

# Dissent in Iraq

By M.C. Armstrong and Noor Ghazi



*Demonstrators, the Iraqi October Revolution (1 November 2019, 09:10:15)*

Protestors in Iraq have a great deal in common with the new wave of protestors in the United States. David McAtee, the owner of a barbecue restaurant and an unarmed demonstrator in Louisville, Kentucky, was shot dead by police shortly after midnight on May 31<sup>st</sup> while marching in response to American police brutality. Safaa Al-Saray, an Iraqi blogger, was also unarmed when police struck him in the head with a tear gas canister in October of 2019. Al-Saray died from his injury, and this is tragic, to be sure. But why should Americans care about Al-Saray? Why should they embrace a protest movement thousands of miles away from US borders?

Many Americans would like to forget about Iraq, but, unfortunately Iraq does not have the luxury to have amnesia. Whereas America has not been occupied by a foreign nation since the War of 1812, Iraq, in spite of having nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11, remains under American supervision, and Iraq is now, once again, on the verge of chaos, which certainly raises questions about the quality of this supervision. One of the richest countries in the world in terms of cultural heritage and natural resources, Iraq is suffering today from a dangerously high rate of unemployment, a lack of quality education, and a dearth of public services such as electricity and clean water. But there is hope. On October 19, 2019, just before the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, a powerful wave of protests disrupted Baghdad and the target of this "October Revolution" was the corrupt political system that emerged from the ashes of the 2003 US invasion.

The first round of revolt spread quickly across the country after originating in Al Tahreer Square. The marchers launched a peaceful crusade of free speech in the streets of Basra, Karbala, Maysan, and Babylon, the multi-generational gatherings chanting for change in a government many now believe to be controlled by the mullahs in Iran. Just as the Americans had Iraqis locked in their grip during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the power dynamic has now shifted to Iraq's neighbor to the East. In both cases, the influence became unwelcome and has, once again, created the potential for civil war. The Iraqi government faced her peaceful protesters with live ammunition and tear gas. The government ignored multiple international calls, warnings and condemnations. Just as McAtee was not the only American casualty of police brutality, Al-Saray was not the only casualty in Iraq. More than 500 martyrs were shot down in the streets. Just as African-Americans wonder where the forces of freedom have gone when their young people are murdered or choked to death on the streets of the United States, Iraqis also wonder what it will take to activate the forces of freedom.

According to the Independent High Commission for Human Rights of Iraq, nearly 15,000 Iraqis have been injured since October of 2019 when the Iraqi government took desperate measures to regain control of Al Tahreer Square, ground zero for demonstrations. Like in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011, these despotic attempts at suppression included police brutality, curfews and internet blackouts to limit communication between protestors. Such media suppression enabled the government cover-up of violent criminal actions and left millions of Iraqis isolated from the rest of the world.

As the pandemic wakes up so many across the planet to the realization that "we're all connected," the situation on the ground in Iraq reveals the other side of that platitude and that very real connection. Yes, a virus in China quickly

becomes America's worst nightmare in this globalized world where the line between tourism and terrorism grows blurrier every year. And yes, it is wonderful to witness international cooperation on the effort to pioneer a vaccine for Covid-19. But before public health became America's favorite media frame in 2020, its predecessor was war and terror. Most Iraqis have no interest in a third decade of the Global War on Terror, but whether its occupiers like it or not, Iraq does have an interest in freedom and democracy, and if Iraq's people can win a democratic future, the public health consequences will almost certainly be positive. After years of bombing, burn pits, police brutality, and depleted uranium one has to wonder: could the public health of Iraq possibly get worse?

Under occupation, the answer is yes, but that is precisely the point. The occupation must end. Just before Covid-19 leveled Western economies and turned so many countries inward, young people in Iraq were marching like their Egyptian friends of 2011 and like so many Americans in the 1960s and again right now. Thousands of demonstrators started requesting United Nations intervention to stop the atrocities against peaceful civilians who were simply asking for human rights and a better life. Iraqis frequently raised the UN flag in Al Tahreer Square to grab the world's attention and make the message clear: If the UN wished for peace, democracy, and freedom in the Iraq of 2003, where there was no war, why did they send war and then, two decades later ignore the homegrown calls for peace? When will the basic dignity and humanity of the Iraqi people trump America's hunger for one more fix for its fossil fuel economy?

