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## Language

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Iraq is a country composed of many diverse religious and ethnic groups, which has often led to deep political divisions. The three most important groups in terms of their size and their political impact are Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and the (mainly Sunni) Kurds. There are also about 3 million Turkmens (divided between Sunni and Shia religious allegiance) and a number of other much smaller religious and ethnic groups, such as Christians and the polytheistic Yazidis. These minorities became the especial targets of the fanatical (Sunni) Islamic State movement, that became a much-feared military and political force in Iraq between 2013-17. The Kurds have played an important role in Iraqi politics and internal wars, seeking independence, but also making political alliances and supporting recent coalitions. But the most central division has been between the Shia majority and the Sunnis. The latter for a long period dominated politically in Iraq. It is only since the US-led invasion of 2003 that Shia representatives have had the opportunity to play a major role.

## Historical Background

Iraq emerged from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and became a British Protectorate. British influence lasted after the Second World War under the monarchy of King Feisal, who was a British ally, until he was overthrown in 1958. Ten years later the Baathist Party took power through a coup, and under Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr pursued an anti-western policy. Saddam Hussein became President at the head of the Baathist Party in 1979, and became known for his ruthlessness against opponents, using chemical weapons against Kurds in Halabja in 1988 and against Kurds and Southern Shia rebels who rose up against him in March-April 1991. Hussein's decision to invade and annex Kuwait in 1990 led to a US-led and UN-approved military assault on Iraqi forces, which resulted in Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

The victory of the US-led forces in the 'First Gulf War' resulted in international control over Iraq's weapons programmes through inspections and through overseeing destruction of chemical weapons. It also resulted in major curbs on movement of Iraqi forces through no-fly zones, and a ban on Iraqi oil sales (partially lifted by the UN in 1995 to allow the buying of much needed food and medicines). After the Iraqi government refused further cooperation with the UN in dismantling weapons of mass destruction in 1998, the US and Britain undertook a bombing campaign to destroy Iraq's ability to produce any of these weapons. Western distrust of Saddam Hussein, especially fear that he had secreted weapons of mass destruction, and the ambition of US President George W. Bush to 'finish the job' of toppling Hussein begun in the First Gulf War, led to the Second Gulf War of 2003. US victory ensured the toppling in March of Saddam Hussein, who was later captured in December that year, and executed in December 2006 for 'crimes against humanity'.

The US Administration aspired to create a liberal parliamentary democracy in Iraq. Power was formally transferred to an interim government in June 2004, and in late 2005 the Iraqi people were offered a new constitution, which was approved in October 2005, and a new parliament was elected in December 2005. However, because the US had tried to eliminate the basis of Saddam Hussein's regime by disbanding the Iraqi armed forces and dismissing top administrators, the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority had effectively to run the country, promote new political parties and train new military forces. The US military and political control increasingly looked to many Iraqis like an occupation rather than a liberation force: photographs of US troops mistreating and humiliating Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghreib prison, released in April-May 2004, outraged Iraqi opinion.

From the outset US forces met with guerrilla warfare, and a suicide bomber destroyed the UN headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003. The radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr mobilized a militia, which fought US forces in Najaf in August 2004. Because of the scale of violent unrest and deaths the US military (already deploying 130,000 troops) brought in thousands more troops after January 2007. Sectarian violence, such as suicide bomb attacks on Shia festival celebrations in March 2004 and on the Shia al-Askari shrine in February 2006, also greatly intensified levels of social conflict and violence. This volatile situation was exploited by the Sunni Al-Qaida, led by a Jordanian jihadi, who intensified religious divisions through bombings, kidnapping and beheadings, until killed in a US air-strike in 2006. His Al Qaida group later renamed itself Islamic State in Iraq, and after extending to Syria became Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In response to IS extremism, Sunni tribes in Iraq began to cooperate in 2007 with US-led forces to resist IS and continued to do so until 2011.



