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WIDER Working Paper 2022/168

## **Don't rock the boat? Fears of conflict and support for protest in Iraq and beyond**

Daniel Silverman,<sup>1</sup> Karl Kaltenthaler,<sup>2</sup> and Mujtaba Ali Isani<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract:** Why do people support—or refrain from supporting—nonviolent protests for political change? The literature offers different answers to this question, but one variable that has received little attention is fears of protest unleashing violent conflict. This is surprising given that protest movements often emerge in insecure societies—from Iraq to Pakistan and Algeria to Myanmar—that have experienced or are at risk of experiencing large-scale civil strife. We argue that conflict fears can be an impediment to people backing nonviolent protest movements in insecure places, making them seen as risky propositions that ‘rock the boat’ and destabilize the country. We investigate this argument using an original survey conducted in Iraq during the ‘Tishreen’ uprising of 2019–21 and a cross-national analysis of civil war and nonviolent resistance from 1945–2013. The results support our argument, suggesting that scholars and practitioners need to pay more attention to how fears of conflict and movements for change are interlinked in world politics.

**Key words:** protests, nonviolence, conflict, fears, Iraq, Tishreen

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## 1 Introduction

In October 2019, large-scale peaceful protests against the government materialized in Iraq. Concentrated in Baghdad and the south of the country, these protests called for an accountable and responsive government and an end to the rampant corruption, sectarianism, and foreign domination that has defined the Iraqi political system since 2003. Meanwhile, similar protests have long been percolating in nearby Lebanon. For example, building on the ‘#YouStink’ movement in 2015–16 over garbage collection in Beirut, protesters poured into the streets of Lebanon in 2019 to demand a functioning state rather than a corrupt vehicle for splitting the sectarian pie.

Why do people support nonviolent protest campaigns for political and social changes such as these? And conversely, why do so many people refrain from supporting them? These questions are of tremendous importance, as the success of nonviolent mass protest movements like the ones that unfolded recently in Iraq and Lebanon is critical to the long-term trajectories of their societies. In particular, these protest movements provide an optimistic vision of a civic state and functioning democracy, and thus a way out of the trap of identity-based patronage and repression which has dominated their countries’ politics for decades.

While the literature offers a number of answers to this question, we argue that an important and oft-overlooked factor shaping support for such protest movements is fears of internal conflict. In societies that have witnessed large-scale conflicts in recent memory, from Algeria to Tajikistan, fears of renewed strife often lie dormant just beneath the surface of everyday life for many citizens. These fears frame many people’s thinking about the risks involved in political confrontation and division in their societies, undercutting support for nonviolent resistance campaigns attempting to change the political status quo.

To test our contentions, we conduct two analyses. First, we analyse the drivers of popular support for the aforementioned Iraqi nonviolent protests using a large-scale public opinion survey (N = 1,822) of Iraq fielded in June 2020. The survey offers a wide variety of information on Iraqi attitudes, allowing us to measure people’s support for the protests as well as a range of explanations for it. Second, we supplement this with a cross-national data analysis using major existing datasets. Specifically, we examine the relationship between recent civil war experiences and the onset and incidence of nonviolent resistance in countries around the world from 1945–2013.

We find results that are broadly consistent with our argument: while Iraqis overwhelmingly back protests, their support is undercut by prior exposure to terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. In other words, we find evidence consistent with our argument that fears of conflict reduce support for nonviolent change. Moreover, we also find evidence that aligns with our argument in the cross-national analysis: past intrastate (but not interstate) wars impede nonviolent resistance campaigns. Overall, these findings suggest that scholars and practitioners interested in nonviolent resistance movements should pay more attention to fears of large-scale civil conflict—they are a substantial barrier that must be recognized and grappled with in order to fully realize the tremendous promise of ‘People Power’ movements for political change.

## 2 Existing scholarship on support for nonviolent protest campaigns

Why do people support or join mass anti-government protests? The literature offers several broad perspectives on this question. One tradition in the study of social movements and resistance

stresses the role of *grievances* or feelings of dissatisfaction with the status quo held by individuals about their own lives and often the welfare and status of their broader identity groups (Gurr 1970, 1993). This perspective has intuitive appeal, as most movements articulate sets of demands based on their grievances. For example, protesters in the Arab Spring uprisings that swept the Arab world in 2010–11 used slogans like ‘*Esh, boreya, adala egtimaia!*’ [Bread, freedom, and social justice!] to encapsulate some of their core grievances around repression, corruption, and living costs in their societies. While the evidence for grievances propelling protest participation is mixed, some recent studies have linked factors like poor services and energy crises to protest activity (Steinhilper et al. 2022), particularly among marginalized groups (de Juan and Wegner 2019) or those with strong redistributive preferences (Justino and Martorano 2019).

