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Maintaining nonviolent selfdiscipline in hostile protest environments: evidence from the 2019 Baghdad protests

Vera Mironova[a] and Sam Whitt[b]

[a]Non-Resident Fellow, Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, USA; [b]Department of Political Science, High Point University, High Point, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Successful civil resistance requires an enduring commitment to non violent selfdiscipline, often in response to repressive and provocative government tactics. We examine dedication to nonviolent collective action using the case of recent protests in Baghdad, Iraq. Based on a sample of 300 activists from 2019 anti-government protests across different locations in Baghdad, we find that those who have been exposed to violence by government forces are more willing to justify violent responses. However, more experienced protesters, reflected in present and past protest activity, display greater commitment to nonviolent activism and less willingness to reciprocate violence despite government provocations. We attribute this to possible socialization effects within activist communities which help transcend identity cleavages and associational divisions within the movement, reinforcing protest commitment and dedication to nonviolence. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for civil resistance as an alternative to violence in conflict-prone environments.

Introduction

How do ordinary protesters maintain their composure and commitment to nonviolent struggle when engaging in long-term daily protest actions and often grueling tests of physical and psychological endurance? This vital question for social movement scholarship requires greater theoretical attention and empirical validation (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). We utilize the case of 2019 anti-government protests in Baghdad, Iraq to provide exploratory answers. We examine two fundamental questions about protester attitudes and behavior. First, what explains why some protesters have greater commitment to the cause than others? We argue that the socializing experiences of ongoing activist participation, as measured by past and present protest engagement, increases commitment to key goals. Because habitual protesters are also more likely to be exposed to government repression, our second question asks: how do activists maintain nonviolent selfdiscipline in the face of government threats? We find that those who have endured or witnessed abuse at the hands of government forces are more likely to justify violence in response to government provocation. However, nonviolent protest commitment and experience

work against impulses to reciprocate violence. We attribute this selfdiscipline to the socializing effects of nonviolent activism. In addition, we also find that identity and associational cleavages and divisions within a movement need not undermine protest commitment and dedication to non-violence. Our results underscore the power of civil resistance as a nonviolent alternative to resolving contentious issues in conflict-prone environments.

Explaining civil resistance at the micro-level

The literature on social movement activism is being continuously updated in response to emerging activist causes (Della Porta & Diani, 2020; Snow & Soule, 2009; Tilly & Wood, 2015). One on hand, the arrival of new social media technologies has revolutionized how scholars approach social movement activism (Gerbaudo, 2012; Mooijman et al., 2018). At the same time, many studies are also expanding and reinforcing established movement participation theory to include instrumental/ rational choice explanations based on resource mobilization and selective incentives (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 1978) or psychological drivers involving relative deprivation, grievances, emotions and moral indignation, a sense of agency to affect outcomes, or social cohesion within activist networks (Gurr, 1970; Klandermans, 2014; McAdam, 1986). Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009, 2013) draw similar distinctions within social movement theory between structuralist approaches (rationalist, resource and opportunity, network and organizationally driven) and social-constructivist orientations (emotional, ideological, identity-driven), which they later expand into five broad domains focusing on grievances, efficacy, identity, mobilization processes, and social embeddedness.

A large body of research has also engaged the efficacy of violent versus nonviolent strategies for achieving movement goals (Lehoucq, 2016). Social movement theory has traditionally differentiated between principled vs. strategic nonviolence, the later most closely associated with work by Sharp (2005). According to strategic nonviolence theory, practitioners of non-violence are not necessarily pacifists or nonviolent absolutists, but pragmatically adopt nonviolence as an efficacious tactic. While some scholars dispute whether non-violence is the only pathway to social and political change (Lehoucq, 2016; Walter, 2006), recent empirical research has found nonviolent strategies more effective at securing movement goals than violence (Schock, 2013; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). However, because activists are often willing to take on higher risk, higher cost forms of collective action over time (McAdam, 1986), movements that begin peacefully can and do turn to violence.

What drives movements to embrace violence? A recent review of the literature on social movement radicalization underscores the interplay of structure and agency-based explanations focusing on ideological, behavioral, and relational theories (Della Porta, 2018). However, research ultimately yields mixed results on the propensity for and drivers of radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; Thomas & Louis, 2014). Also, despite recent advances in real-time survey and interview-based field research exemplified by Tufekci and Wilson (2012), Onuch and Sasse (2016), and Aytaç et al. (2018), most quantitative empirical work tends to be retrospective and does not directly engage activist preferences for non-violence versus violence or radicalization propensity over time.

Our study helps to fill this important gap. We argue for more attention to the complexity of protest activism at the micro-level. Why do some individuals act with greater conviction, protesting for longer periods of time and more frequently than others? Why do some protesters show stronger commitment to nonviolent strategies than others when facing government repression? Our research seeks to expand conceptually and theoretically from a binary understanding of protest participation to one of varying levels of protest commitment and selfdiscipline within social movements. We now turn to further discussion of key concepts, theory, and hypotheses.

