

الجوكر" مقابل "الذبول": الخطابات والخطابات المضادة لاحتجاجات تشرين على
منصات التواصل الاجتماعي العراقية

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'The Joker' vs. 'Tails': The Discourses and Counter Discourses of Tishreen Protest on Iraqi Social Media Platforms

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خلاصة

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة الخطابات والخطابات المضادة المحيطة بالاحتجاجات العراقية على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، وتسليط الضوء على الخطابات الرئيسية والخطابات المضادة والموضوعات والمواضيع المتكررة التي ظهرت خلال هذه الفترة من التعبئة العامة المكثفة. من خلال تحليل المحتوى واللغة وأنماط الاتصال على منصات التواصل الاجتماعي المختلفة، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى توفير فهم شامل للديناميكيات الخطابية وتأثير المساحات الرقمية على حركة الاحتجاج. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم اعتماد منهج وداك وماير للخطاب التاريخي (DHA) تحت مظلة التحليل النقدي للخطاب (CDA) الذي يدرس التمثيل الذاتي والآخر للفئات الاجتماعية في هذه الدراسة. تظهر النتائج أن المتظاهرين تم تمثيلهم من قبل مستخدمي وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي المناهضين للاحتجاج بشكل سلبي على أنهم أتباع جوكر في إشارة إلى شخصية الفيلم السيكوباتي الجوكر المتورطة في دوامة من الجرائم الدموية. كما وتم تمثيلهم أيضًا على أنهم عملاء لقوة أجنبية عظمى بالإضافة إلى تصوير المتظاهرين على أنهم صداميون أو أيتام صدام من بين العديد من التمثيلات الأخرى التي تهدف إلى شيطنتهم. من

ناحية أخرى، قام مستخدمو وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي المؤيدين للاحتجاجات، وكذلك المتظاهرين، بتصوير بعض المسؤولين العراقيين والمليشيات والمستخدمين المناهضين للاحتجاج على أنهم أذناب لإيران ينفذون أجندة إيران في العراق ووكلاء لدول أخرى.

Abstract

This research aims to investigate the discourses and counter-discourses surrounding the Iraqi protests on social media, shedding light on the main discourses and counter discourses recurring themes and topics that emerged during this period of intense public mobilization. By analyzing the content, language, and patterns of communication on various social media platforms, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the discursive dynamics and the impact of digital spaces on the protest movement. To achieve this aim, Wodak and Meyer's (2016) Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) under the umbrella of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that examines the Self and Other (mis)representation of social groups has been adopted in this study. The findings show that the protesters are constructed by anti-protest social media users negatively as Joker's followers in reference to the psychopath movie character Joker who is involved in a downward spiral of bloody crimes. They are also, constructed of being agents to a foreign super power as well as constructing protesters as Saddamists or Saddam's orphans among many other constructions that are aimed to demonize them. On the other hand, the pro-protests social media users, as well as protesters, have constructed some Iraqi officials, militias and anti-protest users as being tails of Iran who are executing Iran's agenda in Iraq and being proxies to other countries.

1. Introduction

The 2019 anti-government protests in Iraq, also named the Tishreen (October) Revolution, are the largest and the deadliest ones since the US-led invasion on Iraq in 2003 (BBC 2019). It emerged as a powerful expression of public discontent and a clarion call for fundamental change. The protest was triggered by a culmination of grievances that had been simmering beneath the surface for years, rooted in deep-seated structural issues that had plagued Iraq's governance and socio-economic landscape since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003. Fueled by a sense of frustration, injustice, and disillusionment, the protest movement grew rapidly and engulfed major cities across the country, resulting in significant social, political, and economic ramifications.



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The protests were against the dire public services, endemic corruption, unemployment as well as foreign interference. The demands then developed into a call for the overthrow of the whole corrupt government. The protests started on the 1st of October, a date set by a group of social media activists, spread mainly in Baghdad and the southern cities of Iraq where the Shiites majority live. People then took to the streets in a series of protests that varied from sit-ins, marches, demonstrations to civil disobedience. These protests, from day one, have not been limited to the protests sites, but have also been taken to social media platforms to share their news and movements. The discourses on the protest are divided into pro- protest and anti-protest putting in mind that the political scene is run by large coalitions that reflect the fragmented intra-sectarian and ethnic divisions: Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Such fragmentation and disagreements among people and parties are also reflected in the social media discourse.

