# THE SOCIAL LOGICS OF PROTEST VIOLENCE IN IRAQ

## EXPLAINING DIVERGENT DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTHEAST

**Benedict Robin-D'Cruz**

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# The Social Logics of Protest Violence in Iraq: Explaining Divergent Dynamics in the Southeast

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## About the Author

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## Abstract

Southeast Iraq has witnessed considerable protest violence in recent years. Yet the nature of this violence, and its effects in shaping protest dynamics, have varied considerably between provinces, and when comparing different phases of mobilisation over time. Consequently, frequently cited macro-level factors (e.g., a breakdown in the elite-citizen social contract, uneven socio-economic development, poor public services, widespread corruption etc.) provide only a partial explanation of violent dynamics and cannot account for temporal and geographic disparities. By contrast, this paper presents a granular and ground-level view of protest violence by drawing on a combination of protest event analysis and interview data. This is used to show how broader structural conditions and national-level politics intersect with more localised structures to produce distinct social logics that govern the application of protest violence, and its effects, in specific localities. The paper's key finding is that effective intervention to alter violent dynamics around protests in Iraq depends on access to local and diffuse forms of power. Consequently, it is only elite political actors with reach into these local domains who regulate violent dynamics.

## About the Conflict Research Programme

## Executive Summary

Since the chaotic demonstrations in Basra during the summer of 2018, protesting in Iraq has become increasingly dangerous and fraught with violence. The southeast – and particularly protest hubs in Basra and Dhi Qar – has witnessed some of the highest levels of protest violence. Yet the nature of this violence, and its effects in shaping protest dynamics, have varied considerably from province to province, and when comparing different phases of mobilisation over time. Consequently, frequently cited macro-level factors (e.g., a breakdown in the elite-citizen social contract, uneven socio-economic development, poor public services, widespread corruption etc.) provide only a partial explanation of violent dynamics and cannot account for temporal and geographic disparities.

By contrast, this paper takes a granular and ground-level view of protest violence by drawing on a unique database of several thousand incidents of protest and protest-related violence and combining this data with targeted interviews with activists and informed observers. It identifies the local factors that shape violent dynamics, including the socio-demographic composition and organisation of protest groups, the interconnected networks of influence that span political, paramilitary and security structures, the varying salience of potentially ameliorative social formations (e.g. tribal), among others. Ultimately, the paper explains how these local structures interact and intersect with broader structural conditions and national-level politics to produce distinct social logics that govern the application of protest violence and its effects in specific localities.

A key finding of the paper is that the diffusion of power within these local structures favours political actors who not only traverse the theoretical boundaries between the Iraqi state and civil society, but also mediate the distance between the complex social formations of power at a provincial, district, or neighbourhood level, and the domain of elite politics. Consequently, when it comes to regulating protest violence, so-called control processes[1] circulate locally, and those actors able to close the gap between command and control and local social logics of violence are best situated to influence dynamics.

The empirical cases discussed in this paper clarify this distinction. Despite analyses focusing on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's efforts to rein in anti-protest violence via a continuous cycle of appointments across elite security sector positions – at both national and provincial level – the data presented here does not provide evidence that this impacted violent dynamics around protests. The key reason for this is the PM's lack of power where it really matters – where control processes circulate locally. Indeed, in some

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[1] This draws on the concept as used by Stanliand, which is interpreted here as referring to those social institutions, formations and processes that transmit and mediate authority and thus structure how strategic control translates into action within a given locality. For more, see Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014).

cases, Kadhimi opted to appoint security leaders who lacked local ties, hoping this would increase their autonomy and reliability vis-a-vis central control. However, this can hinder rather than help the PM to extend his own authority into local power bases.[2]

By contrast, a group like the Sadrists has proven more effective at regulating protest violence in the southeast. This is not merely a function of coercive capacity, but, more importantly, of the movement's diffuse power at the local level. Moreover, the mediation of this local power with the Sadrist leadership typically functions through highly personal ties at only one or two steps removed, that is, through a personal mode of representation at the provincial level that functions as a 'floating broker' capacity knitting together diverse forms of coercive, political, economic, social and religious power.[3]

Consequently, from a policy perspective, the expectation that reform – and particularly progress towards accountability for anti-protest violence – is a process running critically through the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and its struggle for influence over Iraq's security apparatus has been misplaced. This has been most apparent in the disjuncture between the fervent debates that surround each attempt by the PM and Iraqi authorities to arrest militiamen responsible for killing protesters, and the comparative silence vis-à-vis the more salient fact that the Kadhimi administration (and the political survival of Kadhimi himself) has to an extent fallen hostage to the power of the most effective, and frequently violent, counter-protest actor in Iraq, namely the Sadrist movement.[4] This disjuncture would appear to reflect a misdiagnosis of power – where it lies, how it operates, who can wield it – that is unlikely to provide a sound basis for strategic thinking aimed at mapping Iraq's pathway out of destabilising protest violence and repression.

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[2] One recent example of this dilemma was the 12 May 2021 attempted arrest in Basra of Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) member Sabah al-Wafi (head of AAH's Basra economic committee) by a Falcons Cell unit sent from Baghdad. The arrest resulted in AAH militiamen mobilising and attacking the Basra Falcons Cell offices in Basra's Presidential Palaces Compound with small arms fire. The escalation was defused by the intervention of Basra Operations Command (BaOC) CG Maj. Gen. Akram Saddam Midnef who effectively transferred the ISF-militia armed encounter into a tribal dispute resolved via an *atwa* (tribal truce), ultimately resulting in the failure of the arrest mission. For this reason, the PM sacked Midnef and replaced him with Maj. Gen. Ali al-Majidi. Majidi's lack of profile in Basra, and supposed independence from the province's local power bases, was likely a factor in Kadhimi's decision to appoint him. However, it remains highly unlikely that under the same circumstances faced by Midnef on 12 May, Majidi would risk an escalation of an armed dispute between ISF and PMF or militiamen in Basra, meaning that recourse to local mediating structures (e.g., tribal) would still be necessary.

[3] Muqtada al-Sadr's current personal representative in Basra is the cleric Hazem al-Araji.

[4] This is based on both empirical observation of the Sadrist movement's use of intimidation and violence at critical junctures to supress the October Movement, as well as interviews and discussions with activists themselves who frequently cited the Sadrists as being the most effective counter-protest force.

# الملخص التنفيذي

منذ اندلاع المظاهرات الفوضوية في البصرة خلال صيف ٢٠١٨، أصبح الاحتجاج في العراق خطيراً ومحفوفاً بالعنف. شهد الجنوب الشرقي - وخاصة بؤر الاحتجاج في البصرة وذي قار - بعض أعلى مستويات العنف في الاحتجاجات. ومع ذلك فإن طبيعة هذا العنف و تأثيره على تشكيل ديناميكيات الاحتجاج ، قد اختلفت بشكل كبير من محافظة إلى أخرى، وكذلك عند مقارنة مراحل التعبئة المختلفة بمرور الوقت. و بناء على ذلك، فإن العوامل على المستوى الكلي التي يتم الاستشهاد بها بشكل متكرر (على سبيل المثال :انهيار العقد الاجتماعي بين النخبة والمواطنين، و التنمية الاجتماعية والاقتصادية غير المتكافئة، وسوء الخدمات العامة، والفساد المستشري ...الخ) تقدم فقط تفسيراً جزئياً لديناميكيات العنف ولا يمكنها أن تفسر التفاوتات الزمنية و الجغرافية.

وعلى النقيض من ذلك ،تقدم هذه الورقة نظرة دقيقة على الصعيد الميداني للعنف في الاحتجاجات من خلال الاعتماد على قاعدة بيانات فريدة من عدة آلاف حالة من الاحتجاجات و من حوادث العنف المرتبطة بالاحتجاجات ،و تجمع هذه البيانات مع مقابلات مستهدفة مع النشطاء والمراقبين المطلعين .وتحدد هذه الورقة العوامل المحلية التي تشكل ديناميكيات العنف ،بما في ذلك التكوين الاجتماعي والديموغرافي وتنظيم مجموعات الاحتجاج ،وشبكات التأثير المترابطة التي تمتد عبر البنى السياسية وشبه العسكرية والأمنية ،والظهور المتفاوت لتشكيلات إجتماعية مُحسّنة محتملة) على سبيل المثال :القبلية ،(من بين أمور أخرى .أخيراً ،تشرح هذه الورقة كيف تتفاعل هذه البنى المحلية وتتقاطع مع الظروف البنيوية الأوسع والسياسات على المستوى الوطني لإنتاج منطق اجتماعي متميز يحكم تطبيق العنف الاحتجاجي وتأثيراته في مناطق محددة.

و من أحد النتائج الرئيسية لهذه الورقة ، أن انتشار السلطة داخل هذه البنى المحلية يُفضل الأطراف السياسية الذين لا يجتازون الحدود النظرية بين الدولة العراقية والمجتمع المدني ،بل و أيضاً يتوسطون المسافة بين التشكيلات الاجتماعية المعقدة للسلطة ،في المحافظة و المنطقة أوحتى على مستوى الحي ،ومجال السياسة النخبوية . و لذلك عندما يتعلق الأمر بتنظيم العنف في الاحتجاجات ،فإن ما يسمى بعمليات التحكم[5] تنتشر محلياً ،وتكون الأطراف السياسية القادرة على سد الفجوة بين القيادة والسيطرة والمنطق الاجتماعي المحلي للعنف هي الأفضل للتأثير على الديناميكيات.

توضح الحالات العملية التي نوقشت في هذه الورقة هذا التباين .على الرغم من التحليلات التي تركز على جهود رئيس الوزراء مصطفى الكاظمي لكبح جماح العنف ضد الاحتجاجات من خلال سلسلة مستمرة من التعيينات لمناصب النخبة في قطاع الأمن - على المستويين الوطني والإقليمي - فإن البيانات المقدمة هنا لا تقدم دليلاً على أن هذا أثر على ديناميكيات العنف فيما يتعلق بالاحتجاجات .والسبب الرئيسي لذلك هو افتقار رئيس الوزراء للسلطة عندما يتعلق الأمر في الأمور الهامة  أي مكان انتشار إجراءات التحكم محلياً .في الواقع و في بعض الحالات ،اختار الكاظمي تعيين قادة أمنيين يفتقرون إلى وجود الروابط المحلية ،على أمل أن يؤدي ذلك إلى زيادة استقلاليتهم و مصداقيتهم مقابل السيطرة المركزية.

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[5]  يعتمد هذا على المفهوم الذي استخدمه ستانلياند، والذي يتم تفسيره هنا على أنه يشير إلى تلك المؤسسات والتشكيلات والعمليات الاجتماعية التي تنقل السلطة وتتوسطها، وبالتالي تنظيم كيف التحكم الاستراتيجي يترجم الى فعل ضمن منطقة معينة.للمزيد، Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014).

