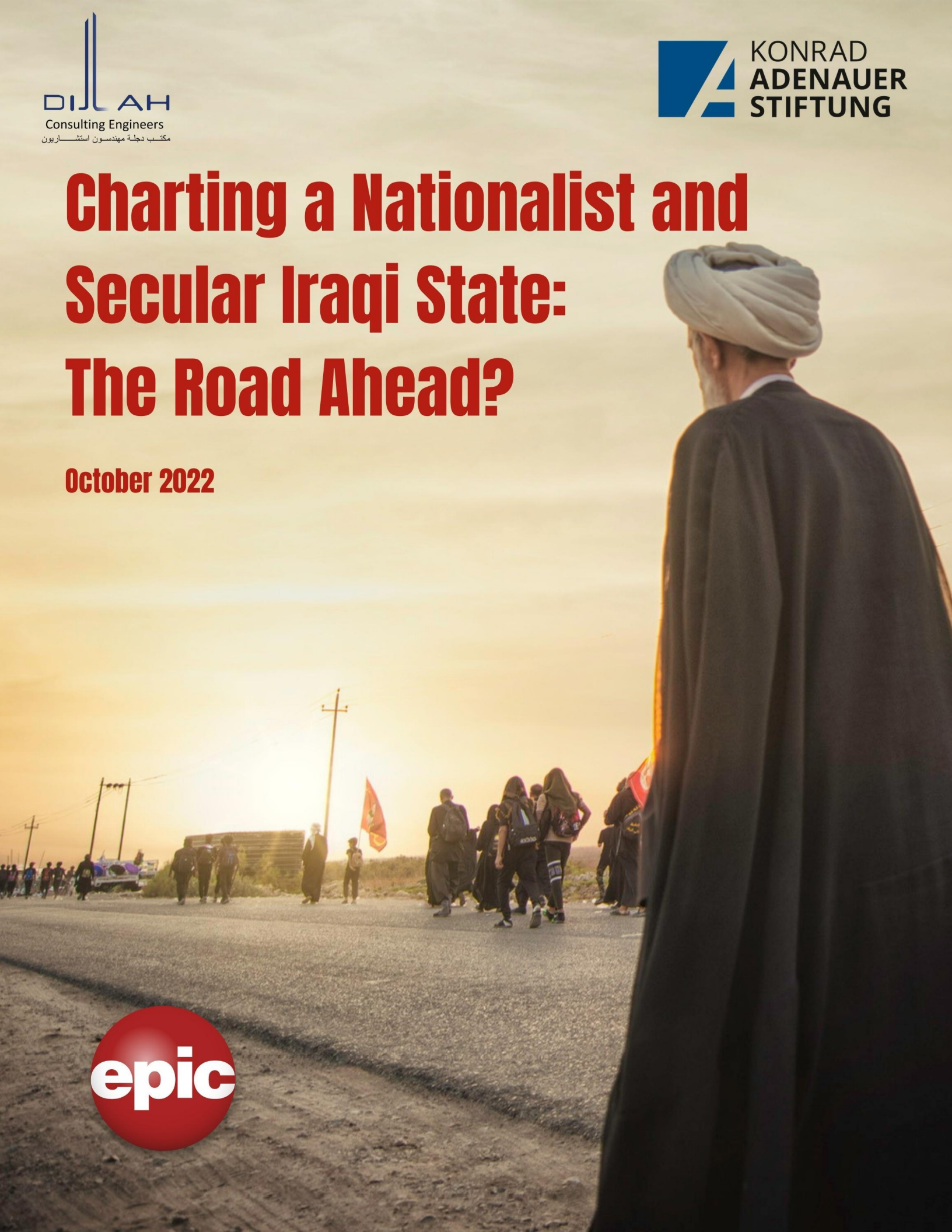


# Charting a Nationalist and Secular Iraqi State: The Road Ahead?

October 2022

**epic**



*Cover image: Iraqis walking on a pilgrimage to Shia Muslim shrines in central Iraq (al-Kafeel.net)*  
*Cover design by Hinda Shakeeb*

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### **About the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)**

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education programs aim at promoting freedom, liberty, peace and justice. The KAS Syria/Iraq Office deals with the political and social situation in both countries, questions regarding the stability of the region, the refugee situation and security implications arising from the Syrian civil war, and the emergence of the Islamic State. In addition to strengthening political dialogue within the region and between Europe and the Middle East, KAS work focuses on reconciliation and civil society support, good governance and rule of law, as well as research and analysis.

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Dijlah Consulting Engineers is an Iraqi firm that has been providing professional engineering services and construction supervision for more than 25 years, with a keen focus on sustainable development in Iraq. As a stakeholder in Iraq's economy, Dijlah ascribes to the statement that "democracy builds the economy." Guided by this vision, Dijlah's president, Dr. Midhat Zwayen, established the firm's Sustainability Office to focus on projects aimed at democracy-building, sustainable development, and social justice. For more information, visit: <https://www.dijlah-eng.com/sustainability>.

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### **About EPIC**

Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of peace and development in Iraq. Founded in 1998, EPIC is headquartered in Washington, DC, with a field office in Erbil. The Center has a long history of working directly with civil society leaders and communities across Iraq to support vulnerable populations, monitor human security, and inform public policy. EPIC's ultimate vision is a safe and prosperous Iraq in which all citizens live free from want and fear, and with dignity. The Center is currently focused on supporting Iraqi efforts to improve governance and human rights, promote peace and recovery in conflict affected areas, and combat climate change while mitigating its impact on vulnerable populations.



Geneive Abdo, a fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, authored this report.

## I. Introduction

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, societies in the Arab Middle East have struggled with the role of identity in state formation, in part because national identity was often in flux among a multitude of ethnic and religious groups. The region has had three primary state identities: Arab nationalist identity; religious identity; or royal family identity.

Arab nationalist identity became prominent in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, while the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain maintained a royal family identity. Later into the century, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran brought into worldview a state with a religious identity that was revolutionary and also a threat to the region.

Over time, Arab nationalism took root in many of the region's biggest, most influential states, bringing with it the institutionalization of secular ideology. This ideology served as a useful and largely effective counterbalance among ruling elites to popular attitudes toward Islam. Thus, national identity was emphasized over religious identity. In states such as Egypt, the government created secular institutions and brought religious institutions under its direct control to counter the powerful Muslim Brotherhood.

In Iraq, when the country gained independence from British colonial rule, the existing Sunni elites clung to their privileged positions and refused to surrender power to the majority Shia population. The state was the focus and agent of change, and top-down modernization was a priority. The rise to power of Saddam Hussein in 1968 and his role as president beginning in 1979, saw a continuation of trends toward pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism that had first emerged in the 1920s.

But eventually, under Saddam, who gave priority to Sunni tribal networks, marginalization, particularly of the majority Shia, became rampant, leading to the repression and persecution of the Shia *marjiyya* in Najaf and Karbala and the general majority Shia population. Today, about 60 to 65 percent of Iraqis are Shia. The 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988 pitted the Sunni state of Iraq against the Iranian Shia state and fueled Saddam's repression of the Shia inside his country.

Shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq's political system was completely transformed. A power-sharing system, which was envisioned by Iraqis in exile before the invasion, was implemented to institutionalize a place in power for the sectarian and ethnic-based parties that would come to dominate Iraqi politics for years to come. The theory was that because Iraq is comprised of ethno-sectarian groups, including Shia, Sunni, Kurds, and Christians, political representation should be based on these categories.

Academics call this system, “consociationalism.” In Arabic, the Iraqi system is often referred to as *Mubasasa Tai’fyya*, or apportionment of political positions among sectarian parties. This has served to ensure political power primarily for Kurdish parties and Islamist Shia parties, which often comprise the largest relatively cohesive blocs in elections. This sectarian system became powerful not only because it was institutionalized from the top down, but because civil society players also believed they could benefit from it, creating sectarianism from below as well. A similar process has been seen in Lebanon, which has had a long history of sectarian allocation of political power.

Although this power-sharing system is not formally enshrined in the Iraqi constitution, national elections between 2005 and 2021, and the government formation processes that followed, indicate a repeated pattern of outcomes whereby the speaker of Parliament is a Sunni, the prime minister a Shia, and the president of the republic a Kurd. The appointment of these positions, which occur long after the votes are cast, has allowed the dominant political parties in each group, such as Shia Islamist factions, to use their political weight to demand that their preferred candidates be chosen. The backroom negotiations have also opened the door for interference in the selection process from foreign governments, particularly Shia-dominated Iran, as part of a regional geopolitical struggle that is both politically and religiously motivated.

