

4. Riding the Pandemic Wave: How the Iraqi Political Elite Survived a Triple Crisis

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I arrived in Baghdad in mid-September 2019 to attend the annual International Energy Forum and conduct routine research and work-related interviews. It was my third visit for the year, and I couldn't help but see the difference in Iraq's capital. For the first time, I was free to come and go to and from my hotel, inside the Green Zone, without the inconvenience of special permits and complicated security arrangements. Concrete barriers were almost completely removed, checkpoints were friendlier and hassle-free, and friends were even able to visit me in the hotel. None of this was possible during my stay at the same hotel just four months earlier. Outside the Green Zone, we enjoyed long restaurant gatherings with old friends and new acquaintances until past mid-night. On the business side, it was the first time where the only conferences in Baghdad were not on terrorism, but economics and reconstruction and it was the first post-2003 summer that Iraq had no demonstrations against shortages in electricity supply.

Iraq was moving on a very promising trajectory, and international confidence in the country's potential was steadily coming back. A major agreement was prepared to change the paradigm of Iraqi reconstruction projects, where a great deal of corruption was committed. For more than a decade, billions of US dollars were allocated to projects that were done on paper

only – some projects were done twice in this fashion, while the money went in the pockets of corrupt officials and their political entities. To curb this practice, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi planned a new system: “oil for reconstruction”. For this ambitious undertaking, the government signed several memoranda of understanding with China and established a fund where oil proceeds are deposited and used to pay for future reconstruction projects by various Chinese companies.

However, three major crises took the country by storm: a wave of widespread protests that were accompanied by a level of violence unprecedented in the post-2003 era, a lethal escalation in the US-Iranian conflict that was fought on Iraqi soil, and a worldwide raging pandemic that took a painful toll on Iraq, whose healthcare has been devastated by decades of negligence.

Protests and the Exploitation of Brutality

On 1 October 2019, two weeks after my arrival, a group of Iraqi youth demonstrated demanding employment opportunities and protesting the inequality between the privileged political parties and the rest of the population. This routine popular eruption has always been contained by government announcements of new jobs in the oversaturated public sector or faded away after the demonstrators made their voice heard. But this time it was dramatically different. The protestors were met with disproportionate force that led to dozens of deaths and many injuries among the demonstrators, who in turn violently attacked the Iraqi security forces. The next ten days witnessed widespread violence and more killings and injuries as the country moved steadily toward the abyss. All this was happening in the midst of complete absence of political leadership. Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi did not address the nation until 4 October, and when he decided to do so, he delivered his address in the most inexplicable fashion – his speech was broadcast on Iraqi National Television well past mid-night and was quite uninspiring. But his government

was saved by a 1,338 year old memory, as millions of Iraqis began preparing for the traditional walk toward Karbala to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed.¹ The demonstrators suspended their protests and promised a strong return on 25 October to avoid a conflict between their activities and the religious pilgrimage.

The return of protests took the country on a political rollercoaster as the staggering violence led to hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries. On 29 November 2019, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi submitted his resignation citing the Friday Prayer sermon by Grand Ayatollah Sistani's Representative, "the hard conditions of the country and to allow for a better chance calm the situation and give the Council of Representatives (CoR) a chance to consider new options".² This was the first time an Iraqi government resigned since 2003. Encouraged by this accomplishment, the demonstrators stepped up their protests and, under their tremendous pressure, the Iraqi CoR began the process of introducing several reforms to address popular demands that fell on deaf ears for over fifteen years. Iraq was heading towards a game change before another exogenous development took precedence over the domestic power struggle. A rocket attack on Iraq's K1 military base near Kirkuk, which hosts US troops, caused the death of one American contractor and multiple injuries among other servicemen.³ The US blamed

¹ This annual event attracts an estimated 15 million Iraqis who walk from their places of residence to Imam Husain's shrine in Karbala to commemorate his martyrdom in 681 A.D. They are normally joined by hundreds of thousands from other countries who travel to Iraq for the occasion, known as the *Arba'een* (the passing of forty days after the actual martyrdom anniversary). This annual event attracts an estimated 15 million Iraqis who walk from their places of residence to Imam Husain's shrine in Karbala to commemorate his martyrdom in 681 A.D. They are normally joined by hundreds of thousands from other countries who travel to Iraq for the occasion, known as the *Arba'een* (the passing of forty days after the actual martyrdom anniversary).

