



Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? In October-December 2019, the largest protest movement in post-2003 Iraqi history unseated the government and forced parliament to adopt a new electoral law. Security forces and paramilitary groups loosely under state control killed more than 600 protesters during the uprising and have continued to target activists since then.

Why does it matter? The post-2003 political system faces a deep legitimacy crisis. Repression of dissent by successive governments and, increasingly, paramilitaries linked to political parties has discouraged reform and increased risks of civil strife, particularly in the predominantly Shiite south, an area suffering economic neglect exacerbated by low oil prices and the pandemic.

What should be done? The government should work to ensure the security of forthcoming elections in hopes that higher voter turnout inspires renewed faith in Iraq's democratic polity. It should hold security forces accountable for violence against peaceful protesters, train riot police in crowd control and clear up chains of command involving paramilitary groups.

Executive Summary

In October 2019, mass demonstrations engulfed Baghdad and southern Iraq as citizens protested widespread corruption, unemployment and poor public services. The Tishreen (October) uprising, driven by youth, became the largest and longest-lasting social movement since 2003. State security forces and paramilitary groups harshly suppressed peaceful dissent on numerous occasions, leaving some 600 protesters dead and over 20,000 injured in the first six months. The turmoil forced Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign; in May 2020, ex-intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi took his place. But despite Kadhimi's declared tolerance for peaceful protest, his tenure has been marked by continuous repression, often carried out by groups tied to the state, acting autonomously. Violence could escalate ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2021. The Kadhimi government should take steps to ensure that the elections will be safe and fair. It should also pursue accountability for state-affiliated armed actors responsible for causing deaths and injuries during the protests.

Besides its scale, four main features of the 2019-2020 protest wave stand out. First, while Iraq's post-2003 governments have used force to quell anti-government unrest since 2011, the reaction has never been so severe as it was on this occasion. The post-2003 political system's legitimacy crisis that fuelled protests in the past was compounded when state coercive institutions joined forces with paramilitary groups following the war with the Islamic State (ISIS), which ended in 2017. From that moment on, paramilitaries linked to the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) began to converge – but only partially – with state security institutions, especially the interior ministry, while engaging in predatory economic behaviour. Their presence helped precipitate the brutal response to protests, while shielding the perpetrators from accountability, as no one could be sure who was swinging the club or who had given the order.

Secondly, the Tishreen uprising exposed an unusual, though not unprecedented, intra-Shiite rift. Whereas earlier post-2003 violence in Iraq had primarily pitted Sunnis against Shiites, Arabs against Kurds or the state against insurgents, these confrontations arrayed a Shiite Islamist-led state apparatus against the predominantly Shiite population in Baghdad and the south. It also involved Shiite political parties, paramilitaries and other armed groups that have long been at odds, especially the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr and others under the banner of the Hashd, some elements of which enjoy material support from Iran.

Thirdly, outside players exacerbated the standoff between protesters and security forces, with Iran choosing the side of the government and the Hashd, and the U.S. rhetorically backing the protesters, or at least their right to peaceful protest. Iran had a dual stake in the survival of both the political system that the protesters wished to see change and the Hashd paramilitary groups, having invested heavily in both. Many activists expressed anti-Iran sentiments, which fuelled the notion in government and Hashd circles that the U.S. was behind the unrest.

Fourthly, Iraq's political class underestimated the conviction of the young people animating the growing mass movement, a formidable and autonomous political force that to a great extent refused to negotiate a way out of the crisis. In past protests, street activists have usually had links to either the Sadrist movement or the Iraqi Communist Party. By contrast, the Tishreen uprising evolved as a leaderless, youth-driven grassroots movement, at times joined and at other times opposed by the Sadrists. The authorities could not co-opt the protesters or reach a settlement with them.

By October 2020, however, the combination of repression and partial concessions, on top of assembly restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, had broken the protesters' resolve, without addressing their main grievances. Since that time, Iraq's ruling elites have fallen back on business as usual. Government promises to deliver justice for killed protesters remain largely unfulfilled, while legislators have resisted proposed reforms, including with respect to key aspects of electoral legislation. More generally, the government, along with its paramilitary tentacles, has done little to address its deep post-2003 legitimacy deficit.

Yet despite protest fatigue, the country has not returned to the status quo ante, certainly not from the street activists' perspective. Demonstrations have continued sporadically in southern provinces as the country heads into legislative elections in October. As recently as 25 May, activists gathered in Baghdad and the south calling for accountability for their slain peers. A new eruption of protests – and both pre-emptive and retaliatory violence – could be a matter of time.

The next major test of Iraq's shaky order is the approaching parliamentary elections in October, which must be perceived by Iraqis as relatively free and fair so as to stand any hope of restoring public confidence in the state and opening politics to wider participation. The government should consider deploying security forces drawn from the military, which command greater trust among the population than interior ministry units, in southern governorates, which have seen the most violence. This step could help limit threats against candidates' campaigns and encourage voter turnout. In May, the UN Security Council adopted an important resolution that supports an extensive international observation mandate for Iraq's elections, which should be supplemented with local observers. Iraq's external partners should keep up pressure on the government to bring state-affiliated perpetrators of abuses during the protests to justice.

In the medium term, a newly elected government and parliament should formulate a comprehensive reform plan that speaks to the protest movement's principal demands, with a priority on security sector reform, including training of riot police and streamlining of command and control within – and between – the interior ministry and the Hashd. These measures will reduce the risk of another violent crackdown if protests erupt again, as they most likely will as long as basic grievances remain unaddressed.

Baghdad/Brussels, 26 July 2021

Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box

I. Introduction

On 1 October 2019, thousands of young Iraqis took to the streets around Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, in a spontaneous outburst decrying corruption, poor public services and unemployment. Despite sporadic anti-government demonstrations since the 2011 popular revolts in the Arab world, the so-called Tishreen (October) uprising – driven largely by a new generation of activists – is the largest and longest-lasting protest movement in post-2003 Iraq to date. With more than 600 protesters killed and over 20,000 wounded in the first six months, it is also the most violent.

Before the Arab uprisings of 2011, Iraq had not seen peaceful mass expressions of discontent, though the seeds had certainly been planted. Since March 2003, it had gone through a U.S.-led military invasion and occupation, as well as a vicious insurgency and sectarian war. Its political system was deeply dysfunctional, even if successive governments had a certain legitimacy, having been formed through elections deemed free and fair under the difficult circumstances. The country was fairly stable following the suppression of the al-Qaeda in Iraq-led insurgency in 2008, but despite the relative calm, Iraqis witnessed little improvement in public services or job opportunities. Corruption flourished as consensus politics undermined effective opposition and checks on the government. The *muhāsasa* system of ethno-sectarian apportionment gave rise to broad, party-based, power-sharing coalition governments fed by an economy built almost entirely on oil revenue. Between elections, elites competed to channel Iraq's wealth through their respective patronage networks rather than distributing it for the public good.

Occasional unrest brought little change except successive governments' expanding the state payroll to ensure that an ever-greater portion of the population would receive a steady income. But Iraq's young people increasingly posed a challenge to this set-up, as the number of youths that entered the work force each year exceeded the state's capacity to employ its citizens. As a result, more Iraqis fell under the poverty line each year, and the political system came to face a severe and worsening legitimacy crisis.¹

Unwilling and perhaps unable to effect significant course corrections, political elites increasingly resorted to coercive methods to repress and discredit popular dissent. When the Arab uprisings broke out in 2011, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government relied on a mix of economic incentives, ideological justifications and force to subdue much smaller protests in Iraq.² Acknowledging popular grievances,

¹ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°169, *Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"*, 8 August 2016.

² In contrast to other Arab leaders targeted by protests, who were long-ruling autocrats, Maliki had just been re-elected in Iraq's second democratic election following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

he expanded public-sector employment and dismissed governors in some provinces to show his resolve to combat corruption in local administration. But he also invoked sectarian language to justify busting up the protests, claiming that Sunni Arab remnants of the former regime were behind them. Security forces attacked and arrested journalists and, in February 2011, killed at least twelve protesters and wounded over 100 across the country.³

Protests continued irregularly afterward, especially in predominantly Sunni Arab provinces, which felt not just excluded, like many other provinces, but also actively discriminated against by the central government for sectarian reasons. In 2012-2013, the Maliki government violently suppressed protests in Anbar, Salah al-Din and Kirkuk that called for the prime minister's resignation following the issuance of an arrest warrant for Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, a Sunni Arab. These events paved the way for another insurgency, and ultimately, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in these areas in 2014.⁴

During the war to defeat ISIS (2014-2017), discontent festered in the south, far from the battlefield, with anti-government protests over corruption and power shortages breaking out in 2015 during the hot summer months. Such unrest then recurred annually in the south.⁵ As the demonstrations continued, they became increasingly politicised.

Populist forces, especially the movement led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, sought to hijack the protests by mobilising his tens of thousands of followers in support. Despite being part of successive cabinets, the Sadrists staged several demonstrations in opposition to the government, a dual role they have continued to play until today. For example, in April 2016, the cleric's followers stormed parliament demanding that ministers appointed under the prevailing *muhasasa* system be replaced with technocrats.⁶ Sadr's efforts paid off in terms of political influence, and the protests he stirred up grew as his movement started coordinating with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) – which has a secular base – and civil society activists from 2015 onward.

The growing protests laid bare the state's growing legitimacy crisis. This crisis became particularly evident around the May 2018 national elections, the first since ISIS was defeated a year earlier. Reflecting public disaffection with the nation's political leadership writ large, these elections recorded the lowest participation rate – 44.5 per cent – since 2005 and drew numerous fraud allegations.⁷

The Sadrist movement and ICP presented a joint Islamist/secular electoral list with several small Sunni and liberal parties – the Sairoun alliance – which presented itself as a reformist alternative to the established Shiite parties and won the largest number of seats in parliament. It then helped form what turned out to be just one more consensus government, entering into a coalition with the second largest parliamentary bloc, Fateh, an amalgam of Shiite Islamist parties and others affiliated

³ "World Report 2012, Events of 2011: Iraq", Human Rights Watch, 2012.

⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°150, *Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, 28 April 2014; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°38, *Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*, 20 June 2014.

⁵ Crisis Group Alert, "Iraq Conflict Alert", 24 August 2015.

⁶ Maria Fantappie, "Iraq: On the Edge of Chaos", Crisis Group Commentary, 14 May 2016.

