

Iraqi Worries and Hopes Regarding Sectarianism

Report on Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and NDI Spring 2011 Public Opinion Research

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From: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

Recent opinion research in Iraq¹ reveals a deep frustration among Iraqis about the role sectarianism plays in the country. They see sectarianism as an entrenched force that undermines political stability, economic growth, and social cohesion. They strongly sense that ethnicity and religious sect play significant roles in how Iraqis vote, how people are selected for employment, and how Iraqis interact socially. Nonetheless, Iraqis are optimistic that their country can reduce sectarianism and its negative consequences.

Even though Iraqis themselves admit the influence sectarianism has on their own behavior, they largely blame political parties and foreign influences for exploiting sectarian divisions. However, Iraqis believe that there are steps the political parties can take to reduce the role of sectarianism, especially by fueling greater economic growth.

Additionally, beyond long-term economic solutions, Iraqis support the idea of leaders making public gestures toward bridge-building, such as holding joint meetings among various religious and ethnic leaders to discuss Iraq's problems.

Sectarianism Continues to Play a Significant Role in Iraq

Iraqis are frustrated by the role sectarianism plays within their society. They see sectarianism undermining political, economic, and social goals. One Sunni woman from Anbar says the country is heading in the wrong direction because of "sectarianism and the lack of unity among Iraqis; each is concerned about himself only."

The vast majority of Iraqis, 77 percent, see sectarianism as playing a negative role in their country. **[Figure 2]** Iraqis see sectarianism playing the biggest role in how people vote (65 percent). **[Figure 3]** Kurds generally tend to see sectarianism having a greater impact in all areas, particularly in voting behavior, oil distribution, and law enforcement. **[Figure 4]**

¹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted 10 focus groups with Iraqi adults from January 16-21, 2011 in five locations – Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Baghdad, Basra, and Anbar. Groups were homogenous with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and political leanings. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner followed this qualitative research with a quantitative survey based on 2,400 face-to-face interviews conducted between February 24 and March 23, 2011 in all 18 of Iraq's governorates. The total sample includes 500 interviews in each region (Baghdad, South, West, and North), as well as a 400-interview oversample in Kirkuk. In the nationwide survey data, these "over-samples" are weighted so that each region is proportional to its share of overall population. **[Figure 1]**

As a starting point, the role of ethnicity is clear in Iraqis' voting preferences. Shias and Sunnis² say they are more likely to vote for a candidate if he or she is Arab (72 percent and 59 percent more likely, respectively), but less likely to vote for a candidate who is Kurdish (69 percent and 61 percent less likely, respectively). Kurds show the same biases. A full 96 percent of Kurds say they are more likely to vote for a candidate if he or she is Kurdish, but 65 percent are *less* likely to vote for a candidate who is Arab. **[Figure 5]**

Although ethnicity has the strongest influence on voting behavior among Iraqis, religious sect also plays a significant role. A plurality of Shias (46 percent) and Sunnis (41 percent) are less likely to support a candidate if he or she is from a different sect. However, Kurds are significantly more open to the idea, with 53 percent of Kurdish respondents more likely to support a candidate from a different sect.

Iraqis not only express sectarian preferences individually, they also express only mild disapproval of others having a sectarian outlook. A 49 percent plurality agree that it is acceptable for people to join political parties made up of only people from their own religious sect and ethnicity. **[Figure 6]** A 54 percent majority of Iraqis, and even stronger shares of Kurds, agree with the statement that "it is natural for people to live among people from their own religious sect or ethnicity, since people feel more comfortable that way."

As some of the preceding data suggest, the sectarian outlook is particularly strong among Kurds. For example, a plurality of Kurds (45 percent) do not think there should be intermarriages between Sunnis and Shias, and a majority of Kurds do not believe Arabs and Kurds should marry. **[Figures 7 and 8]** Interestingly, because Iraqis in the South and North are significantly less likely to have neighbors or friends from a different religion or ethnicity, one would assume these regions would be more likely to oppose mixed marriages. However, the South is the most supportive of mixed marriages, while the North is most opposed to mixed marriages. **[Figures 9 and 10]**

There are differences among Iraqi perceptions of whether sectarianism is driven more by tensions between Arabs and Kurds or tensions between Sunnis and Shias. Sunnis and Kurds are more likely to think tensions between Arabs and Kurds are a greater source of conflict, while Shias think that tensions between Sunnis and Shias are the greater source of conflict. **[Figure 11]** Some of this difference can likely be attributed to the regional locations of these groups and, in particular, tensions over Kirkuk. Sunnis are particularly concerned about the role sectarianism plays in society. While a plurality (48 percent) of the country feels that the problem of sectarianism is improving, a plurality of Sunnis (47 percent) think it is getting *worse*. **[Figure 12]**

Despite the acceptance of sectarian preferences at present, Iraqis tend to want political parties to move away from a sectarian base in the future. With a strong 61 percent, a majority of Iraqis agree that it would be better for political parties *not* to be based on sect or ethnicity. **[Figure 13]** Some respondents may be tempering their true feelings on this question, reflecting a sense that it is socially more acceptable to eschew sectarian preferences. Yet, the strength of this percentage suggests that there may be a real opening for progressive leaders or parties to build narratives, manifestoes, and movements with a less sectarian hue.

Similarly, while Iraqis in focus groups often stress that sectarianism plays a role in hiring practices, a 48 percent plurality *disagree* with the statement that "it is natural for people to favor

² Throughout the memo, the reference to Sunnis is to non-Kurd Sunnis.

people from their own religious sect or ethnicity in things like hiring, because loyalty is important.” **[Figure 14]** This finding suggests that hiring and other economic issues might provide a good area for encouraging an outlook that rises above sectarianism.

Political Parties Blamed for Deepening Sectarianism

Sectarianism tends to play a significant role in the political, economic, and social behavior of most Iraqis; yet, Iraqis see themselves as being part of the solution, not the problem. A full 70 percent of Iraqis think “average people” actually reduce sectarian divisions, while 12 percent think they deepen sectarian divisions. **[Figure 15]** A Sunni woman from Anbar explains: “I don’t know why we hold the Shia guilty when someone Sunni is killed, let alone the Christians and Sabians. No true Iraqi would kill his Iraqi brother.”

Iraqis place the blame for sectarian tensions less on themselves and more on political parties and neighboring countries. Three-quarters think that neighboring Arab countries make sectarianism worse, followed by 73 percent who say that Iran or Iraq’s own political parties are to blame. A man from Anbar province says, “The cause of what happened is third parties, and not Sunnis and Shias, because we have love for each other, what we learned will always carry with us. We are brothers, but the intervention of foreign countries is the reason.” A Kurdish woman from Sulaymaniyah adds, “In my opinion, there is nothing called impossible, and [the division] depends on the understanding between the political leaders in order to move towards a better and more developed community.”

Iraqis point to the allocation of ministers in the new government as a prime example of how political parties exacerbate sectarianism. A majority (54 percent) disapproves of how the ministries were allocated; only in the North does a 43 percent plurality approve. **[Figure 16]** A Baghdad Shia man explains his frustration: “We have 42 ministries. In my opinion, this is a waste of public money. Each is acting according to his whim. There are no competent people, and the reason is sectarian allocation.” A Shia man from Basra says, “We are brothers, but it is the government that is weak and sectarian. I mean, the problems are between them themselves.”

Economic and Unity Actions by Political Parties Can Help

Many Iraqis have a somewhat hopeful outlook on the future of sectarian tensions, viewing these strains as a relatively recent phenomenon that only emerged with the fall of Saddam’s regime and the meddling of foreign powers. A man from Basra explains, “Sectarianism was introduced after the fall [of the previous regime], and it started to become strong when they exploded the shrines in Samarra in 2005.” A Sunni woman from Baghdad says, “When Iran came in [sectarianism increased]. I keep saying that it was Iran that brought these things to us. In Saddam’s time, he did not let them near Iraq.”

As the country moves away from the post-Saddam period, there is a strong sense that Iraq can overcome this period of division. A strong 67 percent majority think sectarianism can be overcome with time, while only 17 percent think sectarianism is too deeply rooted to ever go away. Only in the North does a plurality (44 percent) think that sectarianism is too deeply-rooted in society to ever go away. **[Figure 17]** Some of the Kurdish perceptions can be attributed to Kurdish views of sectarianism – a strong ethnic divide of Arab versus Kurd, as opposed to a religious divide of Sunni versus Shia. **[See Figure 12]** A Kurdish man from Sulaymaniyah says,

“I’m afraid of [the division] leading to civil war,” and a Kurdish woman from Erbil says, “This issue is deeply rooted in society, and it is difficult to overcome it.”

As discussed earlier, Iraqis point the finger squarely at political parties for deepening sectarian tensions. Nonetheless, they are receptive to the idea of political parties and leaders who might work against these tensions. Iraqis see the most effective actions to reduce sectarianism revolving around confronting economic conditions and demonstrations of unity. A solid 88 percent of Iraqis believe that equal distribution of oil revenues around the country would reduce sectarianism; another 88 percent think that strengthening Iraq’s economy with more jobs and a higher standard of living would help. **[Figure 18]** A Shia man from Baghdad notes this link between economic progress and reduced sectarian tension: “Even without dividing Iraq, if revenues are divided, then the Iraqi person will not ask for more. Even sectarianism will disappear.”