From the beginning, there was resistance within Iraq to this power-sharing system, and opposition has grown steadily to the political distortions and opportunities for corruption that it has introduced. Iraqis today perceive their country as a sectarian state verging on collapse, with competing ethnic and religious groups vying for power in a zero-sum game. This competition sometimes has erupted into periods of intense violence, most notably during the 2006-2008 civil war and the 2013-2017 war against ISIS.<sup>1</sup>

Even at times of peace, this competition has resulted in government dysfunction, corruption among political elites, and intervention from the Shia Muslim clerical establishment, the *marjiyya*, who have tried to protect the best interests of Iraqis, even if they could not control the behavior of politicians. The *marjiyya*, particularly Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, took on an important role beginning in 2003 in response to the weak Iraqi state, the increase in Shia political power, and later in response to sectarian strife, the rise of ISIS, and an intra-Shia rift.

In recent years a more hybrid form of politics has emerged in Iraq, whereby nationalism and sectarianism uneasily coexist. As Iraqis became more opposed to the *mubasasa* system and more outraged by general government dysfunction, protests broke out in 2015 to express a harsh critique of the system. By 2019, anti-government protests, which began on a massive scale that October, brought to light the profound depth of opposition to the *mubasasa* system. Although the protest leaders were largely Shia, the focus of the movement was not on sectarian interests; it was an issues-based, nationwide movement, centered on improving the economy,

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<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

creating more government accountability and ending corruption, and regulating renegade Iran-backed militias which operate outside government control. The protests underscored that public discontent is driven by socioeconomic grievances, rather than by ideological or religious divisions.

Throughout the protests, religious arguments were largely missing from the scene. When they were present, they were used by protesters to expose the self-serving exploitation of religion by Islamist Shia parties. Similarly, the symbols and iconography of Shia Islam were used not to claim a sectarian identity for the protest but to emphasize traditional notions of martyrdom and struggle between the oppressed and their oppressors that are central to Shia identity.

Indeed, exposing the failures of Islamist parties in governance had been a prominent theme in protests even before 2019. During the 2015 protests, Iraqis in southern provinces chanted “*bism il-din bagona il-haramiyah*” (“in religion’s name, the thieves robbed us”).

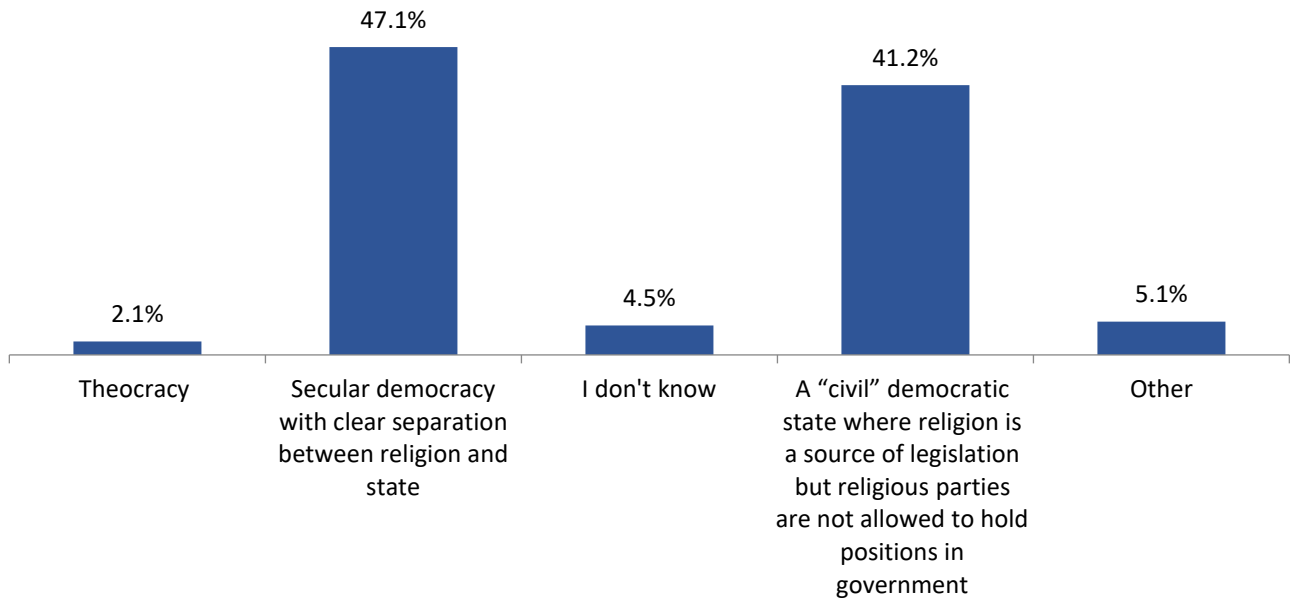
These public sentiments are consistent with a profound shift in Iraqis’ ideas of how they want their state to be governed. Opinion polls conducted since 2019 show consistent trends: Iraqis oppose the sectarian system, and they increasingly favor a secular, democratic state that is divorced from religious influence. For example, a series of surveys conducted by Arab Barometer, a research organization at Princeton University, concluded that current political systems in countries such as Iraq serve to make religious identity more dominant. But in 2019 polling, Arab Barometer determined there had been a decline in trust in religious-based parties across the Middle East, even though there is more trust in religious leaders than the parties themselves, which are perceived to be corrupt. Across the region, according to the Arab Barometer polling, the share of people expressing much trust in political parties, of which many have a religious identity, fell by over a third between 2011 and 2019, to 15 percent. The decline in trust in Islamist parties fell from 35 percent in 2013 to 20 percent in 2018, according to Barometer polling.<sup>2</sup>

New polling data outlined in these pages and the focus of this report confirms Iraqis’ aspiration for secular rule. In polling conducted in July 2022, the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) found that a substantial number of Iraqi respondents – 47 percent – said the system should be a secular democracy with a clear separation between religion and state, while another 41 percent wanted a democratic state where religion is a source of legislation but religious parties are banned from government.

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<sup>2</sup> Arab Barometer, “Arabs Are Losing Faith in Religious Parties and Leaders,” December 5, 2019, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2019/12/arabs-are-losing-faith-in-religious-parties-and-leaders/>.

Figure 1. The best government system for Iraq is



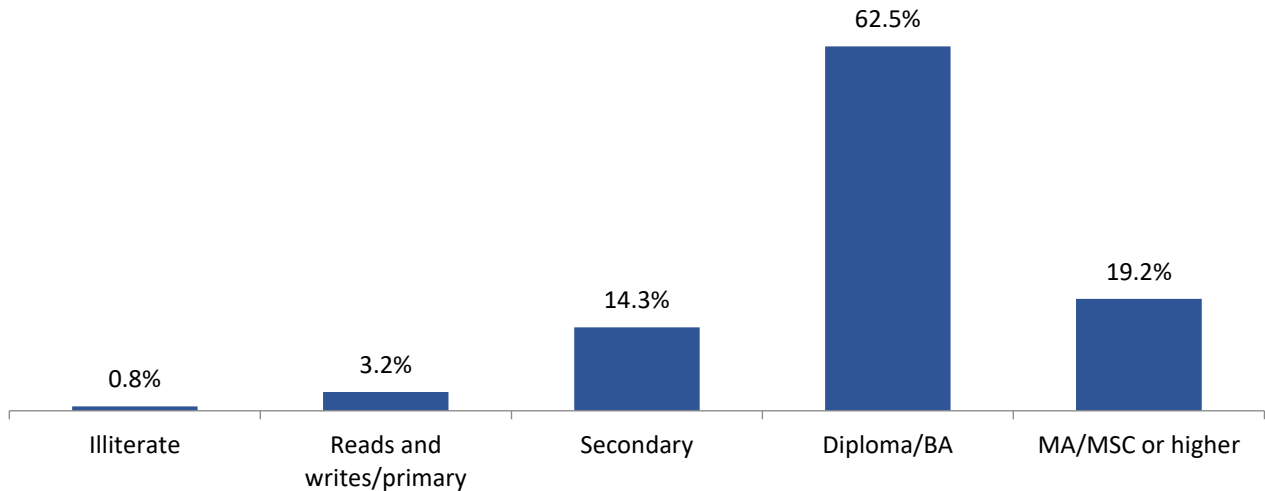
Some political figures and scholars in Iraq agree that the political system in some ways is showing signs of moving toward a secular state. “There is no political party that calls for a religious or Islamic state and most of the Shia and Sunni sectarian parties proclaim that the present Iraqi state and constitution are already a civil state,” said Raid Fahmi, the head of the Iraqi Communist party, in an interview from Baghdad. Ruba Ali Al-Hassani, an Iraqi scholar who has conducted extensive research on waves of protests in the country, agreed. “A good majority of Iraqis, whether involved in the Tishreen Movement or not, want secular rule. The past 19 years have shown that the intertwining of religion and governance is a dangerous formula for the country as it has sectarianized society, divided people, and only benefited the corrupt political elite. Iraqis have largely learned the lesson from the sectarian violence and unrepresentative, kleptocratic governments who govern and rob the people in the name of religion... There is also growing acknowledgement of how the political elites have sectarianized society for their gain. This acknowledgment is crucial for the near and far future,” said Al-Hassani.

