

## **What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State?**

by

Mark Tessler, Michael Robbins and Amaney Jamal

What do ordinary Arabs think about the Islamic State? This spring, we added several questions to the standard battery of Arab Barometer surveys to find out. We asked a scientific sample of respondents in Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine, Algeria and Morocco the following questions:

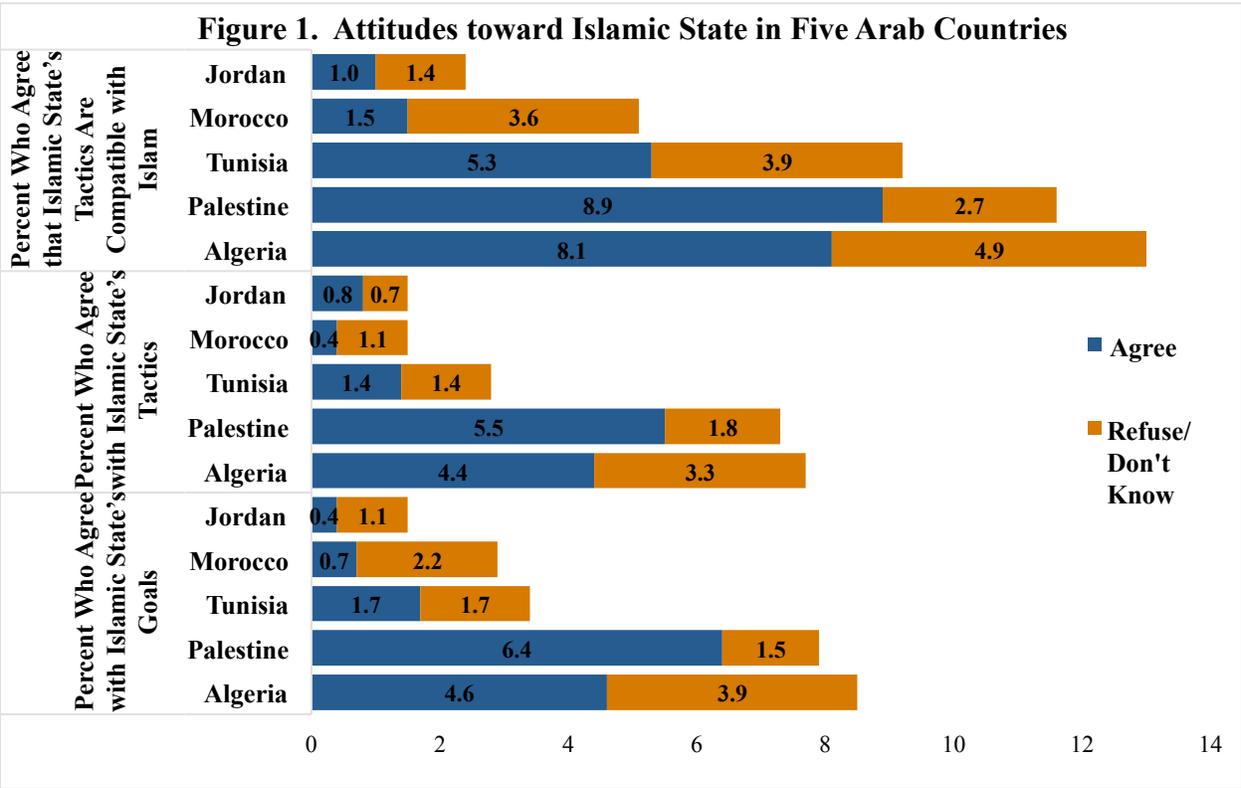
- To what extent do you agree with the goals of the Islamic State;
- To what extent do you support the Islamic State's use of violence; and
- To what extent do you believe the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with the teachings of Islam?

