LSE Middle East Centre

THE IRAQI PROTEST MOVEMENT

FROM IDENTITY POLITICS TO ISSUE POLITICS

FALEH A. JABAR

LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series | 25 | June 2018

About the Middle East Centre

The Middle East Centre builds on LSE's long engagement with the Middle East and provides a central hub for the wide range of research on the region carried out at LSE.

The Middle East Centre aims to enhance understanding and develop rigorous research on the societies, economies, polities and international relations of the region. The Centre promotes both specialised knowledge and public understanding of this crucial area and has outstanding strengths in interdisciplinary research and in regional expertise. As one of the world's leading social science institutions, LSE comprises departments covering all branches of the social sciences. The Middle East Centre harnesses this expertise to promote innovative research and training on the region.

Publications Editor
Ribale Sleiman Haidar

Field Work Team
Saad Abed Razzak, Mohammed al-Silawi, Adnan al-Hilali, Mohammed Riad, Hussein Ali, Bassam al-Saadi, Salah al-Saed, Saad Kasem, Mohannad Abbas, Ahmed Abedulamir, Nawfal al-Safi, Ammar al-Mosawi, Ghaith Adnan.

Cover Image
Iraqi supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr during a demonstration in Baghdad's Tahrir Square on February 26, 2016.

© AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images

LSE Middle East Centre

The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics

Faleh A. Jabar

Translated by Abdul Ilah Nuaimi

LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series | 25

June 2018

Middle East Centre
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London, WC2A 2AE

@LSEMiddleEast

@lsemiddleeastcentre

lse.middleeast

lse.ac.uk/mec

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or the Middle East Centre. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and the LSE Middle East Centre should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this paper, the author(s) and/or the LSE Middle East Centre will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this paper.

The London School of Economics and Political Science holds the dual status of an exempt charity under Section 2 of the Charities Act 1993 (as a constituent part of the University of London), and a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act 1985 (Registration no. 70527).

About the Author

Faleh A. Jabar (1946–2018) was Director of the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies in Beirut. A political sociologist by training, he wrote extensively about Iraq and the Middle East. His research interests covered various fields such as the sociology of religion, nation-building and state-formation, tribes and modern socio-economic formations, and cultural discourses in Iraq and the wider Middle East. His publications include *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq* (2003), *Tribes and Power in the Middle East* (2002) and *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (2002), all published by Saqi Books, London.

Abstract

Beginning in mid-July 2015, one of the largest social protest movements in modern Iraqi history erupted spontaneously in the city of Basra and spread to cities of central and southern Iraq, including the capital Baghdad. This paper examines the principal aspects of this social movement, particularly its political, social and economic underpinnings, its social composition and its growth, and its message and slogans that are mainly directed against political Islam, critiqued as a conduit for corruption. It analyses the impact of the shift from identity to issue-based politics in Iraq – most evident in the 2018 May elections.

Dr Faleh A. Jabar presented the initial findings of this research at the LSE Middle East Centre in April 2016.

He wrote the paper in Arabic but passed away before this translation into English was published.

Foreword

In 2003, in the name of democracy and inclusivity, the United States (US) and its allies among the Iraqi diaspora restructured the Iraqi state. To them, the new Iraq was to be defined along identity lines, so as to ensure fair representation of all ethnicities and sects and to prevent the return of a Ba'athist Tikriti dictatorship. Under the logic of demography, the Shi'a majority would govern the new Iraq. In 2003, Shi'a Islamists parties were best prepared to mobilise and monopolise on the opportunity. They took control of the state. However, the resulting quota system (referred to in Arabic as *muhassasa*) and Shi'a majoritarian rule did not lead to either democracy or inclusivity, but rather to an elite seeking to instrumentalise identity for its own power, wealth and legitimacy.

After over a decade of the new Iraq, a protest movement emerged to challenge the leadership for its lack of responsiveness to the needs of its citizens and for its endemic corruption. Protests first erupted in the summer of 2015 in the destitute province of Basra where most of Iraq's oil wealth lies and where a majority of the population is Shi'a, but where the state has been least responsive in providing services since 2003. They quickly spread throughout the south and eventually made their way to the centre in Baghdad.

Unlike the sectarianism that shaped political activism at different parts of post-2003 Iraq, this protest movement was distinctly marked by an intra-sect struggle – Shi'a citizens demonstrated against their own Shi'a leaders for failing to build state institutions. Protestors argued for a civic state where representation is based not on identities but on issues. The movement challenged the Islamists parties that had governed since regime change. Most critically, the protests developed despite the ongoing external threat from the Islamic State (IS), which presented a sectarian security risk to the Shi'a community at large.

As both a practitioner and writer, Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abdul Jabar followed the movement from its inception, conducting qualitative and quantitative surveys in Baghdad and across the southern provinces of Iraq. This paper represents the culmination of his two-year long research project, which traces the evolution of the protest movement and situates it in a longer historical analysis of Shi'a political activism and a theoretical analysis of social movements. Historically, the paper argues that Shi'a identity has never been successfully politicised, and as such the failure in post-2003 Iraq comes as no surprise. Moreover, the paper distinguishes the Iraqi protest movement from the so-called 2011 Arab Spring protests, which sought to overthrow the old elites and replace them with new ones. In Iraq, in contrast, the movement called for radical reform of the post-2003 governing system. Analysing surveys, the paper argues that the protest movement that began in 2015 was fundamentally a rejection of the Shi'a Islamists parties for their corruption and monopolisation of power in the name of religion.

This paper analyses the impact of the shift from identity to issue-based politics in Iraq – most evident in the 2018 May elections. Unlike previous elections, the protest movement changed the narrative of Iraqi governance, and led to candidates relying on a new lexicon of terms such as 'civic state' and 'anti-corruption' to acquire legitimacy. However, the movement was not a complete success. In the short-term, the same elite simply coopted

the ideas of the protest movement to redefine their movements, rather than addressing the demands of the protests, undermining the likelihood of reform.

However, the clearest impact of the protest movement has been its exposure of the failures of Islamist Shiʿa parties. As a result, the 2018 elections marked an attempt to redefine Islamism in Iraq. For instance, Shiʿa popular cleric Muqtada al-Sadr formed an electoral alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party. Moreover, Shiʿa Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani argued against voting along identity lines, and even said that a Christian should be supported if a better candidate than a Shiʿa. Islamist Candidate Ammar al-Hakim began speaking about a 'new Islam'. At its very least, therefore, the protest movement initiated the process of rejecting the type of Shiʿa political Islam that was born outside of Iraq and began a process of redefining post-2003 governance and the role of Islamism.

Renad Mansour
Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Introduction

Beginning in mid-July 2015, the major cities of central and southern Iraq, including the capital Baghdad, were engulfed by one of the largest social protest movements in modern Iraqi history.

The movement erupted spontaneously in the city of Basra, where protests emerged against the deterioration of public services, particularly electricity, at the peak of Basra's summer heat and humidity. It eventually grew into a broader demonstration against financial and administrative corruption, and against the system of partisan political quota-sharing (*muhassasa*) in the name of ethnic and communal identities. Symbolising the failure of political Islam in running state affairs, the movement opposed the Islamist elites who had governed Iraq since 2003. The recurrent slogan chanted during demonstrations tells it all: 'In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us.' (*Bismil deen baguna al-haramiya*)

In essence, this social movement shows how the politicisation of ethnic and communal identities is losing some of its unifying potency, allowing political, social and class divisions to creep in and segment these identities into what may be described as a shift from identity politics to issue politics. As stolen funds and the shortage of electricity have no religion or ethnicity, the emergence of issue politics has the potential to transcend communal and ethnic segmentation. As the protests have thus far been concentrated in Shiʿa – or predominantly Shiʿa areas – such as Baghdad, the movement signals a strong propensity by part of the wider Shiʿa community to detach its identity from the grip of the Shiʿa Islamist political elites who lead the state.

In the spring of 2012, a Shiʿa–Sunni–Kurdish alliance emerged between the Ahrar Bloc (the Sadrist Shiʿa bloc), the Kurdish bloc (led by Masoud Barzani) and Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Movement (al-Iraqiya), which was predominantly Sunni. These leaders united in an attempt to transcend divisions and move towards intra-communal politics by pursuing a no-confidence motion in the Iraqi parliament to unseat then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The 2015 protest movement, by contrast, was bottom-up and displayed unmistakable signs of a popular shift from identity to issue politics. Most probably, this shift will have political, social and cultural consequences that may further the fragmentation of ethnic and sectarian identities from within, and may well alter power relations amongst competing Shiʿa blocs. A similar trend can be seen in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where protestors in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Duhok began demanding an end to the rule of the Kurdish nationalist parties and calling for better state services and provisions. Although still dormant following the end of IS's territorial rule, Sunnis in Iraq are also expressing dissatisfaction with their post-2003 leaders. Although these movements are not unified, at their core, they represent a similar trend from identity to issue-based politics.