Considering that the quest for a secular state is a relatively new development in Iraq, the contours and definitions of such a state are as yet unclear. For example, even though Iraqi respondents said clerics should have a limited role in political affairs, during the protests in 2019 and 2020, activists often looked to the *marjiyya*, many of whom supported the protesters’ demands, as their allies. Public opinion, particularly among the urban educated under 40 years old, is clear: clerics should have a minimal role in politics, although this does not necessarily translate into anti-clerical sentiment; religious parties should not be allowed to run in elections; and state institutions should be free of religious influence.

## II. Methodology

Between July 10 and July 25, 2022, EPIC conducted telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,062 Iraqi citizens eligible to vote. The primary objective of the survey was to measure how young Iraqis, specifically eligible voters ages 18–40, perceive key actors, concepts, and questions related to the role of religion in politics, governance, and public life. The respondents were largely educated: 62 percent held or were pursuing a bachelor’s degree or two-year diploma and 19 percent a higher degree. Fourteen percent had a secondary education. Thirty-seven percent were employed in the public sector, while 20 percent were fully employed in the private sector.

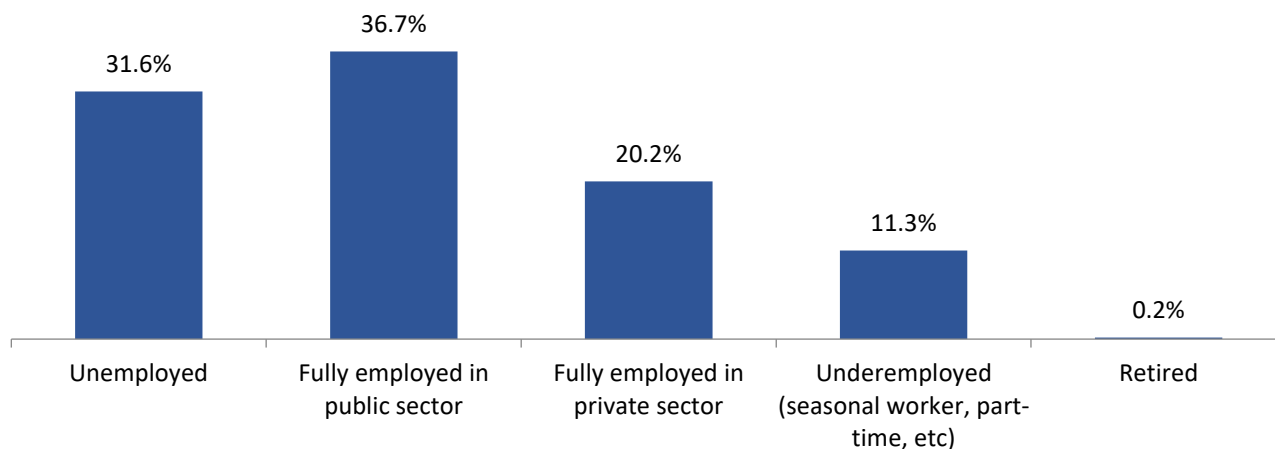
Figure 2. Respondents by education level



And the majority were employed, although a significant minority, 32 percent, said they were unemployed, and another 11 percent said they were underemployed.



Figure 3. Respondents by employment status



Using advanced survey software and Iraqi government data, the sample size was calculated to ensure a margin of error that does not exceed  $\pm 3\%$  at a 95 percent confidence level. To focus the research on Iraq's young voters, a near equal number of men and women ages 18–40 were selected for interviews in each province based on the country's male-to-female ratio of 1.01 (2020 estimate).<sup>3</sup>

The sample included a proportional representation of Iraq's 18 provinces based on each province's share of the national population, which the Central Statistical Organization of Iraq's Ministry of Planning estimates to be 39,127,900 as of 2019.

### III. Role of Clerics in the State

The dynamics between the Iraqi state and the Shia clergy underwent a major transformation after 2003, from repression and marginalization of the latter under an increasingly pro-Sunni Saddam Hussein to becoming major influencers in political matters. The stated position of Iraq's high-ranking clerics, according to interviews this author has conducted in Najaf since 2016, is that it is their religious duty to engage in the political sphere only out of necessity, or *maslaha*, a concept in Islamic jurisprudence which may be invoked during times of crisis to protect the public good.

The reality in Iraq, however, is that ongoing crises have propelled clerics into the political sphere routinely since 2003. This applies particularly to Ayatollah Sistani. This most revered cleric has influenced major turning points in Iraq, including exercising great influence in making sure a polarizing former prime minister did not serve a third term in office, calling on all Iraqis to take up arms against the Islamic State, curbing street violence between protesters and the Iraqi security forces, and trying to curtail Iran's religious and political influence in Iraq. Sistani's unusual role in

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York: United Nations, 2019), <https://population.un.org/wpp/DataQuery/>.

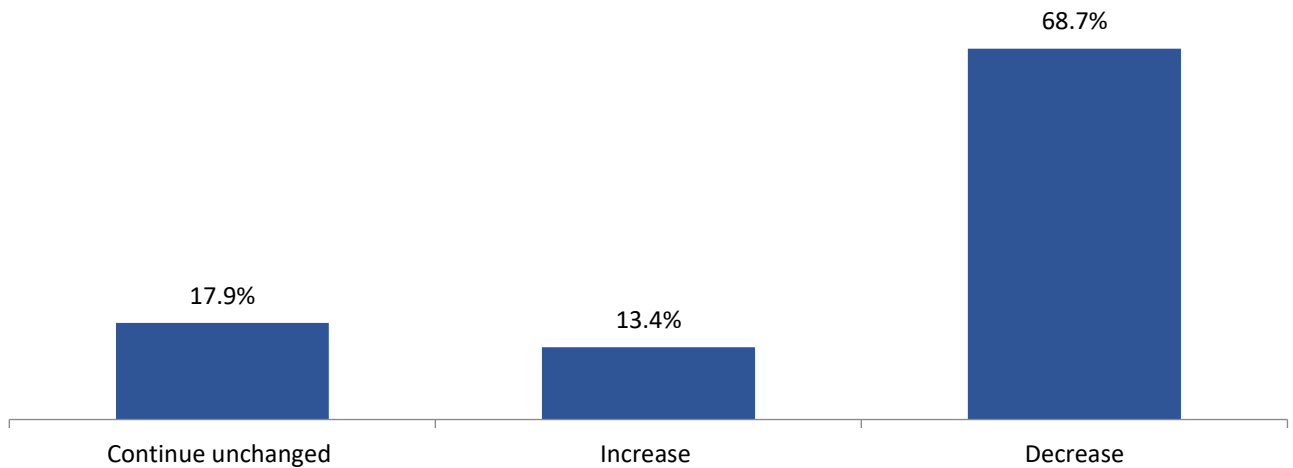
post-2003 Iraq has been primarily driven by two factors: the weakness of state authority and legitimacy, and the shift to a sectarian-based governance.

The overall weakness of the Iraqi state left room for other non-state actors to fill the resulting power vacuum. In the case of pro-Iranian militias, the role they have played as independent actors outside the purview of the Iraqi state security forces has had a damaging effect. By contrast, Sistani's role as a quasi-state actor has proven him to be an essential interlocutor. Sistani for years has met regularly with United Nations officials, prime ministers, and presidents. Such visits propelled him onto the world stage.

In addition to Sistani's personal intervention in state affairs, the *marjiyya* collectively has played a role in mediating protest movements. The most apparent example is the actions of many clerics in Najaf during the protests in 2019 and 2020, when they worked to secure agreements between young protesters demanding political and economic reform and intransigent state officials. Civil society leaders set aside their often-negative views of the clerical establishment and embraced clerical intervention because the clerics gave the movement legitimacy and, thus, some protection against brutal violence committed against the protesters by both the state security forces and Iranian-backed militias.