ومع ذلك ،يمكن أن يعيق هذا رئيس الوزراء بدلاً من مساعدته في بسط سلطته إلى قواعد السلطة المحلية.[6]

و على النقيض من ذلك ،أثبتت جماعة مثل الصدريين أنها أكثر فاعلية في تنظيم العنف في الاحتجاجات في الجنوب الشرقي .هذا ليس مجرد دور للقدرة القسرية ،ولكن الأهم من ذلك ،لقوة التيار المنتشرة على المستوى المحلي .و بالإضافة الى ذلك ،فإن وساطة هذه القوة المحلية مع القيادة الصدرية تعمل عادة من خلال علاقات شخصية بعيدة للغاية لدرجة أو درجتين فقط ،أي من خلال وضع التمثيل الشخصي على مستوى المحافظات و الذي يعمل بمثابة " وسيط عائم " يجمع بين أشكال متنوعة من القوة القسرية والسياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية والدينية.[7]

وبالتالي ،من منظور السياسة ،فإن توقع أن الإصلاح - وخاصة التقدم نحو المساءلة عن العنف ضد الاحتجاج - هو عملية تجري بشكل حاسم من خلال مكتب رئيس الوزراء (PMO) وصراعه من أجل النفوذ على جهاز الأمن في العراق كان في غير محله .كان هذا واضحاً في الانفصال بين النقاشات المحتدمة التي أحاطت بكل محاولة من قبل رئيس الوزراء والسلطات العراقية لاعتقال رجال الميليشيات المسؤولين عن قتل المتظاهرين ،والصمت النسبي تجاه الحقيقة الأكثر بروزاً وهي أن إدارة الكاظمي ،و البقاء السياسي للكاظمي نفسه ،قد وقع إلى حد ما رهينة لسلطة  الأكثر فاعلية و عنفاً و ممثل الاحتجاج المضاد في العراق ،وهو التيار الصدري.[8] يبدو أن هذا الانفصال يعكس تشخيصاً خاطئاً للسلطة - أين تكمن ،وكيف تعمل ،ومن يمكنه استخدامها - من غير المرجح أن يوفر أساساً سليماً للتفكير الاستراتيجي الذي يهدف إلى رسم مسار للعراق للخروج من عنف الاحتجاجات و والقمع المزعزع للاستقرار.

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[6]  أحد الأمثلة الحديثة على هذه المعضلة كان محاولة اعتقال عضو عصائب أهل الحق  صباح الوافي (رئيس اللجنة الاقتصادية في البصرة) في البصرة في 12 مايو / أيار 2021 من قبل خلية الصقور المرسلة من بغداد. نتج عن الاعتقال قيام ميليشيات عصائب أهل الحق بتعبئة ومهاجمة مكاتب خلية صقور البصرة في مجمع القصور الرئاسية بالبصرة بالأسلحة الخفيفة. تم نزع فتيل التصعيد بتدخل قائد عمليات البصرة (BaOC) اللواء أكرم صدام مدنيف، الذي حوّل المواجهة المسلحة بين قوات الأمن العراقية وميليشيا قوات الأمن العراقية إلى نزاع قبلي تم حله عن طريق العطوة (الهدنة القبلية)، مما أدى في النهاية إلى فشل مهمة الاعتقال. لهذا السبب، أقال رئيس الوزراء مدنيف واستبدله باللواء علي المجيدي. من المحتمل أن عدم لفت الأنظار الى المجيدي في البصرة، والاستقلال المفترض عن قواعد السلطة المحلية في المحافظة، كانا سببان في قرار الكاظمي بتعيينه. ومع ذلك، لا يزال من غير المحتمل للغاية في ظل الظروف نفسها التي واجهها مدنيف في 12 مايو/أيار، أن يخاطر المجيدي بتصعيد النزاع المسلح بين قوى الأمن الداخلي وقوات الحشد الشعبي أو الميليشيات في البصرة، مما يعني أن اللجوء إلى بنى الوساطة المحلية (على سبيل المثال: القبلية) سيبقى ضرورياً.

[7]  الممثل الشخصي الحالي لمقتدى الصدر في البصرة هو رجل الدين حازم الأعرجي.

[8]  يستند هذا إلى كل من الملاحظة الواقعية لاستخدام التيار الصدري للترهيب والعنف في منعطفات حاسمة لقمع حركة أكتوبر/تشرين الأول، بالإضافة إلى المقابلات والمناقشات مع النشطاء أنفسهم الذين قاموا بالاستشهاد بالصدريين في كثير من الأحيان على أنهم أقوى قوة للاحتجاج المضاد.

# Introduction

Since the demonstrations in Basra during the summer of 2018, protesting in Iraq has become increasingly dangerous as activists and civil society organisers are routinely subjected to both indiscriminate and highly targeted violence from state and parastatal armed groups. At the same time, protester-directed violence has also become a major political phenomenon with some protest groups engaging in mass-scale property destruction and clashes with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Overall, the violence surrounding protests in Iraq can now credibly be considered as amongst the most extreme in the world. This paper seeks to explain this remarkable expansion of violence and to identify its effects on protest dynamics.

Within Iraq, the southeast – and particularly protest hubs in Basra and Dhi Qar – has witnessed some of the highest levels of protest violence in recent years, while also exhibiting distinct dynamics vis-à-vis other parts of the country. In fact, violent dynamics vary considerably from province to province, and when comparing different phases of mobilisation over time. Consequently, frequently cited macro-level factors (e.g., a breakdown in the elite-citizen social contract, uneven socio-economic development, poor public services, widespread corruption etc.) provide only a partial explanation of violent dynamics and cannot account for localised disparities.[9]

By contrast, this paper takes a ground-level view, identifying the many local factors that structure protest violence within provinces, or within particular urban contexts, and thus explain divergent dynamics of violence across the southeast, and between the southeast and the rest of Iraq. These factors include: the sociodemographic composition and network structures of protest groups, security forces and armed groups; the degree of organisational coherence within these groups; past experience, learning, and strategic adaptation on the part of protagonists; the degree of competition within a province's political and economic 'marketplace';[10] the strength of (potentially) ameliorative social structures (e.g. tribal); and the degree of integration, at both command level and 'foot-soldier' level, between ISF, armed groups and political parties. Each of these local variables, and their mutual interaction, is shown to have an important impact on the violent dynamics surrounding protests.

This focus on local conditions is not intended to deny the importance of macro-structural factors, or political actions taken at the national or international level. For instance, the development of a more coherent counter-protest political strategy at the level of national elites, and the inability of the Prime Minister to alter violent dynamics via shakeups of both national and provincial ISF leadership, are highlighted here as impacting on violent

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[9]  Harith Hasan, 'Beyond Security: Stabilization, Governance, and Socioeconomic Challenges in Iraq', *The Atlantic Council*, July 2018; Renad Mansour, 'Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo,' *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, 2019; Faleh A. Jabar, 'The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics,' *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, 22 June 2018; Marsin Alshamary, 'Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq: Between Reform and Revolution,' *IRIS Report*, December 2020.
[10]  Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, 'Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces', *LSE Conflict Research Programme*, 2020.

dynamics. Nevertheless, such factors are always processed through more localised conditions which determine their ultimate effects. And, as in the case of the PM's limited control, it is precisely the prioritisation of the local, over the national, picture that can clarify the phenomenon itself.

Rather than simply provide a laundry list of factors, this paper deploys a concept of multiple social logics of violence that pertain in different sectors of the social system. This concept seeks to integrate different factors, and levels of analysis (for example provincial or national), into coherent sets of rules, interactions and feedback loops that systematise the application of violence within different contexts. The concept of a social logic also directs attention towards the rational and strategic aspects of violence, whether deployed by protesters or counter-protest actors, and privileges these aspects over the more commonplace focus on chaotic, irrational and emotion-driven behaviours, or a loss of control by the state over coercive actors. Finally, the concept helps clarify an important aspect of the systematic nature of protest violence in Iraq, namely, that parts of this system have gained partial autonomy from the control of any specific agent or set of agents but are nevertheless still governed by a social logic that relates to a rationalisation of systemic power, rather than being a chaotic by-product of systemic dysfunction.

The paper undertakes a granular analysis of protest-related violence in southeast Iraq over three key phases of mobilisation, each lasting a period of three months: July-September 2018; October-December 2019; and October-December 2020. The first two phases saw high levels of both protest activity and protest-related violence. The third phase – October to December 2020 – covers the period wherein the October 2019 protest movement (hereafter, the October Movement) failed to remobilise. Consequently, this latter phase allows further exploration of how counter-protest violence impacted the protest movement's organisational capacity and strategies.

Further data is also presented on violence outside of protest events, providing a more continuous view from September 2019 to January 2021. Including this data recognises that one important adaptation by counter-protest forces saw their use of violence shift from the more public arenas of protest squares to more intimate, targeted violence outside of protest events or periods of peak mobilisation. To contextualise the key arguments of the paper, a mini case study is also presented which examines the August 2020 assassination campaign against activists in Basra.

The quantitative data presented covers the following dimensions: overall levels and types of protest-related violence and anti-protest violence, including that which took place outside of protest events (Data Panel 1); and protester-directed violence and protest tactics (Data Panel 2). This quantitative data on protest dynamics draws on the author's database of several thousand geolocated incidents of protest and protest-related violence. This allows for examining big picture trends and temporal and geographic divergences. Nevertheless, to properly contextualise this data, the paper also draws on qualitative data from dozens of targeted interviews and informal discussions conducted by the author with activists, political actors and informed observers, as well as the author's own close observation of Iraq's protest movements over several years of research.

# What Does the Data Show?

## Anti-Protest Violence

As can be seen in Data Panel 1, the overall level of violence associated with protests in Iraq has escalated dramatically since the summer of 2018. Anti-protest violence, both within protest events and outside of protest events, has accelerated. As the author argued previously, this counter-protest violence was systematised in Basra during, and after, the protests in July and September 2018 (referred to by the author at the time as the 'Basra blueprint').[11] However, from October 2019, this system of repression was expanded across central and southern Iraq.

The data collected on Basra's 2018 protests showed that Iraqi police units were the primary tool of repressive violence. However, a division of labour between the police and armed groups (either PMF or subcontracted local mafias) also emerged. The latter deployed more lethal and intimate forms of violence, typically involving targeted assassinations, kidnappings, IED and grenade attacks, and intimidatory small arms fire (typically deployed against activists' homes during the night). While this division of labour emerged locally, organically and reactively in summer 2018, it has since become more coherent and strategic, incorporated into the political logic of actions taken by elites at the national level.

As seen in Data Panel 1, October to December 2019 saw a further expansion of this repressive model. Police units acted more aggressively to prevent or contain protests, while PMF/armed groups expanded a campaign of assassination, kidnap and violent intimidation. This equated to a massive escalation in the deployment of violence outside of protest squares and public events, with the intelligence-led targeting of activists at home or in transit. Reflecting this shift, the data also shows that the role of PMF/armed groups in anti-protest violence increased markedly between 2018 and 2019. This has continued during the October to December 2020 phase.

However, the pattern of violence that developed in Basra from 2018 did not translate straightforwardly to other provinces. Some of these divergences are seen in how specific counter-protest tactics were adapted to local social and political contexts in other parts of Iraq. For instance, Figure 3 shows there were far fewer kidnap incidents in the southeast, including Basra and Dhi Qar, compared with central Iraq, particularly Baghdad. This is likely explained by the comparatively greater salience of tribal networks in the southeast. As seen in the case of Sajjad al-Iraqi (an activist kidnapped in Dhi Qar in September 2020), tribal involvement can transform a kidnap incident into a complex political problem, or risk escalation into a broader conflict. Ultimately, counter-protest actors in the southeast have preferred to rely more on intimidatory IEDs and explosive attacks to threaten activists, or outright assassinations that carry less risk of entanglement in convoluted tribal politics.

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[11]  Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq,' *Chatham House*, 8 October 2019.

However, some of the divergences in violent dynamics (both temporal and geographic) appear to apply to the entire landscape of violent repression in a province, rather than specific counter-protest tactics (such as kidnappings). For instance, in the 2019 phase, overall levels of violence in Dhi Qar accelerated past those seen in Basra, including both significantly higher instances of high intensity/lethal violent incidents, and violence involving attacks on buildings and infrastructure. Meanwhile, this latter form of violence all but disappeared in Basra. It is also notable that violence perpetrated by PMF/armed groups was more muted in Basra during the October to December 2019 phase, but escalated dramatically in Dhi Qar during the same period.

