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The Psychology of Peaceful and Violent Protest: Research Insights from Iraq and Beyond

POLICY BRIEF

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Cover: Students of the University of Kufa carrying Iraqi flags protesting against the Iraqi government (January 28, 2020).
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Purpose

Understanding why people participate in political protest – and why some turn to violence while others remain peaceful – is critical for policy responses and practitioner efforts in fragile states. However, existing evidence is largely limited to (relatively) stable democratic settings, and frequently analyses political groups or movements rather than individuals, leaving central questions about the psychological causes of peaceful and violent protest in conflict-affected environments unanswered.

This briefing note summarises findings from large-scale quantitative studies in Iraq,[1] conducted as part of the XCEPT programme, as well as related research on high-risk protest behaviour. On that basis, this note presents practical findings with direct relevance for international and practitioner engagement across fragile and conflict-affected environments globally, with implications extending well beyond Iraq.

1 The primary data supporting this research were collected between 2024 and 2025 across eight governorates in Iraq (N = 2,148) in collaboration with a local partner organisation. See N. Mallock et al., "Protesting When Your Life Is on the Line: Pathways to Collective Action in Conflict-Affected Environments." Preprint, submitted in 2026.

Iraqi protesters block the road by burning tyres to protest against the Iraqi government (January 22, 2020).
Hayder Mohsin / Shutterstock.com

Key Findings and Implications

- **Standard psychological models of protest fail to explain political behaviour in conflict-affected settings.** An established three-factor framework, highlighting *group identification*, *moral outrage* and *collective efficacy*, did not reliably explain protest engagement in Iraq, suggesting that decision-making under high-risk conditions follows different patterns.

- **Moral outrage drives high-risk protest.** Intentions to engage in violent or illegal political action are most reliably predicted by the experience of moral outrage, an emotional mechanism which lowers willingness to reconcile with other groups and legitimises political violence.

- **Personal adversity may matter more than exposure to violent conflict.** On average, recent experiences of personal life crises (such as job loss, family death or financial hardship) were a stronger antecedent of protest motivations than direct exposure to war and conflict, signalling opportunities for policy and practice.

- **Demographic profiles do not reliably predict who protests.** Mirroring results from previous research, the psychological pathways leading to peaceful and violent protest were largely consistent across gender and age groups, suggesting that targeting prevention efforts based on demographics alone is unlikely to be effective**.**

- **Prevention strategies should prioritise psychological drivers of mobilisation.** Effective policy responses to reduce the risk of specifically violent protest require awareness of moral perceptions, personal adversity and experiential risk factors – rather than 'hard' characteristics or an exclusive focus on conflict- or war-related experiences.

Background: Political Action in Iraq

Iraq has experienced waves of mass mobilisation in recent years, most notably the 2019–2021 Tishreen (October) movement. Triggered by rising unemployment, corruption and the lack of public services, the protests became the largest sustained social movement in Iraq since 2003.[2]

Consisting predominantly of young, politically unaffiliated Iraqis who rejected the political establishment, demonstrators occupied Baghdad's Tahrir Square and cities across the south, demanding an end to the ethno-sectarian power-sharing system (muhasasa) and to foreign interference in Iraqi politics. The state response was severe: security forces and paramilitary groups used lethal force against peaceful demonstrators, resulting in over 600 deaths and more than 20,000 injuries in the first months alone.2 Prominent activists were assassinated or forcibly disappeared; to date, no meaningful accountability has been achieved.[3]

While the protests succeeded in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and securing electoral reforms, the crackdown – combined with internal divisions over whether to pursue electoral or street-based strategies and riots – ultimately fragmented the movement. Five years on, the legacy of Tishreen continues to shape Iraqi political culture, even as mass mobilisation has become rarer and riskier.

