

# Iraqi Protestors: On the Iraqi State and the Arrest of Muslih

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist based in Iraq. His writing focuses on a variety of issues, including politics, health, society, wars, and human rights. Al-Rubaie is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

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## Protestors in Iraq are using the "Who Killed Me" hashtag to call out militia influence in the Iraqi government and demand greater protection for demonstrators.

On May 25, Iraq witnessed popular demonstrations in a number of governorates that activists and demonstrators had organized on social media in the preceding weeks. The demonstrations called out, “Who killed me?” and demanded the identification of those responsible for the killing of protestors since the major demonstrations in 2019. They condemned the ongoing assassinations of high-profile activists in the October Protest Movement, who opposed corruption and the unregulated proliferation of arms. The day before the demonstrations, thousands of protestors from cities throughout Iraq arrived in Baghdad, while protests continued in cities of Iraq’s southern governorates.

The demonstrations also took place amid the ongoing spread of coronavirus throughout Iraq. Nevertheless, demonstrators announced that they would take to the streets again as their demands in the 2019 protests had yet to be fulfilled. Article 38 of the [Iraqi Constitution \(https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en\)](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en) guarantees the right to assemble and protest peacefully—a right which was denied under the regime of Saddam Hussein prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion.

### The “Who killed me?” Hashtag

Prior to every demonstration in Iraq, protestors have become accustomed to mobilizing on social media and creating hashtags indicating the name of the demonstration and its official demands. An example is “Who killed me?” which refers to protestors’ demand that the identities of the killers be made public. Another example is “The Just Are

Returning,” in reference to demonstrators who survived the demonstrations of previous years and are returning to the streets announcing their demands and their positions on the ruling political class.

Social media posts have played a clear role in maintaining the popular movement and amplifying protestors’ voices to the global stage. This contrasted with the limited role of social media during the 2019 protests, when internet blackouts were imposed to prevent coverage of the demonstrations and stop them from influencing public opinion. Even so, the blackouts in 2019 did not stop protestors from documenting instances of violence that they experienced.

The slogans of protestors in Baghdad also echoed those used in protests in al-Habboubi Square in Nasiriyah governorate, Bahria Square in Basra, and the governorates of Karbala, Najaf, and Wasit. In each case, protestors called on the Iraqi government to discover who was responsible for killing demonstrators. In parallel, they outlined other demands: improving living conditions, restricting weapons ownership to the state, ending the power of factions and militias, establishing security and stability, and moving toward early elections under United Nations supervision.

### **Violence Against Protesters**

In order to prevent angry protestors from entering the Green Zone, security forces imposed a security cordon. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces resulted in **two dead and 150 wounded** (<https://twitter.com/SofiaBarbarani/status/1397470366725980160?s=20>), among them security officers. Security forces deployed live rounds and tear gas despite calls from government authorities for the protection of demonstrators against the use of excessive force.

Official and non-state actors have since condemned the use of excessive force against protestors. Ulric Shannon, the Canadian ambassador to Iraq, **tweeted** (<https://twitter.com/UlricShannon/status/1397616965338947585>): “The basic rights of citizens cannot be respected, and those who commit crimes against activists cannot be held accountable, amid the spread of armed groups that believe they are above the law. The brandishing of weapons against public institutions represents a clear threat to the authority of the State. The Iraqi justice system must be allowed to operate without the threat of violence, and the law must be applied to all.”

The current prime minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, likewise **tweeted** (<https://twitter.com/MAKadhimi/status/1397276584000774147>) on May 25: “We support the freedom to demonstrate peacefully in Iraq and have issued strict orders for the demonstrations to be protected, for restraint to be exercised, and for a prohibition on the use of live rounds for any reason. Today, a transparent investigation will be launched regarding what took place in the final moments of the demonstration in Tahrir Square, in order to clarify events. Security is everyone’s responsibility, and we must work together to preserve it.”

The day after Kadhimi’s Twitter post, the Security Media Cell **announced** (<https://twitter.com/SecMedCell/status/1397621832996560898>) the arrest of the accused Qasim Muslih, the operations commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Anbar, reporting that Muslih would be investigated by a joint commission regarding criminal charges against him. The Supreme Judicial Council had issued the warrant for Muslih’s arrest and investigation on May 21 in accordance with Article 4 of the anti-terrorism law. As of publication, no details have been released regarding his investigation.

A prominent activist from the Karbala governorate, who declined to be named for security reasons, characterized the arrest as a notable step: “The Liwa’ al-Tafuf brigade is the one who is killing activists, including Ehab al-Wazni, the lead coordinator of the protests in Karbala, and prior to that, the novelist Alaa Mashzoub and the activist Fahem al-Ta’i.” For this activist, activism directly led to Muslih’s arrest: “Qasim Muslih was arrested because of pressure from

the campaigns undertaken by Karbala activists. Notable among these campaigns was ‘Who killed me?’ in Karbala, aimed at revealing who detained Ehab al-Wazni. The hashtag “Who killed me?” soon spread to every other city in Iraq.”

