Violent Protests in Hit Iraq Weakening Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi

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Annotation
On October 1, 2019, widespread violent protests erupted in Iraq and has cost more than hundred lives. Demonstrators mainly demand improvement of public services, tackling corruption and providing job opportunities. These events weaken PM Adel Abdul Mahdi’s position and steer attention from planned systematic reforms, including asserting more state control over pro-Iranian elements of Hashd al-Shaabi militias.

Prime Minister Mahdi’s Lingering Challenges
One year in the office, Iraqi PM Adel Abdul Mahdi faces pressure once again and his administration is under scrutiny. Already on June 11, Mahdi had to personally deny rumours¹ that his resignation is nigh due to inability to fill in vacant positions of key ministers, including defence and interior which were finally sworn in only on June 24.² He has faced criticism even from elements of al-Islah alliance which supported his premiership. Critics argued that the PM has not been active enough in implementing reform agenda, including economic reforms, fighting corruption and exerting authority over predominantly-Shiite militias Hashd al-Shaabi (HS).

Recently, PM Mahdi has been trying to get pro-Iranian elements of HS under state control through institutional overhaul. So far these efforts have yielded only mixed results. This complicates his position vis-à-vis powerful pro-HS Shiite actors, primarily rallied around al-Bina’a coalition of Badr’s Hadi al-Amiri and other pro-Iranian HS groups. Consequently, PM also tries to manoeuvre to prevent Iraq from being entangled in Iran-US feud. Yet another challenge to Mahdi’s authority has emerged. Since October 1, widespread anti-government protests across the southern Iraqi cities including in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Nasiriya, Wasit, Babil and others have been raging on³, leaving Shiite political actors caught by surprise by their intensity and sudden eruption.

Violent Protests Hit Iraq
In past, for example when the Green Zone in Baghdad was twice stormed by protestors in April and May 2016⁴, it was mainly Muqtada al-Sadr’s supporters who organized regular demonstrations. This time, influential cleric al-Sadr has remained silent. Already in September 2018 protests in the pre-dominantly Shiite south and mainly in Basra hinted that the era of more spontaneous and violent protests is coming. Angry demonstrators torched assets of all actors, ranging from Iranian consulate to offices of political parties and branches of pro-Iranian HS militias.⁵

Underlying grievances of mostly young protestors in their 20s and teens are the same in October 2019 protests: government has not taken enough action to improve economy, public services, mainly electricity and water, and failed to tackle rampant corruption (Iraq stands as the 12th most corrupt country according to Transparency International⁶). Youth unemployment remains at estimated 25 %.⁷ PM Mahdi’s plans to combat corruption have remained either mainly on paper or resulted in creation of institutions such as Supreme Anti-corruption Council with at best questionable mandate and results.⁸

This time, protests have become more violent, accompanied by rioting and heavy-handed security response, including firing live ammunition. As of October 6, the toll is at least 104 dead and over 6,000 injured.⁹ Various Iraqi security forces have been deployed across southern cities; 75 % of the internet traffic has been shut down mainly social media¹⁰; curfews, including in Baghdad, have been declared. Once again government and political parties¹¹ buildings are being burned down. On October 2, Iraqi Ministry of Defence put the army on high alert.¹² Routes to Baghdad airport have been blocked off and elite Counter-Terrorism Service has been deployed to protect it.¹³ Reports of various armed forces, ranging

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from federal police, military and HS militias using heavy-handed measures are spreading. For example, in Nasiriya, it was reportedly gunmen of pro-Iranian militias Saraya al-Khorasani who killed at least 6 people.\textsuperscript{13} As of October 7, the precise toll and scope of the situation is unclear due to internet blackout. Even media reporting is sparse allegedly due to unknown gunmen shutting down news agencies perceived as ‘anti-Iranian’, such as al-Arabiya on October 4\textsuperscript{14} or Dijlah and Kurdish NRT.\textsuperscript{15} Security forces also cracked down on local activists and journalists, issuing around 130 arrest warrants.\textsuperscript{16} However, it appears that protests have been waning off only slowly so far.