⁷ Crisis Group Statement, "The Contested Iraqi Parliamentary Elections in Kirkuk", 24 May 2018.

with the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) paramilitary groups, including some that were pro-Iran. The Hashd had assembled in 2014 in response to clergymen's calls to fight ISIS. In effect, those groups that considered themselves winners in that war were able to parlay their battlefield victory into triumph at the polls.⁸

During government formation negotiations that summer, the southern port city of Basra witnessed massive demonstrations against the local government's inability to provide clean water and electricity, shortages of which were particularly intolerable during the extreme heat. Protesters voiced their frustration by attacking governorate buildings and offices of prominent Shiite parties. They also torched the Iranian consulate, as they viewed Tehran to be enabling paramilitary groups in Basra.⁹ The federal and provincial governments once again expanded the number of public-sector jobs to placate the population, while security forces and armed groups squashed the remaining protests, leaving at least a dozen dead. Gunmen assassinated an influential activist, prompting others to go into hiding.¹⁰

In October 2018, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, a veteran politician outside the established parties, became prime minister following five months of negotiations over forming a new government. He presided over a weak government, with the main parties determining cabinet positions, as they had done before.¹¹

The next year, the web of shared interests between political parties and armed groups in Basra put a tight lid on organised dissent, preventing a full-blown recurrence. The summer of 2019 passed relatively quietly, but in October the epicentre of protests moved to Baghdad, where popular anger erupted with a vengeance in the Tishreen uprising.¹²

This report, focused on the uprising and its aftermath, builds on Crisis Group's work on Iraqi popular discontent since 2003.¹³ It is based on over 100 interviews, in person and by phone, while several follow-up interviews were conducted with activists and members of armed groups. Research in Baghdad and southern provinces took place in November-December 2019 and October-December 2020. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, telephone interviews were conducted in May-September 2020. Interview locations included Baghdad, Basra, Diwaniya, Erbil, Hilla, Karbala, Najaf, Nassiriya and Suleimaniya in Iraq, as well as Istanbul in Turkey.

⁸ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°188, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, 30 July 2018.

⁹ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°61, *How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire*, 31 July 2018; and Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Mosul and Basra after the Protests: The Roots of Government Failure and Public Discontent", Institute for Regional and International Studies, December 2019.

¹⁰ "Iraqi human rights activist shot dead in Basra", BBC, 25 September 2018.

¹¹ Renad Mansour, "Iraq's 2018 Government Formation", LSE Middle East Centre, February 2019.

¹² Maria Fantappie, "Widespread Protests Point to Iraq's Cycle of Social Crisis", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 October 2019.

¹³ See, for example, Crisis Group Briefing, *How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire*, op. cit.; Crisis Report, *Fight or Flight*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°s 113, *Failing Oversight: Iraq's Unchecked Government*, 26 September 2011; and 67, *Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, 25 June 2007.

II. Three Months of Vitality, Then a Slow Fade

A. Whence the Uprising

Two events in Iraq triggered widespread protests in 2019. First, in the weeks prior to 1 October, university graduates assembled to decry the lack of employment opportunities outside the education, health and electricity ministries in Baghdad.¹⁴ Riot police hosed the student marchers with water cannons. This heavy-handed tactic angered the protesters.¹⁵ Then, on 28 September, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi demoted the highly respected commander of the Counter-Terrorism Service, Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saedi, without explanation, causing an uproar across the country.¹⁶

Using these events as an opportunity, activists deployed hashtags on social media platforms, such as “Descending [into the street] to claim my rights” (*nazil akhud haqqi*), that mobilised thousands to join protests in the capital and southern provinces.¹⁷ The initial call by a small group of youth unleashed a chain reaction among civil society organisations and student unions, which gained wide popular backing in the face of government repression. A social media activist said: “We didn’t expect these large numbers when we launched our hashtag. It seems like people were ready for a revolution”.¹⁸

Already on the first day, security forces used tear gas and live bullets to disperse the crowds in Baghdad.¹⁹ Their harsh response served as an impetus rather than a disincentive to further mobilisation. Before protests briefly paused for the Arbaeen pilgrimage in mid-October, security forces had killed some 150 protesters and wounded more than 6,000 in Baghdad, Diwaniya, Nassiriya and Najaf. Demonstrators vowed to return with greater determination on 25 October 2019.

As part of the protests, young, politically non-aligned activists launched an extensive social media campaign, branding their movement Tishreen (October) and identifying themselves as “Tishreenis”. Yet despite the movement’s popular support, not all the people who joined the protests were necessarily Tishreenis. Nor does the name Tishreen suggest a clear set of demands or values that all protesters embraced. The spontaneous eruption meant that there was no pre-existing agenda. Rather, demands

¹⁴ Approximately 700,000 young people enter Iraq’s labour market annually. In 2017, the government estimated youth unemployment at 25.6 per cent, but the real numbers are likely higher. Sajad Jiyad, Muje Kucukkeles and Tobias Schillings, “Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq”, Global Partners Governance, 2019.

¹⁵ Lawk Ghafari, “Iraqi security forces use water cannons to quell unemployment protests”, *Rudaw*, 26 September 2019.

¹⁶ “Iraq’s removal of counterterrorism chief sparks controversy”, *Al Arabiya*, 29 September 2019. Saedi was not popular with the Iran-backed Hashd groups, and blamed both Hashd pressure and corruption among political leaders for his removal.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, journalist and activist, Baghdad, November 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, November 2019.

¹⁹ A crowd of around a thousand protesters grew larger by the hour as security forces fired tear gas canisters. When thousands began moving toward the fortified Green Zone, which hosts the government and other state institutions, riot police resorted to live bullets, killing and wounding several protesters. “Hundreds wounded in Iraq as police fire tear gas, bullets at protesters”, *The Washington Post*, 1 October 2019.

evolved in response to the violence, government overtures, popular support and arrival of political parties at the protests. For instance, beyond demanding the government's resignation, activists diverged on further steps for electing a new prime minister, the content of constitutional reform and details concerning early elections. Still, the Tishreen uprising differs from protests in previous years in that months of sit-ins and demonstrations created a specific sense of belonging among activists, as well as a broad vision of what the state and nation should be and do.²⁰

Tishreen began as a youth grassroots uprising and gained strength as traditional engines of popular mobilisation joined. These were the Iraqi Communist Party, the Sadrist movement and the labour unions, which at first had watched events from the sidelines. An ICP member explained that the party received an invitation to join the protests in September 2019, but the leadership decided not to respond because it did not know the organisers.²¹ Activists of various stripes set up tents in all the southern (predominantly Shiite) provincial capitals, many camping out overnight. Baghdad's Tahrir Square became the protests' stronghold and symbolic heart, with activists from across the country visiting to partake of the festive atmosphere and the meetings and workshops hosted by the organisers.²²

Some of the youth, defectors from or previously sympathetic to the traditional parties of mass dissent, the Sadrists and ICP, were unhappy about the Sadr-ICP alliance in the 2018 elections. They were disappointed in Sadr, who on several occasions after the elections threatened to withdraw support from the government and go into opposition in parliament, but never did. They saw his inaction as proof that none of the political parties was sincere about reform.²³ Consequently, even as Sadrists and Communists joined the protests, the Tishreen movement remained distinctive, with politically aligned protesters sharing the space rather than driving the agenda. Thus, the street became a political force in itself without having a formal political organisation.

Many other politicians sponsored protest tents or set up their own, including some belonging to Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties. Other tents were linked to civil society organisations, religious institutions or influential businesspeople. Support was not always overt. In many cases, parties backed particular tents financially and logistically in order to have eyes and ears in the square.²⁴

At its peak, from October to December 2019, the protest movement in Baghdad enjoyed widespread popular support. While young men flocked to the barricades on Jumhuriya bridge – some 300m from Tahrir Square – to face off with the security forces, many returning wounded or in coffins, people continued dancing and chanting in the square, as families visited with their children. The people in the square welcomed virtually anyone who wanted to join. Hundreds of youths from impoverished areas like Sadr City and Shoala rarely left the square. Residents, businesses,

²⁰ Crisis Group observations and interviews, activists and civil society members, Baghdad, November-December 2019.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, ICP member, Baghdad, November 2019.

²² Crisis Group observations, Baghdad, November and December 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad and Erbil, November 2019 and October 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad and Erbil, November and December 2019.

political parties and Iraqis in the diaspora provided support, including a constant supply of water and food, during these months.²⁵

Continuous direct interaction among activists facilitated a high degree of dialogue and coordination around messaging. Slogans that had first focused on bread-and-butter issues such as jobs, public services and fighting corruption, evolved toward demands for systemic change, ranging from early elections to constitutional amendments and even the toppling of the entire post-2003 political order. Protesters also called for a new kind of national identity to which they could belong free of sectarian differentiation and which would be free of foreign influence. The hashtag “We want a homeland” (*nurid watan*), which expressed this sentiment, became pervasive. One slogan, “Iran out, out” (*Iran barra, barra*), was directed at what the movement viewed as Iran’s intrusiveness in backing Iraqi political parties and their armed wings. Another chant, “An Iraqi revolution – not Eastern or Western” (*la gharbiya wa-la sharqiya thawra Iraqiya*), pronounced activists’ rejection of both U.S. and Iranian interference in Iraq.²⁶

The protests drew on support from the country’s religious leadership to build momentum. Activists developed a symbiotic relationship with the *marjaeeya*, the highest authority of Iraq’s Shiite clergy headed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In his weekly Friday sermons, Sistani decried the state’s violence and expressed support for demands for reform, in particular early elections.²⁷ Najaf, the *marjaeeya*’s seat, became a hub where clerics congregated with secular activists in dialogue over reform agendas. Protesters, political party officials and civil society activists regularly met with the *marjaeeya*’s representatives.²⁸

Sit-ins at squares served as a vibrant platform for political discussions between activists and established parties as well. Activists’ coordinating committees convened joint meetings with reform-oriented parties, such as the Sadrists, the ICP and the Shiite Islamist Hikma led by Ammar al-Hakim, in which they crafted demands for the government and parliament.²⁹ Yet these demands rarely commanded support from across the broad spectrum of activists, many of whom remained suspicious of the political parties’ motives.³⁰

The grassroots movement’s diversity was something activists valued and wanted to maintain. They refused to elect a leadership, despite certain evident hierarchies. Most tents had a leading figure representing that particular group in coordination meetings, but a broad understanding prevailed that no one person or group of individuals could speak on the movement’s behalf. Activists feared that if they elected a leadership, political elites and security forces would torpedo the movement either by persecuting the top figures or by co-opting them before the protests had accomplished anything.³¹

²⁵ Crisis Group observations, Baghdad, November–December 2019. It was incongruous to see people celebrating while others were being killed nearby.