However, there are more immediate, tangible actions that political parties and leaders might take to demonstrate unity and reduce tensions. A full 86 percent of Iraqis think holding a weekly show in which prominent Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish leaders come together to discuss solutions to Iraq’s problems will reduce sectarianism. A strong 85 percent support the idea of having Shia leaders visit Sunni areas, such as Tikrit, in a show of friendship. What is most important here are not the specific gestures, but rather the strong sense of support for leaders who might engage in visible efforts to overcome the country’s sectarian divisions.

GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER RESEARCH

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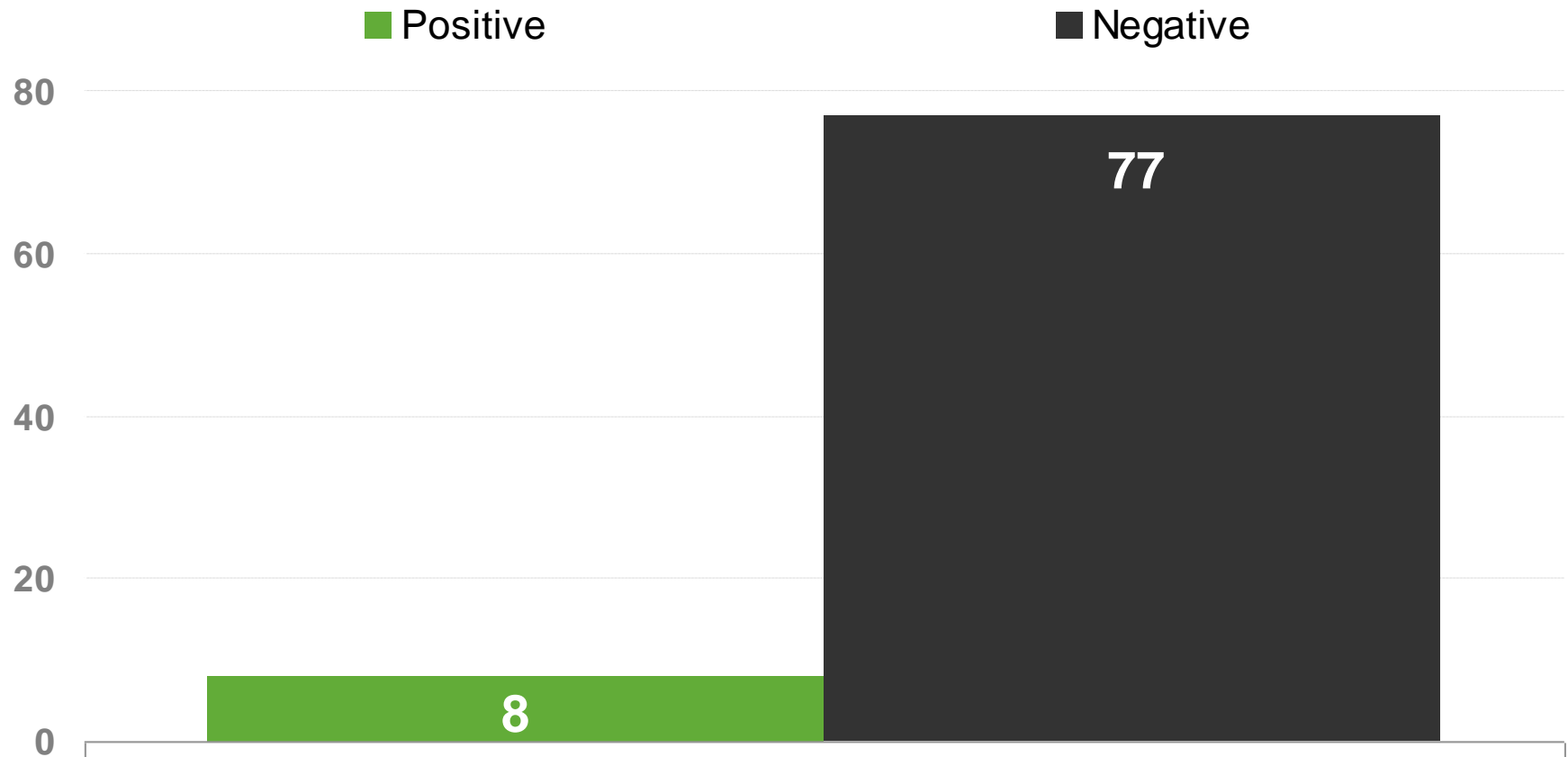
Research Methodology

- **National survey: February 24 – March 23, 2011**
 - 2,400 face-to-face interviews (1,436 weighted) of adults 18 years old and over; distributed representatively by province; national margin of error (MoE) of +/- 2.0%
 - Oversample in Kirkuk: Feb 26 - March 15, 457 total interviews (45 weighted) (+/- 2.0% MoE)
 - Regional breakdowns
 - Baghdad: Feb. 24 - March 10, 500 interviews (351 weighted) (+/- 4.38% MoE)
 - West: Feb. 26 - March 11, 500 interviews (391 weighted) (+/-4.38% MoE)
 - South: Feb. 24-28 (except Thi-Qar, where interviews lasted until March 3), 500 interviews (499 weighted) (+/- 4.38% MoE)
 - North: March 5–23, 500 interviews (194 weighted) (+/- 4.38% MoE)

- **Focus groups: February 16–21, 2011**
 - 10 focus groups
 - Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Baghdad, Basra, and Anbar
 - Groups were homogenous based on ethnicity, religion, gender, age, education, and political leanings

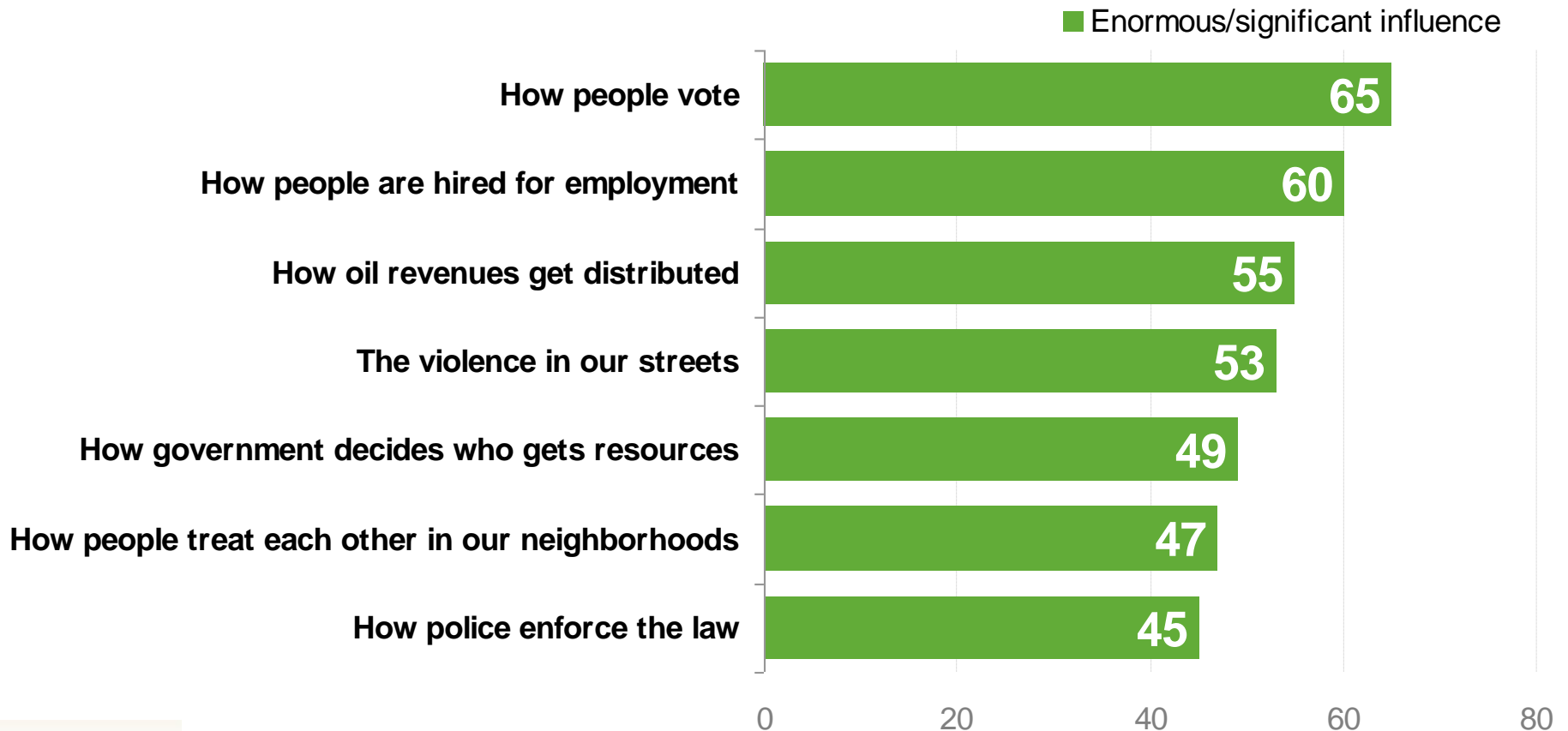
Most see sectarianism playing a negative role

Now to something different. In general, do you think sectarianism plays a positive or a negative role in Iraq?



