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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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20.11.2019

The bloodbath in Baghdad

The death toll in the mass protests that have shaken Iraq for the last seven weeks has risen to over 330, with an estimated 15,000 wounded. Young Iraqis have continued to pour into the streets in defiance of fierce repression to press their demands for jobs, social equality and an end to the unspeakably corrupt political regime created by the US occupation that followed the criminal American invasion of 2003.

Most of those killed have been felled by live ammunition, including machine-gun fire and bullets fired by snipers, both randomly into crowds and at identified protest leaders. Others have suffered hideous fatal wounds from military-grade tear gas grenades fired point-blank into the demonstrators, in some cases with canisters ending up lodged in the victims' skulls or lungs. In addition, water cannon have been employed, spraying scalding hot water into the protests.

Forced disappearances have been reported, while families of victims shot to death by security forces have been compelled to sign statements acknowledging the deaths as “accidental” in order to receive the bodies of their loved ones.



An injured protestor is rushed to a hospital during a demonstration in Baghdad, Iraq, Saturday, Oct. 26, 2019. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)

This brutality has only succeeded in drawing ever wider layers of the population, and in particular growing sections of the Iraqi working class, into the antigovernment mobilizations. In Baghdad, protesters have succeeded in occupying three strategic bridges over the Tigris River leading into the heavily fortified Green Zone, where government buildings, top officials' villas, embassies and the offices of military contractors and other foreign agencies are located.

In the south of the country, demonstrators have once again mounted a siege of Iraq's main Persian Gulf port of Umm Qasr near Basra, reducing its activity by over 50 percent. Oil workers announced Sunday that they were going on a general strike in support of the demonstrators, and columns of workers organized by Iraqi unions poured into Tahrir Square to back the protests. In the southern Shia heartland of Iraq, the teachers unions have led a general strike movement that has shut down most cities.

Only in the predominantly Sunni northern areas of Anbar Province and Mosul, which were bombed into rubble during the so-called US war against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), has the protest movement failed to bring masses into the streets. This is not for any lack of sympathy, but rather the threat of a renewed military offensive against any sign of opposition. Even those in the region who have expressed their solidarity on Facebook have been rounded up by security forces, while the authorities have made it plain that anyone there who opposes the government will be treated as "terrorists" and ISIS sympathizers.

If anything approaching this level of both mass popular revolt and murderous repression were taking place in Russia, China, Venezuela or Iran, one can easily imagine the kind of

wall-to-wall coverage they would receive from the corporate media in the US. Yet, the Iraqi events have been virtually ignored by the broadcast networks and the major print media. This is certainly not for lack of popular interest in the country.

After all, some two million US troops, civilian government employees and private contractors went to Iraq between the US invasion of 2003 and the withdrawal of most US troops by the Obama administration in 2011. Some 4,500 US personnel lost their lives there, while tens of thousands more came back wounded and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Within barely three years, the US intervention was renewed with several thousand more American soldiers sent in to retake cities lost by the US-trained and equipped security forces to ISIS.

The reaction of the American mass media is a guilty, shame-faced silence. The events in Iraq are a stark expression of the abject criminality and failure of the entire US imperialist project in that country, so the less said about them the better.

Those who are filling the streets are by and large comprised of a generation formed by the US invasion and occupation, along with the continuing violence that followed. They lived through what the *World Socialist Web Site* described at the time as an act of “sociocide,” the systematic destruction of an entire society that had before 2003 been one of the most advanced in the Middle East. The estimated death toll from this criminal war, launched on the basis of lies about “weapons of mass destruction,” is over one million, while some two million people remain displaced.

The regime that they are fighting to bring down is the direct product of the US occupation, formed on the basis of a constitution written by US officials. It was fashioned to serve Washington’s divide-and-rule strategy by organizing the puppet political government along sectarian lines, which helped fuel a bloody civil war that had further disastrous consequences.

Iraq’s current Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi is the personification of the bankrupt and corrupt political regime forged by US imperialism. Beginning his career as a member of Iraq’s ruling Ba’athist party under Saddam Hussein, he went on to become a leading member of the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party and then went into exile in Iran as a loyalist of Ayatollah Khomeini. Brought back to Iraq by US tanks, he joined the puppet government created by US occupation authorities in 2004 as finance minister.

He, like his predecessors since 2004, has presided over the looting of Iraq’s oil wealth to enrich foreign capital, the local ruling oligarchy and a layer of corrupt politicians and their

hangers-on. Meanwhile, in a country boasting the fifth-largest oil reserves in the world, the official unemployment rate for younger workers stands at 25 percent, nearly a quarter of the population is living under conditions of extreme poverty and hundreds of thousands of young people, including many university graduates, attempt to enter the labor market each year only to find no jobs.

Ironically, both Washington and Tehran are opposed to the demand of the demonstrators for the downfall of the regime. Both the US and Iran have pursued their respective interests through Mahdi's administration, even as US imperialism fights to effect regime change in Iran in order to eliminate an obstacle to US hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East.

The US State Department, concerned for the most part in securing the US bases out of which thousands of US troops continue to operate in Iraq, had initially remained silent on the bloody suppression of protesters. Late last month, however, after it was reported that Iran had brokered an agreement between the major Iraqi political parties to support Mahdi's remaining in power and to suppress the opposition in the streets, Washington began to make noises about respecting the demands of the protesters.

The State Department issued a vague threat of sanctions, naming no one in particular, but indicating that any official cooperating with Iran could be targeted. At the moment, the US has nothing better with which to replace Mahdi and his fellow thieves. They are the best that Washington could find after it toppled Saddam Hussein.

The *New York Times*, ever the pliant propaganda tool of US war aims, helped to promote the anti-Iranian narrative by publishing on Monday what it claimed was a "trove" of secret Iranian intelligence cables illustrating Iranian ties with various actors in the Iraqi government. A purportedly unknown source—perhaps within the US intelligence apparatus—provided the alleged cables to the *Intercept*, which handed them off to the *Times*.

While the US pursues its regional war aims in Iraq, and the Iranian government strives to suppress social unrest that it fears could—and with the recent protests over fuel price hikes already has—spread across its borders, the upsurge in Iraq points to a new way forward in the Middle East. Masses have taken to the streets to pursue their class interests and fight for social equality against a political elite that has promoted sectarian divisions.

This movement must be armed with the program of socialist internationalism fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International to unify workers throughout

Iraq, the Middle East and internationally in the struggle to put an end to the capitalist system, the source of war and social inequality.

19 November 2019