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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE OCTOBER 2019 PROTEST MOVEMENT IN IRAQ: AN ANALYSIS OF THE "EARLY MOMENTS" OF THE MOBILISATION

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ABSTRACT: On 1 October 2019, a wide-ranging anti-government protest took to the streets in Baghdad. Grievances included unemployment, a lack of basic services, the absence of social justice, and endemic corruption in political and economic institutions. Despite swift and severe state repression, the protest snowballed into a countrywide mobilisation encompassing the central-southern governorates to become the largest protest movement to challenge Iraq's post-2003 political order. By granting analytical weight to the role of early riser activists, this paper focuses on the factors that shaped activists' decisions and lead to different forms of spontaneous participation involving both sympathisers and bystanders. In so doing, it draws attention to the non-hierarchical structure of the movement and its "diffused communication" strategy, the repression as a "moral shock" and the rhetoric of protest slogans. At the crossroads between social movement studies and Iraqi studies, this article contributes to both bodies of scholarship with empirical research. On one hand, it enriches social movement literature by shedding light on strategies and actions adopted by activists operating in non-liberal contexts. On the other hand, it enriches Iraqi political studies by demonstrating that the country hosts a vibrant sphere of contentious politics, a sphere that deserves ample scrutiny.

KEYWORDS: Early riser activists, Iraq, October Revolution, protests, social movements.

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1. Introduction¹

Social movements have played an increasingly significant role as part of Iraq's contentious politics, challenging the country's post-2003 political order. Profound popular discontent with Baghdad's ruling class has fuelled the belief that political, economic and social change is highly unlikely to come from above or exclusively institutional channels. This sentiment triggered the collective mobilisation of various sectors of Iraqi society, driving them to take to the streets in various waves of protests throughout the 2010s. This paper offers an analysis of the latest protest cycle launched on 1 October 2019 with a massive sit-in in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. As with many other previous protests, large portions of the Iraqi population viewed the sit-in with a degree of scepticism: "it is yet another protest against our nation's economic and political corruption. It is a real, serious problem that affects everyone, but no protest has defeated it. It is yet another necessary but doomed protest".² Such scepticism was accompanied by a desire to keep away from the demonstrations, for fear of repercussions. Later in the month, however, not only did the same academic physically take part in the protest; he also openly declared his support for it via his social media accounts. Many Iraqis behaved in the same way. To use Timur Kuran's terms (1991), these individuals aligned their "private preference" – hidden and perhaps even fickle support for an anti-government movement – and their "public preference" – a public declaration of their alignment with a protest in the awareness that they might face retaliation and violence from institutions as a result. Despite the swift and severe state repression, the protest snowballed into a countrywide mobilisation that involved all of Iraq's central-southern provinces on 25 October. According to several observers (Cornish 2019; Ibrahim 2019; Rubin 2019), the October protest movement represented the largest popular mobilisation episode in the country's recent history.

From a methodological perspective, this research was sparked by brief participant observation carried out in the first week of October 2019 when one of the authors was in Iraq. From that moment through the summer of 2020, we followed up on this initial research by collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. We have built relationships with nine early riser activists³ and worked to stay in constant contact with them. Due to the covid-19 outbreak, our interactions were exclusively virtual (see Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020; Lupton 2020 for methodological reflections on possibilities for carrying out social research during the pandemic). Despite the limits involved in conducting "online fieldwork" through Facebook, Skype, and WhatsApp calls, we were able to collect a large amount of information about the protests. We were likewise able to grasp the perceptions, emotions, choices, and ultimately

¹ Chiara Lovotti wrote paragraphs 1, 3, 4 and 6; Licia Proserpio wrote paragraphs 2, 5, 7 and 8.

² Lovotti's conversation with an Iraqi professor in Najaf on 4 October 2019.

³ The following is a summary of the nine early riser activists' profiles (please note that names are fictional):

Hayder, male, 30 years old, works in the humanitarian sector and lives in Geneva.

Dina, female, 29 years old, after her university degree has worked in various NGOs.

Hasan, male, 40 years old, freelance journalist.

Asma, female, 23 years old, feminist, after her university degree she was working for an international organisation until her employer fired for taking part in the protests.

Mohammed, male, 22 years old, university student and rapper.

Jafar, male, 32 years old, working temporarily in Germany when the protests began and chose to come back to Iraq to take part in them.

Zayna, female, 22 years old, university student.

Abbas, male, 21 years old, university student in medicine.

Caesar, male, 23 years old, university student and part time office worker.

strategic decisions of the activists interviewed, thus placing human agency at the core of our analysis (Blee 2013). Our positionality (Clark and Cavatorta 2018) as young, female researchers who are not Iraqi but do enjoy solid connections with Iraqi civil society organisations and individuals, helped us access activists quite smoothly, establishing the necessary interviewer-interviewee trust with them. Simultaneously, this positionality required us to be very aware about potential personal biases when interpreting the data. To bolster the interpretation of the protest offered by our interviews, we have triangulated their accounts with additional sources including documents produced by social movements – mostly social media material – and journalistic or international agency reports.

At the crossroads between social movement studies and area studies, this article draws theoretical and analytical insights from both disciplines. Hence, its contribution is twofold. Firstly, it enriches the social movement studies literature with an empirical analysis dissecting early riser activists' decision-making processes. How did they manage to trigger and sustain such a large mobilisation, overcoming multiple cleavages and pulling in diverse strata of the Iraqi society, in a context in which the personal and collective costs of protesting are high? Secondly, it contributes to the literature on Iraqi politics, a body of work usually focused on institutional politics and security matters, by shedding light on the growing importance of social movements in shaping the country's political arena. These contributions are upheld in the belief that area studies and social movements studies can make important cross-disciplinary conversations, which are often overlooked (Rivetti 2020).