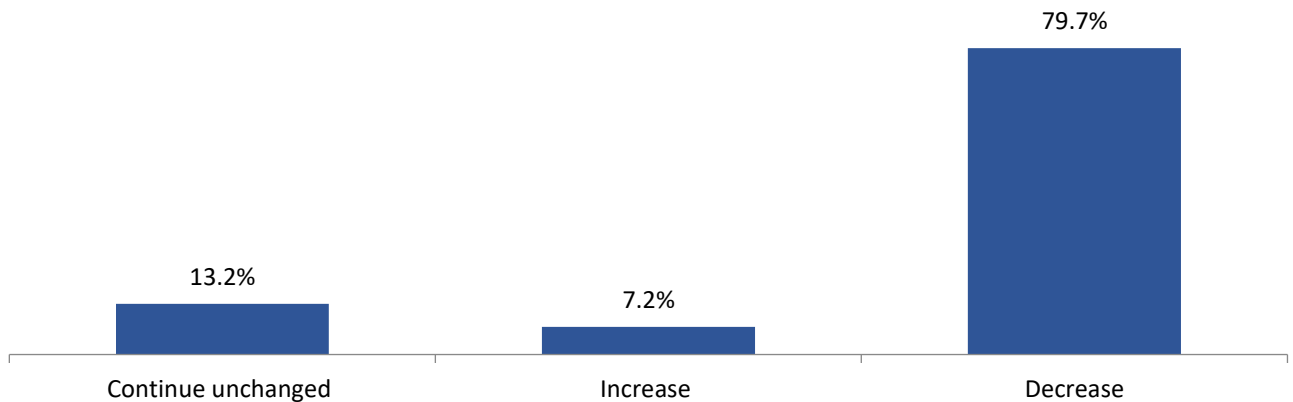
Despite Sistani's role and clerical interventions in protests – both of which Iraqis have said in news reports that they view favorably – in broader terms, Iraqis believe clerics' role in state affairs should be limited. In the EPIC survey, almost 69 percent of respondents said the role of senior Shia *marjiyya* in state affairs should decrease. “A majority of Iraqis remain practicing Muslims, but they are growing to be more reactive to those that want to impose religious rules on them. People want a sense of agency, and they are fighting for it more so now. This is revealed in the popular Iraqi support for the Iranian protests,” said Al-Hassani, the Iraqi scholar, referring to the recent popular uprising in Iran, where millions of Iranians are denouncing the theocratic rule in place since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Figure 4. The role of the senior *marjiyya* in political affairs should



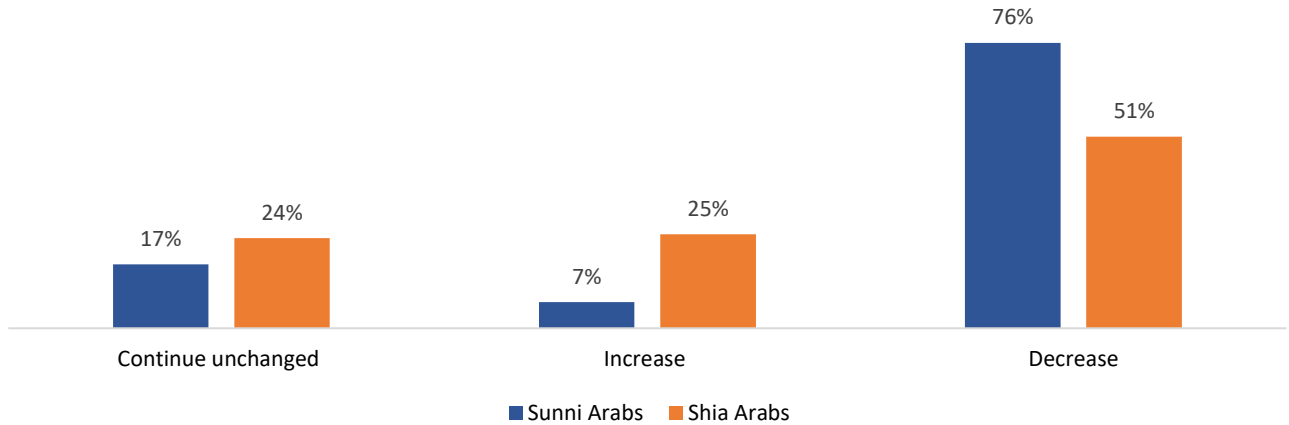
And 80 percent said the role of lower-ranking clerics should be further reduced. The opinions on the proper role for clerics in the political sphere varied little among Shia and Sunni respondents on most questions.

Figure 5. The role of ordinary clerics in political affairs should



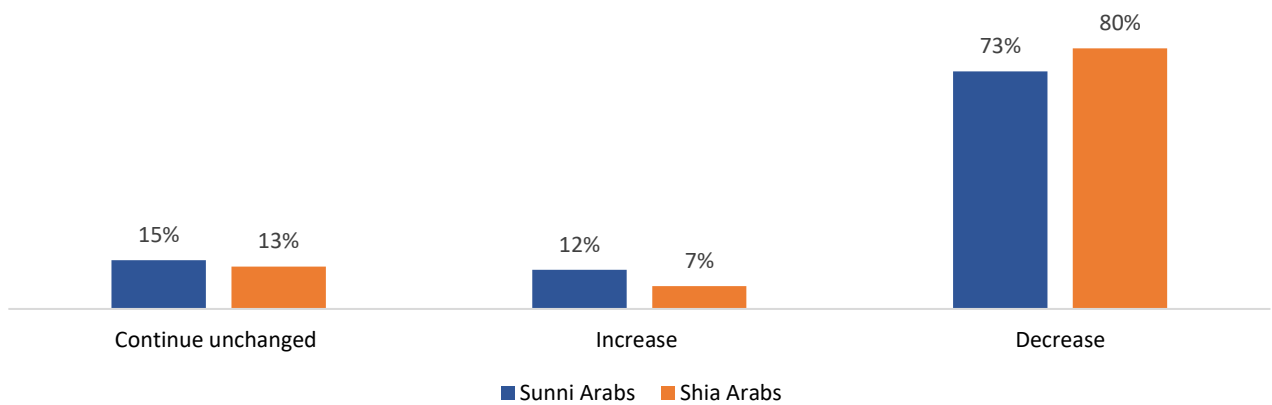
When asked about the role of senior *marjiyya* in political affairs, 17 percent of Sunni Arab respondents said it should continue unchanged, while 24 percent of Shia Arabs said so. Seventy-six percent of Sunni Arab respondents said the role should decrease, while 51 percent of Shia Arabs said so. Only 7 percent of Sunni Arabs respondents said the role should increase, while 25 percent of Shia Arabs agreed.

Figure 6. The role of the senior *marjiyya* in political affairs should



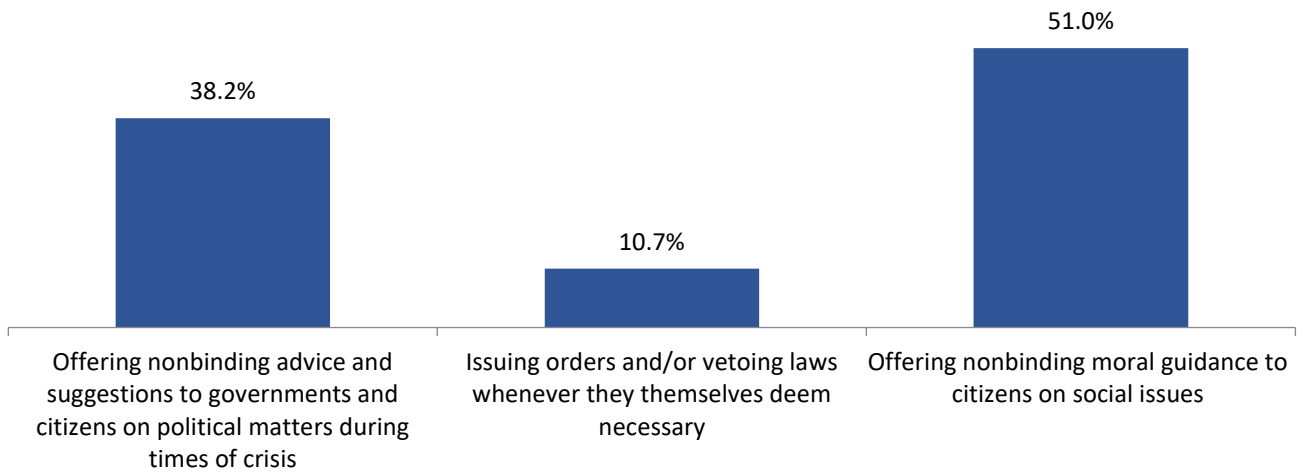
When asked about the role of ordinary clerics, 73 percent of Sunni Arabs said it should decrease while 80 percent of Shia said so. Only 12 percent of Sunni respondents said it should increase, while 7 percent of Shia said it should, and 15 percent of Sunni said it should be unchanged while 13 percent of Shia said so.

