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# 'BASRA IS BURNING'

## THE PROTESTS IN BASRA GOVERNORATE, 2018–20

**Omar al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf**

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# 'Basra is Burning': The Protests in Basra Governorate, 2018–20

Omar al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf

## About the Author

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## Abstract

Basra has always been known in recent Iraqi history as an epicentre of protest against authority. This explains why it is one of the cities that witnessed the most protests in Iraq in recent years against the authorities' neglect of residents' rights. For nearly two decades, Basra has been suffering from a noticeable deterioration of services, especially over the summer. The most obvious include the lack of safe drinking water, electricity, school buildings and roads, as well as widespread unemployment. These were amongst the important factors that prompted the demonstrations that have erupted since 2010. Service provision deteriorated over time, with poor quality leading to a comprehensive collapse, which was met with mass demonstrations that escalated into violence and calls for the overthrow of the political system.

This paper provides a brief analysis of the protest movement that took place in Basra Governorate between 2018–2020 in order to discover the important factors that led to its recurrence, as well as the development of protest methods and the expansion of its demands. We also focus on how authorities dealt with protesters, the extent to which they responded to, or considered, their demands and how this affected the protest movement in the governorate.

## About the Conflict Research Programme



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*For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Taif Alkhudary ([t.alkhudary@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.alkhudary@lse.ac.uk)).*



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## Executive Summary

Over the past decade, protests in Basra have grown and intensified, making people's voices heard by local and federal authorities. Protesters demand changes to political participation and the provision of utility services. Although until 2018, the demonstrations were not large, and participation was limited to certain groups, since then, with the severe deterioration of services, they have expanded and been joined by various groups and different segments of the governorate's population.

The October 2019 protests, or what the demonstrators called the 'October Uprising' and the 'October Revolution', witnessed a significant expansion in the scope of the protests, and the number and identity of the participants. Instead of taking the city centre as the heart of a protest, as happened in 2018, the protest movement evolved and became less centralised in 2019. It threatened to halt oil production, disrupting port activity and main roads in the governorate. In addition, large segments of the Iraqi population rejected the ruling regime and corruption.

The government and regime forces, whether from the armed factions or political parties and movements, often deliberately denied that this is a popular uprising aspiring to bring about radical change. Therefore, the authorities resorted to a 'security solution' to quell popular anger instead of listening to the demonstrators' demands and achieving them. This was at a time when the protesters sought to create a strong state presence in the public sector, rather than to weaken it. That is, to be able to bring radical solutions to the problem of deteriorating services and to enhance the residents' confidence in local governance.

The protest forces have shifted from movements demanding improvements to services, to direct involvement in politics through the formation of emerging parties and nominating independent candidates to run in the elections. However, these candidates face violence, harassment and assassinations which increase people's anger towards the authorities. In addition, Basra is one of the cities where weapons are most widespread among citizens. The local and federal authorities' persistent use of violence to confront protesters, as well as their failure to provide protection to the political parties that emerged from such developments, may cause the province to witness more violence among its citizens.

## Introduction

In the face of continuous deterioration in the local government situation in Basra, especially the provision of crucial services for its residents, the protests recur every summer – in what has come to be known as the ‘season of protests’ – due to the scarcity of water and electricity in the hot Iraqi weather. These protests have witnessed, in recent years in particular, a noticeable development: protesters have been able to enlist new social groups to the movement. The most important of these methods is the distribution of protest spaces throughout regions and districts rather than keeping them exclusively in the cities.

The protesters’ demands have also expanded to incorporate grievances beyond services, including changing the quota system structure in local and federal governance in Iraq and changing local governance mechanisms. The evolution of the protests’ demands was accompanied by the adoption of more radical protest methods such as the burning of political party headquarters, homes of officials, consulates of regional countries, as well as attempting to shut down oil extraction sites – the main source of the Iraqi budget, and docks and border crossings.

Among the most remarkable protests that took place in Basra were those of 2018 that led to dozens of injuries and deaths, almost resulting in the city moving out of state control as the (central) federal government in Baghdad did not realise the danger of the escalating anger. Officials described the scale of demonstrations and violence, stating that ‘Basra is burning’.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, officials did not change much in the way they managed the crisis, and the demonstrations returned and spread across the governorate in 2019, extending intermittently to 2020, once again governed by fire, incitement and accusations directed at the demonstrators by security authorities. This turned Basra into one of the bloodiest centres of protest in 2019 in what was referred to in Iraq as the ‘Tishreen/October Uprising’. The latter disrupted federal and local authorities alike throughout the country and led to the downfall of the government of Adel Abdul Mahdi, about a month after its start and following the deaths of more than 500 protesters.

This research briefly analyses the protest movement that took place in Basra Governorate between 2018 and 2020 in order to explore the main reasons that led to its recurrence. It also seeks to examine the development of the protests’ mechanisms and their growing demands. Moreover, the research focuses on how the government dealt with the protesters and the extent to which it responded to their demands or took them into account.

This research is based on 25 interviews conducted by the research team with activists, protesters and officials in Basra Governorate and on a survey conducted with a sample of

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Al-Eidani: Basra is Burning and What I Heard From the Ministers Was as if the Governorate Was in Another World’, *Alsumaria*, 8 September 2018. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/246748/ال-عيداني-البصرة-تحترق-وما-سمعتة-من-الوزراء-وكان-ال> (accessed 19 May 2020).



150 residents of Basra between April and November 2019,<sup>2</sup> namely only months after the 2018 protests and right after the outbreak of the protests in October 2019. The research also relies on the local press and publications that were circulated during the protests.

## Basra Protests: Background and Reasons

Basra has long been known in Iraq as a hotbed of protest against the authorities. It has witnessed some of the country's most intense protest activity, with residents taking to the streets to highlight the neglect shown for their rights, especially the lack of services. Some examples of protests in Basra throughout history show the persistence of Basrawis' approach in firmly and resolutely confronting authority. Basrawis launched a rebellion against the compulsory recruitment law enacted by King Faisal I, who then ordered the first Iraqi air force to quell the tribes' rebellion north of Basra on 17 July 1931. The air force bombed the villages of Rahmania, today within the administrative boundaries of the Al-Midaina district;<sup>3</sup> the same region that witnessed the first casualties of the Basra protests of 2015<sup>4</sup> and 2018.<sup>5</sup>

Following Iraq's defeat in the first Gulf War in 1991, Basra was the place from which the uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime began, with aims similar to the Basra uprising in 2018 – against the deteriorating situation in the city and its dim prospects.<sup>6</sup> The protesters in Basra in the 2018 and 2019 demonstrations equated the previous protests under Saddam with those against the present government, repeating their most prominent chant using the local dialect, 'We don't want this corrupt government and by God we will bring back '91.' This was a reminder to the current authorities, who had previously opposed Saddam Hussein's regime, that these protests would be similar to the '1991 uprising'.