These protests witnessed an unprecedented level of engagement and participation on social media platforms, acting as an amplifier of public grievances and demands for change. As digital spaces became central hubs for information dissemination and public discourse, it became increasingly important to examine the discourses and counter-discourses that unfolded on these platforms. Thus, this research aims to investigate the discourses and counter-discourses of the Tishreen protest on social media, with a focus on the major discourse topics and themes that emerged during this period of intense public mobilization. By analyzing the content, language, and patterns of communication on social media platforms, this seek to uncover the nuances and dynamics of the discursive space that accompanied and shaped the protest movement.

2. Politics and Social Media in Iraq

Social media has had a significant impact on Iraqi politics in recent years. One of the key ways in which social media has influenced politics in Iraq is by providing a platform for the expression of dissenting voices and the dissemination of alternative perspectives to the state-controlled media (Kareem & Yaseen 2022). Social media has allowed for the creation of virtual communities that transcend sectarian and national boundaries, and has provided a space for people to share their grievances and mobilize around issues of shared concern (Guta 2020) . Moreover, social media has played an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse in Iraq. It has allowed for the circulation of news, information, and opinion in real-time, and has facilitated the creation of networks and alliances across different social, political, and

geographical boundaries. This has challenged the traditional hierarchies and power structures that have long dominated Iraqi politics and opened up new avenues for political engagement and activism.

Joey Shea and al-Hassani (2021) also highlights that social media has been used to spread hate speech and contribute to political polarization. they notes that the issue of sectarianism is deeply ingrained in Iraqi society and has been a significant factor in shaping political discourse. Social media has provided a platform for the propagation of sectarian narratives, which has contributed to the further entrenchment of sectarianism. Furthermore, social media has the potential to bring people together and transcend sectarian and national boundaries.

The government's frequent attempts to control social media during times of political unrest have also been the subject of scholarly inquiry. In a study of the government's response to the 2019 protests, Lovotti and Proserpio (2021) highlights how the government restricted access to social media in an attempt to control the narrative and limit the spread of information about the protests by a complete shutdown of internet services in major cities where the protest took place in an effort to stifle communication among protesters and prevent the dissemination of information to the wider public. The government's decision to impose an internet shutdown during the Tishreen November protest further underscores the significance of social media as a tool for mobilization and information sharing. The shutdown had profound implications for the protesters, as it severely limited their ability to coordinate and organize their activities, as well as to document and share instances of government repression and violence as well as to get their voice internationally heard. Additionally, the lack of internet access hindered the dissemination of alternative narratives and counter-discourses that challenged the government's official stance on the protests.

3. Literature Review

There have been a limited number of studies focusing on critical discourse and language analysis regarding the Tishreen protest in Iraq. Mustafa (2023) conducted an analysis of five key slogans and chants during the initial three months of Iraq's Tishreen protests in 2019, tracing their origins and examining the evolution of their narratives across different iterations. This research adopted a social approach to narrative and a social semiotic multimodal approach, conceptualizing slogans and chants as dynamic genres capable of shaping distinct narratives.



Similarly, Al Rawi and Mahmoud (2019) conducted a study specifically on the slogans used by Iraqi demonstrators during the protests.

Numan (2022) focused on the content and themes present in the signs utilized by Iraqi protesters during the October 2019 uprising, particularly those shared on social media platforms. Collecting a comprehensive dataset from popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the study examined various digital content, including images of individuals holding protest materials, graphic designs, and placard designs.

In a different context, Al-Nasrawi and Abid (2022) explored the linguistic representation of news reports related to the protests within the Iranian newspaper "Tehran Times." The study aimed to investigate the influence of ideology and power dynamics in shaping the portrayal of these protests. The newspaper employed specific linguistic features, strategies, and tactics to align readers with its own ideology.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

The data for this research was collected through observation of Iraqi social media platforms. In order to collect the necessary data, several popular social media accounts (Twitter and Facebook) were monitored over a period of six months. The researcher was observing the main recurring themes and words that were frequently used on Iraqi social media platforms.

The data collection process involved taking detailed notes on relevant posts, comments, and other user-generated content that pertained to the research objectives. This information was carefully organized and analyzed to identify common themes, trends, and patterns that emerged from the data.

4.2 Discourse Historical Approach

Discourse historical approach (DHA) is a methodology within the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of language use in relation to social and historical contexts. DHA draws on theories from linguistic, social and political theory, and combines them with historical and contextual analysis to investigate how language is used to construct and maintain social reality.