² A.J. Rubin and F. Hassan, "Iraqi Prime Minister Resigns in Deepening Political Crisis", *The New York Times*, 30 November 2019.

³ E. McLaughlin and L. Martinez, "US civilian contractor killed, several troops

Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi paramilitary group linked to Iran, and retaliated on 29 December by conducting strikes against three of the group's bases in Iraq and two in Syria. The attacks resulted in 25 deaths and 51 injuries.⁴ Kataib Hezbollah and other Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) allied with them responded to this attack by besieging the US Embassy in Baghdad, a scene that reminded observers of the 1979 takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran.⁵

Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi used a combination of coercion and persuasion on the leaders of the siege and managed to secure their withdrawal from the US Embassy's vicinity. He promised to handle the security issues and ensure that US forces operate according to the mutual agreements and under the supervision of the Iraqi government, as a condition of their operating in Iraq. Abdul-Mahdi was notified about the 29 December US airstrikes on the Kataib, but no details were provided to him regarding the timing and target locations, which earned him harsh criticism from many Iraqis.

The last straw came in the form of a US airstrike near Baghdad International Airport that left a few Iraqis and Iranians dead, including Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, a branch of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of the PMF.⁶ The former was on a visit to Iraq to meet Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi while the latter was receiving him at the airport. The attack triggered many uncomfortable questions about the nature of US-Iraqi relations and the status of the US forces that operate

injured in rocket attack on Iraqi military base", *ABC News*, 27 December 2019.

⁴ "US Attacks Iran-backed Militia Bases in Iraq and Syria", *BBC News*, 30 December 2019.

⁵ F. Hassan, B. Hubbard, and A.J. Rubin, "Protesters Attack US Embassy in Iraq, Chanting 'Death to America'", *The New York Times*, 31 December 2019.

⁶ The PMF, also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), is an umbrella group composed of militias of varying sizes and political affiliations that are officially part of the Iraqi Security Forces.

on Iraqi soil and air space. The fact that they were conducted with no coordination with the Iraqi government and without Abdul-Mahdi's knowledge forced the Prime Minister to reverse his position on the presence of US troops. He went to the CoR and appealed to the legislature to pass a resolution mandating a complete withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.⁷

The Soleimani killing and its aftermath also had a direct effect on the demonstrators throughout Iraq, who for months had been calling for anti-corruption reforms and an end to foreign interference, especially Iran's influence. These demands were forced to take a back seat as pro-democracy protestors in Iraq came under overwhelming pressure to postpone their push for change. US-Iraq relations were brought to their lowest point in recent memory, and even the most vocal Iraqi supporters of the United States had to disappear from the scene.

Media attention immediately shifted from the Iraqi protesters to the more newsworthy rapid escalation in the US-Iran conflict, and once again, demands for political reform in Iraq were eclipsed by higher national priorities. Instead of replacing the corrupt election law and reforming the controversial High Elections Commission, the Iraqi CoR passed a highly consequential resolution calling on the government to expel all US troops from Iraq.

The Double Crisis: Political Stalemate and the Oil Curse

Iraq is a rentier state, with 93% of its budget reliant on oil revenues. Like many oil producing countries, Iraq has limited control over production quantities and prices. Iraq started its 2020 revenues with oil prices hovering over US\$60/barrel. With its level of production being around 4.5mbd, including oil used for domestic consumption, the country barely breaks even on salaries, mandatory financial obligations, and partial

⁷ *Iraqi Parliament Calls for Troop Withdrawal What Next for the United States?*, Atlantic Council, 5 January 2020.

basic services. In the first quarter, Iraq produced an average of 4.6mbd,⁸ as prices started to decline from US\$63.65/barrel in January to US\$55.66/barrel in February and US\$32.01/barrel in March.⁹ The second quarter started with another dramatic price decrease to reach US\$18.38 in April and US\$29.38 in May, before it rose to US\$40.27 in June.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Iraqi production went down to 4.7mbd in April and significantly decreased to 3.7mbd in May and June, setting the country into a deep financial crisis.¹¹

