

Iraq's "October Revolution" Protests Resume as a Tense Country Looks On

Featuring Katherine Lawlor



SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

Mass anti-government protests erupted in Iraq in October 2019. The protests led to the resignation of the government in what became known as the "October Revolution," but not before crackdowns by Iraqi Security Forces and Iran-backed proxies killed over 600 people. On this episode of Overwatch, Katherine Lawlor talks about the origins of the protest movement, what has changed in Iraq over the last year, and what's next for the protest movement as a whole.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. In October 2019, around the same time we started this podcast, mass anti-government protests erupted in Iraq. One year later, I'm sitting down with Katherine Lawlor to talk about the origins of that movement. What has changed in Iraq over the past year? And what's next for the protest movement as a whole and for the corrupt elites who it condemned? Katherine why did Iraqis launch widespread protests last year?

Katherine Lawlor:

So these protests were a long time in coming. Iraq has a history of mass protest movements, Basrah 2018 was a good example. But this particular movement actually came out of a much smaller student protest in Baghdad, where recent university graduates were demonstrating in front of the prime minister's office and Iraqi security forces pretty brutally cracked down on this peaceful demonstration. And videos of them using water cannons against peaceful, primarily female protesters went viral and sparked a lot of outrage nationwide. That happened at the end of September 2019.

At around that same time, then prime minister Mahdi made some unpopular changes to Iraq security apparatus that were perceived as firing leaders in the Iraqi security forces, who opposed Iranian infiltration into the Iraqi security system. The most prominent of those, was the deputy head of the counter-terrorism service of Abdul Wahab al-Saadi, who was this national hero from the anti-ISIS fight. And the combination of all of these pressures, plus mass unemployment and Iraq's terrible economy, came together in a pretty unexpectedly massive protest movement that broke out on October 1st. The protesters started out demanding jobs and improved government services, an end to the ethnosectarian quota filling system that has defined Iraq's post 2003 political order.

But after Iraqi security forces and Iranian proxies started to crack down on those protests, which happened almost immediately, the tone of the protest movement changed and stopped being just, "Let's improve the government." And changed to, "Let's replace the government and let's replace foreign influence and interference in Iraq, especially Iranian interference." But this all happened at the beginning of October. October 8th, 2019 was when the Shia religious holiday of Arba'een began and so the protests stopped. By the end of that week over a hundred protesters had been killed, more than 6,000 had been wounded by Iraqi security forces and by Iranian proxies and the government had cut the internet and attacked media stations that were covering the protests. It was pretty brutal, but they stopped almost entirely on the 8th of October.

Jacob:

But then they resumed, right?

Katherine:

Absolutely. So protestors coordinated a mass resumption of the movement on the 25th of October, which they started to call the October Revolution. And again, faced mass crackdowns by government security forces, anonymous snipers in Baghdad, masked Iran linked militia groups. And eventually, the violence by Iraqi security forces

got so bad that it actually caused Iraq's highest Shia religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, to withdraw his competence from the government and ask for the resignation of the prime minister. And if he says something that explicit, the prime minister essentially had to go along with it. So Prime Minister Methdi resigned at the end of November 2019.

By the end of December, we had almost 600 protestor deaths, 30,000 wounded. And we then ran into six months of just political deadlock, because the system was not functioning well when Methdi was prime minister and it certainly wasn't functioning well enough to appoint a new prime minister. Then in January, we had a portion of the protest movement disappear when nationalist, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr turned on them and aligned himself more closely with Iran's proxies. After that, we saw clashes between al-Sadr's supporters and the protest movement. So they went through a lot at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020.

Jacob:

You mentioned that one of the core demands, one of the core motivating elements of this protest movement was, exasperation with Iranian influence in Iraq. What impact did these protests have on Iran's activity in Iraq at the time?

Katherine:

So I don't think the initial motivation of the protest movement was explicitly anti-Iranian, although it was anti-corruption and Iran has a heavy hand in that, in Iraq. But as Iran's proxies started to really crack down on the protesters and they were responsible likely for most of those 600 deaths, the protests became increasingly anti-Iranian and anti-foreign interference in nature. They're functionally Iraqi nationalists, right? So Iran was terrified, meanwhile, of those protests leaking over the border into Iran, which they actually did in November 2019 and necessitated a substantive crackdown in Iran as well.

But the ability of the Iraqi proxies to kill hundreds of Iraqis with impunity, I mean, they faced no consequences, likely emboldened them and arguably contributed to their willingness to attack the U.S embassy in December that attack triggered the U.S retaliatory strike that killed IRGC-Quds force commander, Qasem Soleimani and the subsequent escalation cycle between the U.S and Iran largely focused in Iraq about which ISW has written extensively. But the protests and their response to the protests, substantially eroded the popularity of Iran's political and militia proxies in Iraq. Those militias used to be the heroes of the anti-ISIS fight and now they are the murderers of unarmed protesters and the defenders of a corrupt and unpopular political system.

Jacob:

So continuing forward along the timeline from... The protests began a year ago, and then we have the attack on the U.S embassy in December, followed by the retaliatory strike against Soleimani, an escalation cycle and then coronavirus hits. What has the effect of coronavirus been on the protests in Iraq?