Basra has been suffering from significantly deteriorating services for nearly two decades, especially in the summer. The most important of these are the provision of electricity, drinking water, unemployment and the lack of school buildings and roads. Those were the most important factors that led to the demonstrations that have erupted since 2010 as services worsened over time from being bad to a total collapse. The majority of the population (68 percent of the

<sup>2</sup> The sample included 70 percent male participants, 24 percent female participants and 6 percent did not indicate their gender. In terms of age groups, 83 percent were 18–30 years old; 35 percent were 31–50 years old; 6 percent were 51–65 years old; while 10 percent did not indicate their age. As for education level, 34 percent had intermediate or middle school education; 44 percent had a diploma or bachelor's degree, 1 percent had a postgraduate degree, while 9 percent referred to themselves as 'students'. In addition, 33 percent of the sample were employed in the government sector, 34 percent worked in the private sector, 15 percent were unemployed and 1 percent were retired.

<sup>3</sup> Anwar Nasser Hassan, 'The Stance of Iraqi Tribes Regarding the Law of Compulsory Recruitment', *Journal of the College of Arts, University of Basra* 102 (2012), p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Muntadhar Family Tells al-Mirbad The Story of His Murder and Demand to Swiftly Reveal the Perpetrator', *Al-Mirbad Radio*, 21 July 2015. Available at <https://www.almirbad.com/Details/10517> (accessed 17 May 2020).

<sup>5</sup> 'One Dead and Two Injured in a Demonstration North of Basra Demanding Services and Job Creation', *Radio Nawa*, 8 July 2018. Available at <https://www.radionawa.com/all-detail.aspx?jmare=4855> (accessed 17 May 2020).

<sup>6</sup> 'protests Basra Protests – We Don't Want the Corrupted Government', *Youtube*, 28 July 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgTIZ4vhpfg> (accessed 15 March 2020).



participants in the survey sample) believes that political parties and armed factions bear the responsibility for the collapse of services, while 36 percent held the local government responsible and 18 percent believe that the federal government bears responsibility.

These results reflect the absence of certain responsible authorities, especially in local governance, that citizens can seek out to demand an improvement in their conditions; one of the main factors behind the recurring protests. This view is further substantiated by the fact that the interviews the research team conducted with local officials showed an 'understatement' of corruption problems in Basra, as these officials blamed the scarcity of financial allocations in the federal budget for the lack of services, without discussing the work quality and efficiency of local authorities.

The lack of residents' faith in the local authorities, both the executive and the legislative, affected their faith in political participation and representation in a way that has shaped their view of the protests as an alternative to official political participation, particularly elections. Indeed, the last elections for the Governorate Council were held in 2013, while elections for the District and Subdistrict Councils have not been held since 2004. The survey we conducted showed that half of the participants did not partake in the 2013 elections because they believed that the voting process was not fair. It seems that this attitude has not changed over the past seven years towards holding elections in Basra – 41 percent of the sample does not believe that such elections would be fair, while 49 percent believe that it might be 'fairly impartial'. The lack of faith in the integrity of the elections also highlights the population's scepticism of the need for legislative and regulatory institutions in the city, with 77 percent stressing the need to disband the Governorate Council while only 19 percent were against this.

Hence, in the absence of electoral participation, the majority of respondents see that protesting is the best and most efficient way to achieve their demands. About half of them participated in the protests in 2018, while 22 percent supported them through posts on social media and 25 percent of the sample did not participate. What characterised the protests in Basra in recent years was the protesters' extended demands compared to those of 2010, including demands for providing job opportunities, reducing unemployment and poverty rates, reducing dependence on foreign or local labour from outside Basra, ending partisan domination in the state administration, fighting corruption, launching real development plans and ending illegal arms flow – all according to the summary of a statement distributed by the protesters in front of the oil field west of Qurna (Line 83, Station 8) where two peaceful protesters were killed on 8 July 2018.<sup>7</sup> In addition to these, there are purely 'Basrawi' demands – although not at the top of protesters' priorities, these have acquired great importance among the Basrawi elite, including demands related to the environmental pollution crisis, currently largely ignored, as well as the salinity of water, the spread of various types of cancer, the proliferation of drug trafficking, abuse and tribal fighting.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A document from the protesters acquired by the field researchers on 10 July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> An interview with Nebras Fakhir Al-Tamimi, Director of the Regional Mine Action Centre in Southern Iraq on 26 June 2019, an interview with the intellectual and journalist Talib Abdul Aziz on 6 September 2019 and an interview with activist and academic Kadhem Al-Sahlani on 19 July 2019.

## The 2018 Protests

For Basrawi demonstrators and activists, the protests have pushed for strong state presence in the public domain, rather than seeking to weaken it. To this end, protestors envision the state developing radical solutions to these chronic problems, such as the lack of adequate services and high unemployment, and would welcome such steps that might enhance people's confidence in local government. Nevertheless, the demonstrations have witnessed limited attacks on some public institutions such as local government headquarters and the parliament office in Basra.<sup>9</sup> Despite mounting instability, officials refuse to propose effective solutions to satisfy the residents; their view remains firm. They insist there is no basis for residents' demands and that the protests are therefore not a legitimate form of democratic participation. They assert that they already 'fulfilled the demands of the people and provided them with services by improving electricity provision times'.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, a widely held belief among local politicians and security forces is that the protests are merely part of a 'conspiracy' led from abroad.<sup>11</sup> This belief shaped the violent behaviour adopted by security forces upon the outbreak of the 2018 demonstrations, with live ammunition used. The first victim killed in Basra city on 8 July 2018 was a young man from the Bani Mansour tribe, north of Basra, whom the authorities claimed was killed 'by mistake'.<sup>12</sup>

However, this claim was proven false and security force violence increased dramatically,<sup>13</sup> with live ammunition used to contain and suppress demonstrations, resulting in many more deaths. Despite protests remaining peaceful, the authorities responded by isolating Basra and

<sup>9</sup> 'Demonstrators Burn Government Buildings in Basra', *DW*, 5 September 2018. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ar/متظاهرون-يحرقون-مباني-حكومية-في-البصرة-العراقية/a-45376228> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>10</sup> This statement was repeated in interviews conducted by the researchers, albeit in different formulations, by each of the following people: the Head of the Basra Governorate Council, Sabah Al-Bazouni, the Head of the Finance Committee in Basra Governorate Council, Ahmed Al-Sulaiti and the Head of the 'Safwan' District Council, Mounadel Al-Jourani.

