Iraqi protesters gunned down as demonstrations and strikes spread across Middle East

Bill Van Auken
3 October 2019

For a second day in a row, Iraqi security forces on Wednesday responded to mass protests against unemployment, poor social services and government corruption with live ammunition, rubber bullets, water cannon and tear gas, reportedly leaving at least nine people killed and hundreds wounded.

Both protesters and hospital employees said the real toll is far higher, as heavily armed troops were deployed alongside elite black-clad counterterrorism units and police. Witnesses reported the sustained crackle of automatic weapons fire, while black smoke hung over the city from burning tires at protesters' barricades.

Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, facing the worst crisis since he formed a government a year ago, convened a meeting of his National Security Council on Wednesday. Afterwards, he issued a statement affirming "the right to protest" and "freedom of expression," while condemning alleged acts of "vandalism" against public and private property. He also paid tribute to the security forces and blamed the violence on "infiltrators" and "aggressors who ... deliberately created casualties."

In the streets, the security forces had clearly gotten the message. They used extreme force to drive protesters from Baghdad's Tahrir Square and prevent them from approaching the heavily fortified Green Zone, the center of the Iraqi government as well as the location of the US and other Western embassies, along with the offices of military contractors.

Counterterrorism troops also used live ammunition against protesters who attempted to storm Baghdad's international airport.

The murderous repression unleashed by the Iraqi security forces dramatically swelled the demonstrations, which began with a relatively small protest Tuesday. After that demonstration was broken up with excessive force, an appeal on social media brought thousands into the streets on Tuesday night, when more violent clashes erupted.

As part of the repression, the government shut down the internet nationwide on Wednesday.

Nonetheless, the demonstrations grew Wednesday, spreading throughout the country. Several thousands of people marched Wednesday night outside of the local administration building in the southern oil center of Basra.

The government has sent its counterterrorism troops into the southern city of Nassiriya, where the authorities reportedly "lost control" amid gun battles and the burning of government buildings. Protesters also burned the government building in the Shia holy city of Najaf.

The mass upheaval has shaken the government above all because it has spread throughout the heartland of Iraq's Shia majority, the ostensible political base of the main ruling parties. It has also broken out without the leadership of any of the political parties. Muqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army fought US forces in Baghdad 15 years ago and who has in the past mobilized major demonstrations, was in Iran and played no apparent role in the demonstrations.

At their heart, the protests are rooted in the increasingly intolerable conditions of life for the Iraqi people, and particularly for younger Iraqis, who face an official unemployment rate of 22 percent. More than 30,000 university graduates are entering the labor market each year and finding no jobs.

© World Socialist Web Site

In smaller protests last month, hundreds of graduates organized sit-ins outside Iraq's oil ministry to demand jobs.

Broad masses of people are fed up with a corrupt bourgeois government that in the 16 years since the US war of aggression that overthrew Saddam Hussein has failed to reverse the deterioration of the country's infrastructure or assure basic services such as water and electricity. Meanwhile, the country's vast oil wealth has gone into the pockets of foreign corporations and their local stooges.

The events in Iraq are part of what is emerging as a resurgence of the class struggle throughout the Middle East, a region that has been ravaged by nearly three decades of uninterrupted US wars and the attempts by the imperialists and native ruling cliques to stoke sectarian divisions and violence.

In Lebanon, demonstrators marched through the streets of Beirut on Sunday chanting "down with capitalism" and "the people want the fall of the regime," the rallying cry of the mass uprising that brought down the US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and spread throughout the region in 2011.

Protesters set up barricades across major highways, paralyzing the Lebanese capital.

"We toil day and night just to be able to live," a 52-year-old woman who joined the protest told the AFP news agency. "They've starved us, stolen from us. Enough is enough."

As in the Iraqi upheavals, the protests in Lebanon have been driven by high unemployment, particularly for youth, as well as rising prices and stark social inequality.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri predicted last month that austerity measures he was imposing to meet the conditions set by the international banks for an $11 billion loan would spark popular opposition. "We will have protests in Lebanon, I'm saying it now," he said. "But we will have it one time, and that's it, fix it."

The austerity policies, however, are only deepening the misery for the masses of Lebanese. In a country of 5.9 million people, 3.2 million are classified as "in need." The official unemployment rate stands at 25 percent, and 37 percent for workers under the age of 25. With an anemic growth rate of 0.2 percent last year, the economy is unable to provide jobs for either the unemployed or those entering the labor market.

Inflation averaged 6.1 percent last year and has risen since. The population is anticipating a devaluation of the Lebanese pound, which will further savage living standards.

Lebanon has been further destabilized by the US-backed war for regime change in neighboring Syria, which has driven 1.5 million Syrians to seek refuge in the country.

Meanwhile, in Jordan, a strike by 146,000 teachers continued Wednesday despite a ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court declaring the walkout, now in its fifth week, illegal. The education ministry followed up the ruling issued on Sunday with a threat to fire and jail teachers who failed to return to the classroom.

The government issued statements telling parents to send their children to school and sent buses to pick them up, but they returned largely empty. In the minority of schools that were reopened, there were few students and no classes being taught.

The teachers launched the action to demand a 50 percent pay hike, which was promised by the Jordanian government in 2014 but never implemented. Rejecting the demand, the government insisted that the most it could afford was 10 percent. The starting pay for teachers is now just $500 a month, barely over the "absolute poverty line" for a family of five. Teachers described the government offer as "crumbs" that would not even cover the rising cost of fuel and transportation.

The Jordanian regime, which has met the teachers' determination with police attacks, is fearful that if the strike continues or if the teachers achieve their demand, it will spark a wider revolt by Jordanian workers.

This mounting upsurge follows the outbreak of protests last month in Egypt, where demonstrators took to the streets in defiance of police state repression in which some 2,300 people were arrested in the space of less than two weeks.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site