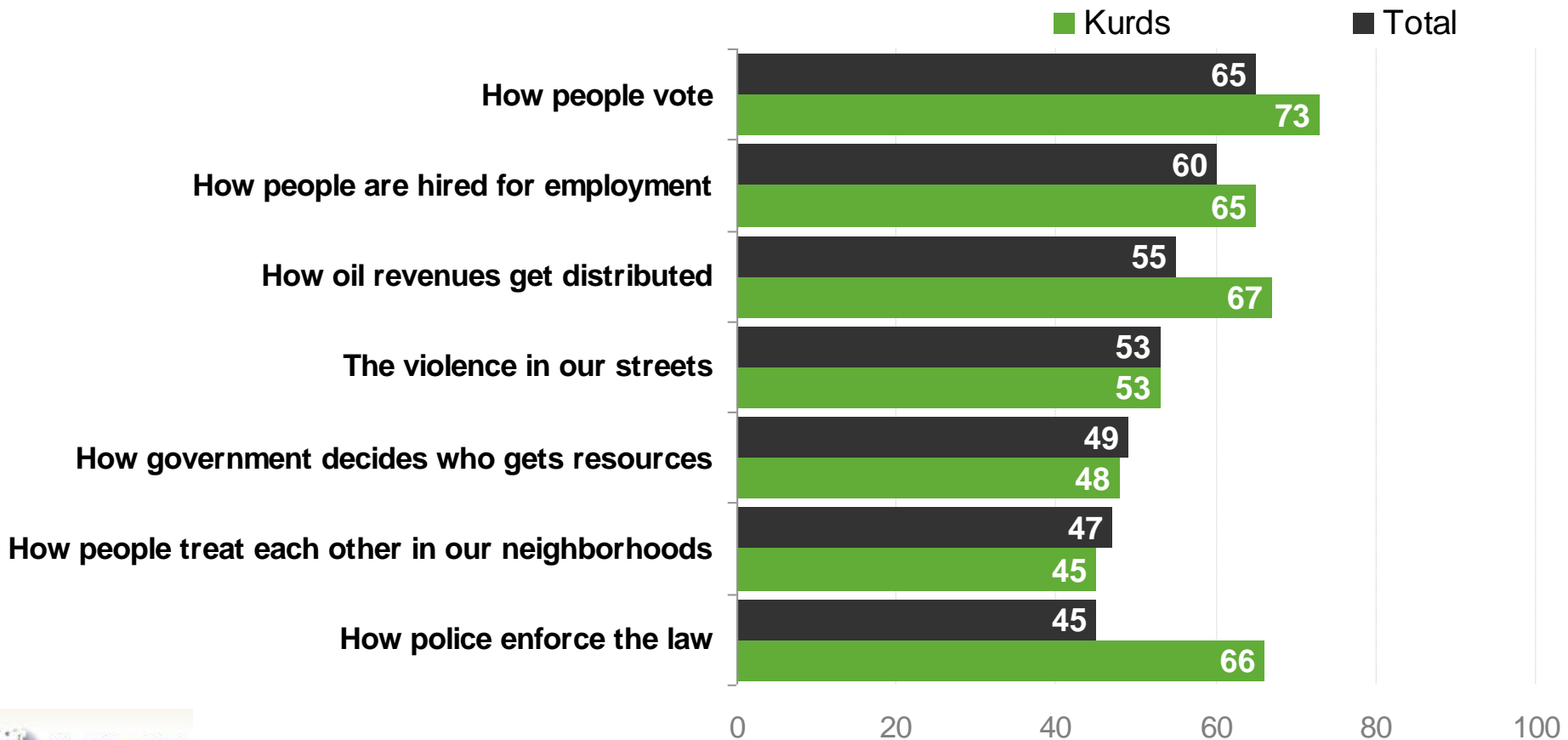
Sectarianism has most influence in voting and hiring practices

Now I am going to read you a list of areas that sectarianism might play a role in Iraq. For each one, please tell me if you think sectarianism has an enormous influence, a significant influence, some influence, just a little influence, or no influence at all.



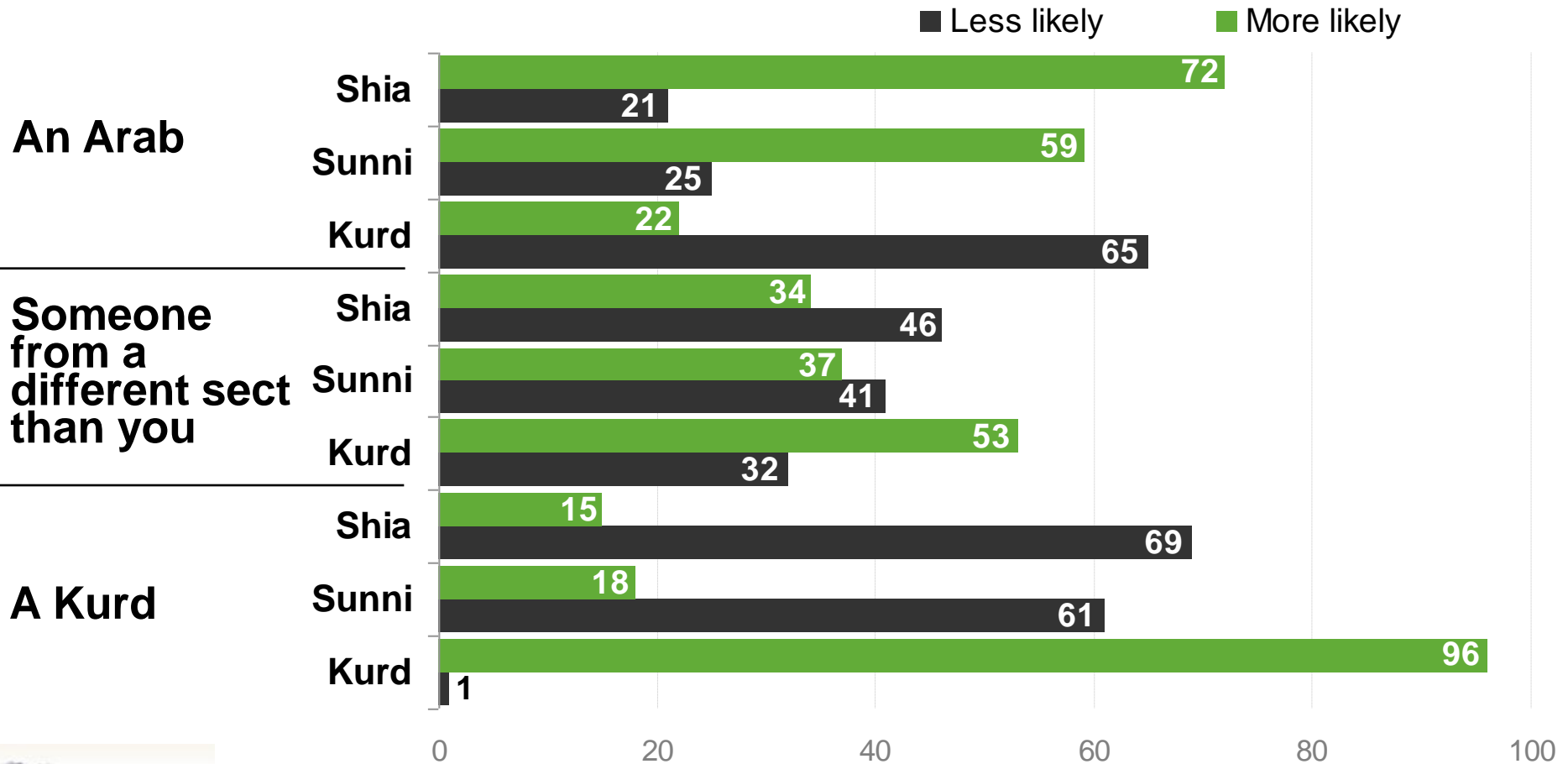
Sectarianism plays stronger role among Kurds

Now I am going to read you a list of areas that sectarianism might play a role in Iraq. For each one, please tell me if you think sectarianism has an enormous influence, a significant influence, some influence, just a little influence, or no influence at all. **(enormous/significant influence)**