²⁶ Crisis Group observations and interviews, activists, Baghdad, November–December 2019.

²⁷ Harith Hasan, “The subtle power of Sistani”, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 November 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad and Najaf, December 2019; May and November 2020.

²⁹ Crisis Groups interviews, activists and parliament member, Baghdad, October–November 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, October–November 2020.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad and southern provinces, November–December 2019.

B. *Who are the Tishreenis?*

The Tishreen uprising sprouted and blossomed as a young people's grassroots movement. Student unions played a pivotal role in mobilising high-school and university students as well as alumni, often coming together with an older generation of activists, many of whom worked in trade unions or civil society groups. Several factors helped account for the movement's growth.

Youth who came of age after 2003 had witnessed regular demonstrations since 2015, especially in the south, coinciding with the three-year war with ISIS. During these years, many young people became involved in civil society, such as humanitarian relief work, which grew in response to the war. Others volunteered in the war either as fighters or in logistical support roles. In both cases, young people gained experience in organising themselves. This period also saw an increase in social media use among the population at large, and among youth in particular, which made it easier to gather people quickly.³²

After the defeat of ISIS, many Hashd leaders who had not already done so turned to electoral politics. Many were from the south, and so won easily in southern elections, but in their new positions they did little to alleviate longstanding problems in governance and service delivery. Young people, in particular, were disaffected with this new elite, which came across as predatory through its continued support of paramilitary groups that sought a new, mainly economic, role in the absence of war.

Although millennials across the country have similar grievances in terms of lack of job opportunities or life choices, Shiite youth in the south are freer in expressing dissent for two main reasons. Too young to carry memories of the south's severe repression under Saddam Hussein's regime and not having directly suffered the 2005-2008 sectarian war that followed the U.S. invasion, they are less prone than their elders to worry about falling prey to an external enemy or to see the current Shiite-led political system, for all its failings, as a buffer against that prospect. The youth question why their provinces remain neglected and impoverished despite having had Shiite-led governments since 2003 and having sent so many fighters to heroically defend the country from ISIS.³³ Many view the sectarian politics of the post-2003 order as a narrative that elites have used to keep people fearful of other ethnic or religious groups and to keep them from questioning the governance failures for which these elites are responsible.³⁴

The second reason is that they hold fresh memories of the war with ISIS and what it meant for the south. A significant number of recruits who responded to the 2014 fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calling on all able-bodied men to defend the country from ISIS were impoverished Shiite youth. Many died in battle, or returned crippled, with little quality health care available. Families of slain volunteers complain that the government has never compensated them fairly, and that corruption within the Hashd funnels the benefits to an influential few with party affiliations.³⁵

³² Crisis Group interviews, journalists and civil society members, Baghdad and Basra, October-November 2020.

³³ See Crisis Group Report, *Fight or Flight*, op. cit.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, Diwaniya and Hilla, November 2019.

³⁵ Jacqueline Parry et al., "Reintegration of Combatants in Iraq after ISIL", Institute of Regional and International Studies, April 2019.

While the war elevated some fighters to prominent positions within paramilitary groups, it left many scarred and disillusioned.³⁶ Young protesters who had fought under the Hashd's banner said parties had manipulated the once honourable institution for political ends. An activist said, for example:

Many of us come from Hashd families, and we defended our country with pride. But as with everything that the parties touch, the Hashd became corrupted. To me, there is no difference between my comrades who fell on the battlefield and those who were killed in the sit-ins. They are all victims of the politicians.³⁷

Thus the "holy Hashd" (*al-hashd al-muqaddas*), as many Shiites in the south called it, lost its appeal. Powerful Hashd groups, viewing this shift in public perception as a threat to their authority, turned against the protest movement. But the Tishreen activists used the overlap between Hashd personnel and protesters to suggest solidarity between the two. One young man enlisted in the Hashd, who would join his protesting friends in Basra's main square during furloughs, was later killed fighting ISIS in Salah al-Din province north of Baghdad. His death became emblematic of activists' attempt to draw a sharp distinction between the Hashd rank and file, among whom many supported and identified with protesters' grievances, and the Hashd's political leadership.³⁸

C. *Trouble in the Squares*

By early 2020, the Tishreen protests began to run out of steam, due to several factors. The first was developments in Iraqi formal politics. Following a bloody clash between protesters and security forces in Nassiriya on 28 November 2019, Abdul-Mahdi resigned, prompted by a Friday sermon by Sistani, who encouraged parliament to consider its options to stop the bloodshed, including a no-confidence vote against the premier.³⁹ A month later, parliament adopted a new election law, hoping that it would further dampen the protests.

Then, as part of the escalating U.S.-Iran tensions playing out in Iraq, the U.S. killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike at Baghdad airport on 3 January 2020. This moment was pivotal, as it led Sadr to turn against the protest movement when large parts of it rejected his call to redirect their ire at the U.S. troop presence in Iraq. The departure of Sadr's followers left sit-in demonstrators, in particular, vulnerable to armed attacks. The COVID-19 pandemic came on top of the Soleimani killing, diverting outside supporters' money, time and energy from protest encampments to humanitarian aid (especially distribution of oxygen canisters to hospitals and clinics, as well as food baskets to poor families), and discouraging assembly due to lockdowns and safety precautions. Yet in most southern provinces, core groups of activists remained in the squares, where they paid close

³⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Fight or Flight*, op. cit.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, activist, Basra, November 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Basra, December 2020.

³⁹ Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraq prime minister says he will resign amidst protests", *The New York Times*, 29 November 2019. See also the second sermon of Friday prayer, delivered by Imam al-Sayed Ahmed al-Safi, Karbala, 29 November 2019.

attention to the political infighting surrounding the efforts to appoint a new prime minister and install a new government.

Internal issues also contributed to the protests' dissipation. Following the protesters' success in forcing the government to resign and parliament to adopt a new election law, disagreements emerged between those who believed in continued demonstrations to compel the government to make further reforms, and those who sought to transform the protest movement into a political force that could itself compete in elections. These divisions widened as the new government assumed office in May 2020. Violence by security actors since the start of the protests also took its toll. Hundreds of activists were killed, while others were forced into hiding or fell silent due to the trauma and injuries they had sustained.⁴⁰

Pre-existing social tensions also made it difficult to sustain the non-sectarian inclusivity of Tishreen activism over time, with an overtly Shiite religious cast introduced instead. At sit-ins in squares, Shiite religious processions took place alongside exhibitions of arts and music, both native and foreign. Squares were also marked by Shiite symbolism that depicted protesters' plight and highlighted their grievances.⁴¹ For instance, activists carried photos of slain protesters to the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala during the Arbaeen pilgrimage in October 2020, citing his "martyrdom" as emblematic of their own struggle.⁴²

While many Tishreenis took pride in the movement's diversity of secular and religious expression, they quickly ran into trouble with an older, more conservative generation of Iraqis, who viewed the interactions between young people in the squares with scepticism if not deep concern. Protesters found themselves having to defend their activism against claims that it promoted values contrary to religious and social norms.⁴³ Sadr, whose authority straddles the religious and political domains, invoked conservative mores on several occasions to delegitimise the movement when it suited his interests. In February 2020, for example, he called for gender segregation in the squares, sparking a large, defiant women's march in response.⁴⁴

Social media campaigns run by parties opposing the protests sought to distort the movement's image by spreading tales of what they characterised as immoral acts that activists allegedly engaged in, such as drug abuse, homosexual acts or premarital sex.⁴⁵ Campaigns smearing women activists as promiscuous discouraged families from allowing their daughters to participate. An arts student who painted murals in Diwaniya's encampment said her mother had to accompany her every day to prevent ru-

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, NGO organisers and activists, Erbil and Istanbul, December 2020.

⁴¹ Marsin Alshamary, "Iraqi protesters are mostly Shiite. And this identity is shaping how they protest", *The Washington Post* (Monkey Cage blog), 14 December 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, activists, Karbala, October 2020.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Basra, Karbala and Najaf, December 2019 and November 2020.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, women activists, April 2020. See also Sofia Barbarani, "Hundreds of Iraqi women challenge al-Sadr's segregation", *Al Jazeera*, 14 February 2020.

⁴⁵ Activists explained that they sought to constrain activities in the squares, such as alcohol use, that defied conservative social values. Meanwhile, they accused political parties of facilitating the distribution of drugs in the squares so as to sully the movement in the public eye. Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, November 2019.

mours from being spread about her.⁴⁶ In Baghdad, the few women who spent nights in Tahrir Square risked both their lives and their reputations. One such activist said:

I give first aid, and sometimes I spend the night here to help the wounded. My parents are proud but also worried about me. It's not easy for a woman to move freely in this area, and I never walk around alone here in the evenings. In general, there is a greater degree of acceptance of women now than before. In my case, people respect what I do. But many of my friends have suffered because of rumours that are spread about them on social media. It is sensitive, because a woman's honour reflects on her family. Some women who receive threats decide not to come back.⁴⁷

For young men and women alike, the struggle often began at home. An activist in Baghdad said:

Tishreen has cut through families. In my house we are two against the rest. My younger brother and I will not give up on the cause. He is still young and lives at home, but I can no longer return. My father has disassociated himself from me. He has written me off as lost to a foreign plot. He doesn't understand that I am out in the street [agitating] for my future and that of my siblings.⁴⁸

Indeed, parents expressed concern about young people's activities from not only a social but also a political perspective. Many young activists directly defied the older generation's authority in continuing to attend protests. This matter was especially sensitive in middle-class families, whose livelihoods tend to be bound up with political elites' economic interests. For example, a tribal leader whose son-in-law asked if he would publicly support the protesters explained that such a move would jeopardise the tribe's businesses, which rely on a particular political party's backing.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, women activists and parents, Baghdad, Diwaniya, Hilla and Najaf, November-December 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, November 2019.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, November 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, tribal leader and activist, southern province, November 2020.

III. The State and Its Armed Auxiliaries

A. *Dysfunctional State, Disjointed Response*

The state – and its corruption and incompetence in governing – was the protesters' target more than any government in particular. It responded to the unrest in ways consistent with the protesters' critique: disjointedly and incoherently, at times offering olive branches but more often cracking down brutally on peaceful gatherings – without an apparent link between the two tactics that would suggest a strategy. The Hashd and other armed groups played a predominant role in the latter approach, often acting outside the state's authority but all the same in the interest of preserving it, as well as their own.

