

Semiotic Analysis of the Guardian and Times' Coverage of the 2019 Protests in Iraq

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Abstract:

This research paper presents a semiotic analysis of the *Guardian* and *Times*' coverage of the 2019 protests in Iraq. It aims to explore the implied ideologies both newspapers may convey to the very wide addressees reading them through selecting specific photos to publish in their online and in print articles covering the protests throughout the period from October till the end of December.

The main concern of this study is the visual representation of the protests in those two newspapers. So, the photos of the articles were analyzed according to Van Leeuwen's framework of visual representation of social actors. The framework includes specific traits to analyze images like distance, gaze, and interaction to show the ideologies those images may convey to the viewers around the world.

The results showed that both newspapers, especially the *Times*, showed the protesters as negative social actors who break police concrete blocks, burn tyres, resist security forces, etc. The *Guardian* specified an article involving a number of images that reflect positive social actions done by protesters which are drawing murals on the walls of Baghdad streets. So, for Leeuwen, excluding some actions and including others can generate certain ideologies and this meets our claim in this study.

Key Words: Ideology, Media, Van Leeuwen, Visual Representation.

تحليل سيميائي لتغطية صحيفتي الكارديان والتايمز لأحتجاجات العراق في ٢٠١٩

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ملخص البحث:

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً سيميائياً لتغطية أحداث احتجاجات ٢٠١٩ في العراق من قبل صحيفتي الكارديان والتايمز. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الأيديولوجيات المتضمنة لكلا الصحيفتين والمراد نقلها إلى الجمهور الواسع من القراء حول العالم من خلال اختيارهما صور معينة دوناً عن غيرها في المقالات المطبوعة أو الإلكترونية لتمثيل الاحتجاجات العراقية خلال تغطيتها للفترة من أول أكتوبر وحتى نهاية ديسمبر.

الهدف الرئيسي في هذه الدراسة هو التمثيل المرئي للأحتجاجات في كلتا الصحيفتين. لذا، تم تحليل الصور الواردة في المقالات بواسطة إنموذج فان ليوين للتمثيل المرئي للفاعلين الاجتماعيين. يتضمن هذا الإنموذج سمات محددة لتحليل الصور كالمسافة و النظرة والتفاعل للكشف عن الأيديولوجيات التي من الممكن نقلها إلى المشاهدين حول العالم.

أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة بأن كلتا الصحيفتين، التايمز على وجه الخصوص، قدمت المحتجين كفاعلين سلبيين لقيامهم بتحطيم الحواجز الكونكريتية الخاصة بالشرطة، حرق الإطارات، مقاومة عناصر الأمن، والخ. من الجدير بالذكر، خصصت صحيفة الكارديان مقالا يتضمن عددا من الصور التي تعكس افعالا ايجابية قام بها المحتجون وهي رسم اللوحات المختلفة على جدران شوارع بغداد. لذا، بالنسبة لفان ليوين، إقصاء بعض الأفعال وتضمين بعضها آخر قد يولد أيديولوجيات معينة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأيديولوجية ، الاعلام ، فان ليوين ، التمثيل البصري .

Introduction

Though our world now is loaded with images, few research papers have been made to produce realistic proposals to analyze the image and word not only theoretical thoughts. Van Leeuwen (2008) made a plucky trial to assist bridge the obvious gap by a framework to highlight the power of images and to show a neglected possibility that images are part of discourse analysis. His method about 'social semiotics' is initially inspired by Hallidayan grammar. Since the pervasiveness of images and the manipulative or communicative reasons of their producers, Van Leeuwen and his colleague Kress, who published a book together "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, a revised version of their earlier Reading Images (1990)" declare it is vital that the society must be educated to understand images. He suggests that it is not different, but somewhat various, to describe artistic, creative usages of images and usual usages. However, he claims the manner of execution and/or the inclusion or exclusion of details may suggest ideological insinuations.

