

The background image is a photograph of a protest in Iraq. It shows a wide, paved street littered with debris and puddles. In the foreground, several people are visible; one person in a striped shirt is raising their fist. In the background, a line of streetlights stretches into the distance, and a person is standing on a raised platform or vehicle. The overall scene depicts a chaotic and active protest environment.

Iraq Protest Activity Post-Incident Report

8 October 2019

Background

From the end of the September 2019, reports were received of protests being organised on social media, planned to be conducted in Tahrir Square, central Baghdad. This reportedly provoked the deployment of security forces to the area in preparation for demonstration activity. Over the next 24 hours, over 1-2 October, a significant escalation of protest activity was observed across major urban centers in the country, including Baghdad, Hillah, Najaf, Kut, Samawah, Nasiriyah and Amarah. In Baghdad, thousands of people gathered in the city's central districts,



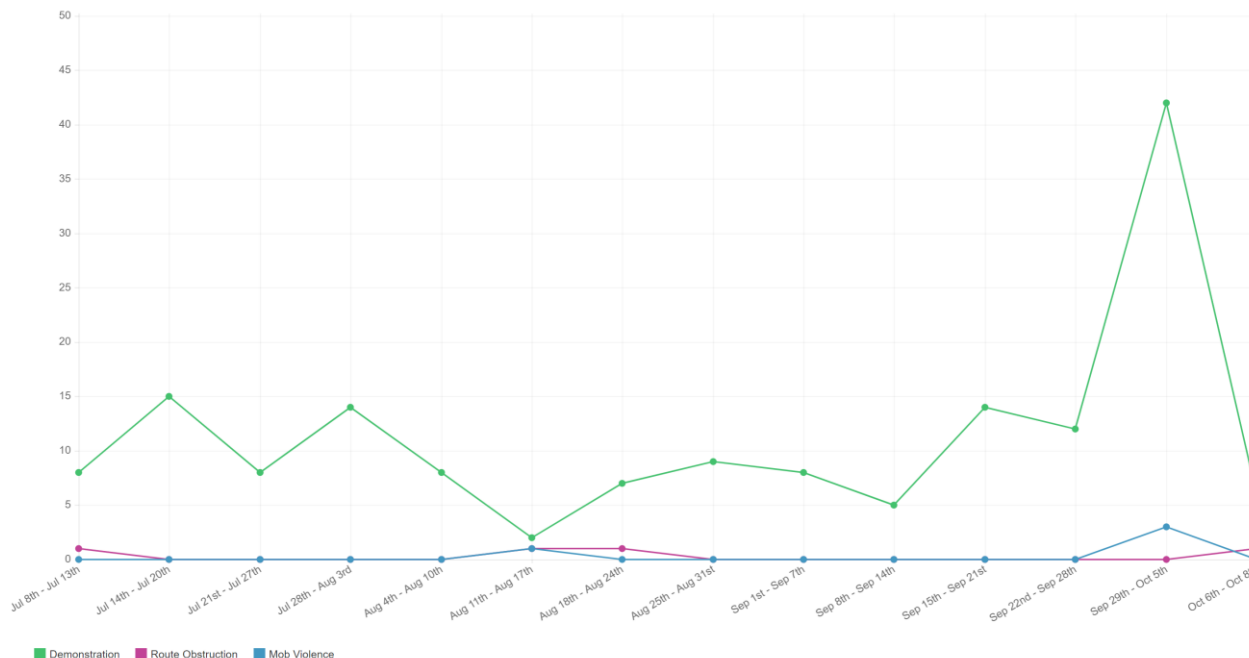
Security forces attempting to disperse protestors in Tahrir Square, Baghdad, with tear gas and live ammunition. (Photo: Shafaq News)

chanting anti-government slogans. Several attendees attempted to push toward the International Zone (IZ), but were restricted by riot police. As more protestors gathered, security forces fired live ammunition in order to disperse them. At least two civilians died and a further 200 were wounded. Security forces also dispersed protesters with water cannons and warning shots after demonstrations escalated in Nasiriyah. One protester died, and 25 others were injured, including 23 security personnel. Protesters burned security posts and used burned tires to block roads during the protest. While the main drivers of civil unrest appear to be demands for government reform and employment opportunities, another unifying factor behind the unrest relates to the dismissal of Lt. Gen. Abdul Wahab al-Saadi, the chief of counterterrorism, which has sparked outrage across the country.

Over the following days, the death-toll from enduring anti-government protests rose to 20 as protesters defied government-imposed curfews across a number of cities. Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi ordered a ban on all movement across Baghdad beginning from 0500h on 3 October. Curfews were also imposed in Najaf after security forces fired at protesters. The deadliest protests took place in Nasiriyah, where eight protesters and one police officer were killed. The city has also been placed under curfew. Over this period, protestors set fire to the Supreme Council building in Amarah, the Dhi Qar Provincial Council in Nasiriyah, and a section of the Najaf Provincial Council. In Baghdad, protestors again attempted to storm the IZ but were stopped by security forces. Tensions were further fueled by an internet shutdown imposed by the authorities in a bid to stem further unrest.

