

Non-Violent Collective Action in Hostile Environments: Evidence from Iraq

Successful non-violent collective action often requires an enduring commitment to self-discipline in response to repressive and provocative governmental tactics. We examine commitment to non-violent activism in the case of recent protests in Baghdad, Iraq. Based on a sample of over 300 activists from 2019 anti-government protests across different Baghdad locations, we find that more experienced protesters, proxied by the number of days of protest activity, show greater commitment to sustaining protests in the face of government intimidation and are less willing to reciprocate violence, even if they have witnessed or experienced violence at the hands of government forces, than less experienced protesters. We attribute this to a socialization effect within activist communities, which despite cross-cutting cleavages and divisions, help sustain protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the utility of civil resistance as an alternative to violence in conflict-prone environments.

How do ordinary protesters maintain their composure and commitment to non-violent struggle when facing long-term daily protest actions and often grueling tests of physical and psychological endurance? This important question for social movement theory has received surprisingly limited attention. We utilize the case of 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 the number of days of active protesting, increases commitment to key goals. Experienced protesters are also more likely to be exposed to violence, which leads to our second question: how do activists maintain non-violent self-discipline in the face of government threats? We find that those who have experienced or witnessed abuse at the hands of government forces are more prone to justify violence in response to government provocation. However, protest commitment and experience work against impulses to engage in violence. We attribute this self-discipline to the socializing effects of non-violent activism. In addition, cross-cutting social cleavages and networks within the movement do not appear to significantly undermine protest commitment and support for non-violence. Overall, the challenges of maintaining unity, organization, and non-violent self-discipline illustrates a classic prisoner's dilemma scenario for protest movements in the face of government oppression. Our results underscore the need for better bargaining incentives to reduce the likelihood that protests will escalate to violence, but it also points to the power of civil resistance as a non-violent alternative to resolving contentious issues in conflict-prone environments.

Literature

The literature on social movement activism is being continuously updated in response to new activist events (Snow and Soule 2009; Tilly and Wood 2015). The arrival of new social media technologies has especially revolutionized the way that scholars study social movement participation (Gerbaudo 2012; McGarty et al. 2014; Jost et al. 2017, 2018; Mooijman et al. 2018). At the same time, many studies are also expanding and reinforcing our understanding of established theory on movement participation. Extant social movement theory has traditionally focused on instrumental or rational choice theories involving resource mobilization and selective incentives (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Tilly 1978; Tarrow 2011) or psychological motivations such as deprivation (grievances), emotions and moral indignation, a sense of agency to affect outcomes, and social cohesion within activist networks (Gurr 1970; McAdam 1986; Garrison 1992; Diani and McAdam 2003; Klandermans 2014) or a combination thereof. Going beyond who participates, what is currently needed in the literature is a better understanding of the relationship between experience, commitment and non-violent self-discipline in participatory roles.

At the macro-level, social movements are often characterized in the literature as complex, long-sustained processes that cannot easily be reduced to singular moments or events (Carothers and Youngs 2015; Brancati 2016). Collective action naturally involves questions about movement intensity, duration, and frequency (Tilly 1978). We argue that more attention needs to be devoted to the complexity of protest activism at the micro-level. Why do some individuals act with more conviction, protesting for longer periods of time and more frequently than others? To what extent do instrumental and/or psychological factors explain not only who protests, but how much they protest? Our research seeks to expand conceptually and theoretically from a binary understanding of protest participation to one of varying levels of protest commitment within social movements.

In addition, a large body of research has engaged the efficacy of violent versus non-violent strategies for achieving movement goals. Research in the past decade has confirmed that non-violent strategies are more effective at securing movement outcomes than resorting to violence (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Schock 2013; Chenoweth 2020). However, sustaining successful civil resistance requires a commitment among

participants to maintaining non-violent self-discipline often in the face of brutal government oppression (Popovic et al. 2007). When this discipline breaks down or when groups abandon non-violence in favor of more aggressive tactics, it can serve as a justification for government crackdowns (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). While it is well known that activists will often take on higher risk-higher cost forms of collective action over time (McAdam 1986), it is unclear why some protest movements resist while others succumb to radicalization over time.

Recent review articles also underscore the interplay of structure and agency based explanations for social movement radicalization distinguishing among ideological, behavioral and relational theories (Amenta 2010; Della Porta and Diani 2015; Della Porta 2018). However, research yields mixed results on the propensity for and drivers of radicalization (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009; Tausch et al. 2011; Thomas and Winnifred 2014). Also, despite recent advances in real time survey and interview-based field research, for example by Tufekci and Wilson (2012); Onuch and Sasse (2016); and Aytac et al. (2018), most empirical work tends to be retrospective and does not directly engage the question of preferences for non-violence versus violence or radicalization propensity over time. Our study helps to fill this important gap. We now discuss our theory and hypotheses.