Van Leeuwen is widely recognized as a semiotician and established, together with Gunther Kress, multimodality – a domain specialized in the possibilities of

making meaning and using distinctive semiotic means, involving physical materials and technologies of communication. Leeuwen's study tries to stretch the impact of social semiotics, multimodality and Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) outside semiotics, applied linguistics and communication studies to domains like arts, media, culture, education, and business. The impact could be credited to the solid relationship it provides between semiotic theory and semiotic practice in addition to the socio-political focus. Hence, his framework is new; no one has tried to this extent of complexity and accuracy to apply a linguistic model to the visual realm.

The following research questions have been generated in this study: How does the *Guardian* represent Iraqi protesters as social actors? How does the *New York Times* (henceforth, NYT) represent Iraqi protesters like social actors? Are the depictions different, if so in what regards? What are the ideologies found in and within the images selected from hundreds of images of the protests all over Iraq? To answer those questions, an analysis to the images is done by using Leeuwen's social actors framework.

1. The Power of Images

In communication frameworks, the partition between word and image can be like: words deliver facts, clarifications and/or things that "need to be said in so many words"; images deliver interpretations, "ideologically colored angles", clearly but implicitly. Semiotic divisions of labor are contextually and historically specific. In some contexts, for example, visualizations are realized as the most comprehensive and clear way of explaining things, and words serve as complements, footnotes, comments, or labels. Hence, visualization remains pervasive. In advertisements, the images offer people the visions of charm and satisfaction, or the "allusions to forbidden pleasures"; words offer people the knowledge needed, the qualifications of products, the sites to purchase it, and/or the prices. In newspapers, the words express what the politicians did, the images, catching a fleeting moment, display them as either strong and powerful, or defeated (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

2. Critical Discourse Analysis and Media

According to Bouvier & Machin (2018), Critical Discourse Analysis is a discipline that highlights the function of language in the social and political events. Rising out of "Critical" Linguistics, Critical discourse analysis showed "language as a form of social practice" whose use is to approve, sustain, and adopt practices of social authority and discrimination. Now, power represents the capacity not merely to compel throughout units like law, army, or the penal system. Nonetheless, it uses power throughout the thoughts and principles practiced to construct the societies. Those ideas are created through institutes and establishments like academies, business, and media. The language and communication located in those establishments expose the welfares of those in control and spread them as common sense and best for all.

So, critical discourse analysis concentrates on detailed analysis of the role of language in producing and supporting those central issues like class relations,

racism, and sexism. Such analysis intends to provide proofs from texts to reveal discourse and ideology. In other words, CDA reveals how people have the power over the discourses—then consequently the thoughts, principles, and superiorities—that describe civilizations. Media is an open domain which exposes societies to countless ideologies which affect and blind-fold minds as a particular ideology is implemented on them in their daily life. The purpose of critical discourse analysis is to shed light on the linguistic discursive aspect of social and cultural experiences and progressions of change in late modernity. Discourse involves not only written and spoken language but also visual images. It is usually recognized that the analysis of texts including visual images must take into consideration the special features of visual semiotics and the connection between language and images (Bouvier & Machin, 2018).

Yet, in critical discourse analysis there is a tendency to study images as if they were linguistic texts. As an exception, social semiotics according to Hodge and Kress (1988) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) is considered as an attempt to develop a theory and an approach to analyze multi-modal texts – namely, texts which make use of various semiotic systems like written language, visual images and/or sound (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002).

One of the essential responsibilities of CDA is to explain the connections between discourse and social power. To be precise, analyzing this relationship through texts and/or images should define and explain how power abuse is recognized and produced by prevailing groups or institutions. The role of media is significant, as they offer knowledge that people, comprising politicians, recognize the “world out of their reach” (Goffman, 1986) and to produce and support ideas on the unknown. Media penetrate crowds, which make them more influential than individuals. Consequently, it is important to pinpoint what aspects of the selected issues are highlighted, what is ignored, and how the included information is represented to the society (Goffman, 1986).

