

# Crisis Brief: Baghdad Protests

## 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 discusses a deteriorating political-security situation in Iraq. Mass protests against the Iraqi government have spread to eleven predominantly Shi'a provinces. Iraqi government forces have used live ammunition in multiple provinces and are fighting with protesters to secure Baghdad International Airport. This update describes the unfolding crisis and the possible trajectories for further escalation. Listen on our website [here](#).

### **Maseh Zarif:**

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

It is 8:00 PM in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, October 2, 2019. We're sharing with you the first *Crisis Brief*. Over the last day, protests in Iraq have spread dramatically, with increasing reports of unrest and violence. ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella will explain the current situation, where the escalation may lead to, and what it will mean for U.S. national security issues, from the fight against ISIS to governance conditions in Iraq to Iran's destabilizing role.

### **Jennifer Cafarella:**

We are recording a crisis update briefing on the evolving situation in Iraq. Protests have now spread to eleven provinces in the Shi'a-majority south and have become violent and engaged in clashes with Iraqi Security Forces in multiple instances. Iraqi forces have used live-fire ammunition against protesters in multiple provinces causing casualties, including multiple deaths and hundreds of injuries. The protestors thus far have attacked government buildings in multiple provinces, including in Baghdad, in Maysan, in Dhi Qar, Najaf, and a number of others. The Iraqi Government has responded by declaring a state of emergency, cutting off internet access, and issuing a curfew in Baghdad starting at 5:00 AM local time tomorrow. At this time, protesters are currently engaged in clashes with Iraqi Security Forces at the Baghdad International Airport, where we have an active crisis situation unfolding. With an absence of internet access, reliable reports from Iraq have of course decreased, and ISW is going to continue to monitor the situation closely and will provide further updates as we gain more information tomorrow.

There are a number of possible trajectories for this crisis situation to continue to escalate in coming weeks. I'm going to outline seven of the most dangerous ways that this crisis can unfold, although this is of course not necessarily a comprehensive list.

The first dangerous possibility is actually that this protest movement does not only continue but spreads actually into the next Arab Spring revolution against the state. We have not yet seen a spread of the protests into Sunni-majority provinces or into Iraqi Kurdistan, and those are the indicators that we would look for actually to signal that the protest movement is actually on a most dangerous trajectory. Thus far, there are multiple instances of revolutionary rhetoric being used in these protests. That's not necessarily surprising. We've seen protest chants calling for the reform of the government but also potentially its restructure before, but we are seeing a much larger spike in those protest chants based on the information coming out of these provinces.

The second potential dangerous escalation is that we actually have a decision by some of Iran's proxies, perhaps the more unruly and less disciplined ones, to exploit the conditions of chaos to conduct their own unilateral

attacks, not necessarily on the orders of Iran or its agents in Iraq. The more likely provocateurs in the set of Iranian proxies inside of Iraq include Qais al-Khazali and potentially also the Nujaba Movement, which could decide either to take action against U.S. forces in Iraq, again exploiting the conditions of chaos, or even simply to take action against competing Shi'a militias for access to revenue, et cetera, amidst the sort of warlord-like environment that has emerged in Iraq after the liberation of much of Iraq from ISIS.

That brings me to category three, which is actually the potential that ISIS will exploit the chaos. ISIS always exploits chaos. It's not necessarily a terribly unique prediction, but we have assessed at ISW that ISIS is gearing up not only for a more aggressive offensive phase inside of Iraq, but that ISIS may actually attempt a campaign of prison break operations after ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called for exactly that in a recent speech released on September 16. The potential for prison break operations includes prisons near Baghdad that ISIS has attacked in the past, from which ISIS actually liberated prisoners in its initial resurgence after 2011, but also potentially a prison in Nasiriyah, where we have actually had reports of ISIS activity near Nasiriyah, which is a prison that is overcrowded and is actually holding an unknown number of ISIS detainees. So we have a dangerous potential overlap there in ISIS threat vectors and the chaos caused by the protests.

Fourth, we have the potential actually that the Iranians decide not to simply duck under the wave of these protests but rather attempt to redirect the momentum of the protests against the United States. Thus far, we've actually seen no significant statements from the major Iranian proxy leaders or from Iran in reaction to the protest movement. That's a notable and rather disciplined silence. It is possible that the Iranians will attempt to defuse in some way the protests actually by orienting it against the United States, or potentially against Israel in retaliation for alleged Israeli strikes inside of Iraq. That won't necessarily dissipate the protest movement and it would be a bit of a risky attempt on Iran's part, given that there are anti-Iran chants within the protest movement, and there is the potential that if the Iranian proxies take too active of a role in trying to redirect the protest movement, they could actually trigger further backlash, the likes of which we did actually see last summer.

Fifth, there is of course the potential that a political faction in Iraq attempts to exploit the conditions of popular pressure against the Iraqi Government to oust the existing government. That can include a greater political challenge against Iraqi Prime Minister Mehdi or the potential, given that this is Iraq, that a political actor decides to take armed action to overthrow the legally elected government.

Sixth, if the protest movement continues over weeks or potentially months, there is another dangerous possibility actually that it creates an opening for a renegotiation, so to speak, of the situation in Kirkuk. The Iraqi Government, with support from Iran's proxies, seized Kirkuk from Iraqi Kurds in late 2017. Thus far, the tensions actually have abated and the Iraqi Government and Iraqi Kurdistan are on track for better relations. But there is of course a possibility that a destabilization in Kirkuk could cause the Kurds to decide actually to try to redeploy forces there, or that a broader condition of instability or state failure could actually create an opening for the Kurds to perceive that they actually have a chance to take Kirkuk back from the central government.

Finally, a possibility throughout actually all of these different scenarios is simply that we do enter into a scenario where the Iraqi Government simply cannot endure under this amount of pressure and collapses. That can be a collapse triggered by a greater escalation, or simply by the state's inability to function. Given that it has failed thus far actually to deliver protestor demands over a period of years, we could have the added pressure of any of these actors attempting to hijack the protest movement actually trigger state failure inside of Iraq. There is of course the potential, which we certainly here at ISW hope becomes the most likely outcome, that the Iraqi Government is able to reassert control and to dampen these protests. The use of live-fire ammunition against protesters does actually create a great potential for further backlash and further instability, but it is possible that

the Iraqi Security Forces under the command of the Prime Minister are able actually to dampen the tensions, to secure key facilities, and to create another political opening to address some of these grievances through the existing mechanisms of government rather than through continued escalation of protests.

We'll of course therefore continue to watch for indicators that the situation will de-escalate, which can include major Iraqi Shi'a political leaders actually calling for de-escalation. What Sadr says next will be very important actually for indicating whether he is going to continue to fuel protests or whether he will attempt to use his influence to de-escalate the situation. So we'll continue to watch for those Iraqi reactions tomorrow, and provide you further updates as we gain more clarity on which of the potential paths Iraq actually is likely to take.

***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.

*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)