

# IN IRAQ THE CORONA VIRUS IS JUST ONE OTHER CRISIS

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by **Moritz Ehrmann**

The world is focused on preventing the spread of the corona virus, and for good reason. The crisis is hitting us hard in Europe and might hit even harder in places much less well prepared. Fragile countries haunted by conflict and fragmentation will have even less ability to focus on this new health crisis, as they often have to deal with multiple challenging dynamics at once.

Iraq is one such place. So far, the number of persons reported as infected by the virus are in the hundreds only, although testing capacities are very low and real counts should be exponentially higher. The country has closed its borders with neighbouring Iran which has since long been a hotspot of the spreading of the virus. However, due to the fragmented context in the country, the effect of the crisis as well as the efficiency of counter-measures appear quite differently depending on where you are.

The Kurdistan Autonomous Region in the North-East of Iraq soon adopted measures similar to European countries and has enforced them rigorously despite the ongoing celebrations of the Persian New Year. Regions until recently occupied by the Islamic State, mostly inhabited by Sunni Arabs in the Centre and West of the country have been living under tight movement restrictions for quite some time and it seems that the virus has had less possibility to spread there. A different situation we see in the rest of the country, especially in the East of Baghdad and the Southern provinces, mostly inhabited by Shia Arabs. While the widespread demonstrations, which since last October had been a constant part of life, have largely disappeared from the streets, others find it hard to adhere to the curfew imposed. Home to the poorest part of Iraqi society, these places were still swarming with people going to work in a daily effort to

somehow make ends meet until police and army were sent out to enforce the curfew. It is difficult to envisage how they will cope with this situation, as the government is hardly in a position to compensate them for their loss of income. In addition, a majority of Shia religious sites are located in these provinces and pilgrims have hardly been deterred by the virus until recently despite public calls by religious authorities.

So far so good – largely unimpressed by this severe health crisis, which by itself is enough to paralyze all other societal and political life in Europe, other fundamental crises and challenges continue – each one of them having the potential to disrupt the functioning of the State.

### **Battlefield for hegemons**

It is just over a couple of months ago that Iraq was once again in the international headlines when the United States killed the Iranian top-general Qasim Sulimani through a drone strike on the road from Baghdad airport and the whole world trembled in front of a possible direct confrontation between a furious Iran and the United States with consequences hard to imagine. When Iran replied by shooting missiles on some Iraqi military bases hosting parts of the American forces in the country and no casualties were reported, analysts agreed that both sides had settled to avoid the looming catastrophe and the issue disappeared again from the headlines.

However, the conflict soon after flamed up again. Just enough to make sure the explosiveness of the situation wasn't forgotten, but also wouldn't reach world headlines again, well protected by the unique focus on the corona-crisis. Rockets were fired on two occasions on Camp Taji, an Iraqi army base North of Baghdad, killing and wounding American and British soldiers and contractors. The attacks were claimed by groups so far largely unknown, although the US was quick to attribute them to the major pro-Iranian Shia

militia group Kataeb Hisbollah, whose leader Abu Mehdi Al Muhandis they had killed together with General Sulimani. The US retribution mostly backfired since the bombing of Iraqi army sites most likely missed the target. The Iraqi army reported the death of three regular soldiers and two policemen, as well as a civilian. Some members of the Popular Mobilization Units (composed mostly of Shia militias parts of which are allied to Iran) were wounded. In consequence, fury against the violation of Iraqi sovereignty once again rose up, this time including the Iraqi army, which itself cooperates with and partly depends on the US and other coalition forces in their efforts against the remnants of the so-called Islamic State. The US and British ambassador were summoned to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and Shia parliamentarians revived the idea to expel all US and coalition forces from the country, after a non-binding vote to the same effect issued after the assassination of General Sulimani that had remained without concrete consequences. The US leadership seems to struggle to find a response to this dilemma. Their opponents seem to dispose of all necessary intelligence to hit them in the middle of the maze of Taji base and disappear in time before retribution takes place in a completely different site. In addition, they seem to regard occasional fatalities amongst their fighters, such as happened at other instances of US strikes, as collateral damage or even serving the cause of exposing the US as ruthlessly disrespecting Iraqi sovereignty. While the situation is fluid and other dynamics might turn fortunes again, the possibility of escalation is becoming more and more real once again. While the US-military seems to try to avoid such a scenario, US President Donald Trump has reportedly ordered planning for highly escalating moves. These could include broader attacks against Kataeb Hisbollah in Iraq or Syria (where they are fighting on the side of the Syrian government) with the aim of significantly diminishing their capacities. However, it could also include directly hitting Iranian targets in an effort to strike the country at one of their weakest moments in the middle of a corona-crisis raging out of control. The danger of either scenario would be that both Iran and local actors in Iraq might in fact see this as an opportunity to divert internal narratives towards the narrative they are most comfortable with: confrontation with the American enemy. In either scenario, the effects would be devastating for Iraq.

