

TEN YEARS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING POLITICAL AND SECURITY REFLECTIONS IN IRAQ

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March 2021



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1

Introduction: The Butterfly Effect

Nearly a decade after the Arab uprisings, the aftermath and repercussions of the movement continue to reshape the region. This exemplifies the “Butterfly Effect” principle, which is based on the theory that “any action, no matter how small it seems, may lead to much larger and unexpected outcomes.” The full impact of most events over the course of human history does not become clear until long after they occur, including radical changes in social, political, and economic structures.¹ This principle held true during what has become known as the “Arab Spring,” when young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in an act of protest against dire economic and social circumstances. Revolution broke out in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Years of authoritarianism, poor governance, economic inequality, corruption, and the looting of national resources contributed to citizens going out to the streets in 2010-2011 in an historical wave of national uprisings that called for dignity, equality, freedom, and social justice. In some

cases, this led to the overthrow of regimes, while others responded with reforms, and still other countries in the region descended into conflicts and wars that continue until this day.

Now that ten years have passed, we are faced with the central question: what are the consequences of this popular uprising, and what are its repercussions for the social, political, and security spheres?

Despite the initial optimism of the popular protests, they generated new conflicts and failed to resolve the underlying social and economic injustices that the people rose up against. Development has faltered in the wake of the Arab Spring. Some countries have been able to establish democratic regimes, such as Tunisia, while in Egypt the military coup of 2013 overthrew the elected government. Meanwhile, Libya, Syria, and Yemen found themselves in civil wars that quickly became international proxy wars. Ten years on, the state of affairs in the Middle East today seems worse than it was during the Arab Spring, with regard to worsening political oppression, slowing economic growth, unequal opportunities, and rampant corruption.

¹ Ahmad Mohamed Abu Zaid, “The Butterfly Effect: Iraq’s Occupation and the Arab Spring,” Arab Studies Institute, 7 April 2013, updated 6 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3k4yOPs>

According to Freedom House, freedom of the press declined in 18 of 21 countries in the Middle East between 2012 and 2017. This regional downturn was also reflected in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which showed that the Middle East and North Africa were still the worst-performing region with regard to all of the global indicators for democracy, such as civil liberties, electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political culture, and political participation. This was also accompanied by the erosion of development gains. In 2018, a report found that a fifth of the population of the Arab region—almost 65 million people—were living in “extreme poverty,” according to the World Bank definition (living on less than 1.90 US dollars per day). One third of the population of the Arab world are considered to be living in poverty.²

Nevertheless, something crucial has changed. Although the Arab Spring protests did not lead to the reforms that everyone had hoped for, it still fostered a culture of political action and opposition in the Arab world that continues until this day, especially among youth. Governments are no longer able to depend upon the submission of their citizens. Arab governments have traditionally relied upon what political scientists call the “authoritarian tradeoff” in which jobs, security, and social

services are provided in exchange for political loyalty. This tradeoff depends upon the people resigning themselves to the status quo, which is no longer a valid assumption. The government is no longer a boogeyman for its citizens; these days, ordinary people participate in political events in order to express their opposition—more than during any previous point in time.³ This was reaffirmed by the events of 2018-2019, during the second wave of the Arab protest movement, when new uprisings occurred in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. The main common dominator between these two waves was that most of the demonstrators were youth. More than 60 percent of the population of the Middle East is under 30, and they are angry and frustrated about unemployment and corruption.⁴ The social, political, and economic circumstances in 2018-2019 were similar to the first wave of the Arab Spring.⁵ Perhaps the Arab Spring has not fulfilled all its promises of immediate reform as had been hoped, but in the long term it may have achieved something more important: harnessing political energy and giving new life to the long process of political recovery in the Arab world. And Iraq was one of the countries that was most affected by this movement, its demands, and its repercussions.

² Maha Yahya, “From the Invasion of Iraq to the Arab Spring . . . Is the Arab World Headed Towards its Final Salvation?” (Originally published in *Foreign Affairs* as “The Middle East’s Lost Decade.”) Translated by Farah Essam for Al Jazeera, 31 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/37SibkT>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jeremy Bowen, “Arab Spring Uprisings of 2011 ‘haven’t been extinguished’ in spite of killings and repression,” BBC, 5 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-50671463>

⁵ Ferid Belhaj, “Ten Years after the Arab Spring, Avoiding Another Lost Decade,” The World Bank, 14 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/3bFwydJ>

2

The Domino Effect

If the Arab Spring could first be understood through the butterfly effect, we can now observe a kind of domino effect upon the political regimes of the region. Iraq finds itself caught amongst all of this, and has dealt with numerous political repercussions, both direct and indirect. This has cast a long shadow over Iraq's precarious situation and what it has endured with regard to political instability and a significant decline in the service sector. The popular movement has spurred many youth and civil society organizations, as well as some political groups, to go out to protest. This occurred at a time when the country was drowning in internal political conflicts as well as foreign interference, security problems, entrenched institutional corruption, and issues of poor governance.