Another prominent perspective highlights not the motivations for anti-government protest, but the factors that impact its *feasibility*. Some scholarship in this camp focuses on the ‘resources’ that enable communities to mobilize and express their grievances, such as money, time, social ties, histories of resistance, and the like. For instance, recent work shows that social media use played a critical role in enabling early protesters to initiate Egypt’s Tahrir Square protests in 2011 (Clarke and Kocak 2020). Meanwhile, other work under this umbrella focuses on the opportunity structures (McAdam et al. 1996), such as the political institutions and coalitions in a society, that facilitate or discourage protest. Studies in this tradition have highlighted how structural factors like the level of democracy, severity of repression, cohesion of elites, and dispersion of power in a society shape the viability and size of protest campaigns (Acosta 2019; Schock 1999; Slater 2009).

In response to concerns that some of these theories were overly structuralist in nature, some alternative approaches to analysing protest movements have emerged. The first is an actor-centric approach that considers the identities, frames, and emotions undergirding participation in political protests (Benford and Snow 2000; Goodwin et al. 2001). The second is a relational approach that emerged as part of the political process model and later in the approach known as the ‘Dynamics of Contention’ (McAdam et al. 2001) which centres around protest movements and their dynamic interactions with the state and other social actors.

While these different perspectives take us far in understanding the drivers and inhibitors of anti-government protest, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge. One key area of neglect is how support for protest intersects with fears of conflict. This gap is notable given that the global spread of civil war and attempts at democratization have been two of the most significant political trends of the last half century (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; Huntington 1991). In many societies, protest movements pushing for inclusive democracy and effective governance flourish alongside significant violent conflict or risks of conflict, from countries beset by violent cartels, like Mexico, to those recovering from civil wars, like Algeria, to those with active insurgencies, like Turkey, and beyond. How do people’s desire to agitate for political change in these settings compete with their potentially powerful fears of unleashing conflict and chaos?

### **3 How fears of conflict shape support for protest**

Before proceeding to our argument, some brief conceptual ground-clearing is needed. First, we recognize that protests against governing authorities can have multiple goals, including trying to achieve policy change, getting leaders to leave office, and pursuing more profound changes like transforming the nature of the political system or ousting a foreign occupying power. Within any given political protest movement, people who participate in or support protests may have a mix of such goals. But what unites them is a general aspiration for some change to the political status

quo. Individuals who support anti-government protests can thus be assumed to be broadly dissatisfied with the political status quo and to want it changed.

Second, it is crucial to understand that protests carry significant risks for those who support and participate in them. In addition to risks of repression, one major risk is that the status quo may change as a result of protests, but in undesirable ways. In other words, things may get worse and not better due to the protests, even from the protesters' perspective. Thus, one of the considerations when gauging an individual's propensity to embrace protests is how much they are willing to risk when the protests can lead to positive or negative political futures for them. We contend that protest support is less likely among individuals who are worried about the potential negative consequences of upsetting the political status quo.

In particular, we argue that fears of unleashing violent conflict and chaos can significantly undermine popular support for nonviolent resistance campaigns. The logic is that while nonviolent protest or resistance can be a potent tool for achieving change (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan 2011), it also has the potential to destabilize societies and, in its worst-case scenario, unleash significant violent conflict within a country.

Indeed, the paths from peaceful protests to violent conflict are manifold. Most obviously, violent repression by authorities can push protests to evolve into armed resistance, sparking a civil war between the resisters and the state. This is basically what happened to many of the Arab Spring protest movements in 2010–11. For example, in Syria, peaceful demonstrations against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in March 2011 only morphed into violent resistance and civil war after months of deadly repression by the regime, including indiscriminate firings into crowds of demonstrators. The sequence of events in the ongoing civil strife in Myanmar is broadly similar, with anti-regime protests leading to a ruthless crackdown that has provoked violent resistance.

In addition, peaceful protests can fuel conflict by weakening the state and allowing existing armed actors to challenge it. For instance, in Yemen, the Arab Spring protests that emerged in the spring of 2011 successfully overthrew the country's long-time autocratic ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, within about a year. But they also weakened and disrupted state control so thoroughly that a variety of armed actors began fighting and seizing territory, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Southern secessionist groups like the Southern Transitional Council, and perhaps most importantly, the Houthis or Ansar Allah movement. The latter took over the government and most of the country by 2014–15, sparking a brutal Saudi-led indiscriminate bombing campaign in Yemen in which tens of thousands of civilians have been killed.

Finally, nonviolent protest campaigns can also destabilize society not by altering the state's capabilities but its preferences. This may lead actors opposed to those preferences to launch violent uprisings against the new status quo, as in Ukraine when the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution ousted the Russian-backed client state of Vladimir Yanukovich and pivoted Ukraine's direction toward the European Union, sparking a pro-Russian insurgency in the east of the country. Likewise, the preferences of the new state authorities may also make them less likely to contain armed actors that share elements of their ideology, as in Egypt, where the successful revolution in January 2011 led to the election of a Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohammed Morsi, who was reluctant to crack down on Salafi violence against the country's large Coptic Christian minority.

