



# Iraq: Protests and the Future of U.S. Partnership

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Mass protests and state violence against some protestors have shaken [Iraq](#) since October 2019, with more than 300 Iraqis [reported](#) dead and thousands more injured in demonstrations and isolated clashes in Baghdad and southern Iraq. Protestors and some prominent political figures have [demanded](#) the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abd Al Mahdi and his cabinet, channeling nationalist, nonsectarian sentiment and a range of frustrations into potent rejections of the [post-2003](#) political order. Current protests reiterate past demonstrators' concerns (with some louder critiques of Iranian interference), but the scope and endurance of the protests are unprecedented in Iraq's recent history. U.S. officials have not endorsed demands for an immediate transition, but protestors' calls for improved governance, reliable local services, more trustworthy and capable security forces, and greater economic opportunity broadly [correspond](#) to [stated](#) U.S. [goals](#).

The nature, duration, and response to the protests are deepening U.S. concerns about Iraq's stability. Related future developments could complicate U.S. efforts to partner with Iraq's government as Iraq recovers from [war with the Islamic State](#) (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) and seeks to [maintain](#) its [sovereignty](#). Congress is considering President Donald Trump's requests for additional [military](#) and [civilian](#) aid for Iraq without certainty about the future of Iraq's governing arrangements or how change might affect U.S. interests.

## Iraqi Perspectives and Proposed Solutions

The [prime minister](#) and some Iraqi officials [acknowledge](#) shortcomings in the current political system, but express concern that a period of potentially violent uncertainty could accompany a sudden transition. Other Iraqi [officials](#), Iran's [Supreme Leader](#), and Iran-aligned Iraqi militia [leaders](#) contend that the protest movement is a foreign-backed conspiracy. These critics have pledged to defend their interests, especially in light of some protestors' isolated [attacks](#) on various party headquarters, an Iranian diplomatic [facility](#), and some security forces and militia personnel. Iran reportedly is [working](#) to shape transition arrangements to preserve its interests and those of its Iraqi partners.

Leaders of Iraq's Shia Muslim [religious establishment](#) have expressed solidarity with the protestors, called for reforms, urged demonstrators to reject violence, rejected foreign interference, and [condemned](#)

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killings of civilians. Iraqi Kurdish leaders have [recognized](#) protestors' concerns and [criticized](#) repressive violence, while [convening to unify positions](#) on reforms that some Kurds fear could undermine the federally recognized Kurdistan region's rights under Iraq's constitution. Arrests and official discouragement [reportedly](#) have limited the spread of protests to areas of western Iraq predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs.

The prime minister and Iraqi legislators have approved a range of [measures](#) in response to protestors' demands, but protestors largely have rejected the measures as insufficient, with many [insisting](#) on a sweeping transition. President Barham Salih has [proposed](#) revisions to the [electoral system](#) followed by elections and has [acknowledged](#) the prime minister's willingness to resign if dominant political blocs agree on a replacement. Amendments to Iraq's electoral law require parliamentary approval, and legislators may resist, having won their seats in May 2018 elections. Elections under a revamped system could introduce new political currents and leaders, but [fiscal pressures](#) and the limited capacity of some state institutions may present lasting hurdles to reform.

Some 2019 [polling](#) suggests that many Iraqis may share protestors' stated concerns about the status quo, but close [observers](#) of Iraqi politics [express](#) some [skepticism](#) that the leading political forces will find consensus easily on transition arrangements. Iraqis continue to differ over implementation of key [provisions](#) of the existing constitution and have formed governments since 2005 only after extended and contentious negotiations among elites and establishment groups. Many elite stakeholders are targets of protestors' [ire](#), but they remain the likely [arbiters](#) of proposed remedies to the protestors' demands. Iran and the United States previously have used pressure and mediation to shape negotiations among Iraqi elites, but now face new dynamics introduced by the nationalist protest movement.

## U.S. Responses and Outlook

The impasse in Iraq presents dilemmas for the Administration and Congress as they contemplate how best to promote Iraq's unity and stability, prevent an IS resurgence, and limit Iranian influence. As Iraqis debate their political future, Congress may seek the Administration's views about the prospects for different outcomes in Iraq and their possible implications for U.S. military operations, patterns of U.S. assistance, and regional security.

On November 1, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [said](#) "the Government of Iraq should listen to the legitimate demands made by the Iraqi people...." He reiterated that the U.S. government [has](#) "called on all sides to reject violence" and called for an end to restrictions on the [press](#) and [expression](#). On November 6, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad said in a [statement](#), "There is no path forward based on suppression of the will of the Iraqi people." On November 10, the White House Press Secretary [said](#), "The United States joins the U.N. Assistance Mission to Iraq in calling on the Iraqi government to halt the violence against protestors and fulfill President Salih's promise to pass electoral reform and hold early elections."

Leading Iraqi officials endorse the continued presence of U.S. military forces in Iraq, despite [calls](#) from some Iraqis, especially Iran-aligned voices, for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The United States has sought Iraq's cooperation in its [maximum pressure](#) campaign against Iran, but has [acknowledged](#) limits on Iraq's ability to reduce some ties to its neighbor. U.S. officials [welcome](#) Iraqi [efforts](#) to assert more state control over militias, but have not encouraged Iraqi counterparts to confront pro-Iranian armed groups forcefully.

Many Iraqis appear to view incremental change as unlikely to resolve their concerns, but they also appear to differ in their preferences for the scope and pace of systemic change. Systemic reform might present new opportunities for U.S.-Iraq partnership, but also might further empower Iraqis seeking to minimize U.S. influence and/or weaken bilateral ties. Some Iraqis [reject](#) what they regard as U.S. interference in efforts to respond to the protestors' demands.

Maintenance of the political status quo despite Iraqi domestic opposition also presents risks. If, for example, the United States continues to cooperate with an increasingly unpopular Iraqi governing elite that remains unresponsive to citizens' demands, then options for pursuing U.S. interests could become more limited or costly. Confrontations resulting from continued paralysis or repressive measures could jeopardize Iraq's hard-won security gains.

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