3. Recontextualizing Social Practice

Van Leeuwen’s method (2008) concentrating on discourse as a recontextualization of social practice is based on Foucault’s idea of discourse as semantic constructions of reality supporting the interests of certain social groups. Moreover, it originates from the Hallidayan method about register as a social dialect, which is specific “in its semantics instead of phonology and lexicogrammar”. Furthermore, Leeuwen chooses Basil Bernstein’s notion of recontextualization to be his method, developing it from the pedagogic framework and supposing every discourse denotes social practice.

Social practice is able to involve merely linguistic, “nonlinguistic actions” and/or other “semiotic actions” or both. As said by Van Leeuwen, real social practices constantly cover the next components: “participants, actions, performance modes, presentation styles, locations, times, resources and eligibility conditions for the participants, locations and resources”. Recontextualization can be merely made with linguistic and/or semiotic actions. Social practice changes throughout the recontextualization progression. Components of the social practice

can be replaced by semiotic components, added, reordered, or deleted. Leeuwen has established recontextualizing codes for the main components of social practices. Though Leeuwen's method is semiotically broad paralleled with numerous critical discourse analysis methods, it is obviously concerned with linguistics and neglects numerous of non-linguistic components. As far as multimodality is concerned, the method requires a technique to investigate the "linguistic" and "visual" representations as a multimodal entirely other than separated units (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

A number of sociological and linguistic theories affected Van Leeuwen in deriving a model that is based on the findings of different scholars. He tried to expand and develop the concept of discourse of Foucault, Bernstein, and Halliday. Throughout 1993, 2008, and 2009, he entitled his approach as "Discourse as Recontextualization", "Sociological Grammar" in 1995, and "Socio-semantic Inventory" in 1996 (Van Leeuwen 2008). In 2008, he developed his Social Actor Representation framework which was firstly suggested in 1996. His framework can represent social actors sociologically and critically, as well as being linguistically analyzed (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

According to van Leeuwen (2008), social actors can be analyzed concerning a socio-semantic inventory. His social actor network categorizes social actors to be sociologically analyzed.

These categories are (Van Leeuwen, 2008):

1. **Exclusion:** it is a process of deletion for some actors from a text. Their deletion can serve needs and purposes of writers and/or readers. Exclusion is of two types:
 - a. **Suppression:** this type overlooks the presence of social actors and their actions in a text as well as the omission of any reference to the social actors.
 - b. **Backgrounding:** this exclusion leaves traces in the representation to appear elsewhere.
2. **Inclusion:** it falls into a number of subdivisions like:
 - a. **Activation:** social actors are activated when they are represented as the doers of an action.
 - b. **Generalization and Specification:** social actors can be represented as classes or as specific individuals.
 - c. **Assimilation:** here, social actors are represented as individuals or as groups made of specific individuals.
 - d. **Association and Dissociation:** the process which refers to the way in which social actors are represented as groups either generically or specifically and are not labeled in the text.
 - e. **Indetermination and Differentiation:** in indetermination, social actors can be represented as undefined individuals or masses of people while determination shows singular characters. Concerning Differentiation, it is to differentiate a social actor from a similar social actor.
 - f. **Nomination and Categorization:** nomination represents social actors in

proper nouns. They can be shown in their unique identities. Concerning Categorization, it represents the identities and functions social actors have.

- g. Functionalization and Identification: functionalization refers to the activities, professions, and roles social actors do. As far as Identification is concerned, social actors can be represented in terms of what they unavoidably are.
- h. Personalization and Impersonalization: social actors can be personalized by being represented as human beings. But, they can be impersonalized by other means; for example, by abstract or concrete nouns whose meanings do not contain any semantic feature of *human*.
- i. Overdetermination: social actors can be represented when participating in more than one social activity at the same time.

