

The Iraqi Protests “Were Anti-American”. A Tale or Two of a Single Protest

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We live in an era of protests. Everyone feels they have to fight to change things. Unless they are comfortable in their work routine, are wealthy and indifferent, or cannot risk getting fired.

There is manipulation and mobilization of protests by given political actors to achieve political goals.

There is genuine resentment and anger.

There are people who protest for a variety of reasons.

But what we cannot accept is a simplistic narrative that distorts reality, no matter where it comes from.

As a graduate of “fine western universities”, I gradually learned (and am still learning) to avoid simplistic, black-and-white arguments. Academics think in more complex ways, make more nuanced arguments. One of the greatest contributions of the western academic world to the third world was, arguably, the introduction of complexities. The educated mind (receiver of an education paid for in money), and a mind that was not in fear, could make nuanced arguments, offer thoughtful analysis, not fall into the trap of black-and-white thinking.

As one who grew up in a fundamentalist environment, whose thinking was rigid and conditioned by violence and tension, the western university landscape opened my horizons. In a US academic environment single-pointed arguments that lacked depth could appear somewhat uneducated, (and who wants to appear uneducated unless he uses it as a tactic to deceive his enemy?).

But now I am discovering that the west has embraced fanaticism and one-sided arguments. It has embraced the backward unthinking mentality that cannot tolerate dissent or doubts. This is the same mentality adopted by fanatics and extremists the world over.

Masses of Iraqis took to the streets yesterday in a massive display of defiance of the US occupation forces that brought untold suffering and misery to their country. They took to the streets demanding an end to the illegal and immoral US occupation.

But, for the New York Times [1], this was no good. First, the protests were “anti-American” (I suppose Iraqis have to lick the boot that steps on them, if to borrow Eric Hoffer’s idiom). That is of course the one thing that protests cannot be and still receive western legitimacy.

No matter the fact that the US went to war in Iraq based on deliberate lies and killed millions in the country, first by sanctions, then by bombing.

How many actually participated in the protest?

The New York Times claims there were hundreds of thousands while Press TV claims [2] that they were millions. I don't know who to believe, but judging from the pictures of Press TV and even while considering the fact that when protesters fill physical spaces they may appear more numerous than they actually are due to the optical illusion that can be formed, still, the truth seems to be closer to the numbers offered by Press TV.



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Then the New York Times takes issues with the fact that people came from all across the bleeding country to Baghdad, the capital. The paper notes that “people were brought in from other cities to participate rather than holding smaller simultaneous demonstrations across the country.”

Here is a wise anti-American ploy. First, the protesters were “brought-in” as if the protesters are not independent actors with their own agency (a term favored by western post-modern academics). Second, the protesters tried to deceive the western readers by getting together and making their numbers larger, while across the country their numbers would appear smaller. Third, the fact that the protesters were “brought in” by organizers delegitimizes the protest itself.

The protesters did not engage in violence and vandalism. Scenes of destruction, as the ones that have become a daily occurrence in Hong Kong for instance, were absent. That is all the more reason to be suspicious of the protesters. If they are not violent, then they do not receive sympathy. But if they are violent, then they must be Shiites.

The New York Times aptly notes that

The vast majority of the participants are Shiite Muslims, who are the main constituency of the cleric Mr. al-Sadr and the armed groups close to Iran.

So, even if the claim of a majority Shiite representation is correct, the religious convictions of a given group of protesters cannot negate the political demands or arguments of the protesters themselves, that must be judged on their distinct basis. I mean, does the New York Times write about pro-Israel parades in the United States that “the vast majority of participants are Jews, who are the main supporters of the State of Israel”?

But a double standard between the legitimate protesters and illegitimate protesters is seen as appropriate when dealing with the Shiites. The New York Times, in a display of subtle racism, reminds its readers that it’s those damn Shiites who are protesting, so it is to be expected that we must not be worried that perhaps we are not that liked in Iraq. A simple equation is offered: The Shiites like Iran and hate America. Case closed.

The New York Times did not engage in the propaganda style typical of historical Communist governments in which the uncomfortable truths are simply blanked out. It did note that

[The protest] also reflected a genuine desire shared by Iraqis to have a government and economy that serves the Iraqi people and not outside interests, many participants said.

Delivering on that may prove to be virtually impossible. But the United States’ recent actions in Iraq drew the wrath of many and distaste even among some Iraqis who support the United States presence.

But it ended the article with a post-modern argument. Criticism of the protest, besides the stigmatization of protesters and spinning of events, came not from the writer itself but from the oppressed, those individuals Iraqis who were skeptical of the protest.

First, even if the Americans leave, protesters won’t get more jobs, as an elder man noted

resignedly. (Of course, that is correct, but how about inserting a little bit of positive American optimism, and on what can happen if we pursue our dreams?) Second, Iran and its militias may take over if the US leaves, the article end by reminding, while quoting another participant. But, if Iran and its militas take over, that is no business of the United States. The United States has no right to be in Iraq, period. It's not a matter of the lesser of two evils.

The suffering people of Iraq who saw the death of 500,000 Iraqi children due to US sanctions, which Secretary of State Madeleine Albright believes were "worth it"[3], have risen up to support a parliament vote in favor of US forces withdrawing, another act of democracy. But this democratic protest is not greeted positively by the New York Times. It was too organized, even if the Americans leave the jobs may not come, Iran may take over, and the protesters were Shiite. (By the way, are the majority of parliamentarians in Iraq's parliament who voted for the Americans to leave also Shiite?) And did the neo-Conservatives time and time again not advocate for a majority Sunni rule in Syria [4], regardless of the consequences (namely a victory of Daesh)?

American soldiers died, supposedly, for Iraqi democracy. The democratic right to loot museums (of course, even the return of the objects looted from the National Museum of Iraq is attributed to a single US soldier by The Independent, while overlooking the invasion itself as the enabler of the massive theft [5]). Is the fact that the vote of the Iraqi parliament being ignored by the White House not an issue for the New York Times?

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Joshua Tartakovsky is an independent journalist.

Notes

1. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/world/middleeast/protests-iraq-baghdad.html>)
2. (<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/01/24/616968/Iraq-Protest-US>)
3. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dYTO9voeBM)
4. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/john-bolton-to-defeat-isis-create-a-sunni-state.html>)
5. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/revealed-the-real-story-behind-the-great-iraq-museum-thefts-515067.html>

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