SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation

Social Relations
After COVID-19: IRAQ

A joint project by SEPAD and TOI:
Bringing in the Other Islamists

Introduction

This report draws on the results of surveys carried out during 2021 which explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social relations in Iraq. It is part of a two country survey that explored a common set of questions in relation to Iraq and Lebanon. Both stand as two key regional states that share a number of commonalities, and also have some important differences. Both have suffered greatly from intervention by external powers in the colonial and modern periods. They have been victims of tragic civil conflicts often drawn along ethno-sectarian lines, and which have also drawn in external actors. Both states have also had to deal with the institutionalisation of sectarian difference through consociational power-sharing arrangements.

Despite such similarities, Iraq and Lebanon have undergone different trajectories in their development as modern nation states, and there are marked disparities between the two in terms of population, ethnic, linguistic and confessional make-up, and integration into the global economy. Regardless, both are often viewed, particularly from the often privileged vantage point of Western academia as classic examples of 'divided societies'.

Understanding the ways in which life is regulated in such 'divided societies' has long been of interest to scholars from a range of academic disciplines, prompting work on a range of different aspects including power sharing, urban politics, socio-economic forces, peace building, the role of religion and the impact of regional politics on various dynamics.

Questions of power, authority, governance, transitional justice, political participation and communal membership all play an important role in understanding cross-cutting divisions within and across societies. This is further complexified by domestic and extraneous challenges faced by regional states, most notably in the cases under investigation here in the form of protest and the Covid-19 pandemic, that can both exacerbate and mitigate against communal difference in social and political life.

The surveys were carried out during 2021 and involved local partner organisations undertaking telephone surveys across a representative range of demographic groups. The questionnaire was devised by a working group of fellows affiliated with the SEPAD and TOI projects,[1] and was based around a common survey instrument used across both cases.

A total of 2022 respondents answered the survey.[2]

The report offers some compelling findings on the national priorities of Iraqi citizens, and points to widespread dissatisfaction with government performance. Though both Iraq and Lebanon are often viewed through the prism of sectarian relations, respondents in both surveys were more concerned with issues of day to day survival and frustration at a lack of government accountability, than questions around sectarianism. In the Iraqi case, however, religion remained a strong marker of identity and political influence, with nationality being of less importance compared to Lebanese respondents. This points to a growing desire among the respondents to move towards a desectarianisation of political life in Iraq, whilst maintaining a role for religion more broadly.[3]

1.
National and local priorities and issues

1. National and local priorities and issues

1) National issues that are considered important for Iraq, ranked in order of importance
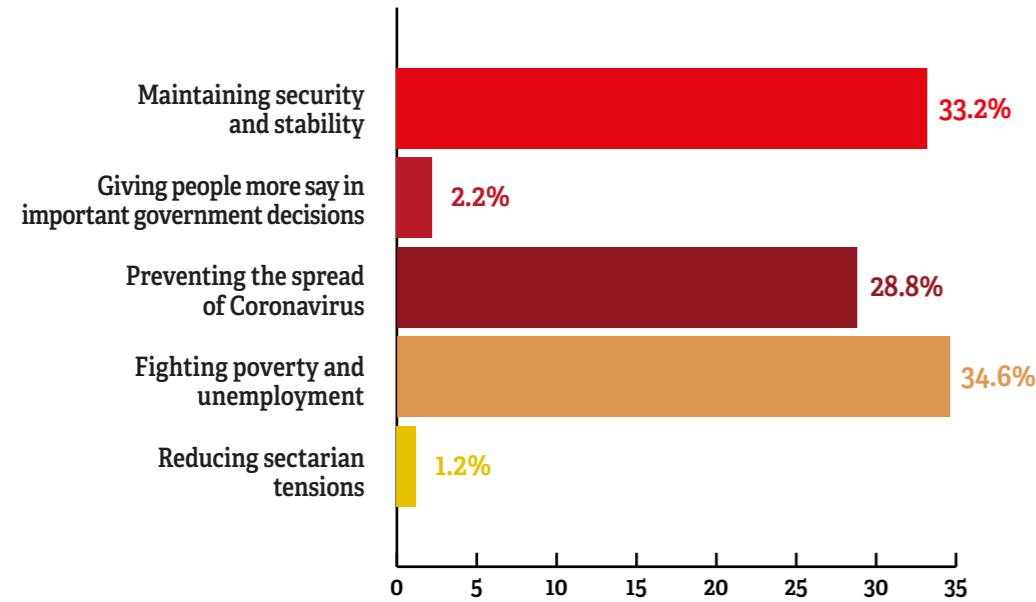
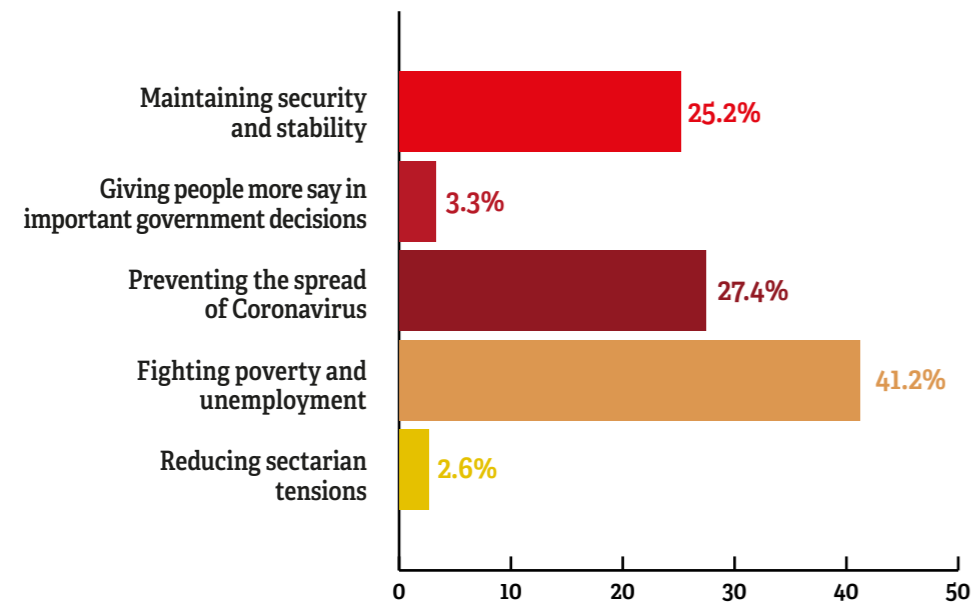On the national level, the most important issues for survey respondents were poverty and unemployment, followed by lack of security and instability, then COVID-19. Sectarian tensions and having more say in government decisions were far less of an issue for respondents. Therefore, conditions for survival and livelihood are the most important.

2) Local issues affecting the neighbourhood where respondents live, ranked in order of importance

Once again, and this time on the local level, survey respondents prioritise poverty and unemployment as the most important issues that need to be addressed. However, on the local level, poverty and unemployment were followed by the spread of COVID-19, then by lack of security and instability. Again, sectarian issues were less significant.

3) If respondent/their families were negatively impacted financially by Coronavirus and needed help, where would they turn to for assistance?
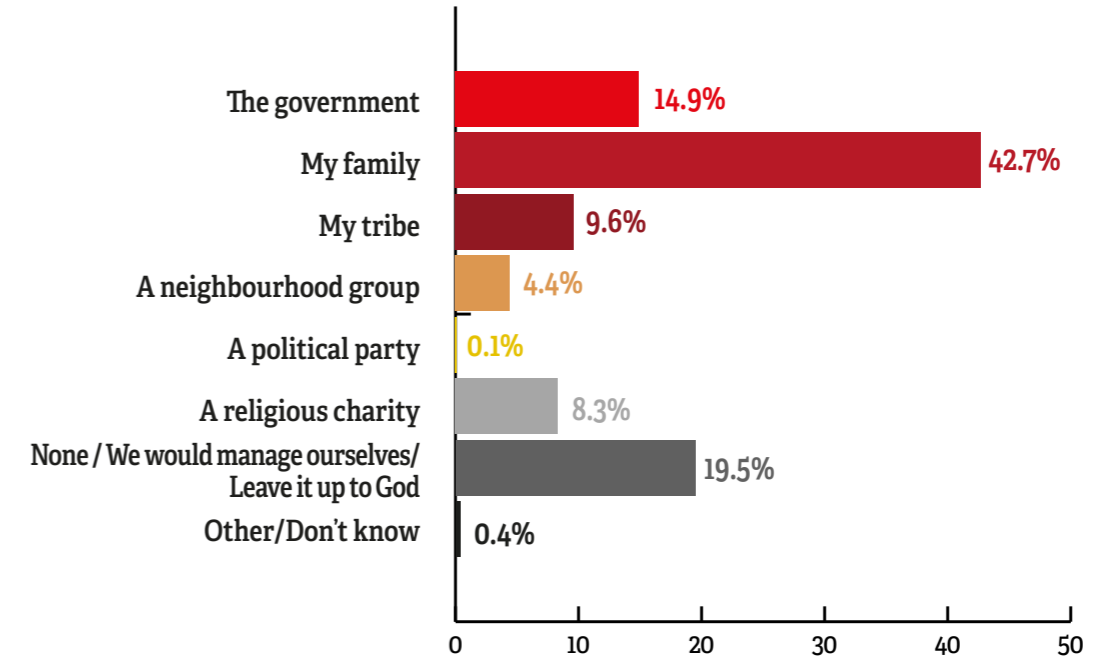
When asked about their first resort if they or their families were impacted by COVID-19, the majority of respondents reported that they would turn to other family/relatives for assistance. The second largest majority of respondents reported that they would manage things themselves, and the third majority would seek assistance from a government institution, likely a hospital or clinic. Smaller groups of respondents reported that they would seek assistance from their tribes and/or a religious charity.

4) Overall satisfaction with government performance

Legend:
- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Unsatisfied
- Very Unsatisfied
- Don't know/Refuse

Values: 1.9%, 4.3%, 7.2%, 26.2%, 16.8%, 43.5%
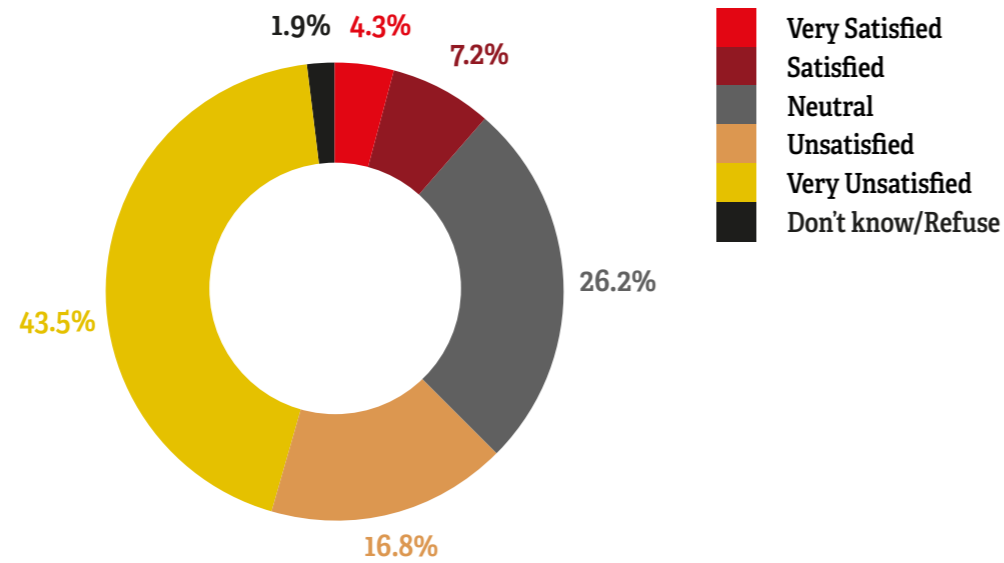
Over forty percent of respondents provided the lowest possible score for government performance. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were either very unsatisfied or unsatisfied with the government's performance. Only a small minority offered a positive response.

