

# A scramble for legitimacy

Iraq's political elites since  
the October 2019 protests

CRU Report

Marsin Alshamary



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May 2024



## **About the author**

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# Abstract

Iraqi political elites exhibited a variety of responses to the 2019 October protests, the largest demonstrations in post-2003 Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr, a cleric-turned-politician and leader of the Sadrist movement, vacillated between attempting to co-opt and repressing the protests. Other Shi'a political elites portrayed the predominantly Shi'a protestors as foreign agents and encouraged violent repression. Yet others who urged reform and response went largely unheard. Iraq's political system emerged largely unscathed from the protests, even though the threat of recurrence inspired the new government to undertake limited service-oriented reforms. However, traditional political elites continue to view reformists, including the politicians that emerged from the protest movement, as illegitimate usurpers of governing power they feel rightly belongs to them.

# 1 Introduction

In the autumn of 2021, Baghdad's streets were covered in early election campaign posters. They featured a mix of familiar and unfamiliar faces, accompanied by slogans promising a stronger state, better infrastructure development and greater national unity. Notably, the October 2021 election marked the first time that each province was divided into several electoral districts, which opened the door for less well-resourced and less well-connected candidates to compete under a new electoral law.

This particular election came about as a result of the 2019 October protests, also known as the 'Tishreen Revolution' or simply 'Tishreen', the largest anti-government movement of post-2003 Iraq. From late September 2019 to February 2020, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis congregated in protest squares in Baghdad and cities across southern Iraq. They rallied behind demands that still resonate with Iraqis today: improved services, more jobs and an end to corruption. When, despite having faced high levels of repression, the protests ended, they had obtained significant 'political process' concessions. These included a promise to hold early elections, to introduce a new electoral law and the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi. The concessions culminated in the October 2021 elections, which had the potential to bring about systemic political change, including voting new political elites into office and bringing about a change in how political business is conducted in Iraq. After all, the movement had inspired a new generation of political activists and germinated a wave of political parties and movements that focused on achieving political change. New parties had evocative names such as 'Nazil Akhith Haqi' (I'm going [to the squares] to take my rights), The National House and the Fao-Zakho Gathering.<sup>1</sup> It was not just protestors who used these new names to establish their parties. Even individuals close to Iraq's traditional political parties started

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1 The new political parties are discussed at length in: Alshamary, M., (2023) *The New Iraqi Opposition: The anti-establishment movement after the 2021 elections*, The Hague: Clingendael.

using the language of Tishreen to establish new political parties, or rebrand existing ones.<sup>2</sup>

However, while Tishreen gripped the hearts and minds of Iraqis across ethno-religious lines and reinvigorated a sense of nationalism, it did not translate into an organised and unified national movement. This is probably because it emerged spontaneously, i.e. it was not the result of prolonged organisational effort by civil society activists. In addition, because the protests were made up of disparate actors, each with their own motivations and aspirations, it was difficult for the movement to cohere. Instead, a set of disparate yet passionate political groups came into being. The potential reoccurrence of the protests occupies analysts and inspires many activists, but does it also occupy, worry or motivate traditional political parties and government officials? Did Tishreen have an indirect impact on politics by altering the incentive structure of Iraq's traditional political parties? Or have these parties simply resorted to co-opting the language of Tishreen without worrying about protests reoccurring? It is with these questions in mind that the brief examines the impact of the protest movement on Iraq's ruling elite and traditional political parties. Underneath this question lies a broader one, which the brief also addresses: now that some of the proverbial dust has settled on the protest movement, should it be regarded as a pivotal turning point in Iraq's post-2003 history or was it simply a dent in an otherwise undisturbed trend of established elite rule?

To answer these questions, this report relies on a series of interviews as well as on primary and secondary sources.<sup>3</sup> As a starting point, Section 2 provides a theory of elite responses to protests that builds largely on the experience of

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2 Most notable among them is Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani. A former member of Dawaa Tandheem Al-Iraq Party and the State of Law Coalition, Sudani established his own party after leaving his traditional party and coalition. Initially, he won a seat in October 2021 and gained two more after the Sadrist Movement MPs resigned in June 2022. Other notable politicians distanced themselves from their past due to Tishreen and ran as independent candidates, such as former Sadrist and deputy Prime Minister Baha al-Araji. See: Al Jazeera, [online](#), 7 August 2023; Al Sumaria TV, [online](#), 13 December 2019.

3 This brief relies on content and media analysis, fieldwork observations and a series of interviews with civil society activists, members of parliament (representing independents, traditional parties and new ones), and individuals representing new political movements. From March to May 2023, seven interviews were conducted with current members of parliament and two with political party representatives. In addition, this report relies on previous fieldwork conducted around the October 2021 election (from March to November 2021).



the Arab uprisings. Section 3 maps the trajectory of Iraq's protest movement, while Section 4 goes on to examine how Iraq's traditional parties responded to the protest movement as it burst onto the political scene. Section 5 looks at the protest movement's legacy, four years after Tishreen. For example, how has the protest movement shaped the discourse, candidate nominations and policies of traditional Iraqi political parties? In conclusion, Section 6 revisits the question of whether Tishreen was a critical juncture or simply a bump in the road in Iraq's pattern of consociational elite rule in since 2003.

## 2 Elite responses to protests: Ignore, repress, co-opt, accept

The extensive literature on contentious politics and social movements examines elite responses to protest through the prism of regime type: namely, do the protests occur in democratic or authoritarian settings? In the former, there are stronger safeguards against repression, including elections.<sup>4</sup> In both settings, the identity of the elites matters (e.g. politicians, oligarchs, religious clerics) as it influences their distance from the state and from the protestors.<sup>5</sup> In addition, elites have access to different types of co-optation strategies (politicians and oligarchs can dangle employment opportunities, for instance). Finally, the degree of elite competition or fragmentation is important as it creates opportunities for protestors to find allies within the existing political system. If there are multiple parties in a political system, some may align themselves with protestors to gain an electoral advantage. Finally, whether protests are peaceful or violent is also relevant. Violent protests make it easier for the state to respond with violence, whereas it is reputationally more costly to repress a movement that is non-violent.<sup>6</sup> Such factors affect how elites respond to anti-government protests. In the Iraqi context, at the time of the Tishreen protests, the system was neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian (it may be described as bounded competition between traditional elites in a consociational context).<sup>7</sup> Elites consist largely of powerful individual politicians who may double up in other roles, such as clerics and commanders, while state power is shared between coalitions of powerful

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4 Davenport C. (2007) *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace*. New York/Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press; Christian Davenport (2004) 'The Promise of Democratic Pacification: An Empirical Assessment', *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2004): 540.