Of course, all of this is not to deny that nonviolent protest campaigns are often a powerful and effective tool for generating political change—they are. Rather, it is simply to clarify that they have potential risks as well as benefits for societies engaging in them, both when they are stymied (e.g. repression and radicalization fuelling conflict) and when they succeed (e.g. power vacuums or opposition to new authorities driving conflict). In light of this, we argue that some societies and

communities weigh these downside risks more strongly than others. In particular, we contend that people who have experienced the often-severe costs of large-scale civil conflict in recent memory are likely to view this trade-off in a very risk-averse way. For these people, supporting protests for political change may seem less like an attractive and aspirational option and more like a dangerous or even foolish gamble that may bring back prior suffering. This argument builds on the significant literature on conflict exposure and the powerful and often-enduring effects it can have on people's thinking and behaviour during and after war (e.g., Gilligan et al. 2014; Silverman et al. 2021; Tellez 2018). Similarly, it builds nicely on studies from psychology and behavioural economics showing that people vary widely in their aversion to risk, and that those who have experienced more adverse events in the past are more risk-avoidant in relevant domains in the future (e.g., Bucciol and Zam 2013; Castillo 2020).

One final clarification around our theoretical argument is that it does not apply to fears of any kind of conflict. Specifically, the pathways we highlighted all focus on ways in which protest campaigns can devolve into *intrastate or internationalized intrastate conflict*. The risk of protests is that they will pit social groups within a society—or the state and the society—against each other, destabilizing the country and generating large-scale political violence. Societies which have recent experiences of *interstate* conflict do not fit our argument, as nonviolent protests do not generate a risk of interstate conflict in the same straightforward way that they do intrastate conflict.

#### **4 The case of the Iraqi 'Tishreen' uprising (2019–21)**

We explore these dynamics in the case of the major pan-sectarian Iraqi protest movement which has been ongoing in the country since 2019—the 'Tishreen' (October) uprising. We briefly describe this protest movement and then derive hypotheses about why individuals would support or oppose it based on the argument outlined above.

Popular protests have been a common feature of the political landscape of Iraq since 2003. Indeed, there have been a myriad of protests in Iraq since the US-led invasion of the country that toppled Saddam Hussein from power. All three of Iraq's major communities—Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and Shi'a Arabs—have engaged in significant anti-government protests at some point since 2003. These protests have focused on many different issues, including lack of basic services (particularly water and electricity), corruption, discrimination, and a lack of voice in politics, and, in the case of the Kurds, calls for greater autonomy and even independence from Iraq. The protests have ranged from dozens of people on the streets to millions. Many of these protests in modern Iraq have been peaceful in orientation, though some have ended in violence committed by (or, more often, against) the protest participants.

Two protest movements have been particularly critical to shaping the trajectory of politics in Iraq since 2003: (1) the Sunni Arab protests that erupted from 2011–13, and (2) the pan-sectarian but heavily Shi'a Arab 'Tishreen' protests that began in 2019 and largely came to an end by 2021. These protests have shaken Iraqi politics to their core and even threatened the stability of Iraq as a functioning state. Iraqis today continue to feel the legacies of both movements, as they have deeply shaped perceptions of Iraqi society, the Iraqi state, and the interactions between the two.

The Sunni Arab protest movement in Iraq starting in 2011 was at first viewed as part of a larger wave of protests in the country against the government of Nouri al Maliki and its perceived corruption, incompetence, and sectarian nature. The impetus for the protests were the Arab Spring uprisings that were spreading across much of the Arab world at the time. Not long into the protests, the nature of the movement became more sectarian as Sunnis protested their political

and economic disenfranchisement in Iraq and many Shi'a began to view the protests as aimed in their direction. In 2012, Sunni protests in the west of Iraq grew in size and anger, and Shi'a counterprotests started to organize to answer them. Moreover, the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi police and army began to attack Sunni protesters, even assaulting protest camps with lethal force. These violent actions prompted more protests with more aggressive demands, such as calls for fighting back against the perceived Shi'a-dominated state. By 2013, these protests were increasingly being met with violence, and in some cases Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) flags began to appear among the crowds. The initially peaceful protests, the vicious sectarian repression by the Iraqi state, and the broader feeling of being second-class citizens in the new Iraq all had a profound effect on Sunni attitudes. While most Sunni Arabs did not support or even sympathize with AQI, attitudes toward the Maliki government, the police, and the army hardened in this period and many Sunnis wanted Iraqi government forces out of their towns. The protests were thus waged *against* the Iraqi state and not *for* Al Qaeda, but AQI—which was soon to become ISIS (Islamic State)—capitalized on them with effective propaganda initiatives and strategic alliances with other elements in the Sunni resistance.