The dysfunction had a long history. Indeed, the post-2003 state was dysfunctional from its inception, conceived in Pentagon corridors and bred on ideological precepts (top-down state building, rapid privatisation) fortified with bags of cash. The result was corrupt, inept governance and the near-total absence of security during the U.S. occupation's first months. Into the crevices stepped non-state actors – both insurgents seeking to overthrow the new order and militias striving to uphold it. The militias prevailed but, while lauded for stepping up to fight first al-Qaeda and, later, ISIS in their incarnation as Hashd paramilitaries, they frittered away the credit they had accumulated by mutating into predatory economic actors and enforcers of the status quo.⁵⁰

The political system's chronic legitimacy crisis deepened in the aftermath of the war with ISIS. In the 2018 elections, Iraqis expressed their overall dissatisfaction with the country's political leadership by staying home, marking the lowest voter turnout since 2005 at 44.5 per cent. Moreover, no bloc won an absolute majority, which left the new prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, to preside over a weak coalition government to which political parties appointed their own candidates for the most senior cabinet posts based on their relative electoral weight.⁵¹ The government thus lacked cohesion, was unable to embark on meaningful reform – had it been so inclined – and operated more like an administrator of ever-expanding patronage networks. This situation was not unprecedented in Iraq, but because of the victory over ISIS, new actors entered the political fray, which they saw as the spoils of conflict. Several of them were parties affiliated with Hashd factions, which increased their number of parliamentary seats.⁵²

The security apparatus's post-ISIS evolution, when paramilitary groups increasingly converged with, if not formally integrated into, official security institutions, precipitated a harsh response to the protests that left significant ambiguity as to who the perpetrators were. Iraq's fractured system provided space for different actors to

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups*, op. cit.

⁵¹ Renad Mansour, "Stalled government formation shows that parties still outweigh a weak PM in Iraq", *World Politics Review*, 6 December 2018.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, government officials and parliament members, December 2019 and October 2020. It is difficult to provide a single number of seats, as some parties did not campaign with their own lists in the 2018 elections. Asaab Ahl al-Haq, for example, increased its number of seats from one in 2014 to fifteen in 2018. See: "Sadiqoun's tactical growth", *Nas News*, 11 October 2018 (Arabic).

either coordinate or act independently, depending on factional interests. While the decision to deploy security forces, such as riot police or the army, is the commander-in-chief's (ie, prime minister's) prerogative, the decision to crack down on an individual activist or target a group of activists during the protests often came from an armed group. These groups' violence took place sometimes in the absence of state security forces, at other times in coordination with them. Security forces and armed groups thus assumed different roles, but the division of labour was not always clear, and responsibility did not necessarily fall within the state's formal chain of command. The blurred lines helped insulate armed actors from responsibility for abuses they had committed against the protesters.⁵³

For this and other reasons, in each of the Tishreen uprising's three distinct phases, the state response lacked coherence, mixing sticks and carrots in the absence of an apparent overarching strategy.

B. *October-December 2019: Violence on the Barricades*

The government's counter-riot measures in the first ten days of October 2019 were harsher than those it had used during previous protests. In some cases, riot police discharged live ammunition, in addition to hot water and tear gas, directly into the crowds. Enraged protesters blocked roads in response; in the south, they also set fire to political party offices and provincial government buildings. On 2 October, the government restricted access to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. It also imposed lockdowns in several southern provinces. None of these measures stopped people from going into the streets. On 4 October, snipers shot at protesters near Tayaran Square in Baghdad.⁵⁴ Activists and journalists attributed the sniper fire not to regular forces but to Iran-aligned paramilitaries, as the shooters were masked and not in uniform. In the following days, armed men raided television stations covering the protests.⁵⁵

In response to national and international condemnation of police violence during these first ten days, Abdul-Mahdi established the "law protection forces" (*quwat hafdh al-qanoon*), a security contingent drawn from active and retired interior ministry personnel, to use less aggressive tactics in policing the demonstrations.⁵⁶ Yet when protests resumed after their brief pause for the Arbreen pilgrimage later that month, repression continued unabated, because the law protection forces were only one among several police contingents. Moreover, this unit was not trained in crowd control and also resorted to force.⁵⁷

⁵³ Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ "8 days of protest movements in Iraq ... What happened?", Al Jazeera, 9 October 2019 (Arabic).

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, activists and journalists, Baghdad, November 2019. "Human Rights Special Report: Demonstrations in Iraq", UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, 22 October 2019.

⁵⁶ Samer al-Kubaisi, "Iraq: establishment of the 'law protection forces' to protect the demonstrations", Al Arabiya, 15 October 2019 (Arabic). Prime Minister Kadhimi dissolved the force in September 2020 due to widespread allegations that it had used violence against peaceful protesters. Baraa Al-Shammari, "The Iraqi government cancels the 'law protection' force for its involvement in violations against protesters", *Al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 3 September 2020 (Arabic).

⁵⁷ A comprehensive report by the UN Iraq mission's human rights office noted that Iraqi security forces lacked training in crowd control. The report also said these units intentionally used lethal

During this period, the Hashd had no official role in crowd control but its factions were present both under the cover of regular forces and in their own capacity without uniform. Its close ties with interior ministry commanders resulted in regular deployment of Hashd members among that ministry's forces, including riot police and the Emergency Response Forces.⁵⁸

As the main political force behind street mobilisation in the past, Muqtada al-Sadr apparently decided that he could not afford to stand on the sidelines when the protests gained popular backing. Many of Sadr's followers were in Tahrir Square, including as part of a "peacekeeping" force called the Blue Hats, which comprised civilians as well as members of the movement's armed wing Saraya Salam, to which it reported directly. The Blue Hats dressed in plainclothes and spread out in the crowd, ostensibly to protect peaceful protesters and maintain order. Sadr's followers and non-aligned Tishreen activists made common cause in formulating and putting forward several demands, such as the government's resignation and early elections, though the cleric's movement did not embrace the Tishreenis' demand for fundamental changes to the system of which he has been a part.⁵⁹

Yet Sadr could not tolerate a mass movement outside his control. He took it upon himself to issue conditions as to what the movement should stand for, what types of civil disobedience were acceptable and how protesters should behave.⁶⁰ Politically, he positioned himself between the government and protesters, on one side, and other paramilitary groups, on the other. While he lent protesters a measure of protection through the Blue Hats, he said these men were also at the security forces' service to keep order in the squares.⁶¹ The Blue Hats engaged in activities ranging from logistical support to intelligence sharing with the authorities, and also took disciplinary action against activists who had allegedly instigated violence. Occasionally, they deployed as a buffer to shield protesters from armed groups' attacks.⁶²

The Blue Hats established their own disciplinary system, sometimes handing over activists they had arrested to the national security service (*al-amn al-watani*) or the police.⁶³ But they also maintained makeshift cells in the basement of a Baghdad Turk-

force on several occasions, including not only live ammunition but also tear gas canisters launched horizontally into the crowds. In general, the report found, security forces used excessive force in situations where protesters were acting violently, such as setting fire to public property or throwing bricks or Molotov cocktails at security personnel. "Human Rights Special Report: Demonstrations in Iraq", op. cit.

⁵⁸ This cross-deployment of fighters was not new; it occurred also in counter-ISIS operations. Crisis Group interviews, Hashd commander and Hashd members, Baghdad, October-November 2020.

⁵⁹ For Sadr, the Abdul-Mahdi government's resignation provided an opportunity to appoint a prime minister more closely aligned to his own political bloc. He considered Abdul-Mahdi too close to his rivals among the Hashd paramilitary groups. Calling for a new electoral law helped him improve his image as a would-be reformer. Meanwhile, as Sadr also commands the largest bloc in parliament, he was able to influence the drafting of an electoral law so that it would be beneficial to him and his voter base.

⁶⁰ Tweet by Muqtada al-Sadr, @Mu_AlSadr, 5:25am, 8 February 2020.

⁶¹ Tweet by Muqtada al-Sadr, @Mu_AlSadr, 4:31am, 5 February 2020.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, activists and Sadrists, Baghdad, December 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Saraya Salam member, December 2019.

ish restaurant, where they regularly held activists for hours before releasing them.⁶⁴ The Blue Hats detained activists on accusations of using violence at the barricades, for example hurling Molotov cocktails, but also of uttering what they deemed defamatory speech aimed at Sadr, their leader.⁶⁵

1. Baghdad

The protest area in Baghdad expanded when demonstrations resumed on 25 October after a brief pause due to the (Shiite) Arbaeen pilgrimage. Activists described how their confrontation with security forces became a battle, with each side trying to push back the other from the front line. Protesters took over the above-referenced Turkish restaurant, located in an abandoned high-rise in the heart of Tahrir Square, overlooking the Tigris and its many bridges to Karkh, the river's left bank which hosts the government and parliament in the fortified Green Zone. When security forces blocked Jumhuriya bridge, protesters set up barricades on Ahrar, Sinak and Shuhada bridges.⁶⁶ Forcing the protesters to spread themselves thin over a large area was, a police officer said, a deliberate tactic to prevent them from breaking through the barricades on the bridges and moving toward the Green Zone.⁶⁷

The protest area's expansion had unforeseen consequences. It complicated efforts to maintain deconfliction channels between protesters and security forces. Activists say plans for demonstrations on which they had agreed with security forces were often limited to Tahrir Square's vicinity. Peripheral areas were thus often neglected by regular security forces, which did not consider them their responsibility. These latter areas, such as Khilani Square, became sites of confrontation between protesters and armed groups linked to the paramilitaries, and sometimes among armed groups themselves.⁶⁸

Repeated incursions by armed groups into the squares rendered formal deconfliction channels completely inefficient after nightfall, when police usually withdrew. As many protesters were themselves former Hashd members, they had friends who were still active in various Hashd factions. For some, these personal contacts proved lifesaving when sympathetic insiders sent them prior warnings of attacks to whose planning they were privy. One activist said he had received a telephone call from a

⁶⁴ Activists and Sadr's followers inhabited different floors of the Turkish restaurant building, often engaging in verbal altercations in the stairwells.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, activists and Sadrists, Baghdad and Erbil, December 2019 and October 2020.

⁶⁶ More than 2km from Tahrir Square, this area covers a central part of Baghdad, with narrow alleyways of shops between the main streets, which are normally busy with traffic and commerce.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, police officer, Baghdad, December 2020.

