

FACT SHEET: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF MUSLIMS WORLDWIDE COULD BE DESCRIBED AS “RADICALS”?

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Since 9/11, the Pew Research Center, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Gallup organization and others have conducted extensive polling in the Middle East, North Africa and East Asia on Muslim attitudes regarding a wide range of political and religious subjects.

An analysis of the data suggests that the vast majority of Muslims – upwards of 90 percent – generally do not support violence against civilians to advance their beliefs.

However, the data indicate that between 7 and 10 percent of Muslims worldwide can be characterized as having radical views in that they openly state that they support the brutal violence of the Islamic State or support the use of suicide bombings against innocent civilian targets to advance their political and/or religious objectives.

In a world of some 1.6 billion Muslims, this would mean that upwards of 112 million to 160 million people could be characterized as followers of “Radical Islam” or, more precisely, “militant Islamism.” To be sure, not all who hold these extreme views will necessarily become engaged in violent activities. However, this is the pool from which Islamist terrorist organizations and states raise funds and recruit new members.

Contrary to what some might imagine, the research does not indicate that Muslims who support terrorism are more religiously devout than other Muslims. Rather, it shows that most Muslims who are deeply committed to practicing their religion do not support violence to advance their goals.¹

It should be noted that among Muslims in the Middle East, there is more public support for the use of violence if the target is specifically Israel, and thus more public support for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. That said, favorable views of both Islamist terror groups have plummeted and then somewhat rebounded in recent years, based in part on how the groups have handled conflicts with Israel and in Syria.²

¹ See, for example, Kunaal Sharma, “What Causes Extremist Attitudes Among Sunni and Shia Youth? Evidence from Northern India,” November 2016, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Extremist%20Attitudes%20Final.pdf>.

² See Bruce Drake, “As It Fights in Syria, Hezbollah Seen Unfavorably in Region,” Pew Research Center, June 7, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/07/as-it-fights-in-syria-hezbollah-seen-unfavorably-in-region/>; Lazar Berman, “Pew: Support for Hamas, Hezbollah collapsing in region,” Times of Israel, July 2, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/pew-support-for-hamas-hezbollah-collapsing-in-region/>; “Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Middle East,” Pew Research Center, July 1, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east/>; Ariel Zilber, “Poll shows fewer Palestinians support Hamas, new intifada against Israel,” Jerusalem Post, September 29, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Poll-shows-less-Palestinians-support-Hamas-new-intifada-against-Israel-376585>; Allyn Fisher-Ilan, “Hamas gains in popularity in Gaza, West Bank since war with Israel: poll,” Reuters, June 9, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-poll-idUSKBN0OP21120150609>; “Gulf Arab states label Hezbollah a terrorist

It would be valuable for private research organizations and the U.S. government to conduct extensive additional polling in the Muslim world to help policy-makers better understand Muslim attitudes towards violence against the West generally, and against the U.S. and Israel in particular. Such polling would also allow for a closer examination of differences between what radicals believe and what most Muslims believe.

Excerpts from a range of polling reports on the Muslim world:

- “According to the Gallup poll, 7 percent of [Muslim] respondents think that the 9/11 attacks were ‘completely’ justified and view the United States unfavorably. By focusing on the 7 percent, whom we’ll call ‘the politically radicalized,’ we are not saying that all in this group commit acts of violence. However, those with extremist views are a potential source for recruitment or support for terrorist groups. . . . They are also more likely to view other civilian attacks as justifiable.” – Gallup study in 2007.³
- “The politically radicalized, on average, are more educated than moderates: 67% of the politically radicalized have secondary or higher educations (versus 52% of moderates). Radicals are not more economically disadvantaged: 65% of the politically radicalized say they have average or above-average incomes, versus 55% of moderates....No difference exists in the unemployment rate among the politically radicalized and the moderates; both are approximately 20%.” – Gallup study in 2007.⁴
- “Overall, support for suicide bombing and related forms of violence has declined in the last decade across the Muslim publics surveyed. Since 2002, the percentage of Muslims who say suicide bombing is at least sometimes justified has dropped 41 percentage points in Lebanon, 31 points in Jordan and 30 points in Pakistan. In Nigeria, meanwhile, support has declined 26 points since 2010.” – Pew Research Center study in 2013⁵
- “Across most of the countries surveyed, gender, age, income and education are not closely associated with support for suicide bombing....For the most part, support for suicide bombing is not correlated with devoutness. Generally, Muslims who say they pray five times per day are no more likely to support targeting civilians to protect Islam than those who pray less often. The only exception is the Palestinian territories, where 66% of Muslims who pray five times per day say suicide bombing is often or sometimes justified versus 49% of those who pray less than five times per day.” – Pew Research Center in 2013⁶

