

A great peril lurks in Iraq

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Iraq, which is looking to get out of its crisis, could turn into another Syria unless politicians, parliamentarians and military agencies address the situation and block the road before the “third party.” The campaign to target unarmed protesters is getting bigger and more violent, and will push the latter to turn to violence themselves. The masked and unidentified perpetrators now being described as the “third party” are, indeed, the Iranian-backed militias that receive their money — and the salaries of their tens of thousands of members — from the Iraqi government. So far, some 450 protesters have been killed and 20,000 injured in the two months since demonstrations began in early October. The attack on demonstrators on Friday was the most daring and violent, when unknown assailants killed about 25 people in the capital Baghdad as the security forces stood neutral.

Because no one is identifying the killers by name, although it is a secret known by all, whether it

is Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq or any of the other armed groups, organized violence will continue and the Iraqi state will continue to lose control day by day.

These militias are daring to engage in confrontations because nobody calls them by name; there is no public warning against them and they are exploiting their semi-official character. These militias live on the government’s own money and do not abide by its orders, despite numerous attempts to tame them. The army — the official military establishment — simply watches and does not intervene, even though it is able to curb the militias. It also whines about the militias’ adoption within the armed forces, although they are originally irregulars and act as if they belong to a foreign state.

No one, neither from the neighbouring countries nor the major powers, wants to push things in Iraq toward a clash; but everyone notes with concern how Tehran wants to control the country’s decisions and organs, because it

is experiencing serious financial, economic and internal security hardship at home, and sees in neighbouring Iraq the soft ground and weak regime.

What about those who promote the argument that civil protests are a project to change the Iraqi political system, and therefore must be suppressed?

In fact, those invoking fear for the regime from the protesters are the ones trying to impose change and take over the remaining state entities that represent Iraq, the homeland and the state. The protests, despite the chaos that has marred them and the unrealistic demands made by some, are in fact strengthening the legitimacy of government, because they call for change and correction from within, not for a coup d’etat. The protesters actually recognize state institutions and their maximum demands are early elections, accountability for those involved in corruption, establishing the rule of law, and activating the role of constitutional institutions that for years have been in a stalemate.



A protestor holds a blood-stained flag at the

The militias and some political forces, on the other hand, reject the protesters’ calls because they do not want to correct the faulty situations that benefit them.

Today’s culture wars in the US to tackle violent extremism



DAMIEN MCELROY

Freedom of speech has been hijacked by the fashionable theory that words hurt. But it has also detracted from the struggle against hateful ideologies

From platforming to gaslighting, the lexicon of offences deemed unfit for public consumption is rapidly expanding. New labels or unfamiliar tags have been attached to whole generations, such as snowflakes, boomers and zoomers, to name but three.

There is no aspect of life that is deemed too trivial for the focus of a dispute. Last week, it was the Mr Men series of comics for children. A PhD student reported that in one book, Mr Clever had been disparaging towards his fellow character Little Miss Curious. Gaslighting.

There is a torrent of headline-making controversies fuelling support for bans and witch-hunts. But the trend is not as clearcut as the media coverage would suggest. When attitudes are rigorously analysed, what is exposed is that priorities have become dangerously skewed.

At one level, freedom of speech has been hijacked by the fashionable theory that words hurt. The flipside is that this has detracted from the



Radical cleric Anjem Choudary is seen leaving a probation hostel in London

vital struggle against hateful ideologies and the people who use these to radicalise recruits.

Two recent studies in the US and UK among high-school and university students found strong figures endorsing the overall principle of free speech. The results were nuanced but can be interpreted as demonstrating the resilience of basic principles.

More than 80 per cent of students

said that freedom of expression was more important than ever while just over half said it was under threat, according to the data published by the policy unit of King’s College London. Only a quarter of the 2,000 students surveyed said they were unable to express their opinions and 63 per cent said free speech and robust debate were well protected at their university.

Separately, a long-running Knight

Foundation survey of students from the biggest schools in the US found a rise in support for the First Amendment of that country’s constitution — which guarantees freedom of expression — over a 15-year period between 2004 and 2018. A report by the foundation said that this was important because attitudes generally prove durable over time. Strong support among the young for free speech is a positive signal for the

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