⁶⁸ One such incident occurred near Khilani Square on 6 December, resulting in dozens of fatalities and over 100 injuries. It started when armed men in pickup trucks attacked rivals in what paramilitary group members referred to as score settling. It quickly descended into a melee, with peaceful protesters caught in the middle. At the time, Tishreen protesters and Sadrists were occupying the same areas. Armed Blue Hats deployed to the square's vicinity, erecting barriers which stopped the fighting before another security force could arrive. Crisis Group interviews, activists, Sadrists and journalists, Baghdad and Erbil, December 2019 and October 2020.

paramilitary group member telling him to stay away from a certain spot hours before an attack occurred there.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, various security personnel established extensive intelligence networks inside protest camps, closely monitoring activists' movements. Not only did police and security services carry out arrests, but so did armed groups, which detained, interrogated and in some cases tortured activists before releasing them.⁷⁰ Paramilitaries targeted those activists whom they considered influential for their speaking or organising abilities and shared intelligence with security institutions. One Hashd group kidnapped an activist whose father was a prominent member of the group's affiliated political party. The activist explained:

When they interrogated me, they asked me how I could be the son of [father's name]. ... So, they can hurt me, but they cannot kill me. This is how they try to correct my behaviour. When they released me, my father said they had threatened to silence me if he didn't do it himself. I did my duty [with the Hashd] in fighting ISIS, but the militias cannot tolerate that I'm standing on the barricades now.⁷¹

Armed groups went beyond targeting activists in their attempts to break the movement's resolve. By the end of 2019, they had increasingly started to intimidate civilians who were aiding the protests with essential supplies. One woman who dedicated her time to cooking for the protesters said she stopped visiting Tahrir Square after unknown gunmen harassed her outside her home, threatening violence if she continued her food deliveries.⁷² First responders also received threats, and armed men attacked them on several occasions as they were bringing medical supplies to squares.⁷³ Staff at Iraq's High Commission for Human Rights also received threats for their work documenting abuses against activists.⁷⁴

2. The south

In contrast to Baghdad, a big city where interaction can stay anonymous, confrontations between protesters and security forces in the provinces were more intimate. They occurred throughout town, not just around the sit-ins. Whereas the Green Zone's heavy fortification made it impossible for protesters to reach state institutions in Baghdad, in the provinces they were able to storm government buildings, sometimes torching them and forcing administrators to work from elsewhere.⁷⁵

Activist rhetoric in the southern provinces targeted not only national party leaders but also local officials, parliamentarians and armed groups. The personal attacks prompted parties and their armed wings to go after activists. In Basra, Diwaniya,

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, December 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, activists and intelligence officer, Baghdad, December 2019 and October 2020.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, November 2020.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, volunteer, Baghdad, November 2020.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, volunteers and civil society activists, Baghdad, December 2019; Erbil, October 2020.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights official, Baghdad, November 2020.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, local government officials in Diwaniya, Najaf and Nassiriya, June 2020.

Karbala, Misan, Nassiriya and Wasit provinces, armed men regularly showed up at prominent protesters' homes to deliver threatening notes. Other activists got menacing text messages. Unlike in Baghdad, where threats could rarely be traced to the source, southern activists often knew who was trying to intimidate them.⁷⁶ Parents received warnings to keep their children away from protests, in some cases impelling entire families, not just individual activists, to move their place of residence, including outside the province.⁷⁷

Another repressive tactic was mass arrests. In issuing arrest warrants, police invoked articles in the penal code related to defamation, destruction of public property and, to a lesser degree, terrorism.⁷⁸ Activists would then use various means to get their comrades released, including legal action, social media campaigns and protests outside detention facilities. A lawyer explained that police in most cases would release protesters within hours or days of their arrest, without indicting them:

Sometimes, security forces detain protesters simply to get them off the streets for a while. In other cases, leading activists are held longer, either because they are accused of inciting violence or because parties or government officials want to discourage them from continuing. It usually doesn't work, even if they detain them ten times over. Every time they arrest a leading figure, it leads to more detentions, because their supporters show up to demonstrate on their behalf, or attack detention facilities.⁷⁹

The escalation between protesters and security forces in the south also drew in tribes. This element was especially notable in Nassiriya, which witnessed some of the most violent clashes. On 28 November 2019, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi deployed army units to the city.⁸⁰ That day, protesters expanded their rallies outside the main site, Habubi Square, cutting off traffic on key routes with burning tires. Dozens of protesters were killed in clashes with the army around Zaytoun bridge, and over 100 were wounded, including members of the security forces.⁸¹ Tribesmen then came to block the arrival of military reinforcements.⁸²

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Basra, Diwaniya and Nassiriya, November 2020. Activists explained that while threatening messages were usually unsigned, they would eventually learn who they came from, either because the message urged the recipient to refrain from speaking out against a certain party or figure, or because they would later get a follow-up warning in person.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, activists and parents, Erbil and Suleimaniya, October-November 2020.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, lawyers, human rights and other activists, Baghdad, Basra and Diwaniya, November 2020. See also "‘We Might Call You in at Any Time’: Free Speech under Threat in Iraq", Human Rights Watch, 15 June 2020.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Diwaniya, November 2020.

⁸⁰ The army's deployment in an urban centre such as Nassiriya was a significant escalation. The decision to appoint Jamil al-Shimmery as the unit commander may have likewise been a signal to the protesters that the state was reaching the limits of its tolerance. Shimmeri had previously been dismissed for leading an army crackdown on protests in Basra in September 2018. On Shimmeri's role in Basra, see Ali Jawad, "Iraqi PM sacks Basra army commander amid ongoing demos", Anadolu Agency, 27 September 2018.

⁸¹ Crisis Group phone interview, journalist, Nassiriya, November 2019. See also Ghaiith Abdul-Ahad, "It's personal here: southern Iraq ablaze as protests rage", *The Guardian*, 29 November 2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, activist, Nassiriya, December 2019. See also Martin Chulov, "Iraq risks breakup as tribes take on Iran's militias in 'blood feud'", *The Guardian*, 30 November 2019. Tribal

The intimacy of interpersonal relationships in the south enabled more detailed profiling of protesters, and thus more calibrated repression, but it also set limits. In some cases, the extraction of blood money pursuant to unwritten tribal codes held the authorities back from using lethal violence. Activists from prominent families or tribes explained that they enjoyed a higher degree of protection than others. Armed groups could detain, torture and threaten activists but would usually not kill them if they deemed the political, social or legal costs too high.⁸³

Some individuals played constructive roles as mediators. The parents of killed protesters sometimes appeared to help calm vengeful crowds. In other instances, university deans and teachers intervened with provincial authorities and courts to reduce unlawful charges or revoke decisions banning students from campus due to their activism.⁸⁴ In some provinces, protesters developed trust with local police officers who facilitated their assembly and established rules of engagement that allowed for release of peaceful protesters after mass detentions. As a police officer explained:

I will do what I can to protect the protesters because they are risking their lives for all of us. It's our sons out there, but sometimes they don't listen to our warnings. Verbal altercations can escalate and then we can't control the situation. But we are constantly talking to the organisers, and most of the time demonstrations run smoothly.⁸⁵

3. Political overtures

As the protesters' demands sharpened, the Abdul-Mahdi government began to find the movement's widespread support deeply alarming. The cabinet soon realised it was no longer enough to expand the government payroll to provide more jobs for unemployed youth. But the government was loath to go further in accommodating the protesters. It resisted demands for early elections and constitutional amendments; it balked at the notion of a more balanced foreign policy (which would require curbing Iranian influence, in particular); and, most of all, it would not countenance getting rid of the *muhasasa* system, on which the ruling parties have thrived. It floated other reform proposals, such as cabinet reshuffles and stipends for poor

leaders also became highly vocal in demanding justice for their slain sons. Because the judicial system has yet to hold anyone accountable, the risk remains that tribes will pursue vengeance rather than wait for prosecution. Several activists expressed concerns that tribal involvement could devolve into armed strife if a family does not consider itself avenged. Crisis Group interviews, Nassiriya and Karbala, November-December 2019.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, Basra, Diwaniya, Najaf and Nassiriya, November-December 2020. Activists from poor families without ties to parties or tribes, or from ethno-religious minority families, were especially vulnerable. Christian activists in Basra, for example, were more likely to leave the province when threatened because their tribal networks were weak compared to their Shiite friends. Similarly, Sunni activists were less likely to have their criminal, or in some cases terrorism-related, charges reduced, than their peers from well-connected families or tribes who can exert pressure in the judicial system.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, activists, parents and civil society members, southern provinces, December 2019 and November 2020.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, police officer, southern province, December 2019.

families, but these had very little traction with crowds that were demanding the government's resignation and fresh elections.⁸⁶

Encouraged by the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi and President Barham Salih tried on several occasions to sit down with movement representatives to discuss their demands. But dialogue efforts did not go far, as the government pushed protesters to name leaders, which they did not want to do.⁸⁷ The activists were concerned first and foremost with keeping their credibility in the street. Dozens who attended a meeting with UNAMI and government representatives at Baghdad's Babylon Hotel in November 2019 found themselves suspected of being co-opted.⁸⁸

Distrust between political elites and protesters was mutually reinforcing. Protesters who accepted suggestions from the government or political parties invariably lost support among the movement, which was looking to overhaul the system, not for piecemeal reforms. For example, protesters who pursued agreements for more public-sector employment faced opposition from those who saw such government overtures as sops that would benefit only a lucky few. In November 2019, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, head of the Hashd, met with a group of Tishreenis, offering them two ministries in the next government, but they refused what they saw as a bid at co-optation. The activists in turn suggested several people they considered independent to be prime minister in an interim government that would facilitate early elections and constitutional reform. Muhandis rejected their ideas out of hand, as he was not ready to allow independents to enter politics. The main difference between the two sides was that Muhandis sought to fold the movement into the existing power-sharing system, while the activists wanted to refashion it.⁸⁹

4. Allegations of foreign meddling

Regional events also coloured the protests and the state's response. Within a month of the start of the Tishreen uprising, anti-government disturbances also erupted in Iran and Lebanon. From Tehran's perspective, the protests in Iraq were an indirect challenge to its power projection in the region, to its friends in the Abdul-Mahdi government and also, through their demonstration effect, to its other Middle Eastern allies.⁹⁰

In Baghdad, Shiite leaders in the Fateh coalition were quick to dismiss the protests as a fraud, driven by inveterate Baathists aided by outsiders.⁹¹ The government had just completed its first year in office and, an official said, suspicions of a foreign

⁸⁶ "Iraq appoints two new ministers after PM promises sweeping reforms", Reuters, 10 October 2019.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and Western diplomats, December 2019 and October 2020.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, December 2019.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, activists, November 2019 and December 2020.