### **Country without leadership**

And indeed, Iraq is deeply fractured. Wide-spread and month-long demonstrations in Baghdad and the South of the

country had forced the moderate prime minister Adel Abd Al Medhi to resign late November last year, after hundreds of demonstrators were killed and even more wounded by thugs, regular and irregular members of the security forces. Since then the country has remained leaderless. The first attempt to designate an interim prime minister failed due to a lack of political majorities. The unfortunate Mohammed Allawi was not only rejected by the demonstrators for having served as government minister before, he also failed to convince Sunni, Kurdish and some Shia forces. Rumors have it that he didn't grant them the influence they had asked for.

The new designate Adnan Al Zurfi is an even more controversial figure. Having lived in asylum in the US for almost twenty years after opposing former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, following the US invasion he was soon assigned as governor of the highly influential province of Najaf, the center of Shia Islam. He was involved in subsequent years in fighting the insurgency of Shia militias against the US-occupation. He now heads the Nasr-coalition formed by the previous prime minister Haider Al Abadi.

He finds himself in an environment where parties led by or associated to Shia militia leaders dominate parliament, some of them allied to the US-arch enemy Iran. The same parties have vowed to prevent him from reaching confirmation in parliament. If party discipline is kept, these parties hold sufficient numbers to make real on this promise. This time around, Kurds and Sunnis and some small Shia parties seem more favorable to the designate. The demonstrators are mostly off the street but mostly reject Al Zurfi for similar reasons to this unsuccessful predecessor Allawi.

Some of the latter's mistakes might be valuable lessons for Al Zurfi and he is also said to be a more skillful and pragmatic negotiator, keeping the possibility real that he might find a creative way to succeed against these unfavorable odds.

The story would of course most likely not end with a possible confirmation of his government in parliament, since the forces opposing him might remain motivated to see him fail taking the country forward. An alternative to his candidature is however also not in sight. Unless all sides establish some sort of pragmatic truce, perhaps in an effort to overcome the immediate health and economic crises, it is hard to see a realistic scenario for the near future other than increased chaos.

### **Severe effects of the oil-crisis**

As if all the above wasn't enough, Iraq also faces an economic crisis independent of the economic effects of the corona-crisis with the potential of bringing the country's finances on

its knees. In fact, Iraq is probably the most effected victim of the recent fall-out between Saudi Arabia and Russia over the levels of oil production.

Iraq relies on oil revenues for more than 90 percent of its budget. The budget calculations for 2020 are based on oil at 56\$ a barrel while prices have crashed to less than half of that. Officials are warning the government will not be able to pay salaries — in a country where the majority of people work in the public sector — and keep up essential imports. The government has recently resorted to asking for donations from private foundations.

### **The only hope is long-term**

At the same time, the wide-ranging demonstrations have provided a completely new dynamic, that looked hopeful and future-oriented before all the other crises described here increasingly occupied the picture. Demonstrators came from the young elements of the majority Shia society. Unlike the

demonstrations in Sunni-majority provinces before 2014 which ultimately led to the rise of the so-called Islamic State, these demonstrators challenge the Shia leaders of their own. Six, seven years after the unfortunate efforts of Sunni youth to address corruption, lack of services and confessionally driven discrimination, the youth on Baghdad's Tahrir Square and in several provinces of the South is in many senses a new generation. They are no longer the post-Saddam generation that grew up under dictatorship like most of the ordinary people, or in exile in the US, Europe or Iran like most political figures. They have known an Iraq which in principle is free and democratic – very much in principle. But they went out to the streets to claim exactly that principle. And they will return to the streets once the corona-crisis is over one way or another, in the middle of a probable economic crisis. They will likely not achieve the change they long for straight away, but in the mid- to long term this post-protest generation presents the best chance for the stability of Iraq.

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