Notable developments linked to the current wave of unrest include calls by Muqtada Sadr for new elections, as well as demands for Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi and other government officials to step down. On 4 October, the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohamed al-Halbousi, invited the representative of the demonstrations to discuss demands at the House of Representatives. Halbousi previously announced his support to the demonstrators and stated that the government should create a system that would confront corruption at all levels. Of growing concern are reports that armed groups have utilised the demonstrations to opportunistically target civilians. In Baghdad, for instance, unknown gunmen reportedly opened fire at civilians during the riots in Tahrir, Khalani, and Tayeran Squares. According to unconfirmed reports, five civilians were killed and 11 injured. In acknowledgement of the ISF's heavy-handed response, the military announced on 7 October that excessive force was used in the country during demonstrations. The statement also added that the government has begun

holding commanding officers accountable. The previous day, the Ministry of Interior announced that a total of 104 people have died, while 6,107 were injured during the recent demonstrations in Iraq.



Levels of civil unrest in Iraq over the past 3 months

Nasiriyah

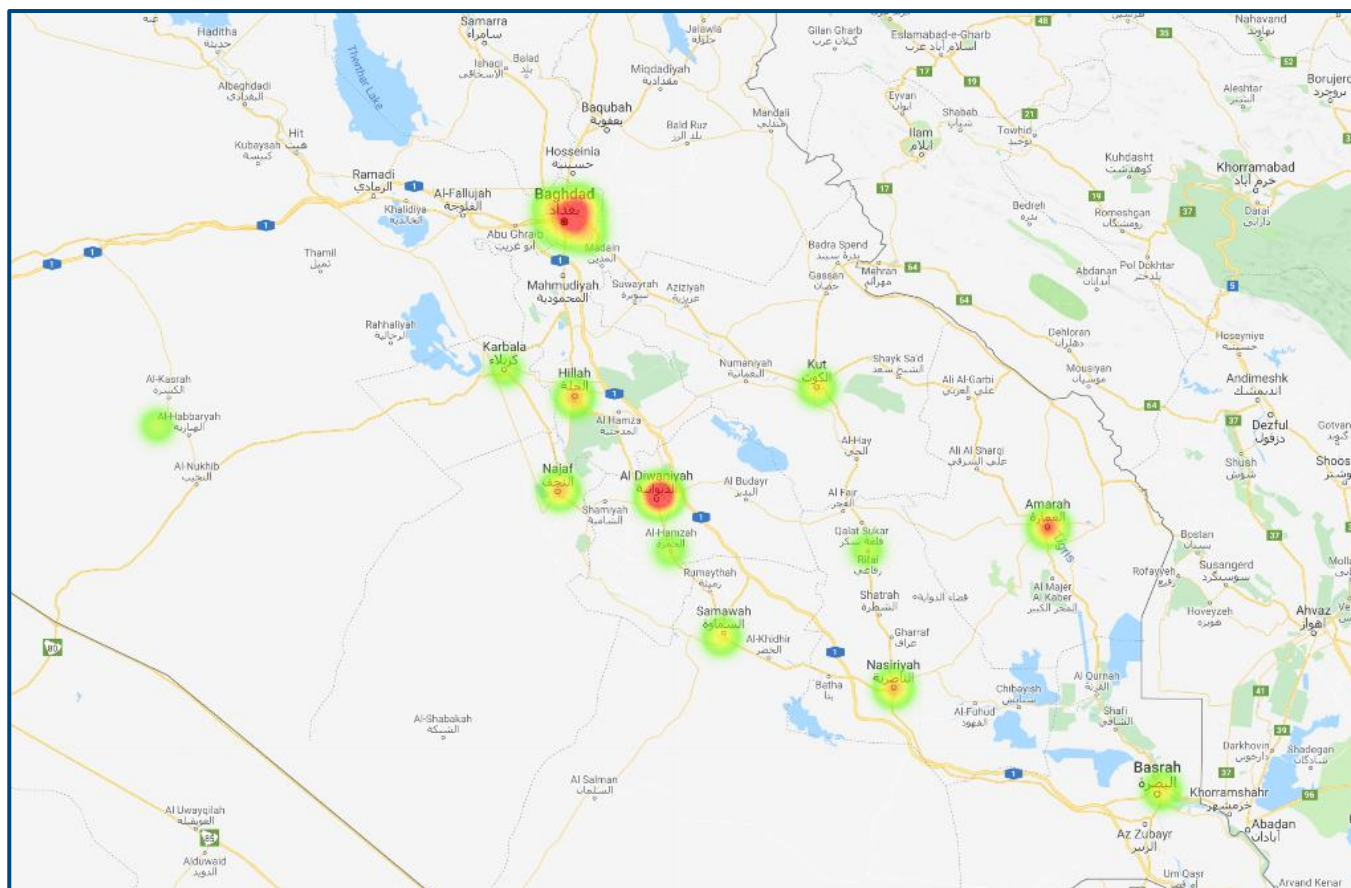
Despite the implementation of a curfew in Dhi Qar, demonstrators continued to organise activity in Nasiriyah. On 3 October, protesters set fire to several government and political party buildings in the city. The targeted buildings were the al-Qaim building, Badr HQ, Asaib Ahl al-Haq HQ, Islamic Dawa Party building, and the Virtue Party office under MP Ola al-Nashi. The protesters previously raided and burned the Dhi Qar provincial building. To the north of the province, protesters rioted against security forces stationed outside the municipal council in Rifai. Gunmen also opened fire at civilians during the incident, killing 11 people including a policeman.

