

# **Behind Events in Basra: Problems and Possible Solutions**

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## Introduction

Basra has always been a source of protests in Iraq. This was motivated at times by the people's sense of distinction and merit and at other times by the pressures that put them in opposition. Following the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Iraq declared the Hashemite Kingdom in 1921. When Faisal I was made king, Basra launched protests registering its rejection and opposition at the wish of its prominent citizens and elders, who aspired to secede and declare Basra an independent kingdom. There was shelling at that time, which denied the opposition its share of this governorate.

In 1931, the residents of Basra demonstrated against the compulsory recruitment law. Protests continued to break out on several occasions, up until the 1991 uprising in Basra that sparked the protests against Saddam's regime.

After 2003, protests became virtually chronic in the city, which was the primary source of political demands and issues. Basra launched key protests throughout the country to demand ration cards and the amendment of the constitution and the electoral system. They also protested the delay in the construction of Al-Faw port, the confiscation of land in Safwan in favor of Kuwait, the detention of Basra fishermen by Kuwait, the construction of the Kuwaiti port of Mubarak, Iran's occupation of the Fakka oil wells, and other grievances. The 2011 demonstrations calling for regime reform, prompted by the Arab Spring revolutions, also began in Basra. Shortly before the end of July 2015, a protest movement was launched in Basra due to lack of electricity. These were the first demonstrations combining a sharp sense of marginalization and oppression, where poverty was mixed with the readiness of the people to sacrifice.<sup>(1)</sup>

Thereafter, there has not been a single year of calm in this governorate, especially in the blazing summer months when people need electricity, the absence of which became one of the symbols of the failure of the Iraqi state after 2003.

Why did the protests in Basra become a chronic yearly event after 2003? What prevented the local and federal governments from finding a solution to Basra's deep-rooted problems? Who are the main actors in the Basra protests? What is the original nature of Basra's problems? What solutions do its people propose to overcome these problems?

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ali Taher Al-Hamoud, "The Sociology of Protests: A Reading of the Civil Protest Movement in Iraq after 31 July, 2015," *Political and International Journal*, (Mustansiriyah University, Volume 9, Issues 35 and 36, 2016), p. 705

## Methodology and theoretical approach

This paper follows an analytical survey approach, using the tools of direct interviews, field observations, and consultation of certain records and documents related to Basra. The interviews consisted of 22 meetings with Basra elites, including academics, media professionals, activists, tribal elders, and political officials in the governorate. In this paper and for the purposes of this study, the criteria for a “Basra resident” is anyone who was born in Basra and has lived there after 2003 to the present.

The interviews were carried out between 15/10/2018 and 30/10/2018, and included various questions seeking to explore the nature of the life challenges faced by Basra residents, the causes of the latest demonstrations in the governorate, and the solutions proposed by the elites.

In order to ensure diversity, the meetings guaranteed the inclusion of differing political and ideological currents, as well as economic classes, residential areas, and genders within the total meetings.

The present paper argues that a complex alliance between parties, clans, and armed factions prevents true radical reform in Basra’s politics and services. This complex alliance has controlled financial access and political power through quota mechanisms, thus imposing inefficiency in local government departments and squandering public funds.

## Basra: Rebellious city

As has happened every year since 2003, demonstrations and protests broke out in 2018, beginning in the city of Al-Midaina, near the oil fields – this time with jobs as their main demand.

These demonstrations had several aspects, including a call for the government to provide job opportunities, followed by an additional demand for electricity. Water contamination prompted a new demand for clean drinking water, after 90,000 citizens were poisoned and the media showed moving images of children and the elderly writhing in pain.

Another characteristic of the protests was that they were of a mostly youthful nature, unlike previous demonstrations in the governorate, where many swathes of society participated. Girls and young women played an unmistakable role in the protests, which Basra had not previously entrusted



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to them, such as providing the men with first aid, water, and masks. They also held special women's protests, especially in front of the provincial council.<sup>(2)</sup>

Perhaps the youthful nature of the protests also made them extremely emotional, prompting the protesters to act to survive. Severe violence by the demonstrators and excessive cruelty by the security forces were an important aspect of these demonstrations, which produced casualties not seen in the governorate since 1991.

