



# What the Iraqi Public Wants

-A WorldPublicOpinion.org Poll-

Conducted by the  
Program on International Policy Attitudes

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Program on International  
Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

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## INTRODUCTION

The situation in Iraq continues to pose many challenges for the US, for the international community and above all, for the Iraqi people and its emerging government.

Attacks on US forces, Iraqi security forces and Iraqi civilians continue unabated. Many have called for the US to set a timetable for withdrawal, but the Bush administration has declined to do so. US long-term intentions in Iraq show some ambiguity: while the Bush administration says that the US will withdraw its forces as soon as it becomes feasible, at last report the US military was continuing to build bases designed to be “enduring.”

Iraq’s December parliamentary elections witnessed substantial participation from each of Iraq’s diverse communities and a lower level of violence. The United Nations declared that free and fair elections took place. The Bush administration has hailed the elections as a key indicator that current strategies are producing success. However, violence continues and the makeup of the new government is still to be negotiated.

In a variety of ways, other members of the international community have sought to become more involved in addressing the situation in Iraq. In November 2005, the Arab League sponsored a meeting of Iraqi leaders from across the ethnic spectrum, which succeeded in agreeing on an important joint statement of principles: rejecting terrorist methods, insisting on political inclusion of all groups and calling for the development of a timetable for the staged withdrawal of US-led forces. The UN has kept a low profile in Iraq, apart from advising on election procedures and continuing a few projects through its agencies. But since the election, the UN representative in Iraq has said that he has been approached by various Iraqi groups asking him to play a fuller advisory role. Interestingly, in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft proposed coupling a large UN mission in Iraq with a newly organized international force dedicated to its security.

US efforts to rebuild Iraq have made some progress but in many ways have stumbled, as funds originally budgeted have been depleted by unplanned security expenses. A recent US government audit found a wide range of shortfalls in many sectors.

In the context of these dynamics, WorldPublicOpinion.org has undertaken a poll of the Iraqi people to determine their attitudes about these various developments occurring around them, and also to differentiate the views of the ethnic subgroups—Arab Sunnis, Shia and Kurds.

The poll was fielded by KA Research Limited/D3 Systems, Inc. Polling was conducted January 2-5 with a nationwide sample of 1,150, which included an oversample of 150 Arab Sunnis (bringing the total of Sunnis to 421). Respondents from all of Iraq’s 18 governorates were interviewed for the sample.

Key findings are:

### ***1. US Forces in Iraq***

A large majority of Iraqis think the US plans to maintain bases in Iraq permanently, even if the newly elected government asks the US to leave. A large majority favors setting a timeline for the withdrawal of US forces, though this majority divides over whether the timeline should be six months or two years. Nearly half of Iraqis approve of attacks on US-led forces—including nine out of 10 Sunnis. Most Iraqis believe that many aspects of their lives will improve once the US-led forces leave, but are nonetheless uncertain that Iraqi security forces are ready to stand on their own.....3

**2. Current Situation in Iraq**

The majority of Iraqis overall view the recent parliamentary elections as valid, are optimistic that their country is going in the right direction and feel that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has been worth the costs. Sunnis, on the other hand, overwhelmingly reject the validity of the elections, see the country going in the wrong direction, and regret the overthrow of Saddam. ....7

**3. Support for International Assistance**

Many Iraqis express strong support for various forms of international assistance, including the presence of foreign security forces, UN (rather than US) leadership on reconstruction, an international conference of global and regional players to address Iraq’s needs, engagement by the Arab League and a variety of forms of nonmilitary US assistance. In some cases, international forms of assistance are even endorsed by Sunnis who tend to strongly oppose all US-led efforts in Iraq.....9

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**FINDINGS**

***1. US Forces in Iraq***

A large majority of Iraqis think the US plans to maintain bases in Iraq permanently, even if the newly elected government asks the US to leave. A large majority favors setting a timeline for the withdrawal of US forces, though this majority divides over whether the timeline should be six months or two years. Nearly half of Iraqis approve of attacks on US-led forces—including nine out of 10 Sunnis. Most Iraqis believe that many aspects of their lives will improve once the US-led forces leave, but are nonetheless uncertain that Iraqi security forces are ready to stand on their own.

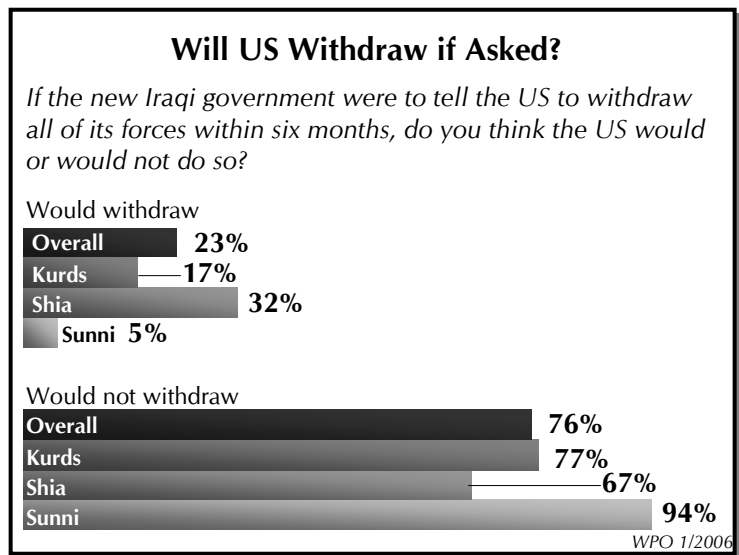
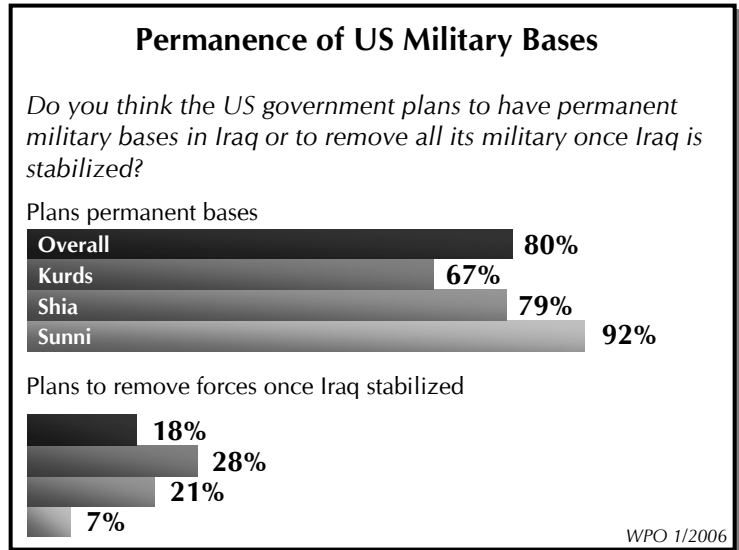
Asked whether “the US government plans to have permanent military bases in Iraq or to remove all its military forces once Iraq is stabilized,” 80% overall assume that the US plans to remain permanently, including 79% of Shia, 92% of Sunnis and 67% of Kurds. Only small minorities believe that the US plans “to remove all its military forces once Iraq is stabilized” (overall 18%, Shia 21%, Sunni 7%, Kurds 28%).