Theory

Social movements, and protests more specifically, are a form of contentious politics that often strive to generate mass public awareness and support, which activists hope will fuel cascading demands for social and political change (Kuran 1989; Lohmann 1994; Klandermans 1997; Tarrow 2011). In terms of movement strategy, non-violence has been shown to be superior to violence in achieving both critical mass support and positive outcomes (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Schock 2013; Chenoweth 2020).

How does non-violent activism work to achieve these goals? First, according to Stephan and Chenoweth (2008), civil resistance is most effective when protest movements refrain from engaging in violence, especially in response to provocations by authorities, who are hoping to disrupt non-violent discipline as justification for cracking down against “terrorist, thugs, and hooligans” in the streets. Protesters gain when they can attract by-standers and encourage opponents to defect from government support (Hale and Colton 2017; Pearlman 2018). Non-violent strategies have been shown more effective at attracting bystanders and encouraging defectors than violence.

The relational interplay between activist and authority strategies can be illustrated as a classic prisoner’s dilemma in Table 1 below. Accordingly, social movement activists have optimal chances for success when they refrain from violence while the authorities choose, or are provoked into using violence. If the authorities respond violently to peaceful protesters, it often backfires, leading more bystanders to join activist ranks (De Jaegher and Hoyer 2019). If authorities remain non-violent, however, it likely results in negotiated settlements and compromises between activists and authorities on key goals. Conversely, if both activists and authorities choose violence, it can lead to bloody civil war, a costly outcome for both sides with victory uncertain. The worst case scenario for activists is one where the government refrains from violence, but activists fail to maintain non-violent self-discipline, marginalizing their group in the eyes of bystanders and providing government justification for more severe crackdowns, destroying the movement.

Table 1. Violence and Non-Violence: The Activist/Authority Prisoner’s Dilemma

Strategy	Authorities restrain from violence	Authorities use violence
Activists restrain from violence	Win, Win	Win big, Lose big
Activists use Violence	Lose big, Win big	Lose, Lose

*players gain most by restraint from violence

To overcome the prisoner’s dilemma, practitioners of strategic non-violent collective action often emphasize the importance of unity, organization, and self-discipline to movement success (Popovic et al. 2007). What explains commitment to non-violent collective action? Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) synthesize movement participation theory around five groupings: grievances, efficacy, identity, mobilization processes, and social embeddedness. While acknowledging the important contribution of each theoretical perspective, we focus on relational social-psychological explanation for protester commitment that is acquired through embeddedness within protest movements. This is essentially a social capital explanation for how relational bonding within activist communities fosters trust and shared norms of behavior (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1993; Baldassarri and Diani 2007).

We argue that experience or time in group is important for increasing exposure to group norms, building trust, and commitment. We draw insights from Saunders et al. (2012) who argue that scholars “need to avoid treating protesters as a homogenous group”, distinguishing between novices, returners, repeaters, and stalwarts. Verhulst and Walgrave (2009) make similar conceptual and analytical distinctions between first-timers and die-hards. On one hand, time within protest communities could increase protest commitment through socialization processes and bonding within activist networks (Passy and Giugni 2001; Diani 2004; Fillieule 2013). There could also be a selection mechanism at work where protesters who are not a good fit experience burnout or attrition (Zald and Ash 1966; Hirschman 1970; Gorski 2019). We test the following hypothesis:

H1 (Protest commitment) Protest commitment is positively associated with protest experience.

Next, we consider the relationship between protest experience, commitment, and non-violent self-discipline. On one hand, there is a potential for committed protesters to transition to increasingly high risk, high cost forms of collective action (McAdam 1986), including radicalization (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Bosi and Malthaner 2015). Although social movements rarely transition from non-violence to violence, radicalization can occur in response to political opportunities, organizational dynamics, and “radical milieus” or micro-dynamics of individual behavior, which Della Porta (2018) indicates can be driven by ideological, aspirational or experiential motives.

A counter-hypothesis, which has been less explored, examines how socialization within activist movements can instill self-discipline that prevents individuals from radicalizing and turning to violence. This social capital perspective argues that group norms are important to signaling acceptable and unacceptable “repertoires of resistance” (Baldassarri and Diani 2007; Downton and Wehr 2019; Gade 2020). This may also be understood as a self-policing argument

where members of the group prevent violence through monitoring and sanctioning of in-group members who deviate from group norms (Fearon and Laitin 1996). We argue that awareness of such norms and self-discipline are likely a function of organizational socialization, which increases with time and commitment to group goals and integration into the group (Fang et al. 2011). We test the following hypothesis:

H2: (Non-violent self-discipline) Non-violent self-discipline is positively associated with both protest experience and commitment.