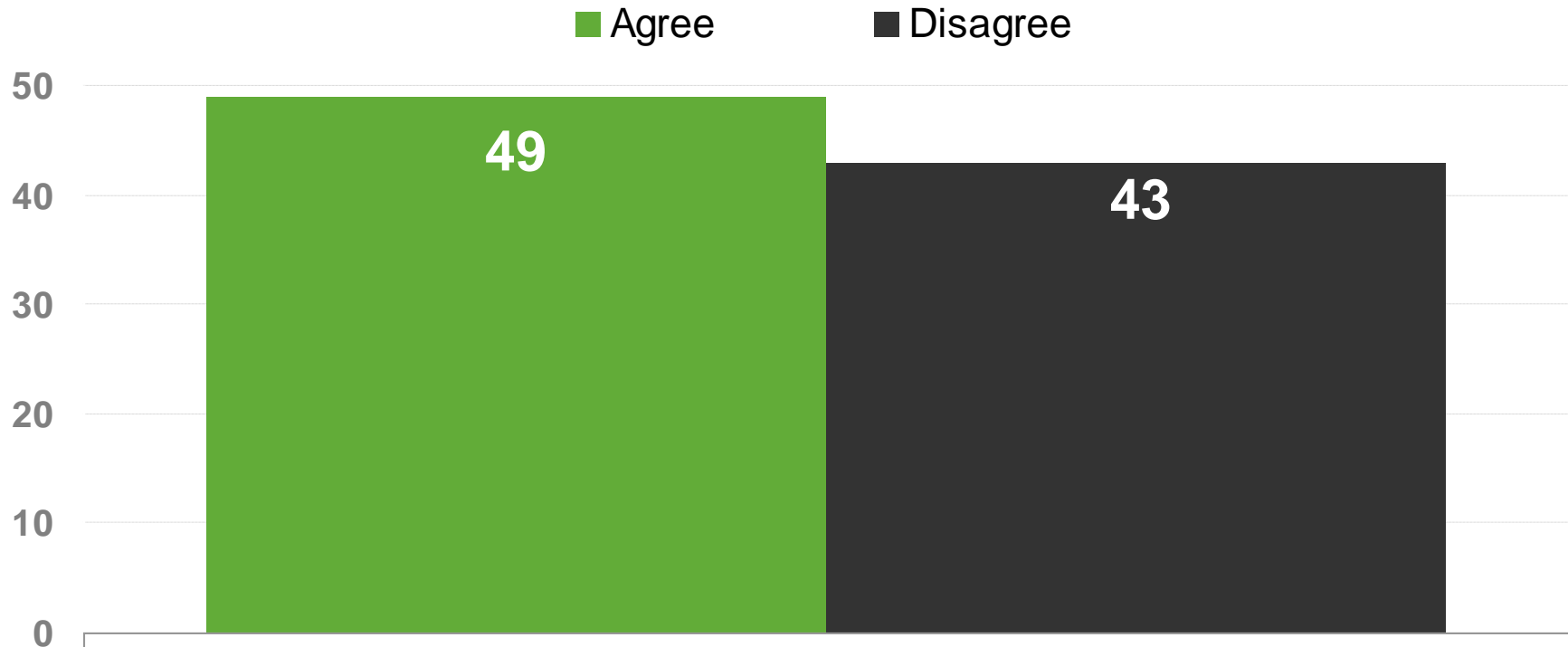
Ethnicity strong influence on vote, sect also influential

I am going to read a list of characteristics that a candidate for parliament might have. For each one, please tell me if this characteristic makes you more or less likely to support that kind of candidate.



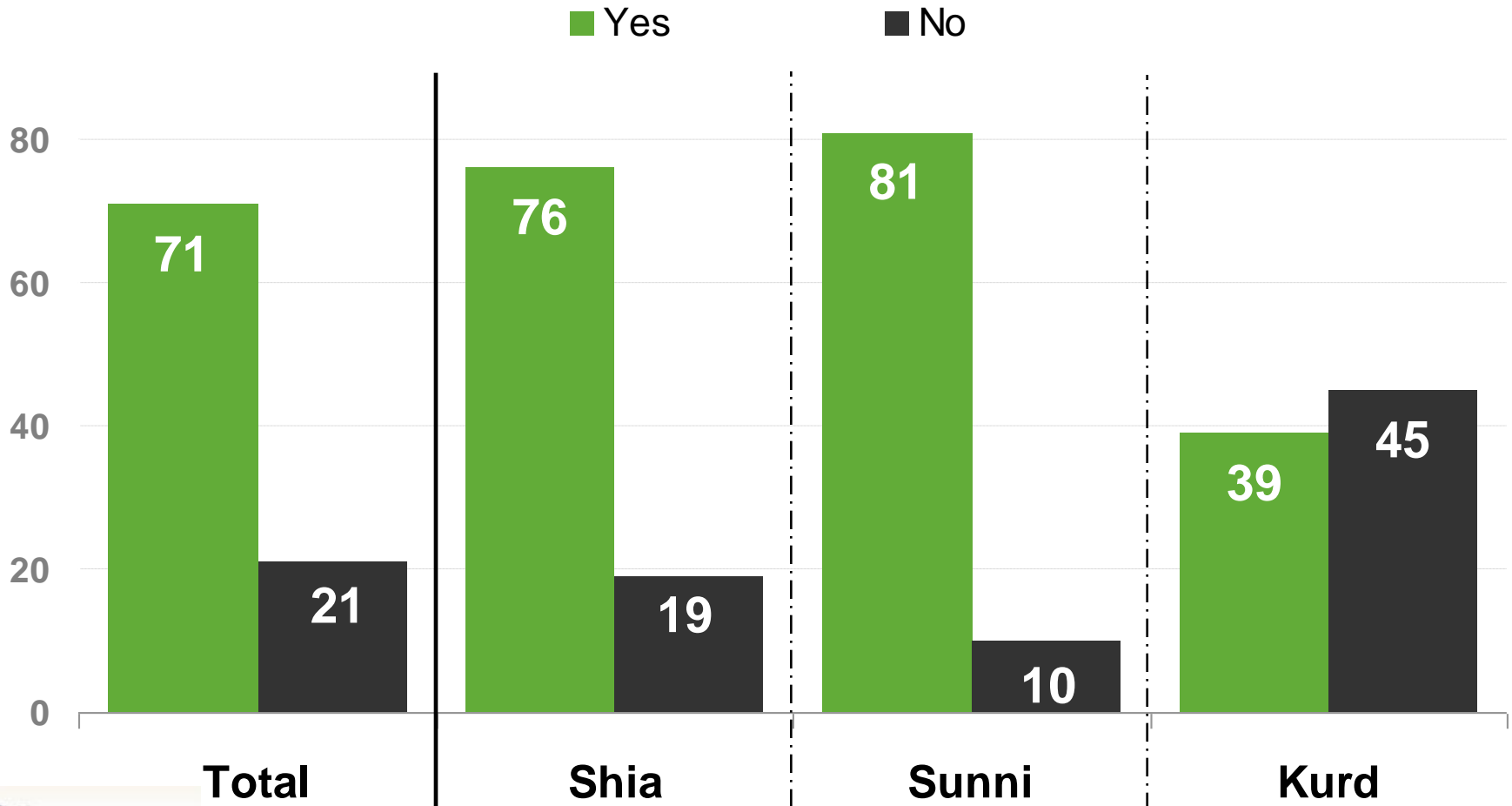
Iraqis lean toward accepting parties based on sect or ethnicity

Now I would like to read a few statements. For each one, please tell me whether you disagree or disagree. It is okay for people to join political parties mostly made of people from their own religious sect and ethnicity, so that they can advocate for their common interests.



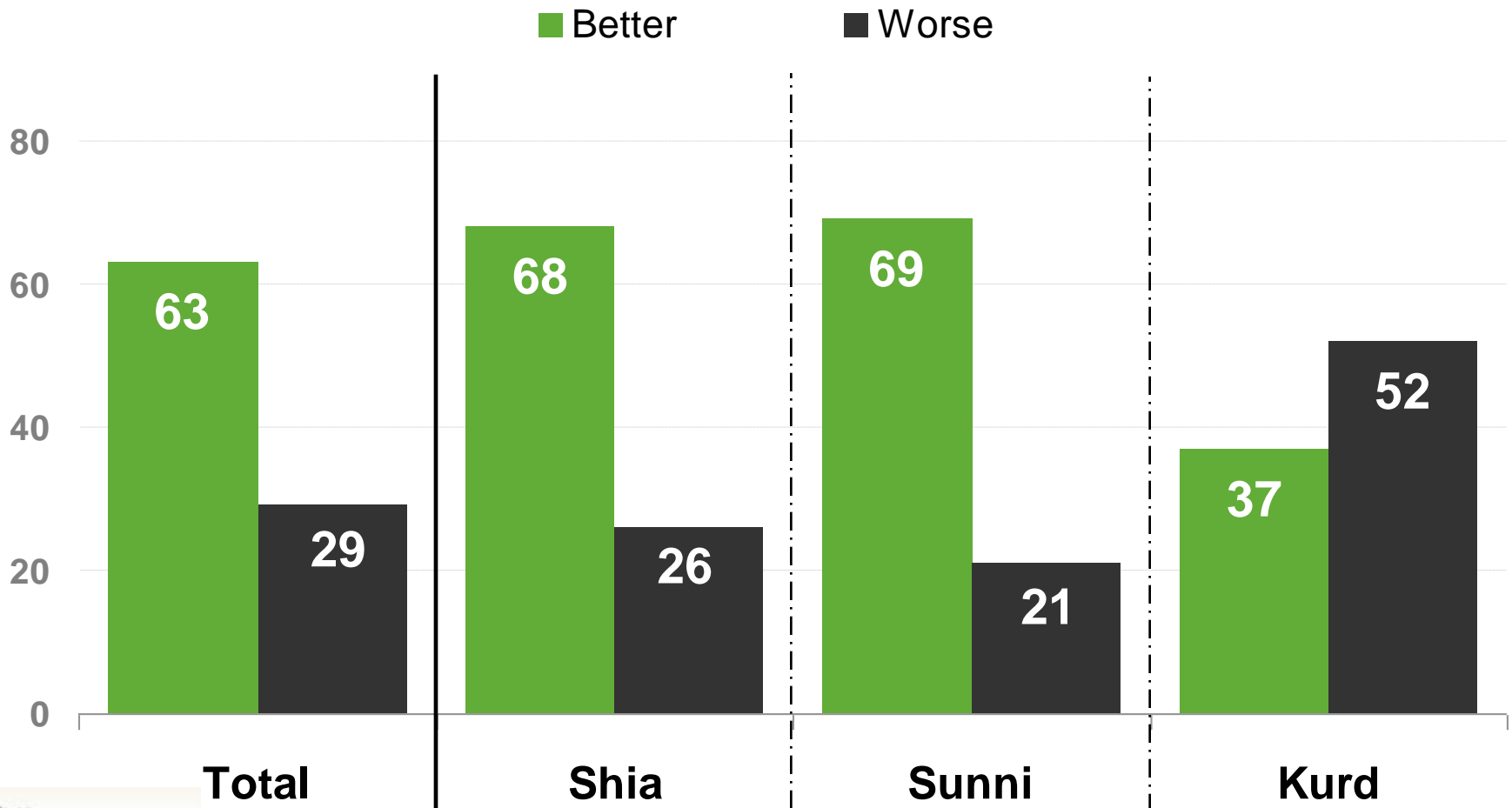
Plurality of Kurds do not think there should be inter-sect marriage

Do you think there should be intermarriages between Sunnis and Shias?