It would be a mistake to interpret the lower levels of counter-protest violence in Basra simply in terms of greater restraint shown by the various parties. Rather, what happened in Basra was a pivot by ISF towards more strategic and focused deployment of violence. On the one hand, this did involve ISF showing more restraint in certain contexts. For instance, when overall mobilisation levels are low, it has been fairly common for some protest groups to use violence against ISF to provoke an aggressive reaction. The subsequent images and videos of repressive police tactics are then used to galvanise wider engagement in the protests. From October 2019, ISF in Basra demonstrated more discipline in not responding to provocations or waiting until they had sustained direct attacks before responding. This helped to shift the media narrative around such clashes in their favour.[12]

However, the most important dimension of ISF's more strategic use of violence in Basra was the linking up of this violence to a broader political strategy. Consequently, ISF retained the capacity and willingness to deploy extreme violence, provided this was reinforced by coordinated action from other political and coercive actors, typically at the national level. This was seen most often vis-à-vis the Sadrist movement, whose moves in terms of counter-protests and violence were increasingly mirrored, and consolidated on, by ISF and intelligence agencies employing a focused deployment of violence and arrests against protesters.[13]

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[12] Article IV (Terrorism) arrests have frequently been used against protest activists as a form of intimidation. The cases are rarely prosecuted, but the severe penalties attached to Article IV offences are threatening to activists. The ISF response to protests was also more intelligence-led, facilitated by penetration of protest groups and the reliance of the protest movement on social media pages and channels to organise protests that were easily accessed by the authorities. This meant ISF were able to use checkpoints and searches to prevent access to protest sites, and to make arrests of so-called 'rioters' and confiscate weapons (such as Molotov cocktails) before they became active in protests.

[13] Particularly following Sadr's withdrawal from the protest movement in late January/early February 2020, the Sadrists' role as a counter-protest force has increasingly cohered with the broader system of repression. This can be seen in multiple instances where a Sadrist political move at the national level triggers aggressive tactics by ISF to clear protest sites, or where ISF appear to stand down to allow Sadrist militias to orchestrate similar attacks. One example from Basra took place on 25 January 2020, when members of the Shock Forces attacked protesters in Navy Roundabout resulting in tents being burned down and protesters being detained. This attack by ISF immediately followed the withdrawal of Sadrists from Navy Roundabout in response to political messaging from Sadr at the national level.

There were other important divergences with respect to provinces in the southeast. Most notable, compared to Basra/Dhi Qar, Maysan saw far lower levels of overall violence, fewer and less intense clashes between protesters and ISF, but more instances of inter-militia violence (typically Sadrist versus Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq) that were still causally tied to protest dynamics.[14] These broader patterns of divergence are explained below.

## The Kadhimi Effect

Since arriving in office, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has repeatedly emphasised his government's commitment to hold those responsible for anti-protest violence to account and has sought to improve the conduct of ISF toward protesters. But what does the data show about Kadhimi's impact on anti-protest violence? As seen in Figure 3, violent attacks on protesters outside of protest events peaked between November 2019 and February 2020 (when a combination of Sadrist pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically depressed protest activity). In other words, the rates of protest-related violence had significantly declined long before Kadhimi took office in August 2020.[15]

Attacks then began to pick up again from August, with a spike in assassinations in Basra coinciding with Kadhimi's visit to the US in late August 2020. ISF actions in Basra following this assassination campaign clarified that, even if ISF were not perpetrating the violence, they had little effective response to the militias. This was despite a series of high-profile changes in the province's security leadership and Kadhimi's repeated direct and personal intervention in the Basra situation. This episode is discussed further in the mini case study at the end of the report.

It might be argued that Kadhimi had more success in restraining the excesses of ISF violence and repression, even if his government failed to constrain the militias. Indeed, much commentary has praised Kadhimi's appointments within the IA, Ministry of the Interior (MoI) and intelligence apparatus, partly on this basis. However, the data does not provide strong evidence to support this claim either. Again, referring to Figure 3, the major escalation of anti-protest violence from late November 2020, attributed in the main to the Sadrist movement, was also accompanied by a systematic campaign of arrests by ISF, and an upsurge in violent clashes between protesters and riot police, most notably in Dhi Qar. The picture of violence appeared to be a further development of the 'Basra blueprint', that is, of the systematic division of labour between police and militias working hand-in-glove to deploy coercive repression within a broader strategy linked to political action at the national level. This logic of violence unfolds more or less autonomously from the actions of the Prime Minister.

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[14]  Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Violence and Protest in South Iraq,' *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 18 August 2020. Available at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/18/violence-and-protest-in-south-iraq/ (accessed 9 July 2021).

[15]  This was largely an effect of the collapse of mobilisation due to Sadrist pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved the imposition of curfews and restrictions on movement and social gatherings.
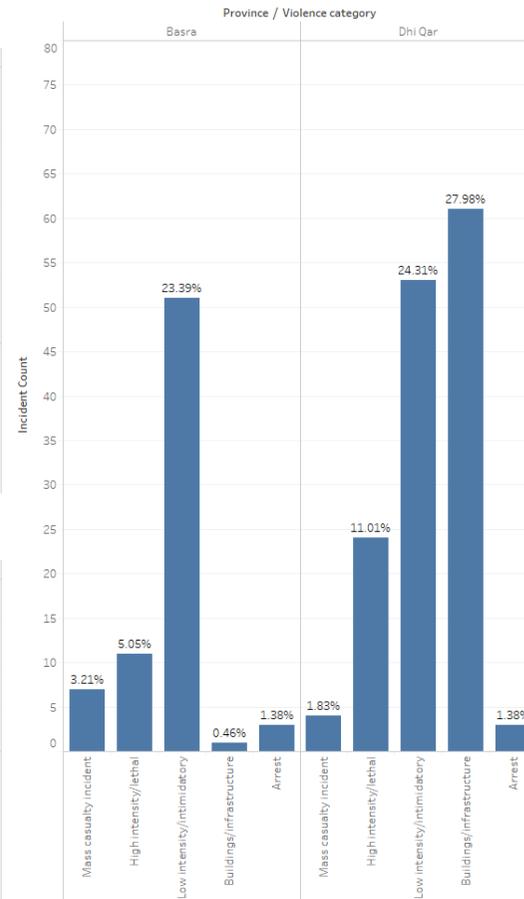
## Data Panel 1: Protest-Related Violence and Anti-Protest Violence
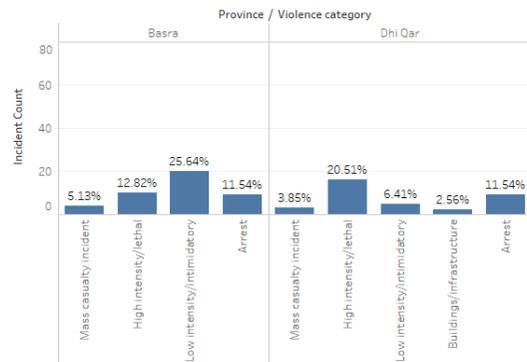
### Figure 1



**All protest-related violence, violence category**
July - September 2018
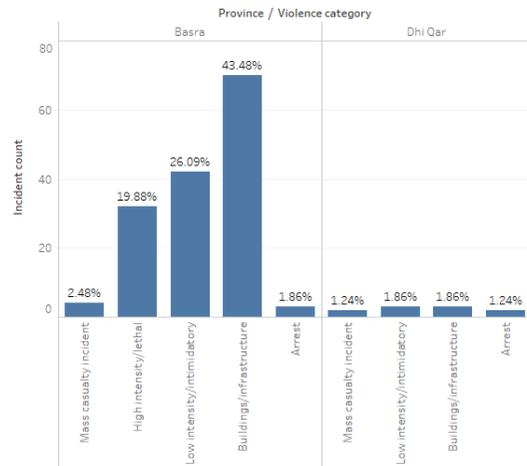
October - December 2019

October - December 2020

## Comments on the Data

*Interpreting the data* – The data in Fig.1 shows all protest-related violence (counter-protest and protester-directed) classified according to the intensity of violence. Mass casualty incidents are those in which at least five individuals were killed/injured. High intensity/lethal captures incidents resulting in a fatality (e.g., assassination) or likely to result in serious injury (e.g., an IED). Low intensity/intimidatory refers to violence unlikely to lead to injury or clearly intended as intimidatory in nature (e.g., intimidatory small arms fire used to disperse protesters). Buildings/infrastructure refers to incidents where the target was a material structure and not a human being e.g., empty party offices or government buildings.

*Changes in Basra* – Among the notable shifts is the collapse of the buildings/infrastructure violence in Basra in 2019, reflecting a significant change in protester tactics in their deployment of violence. Also notable is that this shift did not result in a proportionate decline in overall levels of violence in the province.

*Dhi Qar as the most violent province* – In the 2019 phase, Dhi Qar not only emerges as a major protest hub, but also the most violent province in the southeast. This was driven by an escalatory cycle of extreme violence from ISF, armed groups and protesters themselves who engaged in a considerable amount of property destruction.

*The division of labour in counter-protest violence* – Fig.2, below, shows the emerging division of labour between ISF versus PMF/armed groups in the overall pattern of repressive violence. While the rise in PMF/armed group directed violence can be seen clearly, the data somewhat understates this dimension. This is because the targeted violence – outside of protest events – often took place in periods of lower protest mobilisation (either prior to, or after peaks). Consequently, the PMF/armed group role can be seen more clearly in Fig.3 which covers the entire period from October 2019 to December 2020.

## Figure 2



Anti-protest violence, directed by/violence type...