<sup>11</sup> 'Governor: The Demonstrations Are Run from the South of France', *Kurdistan 24*, 20 August 2018. Available at <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/11571--%7Cبالفيديو-فرنسا-جنوب-تدار-من-احتجاجات-البصرة-تدار-من-جنوب-فرنسا-بالفيديو7C> (accessed 21 April 2020). See also: 'Basra Chief of Police: Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Israel behind the Problems in Iraq', *Rudaw*, 26 October 2019. Available at <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/261020195> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Akram Al Mansouri, 'Sheikh Muhammad Abu Al-Hail Al-Mansouri Demands to Extradite the Perpetrator Who Killed the Protester in Basra in the Presence of Governor Asaad Al-Eidani', *Youtube*, 8 July 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpWZDjoHFqY> (accessed 21 March 2020). See also: 'Documented... (Shocking Data!!) The Killing of a Protester in Basra, Revealed by The Report of the Investigation Committee', *Al-Aalem Al-Jadeed*, 13 July 2018. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/49893-حصريا-معطيات-صادمة-في-تقرير-لجنة-التحقق> (accessed 21 March 2020).

<sup>13</sup> 'Iraq: Security Forces Deliberately Assault Peaceful Protesters While the Internet is Disrupted', Amnesty International, 19 July 2018. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/news/2018/07/iraq-security-forces-deliberately-attack-peaceful-protesters-while-internet-is-disabled/> (accessed 21 April 2020).

imposing a curfew<sup>14</sup> while cutting off the internet and communications<sup>15</sup> in order to conceal the killings and repression. The security forces' violence and unprecedented engagement contributed to the protests' spread to other areas in Basra and neighbouring governorates. Facing the extent of the demonstrations, the supreme Shi'a authority in Najaf, a powerful symbolic force, felt compelled to announce its support for them, increasing their momentum across Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

In response to the increasing violence of official bodies, parties and factions, from mid-July to mid-September 2018, the protesters launched seemingly semi-organised attacks against the headquarters of religious and political parties,<sup>17</sup> centres of armed factions<sup>18</sup> and their media, which had been attacking them and inciting authorities against them on a daily basis. In some cases buildings and facilities were burned.<sup>19</sup> All of the organisations targeted were Shi'a and often closely connected to Iran. The latter is perceived as having exacerbated people's anger due to widespread belief that Iran is influential in the governorate and is therefore considered complicit in sustaining their poor living conditions.

This was noticeably reflected in the results of our survey about people's opinion on the influence of other countries or external parties in Basra. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that Iran has the strongest influence in Basra among all external powers, while 25 percent believe that the US has the most powerful influence. This was followed by Saudi Arabia with 9 percent and Kuwait at 8 percent, while Britain, which occupied Basra several times, most recently between 2003 and 2009, was believed to be the most influential by 4 percent. The expression of the protesters' anger against Iran's interference and support for parties and armed factions took many direct forms in addition to those that befell the headquarters associated with it, including attacks on its symbols and institutions in Basra. The first repudiations included burning a banner of the

<sup>14</sup> 'Announcing the Imposition of a Curfew in Basra After the Torching of a Political Party Headquarters', *Arabic NRT*, 14 July 2018. Available at <https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=2345&MapID=2> (accessed 21 April 2020). Meanwhile, the protesters attacked the Safwan border crossing with Kuwait, and Kuwait placed its military forces on alert – 'Al-Abadi Puts the Army and Security Forces on High Alert', *BBC Arabic*, 14 July 2018. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-44833998> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>15</sup> 'Iraq: The Security Forces Deliberately Assault Peaceful Protesters While the Internet is Disrupted', *Amnesty International*.

<sup>16</sup> 'Sistani Supports the Popular Demonstrations in Basra and Al-Abadi is Trying to Calm Them', *Arabic NRT*, 14 July 2018. Available at <https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=2321&MapID=2> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>17</sup> These included the Badr Organisation and its TV channel *Al-Ghadeer*, the Islamic Supreme Council, the Da'wa Party, the Islamic Party, the Al-Hikma movement and its TV channel *Al-Furat*, the Fadhila Party, the Irada Movement, the Governor's Hospitality House, the office of representative, Faleh Khaza'ali, and the house of the former parliament member, Awatef Neama and the offices of the semi-official *Al-Iraqiya* channels.

<sup>18</sup> It included the offices of the Brigades of Sayyed Ashuhada, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Al-Nujaba Movement, the Al-Khurasani Movement, Ansar Allah Alawfia', the Hezbollah Brigades, Thaer Allah Movement and Al-Abdal Movement.

<sup>19</sup> 'New Casualty in Basra and Announcement of Curfew in the Governorate', *DW*, 6 September 2018. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ar/المحافظة-في-البصرة-واعلان-حظر-تجول-في-المحافظة/a-45390370> (accessed 17 May 2020).

founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in the city centre,<sup>20</sup> which was followed about three weeks later by the burning of the Iranian consulate by angry protesters.<sup>21</sup>

Security services and armed factions, despite their use of excessive violence, seemed unable to stop the demonstrations. Indeed, what characterised the protests and made them difficult to contain was their decentralised character. In other words, unlike previous years, when protests were concentrated at the centre of Basra Governorate, those in 2018 (and later in 2019 and 2020 as this research will show, although on a smaller scale) were dispersed through most areas of Basra and reached districts and subdistricts, oil fields, ports, land trade outlets and the main roads linking Basra to other governorates. This regional distribution of the protest highlighted the need to implement a decentralised system in the administration of the governorate. The demands ranged from specific needs for services in each area to broader issues pertaining to the governorate as a whole. For the first time, the residents resorted to disrupting oil production on a large scale and shut down the border crossing points and ports as a means of protest, given that their revenues were being sequestered into the pockets of the parties and their armed factions, instead of being used for the benefit of the people.<sup>22</sup>

In light of this, the local authorities in Basra and the federal authorities in Baghdad increased repression by deploying a large number of riot police, in addition to the counter-terrorism 'Falcons Cell' and the Ministry of Interior Intelligence services, which had been warning of 'total chaos' in Basra.<sup>23</sup> In addition, accusations were levelled against the so-called 'Third Movement' group,<sup>24</sup> named as such by the security services, though without providing any evidence of its existence before or after the demonstrations. In addition to meeting protesters directly with live bullets<sup>25</sup> and targeted assassinations, there were physical assaults<sup>26</sup> and arrest campaigns, with prosecutions under charges of 'supporting terrorism' and 'striking against national security'.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 'The Picture of Khomeini Was Burned in Iraqi Basra', *Erem News*, 16 July 2018. Available at <https://www.ereemnews.com/news/arab-world/1416873> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>21</sup> 'Protesters Set Fire to the Iranian Consulate', *BBC Arabic*, 7 September 2018. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-45453674> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>22</sup> 'Iraq Oil Card ... The Protesters May Impose a Deeper Siege on The Fields', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 19 November 2019. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الحقول-على-أعمق-حصاراً-أعمق-قد-يفرضون-حصاراً-أعمق-على-الحقول> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>23</sup> 'Document.. The Intelligence of The Ministry of Interior Warns of Complete Chaos in Basra', *Mawazin*, published 12 September 2018. Available at <https://www.mawazin.net/Details.aspx?jimare=9788> (accessed 23 April 2020).

