

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/21/iraq-shia-defy-curfews-to-commemorate-revered-imam>) in Baghdad further illustrates the Shia-led government's halfhearted enforcement of a curfew as a way to appease religious leaders. As part of the preparations for the visit, Iraqi Minister of Health [Jafar Alawi \(https://moh.gov.iq/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=14115\)](https://moh.gov.iq/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=14115) met with Hussain Alsader—a famous religious leader in Baghdad—to ask for Alsader's cooperation. During that visit, [Hussein Alsadr \(https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=24086&MapID=2#link\)](https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=24086&MapID=2#link) expressed support for the government's effort to contain coronavirus. However, their meeting did little to discourage public participation in the annual shrine visit. On March 21, [thousands of pilgrims \(https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/21/iraqs-shia-defy-curfews-to-commemorate-revered-imam\)](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/21/iraqs-shia-defy-curfews-to-commemorate-revered-imam) marched towards Baghdad in defiance of the government's warnings. In many cases, pilgrims [ignored \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUpIq9BdQNC\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUpIq9BdQNC) security checkpoints as they tried to stop the flow of people. Iraq's inability to prevent the pilgrimage forced the Minister of Health to publicly call on Muqtada Alsadr—one of the most powerful Shia political and religious leaders—to release a statement informing visitors of the shrine to quarantine for 14 days because the public would listen to Alsadr more than the Health Minister.

The controversy over the closure of the shrines was also seen as an opportunity for many religious leaders to boost their popularity among the Shia majority. A bold public challenge to the state's authority might have provided more backing to religious leaders, but most took the more “moderate” approach of only objecting to only the closure of the shrines. Muqtada Alsadr's tweets serve as a prime example. He clarified his objection, stating, “I did not object to the curfew, nor did I violate the health and organizational measures...Our objection was to the closure of the shrines only.” The fact that thousands descended upon the shrines despite government orders shows the influence religious leaders can have over the populace.

Turning to religious leaders' influence over Iraq's Sunni minority, the [Council of Senior Scholars \(https://alfiqhi.org/fatwa/%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%86/\)](https://alfiqhi.org/fatwa/%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%86/)—a Sunni religious institution—stated in February that in the case of a mandatory curfew, people should not pray at mosques. The Council's statement also prohibited public gatherings at markets and schools. Additionally, on March 16, the [Sunni Endowment \(https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1603202010\)](https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1603202010) declared that all mosques in Iraq would be closed, encouraging people to pray at home. While Shia religious leaders' initial orders were unclear, Sunni leaders' instructions to stay home have helped the government exert its power in implementing the curfew among the Sunni population.

Religious Iraqis often seek the advice of religious leaders on public issues, increasing their influence over their followers and consequently the entire society. According to an [Arab Barometer \(https://www.arabbarometer.org/2019/12/arabs-are-losing-faith-in-religious-parties-and-leaders/\)](https://www.arabbarometer.org/2019/12/arabs-are-losing-faith-in-religious-parties-and-leaders/) survey, the percentage of Iraqis who defined themselves as religious increased from 39% in 2013 to 50% in 2019. While a relatively high percentage of Iraqis still define themselves as religious, the October 2019 protests reflected different levels of religiosity as protesters took to the streets to chant, “No to religion or sect.” The Iraqi Security forces brutal clampdown on protestors versus its lackadaisical approach to implementing a curfew has outraged many activists and presented government actions as hypocritical.

While it is difficult to assess whether imposing restrictions on the religious ceremonies threatened the government's legitimacy, one must acknowledge that Iraq's religious leaders' approval—or rejection—weighed heavily in its ability to enforce a nationwide curfew. And after the spread of the virus among pilgrims of Imam Kadhim, the public began

to recognize that restrictions are for public safety and not a violation of religious freedom. Regardless of this understanding, religion remains the motivating factor behind the public's participation in government directives—particularly among Shia. If the government does not consult with influential religious leaders, it risks losing the support of religious Iraqis—who make up a sizable proportion of its population. ❖

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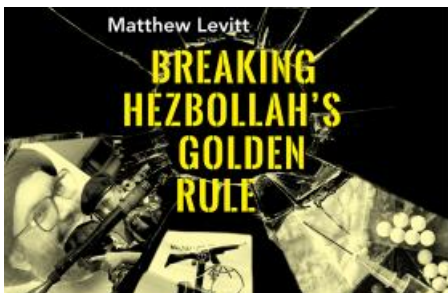
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