The DHA provides a research program that welcomes the incorporation of relevant theories and methodologies necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). In order to apply discourse analysis effectively, the DHA proposes a three-dimensional analytic framework. The first dimension involves identifying the overall content or topics of the discourse being analyzed. Subsequently, the discursive strategies employed within the discourse are investigated. The third dimension focuses on examining context-specific linguistic expressions and patterns.

To examine how social actors, events, and objects were portrayed in specific ways, the research utilized two out of the five strategies suggested by Wodak and Meyer (2016) regarding their discursive strategies. The five strategies encompass nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, framing or discourse representation, and intensification/migration. The research focused on the nomination and predication strategies that are most pertinent to addressing my research inquiries.

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
nomination	discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership categorization devices, deictics, anthroponyms, etc. • Tropes such as metaphors, metonymies and synecodches (pars pro toto, totum pro parte) • verbs and nouns used to denote processes and actions etc.
predication	discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions (positively or negatively)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (stereotypical) evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits (e.g. in the form of adjectives, oppositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, conjunctive clauses, infinitive clauses and participial clauses or groups) • explicit predicates or predicative nouns/adjectives/pronouns collocations





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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparisons, similes, metaphors and other rhetorical figures (including metonymies, hyperboles, litotes, euphemisms) • allusions, evocations, presuppositions/implicatures etc.
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Table 1 Nomination and predication strategies

DHA employs a range of methods to analyze discourse, including examining the linguistic features of text, the social and historical context of the discourse, and the underlying ideologies and assumptions that shape language use. By examining discourse in this way, DHA provides insights into the relationship between language, power and social reality, and how language can be used to challenge dominant social structures and promote social change.

5. Protestors's *Self* and *Other* Constructions

5.1 Joker

The origin of the term "Joker" dates back to the American film that carries the same title, which achieved huge revenues, starring Joaquin Phoenix and directed by Todd Phillips. It was first shown in global cinemas in September 2019, coinciding with the October protests. The film features a distinctive psychological plot, depicting the story of a poor, peaceful, and psychologically unstable young man who plays unsuccessful "comical" roles for the character of the Joker, and is subjected to immense humiliation, poverty, violation, and abuse by society (social and economic power) throughout his life starting from childhood. It ends with his harsh rebellion, starting a bloody revenge against others, which makes him a "hero" in the eyes of marginalized social groups who sympathize with him, leading to a state of security chaos, and disorder accompanied by revenge against the wealthy and higher positions in the city.

The self-representation of the Joker reflects how they see themselves and their role in the protests. The Joker has become a potent symbol of anti-establishment protest in the global popular imagination. The character has been widely used as a symbol of resistance against oppressive systems, and has been appropriated by various political movements around the world. In Iraq, the Joker has emerged as a key figure in the anti-government protests that began in October 2019.





Despite the fact that the use of the term "Joker" did not last long among the protesters for reasons that will be mentioned here, it continued to be used by opponents of the demonstrations, including politicians and militias, to demonize the protesters and associate their actions with America and Western culture. This deliberate association aimed to tarnish the image of the protesters, criminalize them, and label them as individuals who embrace ideas and behaviors that are foreign to Iraqi society.

While some Iraqi protesters wore the Joker mask in the protest squares, others changed their social media profile picture with the Joker image, there were other designers who took the initiative to superimpose the character "Joker" on a number of photos taken during the protest movement and posting it on social media. In one of the photos, for instance, "Joker" appears fleeing from the bullets fired by the Iraqi security forces at the protesters, while in another, he is seen dancing during the demonstrations. In a third image, he is depicted with fire in the background as can be seen in Figure 1.





Figure 1 Depicting the joker in the Protest (Picture by Ahmed Shawqy)
Few weeks after the beginning of the protests, social media debate arose regarding the image's relevance to the protests and Iraqi society and culture. Individuals who were hesitant to use the image believed it to be an unfamiliar symbol associated with Western culture, potentially inviting unnecessary criticism. Consequently, they advised others to remove the image from their profiles. However, the popularity of wearing the Joker mask was short-lived as it faced swift opposition from political parties and their armed factions and was demonized. Additionally, it was not widely embraced by activists, possibly due to the controversy surrounding the incorporation of the Joker in imagery associated with the protests. Essentially, wearing the Joker's mask did not constitute a collective action that created a shared frame or identity.