5) Views on state performance. 4 questions based on statements with responses of: strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree.

a) 'Public officials in Iraq provide services to citizens without expecting anything in return'

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Refuse

Values: 0.8%, 14.5%, 17.6%, 32.2%, 34.8%
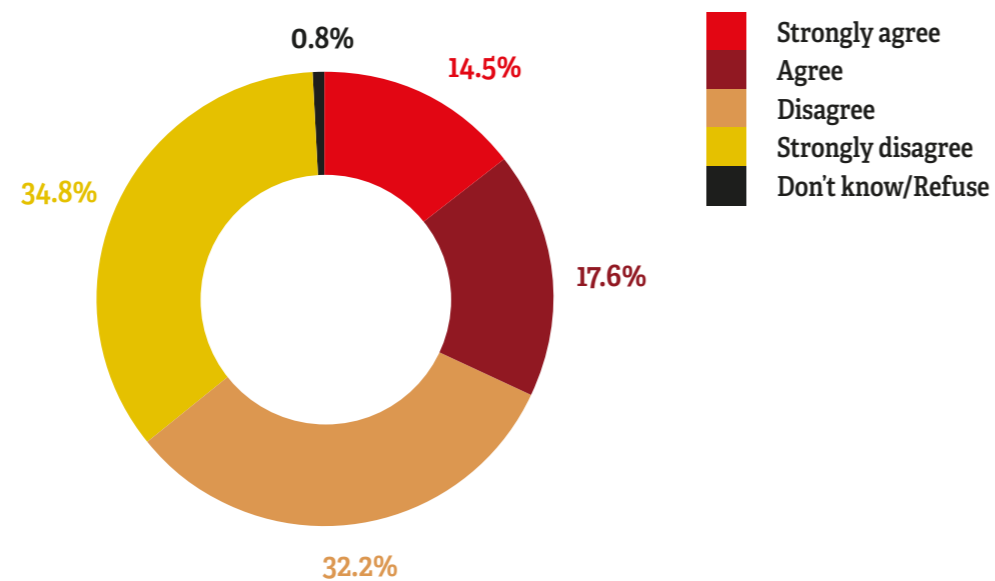
At around sixty-seven percent, a great majority of respondents reported disagreement with the statement that public officials in Iraq provide services to citizens without expecting anything in return, while a minority of thirty-two percent reported agreement.

b) 'In general, religious parties and organisations are more honest than non-religious parties and organisations'

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Refuse

Values: 11.1%, 13.7%, 17%, 28%, 30.2%
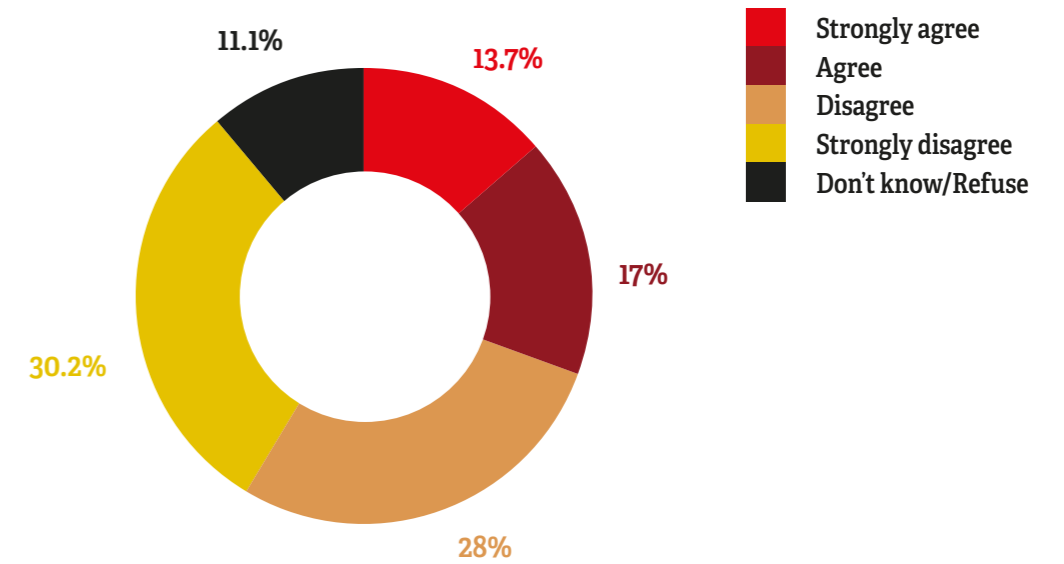
An overall majority negatively responded to idea that religious parties might be more honest, although a significant minority agreed with the statement.

c) 'Democratic regimes are not effective at maintaining order and stability'

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Refuse

Values: 6.7%, 30%, 27%, 22.8%, 13.6%
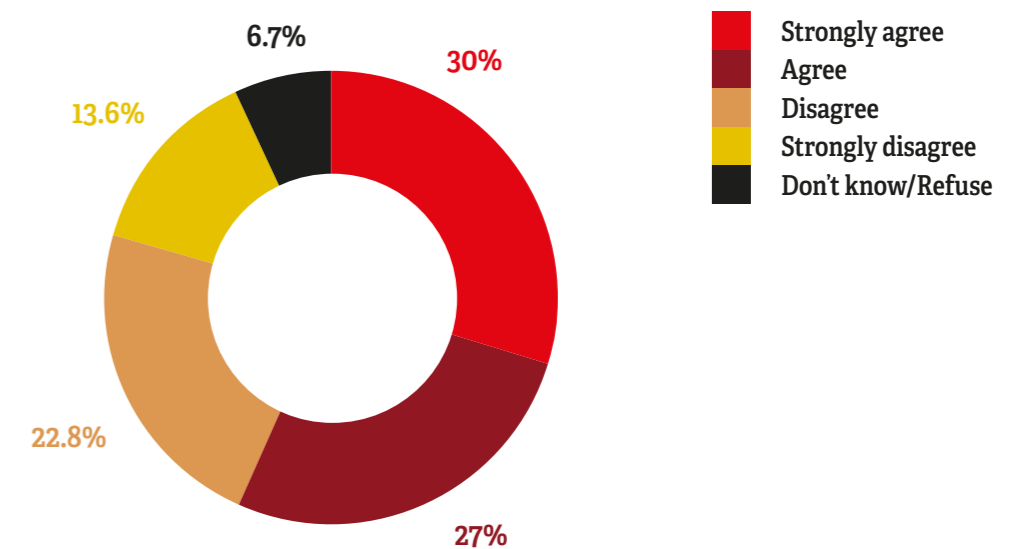
Mixed reports point to general disagreement in terms of whether democratic regimes are better able to manage order, where some think more centralised power can be more efficient at maintaining order and stability than the current power-sharing system does.

d) 'Religion should inform all political decisions the government makes, including regarding Coronavirus'

1.8%
18.3%
33.8%
19.5%
26.5%

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know/Refuse
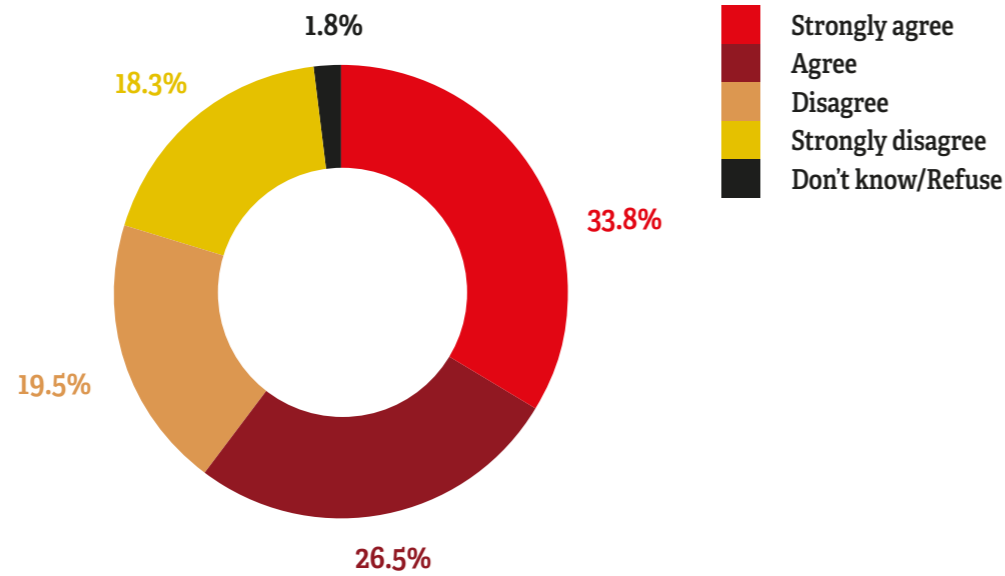
In contrast to their responses to question 5) b), a sizeable number of respondents agree that religion should inform political decisions that government makes, including those regarding COVID-19. Those with negative or neutral responses to the question are mixed.

Synopsis of national and local priorities and issues

- Security and employment are priorities among survey respondents, while sectarianism falls lower on the list of priorities.
- Family is considered the main source of support.
- Interest in politics is mixed and depends on levels of trust in government institutions.
- Massive dissatisfaction with government performance, and major lack of trust in political officials. Lack of trust in religious organisations and their potential political role, and also with democratic regimes - possibly reflecting disillusionment with sectarian elites and the political system.

- Lack of trust in religious parties specifically is in contrast to the general support for religion informing political decisions more broadly. This likely reflects dissatisfaction with entrenched sectarian elites in Iraq.