Iraqis of all ethnic groups also agree that the US is unlikely to take direction from the Iraqi government. Asked what they think the US would do if the new government were to ask the US to withdraw its forces within six months, 76% overall assume that the US would refuse to do so (Shia 67%, Sunni 94%, Kurds 77%).

**Support for Timetable**

Asked what they would like the newly elected Iraqi government to ask the US-led forces to do, 70% of Iraqis favor setting a timeline for the withdrawal of US forces. This number divides evenly between 35% who favor a short time frame of “within six months” and 35% who favor a gradual reduction over two years. Just 29% say it should “only reduce US-led forces as the security situation improves in Iraq.”

There were, however, variations along ethnic lines. Sunnis are the most unified, with 83% wanting US forces to leave within 6 months. Seventy-one percent of Shia agree on having a timeline, but divide between 22% who favor withdrawal in six months and 49% who favor two years. Among the Kurds, on the other hand, a majority of 57% favors reducing US-led forces only when the situation improves.



Even larger majorities, including a majority of Kurds, indicate a readiness to follow the government’s lead should it choose to pursue a timetable. Asked if it was a good idea for Iraqi leaders to have agreed at the Arab League conference that there should be a timetable for the withdrawal of US-led forces from Iraq, 87% say it was, including 64% of Kurds, 94% of Sunnis and 90% of Shia.

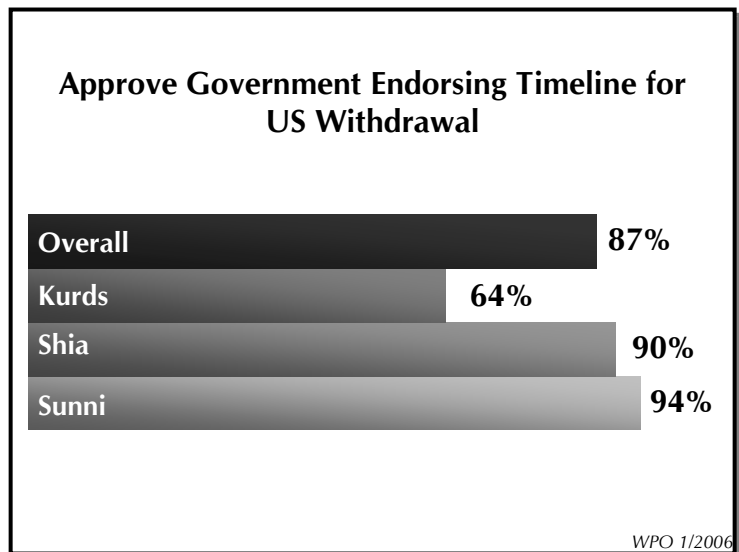
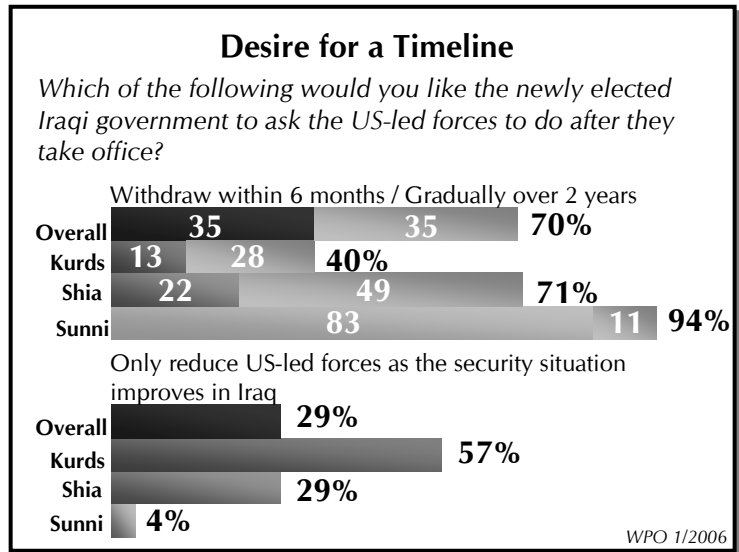
Despite the strong support for a timeline, there are differing expectations as to what the new government will in fact do. Overall, 61% assume that the newly elected government will propose a timeline, with 17% assuming that it will be within six months and 44% over two years. However, there are sharp differences between the ethnic groups. While 76% of Shia assume that the new government will ask for withdrawal in six months (24%) or two years (52%), a majority of Kurds (57%) and Sunnis (54%) assume that the new government will only ask US forces to withdraw as the security situation improves.

A November 2005 poll of Iraqis conducted by the Oxford Research Institute for a consortium of media outlets including BBC, ABC News, NHK and others also found unhappiness with the presence of US troops. Sixty-five percent said they opposed “the presence of coalition forces in Iraq.” However, it was not asked specifically whether they wanted them to leave and when.