July-September 2018
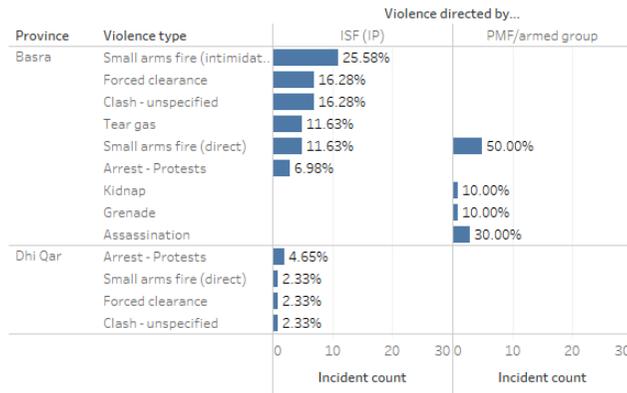
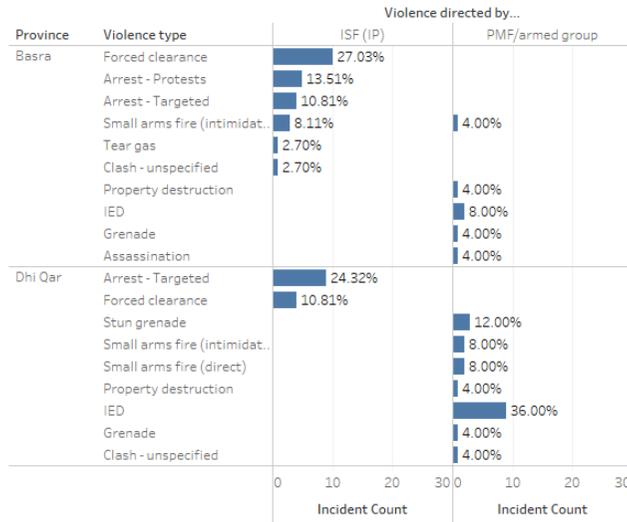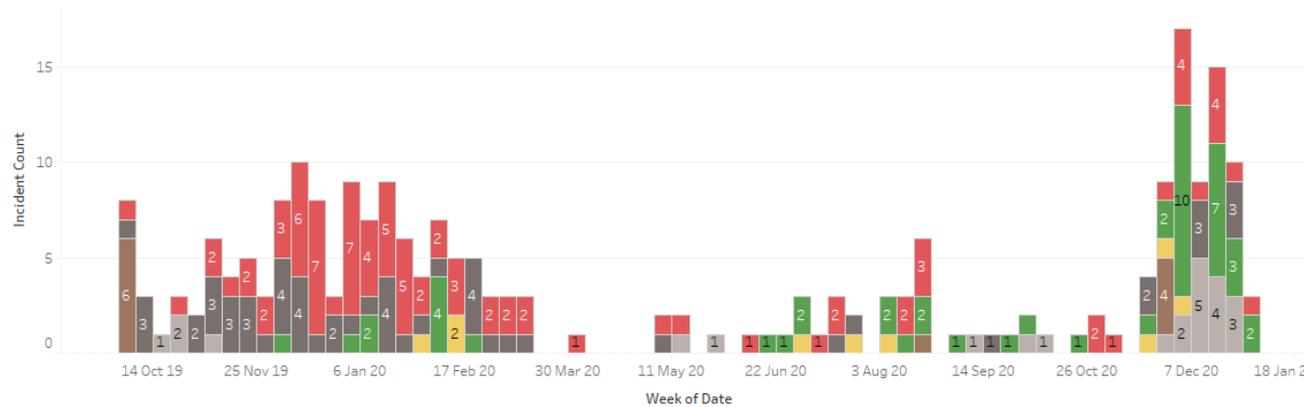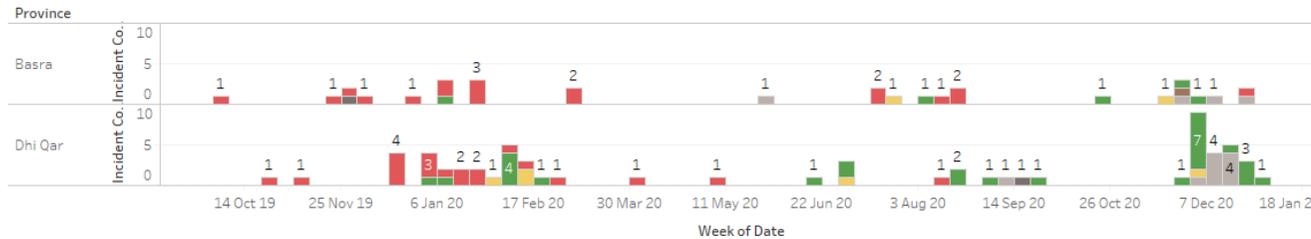October-December 2019
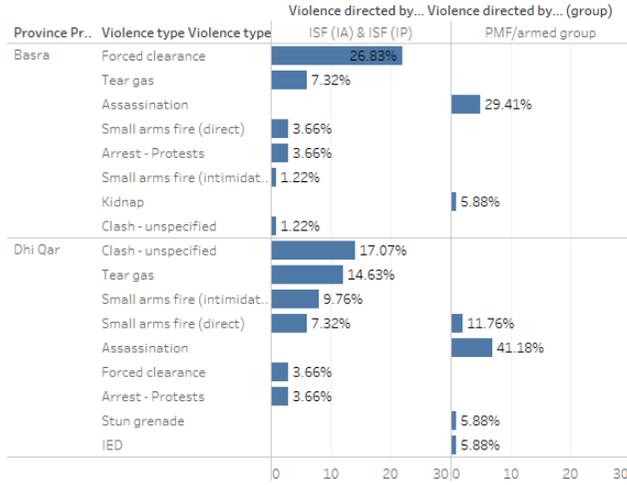
October-December 2020

## Figure 3



**Anti-protest violence outside of protest events**
All of Iraq, October 2019 - January 2021

Basra & Dhi Qar, Oct 2019 - Jan 2021

Violence type (group)
- Assassination
- Kidnap
- Explosive activity (e.g., IED, grenade, RPG etc)
- Small arms fire (intimidatory)
- Property destruction
- Arrest - Targeted

## Comments on the Data

*Interpreting the data* – The data in Fig.3 covers anti-protest attacks for all Iraq (excluding the KRG) that took place outside of protest events. This is typically targeted violence that seeks to kill or intimidate specific activists and send a message to the broader protest movement. The category 'explosive activity' collates IED and grenade attacks that are usually intimidatory in nature.

*A note on arrest figures* – Due to a change in data collection methodology, the data on arrests is uneven, with arrests not being picked up systematically in data collection until mid-2020. Nevertheless, after this point, the major spike in arrests in the southeast (particularly Dhi Qar) from November 2020 is notable.

*The November/December 2020 spike* – The surge in anti-protest violence in late November 2020 occurred simultaneously with moves by the Sadrist movement to stifle efforts to revive the October 2019 movement ahead of the elections scheduled for 2021. However, the accompanying spike in targeted arrest incidents, many of which took place in Dhi Qar, suggests a degree of coordination, explicit or implicit, between the Sadrists and political and security officials in the province.

*Assassination as the preferred counter-protest tool in the southeast* – One clear distinction between Basra/Dhi Qar and the remainder of Iraq is the predominance of assassinations over other forms of counter-protest tactics, particularly abductions and kidnaps. This is likely attributable to the greater influence of tribal networks in the southeast (compared to Baghdad) making kidnapping incidents potentially more complex and riskier for counter-protest actors.

## Protester-Directed Violence, Tactics and Strategies

The ramping up of anti-protest violence in Basra and Dhi Qar is not explained by higher overall rates of protest, nor as simply a reaction to protester-directed violence. In fact, the data shows that protester-directed violence fell as a proportion of the overall rate of protests in the 2019 phase. This was most notable in Basra, where protester-directed violence fell dramatically, but this was not matched by a proportionate fall in anti-protest violence.

More specifically, the data shows that protesters in Basra radically altered their tactics between the summer of 2018 and October–December 2019. As seen in Data Panel 2, this tactical shift was along two main dimensions. First, protester-directed attacks on 'sensitive' targets (political party offices, politicians' residences, PMF offices and government buildings) declined to a negligible level. This also explains the low level of violence in the 'buildings/infrastructure' category for Basra in 2019 (Data Panel 1). And second, there was a consolidation of protest tactics, with sit-ins and occupations of public spaces and university campuses, and street marches (typically toward an established sit-in/occupation at a public square) accounting for most of the protest activity. Consequently, protest-related violence in Basra, compared to Dhi Qar, clustered around protester-ISF interactions at protest events and the more strategic and focused deployment of massive force against protesters (as outlined above).

By contrast, during the same phase, protester-directed violence and tactics in Dhi Qar more closely mirrored those seen in Basra during the summer of 2018. Protesters were far more likely to hit sensitive targets, and there was a huge amount of property destruction (both government property and that belonging to political parties and PMF groups). There was also a more diverse range of protest tactics, with a rise in public square occupations and sit-ins occurring alongside more protests targeting government buildings, logistics (main roads and bridges), and aforementioned sensitive targets. This greater diversity of tactics in Dhi Qar could indicate weaker levels of organisation and coherence within the protest movement in the province during this early phase (particularly away from the central Habobi Square protest hub). Dhi Qar also saw a more even distribution of violent interactions between protesters-ISF versus protesters-PMF/armed groups. The logic of violence that pertained in this context was one of mutually reinforcing incoherence and escalation between fragmentary protest groups and a reactive and erratic coercive apparatus.

This Basra-Dhi Qar divergence also indicates that the repression rolled out in Basra during, and immediately after, the Summer 2018 protests reshaped the tactics and strategies adopted by protesters in the province. A more concerted effort was made to maintain the peaceful character of the protests and to focus mobilisations on the Navy Roundabout occupation and university campuses (rather than confronting the state/political elite directly).[16] Moreover, the greater participation of students and graduates that was noted in Basra also steered the protests in this direction. Particularly for the

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[16]  Directly here means targeting the state, political elites and armed groups directly with protests or violence against their personnel or offices and buildings.

period of October to December 2019, it was this student component that created the tactical and strategic frame for the movement in Basra, while other groups (including youths, Sadrist youths, civil society activists, tribal groups, trade unions etc.), operated largely within this frame. Students were also mobilised in Dhi Qar but constituted a smaller proportion of the protest movement's base which was weighted more towards youths and local residents spontaneously mobilising via localised, informal social structures as opposed to formal 'civil society' organisation.[17]

Nevertheless, orchestrating a more peaceful protest politics did not immunise activists in Basra from counter-protest violence. While it is true that Basra saw fewer incidents of radically destabilising violence, particularly around protest events, it is also true that assassinations and violent intimidation remained a systematic tool for counter-protest groups in the province. In fact, it was precisely the social strata most responsible for ensuring the largely peaceful character of protests in Basra who were most ruthlessly targeted by counter-protest groups. However, this violence was more strategically deployed, often taking place outside periods of mass mobilisation, and designed to deter protest organisation.

This strategic adaptation to violence on the part of protesters can be clarified through the example of the graduate demonstrations that emerged as a major trend in October to December 2020 (mainly in Basra, but also present in Dhi Qar). This group were highly organised through their own social media channels and highly disciplined in their actions. They made a conscious decision to avoid escalatory tactics that could provoke a violent backlash from ISF or armed groups. This equated to careful calibration of protests and the degree of disruption caused, as well as target selection. Protests remained peaceful and focused on Basra Oil Company offices and associated premises in Basra City, and the Dhi Qar Oil Company HQ north of Nasiriyah (these offices deal mainly with HR and administrative matters, not critical commercial operations).

These graduate protesters also maintained a narrow focus on a transactional demand for employment. In other words, they were negotiating entry into the political economy of the Iraqi state, not making transformative political demands. Consequently, the protests were carefully designed not to threaten elite interests and illustrate that some protesters chose to work within the red lines established by counter-protest actors. Notably, a not insignificant number of the graduates involved in these protests were also formerly participants in the Navy Roundabout movement from October 2019. Consequently, this case further illustrates how counter-protest actors succeeded in fragmenting the October Movement and diverting some of its currents into other, less threatening avenues of protest.

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[17]  This observation draws on data collected by the author as part of the present research but not yet published.
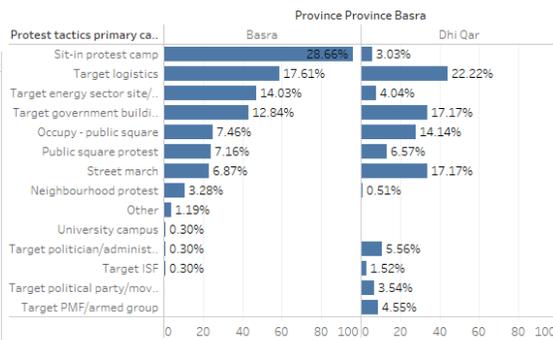
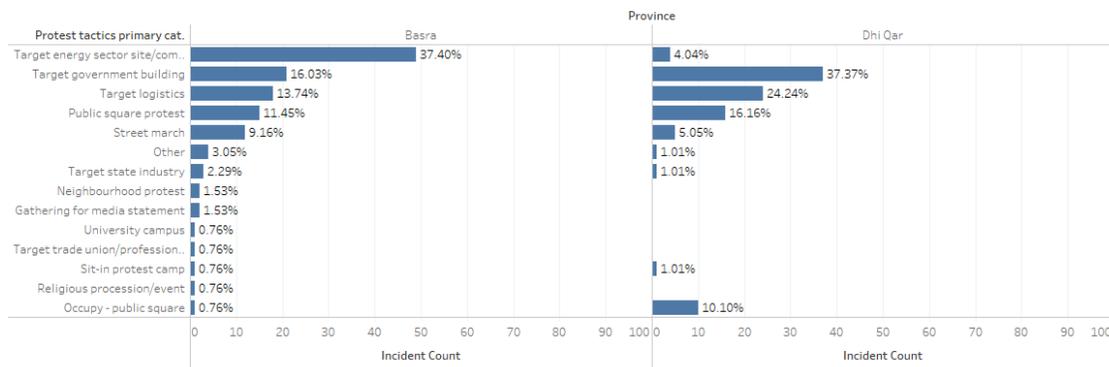## Data Panel 2: Protester-Directed Violence and Tactics

### Figure 4



Protester tactics, primary categories
July-September 2018
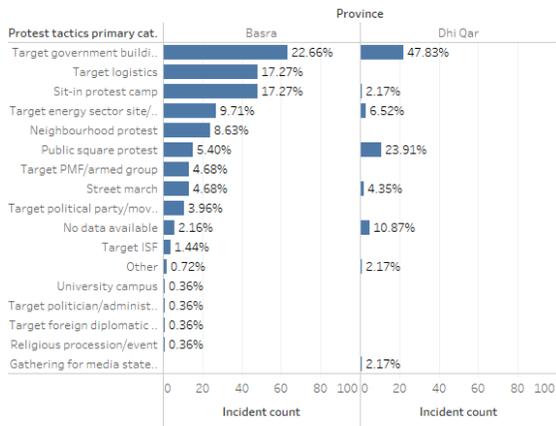
October-December 2019

October-December 2020

## Comments on Tactics Data

*Interpreting the data* – The data in Figs. 4 and 5 capture protest tactics, with those most associated with the October Movement highlighted in orange. High-risk tactics – i.e., those in which protesters aim for sensitive targets such as PMF and political party offices, are highlighted in red. Secondary tactics is a category that drills down further into a series of sub-categories linked to a primary meta-category.