5 For example, Klaiber (1998) has shown that the degree of integration of the Catholic Church into political society across various countries in Latin America affected how the Church responded to anti-authoritarian protests. See: Klaiber, Jeffrey L. (1998) *The Church, Dictatorships and Democracy in Latin America*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

6 Hafner-Burton, E. (2005) 'Trading human rights: how preferential trade agreements influence government repression', *International Organisation* 59 (Summer): 593–629.

7 See: Marsin Alshamary, (2023) 'The Iraq Invasion at Twenty: Iraq's Struggle for Democracy'. *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2: 150–62.

figures. Moreover, the 2019 Tishreen protests were largely peaceful, and deliberately so.

On paper, political elites have several options on how to respond to protests: 1) they can ignore them and hope they go away; 2) they can repress them by various degrees or threats of violence; 3) they can co-opt them using various material and ideological incentives; or 4) they can meet some or all of the protestors' demands, including through structural government reforms or even by stepping down. Responses can be combined, evolve depending on the nature of the protests, and vary between parts of government and/or individual politicians/factions. Of these responses, co-optation and repression have received the most scholarly attention.

Co-optation amounts to the incorporation of challengers into the state's institutions and political system of power so that they no longer represent a challenge.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars argue that the advantage of co-optation is that it is less politically and financially costly than repression.<sup>9</sup> Co-optation usually fragments protests, since a protest leader's voluntary incorporation into a government that they previously opposed almost always generates harsh criticism from former activist peers who remain in the protest movement.<sup>10</sup> Co-optation can be limited to protest leaders through tailored job offers, or aimed more broadly at a protest movement through patronage networks.<sup>11</sup> From an elite perspective, successful co-optation occurs publicly and serves as a deterrent against future protest by delegitimising the acquiescent protestor. Recent research, however, has shown that co-optation is not always the preferred strategy of ruling elites and does not always succeed. It is most

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8 For more definitions of co-optation, see: Selznick, P. (1948) 'Foundations of the theory of organization'. *American Sociological Review*, 13(1), 25–35; Gandhi, J. and Przeworski, A. (2006) Cooperation, Cooptation, And Rebellion Under Dictatorships. *Economics and Politics*, 18(1), 1–26. doi/10.1111/j.1468-0343.2006.00160.x; Maria Josua (2016) 'Co-optation Reconsidered: Authoritarian Regime Legitimation Strategies in the Jordanian "Arab Spring"', *Middle East Law and Governance* 8/1: 32–56.; Johannes Gerschewski (2013) 'The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes'. *Democratization* 20, no. 1: 13–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.

9 Markus Holdo (2019) 'Cooptation and non-cooptation: elite strategies in response to social protest', *Social Movement Studies*, 18:4, 444–462, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133.

10 Selznick (1948) op. cit.

11 Johannes Gerschewski. (2014). *The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes*, Routledge.

successful if interaction between the protest movement and the political elite is a single event and less so if there is a prolonged interaction.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, elite response strategies that centre on the acceptance of some or all protest demands can confer benefits such as re-legitimation of the traditional political elite, although this is conditional on both sides appearing to maintain their autonomy. Acceptance strategies have been used in Iraq previously. For example, in the wake of protests in the summer of 2015 and demands for a more effective government,<sup>13</sup> Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi slashed his cabinet by a third, eliminated the positions of deputy prime minister and vice president, removed or consolidated four federal ministries and reshuffled his cabinet to bring in technocratic ministers.<sup>14</sup>

Repression – the other response of political elites at the centre of scholarly research – can take different forms, ranging from the curbing of civil liberties to persecution and violent crowd control. It can be directed at individuals or more indiscriminate. Josua and Edel (2015) define repression as the ‘sum of all strategies by ruling elites to contain challenges to their rule by constraining (raising the costs of contention for) or incapacitating opposition leaders, rank-and-file activists, or parts of the politically inactive population.’<sup>15</sup> For many scholars, repression is considered a key tool of authoritarian survival.<sup>16</sup> Repression is also commonly understood as violent (imprisonment, torture, harassment, assassination and exile), although Elizabeth Nugent argues that even strategies of co-optation can in some cases amount to non-violent forms of repression: ‘Many regimes adopt long-term state policies of economic reward and punishment to redistribute benefits to loyal supporters, as identified through electoral outcomes. While the co-optation of opposition groups into ruling coalitions or institutions is often considered separately, as an alternative

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12 Holdo (2019) op. cit.

13 Al Jazeera, ‘Iraq’s prime minister slashes cabinet by one third’, 16 August 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/8/16/iraqs-prime-minister-slashes-cabinet-by-one-third>.

14 Ahmed Rasheed and Stephen Kalin (2016) ‘Iraq PM says to bring in technocrats in cabinet reshuffle’. Reuters, 9 February 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-mideast-crisis-iraq-government-idCAKCN0V122I>.

15 Josua, M. and Edel, M. (2015) ‘To Repress or Not to Repress-Regime Survival Strategies in the Arab Spring’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27(2), 289–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.806911>.

