

Public Opinion Survey Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamist Terrorism: A Look at Muslim Opinions on Al Qaeda and IS

This Research Paper seeks to explore what 'sympathy' and 'support' actually mean when it comes to terrorism. The text addresses some of the problems of public opinion surveys, includes a conceptual discussion and then continues with the presentation of data from public opinion surveys. It notes that opinion polls can be helpful in gauging (verbal) support for terrorism but also finds that the questions asked in opinion polls are generally lacking precision while the answers are often influenced by political pressures. When translating (generally low) percentages of sympathy and support for al Qaeda and so-called Islamic State in various countries into actual population figures, it emerges that there is a sizeable radical milieu in both Muslim-majority countries and in Western Muslim diasporas, held together by the world wide web of the internet. While large majorities of Muslims in most countries have no love for jihadist extremists, there are more than enough breeding grounds for terrorism. The Research Paper concludes that better instruments for measuring sympathy and support for jihadist terrorism are needed to inform counter-terrorist strategies.

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Introduction

Connections between religion and terrorism are often vigorously rejected by governments and international organisations. For instance, on 11 May 2016, in a Presidential Statement, the UN Security Council emphasised that “terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion [...]”. However, Jan Eliasson, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, noted at the same time that “terrorist groups are exploiting religious beliefs in order to incite hatred and violence and to cause division and polarization in our societies”.¹ To illustrate this with three examples from Abrahamic religions: The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Africa claimed to act on the basis of Christian fundamentalist beliefs; Kach, the extremist Jewish group founded by Rabbi Meir, sought to restore the biblical Jewish kingdom; and IS has tried to restore the Caliphate, an idea appealing to a wider Muslim audience.

If one accepts that terrorist organisations like al Qaeda and so-called Islamic State (IS) consider themselves – and are considered by many non-extremist Muslims – as being Islamic, this does not take away the fact that 99 percent or more of all Muslims are **not** terrorists. Yet what exactly is the relationship between the 1 percent and the 99 percent? There must be a grey zone between black and white, a zone of tacit sympathy and active support without which terrorist groups could not survive for long. This Research Paper seeks to take a closer look at it, based on public opinion surveys.

Terrorism has often been characterised as a “strategy of the weak” – one chosen by those lacking broad popular support.² However, terrorism is also a political communication strategy which, through mass- and social-media, seeks to reach and influence people.³ Public opinion is important to terrorists, whether it is to win over the ‘hearts and minds’ of their targeted constituency for their struggle or to intimidate and bully the enemy’s constituency – and sometimes even their own constituency – into acquiescence or downright submission.

Public opinion polls can tell us something about the degree of sympathy and support terrorists enjoy among specific sectors of society, for example, youth in Muslim-majority countries or in diasporas in the West. Yet paradoxically, public opinion polls are still an under-utilised instrument of research on terrorism. Already in 1993, a RAND report had concluded that “Despite the importance of public opinion, few attempts have been made to identify empirically public perceptions of either terrorism or terrorists [...]”. In short, no one has made a systematic effort to find out what public

¹ “Security Council requests UN panel to propose global framework on countering terrorist propaganda”, *UN News Service*, 11 May 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53909>.

² A. P. Schmid, *Political Terrorism* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1984), p. 166.

³ Many definitions of terrorism emphasise this communication dimension, e.g. Judith Tinnes’ (2010) definition: “Terrorism is a communication strategy of sub-state actors that, by its asymmetrical, systematically planned, unpredictable violence against targets selected arbitrarily or for their symbolic value (including civilians), is meant to create a mood of extreme fear or insecurity in the civilian population. By means of psychological manipulation, maximum pressure is meant to be created in order to bring about a desired reaction. Terrorist violence, which transgresses traditional military and social norms of waging conflict and conducting opposition, is meant to assure for itself the largest possible receptive audience to which, by its spectacular effect as a means of communication, messages are meant to be transmitted on the basis of its psychological signaling effect”. – J. Tinnes, “Internetbenutzung islamistischer Terror- und Insurgentengruppen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von medialen Geiselnahmen im Irak, Afghanistan, Pakistan und Saudi-Arabien”, *Universität Saarbrücken*, 2010, Ph.D. Thesis, p. 28, http://scidok.sulb.uni-saarland.de/volltexte/2010/3117/pdf/_Thesis.pdf. Definition translated from German by A.P. Schmid. For other definitions along the same lines, see: J. J. Eliasson and A. P. Schmid, “250-plus Academic, Governmental and Intergovernmental Definitions of Terrorism”, in A. P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 99 – 157.

opinion really is and what the implications are for policy”.⁴ In the meantime the situation has improved,⁵ but the basic message that public opinion polls are under-utilised instruments for terrorism research remains.

Our main interest here is popular sympathy and support for Salafi-Jihadist terrorism as practised by al Qaeda and IS – terrorist organisations that seek to mobilise the Islamic community (*ummah*) which, in theory, and undivided, encompasses some 1.6 billion people – or 23 percent of the world population – with Islam now being the fastest growing religious community.⁶

The size of the radical milieu – the core constituency of terrorists – that sympathises with, or supports, terrorist groups can tell us something about their recruitment pool, their further potential for harm, and perhaps even something about the likely longevity of a terrorist campaign. This goes for Christian, Jewish and Islamist extremists⁷ but in the following we will focus on the latter as the currently most virulent of the three Abrahamic religions. Beyond the radical milieu or milieus (as there are often more than one) that support jihadist terrorism, there are moderate mainstream Muslims who might share some of the same religious tenets as extremist jihadist groups profess to follow (for example, regarding the position of sharia law vs. the rule of (man-made) law) but not others. They might be sympathisers only, rather than supporters. One unanswered question is whether there is a ‘conveyor belt’ that leads from showing emphatic understanding for some of the grievances that motivate terrorists, to passive sympathy for their ideology and ultimately active support for, and participation in, their indiscriminate armed struggle in defence of a particular interpretation of Islam.

Opinion Polls: Some Methodological Problems

The easiest and most straightforward type of measuring sympathy and support for terrorism, it would seem, is to consult opinion polls. A representative sample of a population is approached for face-to-face interviews, or on the telephone or via the internet and asked to answer questions regarding one sacred or secular cause or the other, one militant group or the other, or on the level of support for government policies in the field of counter-terrorism.

There are, however, challenging problems of measurement when one looks at existing opinion polls. How large and representative was the sample of people interviewed? Did respondents answer freely and without fear of personal consequences? Were they self-selected, in the sense that survey questions were posted on the internet and people could select themselves as respondents? Were the questions ‘loaded’ with the goal of

⁴ T. Downes-Le Guin and B. Hoffman, “The Impact of Terrorism on Public Opinion, 1988 to 1989”, *RAND*, (1993), p. ix, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/MR225.pdf.

⁵ See: P. Norris, “The Globalization of Public Opinion Research”, in N. Robinson and T. Landman, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics* (London: Sage, 2009), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/Sage%20Cross-national%20surveys4%20bookproofs.pdf>, pp. 522-540 and especially: K. Didow and J. Jacob, “Ten Years After September 11: an Analysis of Public Opinion in the Muslim World”. *Harvard University: John F. Kennedy School of Government*, Spring 2011, <https://www.innovations.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/1871134.pdf>.

⁶ M. Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world”, *Pew Research Center*, 22 July 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world>.

⁷ Cf. J. Fine, *Political Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. From Holy War to Modern Terror* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2015).

‘fishing’ for certain desired answers? Who were the interviewers and how professional were they? Did the questions and/or the publication of answers have to pass government censorship? What other events preoccupied people at the moment their opinion was solicited on terrorism? The seemingly straightforward instrument of polling public opinion can be full of pitfalls.⁸

To give some examples: if an opinion survey is conducted by telephone, the sample automatically excludes those who could not be reached at a given moment – not to speak of those who had no phone. In some cases, large numbers of people – sometimes even the majority of people in a country – are deliberately excluded from a polling sample. This was, for instance, the case when The Washington Institute commissioned public opinion polls in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It found that a mere 5 percent of those polled in Saudi Arabia and even fewer in Kuwait and the UAE voiced a favourable opinion on IS. Yet the disenfranchised foreign workers in these countries – most of them Muslims – were not asked for their opinions because they were not included in the samples despite the fact that they constitute a majority of people in two of the three countries (Kuwait and the UAE).⁹ D. Pollock noted in 2016 that:

Too many purported polls on this subject [Muslim extremism] are unscientific and thus grossly misleading for a variety of reasons. [...]. 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.¹⁰

There are many ways to influence public opinion and widely publicising (or withholding) certain public opinion survey results can by itself also be part of mass manipulation attempts. After some polling outcomes have been made public, many respondents might, in subsequent surveys, wish to be on the safe side with their answers – joining in with what they assume is the prevalent majority opinion. Yet while any specific public opinion survey might reflect bias, the comparison of various opinion surveys can give greater confidence in the reliability of findings.

