

Crisis Brief: A New Phase of Unrest in Iraq?

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring Jennifer Cafarella and Samantha Leathley

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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. Iraq's government has not addressed the conditions that prompted street protests in early October 2019. Baghdad will also struggle to hold accountable the forces that engaged in a violent crackdown on protesters given Iran's role in Iraq. The stage now appears set for a new phase of unrest. ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and ISW Iraq analyst Samantha Leathley discuss the potential for renewed protests this week at a time when some U.S. forces are shifting from Syria into Iraq.

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 is 3:30 PM in Washington, DC, on Monday, October 21st, 2019. The large scale unrest we witnessed earlier this month in Iraq has receded, yet the underlying political tensions and the prospects for renewed protests remain live issues. As we head into a critical period that includes the shift of US forces from Syria, ISW Iraq analyst, Samantha Leathley, joins ISW research director, Jennifer Cafarella, to discuss the state of Iraq's crisis, Baghdad's response, and what to watch for in the week ahead.

Jennifer Cafarella

Iraq had a relatively calm Arba'een commemoration weekend, with millions of Shia pilgrims traveling to Karbala. The Iraqi security forces and Popular Mobilization Forces successfully disrupted multiple planned ISIS attacks against these religious observers. The pilgrims traveling to Karbala also did not participate in violent protests, although some did chant anti-US, anti-Israel, and anti-corruption slogans, in accordance with calls by Shia religious figure Muqtada al-Sadr for such chants. The relative calm over Arba'een weekend is, in part, the result of limited concessions by the Iraqi government to appease protesters for at least the near term, as well as the large scale use of violence against previous protests, which dissuaded many, at least for a time, to continue to demonstrate against the Iraqi government. However, protests do look likely to resume now that the Arba'een holiday is behind us. Multiple Iraqi journalists have reported that political activists are planning additional protest this coming Friday, on October 25th, the first Friday after the Arba'een holiday. There are two additional drivers of the potential for renewed protests in Iraq, despite the concessions from the Iraqi government and the deterrence of past violence against protesters. First, Muqtada al-Sadr released a statement on Arba'een, calling for future demonstrations, putting his support behind protesters, and stating that the Iraqi government is quote, "incapable of reform." The strong statement from Sadr will likely incentivize additional Shia followers to take to the streets this Friday. In addition, Iraq's Shia religious authority, Sistani, has issued a deadline for the Iraqi government to deliver promised reforms that it likely cannot meet. Sam, talk us through the Sistani demand, and how it relates to the possibility for protest this Friday, October 25th.

Samantha Leathley

So, all the way back on October 11th, Sistani responded to the first wave of demonstrations in early October by issuing, via a sermon, a demand to the government of Iraq to identify and hold responsible the security forces, including militias, responsible for shooting live-fire at demonstrators and sniping demonstrators. In that sermon, Sistani issued a two week deadline for the government of Iraq to identify, arrest, and bring to justice, the security forces and militias that perpetrated violence against the demonstrators. Thus far, the government of Iraq has not responded thoroughly or well to Sistani's demands. Immediately after Sistani's sermon, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, made a committee to identify and investigate security forces responsible for violence towards protesters. The follow-up call that Mahdi

formed, this committee, recommended the dismissal of a number of ISF commanders, but did not release the names of these commanders to the public, contrary to Sistani's demand that the names be public. Second, the follow-up cell issued a limited number of arrest warrants, but we have not confirmed that any arrests have actually happened.

Jennifer Cafarella

So, Sistani's statement proceeded Sadr's most recent call for protests and Sadr's accusation that the government is incapable of reform. Can we tell what degree of action Sistani expected the Iraqi government to manage to undertake in a two week period? Was Sistani looking for a symbolic measure of justice for the protesters or a deep and serious reform of the leadership of the Iraqi security forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces?

Samantha Leathley

No, so Sistani's rhetoric was much stronger, and specifically called for a very thorough investigation and identification of the security forces responsible for violence towards protesters. Sistani specifically called for arresting those responsible and bringing them to justice. The rhetoric of Sistani's statement was extremely strong and specific. Sistani called for this investigation to be completed within a specific period, in this case, two weeks, and not to be procrastinated. So, what Sistani statement is conveying is that the government of Iraq must undertake real, specific, and verifiable action to identify and punish security forces for shooting demonstrators.