16 Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger (2004) ‘Waiting for Godot: Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East’, *International Political Science Review* 25, no. 4.

to repression, it is similarly intended to control, marginalize, and ultimately demobilize parts of the opposition.<sup>17</sup> Although the Arab Spring did not take off in Iraq on the same scale as in neighbouring Syria, it nevertheless met with both state-led co-operation and state repression.<sup>18</sup>

Iraq's subsequent protest movements, Tishreen in particular, mirrored preceding regional protest movements in their scope and structure (consider Jordan, Lebanon and Algeria). Such movements did not develop into new nationalist organisations with a vision, but rather, in the words of Sean Yom, '...temporarily paralyzed the existing political order, but could not impose an entirely new one'.<sup>19</sup> This, too, was the case in Iraq. According to Yom, key characteristics of these movements were their inability to scale up and unite across the country and their failure to create 'formal, centralized, and hierarchical organizations devoted to achieving long-term goals'.<sup>20</sup> Among Iraqi activists and analysts, there is agreement that Tishreen lacked an organisational base, but its spontaneous and fluid nature was viewed as a source of pride rather than a hindrance by those involved.<sup>21</sup> Seasoned political activists, however, have expressed concern that Tishreen did not offer ideological innovation akin to communism or pan-Arabism.<sup>22</sup>

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17 Nugent, Elizabeth R. (2020) 'A Theory of Polarization in Authoritarian Regimes'. In *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition*, 36–56. Princeton University Press, p.41.

18 Marina Ottaway and Dinal Anas Kaysi (2011) 'Iraq: Protest, Democracy, and Autocracy', *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 March, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/03/28/iraq-protest-democracy-and-autocracy-pub-43306>.

19 Sean Yom (2022) 'Mobilization without Movement: Opposition and Youth Activism in Jordan', in Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy and Hesham Sallam (eds), *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring*, eds. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p. 153.

20 Ibid., p. 155.

21 According to author interviews and conversations with various activists and experts conducted in Iraq between September 2020 and May 2023.

22 Interview with Qusay Mahbuba, Baghdad, Iraq, 12 April 2023.

### 3 The evolution of the 2019 protests and the Tishreen movement

Much ink has been spilled, both in English and Arabic, over the causes, consequences and demands of the Tishreen movement. There is general agreement over what ignited the protests, their proximate causes and structural conditions. Corruption, poor economic planning and a legacy of violence had created an environment of poverty, poor services and unemployment. With public discontent already running high, several high-profile incidents that took place in the same month proved enough to spark public outrage, leading to large-scale protests. These events included a government campaign to destroy illegal housing in Baghdad and Basra in September 2019, the hosing down of protesting female graduate students by security forces, and the demotion of Lieutenant General Abdulwahab al-Saadi.<sup>23</sup> Al-Saadi, a hero of the war against Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), was growing too popular for the liking of Iraqi political elites.<sup>24</sup> Examination of ruling elite responses to the protests as they unfolded and elite engagement with their legacy today is, however, helped by a short but more detailed overview of the main events, turning points and actors involved between October 2019 and the spring of 2020.

Protests began on 1 October and were met with lethal repression within the first nine days.<sup>25</sup> On 5 October, unidentified armed actors not linked to the protests attacked the headquarters of TV channels in Baghdad, resulting in the flight of dozens of foreign journalists from Baghdad to Erbil, where they

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23 Jiyad, S., Küçükkaleş, M. and Schillings, T. (2020) *Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar.*; Ali, Zahra (2019) 'Iraqis Demand a Country', MERIP 292/3 (Fall/Winter). <https://merip.org/2019/12/iraqis-demand-a-country/>.

24 Bassem Mroue, the Associated Press (2019) 'Iraq's removal of counterterrorism chief sparks controversy', *Military Times*, 29 September 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/09/29/iraqs-removal-of-counterterrorism-chief-sparks-controversy/>.

25 Human Rights Watch 'Iraq: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters', 10 October 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters>.

congregated in the Classy Hotel near the American Consulate in the suburb of Ankawa.<sup>26</sup> By 25 October, the protest movement was in full swing, with protests erupting across Baghdad and Shi'a majority governorates in south and south-central Iraq.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the month, dozens of Iraqis had been killed. In November, protests took on an international dimension with attacks on the Iranian consulates in Karbala<sup>28</sup> and Najaf.<sup>29</sup> On 29 November, Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi resigned under pressure from protestors and the Shi'a religious establishment.<sup>30</sup> By late December 2019, parliament had approved a new election law,<sup>31</sup> but several candidates for interim prime minister failed to obtain sufficient backing to form a government. The struggle to designate a new prime minister and form a government dragged on for months into 2020. On 3 January, in this climate of political tension and instability, the US assassinated Major General Qassim Suleimani of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).<sup>32</sup> A side effect of the assassination was that it polarised Iraqi citizens. Many started to accuse the protestors of being US agents, nicknaming them the 'jokers' and discrediting them by accusing them of pushing a US agenda.<sup>33</sup> In response, some protestors used the accusations as a badge of honour, viewing themselves as the Batman series' anti-hero who seeks to burn to the ground the corrupt

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26 France 24, 'Mysterious attacks on Baghdad news bureaus spark fears of press intimidation', 7 October 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191007-iraq-media-attacks-baghdad-press-freedom-fears>; Author's fieldwork notes from October 2019, Erbil, Iraq.

27 Alissa Rubin, "'All of Them Are Thieves': Iraqis Defy Security Forces to Protest Corruption', *The New York Times*, 25 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/25/world/middleeast/iraq-protests.html>.

28 BBC News, 'Iraq unrest: Protestors attack Iranian consulate in Karbala', 4 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50287644>.

29 Alissa Rubin and Fahih Hassan, 'Iraqi Protestors Burn Down Iran Consulate in Night of Anger', *The New York Times*, 27 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/world/middleeast/iraqi-protest-najaf-iran-burn.html>.

30 Alissa Rubin and Fahih Hassan, 'Iraqi Prime Minister Resigns in Deepening Political Crisis', *The New York Times*, 30 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/world/middleeast/adel-abdul-mahdi-resigns-iraq.html>.

31 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, 'Iraq's Parliament Approves New Election Law Amid Protests', *Associated Press*, 24 December 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/e608aef311759aeeb7483ad3f9f33d5>.

32 Michael Crowley, Fahih Hassan and Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qassim Suleimani, Commander of Iranian Forces', *The New York Times*, 2 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>.