<sup>24</sup> 'Basra Police Director: The Third Movement is Responsible for Burning Institutions and Parties During the Demonstrations', *Alsumaria*, 25 September 2018. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/250169/عن-إحراق-المسؤول-هو-الثالث-التيار-البصرة-التيار-الثالث-هو-المسؤول-عن-إحراق> (accessed 23 April 2020).

<sup>25</sup> 'Iraqi Security Forces Fired on Protesters', *Human Rights Watch*, 24 July 2018. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2018/07/24/320798> (accessed 23 April 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Parliament member Rami Al-Sukaini calls on parliament and the committee responsible for the Basra crisis to investigate the attacks against activists and media workers, *Iraqi Parliament*, 8 December 2018. Available at <https://ar.parliament.iq/2018/12/08/النائب-رامي-السكيني-يدعو-مجلس-النواب-الى> (accessed 23 April 2020).

<sup>27</sup> 'Saeroun Demands from Abdul-Mahdi to Grant a General Amnesty to the Basra Protesters', *Al-Mada Paper*, 7 November 2018. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/nfcwr6th> (accessed 23 April 2020).

In addition, both local and federal authorities, in an attempt to reduce popular support for the protests, launched a propaganda campaign against them and their demands, describing them as riots managed from abroad,<sup>28</sup> or directly supported by the US,<sup>29</sup> while Iranian media and political platforms justified the killing of the demonstrators claiming they were 'armed'.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi decided to fire security officials due to their failure to control the security situation, most notably the commanders of the police and operations.<sup>31</sup> Some Basrawi representatives said that the army forces and militia elements affiliated with the governor were involved in the killings.<sup>32</sup> While armed factions did not officially announce their intervention to suppress the protests at the beginning, as more protesters took to the streets, they created the 'Volunteer Mobilisation Forces' (Qowat al-Ta'bea' al-Taw'ia, which is affiliated with Qowat al-Hashd al-Sha'bi or Popular Mobilisation Forces/PMF) to contain them.<sup>33</sup> Incitement against the protesters increased, with the former Deputy Head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, announcing that the protests were being run out of the US consulate.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, the violence inflicted by authorities and factions against the protesters led to an unprecedented proliferation of mysterious killings and assassinations of male and female activists and media personnel, which Iraq had not witnessed so acutely for many years.<sup>35</sup>

The force of the repression eventually led to a decline of the protest movement in Basra starting in mid-September 2018. Some activists in the city who were coordinating the demonstrations halted the protests because of 'the chaos and the presence of infiltrators from some political parties aiming to deviate the direction of the demonstrations, as well as the presence of those who seek to employ the protests for political and personal

<sup>28</sup> 'A Shiite Leader Accuses the US and Saudi Arabia of Being Behind the Basra Demonstrations', *Al-Khaleej Online*, 26 September 2018. Available at <https://alkhaleejonline.net/سياسة/از-عيم-شيعي-يتهم-امريكا-والسعودية-بالوقوف-وراء-تظاهرات-البصرة> (accessed 23 April 2020).

<sup>29</sup> 'The Role of the US Consulate in Basra in Stirring up The Iraqi Street', *Mehr News*, 13 September 2018. Available at <https://ar.mehrnews.com/news/1887618/دور-الفتصلية-الامر-يكية-في-البصرة-في-تحريك-الشارع-العراقي> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>30</sup> 'The Demonstrations of the People of Basra Governorate... The Causes and Roots', *Al-Alam*, 13 July 2018. Available at <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/3666856/تظاهرات-اهالي-محافظة-البصرة-اسباب-وجذور> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>31</sup> 'Al-'Abadi Dismisses Senior Security Officials in Basra as Protests Continue', *BBC Arabic*, 13 July 2018. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-45458310> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>32</sup> 'Basra Residents: The Parties, Al-Shammari and Al-Aidani militants Bear Responsibility for the Massacre', *Al-'Aalem Al-Jadeed*, 19 September 2018. Available at <https://alaalem.com/?aa=news&id22=49103> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>33</sup> 'The Popular Mobilization Announces the Formation of Ten Volunteer Reserve Brigades in Basra', *Addustour*, 19 September 2018. Available at <https://www.addustour.com/articles/1030527-الحشد-الشعبي-يعلن-تشكيل-عشرة-الوية-احتياطية-تطوعية-في-البصرة> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>34</sup> 'Al-Muhandis: We Will Present Evidence of the US Consulate's Involvement in the Basra Events and Will Not be Dragged into Any Internal Warfare', *Al-Manar*, 8 September 2018. Available at <https://almanar.com.lb/4251975> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>35</sup> '20 Assassinations Targeting Iraqi Protest Activists', *Al-Bayan*, 14 December 2019. Available at <https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2019-12-14-1.3725828> (accessed 21 April 2019). See also: 'After the Basra Protests... Kidnappings, Assassinations and Talk of "Liquidation Lists"', *Bas News*, 26 September 2018. Available at <https://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/468692> (accessed 21 April 2020).

gains'.<sup>36</sup> The true figures of the dead and wounded in the Basra protests in 2018 remain unconfirmed by any official authority, while only one document prepared by the Basra Governorate Council stated that the death toll was 31.<sup>37</sup> The repression exacerbated the residents' distrust not only of political parties but also of security forces and their professionalism. The survey showed that 66 percent of respondents believed that the official government agencies repressed the protests in Basra, while 23 percent indicated that they were not acts of 'repression'. However, 76 percent of the survey participants objected to the crackdown on the protests and 8 percent supported the use of some suppression, while only 5 percent supported total repression.

## The Protests Return

Officials in Baghdad and Basra breathed a sigh of relief after the protests ended in 2018 and thought that what they described as the 'Basra fire'<sup>38</sup> would not reoccur. However, the protesters' awareness of the usefulness of demonstrating – and their perception of change (even if limited) in the provision of services as a result – meant this truce with authorities did not last long. In late June 2019, Basra provided an early spark to the demonstrations season across Iraq, with protesters promised that these demonstrations would be different and more powerful than before.<sup>39</sup> This promise was belatedly fulfilled months later when demonstrations began in October 2019 in 11 out of the 18 Iraqi governorates.