In November of 2019, as the October Revolution was reaching its climax, *The New York Times* and *The Intercept* shared 700 pages of leaked documents about how Iran and America have used Iraq as a battlefield for a proxy war ever since the American invasion of 2003. Far from his 2016 campaign promises, Donald Trump has maintained the policy positions of George W. Bush

and Barack Obama and the mullahs have responded in kind. *The Intercept* documents revealed conversations from the Iranian embassy in which Iranian officials decried the free-thinking of Haider al-Abadi, an Iraqi candidate for prime minister whom Iran viewed as insufficiently servile to their interests. These leaked files “show how Iran, at nearly every turn, has outmaneuvered the United States” and its formidable network of intelligence agencies. But what is urgent to state before the eyes of the world is this: There are human costs for the ways in which “Iran and the United States have used Iraq as a staging area for their spy games.” The occupation must end.

These human costs can be heard in the voices of the protestors and seen in the pattern of mass arrests among activists. Intimidation, torture, and in many cases, assassination, has been the tactic at “play.” Take the story of the activists, Hussein Adel al-Madani and his wife Sara Talib. Al-Madani and Talib were some of the first Iraqis to march against Iranian influence and government corruption. Talib, in particular, was one of the first women bold enough to take to the streets of Basra.

“But they had to stop,” claimed a friend named Abbas. “Gunmen raided their home late in 2018 and asked them to write down the names of other protesters.” Talib and al-Madani, like so many Iraqis before them, fled their country. They traveled to Turkey. But also like so many before them, Talib and al-Madani returned to Iraq. Just before the launch of the “October Revolution,” they came home to Basra. Then, on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, assassins entered their home and shot Al-Madani three times. They killed Talib with a single shot to her head. And what was their crime? Why were the protesters sentenced to death? Was it free speech? Idealism? Talib provided medical aid to her own people while her husband helped with organization. They spoke openly, opposing the influence of Iran-backed militias on Iraq.

The occupation must end.

Many other activists were kidnapped by the armed militias such as Ali Jasib, a human rights attorney who helped with the release of many arrested activists. Ali was kidnapped in Maysan province. But as the chaos in America and the Covid-19 pandemic steal the headlines, the international community seems to be forgetting about Iraq and protestors like Ali Jasib.

The Iraqi protests began with simple demands. The Iraqi people want quality education, decent employment, and public services. However, as so often happens, these demands were quickly revised when the first protestor fell dead. The Iraqi people called for the ouster of the government and an end to corruption. They asked for new electoral laws that would protect the country from regime change wars. The persistence of the protestors did force prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, to submit his resignation in November of 2019, but a demonstrator from Al Tahreer Square exclaimed, "Adil Abdul-Mahdi's resignation will not make the required change. We want a new government that can respect our demands and needs. We want a home."

The occupation must end.

Just as so many Americans tire of the regime change wars they were forced to pay for under Bush, Obama, and Trump, Iraqis, too, have grown tired of the wars. But Trump continues to ratchet up the tension between Washington and Tehran. First, he withdrew from the United States' nuclear treaty with Iran, which was a small albeit imperfect first step toward peace in the region. Then, in a provocative move, Trump assassinated Iran's top security and intelligence commander, Qasim Soleimani, on Iraqi soil. While Trump's supporters chant about "blood and soil" in America and America expands its Global War on Terror to now include its own homegrown protesters like Antifa, the American president continues the Global War on

Terror's policy of pell-mell assassinations overseas, broadly, and in Iraqi territory, specifically. Like Obama's drone assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki and his fifteen-year old son in Yemen back in 2011, Trump's killing of Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport in January of 2020, raises serious questions about international law, human rights, and the rationale for America's continued presence in the Middle East. The attack, far from being framed as a defense of Iraqi civil liberties, was described, instead, as a response to the death of an American contractor on December 27, 2019 at the hands of an Iranian-backed militia. Most Americans, one suspects, do not even know that contractors, intelligence operatives, and special forces are still occupying Iraq. But the occupation continues and the occupation must end.

"General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region," the Pentagon said in a statement. "General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more."

Although the Pentagon report may well be accurate, the larger and more uncomfortable geopolitical truth is that Soleimani and his Quds Force never would have had a chance to kill so many Americans if America had not invaded the wrong country after 9/11.