The subsequent developments in Iraq in 2013 and 2014 are well-chronicled (Kaltenthaler et al. 2018). As Sunni Arab anger over their treatment by the Iraqi state came to a head, ISIS and its allies took the opportunity to launch a wave of attacks against the Iraqi army and police in Sunni-dominated areas of western Iraq. Rather than resisting this coalition of Sunni insurgents, many Sunni Arabs were pleased to see the largely Shi'a police and army expelled from their communities. Only later did it become apparent that ISIS had used their coalition as a way to seize territory and then purge it of any competing elements. The period from 2014–2017 was thus a particularly bleak one for the country's Sunni Arabs, as they lived under the ruthless governance of ISIS that brought many of them extreme hardship. For many Sunni Arabs, there was deep regret in participating in a protest movement that they perceived had made it easier for ISIS to take and hold territory in western Iraq.

The second major protest movement in Iraq that has had a profound impact on Iraqi politics has not been centred in the Sunni Arab-dominated governorates of Iraq but in the predominantly Shi'a areas of the country. In fact, there had been sporadic eruptions of popular protest in the Shi'a areas of Iraq for years. These protests centred on a number of issues, but chief among them was a lack of effective public services from the Iraqi state and deep corruption. Basra, in particular, had seen several waves of protest about its unhealthy water and electricity shortages, especially in the scorching summer months. The lack of electricity made it unbearable to survive Basra's sweltering heat and had led to several deaths. Impure water had also led to many deaths and even more illness. For Basrawis, who lived next to massive oil fields, it was difficult to see how there was not enough money for clean water and functioning electricity. The answer to this, according to the protesters, had to be that Iraqi state officials were deeply corrupt and incompetent.

The outrage at the Iraqi government boiled over in October 2019. After a miserable summer of intermittent electricity and continued water quality problems, as well as growing unemployment and anger against an Iraqi government that was seen as increasingly unaccountable and beholden to Iran, protests began to erupt in Baghdad and several Shi'a-majority cities. The protest movement was sparked by the attempt to demote a widely popular Iraqi counter-terrorism official seemingly at the request of Iran. But the grievances that drove the protests were deeper and more longstanding than this single action on the part of the Iraqi government. None of the issues that had driven earlier protest waves in Iraq were viewed as having been solved—or, in fact, even meaningfully addressed. Using the power of social media to organize, activists were able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets to call for an end to the rampant sectarianism, corruption, unemployment, incompetence, and Iranian domination of the Iraqi political scene.



While the protests did lead to the resignation of the Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi in December of 2019 and his replacement by Prime Minister Mustafa Khadimi—who was seen as more of a political outsider—they did not meet the broader demands of the protesters. In fact, the violent response to the movement from pro-Iranian militias and some Iraqi government forces only deepened protesters' anger. Many protests were met with live gunfire from government and militia forces even when protesters were not being violent. Snipers shooting protesters became a frequent occurrence at protests and led to a number of deaths. By late 2020, it was estimated that nearly 700 protesters had been killed by a combination of the pro-Iranian militias and Iraqi government forces (Berman et al. 2020).

Multiple factors dampened the movement's momentum in 2020–21. First, the COVID-19 pandemic—while it added another grievance to the list due to the government's failure to contain the disease—complicated protesters' ability to organize and mobilize crowds of people. Second, efforts to curtail the protests by Iran-aligned Shi'a militias became more aggressive in 2020–21. There was a concerted campaign of assassinating major activists associated with the protests. This attempt to intimidate the movement's leaders did lead some to back away from organizing, though many activists remained defiant in the face the pressure campaign. Third, the energy of the protests was channelled in new directions. Notably, in 2021, the Tishreen movement moved to some degree from the streets into organized electoral efforts to oust the Iraqi political forces seen as supporting the political status quo in the country. Led by the Iraqi Shi'a cleric and populist politician Moqtada al Sadr, reformist forces that claimed the mantle of the Tishreen movement obtained the most seats in the 2021 parliamentary elections, but they were ultimately unable to form a government because of effective opposition from the Iran-backed, status quo-oriented political actors in Iraq. As a result of all of these impediments, Iraq is again governed by the same type of political coalition that gave rise to the Tishreen protests in 2019.

Stepping back from the historical narrative, a key feature to note about the Tishreen protests is that they have been concentrated in Shi'a-majority parts of Iraq and have not been widespread in the Sunni-majority areas of the country. While Shi'a largely went out into the streets, Sunnis mostly stayed home. This is perplexing because Sunnis are suffering from the same issues that Shi'as are. In many Sunni Arab areas where ISIS took control, there are still wide swaths of destruction, and reconstruction efforts have been slow. Thus, the Sunni community would appear to be even worse off materially than the Shi'a, yet it does not protest as much as its Shi'a counterpart.

