

Iraq Interview

Semillero de Estudios Globales (SEG): Regarding the origins of the protests, what do you think have been the main causes of this protests in Iraq?

Omar Sirri (OS): It's important to recall that Iraq's protests movements didn't start this year or this last month, but has been going on at least since 2011 when young Iraqis took to the streets, around the same time as the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. So, some of the origins of this wave of protests needs to be contextualized, back to that year, if not before. In this year, young students, graduates, post graduates have staged demonstrations and protests in Baghdad from June through September. So, these protests have history and they date back at least 8 years, and the most recent is 3 or 4 months ago when we saw students taking to the streets to demand employment opportunities. The second part of your question, the drivers of the protests, have to do with huge unemployment rates among youth, the Iraqi government states that the official rate of youth unemployment in Iraq is around 25%, but the interviews that I've done with activists and civil society actors inside Baghdad tell you that the numbers are higher, that it's around 40-42%, the Iraqi government has the actual rate of unemployment and they're not releasing it. So, the core issue is lack of economic opportunities, for predominantly young people, a second issue is the quality of services, provided by the Iraqi State, namely electricity, water and infrastructure. The last point is about corruption, that has been in the Iraqi State for years and people have grown tired of it. We have seen inequality grow because of this corruption, and people who have suffered the most are those with lower economic backgrounds and they've taken to the streets to demand a complete change of how the political system operates their country.

SEG: So, do you consider that these protests over the past few years, starting in 2011, reveal the failure of the post 2003 regime?

OS: That's entirely correct. The ethnic and religious political system that was set up by the US government authority alongside a small number of Iraqi forces elite who were living abroad in opposition and exile, has been a complete failure by all accounts. There is no measurement that suggests that this has been a political system that has adequately provided for the majority of the Iraqi citizenship. And so, these protests reveal that people have had enough of the way the political system operates, the way it was constructed, the way it was founded in 2003. Those seeds were planted then and we're seeing the fruits of that disaster sixteen years later.

SEG: What role have youth played in these recent protests or across the years? What is the nature of their grievances? Especially, how has their involvement been driven by intergenerational tensions?

OS: I think the youth have been the prime mobilizers in these uprisings since at least 2011. The 27th of October students insisted on a wholesale school strike, students in colleges and universities attended university to protest, not to attend classes, so I think the youth have been the prime instigators of this revolution, the reason being that they see no economic future for themselves. This is all seem related as well to the migration of Iraqis a few years ago when Syrian migrants were fleeing through Turkey to Europe and was seen as a kind of world wide crisis, so now you see the connections to that of today, with youth taking to the streets, fighting and frequently being killed by these authorities in their repressive practices. The last point, I think is intergenerational solidarity rather than intergenerational conflict, student's parents, teachers, grandparents understanding that this revolution is necessary, it is all that is left for them to do to demand wholesale changes of the political system.

SEG: Regarding the ongoing situation of those involved, is there a significance of the day

SEG: Regarding the ongoing situation of those involved, is there a significance of the day October 1st, as to why they started striking on this day?

OS: That was a day set from youth who have been protesting, seeing the first of October as a useful mark to go to the streets. But perhaps one incident that I think it matters is that there was a very famous commander in Iraq's Counter Terrorism Services, the CTS, his name is Abdulwahab al-Saadi. He became very famous in the recapturing of territory from Daesh and he became well known, very well respected. Days before the 1st of October he was actually demoted, it was reported that the reason was because he would not go along with corrupt behavior inside the CTS. That demotion caused huge outcry among the Iraqi population and I think fueled plans that were already in place to take to the streets on the 1st of October, thinking, if one of the most respected military commandants in Iraq in the last decade can't fight corruption in the institution that he is major commander, who can fight corruption?

SEG: Which other social groups are involved in this new wave of protests and what do you think is their role on the struggle?