A fact-finding report on Basra recorded 20 killed and 492 wounded between 1 July and 7 September, including 80 members of the security forces; an additional 425 people were arrested amid the protests. The report recorded the use of live ammunition, intentional killings (such as crushing the head of a protestor to death), torture of detainees, and kidnapping of activists from their homes at night.<sup>(3)</sup>

The use of excessive violence on the part of government agencies may be attributed to the fact that all the options that previously worked to crush protest movements have already been exhausted. Silence and procrastination were used, hoping that emotions would cool down, then promises to provide services and job opportunities were made, but to no avail. After all that, the government chose to use the maximum level of violence to quickly end the protests, especially since the protests had become part of the equation for political parties that had just emerged from the elections and were busy choosing a new prime minister.

The elites of Basra emphasized that the demonstrations were popular, born of hardship, and had no political entity behind them. Nevertheless, various parties, and even the federal government, sought to exploit the demonstrations and ride their wave to win points in the struggle over the formation of the new government.

Former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was forced to deal with the demonstrations by sending army units to Basra, which, according to numerous activists, provoked the demonstrators with their heavy arms and tanks. No one expected such a scene in democratic Iraq, where the constitution forbids using the army to suppress the people.

<sup>2</sup>For example, the demonstrations that took place on 10/9/2018. For more, see: <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/a/459192.html>

<sup>3</sup>Fact-finding report on Basra by a group of activists and investigative journalists, posted at this link: <https://bit.ly/2I67QHH>

## Basra: Who is responsible for its neglect?

Basra has long been known by names denoting its location: Pearl of the Gulf, City of Sinbad, and Venice of the East are historical names given to Basra for its many orchards and thousands of fresh waterways cutting through its fertile lands. However, service crises and pressure on Basra have not let up since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's and the invasion of Kuwait and its aftermath in the 1990's, up until the present day when wars and destruction continue to burden the city.

Although Basra is Iraq's only port, provides 80% of Iraq's oil budget, and contains the largest date palm groves in the world, neglect and confused administration have marked a watershed in Basra's service situation and put pressure on its people. Regarding their water supply, the people of Basra are no longer demanding drinking water, which has become an outdated dream, but have begun to demand water suitable for no more than washing.

Although Basra is bounded on both sides by two large rivers, the accessible water is very salty and polluted, and so 99.2% of residents are forced to buy bottled water for drinking. In comparison, in Nineveh only 0.2%, and in Irbil only 1.8% of the population uses bottled water.<sup>(4)</sup> In the summer of 2018, the levels of salinity and pollution reached a point that compelled the competent authorities to forbid the use of water for any human purpose, pointing out that it may be life-threatening.<sup>(5)</sup>

As of 3 September, reports have estimated that 90,000 people have been infected by poisoned water due to bacterial and chemical waste. Worse yet, official laboratories recorded that 60 out of 170 water pumping stations in Basra's public network had a chlorine level of zero, indicating an egregious failure to disinfect water provided to citizens for consumption.<sup>(6)</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ongoing Social and Economic Survey (semi-annual) for 2014, Directorate of Living Conditions Statistics - Central Statistical Organization, pp. 6667-.

<sup>5</sup> We obtained an internal document issued by the Ministry of Environment - Technical Agent - Central Environmental Laboratory, signed on 16/10/2018, indicating the results of the water inspection in Basra, which showed that this water recorded very high concentrations, exceeding the recommended specifications, and could be deadly when drunk directly. The document recommends that the use of this water for human and daily purposes be strictly prohibited; however, the authorities did not make such a warning to citizens.

<sup>6</sup> Fact-finding report on Basra by a group of activists and investigative journalists, op. cit.

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Basra officials have noted that basic services (infrastructure) are among the duties of the federal government, but the competent ministries have been unable to complete strategic projects in the area of water and water analysis for many years. Officials mention, for example, a water project established with a Japanese loan, which was marred by many suspicions of corruption and mismanagement, with stages 3 and 4 of the project being completed without beginning the first and second stages.<sup>(7)</sup>

A government report indicated that 80% of potable water is wasted via 320 bypasses in the public pipelines, most of it going to brick factories, fish farms, car washes, ice factories, and orchards, primarily belonging to influential officials in Basra.<sup>(8)</sup>

Government figures also indicate that less than 20% of Basra residents are connected to the public sewer network, while the rest dispose of sewage through septic tanks or informal or open sewers.<sup>(9)</sup>

Basra has suffered from an increasing garbage crisis that has not been helped by contracts with private domestic and foreign companies. The facts show that the municipality of Basra itself has had 200 garbage trucks in its warehouses since 2010, but has not used them. Instead, the municipality has rented 120 mostly- Obsolete trucks as a result of corrupt contracts.

Regarding electricity, Basra officials note the allocation of large amounts of the governorate's share of energy projects, which has provided a better electricity situation than the rest of the country's governorates. Nevertheless, Basra's scorching summer heat calls for greater production and distribution, something that has not reached enough of Basra's population.