The activist also emphasized the role that protesters are playing in challenging these militias: “In the demonstrations, al-Wazni and al-Ta’i warned about the influence of armed groups in the country. The time has come for the names of those who killed protestors to be revealed. Militias have been killing activists and notable individuals one after another, all due to these individuals’ presence in the militias’ zone of influence in Iraq.”

Likewise, Ali al-Muallem, a political activist from Basra, stated “Regarding the elections, and many of the activists wanted to boycott the elections after we realized that the political process was impacted by the efforts of groups with arms and by the presence of militias in Iraq. We had not yet seen any steps from Kadhimi to discover the killers of the demonstrators.

The current demonstrations differ from those that preceded them, as the families of earlier martyrs killed by armed groups are a fundamental part of these protests and have called for them. And there is solidarity between youth political alliances to support the popular movement and the protests in Baghdad. This leads to the delivery of the message that the killings and assassination of the activists and protesters must be stopped.”

Al-Muallem added: “The demands of the current protests call for revealing the killers of the protestors, Including Ehab al-Wazni, Fahem al-Ta’i, Reham Yacoub, Hisham al-Hashemi, and others like them. These protests are a part of a series of upcoming protests that bear the same demands.”

Prior to assuming the position of prime minister, Kadhimi promised that he was committed to respecting human rights and holding those involved in the killing of protestors, activists, and journalists accountable. Consequently, Kadhimi ordered the raid of a building of the Thar Allah factions on May 11, which had opened fire on demonstrators from earlier protests, [killing one demonstrator and wounding four](https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/iraq-police-raid-office-of-pro-iran-militia-accused-of-shooting-protesters-1.1017818)

[\(https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/iraq-police-raid-office-of-pro-iran-militia-accused-of-shooting-protesters-1.1017818\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/iraq-police-raid-office-of-pro-iran-militia-accused-of-shooting-protesters-1.1017818). Iraqi forces arrested all those present in the building, seized weapons, and referred the suspects for prosecution.

A number of Iraqi citizens and demonstrators interviewed see the arrest of Muslih as a positive step towards realizing the demands that fueled their protests. Chief among these demands is the release of the identities of those who have killed protestors over the last three years. Likewise, they support Kadhimi’s efforts to hold the killers and corrupt individuals accountable.

Meanwhile, armed factions encircled the Green Zone, where Muslih was being held for interrogation and where government headquarters, Iraqi officials’ homes, and foreign diplomatic missions are also located. The factions prevented anyone except their own forces from entering or leaving the Green Zone, and they aimed to pressure authorities to release Muslih. Videos on social media showed vehicles belonging to the factions patrolling the streets of Baghdad, which angered the Iraqi public and provoked widespread criticism over the extent of paramilitary groups’ influence in the country. Kadhimi [characterized the actions](https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1397648471704981505)

[\(https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1397648471704981505\)](https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1397648471704981505) of the armed groups as a “grave violation” of the Iraqi constitution and applicable law and ordered an immediate investigation into the activity of armed groups within the Green Zone.

In examining Kadhimi’s response, political analyst Ali al-Baidar stated when interviewed that, “Al-Kadhimi is serious, and he desires reform, but he is running up against political and security pressures. He wants change even though it isn’t possible, and this shows the sincerity of his intentions. He is surrounded by individuals who intend to distract him from reality, which jeopardizes al-Kadhimi’s efforts towards reform. However, the return of the protests

at the present time results from protestors' loss of confidence in the governments' efforts to identify the killers of the demonstrators, bring them to justice, and rein in the power of militias and Iranian influence in Iraq. The assassination of the activist Ehab al-Wazni spurred protestors to action, emboldening them to take to the streets in Baghdad."

In al-Baidar's view, armed militias backed by political actors are behind the detentions of activists as well as the sluggishness of affiliated security officials, who owe allegiance to these factions or receive bribes from them. These actors prevent activists from resuming protests and send threats to kill those who do not stop protesting.

Other observers suspect that the destabilization of the security and political situation in the country will delay early elections, currently scheduled for this October, until further notice. However, as a key feature of protestors demands, a delay in elections would lead to further protest movements demanding transparent elections in which everyone can participate. Fulfilling this demand will require international cooperation to help the Iraqi government provide a secure environment.

Even so, the protest and subsequent arrest of Muslih have encouraged many Iraqis to renew their support for the federal government as it combats corruption and lawlessness and brings criminals to justice. Protestors and the government alike seem aligned in their efforts to strengthen the state and improve its control over those who seek to undermine the country's security and stability. ❖

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