

# Crisis Brief: What Could Happen Next

## Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, Samantha Leathley, and Maseh Zarif

OCTOBER 4, 2019

*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 ISW's Iraq expert Samantha Leathley discuss developments on the ground and what ISW is watching for next. This update outlines possible paths of escalation of the Iraq crisis. Multiple reports of assassinations and other targeted killings of activists and demonstrators reflect an attempt to suppress the protests through intimidation, likely by Iran's proxies. Leading Shi'a political figure Muqtada al Sadr called for the dissolution of the government and a new election in an attempt to oust the sitting Prime Minister, who has failed to address the crisis. A parliament session is reportedly scheduled for October 5th. It remains unclear whether a reshuffle in the political leadership in Baghdad would ameliorate protest demands, however. Listen on our website [here](#).

### **Maseh Zarif:**

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

### **Jennifer Cafarella:**

It is 6:30 PM in Washington on Friday, October 4. Protests in Iraq are continuing to escalate. On this episode, we are returning to eight of the possible escalation paths that we've outlined in previous posts and providing an update regarding what we've seen and which of those eight courses of action have risen to the top of our list for what is most likely to unfold moving forward. Mass protests have continued across Iraq in defiance of the Iraqi Government's protests and despite rising levels of violence between protesters and security forces. The death toll is now reportedly over fifty with more than a thousand additional Iraqis wounded during the fighting.

The actual number of deaths and wounded civilians during this crisis may actually be higher than what has been reported thus far. Protesters continued to call for a regime change across the south and do not show signs actually of dissipating despite some attempts by the Iraqi Government to issue conciliatory statements. In our first *Crisis Brief*, we outlined seven possible dangerous escalation paths that this protest movement could take in coming days. In Episode #2, we added an eighth.

Those potential courses of action are first, that this protest movement does actually evolve into an actual revolutionary movement calling for and actually pursuing the destruction of the existing state. Second, the potential that some of Iran's proxies take unilateral violent action to exploit the conditions of chaos to target U.S. forces or pursue other interests. Third, that ISIS exploits the rising levels of chaos in Iraq to expand its own operations and target the Iraqi Security Forces or potentially Shi'a pilgrims headed to Iraq for the religious event of Arba'een. Fourth, that Iran tries to redirect the focus of the protest against the United States to leverage this popular uprising to add pressure on both the U.S. and America's regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Fifth, that a political faction within the Iraqi Government tries to exploit this crisis to oust the existing Prime Minister or potentially that some actor decides to take armed action against the existing government. Sixth, that the Iraqi Kurds decide that they have an opportunity or perhaps even security requirement to move back into contested areas from which they were expelled in late 2017. Seventh, that the Iraqi Government actually collapses amidst the pressure and is simply unable to sustain this level of unrest and competing interests. Eighth, that the Iranians actually decide to take a direct military role in suppressing the protests within Iraq out of a concern that the

protests could spread into Iran or simply incentivize a reemergence of protests against the Iranian regime. It is too soon to tell which of these potential courses of action is most likely.

However, we have seen dangerous indicators that this crisis will in fact continue to escalate and that it may head in the direction of more of a revolutionary trajectory or potentially that more assertive action is taken against the Prime Minister in an attempt to head off this revolutionary potential. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a statement on Friday siding with the protesters. His statement was especially noteworthy not only because he is the major Shi'a religious leader inside of Iraq, but also because he has historically played a dampening or calming role in crisis situations such as this.

Therefore, his very direct call for the Iraqi state to assume responsibility for the current crisis and his decision to support further protests against that state could actually add further momentum to the existing protest movement by removing one of the brakes, so to speak, on this escalation potential. The government in Anbar, the provincial government in the Sunni-majority province west of Baghdad, has also implemented a media blackout, indicating a concern that protests could spread beyond Shi'a-majority provinces primarily in the south to Sunni areas. If that occurred, this actually would indicate to us that the popular resistance against the government is spreading to include the Sunni population, which is a major sign that this could continue to evolve into not only a Shi'a resistance against the state, but a pan-Iraqi resistance to the current government. We also have seen a statement from Moqtada al-Sadr, the religious cleric who won the most number of seats in the 2018 Parliamentary Election, who called for the dissolution of the existing government and a new election. Therefore, we have in fact seen an indicator that our potential course of action that somebody tries to oust the Prime Minister is unfolding now. Thus far, the Prime Minister's reaction has been relatively muted.

He went on TV at two o'clock in the morning on Friday in a relatively desperate attempt to call for calm. He referenced in his statements the severity of the challenge facing the Iraqi state at this time by saying the protests could "lead to the destruction of the state, the entire state." Therefore, his statement actually is indicative of the potential very dangerous outcome that we've highlighted that the government could collapse under this much pressure. We will need to continue to watch how the Prime Minister responds and whether Sadr's call for his dismissal and a new election is successful.

That dismissal could lead to conceivably a new election that does not amount to the collapse of the government, or in a much more dangerous escalation path could actually accelerate such a collapse. Finally, we have multiple indications of the possibility that Iran is deciding to pursue a more muscular intervention to suppress the protest movement. We have seen multiple instances of the assassination of activists and protesters, including in their homes, and masked men dragging wounded protestors out of hospitals.

