
IRAQ'S TOP SHI'ITE CLERIC SAYS SECURITY FORCES MUST KEEP PEACE

08.11.2019

Reuters (8 November 2019)

BAGHDAD

Iraq's top Shiite Muslim cleric on Friday urged security forces to avoid using excessive force to quell weeks of anti-government unrest as authorities grapple with the countrys biggest crisis in years.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who only speaks on politics in times of crisis and wields enormous influence over public opinion in Shiite-majority Iraq, urged the government to respond as quickly as possible to demonstrators demands.

The biggest responsibility is on the security forces, a representative of Sistani said in a sermon after Friday prayers in the holy city of Kerbala.

They must avoid using excessive force with peaceful protesters.

Protests over lack of jobs and services broke out in Baghdad on Oct. 1 and quickly spread to southern provinces. Security forces began using live gunfire to disperse demonstrations almost immediately and have killed more than 260 people, according to police and medics.

The protesters, mostly unemployed youths, now demand an overhaul of the political system and ruling class which has dominated state institutions since the U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Sistani also warned against the exploitation of the unrest by internal and external forces which he said sought to destabilize Iraq for their own goals. He did not elaborate.

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-sistani/iraqs-top-shiite-cleric-says-security-forces-must-keep-peace-idUSKBN1X1129>

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