Maintaining protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline

Social movements, and protests more specifically, embody a form of contentious politics that strive to generate mass public awareness and support, which activists hope will fuel cascading demands for social and political change (Klandermans, 2014; Kuran, 1989; Lohmann, 1994; Tarrow, 2011). Social movements are often characterized in the literature as complex, long-sustained processes that cannot easily be reduced to singular moments or events (Snow & Soule, 2009). Collective action naturally involves questions about movement intensity, duration, and frequency (Tilly, 1978). At the micro-level, this implies that different protest actors will espouse varying levels of commitment to a movement. We understand protest commitment, then, as the intensity of support and dedication one brings to a cause. We draw insights from Saunders et al. (2012) who urge scholars 'to avoid treating protesters as a homogenous group' (p. 263), distinguishing instead among *novices, returners, repeaters*, and *stalwarts*. Verhulst and Walgrave (2009) make similar conceptual and analytical distinctions between *first-timers* and *die-hards*, where die-hards are perceived as more intensity dedicated to supporting a movement's goals and actions. Implicitly, what separates novices and first-timers from repeaters, stalwarts, and die-hards is prior experience.

How could prior protest experience increase levels of commitment? Here, we focus on a social capital explanation where commitment is acquired through prolonged embeddedness within protest movements (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Social capital is generally understood as an umbrella term for shared values, norms, networks and trust that sustain cooperation within groups (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2001; Baldassarri & Diani, 2007). Hence, protest embeddedness is both structural and relational to others in the movement. We argue that protest experience could increase protest commitment through organizational socialization, a social learning processes where exposure to the group increases internalization of group values and goals (Bandura, 1977; Fang et al., 2011).[1] Socialization effects may operate through conventional face-to-face exposure and contact mechanisms as well as indirect social media platforms (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This socialization process is consistent with Fillieule's (2013) *life-openness model*, which underscores the transformative power of social movements to adapt individual attitudes and behavior in adult life, and considered one of the most promising new directions in socialization research.[2] We test the following hypothesis:

H1 (Protest commitment) Protest commitment increases with protest experience.

Next, we consider the relationship between protest commitment, protest experience, and nonviolent selfdiscipline. In terms of movement strategy, some scholars argue that non-violence is superior to violence in achieving both critical mass support and activist goals (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; though see, Lehoucq, 2016). For nonviolent tactics to work, however, participants must maintain nonviolent selfdiscipline (Sharp, 2005). When selfdiscipline breaks down or when groups abandon non-violence in favor of more aggressive tactics, it can alienate the movement from potentially sympathetic bystanders and defectors, undermine international support, and serve as a justification for government crackdowns (Hale & Colton, 2017; Pearlman, 2018; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008).

How can nonviolent selfdiscipline be maintained? First, selfdiscipline can manifest as a principled cause (Mantena, 2020) or as a pragmatic strategy, consistent with Sharp (2005). Psychologists define violence as including 'four essential elements: behavior that is (a) intentional, (b) unwanted, (c) nonessential, and (d) harmful' (Hamby, 2017, p. 167). Like protest commitment in general, dedication to nonviolence can be highly variable and potentially unstable within movements. Nonviolent selfdiscipline also involves at least three dimensions: an individual's ability to refrain from violent action, a willingness to prevent others in the movement from using violence, and support for the group's commitment to nonviolent principles and strategies.

One possibility is that nonviolent selfdiscipline, in both its individual and group dimensions, can be internalized and reinforced through organizational socialization or social learning processes within a movement, which increase with time and commitment to group goals (Bandura, 1977; Fang et al., 2011). A social capital perspective similarly argues that group norms are important to signaling acceptable versus unacceptable 'repertoires of resistance' (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Gade, 2020). Those who deviate from acceptable norms of nonviolent resistance, then, are either sanctioned or purged from the movement or self-select into other groups.[3] We test the following hypothesis:

H2: (Nonviolent selfdiscipline) Nonviolent selfdiscipline increases with both protest experience and commitment.

Next, we consider whether identity cleavages could obstruct cooperation within activist communities. The literature underscores how movements nurture collective identities among participants to build homophily within the group and facilitate the internalization of shared norms and values (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). If social cohesion is vital to unity of purpose, then groups with potentially divisive identity cleavages and loyalties could have greater difficulty sustaining both protest comment and nonviolent selfdiscipline. Such within-movement divisions could involve associational memberships (parties and organizations) as well as ascriptive identities (ethnicity, religion, language) that might undermine cooperation on shared goals (Oliver, 2017; Onuch & Sasse, 2016; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). Can social movements maintain unity amid diversity? We test the following hypothesis:

H3 (Identity cleavages): Identity cleavages within movements reduce protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline.

Finally, we explore the impact of government authority strategies on protest commitment. When governments use non-coercive incentives (*carrots*) to encourage activists to stop protesting and negotiate, activists could either take up the government's offer or continue the struggle.[4] Consistent with H1, we anticipate that more committed protesters (i.e. seasoned stalwarts) will regard government incentives as a potential ruse, balking at negotiations. Distrust of government invitations may be especially pronounced when authorities have already utilized deceptive tactics to disperse protesters in the past. We test the following hypothesis:

H4 (Authority strategy: carrots): Government use of nonviolent incentives is less likely to deter protest commitment among experienced protesters.