Our study seeks to explain why some Iraqis supported the Tishreen protest movement while others demurred. As outlined above, our overarching argument is that support for the protests will be shaped by the expected benefits and the risks that they entail, with those who fear the eruption or resumption of violent conflict in their society more focused on the risks. In particular, we expect exposure to previous conflict in one's society to be a source of heightened fear. In the case of Iraq, this means we expect Iraqis who were exposed to political violence during the recent conflict with ISIS to be the most beset by these fears.

We focus on exposure to two key types of violence. First, many Iraqis experienced or were close to ISIS terror attacks since 2013. Logically, we should expect that Iraqis who experienced or lived near ISIS often-brutal attacks will be more aware of the potential costs of opening up renewed violent conflicts in Iraq in the future. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H1a: The closer Iraqis live to areas where there have been ISIS terrorist attacks, the less likely they are to support the protests.*

Second, many Iraqis also experienced or were close to airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition. These airstrikes were another key type of violence during the war with ISIS and should make Iraqis who

lived near them more leery of future conflicts as well. It is worth noting here that, while the airstrikes certainly overlapped spatially with ISIS attacks to some degree, there is also a great deal of separation between the two types of violence as ISIS attacked many areas it did not control and the coalition targeted some ISIS strongholds more than others ( $r = 0.10$  for respondents' proximity to the two in our survey). In sum, we hypothesize the following:

H1b: *The closer Iraqis live to areas where there have been Coalition anti-ISIS airstrikes, the less likely they are to support the protests.*

## 5 Data and methods

We use data from a rich survey of Iraq administered in Sunni- and Shi'a-majority areas of the country in 2020. The survey was fielded by the Iraqi polling firm IIACSS, an experienced firm that has conducted polling for the World Values Survey, Arab Barometer, and other major projects. The firm fielded the survey in April and May of 2020 in the Sunni Arab and Shia Arab-dominated regions of Iraq. It was not fielded in the three governorates (that is, Dahok, Erbil, Suleimaniyah) that make up the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The sample size for the survey was 1,822 Iraqi adults. The sample was collected with proportional-probability sampling methods. Within neighbourhoods, a Kish grid was employed to pick specific households to survey, and the next-birthday method was used to pick who in the household was asked to respond to the survey questions. All respondents were asked the questions in a face-to-face manner by trained Iraqi enumerators. This study and use of the data are Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved (University of Akron IRB Protocol #20210903).

Demographically, the sample is 51 per cent male and 49 per cent female. Roughly 72 per cent of the sample are 35 or under in age, with an average age of around 31 years. Sixty-three per cent of the sample have not completed secondary school and 13 per cent are unemployed. The sectarian distribution is 54 per cent Shia, 45 per cent Sunni, and 1 per cent Kurd, as the survey was not carried out in the Kurdish-majority areas.<sup>1</sup> Even though the survey is thus not fully representative of the Iraqi public, in terms of the Shi'a- and Sunni-majority areas, its demographics are fairly similar to existing census data and other representative surveys. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the key variables used in the analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for primary variables used in the analysis

Variables	Mean	Min-Max	N	Std. Dev.
<u>Dependent variable</u>				
Protest support	2.38	0-3	1,811	1.04
<u>Independent variables</u>				
<i>Conflict experiences</i>				
Coalition airstrike proximity (log)	-3.05	-6.1-0.4	1,822	1.78
ISIS terror attack proximity (log)	-1.22	-2.5-2.9	1,822	0.87
<i>Political grievances</i>				

<sup>1</sup> Most Kurds in Iraq also adhere to Sunni Islam.

Foreign meddling scale	24.76	0-36	1,693	7.51
Government corruption	3.04	0-4	1,809	1.38
Pan-sectarianism	2.52	0-3	1,817	0.89
<i>Economic grievances</i>				
Not comfortable	1.15	0-3	1,822	1.09
Unemployed	0.13	0-1	1,776	0.33
<i>Demographic controls</i>				
Age	30.78	18-84	1,811	11.98
Female	0.49	0-1	1,822	0.50
High school	0.37	0-1	1,822	0.48
Shi'a	0.54	0-1	1,822	0.50

Source: authors' calculations based on IIACSS Iraq Survey April–May 2020.

The dependent variable analysed in this study is popular support for the Tishreen protests. This variable is operationalized with a question in the survey that asks: 'There have been protests against the government across cities in Iraq. Could you please tell me whether or not you support or oppose these protests?'. Potential answers were on a four-point scale of support, ranging from strongly opposed to strongly support. Overall, support for the protests in the sample is quite high, with 82 per cent of the sample voicing some level of support for the movement.

