

## International

# 'We have nothing': Iraqi protesters voice anger, hope

## 'I'm rebelling to free my country from the fangs of the corrupt'

**BAGHDAD:** Thousands of Iraqi protesters have occupied the parliament in Baghdad's Green Zone for the past five days, the latest political turmoil to strike the war-scarred country. The mass sit-in is led by followers of powerful Shiite Muslim preacher and political kingmaker Moqtada Sadr, who is facing off against a rival, Iran-backed Shiite faction called the Coordination Framework.

The at times carnival-like protests have seen demonstrators repeat the Sadrist rhetoric but also

Green Zone government district. "I'm rebelling to free my country from the fangs of the corrupt," said the Islamic studies high school teacher, who also wants Iraq to adopt a new constitution and a presidential system.

He spoke proudly of his movement—"we the Sadrists"—and its previous breaches of the Green Zone, prime minister's office and legislative chamber. "I've joined them all and I'm proud of it," he said, stressing the "revolutionary ideology" of the camp around firebrand cleric Sadr who once led an anti-US militia and who has millions of devoted followers.

Oklah acknowledged "the difficulty of the struggle for reform" in Iraq. But he stressed his conviction that Sadr enjoys "divine protection" and commands a "loyal popular base, which is like the arm with which he strikes at the dens of the corrupt".

### The mother of seven

Leaning back in a chair inside the legislative chamber, Umm Ali, 47, has come to demonstrate with her husband, brothers and nephews. She vowed they would stay "until the Sayyed tells us to withdraw," using the honorary title of Sadr, whose black turban marks him as a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH).

A portrait of Moqtada sat in the lap of the mother of six girls and one boy. "He is the only one with integrity," said the woman, who lives in Baghdad's working-class Sadr City district, named after the preacher's late father who was a revered cleric.

Her goal, she said, is to "recover the country. The whole country has been stolen." She said her husband has been disabled since he was wounded in a 2009 bombing in Baghdad. "He was a civil servant, he was just getting out of work," she said. "Since then we have received no compensation." She said her son started working after primary school to help feed the family.



**BAGHDAD:** Supporters of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr, protesting against a rival bloc's nomination for prime minister, raise a banner bearing the name of one of the tribal clans (Masoud Clan) at their sit-in inside Iraq's parliament headquarters. — AFP

"There is no work for young people," she said. "Even those with higher degrees become porters or day labourers. Is this what they deserve?"

### The tuk-tuk driver

Wearing shorts, flip-flops and sunglasses, Rassul Achour, 20, has used his three-wheeled motorcycle taxi to shuttle protesters in the blistering summer heat. He charges only about 30 US cents for the tuk-tuk ride and says "it's symbolic, just for the petrol".

On a normal day his tuk-tuk earns him just over \$10, just enough to scrape by with his wife and their one-year-old daughter. Life is a struggle he said, with daily power cuts, potholed streets and a night-time tuk-tuk ban that makes his job harder.

Pointing to other young protesters, he said: "All these young people don't have jobs. We want jobs." Achour said he would be ready for any job, even with the military: "Let them give me a job and send me anywhere, even to the border with Syria." — AFP

were denounced by the Scottish National Party (SNP), which is pressing for a second referendum on independence.

John Swinney, Sturgeon's deputy as first minister of Scotland, called the remarks "obnoxious" and contrasted the roughly 200,000 Tory members with the 2.4 million votes the SNP won in elections last year. "Nicola Sturgeon has far more democratic legitimacy than Liz Truss is going to have if she becomes the prime minister," he told BBC television.

"And I think Liz Truss has absolutely no right or foundation to make these remarks," Swinney said, arguing her "silly, intemperate intervention" had made the case itself for Scotland to go its own way. Sunak has also ruled out another referendum, after Scots voted narrowly in 2014 to stay in the UK.

Last week, Sunak called it "the wrong priority at the worst possible moment". But the SNP argues that Brexit has transformed the constitutional debate, and wants to hold a second plebiscite in October 2023.

The Supreme Court in London plans to hold hearings on October 11-12 this year on whether that would be legal without approval from the UK government. "Keeping the UK together means confronting nationalism and beating them at the ballot box. Only I have a plan to do this," Sunak said, after winning the endorsement of 10 Scottish Conservative colleagues.

Truss, however, already has the backing of big hitters in Johnson's outgoing cabinet after initially



Liz Truss

building a strong poll lead on her promises of immediate tax cuts to address a cost-of-living crisis in Britain. Both candidates have been issuing daily pledges of policy changes in a bid to turn a page on the Johnson government and address Britons' economic fears. They have also been trying to curry favour with right-wingers in the Tory rank and file. Truss outlined the creation of "regional pay boards" outside London for public-sector pay, rather than a uniform rate set nationally, as part of a plan to wage "war on Whitehall waste".