The US handed over control of security in Iraqi cities and towns to the newly created Iraqi defence forces in 2009, and agreed to withdraw its troops by 2011. (Britain had withdrawn from a major role in southern Iraq in December 2007.) US troop withdrawal was linked to agreement with the Iraqi government that Sunni tribes would be incorporated into the security forces. Parliamentary elections in March 2010 led to a coalition government of the major groups. But this coalition broke down at the end of 2011, leading to a Sunni boycott of both parliament and the government. Moreover, the Shia dominated government failed to honour the promise to employ and pay Sunnis who had fought against IS. Many Sunnis were also detained. There were therefore widespread demonstrations in Sunni areas in early 2013 against the sectarian policies of the government headed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

As a result of the rise from 2012 in sectarian tensions ISIS began to reconstitute itself in Iraq, and by January 2014 had captured Falluja. Between June and September 2014 Iraqi defence forces proved unable to prevent ISIS from seizing Mosul, Iraq's second city, and other major towns. ISIS now controlled about a third of the country and declared an Islamic Caliphate. Kurdish Peshmerga forces provided much of the resistance to further expansion by ISIS and helped the gradual recapture of territory between 2015-17, whilst Kurdish politicians temporarily put aside their demands for independence in order to fight a common threat. The Iraqi security forces (aided by US advisors and trainers) also regrouped, and backed by air power provided by a US-led coalition, which included NATO and the Arab League, began to push ISIS back. By December 2017 the Iraqi government was able to claim that it had control over the whole of its territory.

Therefore, despite renewed conflict in late 2017 over the issue of Kurdish independence (which Kurds voted for in a referendum in September 2017), and continuing Shia-Sunni tensions, a new political era seemed possible in 2018. Parliamentary elections in May 2018 resulted in the new parliament electing a Kurdish president, and a Sunni lawyer was designated Speaker. The bloc headed by Shia cleric and militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr, now turned politician, won most votes in the election. (The bloc included some secular Sunnis and Communists.) The second largest bloc was the pro-Iranian Shia Fatah Coalition. The prime minister, selected after political wrangling, was 76 year old (Shia) economist Adil Abdul al-Mahdi. His government's failure to meet public expectations of reform led to the October - December 2019 mass protests.

### **The October 2019 Uprising**

The protesters who took to the streets in October 2019 were predominantly young and primarily from Shia dominated areas of the country - though some Sunnis then joined in or organized support via social media. The demonstrators were independent of organized political parties like the Communists and the Sadrist. They had multiple grievances over lack of jobs, inadequate basic public services such as water and electricity, the extensive political corruption, and the violence used to quell smaller scale protests in September 2019 demanding jobs for university graduates. There were also political grievances, in particular the influence wielded by Iran on Iraqi politics, and the demands expanded to call for a totally new and democratic politics. Demonstrators also rejected a politics based on sectarian religious divisions, and they acted independently of the Shia religious establishment. The movement was leaderless and loosely coordinated, but inventive and resilient, reflecting a new kind of youthful protest that earlier emerged in Iraq 2015. It also looked back to the slogans, tactics and spirit of the first Arab Spring, focusing on peaceful protest, pitching tents in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, promoting poetry readings and theatre on the site, and mobilizing to clean up the square. The regime responded with deadly violence, killing hundreds and wounding thousands (exact numbers were hard to compile), but failed to deter the protests, which continued into December 2019. Reporters noted that Iranian-backed militias, operating independently of Iraqi security forces, were responsible for much of the shooting. Regime brutality sparked angry and sometimes violent responses by demonstrators, but it remained primarily a movement of civil resistance.

The uprising did have immediate political effects, prompting the parliament to pass several anti-corruption measures, though these were stalled. Although initially the government responded with excessive force, later Prime Minister al-Mahdi admitted the need to tackle corruption and economic problems. He resigned at the end of November 2019, though he stayed on pending selection of his successor. During 2020, however, the numbers at protests decreased, partly due to lockdown measures against Covid-19 but also due to dwindling belief in the possibility of major change and concern the movement had been infiltrated. Although thousands demonstrated in Baghdad and elsewhere in October 2020 to commemorate the birth of the movement, they then went home, even though survey evidence commissioned in 2020 suggested the protests had very widespread public support.

The references below include some background on 2011 in Iraq as well as the 2019 demonstrations and their aftermath.



Al-Rawi, Ahmed, [The Arab Spring and Online Protests in Iraq \[1\]](#), International Journal of Communications, Vol. 8, 2014, pp. 916-942

This article elaborates on earlier protests before 2019, focusing on 2011 and noting 'dozens of protests' (which crossed sectarian lines) against political corruption and calling for revolution at Tahrir Square, Baghdad, between February 12 and the 'day of rage' on February 25 2011. On this day the government of Nouri Maliki shut down media coverage, accusing the protesters of being followers of the banned Baath Party of Saddam Hussein or supporters of Al Qaeda. On February 25 2011, 30 demonstrators were killed by security services and many injured. But the main focus of the article is on the use of Facebook and You Tube to publicize, comment on and justify the protests. The blogs and comments studied were predominantly by young men, including some in the US and Canada.