When protests first broke out in 2011, they were limited to a particular geographic area and specific demands. This was followed by mass protests in Western Iraq between 2012 and 2013, with their own particular demands connected to marginalization, the political balance of power, detainees, and

governmental policy.⁶ However, larger-scale protests began in July 2015, and continued for years in Baghdad and in the central and southern governorates. The first wave of the Arab Spring was sparked after long decades of social and political suffering and a lack of freedom of expression in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. In Iraq, this took various forms: the growing sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008; ISIS terrorists taking control of significant parts of the northwest and western areas of the country in June 2014; the struggle to liberate these areas and the ensuing destruction in most of the western governorates; and the ineffectiveness of the political regime in responding to the people's legitimate demands.

All of this led to the protests of July 2018, during which political issues were not at the forefront of the protestors' demands. Instead, they were focused on corruption, unemployment, the lack of social services, and falling standard of living. Iraq has the fourth largest strategic

⁶ "Winds of Arab Spring Blow Through Iraq: Between Sectarianism and Political Conflict," Arab Center for Research and Studies, 29 December 2013, site accessed 18 February 2021. <http://www.acrseg.org/2294/bcrawl>

petroleum reserves in the world, while more than 22.5 percent of its population of almost 40 million people live on less than 60 dollars per month, according to the World Bank. One in six families in Iraq suffers from food insecurity. However, the exclusion of political demands did not last long, as protestors began to call for regime change, amending the constitution, early parliamentary elections, important political reforms, and other demands. These protests in early October 2019 were some of the largest and most significant protests that Iraq has witnessed.⁷ The most prominent of the protests took place in Liberation Square in Baghdad, although various governmental and non-governmental actors worked to suppress the protests, resulting in casualties and the liquidation of the protest's main leadership, whether by assassination, detention, or kidnapping. More than 490 protestors were killed in total, according to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq.⁸

These consecutive waves of protests were the result of policies dividing Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines which the political regime pursued after 2003, as well as dysfunctional state institutions, weak governance, rampant corruption, and increased regional and

international interference. The prevailing Iraqi policies have become more divisive over the last 18 years, and there are political disagreements, rival political aspirations, and enduring divisions within blocs formed around 2003 categories of identity. This has led to increasing factionalism and conflicts in order to reach consensus on key issues, and reduced Iraqi policy to its least common denominator—protecting the quota system which was built on nepotism and preserved the power and privileges of existing political parties. There was no shared vision among the political elites regarding how to best protect the status quo and respond to demands.⁹

The inability of consecutive governments and political elites to respond to specific demands at that time led to widening and more insistent protests, especially regarding calls for regime change. Time was not on the side of the ruling class, which had ignored the protestors' demands, marginalized their perspectives, and generally turned a blind eye. There was mounting anger both regarding this history of grievances as well as the current failure to respond to demands, which led protestors to challenge the foundations of the existing political process.

The Arab Spring also had other consequences and repercussions, including for example ethnic and sectarian divisions. There was an

⁷ Ihsan al-Faqih, "Where do Iraq's protests stand among the Arab Spring uprisings? (Political analysis): Arab countries, including Iraq, did not reject democracy as a form of governance; rather, they rejected cosmetic democracies," Anadolu Agency, Istanbul, 9 October, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZV7Y2T>.

⁸ "Protests in Iraq: Kidnapping, Torture, and Forced Disappearance after Ongoing Protests in Iraq," Special Report on Human Rights, third edition, UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), Baghdad, 23 May 2020, p. 2.

⁹ Raad al-Qadiri, "Will Al-Kadhimi Offer a Middle Ground to Reform the Broken Iraqi Regime?" Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 27 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2AKU6yQ>

increase in ethnic strife in all spheres of society and a corresponding decline in the value placed on a shared national identity. This meant that identities were defined according to these subgroups rather than national identity. Other groups used this against the central state, especially given the crises within the structures of the state, which emerged at the same time and gave the impression that the uprisings were the cause of those crises.¹⁰ The best example of this were the major tensions in September 2017 between the Kurdistan region in Iraq and the federal Iraqi government, after the Kurdistan region took unilateral steps to hold a referendum on the fate of the region and the Iraqi government subsequently imposed a number of punitive measures on the region.¹¹ Additionally, the escalation of demonstrable US and Iranian influence in Iraqi politics has made Iraq a prisoner of these interventions, and international and regional conflicts and balances of power.