In any event, after the American drone killed Soleimani, Iraqi politicians, religious leaders, and conservative protestors chanted for the immediate withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, which inspired fear among the more liberal protestors that such an evacuation would only allow for the expansion of Iran inside Iraq. This is the chaos of occupation. The occupation must end.

When Iran announced its retaliation on the US by targeting airbases housing US forces on Iraq's land, the demonstrators

rejected this violence, too. Iraq does not want foreign drone attacks and Iraq does not want foreign missile strikes. Like the US and Iran, what the vast majority of Iraq wants is peace, freedom, and respect for its sovereignty.

In the wake of this most recent chapter in The Global War on Terror, mayhem ensued and the streets were again filled with protest and revolt. The government scrambled to establish order. Iraq chose Muhammed Tawfeeq Alawi to be its next prime minister, but Alawi was rejected and so was his successor, Adnan Al Zurfi due to disputes over ministerial portfolios and budgets. Also, they were utterly rejected by protestors since they didn't meet the basic demands. Like so many failed states around the world, the United States included, Iraq is waking up just as the independent media, international travel, and respect for civil liberties is beginning a potentially indefinite pandemic hibernation. Covid-19 has not been a friend of free speech. Iraqi protests could not be crushed by drone attacks, missiles, torture, or government-imposed internet blackouts. But a public health crisis is a different story.

"The pandemic has adversely impacted the situation on the ground," says an Iraqi protestor who has asked to remain anonymous. "Protestors demands haven't been answered."

Although many protestors initially resisted the demands of the World Health Organization and stayed in their tents in Al-Tahreer Square, others went home. They retreated into social media where they witnessed, among other things, shared grievances from their fellow American protestors, but also a surge in honor killings and domestic violence in Iraq, a country more terrified of doctors laying hands on their wives and daughters than on corrupt leaders usurping their civil rights.[\[1\]](#) Meanwhile, the Iraqi government used this international public health crisis as an opportunity to consolidate the old order's power by appointing Mustafa Alkhadimi, the former head of Iraqi Intelligence, as the new

prime minister. As protestors overwhelmingly reject Alkhadimi on social media, one wonders at this point if such rejections do little more than provide valuable intel to this spy who now runs Iraq.

Did America's Global War on Terror successfully deliver democracy to the Middle East? Just as Tahrir Square passed in Egypt, some suspect the October Revolution in Iraq will also pass away. But what those with roots in Baghdad know is that a critical mass is gathering, both in Iraq and abroad. The Iraqi people recognize that the October demonstrations were different and far more powerful than any other in the past. The Iraqi people are getting a taste of freedom. The hunger for freedom and change is going viral just as an actual virus spreads around the world, and although Covid-19 is frightening, it is nothing compared to the horrors of war the Iraqis have witnessed for nearly four decades. This new generation of Iraqis, like other brave young people around the world, is speaking up against corruption and they are not afraid. Like Hussein Adel al-Madani and Sara Talib, they came out in October seeking a better life for the next generation. They want to be left alone by Iran and they want the US to lift its knee from the neck of their country. As one father in Al Tahreer Square said, "I am here today because I am looking for a better future for my daughter. I don't want her to live through this poverty and broken system as I did." It has been almost nine months since the start of the October Revolution and as the demonstrators continually repeat: "We will not return home until our demands are met." The occupation must end.

---

**M.C. Armstrong** embedded with JSOF in Al Anbar Province and reported extensively on the Iraq War through *The Winchester Star*. He is the winner of a Pushcart Prize. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Esquire*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, *The Mantle*, *Epiphany*,

*Monkeybicycle, Mayday, YES! Weekly, The Literary Review,* and other journals and anthologies. His memoir, *The Mysteries of Haditha*, will be published by Potomac Books in 2020. He lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.



**Noor Ghazi** is an international peace activist. She was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and after time in Syria, immigrated to the United States as a refugee in 2008. Ghazi is Visiting Research Scholar with a Master's Degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is currently an academic translator with the Iraqi Alamal Association in Baghdad translating two books by the eminent peace studies scholar John Paul Lederach into Arabic. She has written academic articles in both English and Arabic and recently gave a TEDx Talk titled, "Lost In My Home For 12 Years."

[1] From Human Rights Watch:  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/iraq-urgent-need-domestic-violence-law#>

---

## The Importance of Identity