2. What happens during the early moments of a mobilisation: The theoretical framework

The 2011 Arab uprisings led to a re-thinking of dominant approaches to the study of social mobilisation, leaving behind structuralism in favour of understanding the variability in human perceptions and decision-making that those revolts had brought to light (Volpi and Clark 2019). In developing theoretical explanations for this new wave of protests, many scholars have switched from a macro-level to a micro-level of analysis (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2012; Kurzman 2012; Volpi and Clark 2018). Delving into the protests' micro-foundations means paying greater attention to the processes that lead individuals (activists, sympathisers and bystanders) to participate in contentious events occurring in a specific place and time. In so doing, these scholars have taken Charles Kurzman's (1996, 2009) seminal work on "unthinkable revolutions" as a theoretical reference. Studying protests emerging in the (apparent) absence of favourable structural conditions, Kurzman was among the first to confer analytical weight on activists' perceptions, emotions, choices, and the way these factors ultimately shape their strategic decisions and ability to mobilise others. Since "there is no actor called a crowd" (Kuran 1991), protests' structural conditions (although important) cannot deterministically identify where, when and how a mobilisation will occur, especially in illiberal democratic contexts. Instead, an examination of "the lived experience of the uprising", that is, scrutinising activists' agency and cognitive micro-dynamics, can actually be more revealing about what triggers the protest (Kurzman 2012). Following in the footsteps of Kurzman' work, Wendy Pearlman (2018) has underlined both how "the contingency and the complex motivation infusing individuals' decision to rebel" can shape the course of a protest, and how "a return to the earliest moment" can help in retroactively explaining a protest cycle. James M. Jasper also moves away from structural explanations of social mobilisation. In multiple studies (Jasper 2011a; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015), he has invited scholars to analyse the inter-relational and dynamic interactions between the different "players" (i.e. activists and the system they rise against) to understand the "logic of the situation" of a protest event. It is only by analysing these players' choices and actions in-depth, the author argues, that it is possible to make sense of what they identify as opportunities to mobilise

bystanders and sympathisers at specific moments in time. Indeed, especially in a mobilisation's earliest moment, activists have to make several choices: what messages to deliver; what messages are worth translating into slogans; what portion of the population to mobilise; what strategic actions to prioritise over others; and how to react in case of repression. These choices are driven by consolidated existing knowledge (i.e. the legacy of previous mobilisations) but also by "new" factors related to the contingency of the events and the emotions that such events provoke (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). Emotional responses are not merely irrational reactions. Rather, they can lay the groundwork for strategic thought and common drivers of behaviour that prove particularly meaningful in specific circumstances: in other words, emotions can directly facilitate or hinder mobilisation (Jasper, 2011b).

To give an overarching theoretical framework to this complex bottom-up articulation of protest actions, David Snow and Dana Moss (2014) have formulated the concept of "spontaneity". "Spontaneity" is theorised as "a cover term" for a series of contingent or unplanned events born out of specific individuals' need to make strategic decisions in the heat of the moment. In the words of Edmund Cheng and Wai-Yin Chan (2016), human beings can and often do make conscious and strategic on-the-spot decisions, conditioned by different factors that trigger their spontaneity. Identifying the types of spontaneity triggers, Snow and Moss list: 1) non-hierarchical organisation; 2) uncertain/ambiguous moments; 3) emotional priming; and 4) specific ecological/spatial contexts (Snow and Moss 2014). Furthermore, Chalcraft (2016) notes that "necessity has been the mother of invention (and appropriation)", suggesting that contentious mobilisation can appropriate frames, identities, goals and forms of social associations as well as creating new ones that end up taking on historical importance. In one way or another, all these authors emphasise that spontaneity should not be considered a completely random feature and instead needs to be contextualised. Indeed, spontaneity is better understood if read as an answer to either context-specific triggering conditions or the history of protest in a specific geographical area. The spontaneity of protest actions does not negate the relevance of structured movements or set repertoires of contention. As has already been observed in a variety of contexts, spontaneous and programmatic elements generally combine in different ways to produce a particular protest outcome.

This article traces the micro-events of "the earliest moments" of the October 2019 protest movement focusing mainly on the Baghdad context. Specifically, it sheds light on what happened between the 1 October, the "spark", and 25 October, when "the spark [had] become a Revolution" (in the words of several of the activists interviewed). We ask how the mobilisation snowballed to include different strata and currents of the population in the Iraqi context where protesting has high personal, economic and social costs. In answering this question, we have decided to grant analytical weight to the role of early riser activists, focusing on the factors that shaped their strategic decisions and ability to mobilise sympathisers. In so doing, we have accounted for both the activist's structured action plans and their spontaneous, creative reactions to the contingency of events as shaped by the government's reaction. Theoretically, this paper positions the mobilisation as a contextually contingent event spurred by multiple factors. Using this lens, we begin by defining the specific events that sparked the 1 October sit-in and move towards an explanation of the factors that triggered the "bandwagon effect" and bystanders and sympathisers' self-mobilisation (Granovetter 1978). In particular, we emphasise the role of spontaneity, tracing it through the unfolding of the contentious actions. Finally, we single out several elements that shaped the October 2019 contentions actions in both continuity and discontinuity with the trajectory of Iraq's past anti-governmental mobilisations.