Van Leeuwen's framework has similar classifications to investigate the depicted social actors as it does to investigate texts. Like in text, in photos also, social actors can be excluded or include. The involved social actors are signified as either active agents or passive patients. Social actors can be shown as specific or generic. If a social actor symbolizes a generic group, it is mostly done by classifying the actors according to their cultural or biological features. Social actors can be represented as individuals or as groups. Groups can be sorted into "homogenic or differentiated" (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

4. Visual Representation of Social Actors

Van Leeuwen modified a method to analyze visual representation of social actors. This framework comprises two equivalent extents: "the image and the viewer" as well as the depicted people. (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

The distance, angle, and the gaze of the images influence the viewer's understanding. Social distance in images and in reality serve as evidence of interpersonal interactions. For example, somebody is photographed from a far distance, the person appears as an outsider. The angle, that indicates the social relationship amid the "viewer" and the "depicted person", can be horizontal or vertical. The horizontal angle denotes the "involvement" of the people in the image by placing them face to face, detached or sideways, overlooking the viewer. The vertical angle shows the power through locating the people in the image lower, higher, or at the same level with the viewer. High view in images represents "power over the viewer". Social interaction is related to the gaze of the depicted people. If the gaze was to the viewer, it is a sign of need. When it is turned away, the viewer is only observing deprived of interaction. Figure 1 explains the representation and viewer network fully (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

In examining how a person is depicted, five classifications arise. First of all, we have exclusion, that happens once a specific person or a specific group are overlooked in the image. Secondly, there is “roles”. When the person partakes in a certain action, then he/she is activated. Otherwise, they are passivated. In the fourth category, a person could be represented “specifically” or “generically” i.e. as an individual or as part of a group. The last category in visual classification is classified into cultural or biological. (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

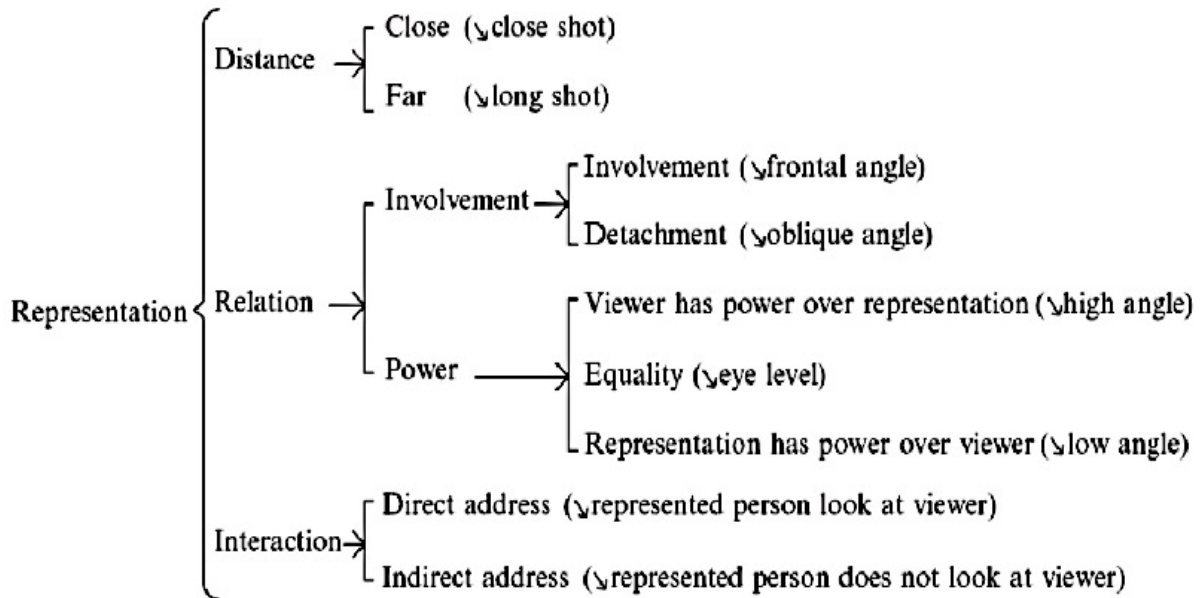


Figure 1. Visual Representation and Viewer Network (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