Despite all caveats that can and should be raised,¹¹ public opinion polls are the second most important instrument for assessing popular support – surpassed only by official

⁸ For a discussion of polling challenges, see: C. Deane et al., “Flashpoints in Polling”, *Pew Research Center*, 24 October 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/2016/08/01/flashpoints-in-polling/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=95ba07b7a9-Weekly_August_4_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-95ba07b7a9-400245697. For a detailed description of Pew’s methodology, see: “Methodological Appendix – About the 2005 Global Attitudes Survey”, *Pew Research Center*, 14 July 2005, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2005/07/14/methodological-appendix>.

⁹ D. Pollock, “New Poll Shows Majority of Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis Reject ISIS Back Two-State Solution with Israel”, *The Washington Institute*, 23 October 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-poll-shows-majority-of-saudis-kuwaitis-emiratis-reject-isis-back-two-st>.

¹⁰ D. Pollock, “Polls Show Most Muslims Reject Both Extremism and Islamic Reform”, *The Washington Institute (Policy Watch 2572)*, 25 February 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/polls-show-most-muslims-reject-both-extremism-and-islamic-reform>.

¹¹ Including the concern that some opinion polls contain no control group, e.g. questions asked to Muslims to gauge support for terrorism are not asked to non-Muslims, implying a zero-level of support for terrorism among non-Muslims. See, for a critique along these lines: A. Cousins, “Muslim opinion and the myth of ‘tacit support’ for terrorism”, *Counterfire*, 20 March 2015; <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/17732-muslim-opinion-and-the-myth-of-tacit-support-for-terrorism>.

and honest election balloting – to assess the strength of endorsement for one or another social cause, political party, religious movement or armed group. Yet, what does ‘support’ for terrorism actually mean?

The Many Degrees of ‘Support’ for Jihadist Terrorism

While the formula of ‘providing material support for terrorism’ is well-known in American jurisdiction since the introduction of the Patriot Act,¹² and while the charge of ‘support for terrorism’ is frequently (mis-)used in political debates between domestic or foreign opponents, the notion of ‘support for terrorism’, is in fact not well conceptualised.

How do we know how much support terrorists enjoy? We know, for instance, that more than 30,000 Muslims and converts to Islam from some 100 countries have gone to Syria and other jihadi theatres of war in recent years to join IS, Jabhat al Nusra (until recently the official al Qaeda branch in Syria) and, to a lesser extent, other jihadist groups.¹³ That is one unequivocal sign of support. Another, less visible, measure of support are the donations terrorist groups and other insurgent groups using tactics of terrorism receive in terms of money, weapons, advisors, logistics, intelligence, safe havens etc. from their well-wishers and sponsors. Much of that kind of support takes place in the fog of proxy-wars whereby rivaling foreign governments – sometimes through third party ‘middlemen’ – back local armed groups in secret. The full and true extent of clandestine support often only surfaces years later when the fight has been won or lost. Yet another platform for expressing support is the internet where the number of ‘followers’ of a particular website and the number of downloads of stories of terrorist ‘heroism’ can be traced.

Yet all these manifestations of ‘support’ for terrorist groups are difficult to assess and compare. In analytical terms, it makes sense to differentiate between at least three types of relationships. The first one is entirely legal but not always unproblematic. The second one is, in legal terms, still within the law in many countries but at times a borderline case – depending on which foreign armed non-state group the government condemns or supports. Some violent groups are considered by some people and governments to be legitimate resistance movements or praiseworthy jihadist movements, rather than terrorist organisations. Then there are clearly terrorist groups that feature as such on UN, regional or national sanction lists – support of these groups is clearly illegal (see Figure 1).

¹² Cf. for Patriot Act: “18 U.S. Code § 2339A- Providing material support to terrorists”, *Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute*, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339A>.

¹³ B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann, eds., “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/report-the-foreign-fighters-phenomenon-in-the-eu-profiles-threats-policies/>; A. P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 8, (2015), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf>.

Figure 1: Understanding, Sympathy and Support for Terrorism

Legal: Empathetic '**understanding**' for terrorism: accepting the legitimacy of (some of the) terrorist grievances, as expressed in verbal or written **opinion** statements, but generally reflecting a more or less **neutral** non-partisan attitude, not condoning and justifying terrorism as a legitimate tactic of conflict waging;

Still Legal: Sympathy for terrorism: **positive attitude** regarding the objectives of terrorists and also (qualified) approval and justification of their tactics as well, expressed in public statements to this effect (e.g. on the internet), but generally short of open and explicit advocacy for, and direct promotion of, the use of terrorist tactics;

Illegal: Various forms of **behavioural support and assistance** to terrorist organisations (e.g. spreading their propaganda, collecting intelligence, procuring weapons, etc.), including freelancing for a terrorist group as lone actor or joining a terrorist organisation.

(i) 'Understanding' for Terrorism

While terrorism is often portrayed as 'senseless violence', most terrorists are not madmen but are driven by a cause they hold so dear that they are prepared to risk – and sometimes even sacrifice – their own lives and those of many others for a – in their eyes – worthy or even sacred cause. Their motives are often not so different from those of others who use no violence in pursuit of their objectives or use violence only against the security forces of their enemy (i.e. not against civilians and non-combatants). These 'other' actors might have similar grievances and complaints about issues such as injustice, inequality, repression, foreign occupation or intervention in support of corrupt and authoritarian local regimes or objections to many of the other shortcomings that plague many of our imperfect societies and the anarchic international system. Many of those who share a cause with terrorists (e.g. the desire to have a state of their own) show an empathetic understanding for what terrorists want, although they might strongly disagree with the methods used by terrorists – unprovoked attacks on civilians who are generally far from being directly responsible for the grievances which terrorists cite as rationale for their attacks.

Showing empathetic 'understanding' for terrorist causes is expressing an *opinion* and as such is a mental disposition and sometimes a *verbal act* – but not a crime. It falls under protected speech in the sense of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees freedom of expression.¹⁴ Empathetic understanding falls short of favourable understanding. To illustrate this position: one public opinion survey conducted in the United Kingdom asked people whether respondents could 'understand' the motives for suicide attacks. Three out of ten British non-Muslims agreed with the statement, "I do understand why some people might behave that way".¹⁵

¹⁴ "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" from: United Nations, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (10 December 1948; General Assembly Resolution 217 (III)), <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

¹⁵ "Percent of non-Muslims expressing understanding for terrorists' motives", http://www.counterfire.org/images/stories/mar2015/figure3_non-muslims_suicide_understanding.png (image from A.

Such a merely empathetic ‘understanding’ – which is different from justifying – is, for instance, also reflected between the lines in the following statement where the authors of a public opinion survey conducted in the late 1980s concluded that:

Although people generally professed to abhor *terrorism*, the results indicate that *terrorists* have not completely ‘discredited’ themselves: Almost half the people surveyed felt that terrorists are not ‘common criminals’ and may have legitimate grievances, and almost two-thirds believed that they are not ‘cowards’. [...] The majority of survey respondents evidently would not buy – much less advance – the argument that the ends justify the means.¹⁶

Such an empathetic understanding falls well short of a positive identification with the terrorists’ modus operandi as long as it does not promote or advocate terrorism.

(ii) Sympathy for Terrorism

Having ‘sympathy’ for terrorist causes and groups involves a middle position between some forms of mere ‘understanding’ and more active ‘support’. It implies not just accepting the same objectives as terrorists profess to pursue, but also a degree of approval of the rightfulness of their particular choice of tactics (e.g. suicide bombings, hostage taking, demonstrative public massacres). Yet sympathy for terrorist causes and acceptance of their modus operandi falls well short of *active* personal involvement. However, if a fugitive from the law who is a terrorist would knock at the door of a sympathiser and ask for a hiding place during a police raid, many a sympathiser would probably not refuse to give him (or her) temporary shelter, especially if the person asking for help is personally known to him or her. This, however, is a borderline case. Normally, sympathy for terrorism is *attitudinal* rather than behavioural, is passive rather than active, is tacit rather than open – but it tends to express a degree of ideological agreement. Sympathisers of terrorism can, however, show approval or even feelings of gratification (“serves them right” – type *Schadenfreude* – *shamateh* in Arabic) when a successful act of terrorism by ‘their’ group or movement has taken place. In doing so, sympathisers are identifying with the perpetrators of an act of terrorism rather than with the victims or with the government under whose jurisdiction a terrorist incident has taken place.¹⁷ However, even such a favourable attitude is generally not unconditional but qualified, depending on context, method of victimisation, type of victims affected and, last but not least, the behaviour of the terrorists’ opponent. The crucial – and still largely unanswered – question is under what circumstances attitudes lead to behaviour, that is, when sympathy for the Islamists’ causes translates into active support for indiscriminate jihadist tactics of terrorism.

