

# Crisis Brief: Iran's Coup by Proxy

## 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. The Iraqi prime minister's concessions to protesters reflects one aspect of the ongoing crisis, but it is only part of the story. There remains an ongoing competition for the future of Iraq. In this installment, ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and the Critical Threat Project's Iran Analyst Nicholas Carl discuss the Iraqi government's recent actions, what the information environment tells us about the situation on the ground, and how the Iranian regime is positioning its proxies as it vies for greater control. 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 5:00 PM in Washington, D.C. on Monday, October 7. Inside Iraq, all eyes have been on the standoff between protesters and the government in Baghdad, but there's another layer to the ongoing crisis that involves Iran and the role of its proxies. In this Crisis Brief Update, ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and Critical Threats Project Iran Analyst Nicholas Carl explore this issue and outline what they're watching for this week.

### *Jennifer Cafarella*

First, a few updates regarding what has evolved since Friday. Protests across Iraq have indeed dissipated after levels of violence continued to rise late last week into the weekend. However, the remaining demonstrations in Baghdad and multiple additional provinces have become increasingly violent as largely unidentified security forces have continued to use violence against protestors and at least some protestors have begun to fight back on small levels. This raises the risk, as we warned in previous episodes, of the potential that the protest movement will overall become more armed and transition into a more active revolution against the Iraqi state rather than a political protest movement given the rising levels of violence. The Iraqi Prime Minister has made a series of concessions to the protesters in an attempt to further quell the demonstrations and sidestep a greater political challenge from within the Iraqi Parliament on his continued survival as Prime Minister.

The storyline of the confrontation between protesters and the Prime Minister is only a very small portion of the story of what's unfolding in Iraq. Given the role of Iran and its proxies in Iraq, far more complex power dynamics are unfolding behind the scenes than is immediately available from the limited stream of information managing to escape Iraq. The suppression of media in Iraq increased over the weekend with an apparently coordinated takedown of multiple media outlets in Baghdad by what seems to be Iran's proxies, in some cases dressed in uniforms of the Iraqi Security Forces. We cannot yet confirm the identity of those attackers. However, the tactics are consistent with past activity by Iran's proxies and were followed by the communication of hit lists targeting specific journalists in Baghdad as well as multiple reported assassinations of journalists in a further attempt to prevent any information from escaping Iraq.

Two storylines have emerged within this crisis in Iraq. First, the growing discontent within the Shi'a-majority south towards the central government in Baghdad due to the government's wide-scale corruption and inability to deliver basic services and good governance in the south. Second, Iran's takeover of Iraqi institutions via its proxies within the Popular Mobilization Forces and Iran's acceleration of that campaign in order to use Iraq as a release valve for the economic pressure imposed on it by American sanctions. The convergence of these two phenomena within this protest escalation has created a difficult problem for Iran in deciding how to respond to the rising levels both of demonstrations and reciprocal violence by the Iraqi Security Forces.

**Nicholas Carl**

Senior Iranian officials have finally begun to break their silence on the Iraqi protests after about a week now. Most notable among them is the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who tweeted yesterday expressing the strong spiritual ties between Iran and Iraq and attributing the unrest in Iraq to Iran's enemies. Since then, Iranian officials including the chief of the judiciary and other senior advisers to Khamenei have followed suit discussing the protests openly. Now, this is notable in that this is the first time that any major Iranian official has discussed the Iraqi protests to any degree since they erupted last week.

**Jennifer Cafarella**

The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq did break its silence within the last twenty-four hours, finally releasing statements after days of no public comment on the protests. The Popular Mobilization itself released a statement affirming that it intends to step in to help stabilize the situation in Iraq and to fight against conspirators, which is language consistent with the new language coming out of Iran. The Popular Mobilization Chairman Falih al-Fayyadh also stated that PMF forces will move in to protect the Iraqi state against a coup or possible insurgency, which demonstrates the level to which Iran's proxies are prepared to engage militarily under the guise of defending the Iraqi state, but actually taking unilateral action perhaps to suppress the protest movement at all costs and thereby increase their own authority within and leverage over the Iraqi state.

**Nicholas Carl**

As I discussed on this podcast a few days ago, Iranian media has been changing its framing of these protests and even been inconsistent in some of its messaging. For example, the Iranians have messaged on and off as to whether it is okay for Iranian pilgrims to travel to Iraq right now for the Shi'a Islamic pilgrimage Arba'een. I think this general confusion in the Iranians' messaging underscores how grave Iran is perceiving this. It looks like it took them a while to figure out how they need to react, but now that Khamenei has finally spoken, he has shown to the rest of the regime that it is now okay to discuss the protests openly and that their talking points is that this is fueled by foreign intervention.