*Tactical shift in Basra* – Among the most notable tactical shifts took place in Basra between 2018 and 2019. Not only did protester tactics in Basra consolidate in 2019, but they also showed considerable strategic discipline by avoiding sensitive targets. This was a marked shift from the Summer of 2018 when government buildings, PMF and political party offices were hit on a regular basis.

*Tactical diversification as an indicator of movement fragmentation* – The other notable shift in the post-uprising phase was a diversification of protest tactics. This is another likely sign of fragmentation of the October Movement as protesters diverted into different protest strategies. However, it is notable that sensitive targets remained low, and fell considerably in Dhi Qar, illustrating the disciplining effect of counter-protest violence.

## Figure 5

**Protester tactics, secondary categories**
July-September 2018
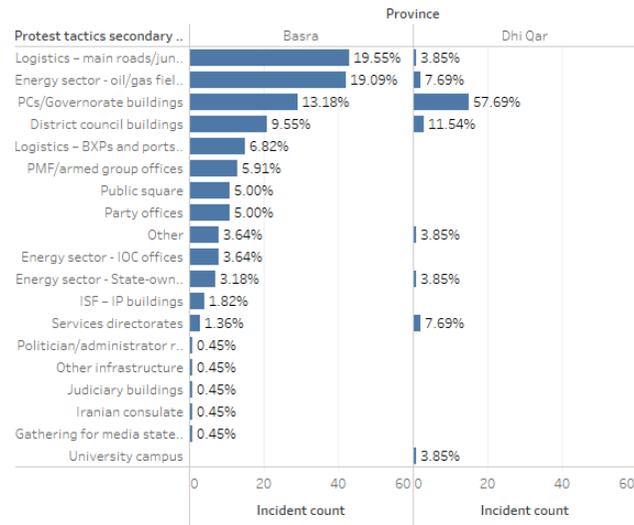
October-December 2019
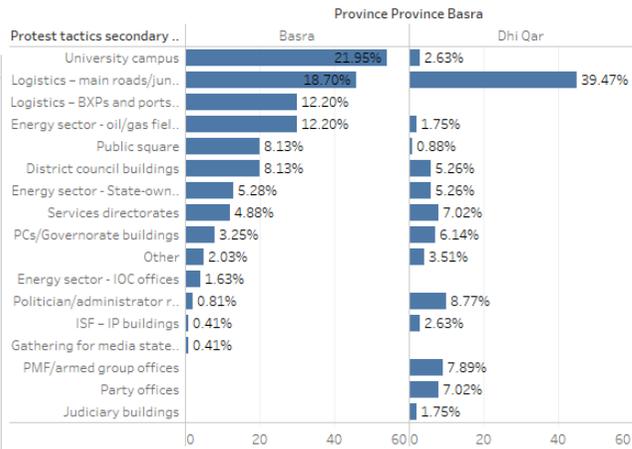


October-December 2020

## Figure 6

### Protester-directed violence, violence type/target
#### July-September 2018



### Comments on Protester-Directed Violence Data

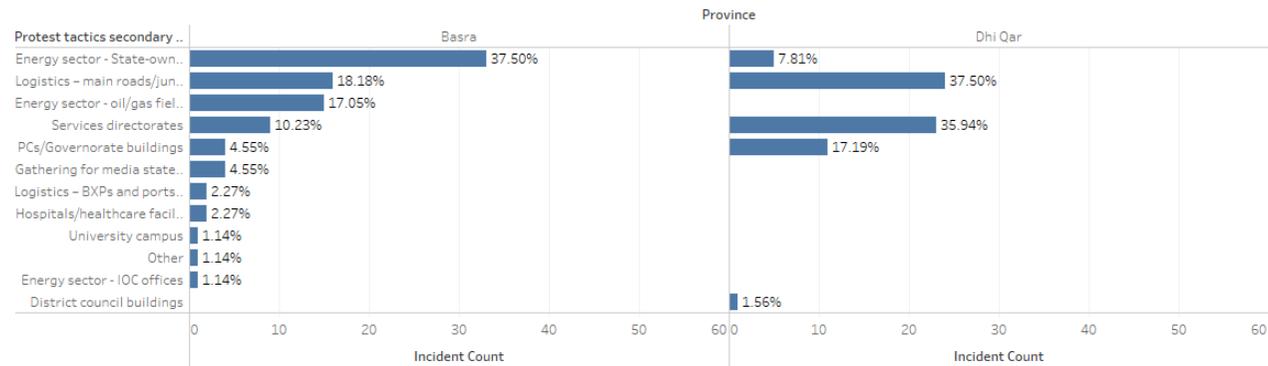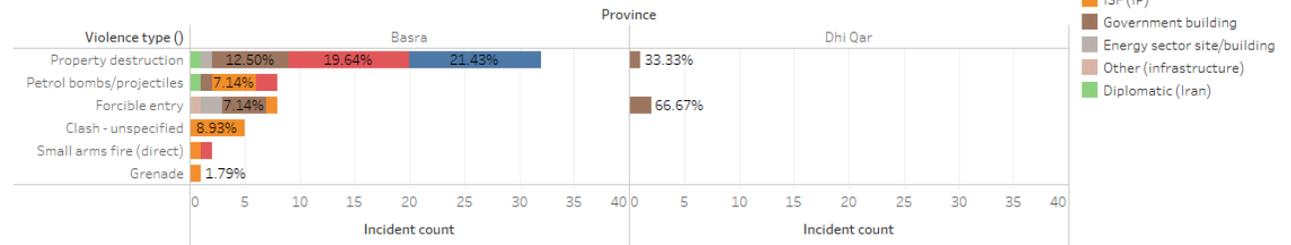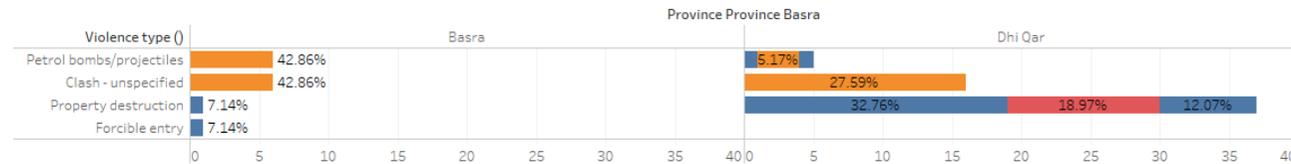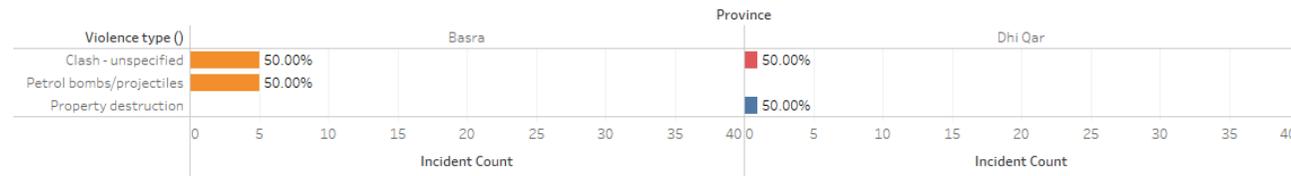*Interpreting the data* – *Fig. 6 shows recorded incidents of protester-directed violence by violence type and target selection. Highlighted in red are the 'sensitive' targets, e.g., ISF, PMF/armed group, political party or politician, intended to capture violence that was extremely high risk and likely to provoke an escalation from counter-protest groups.*

*The Basra transformation* – *As with data on protest tactics, the data on protester-directed violence shows a pronounced retreat from violent tactics in Basra in 2019, while protester-directed violence in Dhi Qar against all manner of sensitive targets escalated dramatically. Within this, a further shift took place in Basra where protester-directed violence was limited to encounters with ISF (mainly police) and attacks on political parties and PMF/armed groups fell away.*

*The Sadrist exception in Dhi Qar* – *It is clear from the data that protesters in Dhi Qar systematically targeted political parties and PMF/armed groups across the board. However, the one exception to this was the Sadrist movement, who were rarely, if ever, targeted by protesters. This anomaly is explained by the fact that the Sadrist movement poses a different type of risk to protesters. During discussions with the author, it was common for activists to identify the Sadrist movement as the most feared counter-protest actor owing to their perception that the Sadrists were both more extreme and more unpredictable in their use of violence, whereas it was felt that violence from other armed groups could be more easily mitigated by strategic adaptation to their red lines.*

## Further Explaining Violent Dynamics: Local Social Logics and the Politics of the Security Sector

Understanding some of the broader patterns of protest-related violence in southeast Iraq, and how these shifted over time and varied widely between provinces, is helped by contextualising violence within local social conditions and politics, and particularly the politics of Iraq's security apparatus. This section looks more closely at these local contexts for Basra and Dhi Qar, while also bringing Maysan into the picture as a further point of comparison in the southeast region.

### Maysan: A Sadrist Stronghold

With reference to data published by the author elsewhere, it can be seen that Maysan has experienced comparatively low levels of protest-related violence compared to Basra and Dhi Qar.[18] In part, this is likely a reflection of the province's smaller size (in population terms), but also the lower stakes of political competition in the province owing to Maysan's relative lack of economic resources. This means competitive political dynamics are less intense.

Compounding this characteristic is Maysan's status as a Sadrist stronghold, with the movement enjoying high levels of support amongst the general population as well as a preponderance of power at the executive and administrative levels. This resulted in a fairly unique dynamic between protesters, political authority and security forces in the province, partly explaining why interactions between ISF and protesters in Maysan have been less violent.

In fact, little protest violence in Maysan was recorded, in part, because violence around protests in the province was so quickly escalated into intra-militia engagements (not classified as protest-related violence for the purposes of this report) between the Sadrists and rival armed group Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). The intensity of Sadrist-AAH conflict in Maysan eventually spilled over into Basra and Dhi Qar, resulting in a string of assassinations targeting Saraya al-Salam figures in these provinces.[19]

### Basra: Political Fragmentation and PMF Penetration of the Security Apparatus

In Basra, the stakes of political competition are far higher, due mainly to the province's oil economy. Consequently, the political and security landscape in Basra is more intensely

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[18]  Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Violence and Protest in South Iraq,' *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 18 August 2020. Available at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/18/violence-and-protest-in-south-iraq/ (accessed 19 August 2021).