Jennifer Cafarella

Thus far, have the government's responses hit the bar that Sistani has set for them?

Samantha Leathley

No, so the Iraqi government, led by the Iraqi prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, did take some steps to begin addressing Sistani's sermon and the calls he made within the sermon. Mahdi formed a committee to follow up on and investigate the security forces responsible. However, that committee has not produced a set of results that meet the bar that Sistani set. The follow-up committee that Mahdi formed did recommend the dismissal of a number of ISF commanders, but contrary to Sistani's statement, it is not known who those commanders are. Their names have not been released. Secondly, Mahdi has issued a limited number of arrest warrants for individual ISF commanders. However, no ostensible efforts have been made by the Iraqi government to hold militias, in particular, PMF or Iran-backed forces, accountable for their violence against protesters.

Jennifer Cafarella

Why is that? Is the PMF responsible for violence against protesters, based on available information?

Samantha Leathley

Yes. Based on what we have seen, Popular Mobilization Forces, including Iran-backed militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces, did contribute to using live-fire and killing demonstrators in the Iraqi security forces' first response to the wave of demonstrations in early October. Therefore, the government of Iraq's lack of response and lack of effort to hold the Popular Mobilization Forces or the Iran-backed forces that likely also participated accountable, does not adhere to the demands within Sistani's sermon on the 11th.

Jennifer Cafarella

Why does the government's inability to deliver on Sistani's demand make further protests likely?

Samantha Leathley

The original wave of demonstrations, in early October, contained many criticisms of the government, including corruption, but one specific and repeated criticism is that the current Iraqi government is weak and in some ways,

beholden to Iran and pro-Iran political allies in Iraq. So, the government of Iraq's lack of ability, in this case, to hold to Sistani's demands and prosecute, not just the Iraqi security forces, but also the militias and Popular Mobilization Forces that participated in violence towards demonstrators, may confirm in the minds of the demonstrators this Friday, that the Iraqi government is in fact beholden to Iran and Iran's political allies, and is unable to stand up to a rollback Iranian influence.

Jennifer Cafarella

So, what should we watch for this week as we head towards Friday protests?

Samantha Leathley

The first things that we could look for are the government of Iraq and Iran resorting to the methods they used to suppress the first wave of protests, or to control the first wave of protests, including preemptive arrests of journalists or activists, additional Iraqi security forces or Iran-backed forces suppressing media or conducting additional raids in television outlets, etc. The other things that we will be watching for, though, is Sistani will almost inevitably make a statement this Friday, on the 25th, when his two-week deadline that he set on the 11th expires. At this stage in the protest, there is likely nothing Sistani can say to actually dampen the protest movement that will likely occur, so one of the things we're watching for is not just whether Sistani will make a sermon, but any sermon he releases is likely to escalate protests.

Jennifer Cafarella

Now, we warned in previous podcasts that the Iranians may be preparing to take a more direct role in the suppression of further protests. That includes activity this past week by Iran's proxies to shepherd in the creation of a Iraqi law enforcement force that would be underneath the Ministry of Interior, typically penetrated and led by an Iran proxy, the Badr Organization, and would, in theory, be the arm of the Iraqi government to ostensibly secure, but more accurately repress future protests. It is possible that the preparation for additional use of force against demonstrators in coming days could disincentivize protests or reduce their scope and scale as we had to Friday. But it is alternately possible that these measures will be insufficient to deter protesters from taking to the streets, especially given the statement from Muqtada al-Sadr and a likely follow-up statement from Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and therefore, the attempts to put in place additional measures of repression of the Shia majority South could actually lead to further escalation between protesters and security forces and thus put Iraq, even more, on a path to a potentially devastating civil war. The potential for even greater instability in Iraq raises the question of how sustainable the US military deployment to Iraq will be, in coming months. US forces withdrawing from Northeastern Syria, as the Turkish military continues to advance into Syria with its own proxies, are redeploying to Northern Iraq for at least a period of time. And the president has stated that the US will continue to support counter-ISIS operations in Iraq, where ISIS is resurging in areas in the Sunni majority, North and West of the country. Further instability in the South, including simply the creation and empowerment of a new law enforcement force, could draw forces away from the counter-ISIS fight in the North, especially if the South and Baghdad get increasingly violent, which would create even greater requirements for US forces attempting to combat the ISIS resurgence in Iraq.

Maseh Zarif

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