed-militias-deployed-snipers-in-iraq-protests-sources-idUSKBN1WW0B1>) clad in black to begin targeting demonstrators by stationing [snipers](#) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-deadly-sniper-attacks-and-intimidation-as-protesters-face-intensifying-crackdown/>) on the roofs (<https://youtu.be/4ZPqd7gLVN8>) of government buildings.

However, this initial spate of violence failed to achieve its goal of removing protesters from the streets. In fact, it brought about a major backlash, which eventually forced the Iraqi military to concede its role in the massacre, [stating](#) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/iraq-military-admits-excessive-force-deadly-protests-191007073440570.html>): "Excessive force outside the rules of engagement was used and we have begun to hold accountable those commanding officers who carried out these wrong acts."

Yet the ["Final report"](#) (<http://incpress.net/print:page.1.5337--.html>) of the higher ministerial committee on the causes of the fall of big number of martyrs in the Baghdad province and other provinces," was presented on [Al-Iraqiya](#) (<https://youtu.be/Neit7Ou5xOk>), a state-run channel, rather than by a government official. Moreover, the report applied vague language that failed to present clear solutions or retribution, nor did it hold government officials responsible for the deaths of hundreds, nor did not provide a clear answer of who the snipers were. These conciliatory measures to end the demonstrations also fueled the protests.

Moreover, the inadequate response to the state-sanctioned killing of civilians added the lack of accountability to the list of protesters' complaints. More importantly, it shifted the energy of the protests from the removal of Adel Mehdi to the complete removal of the entire government and political elites.

Adel Abdel Mehdi promised repercussions on individuals that participated in the assassination of peaceful demonstrators in his [address](#) (https://youtu.be/d_3ij7uSdg) to the Iraqi people on October 9, along with promises of job opportunities for the unemployed and stipends for those living below the poverty line. However, the protesters had no trust that such efforts would be made.

Instead, pressure increased until Adel Mehdi agreed to step down, redirecting his own critique to the remaining Iraqi elites: "If the goal of elections is to change the government, then there is a shorter way: for you [Muqtada al-Sadr] to agree with [Hadi] al-Amiri to form a new government."

During this 'conciliatory' period, the government narrative was one of reconciliation, yet security force actions against the protesters—which were again masked by an internet blackout—suggested a very different story.

However, the internet still allowed protesters to catalogue abuses by the state, even after an early November [UN](#) (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2nd%2520UNAMI%2520Special%2520Report%2520on%2520Human%2520Rights%2520in%2520Iraq%2520Demonstration>) report claimed that Iraqi Security Forces had "exercised significant restraint compared with the demonstrations earlier in October, with one verified report on 4 November of the use of live ammunition to disperse crowds."

Tweets from those on site during this period recorded a more violent reality. Security forces deliberately aimed tear gas grenades at protesters' bodies at point-blank range, piercing their heads and other body parts. The Twitter account 'IraqiRevolution' posted a graphic video of a protester shot dead with a tear gas grenade. The volunteer student doctor can be heard in the background: "Look. look at where [the grenade] was hit... They say there is no [violent] repression and no aimed attacks, but look at this."

As the protests continued, the government began to shift its tactics, reintroducing the internet shutdown. During the hours in which connection to the world was cut, anti-riot forces shifted to the use of live ammunition against protesters and [medical assistants \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192186589482491907?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192186589482491907?s=20), along with the burning of [medical tents \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1193451386937188352?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1193451386937188352?s=20). Several accounts presented the fall of protesters in other provinces aside from [Baghdad \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192435872366551046?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192435872366551046?s=20) (other videos <https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1193867465975054336?s=20>), including [Basra \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192560545548947456?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192560545548947456?s=20), Karbala, Dhi Qar <https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1194359828493279232?s=20>, and Nasiriyah.