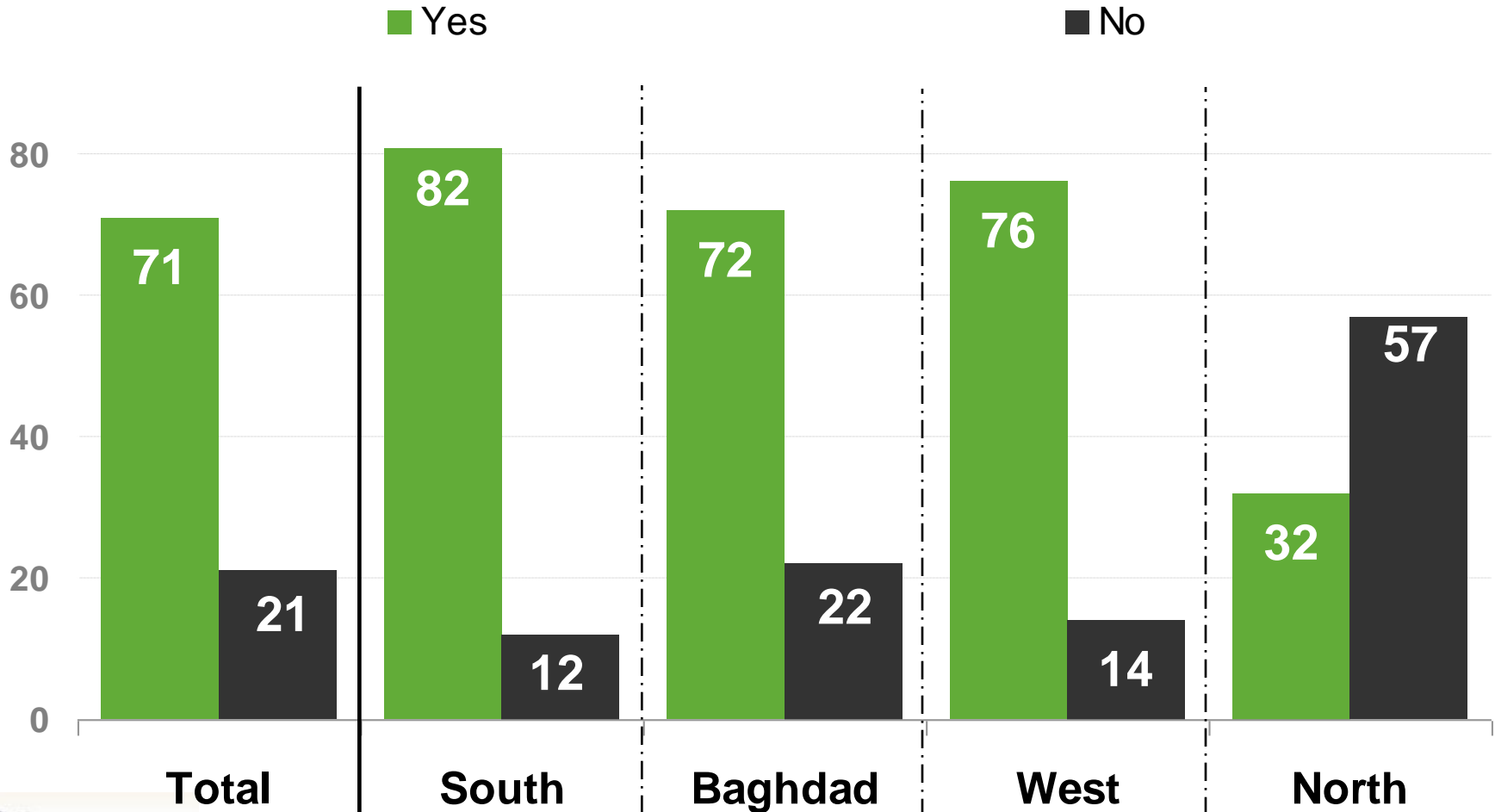
Majority of Kurds do not support marriage between ethnicities

Do you think there should be intermarriages between Kurds and Arabs?



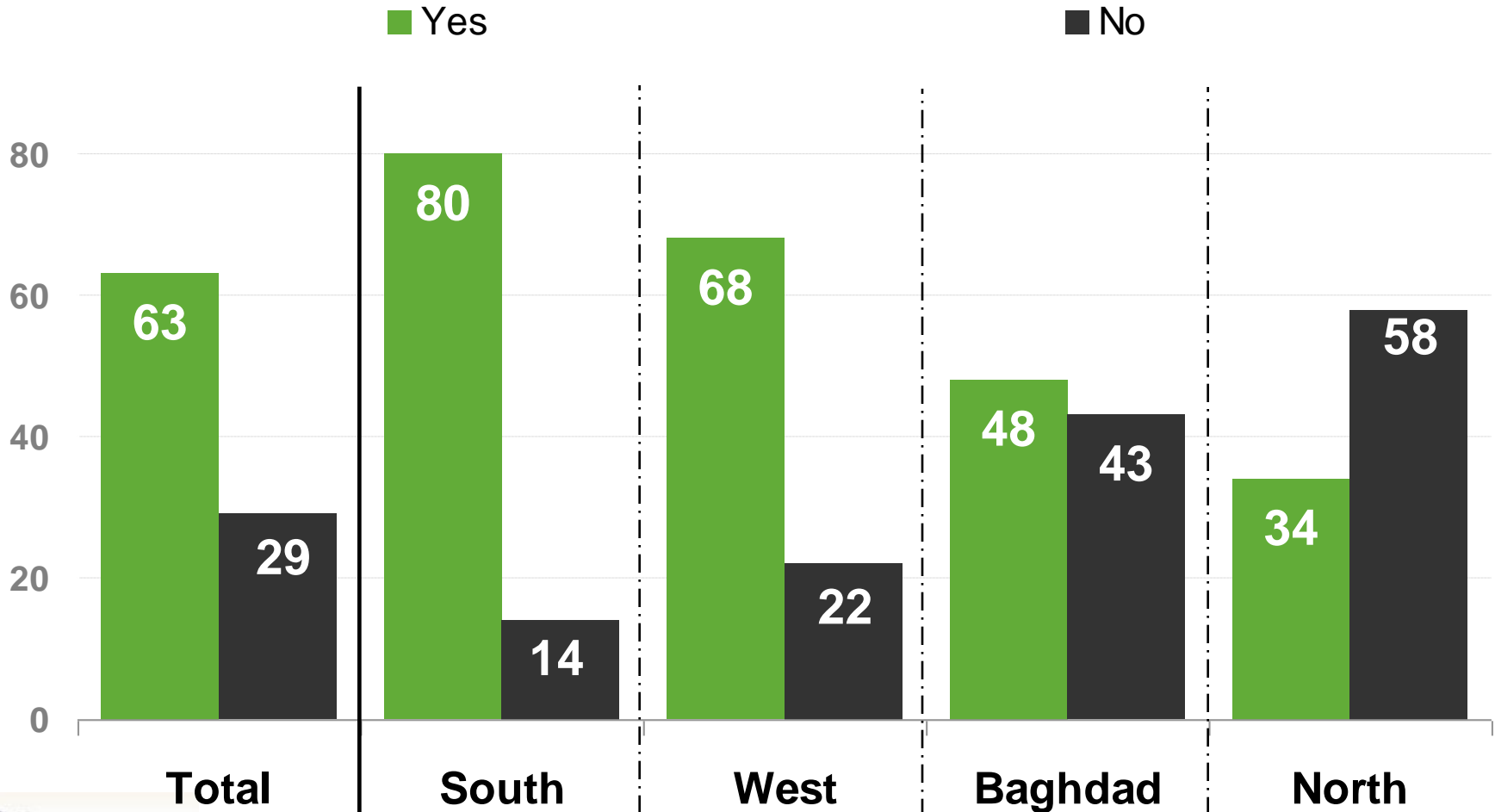
North least likely to support marriage between sects

Do you think there should be intermarriages between Sunnis and Shias?