3. A protest movement rising up to challenge post-Saddam Iraq's socio-political context

Iraq has been suffering from structural weaknesses since well before the post-2003 moment due to multiple factors: the “invention” of Iraq as we know it today by British colonialism, the government’s incapacity to represent the country’s many ethno-religious identities, years of authoritarian rule under Saddam, and wars, foreign interference, and sanctions (Plebani and Redaelli 2013). In the aftermath of the abrupt removal of Saddam’s regime, the lack of comprehensive political planning for the US transition period (2004-2005), the Iraqi army’s dismantling and the brutal de-Baathification process exacerbated existing structural problems (Byman 2003, 2008). The Shia-led Nouri Al-Maliki governments (2006-2014), highly discriminatory against the Sunni-Iraqi component in particular, did nothing but further dug into problems and divisions (Al-Qarawee 2014) – wounds that Haider Al-Abadi’s (2014-2018) more inclusive approach healed only partially. The last few years have been dominated by the war against ISIS and the difficult recovery phase that followed (see Merone’s contribution in this Special Issue).

The governments succeeding each other since 2003 have consolidated such structural weaknesses. According to the literature, there are four main areas of instability. The first area is Iraq’s democratic institutions, deemed weak and fragile (Marr 2006). Weak institutions compromise the rule of law and allow security forces to play a greater role in public life. Furthermore, in this context the military has become highly politicised and subject to foreign (Iranian) interference. This state of affairs has translated into coercive policies and heavy restrictions on civil society activities, especially political activism (Rotberg 2002). Second, there is unequal access to economic opportunities in favour of ruling elites. The state’s intervention in economic activity and reliance on oil impedes the development of a free market and allows corruption to spread: as the businessmen are also the people in power, Iraq’s money tends to remain in the hands of politicians and ends up being distributed only to favoured families or clans (Abdulla 2010). As a consequence, living standards deteriorate and corruption becomes endemic (Rotberg 2002). The third problematic area is the very nature of the “Iraqi nation”: the country’s mosaic of different ethnic and religious communities (Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, Turkmens and other minorities) with divergent demands and agendas has posed challenges. According to some observers, Iraq’s inner pluralism hindered democracy in the first place: the risk of a “tyranny of the majority” lies just around the corner (Bayman and Pollack 2003). In contrast, Adeed and Karen Dawisha (2003) argue that Iraq’s different identities could serve a “constructive purpose” by “promoting democracy at the expenses of rigid particularism”. However, the quota system for allocating political positions (*muhāsasa ta’ifiya*) introduced in Iraq’s politics has institutionalised particular identities, reducing prospects for peaceful coexistence among the different communities. Last but no less significant, Iraq’s prolonged instability and lack of security has represented a critical structural concern. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of Iraqi political studies focus precisely on security matters, from the spectre of terrorism to the fragmentation of the Iraqi military apparatus (Aziz and Van Veen 2019). The 2006 and 2007 civil wars, the 2014 rise of ISIS and following war undermined the government’s ability to perform its duties. Furthermore, the lack of security has undermined the population’s ability to participate in the country’s political life and impeded civil society organisations from forming.

Activists have challenged these structural problems over several waves of mobilisation. In the words of an Iraqi political economy professor⁴:

⁴ Online interview.

From 2011 onwards, there has been a continuous line of mobilisation. Protests never really stopped or froze. In some periods, protests are more visible, in others they kind of disappear from the public opinion's eye. But this never meant that rage was not mounting and people were not organising for future protests. Instead, many long-time problems related to Iraqi politics and economics become more and more urgent. Also, protests have been evolving for the better thanks to the new generations' enthusiastic contribution.

Through empirical field research, Irene Costantini (2020) has recently compared Iraq's various cycles of protests. In February 2011, in the wake of the Arab uprisings in North Africa, a nation-wide youth-led mobilisation occurred in Iraq under the name "the Iraqi day of rage." However, Costantini found, activists reported that "the time was not yet ripe for turning the 2011 protests into a coordinated and structural social force": the mobilisation did indeed prove short-lived and was quickly repressed (Amnesty International 2011). Wider anti-government protests also occurred between 2012 and 2013 in the provinces of Al-Anbar, Niniwa and Salah ad-Din, mostly as an expression of the Sunni minority's dissatisfaction with their marginalised condition under al-Maliki's rule (Wicken 2013; see Merone in this Special Issue). In that case, the author argues, demonstrators sought to collaborate with tribal and religious leaders in terms of organising; nevertheless, the protest's anti-Shia claims coupled with intra-Sunni divisions prevented it from developing clear, practical demands. Between 2015 and 2016, amid the war against ISIS terrorists, significant protests arose in the Shia-majority governorates against Hayder Al-Abadi's government, deemed incapable of reforming the country. According to Costantini, the novelty of this protest cycle was the activists' capacity to "develop a more cohesive agenda framed around three demands": an end to the quota system, an end to political corruption, and improved provision of basic services. Furthermore, Chérine Chams El-Dine (2018) points out that the 2015-2016 cycle paved the way for the rise of a strong anti-sectarian discourse; however, the appropriation of the movement by Moqtada Al-Sadr's followers proved problematic, as it weakened the protest's secular identity. Lastly, in 2018, the province of Basra, the area with Iraq's highest concentration of oil fields and companies, and yet one of the country's poorest governorates, was also the theatre of demonstrations sparked by electricity supply cuts and water pollution (Jabar 2018).