Cousins, “Muslim opinion”, 20 March 2015, <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/17732-muslim-opinion-and-the-myth-of-tacit-support-for-terrorism>.

¹⁶ T. Downes-Le Guin and B. Hoffman, “The Impact of Terrorism on Public Opinion, 1988 to 1989”, *RAND*, (1993), p. x-xi, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2006/MR225.pdf.

¹⁷ An example of identification with the terrorists after the 9/11 attack is provided by Mohammad Taheri-Azar, the son of Iranian immigrants to the United States. He wrote, “The 9/11 attacks revived my anger towards the U.S. government because it distressed me to see the nineteen hijackers lose their lives this way because of the military decisions of the United States and Israel in the Middle East since the 1950s”: C. Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs. Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (Oxford: University Press, 2011), p.17.

(iii) Active Support for Terrorism

Terrorist groups generally fight for a constituency (e.g. the *ummah* – the largely imagined Muslim community) and, in return, seek and need its support for long-term survival. They therefore wish to build up a positive reputation among the sector of the public they claim to fight for so as to win growing assistance from an existing or emerging wider constituency. Terrorists seek to enlarge that supportive community in order to gain more recruits and other resources to resist or attack their enemies. Winning over the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Muslim community – preferably by positive means but, if necessary, by all means – is a key objective of jihadist terrorists.

Support for terrorism can take many forms, ranging from unwitting support to passive and active support, from tacit to overt support, from verbal to operational support. What we find in public opinion polls is mainly ‘verbal support’ for terrorism, which is more often than not just ‘sympathy’, sometimes bordering on passive support. Verbal support can, however, also hide more serious forms of harmful support.

‘Support’ is such a broad category that it needs to be broken down. The US Patriot Act distinguishes four types of material support for terrorism: (i) ‘training’, (ii) ‘expert advice or assistance’, (iii) ‘service’ and (iv) ‘personnel’.¹⁸ However, there are more. If we try to establish gradations of support in terms of *active behaviour* and engagement on behalf of terrorist organisations or operations, we can distinguish a dozen levels or degrees of active support (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Twelve Degrees of Behavioural and/or Material Support for Terrorism

1. Promoting and advocating the use of terrorism in demonstrations, in mass media or on the internet;
2. Assisting terrorists in the collection of information and the distribution of propaganda;
3. Offering an alibi or other false testimony for a person accused of an act of terrorism;
4. Providing services to terrorists like a safe house for those on the run from the law;
5. Donating money to a terrorist (front-) organisation;
6. Providing facilities and other assistance for the recruitment and training of new members of terrorist organisations;
7. Providing (false) identity papers and other services to terrorists;
8. Providing expert advice and intelligence to terrorist organisations;
9. Providing terrorists with logistical assistance and transport for crossing borders and/or reaching (target) destinations;
10. Procuring weapons, ammunition and bomb-making materials for terrorists;
11. Providing personnel and operational assistance to terrorist organisations;
12. Freelancing on behalf of a terrorist group – as ‘lone wolf’ or by joining a terrorist group directly.

¹⁸ Cf. for Patriot Act: “18 U.S. Code § 2339A- Providing material support to terrorists”, *Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute*, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339A>.

Support for Terrorism as Measured in Muslim Public Opinion Surveys

While a conceptual distinction between understanding (referring to *opinion*), sympathy (referring to *attitudes*) and support (referring to *behaviour*) for terrorism makes sense for analytical purposes, public opinion polls generally do not make such fine distinctions when pulsing degrees of 'positive' or 'favourable' views, approval, endorsement, assistance or active support for terrorist groups. The questions asked in face-to-face or telephone interviews by usually commercial polling firms are generally broad and vague, partly due to the sensitivity of the subject. Answers indicating *verbal support* often leave open whether we are dealing with passive sympathy or some more active form of support in terms of the categories above. To quote Kiran M. Sarma:

In terms of the prevalence of support for international terrorism, many large surveys have been administered in countries with Muslim populations, both in the East and in the West. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions involved, and the problems encountered when trying to define 'terrorism', 'extremism' and 'support for terrorism', most of the surveys draw inferences about support levels based on a series of pseudo-questions that are commonly believed to be good indicators of support. For example, many ask about the legitimacy of the 9/11 or 7/7 attacks, [in formulations like: people having] 'confidence in Osama Bin Laden to do the right thing' [regarding world affairs], and the legitimacy of attacking civilian populations in the defence of Islam. The problem with such questions is that they are not necessarily good barometers of support for international terrorism per se, and all we can say with confidence is that they are, at best, possible indicators of support.¹⁹

A relatively neutral way of measuring 'verbal support' for terrorism is contained in a question that Pew public opinion polls use:

Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified.²⁰

Respondents are given a choice to opt for 'often justified', 'sometimes justified', 'rarely justified' and 'never justified', indicating various levels of 'support' for this archetypical

¹⁹ K. M. Sarma, *Support for Terrorism* (School of Psychology, NUI Galway, Ireland) MS, p. 3. Charles Kurzman has pointed out that people expressing confidence in Bin Laden "to do the right thing regarding world affairs" could mean either reflecting some positive sentiment towards al Qaeda's leader but could, admittedly less likely, also mean turning himself in to stand trial: C. Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs* (2011), p.29.

²⁰ R. Wike and N. Samaranayake, "Where Terrorism Finds Support in the Muslim World: That May Depend on How You Define It- and Who Are the Targets", *Pew Research Center*, 23 May 2006, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/05/23/where-terrorism-finds-support-in-the-muslim-world>. For a detailed description of Pew's methodology, see "Methodological Appendix: About the 2005 Global Attitudes Survey", *Pew Research Center*, 14 July 2005, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2005/07/14/methodological-appendix/>.

terrorist tactic.²¹ However, this general question about the justification of suicide bombings is not able to catch any of the twelve specific ways of supporting a terrorist organisation identified in Figure 3 in an unequivocal way. It cannot even distinguish between the two broad categories of 'sympathy' and 'support' in general. Yet until a better question comes up that is able to make such a distinction, we have to make do with this one. The present Research Paper will take it as the main instrument for measuring (more or less tacit) support for terrorism conducted by jihadists.

Acceptance of suicide bombings against civilians as justified by respondents to opinion polls has varied widely depending on time and country. One Pew survey from the year 2002 found that in 14 countries surveyed, the view that suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilian targets 'are sometimes or often justified' in order to defend Islam from its enemies' ranged from 7 to 73 percent.²² A more recent Pew survey from 2013 found low support in countries like Indonesia and Iraq (7 percent) and high support in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories (39 percent and 40 percent respectively) (See Figure 3).

Several opinion surveys found that in most countries large majorities of Muslims – about 75 percent – rejected suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilians.²³ However, by placing 'rarely justified' and 'never justified' in one category and 'often/sometimes justified' in the other, the aggregate data might provide too rosy a picture since we do not know how rare 'rarely' was compared to 'never justified'. If this opinion poll is indeed representative, we can translate the 'often/sometimes justified' category into absolute numbers of people. For instance, in Egypt where there are nearly 80 million Sunni Muslims out of a total population of 87 million people (including Copts), 29 percent in the table in Figure 5 translate into almost 23 million people.

²¹ A. Cherney and J. Povey, "Exploring Support for Terrorism Among Muslims", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 3 (2013), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/264/html>. Pew is, next to Gallup, one of the least biased polling organisations. It describes itself in these words: "The Pew Research Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 'fact tank' that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. The center conducts public opinion polling, demographic analysis and other data-driven social science research. It does not take positions on policy issues": see J. Bell et al., "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", *Pew Research Center – Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>.

²² C. Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs* (2011), p. 28.

²³ "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", *Pew Research Center*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview>; J. Bell et al., "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", *Pew Research Center – Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>.

Figure 3: Support for Suicide Bombings against Civilians among Muslims (Pew, 2013)²⁴**Percentages of Muslims who say suicide bombing in defense of Islam is ...**

	Often/Sometimes Justified	Rarely/Never justified
Turkey	15%	78%
Indonesia	7%	92%
Malaysia	18%	74%
Pakistan	13%	80%
Afghanistan	39%	58%
Iraq	7%	91%
Tunisia	12%	84%
Jordan	15%	82%
Morocco	9%	74%
Egypt	29%	68%
Palestinian Territory	40%	49%

Of course, many of these people are either too young or too old to be potential terrorists and thus also much less likely to translate their attitudes into terrorist behaviour. However, even so, there remain millions of people who view suicide bombings in defence of Islam as justified. Add to the Egyptians who share this view those in Afghanistan (39 percent out of a population of nearly 32 million people) or Indonesia (7 percent out of some 226 million Muslims there), Bangladesh (26 percent out of a population of 166 million), Turkey (15 percent of 81 million) and you end up with tens of millions of Muslims who verbally support a quintessential terrorist tactic 'in defence of Islam'.