This paper examines the principal aspects of this social movement, particularly its political, social and economic underpinnings, its social composition and its growth, and its message and slogans that are mainly directed against political Islam, critiqued as a conduit

for corruption. In addition, this paper examines the emergence of young leaderships and analyses the relationship between the protest movement on the one hand and the religious centres of authority, the parliament, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the Prime Minister's Office on the other. This paper is based on field research and an extensive survey conducted between August 2015 and January 2016. The results of the survey constitute the final section.

Sectarian Identities: Dynamics of Construction and Deconstruction

Attempts to politicise Shiʿa identity are as old as the modern Iraqi state itself. Their story, however, is one of repeated failure. Attempts by Amin al-Charchafchi to establish a Shiʿa party (by the name the 'Ennahda' or the Renaissance Party) in 1924 failed. Equally unsuccessful was the attempt to set up a Shiʿa party in 1954, which only lasted for three months.

Attempts to politicise Shiʿa identity failed not only under the monarchy but also during the first Iraqi Republic (1958–1963), mainly due to an open political system and the development of a market economy. These attempts surfaced again during the second Republic under President Abdul Salam Aref (1963–1968) and increased during the third republic under President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and later President Saddam Hussein, in two phases: first following the Iranian Revolution against the Shah (1979–1978) and then in the aftermath of the Kuwait War (the anti-Baʿath 1991 uprisings). The new attempts were undertaken by Shiʿa Islamic parties like the Daʿwa Party and the Organisation for Islamic Action. However, efforts to politicise Shiʿa identity failed during the Iran–Iraq war, which was marked by the convergence, and even unity, of Iraqi nationalism with state nationalism. However, this unity fell apart following the 1991 Kuwait War. The current mode of politicised Shiʿa identities grew in exile rather than at home in Iraq after the assassination of senior Shiʿa cleric, Sayyed Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr in 1999, despite the different paths taken by such politicisation.

The political rise of the Shiʿa identity turned into an overwhelming mass trend when the Shiʿa Islamic parties returned from exile after the fall of Baghdad in 2003. This represented the wholesale growth of the politicisation of Shiʿa identity as the public sphere opened up with the collapse of the state. Following mass politicisation came the militarisation of sectarian identities in the violent struggle over power and resources. What happened after 2003 was also a transformation from politicisation to militarisation under occupation as tendencies to resist occupation interacted with rivalries for control of the levers of power between communities. The assertion of a Shiʿa sectarian identity became a motive to reassert a counter Sunni identity just as violent attacks against Shiʿa symbols and communities became a motive to assert Shiʿa identity on a new basis: external threat rather than victimhood.

When the violence and militarisation receded, the politicised communities became divided by their own infightings. In this context, the protest movements that started in

2015 partly represent mobilisation in predominantly Shiʿa urban centres against a predominantly Shiʿa government. This disconnect between the Shiʿa section of Iraqi society and the government that claimed to represent them indicated a shift from identity politics to issue politics as post-2003 sectarian mobilisation declined.

This analysis is shaped by distinguishing sectarian identity as a cultural identity involving beliefs and rites from sectarian identity as a political identity used to drive collective political action and create an inclusive discourse to unite the community and manipulate the symbolism of victimhood. This politicisation of sectarian cultural identity is similar, in some respects, to politicisation accompanying nationalism. It feeds on the notion of injustice and thrives on the idea of external danger threatening the community.

The notion of 'victimhood' or 'injustice' was a cornerstone of the sectarian sense of grievance that Shiʿa Islamist parties used for unity-building cohesion in post-2003 Iraq. However, the notion of 'victimhood' became increasingly irrelevant once power was seized. Such a tipping point sees the previous notion of 'victimhood' supplanted by the notion of 'majority rule', with the majority facing a perceived or actual threat from other communities. The notion of 'danger' assumes another dimension as well: the struggle for control of resources and their distribution, whether these are political, economic, social or cultural resources, held by a rentier state with a centrally managed economy.

As 'victimhood' goes out of fashion and the perceived external threat recedes, the politicisation of sectarian identity becomes less effective and rivalry sets in over the representation of each community – Shiʿa, Sunni or Kurd. This competition intensifies due to the existence of an electoral system working at two levels: nation-wide parliamentary elections and local provincial elections. Internal divisions form along social, class, political, ideological, local, clan or even personal lines.

The biggest divide within the Iraqi Shiʿa community may well be between the Iraqi 'insiders' – those like the Sadrist movement who remained in Iraq under the Baʿath – and the formerly exiled groups – the Daʿwa Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Adding to this divide is the rivalry between Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's seat of Shiʿa religious authority, Najaf, which has adopted the principle of rule by the will of the community and Grand Ayatollah Khomeini's school of religious authority based in Qom, which advocates rule by the jurisprudent. These rivalries within the Shiʿa community are sustained by divisions amongst political parties and clerical families. One example of this would be the tensions between the Hakim and Sadr families, with their separate religious organisations and urban following. This also played out in the Badr–Sadr political rivalries of 2007–8, between the Hakim-led ISCI and the Sadrist movement. Profound rivalries also existed in 2008–9 between former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr. In this competition, Maliki managed to fragment the Sadrist movement, leading to the rise of a new party and militia: Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH) or the League of the Righteous. In addition, the Badr Organisation, led by Hadi al-Amiri, left ISCI to form another separate organisation. All of these divisions had remained latent from 2003 to 2005 due to two factors: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's support for an all-Shiʿa united electoral front and the urgent need to consolidate the newly found power of the Shiʿa Islamic forces after regime change.

The wholesale fracturing of Shiʿa politics after 2005 is best demonstrated by examining the electoral blocs that competed to represent the community. A prime example of this would be the 2014 elections campaign. The campaign as a whole was characterised by escalating sectarian animosity, but also intra-communal or intra-ethnic conflicts. Over 9,000 candidates belonging to 277 entities contested the elections. Alliance-formation led to the creation of 36 electoral blocs vying for 328 parliamentary seats. The Shiʿa bloc fought the 2005 constitutional assembly elections and the parliamentary elections of the same year on a single list, that of the United Iraqi Alliance, backed by Ali al-Sistani. In the 2010 elections, the list split into two blocs. By the 2014 elections those seeking to represent the Shiʿa community further split into four blocs, in addition to 8 smaller groups.

Kurdish political groups followed a similar trajectory, going from one united bloc in 2005 to three in 2010 and four in 2014. In addition, a number of small groups represented ethnic minorities such as the Shabak people and the Yazidis.

The Sunni camp was, if anything, even more fragmented. In 2005, some Sunni groups boycotted the elections while others took part, with the Iraqi Islamic Party seeking to capture the votes of Sunnis. In 2010, the Sunnis rallied around a centrist coalition – the Iraqi List led by Ayad Allawi – which included both Shiʿa and Sunnis, winning the largest number of seats.

However, a concerted political and coercive assault on the Iraqi List and its leaders isolated its Shiʿa members of parliament (MPs) and undermined its unity. This led to the collapse of the Iraqi List into centrist factions on the one hand and strictly Sunni elements on the other. In the 2014 elections, a dozen groups contested the elections seeking the Sunni vote.

Social Movements

The best way to understand the Iraqi protest movement is to compare it to the social movements that developed during the 20th century in Europe, America and, in the last quarter of century, virtually throughout the world. These movements emerged in densely populated cities with widespread communications, that is, where mass society had flourished.

The July 2015 protests in Iraq gave birth to a social movement. It is the second of its kind, after the 25 February 2011 'Iraqi Spring' protests, which were brutally put down. The 2011 protests were unprecedented in terms of magnitude and momentum. The 2015 protests, however, came as the number of towns with a population of a million – or close to a million – increased. They also came at time when a new generation of mass communication tools and social media such as Facebook and Twitter came to dominate. The movement developed at a particular juncture in the country's crisis.

Compared to political parties, social movements look like a new departure in political mobilisation. They do not have a stable structure, established leadership or membership requirements. They have no associated branches accountable to a central decision-making

mechanism. The organisation of social movements is limited, at least in the beginning. However, they share with parties and pressure groups an ambition to attain specific goals; the overall aim remains to bring about cultural, economic, social or political change.

The significance of a social movement is that it is often capable of (1) imposing radical policy change if it is reformist, (2) overthrowing the government if it is revolutionary, or (3) shifting the balance of power and hence precipitating the downfall of ruling parties if it is radically reformist. While the movements that made up the so-called 'Arab Spring' belonged to the second type of social movement, the Iraqi protest movement belongs to the third type of radical reform.

The study of social movements in the 20th and 21st centuries tends to divide their activism into three or four phases: first, an evolution against a background of general discontent; second, a growing coherence and unity; third, the creation of a specialised machinery to regulate continuity; and fourth, an ultimate decline under the impact of success or suppression, or alternatively, a transformation into a more institutionalised organisation.