33 To understand this term and the atmosphere in which it was created, see the documentary by Simona Foltyn for Al Jazeera: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3t5CQ8o2Eg>.

system that spurned him. Finally, on 7 May 2020, Mustafa al-Kadhimi formed a government and became the interim Iraqi prime minister.<sup>34</sup> The government did not organise elections until October 2021, a full two years after the protests began. One of the reasons why they ended up being held just six months before they were originally scheduled was the need for parliament to vote themselves out of a job, which was out of the hands of the executive branch of government.<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, protests died down under the mounting weight of repression, fatigue and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020.

While experts mostly agree on the deeper causes and triggers of the 2019 Tishreen protests, there is disagreement about the nature of protesters' demands and the evolution of the protest movement. This is in part the result of the fragmented nature of the movement itself, which encompasses multiple actors and groups with different visions and goals. The starkest difference is between the 'revolutionaries' and the 'reformists', manifesting different philosophies and strategies for demanding an overhaul of the entire political system as opposed to attempting to transform it from within.<sup>36</sup> These differences resurfaced in the October 2021 elections when protest-based parties once more divided over whether to run for elections or boycott the electoral process altogether. As a result, many different narratives emerged about the demands of the protest movement. One school of thought that can be characterised by the label 'entitlement-centred demands within the existing boundaries of Iraqi politics' is summarised by David Patel, who writes:

'The protests in Iraq did not aim to remove Adil Abd al-Mahdi or hold early elections, and they certainly were not primarily about the immediate spark. The mostly young protestors of all backgrounds want opportunities

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34 Alissa Rubin, 'Iraq Chooses New Prime Minister, an Ex-Intelligence Chief backed by U.S.', *The New York Times*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/world/middleeast/iraq-prime-minister-mustafa-khadimi.html>.

35 Article 64 of the Constitution of 2005 states: 'The Council of Representatives may be dissolved by an absolute majority of the number of its members, or upon the request of one-third of its members by the Prime Minister with the consent of the President of the Republic. The Council shall not be dissolved during the period in which the Prime Minister is being questioned.' [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005).

36 Marsin Alshamary (2020) 'Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq: Between Reform and Revolution', Sulaiymaniyah, Iraq: Institute for International and Regional Studies, American Institute of Iraq, Sulaimani, December 2020), <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/projects/protestors-and-civil-society-actors-iraq>.



– an end to austerity measures, renewed public sector hiring, improved provision of services – that the previous decade led them to believe they are owed and that a corrupt political system and elite deny them.<sup>37</sup>

Another school of thought views the protest movement as a moment of revived national consciousness in which material demands and grievances feature alongside the development of a new political consciousness among a new generation of Iraqi youth. For example, Iraqi sociologist Zahra Ali writes:

‘The 2019 uprising shows the development of social and political revolutionary modes of action and expression that exceed any previous protest movement in the country. The youth-led protestors of Iraq are calling for a “new country” as the uprising surpasses narrowly defined political demands concerning electoral politics and legal reforms.’<sup>38</sup>

These two narratives do not necessarily contradict one another, but rather reflect perspectives and priorities of different sets of protestors. Ultimately, there is agreement that the protest movement was an important event in the history of post-2003 Iraq and that its causes and consequences are multilayered. The protests took place at a time when Iraq was no longer facing a war and Baghdad was at its safest since 2003. These conditions allowed citizens to focus on grievances stemming from poor public services and unproductive government policies.

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37 David Siddhartha Patel (2022), ‘The Nexus of Patronage, Petrol, and Population in Iraq’ in [\*Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring\*](#), Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy and Hesham Sallam (eds), Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p. 227.

38 Zahra Ali, ‘The Civic and the Popular: Reflections on the Iraqi Uprising’, *Southern Social Movements Newswire*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.cetri.be/The-civic-and-the-popular?lang=fr>.

## 4 Elite tactics of co-optation and repression during Tishreen

The nature of Iraq's consociational governance system means that all factions enjoy some political relevance, albeit to different degrees and dependent on the strength of their electoral, militant, religious and economic power base. Because Iraq tends to be ruled by consensus governments, all political parties are virtually guaranteed a role in governance and exercise some form of public authority. This made it attractive for some party leaders who were part of the governance system that the protests challenged to also show performative public support for the protests and sympathise with their cause. This section reviews the engagement with the protests of selected Iraqi political elites: Muqtada al-Sadr, Mohamed al-Halbousi, Barham Salih and key Shi'a actors linked with the PMF.

### Muqtada al-Sadr: Co-optation to the point of repression

The clearest case of an established political leader flirting with the protests was that of Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement. He frequently encouraged his supporters to participate and even sought to present himself as leader of the opposition. It was not the first time he had taken on such a role, having risen to prominence as a leader of the anti-American insurgency immediately after 2003.<sup>39</sup> He was also a central figure in the subsequent sectarian civil war that engulfed the country between 2005 and 2007. In 2008, his armed group – the Mahdi Army – was defeated in the Charge of the Knights operation, which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki launched against him in Basra with US support.<sup>40</sup> After the Mahdi Army was disbanded, the Sadrist Movement ran for provincial elections in 2009 and federal elections in 2010,<sup>41</sup> and has since participated in elections leading to a growing number of parliamentary seats.

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39 Leslie Bayless (2012), 'Who is Muqtada al-Sadr?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35(2), 135–155.

40 Mapping Militant Organizations. 'Mahdi Army', Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation. Last modified May 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/mahdi-army>.

41 Godwin, Matthew J. (2012) 'Political Inclusion in Unstable Contexts'. *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5 (3): 448–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.695462>.

In 2014, al-Sadr resurrected his armed group to fight ISIS under the name of 'Peace Brigades'.