The government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi, which turned into a caretaker status, took a hands-off attitude toward the country's staggering hardships as President Barham Salih and major political leaders in the CoR struggled to form a new government. Two candidates for Prime Minister were rejected before they got the chance to have a vote in the CoR and were forced to withdraw their names from the race to set the stage for National Intelligence Chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi to be confirmed as a compromise Prime Minister on 7 May 2020. The leaders who appointed Prime Minister al-Kadhimi gave him a mandate to focus on the following priorities: preparing for an early election, restoring Iraqi sovereignty and bringing all arms under state control, and leading Iraq through the economic crunch and Covid-19 crisis. He added to that the promise to conduct a swift and credible investigation into the waves of violence beginning in October 2019 and bring the culprits to justice, as well as fight corruption wherever it may be found.¹²

⁸ Iraq Crude Oil Production, *Trading Economics*.

⁹ "Numbers cited refer to average monthly Brent crude oil price", *Statista*, 20 July 2020.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Iraq Crude Oil Production..., cit.

¹² For a copy of the full program, see "NAS publishes the full text of the ministerial program of the government of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi", Baghdad, NAS.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Government-Opposition Relations

From the beginning of the pandemic's outbreak, Iraq was identified as a very vulnerable state because of its fragile administrative system, depleted healthcare sector, and lack of economic and financial resources. To make matters worse, Iraq's closest neighbor, Iran, became the second epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic after its country of origin, China. Iran has also been the main destination for the majority of Iraqis who travel abroad. Hundreds of thousands choose Iran for recreation and religious tourism, medical treatment, and business-related travel. A significantly larger number of Iranians in turn visit Iraq for religious tourism to the holy shrines in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and Samarra, in addition to Iranian students who move back and forth between the two leading Shia seminaries in Najaf, Iraq and Qom, Iran. Many asymptomatic travelers returned to Iraq carrying the virus in the early days and spread it to their families and communities.

During the months of pandemic Iraq lost athletes, including three legendary football players, poets, artists, community leaders, and politicians. Many others were lucky to survive after contracting the disease. In a philosophical reaction to the pandemic, the Iraqi academic Dr. Hassan Nadhim posted to his Facebook page a note on the "four humiliations of human narcissism" at the hands of Copernicus, Darwin, Freud, and Covid-19.¹³ On 26 June, a few weeks after he was confirmed as Iraq's Minister of Culture in Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government, Dr. Nadhim tested positive for Covid-19. After a few weeks of wrestling with the virus, he reflected on the battle he won:

Both the virus and I were exhausted. Both of us witnessed metamorphoses. While the virus witnessed the metamorphoses of Covid and I witnessed the metamorphoses of Ovid, we reconsidered our own myths and symbols. We, both, went

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/hassan.nadhem.5/posts/10221738341957259>

through a kind of false tranquility, we rose against each other, we raged, rebelled, persisted, and felt desperate. I could hear it and feel it in me, Covid and Ovid. ... But finally, after a few days, it fell asleep and was quiet ever since. The visible and invisible struggles have come to an end.¹⁴

In addition to impacting Iraqi culture, the pandemic had a significant effect on social movements in the country. In the weeks prior to the spread of Covid-19, Iraqi protesters began to re-group and recover the momentum they lost during the US-Iran escalation. Their goal was to force the CoR to enact several reform legislations that would change the electoral system, contain corruption, and end the monopoly of ruling political parties on employment, business contracts, and access to national and local decision making. Having already resigned, the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi had nothing to lose from the success of the protest movement. But the political establishment was losing ground everyday as the pressure on them mounted from the streets of Baghdad and key provinces. When the Covid-19 pandemic became a public concern, the pressure started to fade away.¹⁵ Large crowds disappeared from the streets and the televised suffering of Covid-19 patients convinced everyone that the government ban on large gatherings was justified, regardless of the political motivations behind it. Most of the protesters were content to retreat temporarily to preserve their lives, wait for the pandemic to recede, and return later to continue the fight. Meanwhile, political leaders reversed their positions on reform and appointed a government on straight partisan quota (*muhassassa*).¹⁶

It is unclear whether the pandemic will strengthen the political regime's control over the Iraqi society, or the opposite is more

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/hassan.nadhemi.5/posts/10222803088975269>

¹⁵ The first coronavirus case appeared in Iraq in February 2020. See: "Iraq takes new decisions to confront COVID-19 as infections reach 315,597", *Xinhuanet*, 19 September 2020.