The Other representation of the Joker, on the other hand, refers to how the character is portrayed in relation to the government, political elites, and other social and political groups that the protesters are opposing. Thus, the Joker has been constructed and associated with chaos

and rebellion and has been viewed also as a figure of fear and unpredictability, and this aspect of the character has been used to construct the protesters themselves as dangerous and unpredictable. This is particularly true in the eyes of those who are opposed to the protest movement and view it as a threat to the existing power structure. In this way, the protesters may be constructed as the *Other*, separate from the established order and viewed with suspicion. Additionally, the Joker is often portrayed as an outsider, someone who is separate from society and operates outside of its norms and do not fit within the established political system. This can be particularly powerful in a context like Iraq, where sectarian and ethnic divisions are often used to exclude certain groups from political power.

5.2 Sons(boys) of Embassies

Sons(boys) of Embassies has been always been used negatively to construct protesters. The negative construction of Iraqi protestors as "sons of embassies" or "boys of embassies" is a derogatory and dismissive term used by some political individuals and parties as well as other parties affiliated TV and media outlets to discredit the motives and legitimacy of the protesters and cast doubt on the authenticity of the voices of protestors. Such references suggest that protestors are agents of foreign powers and are not representative of the Iraqi population's genuine grievances and demands for political and economic reform, but instead are influenced or even controlled by foreign powers, specifically the embassies of Western countries such as the United States.

This construction is part of a larger pattern of delegitimizing grassroots movements in the Middle East by portraying protesters as agents of foreign powers. Al-Mahdawi (2019) notes that the use of this label is a tactic used by the Iraqi government and its supporters to undermine the credibility of the protestors and dismiss their demands for reform. Similarly, these labels have contributed widely by protest opponents to vilify and demonize the protestors and deflect attention away from the real issues at hand.

5.3 Infiltrators

The term "infiltrators" has been used by both the protesters on the one hand and the government, militias, and non-supportive politicians on the other hand in different ways. Each party used this term to exclude the other. The protesters used the term "infiltrators" to distance themselves from acts of arson, sabotage, and throwing Molotov cocktails at security





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forces. They emphasize that their protests are peaceful and that those responsible for such acts are a third party seeking to tarnish the reputation of the protesters and bring an end to the demonstrations.

On the other hand, members of the government and militias use the term to demonize the protesters and portray them as non-peaceful actors who are driven by external agendas, such as the US embassy or Gulf countries money, in order to destabilize the country and overthrow the government and eventually to end the protest movement.

5.4Ba'ath Orphans

The construction of Iraqi protesters as Ba'ath orphans or Saddam's orphans or 'the remnants of the Ba'ath Party'" has been widely used and observed in social media platforms in the discourse of the government and pro-government factions. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2008), individuals and locations can represent actions and policies as symbols. Saddam Hussein, has come to represent a dictator, evil, and symbol of oppression for many Iraqis. Hence, by labeling protesters as "Saddam's Orphans," their image can be tarnished and vilified and eventually can have their life threatened.

The construction of Iraqi protesters as 'Saddam-like' is a form of stigmatization and marginalization. This construction is based on the association of the Ba'ath Party and Saddam with authoritarianism, dictatorship, and human rights abuses, and aims to discredit the protests and delegitimize the demands of the protesters.

However, this construction is contested and challenged by the protesters themselves, who reject any association with the Ba'ath Party or Saddam Hussein and emphasize their demands for democratic reform, social justice, and human rights. The construction of Iraqi protesters as Ba'ath orphans or Saddam's orphans also reflects the larger political and social context of Iraq, which is marked by sectarianism, ethnic divisions, and political violence.

It is interesting to note that after 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, some political and media factions adopted a strategy of marginalization by linking individuals to the former regime and Saddam Hussein in general. Painful memories of the past era and the violations that occurred during the Ba'ath rule were exploited and used as a tool to tarnish the reputation of individuals and exclude them.



This strategy was particularly exploited in political work and elections, where linking individuals to Saddam and the Ba'ath Party was used to cast suspicions upon them and tarnish the image of their competitors or undermine their credibility by linking them to the former regime and its repressive practices. Its aim is to create polarization in public opinion and reduce support for the targeted individuals. The presumed association was used to blame individuals for past events and prevent them from actively participating in the political process or holding government positions.

While it is true that some individuals may have had connections to the former regime, the general use of this strategy leads to the distortion of the image and exclusion of many innocent individuals who may seek to contribute positively to the rebuilding of Iraq, democracy, and development.