For years, al-Sadr and his followers have vacillated between pro- and anti-government stances. Having participated in the preceding elections and government formation process, they nevertheless stormed parliament in 2016 and again in 2022.<sup>42</sup> They have consistently resorted to protest and disruption when closed-door elite politics has not produced the results they desire. Al-Sadr has often tried to style himself as a popular leader for all Iraqis, not just his million or so core followers. During the October protest movement, he tried to jump on the bandwagon and several times assume leadership of the movement. From its inception, many of his followers participated in the protest movement and many were killed in Sadr City in early October 2019.<sup>43</sup> For weeks, the Sadrists – who come from marginalised and lower economic strata of society – were active and important participants in the protest movement. Their numbers were bolstered by the movement's demands for service provision and employment. According to a young protestor from Basra who moved between protest squares in Basra and Baghdad, the Sadrists:

'...had a huge role in Tahrir [square in Baghdad] and a small role in Basra because Basra has a bad history with the Sadrists from 2006 and the Charge of the Knights. When I used to go to Tahrir, the ones who gave out food were Sadrists, the ones who did the checkpoints were Sadrists.... they had a huge role, but their problem is that they follow Muqtada al-Sadr.'<sup>44</sup>

The protestor also complained that, while the Sadrists frequently joined protests in the past, once they were in government they forgot their responsibilities towards the protestors. In line with this observation is the fact that al-Sadr and his followers frequently turned *against* the protestors. For example, al-Sadr

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42 Faliq Hassan, Omar Al-Jawshy and [Tim Arango](#), 'Protesters Storm Baghdad's Green Zone to Denounce Corruption', *The New York Times*, 30 April 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/world/middleeast/iraq-protesters-storm-parliament-demanding-end-to-corruption.html>; Alissa Rubin, 'Followers of Iraqi Cleric Occupy Parliament Again, Demanding Reforms', *The New York Times*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/30/world/middleeast/iraq-parliament-protests.html>.

43 The Associated Press, 'Iraqi Army Ordered Out of Sadr City, Where Dozens Died at Protests', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/world/middleeast/iraq-protests-sadr-city.html>.

44 Author interview with anonymous activist. Baghdad, Iraq, April 2023.

asked his followers to withdraw from protest squares in late January 2020, only to have them return a week later. The Sadrists, known in the protest squares as the 'blue caps' for the hats they wore, also polarised the protest movement and antagonised protestors. In early February, they even took over the iconic 'Turkish Restaurant' – a large structure that served as a focal point for protestors, situated across the street from the Liberation Monument in Tahrir Square.<sup>45</sup> In the same week in Najaf, the Sadrists clashed directly with protestors, resulting in 23 dead and 182 wounded.<sup>46</sup>

The main factor explaining the Sadrists' varying degrees of engagement with the protests is a simple cost-benefit analysis within the boundaries of Iraq's existing political system. When al-Sadr considers that working with protestors will increase his negotiation clout for formal positions of power, government participation and favourable government decisions, he tends to do so. When the reverse applies, he veers towards repression. The Sadrist shift between January and February 2020 outlined above can thus be explained by Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi being announced as prime minister-designate to form a new government. Al-Sadr expected to play a significant role in this government but Allawi's nomination failed. In this context, it is important to remember that al-Sadr had won the largest number of seats in the 2018 elections, which made him a key political player. Ultimately, his preferred candidate – Mustafa al-Kadhimi – became interim prime minister.

### **Mohamed al-Halbousi and Barham Salih: Performative Solidarity and Clandestine Co-optation**

Other politicians in high positions also tried to show sympathy towards protestors and even went to the protest squares themselves. For example, in mid-October, the Speaker of Parliament, Mohamed al-Halbousi, went to Nisour Square, a public roundabout near the upper-class and relatively calm Mansour residential area. He avoided Tahrir Square, the hub of the protest movement, which was

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45 Simona Foltyn, 'Sadr supporters take iconic Tahrir square building', *Al Jazeera*, 4 February 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/videos/2020/2/4/sadr-supporters-take-iconic-tahrir-square-building>.

46 Fatima Ben Hamad, 'How Iraq's "blue hat" militiamen went from protecting to killing protestors', *France 24*, 10 February 2020, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200210-how-iraq-blue-hat-militiamen-went-protecting-killing-protesters>.

crowded and largely out of control of the security forces, and so have likely placed him in physical danger. In photos, he appears in his shirtsleeves, speaking with individuals amid a throng of protestors. The photo-op, however, did nothing more than anger protestors. Despite his performative solidarity in Baghdad and southern Iraq, al-Halbousi controlled his own home governorate, Anbar, with an iron fist.<sup>47</sup> Activists in Anbar describe a climate of fear and repression. Their sympathies were with the Tishreen movement but local politics and a fear of being labelled Islamic State or Ba'athist sympathisers curtailed potential activity in the governorate.<sup>48</sup>

Even Iraq's president at the time, Barham Salih, showed his backing of the Tishreen movement. He had a t-shirt with the protest slogan 'we want a homeland' hanging in his office and met with various protestors and tribal leaders whose families were leading the protests. After Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi's resignation, Salih threatened to resign if the next candidate for prime minister was not acceptable to protestors (in reaction to the proposed nomination of Assad al-Eidani, the governor of Basra, who was deemed close to Iran).<sup>49</sup> The presidential office also employed individuals like Mushreq Abbas and Ali Wajih, who publicly endorsed the protests. Later, Salih welcomed the candidacy of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who was deemed nonpartisan and noncontroversial. Al-Kadhimi placed some protest-friendly figures in high positions, including as direct advisers. He even appointed Nabil Jassim, a TV journalist sympathetic to the protests, as head of the Iraqi Media Network. However, in Salih's home governorate of Sulaymaniyah, his party, the Patriotic

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47 Simona Foltyn (2023) 'The Trouble with Halbousi: The Extraordinary Rise and Looming Fall of Iraq's Sunni Strongman,' LSE Middle East Centre Blog, 16 June 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2023/06/16/the-trouble-with-halbousi-the-extraordinary-rise-and-looming-fall-of-iraqs-sunni-strongman/>.

48 This phenomenon is described in a number of articles and reports written about the protest movement. See for example: Marsin Alshamary (2020) 'Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq: Between Reform and Revolution', Sulaymaniyah, Iraq: Institute for International and Regional Studies, American Institute of Iraq, Sulaimani, December 2020, <https://ais.edu.krd/iris/projects/protestors-and-civil-society-actors-iraq>. Sunni politicians other than Halbousi largely kept quiet, just as the protests hardly resonated in Sunni governorates.

49 Al Jazeera, 'Iraq president threatens to quit over PM nominee', Al Jazeera, 26 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/26/iraq-president-threatens-to-quit-over-pm-nominee>.