Alternatively, authorities may also attempt to utilize violence (*sticks*) to crush protest movements or pressure them into conceding on key demands. Research indicates how government repression can be an effective counterstrategy against protest movements (Walter, 2006; Bueno De Mesquita & Smith, 2011). Authorities may also hope to provoke protesters into reciprocating violence, giving the government justification to launch more repressive crackdowns (De Jaegher & Hoyer, 2019). Experienced protesters, however, are likely familiar with this baiting strategy, and will avoid playing into the government's hands by reciprocating violence (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). We predict that experienced protesters will be less intimidated by and less likely to reciprocate government use of violence than newcomers. We test the following hypothesis:

H5 (Authority strategy: sticks) Government use of violent tactics is less likely to deter protest commitment among experienced protesters.

In summary, we examine how protest commitment can increase with time and experience within activist movements. We also consider how protest experience and commitment can bolster nonviolent selfdiscipline essential to successful civil resistance. We further evaluate whether identity cleavages undermine movement unity and non violent restraint, and we assess how government actions can impact protest commitment, comparing seasoned protesters to novices. We now turn to our rationale for testing these hypotheses in the case of the 2019 Baghdad Protests in Iraq.

Rationale for case selection

On 1 October 2019, thousands of people took to the streets of Baghdad in anti-government protests. While the protests began with a relatively small group of 3000 participants, they grew to include over one million people by 25 October and quickly spread to other regions of the country (see, Lovotti and Proserpio (2021) for more background). In the aftermath of the devastating Islamic State insurgency, sectarian in-fighting, and economic misery, Wilson (2019, np) describes the protests of October 2019 as:

> ... the largest in Iraq since Saddam Hussein fell in 2003, and the demonstrators are demanding the removal of the factions and political elites that came to power in the years afterward, who are seen as corrupt and subservient to other powers—such as the United States and Iran.

While the protesters remained largely nonviolent, occupying public spaces using 'sit-in' tactics and calling for constitutional reforms to curb sectarianism, fight corruption, improve public services, and limit Iranian and US influence, the Iraqi government responded heavy-handedly, resulting in over 500 dead and more than 15,000 injured protesters by the end of the year (Alsaadi, 2020; Mansour, 2019; Wilson, 2019).[5] At the time of our study in December 2019, these repressive measures had largely backfired, and the protest movement continued to build momentum.[6] By the end of December, the government of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi was forced to resign, and the interim Iraqi parliament passed key electoral reforms demanded by protesters, although the predominantly sectarian parties remained deadlocked on forming a new government (Rasheed & Aboulenein, 2019). Since our study was completed, the protests took a major turn due to the 3 January 2020 assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by U.S. forces in Baghdad, which created a rift between pro/anti-American and Iranian factions including Hashd al-Shaabi supporters (Dodge, 2020a). While protests continued across Iraq into 2021, their intensity waned, possibly due to increased fractionalization. The new Iraqi government also refrained from earlier repressive measures again activists, who continued to push their demands for political reforms and an end to sectarian divisions (Al-Rubaie, 2020).

The 2019 Baghdad Protests offer a useful case for testing theories about commitment to nonviolent collective action for several reasons. First, Iraqis have long endured brutal state repression, sectarian insurgency and civilian violence that often overshadow traditions of nonviolent activism (Blaydes, 2018; Davis, 2005; Marr & Al-Marashi, 2018). Given historical gravitation toward violence in Iraqi politics, the 2019 Baghdad protests offers an especially challenging case for an emerging nonviolent civil resistance movement to succeed. Yet for all the focus on sectarian violence and insurgencies linked to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Shia paramilitary groups, a vibrant nonviolent activist culture has materialized in Baghdad in defiance of sectarianism and political divisions that perpetuate it (Ali, 2013b; Jabar, 2018).

Baghdad's recurrent climate of anti-government activism, which shifts between nonviolence and violent repertoires, is a second rationale for case selection. Both violent and nonviolent activism played a prominent role in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 (Isakhan, 2011). Though eclipsed by other Arab Spring movements, a 2011 'Iraqi Spring' mobilized thousands of activists to take to the streets in anti-government protests, calling attention to persistent problems of mass unemployment, the deteriorated state of the economy, and corruption (Sly, 2011). However, such activism was constrained largely along sectarian lines (Haddad, 2013). Protests in late 2012, for example, driven primarily by Sunni Iraqis against the government of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, led to counter-protests by Shia groups through much of 2013 and resulted in violent clashes (Hauser, 2013; Al Jazeera, 2013a-b). In contrast, subsequent protests in 2015 and 2017 were more successful in building unity across sectarian divides and were notably more peaceful (Costantini, 2021). Non-governmental organizational capacities also expanded as part of the 'new civil society' in Iraq, which Ali (2021) characterizes as a transition in