5. Data and Method

This study comprises two newspapers; the *Guardian* and the *Times*. 58 photos were selected from both newspapers. They cover the people and events involved in the protests of 2019 in Iraq. 26 photos from the *Guardian* and 32 photos from the *New York Times* were selected through the period October, November, and December 2019. All the photos selected are found in print and online articles in both newspapers (www.theguardian.com; www.nytimes.com). The study does not come across the textual part of the articles since the main and only concern of this study is the visual representation of social actors.

5.1 2019–20 Iraq Protests

The 2019–2020 Iraqi protests are an ongoing chain of protests that contained demonstrations, marches, sit-ins and civil disobedience. The Protests began on “1 October 2019”, a time that was arranged by civil activists on social media, extending throughout the provinces in the center and south of Iraq; they complained unemployment, corruption, and inefficient public services (“2019–2021 Iraqi protests,” n.d.).

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Later, it increased into unlimited requests to overthrow the government. The Iraqi administration has used several techniques against protesters, causing lots of victims and injuries. It paused on 8 October till its return on 25 October. PM Abdul-Mahdi declared on 29 November that he would quit (“2019–2021 Iraqi protests,” n.d.).

The protestors requested to finish the political system which has existed since the US-led invasion overthrew Saddam Hussein and has been divided by sectarian shares. The protests are the largest event of civil unrest since the fall of former regime. (“2019–20 Iraq protests”, n.d.)

6. Findings

As far as the relationship between the image and the viewer is concerned, Van Leeuwen suggested two questions about how images depict people: “How are people depicted?” and “How are the depicted people related to the viewer?” So, in the light of Van Leeuwen’s framework, the relationship among the social actors in the image and the viewers of the image is based on the following facets: “distance, angle, and gaze”. The images may show the social actors as distant or near, exposed from below, above, or from the eye level. Social actors can also be depicted from the front, back, or side. Social actors can show “direct eye contact” with the onlooker or disregard any possible eye connection. (Van Leeuwen, 2008)

The next table reveals each category of the visual representation of Van Leeuwen’s social actor framework. There is a slight difference between The Guardian and The New York Times. Some images fall into more than one category concerning the same aspects, as lots of them portray large groups of people with various positions.

Table 1. Image and the viewer

	Guardian	Percentage %	NY T	Percentage %
Far distance	15	58%	17	54%
Close distance	11	42%	15	46%
Above	5	19%	11	34%
Below	2	7%	3	9%
Eye level	19	74%	18	57%
Front	9	34%	15	49%
Front/side	11	43%	10	30%
Side/back	6	23%	7	21%
Direct gaze	4	15%	3	9%
Indirect gaze	22	85%	29	91%

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The *Guardian* favours far distance shots of the protesters as 58 % of the photos are shot from a far distance to their entities (see Appendix 1). The most used angle in the *Guardian* is the “eye level”, it is found in 74% of the images (see Appendix 1). Just two photos are shot from below. 43% of the protesters are shot from the front/side, similar to the first image, and the rest are shown from the front or the back. Most of the shots do not have “direct interaction with the viewer” exposing protesters as entities that the viewer can examine. Just 15% of the images show the protesters gaze at the viewer “interacting with them” (see Appendix 1).

As in the *Guardian*, a majority of 54% of the *New York Times*'s photos are of a far distance from the social actors (see Appendix 2). 57% of the images have protesters shown at the eye level and only 9% from below. 79% of the photos show protesters from the front and/or front/side. The *New York Times* favours photos with no “direct interaction” as 91% of the images, which is the majority, don't show protesters gazing at the viewer (see Appendix 2).