The protests of October 2019, or what the demonstrators called the 'October Uprising' and the 'October Revolution', showed that large segments of the Iraqi population openly rejected the ruling regime. The government and its partisans, whether from armed factions or political parties and movements, flatly deny that this is a popular uprising aspiring for radical change. Therefore, authorities have resorted to a 'security solution' to quell popular anger instead of listening to demands and addressing them.

Authorities across Iraq responded violently to the protests, initiating crackdowns in which many were killed. After 15 days of continuous demonstrations, the government and its supporters opted for a turn to 'systematic violence' – marshalled exclusively by the state – to give the appearance of a conflict between 'saboteurs' and the government. In order to

<sup>36</sup> "Missiles at Basra Airport and Protesters Give the Government a Respite", *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2018. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/9/8/قذائف-على-مطار-البصرة-والمظاهرات> (accessed 22 April 2020).

<sup>37</sup> 'Al-Bazouni Announces That He is Sending a List of the Names of Basra Demonstrations Martyrs', *Radio Nawa*, 29 June 2019. Available at <https://www.radionawa.com/all-detail.aspx?jimare=13716> (accessed 23 April 2020). This document was compiled to request that the federal government consider those who died in the demonstrations as 'martyrs' and that their families should be compensated.

<sup>38</sup> An interview with the head of the Basra Provincial Council, Sabah al-Bazouni, on 5 September 2019. See also: 'Al-Eidani: Basra is Burning and What I Heard from the Ministers Was as if the Governorate Was in Another World', *Alsumaria*.

<sup>39</sup> 'In Photos.. Basra Demonstrations Resume', *Al Jazeera*, 26 June 2019. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/6/29/العراق-البصرة-مظاهرات> (accessed 17 March 2021). See also: 'Basra Protests Build in Iraq as Substandard Services Persist', *Al-Monitor*, 26 June 2019. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/iraq-protests-corruption-basra-services.html> (accessed 17 March 2021).



cover up the participation of armed groups in the repression, the former government of Adel Abdul-Mahdi set up a new security entity under the name of the ‘law maintenance force’,<sup>40</sup> affiliated to the Ministry of Interior,<sup>41</sup> on the pretense of protecting the demonstrators. However, that force continued to attack peaceful protesters until it was dissolved by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi as a result of its excessive violence.<sup>42</sup>

In Basra, the protesters’ demands were not limited to services. Rather, the most common refrain was for ‘the dismissal of the Governor of Basra, Asaad al-Eidani’. However, instead of listening to the angry voices of the street against the governor, the Parliament granted al-Eidani broader powers in Basra. This action had been preceded by the federal parliament’s decision to suspend the provincial councils in November 2019,<sup>43</sup> which elicited fierce debate in Iraq that continues to today on the constitutionality of the decision, in addition to its role in undermining the political system’s faith in decentralised governance. The decision of the Parliament made al-Eidani – and the rest of the governors – solely responsible for managing local governments, including by assuming the command of the ‘Supreme Security Committee’, which includes the Police Command (the Ministry of Interior), the Operations Command (the armed forces of the Ministry of Defence), the Popular Mobilisation Forces and the rest of the security and intelligence services in the absence of any local control over their administration.

Since the start of the protests, al-Eidani has allied himself with the police and armed and intelligence groups in order to quell the demonstrations and go after the protesters. That alliance has been consolidated openly with the police chief, Rashid Falih, and the commander of the law enforcement forces. This resulted in flagrant humanitarian violations, including an increase in arrests, physical disappearances, kidnappings, assassinations and the use of live ammunition against peaceful protesters. Falih often declared that the protesters were receiving money from abroad to spark riots<sup>44</sup> and must be confronted with force.<sup>45</sup>

The local government in Basra has mobilised its security capabilities and thousands

<sup>40</sup> ‘Iraq Forms “Law-Maintaining” Force to “Protect” Protesters’, *Kurdistan 24*, 15 October 2019. Available at <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/a3b4f25a-9918-4a70-abae-03d4133197c3> (accessed 29 August 2020).

<sup>41</sup> The Center for Law on Police Use of Force noted in regard to the performance of Iraqi police forces in handling protests that ‘Iraq does not regulate nor restrict the use of force by law enforcement officials as required by international law’, *The Law on Police Use of Force – IRAQ*. Available at <https://www.policin-law.info/country/iraq> (accessed 29 August 2020).

<sup>42</sup> ‘After the “Tortured Child” Incident... The Ministry of Interior Cancels the Law-Maintaining Force’, *Nas News*, 9 March 2020. Available at <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=39437> (accessed 9 April 2020).

<sup>43</sup> ‘The Iraqi Parliament Ends the Work of the Provincial Councils’, *Al Jazeera*, 27 November 2019. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/11/27/المظاهرات-العراق-البرلمان-العراقي> (accessed 30 August 2020).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Basra Police Chief Rashid Falih Attacks Demonstrators and Accuses Them of Receiving Money from Saudi Arabia’, *Al-Rafidain*, 26 October 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emUdrOs-4Pls> (accessed 30 August 2020).

<sup>45</sup> ‘Ali Mashari, Commander of the Security Forces in Basra, Describes the Demonstrators as “Bubbles” and “Reckless Ones”’, *Erem News*, 28 November 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-nRGU3b68go> (accessed 30 August 2020).



of security forces to suppress and stop the protests. Starting in October 2019, the city entered a new era of turmoil, insecurity and widespread assassinations, kidnappings and repression<sup>46</sup> shrouded in ambiguity that included a number of prominent journalists<sup>47</sup> and activists.<sup>48</sup> However, the repression that the authorities relied on to end the protests backfired, as the latter grew stronger and the demonstrators were able to close the commercial and oil port of Umm Qasr, located in the far southwest of the governorate, which stopped operations there for about a week. The demonstrators also closed roads, bridges, power stations and government factories and besieged the Majnoon oil field.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of attempting to assuage the protesters, the local authorities, backed by the federal government, resorted to more violence. Beginning in November 2019, dozens of people were wounded<sup>50</sup> and killed<sup>51</sup> during the authorities' attempts to break up the sit-ins that spread across large areas of Basra. Impunity and the 'security solution' policy against the demonstrators continued, which was exacerbated by the announcement of the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, who withdrew his support for the protests. The announcement was interpreted by authorities as a signal to end the protests,<sup>52</sup> while the protest movement considered it an 'explicit betrayal', especially after al-Sadr's initial support.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Video of an Iraqi security forces vehicle trampling down demonstrators in Basra, *CNN Arabic*, 25 October 2019. Available at <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2019/10/25/iraq-demonstrations-clashes-security-forces> (accessed 3 September 2020).