As this paper argues, the Iraqi protest movement that started in 2015 conforms to the classical social movement model. It began with the expression of discontent, then developed into the second phase of coherence before moving on to the third phase of producing a field leadership to manage its issue-focused fight through peaceful protest and negotiation, winning over, in the process, some state agencies, and neutralising others. Finally, in early 2016, the movement entered the fourth phase by institutionalising itself as it held its first conference and adopted a plan of action.

Social movements do not grow in a vacuum. They are the product of specific social, political and economic conditions, or a combination of conditions that cause general discontent, frustration and even desperation, thus generating a feeling that a rational response is need to totally irrational conditions.

Political and Social Climate: Power Monopolisation, the Fall of Mosul and the Collapse of Oil Prices

The current context of the Iraqi protest movement dates back to the building of a new state in 2003. The emerging political system was the outcome of a conflict between three separate plans for regime change: the US plan to build a federal, free market democracy of the type commonly known in advanced industrial countries; the fundamentalist Shiʿa plan to install governance of the jurisprudent based on Shiʿa-majority rule; and the Baʿathist–Islamist plan for a return to power, in some form, of the former ruling party. None of these plans prevailed. The end product was a freak mishmash, the outcome of an ethnic and sectarian struggle for power and resources. The notion of Iraqi nationalism gave way to rising sub-national identities, the basis of political Islamist movements on both sides of the sectarian divide.

During the 2005 elections, political blocs representing the Kurds and the Shiʿas were formed, while Sunni factions boycotted the process, instead opting for violence. The marriage of convenience between the Shiʿas and the Kurds resulted in the marginalisation of centrist moderates and the exclusion of the Sunnis during the drafting of the new constitution. Several American actors, such as US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad and Commander of the Multi-National Force, General David Petraeus sought to repair this flaw in the state political structure. However, these efforts at reform took place in the midst of violent civil strife. They succeeded in dampening down the conflict and isolating militant Islamist Sunni groups but they only acted as stop-gap measures. They ultimately failed due to deliberate exclusivist policies pursued by the Nouri al-Maliki government during his second term (2010–14), especially following the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011.

Maliki ran an overcentralised government, countering both the newly established decentralised federal system and the multi-party communal governing coalitions based on consensus. His government antagonised not only the Kurds but all provincial governments, including the nine predominantly Shiʿa provinces run by the Daʿwa Party. Apart from clashing with the existing decentralised order, Maliki's monopolistic policy, aggravated by a narrow sectarian perspective, triggered further conflict with excluded forces in the Sunni provinces. It also caused conflict with Shiʿa forces like the Sadrist movement and the Supreme Islamic Council, amongst others. Prime Minister al-Maliki's reasoning was quite simple: the Shiʿa majority rules on behalf of Iraqis; the Daʿwa Party (leading the largest parliamentary bloc) rules on behalf of the Shiʿa community and its head, Nouri al-Maliki rules, on behalf of his party. Forces in the predominantly Sunni regions responded to al-Maliki's policy by sectarian entrenchment.

These tensions converged during three major events: the April 2014 elections; the humiliating defeat and the fall of Mosul in June 2014 coupled with al-Maliki's ouster; and the collapse of oil prices leaving the Iraqi state penniless.

During the 2014 al-Maliki was denied a third term, paying the price for alienating Kurds, Sunnis and some of his Shiʿa allies, namely the Sadrist movement and the Supreme Islamic Council. This opened a window of opportunity to repair the damage inflicted on the state during al-Maliki's two terms while deepening another older dimension, the further division of the sectarian factions in organisational and electoral terms. The result was a split in the Daʿwa Party and the State of Law Coalition between Nouri al-Maliki and the man who replaced him as Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi. A military duality was also created, with the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) by order of al-Maliki while he was still Prime Minister and the setting up of the Popular Mobilization Commission accountable directly to the current Prime Minister's Office.

This was accompanied by a worsening economic situation, triggered by the unexpected and dramatic fall in oil prices from over $100 per barrel to $40 and then to $32–30. State coffers were almost empty. Parliament did not approve the 2014 budget, giving the al-Maliki government a free hand to thoughtlessly squander government funds that were already

declining at a time when the government had to fund the war on IS. Moreover, the 2015 budget was drafted on the basis of a crude oil price assumption of $45 per barrel, which was not only wishful thinking but indicated an ignorance of world oil market realities and prospective trends.

Corruption and the Quota System

Criticism of the quota system, the post-2003 agreement assigning government ministries to political parties claiming to represent Iraq's different communities, is such a recurrent theme in the daily political discourse of every opponent or critic of government policy that it has lost much of its critical edge. However, it surged to the forefront of political debate following the fall of Mosul.

The quota system is usually associated with ethnicity and sectarianism, indicating the distribution of government positions and spoils among certain groups on communal, ethnic or even religious grounds. It allows representation at the highest levels of government with powerful positions and ministerial portfolios as a precondition in any multi-party governing coalition. Position and appointments all along the spectrum are also shared, from ministerial undersecretaries and advisers to the lower level in the civil service, with political parties dividing up all state institutions amongst themselves.

This has caused two problems. First, certain appointments and positions are the preserve of a certain party; for example, the presidency belongs to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the speakership of parliament, explicitly or surreptitiously, to the Iraqi Islamic Party and the premiership to the Da'wa Party, even when it was electorally enfeebled with only 15 MPs in 2005.

Secondly, quota sharing in other appointments is done according to two considerations: employing a Shi'a, a Sunni and a Kurd as advisers in every ministry. The party that runs a ministry then makes sure that within this sectarian quota system, the ministry is staffed with cronies, followers and relatives, with almost complete disregard for competence or merit. This has given rise to a popular demand for a government of 'technocrats'.

In the military and security agencies, the Da'wa Party (and to some extent the Badr Organisation) has secured a semi-monopoly on appointments to the posts of Defence and Interior Ministers. The Da'wa Party, through its members and followers, also established a firm grip on the defence and security budgets, including army salaries, military purchases, logistics and supplies.

This power sharing system, organised via a conventional quota system, is happening in a rentier state heavily dependent on oil exports, which account for 93 percent of state revenues. This means the distribution of appointments is also a distribution of resources, all the more so as various ministries implemented government investment programmes, with funds, in the ten years of Da'wa Party rule between 2004 and 2014, accounting for 25–31 percent of the state budget.

Another way to siphon state funds is through overpricing government projects. According to documents provided to the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies from the Financial Control Committee of the Iraqi Parliament, government ministries had signed contracts to build 6,000 projects. However, 5,000 of those were fake or not implemented, with a total value of some $220 billion; an astronomic figure to be plundered.

Theft in the current budget expenditures takes the form of furniture purchases, cars bought for every minister which they kept after leaving office, travel expenses and training courses abroad, all providing an extra source of income for the high- and mid-ranking civil servants. The same applies to the military with commissions on army purchases. The government has refused to disclose the total value of arms contracts, claiming they are secret national security transactions. There are also some 50,000 non-existent ghost soldiers 'appointed' when Nouri al-Maliki was Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.

The 2014 budget may be the most corrupt. It was not approved by parliament and arbitrarily disbursed. The financial control bureau expressed its reservations over the expenditure, while the respective parliamentary committees refused to approve unfinished accounts.

It is a fact of Iraqi life that corruption is inseparably linked to the quota system. Each party covets a well-funded ministry that would offer a source of profit and an opportunity to employ followers, supporters and relatives. Each party sets a price for voting in favour of the government's proposed budget. Moreover, each party runs rackets in the ministries its controls and does not allow any individual employed as a general manager to be questioned in parliament, let alone any of its ministers. A network of complicity and collusion has been built between the parties to protect their plundering, creating an overlapping web of mutual cover ups.

In Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perception Index, Iraq ranked 170 out of 175 countries. The organisation reported on 7 May 2015 that 'the extent of public and private sector corruption has eroded public institutions, prevented effective basic service delivery and undermined state security'.

In everyday Iraqi usage, 'corruption' gradually evolved from a mere word into a political issue. The wealth of some stood in stark contrast to the squalour, woeful services and abject poverty of entire provinces or parts of some provinces, including Iraq's two most important cities, Baghdad and Basra. Broad sectors of the middle class, especially the new generation of educated young people, have come to clearly see the link between a deteriorating quality of life and financial corruption, as well as the link between corruption in the military and the collapse of the army in 2014.

Beginnings of Protest and the Movement's Growth

There had been earlier protests, notably the 'Iraqi Spring' in 2011, drawing crowds of more than 10,000 over several months under the slogan 'the people want to reform the system'. A disillusioned young generation rejected the government's sectarian character. The movement was met with harsh measures, including violence, arrests and murder after blocking all access to the square where the protest was held.

The 2015 action was different from all the previous post-2003 protests; it was neither sectoral (by workers, professionals or students) nor local (confined to a certain geographic area) nor factional (solely owned by a certain community or sect). It was an all-embracing protest against the entire political system as an institution, culture and practice.