2.
Social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19
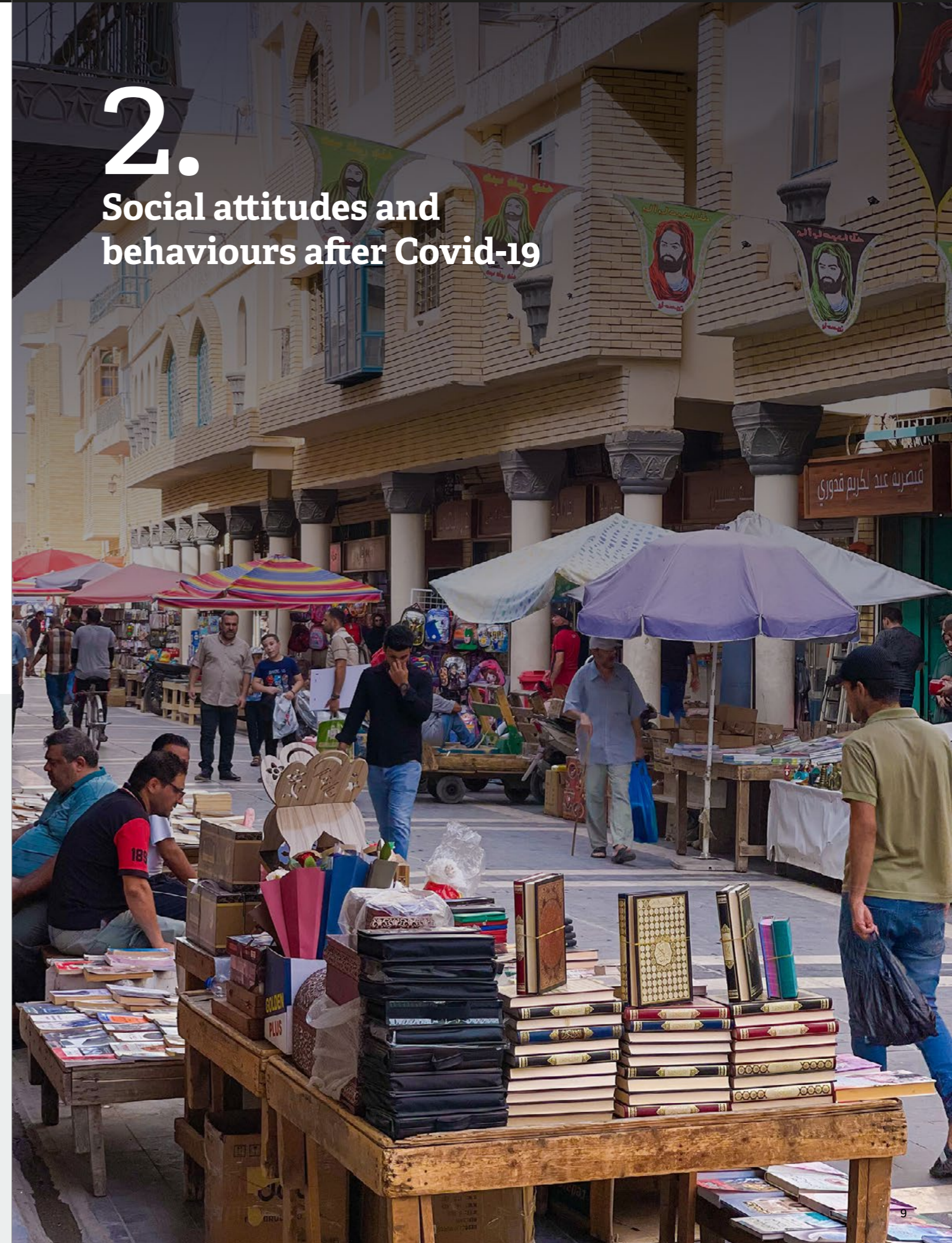
2. Social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

1) Which of the following local media outlets provided the most honest coverage of the Coronavirus outbreak in Iraq?

- 0.2%
- 3.5%
- 20.8%
- 8.5%
- 1.6%
- 0.3%
- 3.2%
- 1.6%
- 0.9%
- 1%
- 0.2%
- 0.4%
- 2.9%
- 26.1%
- 28.7%

Legend:
- Al Iraqiya
- Al Sharqiya
- Al Sumariya
- Al Alam
- Al Manar
- RT Arabic
- Al Hurrah
- Al Jazeera
- Al-Arabiya
- Al Etijah
- Ayn al Furat News
- Other
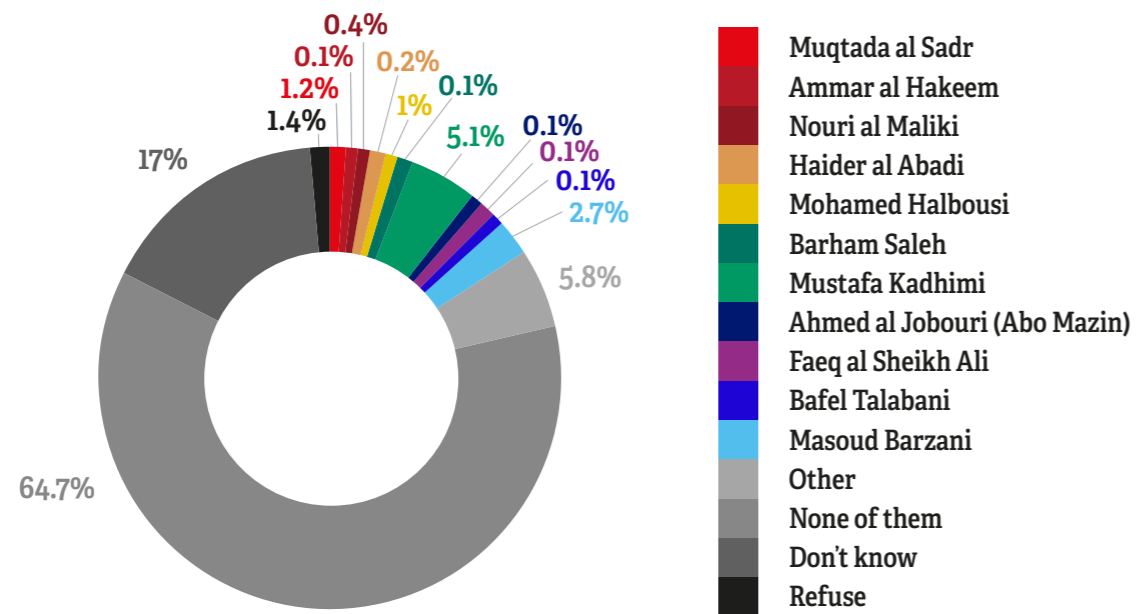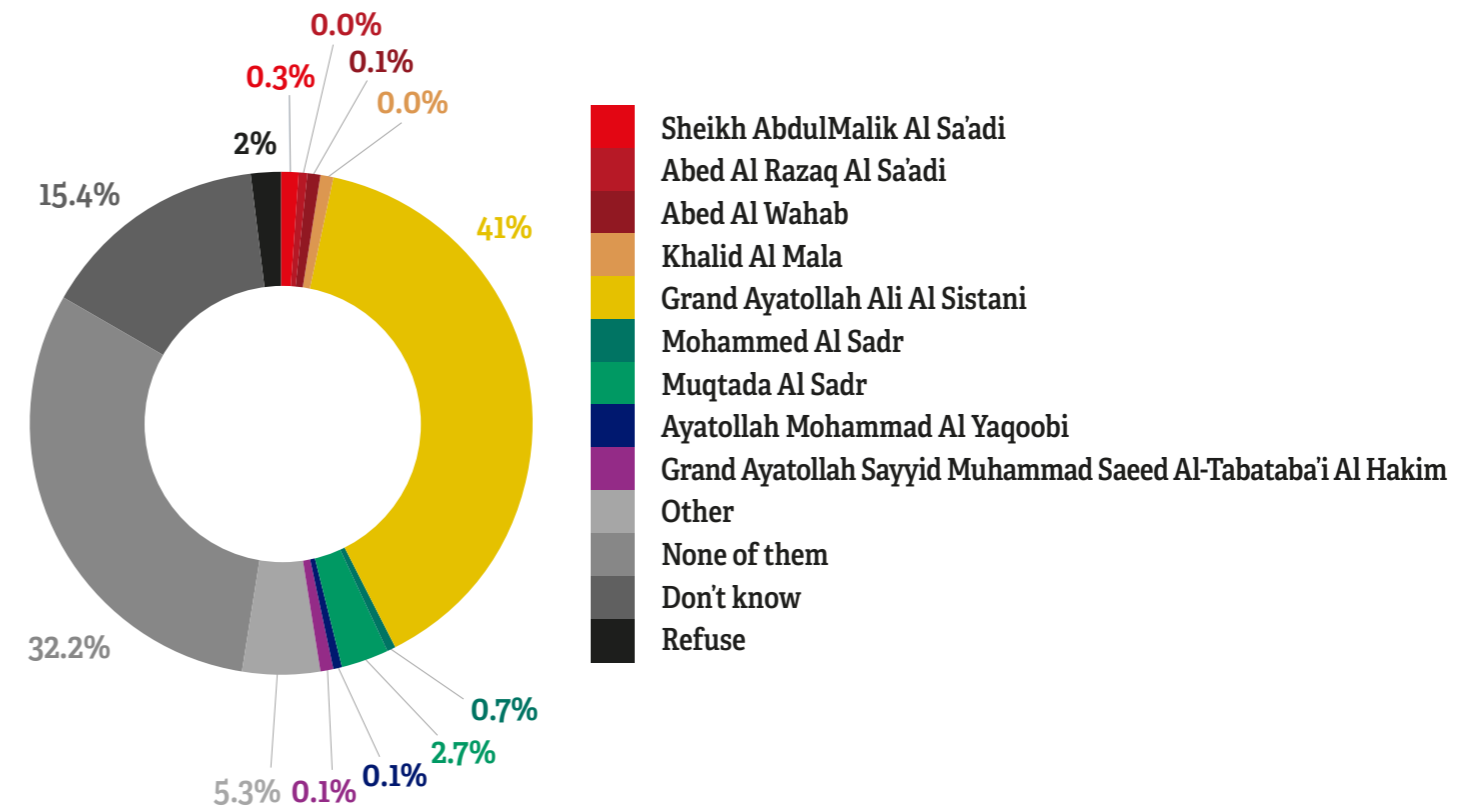- None of them
- Don't know
- Refuse
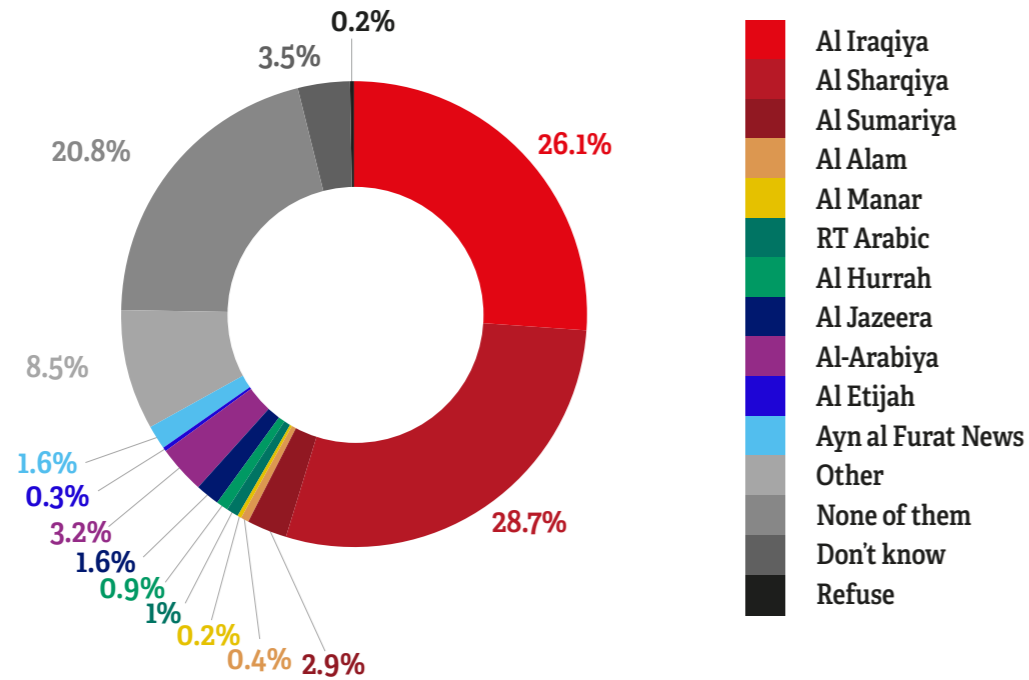
Most respondents were divided almost equally between citing the Iraqi government's official channel (Al Iraqiya) and that run by its biggest competitor (Al Sharqiya) as reliable sources of information relating to COVID-19. The third greatest majority of respondents reported that none of the most recognised official sources of news is reliable on matters pertaining to COVID-19.

2) Which local or regional political leader would you say has done the best job handling the Coronavirus pandemic?