Figure 7. The role of ordinary clerics in political affairs should



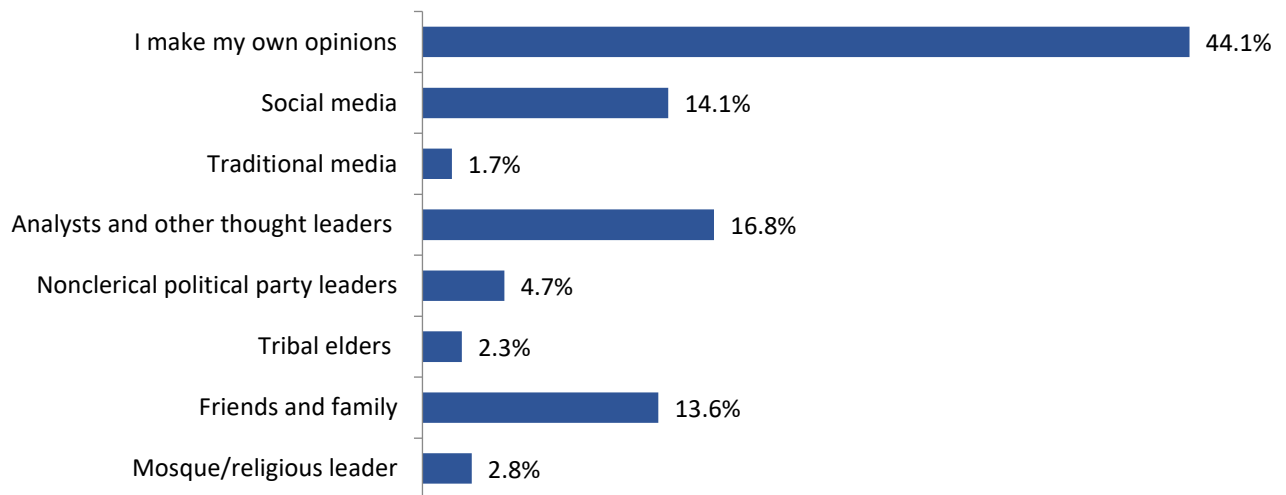
Fifty-one percent of respondents said religious leaders serve their community best by offering nonbinding moral guidance to citizens on social issues, compared with 38 percent who said religious leaders should offer nonbinding advice to government and citizens on political matters during times of crises.

Figure 8. Religious leaders serve their community and country best by



And, in a dramatic shift from twenty years ago, when many Muslims in the Middle East routinely sought social and political advice from clerics, only 3 percent of respondents in the EPIC survey said they seek guidance on political matters from the mosque or religious leaders. Forty-four percent said they make their own decisions and 14 percent said they seek guidance from social media. Seventeen percent said they seek advice from analysts and other thought leaders.

Figure 9. Where do you seek guidance on political matters/form political opinion?



## IV. The State's Use of Islam in Governance

Since Iraq's constitution was drafted in 2005, debates have emerged periodically over the state's use of Islam in governance, in part because the constitution states that Islamic law is a "source of [national] law." This vague designation leaves the door open to widely varied interpretation. A renowned legal scholar at Harvard University, Intisar A. Rabb, defines the Iraqi constitution as "coordinate constitutionalization," whereby the constitution incorporates Islamic law, laws of democratic processes, and liberal norms in a hybrid form of governance.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, she writes that Iran's constitution is considered dominant constitutionalization because Islamic law is the supreme law of the land and clerics have the final say.

One of the most significant debates occurred in 2019 over the interpretation of article 92 of the Iraqi constitution, which states that the Federal Supreme Court should include scholars of Islamic jurisprudence. The debate focused on what role these scholars should have in the Court. Some officials in Islamist parties argued that the scholars' participation in decisions was mandatory, while civil society figures argued that the constitution authorizes the scholars to be appointed only as advisors. The latter argued that giving the scholars anything but an advisory role would risk Islamizing the secular Court and turning it into a religious state authority.<sup>5</sup>

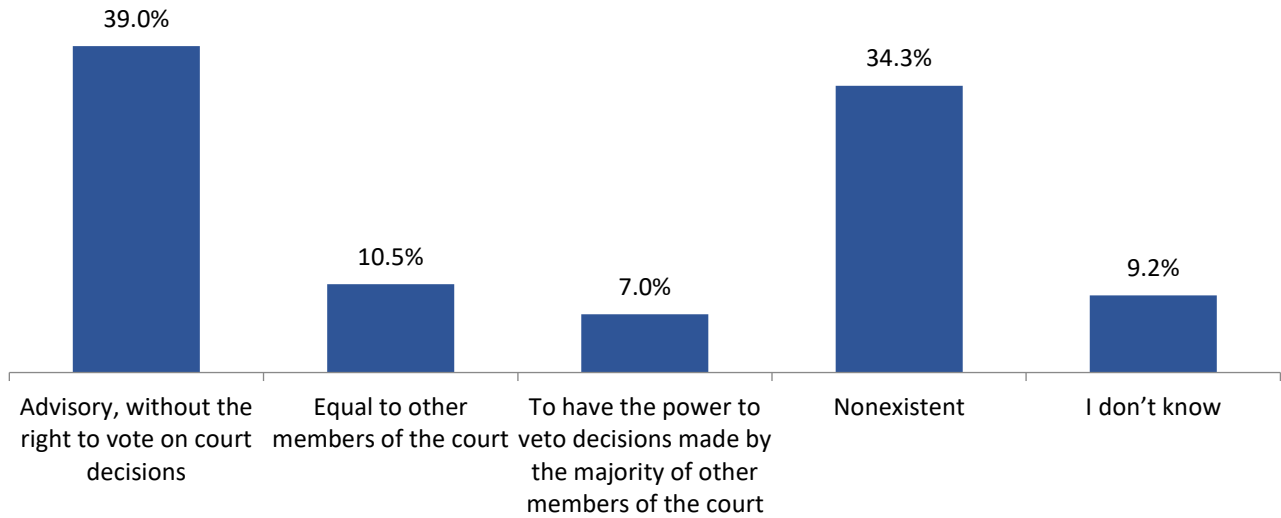
In keeping with the predominant view that Iraq should be a secular democracy, respondents to the EPIC survey said they want a limited role of Islam in governance. Thirty-nine percent of those surveyed said clerics should have only an advisory role in Federal Supreme Court decisions, without the right to vote on court decisions. Thirty-four percent said they should have no role, and 10.5 percent said their role should be equal to the other members of the Court.

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<sup>4</sup> Intisar A. Rabb, "We the Jurists': Islamic Constitutionalism in Iraq," *Journal of Constitutional Law* 10, no. 3 (March 2008): 527–79, <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jcl/vol10/iss3/4/>.

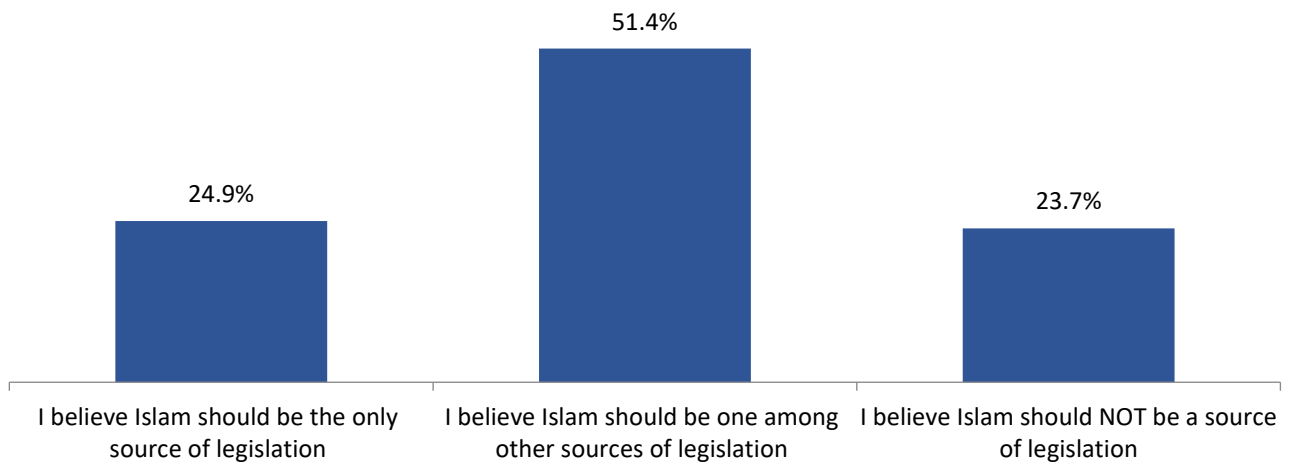
<sup>5</sup> Omar Sattar, "Iraq Considers Appointing Powerful Clerics to High Court," *Al-Monitor*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/iraq-federal-supreme-court.html#ixzz7eraaPaCU>.

