

Crisis Brief: Mass Protests Resume in Iraq

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring Jennifer Cafarella and Samantha Leathley

OCTOBER 25, 2019

Crisis Brief is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. Mass protests resumed in Baghdad and across the Shi'a-majority provinces in southern Iraq despite the Iraqi government's attempts to de-escalate through concessions and limited reforms. Protesters torched political offices and militia headquarters in multiple provinces, chanting slogans against both the Iraqi government and Iran's proxies in Iraq. One Iranian proxy militia reportedly used live ammunition against protesters. ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and Iraq expert Samantha Leathley discuss Friday's escalation and what could follow.

Maseh Zarif:

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. It's 3:30 PM here in Washington, DC on Friday, October 25th, 2019. After a brief lull, protests erupted again late last night in Iraq's Capitol in Southern region. ISW Iraq analyst, Samantha Leafly, joins ISW research director, Jennifer Cafarella to provide a crisis brief update on the lead up to this renewed unrest and what we know so far.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Mass protests resumed across Iraq, including in the capital city of Baghdad and multiple provinces in the Shia majority South. Thus far, Iraqi security forces have not used live-fire ammunition against protests. There have been some unconfirmed reports of the use of live fire ammunition in Baghdad, but on the whole thus far, the security response has been to use tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets against protesters. We have not yet seen a return to the use of snipers and targeted killings of protest leaders and activists. Across multiple provinces, however, protesters have lit fire to government buildings, as well as the local headquarters of political party offices, demonstrating the significant frustration that remains in these Shia-majority provinces towards the central government in Baghdad. Despite multiple attempts by the Iraqi prime minister to grant additional rounds of concessions to the protesters to ameliorate this crisis. Protests in multiple provinces have also include the chant of anti-Iran slogans and similar incidents of lighting fire to the party headquarters for Iranian proxy militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces. In at least one case, there are reports that one of the Iranian proxy militias Asaib Ahl Al-Haq has opened fire on protesters and possibly even clashed with a local militia defending the protesters against such violence. That militia, Saraya al-Salam, is loyal to the populist Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr. Sam, how is Muqtada Al-Sadr positioning himself amidst the renewal of popular protest against the government?

Samantha Leathley:

Well, first it's important to note that Muqtada Al-Sadr likely did not organize or lead the first wave of protests in early October. However, in the last couple of days, Sadr, via a social media page, has addressed his followers, his militia and his political wing, likely to insert himself as having a greater role in the current unfolding protests. Sadr in particular in the last two days has called on his militia, Saraya al-Salam, to protect demonstrators in anticipation of the October 25th protests that are currently unfolding. Sadr's followers have responded to Sadr's calls within the past few days in two ways. Saraya al-Salam militia members deployed in Baghdad today and yesterday evening. The militia members were armed and were deployed to protect protesters. A separate contingent of militia members also deployed in Baghdad who were unarmed and were clad in white to ostensibly participate in the demonstrations. Separately, there may be a armed contingent of Saraya al-Salam members among the demonstrators in Maysan, who, according to unverified reports, may have exchanged fire with the Iran proxy militia Asaib Ahl Al-Haq. The participation of Sadr's political or militia supporters in demonstrations are concerning for a couple of reasons. Firstly because the militia members' commitment at Sadr's call to defend protesters

increases the risk of violence between either of the security forces and the militia members or, most dangerously, Iran proxy forces and the militia members who have committed to protect the demonstrators. Iraq's highest religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, has released a statement to attempt to mitigate the likelihood of protests escalating or escalating violently. Sistani issued the Iraqi government another set of requirements to hold security forces who committed violence against demonstrators in the first wave of protests accountable for their violence. Sistani called for the Iraqi government to create an independent judiciary committee to follow up on the government's investigation into the security forces' violence. Sistani also called for amendments to the election law that would restore Iraqis' faith in the electoral system and in the Iraqi government. However, Sistani's restraint that he showed in his statement this Friday is unlikely to dampen demonstrations as demonstrations continue in Baghdad and multiple provinces, including with the burning of provincial and party headquarters.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Furthermore, and at least one provincial capital, there are reports that demonstrators also lit fire to the local headquarters of the independent high electoral commission, signaling they're distressed in the current system and the difficulty that the Iraqi government will have re-legitimizing the electoral process. Looking forward, we are continuing to watch for signs that the Iraqi security forces will, in fact, return to the use of violence in an attempt to disperse these protests, which have, as we've noted, included rampant attacks across multiple provinces against government buildings and party headquarters including Iranian proxy militias. We've seen some indication today that Iraq's new law enforcement agency has deployed underneath the ministry of interior to provide security and its protests and it is possible that this force will become a core vehicle for violent repression of protests in coming days. We are also continuing to watch for signs of growing Iranian involvement in Iraq, potentially through that new law enforcement agency, which, as we've noted on prior podcasts, Iran may be advising through advisers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force or potentially even through elements of Iran's own law enforcement forces, which have provided similar advice and support to protest crackdowns in Syria as well as inside of Iran. We are also looking for signs of a renewed media blackout. Thus far, the Iraqi government has not yet cut the internet nor blocked access to social media, which is a notable departure from the previous round of protests. The fact that the government is leaving the internet online is likely a sign that it hopes not to further inflame protests by again suppressing the media environment which so many Iraqis were nonetheless able to circumvent during the last round of protests. The Iraqi government has now issued curfews for multiple provinces in the South in an attempt to constrain the protests, but early reports indicate that protesters intend to hold sit-ins in multiple areas, including in Sadr's core stronghold in Baghdad in Sadr City.

Samantha Leathley:

Protests in Baghdad escalated particularly sharply after demonstrators attempted in at least two locations to remove barricades and enter the green zone. Security forces successfully repelled the demonstrators using tear gas and water cannons. However, we're continuing to watch for additional attempts by the protesters to enter the green zone, either via the same route or through alternate routes.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Now, despite the fact that most of the security response to this round of protests has not included the use of live ammunition, there are still reportedly over two dozen Iraqis dead in the clashes with security forces that have occurred thus far and additional reports of hundreds of wounded protesters, including those exposed to tear gas. It is very difficult to see how the current prime minister will resolve this crisis. His attempts at reform and to grant concessions to the protesters have been serious and relatively significant, however, have demonstrated that the protest demand for true reform of the Iraqi government and a departure from the existing ruling class in Baghdad are beyond the Iraqi government's ability to deliver. Moving forward therefore, Iraq remains on a dangerous path towards the potential for a full revolution against the Iraqi government to tear it down and replace it or a

steady drift towards a more authoritarian Iraqi regime that denies the Iraqi population basic rights for freedom of protest, et cetera. Thus far, thankfully the Iraqi government has not responded with violence today, however, the situation remains delicate and it is possible that continued protests over the next hours and days will, in fact, trigger a more serious security response.

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.

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)