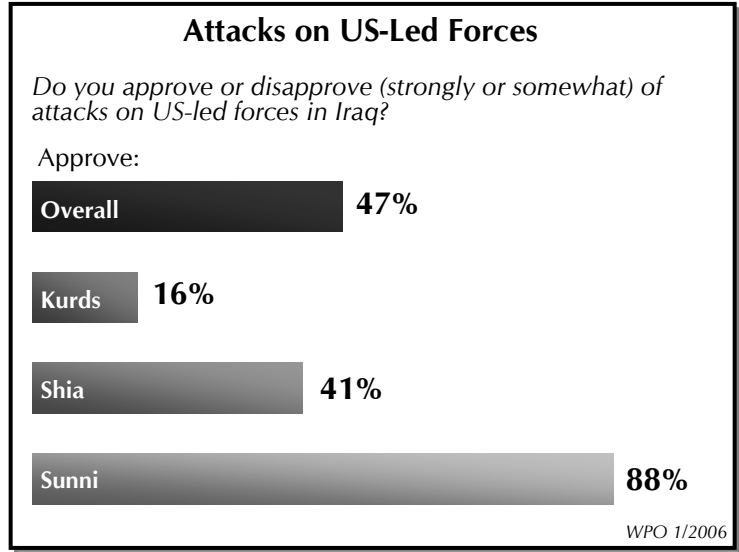
**Support for Attacks**

A substantial portion of Iraqis support attacks on US led-forces, but not attacks on Iraqi government security forces or Iraqi civilians. Ethnic groups varied sharply on these questions.

Overall, 47% say they approve of “attacks on US-led forces” (23% strongly). There are huge differences between ethnic groups. An extraordinary 88% of Sunnis approve, with 77% approving strongly. Forty-one percent of Shia approve as well, but just 9% strongly. Even 16% of Kurds approve (8% strongly).

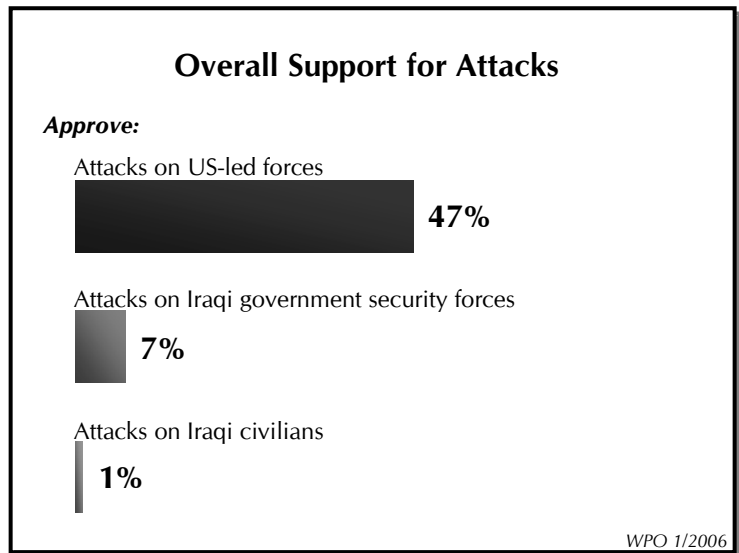


Naturally the question arises why it is that only 35% want US troops to withdraw within 6 months, but 47% approve of attacks on US-led forces. Interestingly, 41% of those who support attacks do not favor a near-term withdrawal. One possible explanation is that the attacks are not prompted by a desire to bring about an immediate withdrawal but to put pressure on the US so that it will eventually leave. Indeed, among those who approve of such attacks, 90% believe that the US plans to have bases in Iraq permanently and 87% assume that the US would refuse to leave even if asked to by the new Iraqi government.



PIPA Director Steven Kull comments, “It appears that support for attacks on US-led forces may not always be prompted by a desire for the US to leave Iraq immediately but rather to put pressure on the US to leave eventually—something most Iraqis perceive the US as having no intention of doing.”

Support for other types of attacks is sharply lower. An overwhelming 93% oppose attacks on Iraqi government security forces (66% strongly). This is true of all ethnic groups, including 76% of Sunnis, 97% of Shia and 99% of Kurds. Thus, it appears that support for attacks on US-led forces is truly aimed at US-led forces, not an indirect attempt to undermine the new Iraqi government.



Support for attacks on Iraqi civilians is nearly nonexistent. Only 1% approve, while 95% disapprove strongly.

**Sources of Urgency for Withdrawal**

The major source of urgency for withdrawal is the feeling, especially among Sunnis, that it is offensive for their country to be occupied. A secondary reason is that US forces attract more attacks and make the violence worse.

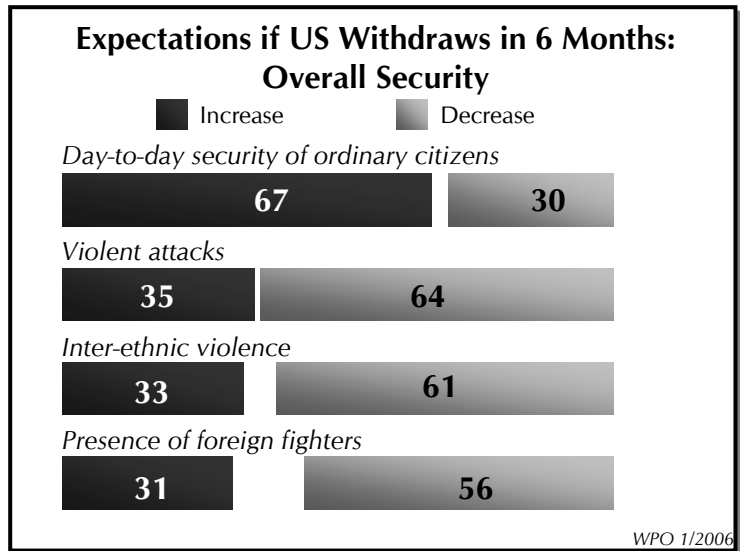
The 35% of respondents who took the position in favor of the near-term exit of US forces from Iraq (six months) were asked: “Which of the following reasons for withdrawing US-led forces is the most important to you?” and given four options. The most common answer is “It is offensive to me to have foreign forces in my country.” This was selected by 20% (of the total sample) overall, 52% of Sunnis, 11% of Shia and 7% of Kurds. The second most common answer is: “The presence of US forces attracts more violent attacks and makes things worse,” which was selected by 11% overall, 26% of Sunnis, 6% of Shia and 4% of Kurds. Far fewer chose the other two options: “It is no longer necessary to have US-led

forces in Iraq: Iraq can take care of itself” (2%), and “I do not like the way US forces have treated Iraqi civilians” (2%).