The federal government has only built one hospital in Basra since 2003, while the local administration has been able to build nine hospitals during this period. Since 2010, the Ministry of Health in Baghdad has notified

<sup>7</sup> We obtained information from a government source that the reason for the delay in the Japanese loan project was administrative hurdles created by Basra governorate officials, also they were not convinced about the contract with the company, referring to embezzlement attempts and corruption that led, ultimately, to the delay of the aforementioned project.

<sup>8</sup> We obtained a secret internal document belonging to the National Cell for Special Psychological Operations in the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, noting the details of these bypasses and calling for their removal in order to provide safe drinking water to 80% of the people of Basra. This proposal has not been implemented to date.

<sup>9</sup> Ongoing Social and Economic Survey (semi-annual) for 2014, op. cit., p. 65.

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Basra officials to stop building hospitals and health centers due to a lack of medical personnel. This is in spite of the poor health situation, infectious diseases, and overcrowded hospitals, as well as the fact that about 15% of the total population of Basra is disabled or chronically ill, according to official figures.<sup>(10)</sup>

According to those surveyed, Basra is a main center for residents of the southern governorates and the Middle Euphrates region to receive treatment because of the presence of qualified doctors, thus placing great pressure on the few, run-down health services available in the city.

In the area of education, the federal Ministry of Education has built 150 schools in Basra since 2003, while the local administration was able to build 850 schools and has expressed its readiness to build more schools to resolve the overcrowding issue. However, the federal government has failed to provide land for this purpose, according to local officials.

Basra elites point out that the unstable political and security situation, the ongoing tribal conflicts, and even the protests do not provide a favorable opportunity for foreign investment. Meanwhile, foreign security contractors that protect the oil companies working in Basra benefit by raising their fees due to the instability. This may suggest the possibility that the oil companies, or the security firms protecting them, have a role in creating some of the crises in the city.

The people of Basra mention the oil companies working in the governorate with a great deal of anger, noting that they do not comply with contracts requiring that 80% of their employees to be Iraqis, and they prefer to employ people from other governorates, both near and far, rather than Basra locals.<sup>(11)</sup>

This idea – i.e., the employment of non-Basrans in the Basra oil fields – seemed almost fixed in the dialogues with the elite, highlighting the misinformation coming from the companies in this regard, and the silence accompanying the work of the Ministry of Oil over the past period. More than that, the lands of many farmers have been confiscated for

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> The writer attended official meetings of the Government Information Cell of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, as part of a report submitted by the Ministry of Oil on events in Basra, where the official representative revealed that the ministry has employed 160,000 citizens of Basra in the oil fields over the last few years. This contradicts the firm belief of the elites surveyed in this paper, as well as the general view that the majority of Iraqi oilfield workers are not from Basra.

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the benefit of oil companies without appropriate compensation. These lands hold the oil “without which Baghdad, Erbil and Ramadi do not exist,” according to one of the respondents.

The protests in Al-Midaina demanding jobs had great symbolism: while the flames of the oil wells and fenced-off fields pollute the air, the educated youth seek a decent livelihood.

Official reports state that the unemployment level in Basra for residents over the age of 15 is 12.4%, while the unemployment level for youths between the ages of 15 and 24 is 25.5%<sup>(12)</sup> However, among those who did not identify themselves as unemployed, 66.6% of them are obliged to work between 40 and 89 hours a week, indicating the scope of the economic problems that compel them to do so. The average per capita income in Basra is IQD 118,600 per month, a low figure compared to Dohuk in Kurdistan (IQD 191,200) and Baghdad (IQD 155,200).<sup>(13)</sup>

Basra residents feel deprived of the opportunity to work at the ports. The elites report that 75% of those working at Basra ports are from Anbar, Saladin, and Diyala governorates, and there is only one staff employee of the ports customs department who is from Basra.

Basra residents comprise about 3.3% of the total work force in state departments,<sup>(14)</sup> while the population of Basra makes up 6% of the total population of Iraq, according to official figures.

Basrans note the severity of its housing problem throughout these years, as more than 100,000 haphazard units (mud houses, shanty houses, and unlicensed living quarters) were erected in empty spaces within the city of Basra or on its outskirts. Eight percent of the population lives in slums, the second highest number in Iraq, while 7-10% of Basrans live in homes housing more than one family.<sup>(15)</sup>

The price per square meter of residential land in Basra sometimes reaches the absurd price of USD 4,000, because of the major shortage of housing units.