Figure 10. The role of clerics in the federal supreme court should be



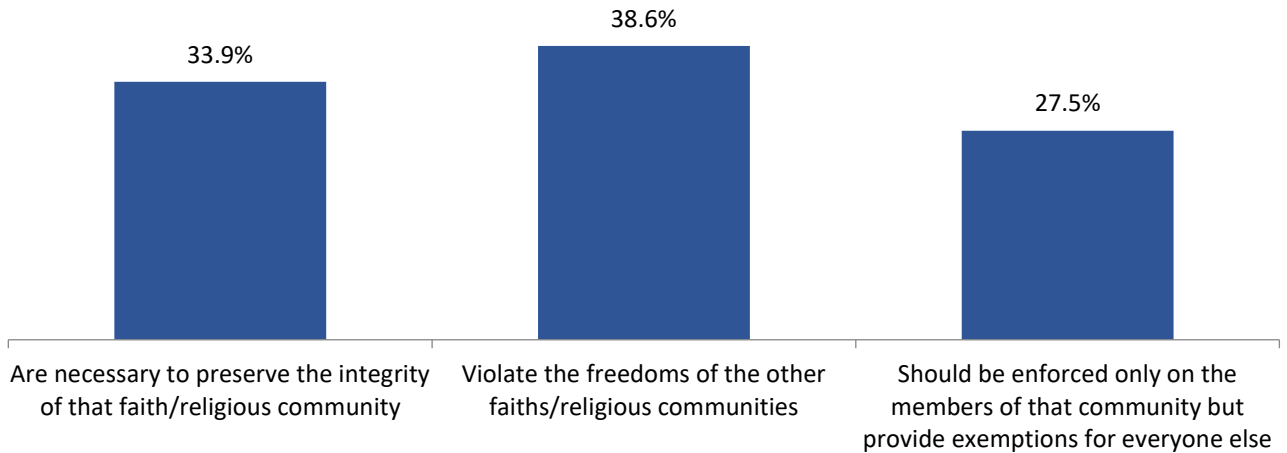
Yet, despite views that clerical influence in governance should be limited, Iraqis have a complex view of religion and law. Three out of four Iraqis who were interviewed said they wanted Islam to be either the only source of legislation (25 percent) or a source alongside other sources of legislation (51 percent).

Figure 11. Which statement do you most agree with



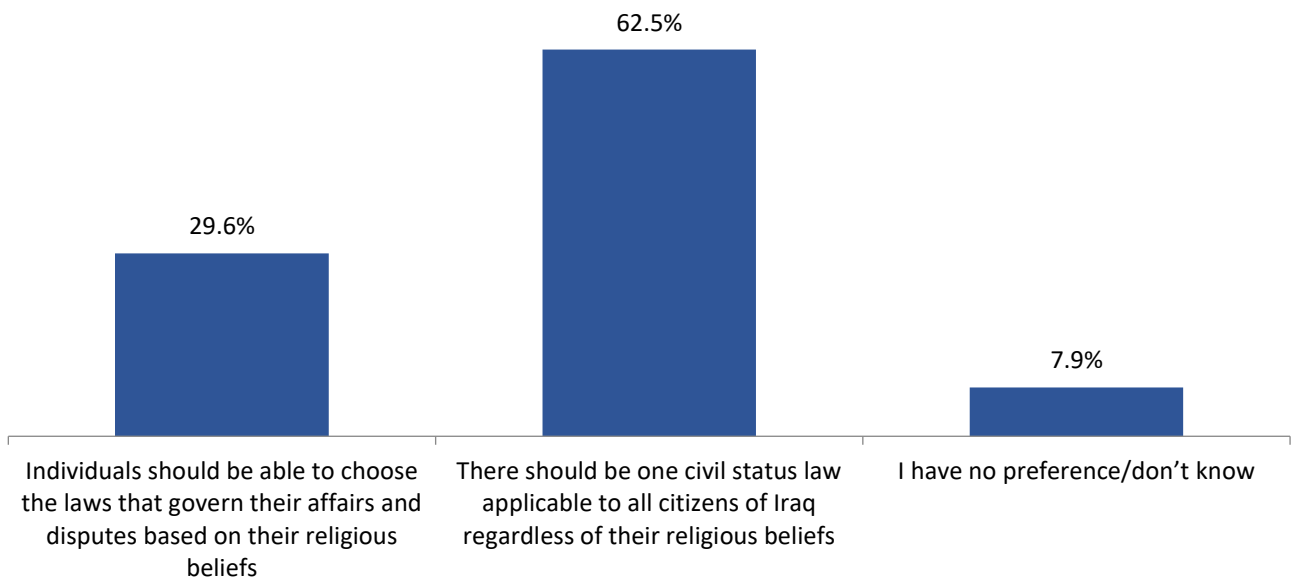
Similarly, when commenting on the statement, “laws that enforce the moral standards of a specific religion but affect everyone else no matter their religious beliefs,” 39 percent said such laws would violate the freedoms of other faiths and religious communities, while 34 percent said they are necessary to preserve the integrity of that particular faith and religious community.

**Figure 12. Laws that enforce the moral standards of a specific religion but affect everyone else no matter their religious beliefs**



When asked the question, “When it comes to civil status laws that govern marriage, divorce, and inheritance,” only about 30 percent said individuals should be able to choose laws that govern their affairs and disputes based on religious beliefs, while 62.5 percent said there should be one civil status law applicable to all citizens of Iraq regardless of religious beliefs. It is common in some Arab countries for such issues, known as “personal status,” to be governed by separate courts which rule according to Islamic law, which is applied even if citizens are Christians, Jews, or of other faiths besides Islam.

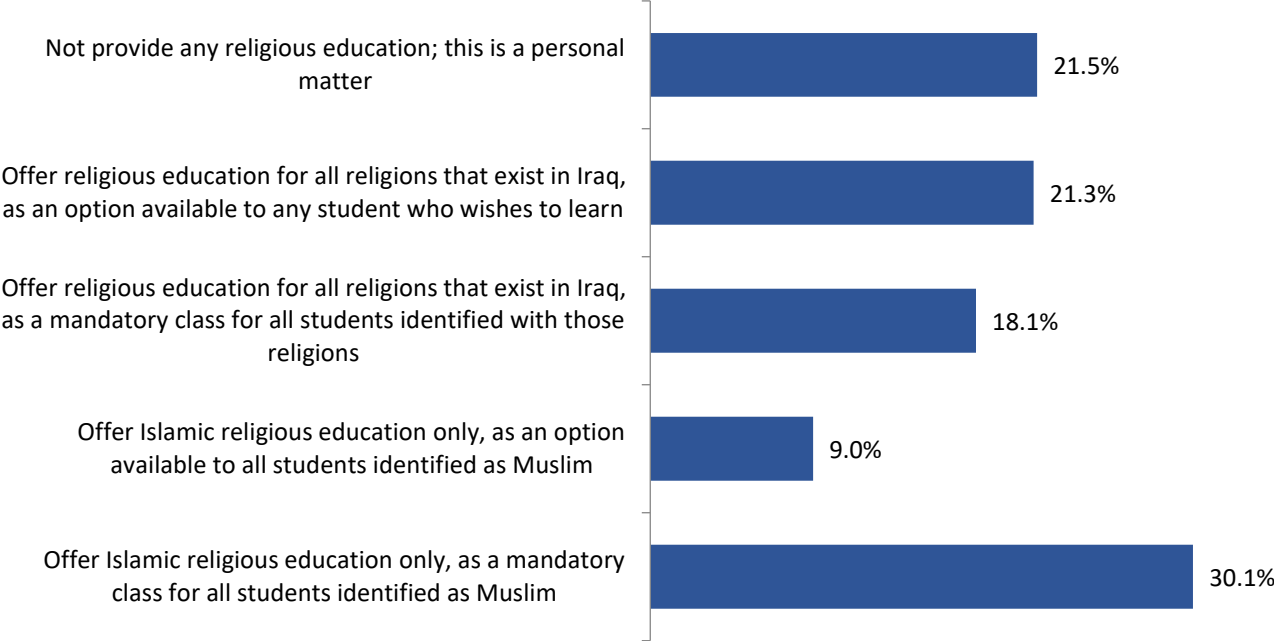
**Figure 13. When it comes to the civil status law that governs marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc., do you think**





Regarding whether public schools should make Islamic education mandatory, 30 percent said public schools should teach only Islamic education and as a mandatory subject for students who identified as Muslim. Twenty-two percent said the state should not offer religious education because it is a personal matter. And 39 percent said public schools should offer religious education for all religions that exist in Iraq, as a mandatory class for those identified with a particular faith (18 percent) or as an optional class for those students (21 percent).