Previous protest cycles offered several "lessons" that activists of the 2019 October movement seem to have learnt. We underline some of these features as presented and discussed by early riser activists.

4. The mobilisation's earliest moments (1-25 October): A timeline of events

In 2019, several important events paved the way for the October waves of mass protests. In March, demonstrators took to the streets of Mosul following an accidental ferry sinking in the Tigris in which almost 100 people lost their lives (Abdul Ahad 2019). In May, protests began in Najaf, Iraq's holy city, when Muqtada Al-Sadr incited his supporters to "surround corrupt business centres and disrupt their affairs for three days" (Ali 2019). Baghdad, Basra, and other areas in southern Iraq also witnessed protests in the wake of those in Najaf (Al-Rubaie 2019). On 19 July, thousands of supporters of the Hikma-movement demonstrated in Baghdad and the southern provinces. In the summer, university graduates held demonstrations and sit-ins outside government ministries in Baghdad, demanding jobs and opportunities.

Although a general call to demonstrate had circulated on social media since July (EASO 2020), the event that sparked the 1 October mass mobilisation in Baghdad was premier Adel Abdul Mahdi's announcement on 27 September about the removal of lieutenant General Abdulwahab Al-Saadi, a top Commander of Iraq's Counter Terrorism Services. Al-Saadi was well known for his role in the fight

against ISIS and his removal was widely seen as an attempt to purge officials who did not sympathise with the Hashd Al-Shaabi, the increasingly powerful Shia-majority para-military and political force closely tied to Tehran. As protests mounted in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, several other provinces (especially in the south) hosted similar mobilisations, marking the beginning of "the largest mass protest movement in Iraq's recent memory" (EASO, 2020).

According to our findings, the protest's earliest moments can be divided into three main stages beginning with the 1-9 October wave of protest. In Baghdad, our interviewees described the presence of people from different backgrounds: highly-educated youth – supported by different student unions – rising against the government's failure to provide job opportunities not tied to patronage dynamics in both the public and private sector; workers and low-income citizens demanding basic services; and members of civil society organisations and state institutions complaining about Iraq's corrupt democracy and the Iranian influence in national politics. These individuals and loosely connected groups gathered at Tahrir Square thanks to online information-sharing, including a call circulating on social media (mostly Facebook⁵) since a few days before, instant communications on WhatsApp, Telegram and Messenger, and the decentralised coordination of voluntary actions. Despite state repression, the protests quickly spread to many other Iraqi cities: Basra, Diyala, Diwaniya, Kirkuk, Kut, Hilla, Samawa, and Tikrit. By 7 October, 106 people had been killed and more than 6,000 injured (Abdul Ahad 2019). During this first week of mobilisation, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi appeared on TV every night, trying to appease demonstrators with promised reforms to create employment, ease real estate prices, and end corruption. It was not until 9 October that protests ceased, mostly due the Shia holiday of Arbæen. The second stage was the inter-period between 9 and 25 October. During this "transition period", no mass protests were held. However, activists were not "inactive" or dormant; on the contrary, they were developing a network of contacts that led to the creation of a protest camp in Baghdad on the night of 24 October (soon followed by other, smaller-sized camps in other cities) and the 25 October event.⁶ The third stage is the 25 October event itself, when protests were held again nationwide. According to one of our sources⁷:

On the 25th of October, the whole of Iraq was there, protesting in the streets. Not only youths, but families were also there, fathers, mothers, children, old people, the whole of Iraq went to the streets. Literally everyone, of any religion – Christians, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims – Arabs, Kurds, no one was missing. The purpose was precisely to demonstrate to change the whole system, so all of Iraq had to be there.

Other sources (EASO, 2020) confirm that demonstrators from demographically diverse groups took part in the 25 October mobilisation, thus signalling a new phase of the protest. The new demographics were more inclusive in terms of gender (more women), age groups (many more older people took part as compared to the 1-9 October mobilisations, as the former were made up mostly of individuals under 30 years of age) and professional groups. Moreover, while the 1 October mobilisation in Baghdad involved

⁵ See the Facebook call at the following link:

<https://www.facebook.com/%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%B1-110584810407664/>

⁶ From an interview with Caesar: "This is the first protest movement I have joined. The period from the 9th to the 25th of October was important for me. I discussed strategies and tactics with more experienced activists and I watched and studied how the government was planning to stop the protest. This time was very formative."

⁷ Online interview with Mohammed.

3,000 individuals (UNAMI, 1-9 October 2019), on 25 October the number of protestors in Baghdad reached an estimated one million (UNAMI, 25 October-4 November, 2019).

Against this background, how did activists manage to keep mobilisation growing between 1 and 25 October? The following three sections identify three major factors that contributed to the activists' success: the non-hierarchical structure of the movement and its "diffused communication" strategy, the repression as a "moral shock," and the rhetoric of protest slogans.

