

Crisis Brief: Baghdad Protests Morning Update

Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, Nicholas Carl, and Maseh Zarif



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Crisis Brief is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. In this installment, ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and CTP Iran Analyst Nicholas Carl discuss what has transpired in the last 12 hours and what to watch for next. Iraqi protesters have defied a government curfew in Baghdad, triggering renewed clashes with security forces. The death toll is now at 19 with hundreds wounded. The internet remains severed as the Iraqi government tries to disrupt the protest momentum and minimize reports of civilian casualties. Listen on our website [here](#).

Maseh Zarif:

This is *Overwatch*. A podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

It's 10:30 AM in Washington on Thursday, October 3rd, 2019. This is the second crisis brief update on a deteriorating situation inside Iraq that has major implications for the United States. ISW research director, Jennifer Cafarella is joined by Nicholas Carl, an Iran analyst, with the Critical Threats Project at AEI. They provide an update on developments on the ground, the scenarios they're watching for and how the Iranian regime is framing the crisis.

Jennifer Cafarella:

We are providing an update to last night's crisis brief focused on providing you the up to the minute assessments from us here at the Institute for the Study of War on the evolving protest movement in Iraq, which threatens to destabilize the country and lead to a number of possible dangerous outcomes that I outlined in last night's crisis brief update. Today we are partnered with Critical Threats Projects to provide additional information about what has transpired in Iraq since we provided the update last night.

The crisis does in fact continue to escalate. Protesters defied the 5:00 AM curfew in Baghdad, prompting new clashes with security forces who again use live ammunition. Protests have also continued across multiple additional provinces in the Shia majority south. AFP reports that the death toll is now 19 after 10 additional nights due to the most recent round of protests.

Some of the protesters in Baghdad have directly blamed Iranian proxies within the popular mobilization forces for the violence in Baghdad, although it is impossible for us at this time to verify which forces actually have directly opened fire on the protesters. The internet is still down, so information is coming in very small quantities from Iraq, in an effort by the Iraqi government actually to not only suppress the protest movement, but potentially also suppress coverage of the use of force against these civilians.

We have additional unconfirmed reports that two rockets were fired towards the Green Zone last night and there are reports of a separate but unidentified explosion within the Green Zone that the ISF is currently investigating.

The government has begun to increase the security response outside of Baghdad. Reports indicate the government has added new curfews in Najaf, as well as in Babil and Maysan provinces. The Iraqi Army and counter terrorism services have deployed reinforcements to Maysan Province, which is the birthplace of a very popular CTS leader who was recently removed from his position. Protestors have condemned his removal. The situation

in Maysan has great potential to continue to escalate over that controversy, which is one of the various threads of condemnation against the Iraqi government within this protest movement.

The US has suspended embassy services in Baghdad until further notice and the US military command in Iraq has issued a strongly worded statement calling for “all sides to reduce tensions and reject violence.” It reaffirmed the coalitions will defend themselves if needed in an obvious reference to the potential actually that Iranian proxies within Iraq decide to exploit the conditions of chaos to target US forces, which a number of Iranian proxy leaders have in the past threatened to do.

As we continue to monitor this crisis, we are continuing to look for indicators that it will escalate along one of the seven possible trajectories that we highlighted last night. In particular, we are also looking for updates on the situation at the Baghdad International Airport where there were clashes between protesters and security forces last night.

We are also looking for responses from Iraqi leaders, including the prime minister and other members of parliament, as well as the leaders of Iran’s major proxies within Iraq. We have seen one statement from Qais al-Khazali, who is a militia leader that is among those most likely to take unilateral action potentially against US forces exploiting the conditions of chaos to target the US, but we have not seen further statements actually from Hadi Al-Ameri, Abu Mahdi al Mohandas, or some of the other major leaders that do have a major role potentially to play in both the continued escalation or any Iranian response on the ground inside of Iraq.

We also of course are looking for statements from the United States or from the NATO coalition members that are also on the ground inside of Iraq who have not only forces at risk, but a key interest at stake in the outcome of this escalating crisis.

Nicholas Carl:

So as you guys had warned last night, one of the potential things that could happen was the Iranians perhaps beginning to call out the protests and argue that these are actually not fueled by local grievances, but instead being stoked by outside forces. And so we’ve noticed a notable inflection in Iranian media over the past 24 hours wherein they have begun to argue that it is the US Embassy actually fomenting the protests and bringing people out into the streets. They’re noting that this is occurring during the Shia Islamic holiday of Arba’een, arguing or suggesting rather, that this could be an attempt to sort of disrupt this Shia Islamic holiday. And so this, as I noted, is different in how the Iranians had previously been discussing the protests in Iraq. A lot of IRGC affiliated media had actually been quite reluctant to report on the protests in very great detail, and instead when they did report on them, they would only highlight messages of non-violence and restraint. And so if the Iranian regime is unable to sort of divert the protests and successfully blamed the United States for them, it’s likely that the Iranians would try to leverage many of their proxies and partner militias in Iraq and perhaps use additional force and crack down on the protesters with a heavier hand.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Protesters have of course, as I mentioned earlier, alleged that the Iranian proxies within the PMF have actually begun to do exactly that in Baghdad, so certainly a dangerous potential additional escalation COA, course of action, that we need to look for moving forward.

Arba’een is of course a Shia religious event that draws millions of pilgrims to Iraq every year. It begins on October 19th. It’s always a security concern due simply to the flow of so many people into Iraq, but also because ISIS has used religious events in the past as an opportunity to inflict high numbers of civilian casualties through

attacks. So we definitely have a number of overlapping threats in this case to Arba'een and the potential as well that the protest movement inside of Iraq actually could backflow into Iran due to the back and forth movement into Iraq by so many Iranian pilgrims.

Nicholas Carl:

Absolutely. So one notable similarity between the current ongoing protests in Iraq and those that we have in the past witnessed throughout Iran and especially in south western Iran in Hormozgan Province. A lot of these are fueled by economic grievances and anger at the government for a variety of issues, mismanagement and things like that. And right now there's a lot of Iranians actually inside of Iraq for this Arba'een holiday. And so as this anti government sentiment spreads throughout Iraq, there's a very great possibility that it will also then spill over into the Iranians and it could actually then begin a much larger protest wave throughout Iran.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Thanks Nick. We're going to continue to track this escalating crisis closely with our partners here at the Critical Threats Project and we'll be providing you further updates in coming hours.

Maseh Zarif:

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 more about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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