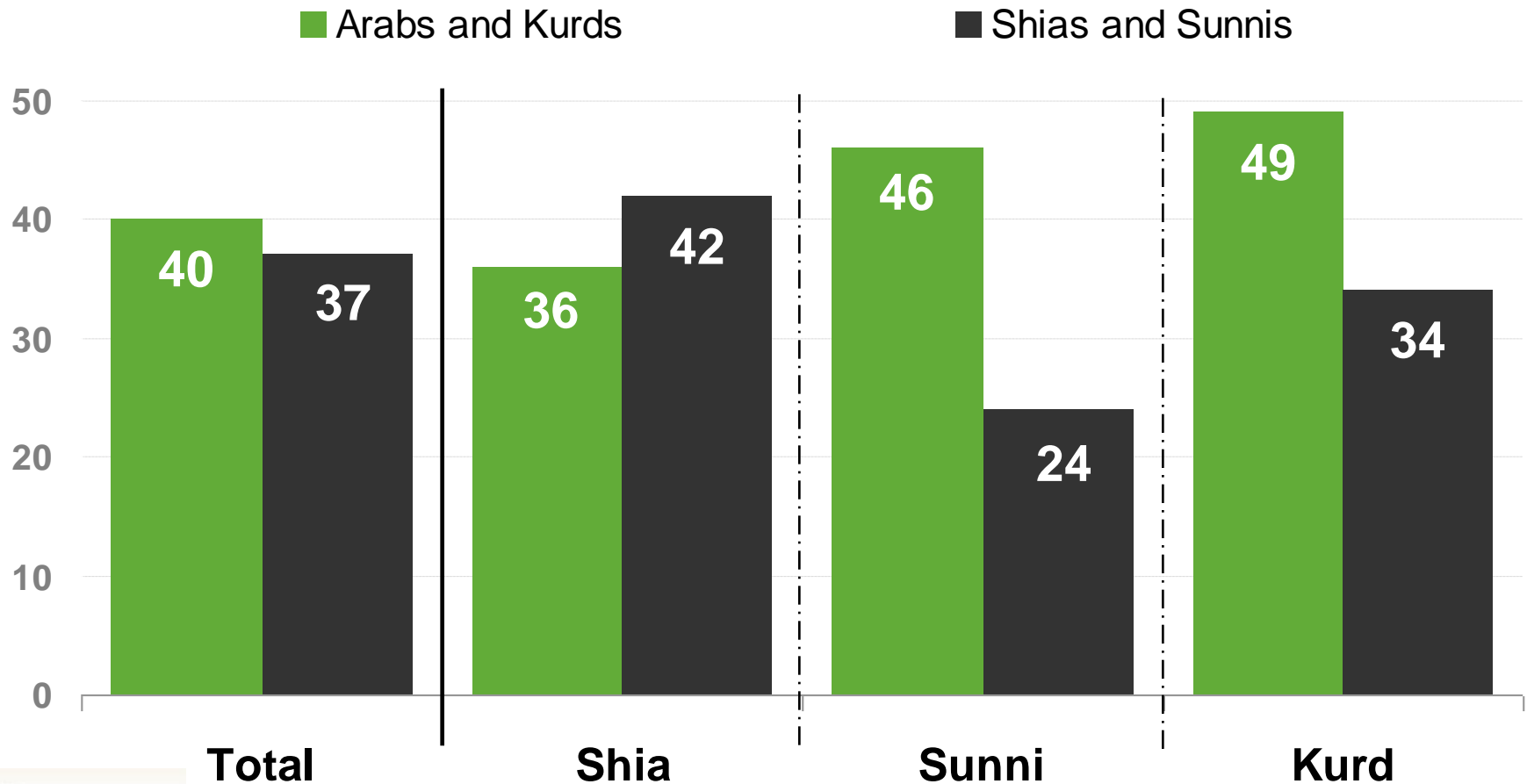
North least supportive of marriage between ethnicities

Do you think there should be intermarriages between Kurds and Arabs?



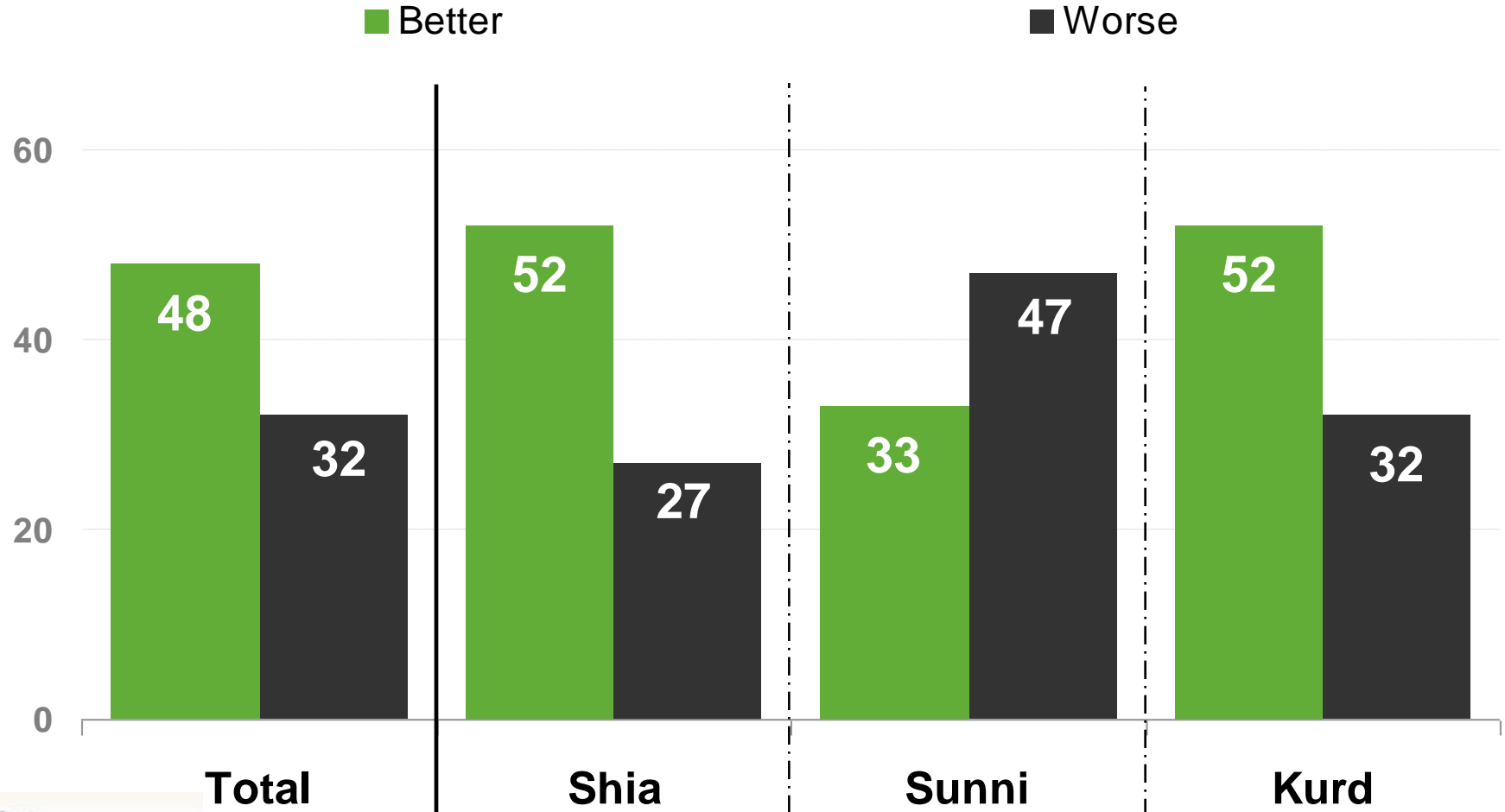
Source of conflict differs by Shia, Sunni, and Kurds

Which do you think is the greater source of conflict in Iraq, differences between Kurds and Arabs or Sunnis and Shias?



