

Death toll mounts as Iraqi protests defy repression

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Iraqi protesters and security forces clashed at the edge of Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone Monday, leaving at least another six demonstrators dead and scores more wounded as the mass protests that have gripped the country continued into their second month.

Monday's clashes came after demonstrators forced their way across the Ahar Bridge, which spans the Tigris River, and into the Green Zone, a restricted area that is the center for government buildings and residences of top officials, as well as both embassies and offices of military contractors and other foreign entities. The crowds reportedly came within 500 yards of the prime minister's office and reached the headquarters of Iraq's state-run television.

Protesters set tires and dumpsters ablaze and hurled rocks inside the Green Zone, which was quickly flooded by security forces firing live ammunition, military-grade tear gas and water cannon.

The clashes came a day after a fatal confrontation between security forces and a crowd that attempted to storm the Iranian consulate in the Shia Muslim holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad.

The latest killing brings the known death toll since the start of the demonstrations in early October to over 260, with thousands of protesters wounded, in some cases grievously injured by live rounds, rubber bullets and tear gas canisters fired directly at demonstrators.

Friday saw the largest mass demonstrations since the US invasion of 2003, with crowds filling Baghdad's Tahrir Square as well as wide avenues funneling into it. It was organized in defiance of the Iraqi military, which attempted to clamp down on the protests by imposing a nightly curfew. Ignoring the order, crowds remained in the square overnight, erecting tents and occupying an 18-story building overlooking the area, which has been dubbed "Revolution Mountain."

Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi made a statement late Sunday calling for an end to the protests and declaring that "it's time for life to return to normal." The appeal expressed the increasing fears within the corrupt Iraqi ruling oligarchy that growing sections of the working class are joining the mass upsurge and threatening its wealth and power.

Mahdi in particular condemned the roadblocks that have shut down Umm Qasr, Iraq's main Persian Gulf port in the southern city of Basra, as well as the joining of the demonstrations by oil workers outside key oil installations in the south of the country. There is also a continuing strike by teachers that has shut down schools throughout much of southern Iraq, as well as by public employees. Government buildings in many cities have been shut down, in some cases draped with banners proclaiming, "Closed by order of the people."

Mahdi warned that the closing of the port and the threat to the oil fields risked "causing big losses exceeding billions of dollars."

As Monday's events showed, this appeal clearly failed to produce the desired effect. The protests are driven by mass unemployment, particularly among younger Iraqis, including those who graduate from universities to find there are no jobs. It is further fueled by stark social inequality and the knowledge that the "billions" in oil revenues that Mahdi is worrying about losing are flowing into the pockets of foreign and domestic capitalists and corrupt politicians, rather than benefiting the Iraqi masses.

Mahdi's remarks were also notable for their failure to mention a promise made just days earlier by President Barham Salih that Mahdi was prepared to resign once a suitable replacement had been found, and that early elections would be held following the drafting of a new electoral law.

Even if Mahdi were to resign, this alone, along with the meager social concessions that have been proffered by the government, would not pacify the hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets. They are demanding an end to the entire political setup imposed under the US military occupation that followed the criminal American invasion of Iraq in 2003, along with a fundamental social transformation.

The chant being taken up by the Iraqi protesters is the same one used by Egyptians and Tunisians in 2011: “The people want the fall of the regime.”

In the case of Iraq, the US-imposed regime was constructed upon reactionary sectarian lines aimed at furthering Washington’s divide-and-rule strategy. State positions and spoils were divided up between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties that would supposedly represent their respective ethnoreligious constituencies, while looting the country’s resources to line their own pockets and reward their followers.

The revolt that has erupted since last month has been directed at this entire reactionary setup and has explicitly rejected religion and ethnicity as the lines of political division, posing instead that of class interests.

The fear of this movement within the Iraqi ruling establishment has found sharp expression in efforts to prevent any spread of the protests into the Sunni areas of Anbar Province, which were devastated in the-called “war on ISIS.”

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported Monday that security forces had arrested two men in Anbar for posting statements of solidarity with the protests on Facebook. It cited the case of Sameer Rashed Mahmoud, who posted a comment stating that students and public employees should strike in support of the protests on October 26. Within an hour and a half, counterterrorism police raided his home and arrested him for the post, charging him with incitement. He has been imprisoned ever since without charges.

A second case cited by HRW was that of a 25-year-old man who also indicated solidarity with the protests on his Facebook page on October 26. Within four hours, five police cars came to his house to drag him away. “They hit him and accused him of inciting protests, before handcuffing him and putting him in one of their cars,” a relative said.

The Anbar security forces issued a statement calling on all of the province’s residents “to head to work and

continue with construction, preserving security, supporting security forces, and benefiting from past lessons, from which the province has only gotten destruction, killings and displacement.” This was an unmistakable threat of more mass killings in response to any attempt to emulate the protests in Baghdad.

The character of the mass protests has cut across Iran’s relations with the Iraqi government, which have centered upon Shia sectarian parties, whose political leaders, such as Mahdi, willingly offered themselves as functionaries in the puppet regime set up under the US occupation.

Last week, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated, “I seize this opportunity to tell those who care about Iraq ... to remedy insecurity as their priority,” while warning, “The US and Western intelligence agencies, with the help of money from regional countries, are instigating unrest in the region.”

While US imperialism will no doubt do whatever it can to exploit the crisis in Iraq to further its own interests in the region, the social explosion that has taken place not only there, but also in neighboring Lebanon, is driven by an intensification of social inequality, anger over conditions of poverty and unemployment, and hatred for corrupt ruling establishments that are totally subordinated to the interests of international finance capital.

To the extent that the Iranian bourgeoisie has sought to defend its own interests in the region by cementing alliances with these ruling elites, it has joined US imperialism as a target of the protesters’ ire.

Washington has responded cautiously to the events in Iraq, where it maintains thousands of troops and military contractors, using the country as a base for its operations in Syria as well.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo advised the Iraqi government to “listen to the legitimate demands made by the Iraqi people,” while cautioning all sides—the security forces and their victims alike—to avoid “violence.”



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