Rationales for Support of Terrorism

Most opinion surveys are not very specific when it comes to identifying rationales for support of terrorism. 'Defense of Islam' is, however, not the only justification offered. If we look into the reasons given by people for sympathy for, or support of, terrorist organisations, we find many different ones, ranging from revenge for injustices (real or perceived), to resistance against state repression, from a constituency's ethnic affiliation with a terrorist group to, on the personal level, mere fascination with

²⁴ "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, p.70, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview>; J. Bell et al., "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", *Pew Research Center – Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>. For other results in answer to the same question, see also a Pew survey from 2007: "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream", *Pew Research Center*, 22 May 2007, p. 60, <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

violence. In other words, the reasons given by people for supporting al Qaeda or IS vary greatly. One poll from the Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies found that among the 11 percent of those respondents who were 'positive' or 'to some extent positive' about IS "only 13% of respondents cited the [IS] group's adherence to Islamic principle as decisive. A much larger group (55%) explains support for ISIL by citing a host of other reasons: its military achievements; its preparedness to challenge the West; its opposition to Iran and the Syrian and Iraqi regimes; or its purported support for the Sunni Muslim community in the Levant".²⁵

More in general, at least seven reasons appear to seem to motivate supporters of jihadist terrorism (see Figure 4):

Figure 4: Seven Reasons for Sympathy and Support for Jihadist Terrorism²⁶

1. Jihadi terrorists are seen as defenders of the religion of Islam which is said to be under attack by Western powers and influences;
2. Jihadi terrorists are seen as true heirs of the Salafi, with Allah thought to be on their side;
3. Jihadi terrorists are seen as vicarious revengers for humiliations and injustices experienced individually or collectively by Muslims in a near or distant past;
4. Jihadi terrorists are seen as 'daring', 'heroic' and 'successful' and engaging in legitimate jihad;
5. Support for them is also due to specific objections regarding foreign assistance for Muslim and Arab authoritarian/illegitimate regimes;
6. Support for them is also due to specific grievances about the foreign (military intervention) policies of one or more Western countries in Muslim countries;
7. Support is given based on the logic of 'My enemy's enemy is my friend' – something we see from parts of the anti-Imperialist atheist Left.

Given the superficial nature of questions in most public opinion polls, it is often not possible to gauge exact reasons behind verbal support. The views from the common people in the street, when solicited out of the blue by an interviewer, are also, more often than not, less considered and straightforward than analysts might wish. The 'don't know' option appears to be used more often by respondents when it comes to such sensitive questions than in other surveys as is the refusal to answer at all (which is often incorrectly combined in the presentation of surveys with the category 'don't know').

Public opinion poll questions are often too broad and unspecific to be useful for social science research. While there are many opinion polls, they tend to tell us far less than we might wish to know. However, due to the large number of people interviewed – generally about 1,000 per country – opinion polls have larger samples of respondents than most academic research projects can afford to approach.

²⁵ Arab Opinion Index, "The Military Campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: Arab Public Opinion", *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, 11 November 2014, p. 5, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/Get/40ebdf12-8960-4d18-8088-7c8a077e522e>. According to the Arab Opinion Index 2014, 85 percent of 5,100 respondents in seven Arab countries and in Syrian refugee camps located in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey held, to varying degrees, negative views of ISIL, while 11 percent were either "Positive" or "Positive to some extent".

²⁶ Various opinion polls, e.g. Arab Opinion Index, "The Military Campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: Arab Public Opinion", *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, 11 November 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/Get/40ebdf12-8960-4d18-8088-7c8a077e522e>.

The simple question: “How much support is there for terrorism?” is therefore difficult to answer and outside observers often end up engaging in simplistic educated guesses like this one by Peggy Noonan of the *Wall Street Journal*:

There are said to be 1.6 billion Muslims in the world [...]. Let’s say only 10% of the 1.6 billion harbor feelings of grievance toward ‘the West’, or desire to expunge the infidel, or hope to re-establish the caliphate. That 10% is 160 million people. Let’s say of that group only 10% would be inclined toward jihad. That’s 16 million. Assume that of that group only 10% really means it – would really become jihadis or give them aid and sustenance. That’s 1.6 million.²⁷

The challenge is to go beyond such “guesstimates”.²⁸ Let us look at some opinion surveys on the popularity of first al Qaeda and then IS.

Sympathy and Support for Al Qaeda

In the first ten years of its existence, between 1988 and 1998 – the year al Qaeda bombed two American embassies in East Africa – al Qaeda was not on the radar of most Western intelligence agencies and even less so an item in public opinion polls. That came only with the hijacking of four planes when 19 terrorists crashed them into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center (while one aborted hijacking ended in a deadly plane crash in Pennsylvania) on 11 September 2001, killing 2,977 people. The events of 9/11 had an electrifying effect and put Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda on the world map – much more than his “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” in 1996 and a similar, second *fatwa* in 1998.

The bold attacks of 11 September 2001 catapulted Bin Laden’s group of no more than a few hundred mujahidin in Afghan camps²⁹ onto the world stage. While many people were shocked by the sheer inhumanity of these attacks as they instinctively identified with the victims, there were many in Arab and Muslim countries who sympathised with the cause of al Qaeda – if not the nature of the attack itself. Gallup polls conducted in late 2001 and early 2002 in seven Muslim-majority countries indicated that between 4 percent and 36 percent of respondents believed that the 9/11 attacks were justifiable. Translating percentages into absolute numbers, this would – if the polling samples were representative – have meant that almost one in 15 Muslims – or 100 million people – considered these attacks “justifiable”.³⁰

After the fall of al Qaeda’s host, the Taliban, in late 2001 and before the American attack on Iraq in 2003, the public opinion scores of al Qaeda fluctuated. Yet once the American intervention in Iraq took place, al Qaeda’s popularity rose again (see Figure 5).

²⁷ P. Noonan, “Unite To Defeat Radical Jihadism”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 March 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-defeat-radical-jihadism-1458862004> cited by G. Meotti, “ISIS in Europe: How Deep is the ‘Grey Zone’?”, *Gatestone Institute*, 4 April 2016, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/7764/isis-europe>.

²⁸ This particular statement is both an over- and an under-estimation: It greatly overestimates the number of jihadists and it probably underestimates the number of those who give them aid and sustenance in one form or the other.

²⁹ J. Mueller and M. G. Stewart, “Misoverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4, p. 31.

³⁰ C. Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs* (2011), pp. 27-28.

Figure 5: Muslim Views on Al Qaeda (2008)

A Pew public opinion poll conducted in late 2008 in Muslim countries found that: Views of al Qaeda are complex. Majorities agree with nearly all of al Qaeda's goals to change US behaviour in the Muslim world, to promote Islamist governance, and to preserve and affirm Islamic identity. However, consistent with the general rejection of attacks on civilians, only minorities say they approve of al Qaeda's attacks on Americans as well as its goals, suggesting that many may feel ambivalence". [...] Consistent with the pattern of ambivalence about al Qaeda, views of Bin Laden are quite divided. Respondents were asked whether their feelings toward Osama bin Laden were positive, negative or mixed. In Egypt, 44 percent said they viewed him positively, 17 percent negatively, and 25 percent had mixed feelings. In Indonesia, a much lower 14 percent expressed positive feelings and 26 percent negative feelings (mixed, 21%, while 39% did not answer). In Pakistan – where bin Laden was thought by some to reside – a quarter (25%) had positive feelings toward him while 15% had negative feelings (mixed, 26%; 34% did not answer).³¹

Looking back at the first decade after 9 /11, a study initiated by the writer of this ICCT Research Paper and conducted at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV University of St. Andrews) by two of his former colleagues concluded, when discussing Muslim public opinion in 2011:

[L]arge majorities [...] supported aspects of the Al Qaeda agenda and Bin Laden's purported goal of removing US presence from the Middle East and establishing strict Shari'a law. This also meant that for a great number of people, attacking US and allied troops in 'Muslim' lands was both justified and legitimate. At the same time, most Muslims across the world thought that it was unacceptable to attack civilians – this applied to both US 'collateral damage' as well as Al Qaeda's deliberate attacks on Western and non-Western civilians. Thus, ten years into the conflict it is clear that in the minds of the public neither AQ nor the USA are winning in this confrontation and, perhaps more importantly, both have lost support and sympathy.

Sympathy for al Qaeda fluctuated between 9/11 and 2 May 2011, when Bin Laden was killed.³² A Pew opinion survey published in 2013 found that 57 percent of Muslims worldwide disapproved of al Qaeda. However, one in four respondents refused to answer the question and 13 percent admitted support for al Qaeda.³³ 57 percent of all Muslims polled having an unfavourable view of al Qaeda is a majority, but not a large majority. In three countries – Egypt, Indonesia and Malaysia as well as in the Palestinian

³¹ S. Kull et al., "Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies", *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, 25 February 2009 p. 20 and p. 23, <http://www.start.umd.edu/publication/public-opinion-islamic-world-terrorism-al-qaeda-and-us-policies>. See also: "Al Jazeera Arabic Poll: 49.9% of Muslims polled support Osama bin Laden", *Partisan Lines*, 11 September 2006, <http://www.partisanlines.com/threads/al-jazeera-arabic-poll-49-9-support-osama-bin-laden.712>.

