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**"NURID WATAN!"
"WE WANT A HOMELAND!"
BASRAWI PERSPECTIVES
ON THE 2019 PROTESTS
IN BASRA PROVINCE**

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"Nurid Watan!" "We Want a Homeland!" Basrawi Perspectives on the 2019 Protests in Iraq's Basra Province

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Cover Image Description: Students participate in continued anti-government protests in Basra, Iraq in January 2020.

FOREWORD

The research conducted in this report took place prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides a qualitative picture of perceptions of select Basrawi residents on the impact of the 2019 protests. The Iraqi government's efforts to combat the virus have had a negative effect on all forms of political life, including the national protest movement we covered in this report. Already active on social media, the movement is being kept alive in the virtual space and by small groups of committed activists who have remained in the public squares of Baghdad, Basra and Nasiriyah. As many of the grievances of protesters have not been addressed by the government, and the movement will almost certainly see a resurgence when social distancing measures are relaxed, and will be energized by the expectation that early parliamentary elections will be held in 2021.

APPROACH

In December 2019, IRI conducted a qualitative research study focused on the southern Iraqi province of Basra at a time when much of Iraq was engulfed in citizen-led protests. The study sought to gain an understanding of local perspectives on the protest movement itself, minority inclusion, public service delivery, corruption, foreign influence and governance. Drawing on this original research, IRI will publish a series of thematic reports drawn from these discussions. This report, focused on Basrawi perceptions of Iraq's protest movement, is the first in this series.

IRI contracted the research firm Al Mustakilla (IIACSS) to lead eight focus group discussions (FGD) with 64 Basrawi residents (referred to as "Basrawi discussants") as well as 10 in-depth interviews (IDI) with Basrawi political, civic and religious leaders.

- All FGDs were separated by gender and grouped by the 18-35 and 36-65 age ranges.
- Two FGDs included only Iraqis of African ancestry.
- Four FGDs were held with Basrawis between the ages of 18 and 65 who had not participated personally in the protest movement.
- Two FGDs were held with Basrawis between the ages of 18 and 35 who had participated in the protest movement.

As is common with qualitative research, findings from this study do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all residents of Basra (referred to as "Basrawis") but do point to broader trends.

BACKGROUND

In 2019, Iraq was gripped by a wave of citizen-led protests throughout much of the center and south of the country — especially Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriyah and Najaf. While most protesters were nonviolent, they were met by a brutal response from the Iraqi government, militias and other entities opposed to their demands.

Although Iraq has had several protest waves since its transition to democracy, this movement is different — it crosses sectarian lines, is youth-led and seeks a renegotiation of the social contract that underpins Iraq's democracy. The spark for the wider protest movement began in late summer 2019 in Basra, as they had many times before, with unemployment as the key driver. The demands of the protesters quickly shifted from jobs and improved service delivery to calls for the wholesale reform of Iraq's democratic institutions, including an end to *muhassasa*, the allocation of political power based on sectarian identity, and prosecution of corruption. This movement is the largest that Iraq has seen since the overthrow of dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.¹ While there are no reliable figures regarding their exact number, reports suggest that at its height the protests in major cities like Basra swelled to the tens of thousands.²

Protesters' tactics in Basra ranged from sit-ins and marches to general strikes by teachers and other unions to blocking access to key oil fields and port areas and going as far as throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. Government security forces and parastatal militias moved to quell the protests, often using military grade tear gas canisters as direct fire weapons and live ammunition. There were targeted assassinations of protest leaders, journalists and civic activists as well, though these have always been attributed to "unknown actors"

“ This protest [has the] slogan “*nurid watan*,” which means we are homeless and want back our homeland, so **this revolution is bigger than any previous one.**”

— Female, 18-35, Basrawi

despite the calls from the Iraqi High Commission on Human Rights (IHCHR), the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq and Amnesty International, among others, for full and transparent investigations. According to IHCHR, the independent government commission charged with promoting and protecting human rights, 521 Iraqis were killed and 23,122 wounded in such clashes nationwide.³

As of 2020, the movement had resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, dismissal of all 15 provincial councils within federal Iraq and the board of the Independent High Electoral Commission, and the reformation of the parliamentary elections law. Political processes related to nominating and confirming a new prime minister have dragged on since Abdul-Mahdi's resignation in November 2019 and with social distancing measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic preventing mass gatherings, the movement has moved online with the exception of small groups still present in public squares observing social distancing rules.

¹ Bunyan, Rachael. "Over 300 Killed as Hundreds of Thousands Take Part in Iraqi Protests. What's Behind the Violent Demonstrations?" *Time*, 13 Nov. 2019, time.com/5723831/iraq-protests/.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1

All Basrawi discussants and interviewees were supportive of the protest movement.