Union of Kurdistan, repressed protests pre-emptively, as it had in 2018, just like the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Erbil.<sup>50</sup>

Figure 1 Barham Salih's 'protest t-shirt'



Source: <https://www.rawfednews.com/index.php/news/116026-بالصورة-رئيس-الجمهورية-يرفع-أبرز-شعارا->

Both al-Halbousi and Salih were distanced from the protests in the sense that neither their constituents nor their electorate were participating or much represented. As such, their inclination to demonstrate sympathy was both low-cost and predictable. They could leave the repression to Iraq's Shi'a parties and still, should the repression fail, emerge stronger.

50 Mariya Petkova, 'Why are Iraqi Kurds not taking part in protests?', *Al Jazeera*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/11/why-are-iraqi-kurds-not-taking-part-in-protests>; Belkis Wille, 'Kurdish Authorities Clamp Down Ahead of Protests', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/19/kurdish-authorities-clamp-down-ahead-protests>.

## Shi'a politicians and parties

### Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and its affiliates

By the time Tishreen unfolded, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) had splintered. In 2012, its military wing, the Badr Corps, became its own political entity. Five years later, in 2017, its leader and member of the Hakim family of Shi'a religious scholars, Ammar al-Hakim, left to lead his own political party, the Hikma National Movement. Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi, who entered office in 2018, was previously a member of ISCI and, although he was nominally an independent upon assuming office, his ascendancy was largely viewed as ISCI finally being able to compete for the premiership against the Dawa Party, and win. He, of course, was head of the very government that protestors had mobilised against. His half-hearted attempts to appease the protestors were met with derision and his administration's use of violence was widely criticised. Nevertheless, it is frequently claimed, by individuals close to the prime minister, that Abd al-Mahdi wanted to resign early on during the protests but was prevented from doing so by powerful Shi'a actors around him. Whether this intention was genuine or a post-hoc attempt to clear his reputation remains unknown.

In contrast, Ammar al-Hakim did try to join the momentum of the protests. In his public statements, he declared support for the protestors, calling on parliament and officials to respond to their demands.<sup>51</sup> However, his overtures didn't seem to register with protestors, who treated him and his party like other members of the political elite. In Najaf, protestors torched the offices of both the Dawa Party and Hikma.<sup>52</sup>

### Resistance factions and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)

Both journalists and activists have described the forces that carried out most of the repression against the protests as 'Iran-backed militias'.<sup>53</sup> These groups

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51 See, for example: <https://www.ammaralhakeem.com/ar/news/13632>.

52 Enabling Peace in Iraq, 'The Long Game: Iraq's "Tishreen" Movement and the Struggle for Reform', October 2021, [https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen\\_Report\\_October\\_2021.pdf](https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_Report_October_2021.pdf).

53 See, for example: Jane Arraf, 'Iraqi Activism Fights for Survival Amid Murder and Threats', *The New York Times*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/world/middleeast/iraq-protest-murder-iran.html>; Reuters Staff, 'Exclusive: Iran-backed militias deployed snipers in Iraq protests', *Reuters*, 7 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-iran-snipers-exclusive/exclusive-iran-backed-militias-deployed-snipers-in-iraq-protests-sources-idUSKBN1WW0B1>.

constitute what is known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – a collection of armed groups legitimised by Grand Ayatollah Sistani’s 2014 edict to fight ISIS and later formalised by government decrees and laws. A sub-set of the PMF consists of ‘resistance factions’, which have roots in violent insurgent movements. They include Kata’ib Hezbollah, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.<sup>54</sup> These groups lost some of their cohesiveness and organising structure after the assassination of al-Muhandis (see above) and have since been more difficult to control or even understand.<sup>55</sup> During the protests, the television channels and media outlets controlled by these groups were unsympathetic to the demands of the street, often portraying protestors as disloyal and as foreign agents.<sup>56</sup> Many of the leaders of these groups also insisted publicly that the protests were fuelled by foreign agents. Numerous media reports circulated about Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri’s criticism of the protest movement.<sup>57</sup> In an interview with Al Jazeera, the leader of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazaili, described the movement as a conspiracy orchestrated by the United States, Israel and the United Arab Emirates to destroy Iraq.<sup>58</sup> In private conversations and interviews with protestors and activists, as well as in some Arabic language media coverage, many individual and collective acts of repression were ascribed to these armed groups.<sup>59</sup>

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54 The distinction between the two is made most strongly by Simona Foltyn in her report for the LSE. See: Simona Foltyn (2023) *Protectors of the state? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 post-election crisis*, LSE Middle East Centre paper series (65). Middle East Centre, LSE, London, UK.

55 Nancy Ezzeddine and Erwin van Veen, “Warning Signs: Qassem Musleh and Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces”, *War on the Rocks*, 4 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/warning-signs-qassem-musleh-and-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces/>.

56 For example, Al Ahad channel, known to be controlled by Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, aired an interview with a lieutenant general claiming that the deaths of protestors occurred inside the protest squares and that the security forces were unarmed: <https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=160872>.

57 See, for example: *Shafaq News*; Al Sharqiya: <https://twitter.com/alsharqiyatv/status/1337855537686454272>, Al Sharqiya: <https://twitter.com/alsharqiyatv/status/1344574465141862400>.

58 <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2019/12/19/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B2%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA>.

59 Mahmoud Al Najar, ‘Who is behind the assassination of protestors after the putting down of Iraqi protests?’, *TRT Arabic*, 25 May 2021, [link here](#).



## The Dawa Party

Long before Tishreen, this party was split between an al-Maliki wing and an al-Abadi wing, each wing taking a different approach to the protests. Al-Maliki, a two-term former prime minister, showed little sympathy and demanded a heavy-handed response from the government. This echoed his own approach as prime minister during the Iraqi chapter of the Arab uprisings. Al-Abadi adopted a more sympathetic approach, in part based on his experience of having to deal with mass protests while fighting ISIS.<sup>60</sup> Dawa's split attitude between repression and reform continued during the selection of al-Kadhimi as interim prime minister. Al-Maliki is known to have abstained from voting for al-Kadhimi's government, signalling disagreement, while al-Abadi, who had earlier appointed al-Kadhimi to head Iraq's main intelligence organisation, was supportive. Al-Kadhimi was initially seen as having a more accommodating attitude towards the protest movement.

