

Mass social unrest leaves Iraq's oil capital in flames

By Bill Van Auken
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Iraq's southern city of Basra, the country's oil capital and center of its Shia majority, has seen mass protests that have left many of the buildings housing offices of the government, the main political parties, Shia militias and even the Iranian consulate in flames.

Iraqi security officials announced a curfew Friday across this city of 2 million, warning that anyone found in the streets would be arrested. An earlier attempt to impose such a curfew was rescinded after crowds defied the government and set up blockades across the Basra-Baghdad highway and the main port of Umm Qasr on the Persian Gulf, through which flow both Iraqi oil exports and food supplies as well as other goods imported into the country.

At least a dozen protesters have been killed in the course of the demonstrations, many of them victims of live fire by security forces. One demonstrator died Thursday night after being shot in the head with a teargas cannister.

Hundreds have been arrested, with reports that detainees have been routinely tortured. Two lawyers who came forward to represent the arrested demonstrators were assassinated.

Among the buildings torched by demonstrators were the offices of the state-run Iraqiya TV, the headquarters of the ruling Dawa Party, the Supreme Islamic Council and the Badr Organization, all of whose leaders are in Baghdad conducting corrupt, but so-far unsuccessful, attempts to cobble together a new ruling coalition government.

Protesters set fire to the offices of the Shia armed militia, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, as well as those of the Hikma Movement. They also stormed the house of the acting head of the provincial council.

The attack on the Iranian consulate stemmed at least in part from the fact that Iran cut off electricity supplies to the region after the Iraqi government failed to pay for them. The Iranian government has also been identified

with the leading Shia parties that have dominated the regime in Baghdad, and the Iranian media had denounced earlier protests as the work of "infiltrators," much as it had reacted to similar protests in Iran itself.

Angry and bloody protests have gripped the region since July. Thousands have poured into the streets to protest conditions of mass unemployment, desperate poverty and the breakdown of essential infrastructure. The water system has failed to provide potable water to the population, sending as many as 30,000 people to the hospital with bacterial infections. The electrical system has been subject to 10-hour blackouts under conditions of an unprecedented heat wave, with temperatures climbing to 50 degrees centigrade. Health officials have warned that the city faces an imminent threat of a cholera epidemic.

Anger has only intensified amid reports of resurgent oil production, which is centered in the province of Basra. August recorded the extraction of 4 million barrels a day, yielding hefty profits for the foreign companies that operate the fields—including US-based Exxon and the Russian energy firm Lukoil—as well as \$7.7 billion that month alone for the government's coffers. While enriching a thin layer of Iraqi businessmen and politicians, none of this money has been invested in improving the conditions of life for the working class in Basra or any other part of the country.

The areas of the mass protests were largely unaffected by the brutal military campaign waged against ISIS, with US airstrikes reducing much of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, to rubble and leaving tens of thousands dead and wounded. Many of the militia members who went to fight ISIS, however, came from Basra, with many losing their lives. This has not stopped crowds from burning down Shia militia headquarters, in a clear indication that the class issues are overriding the sectarian divisions nurtured by the former US occupation

to advance its aim of divide and conquer, continued by the Iraqi ruling establishment to cement its domination.

The deep concerns within Iraq's ruling layers over the events in Basra found expression Friday in a statement by the country's senior Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who delivered an "even-handed" sermon calling for a change in the methods of the government and an end to violence by protesters.

"The failings of Iraqi political leaders in recent years have caused the anger of people in Basra," Sistani said. "This reality cannot change if the next government is formed according to the same criteria adopted when forming previous governments. Pressure must be exerted for the new government to be different from its predecessors."

There is no indication that any such change will take place within the confines of exiting Iraqi politics. The Iraqi parliament suspended its session September 4 amid an apparent stalemate over determining which of two rival coalitions the majority needed to form a new government. In the face of the eruptions in Basra, the parliament was called back into session Saturday.

Had the events in Basra taken place in Iran, one can be assured that they would have been afforded front-page coverage in every major newspaper in the United States and would have led the evening news.

Instead, however, the US media is maintaining close to a universal silence over the upheavals, as Washington is intervening directly in Iraqi politics in an attempt to secure a second term for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The US special envoy to the so-called anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk, has been flown into both the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Erbil and Baghdad in what is universally recognized as an attempt by Washington to cobble together a majority needed to keep Abadi in power.

Abadi—whose "Victory" electoral coalition came in third in the May election—depends for his dominance over the parliament on an alliance with the populist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose list of candidates placed first. Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army once fought against US occupation troops, but he has long since made his peace with the American Embassy.

Washington views the Abadi-Sadr alliance as the lesser of two evils compared to the electoral group that placed second in the May election, led by Hadi al-Amiri, the former leader of the Badr Brigades, one of the prominent Shia militias with close ties to Iran. Al-Amiri is allied with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his

State of Law coalition. In 2006, al-Maliki was installed under the US occupation as prime minister, having been vetted by the CIA as the preferred candidate.

McGurk's mission to Iraq was apparently aimed at swinging the support of minority Kurdish and Sunni factions behind the Abadi-Sadr coalition.

Whichever bloc prevails, the Iraqi ruling establishment will find itself in the maelstrom of Washington's drive toward war with Iran. Baghdad shares close political relations with Iran, and Iraq's economy is heavily reliant upon trade links that are in direct conflict with the Trump administration's sweeping sanctions.

Neither of these two contenders for power will do anything to alter the corrupt political system of sectarian politics and massive bribery and kickbacks that has been in place since the US invaded Iraq and decimated its society.

"The whole system is rotten and has to be toppled," Haitham, an Iraqi soldier from Basra who has joined the demonstrations, told the British daily *Guardian*. "We are peaceful, but each of us sits on a warehouse of weapons. In 15 years [since the US invasion] 1 million Iraqis have been martyred. Had we held demonstrations early on and lost a thousand people we would be in a better place now."

The emergence of a mass working class upheaval among the Shia population of Basra against the bourgeois Shia parties and militias that have dominated the political life of the country since the end of the US occupation threatens to unleash a revolutionary explosion that can spread beyond Iraq's borders.

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