⁹⁰ Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Joseph Krass, "Protests in Iraq and Lebanon pose a challenge to Iran", Associated Press, 30 October 2019.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi journalists and political commentators, Baghdad, December 2020. See, for instance, "Al-Ameri: The Tishreen sedition was planned by the Baath Party and the followers of America, and if it were not for al-Muhandis and Soleimani, we would have gone down the partition tunnel", Al-Ahad TV, 31 December 2020 (Arabic).

conspiracy fuelling street activism ran rampant in Green Zone corridors. In September, he said, the prime minister had visited China, which many in government circles and among Iran-aligned groups cast as the beginning of an Iraqi pivot to China, a move they viewed as preferable to soliciting more Western investment. These insiders thought Abdul-Mahdi's trip had upset the U.S., which they believed had decided to exploit popular grievances to incite – if not actually initiate – an uprising.⁹² The U.S. government's statements supporting the popular protests and emphasising anti-Iranian sentiments only served to fuel these suspicions, thereby exacerbating the repression.⁹³

As a rule, government officials did not recognise, or misunderstood, the uprising's spontaneous and leaderless nature. A former parliamentarian explained that the protests became a "headache" for the government and the Hashd command: "[Abu Mahdi] al-Muhandis reached out to everyone, including myself. He wanted to know who was behind the protests. They couldn't fathom that people simply had had enough".⁹⁴

Lacking an instigator to negotiate with, the government and its backers shifted gears to curbing the protests. Within days of the first surge of unrest, Qassem Soleimani came to Baghdad to help the government devise a strategy for swiftly suppressing the demonstrations, while maintaining Abdul-Mahdi's premiership.⁹⁵ Tehran's involvement turned out to be too transparent, as activists and local human rights groups increasingly accused Iran of propping up the government and Iran-linked Hashd groups of being the main perpetrators of violence.⁹⁶

C. *January-May 2020: Sadr Switches Sides*

The U.S. drone strike that killed Soleimani and Muhandis at Baghdad airport on 3 January 2020 proved to be a watershed for the protests. It prompted parliament to convene two days later to vote on a non-binding resolution to expel U.S. troops from Iraq; the bill passed by a slim margin as all the Shiite parties – but only them – voted in favour.⁹⁷ The U.S. attack also stoked further violence against the protesters,

⁹² Crisis Group interview, government official, Baghdad, December 2019. See also "New Silk Road: Baghdad and Beijing boost bilateral ties", *Asia News*, 25 September 2019.

⁹³ See for example, "Pompeo says Iraqis and Lebanese have the right to get rid of Iran's 'meddling'", Radio Farda, 6 November 2019; and Ismael Naar, "Pompeo says Iraqi protesters have right to 'government free of Iranian influence'", *Al Arabiya*, 7 February 2020.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, former independent parliament member, Baghdad, October 2020.

⁹⁵ Suad al-Salhy, "Iran's top al-Quds force officials in Baghdad to support Abdul Mahdi", *Middle East Eye*, 10 November 2019.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf, December 2019. See also "Iraq unrest: Protesters set fire to Iranian consulate in Najaf", BBC, 28 November 2019. Even as the demonstrations began to abate in 2020, pro-Iran social media platforms continued to frame prominent participants as foreign agents. For example, Reham Yaqoub, a leading women's rights activist, had been photographed standing next to the U.S. consul general at a consulate-hosted event in Basra in 2018. The pictures circulated on social media and Iranian news platforms just prior to her death at an assassin's hand in August 2020. Crisis Group observations, August 2020. See also Yaqoub Fazeli, "Iran's Mehr agency accused slain Iraqi activist Reham Yaqoub of working for US", *Al Arabiya*, 20 August 2020.

⁹⁷ Ahmed Rasheed and Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraqi parliament backs government push to expel foreign troops", Reuters, 5 January 2020.

who had already aroused the pro-Iran paramilitary groups' ire with their anti-Tehran slogans.

On 24 January, Muqtada al-Sadr called for mass demonstrations against the U.S. military presence in Iraq.⁹⁸ Most Tishreen protesters ignored the call, because they did not want to be drawn into the U.S.-Iran standoff, which threatened to overshadow their cause, and because many resented the control that the Sadrists sought to exert in the squares. Stung, Sadr announced that he would end his support for the protests. He told his followers to leave the squares. As Sadrists packed up their tents, security forces raided several protest camps in a push to squash them for good. The sit-ins persisted but with smaller numbers.⁹⁹

Moreover, following Abdul-Mahdi's resignation, Sadr had an opportunity to influence the appointment of a new prime minister closer to his own position and use his parliamentary weight to formulate an electoral law more advantageous to his voter base.¹⁰⁰ Mass protests would not help him in pursuing this gambit. Sadr thus turned against the movement, not only withdrawing his support but also using violence against the protesters.

In early February 2020, Sadr ordered his supporters back to the protest sites, including the Blue Hats who had protected activists in the early days, but now their instructions were to clear the squares of "saboteurs" and "infiltrators", with the aim of ending the demonstrations. Deadly clashes between protesters and Sadrists ensued, including in Najaf on 5 February.¹⁰¹ The protesters responded with an anti-Sadr campaign in the following days, staging large demonstrations throughout the southern provinces.¹⁰² For many Tishreen activists, Sadr's turnabout confirmed their long-time suspicion that his decision to support or oppose anti-government protests was determined by his own political agenda.¹⁰³ Sadr's supporters retorted that protesters had "deviated from the right path", which was to press for reforms, not to serve foreign purposes – a reference to perceived U.S. meddling.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ "Iraq: thousands rally calling for US troop withdrawal", *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2020.

⁹⁹ See Isabel Coles, "Iraqis head to streets after security forces move to quash protests", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 January 2020; and "Iraqi security forces push to regain control of cities from protesters", *Wall Street Journal*, 25 January 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Omar al-Jaffal, "Iraq's New Electoral Law: Old Powers Adapting to Change", Arab Reform Initiative, 12 January 2021. The electoral law adopted in December 2019 prescribes a first-past-the-post system using smaller electoral districts (the law divides Iraq's eighteen provinces into electoral districts in which every 100,000 citizens elect one candidate for parliament). This system favours Sadr's constituents, who are mostly rural or urban poor and tend to be concentrated in areas with few political competitors. He can thus field his preferred candidates without having to worry about rivals.

¹⁰¹ The crackdown backfired on Sadr, who dissolved the Blue Hats for their alleged involvement in protesters' deaths. See "Sadr announces the dissolution of the Blue Hats", *Sky News*, 11 February 2020 (Arabic).

¹⁰² Sofia Barbarani, "Several killed after al-Sadr followers storm camp in Iraq", *Al Jazeera*, 8 February 2020.

¹⁰³ Gilgamesh Nabeel, "Iraqi protests swell despite clash with Sadrist supporters", *Al-Monitor*, 3 February 2020; and Jane Arraf, "Iraq's protests shook the government. Now the movement is nearly crushed", *National Public Radio*, 21 February 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sadrist movement members, July 2020.

Following the Sadrist assaults, a deep rift emerged between the Sadrists and non-aligned Tishreenis, who together had accounted for the bulk of the protesters. This division weakened the street in pressing for reforms, as Sadr turned to negotiations over the appointment of a new prime minister. Yet these tensions were soon overshadowed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought mass demonstrations to a halt. In March, several provincial governors imposed curfews that discouraged assembly. In Baghdad, Basra, Misan and Nassiriya, the remaining sit-in tents housed no more than 200 protesters each. In Baghdad, the government reopened the Sinak bridge, easing traffic congestion in the capital after nearly four months of closure.¹⁰⁵

Despite the relative calm, frictions between the remaining protesters and armed groups continued, often sparked by anti-Iran or anti-paramilitary rhetoric. In Basra, for example, university students objected to the administration's decision to erect statues of Soleimani and Muhandis on campus. Their demonstrations saw verbal altercations with armed men, who entered university grounds and later physically assaulted several students.¹⁰⁶ Similar incidents occurred in several other provinces, where activists defied attempts to be drawn into the U.S.-Iran standoff, which they considered an external conflict.¹⁰⁷

Due to the threats, this period also saw an exodus of activists from their home provinces to Iraq's Kurdistan region and abroad, mainly to Turkey, where they could easily obtain a visa. Smaller crowds meant increased exposure for the remaining activists, while fading media attention allowed for intimidation to go unnoticed. Violence against activists continued but at lower levels.¹⁰⁸

D. June 2020-October 2020: A New Government Promises Early Elections

The third distinctive stage of the protests began with the installation of a new government in May 2020. On 5 May, parliament voted in favour of an interim government headed by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a former journalist-turned-intelligence chief. It wrestled with three main challenges in the latter part of 2020: mitigating U.S.-Iran tensions; battling a fiscal crisis precipitated by the pandemic and low oil prices; and facilitating early elections.

Kadhimi assumed office as a compromise candidate (like his predecessors), accepted by both Iran and the U.S., and tolerated by many protesters because he had no political track record and thus no ties in their eyes to the corrupt governing clique. Some in the movement even viewed him as sympathetic, as among his advisers were older civil society activists. Others were sceptical because he had been intelligence chief. Sadr backed the new government, working with it to prevent any significant resurgence of the protest movement and reaffirming his demand for a full U.S. troop withdrawal. Pro-Iran parties accused Kadhimi of leaning toward the U.S., but leaders of the pro-Iran Fateh bloc, such as Qais al-Khazali (head of Asaeb Ahl al-Haq), none-

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, activists in Baghdad and southern provinces, May 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, activists and students, Basra, November 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, activists and journalists, Diwaniya, Karbala and Najaf, October-November 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Erbil, Suleimaniya and Istanbul, December 2020.

theless accepted his appointment on the condition that he would move to early elections and manage the economic and health crisis, while not venturing into politically controversial waters, such as the targeting of U.S. forces by paramilitary groups.¹⁰⁹

The government was obliged to be more ambitious, however. The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran included pushing Baghdad to rein in Iran-linked armed groups targeting diplomatic missions and U.S.-led coalition forces. At the same time, protesters were clamouring for justice for abuses they had suffered. Tackling both issues at once set the government on a collision course with the paramilitary groups, all the while showing little actual promise of delivering accountability.¹¹⁰ Kadhimi established a committee at the start of his tenure to investigate protest-related violence since October 2019, but this body has released no results to date.¹¹¹

Meanwhile, sporadic protests continued. On 27 July, police fired live ammunition at protesters in Tahrir Square, killing two, the first casualties at a protest site since Kadhimi had taken office.¹¹² The government ordered a probe, which resulted in the arrest of three police officers.¹¹³ In August, a series of assassinations and kidnappings of activists struck several southern provinces. Despite the prime minister's expressions of sympathy toward the protest movement, the government fell short in ensuring the safety of hundreds of activists at risk of being killed. Unable to guarantee their safety in their home provinces, the government, NGOs and individuals facilitated some activists' refuge elsewhere in the country.¹¹⁴ Yet most activists remained at home, subject to constant threats of forced disappearance or death.¹¹⁵

Activists have argued that the defence ministry and the army should play a bigger role in protecting peaceful protesters, as they see the interior ministry as compromised, especially at the provincial level, by its close ties to pro-Iran Hashd factions that have engaged in crackdowns. In October 2020, ahead of the one-year Tishreen anniversary, a group of activists presented a paper to the prime minister's team on how to secure the demonstrations, preferably with support from the Counter-Terrorism Service, an elite force under the prime minister's direct command, through coordination with the protesters. They suggested setting up checkpoints to look for weapons in incoming vehicles, issuing badges to sit-in participants and banning politically linked "protection" forces, such as Sadr's Blue Hats.¹¹⁶

The government rejected the proposals, saying crowd control units had been instructed not to use lethal force, making further precautions unnecessary, and that such

¹⁰⁹ "Qais al-Khazali directs threat at Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi", *Al-Hadath*, 27 July 2020 (Arabic).