³² "Osama bin Laden Largely Discredited Among Muslim Publics in Recent Years", *Pew Research Center*, 2 May 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-largely-discredited-among-muslim-publics-in-recent-years/>.

³³ "Muslim Publics Share Concerns About Extremist Groups", *Pew Research Center*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups>.

territories – one fifth or more held a favourable view of al Qaeda.³⁴ Figure 6 offers us two more recent takes on the question of verbal support.

Figure 6: Muslim Views on Al-Qaeda in 2013 and 2014 (Pew)³⁵

Country	Favourable		Unfavourable		Don't Know
	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013 only
Bangladesh	n.d.	23%		66%	n.d.
Lebanon	1%	2%		96%	2%
Israel		1%		97%	n.d.
Jordan	13%	11%	81%	83%	6%
Turkey	7%	5%	73%	85%	20%
Egypt	20%	15%	69%	81%	11%
Nigeria	9%	18%	62%	46%	29%
Senegal	9%	10%	57%	61%	34%
Tunisia	15%	9%	56%	74%	29%
Indonesia	23%	15%	53%	56%	23%
Palestinian Terr.	35%	25%	53%	59%	12%
Malaysia	20%	18%	48%	32%	32%
Pakistan	13%	12%	46%	42%	41%
Tanzania	n.d.	8%		76%	n.d.

The option 'favourable' offered as a choice to respondents in Figure 6 can mean anything from 'sympathy' to (verbal) 'support' – which of the two we do not know. Remarkable in this table is the high percentage of 'Don't Know' respondents. This is likely to reflect not so much ignorance as unwillingness to answer – or might even be hiding sympathy. There are many uncertainties. What does 'favourable' actually refer to? Which of the different objectives of al Qaeda had respondents in mind when they expressed a 'favourable' view? The implementation of Sharia? The unification of the *ummah*? The opposition to Western meddling in the Middle East? The last of these

³⁴ "Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in the Middle East", *Pew Research Center*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east>.

³⁵ Muslim Publics Share Concerns About Extremist Groups", *Pew Research Center*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups>. (In the case of Pakistan, the question was asked later than in the other 10 countries). In all 11 countries only Muslims were polled. "Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in the Middle East", *Pew Research Center*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east>.

objectives is much more widely shared in the region than the percentages here would indicate – in a number of countries it was and probably still is the majority opinion.³⁶

Between two opinion polls held in 2013 and 2014 (Figure 6) respectively, the numbers of those who held a favourable view of al Qaeda dropped – if we translate percentages into population figures – by 13.5 million people to 122.4 million people. We do not know why, but the rise of ISIS might have had something to do with it. Another option is that many of these ‘favourable views’ were only skin-deep and could change easily in either direction, depending, for instance, on perceived successes and failures on the battlefield. Part of the appeal of al Qaeda has been linked to the charismatic personality of Osama Bin Laden whose image lingered on beyond his death but weakened over time.

For some Muslims, Osama bin Laden represented a positive role model with whom many could identify. This became clear when the leader of al Qaeda was killed by US Special Forces on 2 May 2011. According to the results of a Gallup poll, 51 percent of Pakistanis grieved over Osama bin Laden’s death. 44 percent of Pakistanis saw him as a martyr, while only 28 percent saw him as an outlaw and even fewer – 11 percent – were happy about his death.³⁷

Most of those who grieved for the leader of al Qaeda were probably mere sympathisers. The fact that a perpetrator of terrorism had become a victim of counter-terrorism probably encouraged such high levels of sympathy – although Bin Laden’s role in the events of 9/11 is still questioned by many Muslims. Despite overwhelming evidence that Bin Laden was the chief perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks,³⁸ this fact is still denied: even ten years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, blame for the attacks has been placed by many Muslims on others than Bin Laden and the 19 Arabs – 15 of them from Saudi Arabia, one from Lebanon, one from Egypt and two from the United Arab Emirates – who executed the 9/11 attacks. This is probably to a large extent a case of cognitive dissonance: while many Arabs and other Muslims tend to agree with many of the major policy goals of al Qaeda, they do not want to be associated with the mass murder of civilians in the 9/11 attacks.³⁹ However, it is a depressing realisation that many people, in the face of facts, experience and better judgment, refuse to adjust their opinions and are unable to overcome prejudices,⁴⁰ not questioning whether a piece of information comes from a credible source, not searching for evidence supporting an unusual new claim, nor checking whether others in other parts of the world also accept it.

Even more depressing is the ignorance which still exists in parts of the world. Real ignorance continues to exist in remote rural areas, even in a country that suffered from the consequences of 9/11 as much as Afghanistan. There, literacy does not go beyond 30 percent of the population in some areas. One opinion survey conducted in rural

³⁶ S. Kull et al., “Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies”, *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, 25 February 2009 p. 20 and p. 23, <http://www.start.umd.edu/publication/public-opinion-islamic-world-terrorism-al-qaeda-and-us-policies>.

³⁷ A. G. Bostom, “Majority of our Pakistani Allies Grieve for Bin Laden, and Plurality See Him as a Martyr for Jihad”, *American Thinker*, 18 May 2011, http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2011/05/majority_of_our_pakistani_alli.html.

³⁸ Cf. L. Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006); J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2003).

³⁹ S. Kull et al., “Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies”, *WorldPublicOpinion.org*, 25 February 2009, <http://www.start.umd.edu/publication/public-opinion-islamic-world-terrorism-al-qaeda-and-us-policies>.

⁴⁰ Z. Gorvett, “The reasons why politics feel so tribal in 2016”, *BBC*, 24 August 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160823-how-modern-life-is-destroying-democracy>.

districts in Afghanistan – which experienced an American-led foreign intervention between 2001 and 2014 – revealed that more than 90 percent of all young Afghans there had never heard about 9/11.⁴¹

Sympathy and Support for al Qaeda and IS in a Muslim-Majority Country: The Case of Saudi Arabia

Most public opinion polls among Muslims do not cover Saudi Arabia due to the far-reaching governmental efforts to control information that might damage its image. While Saudi Arabia has spent an estimated 100 billion dollars for the propagation of its fundamentalist Wahhabist brand abroad,⁴² and thereby arguably contributed much to Islamist radicalisation,⁴³ it is afraid of radicalisation at home. That the country has a radicalisation problem became evident from the fact that 14 of the 19 hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks came from Saudi Arabia and that members of the Saudi elite have been linked in the report of the 9/11 Commission to supporting some of those involved in these attacks.⁴⁴ Wahhabism, the official religion of the country, is a variant of Salafism; it supports jihad as long as it is fought outside the Arab peninsula. Wahhabis consider the Saudi government as legitimate – something which most other Salafists do not.

A poll conducted in 2003 by a Saudi national security consultant, Nawaf Obaid, reportedly involving interviews with more than 15,000 Saudis showed that more than half (53 percent) of the respondents held a favourable view of Osama bin Laden's sermons and rhetoric.⁴⁵ As long as recruitment for jihad in Saudi Arabia was channeled towards jihad in other countries, the authorities had no problem. Thomas Hegghammer noted that "Perhaps the most striking specificity of Saudi Arabia as a recruitment context, particularly in the 1999-2002 period, was the freedom with which organized recruiters and so-called "gatekeepers" were allowed to operate without interference from the authorities."⁴⁶ This changed only after May 2003 when al Qaeda began its campaign against the House of Saud (a campaign largely crushed by 2006).⁴⁷ Yet sympathy for Islamist extremism continues to flourish, as shown by opinions about IS. An informal poll of Saudis held in August 2014 showed that 92 percent agreed that IS 'conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law'.⁴⁸ On the other hand, a telephone

⁴¹ Y. Trofimov, "Many Afghans Shrug at 'This Event Foreigners Call 9/11'", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111904103404576556531604340742>. The survey was conducted in eight districts in Helmand and Kandahar among males. In the words of the *Wall Street Journal*: "According to a survey of 15- to 30-year-old men in the two southern provinces where President Barack Obama sent the bulk of American surge troops, 92% of respondents said they didn't know about "this event which the foreigners call 9/11" after being read a three-paragraph description of the attacks".

⁴² D. Pipes, "No Saudi Money for American Mosques", *Daniel Pipes Middle East Forum*, 22 August 2016, <http://www.danielpipes.org/16874/no-saudi-money-for-american-mosques>.