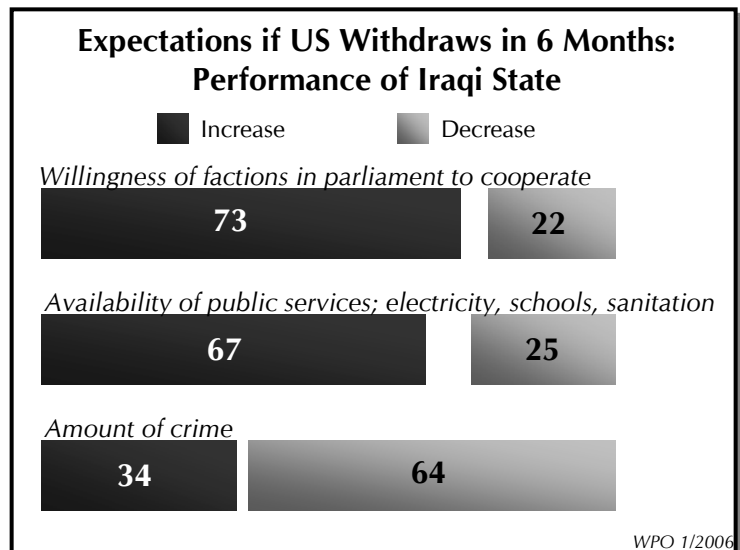
**Effects of US Withdrawal**

Iraqis believe that many aspects of their lives would improve were US-led forces to leave Iraq. Sunnis and Shia feel this way regarding every aspect asked about, while the Kurds have more mixed views. However, the majority is still not sure that Iraqi security forces are ready for US-led forces to leave within a short-term time frame.

Respondents were asked what would happen in a variety of areas if US-led forces were to withdraw from Iraq in the next six months. Majorities of Iraqis express confidence that in many dimensions related to security, things would improve. Sixty-seven percent say that “day to day security for ordinary Iraqis” would increase, a consensus position among all ethnic groups—83% of Sunnis, 61% of Shia and 57% of Kurds. On other points, Sunnis and Shia agree, but the Kurds diverge. Overall, 64% believe that violent attacks would decrease, including a majority of Sunnis (86%) and Shia (66%), but 78% of Kurds think they will increase. Overall, 61% think that the amount of interethnic violence will decrease, including a majority of Sunnis (81%) and Shia (64%), but a majority of Kurds (68%) think it will increase. Similarly, 56% overall agree that the presence of foreign fighters in Iraq will decrease (Sunnis 74%, Shia 64%), but 74% of Kurds think they will increase.



Interestingly, there is a fair amount of consensus that if US-led troops were to withdraw there would be substantial improvement in the performance of the Iraqi state. Overall, 73% think that there will be an increase in the willingness of factions to cooperate in Parliament, including majorities of Kurds (62%), Sunnis (87%) and Shia (68%). Sixty-seven percent assume that there will be an increase in the availability of public services such as electricity, schools and sanitation (Sunnis 83%, Shia 63%, Kurds 54%). Sixty-four percent assume that crime will go down (Sunnis 88%, Shia 66%), but here again the Kurds diverge, with 77% assuming crime will increase.





Naturally the question arises, “Why do only 35% favor the US withdrawing within six months if there would be so many assumed benefits?” The answer may lie in the response to another question that asked whether in six months Iraqi security forces will be “strong enough to deal with the security challenges Iraq will face” or will still “need the help of military forces from other countries.” Overall, 59% felt that Iraqi security forces would not be strong enough, including 55% of Shia, 58% of Sunnis and 73% of Kurds. Thus, the presence of US troops may be perceived as an unwelcome presence that produces many undesirable side effects, but is still necessary for a period.

**2. Current Situation in Iraq**

The majority of Iraqis view the recent parliamentary elections as valid, are optimistic that their country is going in the right direction and feel that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has been worth the costs. Sunnis, on the other hand, overwhelmingly reject the validity of the elections, see the country going in the wrong direction and regret the overthrow of Saddam.

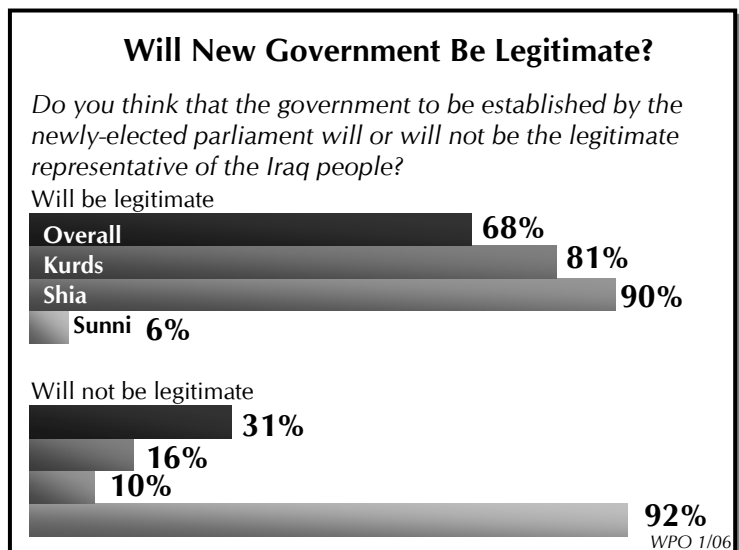
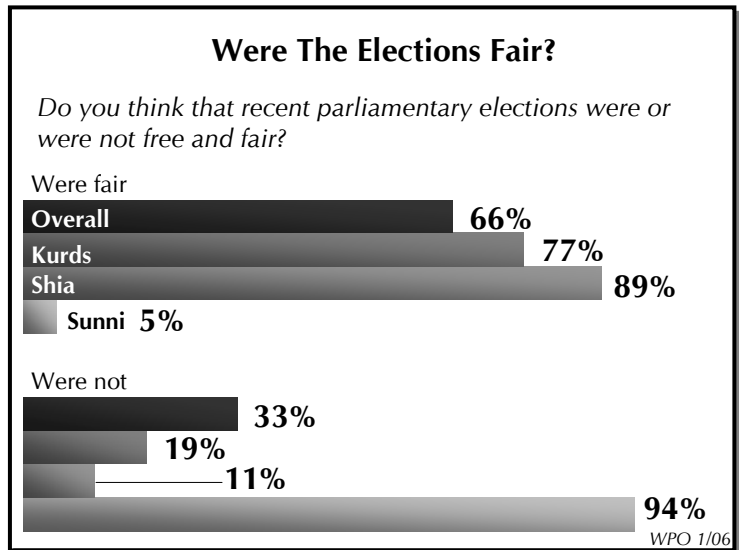
Overall, two out of three Iraqis (66%) believe that the recent parliamentary elections were free and fair. Approximately the same number (68%) say “that the government to be established by the newly elected Parliament will ... be the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people.”