Figure 14. Public schools in Iraq should



## V. Form of Governance: Current Sectarian Power Sharing Versus a Majoritarian Government with Direct Representation for Voters

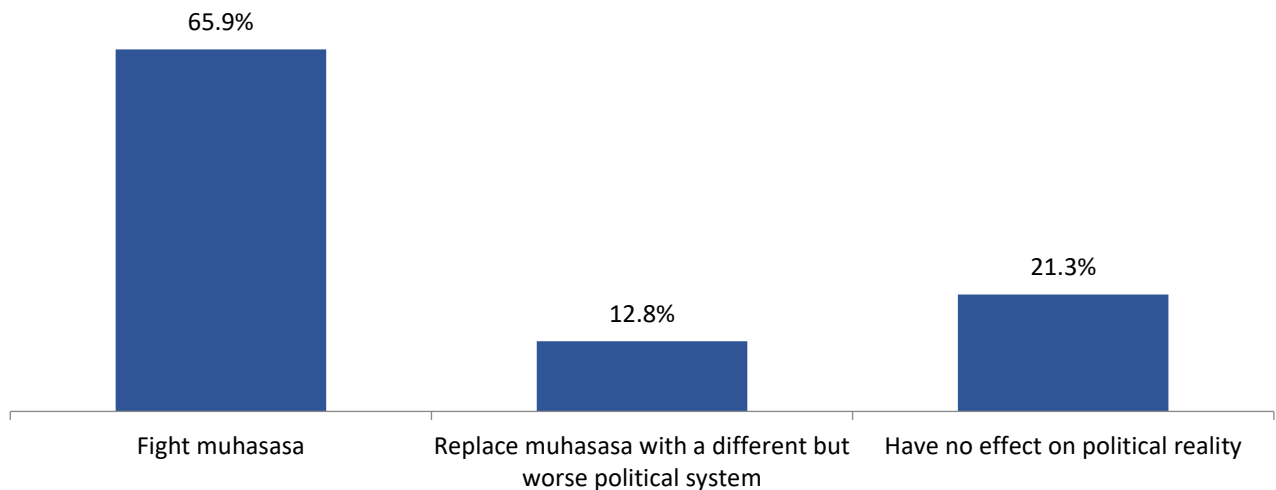
With each national election, opposition to the power-sharing system has grown, and by 2018 all major Shia parties publicly claimed to oppose *mubasasa*. Some proposed a majoritarian government, instead. Moqtada al-Sadr is a proponent of this system, which he argues could cure Iraq’s sectarian strife and end the debilitating stalemates over government formation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sadr’s vision for majoritarian rule may be closer to a more exclusive form of *mubasasa*, however, than it is to true majority government. While Sadr sought to exclude some of his worst Shia rivals from government formation, namely Nouri al-Maliki, his alliance with the Sunni Siyada coalition and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) aimed to preserve the same sectarian formula for allocating top government positions that has prevailed since 2005.

However, some Iraqi scholars argue that while the country should leave sectarian power-sharing behind, it is too underdeveloped politically for a majoritarian government. Critics also say that the memories of oppression experienced by minority communities are too recent, even though the *mubasasa* system was supposed to protect Iraq's minorities. "Iraq's various ethno-sectarian communities are still plagued by memories of their respective experiences of persecution, living in the specter of civil war, and conditioned by a decade of power-sharing politics," wrote Nussaibah Younis, an expert and Senior Advisor to the European Institute of Peace. "A transition to a majoritarian government cannot take place without an authentic reconciliation process that acknowledges the victimhood of Iraq's communities."<sup>7</sup>

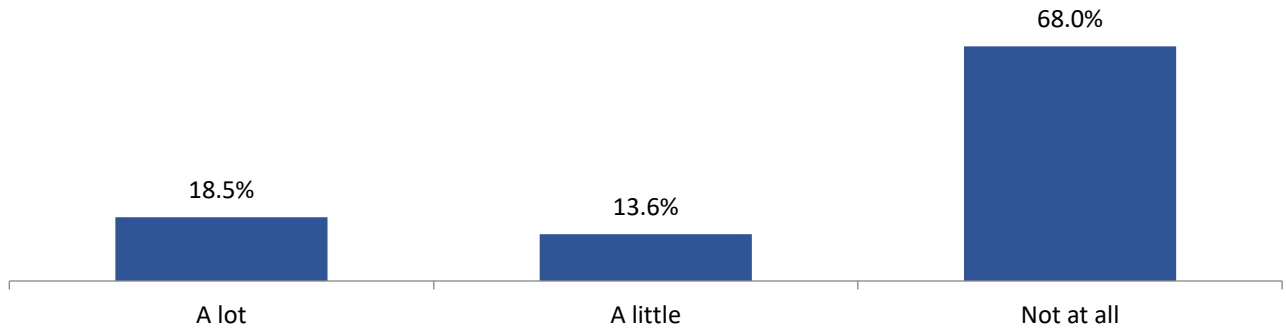
Even if Iraqis are uncertain what system should replace *mubasasa*, they believe separating politics from religion is a step in the right direction, according to the EPIC survey. Sixty-two percent of Iraqi respondents said that separating politics from religion will help fight *mubasasa*. And 68 percent said religious identification should not matter in the selection of the president and prime minister.

Figure 15. The separation of religion and politics will



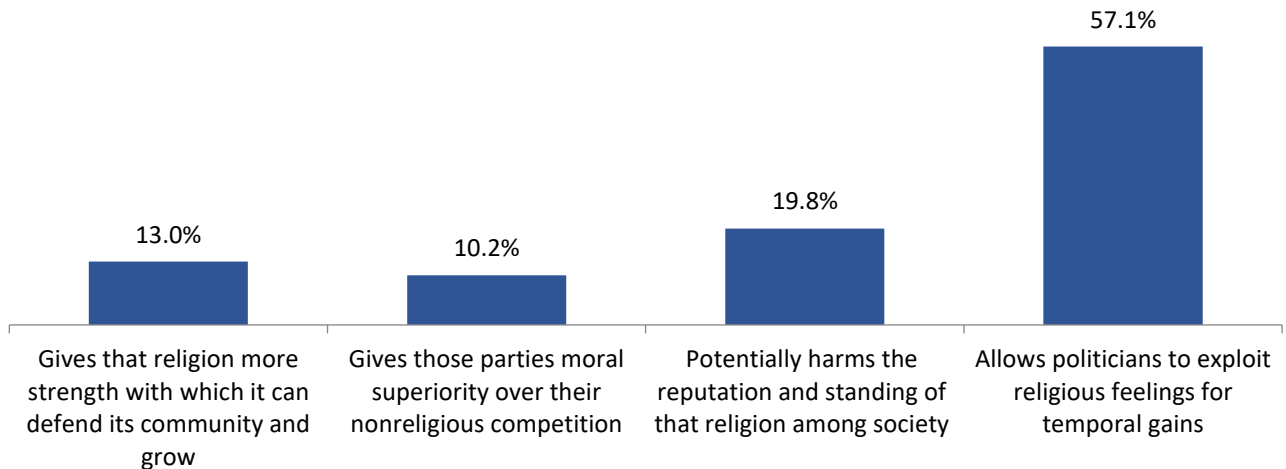
<sup>7</sup> Nussaibah Younis, "From Power-Sharing to Majoritarianism: Iraq's Transitioning Political System," Belfer Center, May 2013, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/iraqtenyearson-younis-chapter.pdf>.

Figure 16. In the selection or appointment of top government officials (such as the prime minister, president, ministers), their religious identification should matter



Forty-seven percent of Iraqis surveyed said the best system of governance for Iraq is secular democracy with a clear separation between religion and state. Forty-one percent said a “civil” democratic state was needed where religion is a source of legislation but religious parties are not allowed to hold positions in government (see figure 1). The polling also shows that Iraqis believe religious-based political parties, such as the Shia Islamist parties that have dominated politics since 2003, are responsible for government dysfunction – a sentiment expressed in the 2019 protest movement. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that political parties which espouse a religious identity allow politicians to exploit religious feelings for temporal gains.

