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Ending Wars – Winning Peace in the Middle East

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Panel One: Making Iraq ‘Work for All’

- Bashir Haddad, Deputy Speaker of Iraqi Parliament Council
- Ahmed Mulla Talal, Independent Journalist
- Sarmad Al-Taee, Independent Journalist and Author
- Hiwa Othman, former Advisor to Iraqi President and Independent Journalist
- Jane Arraf, NPR International Correspondent (Moderator)



Two years after the official ‘defeat’ of IS, Iraqi politics remain dominated by complex and rapidly shifting political dynamics. Intrastate fragmentation and a loss of social cohesion are reflected in the recent public demonstrations for better services across Iraq, as well as in ongoing debates about budget and oil negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad. International Correspondent, **Jane Arraf**, introduced this panel of government officials and journalists by setting the current scene in Baghdad, which is undergoing large-scale public

protests by citizens with dwindling faith in their home country. The protest participants include women and families who have not received anything from the promise of the 'new' Iraq. Young people are among those most vulnerable in the current crisis.

“The protests prompt us to ask the necessary question: has Iraq ever truly ‘worked for all’?” - Jane Arraf

In the aftermath of invasions and mass displacement across Iraq, Arraf highlighted that the biggest splits are not along religious lines, but rather between the losers and winners of the 'new Iraq.' Reporting from the streets of Baghdad, Arraf saw protestors hopeful about a solution, but noted that the government response thus far has been fragile.

According to the Deputy Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament council, **Bashir Haddad**, current governance issues have accumulated from years of poor administration, as well as from the various tragedies that befell Iraq. These protests have brewed for years, reflecting demands for employment; improved living standards, including higher quality and access to social service provision; and transparency within public administration. The October 2019 protests erupted after these long-term demands had been neglected, repeatedly, for years. The authorities are working to restore stability and security while implementing necessary changes within the framework of the Iraqi constitution. A set of resolutions and recommendations has been agreed upon, and is being implemented by the federal government. With a view to demonstrate their commitment to transparency, the government is contemplating publicly broadcasting the upcoming sessions regarding legal amendments via a screen at *Tahrir Square*.

“We are coming up with reforms as per the protester demands. But we can only act within our laws and constitution.” - Dr Bashir Haddad

Haddad profiled the protestors as largely made up of youth who did not experience the shock and traumatic effects of Baathism on the political system. Contending with this, **Sarmad Al-Taee** understands this generation of young protesters as having experienced the rise of IS, the collapse of the national army in 2014, and the subsequent sluggishness with which the rebuilding of Iraq has taken place. The passion with which protesters take to the streets reflects patriotic sentiment, as well as empathy with the displaced victims of these dynamics. Subsequently, any foreign interference is rejected, including, ostensibly, the influence of Iran. It is in this way, **Al-Taee** explained, that they would like to realize the centrality of youth inclusion in political processes to secure social transformation for Iraq.

“Protesters in Tabor square do not appreciate the influence of Iran.” - Sarmad Al-Taee

Independent journalist **Ahmed Mulla Talal** spoke back to recent accusations regarding the 'conspiracy' of these protests, defining them, instead, as a result of large-scale youth disenfranchisement and a natural expression of the failure and fiasco of public administration in Iraq. Arguably, the government needs to see these protests as a source of momentum for change and develop a roadmap to stability by answering the demands of the people. Talal suggested 'freezing' the constitution for one year in order to improve it through necessary amendments. However, this could, technically, open the door for Baghdad to amend the special status of the Kurds established within it. This idea was opposed by al-Haddad, who pointed to the poor implementation and practical application of the constitution as the central issue. In addition, al-Haddad argued that the parliament needs to represent

the Iraqi people more fully, and ensure that their voices and demands are heard and addressed, in order to decrease tension.

“As long as the same political elite and their foreign allies have the monopoly on violence, the political system will remain intact - even if it sends Iraqi people into displacement.” - Ahmed Mulla Talal

According to journalist **Hiwa Osman**, this generation of protesters are the ‘victims of Baathism’ who never received any services or support when the political elite took power through nepotism. Brutal responses to the October uprisings have so far claimed the lives of over 240 protesters and security personnel. Masked people were deployed to shoot and kill people as protests became out of hand. According to Osman, the will of Abdul-Mahdi has been ‘hijacked’ by the forces responsible for killing the protesters, particularly the para-military apparatus of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, who *“treat protesters like IS.”*

“The Iraqi government has no connection to the people on the streets. People with problems go to local militias for help, not the police.” - Hiwa Osman

According to Osman, there are three central actors at play in the current scenario in Baghdad: the angry crowd of Iraqi citizens; a paralysed government; and an active military force oppressing protesters who, they allege, are part of a conspiracy to take down the regime. Thus, the security apparatus speaks freely of toppling or breaking the regime, rendering any hope of reform obsolete.