

Protests in Iraq

by [Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Though recent Iraqi protests have not pushed for the removal of the central government, they nonetheless illustrate a number of widespread attitudes that inform Iraqis' alienation from their authorities.

Following the events in Tunisia and Egypt, protesters in Iraq have taken to the streets to voice their displeasure with the government. Although the violent protests that took place today did not call for the removal of the central government, as in other regional countries, they nonetheless illustrated a number of widespread public attitudes toward the government.

- **High expectations:** Although Iraqis have been able to choose their governments through elections since 2005, the people are sending a message to politicians and officials that the guarantee of voting rights and credible elections is no longer sufficient. Iraqis now expect their government to be able to show improvement in the sorely lacking and eroding basic services.
- **Anger:** The protesters are bitter about their elected officials, whom they perceive to be enriching themselves at the expense of serving their constituency. Their salaries -- estimated at about \$11,000 a month for members of parliament -- stand in gross contrast to the daily hardships of the populace.
- **Geographic differences:** Thus far, Iraqi Kurdistan has been the epicenter of protest activity calling for political change. The city of Sulaymaniyah has witnessed demonstrations demanding a better political system and less control of the government by the two ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Additionally, one opposition group, Gorran, has called for the dissolution of the Kurdistan Regional Government and a new round of elections in three months. Meanwhile, the protests in the rest of the country have focused on demands for better electricity and more jobs, the fight against corruption and nepotism, and a revamped Public Distribution System. The PDS, established by the state in 1990 to provide food to Iraqi families, has halved the number of items it

provides, with a decrease in quality and erratic distribution.

In light of these developments, the central and provincial governments have initiated a number of measures to allay the public's anger. For instance, the newly passed budget includes provisions to give compensation in lieu of missing food items from the PDS. Furthermore, directors-general of several provincial departments have been relieved of their duties. But these measures are perceived by many of the protesters as a bit too late. As a result, today's protest in Basra forced the resignation of the governor, who had been a target of discontent. Furthermore, local government officials in a number of small cities have resigned.

Moving forward, the Iraqi government has to consolidate these steps by making balanced public statements. Its allegations that the protests were organized by the Baath Party have only angered the protesters and trivialized their plight.

Calls by major political groups and religious figures to give the government time to solve these problems might have limited the magnitude of today's protests. Additionally, the Iraqi government has been clear in its commitment to allow freedom of assembly as the constitution dictates. However, the implications of its rhetoric and public statements that marginalize the protesters' grievances and paint them as political are likely to shake the Iraqi people's faith in the political system and further damage the prospects for national reconciliation.

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