- 0.4%
- 0.1%
- 0.2%
- 0.1%
- 1.2%
- 1%
- 0.1%
- 1.4%
- 5.1%
- 0.1%
- 0.1%
- 0.1%
- 2.7%
- 17%
- 5.8%
- 64.7%

Legend:
- Muqtada al Sadr
- Ammar al Hakeem
- Nouri al Maliki
- Haider al Abadi
- Mohamed Halbousi
- Barham Saleh
- Mustafa Kadhimi
- Ahmed al Jobouri (Abo Mazin)
- Faeq al Sheikh Ali
- Bafel Talabani
- Masoud Barzani
- Other
- None of them
- Don't know
- Refuse

The majority of respondents reported that no political leader has done a good job handling the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by 5.8 percent expressing uncertainty. Of all the political leaders, former Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi was seen as the best at handling the pandemic, with a five percent approval rate.

3) Which religious scholar do you think has provided the best guidance to individuals?

- 0.0%
- 0.1%
- 0.0%
- 0.3%
- 2%
- 15.4%
- 41%
- 32.2%
- 5.3%
- 0.1%
- 0.1%
- 2.7%
- 0.7%

Legend:
- Sheikh AbdulMalik Al Sa'adi
- Abed Al Razaq Al Sa'adi
- Abed Al Wahab
- Khalid Al Mala
- Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani
- Mohammed Al Sadr
- Muqtada Al Sadr
- Ayatollah Mohammad Al Yaqoobi
- Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Saeed Al-Tabataba'i Al Hakim
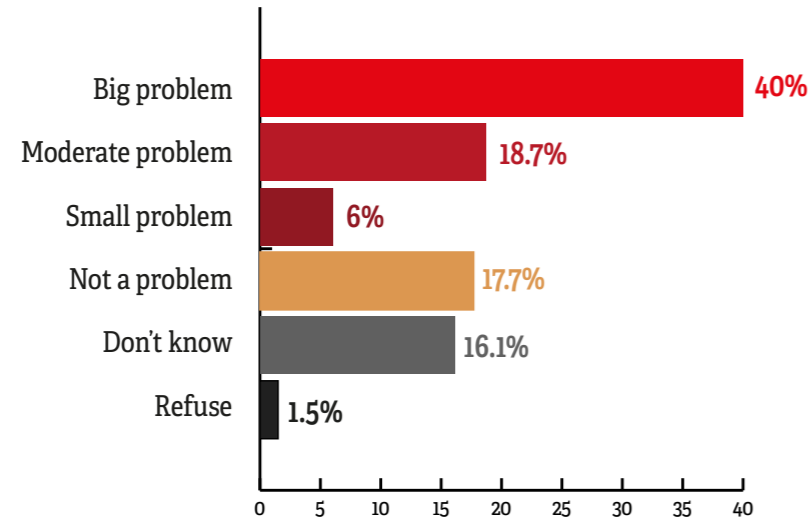- Other
- None of them
- Don't know
- Refuse

Over forty percent of respondents cited Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani as the religious scholar who provided the best guidance to individuals while the second largest majority (at thirty two percent) cited no scholar as offering guidance. The third majority of respondents cited uncertainty.
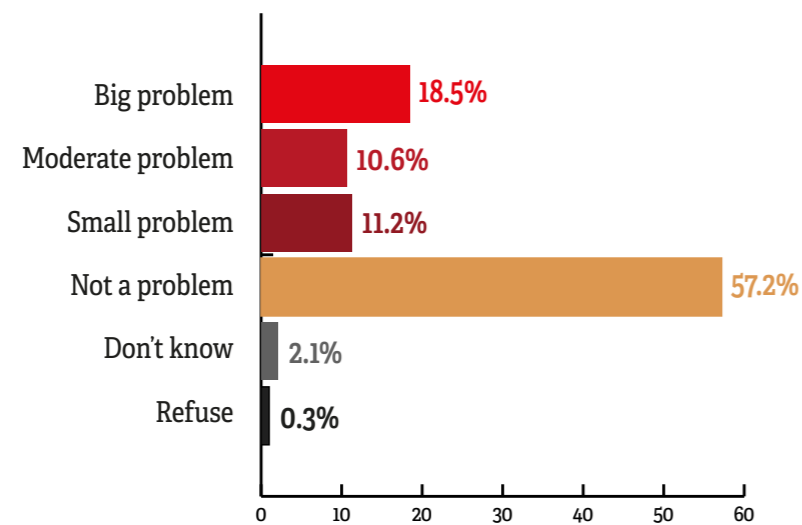
4) How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Iraq nowadays?

a) Government supporters and opposition supporters

Big problem — 40%
Moderate problem — 18.7%
Small problem — 6%
Not a problem — 17.7%
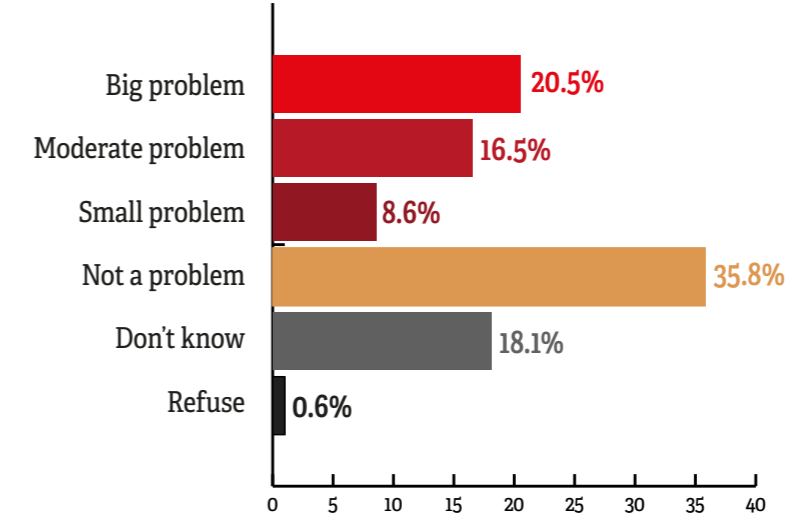Don't know — 16.1%
Refuse — 1.5%

An overwhelming majority of respondents described tensions between the government and opposition supporters as a problem—whether big, moderate, or small—while only around eighteen percent of respondents described it as a non-issue.

b) Sunni and Shi'a

Big problem — 18.5%
Moderate problem — 10.6%
Small problem — 11.2%
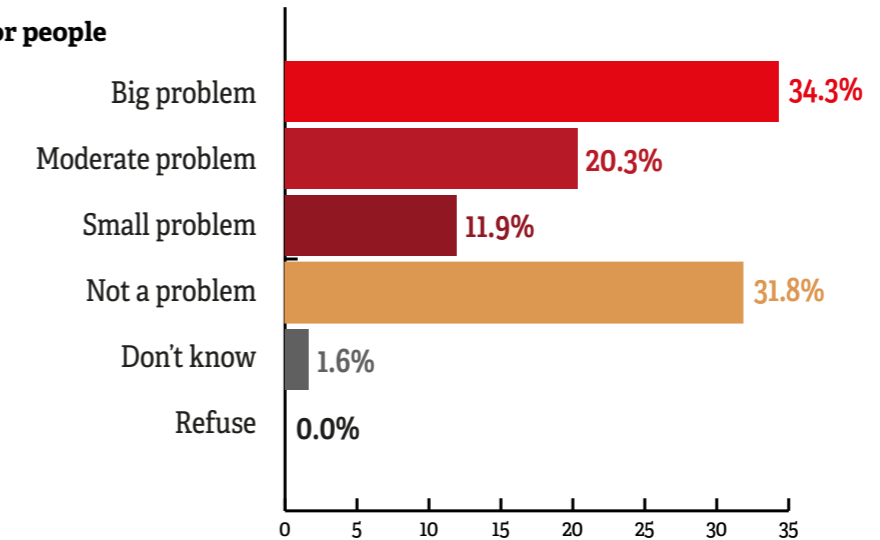Not a problem — 57.2%
Don't know — 2.1%
Refuse — 0.3%

A majority of respondents described tensions between Sunnis and Shia as a non-issue while over forty percent of respondents described such tensions as a problem—whether big, moderate, or small.

c) Islamists and secularists

Big problem — 20.5%
Moderate problem — 16.5%
Small problem — 8.6%
Not a problem — 35.8%
Don't know — 18.1%
Refuse — 0.6%

At around thirty-six percent, most respondents described tensions between Islamists and secularists as a non-issue, while forty-five percent described said tensions as a problem—whether big, moderate, or small—and eighteen percent were uncertain.

d) Rich people and poor people

Big problem — 34.3%
Moderate problem — 20.3%
Small problem — 11.9%
Not a problem — 31.8%
Don't know — 1.6%
Refuse — 0.0%

In almost equal measure, respondents were divided between describing tensions between rich and poor people as a big problem, a non-issue, or a problem in a moderate or small sense.

e) Muslims and Christians

Big problem — 4.1%
Moderate problem — 6.5%
Small problem — 6%
Not a problem — 80.3%
Don't know — 3.1%
Refuse — 0.1%
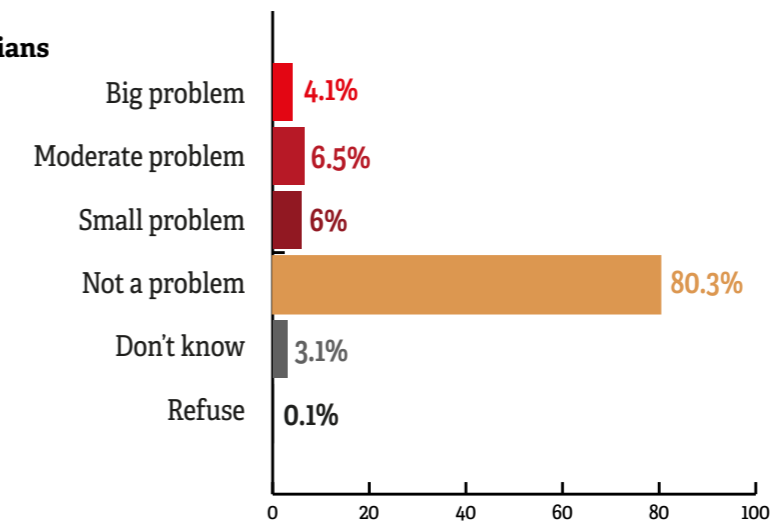
At eighty percent, an overwhelming majority of respondents described tensions between Muslims and Christians as a non-issue while a minority described it as a moderate or small problem.

5) If social unrest occurred in your neighbourhood due to coronavirus, which entity would you most trust to resolve it?

