

# Iraq protests against Iran and government corruption are a rare sign of hope in the Mideast

The U.S. has been trying to weaken Iran's influence over Baghdad ever since America invaded the country. Now an unlikely source is helping: The Iraqi people.



Demonstrators take part in ongoing anti-government protests in Tahrir Square, Baghdad, on Tuesday. Ahmed Jadallah / Reuters

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Nearly 17 years ago, the United States invaded Iraq and toppled the government of Saddam Hussein. That created a power vacuum partly filled — and exploited — by Iran. The U.S. has been trying, with limited success, to dampen its regional arch enemy's influence over Iraq ever since. In recent weeks, assistance has come from an unlikely source: the Iraqi people.

In early October, the Arab Spring finally arrived in Iraq. Large-scale demonstrations broke out against the government, pitting thousands of young protesters against a government they believe has failed them economically and politically and want it to step aside. Demands for jobs, respect for human rights, an end to corruption and better public services are at the heart of protesters' grievances. But so is anger at Iran for trying to use Iraq's political class for its own ends.

Tehran has tried to build influence in Iraq for well over a decade in a not-so-subtle effort to turn Iraq into a subservient vassal state, provoking deep resentment among many ordinary Iraqis. In fact, the protests were touched off by outrage at the reassignment of a popular Iraqi counter-terrorism official who had been trying to rein in pro-Iran armed militias. And the volume of anti-Iran rhetoric is only growing; a few days ago, Iran's consulate in the southern city of Karbala was attacked.

In a region with few signs of hope, this popular uprising against political and economic corruption, with anger toward Iran at its center, is both a serious challenge and a beacon of possibility for the United States. It is a ground-up movement that threatens not only the Iranian grip on an important regional ally but Iran as well. The United States has a strong interest in helping Iraq navigate these tough challenges — both to help Iraq itself, which could fall victim once again to a resurgent Islamic State militant group if not shored up, and to counter Iran's ambitions.

Iran is under growing duress from the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure," which has ratcheted up sanctions and moved additional forces to the Persian Gulf to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions and counter its destabilizing regional policies. In this context, Iran's leaders see Iraq's political turmoil in conspiratorial terms, blaming it on "foreign hands" (read: the U.S. and Israel). They know the damage that "losing" Iraq would do to their strategy for attaining regional supremacy.

And they are all too aware of the possibility that Iraq's mass demonstrations could inspire a similar popular uprising in their own country, having been buffeted by the massive demonstrations of 2009's "Green Movement" as well as countrywide protests early last year against the government's economic policies and repressive theocratic rule.

That's why Iranian security officials have advised Iraqi counterparts to get tougher on the protesters. Militia forces aligned with Iran have been suspected of involvement in the killings of demonstrators, and there have been allegations that Iranians took part. New reports suggest that Iran may be preparing to intervene on a larger scale.

The United States has a strong interest in helping Iraq chart a different course in dealing with the protesters. Beyond neutralizing Iran, Iraqi stability is vital to many U.S. interests, including minimizing the threat posed by ISIS and maintaining security in the Persian Gulf. Perhaps most important, a stable Iraq can show that an electoral democracy can take root in a volatile region and that there is a middle path between autocracy and chaos.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has issued a 13-point reform plan in response to the criticism of the protesters, but he acknowledges there is no quick and easy fix and has offered to resign, a prospect the Iranians abhor as they see him as a political ally. President Barham Salih pledges to hold new elections eventually, but the process of forming another government would take months. Iraq, a country awash in weapons, needs to see conciliatory rhetoric and promises of change backed up by quick and decisive action rather than talk of change months down the road, or the situation could deteriorate dramatically.

It's bad enough right now. Protests have turned steadily more deadly as government forces have turned their weapons on the demonstrators. At least 260 people have been killed and 10,000 wounded since the protests began in October, according to Iraq's High Commission for Human Rights., and daily clashes between security forces and demonstrators are escalating in number and ferocity. A massive crackdown failed to tamp down the unrest.

As if the mounting challenge to Iraq's political order were not worrying enough, chaos in neighboring Syria following the sudden withdrawal of most U.S. troops has opened the door for the re-emergence of ISIS. Since 2016, the group has transformed itself into a covert network with as many as 20,000 fighters in northern Syria and Iraq, where the United Nations believes it is preparing for an "eventual resurgence" to re-establish its "caliphate," the quasi-state that once controlled an area the size of the U.K. Iraqi officials are clearly worried that the return of ISIS could exponentially magnify their internal crisis.

What's taking place in Iraq is similar to the Arab Spring protest movements that toppled autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya beginning in 2011. They came close to overthrowing Syria's dictator, Bashar al-Assad, too, before Russia and Iran intervened to prop him up. And they find echoes in the protests that have taken place recently in Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, and Morocco. Events in Iraq show that it, too, is vulnerable to the same discontent that brought down authoritarian, unresponsive governments elsewhere.

Ultimately, only Iraqis can fix Iraq. But Washington incurred a responsibility when it invaded the country in 2003. The United States must now do what it can to help provide the economic tools Iraq needs to address its problems, particularly by doing more to organize international efforts in support of long-neglected reconstruction projects in the hardest-hit provinces.

The U.S. should provide strong diplomatic backing for Iraqi leaders as they strive to implement the bold political plans and compromises they need and insist on respect for the human rights and civil liberties of the protesters. And Washington should make clear its commitment to Iraq's security by increasing training, logistical support and equipment transfers to the Iraqi Security Forces.

American leadership on Iraq can begin to undo the damage the Trump administration's chaotic policy in Syria has done to perceptions of U.S. regional leadership and put Iran on notice that it cannot have a free hand in the Middle East. These are tough challenges indeed, but challenges the U.S. cannot afford to ignore.

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