¹⁶ A.H. Cordesman, *Iraq is the Prize: A Warning About Iraq's Future Stability, Iran, and the Role of the United States*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 20 March 2020.

likely to happen. In the short term, the fear of infection by the deadly virus drove large crowds away from the streets and places of protest. The political elite have bought some valuable time and enjoyed a temporary relief from the political and security pressures. But, in the long term, it is more likely to empower the opposition as the economic and social consequences take their toll. Meanwhile, the government will use pandemic-related public health concerns as a pretext to impose extended curfew periods and other legal restrictions on public activities. Deploying such legal and security devices in a deceptive way may make it difficult to mobilize the necessary opposition forces in the short run, but this could be a double-edged sword and increase the gap between the government and the population. In this case, a heavy price will have to be paid in the coming elections. Political opposition may exploit what the pandemic exposed about the regime's shortcomings in preparing for and addressing the health crisis. However, whether or not they are exploited by the opposition, these vulnerabilities are destined to haunt the political regime as the long-term economic effects of the pandemic make their impact on several key sectors and aggravate the poor conditions of wide segments of Iraqi population.

Conclusion

For the past seventeen years, Iraq has been moving in a cyclical pattern of violence. Ethno-sectarian politics have prevailed over creative governance and divisive discourse has often paid off better than the message of unity and social cohesion. The state has maintained a rentier economy with more than 90% of the national budget drawn from the petroleum sector. Many sectors that made significant contributions to the Iraqi economy in the past were devastated by greedy influential politicians who made fortunes from monopolies on imports at the expense of national products.

The impact of rampant corruption on the Iraqi infrastructure has been felt throughout the country. Billions of US dollars were spent on electricity, roads, schools, and hospitals, but the reality on the ground does not match these expenditures. Until the 1980s, Iraq possessed one of the best healthcare systems in the entire region. This system crumbled slowly under the crippling sanctions that were imposed by the UN Security Council between 1990 and 2003. Although the post-2003 era opened a window of opportunity to restore the Iraqi healthcare industry, fraud, waste, and mismanagement left the country in hopeless conditions. Hospitals are completely depleted and run by incompetent cronies of the ruling political parties, while doctors are under-paid and unprotected. They are open to physical attacks by unruly mobs and threatened by tribal retaliation for actual or perceived malpractice.¹⁷

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached Iraq, this vulnerability presented the Iraqi people with the sobering reality of how broken their country really is. The country was paralyzed by a shortage of medicine, protective equipment, hospital beds, and medical staff. Furthermore, public health awareness and prevention measures were almost non-existent, because the country has not invested in this important tool of healthcare preparedness. A significantly large percentage of Iraqis remain under-educated or not educated at all.¹⁸ Many preferred to follow religious guidance rather than medical instructions, and simple government guidelines such as observing social distancing and reducing unnecessary social and religious activities proved impossible to enforce. As for those who trusted these guidelines, they too found themselves obligated to violate them because of the devastating economic conditions. For too many Iraqis, staying home meant certain death by starvation, so they decided to take their chances with the virus, which after all had a killing rate of 3% or less.

¹⁷ “Iraq doctors say vendettas threaten their lives as they save others”, *France24*, 28 February 2019.

¹⁸ “Country at a Glance - Iraq”, Education Statistics, World Bank.

It was thought that the post-ISIS era would herald new challenges for Iraq.¹⁹ That prediction began to materialize after a short-lived national euphoria: the triple crisis of protests, severe economic hardship, and Covid-19 will set the scene for a perfect storm if the Iraqi political leadership continue their reckless conduct.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “[Post-ISIS Iraq: A Gathering Storm](#)”, 26 October 2003.