<sup>47</sup> 'Assassination of Iraqi Journalists by Unknown Gunmen in Basra', *Al Jazeera*, 25 January 2020. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/1/11/العراق-البصرة-اغتيال-صحفي> (accessed 3 September 2020).

<sup>48</sup> 'A Crime Shakes Basra... Assassination of Two Activists and a Girl Next to the Two Bodies', *Al Arabiya*, 4 October 2019. Available at <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/10/04/اجتيال-ناشطين-وطفلة-تجتو-جنب-الجنتين> (accessed 9 March 2020).

<sup>49</sup> 'Clashes in Baghdad and Protesters Block the Main Roads in Basra', *BBC Arabic*, 26 November 2019. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-50561414> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>50</sup> 'Clashes in Basra... And 120 Wounded Among Protesters', *Al Arabiya*, 2 November 2019. Available at <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/11/02/اشتبكات-في-البصرة-و120-جريحاً-بين-المحتجين> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>51</sup> 'The Death Toll From the "Basra Sit-In" Rises', *Sky News Arabia*, 8 October 2019. Available at <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1296413-العراق-ارتفاع-عدد-قتلى-اعتصام-البصرة> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>52</sup> "A State of Confusion" in Iraq ... Did Muqtada al-Sadr Make a Mistake?", *Al-Hurra*, 26 January 2020. Available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/01/26/العراق-أخطأ-مقتدى-الصدر> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>53</sup> 'Iraqi Demonstrators: Muqtada al-Sadr Has Betrayed Us', *Al Arabiya*, 25 January 2020. Available at <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2020/01/25/متظاهرو-العراق-مقتدى-الصدر-غدر-بنا> (accessed 9 September 2020).

## Harassment and Assassination

By 2020, the curfew to combat the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the decline in the protests' intensity in Basra,<sup>54</sup> similar to the rest of the country. The authorities took advantage of the closure measures to impose more restrictions on the protest movement.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the protesters sought to engage in political action by forming parties or through individual candidacy to enter parliamentary elections, which were to be held in June 2021. However, the date of the elections has been postponed to October 2021.<sup>56</sup> Activists announced the formation of more than 15 new political entities to run in the upcoming elections.<sup>57</sup> The formation of some of those in Basra turned a group of activists into targets of assassination and harassment due to their formation of a movement to compete with the religious parties and militias that dominate the city.<sup>58</sup>

It seemed that many of the parties and their armed factions were against the parliamentary transformation of the protest movements and started practising subtle forms of violence against the emerging political movements. For example, civil violence increased in the form of tribal clashes, which raged on a daily basis in different parts of the governorate without the perpetrators being held accountable.<sup>59</sup> This fighting was being used as a cover to assassinate activists or opponents of government policies or to increase the hegemony and growth of armed groups and Shi'a militias, all while supporting the unlicensed arms economy.<sup>60</sup> These acts of violence hence weakened the authority of government security forces even more, with many Basra tribes protecting wanted militia members<sup>61</sup> by virtue of family ties. Accordingly, a clear relationship of reciprocal services emerged between tribes and armed factions. While the tribes have used their social influence to protect them from being accountable to the armed factions, the latter in turn protect them by

<sup>54</sup> 'Iraq... Imposing a Curfew in Basra to Confront Corona', *Kuwait News Agency*, 16 March 2020. Available at <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2879383&language=ar> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>55</sup> "The Spectre of Corona" Haunts the Dreams of the October Uprising in Iraq', *Independent Arabia*, 22 March 2020. Available at <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/104796/> (accessed 9 September 2020). الأخبار/العالم-العربي/شبح-كورونا-يطارد-أحلام-منتفضي-أكتوبر-في-العراق

<sup>56</sup> 'Iraq... Parliamentary Elections Postponed to October 10', *Anadolu Agency*, 19 January 2021. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/2115306/10-أكتوبر-إلى-البرلمانية-إلى-تأجيل-الانتخابات-العراق-العربية> (accessed 21 January 2021).

<sup>57</sup> 'Iraqi Youths Form Political Parties to Join Early Elections', *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2019. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/iraq-early-elections-political-parties.html> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>58</sup> 'The Targeting of a Political Group in Basra', *Human Rights Watch*, 26 August 2020. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/26/376197> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>59</sup> 'Tribal Conflicts Renewed in Basra and the Security Forces are Unable to Stop Them', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 30 May 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الأممية-القوى-عجز-وسط-عجز-البصرة-تتجدد-في-العشائر-المتجدد-في-البصرة-متهم-ببيع-رخص-النزاعات-العشائرية-تتجدد-في-البصرة-وسط-عجز-القوى-الأممية> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>60</sup> "Tribal Affairs" in Basra is Accused of "Selling" Licenses to Carry Weapons to "Criminals and Wanted", *Al-Aalem Al-Jadid*, 2 January 2021. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/59222-شؤون-العشائر-في-البصرة-متهم-ببيع-رخص> (accessed 1 April 2021).

<sup>61</sup> 'Basra: Tribes and Armed Militias Protect the Wanted', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 31 August 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/البصرة-العشائر-و-المليشيات-المسلحة-تغطي-المطلوبين> (accessed 9 September 2020).

thwarting government attempts to undermine their influence or disarm them, as well as by threatening to 'burn Basra' should there be any security campaign led by the federal authority to enforce the law.<sup>62</sup>

The federal government tried to alleviate the crisis and security challenges in Basra by holding a cabinet session in the city in July 2020 and starting a security campaign to regain Umm Qasr port<sup>63</sup> and official border crossings from the control of tribes, armed groups and influential individuals with strong ties to Iran.<sup>64</sup> However, this attempt did not succeed in bringing about a major change. The federal government is now facing a mixture of heterogeneous alliances fostering violence in Basra, including launching an organised assassination campaign that targeted two of the city's most prominent young activists in less than a week.<sup>65</sup> This coincided with the outbreak of bloody tribal fighting. The government responded to the assassinations by dismissing the police chief and the head of the National Security Department,<sup>66</sup> allied with the city's governor. These actions were preceded by the replacement of the commander of military operations.<sup>67</sup> The government moved to control and seize the ports and border crossings from the armed factions but its actions did not ultimately lead to regaining the state ports or to protecting the protesters.<sup>68</sup>