6. The 'Other' discursive construction

The accusation of treason was not limited to accusing the protesters of being agents of the United States, Western and some Gulf countries and implementing their agendas. The protesters also constructed politicians in the Iraqi government, political parties, and militias of being agents of Iran and showing loyalty to them

6.1. Iran Tails

During the three months that accompanied the launch of protests in Baghdad and cities in southern and central Iraq, the term "tail" or "tails" or "Walaeen" to mean loyalists spread widely among Iraqis protesters and their supporters. They began to circulate these terms extensively in protest squares, within state institutions, and even on social media platforms. "The tail" or "tails" refer to forces, parties, and political figures specifically linked to Iran, and they are accused of prioritizing Iran's interests over Iraq's interests. However, the term has also extended to other individuals inclined towards other countries, most notably the United States. The term "Thail," which means "animal's tail," has come to be used metaphorically to stigmatize an individual or entity as being subordinate to another more influential entity, regardless of whether it is within or outside their country. This term was revived and has become prevalent in post-2003 Iraq.

The term "Iran tails" emerges within the discourse surrounding the Iraq protests as a powerful symbol that encapsulates the perceived influence and control of Iran over certain actors involved in the political





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landscape of Iraq. It suggests that Iranian influence or interference is playing a significant role in the protests taking place in Iraq. It carries a pejorative connotation, portraying individuals, politicians, and groups as subordinate and lacking independent agency suggesting a lack of autonomy and will on the part of those accused. It implies that these individuals and groups are not acting in the best interests of Iraq but rather serving Iranian agendas. By employing the metaphor of a tail, it invokes imagery of being a mere appendage or extension of a larger body, with Iran assuming the role of the controlling entity and with Iran pulling the strings behind the scenes. This construction positions Iran as a central actor behind the scenes, exerting control and manipulation over Iraqi affairs through its alleged loyalists. This discursive construction serves to delegitimize and discredit the accused individuals and groups, presenting them as traitors or puppets of a foreign power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis sheds light on discourse and counter-discourses in protests in Iraq, revealing the multifaceted self and other representations that shape the narratives and perceptions surrounding the demonstrations. Through the examination of symbols such as the Joker, it becomes evident that protesters utilize these references to express agents of resistance against oppressive systems. However, these symbols can also be deployed by opposing actors to portray the protesters as outsiders, dangerous, and unpredictable elements, challenging the established order.

Furthermore, the derogatory labels as "sons of embassies" or Saddam's orphans emerge as discursive strategies aimed at discrediting the motives and legitimacy of the protesters. By suggesting that they are agents of foreign powers, specifically Western countries like the United States, these actors seek to cast doubt on the authenticity of the protesters' voices and their representation of genuine grievances for political and economic reform. This labeling tactic serves to delegitimize the protests and divert attention away from the actual issues at hand. Similarly, the construction of protesters as Ba'ath orphans or Saddam's orphans aims to vilify protesters and discredit their demands for democratic reform, social justice, and human rights.

Furthermore, the accusation of treason extends beyond the protesters themselves to politicians, political parties, and militias, who are branded as agents of Iran. This labeling strategy attempts to undermine the legitimacy of these actors by presenting them as serving foreign interests

rather than the best interests of Iraq. The term "Iran tails" functions as a powerful symbol that encapsulates the perceived influence and control of Iran over certain individuals and groups involved in the political landscape of Iraq. By portraying them as subordinate and lacking independent agency, this construction aims to discredit and delegitimize their actions within the protests.

Overall, this critical analysis of the discursive construction of protesters in Iraq underscores the intricate dynamics of power, political divisions, and identity politics at play. These discourses shape the narratives surrounding the protests and influence public perceptions, highlighting the contested nature of the demonstrations and the diverse interpretations of the protesters' motivations and goals. Further research in this field is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the discursive strategies employed and their implications for social and political dynamics in Iraq.

Moreover, the findings have implications for governance and policy in Iraq. The study exposes the deep mistrust and polarization between different groups in society, indicating a profound crisis of governance and citizenship. Recognizing and addressing these divisions is crucial for fostering inclusivity, social cohesion, and effective governance that addresses the legitimate grievances and demands of the Iraqi people.

Lastly, the study suggests the importance of further research in this area. The analysis of discursive construction in protests can provide valuable insights into the power dynamics and social tensions at play. Future studies can explore the long-term effects of these discursive strategies on social movements, political participation, and public discourse, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics within Iraqi society.

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