Without exception, all discussants and interviewees were supportive of the protest movement. They believed that Iraqis took to the streets as a last resort to voice their rejection of a governmental system that had not met citizens' needs and expectations. Discussants viewed the movement as a patriotic effort to express dissatisfaction with the status quo and to demand improvements to Iraq's political and economic system, although they diverged in their views on the best way to make citizens' voices heard.

Many of the "older generation" participants felt that their silence over the past 16 years had allowed Iraq's systemic issues to fester and worsen. They expressed admiration for young people, who comprise the majority of those participating in and leading the movement. An older man shared, "Young people are the seed of this change. The artists and the builders created a group to make artistic pieces of work, so they have the potential to form a [bigger] civil society."

The word conspiracy was released by [opponents of the movement] in order to suppress the citizens, but the protests are 100 percent patriotic.

— Male, 18-35 Basrawi protest participant

“These young people are achieving **what their fathers and grandfathers failed to do.**

— Male, 36-55 Basrawi

Some discussants predicted that current protests would lead to greater participation of Iraqi youth in future elections and representation in government. At the same time, discussants expressed apprehension about protest-related outcomes like the shutdown of schools and damage to government property. Some discussants noted that that children missing school may have a long-term impact on young Iraqis. Others expressed fears that anything other than nonviolent protest tactics would provoke violent retaliation from either government security forces or armed parastatal militias.

² Salim, Mustafa, and Erin Cunningham. "As protests rattle Iraq, influential Shiite cleric calls to overhaul political system," *Washington Post*, 29 Oct. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/tens-of-thousands-of-iraqis-protest-in-defiance-of-government-curfew-as-casualties-mount/2019/10/29/0a3ad034-fa3a-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html.

³ Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights. *Demonstrations in Iraq Report IV*, 2020, ihchr.iq/upload/upfile/en/33.pdf.

Civil activists are showing the world what is currently happening to the citizens, and they are providing medicine and other things to the protesters and for that reason they are being kidnapped and killed.

— Female, 18-65 Basrawi of African descent

The lack of defined leadership was frequently mentioned during discussions and interviews, with some Basrawi discussants seeing this as

a reflection of the movement's independent and national character. While there was a common perspective among discussants that a clear leader could allow for direct negotiations with the government, most discussants noted that this leader would be exposed to extreme personal risk. Some discussants from more conservative backgrounds or who were affiliated with the government suggested that the protests were controlled by foreign powers.

Finding 2

Basrawi discussants' lack of trust in government pledges exacerbates their frustration with public institutions, particularly regarding employment opportunities.

Years of government fanfare over new employment schemes and development projects that either never materialize or underperform have eroded trust between citizens and government. More than 90 percent of government revenues come from Iraq's oil and gas industry and the proceeds from production in Basra comprise the majority of Iraq's budget.⁴ Discussants highlighted the fact that annual budget figures are routinely touted as beneficial for the province, but services and infrastructure remain in poor condition. Interviewees who work with government bodies in the governorate attributed this to the lengthy planning, budgeting and disbursement processes required under Iraq's semi-decentralized system, which require the involvement of a range of national and governorate-level bodies. Although government interviewees acknowledged that these delays affect citizen perception of service delivery, they do not believe that government actors can or should act any differently.

A plurality of the FGD participants noted that unemployment was a key initial driver of the protest movement and argued that the government has done little in recent years to alleviate this concern. Some discussants maintained that government should provide the unemployed with jobs in the public sector and blamed government inaction for the disintegration of private industry and agriculture throughout the province.

Lack of job opportunities was a driver of the current protests — however, the demands expanded.

— Female, 18-35, Basrawi

Many noted that they were underemployed or unemployed, and said that the job opportunities announced for government positions were either already filled or nonexistent when they or their family members applied. This contrasts strongly with the perceptions of those interviewed who

⁴ Government of Iraq. *Federal State Budget for the Republic of Iraq for the Fiscal Year 2019*, www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/4529.pdf.

“ Instead of shooting tear gas at the demonstrators, which cost [the government] a lot, **they could have provided cancer treatment to the hospitals.**”

— Male religious leader

worked with the government, who touted a range of specific projects and employment schemes intended to benefit the Basrawi community. These clashing perspectives underscore the lack of public trust in government, which exacerbated the situation within the province and contributed to the protest movement.

Many discussants complained about the misuse of government funding, noting that the provincial council should have monitored the expenditures by the governor's office and line ministries in the province. Some expressed frustration that government spending appears to be predominantly focused on controlling or stopping the protests rather than meeting demands for clean water, medical services, sewage systems and road networks.



