

Crisis Brief: How We Got Here

Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella 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 zooms out to discuss how key actors, domestic political competition, and Iranian influence over the last several years have shaped the current crisis. This update addresses the political dynamics that have led to recent mass protests against the Iraqi government. Listen on our website [here](#).

Maseh Zarif:

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this episode.

It's 7:00 PM here in Washington, D.C. on Thursday, October 3, 2019. ISW has launched a *Crisis Brief* focused on a wave of protests roiling Iraq, but it's hard to understand the immediate standoff and the escalating violence without a sense of the political dynamics inside the country and how we got here. Who are the key actors? How has political competition shaped the current crisis? What's been the effect of the Iranian regime extending its influence in Iraq over the last several years? ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella is back to answer these broader questions.

Jennifer Cafarella:

With this episode, I'm going to zoom out and offer some of the backstory for the political context that led to the current flare up in protests across most of Southern Iraq and some of its central and northern provinces within the past week. The touch point for the timeline for how we got here is the May 2018 Election. Of course, a large number of these trends, including distrust in the Iraqi Government for its inability to deliver services, and a number of the political dynamics that are unfolding today have their foundations in the years and in fact decades prior to May 2018. However, that date is a turning point for a number of reasons that is helpful for us to focus in on, to understand quickly some of the most powerful driving forces politically behind the current crisis.

In May 2018, Iraq held its first parliamentary elections after the ISIS takeover of Mosul and most of Sunni Iraq. That election was therefore a potential watershed moment for the Iraqi state to move forward from its latest devastating military conflict and into a new period of hopefully prosperity and national healing for the Iraqi state. Unfortunately, what happened was in fact a political deterioration in Iraq that is a surprise to some outside observers, but actually was percolating underneath the surface even as counter-ISIS operations were reaching their crescendo and conclusion.

The Iraqi Prime Minister that cooperated closely with the United States and the counter-ISIS coalition to fight ISIS and take back Iraq was a notable and capable leader who desired to play a national level role in reunifying Iraq. He was the best candidate we could have hoped for to work with against the Islamic State. However, he was less capable politically of setting the conditions that would have been necessary while campaigning against ISIS to accomplish a number of important political goals that would have been necessary, not only to prevent another ISIS resurgence, which we are now unfortunately watching in late 2019, but also to set the conditions to increase popular trust in the Iraqi state, even in Shi'a Iraq, as well as to constrain a very aggressive effort by Iran through its proxies to expand its military and political leverage inside of Iraq.

Those larger issues went largely unresolved, while the U.S. and Prime Minister at the time, Haider al-Abadi, focused on the counter-ISIS campaign. The Iranians, however, through their proxies, moved very aggressively during that time to set themselves up for what would become a very big political victory for Iran in the May 2018 Elections. Iran's proxies' campaign, claiming that they actually had played the disproportionately important role in the counter-ISIS fight - that's not true, but they claimed it - and they won a lot of seats in parliament as a result. Prime Minister Abadi, despite positioning himself as a nationalist figure that would reunify Iraq, actually came in third in the election. He lost not only to the Iranian proxies, which campaigned as a united block, but also to the Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who positioned himself as a populist and won the support of much of the voters in the Iraqi Shi'a provinces on a platform of countering corruption and reform within the Iraqi state, which Haider al-Abadi had attempted to make some progress towards during the counter-ISIS fight, but had proven largely incapable actually of delivering.

So the election in May 2018 led to a major loss for the primary American partner within the Iraqi Government, and a major victory both for populace positioning against the Iraqi Government, or trying to hold the Iraqi Government more accountable, and then Iran's proxies. What then ensued was a very long and drawn out and difficult political battle over who would actually become the next Iraqi Prime Minister, and who would gain the seats of power within the Iraqi state after the election.

The current Prime Minister is actually a compromise candidate between those two largest blocks, Moqtada al-Sadr and the Iranian proxies within the Conquest Alliance. He does not have his own deep political base. He therefore is incredibly weak. He's unable to ram through legislation at the Council of Representatives, and he doesn't have political muscles, so to speak, with which to apply leverage against either Moqtada al-Sadr, or some of the Iranian proxies, or even Haider al-Abadi, who does remain involved in the political sphere and has actually joined in with some additional Shi'a leaders in opposition to this new Prime Minister because of his inability to deliver on some of the requirements for countering corruption and reform within the Iraqi state.

The weakness of the Prime Minister and the requirement for compromise between the large Shi'a blocks has led to a paralyzed central government in Baghdad. That is actually a relative success on the scale of the outcomes that could have emerged from that election. Given how many seats Iran's proxies were able to win in parliament, there was a potential actually that the U.S. would face an Iranian client as the premier. So a weak and relatively paralyzed central government in Baghdad was in some ways a relative victory for the United States, as well as for the Iraqi nationalists that desired not to see a hostile takeover of the Iraqi state by Iran through its proxies.