<sup>12</sup> For more, see the official statistics of the Central Statistical Organization of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning: <http://cosit.gov.iq/en/201355-48-08-31-01->.

<sup>13</sup> Ongoing Social and Economic Survey (semi-annual) for 2014, op. cit., pp. 105 and 119.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Al-Sulaiti (editor), Financial Supervisory Committee Report and Follow-up on Appropriations on the Draft Federal Budget for 2019, Basra Provincial Council, 2018, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ongoing Social and Economic Survey (semi-annual) for 2014, op. cit., p. 75.

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The residents of Basra also feel that their infrastructure is not their own. Bumpy, dilapidated roads have been destroyed because of the pressure caused by trucks transporting goods from ports and border crossings to all parts of Iraq, even though the federal government has not devoted attention to repairing these roads. Moreover, official figures indicate that 61.4% of families in Basra live in homes accessed by unpaved dirt roads.<sup>(16)</sup>

Drug addiction is another issue afflicting the people of Basra. Previous field surveys have already indicated that drugs enter Basra from Iran and Kuwait through border crossings and through Basra ports via ships from the United Arab Emirates. Dangerous types of drugs are proliferating among Basra youth, including crystal meth, hallucinogens, and heroin.<sup>(17)</sup>

Environmental pollution is another problem in Basra, with some reports indicating that Basra residents have the highest levels of cancer because of the air pollution caused by the burning of gas in the oil fields. Meanwhile, the governorate does not have a private hospital to treat these diseases.

The overwhelming majority of respondents point out that the real problem in Basra is an administrative one related to the management of projects, control from Baghdad, ending rampant corruption, and implementing projects according to the established timetables.

Basra elites, especially its officials, pointed out that the second most pressing problem for Basra is financial, related to Basra being deprived of its allocations, the latest being Decree No. 347, issued by the Council of Ministers in 2015, which decided to withdraw all existing funds in the accounts of the governorates and to suspend all projects under implementation until further notice.

According to the head of Basra's provincial council, Walid Kitan, there are about 4,000 projects under implementation in Basra, requiring IQD 2 trillion (USD 1.6 billion) to complete. The stoppage has had devastating effects on Basra: streets and roads remain full of potholes, and many projects have become obsolete due to the long work stoppage.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Khalid Hantush Sajit, "Drugs in Iraq: Field Observations in Southern Governorates," *Drugs and Addiction: International Perspectives on Combatting Drugs and the Iraqi Experience*, Ali Taher Al-Hamoud (editor), Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, p.57.

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Many residents of Basra feel that their governorate's funds (known as "petrodollars" under its legal right mandating that the governorate shall obtain USD 5 for each barrel of oil produced) have been illegally confiscated by the federal government.

After the administrative and financial problems, the elites describe the political problems in Baghdad as the main factor in the crises in Basra. The nature of the political alliances and conflicts in Baghdad directly affect Basra and its political representatives.

When questioned about direct responsibility for the failure of services and infrastructure in Basra, all but two respondents stressed the federal government's responsibility for failing to administer projects, allocate funding, and enforce the law in Basra. Meanwhile, two other respondents held the people of Basra responsible for their electoral choices, leading to the neglect being suffered by the governorate.

### **Tribes, factions, political parties: Tacit alliance?**

The majority of respondents agreed that the position of the tribes towards the latest protests was weak and not at the required level. Many activists expressed their disappointment with the tribal sheikhs who did not stand by the demonstrations. They accused them of having an alliance with politicians with the aim of maintaining the current power sharing arrangement in Basra, or, at least as important, the tribal sheikhs were motivated to do so by the politicians' carrot and stick.

Perhaps the position of the tribes vis-à-vis the latest protests, and the events that tainted them, is due to the youthful face of the protests, which are civilian in nature, with modern urban demands. This is not appealing to tribal elders who are mostly middle-aged and older and conservative in thought and behavior, in contrast to the aspirations of the youth.

It is clear to those who visit Basra that the tribes are one of the reasons for the governorate's problems. For example, sometimes the tribes prevent projects from being implemented unless they are paid money and royalties. On one occasion, the Directorate of Education in Basra was not able to open a school after construction was complete without paying for the construction of a road to one of the tribal villages. Other times, tribal disputes complicate life in the governorate. While the field interviews for this paper were being

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conducted in Basra, three tribal conflicts were recorded in the districts of Al-Karmah, Al-Hayyanayah, and Al-Ma'qil, and medium machine guns were used in two of these cases.

In general, the tribes that cause security concerns are not from Basra in most cases, according to the Basra elites. These tribes were either displaced from the marshlands after they were drained in the 1990's or come from governorates neighboring Basra.