Pie chart values: 5.5%, 4.7%, 8.9%, 0.7%, 10.5%, 12.5%, 23%, 6.4%, 27.8%

Legend:
- The police
- The military
- My family
- My tribe
- A neighborhood group
- A political party
- A religious charity
- Other
- No one/ Don't know/Refuse
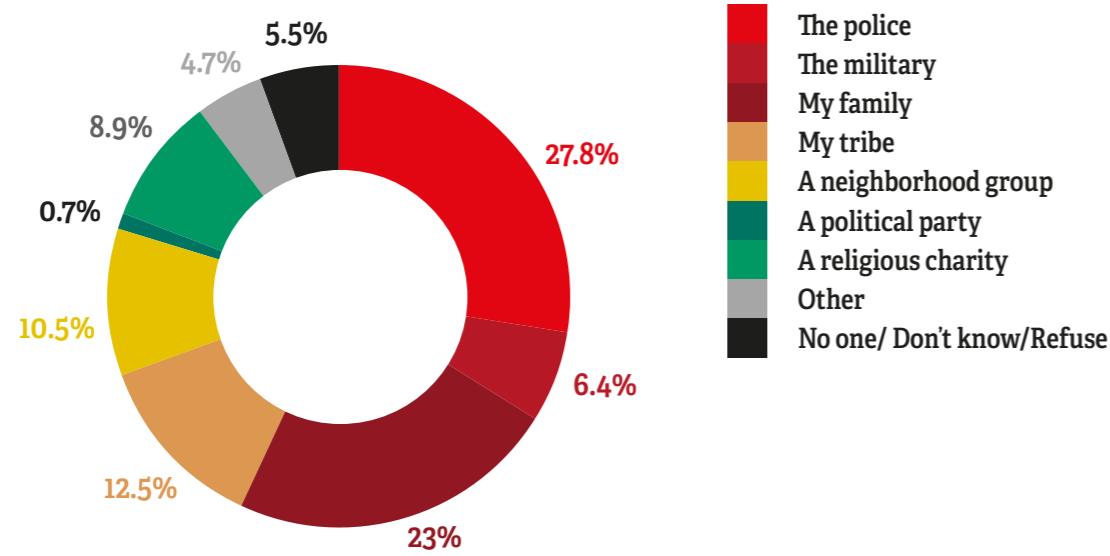
The most trusted entity to resolve COVID-19 related social unrest is the police at around twenty-eight percent, with family coming second at twenty-three percent, followed by tribe and neighbourhood groups.
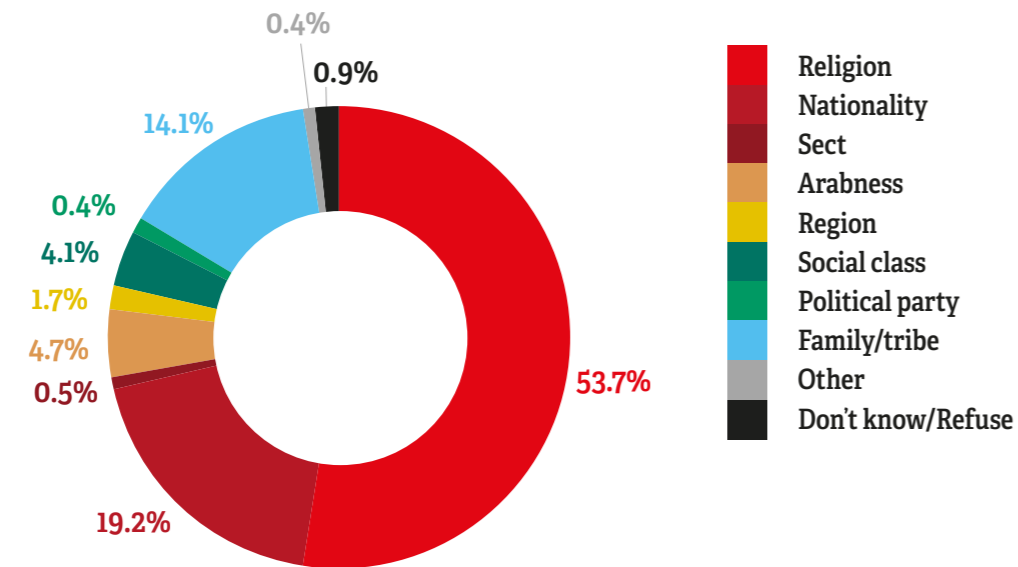
6) Overall, which of the following identities is most important?

Pie chart values: 0.4%, 0.9%, 14.1%, 0.4%, 4.1%, 1.7%, 4.7%, 0.5%, 19.2%, 53.7%

Legend:
- Religion
- Nationality
- Sect
- Arabness
- Region
- Social class
- Political party
- Family/tribe
- Other
- Don't know/Refuse

Around fifty-four percent of respondents cited religion as their most important identity while over nineteen percent of respondents cited nationality as most important to them. Fourteen percent of respondents cited family/tribe as their most important identity.

Synopsis for social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

- Iraqis generally sought guidance on COVID-19 from government and opposition sources but rely largely on the police and family to resolve any issues related to the pandemic.
- Among religious leaders, Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani is seen as giving best guidance to individuals, though a notable percent of respondents report that no scholar has offered much guidance.

- Respondents perceive the greatest tensions between government and opposition supporters while they find sectarian tensions to be far less of an issue. Respondents are equally divided on whether class tensions are an issue.
- Religion is a prominent marker of identity among Iraqis, with nationality coming in second, followed by family/tribe. This points to tribal culture as resilient while religious identity as significant. National consciousness remains relatively weak.
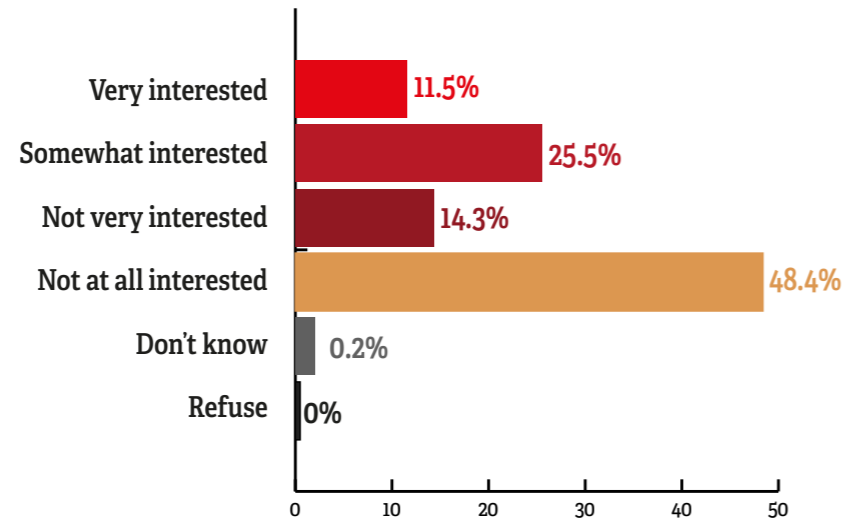
3.
## Political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19
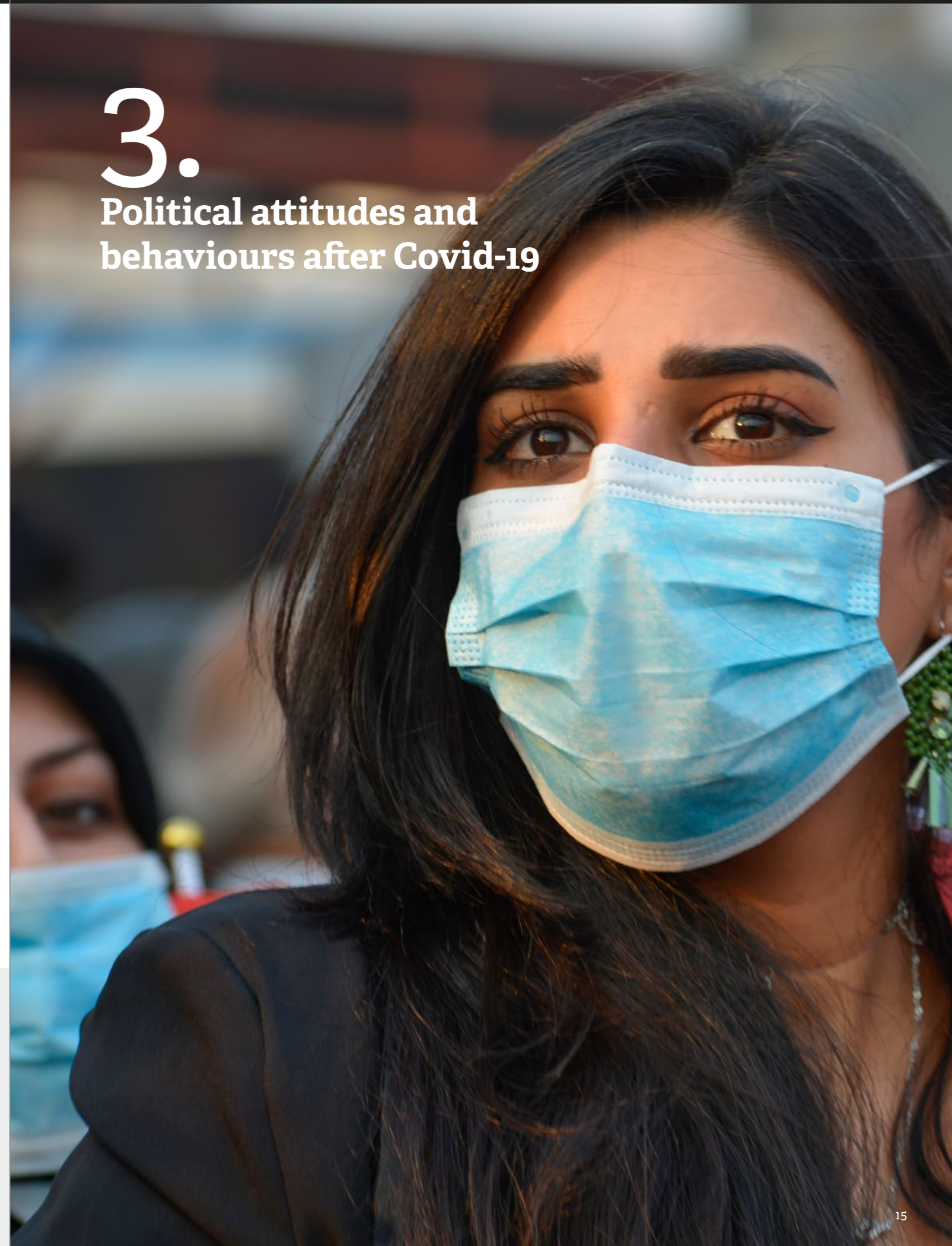
3. Political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

1) Coronavirus has caused some people to lose interest in politics, while others have become more interested. For you personally, to what extent are you interested in politics?

Very interested — 11.5%
Somewhat interested — 25.5%
Not very interested — 14.3%
Not at all interested — 48.4%
Don't know — 0.2%
Refuse — 0%

At around forty-eight percent, a majority of respondents are not interested in politics while the second largest majority range between very and somewhat interested. This points to a notable segment of the population that feels apathetic towards politics.

2) Have you ever taken part in a protest or demonstration for a political cause?

Yes, more than once — 9.9%
Yes, once — 7.2%
No — 82.6%
Don't know — 0.1%
Refuse — 0.1%
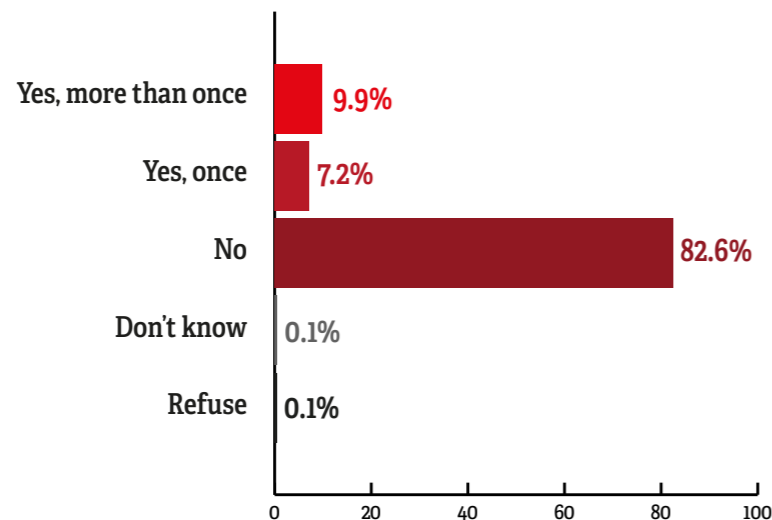
At over eighty percent, an overwhelming majority of respondents have not participated in political protests while around seventeen percent have participated in at least one protest.

