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Protest movements in Iraq in the age of a ‘new civil society’

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Protest movements in Iraq in the age of a 'new civil society'

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Since 2015 Iraq has been experiencing an unprecedented movement of popular protests that is mobilising a whole generation of its youth, demanding a radical change of regime. Based on recent fieldwork with women, civil society and youth organisations and networks, I explore the Iraqi protests in the light of new theorisations of contemporary civil society and social movements. What I find is that the notion of *madaniyya* claimed by Iraqi protesters is not only an expression of a 'post-Islamist' political moment but it is structured by the traumatic experience of sectarian violence. For Iraqi youth, the demands for social justice and economic redistribution cannot be separated from the claim

for sectarian equality and religious freedom: both demands are experienced as matters of life and death.

A new civil society?

My research engages with Gready and Robins' concept of a ['new civil society'](#) and Islah Jad's critique of the ['NGOization'](#) of social movements in the Arab region. For them, conceptions of civil society are often reduced to the human rights NGOs' understanding of transitional justice in theory and practice. If civil society is understood as the sphere outside of the state and the economic market, for Gready and Robins, the difference between the 'old' and the 'new' civil society lies in the relationship to the state and its institutions: 'old civil society' privileges advocacy, support and capacity building, with the state and state institutions as the main point of reference while 'new civil society' insists on autonomy and independence from the state. The 'new civil society' refers to forms of actions and protests, and in the Iraqi case this is manifested through a rejection of sectarianism and identity-based politics.

Earlier protests took place in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in 2011 in the context of the Arab Spring, and the Iraqi protests of 2015 carried transformative and influential dimensions. Demonstrations started from tens of thousands of protesters in July 2015, carrying on every Friday to reach almost one million. Under slogans such as *Bis mil-din baguna al-haramiya* -in the name of religion we were robbed by looters- protesters denounced the ethno-sectarian political system established through the US invasion and occupation of 2003. They question the entire religious political elite, and denounce institutionalised and generalised corruption, the lack of basic services such as electricity, water, the absence of functioning health and education infrastructures as well as endemic unemployment. Protests spread all over the country and

continued for over five months with actions such as sit-ins at the entrance of Baghdad's Green Zone and Iraqi Parliament.

The 2015 Iraqi protest movement was launched by young male individuals under the age of 30 years old, educated, belonging to the lower middle class and middle class – mainly educators, teachers or state employees. However, the individuals who took leadership of the movement belong to the older generation, mainly men with former activist experience and affiliated with civil society or political organisations, such as the Iraqi Communist Party. Ali Taher Al-Hamoud argues convincingly that the 2015 protest are the protest of a middle class seeking to [assert itself](#) after decades of silence. The end of the UN sanctions in 2003 saw the re-emergence of this class previously destroyed by the economic crisis and successive wars.

The 2015 protests echo the growing gap between the political elite and the rest of the Iraqi population. The Iraqi 'political street', to use [Asef Bayat's](#) notion, sees the political elite as sectarian, corrupt and responsible for sectarian violence and the lack of state's services. The core of the protesters grew up in the sectarian war and in a country lacking basic infrastructure and services, and in which the state's institutions are structured by corruption and nepotism. Islamism and identity-based political formation are rejected all together. This is clear in the movement's main slogan denouncing not only the Islamist political elite and its corruption, but also both the importance religion holds in Iraq's everyday life since 2003. Through the notion of *madaniyya* which could be translated as 'civicness', protesters reject the Islamisation and the sectarianisation of social and political life and demand a functioning welfare state redistributing Iraqi wealth to its citizens.

The protests are the most visible side of a wider range of social and political initiatives mushrooming in the country that open social and political spaces and practices outside of the sphere of the NGOs and

composes a 'new civil society'. From initiatives such as organising a Valentine's Day celebration in Tahrir Square to foster love in peace-building, to the campaign *Ana Iraqi Ana Aqraa* -I am Iraqi and I read- placing books on sidewalks and parks to promote a 'culture of reading', a high level of creativity and originality have characterised these new forms of activism developed among young educated Iraqis since 2011. Most of the young individuals who launched these initiatives then participated in the 2015 protests and insist on developing a consciousness led by a rejection of sectarian violence and politics and the defence of freedom of thinking.



During my fieldwork and interviews with young protesters, I observed an important generational gap between the activists born in the late 1990s and the ones born before this period. The younger the individuals, the more radical they were in their demand for change and their rejection of the political elite and system. Expression of a ['Saddam nostalgia'](#) is even noticeable among the generation under 30 years old who never experienced life under the authoritarian regime, as also pointed out by Marsin Alshamary.