Again, protesters adapted to this new style of attack. Near Tahrir Square, protesters transformed government attacks into a systematic if [morbid game \(https://twitter.com/taramrw/status/1189126166063566848?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/taramrw/status/1189126166063566848?s=20)—catch a tear gas canister and throw it down, where other protesters would catch the canisters and put it out. Others would catch the cannisters and run with them away from demonstrators, or would also [throw back \(https://twitter.com/HayderSH/status/1189113734981181441?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/HayderSH/status/1189113734981181441?s=20) the canisters. And some chose to play [soccer with them \(https://twitter.com/hamzaAlkhazraji/status/1194399677099233280?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/hamzaAlkhazraji/status/1194399677099233280?s=20).

These public records of state-sponsored violence were vital to recording the reality behind the situation. The availability of video footage helped prompt Amnesty International to conduct a [series of investigations \(https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraqi-gruesome-string-of-fatalities-as-new-tear-gas-grenades-pierce-protesters-skulls/\)](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraqi-gruesome-string-of-fatalities-as-new-tear-gas-grenades-pierce-protesters-skulls/), gathering accounts from eyewitness and medical reports to independently verify the source of the grenades and its effects on the protesters.

The streets of Tahrir Square and other areas in Iraq are flooded with students and young professionals, masks on their faces and gloves on their hands. Young doctors pitched tents and provided medical services for those with injuries.

To protect protesters on the ground from snipers, protesters took post in the hollowed out Turkish Restaurant, now referred to as Mount Uhud. Mount Uhud overlooks Tahrir Square as well as the Jumhuriya bridge, providing access to monitoring all of the activity on the ground. "The Turkish restaurant is now considered our home," [said \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFbnBAqM9T4\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFbnBAqM9T4) one protester. "We will not leave."

Other tactics to stun security forces include the use of lasers and fireworks. Some protesters have released [balloons \(https://twitter.com/AliRafee86/status/1193910221774696448?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/AliRafee86/status/1193910221774696448?s=20) in Tahrir Square, sending the message of the peacefulness of the protests.

In Tahrir square, other innovations are also visible, including checkpoints to ensure the safety of the protesters. There are [checkpoints \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192352947176386565?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192352947176386565?s=20) at Al-Jumhuriya bridge, the barricade, and the [checkpoint \(https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192352927966478336?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiRev/status/1192352927966478336?s=20) in the Turkish restaurant itself. Protesters have also established a newsletter called 'the Tuktuk', in honor of the transport vehicles—once looked down upon in Baghdad, that have now become heroes due to their transporting of injured demonstrators to the nearest medical center in the role of make-shift [ambulances \(https://twitter.com/IrfaaSawtak/status/1192774016328720386?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IrfaaSawtak/status/1192774016328720386?s=20). Tahrir Square even features a [lost-and-found \(https://twitter.com/IrfaaSawtak/status/1194299094879080451?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/IrfaaSawtak/status/1194299094879080451?s=20) for protesters looking for items misplaced during the demonstrations.

Moving Forward

As made clear by the protesters, these demonstrations are carried by the demands of the people, rather than certain political or religious blocs. This not only distinguishes these protest from previous protests but also raises the concern of lack of leadership of the movement.

The government needs to recognize that, due to the fact that the people have lost trust in their system, political officials need to move towards systematic change, with an emphasis on constitutional change rather than simple shifts of government positions.

If such major reforms are not implemented, [the government can expect the protests to escalate, rather than die down \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraqi-protesters-on-the-killing-of-gassem-soleimani-the-protests-will-conti\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraqi-protesters-on-the-killing-of-gassem-soleimani-the-protests-will-conti). Such trends have already become visible in the past weeks due to the lack of action and change from the government. Protesters have begun to implement new methods of civil disobedience, including blocking main highways with burning tires and welding the doors of government offices shut.

Those protesting are young members of society, including students and recent graduates, who have withstood sniper bullets, dodged military-grade tear gas, and rubber bullets. Their adoption of civil disobedience in the face of months of repression demonstrates that the only thing that will satisfy the people is a commitment to reform and accountability for those responsible for the deaths and injuries.

"They decided to complete their task and change everything in order to live. They have to do the impossible," said [Ahmed Albasheer \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_CfUXOXKoA&t=445s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_CfUXOXKoA&t=445s), also known as the Iraqi Jon Stewart. "They do not have the concept of a red line in their minds anymore. The important thing [for them] is to live a life worth living." ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

•
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: [Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

•
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)