However, the paralysis that then ensued ensured that the government would be unable to deliver the level of reforms and good governance that would have been necessary to head off the current escalation in protests across Southern Iraq. It also kept the central state weak enough to allow those Iranian proxies to engage in a very aggressive campaign at the provincial level, to position themselves to extract financial resources through extortion and taking over of local economies, and to try to position their clients to win in provincial elections scheduled for March 2020. That simultaneous campaign of predation at the provincial level has led to rising levels actually of panic in some Iraqi leaders, that again, desire not to be victimized by such an aggressive campaign by Iran's proxies and, in fact, desire for their country to be independent. And this rising panic has actually been described by some, I believe it was Mike Knights actually published, that it has led to a sensation of being swallowed whole. That the Iranians really were able to muscle themselves into areas, including into Sunni areas, and not only target the local population but set themselves up for further capture of Iraqi state institutions at the provincial level in addition to the central government in Baghdad.

That dynamic is inherently unstable. The Iranians, in some respects, are trying to use Iraq as a release valve for the pressure of economic sanctions that the U.S. President has placed on Iran, but also seek to build within Iraq a durable military and political infiltration that they can use, not only to ensure that Iraq never again threatens Iran, but also to integrate into Iran's wider regional project of building a network of integrated proxies, both military and political, that can advance Iran's hegemonic agenda across the region. This wider Iranian-backed campaign has triggered some of the anti-Iran rhetoric within the current protest movement that we're seeing in Baghdad and across Southern Iraq. And there is a very real possibility that if the Iranian proxies take a muscular response against protests or continue to engage in corruption and abuses at the scale that is happening now, they will further inflame the protest movement or potentially even cause it to direct an increasing level of focus on Iran's role in Iraq.

So when we look at the current crisis unfolding and ask what can or must the Iraqi Government do to avert the worst possible escalations of this protest movement and ideally actually address the valid grievances of those protesters, we must remember that the Iraqi state is not currently a capable and unified government entity. The current government is a composite of multiple powerbrokers whose interests and objectives within Iraq are actually often completely at odds with one another. The current Prime Minister is not going to solve that problem. He does not have the political base to undo the last Iraqi election, or to sideline from power Iran's proxies or even nationalist figures like Moqtada al-Sadr. Some new consensus is going to need to be reached.

Ideally, the political leaders in Baghdad will recognize that they all have interest in de-escalating the situation, and doing their part to deliver at least an improvement in the quality of government to the Iraqi civilians and not just in Southern Iraq.

However, the danger of this moment is because there are wider regional trends underway at this time, including the U.S.-Iran escalation that could cause some elements of those political elite to decide otherwise, to decide to exploit the conditions of chaos to advance their own agendas or simply to exploit the current political upheaval to try to renegotiate a new government in Baghdad that is more advantageous towards their interests. Even the prospect of a new round of negotiations for a Prime Minister has the potential further to destabilize the situation in Iraq.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether these popular protests will even respond to attempts by Iraq's current political elites to dampen this movement. One of the key threads within the protest movement is actually an opposition to the established politicians, and the perception that Iraqi politics follows an ever-continuing pattern of corruption and mismanagement, and that Iraq needs to find a way to break the cycle.

Therefore, watching how the protest movement continues to evolve and the demands that the protesters are making will be critical to understanding what kinds of concessions or reforms could the Iraqi Government actually even attempt to make in order to de-escalate this crisis. We have not yet seen statements from most of Iraq's political leaders in reaction to the crisis. There has been a notable silence, especially from Iran's proxy leaders. That likely reflects a desire not to attract additional attention and to draw the condemnation from this protest movement. However, silence from Iraq's ruling elite can also itself inflame the protests. It is critical that we not lose sight of the fact that the underlying problems of governance within Iraq to which this protest movement is responding cannot be solved overnight. These are deep, systemic, and structural issues with the existing Iraqi state that will take months, if not years, actually to resolve.

If anybody even attempts to resolve it seriously, Iraq will need help from its allies, and the U.S. must ensure that we do not lose sight of the scale of the requirements ahead of us, even if protests do dissipate in the near term.

Iraq is currently on a cycle of protests every year that will continue to escalate compared to the year past until and unless these underlying problems actually show meaningful change.

Therefore, the U.S. cannot set its goal simply to establish a return to calm in Iraq, but must take this opportunity to remind ourselves what is at stake if we pursue a military-only and ISIS-only campaign in Iraq, and fail actually to provide our partners in Iraq the support that they need to improve the quality of governance delivered to their population, and to fight back against attempts from the Iranians to co-opt the Iraqi state for their own regional hegemonic purposes.

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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