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# Protests and Rising Political Temperatures in Iraq

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2018 has been, so far, another very hot summer in Iraqi politics. Throughout July, thousands of Iraqis have taken the streets of Basra, Maysan, Najaf, Nasiriya and Dhi Qar, to protest against rising unemployment, poor governance and lack of basic services. The protests saw a major escalation when Iraqi police forces opened fire on protesters, in one of the major demonstrations held in front of the Basra oilfield on Sunday 15 July. Protesters have since begun setting fire to government buildings and attacking political offices.

Unrests first began in Basra on 8 July as protesters started accusing the government of not providing basic public services, including electricity. As one anonymous demonstrator stated ‘We are the residents of Basra, not infiltrators. We are simply voicing our demands: clean water, electricity, basic services and jobs. Our peaceful protests are met with bullets.’ Residents complain that, although approximately 60% of Iraq’s oil reserves are located in Basra, and more than 3 million barrels per day are exported from the city’s port, the energy revenues are not being invested in the province.

Demonstrations have also taken on a sectarian character as protesters turned their anger and frustration towards the Shiite parties that have governed Iraqi politics since the collapse of Saddam Hussein in 2003. After the 2003 invasion, led by the US, the country’s political circumstances have deteriorated and, with them, so has infrastructure and basic services. Blaming the Shiite-led Iraqi government and their Iranian patron, demonstrators chanted slogans against the “mullahs” and burned down the headquarters of parties, such as the Hezbollah Brigades, which are part of the Popular Gathering forces, the Dawa party in Najaf and the Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia. The Iraqi demonstrators clashed with the militias’ fighters while trying to attack their headquarters, accusing them of being part of an Iranian agenda which is hurting Iraq’s economy and political life.

This is not the first time that sustained demonstrations have been triggered by the lack of public services during hot summers in Iraq. Similar protests shook the country in 2015, with demonstrations starting in Southern provinces, and protesters chanting 'down with the government' and blocking public roads. One of the most pronounced events occurred on 17 July 2015, when the police killed a demonstrator, Muntadhar Al-Halfi, during a protest against electricity shortage. His killing sparked more unrest around the country, and especially in Basra. The root causes of these past protests were numerous: from electricity shortages, which caused major health risks, to the shutdown of several commercial and industrial facilities, and, finally, to the removal of corrupt officials, including the Minister of Electricity and then-Prime Minister Nour Al-Maliki.

Iraq's future was looking rather bright last year, after finally defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and purging from Iraqi territory, and embarking in the process of rebuilding a country that was dismantled by decades of instability and conflict. But the recent protests, which have left some 800 wounded and 14 dead, have put Iraq's future back into question. The Iraqi government reacted in two ways. First, they quickly responded to some of the demands that the citizens voiced on, including through the immediate allocation of \$2.5 billion (USD) for power shortages, construction of residential buildings and medical aid facilities for the residents of the Basra province. Secondly, they cracked-down on protests worrying that those will cause higher tensions in the region.

Indeed, although it is unlikely that the protests will have implications of the likes generated during the so-called Arab Spring, unrest in Iraq has caused great concern to decision-makers across the region. For starters, southern Iraq already received aid packages from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait announced it would send 30,000 cubic meters of diesel to Iraq to help fuel suspended power plants in the southern provinces. Further, a fully loaded oil tanker was sent to the port of Basra, to re-start power stations that have stopped functioning since the recent protests. Saudi Arabia instead invited a large Iraqi delegation to Riyadh for comprehensive negotiations on reaching cooperation deals in energy, transportation, infrastructures and investment. Both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have an interest in a stable Iraq and one that can refuse Iran's patronage and influence. On the contrary, if violence intensifies, this may affect neighbouring countries such as Kuwait, especially if Iraq's oil reserves, which are close to Kuwait's borders, are targeted. Indeed, earlier in July, Kuwait declared a state of emergency on its borders with Iraq

and, fearing attacks on their oil own fields, the government sent a large security contingent. As for Iran, in recent weeks the country, grappling with its own domestic tensions has had to cut its own electricity supplies to Iraq due to unpaid bills for approximately \$1 billion (USD), according to the Ministry of Electricity in Baghdad.

On the other hand, the impact of instability on Iraq itself, can be devastating. Operations around the port of Basra, through which much of oil exports leave, will most probably be affected, due to the proximity to the protests. Furthermore, the prolongation of these protests will continue to affect government formation. Traditionally, the Iraqi government sought to resolve unrest through co-optation - with promises of jobs and money – or, in more extreme cases, the use of military force. Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi has already promised to invest \$3 billion (USD) in Basra's province, and he has sent military reinforcements to the province, but neither of those two measures has cooled the protest down. Moreover, the protests have been taking place as Abadi remains in charge of a caretaker government formed after the elections in May, while the procedure to establish the final outcome of such elections, marred by allegations of fraud, remains ongoing. Therefore, amid uncertainty on its political future, Abadi and his Dawa party are arguably in no position to address the gargantuan challenges crippling the country. Should they be able to find a short-term fix, however, in the long run, insufficient measures and the lack of sustainable reforms tackling institutionalised corruption at the roots, will continue giving rise to further instability. Political temperatures in Iraq can hardly cool down in this environment.