3) Did you participate in the most recent parliamentary elections that took place in Iraq in March 2018?

Yes — 57.9%
No — 41.9%
Don't know — 0.2%
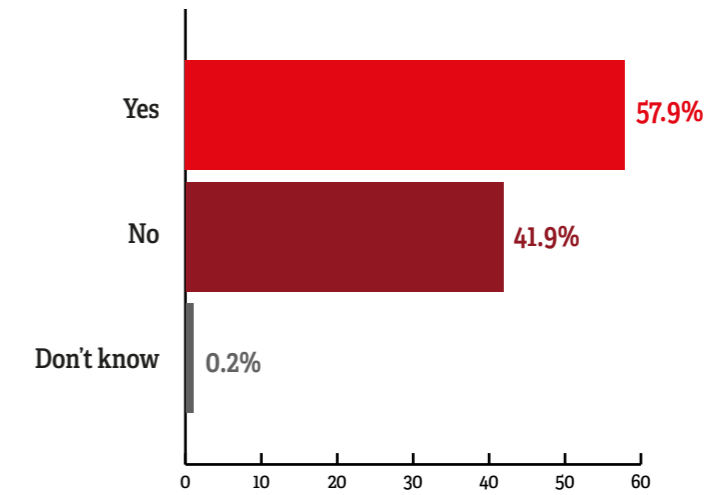
A majority of respondents reported that they participated in the 2018 Iraqi elections. This survey was conducted before the October 2021 Iraqi elections.

4) When voting for candidates in parliamentary elections, which of the following is the most important factor in influencing your choice? Is it:

The candidate's family or tribe — 5.7%
The candidate's sect — 2.3%
The candidate's level of education — 34%
The candidate's level of religiosity — 9.2%
Degree of the candidate's agreement with you on important issues — 40.9%
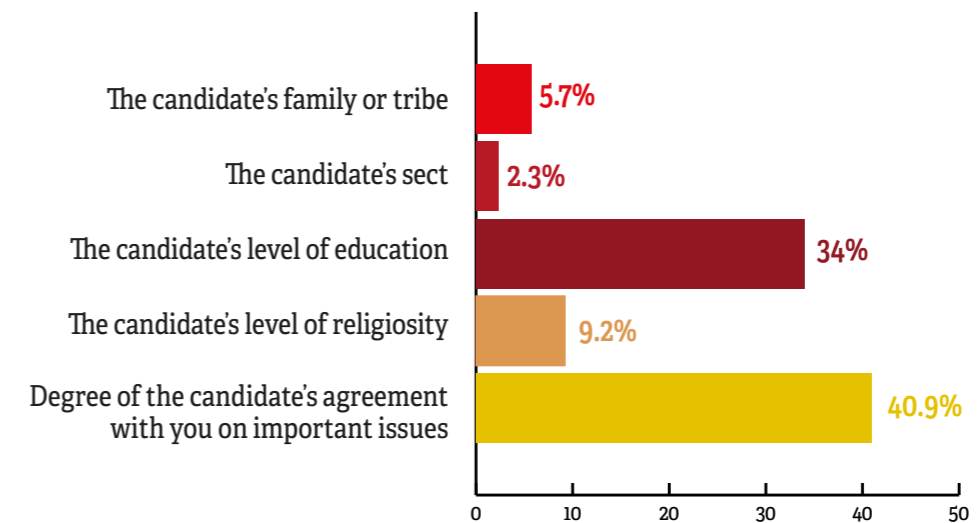
Surveyed respondents overwhelmingly reported a political candidate's level of education and agreement with them on important issues to be determining factors for their electoral choice, while a minority reported the candidate's level of religiosity and tribal affiliation as important.

5) Political party representation regardless of whether you vote in elections

a) Which of the following political parties most closely represents your viewpoints on important issues?

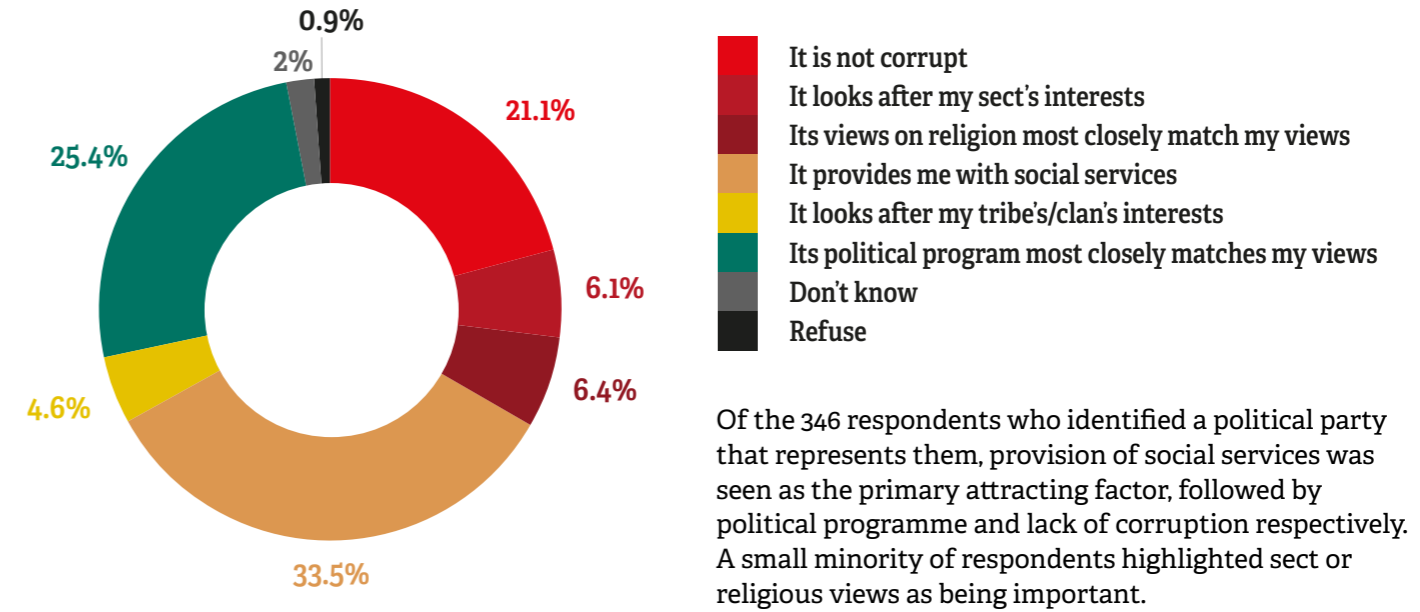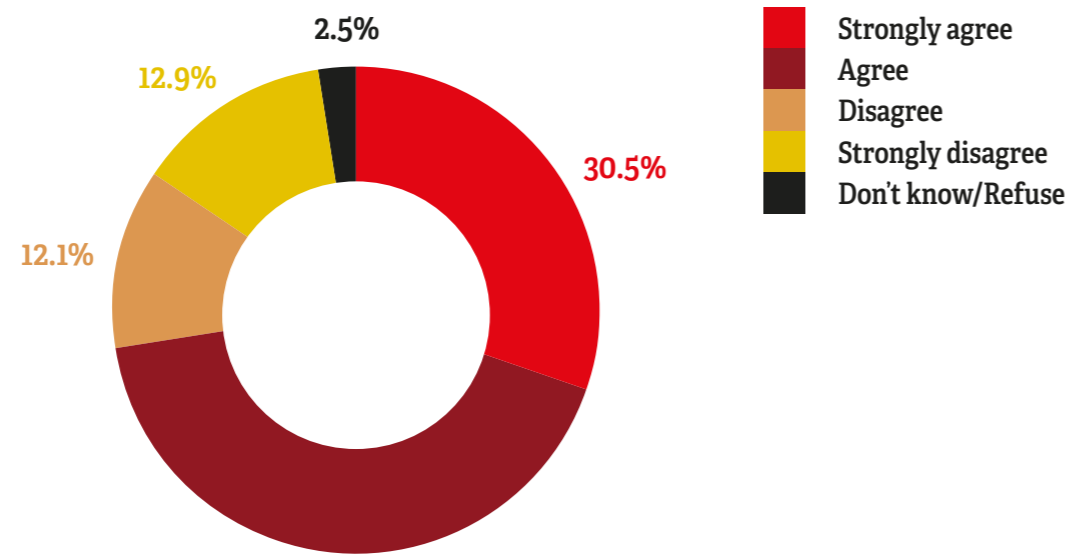| Party	Percentage
Civil Democratic Alliance	0.2%
Civil Society for Reform	0.4%
Victory Alliance	0.8%
The National Coalition	0.6%
Bayareq Al Khaiyer	0.2%
Baghdad Alliance	0.2%
Tamadon	0.1%
Eradaa Movement	0%
Kurdistan Democratic Party	3.3%
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	1%
Arab Coalition Kirkuk	0.1%
Kirkuk Turkmen Front	0%
Koran (The Change)	0%
New Generation Movement	0.4%
Salah Al Den our Identity (Haweyatona)	0%
Iraq Men's Union	0%
Patriotic National Party	0.1%
Fatah Alliance	0.4%
State of Law Coalition	1.9%
National Wisdom Movement	0.4%
Alliance Towards Reforms (Saeroon)	1.8%
Kurdistan Islamic Union	0%
Kurdistan Islamic Group	0.3%
National Party	0.2%
National House (Al Bait Al Watani)	0.1%
October 25 Movement	0.1%
Other	3.6%
No party	74.5%
Don't know/Refuse	8.7%

At around seventy-five percent, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported that no party closely represents their views on important issues.

### b) And what is the main factor that attracts you to this party?

Legend:
- It is not corrupt
- It looks after my sect's interests
- Its views on religion most closely match my views
- It provides me with social services
- It looks after my tribe's/clan's interests
- Its political program most closely matches my views
- Don't know
- Refuse

Values: 21.1%, 6.1%, 6.4%, 33.5%, 4.6%, 25.4%, 2%, 0.9%

Of the 346 respondents who identified a political party that represents them, provision of social services was seen as the primary attracting factor, followed by political programme and lack of corruption respectively. A small minority of respondents highlighted sect or religious views as being important.

6) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
"A politician belonging to a sect different than yours can represent your concerns or solve the problems you and your community face."

- **Strongly agree**
- **Agree**
- **Disagree**
- **Strongly disagree**
- **Don't know/Refuse**

2.5%
12.9%
30.5%
12.1%

At over seventy-two percent, an overwhelming majority of surveyed respondents reported that a politician belonging to a sect different than theirs can represent their concerns or solve problems which they and their communities face. In comparison, twenty-five percent of respondents disagreed.

Synopsis of political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

- There is growing apathy towards politics, while some people remain political engaged.

- The majority have never protested or attended demonstrations, more concerned with daily survival.