Like other social movements in the Arab region and the world, the 2015 movement started as a simple protest against power outages in a locality north of Basra. In July, a group of young people who had gathered to protest in front of the power plant were fired upon and responded by throwing stones. 18-year-old Muntadhar Ali Ghani al-Hilifi was shot dead by a security patrol that rushed to the demonstration. Two others were seriously wounded on 16 July 2015. A massive demonstration took place in front of Basra city hall. Poor services were a nationwide concern, but were especially acute in Basra given the city's searing summer heat and the fact that Basra sits on some of Iraq's biggest oil fields.

By 31 July, Baghdad and central Iraq saw a massive protest movement launched in solidarity with Basra. While the Basra movement was spontaneous, the demonstrations in Baghdad were a combination of spontaneity and organised social activism. The movement grew geographically to include Hilla, Najaf, Karbala, Diwaniya, Kut, Amara and Nasiriya. It came to cover all the Shiʿa provinces as well as the two mixed provinces of Baghdad and Basra that have a Shiʿa majorities.

The movement also grew in terms of its strategy and demands. It evolved from a protest against woeful services to targeting corruption and demanding reform of the political system by doing away with the sectarian-ethnic quota arrangement and aspiring towards the creation of a secular state. Such shifts are not alien to radical social movements; they signify a switch from direct outrage to a maturity focusing on the root causes of the problem or issues motivating the protesters. Interaction between the movement's young activists and veteran participants, especially leaders of the February 2011 'Iraqi Spring', contributed to these shifts.

Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies' field researchers present at the demonstrations estimated the numbers of those present. For example, in Baghdad the movement grew from 50,000 on 31 July 2015, the first Friday protest, to huge crowds of around 200,000 crowds in mid-August. Some calculations suggest that rallies were attended by 700,000–800,000 by the third Friday. In early September, more than a million took part, when supporters of the Sadrist movement joined the protests. The numbers started to steadily decline in late 2015. By the start of 2016, frustration, hopelessness and protest fatigue crept into the movement, with the withdrawal of participants of various social and educational backgrounds.

Continuous demonstrations over five months was unprecedented in Iraq. Maintaining the protests every Friday, from scorching July to freezing January at the same pace, routinised the movement, which then tried to reinvent itself by developing new forms of action, including sit-ins in front of Parliament, the Baghdad City Hall and the headquarters of the Judicial Council.

A remarkable aspect of the protests was the use of secular aesthetic festive forms as opposed to the prudish ceremonies of the ruling Islamist parties. The 2011 'Iraqi Spring' demonstration was preceded by the Valentine's Day celebratory demonstration. The 2015 protest demonstrations culminated in a huge New Year's eve party ever with millions taking to the streets. This unprecedented massive celebration of a non-Muslim anniversary was the expression of a relatively silent majority's aspirations. Taking to the streets and elevating the private domestic party to a mass festival is a sign of new, distinct cultural attitudes amongst most layers of the middle-class as opposed to the ruling elites' mentality.

The Art of Protest

The Iraqi protest movement's ideological positions, political orientations and core demands have been symbolically expressed through banners, flags and sometimes signs, as well as slogans and posters. These spawn a rich material that can be referred to as 'the art of protest'. The recurrent themes can be classified in the following critiques: corruption; political Islam; sectarianism; the executive branch; the judiciary and also specific sectoral demands (wages, salaries, services, tribute to the fallen protesters).

These themes converged in a public space asserting Iraqi national identity, which is the prime theme. Indeed, the Iraqi flag featured most prominently in the protest squares as a symbol of an inclusive national identity in contrast to sectarianism, which is the cornerstone in the thought and practice of the Iraqi political Islamist parties. Representatives of the protest movement insisted that none other than the Iraqi flag could be raised.

Overlooking the Iraqi flags waved by the demonstrators in Tahrir Square is the late artist Jawad Salim's gigantic sculpture, the Liberty Monument, which has become a visual inclusive symbol of the Iraqi protest movement. An artist, Hazim al-Mali, combined the flag with an image of the monument replacing the words 'God is great' inscribed in the middle bar of the official Iraqi flag. It was an expression of new hope.

The movement's assertion of Iraqi national identity is an implicit critique of sectarianism. It is unity in citizenship versus division in religion and sect. One protest banner read: 'I am Sunni but against sectarianism; I am Shi'a but against sectarianism; I am Yezidi but against sectarianism'. Another read: 'No to sectarianism, no to sectarian quota sharing, yes to citizenship'.

The protestors also called for a 'civil state'; the separation of religion and state, to prevent the manipulation of religion for political ends. This has been and remains one of the most powerful and lasting themes. The plunder of public funds was the most profound

and recurrent theme featured in slogans, songs and jokes that sometimes deploy black humour. The slogans range from direct condemnation of corruption to mocking songs about stealing Iraq's oil.

General outrage exists across Iraq but each province had its own way of showing it. Singers, youth groups and folk poets got together to produce what may be called 'the art or etiquette of protest' inspired by the Basra form of protest. This art is found in works of music and poetry, as jokes or in cartoons. If it is true that mocking a ruler is the beginning of a revolt, then mocking politicised religion, on both sides of the divide, is the precursor of rebellion against those who politicise it.

Protest and Religious Authorities: Shiʿa Encouragement and Sunni Caution

Senior clergymen in Najaf were aware of the rampant financial and administrative corruption, the humiliating defeats suffered by the army, the stalled political process and the intensifying strife amongst various communities and factions. They have levelled severe criticism against Nouri al-Maliki and his policies, as demonstrated by the famous *fatwa* that was crucial in denying him a third term. Clerics usually do not make public statements but their views reach the people through trusted representatives, most prominent of whom is Ahmed al-Safi in Karbala. The political themes in the sermons delivered by those representatives are highly critical of corruption, poor services and the quota system. These issues are similar to the ones advanced by campaigners on the eve of the protests.

From the start of the movement until early 2016 the clerics in Najaf had unequivocally supported the demonstrators' demands and urged the government to reform, unless they wanted to risk a 'sweeping upheaval' – the same fear voiced by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. However, the Najaf clergymen, or at least those close to them, were sceptical of some slogans that seemed directed against religion and, by extension, against the clergy themselves. The slogan 'in the name of religion we were robbed by thieves' could be interpreted as being anti-religion. Such interpretations were not rare. The high religious authorities were even more sceptical about the slogans demanding a secular or a 'civil' state.

Indeed, when young Najaf seminary students tried to join demonstrations in Baghdad, they were stopped by protesters. Despite sharing the same demands for reform and combating corruption, mutual mistrust deepened. However, some students in Najaf remained sympathetic to the civil demonstrations and the claim that political Islam had proved to be a failure.

As the protests peaked, it became clear that there was a gap between the movement and the clergy, and that the former could not move forward without support from within the religious and political establishment. A tendency emerged in the movement in favour of reaching out and talking with the clerics to clear any misunderstandings and explore opportunities for cooperation. Meetings were held between leading figures of the protest

movement and Shiʿa clerics, resulting in agreement on the need to maintain the protests and step up pressure on an indecisive and frightened government. The clerics even pledged to advocate nationalist ideals as a way out of sectarianism.

In contrast, there was no response from any Sunni religious authority. Indeed, figures from the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Sunni Fiqh Academy made it known that participation by Sunnis in the protest movement would be perilous should a Sunni demonstrator be arrested. Caution was the key word, not only among Sunni clerics but among broad urban Sunni sectors in Baghdad. The field survey carried out by the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, put four questions to more than 120 Sunnis from various social backgrounds, education levels and districts . It found that an overwhelming majority did not take part in protests. When asked why, 43 percent cited fear of arrest on terrorism charges. When asked if they supported the protesters' demands, however, 79 percent said yes. Finally, 87 percent were prepared to demonstrate against corruption in the Sunni provinces.

Such a passive attitude, was conspicuous in Baghdad and Basra, the only two mixed provinces, and hence may not reflect the general sentiment in Sunni provinces. However, the inhabitants of these provinces have mostly become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) anxious to return to their homes. They believe that had it not been for IS, the protest movement would have spread from Basra to Mosul in what they described as 'Iraqis united against a corrupt state'. They pointed to demonstrations by the Kurds against their regional government as an example showing that protest does not belong to a certain community or group but is a nationwide phenomenon. If true, Sunni abstention from the Baghdad protests was due to fear of perceived or real persecution rather than disagreement with the protest movement.

Protests against Government and Parliament

When protests broke out in Basra in mid-July 2015 and campaigners in Baghdad declared they were preparing to stage a protest demonstration later that month, the Prime Minister's Office was profoundly concerned, seeking earnestly to pacify the protesters. The Governor of Basra was told to visit the family of the killed young man, and attempt to pay blood money to his family as compensation. Al-Abadi was the target of a ferocious assault by Nouri al-Maliki's supporters, accusing him of being weak, hesitant and even powerless. Demands to dissolve Parliament and calls for new elections were made. Al-Abadi was worried that the demonstrations would further weaken him. At that time, he had not yet decided to make use of the movement against his opponents.