## Summing up the disparate reactions of Iraq's political elites to Tishreen

According to both Amnesty International and the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, under Abd al-Mahdi's government live ammunition, smoke grenades, intimidation, arrests and torture were carried out against protestors by security forces in Baghdad and in protest squares throughout the south.<sup>61</sup> The identity of the security forces that carried out these attacks is contested, with different observers and activists in different protest squares making different claims. Underlying this opaqueness is, of course, fear of retaliation. What adds to this confusion is the fact that many armed actors in Iraq do not have standardised uniforms, making identification in the middle of an attack difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear that riot police were deployed during the early days and weeks of the Tahrir Square protests, and that they used rubber bullets, water hoses, batons and tear gas grenades.<sup>62</sup> After months of his government resorting to the violent

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60 <https://baghdadtoday.news/98550-.html>.

61 Amnesty, 'Iraq: protest death toll surges as security forces resume brutal repression', 23 January 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iraq-protest-death-toll-surges-as-security-forces-resume-brutal-repression/>.

62 Al Jazeera staff, 'Several killed as Iraq Protests escalate, spread nationwide', Al Jazeera, 2 October 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/2/several-killed-as-iraq-protests-escalate-spread-nationwide>.

repression of protestors, Abd al-Mahdi finally resigned, having been nudged into it by the Shi'a religious establishment.<sup>63</sup> Despite not having clear information about the identities of the repressors, it is clear which political parties and individuals approved of repressive methods and which attempted to co-opt or introduce reforms. Set against the theoretical framework in Section 2, Table 1 (below) summarises how selected Iraqi elite factions engaged with the Tishreen protests.

**Table 1 Mapping ruling political elite engagement with protests**

Politician / political party	Strategy 1: Ignore	Strategy 2: Accept	Strategy 3: Co-opt	Strategy 4: Repress
Muqtada al-Sadr			x	x
Barham Salih		x	x	
Mohamed al-Halbousi			x	
Adil Abd al-Mahdi		x		x
Nouri al-Maliki				x
Hadi al-Ameri				x
Qais al-Khazali				x
Ammar al-Hakim		x	x	
Haider al-Abadi		x	x	

Many (though not all) prominent Shi'a political actors were inclined towards repression. This is likely due to two factors: first, they were most directly involved and felt most threatened by the protests given that most of those protesting were their own Shi'a constituents. Second, since 2003, the same cast of Shi'a political elites have dominated Iraqi national politics. In other words, they had most to lose. In contrast, for Sunni and Kurdish politicians, the Tishreen protests provided an opportunity to appeal to new segments of the electorate as well as to destabilise a government they were not entirely invested in.

<sup>63</sup> Isabel Coles and Ghassan Adnan, 'Iraq's Prime Minister to Resign Amid Protests After Cleric's Criticism', *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-prime-minister-to-submit-resignation-11575032522>.

## 5 Political elite engagement with the legacy of the protests

Despite their pro-protest rhetoric, Iraq's traditional parties and political elite were eager to return to business-as-usual once repression, the pandemic and fatigue had worn the protests down. Nevertheless, the risk of recurrence loomed large and mitigation strategies were deemed necessary to prevent this happening. Initially, the government hoped that, for a time, the promise of early elections would keep protests at bay. The leaders of the political parties that emerged from the protest movement and intended to run for election were indeed occupied with campaign strategies.<sup>64</sup> Other protestors were neutralised by an expansion of public employment and a few prominent protestors even accepted positions in the Iraqi government. Yet other protestors opted for a third way and turned to civil society activism. As election day approached, Mustafa al-Kadhimi made more overtures towards activists and attempted to draw them into his nascent political party. This was, however, a short-lived and unsuccessful endeavour.<sup>65</sup>

Despite an electoral boycott by some protest-based parties and a low turnout, the 2021 elections delivered surprising results in favour of independents and other protest-based parties.<sup>66</sup> During the lengthy government formation process, traditional parties sought to attract independents and new parties to their coalitions with variable degrees of success. At the same time, aggressive targeting of activists and protestors continued and Mustafa al-Kadhimi's administration failed to hold the political and security establishment accountable for their repression of the 2019 Tishreen protests. Despite continued public discontent and activist attempts to rekindle protests on symbolic days, such as the one-year anniversary of Tishreen, sequels were constrained and focused on demands for employment. In terms of the spaces they occupied, they were limited to government

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64 See Alshamary (2023) op. cit. for a discussion of the new parties.

65 Zaid Salim, "العراق: فريق الكاظمي يستقطب نشطاء لغرض الانتخابات", *The New Arab*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/العراق-فريق-الكاظمي-يستقطب-نشطاء-لغرض-الانتخابات>.

66 Marsin Alshamary, 'Iraqi Elections 2021: Independents and New Political Parties', *Konrad Adenauer Foundation*, January 2022, <https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/0/Marsin+Alshamary+-+Iraqi+Elections+2021+Independents+and+New+Political+Parties.pdf/52c013da-0c90-161d-51f5-632e79ca7984?version=1.0&t=1642142693879>.

buildings rather than the larger and more symbolic public spaces of 2019. For the time being, co-optation via greater public employment turned out to be the dominant strategy of al-Kadhimi's administration. As this strategy worked well enough in the short term, Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani continued with it when he came into office in 2022 despite its longer-term unsustainability given the size of the public payroll and Iraq's dependence on oil. At first glance, this suggests that the situation reverted to pre-Tishreen days, but this would overlook the modest impact of Tishreen on the new administration and parliament. Ultimately, Tishreen did not overturn the consociational system or drastically alter the political landscape. However, interviews suggest that it did have a lasting impact in at least three key ways.

