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THE CURRENT: Is Netanyahu out as Israel's prime minister?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

Protests in Baghdad and cities in southern Iraq have escalated in the past week, resulting in over 100 killed and more than 6000 injured.

To discuss what's happening in Iraq is Vanda Felbab-Brown, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy program, and recently back from Iraq herself. Vanda, thanks for being here

FELBAB-BROWN: My pleasure

PITA: Vanda, what can you tell us about these protests – who's participating in them and what's the cause?

FELBAB-BROWN: The protests seem to be mostly spontaneous protests, expressing the deep frustration of the Iraqi people, particularly young Iraqi people, with misgovernance in Iraq, and lack of job opportunities and economic opportunities. This has been in the making for years, but escalated after the distraction of ISIS has been removed. ISIS still operates in Iraq, but is nowhere near as strong as it was; in fact, the government declared its official defeat more than a year ago. So the government can no longer use the excuse that it can't focus on economic development, providing basic services such as roads, electricity, because it has to focus on ISIS.

Now, many people are suffering and there's a big divide between south and north Iraq – suffering in terms of lack of services, electricity. I was in Iraq, both Baghdad and southern Iraq a week ago, when the protests just started, and the temp was regularly running 105-110 degrees Fahrenheit, and most people don't have electricity. And of course in the summer months, the temperatures were even higher.

So with this basic element of access to water, access to electricity, access to employment, that's the cause of the protests. However, even though they started spontaneously, there are now multiple political dimensions overlaying the protests, with various politicians and paramilitary groups alternatively seeking to either suppress or capitalize and shape the protests.

PITA: Tell us about the paramilitary involvement. Are they seeking to disguise themselves as part of the protestors and being on that side of things, or are they part of the security forces; and how do they fit in?

FELBAB-BROWN: Officially, the paramilitary groups are part of the Iraqi state. They are a separate sector from the police and the army. They are a very powerful sector. They are a very diverse group, but the strongest elements, of maybe a force of some 80,000-120,000 forces are groups aligned with Iran. Many of them existed for many, many years prior to ISIS, though they officially legitimized themselves with the rise of ISIS. But nonetheless, even among them are divisions. Some groups, the militia forces, the paramilitary forces created with Moqtada al-Sadr, don't seem to be directly part of the repression against the protestors and in fact Sadr has called for the collapse of the government. Other groups that are affiliated with Iran seem to be carving up part of Baghdad, taking over various neighborhoods, and at least clandestinely, unofficially, exacting violence on the protestors, shooting protestors, intimidating protestors, preventing hospitals from treating the injured.

But I need to emphasize that the official forces, the army and the police, have also acted very, very brutally. All the information that we are getting is sporadic – there is a lot of propaganda and counterpropaganda going on while the government has been maintaining an internet blackout and even at various times a phone blackout. So reaching contacts in Iraq has been very difficult.

PITA: As you mentioned, there have been incidents of live fire being used against protestors. Over this past weekend, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi did say that he was committed to trying to meet with the protestors without weapons, to hear their demands. What are some of the responses we've seen from the central government trying to pacify things?

FELBAB-BROWN: There have been multiple responses. When I was there 10 days ago, I in fact had meetings with various government officials and asked one of them about protests and the larger sense of the government's massive failure to provide for basic economic, social needs of the people and massive frustration with corruption. And the Iraqi government official responded in the following way: He said, "are you asking me for Tahrir Square-like events here?" By the way, the center of protests in Baghdad is also Tahrir Square, same as the place in Egypt. And he responded to himself, "No chance of something like that happening. We'll simply get away with the repression." And of course the government's first response has been very heavy-handed repression that has surprised everyone. The international community has condemned it, the UN has condemned it.

There have been prior protests in Basra last year that have been very similar, and in that case, there was not official repression on this level, but many of the key leaders were subsequently assassinated in the weeks and months following that, with widespread allegations and expectations that the assassinations had taken place at the hands of the pro-Iran militia groups. Once again, just in the Basra protests, as in these protests, the protestors have demanded that Iran stop influencing political developments in Iraq. But that's just one facet of what's going on.

