



## Plight of the Protests:

### Iraq and Lebanon's Trials and Tribulations in the Face of COVID-19

By

Elisa Cherry  
Middle East Analyst

POLICY BRIEF  
JUNE 2020

RETHINKING  
SECURITY IN  
2020 SERIES

## INTRODUCTION

October 2019 marked the beginning of civil protests in Iraq and Lebanon, calling for political reform, an overhaul of political elites and improvements to state services for civilians. While the roots of the protests are different in each country, they are indicative of a level of incapability on behalf of the state to meet the demands and expectations of civilians, and have resulted in increasingly violent retaliation against the protesters over the course of time.

In recent months, anti-government protests were losing their momentum across Iraq, as the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who was originally one of the strong advocates for the protests, withdrew his support for the demonstrations in late January. The virus gave people an excuse to stay in their homes and many people did not want to put themselves at risk, despite measures in the protest squares to disinfect and sanitize the area. While the number of people that

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > The new Kadhimi government faces many challenges in the upcoming months such as tackling the ongoing protests, corruption, economic turmoil, and a failing health system, which are only worsened by the stresses of the pandemic.
- > The failing health system in Iraq and the inability of the government to enforce lockdown measures has forced civilians to self-regulate by educating one another on how to slow the spread of coronavirus.
- > External actors such as the European Union, play a key role in supporting Iraq's new Prime Minister in meeting the demands of the protesters and improving the public wellbeing in the face of COVID-19.

took to the streets decreased with the onset of coronavirus, the sentiments of the protesters, and their desire to promote governmental change were only reaffirmed with the presence of COVID-19 in Iraq. Following the confirmation of the new Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, after two failed attempts to form a government, there may be a future end for the protests in Iraq. The new head of government faces many challenges, particularly in the times of COVID-19, but has promised to appease protesters' needs.<sup>1</sup>

## Civilians Taking Initiative

Despite government measures to stop the spread of coronavirus, the poorly structured health system in Iraq forced civilians to take matters into their own hands. There is serious concern that with the lack of a strong public health sector, as well as the resentments of protesters, there will be a second wave of COVID-19 throughout the country if protesters do not take the necessary precautions and return to the streets too early, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>2</sup> While numbers of the virus remained tolerable for the first weeks of the lockdown, when restrictions were lifted there was a large spike in the number of reported cases reaching over 6,000 by the 29th of May.<sup>3</sup> A majority of these cases are within the Baghdad governorate, causing major concerns for health professionals, as the hospitals and health care professionals are ill equipped to handle the large number of cases.<sup>4</sup>

Since the onset of the pandemic in Iraq, the country has relied on assistance from international organizations

and allies, such as the WHO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United States and China.<sup>5</sup> In relying on aid from the international community, as well as the inability to take necessary safety precautions, the continued spread of the virus is a serious threat. The weak health system coupled with the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions has emboldened protesters who have been confined to their homes in recent weeks, to take back to the streets again. Iraq is now faced with the difficult task of again creating strict measures to fight coronavirus by pushing citizens back into lockdown, to protect protests and curb the growing rate of coronavirus in the country.<sup>6</sup>

## Increasing Violence

While the protests in Iraq were losing their momentum prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, the failures of the Iraqi Parliament to form a government and choose a viable candidate for Prime Minister further fueled the protesters' sentiments of government inaction. On May 6th, the Iraqi Parliament approved the new Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, after nearly six months of attempting to find a suitable candidate that would appease all parties in the Parliament, as well as external actors such as Iran and the United States.<sup>7</sup> Kadhimi is the third candidate to be appointed to the position of Prime Minister after the previous two candidates, Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi and Adnan al-Zurfi, failed to pass through the Parliament.<sup>8</sup> Following Kadhimi's appointment, protesters were back in the streets for several different reasons. Some

<sup>1</sup> Alex MacDonald, "Iraq Protesters Have Little Faith New PM Kadhimi Will Pursue Justice over Killings," Middle East Eye, May 23, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-protesters-kadhimi-human-rights-killings>.

<sup>2</sup> Hiwa Shilani, "WHO Warns Iraqi Protesters of Second Wave of COVID-19 as Baghdad Announces 95 New Cases," Kurdistan24, May 12, 2020, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/b32b302d-8250-45b6-b8a3-c407e8e35d6c>.

<sup>3</sup> "Iraq Coronavirus: 6,439 Cases and 205 Deaths - Worldometer," accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/iraq/>.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmoud Mohamed Baraket, "Fear Looms in Baghdad amid Surge in Coronavirus Cases," Anadolu Agency, May 29, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/fear-looms-in-baghdad-amid-surge-in-coronavirus-cases/1857966>.

<sup>5</sup> Lujain Elbaldawi, "Iraq's Health System Meets the Challenge of Coronavirus," Al-Monitor, April 25, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/iraq-health-coronavirus-covid19.html>; "Japan Prioritizes Iraq's Health and Recovery from COVID-19 in New Contribution -

Iraq," ReliefWeb, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/japan-prioritizes-iraq-s-health-and-recovery-covid-19-new-contribution>.

<sup>6</sup> "Iraq Parliament: 'Healthcare System May Collapse in 10 Days,'" Middle East Monitor, May 23, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200523-iraq-parliament-healthcare-system-may-collapse-in-10-days/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Iraq Appoints New Prime Minister after Months of Protests and Jockeying," The Guardian, May 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/iraq-appoints-new-prime-minister-after-months-of-protests-and-jockeying>.