The official stance on the upsurge in demonstrations was torn between endorsing the freedom of assembly guaranteed by the Constitution and concern that it would spread beyond the government's ability to control it. Al-Abadi and his aides decided to pursue an understanding with the demonstration organisers on one hand while taking wide-scale military and security precautions on the other. This approach turned the demonstration site in central Baghdad and the bridges leading to it into barracks. The troops cordoning

the crowd certainly offered them water as a gesture of goodwill, but they were, at the same time, blocking bridges over the Tigris to prevent others across the river from joining.

The sheer size of the crowds involved, growing protests in Baghdad, Najaf and Basra and across the southern provinces, and the Najaf clergymen's keen support, encouraged al-Abadi, notorious for his ambivalence, to seize the chance to neutralise his more dangerous opponents. On 9 August, after the second Friday demonstration, al-Abadi launched a reform programme. The programme aimed to fight corruption, improve services, tackle the inflated state bureaucracy, and implement administrative changes. Most significant was the decision to eliminate several high-ranking posts, including those of Vice-Presidents and Deputy Prime Ministers. The move was designed to force al-Maliki to step down from his position as Vice-President. On 13 August 2015, two days after they were announced, Parliament approved the reforms in unanimity unseen before, highlighting the MPs's fear of the angry protesters as well as their sense of helplessness.

Although al-Abadi's reforms met most of the protesters' major demands, they had no timeline for implementation. Moreover, they depended on executive powers that could be granted or denied by Parliament. Al-Abadi maintained his contacts with the leaders of the protest movement, expressing his support and complaining that public finances were in a dire condition. Extensive social media coverage of the meetings showed the protest leaders pressing for speedy implementation and al-Abadi blaming various obstacles for the delays. The resulting impression was that of a Prime Minister irresolute in his commitment to building a foundation for reform. He did not move to create a parliamentary bloc to back the reforms, nor did he try to bring to account those suspected of siphoning off public funds. He also did not urge the Supreme Judiciary Council to initiate legal proceedings against corruption, nor did he strengthen his position inside the Da'wa Party itself.

After he announced the reform package, al-Abadi's popularity skyrocketed as he was seen as a man of change, fighting corrupt fat cats inside and outside his party. According to a Gallup poll, his approval rating jumped to 72 percent before it plummeted to 46 percent. Procrastination and delay shifted popular sentiment from praise for and faith in al-Abadi to criticism and mistrust, which may explain the sharp drop in his ratings. The general tendency observed at the protest sites was an increasing rejection of the state as an institution. Al-Abadi and his faction in the Da'wa Party seemed to be completely reliant on success on the battlefield against IS, specifically the recapture of Fallujah and the fight to recapture Mosul. They were counting on military success to bolster their position against opponents rather than creating a pro-reform parliamentary group to weaken their opponents by going after corrupt politicians. This may well be because some of the corrupt officials are members of factions within his own party or are allied with pro-Abadi factions; he wouldn't know where to begin and who to begin with.

Protest and Leaders of the Rightist Factions: Confrontation or Riding the Wave

In contrast to the Najaf clergymen, political Islamist factions, opposed or cooperating with al-Abadi, have attacked the mass movement. The protest movement came at a critical time for the divided Shiʿa factions, some rallying around al-Abadi, the army and al-Sistani while others siding with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the PMF and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei. The intra-Shiʿa division is not a simple binary split. It is more complex and multilateral. The many groups approached the protest movements in four different ways: explicit support, soft accommodation, confrontation and attempts at containment.

The strongest support for the protest movement came from the senior clergymen in Najaf. The Sadrist movement also declared its unequivocal solidarity and its followers took to the streets in support, warning the government to carry out its reform plan. Mass participation by the Sadrist movement in the protests in Baghdad followed Muqtada al-Sadr's instruction.

Those seeking accommodation with the protest movement quietly engaged with it without offering full support. This was the stance taken by al-Abadi and the factions close to him. Antagonistic opposition to the protest movement was led by Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis. Qais al-Khazali's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a splinter group of the Sadrist movement, was in favour of containment through participation in the protests.

Since the early weeks of the movement, Nouri al-Maliki made strident statements about the need to 'police the protests and control the demonstrations' implicitly criticising the government's 'soft handling' of the demonstrations. He was calling for the suppression of the demonstrations, similarly to what he did in 2011.

The charge that the protest movement played into the hands of IS was designed to deny it further popular support and split its ranks. The popular interest in the movement's actions had further grown, denying commanders of the PMF their previously semi-permanent presence on television or social media. More importantly, Shiʿa communal identity was no longer identified with Shiʿa political leaders. However, the protesters were forced to put up slogans glorifying the PMF and viewing the fight against corruption as complimentary to the fight against IS rather than clashing with it. Most of the young protest leaders, some of them belonging to a creative elite of writers, poets and journalists, mocked 'the conspiracy theory' and its advocates.

On top of these conspicuous tensions, leaders of the PMF and al-Maliki's faction maintained their outspoken positions against the demonstrations. The al-Maliki camp upheld the PMF as sacrosanct, attacking any move perceived as detracting from the fight against IS. They saw the protest movement as a threat to the Popular Movement's operations, commanders and their political future.

The Social and Ideological Structure of the Movement

According to our surveys, the protest movement is mostly based on the lower and middle layers of modern middle-class, with high or intermediate education, those whose trade is knowledge and information. They are providers of knowledge as opposed to sellers of material commodities. In terms of income, those protestors may be divided into two groups: the majority have a monthly income of between 500,000 and one million Iraqi dollars. The other smaller part is made up of people with a monthly income of 1–2 million Iraqi dinars.

In terms of age, the under 30s form the backbone of the movement accounting for some 60 percent. This age groups makes up 67 percent of the population. The upward social mobility of these age groups depends in Iraq, as in most Arab countries, on the public sector for jobs and promotion. They share with other social groups their dependence on public services provided by the state but they distinguish themselves from older generations by their familiarity with modern global liberal culture and their technical aptitude with social media. Moreover, this group is marked by its members' strong interest in modern world arts and culture and their keen openness to the world.

Most under-30 Iraqis, especially the 20–25 age group (who were 8–13 years old in 2003), have not come into contact with any coherent secular ideology. They have essentially been raised after the end of the influence of the big populist ideologies of the second half of the 20th century. This is in contrast with the veterans in the protest movement (the over 50-year-olds) who have leftist, pan-Arabist and Islamist backgrounds. The new generation has been exposed, however, to Islamist influences in sectarian forms following 2003. Civil strife, the drudgery of daily life and a lack of social mobility have made this hostile to party politics continuing unchanged.

This dominant demographic is remarkably under-represented in the leading bodies of the protest movement. This is expected, given the inexperience of youth. There are different undercurrents driving the protest movement: a rational, realist, peaceful and incremental tendency, solidified by the veterans; a militant uncompromising tendency (existing among the young); and a nihilistic institution-hating tendency opposed to the state and to parties as whole in a kind of sweeping deconstructive rejection. The peaceful rational tendency is the strongest as shown by the over 80 percent in favour of continuing the protests by peaceful means, according to polling carried out by the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies.

This polling also showed that the dominant view advocated pushing for reform now, giving it the same priority as fighting terrorism, as opposed to giving priority to fighting terrorism and implementing reforms later. This indicates that the rightist and centrist factions in the central government were unable to impose their view. The tactic of using external danger as a tool unifying the masses behind the ruling elite lost its effectiveness.

The polling also indicated that there was a discernible liberal secular tendency rationally opposed to the Islamist parties' ideology as sectarian and divisive. Supporters of these ideas were deeply suspicious of anyone wearing a turban and hold the religious establishment

responsible for the rise of Islamist parties. However, this tendency is limited in scope and influence. Women have had a remarkable presence in qualitative terms in the protests but limited quantitatively (they make up only 14 percent of participants in the protests). Views among women were, more or less, similar to those of men in regards to maintaining the movement and its peacefulness.

Finally, tendencies towards politicisation can be detected in the protest movement. The views favouring the formation of an electoral machiner are not popular; they are the weakest among the movement's leading bodies, especially the young leaders. This is despite the strong argument that launching such a forum will probably bring about a shift in the balance of powers in Parliament. Thus, the tendency to continue as an independent social movement is stronger than calls for transforming it into a parliamentary force.

Conclusion

The protest movement was driven by a kind of national consensus throughout the middle and southern provinces of Iraq that led to massive popular participation. It has developed from protest against poor services to demands to bring the entire government to account, linking woefully sub-standard services to political corruption and the quota system grounded in religion. The movement has generated momentum, heralding a new mobilisation against political Islam that has been building in Iraq since 2005 in favour of a radically reformed political system. The protest movement has proved that it has the potential to prevent politicians from manipulating communal identity to cover their political, administrative, service, security and economic failures.

In this context, the mass movement has taken shape as a non-ideological campaign shifting from the mere venting of anger to a more mature cohesion, producing field leaders who have eventually institutionalised the movement by setting up a standing coordinating council. The movement has thus followed a comparable evolution to modern social movements elsewhere. New methods have been developed to sustain the movement, starting with a drive to collect one million signatures to demand reform.