In 2016, there were also dramatic protests in Baghdad, and at the time, the army just stood by and the protestors ransacked the Parliament, entered the prime minister's office. So this time around, the response is very different, immediately very heavy violence and repression. After this has been escalated and it hasn't deterred the protestors, Prime Minister Mahdi has issued the seven-point proposal that promises to increase some benefits for unemployment, perhaps give some housing

opportunities to low-income Iraqis, and also now there have been promises over the last several hours that there will be investigation of whether and when the Army or police acted with excessive brutality. But none of that has really quieted the protestors. In fact, the demands of the protestors have escalated. While until about Saturday, Sunday, they have been generally asking for employment, economic opportunities, and particularly for reducing corruption, they are now specifically asking for the collapse of the Mahdi government. Now, this could happen, and there are calls now for rapid snap elections, but it's not clear that the elections themselves will fundamentally resolve what's going on. There needs to be much deeper reckoning amongst Iraqi political elite as to whether they can continue treating their people with the same level of rapaciousness and predatory misgovernance and malfeasance, or whether they will need to start delivering some basic services and providing far greater accountability.

And this is very difficult in the context of Iraqi politics where you have many power brokers affiliated with armed groups, whether they are close to Iran or not, and the overlay of sectarian violence.

PITA: Are there concerns about these protests spreading outside the south and Baghdad, where so far they've been centered?

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you for asking that, Adrianna – that's a very key point that so far that has not made it much to the media. So far, the protests have been in Baghdad and the south, the Shia areas. That's very important because the Shia population is the dominant population and their responsiveness or protests are critical for the govt. But one of the big issues is whether this will spread north into areas – or west – such as Anbar, or Nineveh, or areas that are mixed and that have been liberated from the ISIS takeover. If it does, this will further significantly complicate the security situation. Those areas are equally suffering. I was in Mosul nine months ago and parts of Mosul look like Dresden – it's an incredible level of destruction. Very little construction services have been provided, so there is equally a pent-up sense of being neglected by the government, being abandoned to basic economic suffering. So that is a prime area for protests to go up. Those areas are not doing well. But if protests go up, this will now bring in a very strong way the Sunni-Shia, Sunni-minority, Shia-minority dimensions. And again, the role of the paramilitary groups, the al Hashd al Shaabi, will be even more significant because many of them are highly based along sectarian lines, especially those aligned with Iran. So it's very bad that pro-Iran groups appear to be repressing Shia protestors in the Nasr area or Baghdad. It will be much worse if they start acting with the same level of brutality against protestors in Nineveh, places like Mosul or elsewhere.

PITA: Is there a space for international actors, or neighboring countries? What can be done to either put pressure on the central government to try and be more responsive; what options are there to try and keep this from spinning out of control?

FELBAB-BROWN: I think it's very crucial to deliver the message to the Iraqi government, and for that matter, leaders of paramilitary groups, the response "we can get away with repression" is not a good response. That's a response that's a prescription for disaster. It's very important to echo the voices of the UN that the repression must stop. Yes, it's important to maintain security, that means that the govt must find some wherewithal to rein in not just its own official army and police forces, but also the paramilitary groups that the government is supposed to nominally control. I say nominally because they don't in practice control them, but it's really been distressing to hear some of the responses from the

national security advisor for example – the Iraqi national security advisor – who suggested that the violence is not the government’s responsibility, and who suggested everyone butt out, we’re handling this. That’s not the right response.

It’s important to start identifying voices of communication between the protestors and the government – again, not easy. The protests have been largely spontaneous; they don’t seem to have very visible and concrete leaders. And the few that are there are being targeted – one was just assassinated in the past few hours. So the government is really worsening its own ability to move forward. So the most important is to turn the violence down – yes, control the situation, but stop the level of repression, rein in the militias, then start a systematic dialogue, whether it’s about the elections but more importantly about how often, if ever, Iraqi leaders can afford to go through situations like this and how much the Iraqi people will suffer. This is not just a matter of domestic politics. This has big repercussions for the stability of the region, relations between the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Iran, many geopolitical dimensions to it as well.

PITA: All right. Vanda, thank you very much for explaining this to us today.