movement politics away from divisive sectarian politics of 'recognition' to more culturally cross-cutting concerns about economic 'redistribution', exploitation, and marginalization. Online activism has also become more prominent in Baghdad following the Arab spring, amplifying calls for 'unity protests' in opposition to sectarian politics (Al-Rawi, 2014) with the goal of 'reforms, not revolution' (Costantini, 2021, p. 16). Nevertheless, a series of violent confrontations between protesters and government security forces erupted in July 2018 over protester demands to curb Iran's growing influence (Franzman, 2018). Protesters were especially aggrieved over the inability of the state to control Iranian-backed militia groups like Hashd al-Shaabi, who have in turn responded by targeting protesters with violence (Dodge, 2020a). The 2019 Baghdad protests took shape in the context of these earlier dynamics of violent and nonviolent episodes, building on a continuum of prior efforts to advance large-scale grass roots activism, with protesters calling for national unity to end Iraq's bloody era of sectarian violence and initiate political reforms (Ali, 2021; Costantini, 2021; Dodge, 2020b).

In summary, the 2019 Baghdad protests offer a useful primer on the ability of non violent activists to maintain unity and selfdiscipline in the face of repressive governmental action amid a prolonged history of violence. The 2019 Baghdad protests represent an undoubtedly challenging case for instilling commitment to civil resistance, but one that is potentially generalizable to other contexts of high-stakes contentious politics in societies with enduring, volatile identity cleavages and fractured political divisions. We now turn to the details of our research design.

Research design

We seek to evaluate hypotheses regarding the effect of protest experience on protest commitment (H1) and nonviolent selfdiscipline (H2). Conceptualizing experience as a socialization process, we proxy protest experience using the number of days spent actively engaged in protest activities as well as past protest actions. We then measure protest commitment, our dependent variable, using survey items and survey experiments that capture willingness to continue protesting in response to varying governmental enticements, threats, and hostile actions.

We approach protest commitment from both group and individual perspectives. First, we ask respondents whether they believe activists would collectively be willing to stop protesting and enter negotiations with governmental authorities, to bargain with authorities on key protest demands, and to stop protesting if demands are met. We do not frame government strategies as either violent or nonviolent in these items. Hypothesis 1 is then tested using the following model:

$$Y(\text{Protest commitment})_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(\text{experience})_i + \beta_i(\text{extended controls})_i + e_i \quad (1)$$

which predicts a positive correlation between protest experience and protest commitment. While we ultimately cannot untangle the causal relationship due to endogeneity between commitment and experience, we can control for potential confounders and moderators of the relationship between protest experience and commitment as a robustness check on results.

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we measure nonviolent selfdiscipline by gauging protester reactions to hostile government tactics to disperse them. Specifically, we inquire how protesters would likely respond to government use of batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, as well as live ammunition against them. Respondents are asked whether protesters would be justified in using violence against security forces who undertake those specified violent actions, and we build an index of nonviolent selfdiscipline based on their responses.[7] We test Hypothesis 2 using the following model:

$$Y(Nonviolent\ selfdiscipline)_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(experience)_i + \beta_2(protest\ commitment)_i \\ + \beta_i(extended\ controls)_i + e_i \quad (2)$$

where experience and commitment are measured using previous survey items in model (1). As we are dealing with observational data, we cannot rule out endogeneity between or independent and dependent variables, but we can include extended controls for a range of potential confounders and covariates of both. Ultimately, both H1 and H2 are associational rather than causal hypotheses, as is H3, which we test through use of extended controls for identity and associational cleavages in each model. H3 would predict variation in commitment and selfdiscipline across cleavages that could undermine protester unity.

Moving beyond associational hypotheses, we turn to a survey experiment to examine the causal effects of authority actions on protester commitment (H4-H5). Unlike prior items which focus on protester responses as a group, the experiment tests the potential causal effects of authority strategy on individual protester behavior. We employ the following survey experiment with 'Carrot' and 'Stick' treatments which were randomized respectively:

(Carrot treatment) Suppose the Iraqi government were to pledge to reduce corruption, improve economic conditions, and limit Iran's meddling in Iraqi internal affairs if protesters will stop all actions immediately. Imagine some protesters accept the government's terms but others do not.

(Stick treatment) Suppose the Iraqi government were to threaten to authorize police and security services to use increased force if protesters will not stop all actions immediately. Imagine some protesters accept the government's terms but others do not.

We then ask respondents: 'How likely are YOU to accept the government's terms to stop protesting?' Response options range from 'definitely yes, probably yes, probably not, to definitely not'. If individual protesters believe that gains can be made through negotiations with the government, then they could be persuaded by governmental pledges in the 'Carrot' treatment. In the 'Stick' treatment, protesters could yield to government threats or opt to maintain their struggle, hoping the government's violent strategy backfires and only bolsters public support for their movement. We test Hypothesis 4 and 5 at the individual level with the following model:

$$Y(Protest\ commitment)_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(authority\ strategy)_i + \beta_2(experience)_i \\ + \beta_3(authority\ strategy\ x\ experience)_i + e_i \quad (3)$$

Authority Strategy corresponds to the 'Carrot vs Stick' treatments in the survey experiment. Hypothesis 4 predicts that more experienced protesters will be less likely to yield to government incentives to bargain (β_2). Hypothesis 5 expects that experience would

increase protester resolve against government threats and intimidation (β_3). We also employ extended controls to examine the potential influence of nonviolent selfdiscipline on treatment effects.[8] We now discuss our sampling strategy and data collection.

