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Iraqi Activism and the Green Zone: From Public Protest to Social Movement

This project will explore Iraq as a case study of social mobilization in the 21st Century. Focusing on the activists, the study will examine the evolution of an Iraqi social movement in the context of power dynamics and socio-cultural division following the 2003 invasion and occupation. In contrast to the post-2011 Arab Spring uprisings that spawned democratic reform in Tunisia, entrenched military dictatorship in Egypt, and fomented civil war in Libya and Yemen as well as internecine conflict in Syria, the phenomenon of mass mobilization and collective action in Iraq has been given scant attention in Western foreign policy, academic and media production. The significance of Iraq as a case study emerges largely from the fact that little is known or understood about Iraqi politics in general with meager scholarly research examining the contemporary period in particular. Prior to 2003 the country was isolated from scholarly analysis due to the Ba'thist regime and following the 2003 invasion the immense violence associated with the occupation privileged research on security. This has led to a lack of agency afforded to Iraqi civil voices, especially those not linked to violent action. Commensurate marginalization in the literature of non-violent civil actors has allowed a creeping assumption that has impaired the visibility of a process of social mobilization and collective action. This case study will address this knowledge gap directly by bringing forward voices from Iraqi civil society and examining the techniques, repertoires and organizational strategies they have developed and deployed.

Iraq is also situated as an instructive case study of the ongoing regional uprisings as well as the connectivity of activist networks across the Arab public sphere. The prominence of post-2003 Iraq in the work of civil society organizations' gives Iraqi activists a distinct role in the region with implications for knowledge transfer with regard to lessons learned from social mobilization efforts. Four stages of social mobilization are identified, corresponding to successive alterations of the scope and nature of public demonstrations within Iraq. This research will track changes in the socio-demographic profiles of activists at each stage; identifying changing goals, aspirations and strategies of activists across the stages; while also revealing individual stories of the experiences and perceptions of the trajectory of particular demonstrators and activists.

The significance of the research is two-fold: first, in its empirical contribution to the knowledge base on Iraq. The disastrous 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation reflect the immensity of the gap in knowledge found in prevailing understandings. This study will contribute to closing this gap by establishing the first dataset of activists' backgrounds, aspirations, strategies and experiences. Second will be its contribution to theoretical development through iterative data collection, which will allow for assessments of social movement theory as practiced by Iraqi activists. In this way, this research is relevant to the understanding of popular movements regionally, and to the global south in general, providing a foundation for future studies. For scholars, policy-makers, and NGOs involved in the Middle East region, this research will be highly relevant, as its evaluation of the political objectives and strategies of the activists will provide insight into regional developments. The research will also be useful to scholars interested in socio-political change, as well as the growing role of social movements and global activist networks unmoored from formal political structures.