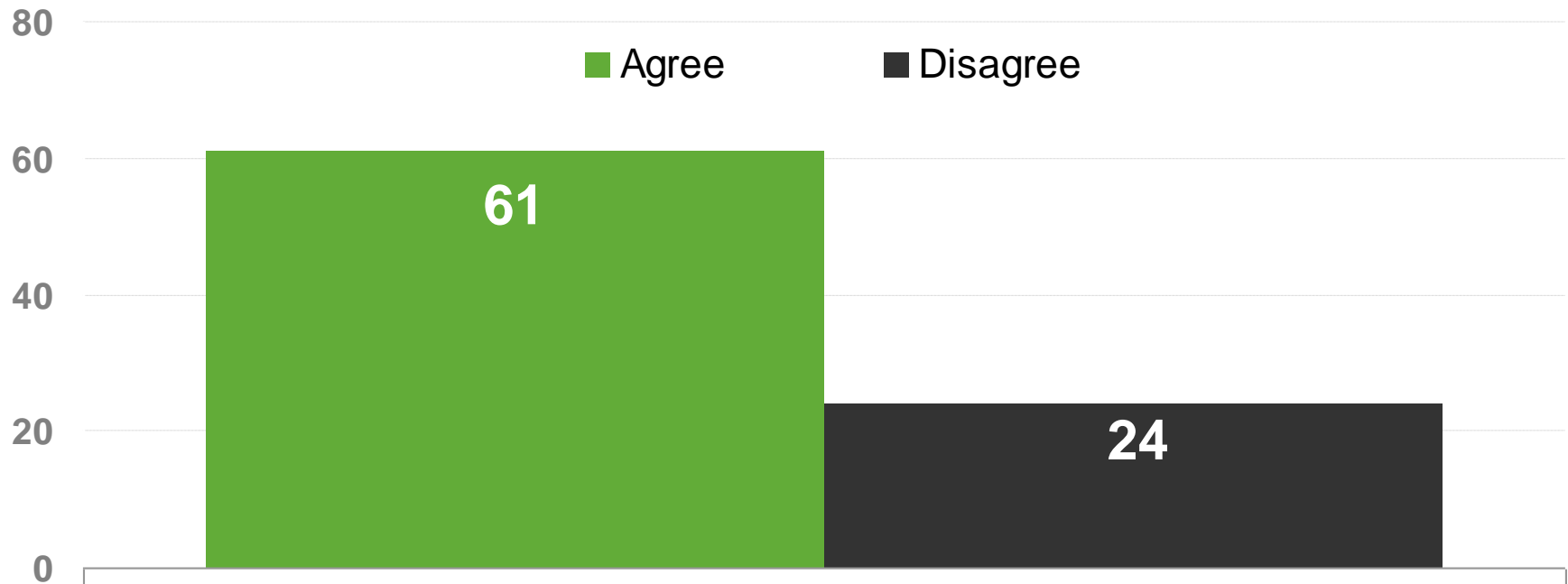
Among Shia/Kurds sectarianism seen as decreasing, worse among Sunnis

Please tell me if you think **sectarianism** is getting better or worse in Iraq.



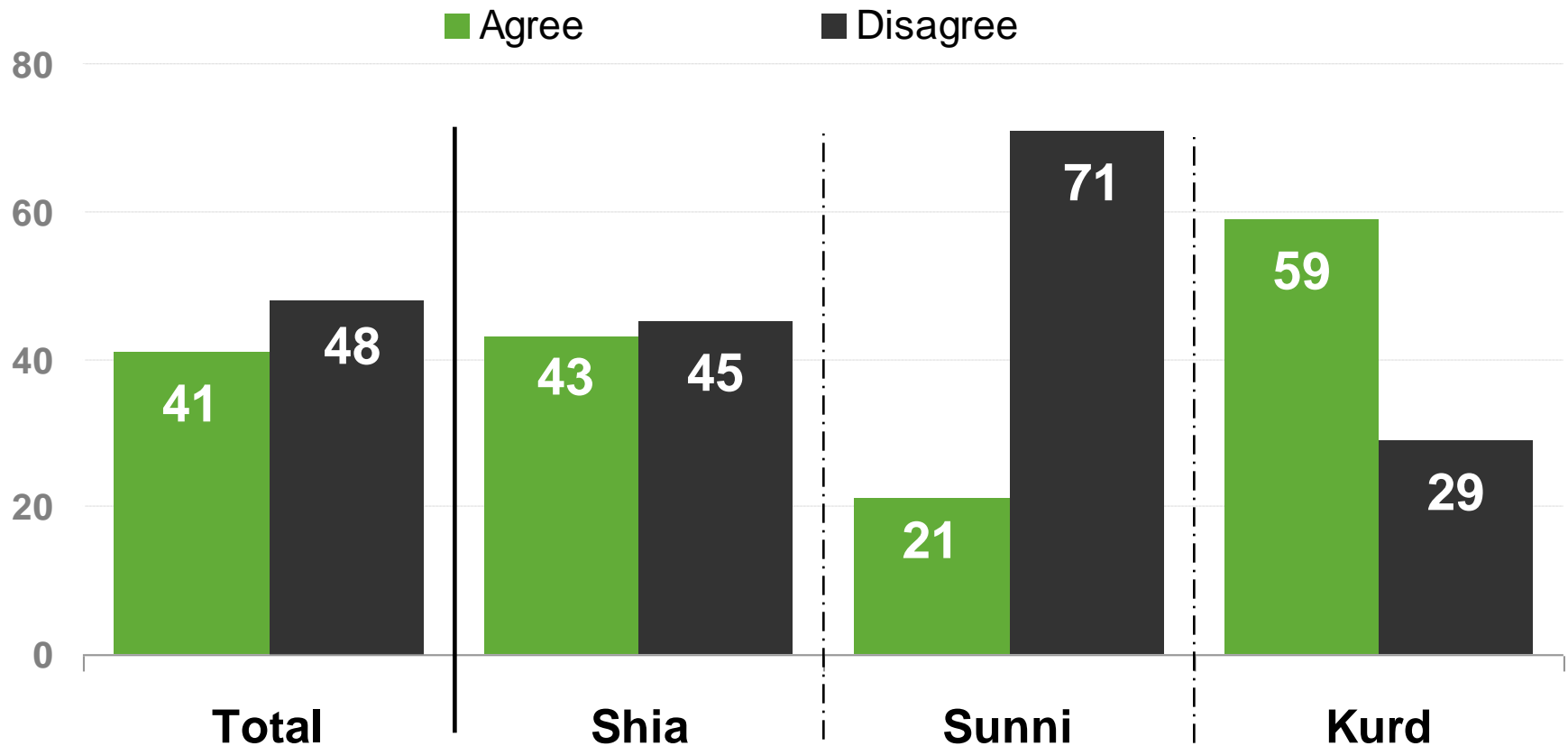
Iraqis prefer parties not based on sect or ethnicity

Now I would like to read a few statements. For each one, please tell me whether you disagree or disagree: **It is better for political parties not to be based on religious sect and ethnicity, because that will reduce the chances for sectarian discrimination or violence when one party or another is in control.**



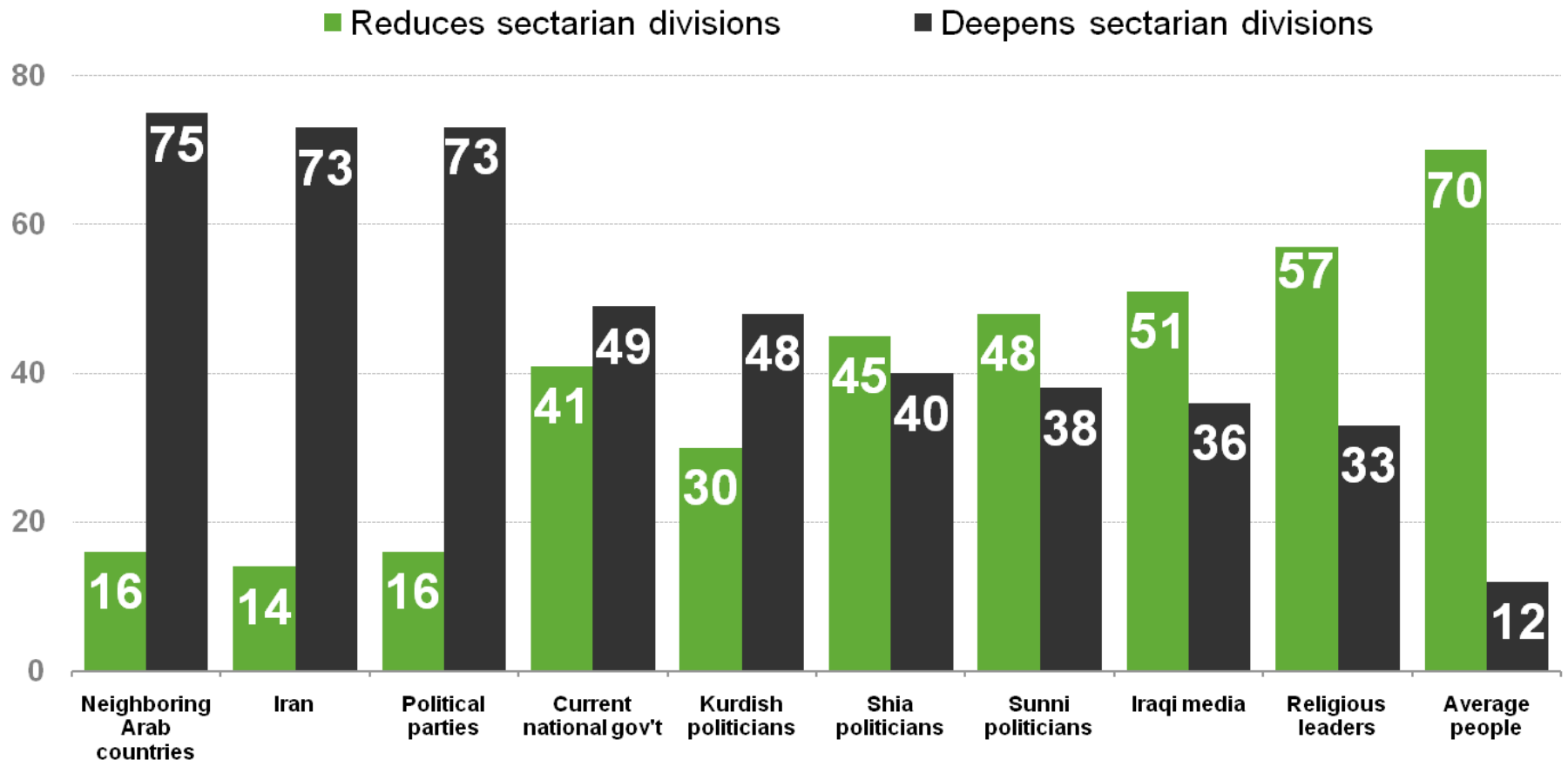
Hiring based on ethnicity and sect varies among groups

Now I would like to read a few statements. For each one, please tell me whether you disagree or disagree: It is natural for people to favor people from their own religious sect or ethnicity in things like hiring, because loyalty is important.



