

The Iraq Protests and Implications for “Political Stability”

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Earlier this month, bringing in foreign workers by some oil companies in Iraq was seen by the local labour as a grave threat to their livelihood. Despite the high unemployment rates among Iraqis, the government has allowed the foreign firms and agencies to recruit approximately [200,000 foreign workers](#) so far. Many of these are employed illegally in Iraq. The fervour of Iraqis reached its peak when Iran, one of its biggest trading partners, cut electricity supply due to Iraq's unpaid bills of around [\\$1 billion](#) on July 9, exacerbating country's electricity crisis amid the suffocating heat waves of more than 50 degrees Celsius. While few Iraqis could afford fleeing the country, others are outraged at power cuts and blame the government for corruption and mismanagement.

Hundreds of Iraqis took to the streets, demanding actions to tackle corruption, to bolster the weak economy and to improve the provision of basic services. Since employment is their major demand, the protestors mostly targeted economic sites such as Umm Qasr port, Zubayr oil field and Shiba gas field in Basra. In a matter of days, the protest that resonated in Basra, quickly spread like a copious cloud to other provinces like Maysan, Karbala, Najaf, Babel, and Dhi Qar, taking the government by surprise.

This massive movement, with the potential to reshape Iraq was simmering with sulking water security that worsened after Turkey threatened to construct a dam, reducing the flow from the Tigris River into the Mosul Dam Lake. It was followed by Iran's announcement in June that its massive new water project, which would divert the waters from west to the parched parts of east in the country, is at its edge of completion. In other words, it means diversion the waters of the little Zab and Sirwan rivers, both of which flow into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Middle East is already grappling with a crippling water shortage that shows few signs of abating. This year, rain too has failed them. Under these circumstances, the competition over shared water resources between these three countries is all set to intensify. Without an effective working mechanism, water conflict could potentially become a serious challenge to Iraq's bilateral relationship with Iran and Turkey.

Instead of addressing the water disputes however, the Iraqi government has set its priority in resolving reports of frauds, vote rigging and political interference that took place during the 12 May elections. In the post-ISIS era, politics in Iraq has become livelihood of the Iraqi judiciary, bureaucrats, and the political elites who are thoroughly engaged in the manual recount of ballots. Few of them are also insisting on re-election and are willing to go at any such lengths to secure few of additional seats in the parliament. The political infighting

among the Iraqi parties is not only delaying the formation of the new government but also has proven to be an impediment in the governance of the country. As a result, Iraq's trust in government and political parties has reached a historical low. It appears that they like the idea of democracy but loathe the reality.

The Iraq government's failure to address water shortage has also widened the tribal dispute in the southern Dhi Qar province. According to [Mayor Hussein Ali Raddad](#) of the Isah district alone, there were nearly 20 clashes over water scarcity in recent months. The effect of drought has also provided a pretext for the [revival of ISIS](#). The affiliates of the Islamic State is trying to tap the grievances of farmers, who feel abandoned by their leaders and were ripe for recruitment. Already battered with the government's shoddy policies which hobbled agriculture and impoverished its dependents, these farmers were in no state to navigate the extra challenges caused due to lack of basic services and necessity.

While few villages emerged as some of the deep-pocketed jihadists foremost recruiting ground, others decided to move into urban cities to find an alternate jobs to sustain their families' livelihood. But, the situation there was not any more different than the rural areas. The unemployment ratio is about twice as high, especially among the poorest households and governates mostly affected by ISIS-related violence. As per the [World Bank](#) reports of April 2018, the poverty rate in Iraq had increased from 18.9 % in 2012 to an estimated 22.5% in 2014. It has gone further up in the later years. The recent labour market statistics suggest further deterioration of the poverty situation due to the markedly dropping participation rate of youths (ages 15-24) since the onset of the crisis in 2014, from 32.5% to 27.4%.