The main controversy that divided activists and protesters in Baghdad's Tahrir Square during the 2015 protest is the involvement of the conservative Islamist Shi'a Sadrist movement, some accusing the Sadrists of co-opting the movement, others considering their

participation as a way to involve their wide working-class base in the movement. Some women's rights activists view the Sadrist involvement with pragmatism describing it as a way to spread ideas of *madaniyya* to the proletarian Sadrist base. Others are very critical of the lack of clear feminist demands in the protest and reject the participation of the Sadrists describing them as sectarian, religious and conservative. Many feminist activists criticise the 2015 movement for accommodating the Shi'a Islamist movement in their choice for 'civil' and 'nationalist' type of demands rather than 'secular' and 'leftist'.

More recently, in July 2018 [protests](#) erupted again from the oil-rich province of Basra and spread in the Shi'a South. Composed predominantly of young men, its slogans are clear and go beyond the call for functioning state services through slogans such as "There is no *watan* (homeland)!" and "No, no, no to parties!".

From recognition to redistribution?

For [Fraser](#), demands for *redistribution* correspond to the addressing of socioeconomic injustices rooted in the political and economic structure of a society (exploitation, deprivation and economic marginalisation) while claims for *recognition* tackle symbolic or 'cultural' injustice, rooted in patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. Fraser considers that the intersection of class, race and gender, for example, are both socioeconomic and symbolic and that class, race and gender justice requires both redistribution and recognition. Her attempt to examine the relationship between them and her critical examination of the analytical 'redistribution-recognition dilemma' is interesting in our exploration of today's political and social mobilisations in Iraq.

It is clear that the occupation administration along with the new Iraqi elite politics have been dominated by a recognition paradigm, in the sense that prefabricated ethno-sectarian identity politics have been

imposed from the top and institutionalised. The protest movements reject this. Instead, they are putting forward what Faleh A. Jabar calls 'issue politics' dominated by a redistribution paradigm. While the context following the invasion and occupation of Iraq is clearly characterised by the institutionalisation of identity politics through the *muhasasa* system that determines political representation based on communal identities -religious, ethnic or sectarian; it is equally important to analyse identity politics as changing and dynamic. Moreover, these recent protest movements are intra-sectarian, their main actors are mainly Shi'a citizens protesting against the Shi'a political elite.



Photo credit: Zahra Ali

So beyond the redistribution-recognition dilemma, my research shows that the polarisation between the elite and the people needs to be analysed by looking at neo-liberal economic politics (privatisation, job crisis etc.), the political economy of war (militia-sation, militarisation etc.), and the 'toxicity of everyday life', that I would define here as the structural conditions of everyday life and livelihood such as health and sanitary infrastructures and environmental conditions.

[Basra's recent protests](#) have not been echoed in the Sunni provinces, many of which have been destroyed in the course of the numerous

military battles from 2003 and the war against the Islamic State in Mosul. As pointed out by the researcher [Safaa Khalaf](#), their millions of inhabitants, either living in camps or in terrible conditions fear the stigmatisation of being associated with 'terrorism' or members of the Islamic State and state repression. Additionally, the protest movement has not been followed in Iraqi Kurdistan despite the economic crisis in which it is plunged. In its structure, demands and reach, the movement represents a shift from 'recognition politics' that is associated with the system backed by the political elite to redistribution politics. Basra's dramatic social, economic and sanitary crisis epitomised the structural dysfunction of the post-2003 Iraqi political system depriving its citizen from its very rich oil resources.

If the 2015 movement could be deemed as characteristic of a 'new civil society', the specificities of the Iraqi context structured by political and sectarian violence make the rejection of identity politics, especially sectarian identity and religion, central. For Iraqi protesters individual freedom, especially the freedom not to belong to a religious and sectarian group is considered as essential as economic equality. The *madaniyya* claimed by Iraqi youth is not only the 'post-Islamist' moment spreading throughout the region over the last decade. Instead, it is characterised by the traumatic experience of sectarian violence that the invasion of the Islamic State only further exacerbated. Thus, for Iraqi youth being free to not believe in religion or belong to a sect is as important as being free from poverty: both are lived as matters of life and death.

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.

About the author



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Zahra Ali is a Sociologist and Assistant Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University. Her research explores dynamics of women and gender, social and political movements in relation to Islam(s) and the Middle East and contexts of war and conflicts with a focus on contemporary Iraq. Her book 'Women and Gender in Iraq: between Nation-building and Fragmentation', published by Cambridge University Press in 2018, is a sociology of Iraqi women's social, political activism and feminisms based on an in-depth ethnography of Iraqi women's rights organisations and a history of Iraqi women's social, economic and political experiences since the formation of the Iraqi state.

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