Next, we examine a scope conditional hypothesis related to the impact of cross-cutting social networks and cleavages that could disrupt the ability of activist groups to socialize and self-police group members. If activist groups require unity and social cohesion to maintain protest commitment and adherence to non-violence, then individuals who come into groups with cross-cutting and potentially conflicting cleavages and loyalties may be more resistant to socialization. These networks could involve associational memberships as well as ascriptive identities (ethnicity, religion, language, etc) that might undermine cooperation on shared goals (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Onuch and Sasse 2016; Oliver 2017). Can social movements maintain unity amid diversity? We test the following hypothesis:

H3 (Cross-Cutting Networks and Cleavages): Cross-Cutting social networks and cleavages are associated with reduced protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline.

Finally, we explore the causal impact of authority strategy on both protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline. Recalling Table 1, we predict that when government efforts to use non-violent strategies to convince activists to stop protesting and negotiate, activists could either take up the government's offer (the Nash equilibrium strategy) or continue protesting. Given H1, we anticipate that more committed protesters (i.e. seasoned stalwarts) will see government incentives as a ruse, balking at negotiations. Distrust of government invitations to negotiate may be especially pronounced when authorities have already attempted violent strategies to disperse protesters but failed. We test the following hypothesis:

H4 (Authority Strategy: Non-violence): Government use of non-violent incentives to stop protesters will increase protest commitment among experienced protesters.

Alternatively, authorities may also, attempt to utilize violence to crush protest movements. They may hope that protesters themselves will reciprocate violence, given the government justification to launch more repressive crackdowns (De Jaegher and Hoyer 2019). Experienced protesters, however, may see through this strategy, which has been shown to often backfire provided protesters maintain non-violent self-discipline (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Hence, we test the hypothesis that government use of violence will not deter experienced protesters from either their commitment to protesting or their non-violent self-discipline. We test the following hypothesis:

H5 (Authority Strategy: Violence) Government use of violent tactics will not deter protest commitment among experienced protesters.

In summary, we examine the relationship between protest commitment and socialization experiences that are gained through time within activist movements. We also consider how socializing experiences and commitment can bolster non-violent self-discipline essential to successful civil resistance. We evaluate whether cross-cutting cleavages and networks undermine movement unity and non-violent restraint, and we assess how government actions can impact protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline, comparing seasoned protesters to novices. We now turn to our rationale for testing our hypotheses in the case of Iraq.

Rationale for Case Selection

Iraq is a useful case for testing theories about commitment to non-violent collective action for several reasons. First, Iraq has long experienced brutal state repression, sectarian insurgency and civilian violence that often overshadow traditions of non-violent activism (Davis 2005; Blaydes 2018; Marr 2018). Given the historical gravity of violent collective action in Iraqi society, it represents an especially challenging or hard case for an emerging non-violent civil resistance movement to succeed. Yet for all the focus on sectarian and jihadist insurgency around Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Shia paramilitary groups, there is a non-violent activist tradition in Iraq, often in opposition to the sectarian violence and corruption that consumes it (Jabar 2018).

Iraq's recurrent climate of anti-government activism, which shifts between non-violence and violent repertoires, is a second rationale for case selection. Both violent and non-violent activism played a prominent role in Iraq after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Isakhan 2011). Though eclipsed by other Arab Spring movements, there was a 2011 'Iraqi Spring' that garnered thousands of activists into the streets in anti-government protests that emphasized unemployment, the deteriorated state of the economy, and corruption (Sly 2011). However, activism was commonly constrained along sectarian lines (Haddad 2013). Protests in late 2012, for example, driven largely 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 embraced more unifying economic themes of unemployment and corruption and were also more peaceful (Hameed 2016). Online activism has also grown more prominent role in Iraq following the Arab spring, including calls for "unity protests" in opposition to sectarian politics (Al-Rawi 2014). Nevertheless, a series of more violent protests, between protesters and government security forces and their supporters, erupted in July 2018 aimed at curbing Iran's influence over Iraq (Frantzman 2018). The 2019 protests evolved from earlier dynamics of violent and non-violent contentious politics.

Third, the 2019 protests represent a turning point for building successful grass roots activism on a large scale, with protesters calling for national unity to end Iraq's bloody era of sectarian violence. In the aftermath of the devastating Islamic State insurgency, sectarian infighting, and economic misery, anti-government protests erupted in October 2019, in what Wilson (2019, np) describes 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 protester demonstrations remained largely non-violent, calling for constitutional reforms against sectarianism, fighting corruption, improving public services, and limiting Iran and US influence, the Iraqi government responded heavy handedly, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands more injured by the end of the year (Mansour 2019; Wilson 2019; Alsaadi 2020). At the time of our study in December 2019, these repressive measures had largely backfired while the movement continued to grow as protesters maintained unity and self-discipline. By the end of December, the government of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi had resigned and the interim Iraqi parliament passed key electoral reforms demanded by protesters, although the largely sectarian parties remained deadlocked on forming a new government (Rasheed and Aboulenein 2019). Since our study was completed, the protests took a major turn following the January 3rd, 2020 assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, which created a rift between pro/anti-American/Iranian factors within the movement. A year later, protests continue across Iraq, though the Iraqi government has stepped back from earlier repressive measures against activists, while protesters continue calls for reforms and an end to sectarian division (Al-Rubaie 2020).