The study also registered major concern about armed factions in Basra. This concern manifested in the reluctance of some respondents to answer questions related to this matter, which reflects the size of the threat to life posed by the factions. During the field observations, numerous cases were recorded of vehicles driving without license plates, vehicles with tinted windows, and weapons without the government identification or marks required by law.

Most of the elite pointed out that the armed factions are threatening contractors, extorting them, and submitting tenders through the parties that represent the factions within the local administration in Basra. Most importantly, there was a clear consensus that the ports in Basra have been split up among the various factions.

Along the road leading to the port of Basra, inspections are controlled by a small number of members of the security forces, which the government was not able to remove after receiving reports documenting their dual work. These individuals notify port officials of the arrival of inspection committees so they can conceal abuses, and they extort truck drivers transporting goods from the port to other parts of Iraq. A number of respondents report that the issue is due to the fact that members of this security control belong to armed factions with heavy influence in Baghdad as well as Basra.

It appears that the factions in Basra are concentrating on recruiting members from the outskirts, slums, and poor areas of Basra, thus garnering a non-negative reputation in these circles for their contribution to providing the youth with financially-rewarding work.

These armed factions also maintained security, especially in the period following the removal of regular military forces and police from Basra to the governorates occupied by ISIS between 2014 and 2016.



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In addition to all this, the factions are conducting social welfare campaigns to help the poor and the families of the martyrs and the wounded, thus fostering communication with a segment neglected by the laws and institutions of the federal government because of poor funding and lack of allocations.

We can divide the armed factions in Basra into three categories. The first category is known to rally under the official Popular Mobilization establishment. The second are armed factions from Basra, with no presence outside Basra; they are not part of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and include, for example, the Thar Allah movement, among others. The third category is made up of tribes/ factions known to the people of Basra, with strongly cohesive members who are expert in fighting and provoking conflict.

In any case, regardless of the type of faction classified above, it appears that residents of Basra cannot obtain the right to or ensure the success of a project without resorting to an armed faction. Competition between two contractors often ends in armed conflict between two factions, while the few foreign investment firms in Basra seek the protection of the factions in exchange for money.

In fact, Basra is a city that represents a source of financial opportunities and investment for the political parties in Baghdad. Thus, its party representation is not so much political representation as representation (force) through factions.

The factions focus on guaranteeing the flow of funds for their benefit, as well as the survival of their audience in the areas, suburbs, and slums within their electorate.

The study's field observations noted that Al-Wufud Street in the center of Basra was transformed from a street of plant nurseries into commercial shops, transferred to the factions by the Municipality of Basra at nominal prices for rent or sale, despite the high prices for such purposes in general throughout Basra.

Thus, the factions, along with the tribes, were against changing the general political situation in Basra and stood against the wave of demonstrations.

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A number of respondents pointed out the lax security in the streets (for political reasons related to the desire to accuse the Sadrist movement of provoking a wave of protests and destruction) and the general refusal in Basra to control the factions on the street. Thus, the factions and the parties that represent them were blamed for the deterioration of services. All this effectively caused the demonstrators to set fire to the headquarters of several parties and factions in Basra, as well as the Iranian consulate.

The burning of the Iranian consulate and the headquarters of parties and some PMU factions, as well as the destruction of a private hospital with PMU wounded and meddling with those hospitalized, appears to be more complicated than reported by the elite respondents. Other information indicated that the reason for loosening protection of institutions on the part of the security apparatus was because it received no orders in that regard from the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces. Other information pointed to the involvement of certain currents in the fires in order to embarrass the parties and factions and push them to confront the demonstrators, all within the framework of the political rivalry that was in full swing in forming the new government. This reinforces the opinion of some of the respondents that some factions have mounted a wave of demonstrations against other factions, noting that neither the headquarters of the Sadrist current nor its militia, Saraya Al-Salam, were burned. Other respondents blamed unknown factions for these acts of sabotage.<sup>(18)</sup>

It is interesting that few respondents distinguished between the factions and the parties. They mentioned them both with great sensitivity and blamed both of them for the rampant corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency in the management of institutions, resulting in the lack of services and the deterioration of the living conditions of the citizens of Basra and throughout Iraq.

