

In Iraq, Stirrings of an “Ungrateful Volcano”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Perhaps you remember all those high hopes once expressed by Americans for bringing democracy to “ordinary moms and dads” in Iraq, as President George Bush called them. America would not only topple Saddam Hussein, and play its famous game of fifty-two pickup – that is, bring to justice the 52 top figures in his regime – but would bring democracy to a country that had never experienced it. Elections were held; Iraqis proudly held up their purple thumbs that meant they had voted. But the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi’a Arabs remained, and so did the ethnic divide between Arabs and Kurds. The Sunnis had lost the power, political and economic, they had formerly possessed under Saddam Hussein, but have been unwilling to acquiesce in that loss. The Shi’a Arabs, to whom power devolved after Saddam’s overthrow, supported “democracy” because they constituted 60% of the Iraqi population, while Sunni Arabs were only 19%, and therefore

elections suited the Shi'a just fine. Now that they dominate, they have not been about to relinquish any of their newfound power. And the Kurds add another dimension of conflict, for they had become accustomed, under the protection of the American air umbrella, to a large degree of autonomy which they wish to retain, while the Iraqi Arabs predictably wish to bring them firmly back into the national fold.

At the beginning of October protests began in Baghdad and regions directly to its south. The protesters were mostly the Shi'a poor, raging against their own largely Shi'a government. They were protesting against both the lack of basic services, such as intermittent electricity, the high unemployment, and the low wages for those who are employed. But most of all they were protesting against corruption at the highest level. Protesters carried signs – “Just give us a country” – clearly suggesting that the country, or much of its wealth, had been stolen by a cabal of politicians. The same protests against corruption have been going on in Lebanon, where demands have been made for the whole government to resign.

The protest itself was put down in very violent fashion, not only by the army, but also by units of the Iran-supported Hasht al-Shabi, who attacked and vandalized television stations covering the story, as they did not want the ferocious suppression of the protesters to be broadcast. Just as in Lebanon, where the Iran-backed head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has called on the government not to resign as protesters demanded, so in Iraq the Iran-backed Hasht al-Shabi has taken the side of those who suppressed the protesters. The Iraqi government's report largely glossed over the role that fighters for Hasht al-Shabi are believed to have played in vandalizing four television stations, some of which was caught by security cameras and circulated widely on social media. Rather than naming the group, the report said that members of “armed groups” had been responsible. It said that “some of those responsible have been arrested and released with

sponsors" while they await trial. That suggests there will likely not be any prosecution of Hasht al-Shabi in the end – the Iraqi government not wanting to antagonize Iran over such a matter.

One hundred forty-nine unarmed protesters were killed, and thousands wounded. The government immediately distanced itself from the killings, and publicly fired all of the military commanders involved, claiming they had not been given orders from above to open fire. What will happen now is unclear. Some protesters may have been impressed that the government immediately punished, by dismissing, six of the commanders it blamed for the violence. But that can only bring a temporary reprieve, for the problem of corruption, endemic at every level of the Iraqi government, remains. The amounts that have gone missing are staggering. One report estimates that since 2003, some \$450 billion of government money has evanesced.

If the Iraqi government can ride out this wave of protests, will it be able to do so with the next wave, or the next? For nothing was made public by the national government about dealing with corruption. How could it have done so, given that the most massive corruption is to be found among those same government officials at the very top?

Meanwhile, the Iraqi government has told the U.S. that the troops entering the country from Syria cannot remain in Iraq. It was a show of independence, but were the Iraqis to give the matter more thought – and they still may – they might have wanted the American troops from Syria to remain in northern Iraq to combat, as Defense Secretary Esper said they would, a possibly resurgent ISIS. Or were the Iraqis trying to please Iran, which wants the Americans out of the Middle East entirely?

At the same time, one of the most important Shi'a festivals, Arbaeen, was being held in the Shi'a holy city of Karbala. Fifteen million Shi'a attended, with one quarter of them from

Iran. The Islamic Republic contributed tents, bathrooms, and hospitals along the pilgrimage route, supplementing those erected by Iraq, to aid the estimated 15 million pilgrims, nearly one in four of them from Iran. But when Iran said it would also send tens of thousands of police officers into Iraq to provide security for the event, the Baghdad government refused. That would have been too humiliating, an admission that the Iraqis couldn't handle their own security. And the presence of those Iranian police might have worrisomely increased the Islamic Republic's prestige, and influence, in Iraq.

That is where things stand now in Iraq: the corruption is still rampant, while the poor are still suffering, with no alleviation in sight, and they may again be stirred to protest at any moment. As for powerful foreigners, the Iraqi government is still trying to carefully calibrate its distance both from the Americans and from the Iranians. The Americans, having spent three trillion dollars to help the Iraqis, must be chagrined at this outcome. The Iranians, who have helped to train and finance Shi'a militias in Iraq, must also be disturbed that their fellow Shi'a in Iraq's government are not offering them a full-throated welcome.

In 1926 Winston Churchill, lamenting that the British had ever gotten involved with Iraq (Mesopotamia), described the country as an "ungrateful volcano." Volcanoes erupt periodically, and this month these popular protests, and the rebuffs both to America (by not allowing its troops redeploying from Syria to remain) and to Iran (by not allowing tens of thousands of its police officers to be stationed in Iraq along the pilgrim's route to Karbala) may be the first signs of that volcano once again coming alive.

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