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, adviser to the prime minister and Western diplomats, Baghdad, October 2020.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, government adviser, Baghdad, December 2020.

¹¹² "Two protesters die after clashes with police in Baghdad, medics and security sources say", Reuters, 27 July 2020.

¹¹³ "Two majors, lieutenant accused of killing protesters in Baghdad", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 31 July 2020.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, NGO activists and government officials, Baghdad and Erbil, October-November 2020.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights official and NGO activists, Baghdad and Erbil, December 2020 and May 2021.

¹¹⁶ Signed proposal obtained by Crisis Group in meeting with activists, Erbil, October 2020.

policing was outside the Counter-Terrorism Service's mandate.¹¹⁷ Indeed, interior ministry forces in Baghdad on the day of the anniversary, 25 October 2020, were not equipped with lethal weapons, but used hot-water cannons to prevent protesters from penetrating the barricades on Jumhuriya and Sinak bridges leading into the Green Zone.¹¹⁸ In this standoff, security forces suffered higher casualties than the protesters, as the latter hurled Molotov cocktails and in some cases hand grenades at them.

Afterward, activists argued that the clash could have been averted if the government had accepted their suggestions for keeping protests peaceful.¹¹⁹ Several organisers complained that the government had deliberately limited participation in peaceful assemblies around the anniversary, while allowing violent protesters to dominate the scene in order to justify shutting down the sit-ins. Security forces had instructions to prevent a large build-up of crowds; they blocked buses bearing activists from other provinces at Baghdad's periphery, compelling the passengers to walk or take taxis to reach the city centre; and they failed to check people downtown for weapons.¹²⁰ An organiser of a student march claimed that police prevented his group from marching from Firdos Square to Tahrir Square, forcing the demonstrators to split up and take alternate routes that delayed their arrival.¹²¹

Muqtada al-Sadr, meanwhile, tweeted that foreign infiltrators had taken advantage of the prime minister's decision not to equip security forces with lethal weapons, resulting in large crowds choosing merely to watch the clashes at the barricades rather than being drawn into what they considered a trap.¹²²

Two days later, federal police under the Baghdad Operations Command, the joint coordination centre of Baghdad governorate's security forces, removed the sit-in camp from Tahrir Square. Although many activists perceived the police action as a symbolic defeat, there also appeared to be a consensus that the movement had exhausted its role in the streets and should reorient its efforts toward elections. Others claimed that the elites had won yet again – using a combination of repression and co-optation, which had also been at work in the installation of the interim government.¹²³ A parliament member claimed that Kadhimi had been under pressure from political elites, especially Sadr, to bring the protests to an end: “In this environment, in which paramilitary groups challenge the prestige of the state, Kadhimi is obliged to rely on Sadr [for political protection against other paramilitary groups]”.¹²⁴ Preventing protests became the safest way for the government to avoid bloodshed. Since the 25 October anniversary, the government has kept troops deployed in Tahrir Square to deter renewed sit-ins.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, activists and government adviser, Baghdad, October 2020.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group observations, Baghdad, 25 October 2020.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, October 2020.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, police officer and activists from southern provinces, Baghdad, October 2020.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews and observations, Baghdad, 25 October 2020.

¹²² Crisis Group observations, October 2020. See also tweet by Muqtada al-Sadr, @Mu_AISadr, 6:53am, 25 October 2020.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad and Erbil, October–November 2020.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, parliamentarian, Baghdad, November 2020.

IV. Heading into Elections

A. *A Tishreeni Turn to Electoral Politics?*

Young Iraqis who honed their political awareness and skills through street activism in the past two years or before now face the challenge of finding their place in a political party-dominated landscape they reject. Some have charted a pragmatic path, accepting the rules of the game for now, despite the system's deep dysfunction. That is, they have come to believe that protesters cannot overthrow the system and so must participate in it, at least in elections. They know the pitfalls. They fear being co-opted, as they are inexperienced in politics. They fear the perception of being co-opted just as much: others in the grassroots movement are quick to denounce any new initiative the established parties proffer.¹²⁵ Activists inclined toward politics are thus contemplating three possible ways forward: supporting, and even campaigning on behalf of, newly established parties and independent candidates; joining older reform-minded parties, such as Hikma; or remaining in opposition outside parliament and free of parties new and old.¹²⁶

These three trajectories became evident after the Kadhimi government set early elections for June 2021, a date it subsequently pushed back to 10 October.¹²⁷ Several parties have emerged from the protest movement's ranks since that time. Among the most notable was Marhala, a party led by an older generation of activists close to Kadhimi. This party collapsed in April 2021, however, amid internal divisions and lack of support from the prime minister, who may be betting on re-election as a compromise candidate with Muqtada al-Sadr's backing.¹²⁸

Other notable parties with no direct links to government or the established parties are Imtidad, al-Bayt al-Watani (National Home) and al-Bayt al-Iraqi (Iraqi Home).¹²⁹ While these parties have managed to garner sufficient financial support to register with the Iraqi High Electoral Commission, they do not campaign with the same confidence as established parties, fearing persecution by armed groups. A member of one of these parties said prominent activists who would be crucial to electoral campaigns in their home provinces have been unable to participate, as they remain in hiding due to continuous threats from armed groups.¹³⁰

Some of the new parties express uncertainty about whether they will participate in the polls. Following a leading activist's killing in Karbala in early May, protesters took to the streets calling for accountability, with some parties announcing an elec-

¹²⁵ This perception has proven justified in many cases. Activists claim that established parties have approached them with offers of large sums of money, land or vehicles if they agree to join up. Crisis Group interviews, activists, Basra, Erbil, Diwaniya and Najaf, December 2020, February 2021.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Karbala, Najaf, Nassiriya and by telephone, December 2020 and February 2021.

¹²⁷ Elections in October 2021 can go forward if parliament can reach agreement on dissolving itself two months prior, as per the constitutional requirement.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, former Marhala party member, Baghdad, June 2021. See also "Al-Kadhimi's party is suspended due to disagreements and financial problems", *Shafaq*, 27 April 2021 (Arabic).

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, activists affiliated with new parties, Baghdad, November-December 2020.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, activist, Baghdad, February 2021.

tion boycott.¹³¹ Indeed, a member of one party said that its leadership was divided over whether to stand in the elections due to safety concerns. He went on to say: "It is already difficult enough to convince our constituents to go out and vote".¹³²

At the same time, established parties have adjusted their strategies in an effort to uphold the status quo. One change was to register new parties under the leadership of prominent members of existing formations. Several parliamentarians from Shiite parties said political leaders realise that Iraq's youth can no longer be ignored and should be included in the political process. Parties are thus promoting younger faces and may field young candidates in the forthcoming elections.¹³³ Yet it is unlikely that the parties will select candidates from outside their elite networks; and new participants will probably not represent the large segments of the youthful population that feel disenfranchised.

Other established parties started fragmenting or ending old alliances as a result of Tishreen's rise. For instance, while Sadrist leaders appear confident that the movement will secure a larger number of parliamentary seats in 2021 than in 2018, when it won 54, and as the largest party or coalition will be able to claim the right to appoint the next prime minister, some members have left the party due to disagreements over its policy vis-à-vis the protest movement. They say Sadr was wrong to abandon protesters.¹³⁴ The Sairoun alliance that Sadr forged with the ICP ahead of the 2018 elections broke apart for the same reason, with two Communist parliamentarians renouncing their seats in late October 2019. ICP members argued that the party cannot be part of a parliament that remains docile in the face of state-sanctioned repression of peaceful dissent; there is talk in the ICP about boycotting the forthcoming elections due to these concerns.¹³⁵

Less visible trends suggest a similar knock-on effect even within the political wings of some paramilitary groups. A commander and member of a Hashd-linked party contended that the Tishreen protests posed a danger to the system, one that required parties to forge new alliances as a way to prevent another round of protests, which could descend into civil strife. He said he recognised that the extensive loss of life in 2019 constituted a failure of the political class.¹³⁶ Such sentiments suggest that civility between elites and the street is possible, but also that preserving the status quo is the elites' top priority.

The elections offer an opportunity to address at least to some degree the political system's legitimacy crisis – provided that they come off transparently and safely. If

¹³¹ Fadhel al-Nashmi, "Iraq anti-government movement announces election boycott after activist's assassination", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 11 May 2021.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, member of a new party, Baghdad, June 2021.

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, parliament members, Baghdad, November-December 2020.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, head of the Sadrist movement's political bureau, defector from the party, Baghdad, November 2020. On 15 July 2021, Sadr announced his withdrawal from the upcoming elections. It is unlikely he will follow through, however, as he has made similar announcements ahead of previous elections. Hasan Ali Ahmed, "Sadr withdraws from Iraqi elections", *Al-Monitor*, 19 July 2021.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group, ICP member, Baghdad, November 2020. See also Alex MacDonald, "Iraqi communist MP who resigned over protest violence now calls for government to step down", *Middle East Eye*, 28 October 2019.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, October 2020.

large segments of the population perceive the elections to have been stolen, as many did in 2018, their tolerance for the rules of Iraq's democratic game will diminish even further.

