

Mass protests escalate in Iraq and Lebanon

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Iraq and Lebanon have been rocked once again by mass protests and violent repression under conditions in which discredited caretaker governments in both countries have failed to meet any of the social and political demands made by hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets.

The resurgence of the street demonstrations, which broke out in both countries last October, followed a lull in the wake of the US drone missile assassination of Iranian Gen. Qassem Suleimani on January 3 at Baghdad's international airport and the mass outpouring throughout the region against the American war crime.

At least five demonstrators were reported killed in the course of protests that swept Baghdad and other cities on Monday as security forces fired live rounds into the crowds. In Baghdad, three people died from wounds suffered in the protests, two from gunshots and a third who had been felled by a tear gas canister fired directly at his head. A fourth demonstrator was shot to death by police in the central Iraqi city of Karbala, southwest of Baghdad, and a fifth was killed in the northeastern city of Baqubah.

Two policemen were also reported killed in the southern city of Basra, the center of the country's oil industry, when a panicked motorist trying to flee the scene of a violent confrontation drove his car into them.

The brutal repression of the Iraqi demonstrations has seen more than 500 killed since October 1 and another 25,000 wounded.

Beginning on Sunday and continuing into Monday, protesters sought to block the main highways and bridges in Baghdad and the south of the country with barricades and burning tires.

"We blocked the road to demand our rights... the rights of young people to get a job," one of the protesters in the Iraqi capital told *Al Jazeera*.

Another protester denounced the violent repression, telling the news agency, "For months no one listened to our demands. They are killing us. It's just bloodshed."

The government, headed by Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, who resigned two months ago but has stayed on as a caretaker with the Iraqi parliament still unable to choose a successor, has taken a hard line against the renewed protests, describing those blocking highways as "outlaws." The spokesman for the commander of the Iraqi armed forces, Adel Karim Khalaf, said that security forces had "absolute authority"

to repress such protests.

Iraq's mass demonstrations grew out of earlier scattered actions by university graduates protesting the lack of jobs under conditions of a more than 25 percent unemployment rate for younger workers. Repression of the initial protests led to their mushrooming into a generalized uprising against the conditions of poverty, the failure of essential social services and the endemic corruption in the sectarian-based regime created by the American military occupation that began with the criminal US invasion of 2003.

Popular anger has been driven by the glaring social inequality in a country that boasts the third largest oil exports in the world, bringing in over \$1 trillion in revenue since 2005. These vast resources have flowed into the coffers of foreign corporations and banks, along with Baghdad's politically connected oligarchy, while seven million of Iraq's 38 million people live below the poverty line, and 53 percent are vulnerable to food insecurity.

Similar social and political contradictions have motivated the mass protests in Lebanon, which also resurged over the weekend, with at least 540 people wounded in violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Beirut over the weekend.

While the media focused on an alleged shift toward violence by protesters, the Lebanese government turned Beirut into an armed camp, ringing the parliament building with razor wire and deploying heavily armed elite US-trained special operations troops, including some carrying rocket launchers. There were reports of snipers deployed on rooftops and government thugs throwing rocks from nearby buildings into the crowds below. Security forces fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters directly at the demonstrators. Police went so far as pursuing people and attacking them inside hospitals and mosques.

The weekend's protests came in response to a call for a "week of rage" over the government's failure to meet any of the demonstrators' demands or to create an acceptable replacement to the regime headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a political stooge of Saudi Arabia, who resigned last year in the face of mass opposition.

Driving the protests are the country's deteriorating economic and social conditions, as Lebanon faces its worst crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war.

The Lebanese protests have been accompanied by attacks on some 300 banks and ATMs across the country. The banks have become the target of public ire. People have seen their savings destroyed as the value of the Lebanese currency has been cut in half over the past three months. Meanwhile, the banks have imposed limits on how much money depositors can withdraw in an attempt to prevent financial collapse. These restrictions are waived for the wealthy and politically connected, but enforced on the broad masses of the population.

Bank workers have remained on an extended strike, in part over concerns for their own safety.

The devaluation of the Lebanese pound has led to the soaring of imported food prices, together with the near halving of real wages. The country's minimum wage, which was the equivalent of \$450 a month, is now barely \$270. The World Bank has warned that continuing devaluations will lead to the rise of the portion of Lebanon's population living in poverty from one-third to one-half.

In many industries, employers have stopped paying salaries, leading to strikes. Hospitals have run out of essential medicines, and gasoline is being rationed.

Lebanon's mass protests were triggered on October 17 of last year after the government announced a tax on popular messaging applications, including WhatsApp. The action triggered a mass revolt against all of the austerity measures imposed over the previous period, together with the conditions of growing poverty and unemployment, crumbling infrastructure and social services, and rampant corruption. As in Iraq, the driving force behind the demonstrators' anger was the ever widening social inequality that constitutes the essential feature of Lebanese society.

The latest upsurge has been further fueled by the announcement that Lebanon's outgoing foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, is to attend this week's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland to speak on "unrest in the Arab world." Bassil is President Michel Aoun's son-in-law. An online petition has called for the Forum to rescind his invitation, declaring that he should not be invited to "speak on behalf of a nation that has rejected him and accuses him of flagrant corruption."

As in Iraq, a caretaker administration headed by President Aoun has proven unable to cobble together a new government since Hariri resigned on October 29. Hezbollah, together with its fellow Shiite movement Amal and other allies, holds a majority in parliament and appears poised to put together a cabinet led by the former education minister and professor at the American University of Beirut.

While the demonstrations have advanced the demand for a government of "independent technocrats," the bourgeois order, set up along sectarian lines in the wake of the country's civil war, is incapable of jumping out of its skin.

Whatever government is formed by the existing bourgeois parties in Lebanon will be tasked with the speedy

implementation of a sweeping agenda of additional austerity measures in order to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and major power creditors in return for a "rescue package" of \$11 billion pledged at an international conference last year. Most of this money will go to meet debt obligations to the international banks. As early as 2016, interest payments on the country's debt consumed fully half of the Lebanese budget.

Hezbollah, which is aligned with Iran, had initially taken a hostile stance toward the demonstrations, suggesting that they were being fostered by Washington, Saudi Arabia and Israel to further imperialist interests in the region. On several occasions the Shiite movement staged counterdemonstrations, clashing with protesters.

More recently, however, Hezbollah has sent its representatives to meet with protest leaders, expressing agreement with their demands and offering them support, undoubtedly with the hope of quelling the mass upheavals.

Social tensions within both Iraq and Lebanon have been exacerbated by US imperialism's drive to assert its hegemony over the region and roll back Iran's influence by means of crippling economic sanctions and criminal military violence. Washington and its regional allies are undoubtedly attempting to manipulate these tensions to further their regional aims. Tehran has responded by supporting repression on the part of both the Iraqi and Lebanese governments in an attempt to defend the influence of the Shiite sectarian movements with which it is allied.

Iraqi protesters have expressed hostility to the prospect of the country being turned into a battlefield for a US-Iranian war. Washington, meanwhile, has rejected the Iraqi government's demand that it withdraw the 5,000 to 6,000 US troops that are deployed in Iraq.

In both Iraq and Lebanon, the popular protests have expressed a mass rejection of sectarian politics, making clear that in both countries, as all over the world, the decisive dividing line is class, not religion, ethnicity or nationality.

The demands of the masses of Lebanese and Iraqi workers and youth, like those of workers who have risen in revolt by their millions across the planet, cannot be resolved outside of the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism on a world scale.



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