On the other side, division has further deepened within Shiʿa forces, between a centrist faction shuffling its feet (led by al-Abadi), a faction supporting the movement (the Sadrists and intellectual defectors from other Shiʿa parties) and a right-wing faction bent on putting down the movement by outright violence.

The protest movement is a tipping point in the thinking of broad sectors of the young, middle-class generation across the sectarian divide. It seeks to base politics on performance, competence and honesty. In this, it has the support of both Shiʿa clerics and a broad spectrum of the population. It is winning over politicians from an establishment riven by divisions and rivalry. The movement laid the ground work for a decisive break from the sectarian political space created after 2003 and exploited by politicians. If this trend takes root, it might strip the political Islamist parties of their ability to politicise communal identities unchallenged.

Appendix

Survey conducted in September–December 2015 in Baghdad and the Southern provinces of Amara, Nassiriya, Najaf, Karbala and Hilla. Sample under 3,000.

Composition of the Movement

Figure 1. Gender (in percent)

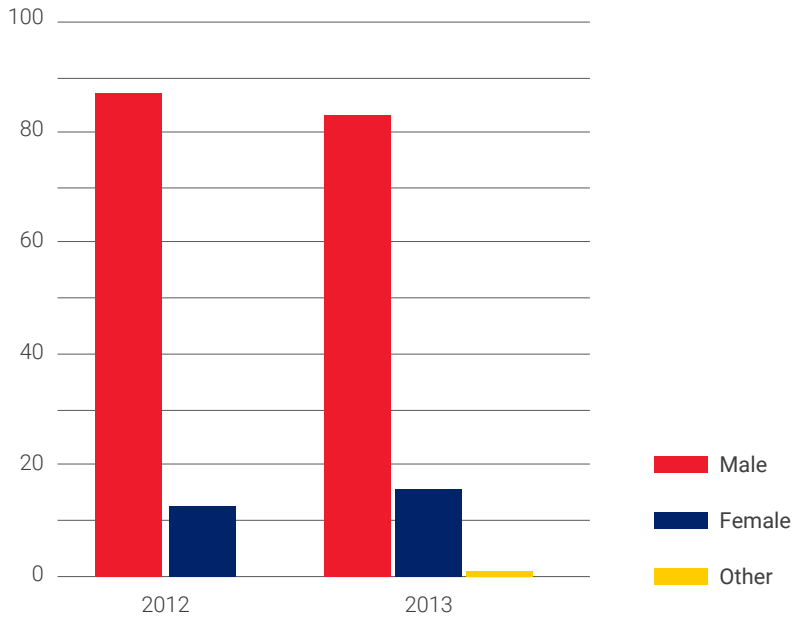


Figure 2. Age (in percent)

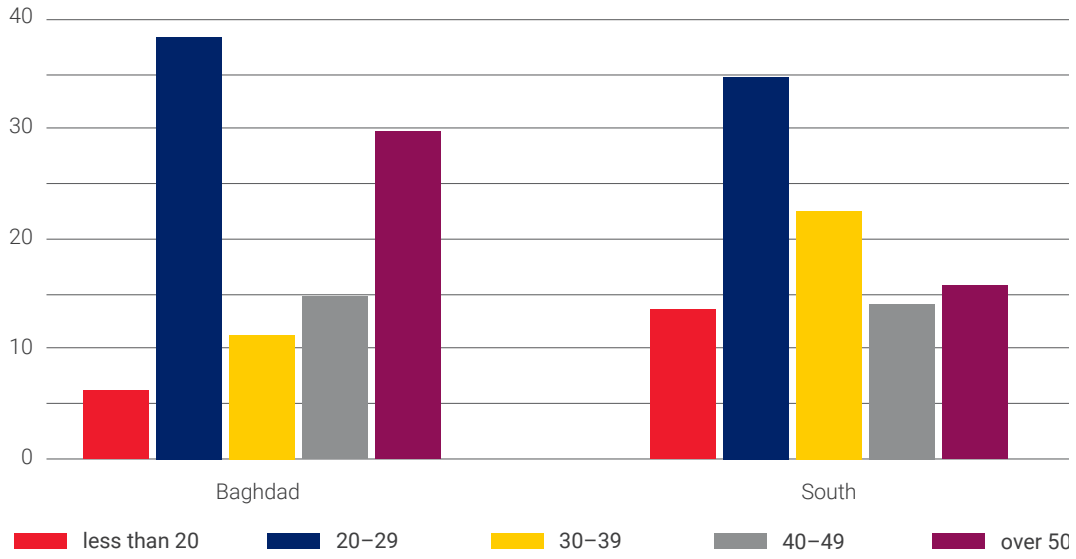


Figure 3. Education (in percent)

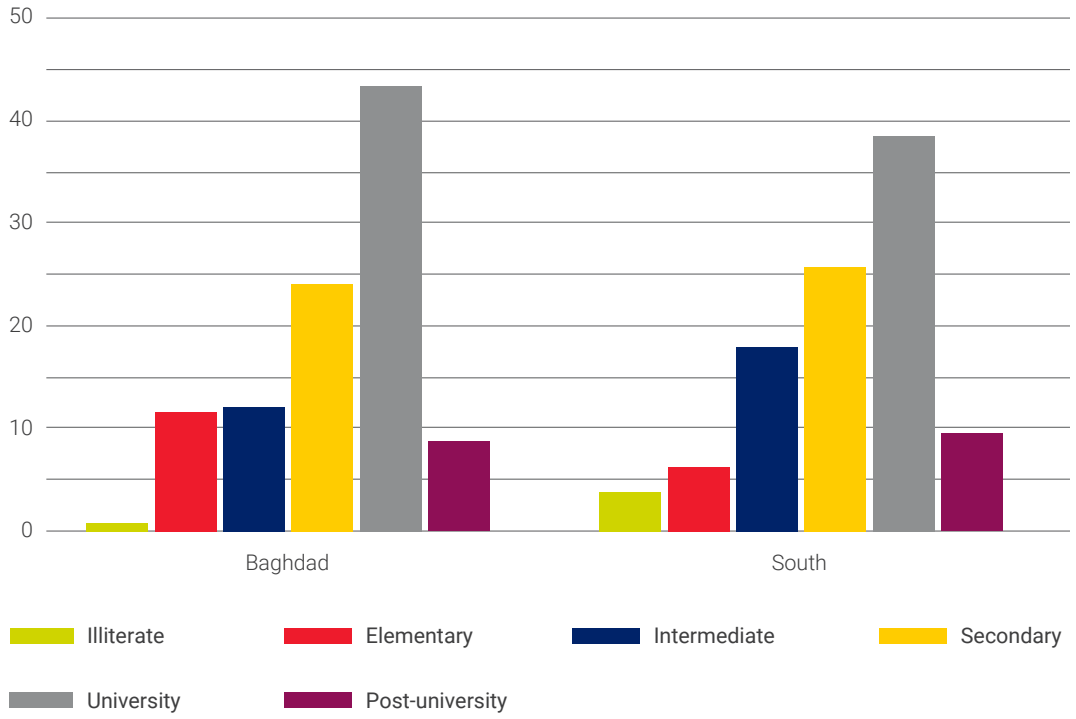
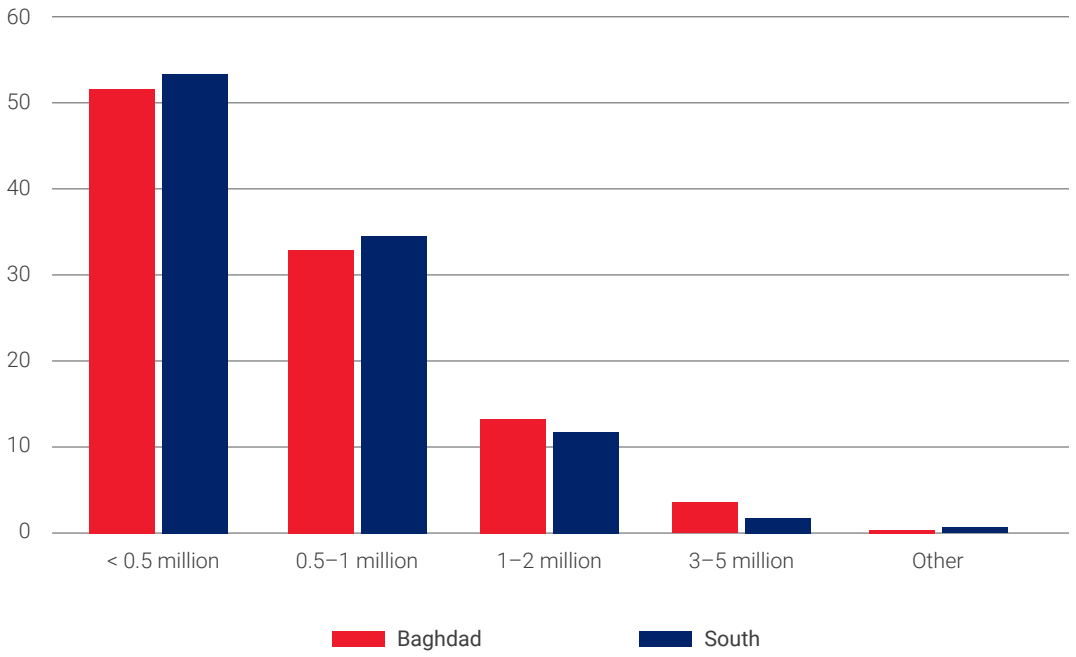


