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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Jssor Youth Organization, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[28 January 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The Young at the forefront of the movement in Lebanon and Iraq

Protests in Lebanon chanting: "From Baghdad to Beirut one revolution that will not die"

There is no question that the ongoing protests in Lebanon and Iraq are a response to serious socio-economic and political problems. But they are also the harbinger of a new wave of patriotism that transcends sectarianism and localism.

Protesters in each country has a unique set of demands, but the central themes have been the same -- calling for changes in government amid a deep distrust of leaders and for economic opportunities amid high levels of corruption and unemployment, especially for young people.

In addition, the protesters called for reforming the ruling government all over again based on a new constitutional framework which ensures countering corruption, tackling poverty, addressing unemployment, and improving basic services such as the provision of water and electricity. Also, any reforms must deprive sectarian politicians of the ability to exploit state resources for their own advantage and promote the building of a nation-state which keeps the same distance from all factions and political currents and combats sectarianism.

The biggest portion of the protests in Iraq and Lebanon is made up of youth who are under 20. They belong to the post-2003 generation in Iraq and the post-8 and 14 March generation in Lebanon. It is a modernist generation of youth who spend most of their time on social media. The youth are disconnected from faction and sectarian-based politics. The youth are not fond of turbaned clerics and religious leaders due to their acquaintance with the world and its modernist and contemporary values.

The protest consist of youth who are hostile to sectarian projects

Lebanese and Iraqi demonstrators today are picking up the banner of a dignified national identity that has been submerged under the guises of power sharing and confessional formulas. Even if the two states' security apparatuses were able to force everyone off the street, a new chapter in the two countries' histories has been opened; and more will follow.

Perhaps the best hope for a move away from sectarianism is that the unaffiliated youth are taking the lead. The political forces ruling the two countries have realised that the time for change has finally arrived.

Some scenes from both countries bear uncanny resemblance: young, working class men revolting shirtless; women leading the chants, standing defiantly in front of security forces; satirical songs, aimed at the ruling elite, spreading like wildfire; previously-deserted concrete buildings occupied, floor after floor, by demonstrators raising flags; and protesters swaying to "Mawtini, Mawtini", Iraq's national anthem, equally emotional and angry, their raspy voices calling out for new election law that not based on sectrians or ideological lines.

"Our protests are unlike protests in the past. Before, protests were a mix of religious groups making political demands," said Sahar Qassim, a 28-year-old activist in Baghdad. "Now, the protests are political, and religion does not play a role in our demands." ¹

The absence of partisan Leaders in the protests

So far, however, the movements have insisted that they are leaderless. Lists of demands have emerged at protest sites, but many of the calls compete with one another, with few groups presenting themselves as capable of leading their countries into a new phase.

Both protests are characterized by their non-partisan nature and cannot be easily polarized. Even those who are partisan have had to leave their partisan slogans and chants when they arrive at the places where the protesters gather. The protests are collective involving everyone

¹ <https://www.wral.com/young-iraqis-and-lebanese-arent-just-demanding-better-societies-theyre-creating-them-at-protest-sites/18749738/>

with no clear religious and partisan leader. This is one of the strengths of the protest, which makes it difficult for political parties and its proxies to curb the protests in a way that serves its agenda.

This unity narrative has reached much of Lebanon and Iraq, but the generational division that has been amplified by these protests still has the power to divide families.

The map of the protests in the two countries

The spillover map of the protests reveals that the protests are spreading across Lebanon's territory (Sidon, Tripoli, Jbeil, Baalbek, Nabatieh, Chtaura). On top of these areas comes the Southern Suburb, the hotspot of Hezbollah and the Amal movement. The protests spilled over in Iraq to extend from the capital Baghdad to most of the Shiite-majority southern provinces and cities (Shiite incubators of the Iranian project), bringing the number of Iraqi provinces that have witnessed protests to nine (Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Samawa, Diyala, Wasset, Hillah). The spillover map of the protests and the chants of the protesters indicate that they have transcended – though temporarily – many of the sectarian and political divisions that have gripped Iraqi and Lebanese political landscapes since the beginning of the first decade of the third millennium.

The two movements also seem to be adopting similar protest strategies. In both countries, rows of parked vehicles have blocked traffic along main thoroughfares in recent weeks. University-aged demonstrators wearing medical masks or eye goggles have occupied bridges and flyovers, refusing to believe pledges of reform from both governments.

'The goal is one' The big difference is that in Iraq, the demonstrations have turned deadly, with more than 500 and thousands been injured, mostly protesters but also including security forces, killed since the movement started Oct. 1, while in Lebanon, has been largely incident-free despite scuffles with security forces and counterdemonstrators rallying in support of established parties.

The role of civil society

A primary observation of the protests reveals the inaptitude of civil society to carry out the role it's meant to perform, a more in-depth study is however needed to explore the reasons behind this inaptitude and the ways in which civil society can provide its tools and assistance to the service of the revolution.

We did notice the high level of fragmentation of Beirut's movement scene, compared to the collectiveness of other urban scenes such as in Tripoli, Tyre and other regions where the movement is led by one community rather than individuals or separate communities.

Discussion groups are being organised in the squares and streets in both capitals bringing together protesters from all walks of life to share opinions, perspectives and fears, and to raise awareness on the constitution and the constitutional and legal frameworks for realising their goals of reform.

On the other hand, another link seems to be missing, specifically the role of civil society as a coordinating and organizing force; a very crucial role taking into consideration people's lack of trust in political parties which makes them incapable of leading this transitional phase. The non-governmental sector is, however, unable to fill this gap since it has also gained a bad reputation of corruption and submission to foreign agendas. While non-governmental organizations have been very active in advocating for many issues raised by the protesters, their contribution today seems to be very marginal and ineffective.

So where do we go from here?

- Prioritise targeted youth programmes that provide holistic personal and community development, and strengthen volunteering, youth-led initiatives and other leadership opportunities, particularly for young women.

- Support and build on existing youth initiatives and community activities where they exist rather than creating parallel structures.
 - Support and fund comprehensive national youth strategies that address youth disempowerment and include systematic youth engagement and participation in social and political processes.
 - Fund programmes that provide economic opportunities for both displaced and local youth, including start-up grants, micro-finance, internships, vocational training and apprenticeships
 - Develop comprehensive national youth strategies that address youth disempowerment and include systematic youth engagement and participation in social and political processes.
 - Operationalise the 2015 Amman Youth Declaration and UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security to enable young people to participate meaningfully in society and in political processes.
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