[19]  These began with a Sadrist attack on AAH offices in Maysan on 25 October 2019. Multiple attacks on Saraya al-Salam militiamen followed in Maysan, Basra and Dhi Qar. The pattern of attacks persisted until the 5 February 2020 assassination of Abu Muqtada al-Izairjawi (Saraya al-Salam) outside his home in Amarha (Maysan), and the 6 February assassination of Hazim al-Helfi (Saraya al-Salam) on Muhammad al-Qassim road in Basra. The dissipation of this violence likely reflected intense mediation efforts by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps following the assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020.

contested, and the resulting fragmentation of the province's political field has been an important driver of protest-related violence in some instances.[20] Nevertheless, recognising the effects of political competition should not overshadow the important integrative dynamics which confer greater coherence on how political and security actors respond to protests. These integrative logics tend to take over from competitive dynamics when the system shifts toward a defensive posture. Consequently, they are especially relevant during phases where protest mobilisations pose a radical challenge to the political system.

The fragmentary factor is most important for understanding protest violence in relation to the Sadrist movement. The Sadrists are well represented amongst Basra's youth and have constituted a significant bloc of the province's protesters.[21] However, unlike in Maysan, the political makeup of Basra's security apparatus results in a markedly different dynamic between Sadrist protesters and security forces. Moreover, the Sadrists are one of several factions who compete for power in the province's political, economic and security fields. This provides the Sadrists with more targets for violence (in the form of rival political and militia groups). Moreover, a portion of Sadrist protest violence is a function of the movement's competition in these fields – it is a mechanism of threat, pressure and leverage within intra-elite competition.

However, while these fragmentary dynamics drive certain forms of protest-related violence, the overall systemic pattern of repression (the division of labour between ISF and PMF/armed groups noted above) relates to an increasingly integrative dynamic within Basra's security sector. This refers to how Basra's security apparatus became more integrated with the PMF, especially its dominant forces in the Badr Organisation and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis-Kataʾib Hezbollah (prior to Muhandis' assassination). This continuity between the ISF (primarily the police forces) and PMF groups helps explain the broader model of systemic violence in Basra, not as an effect of fragmentation, but as a coherent pattern of violence shaped by it having a more consolidated and coherent set of actors, with a more unified strategic purpose, as its point of origin.

For example, the police formation directing most of the anti-protest violence in Basra (in both summer 2018 and October to December 2019), was the so-called police Shock Forces (*quwaat al-sadma*).[22] The Shock Forces are somewhat unique to Basra (in other provinces protests are handled mainly by Anti-Riot and, to a lesser extent, SWAT units who mainly conduct arrests). The unit was created in 2018 out of the Basra Emergency Police Battalions and was intended initially as a specialist force to tackle narcotics and tribal disputes. However, the Shock Forces were repurposed in summer 2018 by Basra Governor Asaad al-Idani as the front-line unit for dealing with protests.

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[20]  Zmkan Ali Saleem & Mac Skelton, 'Basra's Political Marketplace: Understanding Government Failure After The Protests,' *IRIS Policy Brief*, April 2019.

[21]  'Sadrists' here refers to a broad category that encompasses Iraqi youths with a *Sadri* orientation rooted in social class, familial and tribal networks, and not necessarily integrated into the organisational-institutional structure of the Sadrist movement.

[22]  Due to its negative reputation in Basra, the Shock Forces have recently been renamed the 'Duty Force'.

The unit's commander was Brigadier Ali Mishari al-Muhamadawi. Mishari was closely affiliated to Badr and protesters frequently accused him of links to Kataʾib Hezbollah.[23] Meanwhile, the IP members who made up the Shock Forces – drawn from Basra's Emergency Police Battalions – contained a not insignificant number of PMF members who were operational around Samarra during the fight against Islamic State. The force gained considerable notoriety in Basra, with protesters persistently calling for Mishari's resignation. On 16 July 2020, Mishari was demoted to become head of the Basra Police Martyrs and Wounded Department. The Shock Forces were officially dissolved (resubmerged into the Emergency Police Battalions), and Faw Police Station Manager Col. Kadhum Qadir Draweesh was promoted to head that force.

Similar dynamics can be seen further up the chain of command. Here, power had conglomerated in a nexus between Governor Idani and Basra's Chief of Police Rashid al-Fleih, who was strongly backed by Badr and was also instrumental in bringing in Mishari as head of the Shock Forces. The Idani-Fleih relationship succeeded in shifting the balance of power in Basra's security apparatus away from the Iraqi Army and towards the police. The result was the sidelining of Qasim Nizal al-Maliki, then Commander General (CG) of Basra Operations Command (BaOC), who retired from his post in early August 2020. Indeed, the power to appoint provincial police directors is a contested issue between the MoI and provincial governments, with the latter regarding this power as an important mechanism for maintaining their political influence over the security apparatus (whereas the IA chain of command makes the BaOC CG accountable to the Chief of Staff of the Joint Operations Command (JOC), who reports to the Commander in Chief/PM).

The BaOC CG is meant to be the most senior security position in the province with operational control over the police (although this arrangement is a legacy of the post-2003 period and does not have a strong legal basis).[24] In practice, the BaOC has taken the lead on tactical plans and operations that require combined forces involving Iraqi police and IA units, typically to tackle outbreaks of tribal fighting. However, in the past this has also involved coordinating the response to protests and civil unrest.

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[23] 'He Made it a Tool of Repression in Basra: Who is the Leader of the Shock Forces?', *al-Hurra*, 25 January 2020.

[24] The MoI is meant be taking full control of security in cities in Federal Iraq. On 17 June 2020, the MoI announced that the police are taking over the security portfolio from the Joint Operations Command (JOC) in seven provinces. Earlier, in February 2020, the NSC announced a transfer of security responsibilities to the police in six provinces where JOC were present (Babylon, Najaf, Diwaniyah, Wasit, Muthanna, and Maysan). However, the decision was not fully implemented. JOCs between the police and the Iraqi Army continue in Baghdad, Karbala, Dhi Qar, Basra Anbar Salah al-Din, Kirkuk Diyala and Mosul. An important factor in the delay (of this transition of security responsibilities to the police) relates to differences between Federal and Provincial governments. JOCs in the provinces report to the Chief of Staff of the JOC, who reports to the Commander in Chief/PM. On the other hand, local governments in the provinces have more influence over the police. In theory, a provincial police commander cannot function in permanent/standing capacity without a vote from the Provincial Council in each province. However, in practice, the MoI did appoint several provincial police commanders in acting capacity without PCs voting (particularly as PCs are now suspended). The matter remains a contested point between the Federal and Provincial Governments.

Consequently, during the summer 2018 protests, it was the then-BaOC CG, Lieutenant-General Jamil al-Shammari, who oversaw the violent crackdown on protesters in the city that resulted in 18 protesters being fatally shot by ISF. As a result, Shammari was removed from his post by then-PM Haider al-Abadi. Nevertheless, Shammari, who comes from a powerful family (Shammari's brother is Abd al-Amir al-Shamiri, the current IA Deputy Commander of JOC) with close links to Nouri al-Maliki, was briefly re-posted to Dhi Qar in 2019 to oversee the crackdown on protesters there.

By contrast, Shammari's replacement as BaOC CG, Qasim Nizal al-Maliki, played a much more subdued role than his predecessor, allowing de facto power to gather around Governor Idani and Chief of Police Fleih. Maliki's supposedly hands-off approach to his position was often attributed to his lack of interest and ambition compared to Fleih (he was reaching retirement age). However, there were strong rumours – albeit unverified – that in October 2019 Maliki refused a phone request from Governor Idani to deploy Iraqi Army units against protesters at Navy Roundabout in Basra City. It is possible that this refusal partly explains the sidelining of the CG as other security actors (Fleih, Mishari) stepped into the breach to take the lead on counter-protest activity.

In any case, the foregoing establishes that theoretical boundaries between Iraq's security forces, political parties and the PMF have not been borne out in reality. The division of labour between police units and PMF/armed groups in anti-protest violence should not be understood as a form of tacit cooperation between state and non-state forces. This depiction obfuscates the continuities between the PMF and Basra's security apparatus.

PM Kadhimi has repeatedly used appointments in the security sector to try and extend his own zone of authority and signal to protesters that he is listening to their demands for restraining counter-protest violence. However, the PM's strategy has often served more to clarify the limits of his power. This is due to both the nature of the new appointments themselves (who he has put in place and the accompanying quid pro quo deals), and also the limited gains these new appointments have been able to deliver, at least from the protesters' perspective.

In the case of Basra, PM Kadhimi oversaw an extensive reshuffling of the top security posts. As noted above, BaOC CG Maliki was moved into retirement and Shock Forces Commander Mishari was demoted. These moves took place in the weeks leading up to the assassination campaign against activists in Basra in late August 2020. Tahseen Osama was assassinated in the Junaina area of Basra City on 14 August. On 17 August, three more activists were targeted in an assassination incident in the city's Kut al-Hajjaj neighbourhood. This triggered the removal of Basra's Chief of Police Rashid al-Fleih. However, Fleih's removal did not prevent assassins from murdering Riham Yacoub in Basra two days later. The head of the Basra branch of the National Security Service (NSS) was also rumoured to have been removed following the assassinations (the NSS is a powerful intelligence agency created by Nouri al-Maliki via an Executive Order in 2013, meaning the agency has no basis in law or the constitution. The NSS was previously headed by PMF Chairman Falih al-Fayadh, whom Kadhimi replaced with the former head of the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), Lt. Gen. Abd al-Ghani al-Asadi).[25]

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[25]  Amongst CTS leadership, Asadi was considered to have the closest relationship with the PMF.

Consequently, the response to the assassination campaign in Basra was headed up by new personnel across the board. CG Maliki was replaced by Maj. Gen Akram Saddam Midnef (Maliki's deputy). The new CG had a fairly low political profile, but his background as former acting CG of Diyala OC suggests he has good working relations with Badr (as Diyala is a Badr stronghold). As an internal promotion, his elevation was likely designed not to upset the status quo. Midnef has been tasked with reasserting a more active role for the BaOC in provincial security matters. This has translated into increased media profile for the CG and more operations targeting tribal fighting.

General Abbas Naji, who took over as Chief of Police, was another internal promotion as Naji worked as Fleih's Deputy prior to the latter's removal. Naji's career has been almost entirely within the police's internal affairs branch (Inspection Offices), including most recently as Director of the Basra Governor's Inspection Office. Naji's background suggests he has good relations with Idani and his lack of operational commands could be a further indication of the intention to shift the balance of power back to the BaOC CG in terms of overall strategic and tactical operational planning for the province. Like Midnef, Naji was another promotion unlikely to cause controversy and deemed acceptable to Basra's main political players. It is not particularly surprising, then, that the new appointments failed to inspire many positive reactions from the protest movement in Basra. This scepticism was later bourne out by the failure of security leadership to deliver accountability for assassinations in the province (see mini case study below).

### Dhi Qar: Epicentre of the Youth-Quake

Several interlinking factors explain the social logic of violence in Dhi Qar and its higher levels of protest-related violence from 2019. The most important relate to a breakdown in non-coercive systems of domination over the province's youth (who figured more prominently in the protest base in Dhi Qar than any other province). Dhi Qar has some of the highest poverty rates in all of Iraq. In the southeast, only Muthanna and parts of Maysan have comparative levels of extreme poverty. By contrast, Basra shows comparatively lower poverty levels, and the province is a target for internal migration for work within the southeast region, owing mainly to its energy resources and trade links.[26] These factors have also made Basra a strategic priority for the GoI in recent years, while other provinces in the southeast have been largely neglected.

However, unlike Muthanna and Maysan, Dhi Qar has significant urban populations. Nasiriyah has a population of over half a million, which equates to the entire population of Maysan and is more than twice the size of Samawah. Urbanisation tends to produce social atomisation, disconnecting people from traditional social structures. If the salience of tribal networks were plotted on a graph, with Amarah and Samawah being cities where this salience is most pronounced, and Baghdad being the least, Nasiriyah and Basra City would be somewhere in the middle. This factor of population scale and urbanisation in

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[26] 'Where are Iraq's Poor: Mapping Poverty in Iraq', *World Bank* (2015). Available at https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22351/WhereoareoIraqopingopovertyoinoIraq.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 9 July 2021).