One interesting thing to note about the Iranian regime's framing here is that officials have begun to describe the protests as "sedition." It is interesting that they are using this language in particular, because it is exactly how the regime has described previous mass protest movements including the 2009 Green Movement protests and more recently the nationwide anti-regime protests in late 2017. The regime has similarly alleged in the past that these protest movements in Iran have been instigated by outside forces and this could serve as the sort of green-light to Iraq and more specifically in the Popular Mobilization Forces to continue violently cracking down on the Iraqi protestors to ensure Iraq's stability and protect the government there.

**Jennifer Cafarella**

Certainly this reaction from Iran is further evidence of how closely linked it perceives the protest movement in Iraq with the threat of protests within Iran and demonstrates that Iran will support in Iraq the level of suppression it would be willing to conduct within Iran in order to prevent even the risk of a cross-border spillover of this protest movement.

**Nicholas Carl**

The care with which the regime has addressed these protest movements is likely due to the congruency between the Iraqi protests and those we have witnessed throughout Iran in the past. Many of these are fueled by economic grievances and the potentiality for these protests to spread to Iran is a very real and existential threat to the Iranian regime in Tehran.

*Jennifer Cafarella*

Iran's decision to align itself with the Iraqi state against the protesters, and to therefore provide a green-light to its proxies in Iraq to suppress with violence to an even greater degree this protest movement, puts Iraq further on a path to the Iranian proxies within the Popular Mobilization to be a priority - if not the main - security instrument of the Iraqi state. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo held a phone call with the Iraqi Prime Minister today in which he affirmed U.S. support for the Iraqi Government and essentially signaled that we trust the Iraqi Government to handle this escalation. That message sends a sign that not only will the U.S. not become involved, but that perhaps we are leaving the door open for Iran's proxies to play a more muscular role in Iraq despite the fact that the U.S. is simultaneously attempting to implement a strategy to contain Iran's expansion throughout the region and its access to economic resources.

There already has been a large slew of reporting from the information escaping Iraq that Iran may have already sent forces into Iraq directly. Is it a conspiracy or insane to think that Iran might be willing to use its own forces to suppress this protest movement if it escalates far enough?

*Nicholas Carl*

There is absolutely a potentiality for the Iranian regime to intervene directly into Iraq if it perceives that the Government of Iraq and its stability as a whole is at risk.

*Jennifer Cafarella*

Certainly too soon to know for sure whether the Iranians have sent forces in covertly or otherwise to assist in the crackdown against protesters, but very worrying reports are emerging. This is something we will continue to watch for when the internet comes back online and information begins to flow back out of Iraq. But the potential that we've already highlighted for the protesters against the government to become armed and to respond to this crackdown by what seems to be a combination of some elements of the Iraqi Security Forces and some elements of the Popular Mobilization. The risk that protesters arm is perhaps the greatest indicator of whether Iraq is headed on a trajectory that may cause the Iranians to decide whether they need to in fact send forces to Iraq.

However, there's another potential escalation of this crisis worth keeping in mind, which is that further crackdowns by the Popular Mobilization Forces and expansion of those Iranian proxies within Iraq will likely further exacerbate the simmering ISIS insurgency even if ISIS does not immediately conduct major offensive operations during the chaos. ISIS benefits from the perception that the central government in Baghdad is co-opted by Iran in order to recruit within Sunni communities and Iran has in the past decided to deploy IRGC forces into Iraq in order to protect Iranian interests from an ISIS resurgence.

Therefore what to watch for moving forward includes the reaction from Moqtada al-Sadr, who is a Shi'a nationalist cleric who has been a leading voice both for the protest movement currently unfolding and for wider reforms within the Iraqi state, to a major escalation within Sadr City, the key support base for his followers as well as the protest movement within Baghdad. That escalation sent a signal to Sadr and we have not yet seen him respond either to that escalation or to the list of concessions from the Prime Minister, which have fallen far short of what Sadr has demanded, which is again the full resignation of the entire Iraqi Government and a new round of UN-monitored elections. Sadr himself has a difficult choice to make. Will he call for his protesters to take more assertive action to fight back against elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces and ISF forces suppressing the protests? Or will he actually concede to the concessions from the Prime Minister and instead choose to de-escalate the situation and accept a more repressive and less responsive Iraqi state?

***Maseh Zarif***

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*This podcast is produced by ISW's Educational Programs and Outreach Coordinator Marissa Morton*

**Contact us:** For press inquiries, email [press@understandingwar.org](mailto:press@understandingwar.org)