Even larger majorities feel this way among the Shia and Kurds. Eighty-nine percent of Shia and 77% of Kurds say the elections were free and fair, while 90% of Shia and 81% of Kurds say the new government will be the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people.

However, despite significant participation by Iraq’s Sunnis in the December 15 parliamentary elections, an overwhelming majority rejects the validity of these elections. An extraordinary 94% of Sunnis say the elections were not free and fair. Ninety-two percent say that the new government resulting from the elections will not be the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people.

Sunni objections are not, however, predicated on the position that they have a unique right to dominate the government. Sunnis as well as other groups polled are nearly unanimous in supporting the position that “all groups should participate in the political process” (overall 97%, Sunnis 98%, Shia 97%, Kurds 93%).

Overall, 64% of Iraqis say that Iraq is heading in the right direction, while just



36% say it is heading in the wrong direction. This represents a sharp upward movement from when the International Republican Institute asked this question in November 2005 and just 49% said that Iraq was headed in the right direction and 36% said the wrong direction. The only other time that IRI has found such a high number expressing such optimism was in April 2005—also just after an election—when 67% said the country was headed in the right direction and 20% the wrong direction.

Among the Shia and Kurds optimism is even higher. Seventy-six percent of Kurds and 84% of Shia say they thought the country was headed in the right direction.

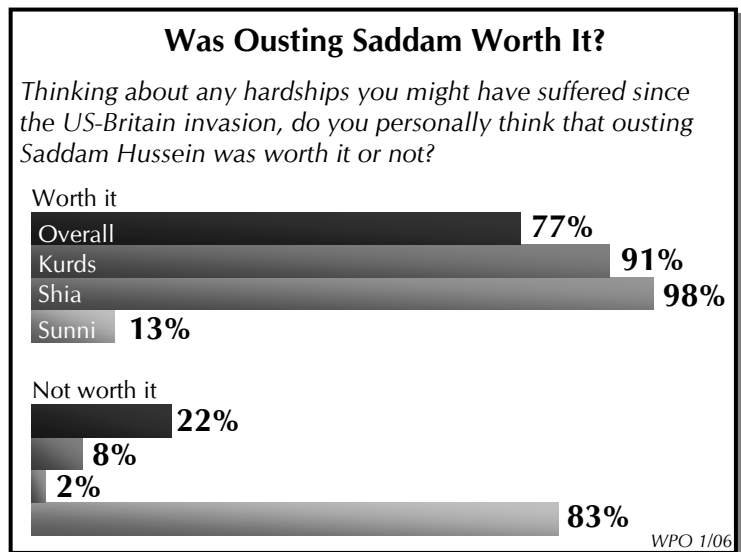
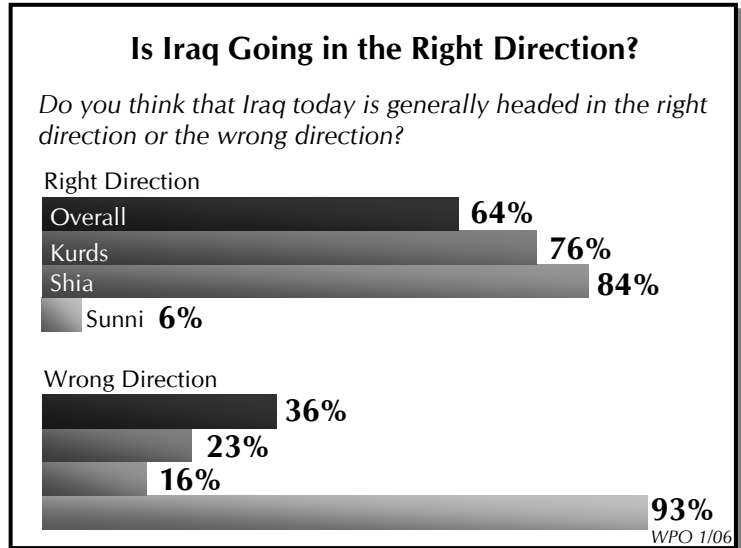
Sunnis, though, are overwhelmingly pessimistic. A remarkable 93% say the country is headed in the wrong direction. (Trendline data by ethnic group was not released by IRI.)

Iraqis overall have a positive view of the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Asked, “Thinking about any hardships you might have suffered since the US-Britain invasion, do you personally think that ousting Saddam Hussein was worth it or not?” 77% say it was worth it, while 22% say it was not.

Gallup asked the same question in April 2004. At that time, 61% said that it was worth it and 28% said that it was not.

However, here again, the ethnic divisions are very sharp. Ninety-eight percent of Shia and 91% of Kurds say the hardships were worth it, while 83% of Sunnis say they were not.

This pervasive pessimism challenges hopes that the alienated Sunni minority, which boycotted Iraq’s first post-Saddam Hussein elections a year ago, would feel empowered by participating in last month’s elections. Since Sunnis largely reject the election outcome and the new government that will be formed, and harbor continued resentment about Saddam’s overthrow, the challenge is as strong as ever to make the Sunnis feel they are included in Iraq’s political process.