The plan could save £8.8 billion (\$10.75 billion) a year if it covered "all public-sector workers in the long term", her campaign said late Monday. — AFP



"He is the only one with integrity"

express anger at a dysfunctional political system, poor public services and the weak economy of the oil-rich but corruption-plagued country.

Nearly two decades after a US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, and 10 months on from the latest elections, the impasse has left Iraq without a new prime minister or president. AFP spoke to demonstrators, several of whom did not want to be fully identified, about why they have joined the mass protest camp.

### The school teacher

Ali Mohammed Oklah, 43, left behind his wife and three children to drive for four hours from Iraq's mostly Shiite south to the legislature in the usually ultra-secure

## Beirut blast victim's parents wage lonely battle for justice

**BEIRUT:** Paul and Tracy Naggear have lived in grief since the massive explosion that tore through the Lebanese capital in 2020 killed their three-year-old daughter, and their anger boils over the stalled investigation.

The August 4 mega-blast, blamed on a fire that ignited tonnes of ammonium nitrate fertiliser haphazardly stored for years at Beirut harbour, was one of the largest non-nuclear detonations ever recorded. It destroyed thousands of homes, including the couple's apartment which overlooked the harbour-side. Their daughter Alexandra was one of the youngest among the more than 200 people killed.

Failed attempts to hold accountable the state officials whose negligence is widely blamed for Lebanon's worst peacetime disaster have made Alexandra's death even more bitter.

"Our sadness is not the same, it keeps growing, because as time goes on, we miss Alexandra and feel her absence," said Tracy, 36. "Although we can learn to live with sadness, there is an anguish and anger that continues to grow" in the absence of justice, she told AFP in the lead-up to the tragedy's second anniversary on Thursday. — AFP

## UK PM hopeful Truss poll favourite

**LONDON:** Polls Tuesday showed Conservative Liz Truss ahead in the race to become Britain's next prime minister, even as she came under fierce fire in Scotland and was forced into a policy U-turn. As Tory members begin voting for a new party leader by post and online this week, a new survey said the foreign secretary had extended her lead over her main rival, former finance minister Rishi Sunak.

The YouGov poll for The Times found that 60 percent of party members surveyed over five days said they would vote for her, against 26 percent who preferred the ex-chancellor of the exchequer. It came after another poll reported by The Times earlier Tuesday said her lead had narrowed from more than 20 points to just five: 48 percent to 43 percent.

The result of the election, to decide who will replace Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is due on September 5. Earlier on Tuesday, Truss was accused of insulting the government in Edinburgh after she alleged First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was an "attention seeker" for agitating for Scottish independence, and suggested people should "ignore her".

The provocative remarks, delivered at a Tory member hustings in southwest England late Monday,

2.818 million bpd. The Kuwaiti delegation to the two meetings included the OPEC Governor Mohammad Al-Shatti and the National Representative of Kuwait to OPEC Sheikh Abdullah Sabah Salem Hamoud Al-Sabah.

Meanwhile, the OPEC+ oil cartel agreed to a small increase in production Wednesday, likely disappointing US President Joe Biden who lobbied for a big hike to tame soaring energy prices on a recent trip to Saudi Arabia. The cartel led by Saudi Arabia and Russia decided to raise production by 100,000 barrels per day for September, much lower than previous increases, according to a statement issued after a ministerial videoconference.

Oil prices had fallen earlier this week but they rose more than one percent on news of the OPEC+ decision, with the main international contract, Brent, climbing back above \$100 per barrel.

"The smallest increase in OPEC+ history will do little to help the ongoing global energy crisis," Edward Moya, analyst at OANDA trading platform, told AFP. — Agencies

protest student leader Wu'er Kaixi. "We are in high agreement that Taiwan is in the frontline (of democracy)," Wu'er said. "Both the United States and Taiwan governments need to... conduct more in defending human rights." Pelosi's delegation left Taiwan on Wednesday evening en route to South Korea, her next stop in an Asia tour that has included stops in Singapore and Malaysia. She will wrap up her trip in Japan.

After her departure, Taiwan's defense ministry announced late Wednesday that 27 Chinese warplanes had entered the island's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Over the last two years, Beijing has ramped up military incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ - which is not the same as the island's territorial airspace, but includes a far greater area.

The ministry published a map that showed 16 Su-30s and 6 J-11s had crossed the so-called "median line" of the Taiwan Strait - an unofficial boundary in the narrow waterway, which separates the island from the mainland and straddles vital shipping lanes. Chinese jets also crossed over the so-called "median line" during two high-level visits by US officials in 2020 during Donald Trump's presidency. Nevertheless, that is still a relatively rare occurrence. — AFP

## Oil Minister urges OPEC+...

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yesterday, wishing him success on the upcoming period in supporting and encouraging cooperation among member states, as well as unifying efforts to create more stability in the oil markets. He commended the role of OPEC+ in contributing to the stability of markets and the security of supply effectively, stressing that OPEC+ is a major element in the market that must be preserved for the benefit of all.

