

ISIS Has Almost No Popular Support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon

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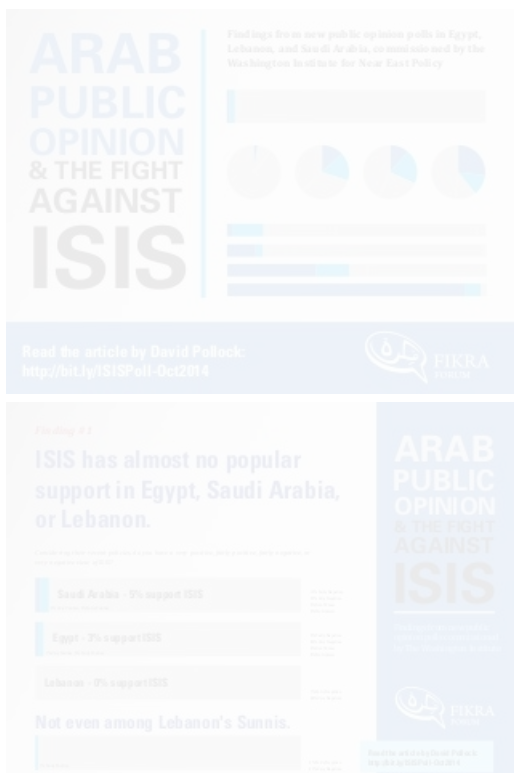


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New polls show that the group has curried little favor in key countries, but the nuances behind the numbers have important implications for U.S. policy toward Syria, Iran, and other actors.

How much grassroots support does the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) enjoy in key "coalition" countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon? Until today, one could only guess at the answer. Recent news reports about the arrests of ISIS adherents in all three of these countries add urgency to the question.

Now, however, a trio of new polls -- the first ones of their kind -- provides the hard data on which to make this judgment. The polls were conducted in September by a leading commercial survey firm in the Middle East, using face-to-face interviews by experienced local professionals. The sample was a random, geographic probability national sample of 1,000 respondents (nationals only, excluding expatriates or refugees) in each country, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3 percent.



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The most striking as well as encouraging finding is that ISIS has almost no popular support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon -- even among Sunnis. Among Egyptians, a mere 3 percent express a favorable opinion of ISIS. In Saudi Arabia, the figure is slightly higher: 5 percent rate ISIS positively. In Lebanon, not a single Christian, Shiite, or Druze respondent viewed ISIS favorably; and even among Lebanon's Sunnis, that figure is almost equally low at 1 percent.

Nevertheless, there is a real difference between almost no support and no support at all. Since 3 percent of adult Egyptians say they approve of ISIS, that is nearly 1.5 million people. For Saudis, the 5 percent of adult nationals who support ISIS means over half a million people. And even in tiny Lebanon, 1 percent of adult Sunnis equals a few thousand ISIS sympathizers. In any of these places, this is enough to harbor at least a few cells of serious troublemakers.

Another major caveat is that the nearly uniform opposition to ISIS does not extend to other political Islamist organizations. In Egypt, for example, a surprisingly high proportion -- one-third of the total population -- voices a positive attitude toward Hamas. In Saudi Arabia, that figure is even higher at 52 percent. Still more surprising, despite the Egyptian and Saudi governments' relentless crackdowns and propaganda campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood, is the comparable percentage who say they view the group favorably: 35 percent in Egypt and 31 percent in Saudi Arabia. By way of comparison, Hezbollah, a Shiite Islamist organization, receives just 12-13 percent popular approval among Egypt's or Saudi Arabia's overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim populations.

On these and other issues, there is very little variation among Egyptians by various demographic categories. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood rates 37 percent approval in urban concentrations like Cairo or Alexandria; 35 percent approval in Upper Egypt; and 33 percent approval in the Delta countryside. The subsample of Egypt's Coptic Christians, fewer than 10 percent of the total, is too small to be statistically significant.

In Lebanon, by contrast, even as nearly all reject ISIS across the board, opinions about other Islamist groups are highly polarized by sect -- but not always in the way one might expect. Hezbollah, as expected, is rated favorably by

92 percent of Shiites. Among Christians, that figure drops dramatically, yet still hovers near 40 percent. But among Lebanon's Sunnis, a mere 8 percent have a positive view of Hezbollah. More counterintuitive, however, is the relatively low level of support for Hamas among Lebanon's Sunni Muslims, especially so soon after the latest war in Gaza. Only one-fourth have even a "fairly positive" view of the Palestinian Islamist movement.

A further major point is that shared opposition to ISIS does not mean high ratings for the United States. In Egypt and in Saudi Arabia alike, America now has a dismal 12 percent approval number. In Lebanon, that number doubles to 25 percent, but again along a sharply polarized sectarian gradient: from 39 percent among Christians, to 30 percent among Sunnis or Druze, down to a measly 3 percent approval among the plurality Shiite population. To put these figures in perspective, China rates 38 percent positive among Saudis, 40 percent positive among Egyptians, and 54 percent positive among Lebanese.

One final key finding concerns popular attitudes toward two other common enemies of ISIS: Syria and Iran. In both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, favorable attitudes toward either the Iranian or the Syrian government barely make it into double digits. The relevant numbers in each country are stuck at merely 12-14 percent approval.

But in Lebanon, once again, sectarian polarization is the rule, in this case to an astonishing degree. Among the country's Shiites, both the Iranian and even the Syrian governments enjoy a 96-97 percent approval rating. Conversely, among Lebanon's Sunnis, Iran gets just 12 percent favorable reviews and Syria just 14 percent. Interestingly, however, Lebanese Christians fall somewhere in the middle on this measure: over a third (37 percent) give Iran at least a "fairly positive" rating, and nearly half (47 percent) say the same about Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's regime is sometimes viewed as their protector against ISIS and other Islamic extremists.

What do all these numbers mean for the current U.S. campaign against ISIS? Public opinion can be fickle, but for now several policy implications emerge from this analysis. First, Washington and its allies need not fear that ISIS might attract a mass following in these nearby Arab societies, or that a strong popular backlash might develop against U.S. airstrikes, or against our other Arab allies in this fight. But second, the United States would be well advised to target its actions very narrowly against ISIS -- not against other Islamist groups that have recently come under American fire, and could well add to their substantial popularity as a result. And third, any U.S. overtures either to Assad or to Iran, as potential partners against ISIS, run a great risk both of further alienating the Egyptian and the Saudi publics, and of further inflaming the dangerous sectarian polarization among Lebanese at the same time.

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

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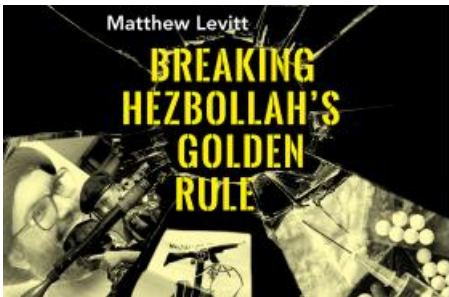
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