The case of the Tishreen movement highlights a broader insight: even today, Iraq experiences a wide spectrum of political action forms, ranging from peaceful demonstrations and civic organising in political communities to violent riots and even armed confrontations. This is not unique to Iraq: societies recovering from war and authoritarian rule often experience a variety of political action as unresolved grievances, weakened institutions, and competing visions for the future create conditions for both pro-social activism and renewed political violence.[4] Yet this raises a question with important implications: what motivates individuals to take political action at all, and what distinguishes those who protest peacefully from those who turn to violence? To date, there remains a knowledge gap specifically in environments affected by extreme political violence and prolonged conflict.

2 *Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, Middle East Report No. 223 (International Crisis Group, 2021).
3 *'We Hold Them Responsible for the Blood of Our Youth': Five Years On, Impunity Prevails for Violations against Tishreen Protesters* (Amnesty International, 2024).
4 Pëllumb Kelmendi et al., "Protests in Postwar Societies: Grievances and Contentious Collective Action in Kosovo," *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 5 (2023): 1143–1163, doi:10.1017/nps.2022.7.

Why Do People Protest?

Social psychological research has long sought to explain why individuals participate in collective action, including political protest. The dominant framework identifies three central predictors:

- Group identification – The extent to which people feel part of a politicised collective
- Moral outrage – Emotional reactions to perceived injustices against the group
- Collective efficacy – The belief that collective action can achieve meaningful change.

These factors have been widely established across numerous studies and contexts.[5]

However, this evidence base is almost exclusively drawn from stable, liberal democracies – and typically examines relatively low-risk forms of protest, such as student demonstrations or pro-environmental marches. This leaves two critical questions unanswered. Do the same mechanisms apply when protest carries extreme personal risk, such as a potentially violent crackdown by state or other non-state actors? And do motivations differ between peaceful marches and violent confrontations?

5 M. Van Zomeren, et al., "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Three Socio-Psychological Perspectives," *Psychological Bulletin* 134, no. 4 (2008): 504–535, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.4.504.

Protesting in High-Risk Environments: Findings from Iraq

We sought to address these policy-relevant questions through a large-scale study in Iraq,[6] examining intentions to engage in either lower-risk (peaceful and legal forms) or higher-risk (violent and/or illegal forms) of political action. In collaboration with a local research institute, we conducted surveys and interviews with more than 2,000 people from across the country and all demographic groups. The findings reveal important departures from prevalent psychological theory.

Motivations are consistent across demographics, but context shapes how they translate into action

The psychological pathways to protest were largely the same across gender and age profiles, even though baseline intentions differed (for instance, men reported ~11% higher intentions; intentions declined slightly with higher age). There was no participant profile that would have reliably predicted engagement in either peaceful or violent protest forms.

Standard models do not replicate

Direct tests of two prominent frameworks reflecting the three factors introduced above – the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA)[5] and the encapsulated model of social identity in collective action (EMSICA)[7] – were not supported by the Iraq data. Neither model adequately explained intentions to engage in political protest, especially not in higher-risk forms such as those involving violence.

Moral outrage dominates, but may be conditional on hostility to other groups

Instead of an interaction between group identities and beliefs about the effectiveness of protest, moral outrage emerged as the key predictor of high-risk protest intentions. Moral outrage was generally higher than in comparable populations not affected by conflict (likely owing to the extreme experiences and unresolved grievances introduced by conflict exposure). However, the evidence suggests that such moral outrage may not directly lead to protest in most cases. In our sample, moral outrage only translated into action intentions once it manifested in specific hostile attitudes about other groups in Iraq: rejection of reconciliation with outgroups and support for political violence. In other words, a general sense of injustice or political grievance is often found in conflict-affected populations, but what distinguishes those who act is whether that grievance becomes directed against specific groups and then legitimises confrontational responses.

6 Mallock et al., "Protesting When Your Life Is on the Line."
7 Emma F. Thomas et al., "Social Identities Facilitate and Encapsulate Action-Relevant Constructs: A Test of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 15, no. 1 (2012): 75–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430211413619.

