

## THE WHIFF OF A NEW ARAB SPRING IN WEST ASIA?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

Lebanon and Iraq seem to be on the cusp of far-reaching political change but it is too early to predict the final outcome of the struggles taking place in both countries. The sustained and huge anti-government protests taking place in both countries for the past several weeks send three clear messages. First, the average citizen is fed up with corrupt ruling elites that engage in all sorts of manoeuvres to remain in power.

Despite the existence of multiple parties in both countries, government formation has become a rotating door process with the same leaders alternating in office. Second, sectarian divisions are breaking down with members of all sects joining hands in challenging established primarily sect-based parties and their leaders. Third, there is revulsion among the Iraqi and Lebanese populations against foreign interference and the outcome of the protest movements could have a major impact on the balance of power in West Asia. This adds to the strategic importance of the Iraqi and Lebanese movements.

The Lebanese polity has been divided on confessional and sectarian lines since the independence of the country in 1943. Government offices as well as representation in Parliament are distributed on the basis of sectarian quotas. This provided confessional-based parties and militias a strong foothold in Lebanese politics. The Hezbollah's dominance of Shia politics is the primary example of this phenomenon but Christian and Druze militias also operate on the same principle.

Iraq was under brutal Baathist rule for decades until the American invasion of 2003. The American occupation by destroying the state structure in the country spawned sectarian militia and parties that acted as security providers for their communities thus turning all politics into sectarian politics.

The current protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq that cut across sectarian lines indicate that both countries are moving towards transcending sectarian divides and eroding the control of the traditional confession-based leaderships. The most remarkable example of this potential turnaround is the challenge posed to the Hezbollah (which has dominated Shia politics in Lebanon for decades) from within the Shia community itself. But the challenge is not limited to the Hezbollah. The Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri has also lost the confidence of his Sunni constituents and has been forced to resign although he continues in a caretaker capacity. The Maronite President Michel Aoun is under pressure from his Christian constituency to do so as well. Similarly, the Shia-dominated government of Iraq is facing the wrath of its erstwhile Shia supporters thus upending sectarian calculations. Even Shia leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr have called for the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who incidentally was the preferred choice of both Iran and the United States after the last Iraqi elections.

There is a major international angle to these developments as well. If the upheavals in Lebanon and Iraq succeed, the biggest loser will be Iran. What U.S. President Donald Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran to curtail its growing regional influence has been unable to achieve, could well be attained by the Iraqi and Lebanese demonstrations against Iran's influence in these countries.

The Hezbollah's loss of credibility among its Shia constituents, who form a plurality in Lebanon, is likely to translate into Iran losing much of its influence in Lebanon, which Tehran considers essential both to confront Israel and to provide support to the Assad regime in Syria. Iraq is even

more important in strategic terms for Iran. Given its bloody experience of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, Iran cannot afford to have a less than pliant government in power in Baghdad.

What has Tehran very worried is that some of the largest and most virulent demonstrations against the Shia-dominated Iraqi government and against Iran itself have taken place in Shia-dominated cities and towns in southern Iraq. It is remarkable that Shia protesters attacked the Iranian Consulate in the holy city of Karbala and attempted to set fire to it. The leading Iraqi Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's endorsement of the demands of the Iraqi protestors for the resignation of the Iran-backed government in Baghdad has further rattled the Iranian regime.

Anti-Iranian demonstrations in Iraq have prompted Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to blame "foreign elements", code word for American intelligence agencies, for inciting the protest movements. The Iranian leadership sees them as an attempt to punish Iran for not accepting American diktat on the nuclear and other related issues. Tehran has several instruments it can use to prevent radical change in Iraq including the Shia militias trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. However, the deployment of these militias by the Iraqi government to crush the protest movement has boomeranged and led to the exacerbation of anti-Iranian sentiments that cuts across sectarian lines.

The question that is very difficult to answer is whether the protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq have the organisation and the staying power to bring down the current regimes. So far, the protests have persisted because of spontaneous action. The experience of the short-lived Arab Spring in 2011 does not provide cause for optimism that such spontaneous action can be sustained over the long term.

Even more important, there is no guarantee that the protest movements, given their amorphous and spontaneous nature, can provide viable alternatives in terms of coherent governing structures to either Iraq or Lebanon. If they fail to do so then there is the distinct possibility that one or both of these countries may descend into anarchy once the current power structures crumble and alternative arrangements capable of providing governance and security are not put in place quickly.

If the protest movements succeed in providing viable long-term alternatives to the present regimes, they will herald the beginning of a non-sectarian and democratic future for West Asia. If they fail, the Arab world will continue to remain mired in the same dysfunctional mess in which it has been trapped for the past several decades.

While one hopes for the former outcome, one cannot rule out the possibility that the latter scenario may come to pass.

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