Iraqi security forces fire tear gas at demonstrators during anti-government protests in Basra, Iraq in November, 2019.

Finding 3

Foreign influence on the protest movement and on Iraq's economic and political spheres is unwelcome.

Basrawis discussants kept returning to the theme of being caught in the middle of someone else's fight.

The issue of foreign influence and pressures featured strongly in each FGD. With few exceptions, discussants and interviewees disapproved of what they perceived to be the aims of external influences, instead preferring that Iraqi actors support the demands, needs and goals of the Iraqi people. Many believe that the interference of foreign countries was undertaken solely to benefit their own aims, rather than to support Iraq.

Young people realized how [other countries are] interfering with our internal affairs and controlling the country's decisions, which are consequently causing unemployment and all the corruption that we are witnessing every day.

— Male, 18-35 Basrawi protest participant

Although this research was conducted just a few weeks before the December 2019 escalation between the United States and Iran, the two countries featured prominently in the FGDs and interviews. Some discussants believed that the U.S. and Iran have agreed to maintain separate spheres of control within Iraq to the detriment of Iraq itself.

Most participants expressed disapproval of the perceived competition between the United States and Iran. Many shared a longstanding suspicion of the United States that was nebulous in nature but centered around distrust of U.S. motives and a perception that it acts without regard for Iraqi sovereignty. Discussants shared specific concerns

“ External interference [by certain countries] plays a major role in destroying Iraq, and they are trying to control the petrol fields to serve their interests.

— Male, religious leader

about what they saw as Iran's negative impact on Iraqi industries, especially agriculture, as imported products undercut domestic production and control of Iraq's political parties. First, they cited Iran's negative impact on Iraqi industries — especially agriculture — as imported products undercut domestic production. Secondly, discussants cited Iran's powerful influence over many Iraqi political parties. To a lesser degree, some participants noted concerns about the influence and actions of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Israel.

Finding 4

Basrawi discussants overwhelmingly support the role of Iraqi civil society organizations in the protest movement, but have mixed opinions regarding the role of religious leaders.

All discussants and most interviewees reported positive impressions of Iraqi civil society organizations, believing that they play an important constructive role in organizing the demonstrations and in ensuring protesters have access to food, shelter and medical supplies. Beyond providing and distributing these essential supplies, discussants noted that civil society organizations brought a sense of community to the protests, which created more momentum for the movement overall. Some discussants attributed the violent response of the government to the success of civil activists and organizations, saying that protesters would not have been worth targeting if they had not been so successful.

The volunteers, civil activists and civil society organizations have more effective roles than the government as they were able to provide something to the citizens of Basra such as cleaning campaigns, festivals, campaigns to help martyrs' families [relatives of the slain protesters] with even the smallest efforts and simple funding while the government is not providing anything to them although it owns that massive budget.

— Male, 18-35, Basrawi protest participant

The civic activists interviewed as part of this research believe that their role is to keep young protesters focused on strategic goals and encourage them to continue using nonviolent resistance techniques.

Participants were divided in their views on the involvement of Shia religious leaders. Some believed that the Friday sermons and counsel of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most influential Shia cleric, and other senior clerics had a positive effect on the protest movement, providing inspiration and guidance to protesters while also advising the government on needed reforms and admonishing it for acts of violence against protesters. Others expressed disappointment that these statements did not take place as formal opinions issued as *fatwas* (religious rulings).

“ We guided [the protesters] and gave them lectures on how to have clear demands and a peaceful role as called by Grand Ayatollah Sistani; we highlighted that **this is their country and they should not burn or destroy anything in it.”**

— Female, 18-65, Basrawi activist

CONCLUSION

Basrawi grievances over the quality of governance and public services run deep, damaging public trust in government to such a degree that protests are seen as the only effective outlet. Civic activists have sought to keep the protest movement nonviolent and strategic but the scant protection that a leaderless movement provides also hobbles its ability to directly negotiate with government actors. The majority of the movements' demands have not yet been addressed, in fact, the government formation process that followed the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi further reinforced public belief that the political class intends to continue negotiating power sharing arrangements and ignore the will of the people.

The looming economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19-related oil price crash will inevitably affect millions of Iraqis employed by the government if it is unable to make monthly payroll, which is currently feared. This crisis threatens to spread throughout Iraq as small businesses struggle to keep their doors open in the face of fewer customers and ongoing travel restrictions that make day-to-day transactions unaffordable or unreachable. If Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the third prime minister-designate since December 2019, succeeds in achieving a vote of confidence for his proposed cabinet, once the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions are relaxed, he will likely be met by a reinvigorated protest movement that will press for its demands for early elections and concrete steps to prevent and prosecute corruption.

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