organization,” Reuters, March 2, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-hezbollah-idUSKCN0W4oXF>.

³ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks For Islam? What A Billion Muslims Really Think* (Gallup Press, February 2008), see Chapter Three, “What Makes A Radical?” (page 65-98).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups; Much Diminished Support for Suicide Bombing,” Pew Research Center, September 10, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups/>

⁶ Ibid.

- “The self-styled ‘Islamic State’ has almost no popular support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon, a trio of public opinion poll commissioned by The Washington Institute has revealed. Only 5 percent of Saudis and 3 percent of Egyptians expressed a favorable opinion of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham). In Lebanon, not one Christian, Shiite, or Druze respondent expressed a positive view of ISIS, and only 1 percent of Sunnis expressed approval of the Sunni jihadist group that has overrun portions of neighboring Syria and Iraq. The polling, directed by Institute Kaufman Fellow David Pollock, relied on face-to-face interviews with 1,000 randomly selected respondents in each nation....The polls have a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points....Although the low single-digit popular support for ISIS among America's regional partners in the global anti-ISIS coalition represents good news, Pollock cautions that there is a real difference between little support and no support at all. ‘Since three percent of adult Egyptians say they approve of ISIS, that’s nearly 1.5 million people,’ Pollock wrote. ‘For Saudis, the five percent of adult nationals who like ISIS means over half a million people.’” – Washington Institute for Near East Policy study in 2014.⁷
- “According to newly released data that the Pew Research Center collected in 11 countries with significant Muslim populations, people from Nigeria to Jordan to Indonesia overwhelmingly expressed negative views of ISIS....In no country surveyed did more than 15% of the population show favorable attitudes toward Islamic State. [The average support for ISIS across the 11 countries was 8.3%.]” – Pew Research Center study in 2015.⁸
- “Muslims mostly say that suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians in the name of Islam are rarely or never justified, including 92% in Indonesia and 91% in Iraq. In the United States, a 2011 survey found that 86% of Muslims say that such tactics are rarely or never justified. An additional 7% say suicide bombings are sometimes justified and 1% say they are often justified in these circumstances. In a few countries, a quarter or more of Muslims say that these acts of violence are at least sometimes justified, including 40% in the Palestinian territories, 39% in Afghanistan, 29% in Egypt and 26% in Bangladesh.” – Pew Research Center study in 2016⁹

⁷ “Poll: ISIS Has Almost No Popular Support among Arab Publics,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 14, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/press-room/view/poll-isis-has-almost-no-popular-support-among-arab-publics>; see also David Pollock, “ISIS Has Almost No Popular Support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 14, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-has-almost-no-popular-support-in-egypt-saudi-arabia-or-lebanon>.

⁸ Jacob Poushter, “In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS,” Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>.

⁹ Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world,” Pew Research Center, July 22, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>

- “Based on surveys in a variety of Arab, African, and other predominantly Muslim societies, IS [Islamic State] 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”). 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.” – Washington Institute for Near East Policy study released in February 2016.¹⁰

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¹⁰ David Pollock, “Polls Show Most Muslims Reject Both Extremism and Islamic Reform,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 25, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/polls-show-most-muslims-reject-both-extremism-and-islamic-reform>.