5. A non-hierarchical mobilisation fostering spontaneous forms of participation

In the past movement [referring to 2015-2016], a lot of political interference came in and a certain group of people tried to bring the protest under their political umbrella. That protest did not represent everyone in a unified kind of message and goal: political parties interfered. I would even say that it was "broken" by political parties that tried to take control over it. This is why previous movements were not really as significant as the October 2019 one. [...] Our movement is apolitical and it is driven by people who are frustrated. I would say it is an uprising, one that is free from any political party, person, or politician. And this is why we do not want a leader.⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the 1 October sit-in, activists attributed the success of the protest event to its decentralised structure, allowing for self-organised action on the part of ordinary people, mostly youth. Both local and international newspapers have amplified the narrative about the rise of a new decentralised and non-hierarchical movement challenging Iraq's political and economic order.⁹ As Castells (2015) points out, non-hierarchical movements ignite "not because of the lack of would-be leaders, but because of the deep, spontaneous distrust of most participants in the movement toward any form of power delegation [...] the rejection of political representatives by the represented, after feeling betrayed and manipulated in their experience of politics as usual." Unquestionably, such profound distrust was rooted in the minds of the activists who had seen previous protests movements (born as similarly non-hierarchical since the 2011 "Iraqi spring") co-opted by politically affiliated groups, thus leading to gradual de-mobilisation. For instance, when Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Shia cleric who had personally led mass protests in the past, voiced his support for the protest scheduled on 25 October following the 1-9 October events, activists were determined to avoid this pitfall. As an interviewee commented¹⁰:

There were politicians trying to actually take over and represent the protestors. And that worked for a short while [a few days]: they got empathy and sympathy from the demonstrators, like Moqtada Al-Sadr, he tried to take over, he sent his supporters and, like, when I was there they were all standing around wielding a poster with his name and picture. [...] So, it's leaderless when it comes to the movement, but there are people who try to emerge and claim that they are the leaders. But not

⁸ Online interview with Zayna.

⁹ As Ali Al-Hashimi, Professor of International Relations at the Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad, told Al Jazeera: "The latest protests are the most serious we have seen yet. The protesters are raising many slogans – they want jobs, they want to fight against corruption, they want electricity. They don't have one slogan or one leader. They are looking for everything. And they are not followers of a specific religious or political party. Therefore, it will be difficult to control or negotiate with them." (Al Jazeera, 2 October 2019).

¹⁰ Online interview with Jafar.

everyone identifies with them. There isn't one single person who everyone unites around and calls him our leader, or says 'we are following that person, that party, that entity.' It has to remain a grassroots movement, a set of principles that most Iraqis agree on, even the politicians.

Previous protests faced both the challenge of the invasive Iraqi political party system and the country's traditional social structures (families, tribes, and clans with important positions in the social fabric of the nation). Early riser activists not only viewed themselves as autonomous political actors without any group affiliation; they were also particularly aware of the need to identify communication strategies they could use to spread their message without it being appropriated by "the outspoken people, be they from political parties or other social and religious entities".¹¹ Therefore, they began by turning to social media. Multiple studies (Juris 2012; Castells 2015; Mattoni 2019) agree that social media facilitate "leaderless" or "non-hierarchical" movements, emphasising individual autonomy. Tellingly, early riser activists generally preferred to use their personal (and real) social media accounts rather than creating collective ones for sharing official, previously agreed-on information. Although this choice exposed them to repercussions and profiling, the use of their own accounts served the need to keep the decision-making process quick and horizontal while at the same time circulating the narrative of a leaderless movement of "Iraqi people asking fellow Iraqi to join them in the protest".¹²

In Baghdad, as the protest had already been launched mostly thanks to social media communication, activists soon began to organise offline communication strategies as well.

You know, in October, the government cut the internet for days, sometimes, and sometimes they would only cut Facebook and Twitter, but people kept on taking to the streets. It wasn't just social media; social media had a big influence and, personally, I am part of several Telegram and WhatsApp groups [...], but it is also about word of mouth. Sometimes – especially in the more working-class areas – you would see people going around holding up a sign with the name of the area we are gathering in.¹³

Activists knew that heavy reliance on online communication was a clear risk, considering that frequent internet shut-downs are a common state containment measure. Indeed, the Iraqi government promptly began to interrupt internet services on 2 October, not only in the Baghdad area but also in other governorates of the country. An interviewee noted that, paradoxically, "cutting the Internet actually turned out to be a good thing for the movement, because people were getting bored at home with no Internet, and they started to go out and join the protests just to have fun, and so the numbers went higher and higher. It was a positive thing for us [the demonstrators]".¹⁴ Physical spaces were needed to communicate with these new supporters. At the same time, activists felt that they would be more effective in making protest decisions and planning actions if they could gather in a single space, a space where they would be able to control the decision-making process and avoid "interference." Baghdad's sit-it thus evolved into a proper, well-equipped protest camp providing all the facilities demonstrators needed to eat and sleep there. The protest camp was erected in Baghdad on the night of 24 October and other cities soon followed suit.

¹¹ Online interview with Asma.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Online interview with Hayder.

¹⁴ Online interview with Asma.

For me, as a young person, being part of the protest camp in Tahir Square was the opportunity to lead and plan the protest with my peers. In the beginning, the protest camp was not very structured, each tent had its leaders and activities. But soon, we started to create coordination teams among the different tents. These coordination teams were the tools to structure communication activities of the protests.¹⁵

These camps became hubs for activists' "diffused communication" strategy (Juris 2012) based on the ability to switch frequently between online and offline communication. According to the early-riser activists we interviewed, the structure of the movement we have analysed so far led to multiple spontaneous forms of participation. We have mapped three of these forms of participation that developed precisely in the movement's earliest moments and made the mobilisation resilient. Interviewees narrated how artistic and cultural work supported the protest:

Artists are engaging in shaping the protest. There was cultural production in the form of art, poetry, [and] music. Artists wanted to make sure that the revolution is not only live-streamed, but also joyful. Artists want to show what the future of a free and truly independent Iraq would look like, to attract all the people tired of the violence and anger created by 17 years of sectarian violence.¹⁶