⁴³ S. Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam. Saudi Fundamentalism and its Role in Terrorism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

⁴⁴ See: P. Sperry, "Yes, the Saudi government helped the 9/11 terrorists", *New York Post*, 15 July 2016, http://nypost.com/2016/07/15/yes-the-saudi-government-helped-the-911-terrorists/?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=NYPTwitter&utm_medium=SocialFlow&sr_share=twitter.

⁴⁵ H. Schuster, "Poll of Saudis shows wide support for bin Laden's views", *CNN*, 9 June 2004, <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/08/poll.binladen/>; cit. "Muslim Statistics (Terrorism)", *Wikipedia*, [https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Statistics_\(Terrorism\)](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Statistics_(Terrorism)).

⁴⁶ T. Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (2006), pp. 53-54; http://hegghammer.com/_files/hegghammer_-_terrorist_recruitment_and_radicalisation_in_saudi_arabia_-_middle_east_policy.pdf.

⁴⁷ See D. L. Byman, "Saudi Arabia and Terrorism Today", *Brookings*, 29 September 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/09/29/saudi-arabia-and-terrorism-today/?utm_campaign=Brookings+Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=35130359.

⁴⁸ "92% of Saudi's believe that 'Islamic State conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law' – Poll", *Muslim Statistics*, 22 July 2014, <https://muslimstatistics.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/92-of-saudis-believes-that-isis-conforms-to-the-values-of-islam-and-islamic-law-survey/>.

interview poll, with 5,100 respondents in Saudi Arabia and six other Arab countries as well as people in Syrian refugee camps located in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, showed that, while an average of 85 percent of the Arabs interviewed held a negative view of IS, in Saudi Arabia 32 percent were “Positive” or “Positive to some extent” about IS – six percentage points more than in the Palestinian territories (26 percent). However, another poll from 2015, said that 78 percent of Saudis had a very negative view of IS, with another 14 percent having a ‘fairly negative view’.⁴⁹ Yet another opinion poll from 2014 purported to show that only 10 percent of Saudi citizens had a positive (or somewhat positive) view of IS.⁵⁰ How can we explain such big discrepancies? Public opinion can be fickle but does not fluctuate that much. Searching for an explanation, it is worth recalling what David Pollock, a former US foreign policy practitioner in the Middle East, said about polling in the Arab world eight years ago:

In most cases, Arab governments must approve any polling, which raises serious questions about possible censorship (or self-censorship), surveillance, intimidation, or outright falsification, particularly on even mildly controversial questions. Although polling is somewhat more common in the region today than it was until just a few years ago, that could actually increase rather than decrease the level of official concern and interference with survey activities and results.⁵¹

The conclusion we have to draw is that results from public opinion polls under authoritarian regimes – whether this be Russia or Saudi Arabia – must be treated with great caution.

Sympathy and Support for al Qaeda in Western Diasporas: the Case of Great Britain

If we look at sympathy and support for Islamist terrorists in Western Muslim diasporas, some of the figures reported in opinion polls also give rise to concern. Great Britain has a Muslim minority of 4.4 percent out of a total population of more than 64 million people. Among the nearly three million Muslims, sympathy for al Qaeda has been small but not insignificant. According to one opinion poll held in 2011, Islamists comprise 9 percent of Britain’s Muslim population and an even larger share of British Muslims, 29 percent, claimed to be prepared to “aggressively defend Islam”.⁵²

An ICM poll taken after the attacks on the London transport system on 7 July 2005 claimed that 20 percent of British Muslims sympathise with the 7/7 bombers – which would have been the equivalent of 600,000 Muslims if the survey can be considered

⁴⁹ D. Pollock, “New Saudi Poll Shows Iran, Russia, United States, and ISIS Are All Unpopular; Mixed Views on Others”, *The Washington Institute*, 22 October 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-saudi-poll-shows-iran-russia-united-states-and-isis-are-all-unpopular-m>. According to D. Pollock: “This is almost the same result as in our poll conducted one year ago” (Ibid.).

⁵⁰ Arab Opinion Index, “A Majority of Arabs Oppose ISIL, Support Air Strikes on the Group”, *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, 11 November 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/6a355a64-5237-4d7a-b957-87f6b1ceba9b>.

⁵¹ D. Pollock, “Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States”, *The Washington Institute - Policy Focus* 82 (2008), [from Executive Summary on p. vii], <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippery-polls-uses-and-abuses-of-opinion-surveys-from-arab-states>.

⁵² National Opinion Polls (NOP) Research: Hardcore Islamists comprise 9% of Britain’s Muslim population; Another 29% would “aggressively defend” Islam: see P. Basham, “Many British Muslims Put Islam First”, *CBS News*, 14 August 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/many-british-muslims-put-islam-first/>.

representative.⁵³ Those Muslims who said that they fully supported the attacks were 6 percent of all Muslims in the UK – the equivalent of more than 100,000 Muslims. Another poll conducted in 2006 by NOP Research claimed that 25 percent of British Muslims said that the 7/7 bombings (which killed 52 people, and injured over 700 others, including Muslims) were justified.⁵⁴ That level of support was apparently predominantly a youth phenomenon, for another opinion survey by Channel Four in 2006 noted that 31 percent of younger British Muslims said that the 7/7 bombings were justified – while only 14 percent of those over 45 held the same opinion.⁵⁵ All told, according to an opinion survey reported in the *Daily Telegraph* two weeks after the 7/7 attacks, one in four Muslims sympathised with the motives of the four terrorists.⁵⁶ According to a Populus Poll held in 2006, 12 percent of British Muslims said that they believed that suicide attacks against civilians in Britain can be justified and more than twice as many – 25 percent – thought that suicide attacks against British troops were justified.⁵⁷ This has to be understood against the background of the British participation in the unjustified US intervention in Iraq in 2003. At that time, many Muslims in the UK did not feel that they were British. Integration of Muslims in the UK faced the problem that, according to a Pew poll from 2006, only 7 percent of British Muslims think of themselves as British first – 81 percent say ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘Briton’ when asked about their primary identity.⁵⁸

Mistrust in the British state was also reflected in a poll taken in 2007. It found that one in four Muslims thought the government had staged the 7/7 bombings and framed the Muslims convicted.⁵⁹ While 88 percent of Muslims polled said that they were opposed to the 7/7 bombings, 12 percent – or nearly one in eight UK-based Muslims – were not.

This suggests that there is a radical milieu that arguably could offer some protection to terrorists. One opinion poll, conducted in 2006 by IMC, found that 25 percent of British Muslims disagreed with the idea that a Muslim has an obligation to report terrorists to the police.⁶⁰ On the other hand, there are also signs of better integration. A poll conducted in 2016 for the BBC found that only 6 percent of British Muslims felt no loyalty to the host country and 85 percent of those polled (n = 1,000) were not sympathetic towards people who want to fight against Western interests. Half of those polled (49 percent) believe that Muslim clerics preaching that violence against the West

⁵³ Independent Communications and Marketing (ICM) Poll: 20% of British Muslims sympathize with 7/7 bombers: P. Hennessy and M. Kite, “Poll reveals 40pc of Muslims want sharia law in UK”, *The Telegraph*, 19 February 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1510866/Poll-reveals-40pc-of-Muslims-want-sharia-law-in-UK.html>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ M. Mirza, A. Senthikumar and Z. Ja’Far, *Living apart together: British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism* (London, Heron, Dawson & Sawyer: 2007), <https://www.policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/living-apart-together-jan-07.pdf>.

⁵⁶ A. King, “One in four Muslims sympathises with motives of terrorists”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1494648/One-in-four-Muslims-sympathises-with-motives-of-terrorists.html>; cit. “Muslim Statistics (Terrorism)”, *Wikipedia*, [http://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Statistics_\(Terrorism\)](http://wikiislam.net/wiki/Muslim_Statistics_(Terrorism)); J. Dean, “Survey reveals chasm between Muslim values and rest of UK”, *The Times*, 11 April 2016, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4730825.ece>.

⁵⁷ Populus Poll (2006): 12% of young Muslims in Britain (and 12% overall) believe that suicide attacks against civilians in Britain can be justified. 1 in 4 support suicide attacks against British troops; in D. Pipes, “More Survey Research from a British Islamist Hell”, *Daniel Pipes Middle East Forum*, 26 July 2007, <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2005/07/more-survey-research-from-a-british-islamist>.

⁵⁸ The Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006: Only 7% of British Muslims think of themselves as British first (81% say ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘Briton’); “Few Signs of Backlash From Western Europeans”, *Pew Research Center*, The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July 2006, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/254.pdf>.

⁵⁹ “Muslim Attitudes towards Terrorism”, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_attitudes_toward_terrorism.

⁶⁰ D. Pipes, “More Survey Research from a British Islamist Hell”, *Daniel Pipes Middle East Forum*, 26 July 2007, <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2005/07/more-survey-research-from-a-british-islamist>.

can be justified are out of touch with mainstream Muslims opinion; but almost as many – 45 percent – disagreed.⁶¹

After these two brief excursions into national opinion surveys in Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, let us return to IS's standing in public opinion polls.

