

Iraq's 'Armed Protest Syndrome': From a Clash of Ideas to Violence

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Brief Analysis

In order to restore the stability and authority of the Iraqi state, the Sudani government must endeavor to end the years-long connection between protests and reciprocal violence.

The degree of violence in protests across Iraq has escalated significantly in recent years. Scenes of violence and bloodshed have become one of the main features of popular protests throughout the country, usually resulting in casualties on both sides of the conflict. What brought about this syndrome of armed protests? Why have political protests in Iraq largely lost their peacefulness? And what are the consequences of a culture of armed protests in Iraq for the future of the political system? Understanding the answers to these questions is key as a new government in Iraq begins its tenure, and as deteriorating conditions for the Iraqi public suggest a new movement could emerge.

In the century since the foundation of the Iraqi state, armed protest through revolutions, coups, and uprisings has been a hallmark of the country's political and social scene. Since 2003, Iraq has witnessed three key phases of protests, notable in the fact that each wave began peacefully yet ended in violent disasters. These phases include the resistance phase, the Iraqi Spring, and the October 2019 protests.

From the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 to mid-2008, armed protest became a significant aspect of resistance for the Iraqi people. Unfortunately, this armed resistance only produced devastating results, leading Iraq into sectarian conflict and making room for the emergence of armed groups benefiting from strong organization, flexible operations, and the power of sheer violence. More specifically, the cycle of armed protests ultimately undermined state stability, causing the decline in state power, sectarian and intellectual divisions of society, an outbreak of sectarian conflict, the spread of terrorist attacks, and further justification of armed militias' presence as a fait accompli. Until the state was able to eliminate Al-Qaeda and other armed groups and militias in 2008, instability reigned.

Just years later, the rising tides of the Arab Spring—which started in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010—brought about a second round of Iraqi popular protests in February 2011. Although these protests began peacefully, featuring civilians and peaceful slogans, they gradually escalated to mutual acts of violence from both protesters and security forces. Eventually, this [hotbed of rebellion \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle east/iraqs-sunni-tribal-leaders-say-fight-for-fallujah-is-part-of-a-revolution/2014/03/12/cac86d7a-9f19-11e3-b8d8-94577ff66b28_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqs-sunni-tribal-leaders-say-fight-for-fallujah-is-part-of-a-revolution/2014/03/12/cac86d7a-9f19-11e3-b8d8-94577ff66b28_story.html) turned into what was called the “revolution of the clans,” a situation that later became an incubator for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). These forces initially presented themselves in a manner consistent with the popular demands in protest areas, but soon showed their true colors as terrorist organizations.

In both of these cases, political and security outcomes of the protests were wholly different from their origins. Although starting as often-legitimate protests against the dominant order, these periods of violence ended in the emergence of armed Shia factions and groups like ISIS. In turn, Iraqis established groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in reaction to the emergence of ISIS and the spread of terrorism. All around, armed conflict metastasized as each side spawned increasingly violent splinter-groups.

Notably, the third cycle of Iraq’s violent protests drew from a different element: anti-Iranian sentiment. Although the first two periods of violence focused on the United States’ presence in Iraq and then the Iraqi regime itself, these only provided the fuel for what would become the third cycle of armed resistance in Iraq, beginning in October 2019.

The protests in October 2019 were radically different from previous protests in a number of ways. Geographically, Baghdad was the center of these protests, but they also extended deep into the central and southern provinces of the country. Moreover, the demands of protestors were national in nature, not specific to a sect or social group. This rhetoric was, of course, broadly attractive, and most Iraqis took up the expression of these popular demands.

Still, these protests garnered further violence on both sides. Demonstrators were fired upon, injured, killed, and arrested en masse. In turn, security forces were subjected to Molotov cocktails, rocks, and sometimes bullets. Public and private facilities were burned and broken into by the demonstrators, or so-called “infiltrators.” Sadly, this violence reached its peak when a boy was [lynched](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/world/middleeast/iraq-protesters-teen-lynching.html)

[\(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/world/middleeast/iraq-protesters-teen-lynching.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/world/middleeast/iraq-protesters-teen-lynching.html) by demonstrators in al-Wathba Square, marking the protest’s deviation into the ugliest forms of violence. Again, although the protests began as peaceful resistance, specifically resistance to the presence of Iran in Iraq, this harmony quickly fell apart in the face of brutal repression and an increasingly desperate response.

An interesting difference in this third cycle was the institutionalization of the protests. More specifically, a number of political forces managed to enter the October Movement as a “partner” to the protestors, a partnership which some viewed as necessary in order to maintain the movement’s momentum. For example, the masses of the Sadrist Movement came into the demonstration squares, and a Sadrist group known as the “Blue Hats” emerged, justifying their presence as an assurance of safety for the sit-in protestors. Although this politicization was not completely successful—in fact, many of the “Blue Hats” were unable to gain other protestors’ trust and there were incidents of bloody clashes between groups, the Sadrist movement has nevertheless leaned on the October Revolution as a means of garnering popular appeal outside of their current base.

Indeed, the Sadrist movement in particular has used the October protests as justification for new armed protests. Though embodied by more than one incident, the most prominent continuations of violence can be seen in the Sadrists’ storming of the parliament building in the international Green Zone in July 2022, followed by further bloody attempts to storm the Green Zone by armed force, an effort that resulted in clashes with light, medium, and heavy weapons, leaving more than 34 dead and dozens injured among the Green Zone attackers and defenders.

This most recent period in Iraq’s ongoing ‘armed protest syndrome’ has significantly entrenched the state’s

weakness. It has also hinted at a changing geography of violence in Iraq, from sectarian—as it was in the first cycle of armed protest before 2008 and the second before 2017—to intra-Shia conflict.

Armed protests in 2022 also cemented a new and extremely dangerous political tradition: the need for political parties to have armed wings that can be used as a force factor in winning votes, negotiating policies, and disrupting or diverting the course of political institutions. Most political forces active in Iraq today have an armed wing. Some are actually longstanding institutions, as is the case of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)'s Peshmerga forces. The Sadrist Movement has several armed wings, and the Coordination Framework is affiliated with Iraqi Hezbollah Battalions, the most powerful armed militia supported by Iran. Moreover, there are several militias unaffiliated with political wings that include the Master of Martyrs Battalions, Imam Ali Battalions, and Nujaba Battalions.

The issue of violent protests must be among the top priorities on the agenda of Iraq's new Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani. Although he is not expected to enter into direct confrontation with any armed faction, it is important that he seek to restore the status and privilege of the state in the wake of severe destabilization. During his candidacy, Sudani **announced**

(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%22-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%22%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%91%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86%22-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>) that the government would work to control the spread of

weapons, impose state sovereignty, restrict the number of militias and armed groups, and impose the force of law on any armed faction or party that exercises its role separately from the state and security institutions. It is now up to Sudani to in fact provide solutions to these issues, although it will admittedly be difficult for these groups to give up their weapons without concrete assurances.

These three transformative periods of violent protests in Iraq's recent history—the October 2019 protests being especially impactful—demonstrate that even legitimate protests can quickly spiral out of control when armed groups are involved. It will take significant time for Sudani and the Iraqi government to set things right. As the third cycle of violence actively continues, the inherent danger of weapons and armed factions in the democratic process only increases given the right catalyst. Facing this reality, it is incumbent upon all political forces that truly believe in the system of Iraqi democracy to find practical ways to take weapons out of the political equation, disrupting the years-long connection between violence and protest in Iraq. So long as the political dialogue is given over to the trinity of smoke, fire, and blood, catastrophe awaits. ❖

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