Sampling and data collection

Data were collected in Baghdad between 17–26 December 2019, with a total of 301 respondents. Approximately half (54%) were sampled at Baghdad's Tahrir Square, including the symbolic epicenter of the protest movement, a large bombed-out building known locally as the 'Turkish Restaurant' (MacDonald, 2019). The remaining respondents were sampled in other active protest locations to include Sadr City, New Baghdad, Dora, Al-Wahda and Karada districts (see online appendix for map and sampling demographics). Within each location, enumerators employed a cluster sampling method, interviewing no more than five respondents within a given group of protesters. Respondents in each cluster could not be related to one another. Given unknown population parameters, we do not claim to make population inferences about the protest movement in general or its representativeness of Baghdad, but rather seek to compare those who had limited protest experience to those who had ongoing experience taking part in the protests since October 2019. All respondents should be viewed as 'rank-and-file'. We excluded those who could be considered protest leaders or activist organizers from the sample, though we sought their permission to conduct our study within the activist spaces that they occupied. We were not denied permission at any location. We also did not encounter any problems with authorities during data collection. Our research design received IRB approval.

Finally, we strove to follow best practices in terms of conduct of field research. We took seriously our responsibilities for ethical conduct of research during the data collection process. Field enumerators were trained by one of the authors of the project, and we report no adverse effects in the data collection process. At the end of the survey, 92% of respondents indicated that they had felt entirely or mostly comfortable with all the questions we asked. Similarly, the enumerators reported that they felt safe when conducting this study in the field 98% of the time in post-questionnaire response items. We now present our main results.

Results

We begin with an overview of our observational variables measuring protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline. We measure protest commitment using three items from our survey which we combine into an index. Those items gauge protest commitment through support or opposition to bargaining with the government over key demands. The items ask respondents whether protesters should 'stop protests temporarily to begin negotiations with the current government', 'stop protests if the current government agrees to some demands', and 'be willing to make concessions on some demands'. Response options range from 'strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, to strongly oppose' for each item. Factor analysis indicates that responses to these items align clearly on a single dimension capturing a latent variable, which we combine into a continuous index of protest commitment (Cronbach's alpha = 0.73). The index ranges from 1 = strongly support to 4 = strongly oppose.

We also utilize an array of survey items to measure nonviolent selfdiscipline. We ask respondents 'To what extent do you believe that protesters would be justified in using violence against government forces?' under the following conditions: 'If security forces are aggressive in arresting and detaining peaceful protesters', 'If security forces use batons to beat protesters', 'If security forces use tear gas against protesters', 'If security forces fire rubber bullets injuring protesters', and finally 'If security forces fire real bullets injuring and killing protesters'. Response options range from '1 = definitely yes, 2 = probably yes, 3 = probably no, to 4 = definitely no' for each item. Factor analysis indicates that responses to these items also align on a single latent dimension, such that responses do not vary according to the type of violence employed by authorities. We combine all items into a single continuous index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86) where nonviolent selfdiscipline increases with index values.

Figure 1 provides an overview of both indices using kernel density plots to illustrate the distribution of responses. Both indices are skewed such that more respondents oppose negotiations with authorities than support them, but more also favor non-violence over violence in responding to government crackdowns. These items underscore how protesters are both highly committed to their cause but also dedicated to nonviolent collective action to achieving goals. Our respondents appear to appreciate the importance of nonviolent resistance to successful outcomes.