To investigate our hypotheses about conflict exposure undermining protest support (H1a–b), we use two variables. The first is proximity to coalition airstrikes against ISIS using data from Airwars (2017), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that compiles a comprehensive and transparent database of the strikes. Premised on the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's Drones Project—the most comprehensive, transparent, and reliable public database of US drone warfare in countries like Pakistan (Bauer et al. 2015)—Airwars has tracked the frequency, results, and locations of all 10,000-plus reported coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014. It has relied on a wide range of sources, including international and local media, NGO reports, social media sites (e.g. so-called 'martyrs' pages'), and statements by the combatants themselves, triangulating between these to verify its information. Since the people in our survey are geolocated, we were able to match them with the Airwars data and create a measure of distance from the closest observed strike for each respondent. This variable is flipped, so higher values mean greater proximity, and logged due to its right skew.

The second variable is a measure of proximity to terror attacks by ISIS based on data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). To generate this measure, we extracted all terror attacks in Iraq in the GTD, selected those carried out by ISIS, and filtered the data so that we only included those with the most precise level of geo-location. This left us with over 5,000 attacks conducted by ISIS during the 2013–19 time period. We then calculated the distance from each person in the survey to the nearest attack, producing an individual-level measure of proximity. This variable is flipped so that higher values mean greater proximity and logged due to its right skew.

In addition, we added a number of other variables to capture additional drivers of Iraqi support for the protests. Some of these tap into Iraqi political grievances. One such variable is perceptions of corruption. In particular, Iraqis were asked: 'How corrupt do you consider each of the following organizations to be? [Government of Iraq]'. Response options ran on a five-point scale from 'not

at all corrupt' to 'extremely corrupt'. Another important grievance-related variable is perceptions of foreign meddling in Iraq. Here we used a battery of items that asked Iraqis to rate their opinions of foreign actors' influence in Iraq. The specific wording of the question was: 'Generally speaking, do you think the following countries/organizations have a positive or negative influence on the internal events/affairs of Iraq?'. Respondents were asked this question about nine actors: Russia, the USA, Iran, the anti-ISIS coalition, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and China. Potential responses for each of these items ran along a five-point scale from 'completely positive influence' to 'completely negative influence'. We made an additive index of perceptions of foreign meddling by averaging these scores across all nine items, so that higher scores indicate greater perceptions of negative external influence and lower scores indicate more benign views of outside influence.

A third key variable related to respondents' political grievances is people's pan-sectarian attitudes and their aversion to sectarian division. In particular, we use an item which asked Iraqis the degree to which people agreed with the following statement: 'The Arabs, Kurds, Shi'a, and Sunni of Iraq are able to struggle together to eliminate Da'esh'. The response options for this ran from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly' on a four-point scale. While this item includes language focusing specifically on defeating ISIS, we believe it captures broader frustration with the sectarian nature of politics in Iraq and desire for a more civic state.

We also include variables measuring people's economic situation and grievances. Notably, we control for the extent to which Iraqis see their lives as comfortable or not. In particular, people were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following: 'My family and I live a comfortable life'. The response options for this item fell on a four-point scale ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly'. Those who disagreed most strongly are expected to voice the most support for the protests, following the 'haves' vs. 'have-nots' cleavage in Iraq. In addition to this, we also use a simple binary indicator for respondents who reported that they were unemployed at the time the survey was fielded. This too is expected to boost protest support.

Finally, we also include several demographic covariates that may help us explain support for the protests. First, we include respondents' age, as the protests are widely portrayed as having been youth-led. Second, we include respondents' sex, as it is possible that the protests appeal more to men frustrated at their role in a society in which they are often still expected to be bread-winners or at least attain some material success. Third, we include sectarian identity, as there has been more activism in Shi'a-majority areas of the country, and there is a perception of the protests as primarily a Shi'a phenomenon, as mentioned earlier. And last, we include a measure of whether respondents completed high school as an indicator of their educational level, as uneducated Iraqis may be more aggrieved about their status in society and thus motivated to protest.

## 6 Empirical results

In order to model Iraqi protest support, we estimate a series of ordered probit models with standard errors clustered at the neighbourhood level to account for non-independent error structures within communities. The results of our models are shown in Table 2. M1 shows the effects of the conflict exposure variables alone, while M2 adds the political grievances, M3 adds the economic variables, and M4 adds the demographic covariates.

As is evident, the conflict-related variables generally behave as expected. In particular, the two measures of past conflict exposure—proximity to ISIS violence and to coalition airstrikes—both predict significantly lower support for the protests. This lends support to the central argument that

physical insecurity and fears of conflict can significantly undercut public support for protest, as outlined in H1a–H1b.