In summary, the 2019 Iraqi protests offer a useful primer on the ability of non-violent activists to maintain unity and self-discipline in the face of repressive governmental action and a long history of violence. It is undoubtedly a hard, challenging case for instilling commitment to non-violence, but one that is generalizable to other contexts of high stakes contentious politics. We now turn to the details of our research design.

Research Design

We aim to test hypotheses about the effects of protest socialization experience on commitment to non-violent. Since socialization is a process, we measure protest socialization using the number of days spent actively engaged in protest activities. We then measure protest commitment using survey and survey experimental items that capture willingness to continue protesting in response to varying governmental threats and hostile actions.

We first approach protest commitment from individual assessments of protesters in general. We ask respondents whether they believe activists would be willing to stop protesting to enter into negotiations with governmental authorities, to bargain with authorities on key protest demands, and to stop protesting if demands are met. This corresponds essentially to the Nash equilibrium strategy in Table 1. We do not frame government strategies as either violent or nonviolent in these items, though it would be clear to many protesters that the Iraqi government has already been willing to use violence selectively against them over the previous two months, and we can control for exposure to violence accordingly. Hypothesis 1 is then tested by the following model

$$(1) Y(\textit{Protest Commitment})_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(\textit{Experience})_i + \beta_i(\textit{Extended Controls})_i + e_i$$

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 potentially exogenous confounders of experience and endurance as a robustness check on results.

We then examine non-violent self-discipline, again from individual assessments of protesters in general, where we ask how protesters would likely respond to various hostile actions by the government. This corresponds to the right side column of authority strategies in Table 1. Respondents are asked to what extent protesters would be justified in using violence if security forces undertake specified violent actions. We test Hypothesis 2 using the following model

$$(2) Y(\text{Non-violent Self-Discipline})_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(\text{Experience})_i + \beta_2(\text{Protest Commitment})_i + \beta_i(\text{Extended Controls})_i + e_i$$

where experience and endurance are measured using previous survey items in model (1). As we are again 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 cross-cutting cleavage in each model.

To understand more clearly the causal effects of authority actions on protester commitment to non-violence (H4-H5), we turn to a survey experiment. Unlike prior items which focused on protester responses in general, the experiment tests the potential causal effects of authority strategy on individual protester behavior. We employ the following survey experiment with two “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 forces 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. Recalling our earlier prisoner’s dilemma discussion from Table 1, activists achieve the greatest gains when authorities use violence while activists maintain non-violent self-discipline (bottom left square in Table 1). The “Carrot” treatment captures the upper left authority strategy in the 2x2 matrix in Table 1. The “Stick” treatment corresponds to the upper right authority strategy. If the protesters follow the Nash equilibrium pure strategy, they would be more likely to stop protesting and bargain with the government and refrain from using violence in the “Carrot” treatment. In the “Stick” treatment, the prisoner’s dilemma logic suggests that protesters should maintain non-violent resistance, hoping the government violent strategy backfires and serves to strengthen public support of their movement. We test Hypothesis 4 and 5 at the individual level with the following model

$$(1) Y(\text{Protest Commitment})_i = \beta_{0i} + \beta_1(\text{Authority Strategy})_i + \beta_2(\text{Experience})_i + \beta_3(\text{Authority Strategy} \times \text{Experience})_i + e_i$$

where Authority strategy corresponds to the “Carrot vs Stick” treatments in the survey experiment. Hypothesis 4 would predict that protesters who are more experienced will be less likely to yield to government incentives to bargain (β_2). Hypothesis 5 would predict that experience would be important to protest commitment in the face of authoritarian violence (β_3). We also employ extended controls to examine the potential moderating effects of beliefs about the justifiability of anti-government violence on treatment effects. We now discuss our sampling strategy and data collection

Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected between December 17-26, 2019 in Baghdad 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 SI Appendix for map). Within each location, enumerators employed a cluster sampling method, interviewing no more than five respondents within a given group of protesters. Respondents in a given 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, 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 considered “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 experience any confrontation with authorities. Our research design received IRB approval.

Table 2 below includes summary demographic statistics for 301 respondents. Our sample is skewed toward males, which is consistent with prior Iraqi survey demographics (Jabar 2018) but our female sample is sufficient to offer a meaningful control for gender effects. The sample tends to be well-educated, having completed secondary school, and somewhat disproportionately representative of students and professional classes compared to working class and the unemployed, which reflects the outgrowth of activism from many student unions and professional associations. It is also skewed toward higher incomes. Regular mosque attendance and participation in religious organizations is much lower but comparable to political party and political organizational memberships. Finally, respondents are highly politically engaged, having almost unanimously voted in the previous parliamentary election, where surprisingly, the vast majority (93%) indicated that they voted for the government against which they are now protesting and are highly distrusting of. It is also remarkably balanced between Sunni-Shia respondents, which reflects the anti-sectarian goals of the movement, though it remains predominantly an Arab movement, with limited representation of non-Arab, non-Muslim minorities.