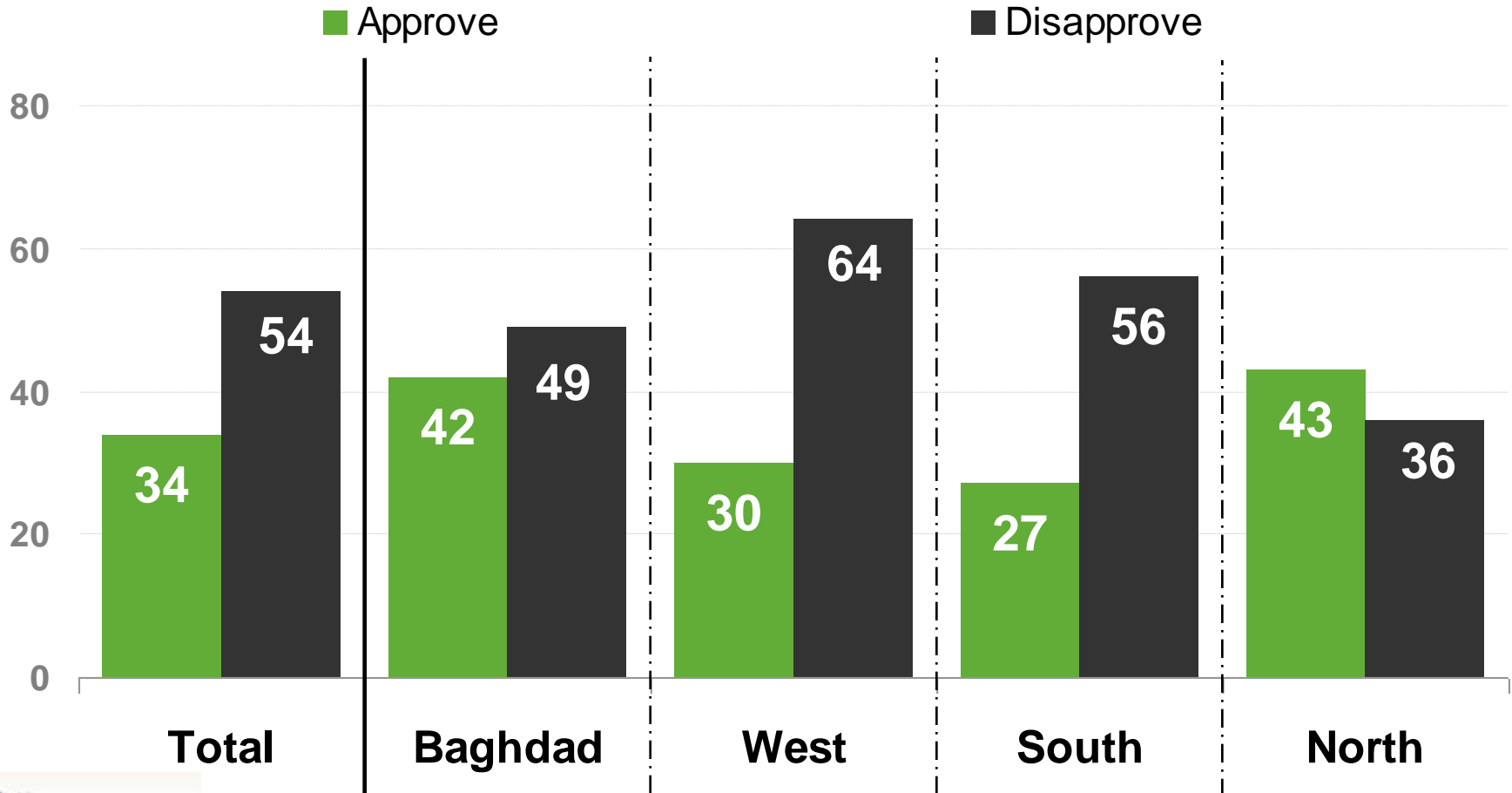
Other countries and political parties deepen sectarian divisions

Now I am going to read you a list of some people and institutions. For each, please tell me if you think it mostly deepens sectarian divisions in Iraq, or mostly helps to reduce sectarian divisions in Iraq.



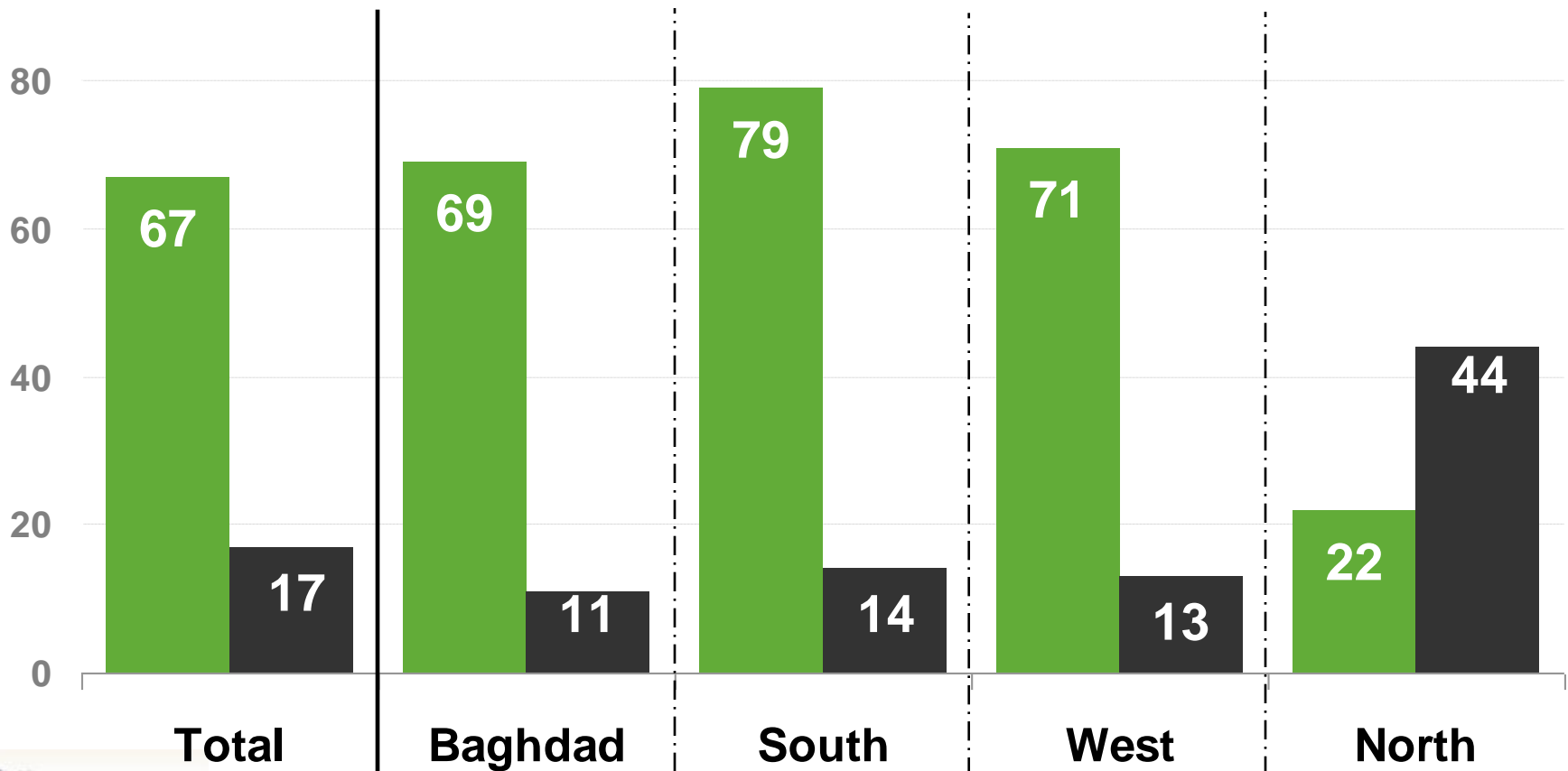
Majorities disapprove of minister allocation

As you may know, Parliament recently approved the ministers of the new government. In general, do you approve or disapprove of how the ministries were allocated in the new government?



Most think sectarianism can be overcome, except in North

- With time, sectarianism will become less of a factor in Iraq.
- Sectarianism is too deeply-rooted in Iraqi society to ever really go away.



Economic and unity actions can reduce sectarianism

I would like to read you a list of some things that might be done to reduce sectarianism in Iraq. For each one, please tell me if you think it would greatly reduce sectarianism, somewhat reduce sectarianism, only slightly reduce sectarianism, would not reduce sectarianism at all, or would increase sectarianism