Dhi Qar indicates a weakening of traditional social structures that transmit authority and ameliorate conflict within the social system as a whole. Consequently, the province sits at a critical intersection of extreme poverty and unemployment combined with a weakening of these ameliorative social structures.[27]

Added to this, compared to Basra, the leadership in Dhi Qar has had fewer tools with which to bargain with the province's disaffected youths. In Basra, Governor Idani has sought to utilise financial resources raised from the province's border trade, and allocations from oil and gas production, to fund salaries for new public sector jobs.[28] Idani has also been assisted by the relatively deep financial pockets and political clout of the Basra Oil Company, which took 2,000 of Basra's unemployed youths, assigned jobs via Idani's 2019 'jobs lottery', directly onto the books of the MoO.[29] These avenues for off-ramping unemployed youths from protest activism are less available to the leadership in Dhi Qar.

The breakdown in non-coercive systems of domination in Dhi Qar likely explains why authorities in the province reached so quickly for coercive tools when protests escalated in October 2019. The deployment of General Jamil al-Shammari to oversee a crackdown on protesters in Nasiriyah suggests that provincial and national leadership regarded Dhi Qar as more combustible even than Basra and opted for extreme violence in a desperate effort to clamp down. This resulted in a higher rate of mass casualty incidents (Data Panel 1), most notably the Zaitoon Bridge massacre in late November 2019. This ISF-directed violence was a major contributing factor in sending Dhi Qar into an escalatory cycle that further eroded systems of domination over the province's youths.

Prime Minister Kadhimi has also overseen multiple changes to senior security leadership in Dhi Qar. Shortly after the PM took office in May, Brigadier General Hazem Muhammad al-Waeli replaced Brigadier General Nasser Latif Al-Asadi as Chief of Police. The head of the Federal Intelligence and Investigations Agency (MoI) Dhi Qar Directorate was also replaced by Colonel Aziz al-Shami at the same time. These moves, some of the first of the new administration, were intended as an early signal to the protest movement that Kadhimi was determined to change how ISF dealt with protesters.

In early September 2020, there was also a shakeup on the military side, with the creation of Sumer Operations Command – headquartered at the Imam Ali airbase south of Nasiriyah – replacing Rafidain OC, now covering Dhi Qar, Muthanna and Maysan. Sumer Operations Command was headed by Major General Imad Majhoul Sumaidam and his Deputy is Major General Jawad Abbas Abd Ali. Following a further violent escalation around protests in the province in November 2020, Hazem al-Waeli was sacked as Chief of Police and replaced by Major Salim Aboud.

As in Basra, ISF in Dhi Qar have struggled to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis political factions and armed groups. Politically, the province is divided up between the main Shiʿi

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[27] Based on interview conducted by the author with an Iraqi expert on tribal structures, December 2020.
[28] The petrodollar allocation.
[29] Although these employees have also experienced salary delays due to the absence of a budget law.

Islamist factions, where former Governor Nadhim al-Waeli was backed by a Sadrist-Fatah agreement. However, the governorship has emerged as a focus of political struggles between the Sadrists and Nouri al-Maliki, with Sadr backing Waeli while Maliki has been seeking to have him replaced. Maliki also sought a tougher response by Kadhimi and ISF to protesters in Dhi Qar. On 21 August 2020, Maliki gave a television interview in which he claimed that Dhi Qar had fallen under the control of 'youths' acting like 'anarchists' and 'outlaws' and stated that: 'We need a plan to impose the law, to mobilise, and deal with those who transgress the prestige and authority of the state.'[30] However, Sadrist violence against protesters in Habobi Square in November 2020 showed that it was Sadr himself, not the PM nor ISF, who possessed the local coercive capacity to put out the lights of Habobi Square after over a year of determined resistance by protesters in the province.

Although some of the province's tribes have taken a more pro-protester stance or have sought to mediate to reduce tensions around the protests (particularly the Badour and Abouda tribes), many are also deeply interwoven with the PMF. The extent of these ties came to the surface in mid-September, when local tribal resistance forced a halt to a CTS operation attempting to free kidnapped activist Sajjad al-Iraqi. The operation implicated the Al-Askara tribe, headed by Kadhim al-Shibrum, in the kidnapping and the tribe received protection from Badr and AAH. Kataʾib Hezbollah (KH) is also a major power in the province, although working more behind, and through, groups like AAH. KH also has a hand in the province's security committee.

As in the case of Basra, these continuities between the security apparatus and political, tribal and armed group networks, have resulted in coordinated counter-protest action against youths in Dhi Qar who have endured an incredible degree of violence. This has undercut the credibility of the PM's efforts to change how ISF deal with demonstrations and rein in armed groups. As argued above in the case of Basra, Dhi Qar has also seen a shift by ISF towards more strategic and focused use of violence. This may be more effective as a counter-protest strategy, but it should not be confused with showing restraint.

## Mini Case Study: The August 2020 Assassination Campaign in Basra

Between 14 and 19 August 2020, a series of assassination incidents took place in Basra. On 14 August, gunmen arrived at an apartment where a 30-year-old Basra activist, Tahseen Osama, operated an internet services company. The gunmen entered the offices and shot the activist twelve times. Osama's brother was immobilised by a gunshot wound to the leg. Police initially attributed the attack to localised criminality, claiming to have recovered narcotics paraphernalia from the site. On 17 August, three activists were targeted in an attempted assassination which took place in Kut al-Hajjaj. Gunmen driving a white Toyota Crown opened fire on the target's vehicle as it was parked near a local church. Abbas Subhi, 35 years old, was seriously injured. A well-known female activist, 26-year-old Louida Rimun Bulis, sustained light injuries. A third male in the vehicle escaped the attack unscathed. Then, on 19 August, 30-year-old Riham Yacoub, a graduate in sports science who ran a women's health and fitness centre in Basra, was assassinated. Yacoub

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30 'Fallen governorates comment triggers Iraqi anger against Maliki', *al-Hurra*, 19 August 2020.

was sitting inside a vehicle at Jumhuriya Intersection in Basra City when gunmen opened fire. She died from a bullet wound to the head, while two other women in the vehicle sustained injuries.

While Osama and Bulis were prominent activists in Basra during the October protests, Yacoub had far more tenuous links to protest activism (despite claims following her assassination that she was a protest leader).[31] In reality, Yacoub was not a protest leader nor a political activist. She had withdrawn from participation in the protests after 2018, and she was never a leading protest organiser prior to this. Consequently, the commonalities and differences between these cases reveal much about the social logic of protest violence in Basra. The response of political and security leadership following the assassinations also shows why, even when the Prime Minister becomes personally involved in a case, the prospect of obtaining accountability for such killings is remote.

Yacoub was one of several civil society actors in Basra whom the author had been following for several years. In the summer of 2018, her name, along with several other young Basrawis, got caught up in a controversy surrounding the US Consulate in Basra. A conspiracy theory – initiated by Iranian state news agency Mehr – was circulated in Iraq, accusing a group of young people who participated in the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP, funded by the US Embassy in Baghdad) of being agents in a US plot to orchestrate violent protests in Basra. This was mid-September 2018, approximately a week after protesters in Basra had burned down the Iranian consulate building in the province (along with many offices belonging to Iraqi political parties and armed groups).

The young Basrawis accused by Mehr were not US agents. In fact, most of them were not even involved in the protests. Another of Mehr's targets, a university student, told the author how he was woken at one in the morning by a barrage of messages on his social media accounts:

> I was accused of starting all the protests that took place in Basra, that I was the mastermind of all the chaos that was happening... It was very ironic because all those claims were completely false. First of all, I was preparing for my exams, and secondly, I never knew anything about politics and don't even talk about or discuss it!

This young man, an aspiring Youtuber, was forced to flee Basra altogether and still resides outside Iraq to this day. Why was he targeted? He told the author: 'The militias can eliminate people, just like that, just because they're different and productive people who try to make a difference in their own world.'

Yacoub's own involvement in the protests was slight. She told the author that she took part in some of the demonstrations in 2018 and had encouraged a few dozen women to join the marches with her. A photo she had taken of herself with these female protesters

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[31] A video even circulated widely on social media claiming to show Yacoub leading protesters in chants during recent demonstrations in the province. However, the woman in the video was not Yacoub and the protest was not in Basra.

was used by Mehr, along with photos featuring Yacoub published by IYLEP, to construct their conspiracy by connecting the protests to Yacoub and Yacoub to the other participants in the IYLEP program and the US consulate. This was picked up by Iran-aligned political groups in Iraq and circulated widely. Yacoub was clearly scared: 'I was threatened from unknown sources, there was incitement to kill me. My pictures spread everywhere.' She told the author that her name had also been placed on a monitoring list held by ISF in Basra.

Yacoub's family were ultimately able to intervene on her behalf and to have her name removed from the list (or so it seemed). In return, Yacoub withdrew from protest activity. This sort of negotiation has been fairly common in Basra. When an activist is threatened by an armed group and their name put on a monitoring or assassination list, they are sometimes able to draw on tribal networks, or wider social ties, to intercede on their behalf. Yacoub's family are part of Basra's powerful Imara tribe (concentrated particularly around the Madaina area in northern Basra), and although she never stated so explicitly in communications with the author, it is probable that a tribal intervention had smoothed over the controversy on a temporary basis.

In Osama's case, the tribal factor came to the fore following his assassination. Osama's family are from the Shahmani tribe, a sub-tribe of the Mayaha concentrated in Madaina and Qurna in northern Basra. After Osama's killing, his family threatened a tribal escalation if his killers were not identified and brought to justice. The statements came following an apparent snub by the Prime Minister who visited Yacoub's family during his visit to Basra, but did not visit Osama's family. In any event, the threat of tribal escalation was most likely intended to generate a tribal dispute and subsequent settlement over the killing, and never escalated beyond verbal threats.

Although Yacoub was not a protest leader, her social background fits a similar profile to the other activists targeted in the August campaign, and those targeted by violence outside of protest events more broadly. These individuals tend to be slightly older than many of the protesting youths (typically in their mid-to-late 20s or 30s), come from middle class families, are university educated and in employment, and are disproportionately female.[32] This is not the social profile of the young men who, around the time of the August assassinations, were involved in violent clashes with ISF in Basra and were throwing petrol bombs at police vehicles, Iraqi police members and government buildings. This disjuncture between the purveyors of protest violence, and the targets of counter-protest violence, requires explanation.

The reason is that the young men responsible for most of this protester-directed violence are disproportionately Sadrist youths from Basra's poorer neighbourhoods such as Hayy al-Hussein, Khamsa Meel and Tamimiyya. A characteristic of this group has been a propensity for violence against a wide variety of targets from government buildings and politicians to political parties and militias considered enemies or rivals of the Sadrist

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[32]  Disproportionate when considered against the size of female participation in Basra's protest movement.

trend. Nevertheless, the group's socio-economic insecurity makes them easier to buy off with promises of jobs or money when compared to their middle-class counterparts.[33] Consequently, despite their propensity for violence, this group is more containable and less threatening to the political system. Their violence may even partly serve the interests of political factions who want to portray the protest movement as 'anarchic' and destructive.

Moreover, these young men typically belong to families that are both tribally engaged (meaning their tribal networks are more active),[34] and to have brothers, uncles and cousins involved in different PMF or other armed groups. AAH cannot send assassins into Khamsa Meel to kill a Sadrist youth without risking repercussions or complications (whether from Sadrist or tribal escalation).[35] A Sadrist youth could quite possibly have an older brother in AAH who could potentially intercede on his behalf, or warn him of possible violence, helping the youth to mitigate threats. Finally, when the organised element of the Sadrist movement wants to exert its authority over these youths, it can rely on pressure from older males in their families to help withdraw them from the streets.