There also are security concerns. Activists complain that the government will be unable to keep people safe during campaigning, to the detriment of activists' participation, whether running for office themselves or in bringing out the vote. Following his appointment, Kadhimi invited several seasoned activists and human rights defenders to join his team of advisers, opening channels with protesters across the country to discuss election security and other reforms. But the government is unlikely to concede the protesters' demand that the defence ministry replace the interior ministry in organising election security.¹³⁷

The debate in Iraq leaves little hope that elections will be smooth or that the entire electorate – let alone Tishreen activists – will accept the outcome. Political posturing among Shiite elites suggests little commitment to holding elections that are free and fair. For example, despite protesters' demand that the UN supervise the elections, some Shiite parties prefer limited international observation, in some cases claiming that a more intrusive outside role would infringe intolerably upon national sovereignty.¹³⁸ In May, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution supporting an extensive international mission of 150 observers, which the government accepted.¹³⁹ While an improvement over the arrangements in previous elections, as such a number of observers might be able to deter or catch at least some attempts at fraud, the UN resolution may be too little, too late to reassure would-be voters who fear violence or intimidation at polling stations.¹⁴⁰

B. *A Better Way Forward*

The post-2003 Iraqi state has been unable to transcend its prolonged crisis of legitimacy. No one needed mass protests to understand this reality, but the fact that people took to the streets in such numbers and for so long despite the security forces' extreme violence showed how acute the crisis is. It is doubtful that general elections can do more than extend the interval to the next shock. If the government and its armed auxiliaries, especially paramilitary groups, mishandle or undermine the elections, the shock could come very soon indeed.

Some Shiite politicians believe that the state's violent response to the Tishreen protests and its continued lack of control over armed groups increase the risk of civil strife in Iraq's south should mass protests erupt again. Others dismiss the protests as a short-lived crisis that the system has overcome. Yet the relative calm is deceptive,

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Baghdad, Basra and Misan, November-December 2020; government adviser, Baghdad, November 2020.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Baghdad, February and May 2021. These diplomats claimed, moreover, that Iraqi government representatives in New York were vague about what kind of electoral support they desired from the UN, allegedly due to political pressure from parties at home.

¹³⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2576 (2021), 27 May 2021. On 21 June, the European Union announced that it, too, would send an observer mission to the elections. "News Briefs/Iraq: EU to observe October parliamentary elections", Agence Europe, 22 June 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, April 2021.

as the people in the squares went home angry and disappointed that their public remonstrations met with so little success.

The built-up grievances are so significant that reforms – should proposals be agreed upon – would take years to redress them. In the meantime, politicians will have to take urgent steps to address at least the main triggers of violence. The combination of close ties and blurred command-and-control lines between the interior ministry and the Hashd enabled extensive repression without accountability for paramilitaries. New legislators should press the government to revise these lines of responsibility. Clarity on the chain of command, and the ability to identify various security actors, could discourage the excessive use of force, particularly if it means that armed groups can no longer blend in with formal institutions such as the police or emergency forces. The government should also make available special training for designated riot police in non-lethal methods of crowd control. The European Union's assistance mission to Iraq could help develop the curriculum for this training and assist in integrating it into the existing security sector reform programs.

The government also needs to urgently address the absence of accountability for the excessive use of force against protesters by all security institutions, including those under the defence and interior ministries and the Hashd, over the past two years, which has led to loss of life unprecedented in Iraq's post-2003 protest history. To date, the government has released no findings from its comprehensive enquiries.¹⁴¹ On a few occasions, it has issued arrest warrants against commanders of Hashd groups allegedly involved in violence against protesters. One case led to the detention of a high-ranking member, Qasim Muslih, on 26 May, but he was released two weeks later, reportedly due to lack of evidence.¹⁴²

Since these factions also stand accused of attacks on U.S. troops and facilities, as well as other foreign military assets, they tend to suspect the government of pursuing their members for political reasons. The government should thus be clear in its communications, lest the Hashd factions close ranks to block legal action against their members, as they did following Muslih's arrest.¹⁴³ To date, accountability has fallen by the wayside because of distrust between the government and paramilitary groups, and because the government has so rarely disciplined members of the regular security forces for abuses.

International stakeholders in Iraq, including the UN, European Union and individual diplomatic missions, should maintain pressure on the government to deliver accountability for abuses perpetrated by formal and informal security forces during the protests, and keep this issue strictly separate from accountability for attacks on U.S. troops or facilities. They should provide assistance to internally displaced and exiled activists, and advocate with the Iraqi government for their safe return.

¹⁴¹ According to UNAMI, two cases of abuses against protesters committed by low-ranking members of interior ministry forces appear to have progressed to trial and conviction. The government had not publicised these cases at the time of publication, however. "Update on Demonstrations in Iraq: Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements", UNAMI, May 2021.

¹⁴² Jane Arraf and Falih Hassan, "Iraq arrests militia leader, inciting standoff with Iran-backed forces", *The New York Times*, 27 May 2021; and "Iraq militia leader arrested over attacks on bases hosting U.S. forces", Reuters, 27 May 2021.

¹⁴³ Ibid. Also Crisis Group telephone interview, Hashd commander, Baghdad, June 2021.

Regarding the forthcoming elections, the government should take activists' safety concerns seriously, especially in southern provinces that have witnessed violence against dissidents and where people have lost trust in local security institutions. Deploying additional forces with a mandate to protect campaign rallies and polling stations could encourage voter participation and thus shore up the political system's crumbling legitimacy.

The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution that gives the UN mission an extensive international observation mandate for Iraq's legislative elections. UNAMI should now build a team of Iraqi election observers who are able to cover large areas, as they are not limited by the same security considerations as international observers would be. The mission has launched initiatives to include a greater number of women and youth as local observers – an important confidence-building measure in the circumstances.

While not so articulated, the protests revealed a deep-seated need for a common vision of what a social contract in Iraq should look like. Amid the violence, the sit-ins provided an unprecedented space for dialogue among citizens, political parties and religious institutions such as the *marjaeeya*. Now the various elements have retreated to their own silos in the absence of in-person interaction or pressure from the street to continue critical conversations about the country's future. Instead of taking comfort from the perception that mass protests have ended, political elites should erect new platforms for dialogue with youth and civil society actors – and not just their own constituents – if they want to prevent the next outburst.

V. Conclusion

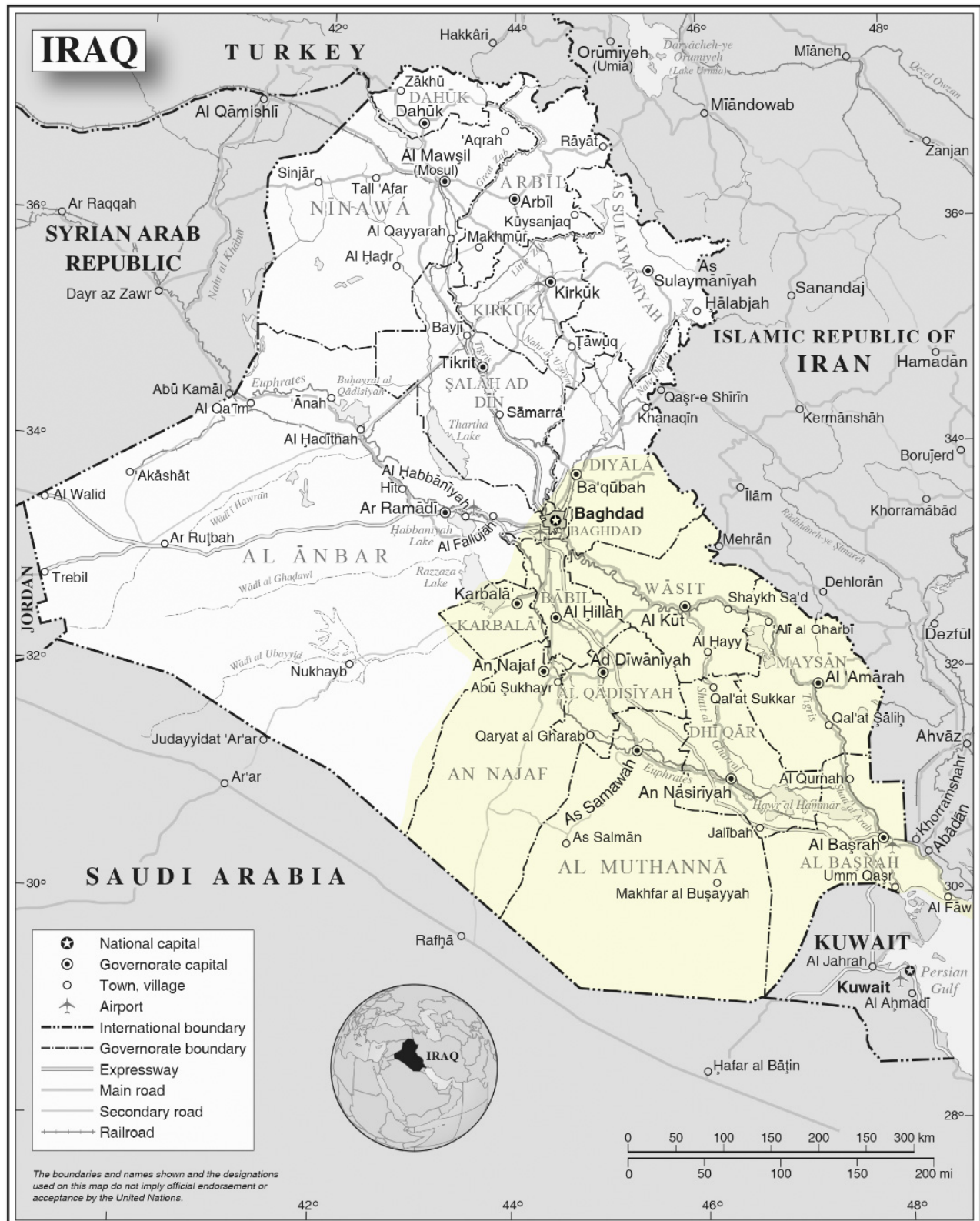
The Tishreen protest movement challenged the foundations of Iraq's post-2003 order. Defying extensive repression, it forced the Abdul-Mahdi government to resign, but it has yet to accomplish its goal of fundamentally changing a highly corrupt and dysfunctional system.

The forthcoming parliamentary elections will serve as a litmus test of public confidence in the post-2003 democratic polity. If people perceive the elections as likely to be relatively free and fair, and grace them with a higher turnout than in 2018, new forces may enter the political arena.

That development could only be positive. Successful elections could also help repair the severely damaged relationship between political elites and ordinary citizens. Failing credible polls, the state's legitimacy crisis can only deepen and sooner or later will almost certainly set off another deadly cycle of unrest, especially in the southern provinces.

Baghdad/Brussels, 26 July 2021

Appendix A: Map of the Spread of the Tishreen Uprising



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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July 2021

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2018

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Israel/Palestine

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

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