Various forms of volunteer work also contributed. Demonstrators' families, often women, joined the camp to support in whatever way they could, for instance by cooking meals:

It is not only about demonstrations; it could be considered a cultural revolution. For instance, even those that did not protest, they were supporting their siblings, parents and family members: they would sit down with food, laundry services and other essentials. We have said: we don't have a leader, we are on our own and this is what we want, please support us. You see, it's different. It's a cultural movement.¹⁷

As emerged from the interviews with Abbas, student at a medical University, volunteer work was done by people with different medical expertise. In the days of heavy military repression, the wounded demonstrators were carried to the protest camp by the *tuk-tuk* drivers running around Baghdad as ambulance and medicated by volunteers. Lastly, spontaneous forms of participation also involved payments and donations both from people on the streets in Iraq and those providing support from abroad. In the words of Caesar: "Iraqis living abroad were among the biggest supporters of this protest movement. They joined in unprecedented numbers and helped in keeping the international attention high."

6. The repression as "moral shock" fuelling mobilisation

"The Iraqi security forces used extreme violence and hit us. They even hit an old man who was standing [in the square] peacefully, waving an Iraqi flag. It was highly emotional and we found our motivation to remain in Tahrir. [...] All those emotions stayed with us and supported us in finding a way to keep the spark alive."¹⁸

¹⁵ Online interview with Caesar.

¹⁶ Online interview with Hayder.

¹⁷ Online interview with Dina.

¹⁸ Online interview with Hasan.

Iraqi authorities employed a variety of strategies to stop the mobilisation from growing. According to Human Rights Watch (2019), the security forces sought to suppress the protests through mass shootings (also employing snipers positioned on buildings), mass arrests, and disappearances. Public and private property were destroyed: TV stations were attacked, the internet was shut down, curfews were imposed and public gatherings were banned. Indeed, we found empirical validation of such repression in the individual experiences of all the activists we interviewed. Our interviewees recounted frequent experiences of retaliation, including: the rape of female activists; harassment and the disclosure of private pictures in public places; defamation campaigns, including branding activists as “sons and daughters of the embassies” or “Batman jokers;” and forcing people to sign pledges to not take part in future protests. Activists, demonstrators and journalists were intimidated in multiple ways and many of them fled the capital.¹⁹

While some have argued that civil freedoms violations eventually stopped the protests (Mansour 2019), our findings seem to offer a different perspective. Tellingly, early riser activists suggest that the security forces’ efforts at repression may have acted as a push factor fuelling participation in the protest movement rather than dissuading it. Indeed, the government’s tendency to rely on repressive practices is one of the major structural weaknesses against which Iraqis have been protesting. It seems that the more human rights were violated and civic freedoms were limited, the more reasons the activists and new sympathisers had to protest. The scientific literature on social movements likewise shows that “the perception of unjust repression” potentially leads to stronger mobilisation (Hess and Martin 2006). As Jasper (1997) has suggested, the experience of violence committed by the state can create a “moral shock” – or “emotional priming” (Snow and Moss 2014) – that potentially causes people to become more “inclined towards political action,” including contentious political action. We have found evidence that the shocking military brutality committed against the protesters provoked a sense of visceral unease and outrage among individuals and triggered a critical mass turnout, including bystanders previously unconnected to the protest.

Actually, the repression increased the willingness of ordinary people to protest. It gave possible supporters a big push to support this movement and the people who had died for it. In the protest camp, we put pictures of all the people that had died. So, if people went to Tahrir square, they would see faces and names of the people under their pictures. The biggest one is Safaa [Al-Sarray],²⁰ who became the symbol of the uprising with his photo – if you’ve seen him, you know, the guy with the

¹⁹ “I had a friend who was very vocal at a certain point, but someone put an envelope outside his tent with a picture of his kids and they told him that if he stays there his kids will suffer, so he took his kids and he went to Turkey. So things like that happened that don’t allow people to actually grow their opinions” (from an online interview with Hayder). Or again: “Many people were released from hospitals and were forced to sign pledges to not take part in the future protest if they care about their lives” (from an online interview with Dina).

²⁰ Safaa Al-Sarray was a long-standing activist, poet and musician. He had participated in the 2011 protests as well, and in that period was detained three times for his anti-government slogans. In October, he was a very vocal part of the movement in Baghdad and contributed to publicising the movement’s messages by sharing his videos of the protests with local TV channels. On 25 October, as protests were mounting again, he received an intimidation letter and fled to Erbil, Kurdistan, fearing for his safety; soon, however, he felt the urgent need to return. On 30 October, he was killed when a tear gas canister struck him on the back of the head. His popularity made his death an icon of the October movement and further reason not to ease demonstrations (McDonald 2019).

beard – and that just gave them a bigger push. We gave them an example that we will do anything for this movement and that government repression doesn't scare us. This really drove people to us.²¹

Organisers thus consciously and constructively exploited the rage caused by the government's violent response to gain as much consensus and support as possible among sympathisers and keep the flame of the protest movement alive. One way of building such consensus was asserting the sharp contrast between their legitimate actions and the security forces' unjust response. While national TV stations were broadcasting images of the wounded protestors, the activists were carefully crafting a positive narrative around their actions, valorising the power of change and the positivity commonly associated with experimental forms of collective action. As one interviewee commented:

I just go to Tahrir Square and I feel good about it because you feel like you are doing something, you are changing something. So, it was really peaceful for us, even though many people were killed, and thousands were wounded [...] by the army. But we still go there and are happy because we believe in that positive and bright change.²²

Joining the movement, activists said, was not only a way to oppose repressive practices; it also gave them a sense of kinship and belonging, the feeling of being part of a community and doing something with the real potential to change their lives. Furthermore, we found that this sense of “membership” spread well beyond the Iraqi borders. Multiple records of the security forces' violent repression of protests were broadcasted internationally via social media and newspapers, attracting the attention and concern of the Iraqi diaspora. In some instances, Iraqi diaspora supporters who had only participated in the movement “virtually” saw what was happening to their national fellows and went so far as to temporarily leave their jobs, travel to Iraq and join the protest camps for the 25 October mobilisation.