By contrast, the activists targeted for assassination tend to be those who have helped steer Basra's protest movement toward more peaceful channels. They have also sought to elevate its demands from transactional claims for jobs or better local services, into a more political movement focused on calls for systemic political transformation. It is this latter aspect, and particularly the potential role they could play in turning the protests into a new political platform to compete in Iraq's national elections (tentatively scheduled for October 2021), that marked the activists out as a threat.

At the same time, they also lack a coercive shield or deterrence. They are less likely to have strong networks that tie them to PMF and other armed groups (although the boundaries between such networks are often less clear cut than might be thought), and their families are likely to be less tribally engaged. For instance, Yacoub's father, a retired navy captain, told local media following his daughter's killing, that he does not want tribal vengeance, but the justice promised to him personally by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, that is, the justice of the Iraqi state.

The assassination of Yacoub is a more complex case given that she was not a political organiser or even prominent protest activist. So why was she killed? For Iraq's armed groups, and their patrons in Iran's intelligence apparatus, the fact that Yacoub was a

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[33]  In one recent case, a young man active in Basra's protests was arrested during a violent demonstration. Governor Assad al-Idani met with the youth in a televised recording at Basra Police HQ. He reminded the youth that he had previously obtained jobs for him and some of his friends who had been protesting earlier in the year. However, the youth revealed he had sold the job for cash in order to buy a taxi. In the end, the young protester was released and Idani pledged to build his family a new home. The youth was later filmed returning home to family and praising Idani's generosity.

[34]  Notably, among the activists targeted in the August assassination campaign, Osama came from a more modest socio-economic background.

[35]  It is worth recalling here the incident in Maysan following the outbreak of protests in October 2019, in which AAH militiamen opened fire on protesters at one of their offices, only to come under direct fire from Sadrist paramilitaries, resulting in one death and several injures to AAH gunmen.

high-profile female voice in local civil society activism was one reason she would be on their radar. It is not only political action that threatens these groups. They also cannot tolerate Iraqi youth who are determined to reject their system of violence and corruption and to strive to create a way of life for themselves beyond the militias' reach.

However, it should also be noted that Yacoub came from a similar social milieu to the more politically active protest organisers. Consequently, her killing sends an impactful message to this group, a warning that anyone who gains prominence and becomes a symbol around which resistance can be organised, risks assassination. This was a stark message against a backdrop of attempts that were ongoing at that time to organise the protest movement ahead of the 2021 elections. Many activists who had been preparing the ground for the protest movement's first political steps went underground following the assassinations. Yacoub's killing also reminds activists that the armed groups have long memories, and that once your name goes on the list, it can never truly be removed.

Finally, the targeting of Yacoub was clearly timed to coincide with Kadhimi's trip the US as part of the Strategic Dialogue between the two countries. Her superficial and largely fabricated interactions with the US consulate tied together the narrative of the assassination from the perspective of those seeking to undermine US-Iraq relations. This strongly suggests direct involvement from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. In this sense, like the assassination of Hisham al-Hashimi in Baghdad in July, Yacoub's murder, more so than the other activists targeted in August, looked like a personal challenge to the authority of the Iraqi Prime Minister and a warning against drawing too close to the US.

The Prime Minister appeared to draw the same conclusion, returning from the US and heading straight to Basra to oversee the response of the province's security apparatus to the assassinations. Kadhimi also visited Yacoub's family, where he promised them swift justice for their daughter's killing. On the evening of 22 August, Kadhimi convened a meeting of Basra security leadership at the BaOC, also attended by the head of Iraq's CTS, Lt. Gen. Abd al-Wahaab al-Saadi.

According to a statement later released by the PM, Kadhimi told ISF present at the meeting: 'You must work with all possible means to provide security for the people of Basra. However, there have been assassinations committed, and we have not seen action equivalent to the seriousness of this crime... I wait for serious action from you, and you must detect the criminals as soon as possible.' Kadhimi also reportedly stated: 'There is no place for the fearful within the security services... Whoever makes mistakes and who fails will not remain in his place, and he will be held accountable according to disciplinary laws.'

As noted above, the security response to the assassinations would be headed by new ISF leadership across the board (including a new BaOC CG and Chief of Police). Nevertheless, the province-wide security plan that was implemented, named Operation Faithful Promise, had little connection to anti-protest violence. Faithful Promise was directed by the BaOC and involved joint operations across the province (involving units from the Iraqi Army, Iraqi police, border force, PMF intelligence directorate, NSS, and Navy). Searches were conducted for wanted individuals, 'unlicensed weapons' and contraband. Faithful

Promise involved so many different security agencies and groups that operational security was weak, and most operations were flagged in advance.

The raids typically resulted in a handful of arrests along with seizures of weapons, narcotics and alcohol. The focus of the operation shifted quickly from the assassinations to containing armed tribal disputes. Meanwhile, the MoI handed down its own security plan for Basra City, involving Iraqi police units putting up additional checkpoints and issuing fines for vehicles with tinted windows[36] or lacking the requisite registration documents. The overall impression was that the measures taken were more theatrical than substantive.

On 14 February 2021, PM Kadhimi announced that members of a death squad responsible for a long list of political assassinations had been arrested in Basra. According to the Tactical Cell,[37] the arrested individuals confessed to carrying out the assassination in Basra of Makki al-Tamimi (Tamimi was head of the BPC committee dealing with slums and illegal housing settlements in the city); activist Mujtaba Ahmad Jassim (AKA Mujtaba al-Zaajal) in Hindiya district; civil society activist Jannan Madhi Shamkhi (AKA Umm Janat); journalists Ahmad Abd al-Dhamad and Safaa Ghaali in Shamsumiya; an attack on the residence of Basra Governor Asaad al-Idani in Manawai Basha; an attack on the residence of the Governor's brother in Tahsiniya; an attack on the residence of Hatim Muhsin Hamil al-Daraji, the Director of al-Narjis company (a construction company linked to Idani); and an attempted assassination against Lt. Col. Adnan Abdul Karim and an IED attack on Lt Col. Mustafa Abbas Mohsen (both of whom work for Basra IP Intelligence Directorate). Finally, the group was accused of involvement in attacks on logistics convoys contracted to the International Coalition.

While the arrested individuals admitted to involvement in the improbably long list of political assassinations and terrorist activity, they were not accused of perpetrating the August 2020 assassination campaign in Basra. Nevertheless, PM Kadhimi presented the arrests as an important step towards capturing the killers of the Basra activists as well as Hisham al-Hashimi who was assassinated in Baghdad. However, behind the theatre of their arrest and confessions (including a televised staged re-enactment of the crimes), more senior actors in the death squad escaped arrest. This followed a familiar pattern whereby well-timed leaks continually frustrated efforts to detain mid-level or senior figures involved in these crimes.

Of note, the death squad leader, Ahmed Abd al-Karim Dhamad (AKA Ahmad al-Tuwaisa), was able to evade arrest, along with Khalaf Abu Sajjad, Sayid Alaa al-Ghalibi, Abbas Haashim, Haider Shinbousa, Ahmad Awda and Bashir al-Wafi. Of these individuals, Ahmed Tuwaisa is from Tamimmiya in Basra City, a member of the Bayt Ruwaima tribe and formerly a member of the Sadrist Mahdi Army. He later joined several other PMF groups, eventually becoming active in KH. Meanwhile, Ahmed Awda is a leader in AAH in the Qarmat Ali area of Basra City.[38] It was also reported that Ahmed Tuwaisa possesses

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[36]  Technically illegal in Iraq but actually widespread, so not a definite indication of criminal activity.

[37]  An independent 'think tank' thought to have ties to the MoI.

[38]  Based on interviews conducted by the author, source and other details anonymised.

an import licence for Umm Qasr Port. These licences allow the holders to operate as so-called *istikhraj* companies, essentially fixers who coordinate bribes with customs officials to secure passage of goods through the port. This is amongst the most profitable corruption rackets in Iraq, and possession of such a licence would strongly indicate that Tuwaisa is extremely wealthy and well connected with the political elite. So long as actors like Tuwaisa are able to act with impunity, and can rely on the state and political allies to assist them in evading accountability, claims by the PM and his supporters that progress is being made on delivering accountability for anti-protest violence will continue to ring hollow.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented data on protest violence and its effects on protest tactics and strategies in southeast Iraq, showing how this violence – in its diverse forms – has dramatically escalated since the summer of 2018. Temporal and geographic distinctions in violent dynamics, between different phases of mobilisation and between different provinces in the southeast, as well as between the southeast and the rest of Iraq, have also been highlighted. To account for these divergences, the paper has sought to describe the multiple, overlapping social logics of protest violence that differentiate violent dynamics both within, and between, provinces in southeast Iraq.

This granular, ground-level view of protest violence adds depth to existing analyses that have tended to focus on more general and macro-level forms of explanation that struggle to account for divergences in protest dynamics at the local level. Moreover, the data presented here has also clarified how anti-protest violence, protester-directed violence, and protest tactics and strategies more broadly, are constantly shifting and adapting to their mutual causal effects.

Ultimately, the social logic of protest violence in Iraq reflects the fact that violence per se is organised primarily not within the de jure boundaries of the state, but directly within civil society and functions as a regulating principle, more or less explicitly, of virtually all political, economic and social relations. Iraqi activists must negotiate with this violence not only to formulate viable protest strategies, but merely to survive and avoid liquidation. In this negotiation, the Iraqi state qua state is almost entirely absent with its Weberian functions having been disaggregated into broader domains of civil society. Here, power circulates close to the ground, accessible only to those politico-coercive entities embedded within the local social, political and coercive structures this paper has outlined.[39]

Consequently, the policy agenda pursued by western governments in recent years, ostensibly seeking to push back the tidal wave of protest-related violence and instability in Iraq, rests on a misdiagnosis of power. The focus has been on securing favourable nominations for Prime Minister, and on strengthening the current Prime Minister and Iraqi state

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[39] The Sadrist movement is the example par excellence of this type of locally embedded politico-coercive entity explaining its unrivalled capabilities as a coercive counter-protest actor.

institutions to deliver accountability for anti-protest violence. Yet this approach has been constrained by the Prime Minister's lack of a social base, leaving him unable to tap into power as it circulates through local structures. Indeed, the political apparatus of the PMO, and the PM himself, has, at least to some extent, fallen hostage to the Sadrist movement. Consequently, it ought to be questioned whether the policies pursued by the current government (e.g., arrests of corrupt officials and militiamen)[40] are best understood as incremental steps towards reform or, in a more limited sense, as actions permitted by the Sadrists insofar as they increase Sadrist comparative advantage vis-à-vis rivals, while ultimately remaining contained by the framework of the Sadrists' own interests in sustaining fairly state-autonomous coercive-economic practices and political violence.

Meanwhile, the continual reshuffling of senior security posts incorrectly perceives coercive power as organised within elite-level state security apparatus. However, it has been shown repeatedly that these institutions have little autonomous power over violence because control processes[41] pertain locally. This is particularly true when contrasting ISF-PMF escalations in Baghdad versus more peripheral localities in the south, such as Basra, where the prospect of ISF and local political leadership 'standing their ground' is far more remote.[42] Any power wielded by the de jure apparatuses of the state is largely a function of the power of the actor working through these institutions and is not conferred by them. Thus, strengthening the Iraqi state under these conditions ought to consider the risks of enhancing the coercive tools at the disposal of actors whose real sources of power lie elsewhere.[43]

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[40]  The work of Abu Ragheef's anti-corruption committee.

[41]  Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*.

[42]  This calculation cannot be ignored by central political authority, since even were political and security leadership to stand up to the militias in Baghdad (as failed to happen in the Qassim Musleh case), the potential escalation by militias in Basra would be even harder for the central government to resist.

[43]  The apparent reluctance of the international community to confront this reality, and its eternal search for the elusive formula for reform, is plausibly a consequence of their own complicity in the political economy of violence that sustains the flow of Iraqi oil to international markets, which prevents a clear-sighted analysis of power and the Iraqi state from taking hold.

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