

Polls Show Most Muslims Reject Both Extremism and Islamic Reform

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

In places like Jordan, even minimal support for the Islamic State fell over a one-year period, and a similar downward trend may be occurring elsewhere.

In January 2016, The Washington Institute sponsored a daylong workshop on the challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East posed by new trends in political ideology. This PolicyWatch is part of a [series of written contributions by participants. \(/policy-analysis/view/27683\)](/policy-analysis/view/27683)

The headlines feed a false narrative that extremist jihadist ideologies have somehow attracted a mass following among Muslims. In fact, the opposite is true. The evidence for this brazen assertion lies not in anecdotes or sensational reports but in actual hard data from real public opinion polls.

To begin with, in Muslim-majority societies, ideology is not the first thing on most people's minds, according to a variety of recent scientifically conducted surveys. Not even close. In fact, when asked open-ended or multiple-choice questions about their personal priorities, large majorities give pride of place to practical issues -- like jobs, family, education, health, or income. Asked about national priorities, large majorities rank security, economic development, or combating corruption highest on the list, rather than any particular ideological orientation.

Just to cite a telling example: in one 2015 poll of Palestinians, often viewed as among the most politicized -- and pro-Hamas or Hezbollah -- publics in the region, "being a good Muslim" ranked far behind the practical options listed above. Only about one in seven West Bankers and Gazans, on average, selected the Islamic option as their top personal priority.

Moreover, contrary to common misconception, tough countermeasures against jihadist ideologies and organizations are probably acceptable to the vast majority of local Muslim populations. This is because the vast majority of them are firmly opposed to the Islamic State (IS), its African affiliates, or other extremist jihadist movements.

Little Backing for Jihadists

Based on surveys in a variety of Arab, African, and other predominantly Muslim societies, IS and its affiliates, al-Qaeda, and other jihadist organizations actually have very little popular support. In half a dozen Arab countries polled by the author on this subject, support is down in the low single digits: just 2 to 5 percent in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Palestine (see "[ISIS Has Already Lost the War of Ideas, Despite the Specter of Paris Attacks](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-has-already-lost-the-war-of-ideas-despite-the-specter-of-paris-attacks)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-has-already-lost-the-war-of-ideas-despite-the-specter-of-paris-attacks>)). Hezbollah has likewise seen its support drop precipitously, to the low teens except among fellow Shiites in Lebanon. Even Hamas has lost much of its support in some places, particularly in Egypt but also in the Gulf.

Correspondingly, overwhelming majorities -- around 95 percent -- of key Arab publics have a negative view of IS. These are not estimates; these reflect actual hard data from scientific surveys organized and sponsored by the author in September 2014, June 2015, and September 2015. They were conducted by leading independent, and totally apolitical, regional commercial pollsters, who must remain anonymous for fear of reprisal. Each survey used personal interviews among a representative national geographic probability sample of one thousand adult citizens.

In Jordan, where IS scored a relatively "high" 8 percent approval in September 2014, the rating fell in the September 2015 survey, to just 4 percent. At this point, therefore, the evidence is completely compelling that IS has nothing more than a minuscule base of support in a large portion of the Arab world. To be sure, even a small group can do some serious damage. But a mass movement IS clearly is not. And over the past year, as these surveys demonstrate, its already low popularity among major Arab publics has been shrinking, not rising. The notion that IS or other such groups could take over any other country, in the face of overwhelming popular and government opposition, is ludicrous.

Moreover, each public was asked what should be its government's number-one and number-two foreign policy priorities, from a list of six options. The winner in all four countries was "the conflict against Daesh," as the Islamic State is also known. By varying margins, that struggle topped all five other options offered, including: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the conflict in Syria, the conflict between Iran and Arab countries, the conflict between sects or movements of Islam, and the conflict in Yemen.

Some Sympathy for Fundamentalism

Yet these numbers, while very solid, do not mean that these major, mostly Sunni Arab publics reject all fundamentalist organizations. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, still receives favorable ratings from between one-quarter and one-third of the public in each of the four countries recently polled -- even where the group has been outlawed. Those controversial views add to the overall credibility of these findings, even as they emphasize how very poorly IS fares in Arab public opinion.

Nor does the near universal rejection of IS mean that these Arab publics would like to see a religious "reformation" in Islam. Asked if it would or would not be "a good idea to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, or modern way," just one-fifth said yes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait. Yet the Islamic State is so extreme and reactionary that it repels even the conservative Muslim majority in every country polled.

Scanty Data in Other Regions

Unfortunately, data of this kind is not readily available from the Maghreb or Sahel. It would be quite useful to research such questions in Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and some of their neighbors. Data from Muslim populations in Europe, South Asia, or East Asia is likewise very fragmentary, and would certainly make for interesting comparisons as available.

For example, one recent Turkish survey shows IS support at 8 percent. Some reported polls of French or British Muslims claim considerably higher figures, in the 25 percent range; but their reliability is more doubtful, if only because accurate census data and sampling frames for Western European Muslim populations are almost impossible to obtain. And the spring 2015 Pew Research Center poll in Pakistan found that the majority there -- 62 percent -- voiced no opinion, either positive or negative, about IS. This probably reflects some combination of genuine ignorance and, as is often the case in Pakistani polls, widespread reluctance to answer sensitive questions.

Turning to sub-Saharan Africa, data from the reliable Pew poll last year suggests that support for IS or al-Qaeda affiliates is somewhat greater -- in the high teens or low twenty-percent range -- among Muslims in Nigeria, Senegal, and Burkina Faso. In Nigeria particularly, Pew found that at least 20 percent of Muslims voice some sympathy for Boko Haram. This data is almost a year old, however, and perhaps the trend has since been moving downward. If not, this would be a very disturbing anomaly.

As noted above, an important real-world caveat to all of these statistics is this: even tiny percentages of IS or other violent extremist supporters in these populations are sufficient to cause a great deal of damage. This is, of course, especially the case in areas where governments are weak or failing. We see the results in, among other bad things, the thousands of foreign fighters who have flocked to IS battlegrounds, all in ungoverned spaces, from many Muslim countries or subcultures, whether from Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, or especially North Africa. Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya stand out as major sources of foreign jihadist terrorists in Syria, Iraq, and beyond.

Methodology Matters

A final word about methodology: beware. Too many purported polls on this subject are unscientific and thus grossly misleading for a variety of reasons. Some use self-selected samples, usually online, and are therefore inherently unrepresentative. Others, like some of the Zogby polls, use loaded question wording, sequence bias in ordering questions, selective reporting of results, false "trends" over time based on differently worded questions, and other highly questionable techniques. Still others are simply out of date; too narrowly focused on one or two not necessarily "bellwether" societies; or, like some of the Arab Barometer surveys, too vaguely defined -- in terms of broad values rather than specific ideologies or organizations -- to be of much policy relevance.

By contrast, the best polls, like those cited here, use true random samples, neutrally worded and sequenced questions, and identical direct comparisons among different countries and timeframes. Some also employ clever methods -- like tacking on a few political questions to a commercial market research survey on ordinary consumer products -- to avoid government interference or censorship, and to relax respondents enough to elicit the most candid answers humanly possible.

The findings from these reliable surveys almost speak for themselves. The good news is that most Muslims reject the most violent, extreme jihadist ideologies. The not-so-good news is that most also reject efforts to reinterpret Islam in a newly moderate, tolerant, or modern fashion. And while public opinion is far from a foolproof predictor, either of government policies or of individual behavior, this overview should provide the basic parameters for evaluating both the threat of jihadist ideology and the opportunities for addressing it.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. ❖

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