Katherine:

So the coronavirus has definitely had a substantial impact on the protest movement. Iran just over the border, had one of the highest COVID case loads in the world, early on, which spilled over into Iraq. They did not close the border super quickly and Iraqi cases likely still aren't being counted accurately, but they are setting new records every day. In April is when the coronavirus really hit Iraq in earnest and protests died down, for sure after that. Some cities stopped protesting entirely, others confined themselves to sit-in squares. But many of the protesters are young, many of them are educated and have a solid understanding of disease transmission, so the protests we're seeing now are masked, some of them try to remain distanced. But the movement as a whole, has promised to return post-COVID.

Jacob:

And do they believe that this time right now, is post-COVID?

Katherine:

No, definitely not. Iraq still has rising case numbers, as I said, and the hospital system is still frankly, at risk of collapse. Protest leaders haven't framed this as a resumption, but rather as a reminder or reaffirmation of their vows to return after the coronavirus, but nobody knows exactly when that will be. So this week's protests will be more of a Memorial, we'll likely see a similar Memorial on October 25th, but we're less likely to see the more permanent mass sit ins that we saw last year. However, we might actually see clashes between splintering groups, even in these temporary protests.

Jacob:

Understood. So why do these protests matter to American national security interests and how do they affect American objectives in the Middle East?

Katherine:

Yeah, that's a really good question. The demands of Iraq's protesters are many of the same demands that the United States would have in Iraq. We too want an end to corruption and an end to Iranian influence there. The United States also wants free and fair elections under representative government for Iraqis. Also, frankly, an end to Iranian interference. There will never be an end to Iranian influence in Iraq, but mitigation of Iran's current dominance in Iraq would make Iraq a better and more reliable security partner for the United States in the region. And an end to the corrupt political appointments and corruption in the security forces would also allow Iraqi security forces to become a better ally to fight ISIS, so that we can continue our mission to transition that fight over to them.

Jacob:

Certainly one of the biggest developments in Iraq since the last round of protests in October of last year, was the seeding of the new prime minister, Prime Minister Kadhimi, has his ascension and that change in leadership, quelled the protests at all? Has he addressed their demands and whether he has or hasn't, do they believe he's addressing their demands?

Katherine:

So Kadhimi's government was fully formed in June 2020, and that change in leadership did risk splitting the protests, because Kadhimi's objectives aligned with those of the protest movement, but he's an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary leader and substantial parts of this movement want revolution. So he's not moving fast enough for them. And there was a definite split, particularly in the month or two following his ascension in which we saw arguments between a group of protesters that wanted to give him time to see if he would abide by his promises and another group who said he was appointed by the political system that was already in place. And therefore, he is unacceptable because any output of that political system is unacceptable.

Jacob:

So what comes next? We've got these Memorial protests this week, and then about a month from now, another one is planned. What do we see coming down the road?

Katherine:

Thankfully, we are less likely to see violent crackdowns by government security forces operating in their official capacity. As I said, prime minister Kadhimi does support the objectives of the protest movement in a general sense, albeit in a more evolutionary form. But there's actually a potentially even greater threat to the movement coming up, which is the early elections that Kadhimi has promised. Those are scheduled for June 2021. They may

not be able to take place that early, and they're not constitutionally mandated until 2022, but protesters will need to come together and form a unified front with specific policy objectives, if they want a chance in these elections. And so far, they have been relatively leaderless and coordinated from a more grassroots level. And meanwhile, in preparation for those early elections, political blocks are very much trying to co-opt the protest movement. Any co-optation by political blocks could splinter and crush this movement in a way that violent security forces or violence by Iran's proxies never could.

Approximately 56% of our Iraq's population is under the age of 24, so every year more and more young people will be able to vote. And when we saw similar youth bulge like that in Afghanistan, it was rapidly co-opted by warlords who took their sons and said, "We'll go form a youth wing of our same parties." So the same power brokers stayed in power, even though young people ostensibly took on more authority. And the same thing is really, unfortunately, likely to happen in Iraq.

Protesters don't have the institutional expertise or connections or protection from the armed wings of the political groups that they would be up against. But if they could avoid being co-opted and if the Kadhimi government can protect the integrity of the elections, and those are both big ifs, protesters could actually form a plurality or even potentially a majority coalition in the Iraqi parliament. Instead, unfortunately, they're more likely to break into a series of small splintered groups with conflicting demands and sort of varying connections to pre-existing political elites, and that would make them unable to present any coalition unified enough or large enough to implement their legitimate demands.

Jacob:

Now, that fracturing, does that pose any kind of threat to U.S National Security goals? Alternatively, are there any opportunities that the U.S could pursue as a result of that?

Katherine:

Yes, definitely to both. So any political fracturing in Iraq is bad news for U.S National security interests, because we want a strong, stable and sovereign Iraq, that's free of Iranian influence. But further political fracturing weakens this already incredibly fragile Iraqi state. But in terms of opportunities, I would say that Prime Minister Kadhimi remains the best opportunity that the United States has had in Iraq, in a very long time. U.S Policymakers can and should support him in terms of security, military training, and aid, international support, humanitarian aid. And we can also support those political blocks that back his agenda. If Kadhimi is even moderately successful in achieving his objectives, like constraining Iran's militias, limiting corruption in the Iraqi government and holding relatively free and fair early elections, he could actually set conditions for a much more democratic and more stable Iraq, for decades to come.

Jacob:

Kat, thank you for being here and sharing your expertise on the almost one year anniversary from those protests and the Overwatch podcast.

Katherine:

Thanks so much Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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