Personally, I have been a supporter from the beginning, we did some protests here in Geneva when it first started, so, we tried to go in front of the United Nations three times, we collected donations through our networks and sent them back to the demonstrators in Baghdad. [...] and then I actually went back to Iraq for more than a month and stayed with the protestors. I stayed there most of the time.²³

Diasporic support fostered greater international coverage of the protest movement and led to crowd-funding campaigns to support local demonstrators or aid the wounded. On reaching out to a few Iraqis based in Europe and the United States, we found a great deal of support for the October 2019 movement's cause and a desire to be part of it.

7. New “Iraqiness” in the protest's slogans

Literature suggests that protest slogans are important tools used by activists to urge individuals to become proactive and move towards realising their cause. Pragmatically speaking, they can be analysed as communication events serving two purposes: they offer information and, at the same time, demand action (Denton 1980). They thus play a pivotal role as a tool of struggle, building a narrative through

²¹ Online interview with Hayder.

²² Online interview with Asma.

²³ Online interview with Hayder.

catchy claims and cheers with the power to attract sympathisers. As with any other protest movement, the 2019 October mobilisation had a number of recurrent slogans that were amplified through different online and offline mediums and formats: hashtags, wall graffiti, banners, videos, songs, chants, and speeches. Some of the most important movement slogans we documented include “bread, freedom, a civil state” (*khubz, hurriyya, dawla madaniyya*), “the revolution of the right against injustice” (*thawrat al-haq did al-zulm*), “keep it peaceful” (*silmiyya, silmiyya*), “Iran out, out!” (*Iran, barra barra!*), “not America, not Iran, Baghdad is the address” (*la America, la Iran, Baghdad hiya al-‘unwan*). As noted above, the protest championed long-standing issues and grievances that have run through Iraqi protest struggle since 2011 (i.e. corruption, external influence on national politics, lack of political representation) and these issues were definitely reflected in its slogans. At the same time, the activists we interviewed argued that the most recurrent and important slogan of the 2019 protest movement was “we want a homeland” (*nurid watan*) and this marked an evolution in the objectives of the 2019 movement as compared to those of the past. “We want a homeland” appears to have been derived from a fortuitous event. As an interviewee declared:

There was a TV interview with an old man who was very passionate [in Tahrir Square on 1 October]. He is a street vendor and when the TV presenter asked him “why are you protesting, what do you want?”, he replied, “we don’t want anything, we just want a homeland”. That answer went so viral that it became the motto for the [2019] October revolution. “We want a homeland”.²⁴

“Inclusiveness” vs. “sectarianism” served more as distinctive characteristics of the 2019 protest cycle than key claims. Chérine Chamas El-Dine (2018) observes that an anti-sectarian discourse emerged as part of the 2015–2016 movement, the first protest cycle to strongly challenge the sectarian foundation of the post-2003 political order. This sentiment was expressed through several significant catch phrases such as, for instance, “let us come together in order to fight the merchants of religion and blood, to fight the looters and all those wearing a white – Sunni – or black – Shia – turban in order to control power and wealth.” The 2019 movement definitely went further in terms of creating a new, non-sectarian, inclusive feeling of nationhood that we can tentatively describe as a new idea of “Iraqiness.” In varying ways, activists expressed that the only identity that mattered in the “October revolution” was the Iraqi one.

Artists in the streets were creating a new nationalism. They made community services, cultural projects to heal the divides caused by 16 years of political and sectarian divisions, fear and violence. In the first weeks of October, Iraqi youth showed what the future of a free and truly independent Iraq would look like. This is really how it is different from any other uprising that has ever happened in Iraq, including 2015-16.²⁵

This idea of an inclusive “Iraqiness” was enmeshed with feelings of joy that the activists tried to amplify through their slogans and art. Their communication rejected the image of Iraq as “a doomed nation”, an image lingering in the minds of both its citizens and international public opinion.²⁶

²⁴ Online interview with Hayder.

²⁵ Online interview with Dina.

²⁶ In relation to this point, it is worth citing the controversy kindled by the use of the hashtag #save_the_Iraqi_people. In the early days of October, activists spread this hashtag to attract attention particularly among Iraqi members of the international diaspora, but it did not fit with the positive image that the movement wanted to put forth. A debate arose over the very idea of asking for Iraqis to be “saved”: this was deemed to promote an image of Iraqis as inert, passive actors

Moreover, this “new Iraqiness” idea was able to attract women’s participation in the movement. Tacking stock of the 2015 experience, when women joined existing protests (Ali 2021), they seem to have played on the frontline since the beginning of the October 2019 movement (Ibrahim 2019). According to estimations of the UN, women played an unprecedented role within the movement (United Nations 2020). Asma, an outspoken feminist we interviewed, recounted her experience of taking active part in the protest and feeling responsible for bringing more women into the protest. She felt she was succeeding in this task, as the number of women involved was much higher than in past protests:

This was the first movement that involved so many women. Not only women outside the “cultural norm” or feminist or activist, but also just sympathisers. We saw even, for example, high school students from girls’ schools joining the protest and begin part of the protest camp activities. It showed a whole different face of Iraq, because you would have thought there were only women of a certain type joining a “revolution”, but it there were women of all ages and types.²⁷

Different male activists have underlined how “this was the first time that boys and girls were discussing things tighter at the heart of Baghdad.”²⁸ The movement was able to create a strong, shared rhetoric on the construction of a new “Iraqiness”, a shared feeling that aims to take distance from the country’s problems and offer a new imaginary linked to ideas of social justice, participation and inclusiveness. This image that early riser activists fostered through their words and actions centres around a few milestones: the end of sectarian logics, the emergence of a new “joyful” pride in being Iraqi (against the idea of a violent nation doomed to fail) and a society able to create a space where gender barriers are reduced.²⁹

8. Conclusion

This paper offers an analysis of the latest cycle of Iraqi protests that emerged on the first day of October 2019 with a massive sit-in in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square and rapidly grew into the largest episode of mobilisation in the country’s recent history. At the moment this movement surfaced, we asked ourselves how activists were able to create this space of dissent and overcome the challenges posed by Iraq’s structural conditions. Unpacking “the earliest moments” of the mobilisation (Pearlman 2018) helped us find answers to this question. We thus identified and analysed several factors, situating them in the history of Iraqi protest movements.

First, profound distrust for hierarchical organisations and past experiences of Iraqi protests co-opted and neutralised by political parties led early riser activists to emphasise their “leaderless” horizontalism. As suggested by David Snow and Dana Moss’ (2014) “theory of spontaneity,” this horizontal structure gave rise to spontaneous and creative actions. As Snow and Moss (2014: 1128) argue: “non-hierarchical

labouring away at the bottom of society while, on the contrary, they felt themselves to be active agents of their own destiny. Eventually, activists ended up avoiding this hashtag.

²⁷ Online interview with Asma.

²⁸ Online interview with Caesar.

²⁹ Even if outside the scope of our paper, at the beginning of 2021, we have started to discuss movement’s impact with the activists. Most of them mentioned the gender dimension. Caesar offered us a paradigmatic example: “There are several cafés near Tahir Square. Before October 2019, they were operating secluding boys and girls. Thanks to the establishment of the protest camp, boys and girls started to go there together to discuss things. From that time, the owners decided to abandon the secluding regulations.”

movements are more likely to produce spontaneous collective actions, because their cultures valorise openness, innovation, and experimental forms of collective action ... because non-hierarchical movements value and often rely on impromptu contributions by participants.” The Iraqi 2019 protest movements are unquestionably an example of horizontal and voluntary engagement fostering spontaneous actions that in turn made the movement more resilient. Spontaneous participation took different forms: artistic and cultural work, voluntary assistance for the protest (including logistical work), and financial donations.

As has been common since the 2011 “Iraqi Spring,” activists used social media as a key tool for organising the movement, but we argue that they did not rely exclusively on these virtual platforms. Indeed, they skilfully managed a “diffused communication” campaign to spread their messages and organise protests by switching frequently between offline and online communication. One important aspect of communication was the way activists managed the emotions created by the government’s rapid and violent response. Paradoxically, we found that the movement derived part of its strength precisely from the “moral shock” provoked by security forces’ repressive reactions and the activists’ ability to create a positive and joyful narrative in contrast to this violence. Activists strived to move away from identity-based divisions and develop forms of solidarity based on a sense of national inclusiveness, a shared “Iraqiness” crystallized in the powerful new slogan “we want a homeland.” They also sought to re-interpret old and new grievances around the country’s economic and political corruption. This new language was supported by the creation of a protest aesthetic, a visual culture and creative imaginary that they further amplified by juxtaposing words and art linking it to joyful feelings.

The protest movement launched in October 2019 is still ongoing at the time of writing (spring 2021). The first cycle of protests lasted until March/April 2020, when it was ended by the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. Due to covid-19 restrictions, mass gatherings were stopped but activists did not cease their activities: “We still have a tent camp in Tahrir Square, so we go there committing to social distance, with the gloves and face masks. We go there to show that we are still there and still stick to our goals, and our protesting is still on, and many of our friends are staying in a tent even during the quarantine, they are quarantining in their tents, so and they did not leave Tahrir Square and did not leave the protest land I can say, because they wanted to keep the message alive.” New protests began in May and June 2020, albeit with markedly fewer participants. These demonstrations have been viewed as part of the same protest movement, with similar demands, tactics, and participants’ demographics (EASO 2020). At this point it is difficult to evaluate its concrete impacts on Iraq’s politics; the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi (end of November 2019), activists have said in our interviews, was a limited result that did little to resolve Iraq’s structural problems (furthermore, we would add, it is not even possible to ascribe this development to the protests alone, as it also had much to do with party politics).

What seems certain is that the October 2019 protest movement entailed many novelty elements that have been shaking up Iraq’s socio-political arena. Activists seem to have worked largely in the wake of the past protests’ experience but were able to better involve sympathisers through a skilful use of planned and spontaneous actions. Both Iraqi studies scholars (who to date have prioritised the study of institutional politics, identity politics, and security issues) and social movements scholars (who have prioritised other Arab countries in the MENA region) will have to closely monitor the role of activism in shaping Iraq’s socio-political arena.

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