Next, we turn to our main tests of associational Hypotheses 1–3. Table 1 below reports results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis on our protest commitment index and nonviolent selfdiscipline index using equations 1 and 2 as specified in the
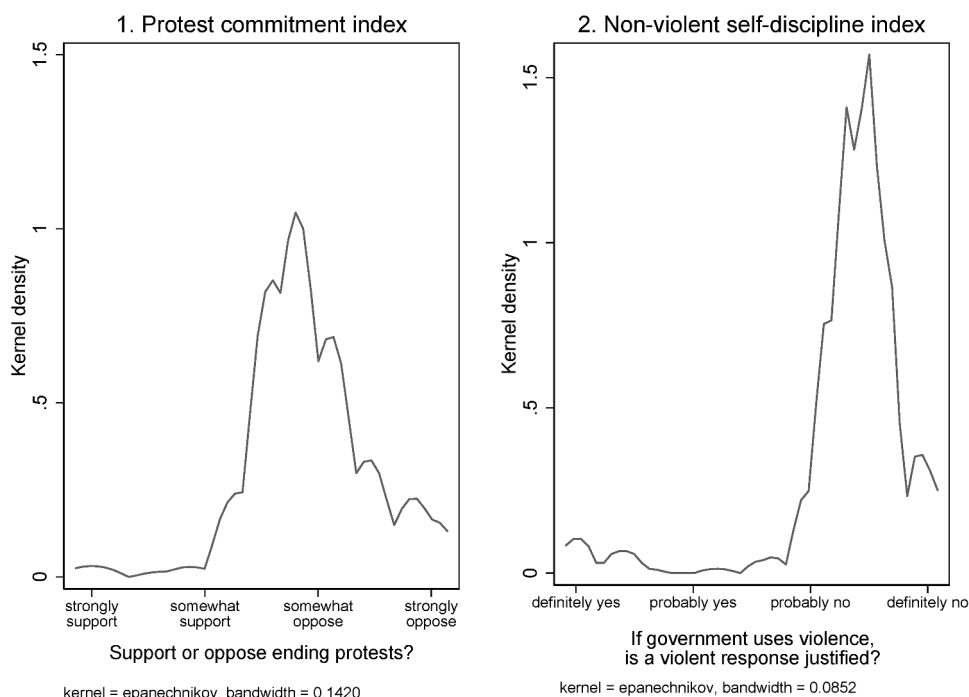

Figure 1. Indices of protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline.

research design. Consistent with H1, the number of days spent protesting (*current protest experience*) and past protest activity (*past protest experience*) are strongly correlated with protest commitment in Model 1. The average number days protesting was 17.3 (± 11.6 days) and ranged from 2 to 60 days. Before 2019, 63% reported no prior protest experience, 29% had attended 1–2 prior protests, and fewer than 7% had attended 3 or more protests. In support of H2, *current/past protest experience* and *protest commitment* are also both positively correlated with nonviolent selfdiscipline in Model 2. In addition, in line with our social capital argument, protesters who are active *social media* users and feel closer to others in their local communities (*social capital*) also display greater commitment to protesting (Model 1). Furthermore, while exposure to violence, injury, and having friends injured do not impact protest commitment (Model 1), victimization has a reductive effect on nonviolent selfdiscipline (Model 2), which indicates how government crackdowns could undermine protester restraint and trigger escalations of violence if unchecked.[9]

Next, we test H3 by examining the impact of identity and associational cleavages on protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline. First, we find a sectarian, religious effect in Model 2 where Sunni protesters display greater support for nonviolence than Shia Iraqis. We speculate that Sunni Iraqis refrain more from violence against the sectarian Shia-government of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi because they are more fearful of being targeted for reprisal as an out-group and/or because violence might alienate Shia protest supporters. We also use a behavioral measure of *sectarianism* in the form of a dictator game (Engel, 2011), where we ask respondents to make a hypothetical allocation of 4000 Dinar between two people of differing Sunni/Shia Arab identity. Nearly 45% choose an allocation that reflected a bias in favor of a co-religious group over an out-group (or for Christians, a bias in favor of one out-group over another). The remaining 55% allocated money equally between the two individuals. However, sectarian bias does not strongly predict either protest commitment or nonviolent selfdiscipline.

We also find little evidence of how associational memberships influence both protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline. Almost everyone in the sample (99%) had at least one additional associational membership other than the protest movement itself, which included regular mosque attendance or other religious organizations, political parties, political organizations, as well as labor unions and professional associations. However, these memberships had virtually no overlap. In other words, mosque attendees were not also members of unions or professional associations or political parties. We find that political party membership has a weak negative effect on protest commitment (Model 1), while mosque attendance is weakly correlated with greater tolerance for anti-government violence (Model 2). Respondents with union or professional association memberships are the comparison group in both models. Binary control variables for occupational status (students, laborers, unemployed persons) are also not significant in the models.

Finally, protester divisions could also be expressed in terms of conflicting goals and priorities. About half the sample prioritize opposition to Iran's influence in Iraq, while the other half are primarily focused on opposition to the Abdul-Mahdi government (though these goals are not unrelated). We see a weak effect where protesters driven by anti-Iranian motives are marginally less committed to non-violence than others. Overall, however, support for H3 is limited. Instead, protesters have organized a diverse coalition

Table 1. Protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline (OLS regression)