Figure 4. Monthly Income (in percent)



Attitudes

Figure 5. Frequency of Participation (in percent)

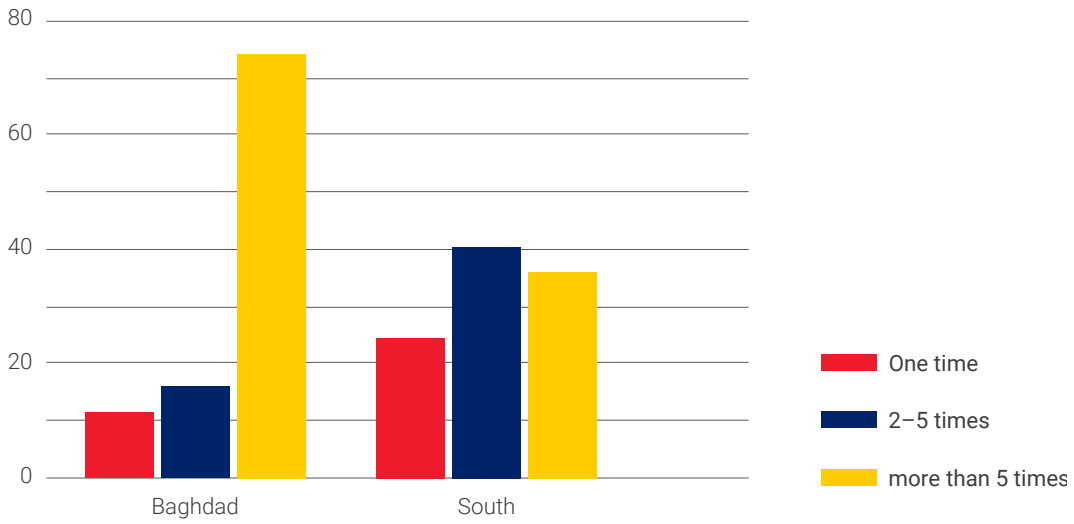


Figure 6. Readiness to Take Part in Future Demonstrations (in percent)

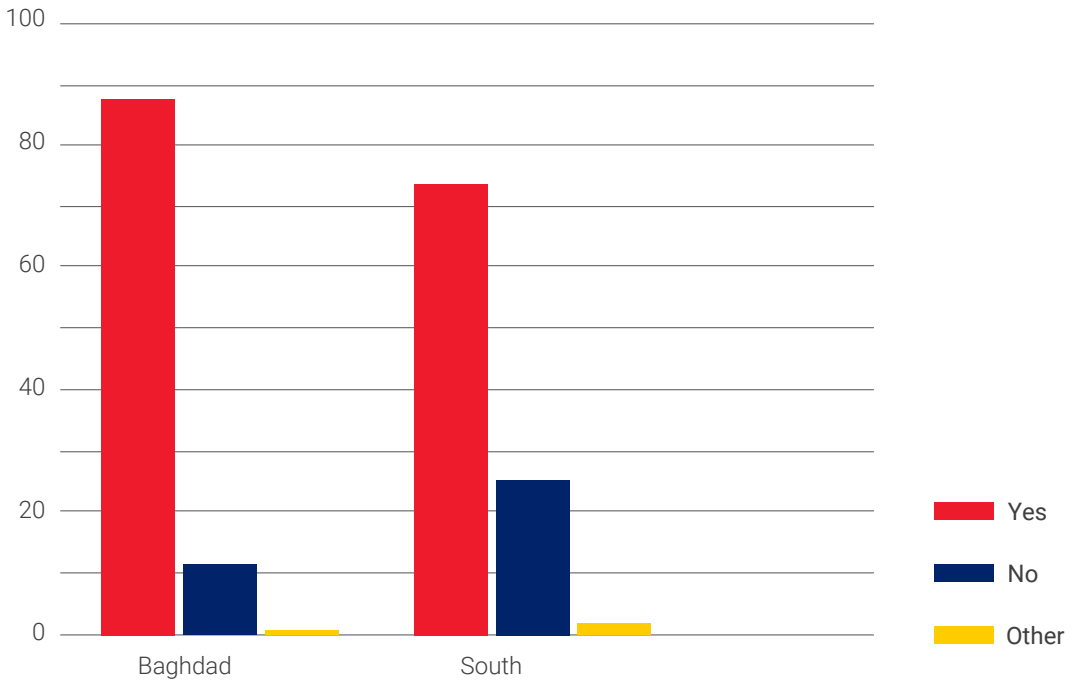


Figure 7. Do you support transforming the protest movement into a permanent platform? (in percent)

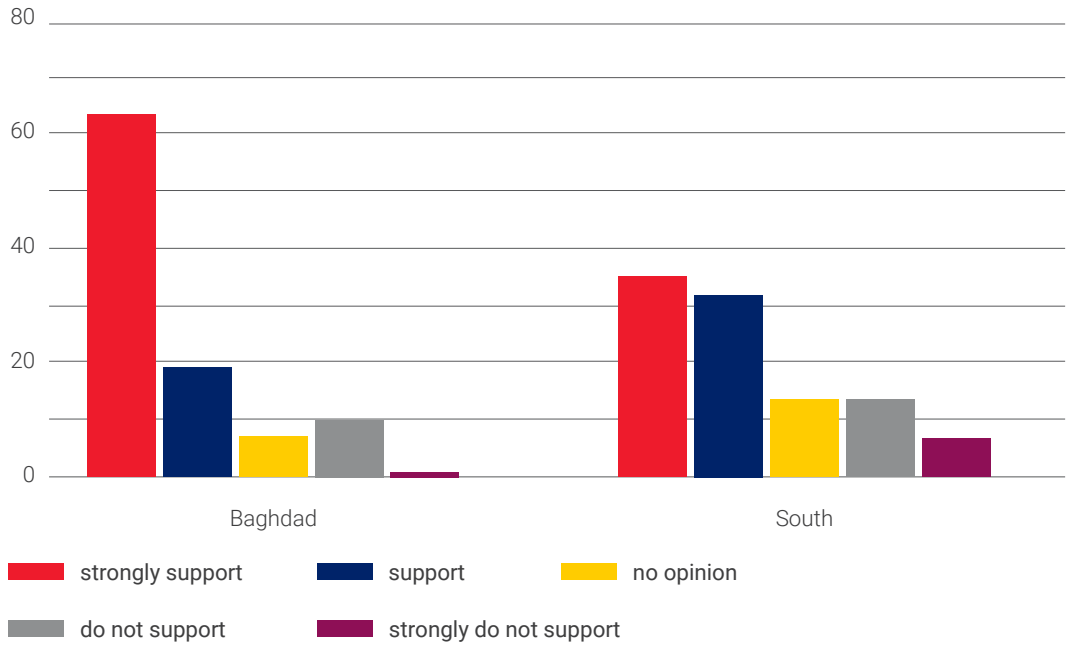


Figure 8. Do you agree that Abadi's plan for reform is earnest? (in percent)

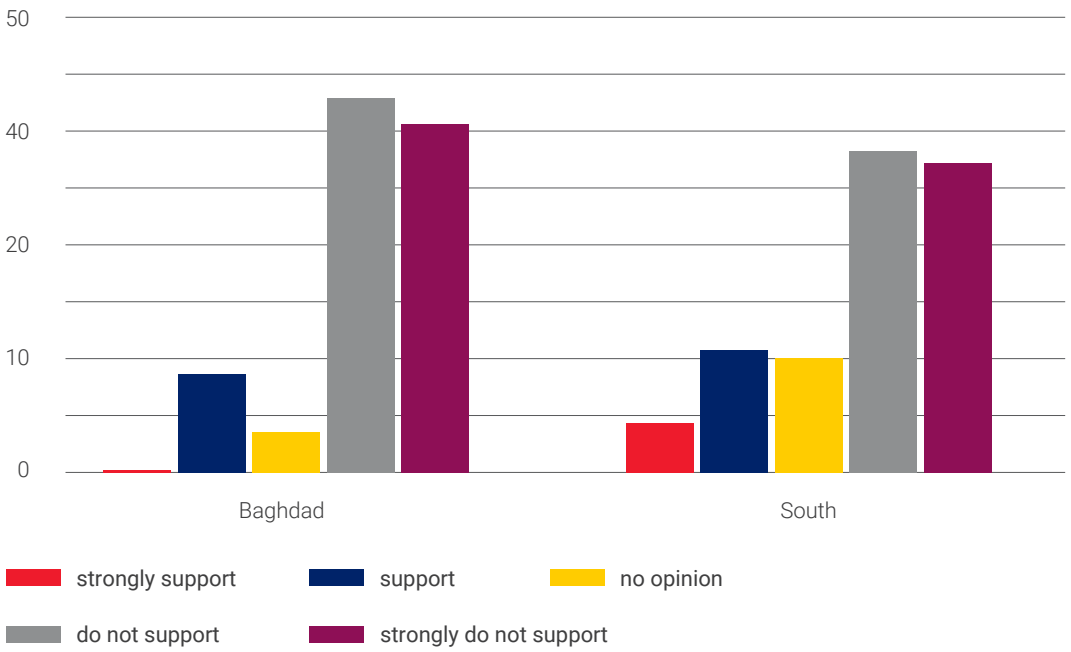


Figure 9. Do you call for the dissolution of the Higher Council Justice? (in percent)