Table 2: Predictors of Iraqi public support for the Tishreen protest movement

	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)
	Protest support	Protest support	Protest support	Protest support
<u>Conflict exposure</u>				
ISIS terror attack proximity	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.04)
Coalition airstrike proximity	-0.07** (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.05+ (0.03)	-0.05* (0.02)
<u>Political grievances</u>				
Government corruption		0.01* (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)
Foreign meddling scale		0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)
Pan-sectarian orientation		0.11*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
<u>Economic grievances</u>				
Not comfortable			0.10 (0.09)	0.10 (0.10)
Unemployed			0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
<u>Demographic controls</u>				
Age				-0.01+ (0.00)
Male				0.00 (0.08)
Shi'a				-0.01 (0.09)
High school				0.01 (0.03)
Cutpoint 1	-0.82*** (0.12)	0.37 (0.24)	0.35 (0.25)	0.18 (0.25)
Cutpoint 2	-0.58*** (0.11)	0.61** (0.24)	0.59* (0.24)	0.42+ (0.24)
Cutpoint 3	-0.11 (0.10)	1.11*** (0.23)	1.08*** (0.23)	0.92*** (0.24)
Observations	1,811	1,675	1,636	1,636

Note: results from ordinal probit models with neighbourhood clustered standard errors.\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, + p<0.1.

Source: authors' statistical modeling results based on IIACSS Iraq Survey April–May 2020.

Meanwhile, all of the political grievance measures have statistically significant effects in the expected direction as well. That is, perceptions of corruption and foreign meddling and support for pan-sectarian politics all predict significantly greater support for the protests, as hypothesized. Meanwhile, the measures of economic grievances needs do not perform very well in the models. Not having a comfortable life and being unemployed both predict increased protest support, but neither is close to statistical significance at conventional thresholds. Finally, demographic factors do not show much explanatory power, as the only significant predictor among them is age, which highlights the largely youth-oriented nature of the protests. While being Shi'a is positively linked

with protest support, it is somewhat surprisingly not a significant predictor, speaking again to the movement's broad and pan-sectarian appeal.

In sum, the theoretical argument we proposed receives substantial empirical support from our models. In particular, individuals who were more directly exposed to the ISIS insurgency and the counterinsurgent response to it in Iraq are less likely to support the Tishreen protest movement, consistent with the notion that they are more sensitive to the dangers of unleashing new rounds of violent confrontation in Iraqi society.

## **7 The shadow of conflict and the promise of protest beyond Iraq?**

The above results support our argument that past conflict exposure diminishes support for nonviolent protest movements in one's society. But do these findings hold outside the case of Iraq and scale up to the macro level? We conduct a preliminary check and supplement our main results by examining the link between past civil wars and the onset and incidence of nonviolent resistance campaigns using existing cross-national data.

Specifically, we analyse patterns in nonviolence resistance campaigns with the Nonviolent and Violent Campaign Outcomes (NAVCO) 2.1 dataset (Chenoweth and Shay 2019), pairing this with civil war data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Davies et al. 2022; Gleditsch et al 2002). We use two binary dependent variables in this supplementary analysis: (1) the onset and (2) the incidence of major nonviolent resistance campaigns in each country-year as recorded in the NAVCO 2.1 dataset. This allows us to predict both the initiation and persistence of nonviolent campaigns. Our primary explanatory variable of interest is whether the country experienced a major civil war (1,000 battle deaths in a given year) at some point in the previous decade. We include a variety of covariates often found in the literature on nonviolent resistance (e.g., Cebul and Grewal 2022; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011.), including the country's military expenditure, its regime type, its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, its total population size, its urbanization, its mobile phone use, and the number of contemporaneous nonviolent campaigns in its region. The models are estimated with logistic regressions.

Table 3 shows the results. M1 and M2 predict the onset of nonviolent resistance campaigns, while M3 and M4 predict their incidence. M2 and M4 are equivalent to M1 and M3 but add country and year fixed effects in order to control for relevant unmodelled spatial and temporal differences. As is clear, civil war significantly impedes the development of nonviolent resistance campaigns. Specifically, recent experiences of civil war have a statistically significant negative impact on both the onset and the incidence of nonviolent resistance campaigns even when controlling for many of their other leading predictors as well as including spatial and temporal fixed effects. This provides another key secondary layer of evidence consistent with our central argument, suggesting that the shadow of conflict is a major impediment to nonviolent protest.

Table 3: The impact of conflict on nonviolent resistance campaigns, 1945–2013

	Dependent variable:			
	Campaign onset		Campaign incidence	
	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)
<u>Violent conflict</u>				
Civil war in past decade	-0.83** (0.28)	-0.83** (0.29)	-0.70*** (0.16)	-0.69*** (0.17)
<u>Other predictors</u>				
Military expenditure (Log)	-0.12 (0.06)	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.13* (0.05)
Democratic regime	-1.52*** (0.24)	-1.66*** (0.26)	-1.64*** (0.14)	-1.59*** (0.17)
Lagged GDP (Log)	0.091 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.16)	0.18* (0.08)	0.19 (0.11)
Population size (Log)	0.19*** (0.06)	0.13 (0.06)	0.30*** (0.04)	0.35*** (0.04)
Per cent urbanized	0.56 (0.65)	0.56 (0.71)	0.75 (0.39)	0.29 (0.46)
Mobile phone use (Log)	0.14* (0.06)	0.02 (0.13)	0.13*** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.09)
Regional diffusion (Log)	1.03*** (0.15)	0.40* (0.17)	0.78*** (0.10)	0.39*** (0.11)
<u>Fixed effects</u>				
Regional fixed effects		YES		YES
Year fixed effects		YES		YES
Observations	9,007	9,007	9,007	9,007
Log likelihood	-639.14	-594.06	-1,375.18	-1,290.50
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,296.28	1,320.13	2,768.37	2,713.01

Note: results from logistic regressions. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001.

