

627 Battle at Nineveh: Byzantine Emperor Heraclius beats Sassanid forces during Byzantine-Sassanid War

1901 Guglielmo Marconi sends the first transatlantic radio signal, from Poldhu in Cornwall to Newfoundland, Canada



1925 Last Qajar Shah of Iran deposed; Reza Shah Pahlavi takes over

2015 COP21 climate change summit in Paris reaches a deal between 195 countries



TOP  
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TWEETS

01



SIR JOHN JENKINS

15 former Labour MPs including @IanAustin1965 @GiselaStuart have signed an open letter saying people should not vote Labour. Its running as a full-page advert today in local and regional papers across the north of England. bad timing for @jeremymycorbyn

@toryboypierce

02



Honored to join the defence ministers of Bulgaria Croatia Hungary and Slovenia for the official opening of the NATO Multinational Special Aviation Programme in Zadar. A major initiative strengthening NATO and its special forces.

@camille\_grand

03



I don't know about you, but I couldn't care less what some millionaire Hollywood luvvie, with no idea what it's like for ordinary people out there, thinks about this election. Why does the Labour Party keep wheeling them out?

@darrengrimes\_

04



We needed this election to break the deadlock, but I am referring to the tone of the election, the vile personal attacks, no longer are we allowed to have different views. We need Boris in and, let's deliver on our promise to the British people, and onwards for our great country.

@andreajenkyns

Disclaimer: (Views expressed by columnists are personal and need not necessarily reflect our editorial stances)

# Time to hit Iraqi elite where it hurts

*The protesters want a truly national politics that gives every Iraqi pride in being an active citizen of a functioning state*

Iraq is currently the most important country in the Arab Middle East. It has always been contested territory — in antiquity the site of a shifting border between Rome and Persia — and a place where important things happen. The 7th century battles of Al-Qadisiyyah and Karbala changed history. A hundred years later, the Abbasids with their black flags swept West on their way to destroying the Umayyads in Damascus. In the 9th century, the marshes of the south were the epicenter of the great Zanj Rebellion. During the First World War, the grinding Mesopotamian campaign and its aftermath cemented the northeastern borders of the modern Arab world.

More recently, Iraq has become a place where dreams die. With the benefit of hindsight, the bloody revolution of 1958 was perhaps the last real triumph of Nasserism. And the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Gulf War of 1990-91 and the agonies that followed the 2003 invasion all now seem a protracted prelude to what we see not just in Iraq but across the region as a whole: The testing to destruction of a range of political ideologies, from Arab nationalism, Ba'athism and Islamism to the forced imposition of democracy.

So the scenes now being played out on the streets of Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriyah, Hilla, Najaf and Karbala represent, at the same time, the end of illusion and a popular struggle for something else — better, more durable, more authentic — to fill the void. The protesters want an end to a corrupt sectarian system (made in Washington and perfected in Tehran) held in place by greedy and violent elites, and a new political dispensation that represents, listens and better meets their own material needs — those of the vast majority of the population of Iraq. They want this as Iraqis, not as Sunnis or Shiites or Christians or Yazidis or Kurds or Arabs. This is not to say that these identities are not important; they are. But people are tired of these identities being exploited by sectarian entrepreneurs for their own ends. They instead want a truly national politics that gives every



Iraqi anti-government protesters gather in the capital's Tahrir Square

Iraqi pride in being an active citizen of a functioning state.

The same is probably true of Lebanon and indeed Iran (or Algeria, where demonstrators have even built walls around polling stations to represent their contempt for the electoral gerrymandering of the ruling military elite). The slogans of the protesters in different countries rhyme: "All of you means all of you," "We want a country," "We are Lebanese/Iraqi not Iranian," "We want you to focus on this country not foreign adventures." A new revolutionary newspaper in Beirut quotes Umm Kulthum: "We are the people: Nothing is impossible for us." A remarkable video clip on YouTube shows a traditional religious reciter in front of the Shrine of the Imam Husayn in Karbala declaiming verses appealing to heaven to support the protesters; saying there is not a single man of honor in Iraqi politics and those in power "are all thieves". Although the protests are national, aimed at national governments

and those — particularly but not only Iran — whom they accuse of interfering illegitimately in the affairs of other countries, their sympathies are broader, with Iraqi, Lebanese and Iranian protesters all supporting each other against structures of oppression.

Iraq is where this struggle will be decided. It matters more to the Islamic Republic than anywhere else. Iraq is where the severest external challenge to Ruhollah Khomeini emerged in the 1980s. Najaf threatens the aspirations of Ali Khamenei to establish the unchallenged doctrinal and spiritual authority of Qom. And, in a curious replay of events in the early 1920s, Iran has invested far too much in the recruitment, co-optation and intimidation of Shiite and other leaders in Iraq to let it go to waste.

And it's getting very nasty. From the beginning of the protests over two months ago, dark forces — almost certainly affiliated to Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi and the Badr-controlled Ministry of the Interior — have been targeting demonstrators with lethal force. In the last week, as demonstrators returned en masse to Baghdad's Tahrir Square and other key locations, counter-demonstrations have been used as cover for kidnappings, assaults and more killings — this time by stabbing as well as shooting. On Sunday, a prominent activist was assassinated by two men on a motorbike on his way home

to Karbala from Baghdad (the CCTV footage is graphic). On the same day, an entire busload of protestors from Karbala went missing. On Monday, four rockets hit a joint US-Iraqi base near Baghdad — the ninth such attack on US facilities in the country in the last five weeks. And there was a mysterious drone attack on Muqtada Al-Sadr's house in Najaf.

Meanwhile, the political class caucus with Qassem Soleimani and Hezbollah's Abu Zainab Al-Kawthrani in order to identify a new prime minister who might be acceptable to the usual powerbrokers. They talk about constitutional and other amendments but don't really mean it. And they offer up the occasional sacrificial lamb in the cause of fighting corruption in the hope the pressure will ease.

But it shouldn't. Because they are not serious enough. The risk is now of complete political breakdown and a return to civil conflict. The international community has plentiful tools at its disposal to concentrate minds and help find a way through this minefield. The UN is very active on the ground, but it needs support. In a positive move, the US authorities have just sanctioned four individuals in Iraq — including the murderous Al-Khazali brothers — whom they believe to have been instrumental in enabling the bloody crackdown that Iran has demanded. But much more is needed. After all, there is no shortage of suitable targets.

It is true that sanctions can be overdone. But, as Michael Knights of the Washington Institute has recently pointed out, given that many in the Iraqi elite have squandered away so much ill-gotten cash outside the country — often in the UK — properly enforced financial sanctions will hit them where it hurts. When I was British ambassador in Baghdad a decade ago, I tried repeatedly to get people interested in the issue of corruption. I failed. But now, as the dark forces of repression continue to crack heads, it is beyond time for us to get cracking on their freedom of movement, their friends and their loot.

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Iraqi police fire teargas at protesters during a demonstration against state corruption, failing public services and unemployment in Tayaran square, Baghdad