<sup>8</sup> Mansour, Renad, "Why Is It So Hard for Iraq to Form A Government?," Chatham House, Chatham House, April 25, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-it-so-hard-iraq-form-government>; Renad Mansour, Mac Skelton, and Abdulameer Mohsin Hussein, "COVID 19: Assessing Vulnerabilities and Impacts on Iraq," Chatham House, April 7, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/covid-19-assessing-vulnerabilities-and-impacts-iraq>.

called Kadhimi another pawn in the Iraqi political landscape, noting that there would not be any change within the government structure with his appointment, a key point of contention and call to action for the protesters.<sup>9</sup>

Since the protests started on the 1st of October 2019 in Iraq, over 600 people have died due to the violence of the protests and retaliation from security forces.<sup>10</sup> The newly confirmed Prime Minister will face many challenges as there are high levels of resentment towards the government, due to the volatile economic and political landscapes as well as the violence carried out against the protesters. However, some protesters are hopeful that Kadhimi will uphold his promises, such as bringing justice to those who carried out violence against the protesters and releasing protesters who have been detained since October 2019, which he fulfilled on 11 May 2020.<sup>11</sup> Further struggles Kadhimi could face that could impact the ongoing protests include the integration of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group of various militias, into the Iraqi army, which has contributed to the violence against protesters. The divisions between pro-state militias and the state-sponsored military forces has been cause for concern previously, as the divisions between the groups and the inability to seamlessly integrate the militias under the government military has been seen in both Iraq and Lebanon, where increasing levels of violence against protests has characterized the protests during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> Protests have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic because “militias are more dangerous than coronavirus” and protesters are not afraid of contracting the virus after nearly two decades of war, economic turmoil, and corruption in the country.<sup>13</sup>

Protesters in Lebanon have taken back to the streets, despite COVID-19 measures, facing massive levels of violence and retaliation from security forces. At least ten people have died from the protests in Lebanon, most recently a 26-year-old, Fawaz al-Samman, was killed in Tripoli by the Lebanese army, and several others were wounded on 27 April 2020.<sup>14</sup> This drastic uptick in violence is the result of weeks of pent up

tension over the plummeting economic situation, coupled with the financial and banking crises, brought thousands of people back to the streets around the country.

## KEY INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

The protests in Iraq have evolved from their initial state in October 2019, becoming more violent in nature and facing multiple challenges, including the lockdown restrictions and a failing public health sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the protests were paused or significantly reduced in size, but as lockdown restrictions were lifted, people took back to the streets and coronavirus returned stronger than ever, forcing Baghdad back into lockdown.<sup>15</sup> However, at the moment Iraq does not have the capacity to fully enforce the lockdown measures and is relying on assistance from the international community to bolster their failing health system that is ill-equipped to tackle the pandemic. The new government that was formed at the beginning of May, led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, has vowed to bring justice to the protesters who have been arrested, and hopes to adhere to the demands of the protests. Initial measures were taken by Kadhimi’s government, but the long-term challenge will be to address the oversaturated public sector and equip the country to face its current threats of COVID-19 along with rising unemployment, a global oil crisis and a rise in terrorist activities around the country.

Lebanon also faces economic challenges and has taken alternative measures to combat coronavirus, yet both countries’ protests have become increasingly volatile in recent months. The response from the international community regarding the increased violence against protesters has been lackluster. Neither country will be able to fully address the violent protests, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic, without addressing larger, systematic issues that threaten Iraq and Lebanon.

<sup>9</sup> Azhar Al-Rubaie, “Coronavirus Fears Leave Iraq’s Anti-Government Protesters Divided,” *Middle East Eye*, May 15, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-iraq-anti-government-protesters-divided>.

<sup>10</sup> Mansour, Renad, “Why Is It So Hard for Iraq to Form A Government?”

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200511-new-iraq-pm-orders-release-of-detained-protesters/>.

<sup>12</sup> Faisal Al Yafai, “Iraq’s Choice: Be like Singapore or Lebanon,” *Asia Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/iraqs-choice-be-like-singapore-or-lebanon/>.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Rubaie, “Coronavirus Fears Leave Iraq’s Anti-Government Protesters Divided.”

<sup>14</sup> Lina Mounzer, “Opinion | In Lebanon, a Pandemic of Hunger,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/opinion/lebanon-protests-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>15</sup> “Parts of Iraqi Capital Go under Full Lockdown after Jump in Virus Cases,” *Al-Monitor*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/baghdad-areas-lockdown-coronavirus-iraq.html>.

---

## BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Towards the supporting international community, including the European Union:**

- > With the appointment of the new Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is working to promote early, free and fair elections within the country, the EU and additional international institutions should support Kadhimi in his efforts to uphold his promises to the people of Iraq by supporting the new agency for early elections within Iraq, providing partners and support in the electoral process.
- > In recognition of the peoples' right to protest, continue to encourage both militias and military actors involved in the protests to remain peaceful, protect human lives and identify non-violent measures towards the protesters by not using live rounds of ammunition, tear gas or other combative substances.
- > As combatting COVID-19 in Iraq is a multidimensional matter, prioritize helping Iraq to strengthen its health sector by bolstering the organizations and projects that already exist to support the health sector. The local initiatives that have been started or supported by local populations will be the most effective.
- > Grassroots education on the impact of coronavirus is vital to help the public in understanding the threat of the pandemic, particularly in areas where security forces face difficulties in enforcing lockdown restrictions, and should be supported through financial assistance to local initiatives, providing medical and sanitation supplies and engaging with the population to better understand the global measures of health standards and social distancing.

---

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



**BRUSSELS  
INTERNATIONAL  
CENTER**

---

## **AUTHOR**

**Elisa Cherry**

MIDDLE EAST ANALYST

## **Supervision**

**Ramadan Abujazar**