Left with nowhere to go, these young and old peasants, men and women are on the streets, halting along the roads, calling for a revolution against their leaders. These protestors least concerned about the consequences, are suffering because of unpayable debts, water-energy scarcity and zero government relief. Even though the Iraqi government keeps chanting that farmers are the backbone of the economy, no one seems to care about them in actuality. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has alternated between trying to suppress the protest by shutting the internet service and, more ominously had redeployed counterterrorism force who were given [orders to arrest all demonstrators](#), and forcibly break the protest. Apparently, the Iraqi security force had beaten and fired on the protestors, killing and wounding more than [800](#).

Moreover, the government crackdown featuring multiple arrests of organizers, activists, and journalists is an attempt to diminish the size and scope of the protest. Abadi even tried to appease the protestors by [suspending his electricity](#) minister, Qassim al-Fahdawi, while his government investigates the ministry and the poor state of electricity service in Iraq. He also offered nearly [\\$3 billion](#) (3.5 trillion Iraqi dinars) for new utility-related projects in Basra. However, the offer is a long-term project and will not address the current need of the protestors. Also considering Abadi's rhetoric dishonesties, one cannot trust his commitment especially when there is a slim chance of regaining his premiership with the next government.

On the other side, Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of Iraq's largest party (Sairoon) in the recent elections, [expressed support](#) for the protestors and called for the formation of Iraq's next government to be further delayed until their demands have been addressed. Here, the problem is that these demand cannot be resolved overnight. In order to pay attention to the

emerging crisis and demands that embody them, transformation and formation of the government is must. A government with structural and normative change with a systematic body is necessary to address past and present needs of Iraqi citizens. While others ignored this fact, Iraq's top Shi'a leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, recognized the importance of a new functional and effective government. He [delivered a sermon](#) that called for political factions to get over their differences and form a new government which can tackle the endemic corruption that's triggered the protests across the country. Sistani is not a political actor but he is immensely influential and his words carry enormous weight amongst the Iraqi Shi'a.

Along with the grand leader, the neighbouring countries especially Kuwait is concerned about brewing instability which has the potential to push Iraqi refugees into the country. As a result, [Kuwait](#) decided to help Iraq by supplying fuel for its power plants and has also expressed its willingness to help with desalination effort to improve Iraq's water supply. Amidst the anti-Iranian and anti-Turkish sentiment amongst Iraqis, Saudi Arabia has also suggested that it will build a [solar power plant](#) and sell its electricity to Baghdad for around quarter of what Iran was charging. While the Iraqis say that they are still evaluating this proposal, which would obviously be a way for Riyadh to undermine Iran's influence in Iraq, Iranian have not yet commented on this alleged offer. However, the Iranians have reportedly reached an [agreement](#) with Iraq to block heavily polluted and salty water from Tehran's Karun River from reaching Bagdad's Shatt al-Arab waterway, the river formed by the joining of the Tigris and Euphrates. Salty water in the Shatt al-Arab has become a major issue in terms of both irrigation and drinking water in southern Iraq. While these external factors ticked down the protest, Iraq and its government is still in a mess.

It has been a year since Iraqis achieved liberation from ISIS, yet the situation remains unlivable. So far, the international community/allies have contributed [\\$30billion dollar](#) to rebuild areas damaged during the war against ISIS. But, the reconstruction project has been [hampered](#) by [corruption](#), mismanagement and dysfunctional governance. Apparently, [hundreds of billions](#) in oil revenues have been syphoned out of the country by the elites. Even if Iraq is rebuilt, lingering distrust and ongoing [sectarian-ethnic violence](#) will continue to ruin Iraq in the post-ISIS era. Shia and Kurd forces who participated in the operation against ISIS are reluctant to allow Sunni Arabs to return home due to unjustified fears that they might have a link to ISIS. And it is the Iraqi government's inability to provide security assurances that contribute to such fear. Thus, it is significant to Iraq to form a new government which ought to take charge of the situation in terms of addressing energy, water and security crisis, followed by corruption and unemployment. If they dwell further on the electoral frauds, other pertinent issues of governance would remain to be languishing without being adequately addressed.

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