10 Abd al-Qader Ahmed Nanaa, "Effects of the Arab Spring Revolutions on Separatist Conflicts," *Al-Sharq Future Center for Studies and Research*, 29 July 2017, <https://bit.ly/3dtEb9n>

11 "Inspiration for the Arab Spring between New Lines of Armed Conflict," In *A Summary of Human Rights Indicators in the Arab World*, Reform series (39), Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Tunisia, 2019. p. 35.

3

Security Implications and the Snowball Effect

One of the main repercussions of the Arab Spring for Iraq was the security consequences, which had a snowball effect on the country. In other words, this started as a small issue in 2011 but picked up steam and became a much larger and more pressing matter. Events escalated in June 2014 when ISIS occupied Mosul, with its ensuing ramifications for security.

The chaotic security situation affected Iraq's stance on developments happening in Arab Spring countries in general and in Syria in particular, especially given the connections among different terrorist organizations, their geographic proximity, and the similarities between Syria and Iraq's circumstances. This resulted in significant security upheavals. Iraq was unable to prevent armed terrorist organizations from moving between Iraq and Syria and joining together under a single organization (the Islamic State of Iraq) which later announced it had become ISIS. The civil war in Syria provided an arena in which ISIS could consolidate its power, as well a refuge for jihadist terrorist organizations.¹² ISIS took

control of part of Iraq in June 2014, declared an Islamic caliphate based in Mosul, and launched a war that caused destruction in the country.

After this, international and regional actors played a greater role in internal Iraqi security affairs, whether working to eliminate ISIS through international coalitions, or turning Iraq into an arena of regional and international conflict, especially as the two key players, the US and Iran, competed to impose their influence on Iraq and the region. This could be seen in Iraqi domestic affairs and in all levels of political, economic, social, and security matters. This ultimately led to the rise of many non-state actors in Iraq's security sphere, and their growing influence in controlling resources and power, as a result of the weakness of the government, which undermined the legitimacy of the state.¹³

In spite of the victory against ISIS in 2017, and the significant decline in the intensity of terrorist threats, Iraq is still unable to establish sustainable security backed by sound

¹² Muthanna Faiq Ubaydi and Iman Musa al-Nims, "Iraq and Algeria during the Arab Spring: A Comparative Study of Approaches and Implications," Beirut Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Beirut, 25 March 2015, <http://www.beirutme.com/?p=10123>.

¹³ World Bank Group, "Iraq: A Systematic Diagnostic Study of Iraq," Report no. IQ-112333, 3 February 2017, p. 1.

professional institutions, effective capabilities, and highly trained and specialized human resources. Furthermore, threat levels remain high. At the end of the report on the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, Iraq is ranked the second highest country for damages from terrorism: the report indicates that most terrorist attacks have targeted civilians, private property, security institutions, and economic institutions. Likewise, in the report on the 2020 Global Peace Index, Iraq ranked 161 out of 163 countries, falling one place from the previous year's index. The deteriorating security situation has resulted in major economic losses for the Iraqi state, which is confirmed by the Global Peace Index report. The report indicates that violence has resulted in economic losses amounting to up to 26 percent of Iraq's GDP, with estimated costs around 177.5 million dollars. Additionally, the report indicates that the arms budget in Iraq makes up 9.1 percent of its GDP, which reflects the enormous costs that Iraq has paid for its security situation, and which depleted and continues to deplete the state budget. On the other hand, Iraq was given 57 of 81 points in the Gallup's 2020 Global Law and Order index. This index aims to measure the capacity of state security and bureaucratic institutions in providing security, through a study carried out in 144 countries.¹⁴

In light of this, there are many questions that remain to be answered. After eighteen years of challenges and hard work, Iraq has established

defense, security, and intelligence institutions that involve more than 1.1 million people. These institutions and structures vary from the newly-established to older, restructured institutions. What are the capabilities and best utilization of such a large number of people? What level of security and defense can really be achieved, given the continuing threats from reemerging terrorist cells, non-state actors, members of organized crime groups? Iraq has also dealt with other manifestations of political violence, including anonymous assassinations, kidnapping operations and threats, and security crises that arise through resorting to tribe-based mechanisms that challenge the authority of central state and its laws. All of this demonstrates that current efforts and resources expended for building successful security and military institutions able carry out security operations without any external involvement or conditional foreign aid have been insufficient. There is no doubt that these divisions suggest that Iraq will remain a "fragile state," unable to protect its citizens, or provide the security necessary for a continued popular movement for economic and social causes, or for political participation and public satisfaction with the status quo. Therefore, we cannot say that Iraq has been successful or is even on the path towards success in building effective security institutions.¹⁵