**3. Support for International Assistance**

Many Iraqis express strong support for various forms of international assistance including the presence of foreign forces, UN (rather than US) leadership on reconstruction, an international conference of global and regional players to address Iraq’s needs, engagement by the Arab League and a variety of forms of nonmilitary US assistance. In some cases, international forms of assistance are even endorsed by Sunnis who tend to strongly oppose all US-led efforts in Iraq.

A majority of Iraqis (59%) feel that in six months it will be necessary for Iraq to have “military forces from other countries.” Just 39% say that “six months from now Iraqi security forces will be strong enough to deal with the security challenges Iraq will face.” Not surprisingly, 55% of Shia and 73% of Kurds endorse the need for foreign forces.

What is surprising is that 59% of Sunnis also endorse the need for “military forces from other countries” six months from now. In the case of the Sunnis, this support for help from military forces from unspecified “other countries” is in sharp contrast to attitudes about the presence of “US-led forces.” An overwhelming 83% of Sunnis favor the withdrawal of “US-led forces” within six months.

Those who said that Iraq still needs the help of foreign forces were also asked how much longer such forces would be needed. Twenty-one percent (of the whole sample) say one year, 26% two years and 12% three years or more. Kurds’ estimates of how much longer foreign forces would be needed were a bit longer (33% three years or more, 31% two years), while Sunni and Shia estimates are similar.

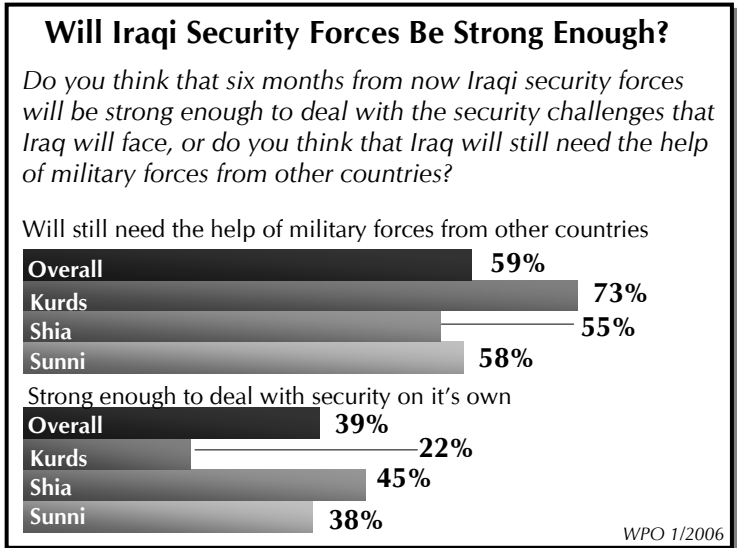
A poll of Iraqis conducted in Baghdad governorate by Gallup in September 2003 also found strong support for an international military presence. Sixty-four percent said they would favor “installing an international peacekeeping force in Iraq.” Only 32% were opposed.

**UN Leadership**

Iraqis also express support for the UN, not the US, to take the lead in the economic reconstruction of Iraq. Overall, 59% express such a preference, with just 21% favoring the US taking the lead. Kurds have the highest percentage favoring the US taking the lead (43%), but the majority (53%) of Kurds favor the UN. Shia express the strongest support for the UN (64%). Only 22% of Shia support the US taking the lead in reconstruction.

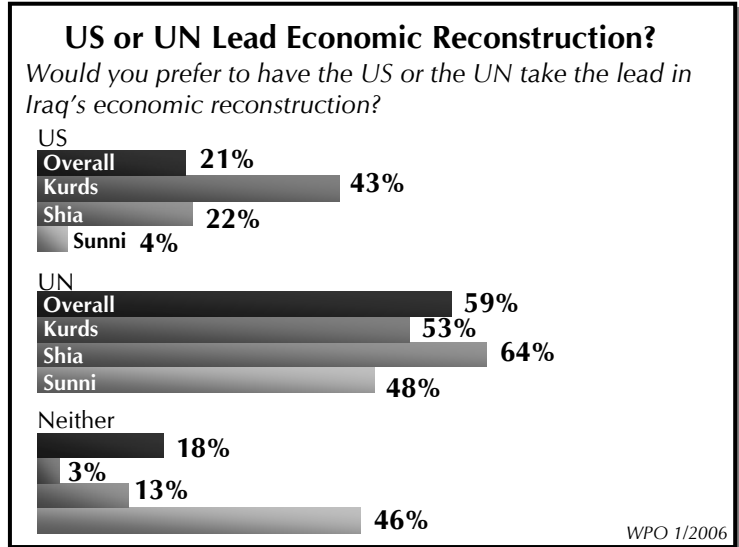
Sunni support for the US taking the lead was almost nonexistent (4%). But approximately half of Sunnis (48%) express support for the UN, while 46% say they would prefer to have neither involved.

When asked whether the UN is having a positive or negative influence in Iraq now, this produces a divided response, with 38% saying mostly positive and 38% saying mostly negative. Shia are mixed, with



39% saying the UN is having a mostly positive influence and 38% saying it is having a mostly negative influence. Given their strong desire for a larger UN role, this suggests that there is unhappiness with the UN for not taking a more active role in Iraq. Among those who say the UN is playing a mostly negative role in Iraq, 59% prefer the UN to take the lead in economic reconstruction.

Kurds are the most satisfied with the UN, with 60% saying it is having a mostly positive influence on the situation in the country. Sunnis are the least satisfied with the UN's influence on the situation in Iraq—57% say it is mostly negative.

