



Iraq and U.S. Policy

Protests and Violence Spur Transition

Mass protests and state violence against some protestors have shaken Iraq since October 2019, with more than 450 Iraqis killed by security forces and militiamen in Baghdad and several southern Iraqi cities. Thousands more civilian demonstrators have been injured. After security forces and gunmen killed 45 protestors on November 27 and 28, 2019, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abd Al Mahdi publicly stated his intent to resign, which protestors and some prominent political figures had been demanding since October.

Iraqi legislators in the Council of Representatives (COR) acknowledged the prime minister's resignation on December 1, but he remains in office as a caretaker until the a replacement is endorsed. Procedures for prime-ministerial replacement in cases of resignation are ambiguous under Iraq's constitution, and political differences among leading factions may preclude a prompt resolution. Demonstrations continue, as protestors demand systemic change and an end to corruption and foreign interference, especially by Iran.

Iraq's government declared military victory against the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) in December 2017, but operations against remaining supporters of the group are ongoing. Security has improved since 2017, but thousands of IS fighters in Iraq and Syria pose a continuing threat. IS fighters do not control territory, but carry out frequent attacks in some areas.

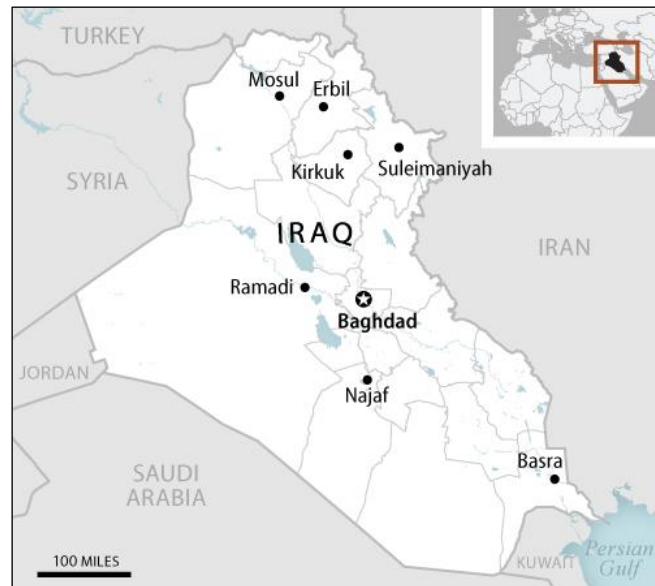
The nature and duration of the protests and the Iraqi government's responses have deepened U.S. concerns about Iraq's stability. Rocket attacks attributed by U.S. officials to Iranian proxies threaten U.S. personnel and Iraqis. Related future developments, including the treatment of protestors and the outcome of possible national elections in 2020, could complicate U.S. efforts to cooperate with and assist Iraq's government. Congress is considering President Donald Trump's requests for additional military and civilian aid for Iraq without certainty about the future of Iraq's governing arrangements or how further changes in Iraq's politics and security might affect U.S. interests.

Iraqi Perspectives

Leaders of Iraq's Shia Muslim religious establishment have expressed solidarity with peaceful protestors, rejected foreign interference, and condemned killings of civilians. Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani on December 6 demanded that a transitional government be chosen swiftly and independently. Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) leaders have recognized protestors' concerns and criticized repressive violence, while convening to unify positions on proposed reforms that some Kurds fear could undermine the Kurdistan region's rights under Iraq's constitution. Arrests and official discouragement reportedly have prevented the spread of protests to areas of western Iraq predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs, but Sunni Arab political figures are now involved in transition negotiations.

Some Iraqi officials, Iran's Supreme Leader, and Iran-aligned Iraqi militia leaders have contended that the protest movement is a foreign-backed conspiracy. Iran maintains ties to some armed groups in Iraq, including some units of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Some PMF units complied with the prime minister's July 2019 decree ordering them to comply with a law calling for PMF subordination to national security command structures. Others did not. Iranian officials, including Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani, reportedly are working to shape Iraq's transition. However, like U.S. and Iraqi leaders, Iranian leaders also now face new Iraqi political dynamics introduced by the nationalist protest movement.

Figure 1. Iraq



Sources: CRS, using ESRI and U.S. State Department data.

Iraq's major ethnic and religious constituencies are internally diverse in political terms, as evident in May 2018 national election results for the 328-seat COR. A pan-ethnic and pan-sectarian coalition of interest groups agreed to support the Abd al Mahdi government, though differences over policy and leadership within and between rival blocs prevented progress on several issues through October 2019. The *Sa'irun* (On the March) coalition led by populist Shia cleric and longtime U.S. antagonist Muqtada al Sadr and the predominantly Shia *Fatah* (Conquest) coalition led by Hadi al Ameri of the Badr Organization hold the largest number of COR seats. *Fatah* includes individuals formerly associated with Shia PMF militias with ties to Iran. Sadr has expressed solidarity with protestors and demanded Abd al Mahdi's resignation, but his coalition has declined to nominate a replacement. COR members are debating electoral system reform to guide elections in 2020.