Sympathy and Support for IS among Muslims

Since 2014 IS, which features the self-proclaimed Caliphate as its main selling point, has taken the limelight from al Qaeda and attracted, despite its extraordinary cruelty, more sympathy and support among young Muslims and recent converts to Islam. It would appear that, beginning in 2013, many foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq switched allegiance from al Qaeda to IS, at least if one takes the destination of would-be foreign fighters as an indicator.⁶²

Most opinion polls from the Arab world tend to stress (correctly) that large majorities of Muslims are opposed to both al Qaeda and IS. Yet terrorist groups do not need majority support to be able to operate. Sizeable minorities are enough. One study, based on four polls surveying Arab public opinion between October 2015 and March 2015, found that ISIS had – if the polling samples are representative – in ten Muslim-majority countries and the Palestinian territories a minimum of 8.5 million supporters and another 24.5 million sympathisers who view IS at least somewhat positively.⁶³

When one translates several single digit and a few double digit percentages from opinion poll results expressing 'very positive' and 'positive to some extent' opinions towards jihadist terrorists into demographic population numbers, one reaches figures that go into millions of individuals. Figure 7 reproduces some results of a survey conducted by Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies in Qatar.

⁶¹ BBC Radio 4 Today, "Poll of 1,000 Muslims in Britain for BBC Radio 4 Today", *Com Res Global*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/bbc-radio-4-today-muslim-poll/>.

⁶² D. Dumont, *Dutch and Belgian Foreign Fighter Pathways*. The Hague: Master Thesis, Leiden University, August 2016, p.25.

⁶³ R. Mauro, "ISIS Has Up To 42 Million Supporters in the Arab World. An analysis of four recent polls surveying Arab public opinion towards the Islamic State", *The Clarion Project*, 28 June 2015, <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-has-least-42-million-supporters-arab-world>. The estimate was based on a March 2015 poll by the Iraqi Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies; a November 2014 poll by Zogby Research Services; another November 2014 poll by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and an October 2014 poll by the Fikra Forum commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The eleven countries surveyed were Iraq, Syria, Palestinian Territories, Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Jordan, Libya, and Lebanon.

Figure 7: Percentages of 'Very positive' and 'Positive to some extent' responses expressed in population shares of total country population (mid-2015) (n = 18,311) in 11 countries & Palestinian Territories, in response to the question: "In general, do you have a positive or negative view of ISIL"?⁶⁴

Country	(i) 'Very Positive'	(ii) 'Positive To Some Extent'	(i) + (ii) As Populations
Jordan	1%	1%	162,351
Tunisia	1%	1%	220,744
Algeria	5%	4%	355,879
Saudi Arabia	1%	1%	555,046
Sudan	5%	6%	397,197
Iraq	1%	1%	741,123
Palest. Terr.	2%	4%	280,948
Kuwait	1%	4%	139,426
Lebanon	1%	-	61,847
Egypt	3%	6%	7,963,564
Morocco	3%	5%	2,665,815
Mauritania	10%	10%	719,340
Aggregate			<u>14,263,450</u>

The combined percentages of columns one and two represent more than fourteen million people in 11 countries and the Palestinian territories. These are the people whose views are 'very positive' or 'positive to some extent'. While there are more than 310 million people living in these countries,⁶⁵ the more than 14 million people with

⁶⁴ "Arab Opinion Index 2015: In Brief", Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, p. 36, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/6ad332dc-b805-4941-8a30-4d28806377c4.pdf>. The population figures were calculated on the basis of data from "The World Fact Book" (estimates for mid-2015), CIA, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>; the Palestinian demographics were taken from the English version of "Demographics of the Palestinian territories", Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_Palestinian_territories.

⁶⁵ Christin Löchel et al., *Der neue Fischer Weltatmanach 2017* (Frankfurt am Main: FischerVerlag, 2016).

positive views constitute a potential radical milieu from which IS can draw support. While these sympathisers and supporters are scattered over almost a dozen Arab countries, the medium of the internet does link many of them up in a way that was not possible fifteen years ago. To be sure, these sympathisers are minorities in all Arab countries. But they are not alone.

There are also Muslims sympathising with IS outside the Arab world. A Pew opinion poll of 2015 found that 20 percent of Nigerian Muslims view IS favourably.⁶⁶ One wing of Boko Haram – not so long ago next to IS the most lethal terrorist organisation in the world – has also sworn allegiance to IS. Indonesia (4 percent) and Pakistan (9 percent) are two more countries where single digit percentages of opinion polls translate into more than 25 million people if the respondents surveyed can be considered representative of the whole population. Adding just Indonesia and Pakistan to the more than 14 million from the previous information box adds up to more than 40 million sympathisers.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ M. Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world", *Pew Research Center*, 22 July 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world>.

⁶⁷ To make the calculation for just two countries: Indonesia: population estimate for July 2014: 253,609,643 (of which 87.2 percent Muslims); 4 percent = 8,845,904 sympathisers; Pakistan: population estimate for July 2014: 196,174,380 (of which 96.4 percent Muslims); 9 percent = 17,020,089 sympathisers. If a broader sample of Muslim-majority countries is taken, the total figures are significantly higher, suggesting that almost one in eight Muslims support suicide bombings against civilians. Jay Michaelson arrived at such a conclusion based on the following calculation: "According to a 2013 Pew Survey entitled *'The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society'*, in most countries, at least three quarters of Muslims polled 'reject suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilians.' Excluding Palestine and Afghanistan, where the numbers are higher for obvious political reasons, the highest percentages who approved of such tactics were 29 percent in Egypt and 26 percent in Bangladesh. Michaelson wrote: 'The Pew report, which appears to be the best data currently available, doesn't add up all the numbers. But I did. There are approximately 1,083,021,825 Muslims in the 21 countries they polled – 68% of the global total. Based on the country-by-country percentages in the Pew report, that means about 133 million support suicide bombing or other forms of violence against civilians. Extrapolating the data – which is probably inaccurate since American and European Muslims probably support violence significantly less, while Iranian Muslims may support it more – that means about 195 million Muslims worldwide support suicide bombing and other acts of violence against civilians' (...). More importantly, the global percentage is just 12 percent". – J. Michaelson, "How to Measure What Muslims Really Believe: How Many Muslims Support Terrorism? About 12 percent. Here's Why That's Worth Knowing.", *The Daily Beast*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/10/how-to-measure-what-muslims-really-believe.html>.

Figure 8: Views on ISIS in 10 Countries and Palestinian Territories (Spring 2015)⁶⁸

Country	Unfavourable	Favourable	Don't Know
Lebanon	100%	-	1%
Israel	97%	1%	2%
Jordan	94%	3%	4%
Palestinian Terr.	84%	6%	10%
Indonesia	79%	4%	18%
Turkey	73%	8%	19%
Nigeria	66%	14%	20%
Burkina Faso	64%	8%	28%
Malaysia	64%	11%	25%
Senegal	60%	11%	29%
Pakistan	28%	9%	62% [sic!]

⁶⁸ J. Poushter, "In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS", *Pew Research Center*, 17 November 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>.

Some of those expressing sympathy or verbal support when asked for the reason why, referred to the military successes of IS. The recent reversals of fortune for IS on the battlefield has probably reduced that rationale for support. The flow of foreign fighters to Syria has slowed down dramatically, coming almost to a halt. However, if IS is beaten in Syria and Iraq, many of the surviving fighters might not give up the fight but return to their home countries or move to other theatres of jihadi conflict. In the meantime, those who can no longer go to Syria have been encouraged by IS to conduct attacks in their home countries.

Conclusion

Based on such opinion surveys, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a sizeable undercurrent of sympathy and support in both Muslim-majority countries and in Western Muslim diasporas where jihadist propaganda is accepted and a certain freedom of action for recruitment and mobilisation continues to be present. This conclusion coincides with one reached by Professor Brynjar Lia, an eminent Norwegian researcher:

Numerous polls in the region show a remarkably high level of support for jihadis [...]. With an estimated 355 million inhabitants in the Middle East and North Africa, the polls [...] actually suggest that several million people in the region may be very supportive of ISIS and/or al-Qaida. [...] That is, the level of popular support is so extensive that the local population in certain areas is willing to go to some length to aid, abet and even glorify “the mujahidin” hiding in their midst. Hence, far from being an isolated terrorist underground or an extremist fringe, hated and despised by the surrounding populations, the jihadi movement has managed to insert itself as an insurgent movement with a foothold among the masses.⁶⁹

This is an alarming conclusion and nothing less than astounding when one keeps in mind that in late 2001 al Qaeda counted only a few hundred mujahidin and IS did not exist at all. After the United States alone spent several trillion dollars in fighting al Qaeda and IS with military as well as non-military instruments,⁷⁰ no victory is in sight. Seldom has counter-terrorism been so counter-productive than in the American strategy based mainly on military interventions.

