

# As Polls Show Increasing Dissatisfaction, will Young Shias Turn the Tables on Iraq's Political System?

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Brief Analysis

## The Kadhimi government must move quickly if it wants to avoid a potential popular uprising among dissatisfied Shias in Iraq.

According to the Al Mustakilla Research Group (IIACSS)/Gallup International Iraq recent Opinion Thermometer (IOT) poll conducted in April 2021, Iraqi Shia are showing particularly high rates of dissatisfaction, distrust, and unhappiness regarding their political system when compared to Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds.

The IOT is a long-term project to assess the state of public opinion in Iraq towards democracy and governance in the country. The overarching goal of the project is to determine whether the state of public opinion in the country is on a trajectory conducive to sustainable and well-functioning pluralistic democracy. While the first survey in the project was conducted in April 2021, the project will periodically track key attitudes in Iraq in order to better understand the societal foundations of the existing political order.

Though there are no official or undisputed figures on the percentage of the Iraqi population that is Shia, most sources agree that they represent almost half of the population. After the U.S. invasion and the establishment of a new political system, Shia had finally obtained their moment for political ascendance in 2003. The new governmental structure meant that Iraqi Shia became the most powerful political force in the country and gave them the upper hand in political decision making; most of the parliamentary seats, ministers, and the prime minister have been Shia.

As such, and in contrast to Sunni Iraqis, most Shias and Kurds were happy about the fall of Saddam Hussein's

regime. Less than one year after the invasion, whereas only 35% of Sunnis said that Iraq was going in the right direction, the majority of Shia and Kurds—65% and 70% respectively—saw Iraq’s direction in a positive light. More than 80% of Iraqi Shia thought that their lives were significantly improved in 2004.

Yet after more than fifteen years, Iraqi Shia have started to look much less favorably toward the current political system. Shia Iraqis started to realize that Iraq’s current political parties had stolen the popular Shia Iraqi dream of good governance with a prominent voice in policy.

This dissatisfaction reached its peak in October 2019, when hundreds of thousands of protesters went into the streets in majority Shia governorates to express their frustration and to call for a complete replacement the current political system. This pressure from Shia demonstrators led the Adil Abdulmahdi government to resign at the end of 2019, and the Iraqi parliament chose a new government in May 2020 in order to placate protestor demands.

Initially, the new government under current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi was greeted with much public goodwill. Public expectations for Kadhimi’s government were extremely high, and the Kadhimi government enjoyed a relatively high approval rate in its first six months, around 60% in total and around 50% among Shia.

However, the recent IOT survey, which was based on a nationwide face-to-face representative sample of 1,200 CAPI interviews, confirms that almost two years after the October uprising, Iraqis in general and Shia in particular are still pessimistic about the direction of their country. In January of 2021, Shia Iraqis’ trust in the government was at 27%, with Sunnis’ trust in the federal government at 46% and Kurdish trust at 55%.

Now, overall trust in the government is at its lowest point ever: 22% of all Iraqis and just 17% of Shia express trust in the government according to the April 2021 IOT poll. This most recent poll also shows that although 75% of Iraqis in general think that Iraq is going in the wrong direction, the percentage among Shia is even worse (80%). This is the lowest rate of optimism about the country seen since IACSS began polling in 2003. According to the IOT, Shia are showing higher dissatisfaction rates than Sunnis and Kurds by all measures. While 5% of Kurds, and 16% of Sunnis feel unsafe in their cities, the percent jumps to 25% among Shias. This striking number of one in four Shia could be better understood if we consider that 60% of Shias believe that non-state armed groups—in other words, the Shia militias—are stronger than the government.

Likewise, while almost 50% of Sunnis and Kurds believe that they cannot influence decisions made in Iraq, the percent jumps to 60% among Shias. Along the same lines, 60% of Sunnis feel that not all people are treated fairly and equally by the government, while 70% of Shias believe that as well. There is clearly an immense crisis of trust in Iraq when it comes to how the public views the government. As this is most profound among Iraq’s Shia community—the government’s most important group for its political support, this means that the societal foundation for government legitimacy in Iraq is sorely lacking, and this deficiency in societal support could mean further political instability in the country. It also means that much of the Iraqi public views its government more as a cause of problems than as the solution for Iraq’s many economic, social, and political challenges.

One might expect that the coming October election may impact this dire lack of public trust in the Iraqi government, but the data unfortunately does not support this optimism. Fifty percent of Sunnis and 60% of Shia are unlikely to vote in the coming election. Furthermore, based on previous elections, the percentage of Iraqis who state that they are unlikely to vote is likely to rise further as election day approaches.

These numbers reinforce the recent IOT findings, which show that while a small majority of Sunnis (53%) agree that elections and voting do not give them a voice in politics in Iraq, this percentage jumps to 71% among Shia respondents. Accordingly, it is fair to assume that the coming election will witness a low turnout, with the lowest turnout expected in Shia areas. In addition, of those who said that ordinary Iraqis can influence the decision-making process, only 14% of Sunnis, 11% of Shia, and 31% of Kurds believe that voting is the way to do so. Clearly, Iraqis in

general and Shia in particular are increasingly convinced that the normal, institutionalized ways of influencing politics and policy in Iraq do not work for them.

While political apathy produces its own problems, such as allowing corrupt politicians to rule unchallenged, this indifference to voting may also signal a much larger problem. Many Iraqis could be turning against their political system, potentially making them more susceptible to radical, non-system oriented solutions to Iraq's political problems. Looking ahead, all of this data points to the possibility that the next few months will witness an acceleration in the momentum of different kinds of protests and expressions of popular dissatisfaction, particularly among Shias. In fact, this data may help explain why there has been an increased number of assassinations of Shia political activists in the past few weeks. These activists, who could play a significant role in changing the political game in Iraq, have been targeted in a desperate attempt to stop the momentum of the so-called October Uprising from returning.

Yet these recent assassinations are unlikely to stop the expected acceleration of this popular uprising, focused in Shia areas, in the coming weeks. The most important question for Iraqi politics right now is that with these high levels of dissatisfaction with the current state of politics, whether young, angry Shia will be able to turn the tables on the entire political system in Iraq.

Though the aforementioned scenario is very possible and the door to stopping it is gradually closing, there is still a chance for Kadhimi and his government to fix things. Kadhimi can take advantage of the fact that he is not affiliated with the current political parties and the fact that he is often attacked by some of these parties. Moreover, he gets particularly withering criticism from the parties close to Iran.

To arrest the momentum toward more anger among Shias, Kadhimi will have to complete significant reforms on three fronts: 1. Fighting corruption, and there is good evidence that he has already made significant progress on this front; 2. Improving the economy, and the recent jump in oil prices may help with this; 3. Most importantly, degrading the influence and the power of Shia militias. This last challenge could be the master key for all other reforms as it ensures the possibility of his government regaining control over the state. Regaining control over the state of Iraq will be the top challenge for Kadhimi during the coming few months. ❖

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