Protesters have accused Iran's proxies of this violence, which is consistent with how Iran's proxies have behaved in Iraq in the past, including in last year's escalation of protests in Basra in Southern Iraq where a widespread campaign of such targeted killings contributed to a decrease in the protest movement through intimidation. It is also possible that Sistani's decision to align with the protestors could cause the Islamic Republic of Iran to recalculate the risk that it perceives to its own stability inside of Iran as a result of this protest movement. Sistani is ideologically opposed to the Islamic Republic. He is the second of the two major pillars within Shi'a Islam, but has historically refrained from using his influence to actually advocate for or stimulate anti-Iran activity. He has not done so thus far, but it is possible that Iran will perceive his support to the protest movement, which has included some anti-Iran rhetoric, as a dangerous escalation, and that if Sistani does in fact continue to refrain from dampening - or, more dangerously, actively fueled - the protest movement, this could cause a major

change in how the Iranians are perceiving their risk and therefore what levels of force they may consider using or encouraging their proxies inside of Iraq to use.

Looking forward as we enter Saturday, there are four main questions that we are asking as we continue to watch the situation unfold. I am joined here by Samantha Leathley, ISW's Iraq Analyst, who will discuss four main questions we are asking as we enter Saturday and this crisis continues to unfold. First, will the ISF remain cohesive or not?

***Samantha Leathley:***

We are looking for whether or not the ISF will remain cohesive because during the 2018 phase of protests, particularly in Southern Iraq, we observed that Iraqi soldiers, especially the Iraqi Army, occasionally abandoned their mandate to protect the government buildings and began demonstrating with the protesters. Some protesters in this phase in 2019 are calling for the Iraqi Security Forces to join them and protest alongside them.

***Jennifer Cafarella:***

Thus far, we have not observed any instances of the Iraqi Security Forces members deciding to break rank and side with the protests, but again, with the internet shut off in Iraq and very few reliable reports getting out, it is possible that some of this activity has already begun. Second, what will major Iraqi military leaders, including the commanders of the elite Counter-Terrorism Services and Iraqi Army, do moving forward? There is a possibility, hopefully a far remote possibility, that Iraqi military leaders will decide to take action to oust the Prime Minister and establish a new government or to step in to stabilize the existing government in a condition where collapse looks more likely.

***Samantha Leathley:***

Since the beginning of the demonstration escalation around the beginning of October, demonstrators have protested against the Prime Minister's removal of a prominent counter-terrorism commander. Some social media messaging within the protest has called for the commander and several of his colleagues to step in and take control of the government as a

***Jennifer Cafarella:***

The dismissal of a senior and very widely respected commander within the Counter-Terrorism Services was, of course, one of the events that helped to trigger the scale of the protests that we're seeing in the south. The emergence of rhetoric from within at least some of the protestors calling for this CTS commander and other Army leaders to step in is potentially quite dangerous. Third, we are watching to see what will other Iraqi political leaders do in reaction to Sadr's call for the dismissal of the prime minister and a new election, including what the reaction will be from former Prime Minister and U.S. partner Haider al-Abadi.

***Samantha Leathley:***

In the beginning of October, a series of parliamentary coalitions formed an opposition front to the current government, which included the former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Sadr, and so one of the things that we're watching for is whether or not a parliamentary coalition contingent will propose themselves as an alternate and adhere to Sadr's call of removing the current government, as well as the Prime Minister.

***Jennifer Cafarella:***

In this case, one of the additional questions that we have is would such a change in the composition of the government in a marginal sense actually be sufficient to de-escalate the protests, or would that kind of round-robin replacement of the Prime Minister serve to further aggravate the protestors who have decried the existing politi-

cal elite and claimed that this has been a cycle of simply replacing corrupt leaders within an existing system. Finally, will the violence used against protesters to date both by unnamed security forces, but also potentially by Iranian proxies conducting assassinations and targeted killings, actually dampen the protest by intimidating protesters not to risk their lives in order to take to the streets?

***Samantha Leathley:***

We've seen an abnormally low level of demonstration on a Friday. That is odd because in Iraq typically on Fridays protest activity is high as people congregate in mosques and in public areas. We cannot confidently say that protests have decreased due to the limited information coming out of Iraq. The Government of Iraq did institute a bandwidth restriction on Iraq's internet use, so it is possible that reports of demonstrations happening today are restricted. The intimidation cases that we're seeing, especially the intimidation cases that may be being driven by Iranian proxies, could put the brakes on the protests by either targeting organizers of the protests or generally having an intimidation effect and dampening the protests. One effect of intimidation or targeted intimidation towards protesters could be that only extremely dedicated protesters are going to show up in future demonstrations, which could actually intensify or organize the demonstrations. In the instance that the demonstrations are culled down by intimidation to only those that are extremely committed, the violence risk may increase. If those very committed contingent of demonstrators who are not afraid to come out and protest under threat returned armed or returned more organized, that could increase the risk for violence and the intensity of the demonstrations.

***Jennifer Cafarella:***

Certainly far too soon to tell whether we are headed towards a worse escalation of this crisis or the potential that it will dissipate. Unfortunately, what we've observed thus far makes us continually worried that the dangerous escalation paths remain the more likely paths at this time, that this crisis is not over. We will continue to watch for further signs of which of these trajectories is likely and provide further updates.

***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](http://www.understandingwar.org) to learn more about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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