variables	(1) protest commitment	(2) nonviolent selfdiscipline
protest commitment		0.140**
		(0.0571)
current protest experience	0.00813**	0.00830**
	(0.00318)	(0.00327)
past protest experience	0.116***	0.138***
	(0.0399)	(0.0370)
social media use	0.132**	0.0885
	(0.0519)	(0.0749)
social capital	0.120*	-0.0700
	(0.0674)	(0.0582)
saw violence	0.158	-0.658**
	(0.135)	(0.258)
injured	0.0470	-0.691**
	(0.147)	(0.269)
friends injured	0.174	-0.772***
	(0.133)	(0.262)
female	0.0185	-0.0328
	(0.0600)	(0.0815)
age	0.00350	0.00194
	(0.00424)	(0.00647)
education	-0.0953	0.0642
	(0.0647)	(0.0892)
student	-0.00747	0.151
	(0.122)	(0.111)
laborer	-0.120	0.216
	(0.115)	(0.134)
unemployed	-0.160	0.118
	(0.118)	(0.148)
income	-0.0440	0.0510
	(0.0393)	(0.0566)
Sunni Muslim	0.0148	0.168**
	(0.0717)	(0.0669)
sectarianism	-0.127*	-0.0774
	(0.0728)	(0.0611)
mosque	-0.000360	-0.251*
	(0.146)	(0.152)
religious group	-0.285	0.0788
	(0.180)	(0.104)
political party	-0.182*	0.0439
	(0.0961)	(0.0791)
political org.	0.0578	0.112
	(0.0815)	(0.0824)
security org.	0.0424	-0.181
	(0.0814)	(0.128)
vote for gov.	-0.0197	-0.0598
	(0.131)	(0.116)
distrust gov.	0.0417	-0.00186
	(0.0538)	(0.0618)
anti-Iran	-0.0802	-0.126*
	(0.0607)	(0.0748)
constant	2.580***	3.088***
	(0.442)	(0.666)
observations	291	291
R-squared	0.306	0.198
adj. R-squared	0.244	0.123

robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

of anti-government activists from a range of backgrounds who remain largely committed to both protesting and to nonviolent selfdiscipline. Controls for government distrust and voting behavior also do not suggest major partisan divisions within the movement in terms of its anti-government orientation. We include additional robustness checks on these results in an online appendix.

To this point, we have focused on perceptions of protest commitment and non-violence collectively within the movement. Next, we utilize a survey experiment to examine how government incentives and provocations (Carrots and Sticks) might impact individual commitment to protesting (H4-H5). Recall that subjects are randomized into two groups, those who receive incentives to negotiate with the government (the Carrot treatment) and those who receive primes about government threats to use violence if activists do not stop protesting (the Stick treatment). All respondents are then asked whether they would be willing to stop protesting with responses ranging from 1 = definitely yes to 4 = definitely not.

Table 2 reports the results of OLS regression analysis indicating the average treatment effect of the Stick vs. Carrot treatments interacted with protest experience as measured by total days protesting. Model 1 shows the basic treatment effect of the Stick treatment compared to the Carrot treatment, which is negative. Government threats to use violence have a diminishing impact on personal commitment to protest. However, consistent with H4 and H5, protest commitment increases with protest experience regardless of the counter-strategies authorities pursue (violence in the Stick treatment or non-violence in the Carrot treatment).[10] Model 2 also shows that the negative impact of the Stick treatment is greatly reduced by controlling for nonviolent selfdiscipline using the index from Figure 1. A willingness to refrain from violence in response to government threats attenuates the reductive impact of the Stick treatment on protest commitment. Hence, in support of H4-H5, seasoned activists are more resilient to government pressures in maintaining protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline. Overall, we find consistent results for how protest experience and protest commitment affect perceptions of what protesters will do as a group, and what individuals would do personally when facing government threats. We provide additional robustness checks in an online appendix.

Table 2. Protest commitment and authority strategy (OLS regression)

variables	(1) protest commitment	(2) protest commitment
stick treatment	-0.325**	-0.274*
	(0.158)	(0.161)
protest experience	0.0345***	0.0346***
	(0.00585)	(0.00599)
stick treatment x protest experience	0.0153*	0.0118
	(0.00813)	(0.00820)
nonviolent selfdiscipline		0.286***
		(0.0870)
constant	1.670***	0.718**
	(0.123)	(0.317)
observations	291	291
R-squared	0.225	0.250
adj. R-squared	0.217	0.239

robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Discussion and conclusion

We find that protest commitment and nonviolent selfdiscipline increase with protest experience, even when governments apply repressive tactics against protesters, and even when activist groups include identity cleavages and associational divisions that could potentially generate friction in the movement. Our results speak to the resiliency of non violent collective action in a challenging case. Iraqis, both within and beyond Baghdad, have suffered decades of violence at the hands of various insurgent groups, whose actions have often overshadowed a growing and vibrant coalition of civil resistance movements dedicated to reforming the Iraqi political system through nonviolent means. The 2019 Baghdad protests built on earlier civil resistance movements, bridging across sectarian lines, and succeeded both in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi's government and then pressuring the interim Iraqi parliament to push through major constitutional reforms to reshape election laws. Despite harsh crackdowns against protesters by government authorities and informal paramilitary groups in Baghdad and in other cities, protesters displayed remarkable commitment to nonviolent civil resistance. They refused to bargain on key demands, and repressive tactics by Iraqi authorities only strengthened public as well as international support for the movement. Emboldened by these early successes, activists continue their agitation for political and economic reforms, denouncing official corruption and sectarianism, as well as calling for an end to US and Iranian interference in domestic affairs. Hence, the Baghdad protests have evolved into something more than a 'one shot deal' (Meirowitz & Tucker, 2013), expanding on earlier movement efforts (Ali, 2013b; Costantini, 2021), and speak to the transformative power of 'new civil society' movements.