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<sup>18</sup> An intelligence officer reported that security forces uncovered an unknown armed faction, named the al-Tayyar al-Thalith, involved in directing the angry crowd towards the Iranian consulate and the headquarters of parties and factions to burn and sabotage them. According to the well-informed officer, the al-Tayyar al-Thalith was founded by someone who belonged to the Iranian Hezbollah faction in the 1990's. He was jailed and then pardoned before the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003. The founder sought to establish the Al-Ahrar Party after belonging to the Sadrist current, but he was unsuccessful. In his pamphlets and writings, he promoted ideas among his followers related to armed struggle, revolution, coup d'état, and glorification of Sisi's method of controlling power in Egypt. The configuration of the al-Tayyar al-Thalith, as well as a number of youth organizations, can be described as hidden facades, working under the cover of the Sadrist current for shelter at times. The al-Tayyar al-Thalith has a military wing whose discussions with the political leadership have been monitored, in which it asked for permission to set fire to party headquarters and the Iranian consulate. According to the officer's report, all the political leaders of the al-Tayyar al-Thalith and its military wing were arrested in an operation led by the intelligence cell in Baghdad.

## Basra: Narrative of concern for identity or its extinction?

There was striking agreement among the Basra elite regarding what amounted to a social and cultural invasion by migrants from neighboring governorates, particularly from the governorates of Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Muthanna.

Basrans complain about the pressure placed on Basra's already weak services by the arrival of these migrants, in addition to the loss of Basra's identity among hundreds of thousands of people coming to the governorate in search of work and a decent life.

Most of the elite agree that the actual population of Basra is at least 4.5 million, while official statistics indicate that the population of Basra is less than 2.5 million.

Residents of Basra cite the residential slums, which are the main place of residence for immigrants, as well as the changing identity of the governorate and its exposure to mockery and challenge in many parts of Basra itself.

The people of Basra have not concealed their desire for a special status for their governorate, indicating this in different expressions, such as "Basra provides 80% of the budget," "a contribution that has not been reflected in the lives of its people," "Basra is oppressed and marginalized," and "the bread basket of Iraq, the economy of Iraq, the port of Iraq, and its space to breathe freely...Basra is Iraq."

Clearly, the search for justice for the governorate of Basra certainly does not correspond to "equality" with the other governorates, because of Basra's major contribution to Iraq's very presence, in terms of oil, money, and communication with the world through its ports.

Concern for Basra's identity and the call for a special status for Basra in Iraq have not been clearly reflected in a demand for administrative separation from Baghdad and the call for federalism. Apart from one answer, the rest of the answers doubted that the recent protests would lead to demands for the formation of an autonomous region in Basra. "Devolution is not in Iraq's interest. It is not the solution, and it is not correct, but what do people do in the end if no one responds to them? The autonomous region serves Basra and does not serve Iraq." Thus, it seems that many Basra residents call for federalism or allude to people in Basra's inclination towards federalism simply to wield the issue rather than from a deeply-rooted conviction that such a thing should actually be established.

One particular answer pointed to an analysis that seemed logical in explaining why people in Basra are not inclined towards the demand for federalism: “Recent migrants to Basra fear the establishment of an autonomous region. They are afraid that the people of Basra will expel them or oppress them. They are the majority now, and multiple internal and external entities stand by them. Otherwise, autonomy is in the soul of every resident of Basra.”

### **Basra: Disapproval of the Marji’iyyah and lack of a role for Civil Society organizations**

Basrans did not hesitate to acknowledge that the Marji’iyyah [senior Shiite clergy] sided with the demonstrators during the protests, but they also did not conceal the disapproval and anger of the general public at the positions of the Shiite Marji’iyyah in Najaf, due to its tendency towards ambiguity and non-escalation and its failure to take direct positions against politicians. The elite insists that the recent protests in Basra have eroded much of Sistani’s popularity in the governorate, although he remains greatly respected.

It appears that this new position in the Iraqi arena is due to people holding the Marji’iyyah responsible for pushing them to choose these parties, causing a general rebuke of the positions of the Marji’iyyah on the part of the people of Basra.

Some of the respondents noted that it is not Sistani’s job to mobilize engineers and attract services to Basra, as his representatives in effect did; rather, his job is to correct the path of the political process that was built after 2003 based on his guidance and instructions. This idea seemed very incompatible with the call of the majority of these elite respondents for a civil state with no role for clerics. It appears that these elites justify their position as a moral necessity that requires the Marji’iyyah to correct its mistake of supporting the political powers, and not from a belief in the Marji’iyyah or a recognition of its role in political life.

At the level of civil society organizations, there are about 400 non-governmental organizations in Basra. The respondents did not see a major role for these organizations as intermediaries between the needs of the people and decision-makers. Indeed, some of the respondents found that many of these organizations are entities to procure funds from donors, and

few of them have been influential in establishing training courses, helping women, etc.