Al-Fares reiterated Kuwait's full commitment to the agreed production quotas, commending the OPEC+ decision to increase supplies on September by 100,000 barrels per day, becoming a positive indicator of market support, as Kuwait's share for September will be at

## Taiwan defiant; China gears for...

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We will... continue to hold the line of defense for democracy," Tsai said at an event with Pelosi in Taipei. She also thanked the 82-year-old US lawmaker for "taking concrete actions to show your staunch support for Taiwan at this critical moment". China tries to keep Taiwan isolated on the world stage and opposes countries having official exchanges with Taipei.

Pelosi, second in line to the presidency, is the highest-profile elected US official to visit Taiwan in 25 years. "Today, our delegation... came to Taiwan to make unequivocally clear we will not abandon our commitment to Taiwan," she said at the event with Tsai. She added her group had come "in peace to the region".

Before leaving Taiwan, Pelosi also met with several dissidents who have previously been in the crosshairs of China's wrath — including Tiananmen

## US warns Americans after Zawahiri...

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"I made a promise to the American people that we'd continue to conduct effective counterterrorism operations... We've done just that." Announcing jihadist leader deaths has become a ritual—both somber and highly political—for presidents ever since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Barack Obama's 2011 revelation of the daring operation to kill Osama bin Laden in his home in Pakistan electrified the nation.

On hearing Obama, a skilled orator, people poured into the streets, chanting "USA!" Donald Trump took a different approach in 2019, using gory language to deliver news of a raid to kill Islamic State group leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in Syria—and to bolster his own strong man image. "He died like a dog," Trump said.

For Biden, the setting was inauspicious. Isolating from a case of rebound COVID-19, battered in the polls and facing the anniversary this month of the traumatic August 2021 exit of US troops from Kabul, the Democrat is in a weak position. In a nod to COVID ventilation measures, his speech was delivered from the noisy balcony of the Blue Room. As he touted American resilience, Washington police sirens wailed in the background.

Yet the timing of the speech could not have been better for a president seeking to change the narrative. While steering clear of triumphalism, Biden noted that Zawahiri had been on the wanted list "for years under presidents (George W) Bush, Obama and Trump." The implication—that the country is safe in Biden's hands—was clear. "No matter how long it takes, no matter where you hide, if you are a threat to our people, the United States will find you and take you out," Biden said.

### Afghan strategy debate

Critics on the right and left see last year's US withdrawal from Kabul as a show of ineptitude that, in addition to being a humiliating spectacle, will make Afghanistan a hotbed of anti-American Islamic

groups, similar to the time of 9/11. Biden argues he had the courage to pull the plug on a failed war conducted by three previous presidents and that there simply was never going to be a neat ending to the debacle.

Dismissing skeptics, he also promised that American "over the horizon" capabilities meant there'd be no more need to risk US lives on the ground. Now with the Zawahiri killing, Biden has a golden opportunity to say that he's been proved right. Afghanistan "can't be a launching pad against the United States," Biden said in his speech. "This operation is a clear demonstration that we will, we can, and we'll always make good on the solemn pledge."

### Downsides

There was instant praise from even unlikely quarters, with the anchor on the often hostile Fox News' evening broadcast calling it "President Biden's bin Laden moment" and "a huge, huge win for the US." Some experts, however, caution against the White House spin. James Jeffrey, a former US ambassador to Iraq and now chair of the Wilson Center think tank's Middle East Program, applauded the demonstration of "excellent intelligence, an operational strike capability and decisiveness."

However, that expertise does not outweigh the "chaos" of last year's Afghan withdrawal, which Jeffrey blamed on poor coordination and Biden's "handicapping" of staff through his refusal to accept there could be any downsides to pulling out—or to plan for them. Nathan Sales, another former diplomat who works at the Atlantic Council, said Zawahiri's mere presence in Kabul was a failure for the United States, suggesting "as feared, the Taliban is once more granting safe haven to the leaders of Al-Qaeda."

And it's too early to say whether one spectacular drone strike "can be replicated against other terrorist targets," he said. "Until we know more, we should resist the urge to see the strike as a vindication of 'over the horizon' counterterrorism." Biden, however, is so far getting overall good marks. Among those cheering Tuesday was Bill McRaven, who as then-commander of US special operations oversaw the bin Laden raid. "What the US has shown is that we can in fact do over the horizon targeting on certain high value individuals," he told CNN. — AFP