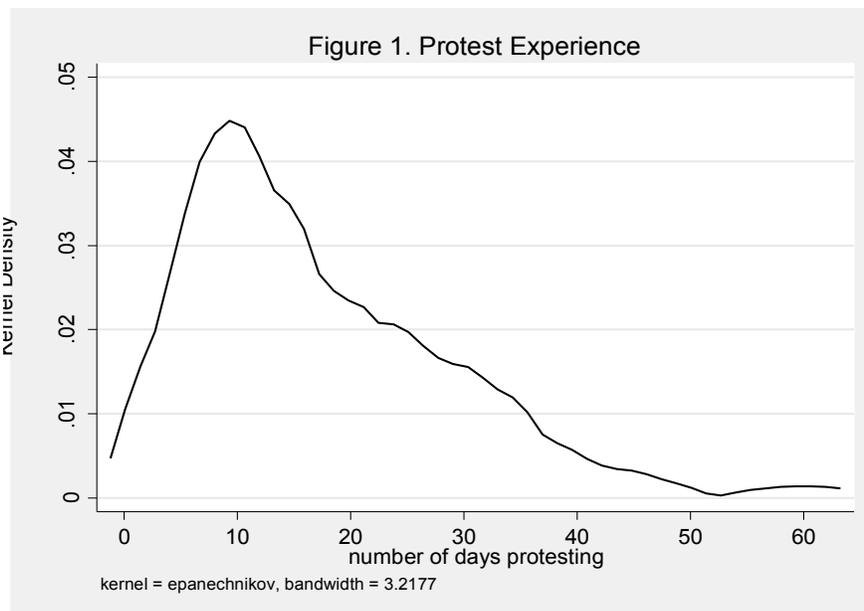
In terms of protest experience, there is good distribution in terms of days having spent in active protest (see Figure 1). Respondents also have experienced varying degrees of exposure to violence during the protests. Many have seen violence (64%), a small number have been injured (14%) or had close friends injured (24%), but few (1%) indicate that they ever engaged in violence against security forces themselves. Protesters are also divided in terms of what they see

as the main reason for the protests with approximately half citing Iran’s influence in Iraq while the other half focusing more on domestic opposition to the government and corruption (which are not unrelated). Prior to the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, few (<1%) cited opposition to the United States as a main reason for protesting. Finally, to measure social capital, we utilize two items to assess connection between other protesters. One is a measure of how protesters receive information about protest news and events. Almost half indicate that social media is their primary source. We assume that social media intensifies social capital within protest communities independently of live protest activism compared to people who seek out protest activities through flyers or non-interactive forms of media. We also include a measure of social distance to people in Baghdad, which asks respondents how close they feel to people in Baghdad ranging from 0 =not close at all to 3 = very close. The mean response of 2.74 indicates that these are people who feel strong bonds to others within their local community.

Table 2. Summary Demographic Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Range	
female	301	0.37	0.48	0	1
age	301	29.48	8.20	18	65
education	301	3.58	0.62	2	4
professional	301	0.27	0.45	0	1
laborer	301	0.19	0.40	0	1
unemployed	301	0.20	0.40	0	1
student	301	0.32	0.47	0	1
Social capital					
mosque	301	0.10	0.30	0	1
religious group	301	0.06	0.24	0	1
political party	301	0.11	0.31	0	1
other political org.	301	0.18	0.38	0	1
military, security, police	301	0.10	0.30	0	1
student, labor, prof. assoc.	301	0.47	0.50	0	1
Voted in last parl. election	301	0.99	0.08	0	1
Voted for current gov.	301	0.93	0.26	1	2
Distrust current gov.	301	3.45	0.57	1	4
income					
significant difficulties	301	0.02	0.13	0	1
some difficulties	301	0.19	0.39	0	1
cover expenses	301	0.49	0.50	0	1
cover expenses + save	301	0.30	0.46	0	1
religion					
Sunni	301	0.49	0.50	0	1
Shia	301	0.50	0.50	0	1
Christian	301	0.02	0.14	0	1
ethnicity					
Arab	301	0.93	0.26	0	1
Kurd	301	0.04	0.19	0	1

Turkmen	301	0.03	0.17	0	1
other	301	0.01	0.08	0	1
protest location					
Al Dora	301	0.08	0.27	0	1
Al Nahtha	301	0.08	0.27	0	1
Al Kadara	301	0.08	0.28	0	1
Sadr City	301	0.10	0.30	0	1
Tahrir Square	301	0.38	0.49	0	1
Tahrir Square –T. Rest	301	0.17	0.37	0	1
Al Wahda	301	0.06	0.24	0	1
New Baghdad	301	0.05	0.22	0	1
protest experience					
Protest days	291	17.30	11.61	2	60
saw violence	301	0.64	0.48	0	1
injured	301	0.14	0.35	0	1
friends injured	301	0.24	0.43	0	1
fought	301	0.01	0.10	0	1
Reason for protest: Iran	301	0.50	0.50	0	1
Social Media	301	0.46	0.50	0	1
Close to People in Baghdad	301	2.74	0.46	0	3



Finally, 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.

