



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## **IRAQI PROTESTS UNLIKELY TO YIELD MEANINGFUL CHANGES**

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October 2019 represented one of the largest grassroots protest mobilizations in Iraq since 2003, protests which continue into November and will likely linger in diminishing numbers. Iraqi youth (two-thirds of Iraq is under the age of 30 and many are without job prospects) are disillusioned by rampant, systemic corruption that privileges Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni elites. In response to protests, which began in Baghdad's Tahrir Square on 01 October but have spread throughout the south, Iraqi forces and allied Iran-backed militia have used increasing force against largely unarmed protesters, resulting in the deaths of over 300 protesters. In addition, armed groups affiliated with the prime minister's office shut down several independent media outlets, arrested civil society activists, and intermittently cut the internet. Vows to reform the political system, including the promised resignation of Prime Minister Adil 'Abdul Mahdi on 01 November, have failed to quell protests thus far, just as they've failed to yield any discernable changes to the government.

The protests have already cost Iraqi businesses. According to [Net Blocks](#), shutting down the internet alone has so far cost over \$1 million. Continued protests and the government's violent repression could disrupt major roads, as well as oil and gas fields in the south, such as Um Qasr in Basra. However, the Iraqi armed forces have been ordered to protect these areas and have thus far generally been able to do so. In the recently-liberated and predominantly Sunnis areas, government-backed armed groups have been more effective in using force to prevent protests.

### **OUTLOOK**

The Iraqi government will attempt to muddle through with a mix of cosmetic reforms – such as working on an electoral law and revamping the parliament – and repression to disrupt the protests and limit civil society activity. The protests offer Iran the chance to help mediate a settlement between the ruling parties; it has already intervened to forestall 'Abdul Mahdi's resignation. The Sadrists and other opposition groups will not have the numbers to bring down the system, and the leaderless and divided nature of the protests means that achieving meaningful reform in a post-protest environment is difficult to see.