### **Little support for the Islamic State**

The findings were stark: not many Arabs sympathize with the Islamic State. The percent agreeing with the Islamic State's goals range from 0.4 percent in Jordan to 6.4 percent in Palestine. The percent agreeing with the Islamic State's use of violence range from 0.4 percent in Morocco to 5.4 percent in Palestine. The percent agreeing that the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with Islam range from 1.0 percent in Jordan to 8.9 percent in Palestine.

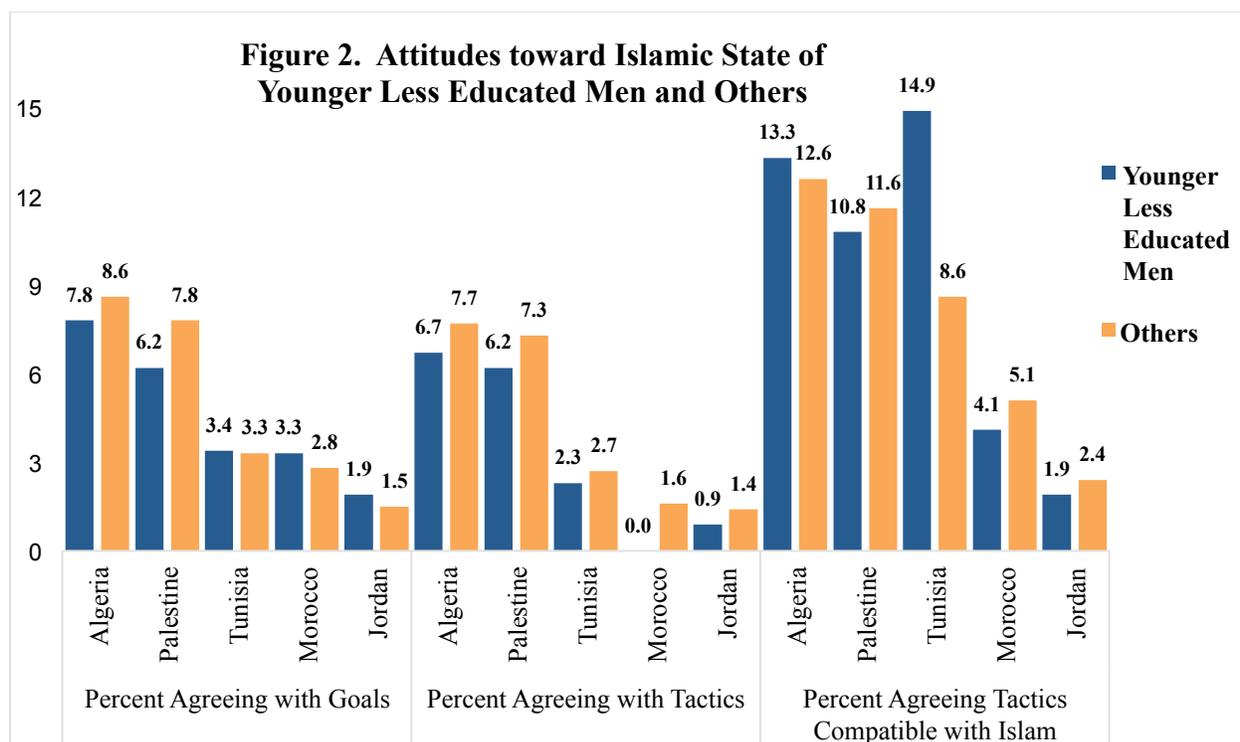
It's important to dig deeper, though. While very few respondents express positive attitudes toward the Islamic State, it is possible that some who support the Islamic State's goals or tactics or believe the group's actions are compatible with Islam decline to answer the question or say they don't know, rather than explicitly express approval of the Islamic State.

For sensitive issues like support for an extremist group, this is a common way to avoid expressing an opinion that is contrary to societal norms. For each question and each country, therefore, we also note the percent that decline to respond or say they don't know. With these responses treated as expressions of support for the Islamic State, the percent having positive, or at least neutral, attitudes toward the Islamic State increases, particularly in Algeria and Palestine. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 1, it is clear, overall, that there is very little support for the Islamic State among these five Arab publics.