It seems that some organizations did not adhere to this mediating role but have worked on the very edge of political activity over the years by supporting issues of freedoms and amendment of laws, and opposing political Islam, Iran, and armed factions. They see the recent protests as the outcome of their effort.

These organizations helped electronic armies on social networking sites, which, intentionally or not, were working to distort the picture of the political process, labeling those people as corrupt and political Islam as a whole as evil. This provoked despair of change among young people and concealed anything positive in the political process, according to one media figure.

A public survey of citizens conducted throughout the country (except for the Kurdistan region) recorded very high levels of concern for the future among residents of Basra, and many Basra youths were convinced that people resort to drugs to forget the worries of life. The youth of Basra also were the second most likely among the governorates to reject participation in elections.<sup>(19)</sup> All this is an eloquent expression of the extent of the pessimism among the residents of Basra due to mismanagement and the level of information pumped out by the media.

Thus, the burning of government institutions flying the flag of Iraq in Basra has become commonplace and even a source of pride boasted of by many young people. These events would not have happened without the major and prolonged priming of feelings of hatred for anyone affiliated with the political system since 2003.

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<sup>19</sup> A survey conducted by the Maraya Center for Opinion Polls, on a large sample of almost 6,000 people in all governorates, except the Kurdistan region, 12-15 April 2018, entitled "Opinion poll of Iraqi university students (sociocultural and political issues) by governorate," showed that the proportion of respondents who agreed with an expression of feelings of concern for the future was the highest in Basra (79.9%) of all governorates, compared to 54% in Nineveh and 64.9% in Baghdad. Likewise, Basra university students ranked first in Iraq in believing that young people resort to drugs to forget the worries of everyday life: 42.3% agree with this statement, compared to 27% in Nineveh and 33% in Baghdad. Basra youth were also the second-lowest in their desire to participate in elections: 34% responded that they would participate in elections; meanwhile, Baghdad had the lowest proportion at 27.7%, and Diyala the highest desire to participate in elections at 53.9%.

## Basra's view of neighboring countries

In general, it is not being said that neighboring countries are responsible for instigating the recent protests in Basra, yet there is general agreement that Iran is the most politically influential country in the governorate. Clearly, this influence resonates in Basra through political parties and factions, and the cheap price of Iranian goods has made it the leading exporter of goods to this governorate. However, a steady decline in Iran's popularity among the people of Basra can also be seen, due to the policies of the parties and factions controlling the administrative workings of the governorate, in addition to the unmistakable rise of Iraq's (Arab) identity.

The residents of Basra appear to have expressed their position during a match between the Iraqi and Saudi teams held in Basra a few months before the start of the protests. The welcome offered by the residents of Basra to the Saudi team surprised observers. Basra residents did not deny the matter, noting that it happened to spite Iran more than anything else.

One journalist said that "the Basra protests divided people into those who support Iran and those who oppose it," a statement emphasizing the scale of the Iranian interventions in Basra and the growth of movements against Iran.

It is interesting to note that Iran has not carried out any investment project in Basra since 2003, with one of the well-informed respondents reporting that the year 2012, with its large investment budgets in Basra, saw the signing of 1,000 project with contracting companies, yet only one was an Iranian company, which was later released because of delays in implementation. At the same time, Turkish companies held 34 contracts, with the respondents noting that country's good reputation for investment, project implementation, and quality of goods. However, the respondents also mentioned that Turkey cut off water from Iraq to fill its dam, which was ultimately a turning point in Basra residents' view of that country.

Remarkably, there is also a Turkish school in Basra, praised by the residents of Basra for its educational level; there is no other school belonging to another country in the governorate.

With regard to Kuwait, the residents of Basra did not hide their bitter view of this country. They mentioned Kuwait's failure to build the Al-Faw Grand Port, its violation of the Khor Abdullah waterway by building Mubarak Port, its persecution of poor fishermen from Basra, its reduction of farmers' land in the Safwan area (transferred to Kuwait under the UN border demarcation between the two sides), and other incidents in which they perceived Kuwait's desire to damage Iraq and, specifically, Basra.

Despite all this, Basra residents appear ready to forget the past and welcome any Kuwaiti step towards Basra. This is a position not expressed by the respondents towards any other neighboring countries.

The positions of the Basra elite vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia are not entirely negative. However, they do note Saudi Arabia's sectarian stance towards the Shia minority in the Kingdom and its interference in Iraqi affairs by communicating with some of its tribal elders, as reported by one of the elders of Basra.

