
IRAQ: PROTESTS RAGE OVER POOR PUBLIC SERVICES, UNEMPLOYMENT

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16.07.2018

Al Jazeera (14 July 2018)

Iraq has placed its security forces on high alert after protests against high unemployment and a lack of basic services in the country's southern provinces spread to the capital, Baghdad.

The nationwide directive on Saturday was issued overnight by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who also serves as the country's commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Reinforcement soldiers from both the Counter Terrorism Service and the Army's Ninth Division have already been dispatched to Basra, where demonstrators gathered for the sixth consecutive day, to help protect the province's oil fields, security sources told the Reuters news agency.

The order came in an effort to stem the burgeoning protests, which on Friday spread from oil-rich Basra - where residents had blocked access to the nearby commodities port of Umm Qasr - to the cities of Amara, Nasiriya and the Shia holy city of Najaf.

After an urgent meeting under al-Abadi's chairmanship, the National Security Council also decided on Saturday to cut internet access in the capital to prevent the unrest from spreading further, Anadolu Agency reported.

Three people killed

Hundreds of Iraqi protesters stormed government buildings in the south of the country on Friday and stormed Najaf International Airport, demanding better services, job opportunities and an end to alleged Iranian interference.

In the latest in a week of daily protests against corruption and poor governance, demonstrators clashed with security forces in several provinces, including Maysan, Dhi Qar, Basra, Najaf and Karbala.

Officials said two more demonstrators were killed overnight in Maysan province on the border with Iran, bringing the number of people killed since the protests erupted on Sunday to three.

At least one person was killed and 15 injured in Maysan when Iraqi forces shot at protesters after they attacked and set fire to office buildings used by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Islamic Dawa Party, the Iranian-backed Al-Badr Organisation and the Shia Supreme Islamic Council Party.

According to Iraqi news website Al-Sumaria, 25 anti-riot policemen were also wounded as they

tried to stop demonstrators from storming the governor's house in the province of Dhi Qar.

The protesters had gathered near his residence and could be heard chanting slogans such as "Iran, we don't want you anymore."

Rampant electricity cuts have exacerbated a sweltering heat wave, with Basra seeing temperatures exceed 48 degrees Celsius in recent days.

The region is home to the oil fields that account for the vast majority of the more than three million barrels of oil Iraq exports every day. Yet, it remains underdeveloped and has suffered from chronic power outages, poor water quality and uncollected waste.

Demonstrators in Basra used burning tyres to blocking roads as they marched on government installations and even attempted to storm an oil facility.

"These protests are for the oppressed people of Basra," said a demonstrator. "We are asking for what is rightfully ours. The government should provide clean water, job opportunities, electricity and basic infrastructure. These basic needs are the responsibility of the prime minister and the governor."

Mohammed Jabbar, 29, an unemployed college graduate, said the demonstrators will not stop until their demands are met.

"If they don't create jobs and improve services such as water and electricity, we will close down Basra and oil production," he said.

High unemployment

The demonstrations spread after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the supreme spiritual leader of Shia Muslims in Iraq, expressed his solidarity with the protesters.

"It is not fair and it is never acceptable that this generous province is one of the most miserable areas in Iraq," Abdel Mahdi al-Karbalai, the representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, said at Friday prayers in Karbala.

Karbalai urged the "federal and local government to deal seriously with the demands of citizens", while also calling on demonstrators to refrain from violence.

Al-Abadi has vowed to rebuild Iraq's economy, which has been ravaged by years of conflict, but frustrations have grown in the oil-rich south.

Officially, 10.8 percent of Iraqis are jobless, while youth unemployment is twice as high in a country where 60 percent of the population is under 24.

Iraq is the second-largest producer of crude in the OPEC oil cartel, with 153bn barrels of proven reserves.

The oil sector accounts for 89 percent of the state budget and 99 percent of Iraq's export revenues, but only one percent of jobs, as the majority of posts are filled by foreigners.

Iraq is currently in political limbo as the country looks to form a new government after Shia leader

Muqtada al-Sadr's surprise poll win saw longtime political figures pushed out by voters seeking change in the country.

Saad Jawad, a professor of political science at the London School of Economics, said the unrest was the result "of what happened in Iraq since 2003".

"It's an accumulation of protests about bad services, corruption, unemployment, lack services and electricity - all these things have been going for a long time and the people have been suffering from them," he told Al Jazeera from the UK capital, noting that the protests against the Shia-led government are taking place in Iraq's Shia provinces.

Jawad said al-Abadi is "weak" politically, casting doubt over his ability to find a solution, and stressed Tehran's "major role" in the crisis in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the threat of biting sanctions.

"Since Iran was put in a corner economically, they are cutting all electricity supplies and water supplies to Iraq, which were normally going smoothly, and this is also creating a problem for Iraq," he said.

"I think the Iranians want to tell to the Americans that if you create problems to us somewhere else we can combat you everywhere - Syria, Iraq, the Gulf, whatever we can do."

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