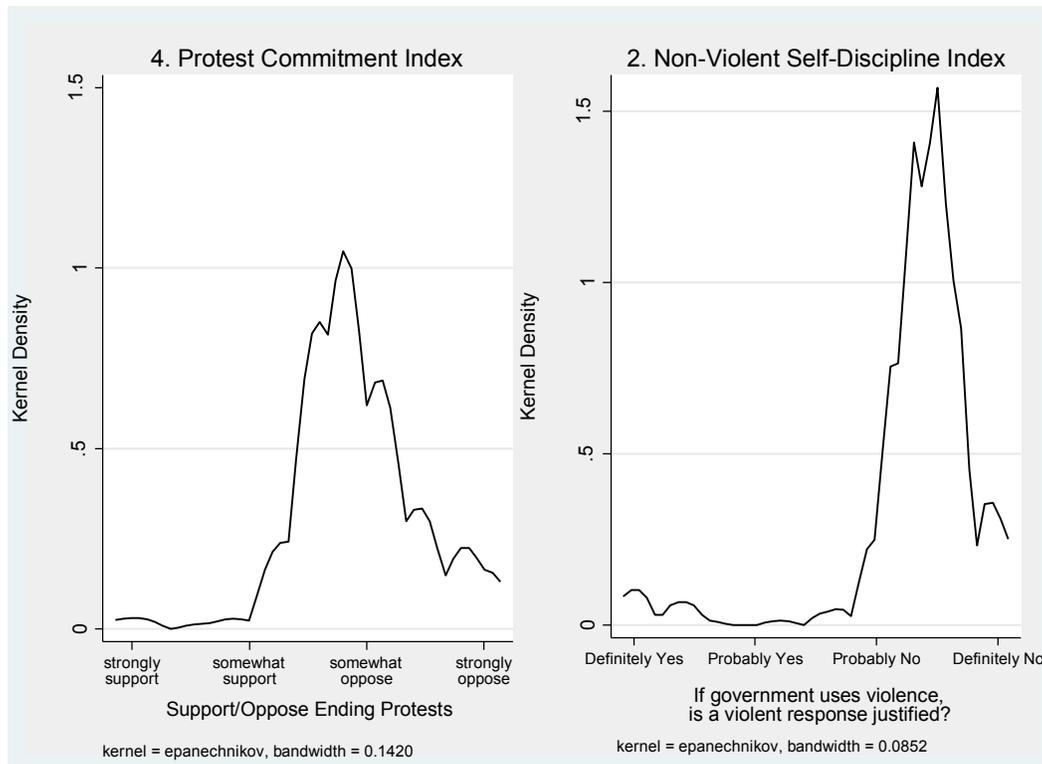
Results

We begin with an overview of our observational dependent variables measuring protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline. We measure protest commitment using three items from our survey which we build into an index. Those items measure protest commitment through support or opposition to bargaining with the government over key demands. The items ask respondents whether they are willing to 1. “stop protests temporarily to begin negotiations with the current government” 2. “stop protests if the current government agrees to some demands” and 3. “willing to make concessions on some demands”. Response options range from strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, and strongly oppose. Factor analysis indicates that these items align clearly on a single dimension that suggests they are capturing a latent variable, so we combine them into an additive index on commitment to protesting (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.73). The index ranges from 1 = strongly support to 4 = strongly oppose.

We construct a similar index of survey items to measure non-violent self-discipline. 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 definitely yes, probably yes, probably no, definitely no for each item. Factor analysis indicates that responses to these items also align on a single latent dimension, indicating that responses do not shift according to the types of violence employed by authorities. We combine all items into a common additive index (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.86) where non-violent self-discipline increases with index values.

Figure 2 provides an overview of both indices using kernel density plots to illustrate the distribution of responses. Both indices are skewed with more respondents opposing negotiations with authorities than supporting them but also more favoring non-violence over violence in responding to government violence. These items underscore how protesters are both highly committed to their causes but also committed to non-violent collective action to achieve outcomes.

It is worth noting here that protest commitment itself is not necessarily conducive to success. The Nash equilibrium strategy in Table 1 indicates that protesters should bargain with the government. However, when governments resort to violence, the greater payoff comes when protesters do not yield to coercive intimidation, but also maintain non-violent self-discipline in the face of government brutality. Though Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) caution that this strategy is not assured of victory (it only seems to work about half the time), it is twice as likely to succeed than countering government violence with more violence, which tends to alienate protesters in the eyes of the general public and international observers.