In facing these internal problems, Basra has turned into an open theatre of maneuver between Iran, the armed groups and parties affiliated with it, and the US and the Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is accused of siding with the US agenda in Iraq. During

<sup>62</sup> 'With the Expiration of "Al-Ghanmi" Deadline... 2000 Arrest Warrants are Still Suspended in Basra', *Al-Aalem Al-Jadid*, 29 August 2020. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/57477-مذكرة قبض-2000-مهلة الغانمي> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>63</sup> 'Al-Kadhimi Holds a Session of the Government in Basra and the Army is Supervising the Border Points and Ports', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 15 July 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>64</sup> 'The Iraqi Forces are Digging a Trench and a Dirt Barrier on the Border with Iran in Basra', *Al-Hurra*, 25 July 2020. Available at <https://www.alhurra.com/arabic-and-international/2020/07/25/توجيهات-الكاظمي-القوات-العراقية-تحفر-خندقا-وساترا-تربيا-الحدود> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>65</sup> The new assassination campaign began with the killing of the prominent activist Tahsin Osama on 14 August 2020 inside a company he owned in the city centre. See: 'The Assassination of an Activist in the Demonstrations' Movement in Basra', *Rudaw*, 14 August 2020. Available at <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1408202011> (accessed 9 March 2020). A few days later, gunmen tried to assassinate three other activists. See: 'An Attempt to Assassinate Activists in Basra, Days After Tahsin Osama Was killed', *Al-Hurra*, 17 August 2020. Available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/08/17/محاولة-اغتيال-ناشطين-في-البصرة-أيام-مقتل-تحسين-أسامة> (accessed 9 March 2020). Then the activist Reham Yaqoub was assassinated with her friend on 17 August 2020. See: 'Unidentified Gunmen Assassinate Doctor Reham Yaqoub', *Al-Jazeera*, 20 August 2020. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/8/20/مسلحون-مجهولون-يقتلون-ناشطة-في-20/8/20> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>66</sup> 'The Dismissal of the Police and National Security Chiefs in Basra Following the Escalation of Assassinations', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 17 August 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>67</sup> 'Replacement of Basra Operations Commander', *Rudaw*, 3 August 2020. Available at <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/030820203> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a National Security officer who declined to be identified, 2 December 2021.

al-Kadhimi's visit to Washington in August 2020,<sup>69</sup> violence and tribal fighting led to very bloody and extremist messages targeting civil protest groups through assassinations that sparked unprecedented discontent. For the first time, this led peaceful protesters to issue a call to take up arms against the militias<sup>70</sup> (which did not gain any response), in reaction to the killing of activists and to the state's inability to protect its citizens.<sup>71</sup> These events led a coalition of ambassadors of foreign countries in Iraq to call upon Baghdad to 'take the necessary steps to ensure that those responsible for these actions are punished to the maximum extent permitted by law'.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, some protesters have called for the creation of 'armed groups for self-defence', which has raised fears over the possibility of a civil war – especially in a country where weapons far outnumber citizens. However, as of yet no-one has responded to these calls and the protests have remained peaceful.<sup>73</sup>

In light of the escalating use of arms and increasing calls for militarisation, the federal government decided, in another futile attempt, to launch a military operation touted by the media as 'the largest and broadest' effort to confiscate unlicensed weapons.<sup>74</sup> However, this campaign was criticised for the state's lack of serious commitment to disarmament and for implicitly permitting the proliferation of weapons by agreeing to let every house keep a weapon 'for self-defence'. Additionally, influential parties also impeded weapon collection using various political obstacles.<sup>75</sup>

The local government alone should not be held responsible for the insecurity and the increasing anger of the residents against the authorities. The federal parliament's decision to dissolve the provincial councils and grant authority to the governors led to the dismantling of the local authority structure in Basra, which was distributed among an elected legislative council, smaller representative municipal councils, an executive authority represented by the governor and the service departments directly under the federal ministries. This decision led to the concentration of all powers in the hands of the governor, who occupies an executive position that is not controlled by an authority

<sup>69</sup> Michael Knights, 'Inside the Kadhimi Visit to Washington D.C.', *Washington Institute*, 26 August 2020. Available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-kadhimi-visit-washington-dc> (accessed 29 September 2020).

<sup>70</sup> "Calls to Take Up Arms"... Messages From Al-Kadhimi and Questions About a Deal With the Blocs', *Al-Hurra*, 30 August 2020. Available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/08/30/> (accessed 9 September 2020).  
دعوات - حمل السلاح - رسائل الكاظمي - وأسئلة - صفقة - مع الكتل

<sup>71</sup> 'Activists Continue to be Killed in Basra', *Al-Monitor*, 21 August 2019. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/iraq-basra-protests-killings.html> (accessed 29 September 2020).

<sup>72</sup> '18 Diplomatic Missions Condemn the "Assassinations" of Activists in Iraq and Call on the Government to Protect Them', *Alsumaria*, 21 August 2020. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/> (accessed 9 September 2020).  
سياسة / 355671/18 بعثة دبلوماسية تدين - عمليات اغتيال الناشطين - بالغ

<sup>73</sup> 'Al-Kadhimi Dives into the Nest of Uncontrolled Weapons and the Armed Factions Prevaricate', *Al-Mada Paper*, 31 August 2020. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/r6xkdnh3> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>74</sup> 'Iraq Launches an Operation to Confiscate Unauthorised Weapons in Basra', *Anadolu Agency*, 5 September 2020. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/1963724/> - المرخص بالبصرة - غير السلاح - عملية لمصادرة السلاح - العراق - يطلق - الدولة العربية / (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>75</sup> 'Modest Results of the Basra Security Operation', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 7 September 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/نتائج-متواضعة-لعملية-البصرة-الأمنية-في-يومها-الثالث/> (accessed 4 January 2021).

that oversees him and that holds him accountable, which was previously the role of the provincial council.<sup>76</sup>

As a result of this, the daily popular protests have become the only force that holds the governor of Basra and the political and armed forces he is allied with accountable. That reality necessitated the dismantling and fragmentation of the protest force in order to impose absolute authority on the governorate without opposition. As a result, security pressure continued to be exerted against the protesters through arrest campaigns, prosecution, assassination and physical intimidation. Meanwhile, security leaders acknowledged their inability to protect activists,<sup>77</sup> prompting a tribal sheikh to threaten to 'form tribal platoons to protect the demonstrators and combat the aggressors'.<sup>78</sup>