¹⁴ Qasimi Abdel-Samia, "Iraq 2020: Report on the State of Iraq in International Reports," IFPMC-London, December 2020, <https://bit.ly/3e0OB0l>.

¹⁵ Ibrahim al-Abadi, "The Security and Military Apparatus in Iraq: Challenges and Difficulties," Position paper, Rewaq Baghdad Center for Public Policy, 9 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Y2RnJ9>.

4

Chain Reactions and Social Implications

The successive protests in the region in general, and in Iraq in particular, have had significant social consequences as a result of various compounding crises. These have caused chain reactions tied to the social precariousness that undermines quality of life and sustainable livelihoods in Iraq.¹⁶ Development indices also affirm this fragility: the 2020 global Human Development Report placed Iraq among countries with medium levels of human development. Iraq was ranked 123 out of 189 countries, after ranking 120 in the same report in 2019. Iraq also fell on the Human Development Index from 0.689 in 2019 to 0.674 in 2020.¹⁷ Additionally, the dominance of subgroup allegiances (before allegiance to the state) and the weakness of the rule of law and execution of justice has created an infrastructural deficit and continuing proliferation of problems, as well as a lack of social will or tools that could develop it. It has also produced greater fragmentation and tears in the social fabric, which has depleted the elements necessary for sustaining development. There have been higher levels

of multidimensional poverty resulting from these successive crises and armed conflicts, along with terrorism, violence, and internal displacement.¹⁸

In 2018, the Ministry of Planning in Iraq found that poverty rates had reached 20 percent. Although poverty rates had fallen from 22 percent in 2014, this showed that successive Iraqi governments had failed to act with sufficient haste to curtail this problem. Poverty rates have declined only marginally at the country level (less than 2 percent over the last four years). By contrast, poverty rates were under 15 percent in 2013.¹⁹ Even recent rates were not maintained for long: the Minister of Planning announced that in 2020, poverty rates had risen to 31.7 percent, or 11.4 million people.²⁰ This marked increase was caused by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), falling oil prices, and the pausing of most projects

¹⁶ National Development Plan 2018-2022, Ministry of Planning, Republic of Iraq, June 2018, p. 16.

¹⁷ See: Human Development Report 2019, UNDP, New York, 2019; Human Development Report 2020, UNDP, New York, 2020.

¹⁸ National Development Plan 2018-2022, p. 19.

¹⁹ "Ministry of Planning Announces Poverty Rates Have Fallen in Iraq," 16 February 2020, <https://mop.gov.iq/news/view/details?id=360>

²⁰ "Minister of Planning: According to a study carried out by the Ministry in cooperation with international bodies, the coronavirus pandemic caused poverty rates in Iraq to rise to 31.7 percent," 8 July 2020, https://mop.gov.iq/activities_minister/view/details?id=1216

across all economic sectors, which meant that many day laborers lost their source of income.

Additionally, the gender gap undermined the foundations of development, due to traditional stereotypes about women's roles as determined by a hegemonic patriarchal culture that is deeply entrenched in society. The continued inability of the state and society to integrate youth into public life or to offer adequate work opportunities has also threatened the foundations of societal stability and security. As a result of these circumstances, some young people have either emigrated or gone out to protest. Unemployment rates for people aged 15 and up were estimated at 10.8 percent (11.5 percent in cities compared to 8.8 percent in the countryside), while underemployment (working fewer than 35 hours per week) reached 28.2 percent.²¹