Salafist Jihadism (*al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya*) has managed to establish itself as the dominant ideology of rebellion in the early 21st century, just as Fascism and Communism had been the most violent ideologies of the twentieth century. For a brief moment in 2011, the Arab Spring with its non-violent mass demonstrations, seemed to offer an alternative model of rebellion in the absence of democratic regimes but when these mass uprisings were crushed in all countries except Tunisia, jihadism as a non-mass based method of fighting repression and foreign intervention gained the upper hand in the minds of many militant youths. Young Muslims with rising expectations but low chances of realising them also have emerged in diasporas outside the Muslim

⁶⁹ B. Lia, “Jihadism in the Arab World after 2011: Explaining its expansion”, *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4, (2016), p. 8.

⁷⁰ R. Wright et al., “The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond”, *United States Institute of Peace – Wilson Center*, 12 December 2016, p. 5, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>.

world, especially among disgruntled young Muslims in Western Europe where militant Islamism forms a small but significant sub-culture among some 25 million Muslims.⁷¹

The American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 allowed the rise of IS and led to the declaration of a new Caliphate in 2014 which was a game-changer. Tens of thousands of Muslims – including more than 5,000 from Europe – rushed to Syria and Iraq to support the new Caliphate. Various isolated sympathisers and supporters of jihadism managed to link up thanks to the social media of the internet. Unusual for most terrorist movements, both al Qaeda and IS have been able to conquer and – at least temporarily – hold territory in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, and, to a lesser extent, in northern Nigeria, Mali, Algeria, Egypt (Sinai), Afghanistan/Pakistan and Russia (Caucasus).⁷² Altogether IS now claims to be a global movement with eight formal branches, divided into 37 provinces (*wilayats*), communicating to its followers in 35 languages. IS and other extremist groups have managed to attract between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters from 86 countries. IS and its followers have plotted or staged attacks on all five continents.⁷³ According to Brynjar Lia this “represents a massive global rebel movement with several territorial proto-states, a huge popular base of geographically scattered and dedicated supporters around the globe and a massive capacity to rally foreign fighters and resources to new conflict areas”.⁷⁴

Much of that support is based on the clever use of an old religion and the new worldwide web as mobilising instruments. By defending and legitimising their actions meticulously with appropriate references to the Qur’an, the *hadith*, and texts from Islamic scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah, al Qaeda and IS have been able to appeal to sizeable sectors of the Muslim public, especially among the young.

The battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of Muslims is unlikely to be over with the defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq. One way to monitor its progress and regress in the battle for ‘hearts and minds’ of Muslims will be by paying more attention to opinion polls and conducting them in a scientifically sound and non-partisan way, using a set of more precise questions than hitherto.⁷⁵

The present Research Paper has only been able to scratch the surface. There are many more opinion polls – some in Arabic – which this author could not access. There are plenty of methodological questions that need to be asked about opinion polls, especially when it comes to the Arab world. Some of these problems with Arab public opinion polls have already been addressed by David Pollock in 2008.⁷⁶ The situation

⁷¹ T. Hegghammer, “The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no.6, (2016), p. 159.

⁷² R. Wright et al., “The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond”, *United States Institute of Peace – Wilson Center*, 12 December 2016, p. 17, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>.

⁷³ Idem, pp.16 and 11.

⁷⁴ B. Lia, “Jihadism in the Arab World after 2011: Explaining its expansion” (2016), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁵ A report written in 2011 had already concluded that “Few data exists about the motivations and support for terrorism, topics that are difficult to measure and that are relevant to quell terrorism worldwide. Uncovering public opinion about these issues is therefore extremely important to fill this gap for scholars and policy makers”. K. Didow and J. Jacob. “Ten Years After September 11: an Analysis of Public Opinion in the Muslim World”. *Harvard University: John F. Kennedy School of Government*, Spring 2011, <https://www.innovations.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/1871134.pdf>.

⁷⁶ David Pollock commented on some of the difficulties in 2008 but they are still present to varying degrees: “Although a few of these polls are fairly credible, most are methodologically suspect, so their numbers are unreliable - even apart from the numerous instances of loaded questions, selective presentations, and biased analyses.[...] In short, even with the best of intentions, many ‘Arab world’ surveys suffer from severe and mutually reinforcing problems of sample design and execution, social controls, government surveillance, dearth of credibility checks, and most of all, absence of any clear links to events on the ground. At best, these polls are just imperfect snapshots of what people are willing to say to strangers, quite possibly with only a tenuous connection to actual behavior at either the popular or the policy level. At worst, they are so fatally flawed as to verge on the fraudulent.” D. Pollock, “Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion

has by and large not improved much, since, in reaction to the Arab Spring uprisings, many governments in the Middle East and North Africa have tried to control the expression of public opinion even more.

It is probable that many polls – especially those which required government approval – downplay the degree of popular sympathy and support for al Qaeda and IS. One indication that the problem is larger than some of the main opinion polls suggest is the high level of concern among moderate Muslims in Muslim-majority countries who worry much about religious extremism. According to one survey from 2012, at least half of Muslims in most countries surveyed said they were concerned about religious extremist groups in their country, including two-thirds or more of Muslims in Egypt (67 percent), Tunisia (67 percent), Iraq (68 percent), and Indonesia (78 percent). On balance, more Muslims are worried about Islamic extremists than about Christian extremists⁷⁷ – and rightfully so. Most of the Muslims victimised by acts of terrorism are the victims of other Muslims, e.g. in Sunni vs. Shia confrontations. These attacks are mainly – but not exclusively – the work of non-state jihadists of which there are now tens of thousands⁷⁸ – mainly in Syria and Iraq but also beyond.

What will happen on the physical battlefields of jihad will be important. But as important is what the fallout of these physical battles will be when it comes to the ‘hearts and minds’ of Muslims worldwide. To assess that we need better monitoring instruments in the form of more refined opinion polls.⁷⁹

While terrorism is a typical minority tactic, the minorities sympathetic or supportive of terrorism are sizeable enough to provide a radical milieu and breeding ground for the continuation of the terrorist form of struggle. The continuing existence of authoritarian, corrupt, undemocratic and repressive regimes in the Arab and Muslim world and the absence of alternative paradigms for achieving political change are likely to guarantee that jihadist terrorism, seeking to justify itself by trying to root itself firmly in the religion of Islam, will continue. We should, however, never lose sight of the fact that voicing sympathy for IS (and al Qaeda) is closely linked to the corresponding antipathy among many Muslims for those authoritarian Arab and Muslim regimes – and those external forces supporting them – whose acts of injustice, repression and violence continues to this day.

While support for terrorist organisations like al Qaeda and IS among Muslims has not become a mass phenomenon in the twenty years since al Qaeda’s first *fatwa* against the West (1996), and while voicing sympathy does not necessarily translate into direct

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Surveys from Arab States”, The Washington Institute - Policy Focus 82 (2008), from Executive Summary, pp. vii-viii, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippery-polls-uses-and-abuses-of-opinion-surveys-from-arab-states>.

⁷⁷J. Bell et al., “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society”, *Pew Research Center – Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>.

⁷⁸J.M. Berger recently wrote: “While there is no consistent estimate of the Islamic State’s foreign fighter base, no one believes it is greater than tens of thousands of fighters.” J.M. Berger, “The Social Apocalypse: A Forecast”, *Intelwire*, 31 August 2016, <http://news.intelwire.com/2016/08/the-social-apocalypse-forecast.html>.

⁷⁹One example, but based on a small *n* population, is M. Tessler, M. Robbins and A. Jamal, “What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State?”, *Washington Post*, 27 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/07/27/what-do-ordinary-citizens-in-the-arab-world-really-think-about-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.15ed3714ed6e; Tessler and colleagues asked more sophisticated questions than simply whether or not views of al Qaeda or IS were ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’. They asked young, less educated Muslim (and others) three questions that break down the reasons for support of IS:

- (i) To what extent do you agree with the goals of the Islamic State?;
- (ii) To what extent do you support the Islamic State’s use of violence?; and
- (iii) To what extent do you believe the Islamic State’s tactics are compatible with the teachings of Islam?

support let alone actual participation in violence, the various polling data from Muslim-majority countries and Muslim diasporas in the West do point towards the existence of radical milieus woven together by the internet. Most current opinion poll questions are too broad and vague to catch in detail degrees of sympathy and support for Salafist jihadism. It might well be that the terrorists themselves over-estimate and their opponents under-estimate such sympathy and support. In the end, all sides in this struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of Muslims would be served by better data to avoid building their strategies on sand.

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⁸⁰ With the assistance of Judith Tinnes (Terrorism Research Initiative) and Amal Nassar (former intern, ICCT).

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