Table (2) clarifies the way the *Guardian* and the *NYT* depict Iraqi Protesters concerning the framwork's categories. Also, some of the images can be detected in more than one category concerning the same aspect, as several shots contain big assemblies of individuals in the background whilst showing also individuals.

Table 2. Depicting people

	Guardian	Percentage %	NYT	Percentage %
Inclusion	26	100%	28	87%
Exclusion	0	0%	4	13%
Agents	20	75%	18	56%
Patients	6	25%	14	44%
Specific	21	80%	13	41%
Cultural categorization	8	30%	0	0%
Biological categorization	0	0%	0	0%
Individuals	7	27%	3	9%
Homogenic groups	15	58%	19	59%
Differentiatd groups	4	15%	10	32%

The *Guardian* doesn't exclude any protester, even the image showing security forces, it didn't neglect the protesters from the scene (see Appendix 1). 75% of all shots signify protesters as active agents and 27% show them as individuals, 58% as homogenized groups and 15% as differentiated groups. Once we examine protesters, we can find 0% concerning the biological categorization, while 30% of

cultural categorization is clearly found; like the case of some girls wearing hijab as in (see Appendix 1).

The *NYT* excludes only 13% protesters from the photos. It shows them as active agents in 56% of the images. Only 9% of the photos represent protesters as individuals and 59% as homogenized groups. Neither cultural nor biological categorizations are depicted in the protesters' images in the *NYT* (see Appendix 2).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Discussion

The photos from the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* were “critically” analyzed by using Van Leeuwen’s method to show the way the Iraqi Protesters were “represented visually” in the Iraqi protests specifically in October, November, and December of 2019.

As far as inclusion and exclusion are concerned, women are not sufficiently shown in the images in both newspapers and this can generate a very negative ideology that the protests are not supported by women which lessens the importance of the role of women on one hand and the protests on the other hand (see Appendix 1&2).

Both newspapers, often, represent the protesters as active actors; the protesters were involved in actions like resisting the security forces and destroying infrastructure. Very few images show the protesters doing nonviolent activities like healing injured protesters. The protesters are clearly shown by other media or by the photographs shot by the protesters themselves serving food, cleaning streets and reconditioning uninhibited infrastructure. Protesters were photographed, not in those two newspapers, playing games, singing, playing music, and reconstructing old buildings in different sites and newspapers all over the world. It should be mentioned that the *Guardian* posted a group of pictures showing murals and graffiti made by the protesters in Baghdad in 26 Nov 2019 (see appendix 1).

Both papers depict the protesters mostly from far distance. This can generate a feeling of non-involvement inside the viewer as the photos of the “faceless masses” are securely remote. Depicting protesters as masses rather than individuals can produce “fear” once the protesters are represented as great groups raging in Iraq and in Baghdad in particular creating chaos. The *Guardian* and the *New York Times* represent protesters in the photos mostly at “eye level”. Yet, the images are “more aggressive than equal”, as the protesters are mostly depicted from “a more involved position”, straight from the front. Also, a great majority of the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*'s “close-ups” doesn't have protesters interacting with the viewer which increases our claim that the viewer does not need to get involved.

7.2 Conclusion

This paper studies how the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* represented Iraqi protesters in a number of photos published in online articles about Iraqi protests arose in October 2019. The study is interested in the visual representations of the protesters and the possible differences and similarities in the representations between the two newspapers concerning photos. The study also shed light on the ideologies that can be found in and through the images in both newspapers.