- There was high voter turnout and engagement in March 2018, with political apathy growing since—an indicator pointing to the October 2021 elections where voter turnout was at an all-time low.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents have lost faith and trust in existing political parties.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents do not care for a political candidate's sectarian affiliation as an indicator to their ability to serve the public's interests.
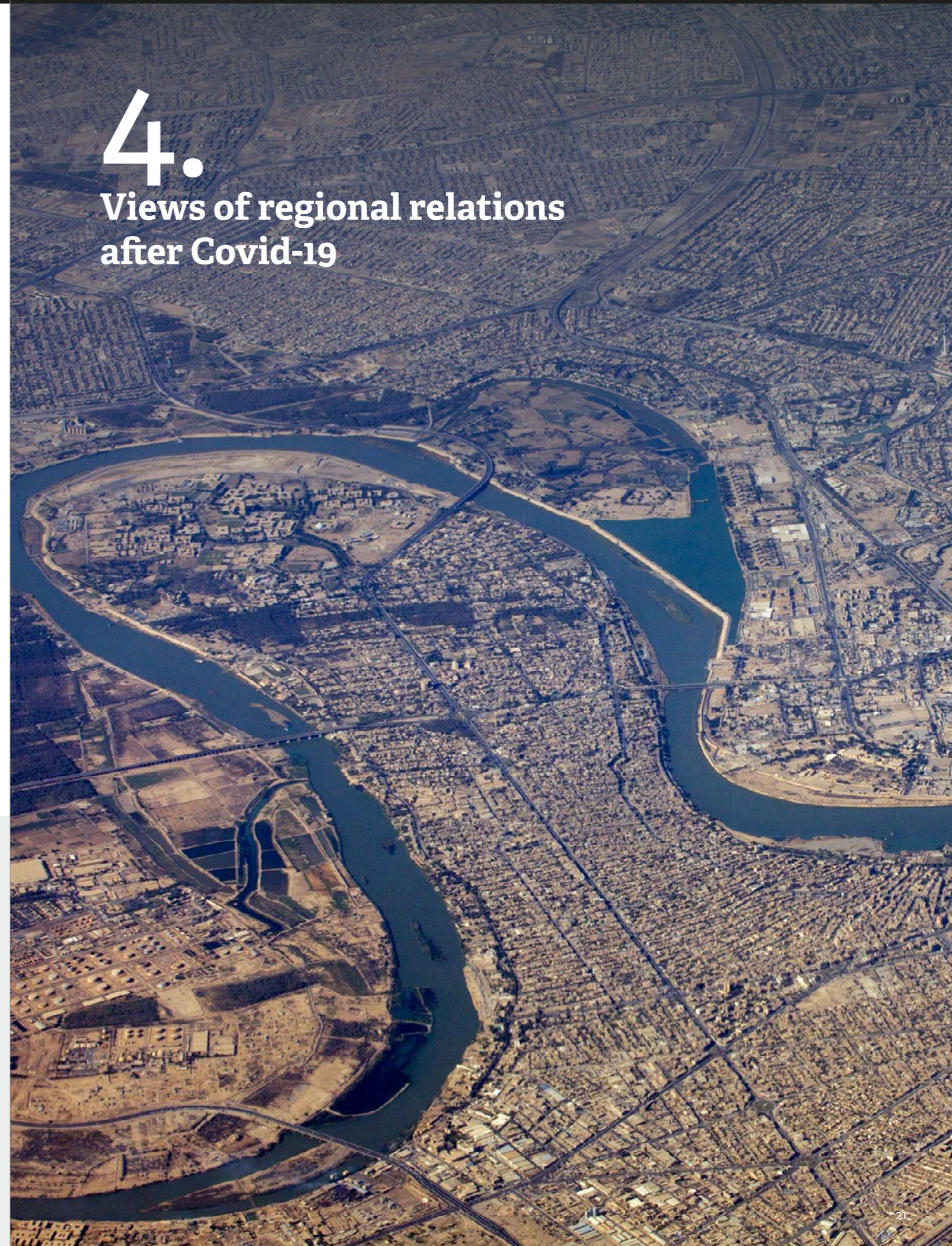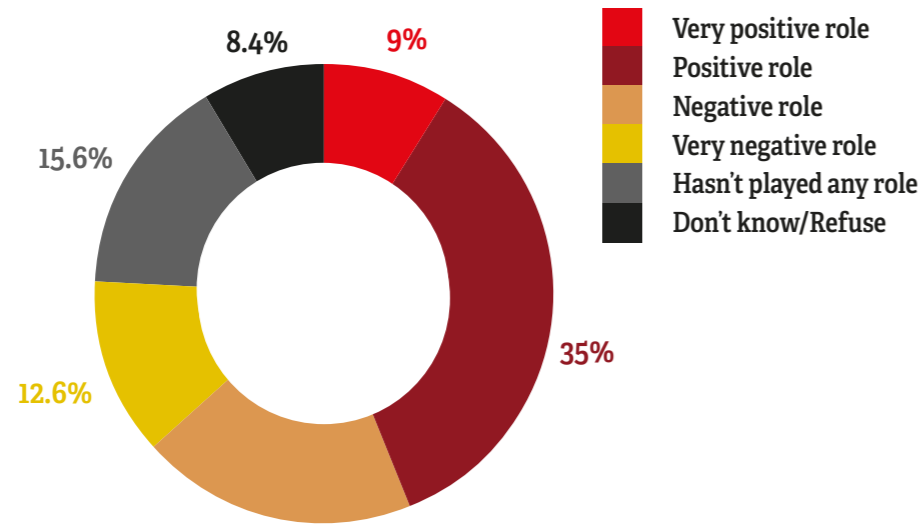
4.
Views of regional relations after Covid-19

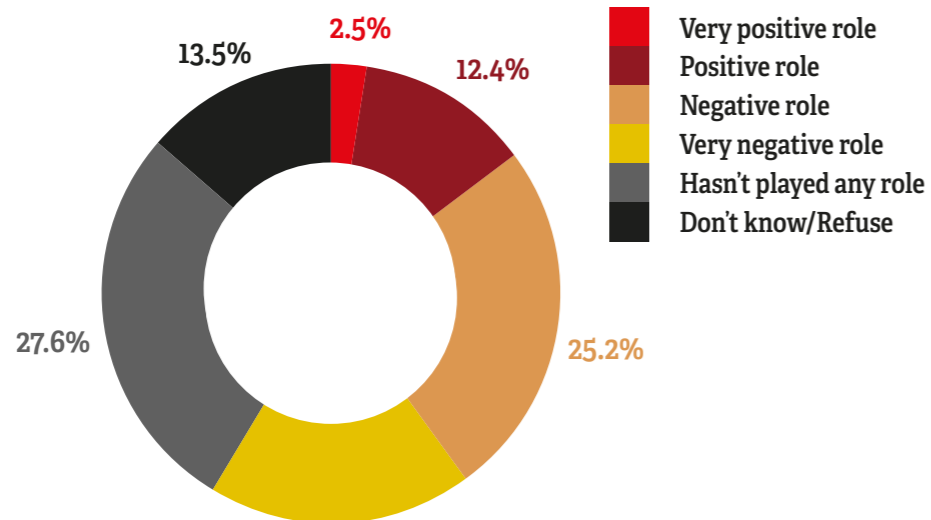# 4. Views of regional relations after Covid-19

1) In your opinion, to what extent have the following countries played a positive or negative role in addressing the Coronavirus crisis in Iraq

a) China

8.4% 9% 15.6% 35% 12.6%

- Very positive role
- Positive role
- Negative role
- Very negative role
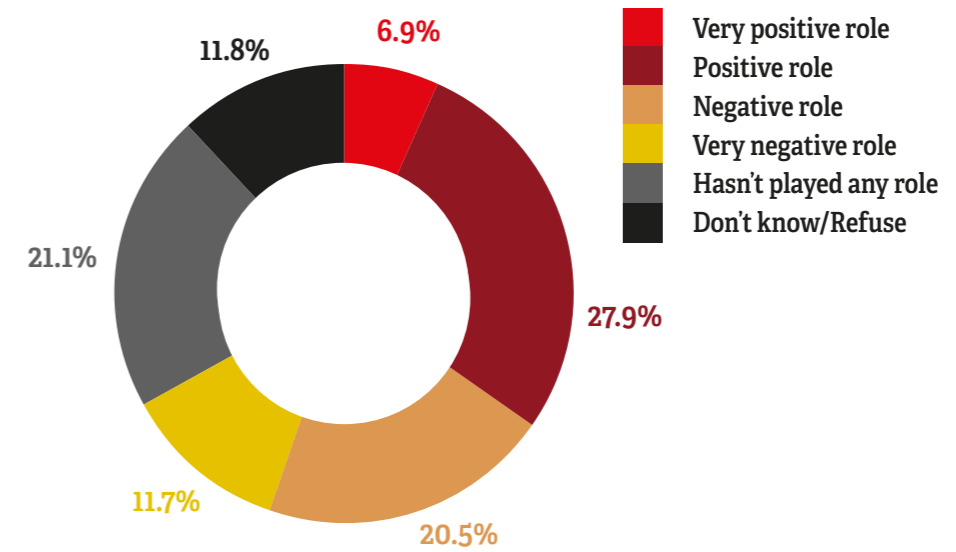- Hasn't played any role
- Don't know/Refuse

At forty-four percent, a notable number of respondents think that China has played a positive role in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq, while around thirty-two percent of respondents think that China played a negative role.

b) Iran

13.5% 2.5% 12.4% 27.6% 25.2%

- Very positive role
- Positive role
- Negative role
- Very negative role
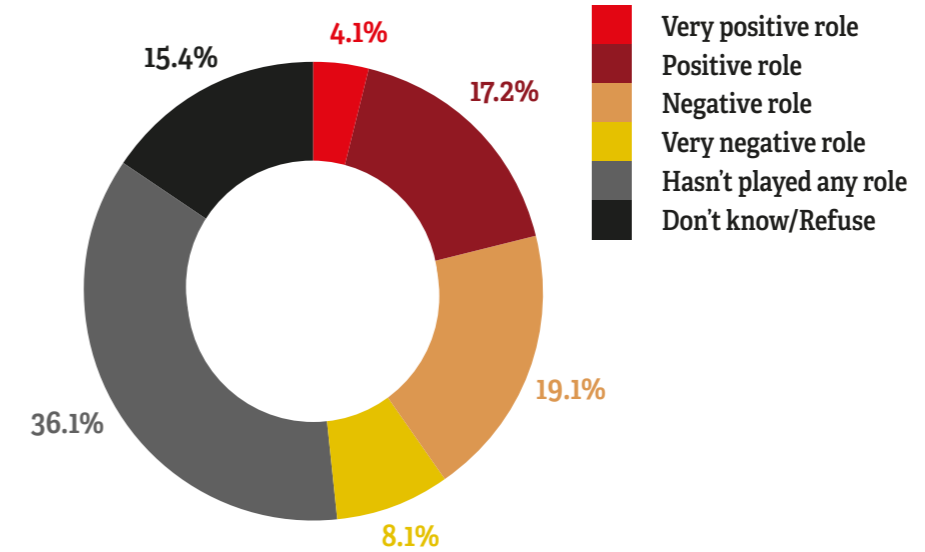- Hasn't played any role
- Don't know/Refuse

Regarding the role Iran has played in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq, around forty-four percent reported that it played a negative role, around fifteen percent reported that it played a positive role, and over twenty-seven percent reported that Iran played no role.

c) United States

11.8% 6.9% 21.1% 27.9% 11.7% 20.5%

- Very positive role
- Positive role
- Negative role
- Very negative role
- Hasn't played any role
- Don't know/Refuse

Survey respondents are equally divided in terms of the role they think the United States played in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq, with around thirty-two percent reporting that it played a negative role, around thirty-five reporting that the United States played a positive role, and twenty-one percent were uncertain.

d) Saudi Arabia

15.4% 4.1% 17.2% 36.1% 19.1% 8.1%

- Very positive role
- Positive role
- Negative role
- Very negative role
- Hasn't played any role
- Don't know/Refuse

At thirty-six percent, most respondents reported that Saudi Arabia did not play any role in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq. Those who reported that it played a positive or negative role were almost equally divided, with those reporting the role as positive were around twenty-one percent, and those reporting it as negative were around twenty-seven percent.