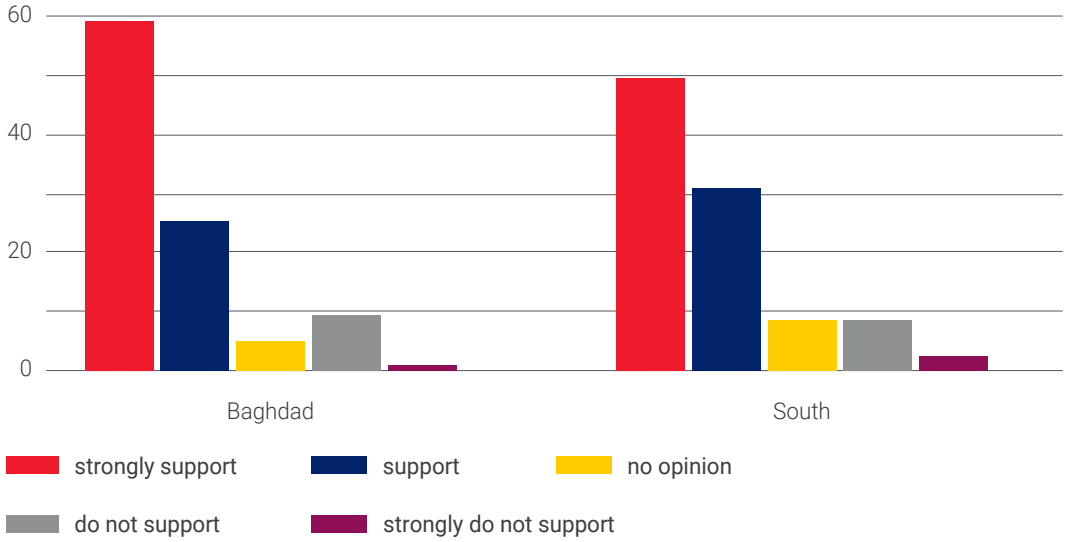


Figure 10. Do you call for the dissolution of Parliament? (in percent)

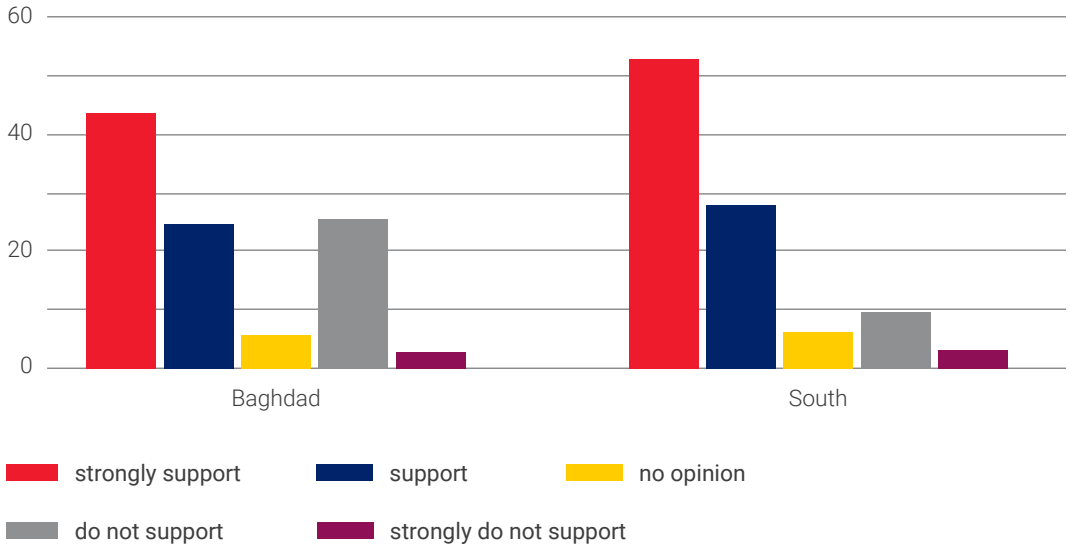


Figure 11. Which strategy would you choose? (in percent)

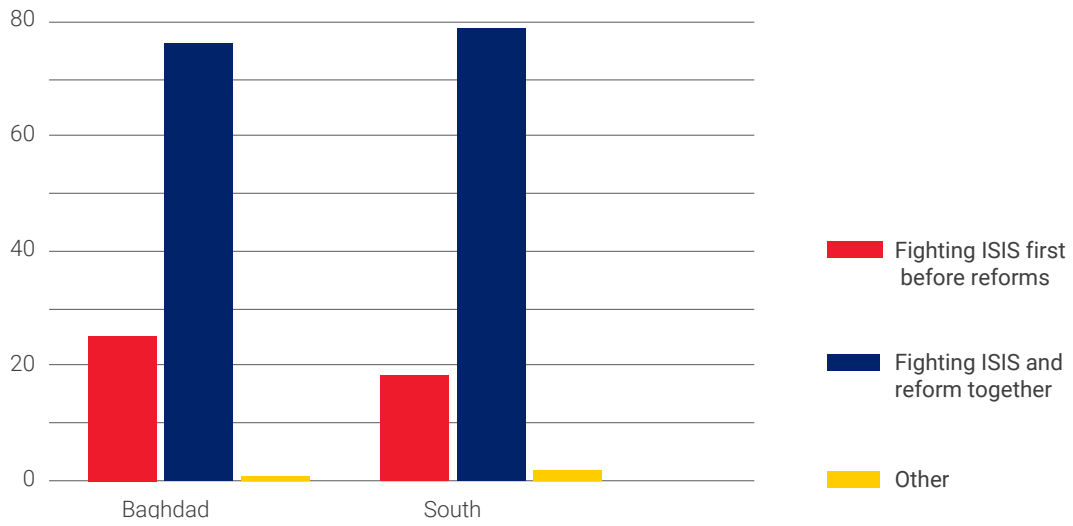
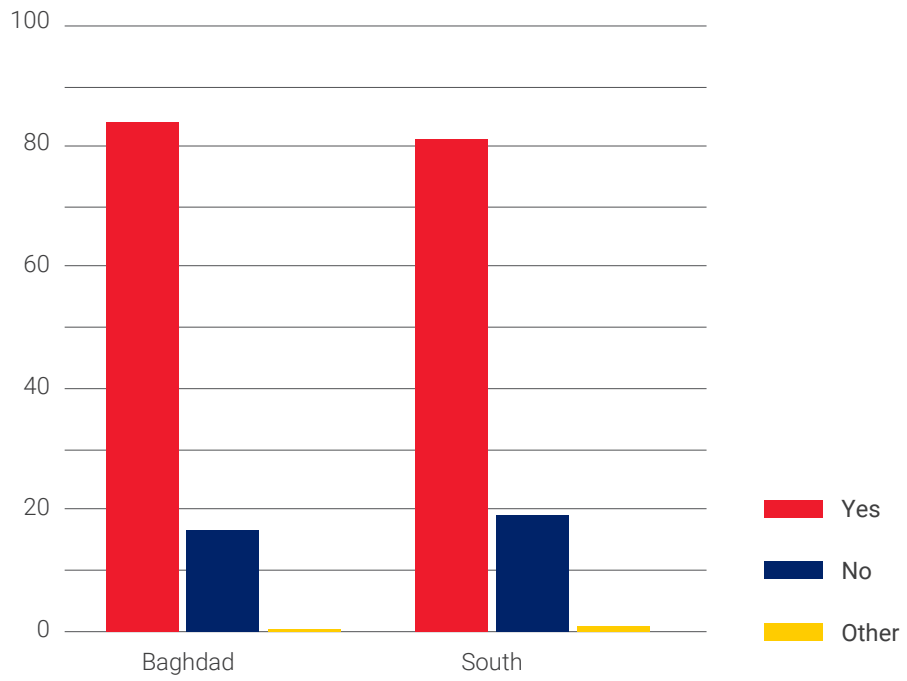



Figure 12. Did you vote in the previous general elections? (in percent)