In general, one can observe a rising national sense against foreign countries, rejecting intervention and demanding more diplomatic and political power from Baghdad vis-à-vis neighboring countries and the world.

### **What comes next? What is the solution?**

In general, the complexity of Basra's problems, leading to chronic protests in the governorate, made it difficult for the elite respondents to propose practical solutions for these problems. Their proposals generally range from an emphasis on education to ending corruption and guaranteeing services.

The situation is exacerbated by the federal government's lack of an in-depth understanding of the scope of the challenges facing Basra, even after the latest protests. This can be seen in the 2019 draft budget law submitted to the Council of Representatives that did not take into account any of Basra's demands regarding the allocation of petrodollars, employment opportunities, and large-scale service projects.

One of the Basra elite's proposals is to facilitate the functioning of the private sector in Basra. They believe that changing the laws, regulations, and procedures related to the private sector is a way to resolve the unemployment issue and guarantee services and economic prosperity in Basra.

Two respondents proposed that Japanese and German companies take responsibility for overall planning to rebuild Basra, according to specific timetables and with a special budget guaranteed by the federal government. A third respondent added Korean companies to the responsibility for this task. The choice of these countries by the Basra elite is likely due to their reputation for quality work as well as the integrity the companies of these nations possess in the minds of Basra residents.

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To sum up the above, we can see how difficult it will be to undo the tripartite alliance formed by the parties, the factions, and the tribes. To do so, it will be necessary to take control of the sources of illegal funding at wharves, border crossings, and in contracting; provide transparency in their dealings; and end the network of partisan patronage in the districts of Basra. According to field observations, general directors in Basra have remained in office, unchanged, for the past 14 years, entire municipal districts are made up of members of one party, and officials are unable to make the decisions granted to them by law.

Complete structural change is required in Basra at the level of its service departments, along with persistent work to combat corruption by bringing the main perpetrators of corruption to justice. This will not be possible without political will from Baghdad first and without giving the judiciary the opportunity to prosecute corrupt persons through a security apparatus that does not have social ties with the people of the governorate.

At the level of services, Basra needs large-scale strategic projects to desalinate water, build roads, and create water, sewer, and electricity networks. These projects are within the jurisdiction of the federal government, and the governorate cannot carry them out because of their large scale and the legal complexities involved.

### **Several more specific recommendations can be proposed to end protests in Basra, for example:**

- The Ministry of Transportation should expedite the building of the Al-Faw Grand Port and begin construction of the electric railway connecting the port with the rest of Iraq's governorates, as part of the Dry Canal project and within a specific, stated timetable.
- The Ministry of Water Resources should expedite the construction of the proposed project to desalinate seawater in Basra.
- The Council of Representatives and the Office of Financial Supervision should accomplish its goal of ending the dispute regarding foreign oil companies' employment of non-Iraqi and non-Basran labor through a comprehensive tally of employees. This will make it possible to verify their numbers and determine who can be replaced by labor from Basra, especially people close to the oil fields.
- Reconsider the compensation allocated by the Ministry of Oil to the farmers whose lands were confiscated for the benefit of the oil



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companies and the affected farmers who lost their lands due to salty water and environmental pollution.

- The Ministries of Finance and Transportation should reconfigure workers at the southern ports, in tax and customs departments, and at border crossings, so that the people of Basra and its young graduates are the first to work at those places.
- The Ministry of Finance should be responsible for designating land to resolve the issue of land specifically allocated for schools and residential projects and should also free legal allocations for petrodollars and the development of districts, which have been withheld from Basra since 2015.
- The National Investment Commission in Baghdad should establish a large-scale housing project, similar to the Bismayah project in the capital, to definitively resolve the housing problem in Basra.
- The Council of Representatives should amend the “Basra as Economic Capital of Iraq” law to include extraordinary powers to divert and allocate funds and establish administrative units with wide powers in all service and economic sectors.
- The Council of Representatives should issue humanitarian and strategic development plans to counter poverty in the form of binding laws rather than the current non-binding pilot plans. Most of the problems of Basra, like those of Iraq’s other governorates, are due to a lack of effective development plans to prevent poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, pollution, epidemics, inequality, and lack of services.
- The Council of Representatives should amend the PMU law to include the integration of factions into the armed forces and end their presence in the streets.
- The Ministry of Interior should issue plans to mobilize an internal security force (traffic police, local police, federal police) from among various regions of the country, to overcome the problem of the police’s inability to enforce the law due to social and tribal ties.
- The Supreme Judicial Council should issue plans to mobilize the judiciary within the different parts of Iraq to overcome the problem of social and tribal ties that hinder the enforcement of the law.

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