With the wave of crack downs on protests throughout Iraq on the first anniversary of the October movement, the local authorities in Basra, with support from Baghdad, were given the opportunity to dismantle the protest in the city square through a series of preliminary security measures on 1 October 2020. These included lifting the concrete barriers<sup>79</sup> surrounding the square, which were placed to repel attacks by armed groups against the protesters on the one hand and to contain the protest inside the square on the other. Following this, the riot police stormed in the square in the middle of the night, with direct orders from Governor Asaad al-Eidani as head of the Supreme Security Committee in the governorate.<sup>80</sup> An escalation in government violence and the dispersal of the protest using direct force<sup>81</sup> and live fire at the protesters ensued, resulting in the killing of one demonstrator and the wounding of seven others.<sup>82</sup> This killing came just one day after the visit of the Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi during which he called for the 'prohibition of the

<sup>76</sup> 'A Parliament Member Reveals the Details of a Lawsuit Against the Governor of Basra in the Court of Integrity', *Al-Aalem Al-Jadid*, 25 December 2019. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/58512-نائب-يكشف-عن-تفاصيل-دعوى-ضد-محافظة-البيص> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>77</sup> 'Basra is Out of Control... The Security Leaders Warn Activists: We will Not Be Able to Protect You', *Al-Aalem Al-Jadid*, 20 August 2020. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/57378-البصرة-خارج-السيطرة-والقيادات-الأمنية> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>78</sup> 'Bani Tamim Sheikh Hamed Abu Adnan Al-Tamimi: We Are Obligated to Build Armed Platoons That Protect the Citizen', *Youtube*, 11 May 2020. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyYAbNK-LO9M> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>79</sup> 'Iraqi Forces Move to End the Sit-In in Bahriya Square in Basra After the Dispersal of Tahrir Square in Baghdad', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 31 October 2020. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/قوات-عراقية-تنتج-لإنهاء-اعتصام-ساحة-البحرية-في-البصرة-بعد-فض-التحرير> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>80</sup> "'Riot Police' Burn Protesters' Tents in Basra', *Anadolu Agency*, 1 November 2020. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/20206749/-في-البصرة-خيام-المحتجين-في-البصرة> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>81</sup> 'Basra Activists Are Angry: We Have Never Seen Such Excessive Violence', *Al-Arabiya*, 3 November 2020. Available at <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2020/11/03/ناشطو-البصرة-غاضبون-عن-مفرط-لم-نر-له-مثيلاً> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>82</sup> 'A Protester Was Killed and 7 Wounded in the Dispersal of a Sit-In in Basra', *Anadolu Agency*, 6 November 2020. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/-بفض-اعتصام-7-واصابة-مقتل-متظاهر-في-البصرة> (accessed 4 January 2021).

use of weapons against unarmed citizens'.<sup>83</sup> However, he did not instruct al-Eidani to start an investigation or take any action regarding the killing of protesters during the dispersal of the protest.<sup>84</sup>

The governor and the forces allied with him succeeded in ending the sit-in and protest in the main demonstration square in Basra in November 2020. In return, instead of gathering in one place, the protest movement resorted to what it called 'foot demonstrations'<sup>85</sup> to maintain their momentum. However, the security and intelligence authorities' widespread arrest campaigns of activists and protesters – based on accurate information collected about their whereabouts – greatly weakened all protest activity. They became restricted to limited sectoral protests that were confined to specific regional or factional demands. Among the most prominent were the protests of the '30,000 jobs' employees, which were jobs created by the governor in October 2019 to appease some of the protesters. However, it became clear later that those jobs were not covered financially by the central government in Baghdad and the local government was unable to bear the cost.

Facing the central authority's 'security solution' in dealing with the protests, the new parties that emerged from the protest movement began to carry out their activities in secrecy for fear of assassination.<sup>86</sup> Thus, Basra faces notable challenges in the future, as a result of the government's use of the 'security solution', as well as the dominance of armed factions (with links to local authorities) over large parts of the city and the identification of local authorities with them. With weapons widespread, this is likely to exacerbate the city's problems in the future. It is entirely possible that residents may resort to arms in despair over their inability to exercise democratic rights by protesting or even forming political entities.

<sup>83</sup> 'Al-Kadhimi From Basra: We Instructed Not to Use Weapons Against Unarmed Citizens For Any Reason Whatsoever', *Al-Hurra*, 5 November 2020. Available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/11/05/> الكاظمي-البصرة-وجهنا-بعدم-استخدام-السلح-ضد-المواطنين-العزل-لأي-سبب-كان (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>84</sup> 'A Protester Killed in Basra, the Operations' Command: The Situation is Foggy', *Al-Aalem Al-Jadid*, 6 November 2020. Available at <https://al-aalem.com/news/58344-مقتل-متظاهر-بالبصرة-وقيادة-العمل-58344> (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>85</sup> 'Foot Demonstrations, A New Stage in the Basra Protests', *Raise Your Voice*, 2 November 2020. Available at <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/iraq/2020/11/02/> التظاهرات-الراجلة-مرحلة-جديدة-في-احتجاجات-البصرة (accessed 4 January 2021).

<sup>86</sup> An interview with an activist from Basra who joined a newly formed political party and refused to be named, 19 January 2021.

## Conclusion

The protest movement in Basra Governorate over the last two years shows the extent to which the protesters' mechanisms of dissent have developed in order to impose their demands on the authorities. The protests expanded far beyond the city centre, using the suburbs as bases to convey their voice to the authorities while threatening to disrupt oil production and close the ports. Additionally, the protest forces have shifted from movements demanding services to a direct involvement in politics through the formation of emerging parties and the fielding of independent candidates running for elections. On the other hand, the local authorities in Basra, and the two federal authorities represented by the government and parliament, are all revealing an unparalleled confusion in dealing with the complex conditions in the rich province. These authorities have committed flagrant violations that threaten social stability in Basra, in addition to the parliament's continued postponement of local elections since 2013 and the failure to select an elected local authority in the governorate. These circumstances have exacerbated residents' anger and their lack of faith in the authorities.

Moreover, the federal government's failure to control the security situation as well as the border entry points and ports has given armed factions an opportunity to expand their activities and increase their influence through the use of stolen money. Hence the local authorities' failure to listen to the protesters' demands to provide them with services and jobs, its collusion with the armed factions in the violent suppression and assassination campaigns against political activists, parties and emerging candidates has rendered it a fierce opponent of the street. Therefore, these complex crises – in addition to other crises such as the proliferation of weapons among people and tribes – may lead to a complete lack of confidence that pushes the population to more radical forms of dissent. This may go beyond burning party headquarters and consulates to taking up arms against the security authorities; an option that was already discussed during the demonstrations in October 2019, although never fulfilled.







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Protesters throw documents as they stand on concrete blast walls during an anti-government protest near the burnt building of the government office in Basra, Iraq, 7 September 2018.

Source: REUTERS/Alaa al-Marjani

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