



Stop violence against Iraqi protesters, listen to them

The violent response by the Iraqi government to peaceful protests should stop immediately. Last week Iraqi citizens – mostly young people – took to the streets in the capital Baghdad, non-violently demonstrating against the current living conditions in their country. They demand access to basic services, employment opportunities, and government accountability. The reaction from the government was one of violence. PAX believes that the Iraqi government should immediately act to respond constructively to protesters' concerns and radically change course in how security forces are responding in the streets.

In the past week, the situation on the ground has seen worrying developments, as protests have spread throughout federal Iraq (notably in Najaf, Karbala, and other cities in Iraq's southern sub-districts) and have been met with violent measures from the side of Iraqi security forces and unknown armed actors. According to local and international news outlets, the [death toll](#) has risen to over 100 (and number of injured has reached over 6000), including both protesters and security forces. Security forces are reported to be firing live bullets, spraying hot water, and throwing stun grenades and tear gas directly at the peaceful protesters. The use of violence by security forces has been reported to be particularly extreme in Sadr City, one of the most disadvantaged areas of Baghdad.

Over the past couple of days, alarming videos have been circulated on social media showcasing protesters being shot at by unidentified snipers while being interviewed by local media outlets on the street. The violent response is 'unprecedented', according to our source in Najaf. PAX has been closely monitoring the situation in Iraq in collaboration with its partners and network in Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, and Erbil. We join our voice with our partners in condemning the violent and extreme measures exercised by security forces against the non-violent demonstrations, and the lack of action taken by the federal government to cease fire and address the demands of the protesters.

Arrests and disappearances

Our contacts in Baghdad and Najaf reported arbitrary arrests and disappearances, mainly targeting journalists, reporters, and activists who are considered to have critical opinions regarding the government's policies and current actions towards the protesters. Other media outlets that are not government-affiliated have also been the subject of such arrests, and have reported that unidentified military forces have broken into and destroyed their offices. So far, the exact numbers of disappearances and arrests are unknown, as local and regional media outlets have not shared any news related to the escalation of the events. PAX considers the actions taken against journalists and media outlets as a direct infringement on freedom of expression and information, not conforming to the Iraqi Constitution (article 38) and the International treaties supposedly adopted by the Iraqi government (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

Internet shutdown

Aside from the violence and arrests, the federal government has also shut down internet access and social media outlets throughout Iraq (with the exception of the Kurdistan Region), with the intention of halting any coordination amongst protesters and plunging the country into a state of uncertainty and ambiguity. Accurate and up-to-date information and data has thus become scarce, making it difficult for local and international organizations to monitor the situation on the ground. Our partners in Najaf have expressed particular anger and worry over the government's decision for an internet shutdown, as feelings of frustration and unsafety are on the rise, which is likely to lead to increased chaos and violence.



Potential positive outcome

This might only be the first wave of protests and violence is likely to rise while numbers of protesters grow, causing severe and unprecedented consequences, especially loss of human life, as has been the case over the past few years. While demonstrations may calm down in the coming days due to increased fatalities and fear, protests are likely to be renewed and violence exacerbated if the government is not willing to take structural measures to address the protesters' demands for basic rights and services. Witnesses in Basra have reported that protests in the city are not nearly as massive as in 2018, which might indicate that the acute crises affecting the region at the time are currently less acute, that the public is too fearful or disillusioned to turn up in such large numbers again. Our own primary research through the [Human Security Survey](#) indicates that Basrawis remain incredibly frustrated with the high rates of unemployment and poor quality of essential services, and see these conditions as likely to result in additional conflict and unrest in the governorate. This reaffirms the need for the Iraqi government to directly address demands, and gives hope for a potential positive outcome if violence is halted and Iraqi voices are heard.