Pragmatic considerations matter less

On the other hand, beliefs about the efficacy of protest ('will this work?') did not play a decisive role. While they somewhat predicted intentions for peaceful protest, there was no reliable link to higher-risk action, which tends to carry a higher urgency for policymakers and practitioners.

Personal versus political drivers of protest

A second analysis examined what gives rise to the key motivational factor identified (moral outrage) in practice. One intuitive assumption was that in conflict-affected conditions, it is primarily political experiences – such as exposure to war and violence – that create the emotional path towards protest. Yet the evidence from our study challenges this picture. Both personal life crises (recent job loss; death of a family member; serious illness; financial hardship) and conflict exposure (witnessing violence; displacement; loss due to war) were associated with higher levels of moral outrage. However, the effects of personal adversity were consistently stronger. Personal life crises predicted increased moral outrage and, through that pathway, stronger intentions for both peaceful and violent protest. Notably, personal crises also predicted higher collective efficacy beliefs, suggesting that personal hardship may increase a sense of collective empowerment alongside grievance.

Evidence from other fields

Beyond the immediate study context, these results echo those from research conducted in other conflict-affected environments, including protest behaviour in the West Bank,[8] resistance against repressive regimes from Russia to Hong Kong,[9] and among armed opposition groups in the Syrian civil war,[10] where moral outrage similarly emerged as the dominant driver of high-risk political action while efficacy beliefs remained bounded to lower-risk protest.

8 Nils Mallock et al., "Proximity to Settlements in the West Bank Shifts Protest Behavior toward Higher-Risk Actions and Increases Perceived Collective Injustice," *Political Psychology* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70068.

9 A. H. Ayanian et al., "Resistance in Repressive Contexts: A Comprehensive Test of Psychological Predictors," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 120, no. 4 (2021): 912–939, https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000285.

10 Nafees Hamid, Nils Mallock, Broderick McDonald, and Rahaf Aldoughli, "The Right Way to Engage with Syria's New Rulers," *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2025.

Policy and Practice Implications

Social environments affected by a legacy of extreme and prolonged conflict deeply shape people's lives, and also the reasons why individuals may engage in protests of different kinds. This research highlights these dynamics through a rare comparative study of both lower-risk and higher-risk political action in Iraq, a difficult-to-access yet highly policy-relevant setting.

Several implications emerge from this research for policy and practice:

1. Understanding moral motivations, not just material interests

Traditional approaches to preventing social unrest often focus on addressing material grievances or targeting populations with direct conflict exposure. These findings suggest that understanding moral perceptions, and the specific cognitive pathways through which they translate into action (outgroup rejection; legitimisation of violence) deserve greater attention. **Programmes that provide alternative frameworks for understanding grievances, preventing narratives of competitive victimhood and blame attribution, may prove useful.**

2. Recognising the role of personal adversity

Focusing humanitarian efforts on war and conflict exposure is worthwhile in many ways, and can help reduce the risk of perpetual cycles of violence and retribution. However, another driver may be equally important to consider: adverse personal life events. **Comprehensive social protection systems and accessible psychosocial support services could serve a dual purpose of addressing immediate humanitarian needs while potentially reducing social risk factors.**

3. Targeting beyond demographics

The finding that psychological pathways to protest are consistent across gender, age and (largely) ethnic-religious groupings suggests that demographic-based targeting of prevention efforts may be insufficient. **Interventions may be more effective when focused on psychological and experiential risk factors rather than population categories.**

4. Distinguishing peaceful from violent mobilisation

The divergent role of efficacy (predicting peaceful but not violent action) suggests that social empowerment programmes, while valuable for democratic participation, may be insufficient for preventing violence in deeply fractured societies. Here too, efforts by policy and practitioners seeking to prevent political unrest without subduing peaceful protest may be informed by measuring and monitoring moral outrage in at-risk contexts.

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