Next, we turn to our main tests of Hypotheses 1-3. Table 2 below reports results from OLS regression analysis on our protest commitment index and non-violent self-discipline index using models 1 and 2 as discussed in the research design. Consistent with H1, the number of days spent actively protesting is strongly correlated with protest commitment. Consistent with H2, the number of protest days and protest commitment, which are likely endogenous to one another, are both strongly correlated with non-violent self-discipline. In line with our social capital argument, protesters who are active social media users and have more cohesive bonds within their local communities have greater commitment to protesting (Model 1), which in turn, has a positive association with non-violent self-discipline (Model 2). Exposure to violence, injury, and having friends injured also increases protest commitment (Model 1) which likewise strengthens non-violent self-discipline (Model 2). Only those who have had friends injured in government violence are more likely to see violence as justified. Education is negatively correlated with protest commitment, but not self-discipline. Other demographic variables are not observed.

Finally, we test H3 by examining the impact of cross-cutting cleavages on protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline. First, we find a sectarian, religious effect where Shia Arabs see violence against the government as more justifiable than Sunni Arabs (the effect for Christians who only make up 2% of the sample is noted without interpretation). It's possible that Shia Arabs feel less intimidated in opposing the sectarian Shia-government of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi compared to Sunni Arabs, who may fear they would be more readily targeted as an out-group. 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% divided the money equally between the two individuals. Sectarianism does not appear to influence protest commitment, but it has a negative effect on self-discipline, which supports the H3 logic of how sectarian divisions could undermine protester unity in restraining from violence.

We also find evidence of cross-cutting cleavage effects in how associational memberships influence both protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline. 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 or other political organizations, as well as unions and associational membership. 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 negative effect on protest commitment, while mosque attendance is weakly correlated with greater tolerance for anti-government violence. Those with union or professional associational members are the comparison group in both models. Finally, cross-cutting divisions could exist in terms of protest goals. About half the sample see opposition to Iran’s influence, while the other half are primarily focused on opposition to the Abdul Mahdi government (these goals are not unrelated). We see a weak effect where those who focus on Iran’s influence primarily are marginally less committed to protesting and to non-violence. Overall, however, support for H3 is mixed. If anything, protesters have organized a diverse group of anti-government activists from a range of backgrounds who remain largely committed to both protesting and to non-violent self-discipline. 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.

Table 2. Protest Commitment and Non-Violent Self-Discipline (OLS Regression)

VARIABLES	(0) Protest Experience	(1) Protest commitment	(2) Non-violent self-discipline
endurance			0.204*** (0.0587)
protestdays		0.0102*** (0.00312)	0.00888*** (0.00324)
socialmedia	-3.372*** (1.172)	0.153*** (0.0529)	0.0821 (0.0759)
closebaghdad	-2.374* (1.263)	0.160** (0.0652)	-0.0484 (0.0572)
sawviolence	9.179** (4.566)	0.151 (0.150)	-0.640** (0.258)
injured	10.27** (4.578)	0.0357 (0.163)	-0.651** (0.267)
friendsinjured	8.553* (4.502)	0.184 (0.147)	-0.743*** (0.261)
female	1.063	0.0825	-0.00393

	(1.278)	(0.0598)	(0.0821)
age	0.0275	0.00215	-0.000830
	(0.102)	(0.00439)	(0.00653)
education	-1.456	-0.143**	0.0159
	(1.437)	(0.0657)	(0.0831)
student	-1.248	0.0156	0.138
	(2.126)	(0.123)	(0.113)
laborer	-0.367	-0.162	0.153
	(2.169)	(0.118)	(0.127)
unemployed	-1.373	-0.193	0.0574
	(2.304)	(0.123)	(0.144)
income	-1.014	-0.0602	0.0272
	(0.879)	(0.0411)	(0.0574)
Shia	1.848	0.0264	-0.224***
	(1.709)	(0.0779)	(0.0743)
Christian	8.898*	-0.346*	0.291**
	(4.585)	(0.191)	(0.123)
sectarianism	0.697	-0.108	-0.165**
	(1.592)	(0.0784)	(0.0655)
mosque	9.533***	0.000700	-0.284*
	(2.968)	(0.139)	(0.151)
religiousgroup	-3.265	-0.265	0.147
	(2.980)	(0.173)	(0.106)
party	-4.676**	-0.235**	0.0269
	(1.890)	(0.0949)	(0.0827)
polorg	-1.097	0.00340	0.0782
	(1.652)	(0.0821)	(0.0812)
security	-2.674	9.24e-05	-0.201
	(1.812)	(0.0809)	(0.133)
votegov	-5.535*	-0.0774	-0.129
	(2.845)	(0.129)	(0.111)
distrustgov	3.232***	0.0545	0.0198
	(1.121)	(0.0529)	(0.0634)
main_iran	1.136	-0.115*	-0.130*
	(1.328)	(0.0627)	(0.0758)
Constant	16.07	2.784***	3.466***
	(9.991)	(0.468)	(0.638)
Observations	291	291	291
R-squared	0.349	0.285	0.178
adj. r2	0.293	0.220	0.100

