

# The Iraq Report: Basra's Fury Spreads to Baghdad as New Protests Erupt

By [The New Arab](#)

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*For more than a fortnight the fires of fury have been stoked in the oil-rich and Shia-majority south of Iraq after the government was accused of doing nothing to alleviate a deepening unemployment crisis and to tackle rampant corruption.*

*The demonstrations began in Basra, before swiftly spreading to major population centres including Najaf and Amarah, and now discontent is stirring in the capital, Baghdad.*

Baghdad's Green Zone has been quick to promise more funding and investment in development of chronically underdeveloped cities, but this has done little to quell public anger. Iraqis have heard these promises countless times before, and with a water and energy crisis striking in the middle of scorching summer heat, people are less inclined to believe what their government says.

With Iran refusing to provide for Iraq's electricity needs, Baghdad has now also turned to Saudi Arabia to see if its southern Arab neighbour can help alleviate the crises it faces.

## Protesters killed

Demonstrations against chronic unemployment, corruption and Baghdad's subservience to the agendas of foreign powers have entered their third week.

Iraqis in the Shia-dominated south - the heart of Iraq's oil sector - are outraged at the political elite for failing to provide opportunities for citizens, particularly the youth. Youth unemployment currently stands at 18 percent, and has hit those with higher education degrees hardest.

About 60 percent of Iraqis are below the age of 24, and with such a high proportion of jobless youth, politicians have their work cut out to be able to convince young people that officials have a plan to ensure they have a future.

The situation is made even worse in southern industrial cities like Basra, where the petroleum industry is employing cheap foreign labour - despite laws stating that 50 percent of staff employed by companies enjoying the spoils of lucrative Iraqi oil contracts must be Iraqi.

Demonstrators have angrily lashed out at politicians they accuse of benefiting from

kickbacks and corruption by allowing companies to hire cheaper labour and ignoring the domestic workforce. Protesters have even attempted to break into oil installations, according to Oil Minister Jabbar al-Luaibi, who last week said that foreign workers were being evacuated for their own safety.

The eruption of anger forced Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to cut short his trip to the NATO summit in Brussels last week and head straight to Basra to try and calm public fury after security forces [killed an unarmed demonstrator](#). Rather than prevent an escalation of the violence, and promising to hold violent Shia militias and unruly security forces to account, [nine more Iraqis were killed](#) by the start of the week, with more video footage emerging showing the lifeless bodies of victims of state and militia violence.

Demonstrators and their supporters on social media have accused Abadi of being incapable of controlling violent police, military and paramilitary units, including Iran-backed Shia militants in the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) – a militant group that is now formally a part of the Iraqi armed forces. The PMF and its constituent militias often only follow the orders of their own local commanders, or Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), completely undermining the prime minister’s role as commander-in-chief.

[#breaking](#) : Protesters have attacked Dawa party office in Najaf, Dawa has been the party of the PM in Iraq for the last 12 years  
[pic.twitter.com/Q5uuirfvog](https://pic.twitter.com/Q5uuirfvog)

— Steven nabil (@thestevennabil) [July 13, 2018](#)

Counter-terrorism forces used against ‘Baathist’ protesters

PMF militants, including the notoriously sectarian Asa’ib Ahl ul-Haq militia, the Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba group, and Kata’ib Hizballah, have all taken part in violently suppressing protests. This follows the torching of the rulin Dawa Party’s offices and those of IRGC-linked militias by demonstrators in the first week of the protests.

Shia Arab protesters could be heard cursing various political parties and militant groups as “Iranians” and not Iraqis, and branding them “Safavids”, in reference to the Shia Persian empire who fought against the Ottoman Turks for control over Iraq for centuries.

The use of the term “Safavid” is more usually associated with Sunni groups who remain critical of the former Persian empire for their sectarian pogroms in Baghdad and other cities – so its use by Shia Iraqis is perhaps indicative of the scale and depth of the anger against Iranian interventionism in Iraq.

Open criticism against pro-Iran groups is rarely tolerated in Iraq, however, and Dawa Party officials have been quick to react, especially after protests spread to Baghdad, causing politicians and militia leaders to become jittery.

*The New Arab’s* Arabic language service reported that Saad al-Muttalibi, a Dawa Party official loyal to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, described the protesters as [“little children”](#) and claimed they were linked to the proscribed Baath Party of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

Muttalibi, who also serves on the Baghdad security council, said his party had information that demonstrators in the Shola district were attempting to “encourage acts of sabotage”, but had been thwarted by political parties and security forces, who arranged a brutal crackdown on dissent.

Activists in Baghdad say they organised demonstrations in solidarity with their countrymen in Basra, Najaf and other major cities, and because they shared the same grievances. Nevertheless, [counter-terrorism forces have been deployed](#) against them.

This is not the first time that Muttalibi has fuelled major controversy. In early 2017, during the battle for Mosul, Muttalibi openly admitted during an appearance on *TRT World* that his government was [conducting executions without trial](#). When he was informed by another panellist that he was in fact admitting to war crimes, Muttalibi burst out in laughter.

Such disregard for international human rights law has likely encouraged an environment of impunity, as PMF militants and security forces abduct, torture and sometimes kill demonstrators.

*Al Jazeera Arabic's* Iraq editor, Hamid Hadeed, reported that a young man, Mohammed al-Shakir, was [kidnapped and murdered](#) before being dumped on the streets of Najaf as a message to other protesters. The victim was a Shia activist killed by Shia militias.

### Iraq turns to Saudi Arabia as Iran fails to cut electricity deal

In an attempt to quench the fires of public anger, Baghdad has attempted to negotiate with neighbouring Iran for an increase in the electricity supply to Iraq and to stabilise the grid. Although Iraq has enough natural resources to be completely energy independent, a cocktail of corruption, mismanagement and the effects of decades of war has left it reliant on neighbouring powers, particularly Tehran.

However, Iran has been unwilling to assist Iraq this time, as it grapples with its own domestic problems, cutbacks and the fallout of the imminent reinstatement of US sanctions. Tehran has even cut the electricity supply to Iraq which has made an already hot summer even hotter as Iraqis contend with record scorching temperatures.

With tempers already flaring, Abadi has sought alternative solutions, and has turned to Saudi Arabia instead, seeking Riyadh's help to calm public anger.

A senior delegation travelled to Riyadh on Wednesday to tackle issues “led by the electricity and fuel problems”. The prime minister's office also revealed that the country's energy minister will be dispatched later this week to sign [urgent energy agreements](#) with the Sunni Arab monarchy.

While Iran's intransigence has been seen as a sign of its displeasure at the outcome of the Iraqi elections held in May, this is perhaps an overly conspiratorial outlook that is not reflective of the reality faced by the Iranian regime. Iran has a plethora of unpaid debts as well as power and energy problems of its own – and with the United States decision to walk away from the nuclear deal earlier this year portending difficult times for Tehran.

This has caused Iran to pare back services that it views as non-essential to its aims, including power distribution to southern Iraq.

Iran's decision may have unintended consequences, however, with Saudi Arabia being in a prime position to fill the void and show Iraqis that there is an alternative to reliance on Iran. Abadi may seek to balance both powers against one another to his benefit, but only if he manages to hold onto the premiership – which is far from certain, even though a new government has yet to be formed and is unlikely to appear in the near future.

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