To begin with, traditional parties and their representatives acknowledged the protest movement and its legacy, but distinguishing between legitimately protesting citizens and enterprising 'disruptors' who took advantage of the innocent citizens. In an interview, a member of parliament from a PMF-aligned party described the difference as between:

‘The “public-demands Tishreen” [made up] of the poor and needy citizens with their grievances, and the “politicized Tishreen” that is supported by the United States, the Zionists and the Gulf, which brought down the government of Adil Abd al-Mahdi because it is from the Binaa Alliance and too close to Iran.’<sup>67</sup>

In an event at the Rafidain Center for Dialogue in 2021, Hadi al-Ameri similarly described the Tishreen protestors as 'our audience', explaining that the PMF has always supported the 'peaceful protestors of Tishreen' due to their closeness to the poor and downtrodden.<sup>68</sup> In this perspective, the disruptors are those who co-opted the movement and attempted to 'rise on the blood of oppressed people'.<sup>69</sup> Though it is never stated explicitly, it can be safely surmised that both the Sadrists and activists viewed as too closely aligned with the West are considered 'disruptors'. Some of the traditional political elite go a step further, however, and paint the protests as inorganic as well as driven by political rivals or foreign agents. This has polarised the country in a new way, creating a

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67 Author interview with Member of Parliament Mohammed al-Baldawi. Baghdad, Iraq. 4 April 2023.

68 For the full interview: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gToJ\\_iMvPw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gToJ_iMvPw8).

69 Ibid.

conflict between the so-called 'Tishreenis' and the 'loyalists', or those who are sympathetic to Iran. This created the false image that Tishreen activists were all sympathetic to the West.

Another lasting impact of the Tishreen protests has been that traditional political parties have adjusted their rhetoric and campaigning to include more nationalist and reformist messages without adjusting their behaviour. Take Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani, for example. In the aftermath of the protest movement in 2019, he left the Dawa Tandheem Al-Iraq Party and the State of Law coalition to create his own political party and increase his independence. He is, however, still beholden to, and works closely with, the Coordination Framework. Both Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Mohammed al-Sudani reverted to the pre-Tishreen and post-Maliki mold of prime minister, each without a political base of their own and therefore depending on keeping the larger Shi'a political factions on board to govern. This has effectively stopped any efforts at more radical systemic political reform.

A final longer-term impact of Tishreen is the rejection of protest-based parties by the traditional political parties and those in their orbit. The traditional parties regard new parties as usurpers that have reached their position unfairly. Consequently, the traditional parties have been eager to rewrite the electoral laws in a bid to restore the status quo after the next elections.<sup>70</sup> In the meantime, and as discussed in a preceding brief,<sup>71</sup> even the physical space of the new parties in parliament has been constrained and downgraded based on the presumption that they are inexperienced, illegitimate and driven by foreign interests.

Behind closed doors, however, traditional parties do recognise simmering public grievances and have acknowledged the need for an emphasis on better service provision. Among parliamentary staff, the current government is known as the 'services government', with al-Sudani's administration paving roads and rehabilitating hospitals while fulfilling the employment promises of its

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70 In addition to the continued Sadrist boycott of electoral politics, the revised electoral law benefited traditional parties in the 2023 provincial elections, in which the Nabni Alliance performed well.

71 Alshamary (2023), *op.cit.*

predecessors.<sup>72</sup> For Iraq's political elites, this strategy is directed at reducing grievances and ensuring the non-recurrence of protests. But while these strategies are positively aimed at mitigating the underlying conditions for protest (matters as simple as improving electricity to avoid the annual summer protests in Basra due to heat and water shortages), there has also been a negative side to the equation in the form of a concerted effort to weaken civil society and silence independent dissenting voices. Journalists warn that freedom of expression is shrinking in Iraq and over the last few years several prominent activists have been kidnapped and assassinated.<sup>73</sup>

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72 Hamzeh Hadad, 'From shock and awe to stability and flaws: Iraq's post-invasion journey', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 May 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/from-shock-and-awe-to-stability-and-flaws-iraqs-post-invasion-journey/>.

73 Simona Foltyn, 'Iraq's Prime Minister is Silencing Human Rights Advocates', *Foreign Policy*, 2 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/02/iraqs-prime-minister-is-silencing-human-rights-advocates/>.

# Conclusion

Iraq's traditional political elites and parties reacted to Tishreen with a mix of co-optation, repression and acceptance of the need to reform, albeit within the limits of the existing political system. Their responses have been enabled by the multiparty and diffuse structure of Iraqi governance, which makes it difficult to hold one party responsible for poor services and governance, and which allows many politicians to retain their stake in the system while (on the surface, at least) adopting a supportive stance towards the protests (or even seeking to co-opt their legitimacy). Tishreen did, nevertheless, have a lasting yet limited impact on Iraqi politics. The threat of renewed protests forced – or perhaps inspired – the new Iraqi government to undertake more service-oriented policies, even though it shies away from any structural reform. At the same time, Tishreen revealed the extent to which the traditional parties presume ownership over the Iraqi state and put them on alert that their position is at risk. This resulted in reactionary policies, including exclusionary legislation like the new electoral law and campaigns of repression. The traditional political elites and parties sought to synthesise their overt yet superficial co-optation of protest demands with their more covert resistance tactics in a rhetorical narrative that appeals to nationalist sentiments.

Tishreen also brought about a generational change in prime ministers, though they were still compromise candidates. At the same time, Iraq's political system affirmed its resilience in the face of Tishreen's demands for more fundamental change, even as it allowed the creation of a new avenue to influence politics in the form of protest parties. Although this will disappoint the revolutionaries who led the protests across the squares in Baghdad and southern Iraq, it did usher in a wave of political groups that might ultimately come to challenge the established political parties that have ruled Iraq over the past two decades.

How the Tishreen movement develops beyond the next federal elections has yet to be seen. The protest movement has faced violent oppression before, with hundreds of activists being assassinated before reformists could run in elections as serious contenders. While those who are now politically active do not face the same level of violent oppression, they do nevertheless face pushback from the established parties and a more covert and targeted campaign to silence dissenting political voices. The new parties are seen as usurpers: unqualified and unprepared for the mantle of leadership. Despite such duality, the protest

movement has become a fixture of Iraq's political landscape. Yet, for now, Iraq's traditional political elites and parties are confident that they can prevent a recurrence of Tishreen through a mix of co-optation, repression and limited acceptance of reform demands that focuses on the improvement of service delivery. When the country's oil money runs out, however, their options will be more restrained and there will be more potential for Tishreen to reignite.