2) To what extent would each of the following types of involvement from foreign parties be acceptable in order to help Iraq address the Coronavirus pandemic? For each one, please say whether you think it would be totally acceptable, somewhat acceptable, somewhat unacceptable, or totally unacceptable.

a) Financial aid to pay salaries

1.8%
17.8%
6.6%
52%
21.9%

Totally acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Somewhat unacceptable
Totally unacceptable
Don't know/Refuse
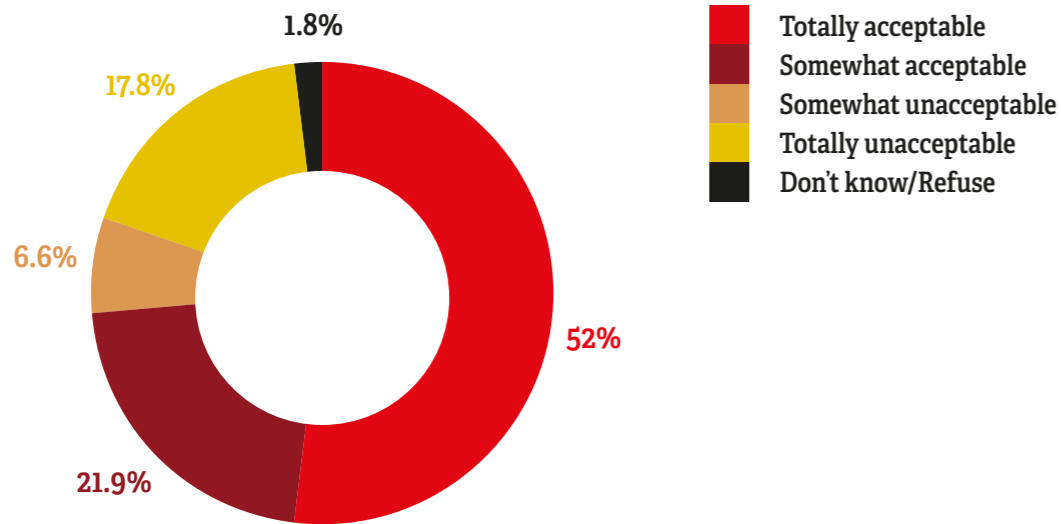
The significant majority of respondents were in favour of receiving foreign financial aid to assist with the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq.

b) Military assistance in the case of breakdown in law and order

3.7%
18%
7.7%
43.7%
26.9%

Totally acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Somewhat unacceptable
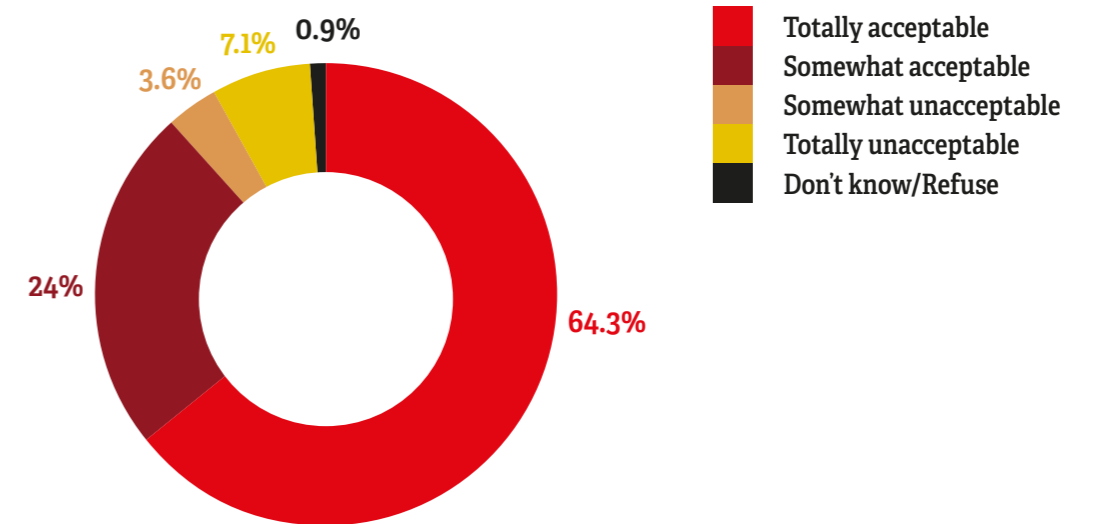Totally unacceptable
Don't know/Refuse
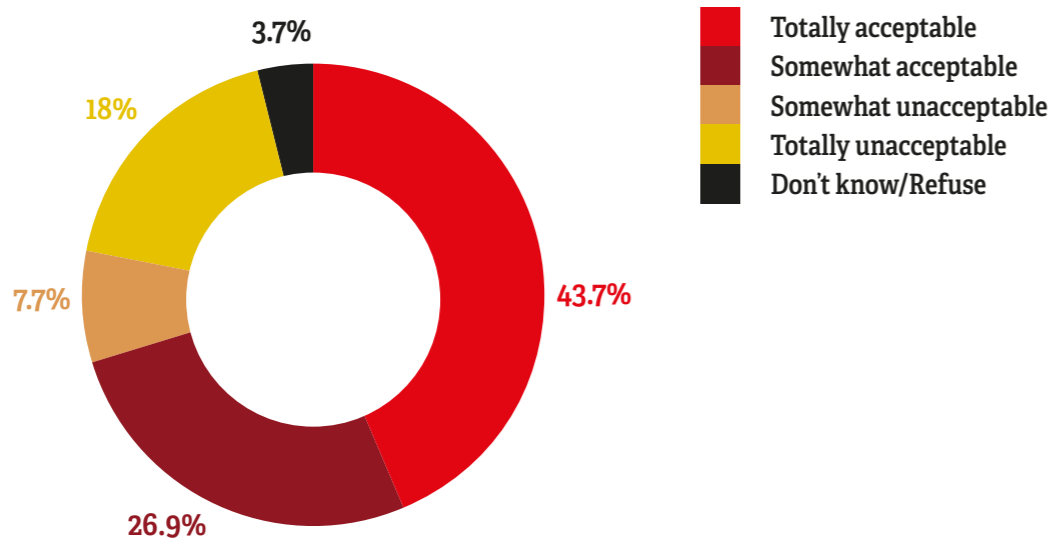
The majority of respondents were in favour of foreign military intervention in case of a breakdown in law and order, with only eighteen percent opposed to said intervention.

c) Police assistance in the case of breakdown in law and order

2.8%
15.2%
6%
47.2%
28.8%

Totally acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Somewhat unacceptable
Totally unacceptable
Don't know/Refuse
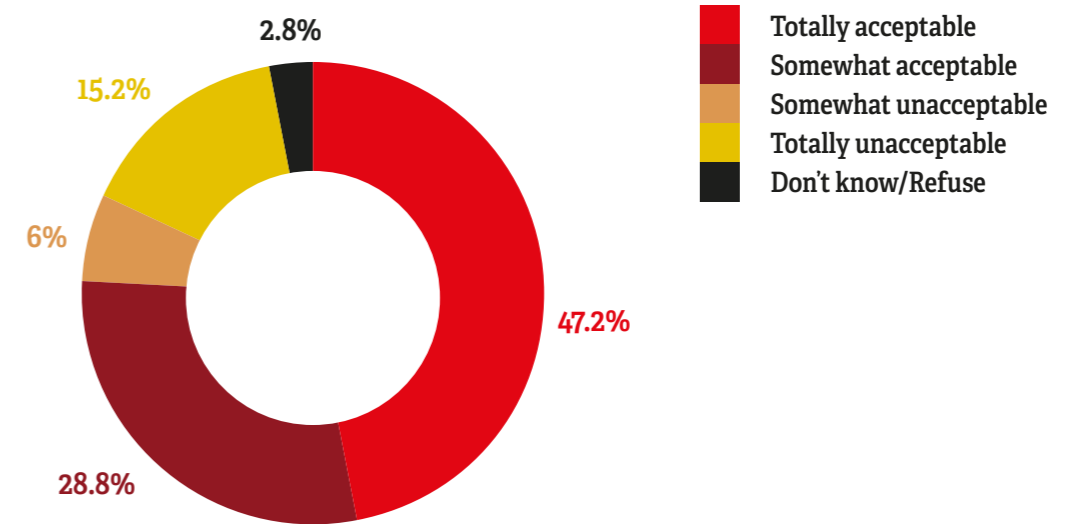
Overwhelming support for police assistance in the case of a breakdown in law and order is reflective of responses pertaining to military assistance.

d) Providing medical supplies or vaccine

7.1% 0.9%
3.6%
24%
64.3%

Totally acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Somewhat unacceptable
Totally unacceptable
Don't know/Refuse

At over ninety-one percent, an overwhelming majority of respondents are in favour of external medical support, pointing to low faith and trust in Iraq's deteriorating health system.

Synopsis of views of regional relations after Covid-19

• The majority of respondents are mostly neutral or equally divided in terms of whether they think China, Iran, the US, and Saudi have played a role in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Iraq.

• The majority of respondents reported support for foreign intervention in terms of financial aid, military and police intervention, and especially provision of medical aid in the case of a breakdown in law and order. This reflects low trust in state institutions—especially Iraq's health sector—in addressing the people's needs during times of crisis. It also points to Iraqis being somewhat accustomed to foreign intervention in the country.

About SEPAD
Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianisation

SEPAD (the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation project) is an international research network and collaborative project based at Lancaster University's Richardson Institute, the oldest peace and conflict research centre in the United Kingdom.

Under the direction of Professor Simon Mabon and Dr Edward Wastnidge, SEPAD brings together more than 60 world renowned experts and early career scholars from over 20 countries in pursuit of knowledge production, policy engagement, impact and outreach activities, media work, and the raising of public awareness around questions of sectarianism, de-sectarianisation, and the (international) politics of the Middle East. Since its formation in 2018, SEPAD has positioned itself as a leading global hub of research and expertise for all matters related to the emergence, evolution, and exploitation of sect-based difference in the region and beyond.

Thanks to the cutting-edge expertise and close collaboration within SEPAD's team, our work delivers comprehensive answers to multi-faceted problems operating across areas of study and disciplines, including Political Science, International Relations, Political Economy, Law, Criminology, Sociology, Political Geography, Anthropology, History, Area Studies and Linguistics. SEPAD receives generous funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York and has received funding from The Henry Luce Foundation.

sepad.org.uk

TOI: Bringing in the Other Islamists - comparing Arab Shia and Sunni Islamism(s) in a sectarianised Middle East.

Research on Islamism has remained predominantly Sunni-centric. This project brings 'the Other Islamists' – Shia Islamists – into the debate on Islamism in the Arab Middle East. It uses a cross-disciplinary theoretical approach which takes religion seriously without essentialising it, to explore whether, and if so, how and why, Shia Islamism(s) differ from their Sunni counterparts.

The project focuses on three research puzzles drawn from the Islamism and sectarianisation debates: 1) to what extent are Islamist movements shaped by their context, to what extent by their religious identity/ideology/ institutions; 2) to what extent and how does the importance of sect-coded identities for Islamist movements change over time and how has this affected/been affected by the process of sectarianisation; 3) what role does sectarian othering play in intra-sect competition within the current sectarianized milieu.

These questions are examined through three WPs made up of comparative and within-case-studies of key Islamist movements in Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain. The studies are carried out by a team of internationally leading experts. The TOI Project is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

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