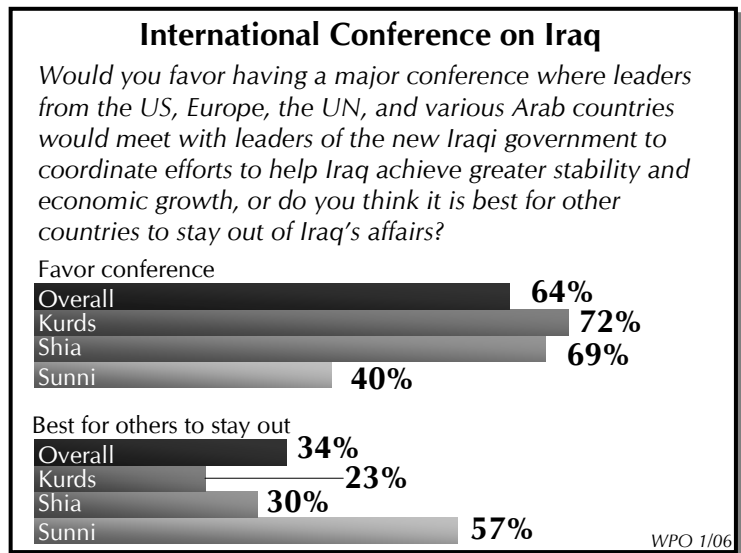


**International Conference**

Respondents were asked about the prospect of holding a major conference where leaders from the US, Europe, the UN and various Arab countries would meet with leaders of the new Iraqi government to coordinate efforts to help Iraq achieve greater stability and economic growth. Overall, nearly two-thirds of Iraqis—64%—support the idea, including 72% of Kurds and 69% of Shia.

Sunnis are decidedly less enthusiastic. Still, 40% favor the idea, while 57% say it is best for other countries to stay out of Iraq's affairs.

This majority openness to some forms of international involvement recalls a Gallup finding in its Baghdad poll of September 2003. Respondents were told: "Some people have called for internationalizing the reconstruction effort by having nations in addition to the US and Britain help in the reconstruction of Iraq." Eighty-three percent favor this idea (55% strongly).



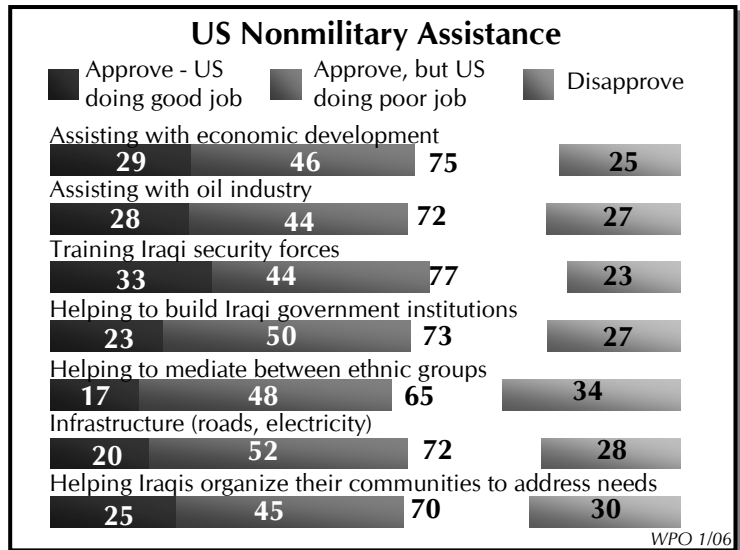
**US Nonmilitary Involvement**

Two-thirds of Iraqis approve of US involvement in nonmilitary activities—including training Iraqi security forces, developing Iraq's oil industry, building government institutions, mediating between ethnic groups, assisting with infrastructure and economic development and helping organize local communities. Yet a majority or plurality says the US is doing a poor job in each of these areas.

Of the seven nonmilitary activities Iraqis were asked about, approval is highest for training Iraqi security forces (77% overall) and lowest for US efforts to help mediate between ethnic groups (65% overall).

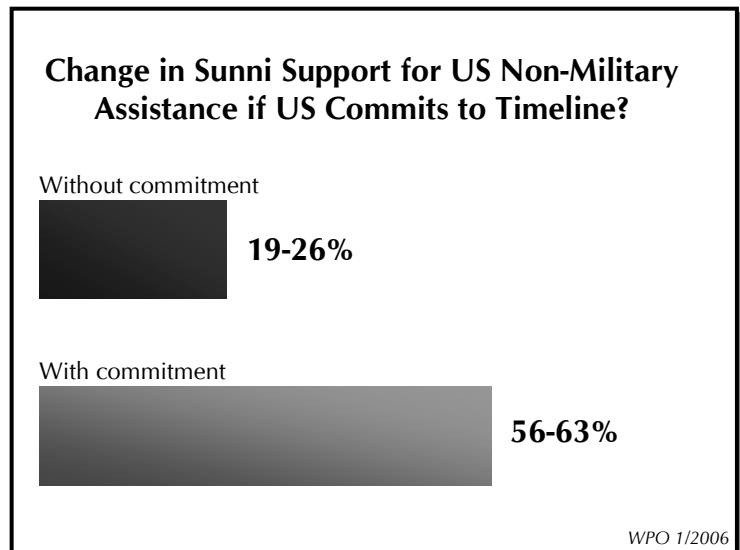
Sunnis, however, disapprove of US involvement in these activities by a large majority. Sunnis are the only group that disagrees in principle with US involvement in nonmilitary activities. Between 74% and 81% percent of Sunnis disapprove of US involvement in each of these activities (19-26% approve), while 76% to 96% percent of Kurds and Shia approve.

However, even among Kurds and Shia most feel the US is doing a poor job. The only case in which a majority of any group says the US is doing a good job is Kurdish approval of US training of Iraqi security forces—54% of Kurds say the US is doing a good job in this area.



The low level of approval for US performance was also found recently in a more general question in the November 2005 poll by BBC, ABC et al. Fifty-nine percent thought “the United States and other coalition forces” have done a bad job (40% very bad job) in “the way [they] have carried out their responsibilities in Iraq.” Only 36% say the US-led coalition has done a good job.

In the current poll, those who disapprove of US involvement in any of these nonmilitary activities were asked whether it would make any difference in their opinion about US involvement if the US were to agree to a timetable for withdrawing forces. A significant number say it would. Ten percent of Kurds and 9% of Shia say it would make them more supportive. Most significant, 37% of Sunnis say it would make them more likely to approve. Combined with the 19-26% of Sunnis who support various forms of nonmilitary US involvement, this could lift Sunni support to a solid majority.