Protests lack unified message which also points at absence of organization apart from popular calls on social media for people to gather. Some criticize Iranian influence in Iraq. Some lament over corrupted parliamentary system and even demand regime change. And others despise PM Mahdi’s controversial decision from September 27 to transfer popular Counter-Terrorism Service commander Abdulwahab al-Saadi.\textsuperscript{17} Many view this step as another attempt to weaken Iraqi military under PM Mahdi’s watch against pro-Iranian forces, including elements of HS.\textsuperscript{18} On October 5, parliamentary speaker Mohammad al-Halbusi met with some 100 said-to-be representatives of protestors.\textsuperscript{19} But the problem is lack of centralized leadership persists and the spontaneity of protests simply defies the assumption that once again protests are being used by political actor(s) against one another.

Meeting between PM Mahdi, Iraqi president Barham Salih, and speaker Mohammad al-Halbusi and leaders of parliamentary blocs held on October 2 resulted in a 12-point action plan. Rather than concrete solutions it again offered frequently repeated vague promises such as ‘sincere national dialogue’ or ‘providing job opportunities’.\textsuperscript{20} Additionally, PM Mahdi asked for parliament support for a cabinet re-shuffle to answer protestors’ demands for change.\textsuperscript{21} On October 6, following the cabinet meeting, reform package to meet protestors’ demands was introduced.\textsuperscript{22} It mainly promised subsidies in the form of 100.000 housing units, unemployment benefits for 150.000 people, creation of 45.000 new jobs and several other measures. However, it is highly unlikely that PM Mahdi’s government is going to be able to systematically resolve endemic socio-economic issues and tackle corruption effectively before its term concludes in 2022. In 2019, public services have been partially improved in certain sectors, such as electricity supply compared to 2018 but it is far from “Everything is calm, and people are happy” as Iraqi electricity minister asserted in May 2019.\textsuperscript{23} On the contrary, it appears that for long-frustrated Iraqi streets it is not enough.

**Political Blocs Undermine PM Mahdi**

PM Mahdi’s major political backers, al-Sadr’s Sairoon, Ammar al-Hakim’s al-Hikma and Haidar al-Abadi’s al-Nasr also formed the ‘Parliamentary Opposition Front’ and on October 2 voiced support for the protesters.\textsuperscript{24} Voices from these blocs again hinted possible shift from support to PM. Al-Sadr and al-Abadi openly called for early elections.\textsuperscript{25} Such a one-foot-in-one-foot-out government game is common since large fluid government coalitions formed across sectarian lines regardless of ideology are trademark of post-2003 Iraqi politics. For example, former PM Nuri al-Maliki using his wing of Da’wa Party and allied blocs created the ‘Reform Front’\textsuperscript{26} in 2016-2018 to undermine then PM Haidar al-Abadi by dismissing his ministers.

The rationale behind political blocs’ behaviour is two-fold. Firstly, to prevent the ascendancy of a strong PM in Iraq and secondly, to protect their public support by arguing they are outside the government whenever popular opinion of the government is lingering. Sairoon’s, al-Hikma’s and al-Nasr’s behaviour is also motivated by the proximity of provincial elections scheduled for April 2020. Consequently, their criticism of Mahdi’s government does not necessarily mean that PM will be dismissed but it almost certainly means that his position is likely to be weakened.
Looking for Hashd al-Shaabi’s Position in the post-ISIS Iraq

