



## **The Iraq Uprising: Where Does It Go From Here?**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The killing of Qassem Soleimani could prove to be a turning point in the history of the Middle East as a whole, but first and foremost in Iraq. That country has been contending for months with a popular uprising that has produced chaos and turned it into an arena for a titanic battle between Iran and the US.

The Iraqi uprising erupted on October 1, 2019. Several months earlier, an Iraqi journalist published a scathing article under the headline, “Is Iraq Now a Leaf Blowing in the Wind?”

To answer that question, we need to look into the roots of the problems in post-Saddam Iraq, the cycles in which the country has been trapped since its establishment, and the possible impact of the uprising on Iraq’s future.

The 2003 US-led invasion created high expectations of societal rehabilitation, democratization, economic wellbeing, and political stability. In reality, the result was a radical crackup the likes of which Iraq had not known since its creation in 1920. The war precipitated a sharp transition from centuries-long Sunni domination to Shiite rule. The reins of power thus passed into the hands of inexperienced Shiites, while the Sunnis, stripped of their historical status, became fixated on turning the clock back in whatever way possible.

Iraq also underwent another sudden, sharp transition: from an untrammelled dictatorship to a democracy imposed from above. The population that was supposed to manage this democracy was completely unprepared for such a transition.

There were yet further major changes. Another was the shift from centralized to decentralized rule. Baghdad, the capital, had trouble properly administering the peripheral parts of the country. Rule transitioned from a single party, the

Baath, to a welter of parties and factions fighting among themselves for power and influence.

The anarchy was intensified still further by the dismantling of Saddam Hussein's army, which numbered about a million soldiers in its heyday. It was replaced by an improvised army, the extreme weakness of which enabled the rise of the Shiite militias known as al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The great majority of these militias are under Iran's authority.

Another deep-seated problem afflicting Iraq is the endless cycle of violence, which continues to leave deep scars on the society. Under the Baath regime, the population suffered three of the most deadly wars in its history: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the Gulf War (1991), and the 2003 war. But even after the last of those conflicts ended, peace did not return to Iraq. A civil war erupted that lasted until 2008. That war fostered the rise of the Sunni terror organizations al-Qaeda and ISIS, which sowed destruction and bedlam in the country (and beyond).

The latest cycle, now at its zenith, is the Iraq uprising, which has been raging for about three months and has no end in sight.

The uprising has several unique features. First, the struggle is within the "Shiite house": Shiites are battling Shiites while the Kurds and the Sunnis watch from the sidelines. Another feature is the struggle between those who consider themselves Iraqi patriots and those who see themselves as pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiites. There is also a more camouflaged confrontation between the pro-Iranian and pro-American camps. Overall, the popular uprising is directed at the state institutions, which are viewed as corrupt and rotten to the core.

The insurrectionists are demanding no less than a fundamental change in the system of government, including the annulment of the 2005 constitution, which distributed power among the different ethnic groups. The insurrectionists have not hesitated to strike hard at symbols of authority and the militias and security forces have hit back with great violence, killing over 500 people. Meanwhile, battles are being waged in many domains of national and religious identity over control of the economy, the military, governmental institutions, and the orientation of the country.

At present, the "mediating" force between the insurrectionists and governmental institutions is Iraq's most senior Shiite leader, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who emphatically backs the insurrectionists' demands. Also taking a prominent role and building up their power amid the prevailing anarchy are tribal leaders. They are trying to fill the governmental vacuum that opened with the resignation of

PM Abdel Mahdi, the paralysis afflicting the parliament, and the inability to reach agreement on ways to solve the country's deep-seated ailments.

Complicating these structural problems even further is the fact that Iraq is caught between two hugely powerful external forces that it can neither control nor choose between. On one side is the US, which opened a Pandora's Box in 2003. Until recently, the Trump administration simply wanted to get out of Iraq with minimal damage to the US and the Middle East. Things have not gone as it wished. Iran, meanwhile, wants to continue to expand its power and influence as much as possible. Indeed, Tehran is essentially continuing the Iran-Iraq War by different means, taking over its western neighbor through "soft power." Thirty years after the war, Iran has changed from a sworn enemy to the force exerting the greatest control over Iraq.

The US-Iranian struggle for control over Iraq recently escalated to a frontal clash between Washington and Iran's proxy militias in Iraq.

After one of these militias attacked a US base, killing an American contractor and wounding American soldiers, the US hit back. On December 29, 2019, at a base of the Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah group, the US conducted a strike that killed 25 of the group's fighters.

A short time later, the Tehran-controlled al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias besieged the US embassy in Baghdad and sowed destruction in its vicinity. The Iraqi army did not lift a finger to intervene.

Although the militias withdrew from the embassy compound after one day, the Trump administration had a fierce response, and it was not long in coming. On January 3, 2020, a US drone airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani, who was commander of the Quds Force and in charge of the activity of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps outside Iran. Killed along with him were nine other people, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

The popular uprising manifests the rise of strong anti-Iranian Iraqi-Shiite patriotism—and at the same time, an upsurge in anti-American sentiment that demands a US military withdrawal. The big question is which of these trends will prevail. At the moment, it appears doubtful that the anti-Iranian camp is capable of ousting Tehran from all the power centers it has built up around the country. It is also hard to imagine Iran giving up the political, economic, and strategic clout it has painstakingly accrued over the years. On the other hand, it is difficult to envision the Trump administration, with all its desire to exit Iraq, folding now that Tehran and its supporters have challenged it so starkly.

As long as the Iranian-US struggle continues to rage on Iraqi soil, the country will be unstable, especially as the insurrectionists offer no clear alternative to the country's structural problems.

In a recent article, the Shiite commentator Sajjad Taki Quttam claimed that "the crisis in Iraq does not stem from the fact that it is a united country that some are trying to divide, but from the fact that it is a divided country that some are trying to unite by force." His advice is that each of the three parts of Iraq go its own way, which seems to be happening in any case. Arab-Shiite Iraq is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis, but the Sunni region is quite calm, and the Kurdish enclave is flourishing.

In view of this situation, perhaps an Iraqi federation would provide a solution. But after recent events, any solution to Iraq's problems appears very distant indeed.

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