The two largest Kurdish parties, the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Suleimaniyah-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), hold significant numbers of COR seats and won the most seats in the KRG's September 2018 election. In July 2019, the KRG parliament confirmed KDP leader Masrour Barzani as KRG Prime Minister. His cousin Nechirvan Barzani is KRG President. KRG leaders had negotiated with Prime Minister Abd al Mahdi over unresolved oil export and budget transfers, but resolution likely awaits a new government.

U.S. Policy

The impasse in Iraq presents dilemmas for the Administration and Congress as they contemplate how best to promote Iraqi unity and stability, prevent an IS resurgence, and limit Iranian influence. Protestor calls for improved governance, reliable local services, more trustworthy and capable security forces, and greater economic opportunity broadly correspond to stated U.S. goals. U.S. officials are advocating for the protestors' rights to demonstrate and express themselves freely and signaling U.S. willingness to work with any Iraqi leaders who will move forward on reform priorities. In a series of statements since October 2019, U.S. officials have urged Iraqi leaders to respond seriously to protestors' demands and to avoid attacks against unarmed protestors, while expressing broad U.S. goals for continued partnership with "a free and independent and sovereign Iraq."

Security Assistance and Foreign Aid

The United States provides foreign aid and security assistance to Iraq in support of Iraqi operations against the Islamic State, Iraqi security force development, de-mining, Iraqi public financial management reform, United Nations-coordinated stabilization programs, and other objectives. Reflecting Iraq's needs, fiscal situation, and status as a major oil exporter, U.S. aid to Iraq blends U.S.-funded programs with lending and credit guarantees. Congress has authorized U.S. train and equip programs in Iraq through December 2020, including aid to KRG forces. U.S. military personnel are present in Iraq to provide related assistance pursuant to an exchange of diplomatic notes under the 2008 U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement. Since 2014, Congress has appropriated more than \$5.8 billion for U.S. military train and equip programs for Iraqis.

More than \$365 million in U.S. stabilization aid has flowed to liberated areas of Iraq, largely through the United Nations Development Program's Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS). U.S. officials have directed some of this aid to religious and ethnic minority communities. President Trump requested additional foreign aid (\$165 million) and defense funds (\$745 million) for Iraq for FY2020. The United States has provided more than \$2.5 billion in humanitarian funds for Iraq programs since 2014.

Human Rights and Security Partnership

U.S. officials acknowledge that some Iraqi military leaders and units recently have used violence against protestors, and accuse some Iran-linked militia forces of leading and participating in attacks on protestors since October 2019 and other human rights abuses. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) in December 2019 reported that it has received reports of "unlawful, improper

and excessive use of (lethal and less-lethal) force" by security forces, along with "credible allegations of deliberate killings, abduction and arbitrary detention carried out by unknown armed men." U.S. officials state they are actively reviewing reports of violence against protestors to inform future decisions about the participation of Iraqi personnel and units in U.S. security assistance programs.

Outlook

Prime Minister Adel Abd al Mahdi's resignation may mark the beginning of an extended political transition period that could reopen several contentious issues for debate and negotiation. Principal decisions now before Iraqi leaders concern 1) identification and endorsement of a caretaker prime minister and cabinet, 2) consideration of proposed electoral system reforms, and, 3) the proposed holding of COR and provincial council elections in 2020. In the wake of new elections, government formation negotiations would recur, taking into consideration domestic and international developments during the interim period.

"Nothing will change [in Iraq] until political leaders decide that government agencies should provide public services rather than serve as ATM machines for their parties. Until that happens, the people's demands for a clean and effective government will not be met, no matter who serves as Prime Minister or in Cabinet positions."

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joey Hood, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 2019

Early elections under a revamped system could introduce new political currents and leaders, but fiscal pressures, political rivalries, and the limited capacity of some state institutions may present lasting hurdles to reform. Whether or not reforms are implemented in response to protestors' demands, the threat of an IS resurgence, security force management issues, reconstruction needs, and demographic pressures are expected to present continuing challenges. More than 1.4 million Iraqis remain internally displaced.

With leadership and systemic changes under review in Iraq, continuity in U.S.-Iraqi cooperation is not guaranteed. New leadership and systemic reform might present new opportunities, but also might further empower Iraqis seeking to minimize U.S. influence. Iraqis who oppose a continued U.S. military presence in Iraq could seek to re-litigate the issue during transition and government formation negotiations. U.S. officials state that the U.S. government does not seek to sever all of Iraq's relationships with neighboring Iran, but warn that if Iran-backed attacks harm U.S. personnel, then the United States will respond decisively. Policymakers may continue to debate how best to compete with Iran-linked Iraqi groups and support reform, while protecting U.S. civilian and military personnel and respecting Iraq's sovereignty.

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.