Source: authors' statistical modeling results based on various data sources.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to add to our understanding of what influences popular support for nonviolent protest movements seeking political reform and change by paying particular attention to fragile societies. Existing literature on nonviolent protest movements has paid little attention to how support for protest may be shaped by this social fragility. We developed an argument in which individuals who have experienced violent conflict in their society in recent memory are less likely to back protest movements because of their fears of unleashing renewed conflict. We tested these arguments on a rich survey of Iraqi attitudes conducted in spring 2020 when the Tishreen protests were well underway in the country and yet much of Iraq was still very much recovering from and concerned about war. Overall, we found substantial support for our argument—proximity to both terrorist and counter-terrorist violence during the country's conflict with ISIS both diminished Iraqi support for the Tishreen movement. We also provided some evidence consistent with our

argument at the macro level, showing that the experience of major civil war impedes the onset and incidence of nonviolent resistance campaigns cross-nationally using existing large-n datasets.

These findings hold some notable implications for scholars and policy makers alike. First, for the literatures on protest and democratization, they indicate that fears of destabilization among the mass public need to be taken seriously as an obstacle to political change. Indeed, the literature on anti-government protests has tended to focus on fears of individual repression—people’s worries that they may be harmed by the state due to their participation (e.g. Young 2019). Yet, there has been little attention paid to the ways in which publics often fear not just state repression but societal destabilization. Especially in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, recognizing how protests can in fact be deeply destabilizing—and how that can shape mass attitudes toward them—seems crucial to understanding the factors that enable and constrain their appeal.

Second, for the study of conflict, there is a substantial body of evidence that actual conflict exposure can have powerful effects on individuals, impacting their attitudes, beliefs, and networks (Silverman et al. 2021; Tellez 2018). In many cases, these effects are seen as beneficial, making people more ‘pro-social’ (Gilligan et al. 2014) and politically engaged (Bateson 2012; Blattman 2009). Our results contribute to this literature while also raising important questions, since we find that those facing the most threat in fragile societies tend to shun political change out of fear of destabilization. While this is puzzling, the discrepancy may emerge from contextual differences. One possibility is that the pro-social results come from settings where security threats have fully receded, while ours apply where they are still acutely felt and dominate people’s thinking. Indeed, Tellez’s (2018) findings that those on the front lines of the Colombian conflict tend to support peace (as opposed to justice or retribution against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) suggests a similar pragmatism among those still at risk. Another possibility is that—at least in the case of Iraq—the insecure people in our study see their insecurity as *caused* by their community’s past activism (i.e. in the 2011–13 Sunni Arab protests in Iraq), while there is not necessarily such a clear linkage between previous change movements and violent conflicts in all other cases. Disentangling these possibilities and unpacking the conditions under which conflict fears (de)mobilize may be a fruitful area for future research.

Third, the findings also carry implications for policy makers and society more broadly. One practical implication is that those interested in promoting protest movements for political change in places like Iraq should be wary of state efforts to foment and manipulate internal security threats. This can occur in several ways. First, states can engage in repression designed to provoke an armed response from the population and draw them into war. Second, states can even place provocateurs among the protesters to attack security forces and foment conflict. And third, states can tout other security threats facing their citizens in order to quieten demands for reform. All three of these tactics would prey on the political psychology examined in this piece, exploiting the power of insecurity to distract and disrupt calls for change. While countering these machinations may prove difficult, activists on the ground as well as the international community more broadly should anticipate these tactics and call them out when there is any indication of their use.

Finally, it is worth thinking about how these findings might scale up to the regional level. Protest movements and revolutions often come in ‘waves’, such as the Colour Revolutions in many former Soviet countries in the 2000s or the Arab Spring uprisings in the Arab world in the 2010s. When these waves initially break, it is a heady time filled with demands for justice, democracy, an end to corruption, and the fulfilment of other significance and sustenance needs in the region. Yet, these waves often eventually crash on the reality of a successful repression campaign (China 1989) or a descent into civil war (Syria 2011) in one or more countries in the region, generating a different public mood as people become much more aware of insecurity and consider the trade-off between security and change more acutely. Eventually, after order is restored when repression and conflict



end, this mindset has an opportunity to fade over time, again opening up room for further demands about change and justice. In this sense, the results suggest that there may be cyclical dynamics to attitudes toward protest and reform at the regional or transnational level. This is an area that future research may wish to explore, as well as one that practitioners should be aware of when thinking about windows of opportunity to push for political change.

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