

# The Islamic State: New Inside Views

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Brief Analysis

## Three experts discuss what polls conducted inside the group's territory tell us about its political strength, ability to govern, and appeal beyond Iraq and Syria.

*On December 14, Munqith Dagher, Aaron Y. Zelin, and David Pollock addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dagher has a distinguished record of conducting insightful Middle Eastern polling in extreme situations, including in Syria and Iraq throughout the latest conflicts there. Zelin is the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow and founder of the website Jihadology.net. Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman Fellow and director of Fikra Forum; he supervised polling in Arab countries for years while at the State Department. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### MUNQITH DAGHER

Polling in areas under the Islamic State's control is more difficult than under regular conditions, but the results give

confidence that people are answering with their true opinions. The majority of those polled have expressed their dislike for IS, which is quite remarkable. Furthermore, even though the results cannot be regarded as fully accurate, how people respond to the same questions over time is of considerable interest.



In a survey earlier this month, for example, 55% of respondents in Mosul, Iraq, said that their life is better than it was a year-and-a-half ago; only 21% reported such improvement when asked in June 2015. Not that Mosul residents like IS -- only 39% considered the group to be representative of their views and interests. Yet that is much higher than the 10% figure recorded in June 2014. Moreover, while 57% would rather IS leave Mosul, 39% would opt for the group to stay. Of that 39%, a third identified their primary reason as support for IS, while others reported a fear of civilian casualties or distrust of the United States, the Iraqi army, or Kurdish forces.

Delving deeper into such sentiment, a majority of respondents stated that the United States conspires to support IS -- a 50% increase compared to eighteen months ago. More respondents also identified coalition airstrikes as the biggest threat to their family's security (45.8%), while only 37.5% considered IS the biggest threat. A majority opposed U.S. airstrikes, and three-quarters are concerned about Popular Mobilization forces and other Shiite militias. At the same time, most residents do not see Mosul politicians, Sunni politicians, or the Iraqi central government as representative of their views and interests.

These results suggest that the Islamic State is winning the battle for hearts and minds in areas under its control, while public opinion is simultaneously turning against those who oppose the group. The majority of Mosul residents still reject IS, but they lack reliable alternatives. They distrust Iraqi state institutions, including the central government, army, police, parliament, local officials, and politicians in Baghdad. And they believe the armed opposition against IS has been ineffective.

From this perspective, the coalition's military strategy seems to be helping IS. The group's governance efforts are not the main reason why its local support is growing or public opposition to coalition activities is increasing. Rather, the spike in collateral damage is the biggest culprit. To be successful, coalition strategy needs to incorporate popular support as the center of gravity; IS will not be defeated by military actions alone.

Iraqi Sunnis have long been dissatisfied with Baghdad, and there were many red flags in Sunni-majority territories

when they were controlled by al-Qaeda in 2006-2009. This suggests that the Islamic State is symptomatic of a structural problem rather than being the disease itself. When it called itself AQI, the group was already seemingly defeated in 2009, but its present reincarnation is even worse. Sunnis need to be convinced to fight IS themselves.

In short, polls in areas under IS control highlight local dissatisfaction with alternatives to the group. And while only a minority prefer IS, that minority is growing.

## AARON ZELIN

IS first established a presence in Mosul in 2003-2004. IS leaders considered the area to be vital territory, particularly during the tribal awakening and surge. Between 2006 and 2010, Mosul provided a base for planning terrorist activities, and IS was able to fund its operations by extorting businesses and drawing revenue from oil. Given this entrenchment, Mosul might be the group's last stronghold if the U.S.-led coalition is able to defeat it elsewhere.

IS has established different proto-ministries under the office of the "caliph," including education, public services, precious resources, *dawa* (proselytizing), health, security, treasury, and tribal outreach. Notable public services include vaccination programs, road cleaning and building, food and drug security, and enforcement of the ban on smoking and alcohol. The group is also restarting local industries.

In addition to showing the local population that IS leaders are committed to sustainable governance, these state-building efforts assist local economies and increase the group's military capabilities. Such efforts are most successful and sophisticated where there is limited pressure from coalition efforts, and where IS has had more time to consolidate its administration.

That said, there are real limits to this state-building campaign. Despite public announcements to the contrary, IS still uses local currencies instead of establishing its own. And while it publicly claims to have abolished the border between Iraq and Syria, in practice its records reflect the demarcation.

As for ideological support, its role in the group's success is exaggerated. Few members have an in-depth understanding of Islam beyond platitudes. Military progress is more crucial to the Islamic State's ability to hold territory and promulgate its narrative of success, and new conquests ensure that its message is spread. Trying to defeat IS by defeating its ideology is a dead-end approach: a small portion of the population will always be receptive to this ideology, and jihadist movements only need the support of a small percentage to create tremendous problems. Furthermore, IS controls the distribution of information within its territories, which makes combating its ideology particularly difficult. It constructs media points where Internet access and SIM cards are made available to follow its news. Teenagers are especially targeted with IS propaganda, which means its ideology is spreading among the next generation.

## DAVID POLLOCK

While the Islamic State is not losing the war for hearts and minds in Mosul, there is good evidence that it has lost that war in the wider Arab and Muslim worlds. Polls provide an antidote to some of the group's sensationalist propaganda. These polls are not based on self-selecting online or telephone surveys; they are the result of face-to-face sessions conducted by local interviewers employed by commercial research companies, which is the most reliable methodology ([see "ISIS Has Already Lost the War of Ideas, Despite the Specter of Paris Attacks" \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8129\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8129)). The best way to ask political questions in the region is to add a few of them to commercial surveys that do not make respondents wary like full-on political polls do. As a testament to the polls' reliability, even in countries where the Muslim Brotherhood is outlawed, substantial numbers of people voiced their support for the group.

As measured by recent surveys from six different Arab countries, IS has single-digit support in the broader Sunni Arab world. The group's highest support outside the territories it controls can be found in Nigeria, where 20% of Muslims say they support Boko Haram, a nominal IS affiliate. And IS support has declined over time, not increased. Contrary to the claims of its propaganda, the group's vision of Islam runs counter to what most Sunnis believe. Even though a small percentage of people in some countries do support IS, it is not a sufficient amount to create a mass movement or pose a strategic threat to those countries. Yet a small percentage of several hundred million people is still a considerable number -- a few million IS sympathizers clearly poses a problem from a counterterrorism perspective.

Finally, when asked about the root causes of IS, most Sunnis do not list anger at foreign occupation as a primary reason. Instead, they tend to list corruption, poverty, and lack of education. Although al-Qaeda initially had some measure of support, it lost most Muslims when they realized that the group hurt their interests. This shows that appeals to humanity are not as powerful as appeals to practical self-interest. And while many in the West argue that there is no military solution to IS, Arab poll respondents say that military means must be part of the solution, noting that the group cannot be defeated solely by efforts in the realms of education, employment, and anticorruption.

*This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt. ❖*

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