

2.3. Political opposition activists and protesters

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last updated: January 2021

This profile refers to political opposition activists and protesters. For guidance on human rights activists see the profile [Journalists, media workers and human rights activists](#).

COI summary

[\[Protesters\]](#)

Freedom of expression as well as of assembly and peaceful protest are enshrined in the Iraqi constitution. Political protests have taken place regularly in Iraq over the past few years but have varied in scope and focus between different regions.

On 1 October 2019, protests in Baghdad and several other governorates marked the beginning of the largest mass protest movement in Iraq's recent memory. The protests can be divided in three stages: from 1 to 9 October 2019, from 25 October to March/April 2020, and protests that began in May/June 2020.

Protesters called for economic reforms, jobs, social justice, better services, an impartial government, an increased accountability, and an end to corruption. As the protests developed, the demands raised developed with them, entailing systemic change, such as resignation of the government and new elections, as well as constitutional changes, and an end to Iraq's post-2003 ethno-sectarian political system. Additionally, people took part in demonstrations due to anger at the violent response with which initial protests were met.

The protests predominantly took place in Baghdad and the central and southern Shia-majority provinces. The number of protesters taking part varied throughout

autumn and winter 2019/2020, with most sources referring to thousands or in some cases tens of thousands of protesters. Following the national curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic, protests re-emerged in May/June 2020 with markedly fewer participants.

The protesters mostly did not belong to any particular political party or subscribe to any particular view or ideology. Protesters from demographically diverse groups were taking part, such as young men, women, seniors, school children, students, and professionals. The protests did not have any unified or formal leadership.

The protests were met with violence on the part of Iraqi security forces and other forces, such as (Iran-backed) militias and parts of the PMU, causing a high number of casualties. Estimates on the number of fatalities go as high as 600, whereas the number of injured varies more, with sources referring to between 9 000 and 25 000 injured in total. Most of those killed died due to shots to the head or chest through live ammunition. Deaths because of the use of military grade teargas cannisters and because of arson of buildings were also recorded.

Large numbers of people have been arrested throughout the protests, typically without a warrant, but most of the demonstrators have been released and those remaining in detention have been charged pursuant to the Iraqi Criminal Code. By mid-February 2020, 2 800 people had been arrested, of which all but 38 had been released.

Well-known activists, people who take part in and/or play a significant role in the protests, and people who are critical of the authorities and armed groups have been subjected to threats, intimidation, kidnappings, arrests, ill-treatment, assassinations and killings. The attacks seem to have been pre-planned and well organised. The persons were being abducted near or on their way to protests sites, close to their homes, or during regular commutes. Sources are pointing to both ISF and PMU as responsible for targeting individuals. Kidnappings are primarily attributed to militias. On 23 May 2020, UNAMI stated that it had confirmed 99 cases of missing protesters, involving 123 people, of whom 25 remained missing. While in detention or while in captivity, protesters have been subjected to beatings, ill-treatment, and sometimes electrocution. There were also reports of detainees and/or abductees being forced to sign a pledge not to take part in further protests, before being released. In the context of kidnappings, information on the participation in protests, the political affiliation of the protester and sometimes information on other protesters, was also sought. Sources further refer to rumours of a government-compiled 'blacklist' of wanted protesters.

Sources report that, in a limited number of cases, members of ISF have been removed from their positions, or have been arrested, charged, or sentenced, or in which arrest orders have been issued, on the basis of violence perpetrated against protesters. Little information is found concerning actions taken against other armed forces involved in violence against protesters.

There are no official investigations conducted by law enforcement authorities to locate the missing and to identify and prosecute those responsible. It was also reported that family members reporting persons missing to the police are not receiving any help. There were also cases where family members or a victim have reported kidnappings to the police, which in turn lead to the family being threatened and the victim being kidnapped by the same group again.

The government has started paying compensations to the injured and to the families of those killed.

Protests have not taken place in Sunni-majority areas as the authorities restricted the opportunity to hold demonstrations by either arresting people for calling for protests or even for expressing support on social media for protests taking place elsewhere.

Throughout 2020, protests have been taking place in the KRI, although to a smaller extent than in other parts of Iraq. The protesters' demands included better basic services and job opportunities, the lifting of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the payment of unpaid wages.

Authorities in the KRI broke up demonstrations or tried to prevent them from happening for example by pre-emptively arresting a large number of activists and journalists.

Risk analysis

Legitimate actions of law enforcement would not amount to persecution.

The acts to which individuals under this profile could be exposed are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution (e.g. killing, arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention, torture, beatings, abduction).

The individual assessment of whether or not there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: nature of activities and degree of involvement, leadership role, being known to the authorities (e.g. previous arrest), etc. The sole

fact of participating in a protest in the past may not be sufficient to establish a well-founded fear of persecution.

Nexus to a reason for persecution

Available information indicates that persecution of this profile is for reasons of (imputed) political opinion.