OS: How I mentioned earlier, youth generally across the board have been fueling and have been the engine of this revolution. You have also professional groups, unions slowly coming on board, the teachers, the Iraqi Bar association --the association representing the lawyers--, demanded that it is the legal right of Iraqis under the Constitution to protest and to strike, and nobody can be punished for exercising that right. The prominent religious authorities in southern Iraq, --led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani-- came out and gave a speech to their representatives, fully supporting the protesters and the demonstrations and giving zero support to any political figure, any political elite at all. The last thing I should say on this, is that these protests are happening in the center and south of the country, these are predominantly, and I stress predominantly, Shia Muslim areas. The reason why this is important is because in the last 16 years, --because of the political system that was imposed on Iraq in 2003--, people outside and even inside of Iraq have been reading Iraq politics society through the lens of sectarian divisions. [But] the political system hasn't served anybody, the political geography of these protests shows you that the way of thinking about Iraq, as a sectarian society or having simply a sectarian government that discriminates against particular people is inadequate.

SEG: Omar, you have mentioned that the protests have centered in south and central Iraq, in the Shia areas. Do you think there is a possibility that they can spread nationwide?

OS: Sunni majority provinces are in full support of these protests, what is happening is that, any kind of expression of grievance with the Iraqi government has been deemed or labeled or these people have been labeled as sympathizers of Daesh, so when they express grievances they are oppressed, they are arrested, they are beaten and or worse. The Kurdish region is similar and different, Kurdish civil society actors have been protesting in previous years against their regional government, the same kind of corruption that plays in the Iraqi federal government also plays in the Kurdish government. So that's why you see protests and demonstrations happening in the Kurdish autonomous region in different cities against the Kurdish regional government. If you speak to Kurdish civil society actors on the ground in these cities, they express support for their friends in other parts of Iraq who they know are fighting similar battles as they are in their region.

SEG: We know there's been a lot of excessive force and repression from the state towards the protesters, more than 100 people have been killed, more than 6,000 have been wounded and in your article you state how more than 60 people have been killed in the hands of parastatal groups. Do you think this has consequences in how protesters organize and execute their strategies?

OS: It's important to update those numbers. From the 25th of October until now, that number calculating the initial number of those killed and injured, added to what has happened in the last

week, has added to pass up to 260 killed. I hesitate often to estimate because the numbers have not been released by the Ministry of Health, but I think the number is probably closer to 300 [killed] and possibly more than 10,000 injured in these protests. So, I think the reaction from the iraqi political elites and their armed group supporters, as fragmented as they are, has been unified, and that response is violence to quell any protests that threaten the political bargain that they have since 2003. In terms of affecting how organizers strategize and carry out their tactics, activists are trying to react to the unprecedented levels of violence from these elites and their armed supporters, by essentially trying to protect themselves while continuing to take the streets. Secondly, the response to violence has been more numbers, more people taking to the streets, which is going to show you the credibility of their grievances, the fact that people are willing to put their lives on the line and die for their cause of political revolution in their country, this is telling how desperate the conditions are. And finally, activists have been trying to point to this situation for years now on how bad the political and economical situation is, particularly among youth and their attempt is to revolt and change the system and in doing so they want to get out as much information as possible to journalists, activists and anyone who will listen inside Iraq and outside. And I think that's part of our work for those who stand in solidarity for people who are going through this.

SEG: Do you think it is likely that the protesters will have some of their demands met? And regarding the international influence of these protests, do you think that these protests in Iraq are related to other protests movements in places like for example Lebanon?

OS: So, to your first question about achieving their demands, trying to prognosticate and anticipate what might happen is always a very difficult and flawed exercise. I will say that the protesters don't seem to be going anywhere any time soon. The iraqi president last week came out and gave a speech stating that new early elections can be held provided that a new electoral law pass through the iraqi parliament to facilitate those elections. Of course, the problem with that is that you are relying on the same political elites to engage in some sort of reform project that again, has not really worked until now. And so it suggests that the same political elites who are threatened by this revolution can engage in any meaningful reform and enact electoral changes that can threaten their base of power [which] is questionable. To your second question, I think one of the biggest things, strategies or one of the biggest takeaways that we can point to, in terms of the connections between these two places, these two movements is inspiration. I was at a march yesterday and one of the slogans that people were chanting were essentially saying from Beirut to Iraq, from Beirut to Baghdad. Iraqis see that and send that solidarity back to those in Lebanon, they know they are fighting the same kinds of corruption, poor services, bad governance.