Ali, Zahra, [Iraqis Demand a Country \[2\]](#), MERIP: Middle East Research and Information Project, Vol. 292, issue 3, 2019, pp. 1-10

A detailed account and analysis of the 'spontaneous and leaderless protest movement' that was strongest in Shia-dominated provinces, but spread across Iraq. Ali notes how protests in Baghdad in early October 2019 against the removal of a popular general, who had led the fight-back against ISIS, were also fuelled by anger at failures of basic services, such as water and electricity, and the pervasive political corruption. These demonstrations developed into a demand for a new political system to replace the US- imposed regime based on ethnicity and religious divides. The article then sets the 2019 movement in the context of earlier waves of protest, starting with the 2009 protests in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Sunni-majority protests in 2012-13 against their exclusion from political power. It also emphasizes the role of a new generation of protesters since 2015.

Bobseina, Haley, [Iraqi Youth Protesters: Who They Are, What They Want, and What's Next \[3\]](#), Middle East Institute, 2019

This analysis, written at an early stage of the 2019 protests, comments on the combination of longstanding grievances and the recent sources of anger, such as repression of protests calling for jobs for university graduates in September, which led to the mass eruption onto the streets of 'unemployed and underemployed youth' in Shia majority areas. It notes that there was little immediate response in Sunni-majority areas, because of the recent violence of the war against ISIS and fear of being targeted as pro-ISIS, or as supportive of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. The author also examines why Shia protesters reject the existing political parties and often criticize Iran's role in Iraqi politics.

Cooke, Georgia ; Mansour, Renad, [Iraqi Views on Protesters One Year After the Uprising \[4\]](#), London, Chatham House: Expert Comment, 2020

One year after the outbreak of mass protests in October 2019, the authors note that thousands turned out to mark the anniversary, but that this time the protests were brief. The Covid-19 lockdown, 'protest fatigue' and suspicion of infiltration of the movement have combined to reduce active support. The main focus of this analysis is a survey commissioned by Chatham House of over 1,200 Iraqis to gauge public opinion about the October 2019 protests. It finds that 83 per cent of those surveyed believed most or all the demonstrations were justified, and only 10 per cent strongly disapproved, and suggests that most Iraqis support the main complaints of the activists.

Costantini, Irene, [The Iraqi Protest Movement: Social Mobilization amidst Violence and Instability \[5\]](#), British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2020

The author argues that social mobilization in Iraq, especially since 2011, has been politically significant, but not seriously analyzed. Her focus is to investigate 'nonviolent means to promote social and political change in violent contexts', which Iraq amply illustrates. She compares waves of protest since 2011 and concludes that cyclical



violence and political dysfunction are a major limitation on the effectiveness of protest, but that social mobilization also holds out the possibility of more positive political change.

Dawood, Hussein, [Iraq after the "October Protests": A Different Country](#) [6], European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019

This brief but interesting commentary was written after the first week of protests in October 2019, in which 100 people were killed and over 6,000 injured. Dawood discusses the immediate causes of the protests and the longer term failings of the government under Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, elected as a compromise candidate between two Shiite coalitions a year earlier. The author notes that opposition groups like the Communist Party and the Sadrist movement (followers of the radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr) were not involved, but that the lack of leadership among the protesters (even within cities) was a weakness in making credible demands for change. Nevertheless, the government (despite its immediate authoritarian reaction) was making concessions by offering economic reforms and pressing for passage of anti-corruption bills before parliament.

Najaf, Ghaith ; Harrison, Emma Graham, [Bloody Defiance. The Big Story: Iraq Protests](#) [7], Guardian Weekly, 13/12/2019, pp. 10-12

This on the spot report provides an overview of the popular uprising up to mid-December 2019, and to the resignation of Prime Minister Mahdi. (Though he was to stay on in a caretaker government until parliament could agree a replacement.) The authors note the scale of violence against the protesters and the role of Iran-backed militias in shooting at them, as well as increasing international concern.

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