Likewise, internal displacement has produced compounding vulnerability (such as precarious groups that also experience displacement) as well as increased levels of terrorism, violence, forced displacement, and weak protective policies. The internal displacement of more than 4 million Iraqis due to different conflicts in the country, especially with ISIS, means that 11 percent of Iraqis have been internally displaced.²² The destabilization of human security and societal stability resulted in poverty rates for internally displaced persons climbing to 42 percent.²³ Likewise, internal displacement

led to many other repercussions as rates of social vulnerability climbed above 50 percent in 2016.²⁴ As a result of unemployment, poverty, begging, and living in camps unfit for human habitation, internally displaced persons have faced violence and social exclusion from those living in more developed areas. There have also been reports that internally displaced persons have faced many human rights violations, such as the exploitation of women, child labor, and insufficient access to education. Many internally displaced persons also suffer from the spread of infectious diseases in addition to psychological ailments. WHO reports indicate that the main psychological conditions among internally displaced persons are increasing rates of depression and PTSD, increased suicide rates in camps for displaced persons, and substance addiction.²⁵ There are also other repercussions from societal upheaval; after the ISIS threat was reduced, many governorates experienced other conflicts, whether sectarian conflict in Diyala, tribal conflict in Saladin, or ethnic conflict in Nineveh. The escalating tensions among tribes, sects, and ethnic groups, and concerns about ISIS's role have spawned new local conflicts. In many areas, armed groups or other residents have occupied the lands of internally displaced persons.²⁶

²¹ National Development Plan 2018-2022, p. 19.

²² World Bank Group, p. 1.

²³ National Development Plan 2018-2022, p. 15.

²⁴ National Development Plan 2018-2022, p. 19.

²⁵ Fahad Mizban Khazar al-Khazar, "Internal Displacement Crisis in Iraq after the June 2014 Occupation of Mosul: Causes and Sustainable Solutions," Special Issue on Conferences, *Midad al-Adab* magazine, Basra, 2018-2019, p. 77.

²⁶ Lahib Higel, "The Crisis of Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq: Security and Protection," *Ceasefire Center for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International*, United Kingdom, March 2016, p.24.

The loss of significant areas of Iraq to ISIS control for almost three years, expansion of incubators for extremism and terrorism, violence stemming from the conditions of occupation, and the social conditioning and study programs that children and youth in these regions were subjected to has had deep social and psychological repercussions that undermine the unity and cohesion of Iraq's social fabric. Education indicators at all levels have not yet seen qualitative progress, geographic distribution, or received the necessary infrastructural coverage. This, combined with the continued rise of illiteracy and dropout rates as well as the gender gap, threatens the educational system and prevents Iraq from keeping up with international developments in this field.²⁷ Dropout rates among displaced people in Iraq (i.e. those who left school because of their displacement) are estimated around 8.2 percent of all the displaced students in the country.²⁸

The population of Iraq has grown to 40 million people.²⁹ More than 60 percent of Iraqis are under 24 years of age, which means that there are 700,000 Iraqis ready to enter the workforce each year. The population of Iraq is increasing by one million people every year, which means an increasing demand for social and medical services and employment opportunities.³⁰ There have also been societal

factors regarding information technology and exposure to the broader world, which have made it difficult to contain the uprisings' social and economic demands and expectations. This is particularly true given the ineffective institutions of governance, which are unable to peacefully employ different sectors of society, especially youth, who make up the largest age bracket in the country.³¹

²⁷ National Development Plan 2018-2022, p. 19

²⁸ Fahad Mizban Khazar al-Khazar, "Internal Displacement Crisis," p. 73-76.

²⁹ "Ministry of Planning Announces State of the Population of Iraq in 2020," 12 January 2021, <https://mop.gov.iq/news/view/details?id=508>.

³⁰ Harith Hassan, "Iraq is Drowning in Violent Protests," Carnegie Middle East Center, 7 October 2019,

<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80002>.

³¹ "Inspiration for the Arab Spring," p. 10.

5

Conclusion

Despite Iraq's political, security, and social fragility, this brings into focus many of the challenges that need to be addressed, as well as which sectors require deeper reforms and should take priority. The protests provide a link between societal demands and expectations that the government will respond to them. Iraqis are counting upon political, social, and economic reforms that will coincide with efforts to diversify the economy, support investment, and address unemployment, as well as to restore security in order to allow for the return of economic activity, societal cohesion, and political democracy.

There is a need to reexamine structural imbalances, which will require difficult reforms and long-term adjustments, and therefore public support. Given the extent of popular protests against the political status quo, it is unlikely that this could happen without major political reform. The protests in Iraq are not only a fleeting phenomenon: they represent an historical turning point for a generation fed up with incompetent governance, politicized sectarianism, corruption, and social inequality.

As long as these problems persist in Iraqi society, so will the protests.

The most far-reaching effect of the Arab Spring movement in Iraq is the transformation of the people themselves to a vital and engaged element of society, whom politicians cannot ignore or put aside. As a result, the political process is no longer only concentrated in the hands of elites, whether political, religious, regional or international.

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