In the aftermath of parliamentary elections held in May 2018, it appeared that Shiite HS successfully bolstered their position in Iraqi politics working with Hadi al-Amiri’s al-Bina’a bloc. Even the most hard-line pro-Iranian Shiite groups, such as Asai’b Ahl al-Haq (AAH) led by Qais al-Khazali, asserted that the time for legal politics has come and shifted their moderate rhetoric what that resembles to ‘Iraq first’ narrative.27 But as of now ‘the old and new special groups’ within HS as Washington Institute’s Michael Knights labels Iranian-backed elements of HS with some 63.000 personnel are reluctant to integrate in Iraqi security forces structure.28 On July 1, PM Mahdi issued a decree ordering integration of HS units to Iraqi armed forces under his direct command or face disarmament.29 However, it seems that more than ‘integration’ it confirmed HS’ stand-alone position under the HS Commission stipulated by parliamentary law adopted already in November 2016.30

HS, specifically ‘new special groups’ tied to close Iranian ally Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chairman of the HS Commission have faced increased pressure after series of rocket attacks at US facilities in Iraq. The pressure mounted even more, after it surfaced that drones that attacked Saudi pipeline in May 2019 took off from Jurf al-Sakr zone outside Baghdad which is under control of al-Muhandis’ Kataib Hezbollah.31 Since mid-July at least five major HS military installations were bombed, likely by Israel.32 Al-Muhandis in turn attempted to establish Air Force Directorate on September 5 which showed another rift.33 The decision was slammed not only by PM Mahdi but also denied by chairman of the HS Commission Falah al-Fayadh. Al-Fayadh also travelled to the US on October 2 arguably to address Washington’s concerns over HS and al-Muhandis.34

In the newest attempt to get ‘special groups’ in check, PM Mahdi issued another decree on September 17, introducing organisational overhaul of HS Committee. Changes effectively abolish al-Muhandis’ position and offer three new key posts – the president, secretary-general, and chief of military staff.35 However, there are already talks that al-Muhandis could assume the chief of staff position.36 The overhaul includes also new geographical division of areas of operations into 8 commands in major cities.37 This, if implemented, could also bolster central control over some HS units which have ignored al-Mahdi’s direct orders, such as repeated calls for HS withdrawal from Nineveh Plain area.38 As Knights notes39 “Recent organizational shifts offer a glimmer of hope that Baghdad will stand up to Iranian influence, but implementation will be the test of their actual merit.” One could argue that with political actors pre-occupied with violent protests and PM Mahdi considerably weakened the chances for seizing the momentum and continuing with getting problematic HS units in check are much lower.

The Likely Road Ahead

Having limited resources and power to address protesters’ over-arching demands, it is most likely that PM Mahdi, himself without party affiliation and popular base, will have to strike a bargain with other Shiite actors to calm the angry public. Both al-Sadr-led bloc al-Islah and al-Amiri-led bloc al-Bina’a have presence on the ground and thus means to help with defusing tensions. This appears to be the most likely pathway also because none of the political actors want to see the spontaneous popular uprising flourish. However, this will inevitably further weaken PM Mahdi and decrease already low chance of steering HS institutional reform to get its pro-Iranian elements under control.

On October 4, PM Mahdi lamented in response to the protestors that there are “no magic solutions” to solve long-standing problems such as systemic economic and social issues Iraq has for any government in a year.40 While this is a valid argument, it is unlikely that any meaningful reforms will be introduced due to the

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4 That is 15 times more than, ‘special groups’ had in 2010. Both figures exclude Badr having additional 18-22.000 fighters.
lower legitimacy of PM Mahdi and his cabinet. The glimpse of hope for Mahdi is intervention of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shiite religious authority in Iraq with considerable political influence. During Friday sermon delivered on October 4, al-Sistani refrained from blaming the government and PM Mahdi. Instead, he called for both sides to calm down and instructed the parliament and judiciary allow for reforms and deal with the corruption.11

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5 Aref Mohammed, Raya Jalabi, “Protestors torch political party offices in Basra’s fourth night of violence,” Reuters, September 6, 2018, https://reut.rs/2wUPHER.
32 The New Arab, “Iraqi militia leader.”
39 Knights, “Helping Iraq Take Charge.”