Beyond Baghdad, our research provides further validation of nonviolent civil resistance logic posed at the group-level by Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) and others. Micro-level research into activist goals, motivations, and behavior is growing, but few quantitative researchers have evaluated grassroots activism in conflict-prone environments, where authorities are employing harsh, repressive measures against activists. Our research complements earlier work by Tufekci and Wilson (2012), Onuch and Sasse (2016), and Aytaç et al. (2018) to capture protester attitudes and behavior through systematic surveys in real time as protests are unfolding. We find that protest experience matters for how activist movements maintain commitment to nonviolence when withstanding government repression. Our results are encouraging that the socializing effects of protest experience can bolster unity of cause and commitment, transcending potential sectarian, demographic, and associational cleavages that often divide movement participants.

At the same time, preserving unity and nonviolent selfdiscipline in the face of government repression and provocation is difficult in large-scale mass movements (Sharp, 2005). Results from another survey experiment, which we report in our online appendix, show that protesters may be indifferent to how minor violations of self discipline (ex. throwing rocks at police) could reduce public support for the movement, result in further government crackdowns, or otherwise escalate violence. We also find that protesters are more willing to hand down punishments to government forces who engage in violence than those within their own movement, suggesting potential

limitations to self-policing. Nevertheless, our work informs how nonviolent resistance could be reinforced by the actions of committed protesters who gain endurance and self discipline through experience, providing guidance to novices and newcomers within the group.

On the other hand, a movement dominated by seasoned stalwarts could also pose challenges. Committed protesters who refuse to back down could reduce the effective bargaining space between activist leaders and the government authorities to resolve disputes peacefully. Analogous to two-level games in international relations (Putnam, 1988), protest leaders could leverage that limited bargaining space to extract greater concession from government authorities in negotiations, but inflexibility could also prevent mutually beneficial outcomes from being realized. While the historical record shows that persistent nonviolent strategies have worked roughly half of the time to the activists' advantage (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008), activist movements have just as often failed to achieve their goals and were crushed by government forces or abandoned non-violence in favor of escalatory tactics (see Lehoucq, 2016 for a skeptical critique of non violent civil resistance).

These negative outcomes need not depreciate the value of nonviolent civil resistance to achieving ambitious goals but underscores the strengths as well as potential limitations that committed protesters (i.e. die-hard activists) can bring to any movement. Our study finds that protest experience emboldens both dedication to the cause but more importantly commitment to nonviolent strategies for achieving goals, even when confronting government repression and historical legacies of violence. It signals that publics are willing to support alternatives to insurgency and unrest to achieving meaningful social and political change in divisive, conflict-prone environments, which we see as a positive development for sustainable peace and progress both within and beyond the 2019 Baghdad context.

Notes

1. As a counterhypothesis, protest experience could also lead to increased burnout and disillusionment with protest causes (Gorski, 2019). We regard protest commitment and experience as potentially endogenous, but not tautological to one another.
2. Fillieule (2013) identifies four major theoretical models of socialization: a persistence model which rests on the lasting impacts of early childhood experience and has been criticized for its rigidity; an impressionable years model, which focuses on the lasting influences of experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood and has been used to explain a number of generational effects; a life-cycle model which emphasizes stages of life adaptations (ex. youth radicalism, conservatism among older adults); and finally a lifelong openness model, which we apply here.
3. Violent protesters could also self-select out due to injuries sustained from their use of violence.
4. See the online appendix for game theory perspectives on activist vs authority strategies.
5. Government tactics included mass shootings, mass arrests and disappearances, imposing curfews, shutting down or restricting communications (TV, internet), banning public gatherings. Female demonstrators were subject to sexual harassment and assault. Some protest leaders were also subject to targeted assassinations by unknown assailants. See the online appendix for more details.

6. The protesters strategies involved occupation of visible, symbolic public spaces such as Tahrir Square. Protesters also organized using Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Messenger, which facilitated the growth of the protest movements beyond Baghdad to other cities across Iraq. Lovotti and Proserpio (2021) credit the movement's success to a decentralized organizational structure.
7. We do not specify what types of violent acts protesters might support (ex. throwing rocks, using firearms). Future research should clarify what protesters might understand as justifiable violent responses. For example, see our online appendix for a 'Protester Violence' survey experiment involving rock throwing.
8. In future research we hope to test whether protesters would be willing to intervene to prevent others in the movement from using violence.
9. The negative effects of indirect exposure to violence reduces concerns about selection bias due to people with severe injuries being excluded from the study.
10. Past protest experience also strongly predicts protest commitment in the experiment.

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Notes on contributors

Vera Mironova received her PhD in Political Science from the University of Maryland in 2017. She is currently a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute. She has conducted field research in numerous countries including Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, the DRC, and Myanmar.

Sam Whitt received his PhD in Political Science from Vanderbilt University in 2005. He is an Associate Professor of Political Science at High Point University. His research interests include survey and experimental field research in conflict and post-conflict environments.

Data availability statement

Replication data for this study are available at is available at Harvard Dataverse https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VYJ5PM

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