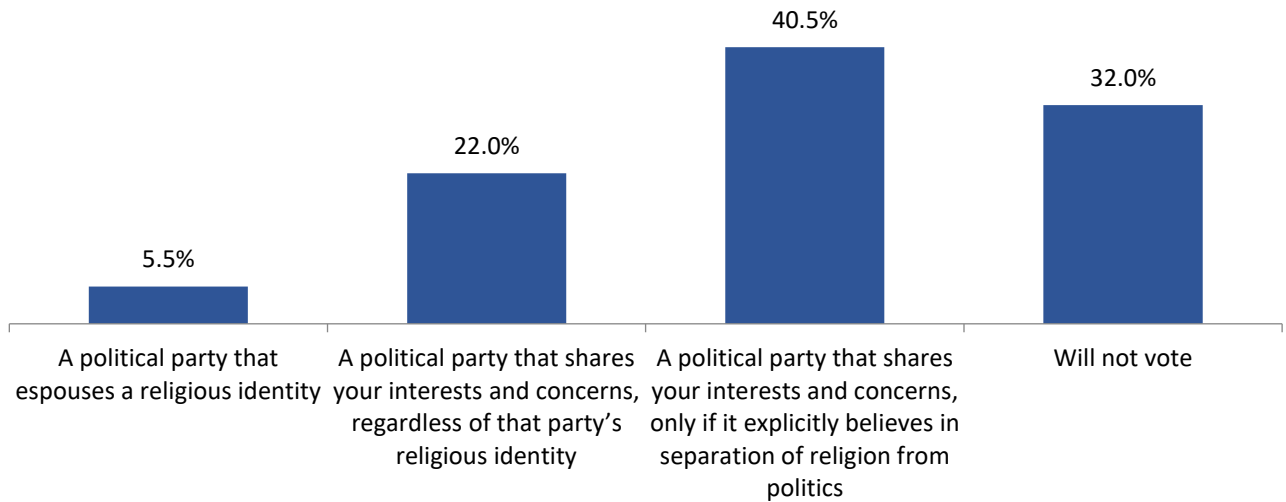
Figure 17. The existence of political parties that espouse a religious identity



If free and fair elections were held in Iraq, 40.5 percent of respondents said they would vote for a political party that shares their interests and concerns, but only if it explicitly believes in the separation of religion from politics. Twenty-two percent said

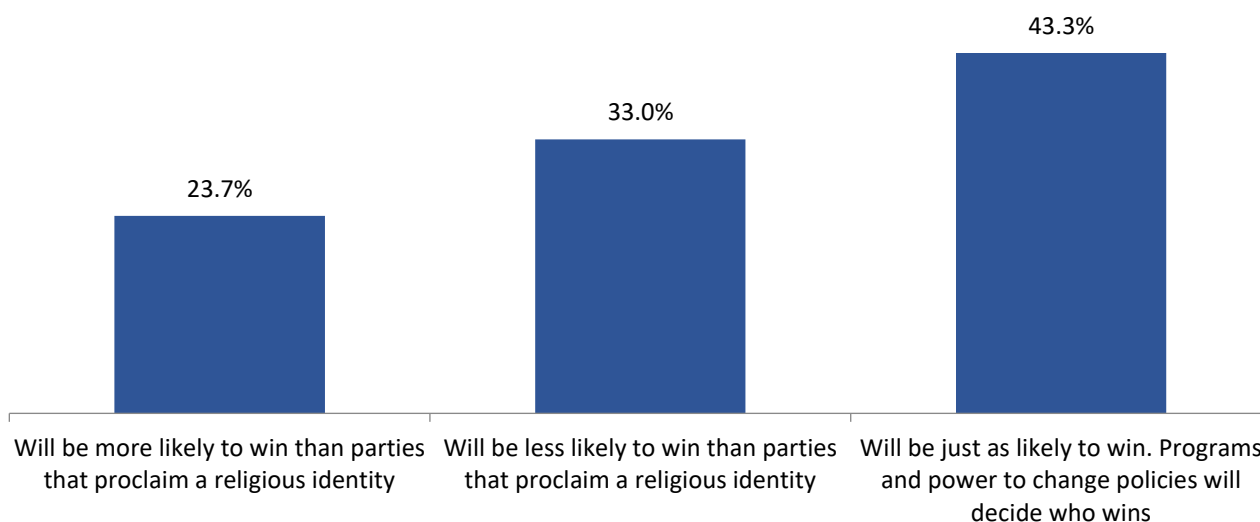
they would vote for a party that shares their interests and concerns, regardless of the party's religious identity.

**Figure 18. If new, free, and fair elections were to be held next week, would you be more likely to vote for**



Yet, despite the skepticism toward religious parties, respondents had mixed feelings about the likelihood of nonreligious parties doing well in the next election. When asked about the outlook in the next election for political parties that have no explicit religious identity, 43 percent said they would be just as likely to win as parties with a religious identity, but 33 percent said they would be less likely to win, and 24 percent said these parties would be more likely to win. Such polling results may be an indicator of the extent to which Iraqis view the system as rigged to favor Islamist parties and disfavor secular parties.

Figure 19. In the next election, do you think political parties that have no explicit religious identity



## VI. Conclusion

The struggle in Iraq between those trying to maintain the status quo and those determined to change the system of governance exploded in the summer of 2022. Sadr’s coalition had won 73 parliamentary seats in the October 2021 election out of 329 – a great sign of his strength and *relative* popularity.<sup>8</sup> Sadr brought the issue of a majoritarian government to a head, when a crisis erupted because a new government could not be formed. A ruling by Iraq’s top court raised the quorum requirement for Parliament to elect a president, the first step in forming a government, to a two-thirds supermajority. This ruling, and effective maneuvering by Sadr’s rivals, thwarted efforts by Sadr and his coalition to form a government for eight months after the election because they could not muster the two-thirds majority.

Thus, in June, Sadr resigned his 73 representatives from Parliament, and the future became uncertain. In late July, the Iranian-backed factions, which are his rivals, made public their pick for prime minister, a former minister and provincial governor. The news provoked Sadr and his followers. Not only did Sadr object to the proposed choice for prime minister, but it showed that the Coordination Framework, which is the name of the Iranian-backed coalition of parties, was marching forward to form a government without him.

<sup>8</sup> In absolute numbers, Sadr and most other traditional parties received fewer votes in 2021 than in the previous election, reflecting their decreased popularity among voters across the board, even as they continued to dominate the legislature. For instance, despite winning a plurality of seats in 2021, the Sadrists lost 400,000 votes compared to the 1.3 million they received in 2018. Further, it’s worth noting that Sadr’s approximately 900,000 voters represented under 10 percent of votes cast and 3.6 percent of eligible voters in 2021.

The confirmation in late October of a new government led by the Framework's candidate underscored that, despite Sadr's attempts at a majoritarian government, Iraq's political elites and the political system apparently are not ready for the shift. And, despite the commonalities among Sadr's supporters and the typical protesters of 2019 and 2020, who also want to overhaul the political system, there are vast differences in motivations, goals, and methods between these two sectors of Iraqi society.

A survey conducted by Chatham House, a London-based think tank, shows how Sadr's supporters' vision of an Iraqi state differs from that of the majority urban, educated respondents to the EPIC survey. Sadr's millions of supporters comprise the largest Shia Islamist movement in the region. Many are from the urban, poor segment of Iraqi society and live in Sadr City, a section of Baghdad. According to the results of the Chatham House survey released in August, a majority of Sadr's supporters living in Sadr City have lost faith in the Iraqi government. Fifty-five percent have no trust in Parliament and 45 percent have no trust in the cabinet. However, their vision of an ideal government is one that should enact laws in accordance with Islamic law. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed strongly agreed with this idea.<sup>9</sup>

Their loss of faith in the government sets Sadr supporters in sync with the young protesters from the 2019-2020 protests. They indeed have some common goals: "There are some common objectives if we refer to the declared demands stated by Al Sadr, namely the rejection of the power sharing system (*mubasasa*), the removal of corrupt ruling parties and politicians, the rejection of foreign interference, including the overwhelming Iranian presence and influence, and the call for more social justice," said Fahmi, the Communist Party leader.

The Chatham House survey illustrated the significant polarization in Iraq and the competing interests. Even though Sadr's supporters may share ideas with those more educated respondents in the EPIC poll that the system of governance should change, there are significant divisions over the role of religion in politics. It is likely this struggle will continue for the foreseeable future.

"*Mubasasa* is unlikely to disappear because the country is already demographically apportioned and dominated by parties according to ethno-confessional lines, so they will have to be part of coalition governments no matter the outcome of elections," said Sajad Jiyad, an Iraqi scholar at the Century Foundation, a New York-based think tank. Al-Hassani is a bit more hopeful, if there is accountability and fair elections. "If they go hand-in-hand, they can have powerful outcomes. Accountability would ensure that corrupt politicians do not run in elections again," she said.

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<sup>9</sup> Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Understanding Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Inside Baghdad's Sadr City," Chatham House, August 8, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/understanding-iraqs-muqtada-al-sadr-inside-baghdads-sadr-city>.





**Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC)**

1140 Third Street NE, 2nd Floor,  
Washington, DC 20002

**[www.EnablingPeace.org](http://www.EnablingPeace.org)**