**Role of Neighboring Muslim Countries**

A large majority of Iraqis approve of recent efforts by the Arab League to facilitate reconciliation in Iraq. However, more broadly Iraqis seem to be somewhat unenthusiastic about the Arab League and are largely negative about the role of Iran and Syria.

Asked how they feel about recent efforts of the Arab League to help Iraqi leaders achieve national reconciliation, 73% say they approve. The number includes majority support from every group (74% of Sunnis, 73% of Shia, 67% of Kurds).

Positive opinions about the Arab League’s efforts to assist with Iraq’s reconciliation are likely connected to what was seen as a concrete outcome of the Arab League’s summit on Iraq in November—a statement that there should be a timetable for the withdrawal of US-led forces from Iraq, terrorism should be rejected and all groups should participate in the political process.

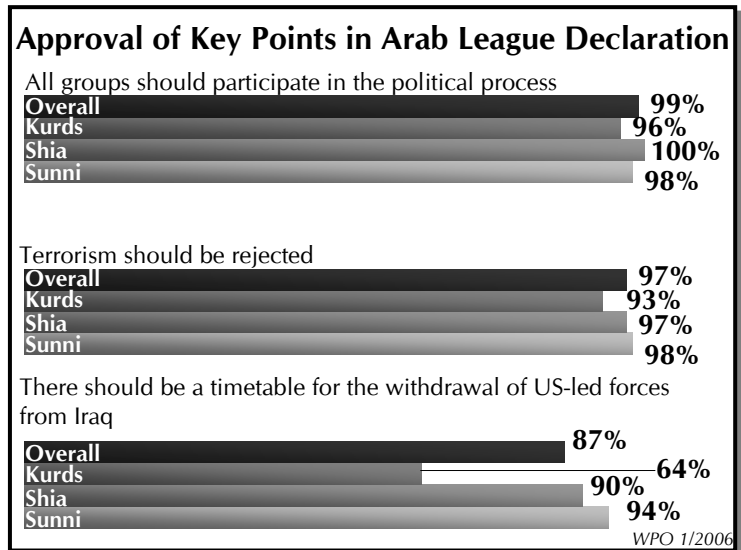
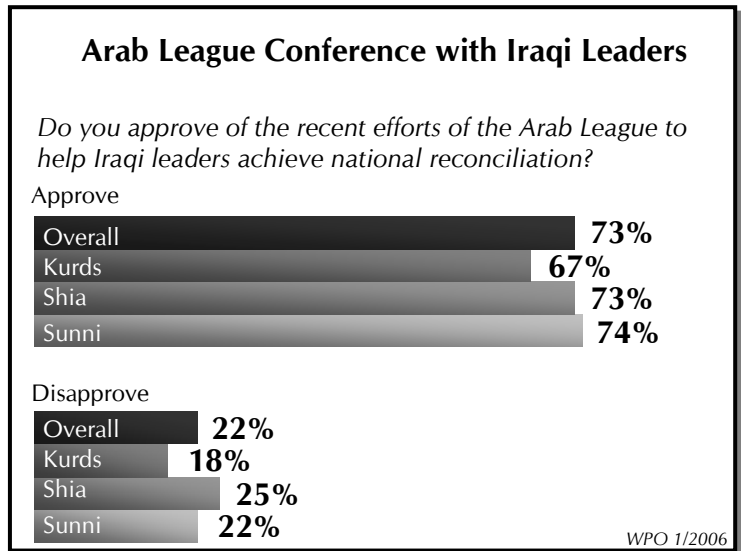
Large majorities of Iraqis from all ethnic groups concur that it was a good idea for Iraqi leaders to agree to each of these points:

- Rejection of terrorism—99% overall (100% of Shia, 98% of Sunnis, 96% of Kurds)
- All groups should participate in the political process—97% overall (98% of Sunnis, 97% of Shia, 93% of Kurds)
- A timetable for withdrawal of US-led forces—87% overall (94% of Sunnis, 90% of Shia, 64% of Kurds).

Of the 28% of Kurds who say that having such a timetable is a bad idea, 90% say it is too soon to talk about withdrawing US-led forces from Iraq.

Yet when asked about the influence of the Arab League on the situation in Iraq in general, only 30% say it was mostly positive. Opinions are divided in every group on the Arab League’s influence. Fifty percent of Sunnis give a neutral answer, that the Arab League had neither a positive nor negative effect, while Shia and Kurds are divided among those who felt it had a negative effect, those who feel it had a positive effect and those who feel it had neither or no effect.

This apparent contradiction between support for Arab League recent efforts on reconciliation and skepticism about the effect of the league’s influence in Iraq may be a reaction that this effort is too little,



too late. Among those who view the Arab League as mostly negative, 68% still support the organization's recent efforts regarding Iraq. Negative attitudes about the Arab League's influence in Iraq may also indicate longstanding suspicion among Iraqi Shia and Kurds about the organization. The Arab League, whose member states are predominantly Sunni Arabs, did not speak out against Saddam Hussein's oppression of Shia and Kurds during his long domination of Iraq.

Majorities of Iraqis have negative views of the influence of neighboring Muslim countries on Iraq, although differences are evident by ethnic group depending on whether it is Iran or Syria that is being considered.

A slight majority of Iraqis—52%—believe Iran is having a mostly negative influence on Iraq, but the number reaches 93% among Sunnis, who belong to a different branch of Islam than the vast majority of Iranians. Among Iraq's Shia, who share the same religious tradition as most Iranians, a plurality (43%) says Iran is having a mostly positive influence on Iraq, yet nearly a third of Iraqi Shia (30%) say Iran is having a mostly negative influence. A majority of Kurds (63%), who mainly belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, say Iran is having a mostly negative influence on Iraq.

A majority of Iraqis, 61%, believe Syria is also having a mostly negative effect on Iraq. Syria, a mostly Sunni Arab country, has long been ruled by the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Islam. Iraqi Shia are the most vociferous group in calling influence from Damascus mostly negative (80%). A slight majority of Kurds (55%) say Syria is having a mostly negative influence, while slight majorities of Sunni Arabs (54%) say that Syria is having neither a mostly positive nor mostly negative effect, or no effect.