There is no notable difference between both newspapers in representing the protesters visually. The analysis proves that both the *Guardian* and the *Times* denote protesters mostly as a homogenous group. Also, the *Times* depicts the protesters mostly from the front, opposing the viewer, which gives an aggressive feeling toward the viewers. The *Guardian* is less confrontational, as it depicts the protesters from the side or the back. These results show that those newspapers especially the *Times* can generate indirect negative ideologies about the protesters, since both newspapers chose photos that do not show the protesters as positive social actors doing actions like restoring dirty and derelict infrastructure, drawing, playing games, singing, etc. Instead, those newspapers showed them as negative social actors (breaking police concrete blocks, burning tyres, resisting security forces, etc.). Shedding light on few negative aspects and ignoring a wide range of good aspects of the protests is not objective and reflects the ideologies both newspapers want to deliver through the images; showing the Iraqi protesters as violent and do not have upright requests, since no request sign is shown in the images of the articles published.

To be objective, we should take into consideration the images that reflect the protesters as positive social actors like showing them heal each other's injuries, drawing murals, especially the *Guardian* which published a substantial number of photos in 26 November 2019 representing the role of art in the protests (see Appendix 1).

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Appendix 1

**Some of the Guardian photos under study. For more photos visit:
(https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Guardian&oldid=985811088)**



Figure 1- A Demonstrator Runs from Tear Gas in Baghdad.



Figure 2- Three young anti-government protesters in Baghdad



Figure 3- Security Forces Stand Guard at a Protest Against Unemployment, Corruption and Poor Public Services.

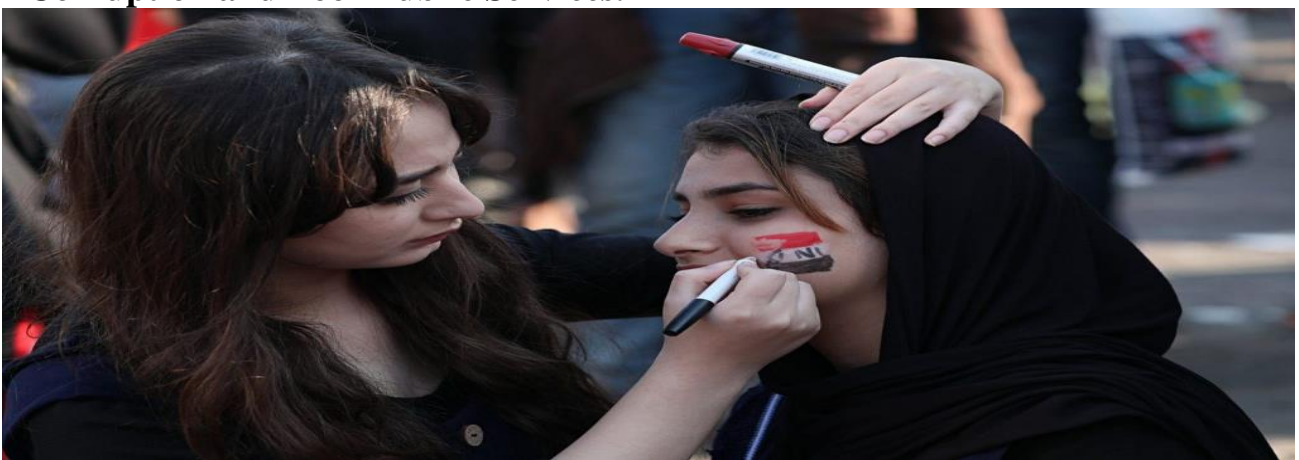


Figure 4- A Protester Gets her Face Painted with the Colours of the Iraqi Flag During Anti-Government Protests in Tahrir Square.



Figure 5- Antigovernment Protester Paint Murals in Baghdad.

Appendix 2

Some of the Guardian photos under study. For more photos visit:
(https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_New_York_Times&oldid=986008715)



Figure 1- Demonstrators pulled down concrete walls leading to Baghdad's heavily guarded Green Zone.



Figure 2- Protesters crowded the streets around Tahrir Square in Baghdad during renewed antigovernment protests.

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Figure 3- Demonstrators in Baghdad.



Figure 4- An injured protester being rushed to the hospital during a protest in Baghdad.



Figure 5- Protesters snatch and throw tear gas bombs thrown against them in Baghdad.