**A key demographic differs little**

What about younger and poorly educated men, which seem to be a primary audience for the Islamic State message? Breaking out the responses of male respondents aged 36 or under who have had less than secondary schooling shows that even among this key demographic group there is also little support either for the Islamic State's goals or for its use of violence, and that few consider the Islamic State's tactics to be compatible with the teachings of Islam. Indeed, in some instances positive attitudes toward the Islamic State are held by fewer individuals in the key demographic category. These findings are shown in Figure 2.



### A Tunisian exception?

Findings are similar with respect to whether the Islamic State’s tactics are compatible with the teachings of Islam, but with one potentially instructive exception. This concerns Tunisia, where 14.9 percent of poorly educated younger male respondents believe that the Islamic State’s tactics are compatible with Islamic teachings, compared to only 8.6 percent of other Tunisians.

The finding that younger and less well-educated Tunisian men are more likely than other Tunisians to judge the Islamic State’s tactics to be compatible with Islamic teachings may help to explain why a large number of Tunisians have left the country to fight with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. News reports place the number between 3,000 and 8,000, far more than any other Arab country with the exception of Saudi Arabia. And since most who have responded to the Islamic State’s call are poorly educated younger men, the comparatively high percentage that considers the Islamic State’s tactics to be compatible with Islam may provide a part of the explanation.

There are only 87 respondents in this key demographic category in the Tunisian survey, and so findings should be accepted with a measure of caution, even though a non-parametric statistical test does show a very low probability of obtaining by chance alone the difference reported in Figure 2.

Only 3.4 percent of poorly educated younger Tunisian men express support for the Islamic State's goals and only 2.3 percent agree with its violent tactics. Nevertheless, it is notable that Tunisians in the demographic category that is the primary target of the Islamic State messaging are significantly more likely than other Tunisians, and also than their counterparts in other Arab countries, to consider the Islamic State's tactics compatible with Islam.