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

So far, we have focused on perceptions of protest commitment and non-violence broadly within the movement. Next we utilize a survey experiment to examine how government incentives and provocations (Carrots and Sticks) might impact personal commitment to protesting and to non-violence. 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 3 reports the results of OLS regression analysis on the average treatment effect of the Stick vs. Carrot treatments interacted with protest experience in terms of 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, protest commitment increases with protest days, in both the Carrot and Stick treatments, though not clearly more in one than the other. Rather, protest experiences increases protest commitment regardless of the strategies authorities pursue (violence or non-violence). Model 2 shows that the impact of the stick treatment is also moderated by our non-violent self-discipline index. The ability to resist the urge to use violence in the face of government violence attenuates the reductive impact of the Stick treatment on protest commitment. Hence, protest commitment and non-violent self-discipline, consistent with H5, are resilient to government pressures among more seasoned activists. We find consistent relationships between protest experience and protest commitment in terms of what individuals believe other protesters will do, and what they themselves would do when facing government threats. We provide additional robustness checks of these results in an online appendix.

Table 3. Protest Commitment and Authority Strategy (OLS regression)

VARIABLES	(1) Personal Protest Commitment	(2) Personal Protest Commitment
Stick treatment	-0.325** (0.158)	-0.274* (0.161)
Protest days	0.0345*** (0.00585)	0.0346*** (0.00599)
Stick Treatment x Protest Days	0.0153* (0.00813)	0.0118 (0.00820)
Self-Discipline		0.286*** (0.0870)
Constant	1.670*** (0.123)	0.718** (0.317)
Observations	291	291
R-squared	0.225	0.250
adj.r2	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 non-violent self-discipline increase with experience protesting, even when governments apply pressure tactics against protesters, and even when protester groups include cross-cutting cleavages that could potentially sow division in the movement. Our results speak to the resiliency of non-violent collective action in a challenging case. Iraq has suffered years of violence at the hands of various insurgent groups, but this has overshadowed a growing and vibrant coalition of civil resistance movements, who seek to reform the Iraqi political system through non-violent activism. The 2019 protests mark the arrival of widespread civil resistance movement to Iraq, one that crossed sectarian lines and succeeded in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul Madhi's government and pressuring the interim Iraqi government to push through major constitutional changes governing election law. Despite harsh crackdowns against protesters in Baghdad and in other cities, protesters maintained unity and non-violent discipline. They refused to bargain on key demands, and repressive tactics by Iraqi authorities only furthered 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 sectarian division, and calling for an end to US and Iranian interference in domestic affairs. Hence, it appears that Iraqi protests have evolved into something more than a "one shot deal" (Meirowitz and Tucker 2013).

Beyond Iraq, our research provides further validation of non-violent 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 studies have managed to evaluate grass roots 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), Aytaç et al. (2018) to capture protester attitudes and behavior through systematic surveys in real time as protests are ongoing. We find that protest experience matters to understanding how activist movements maintain commitment to non-violence in the face of government repression. Our results are encouraging that the socialization experiences of protesting can sustain unity of cause and commitment amid cross-cutting cleavages across sectarian, demographic, and associational/occupational lines.

At the same time, there may be challenged posed by movements that become dominated by committed stalwarts. Maintaining unity and non-violent self-discipline in the face of government violence and agent provocateurs is difficult in large-scale mass movements (Popovic et al. 2007). Failure to effectively self-police protesters could lead to escalatory spirals of violence. Indeed, a follow-up survey experiment, we report in our online appendix, shows that protesters may be indifferent to how minor violations of self-discipline (ex. throwing rocks at police) could affect public support for the movement, government willingness to further crackdown, or worsening violence. We also find that protesters are more willing to hand down punishments to government forces who engage in violence than they are of protesters who engage in violence, suggesting potential limitations to self-policing.

Another problem of committed protesters involves the potential reduction in bargaining space between activist leaders and the government authorities to peacefully resolve disputes in

mutually agreeable ways. Analogous to two-level games in international relations (Putnam 1988), protest leaders could leverage that limited space to extract greater concession from government authorities in negotiations, but it could also prevent mutually beneficial outcomes from being realized. As Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) point out, at best, non-violent strategies have worked half of the time to the activists' advantage. Activist movements have just as often failed to achieve those goals, in many cases having been crushed by government forces or degenerating into civil war.

This does not depreciate the value that non-violent civil resistance can play in achieving ambitious goals, only that there are potential strengths as well as weaknesses that committed protesters (i.e. seasoned stalwarts) can bring to any movement. Fortunately, from the standpoint of our study, we find that protest experience strengthens both commitment to the cause but more importantly commitment to adhering to non-violent strategies for achieving them, even in the face of 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 – a positive development for sustainable peace.

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