Activity persisted in Nasiriyah over the following days (4-5 October), with protestors rioting against security forces in al-Haboubi Square. According to reports, one demonstrator was killed, while 21 more were injured, including ISF personnel. Protestors again attacked various assets, with attendees burning the Dhi Qar council building, and the Dawa and Fadhila party HQs during the incident. Unknown gunfire was reported during the protests near the Asaib Ahl al-Haq branch HQ. Security forces eventually succeeded in dispersing the protesters. At present, activity appears to have temporarily subsided, though the threat of further protests and violent escalations is still assessed to be extant.

Basra

Basra has so far been largely spared of mass, violent protests as observed elsewhere in the country – with levels of activity in the province remaining relatively subdued. Although a demonstration was held on 28 September in alignment with activity in Baghdad – namely a small group of civilians demonstrating near the statue of Badr Alsayab, demanding the cancellation of the order to transfer Lt. Gen. Abdul Wahab al-Saadi from the Counter

Terrorism Command to the Ministry of Defence – this was an isolated event which passed without incident. Since then, the only protest to show signs of increased hostilities was an event outside of the Provincial Building in Maqil, on 2 October. Here, protestors burned tires to demand improved living conditions and governmental reform. Of additional note, over 3-4 October, over 1000 civilians demonstrated in the Qurna area, demanding government reform, anticorruption, employment and improved services, though no violent escalations were noted. All other protests recorded in the province during the period of unrest have been low profile and related to local grievances.



Protest Activity Heat Map from 1 to 8 October 2019

Outlook

With unrest enduring, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi conducted an emergency session with the Council of Ministers on 5 October, discussing the recent developments with regard to the protest movement. Security operations have meanwhile persisted in the capital, with security forces arresting several suspects and seizing Molotov cocktails. However, likely in response to the acknowledgement of the military that dispersal tactics have been overly forceful, Mahdi ordered the withdrawal of army units from Sadr City on 7 October, with federal police to replace them. Furthermore, the IZ has been reopened following negotiations between the prime minister's office and protester representatives, with alleged promises by the government to meet the protestors' demands. Nevertheless, while tensions remain elevated, activists will likely continue to stage protests for the short-term at least. Of further concern, the Security and Defence Committee has issued warnings regarding the possible existence of militant sleeper cells and gangs in Baghdad, contributing to the violence and raising suspicions of the protests being sabotaged. As such, further instances of violent unrest can be expected, in addition to travel

restrictions and temporary internet blackouts.

To improve security in Dhi Qar, and prevent further attacks against governmental and PMU assets, counter-terrorism forces were deployed around government buildings on 5 October. While activity in Nasiriyah over the past 24 hours has subdued, demonstrators may seek to increase activity at short notice, despite an increased ISF presence and the implementation of a curfew. So far, activists in the city have predominantly focused on government and PMU sites, and so personnel should limit all visits to such establishments while tensions remain heightened. Though activity in Basra has been largely restrained, coordinated activity cannot be discounted, particularly given that at least four protests in the province have shown links to the wider protest movement emanating out of Baghdad. Furthermore, activists in Basra have also threatened to continue demonstrations until their demands are met. This may translate into further activity outside the BPC Building in Maqil and north of the province in Qurna, with the potential for tires to be burnt and routes temporarily blocked. While violent escalations are possible, ISF are unlikely to deploy violent dispersal tactics in the province given the experience of last year. However, if provoked by protestors, live fire and tear gas could be deployed.

Overall, a temporary lull in protests is possible in the lead up and during the religious period of Arba'een (19-20 October), though protestors will likely increase activity toward the end of the month if tangible progress is not made with regard to their demands being met.

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