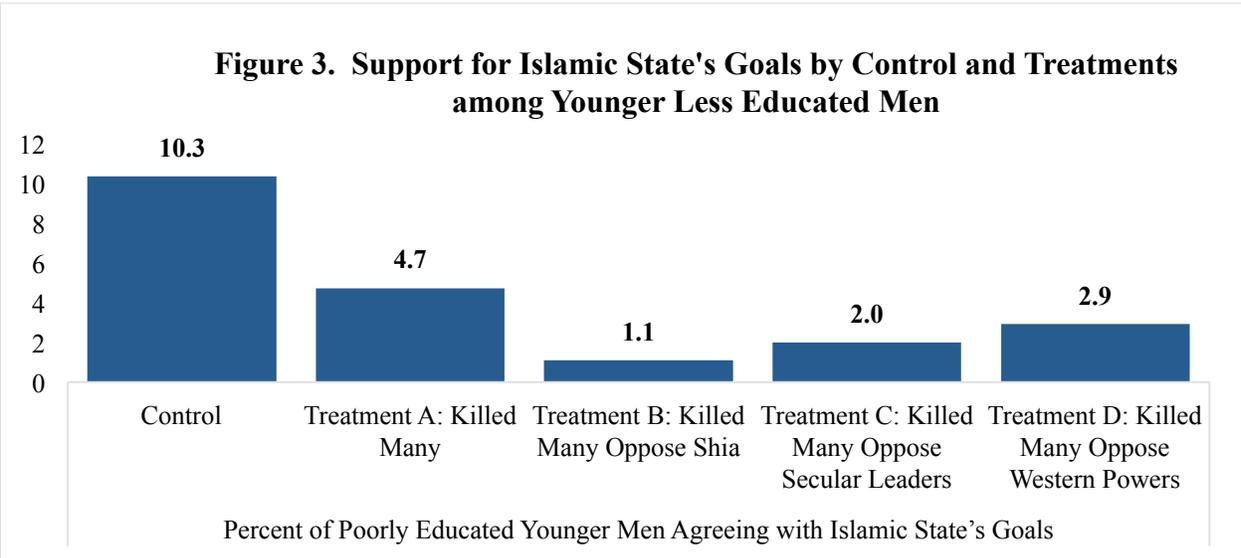
### **An embedded experiment**

We wanted to dig even deeper into factors shaping the views of younger less well-educated men, the key demographic targeted by Islamic State messaging. We therefore introduced a survey experiment into the 2016 Arab Barometer instrument. Respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of four treatment groups before being asked the questions about the Islamic State.

The various treatment scripts provided information about the Islamic State and its stated objectives. The control version included no additional text. The script of the first treatment, Treatment A, told respondents that the Islamic State has emerged as a potent force in the Middle East, that its goal is to extend the caliphate across the Muslim world, and that it has killed many Muslims and non-Muslims in pursuit of this aim.

The three remaining treatments, B, C, and D, included the Treatment A script and then provided an additional piece of information. Treatment B added that another of the Islamic State's stated objectives is to limit Shia influence across the Muslim world and to confront Iranian-led Shiite forces in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere; Treatment C added that another of the Islamic State's declared goals is to defend Islam from attacks by secular leaders and other elites whose goal is to limit the role of Islam in government and public life; and Treatment D added that another of the Islamic State's declared goals is to counter intervention in the region by the United States and other Western powers who have engaged in military attacks against it.

Figure 3 shows responses to the question about the Islamic State's goals of younger less educated men in the control group and in each of the four treatment groups. The figure shows that approval, or at least the absence of disapproval, is more common among respondents in the control group and less common among those in all of the treatment groups, especially those in Treatments B, C, and D, each of which provides information about one of the Islamic State's stated objectives. In each case, the difference between the control and Treatment B, the control and Treatment C, and the control and Treatment D is statistically significant. Figure 3 thus strongly suggests that the provision of information about the Islamic State's declared goals reduces the likelihood that a young poorly educated man will approve of the Islamic State's goals.



Several additional insights are suggested by the findings shown in Figure 3. First, although the degree of support for the Islamic State's goals is lower among those in Treatment A than among those in the control group, the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant, meaning that this result could have just been chance. Accordingly, we cannot say with confidence that telling those in the key demographic targeted by the Islamic State only about the group's violent actions, including the killing of Muslims as well as non-Muslims, will change their views very much.

Although telling these young men both about the Islamic State's violent actions and also about any one of its stated objectives is likely to reduce support for the group, telling them about the Islamic State's goal of combatting Shia influence has the greatest impact on their assessments. This is probably because Sunni-Shia tensions are largely absent in the five Arab countries on which this analysis is based, whereas in many if not all of the countries there is likely to be at least some concern about secular leaders and Western influence. Accordingly, the conclusion to be drawn is that support for the Islamic State will diminish among those in the population category from which the Islamic State seeks to recruit fighters to the extent they see as less relevant to their own societies the goals on behalf of which the Islamic State claims to be fighting.

Only a small minority of young, uneducated men who sympathize with the Islamic State have left to fight on its behalf. Yet, those who sympathize with the movement are more likely than others to one day join its cause. It may be possible to use some of the Islamic State's own messaging against the movement. Juxtaposing information about its use of violence and its specific aims leads to small but statistically significant and meaningful declines in support for the group. Combining this strategy with other messages combating its extremist ideology may offer the best approach to influence the views of the small minority of uneducated young men who sympathize with this terrorist organization.

*Mark Tessler is the Samuel J. Eldersveld Collegiate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. Michael Robbins is the director of the Arab Barometer. Amany A. Jamal is the Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Politics at Princeton University and director of the Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice.*