



**Question (R2 QL8):** *How does the U.S./Coalition view Shia extremism? Different from Sunni extremism? How do Sunni communities, Shia communities, MENA countries, and media perceive the U.S./Coalition position on combatting extremists?*

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## Executive Summary

***How does the U.S./Coalition view Shia extremism? How does the U.S./Coalition view Sunni extremism?***<sup>1</sup>

Experts who volunteered to respond to this set of questions did not directly answer how the US and its Coalition partners view Shia and Sunni extremism. However, there was an implicit assumption that the populations of these countries see Sunni extremism as a greater—or at least more visible—threat. However, Alex Vatanka of the Middle East Institute argued that they *should* both be viewed as equally threatening to US and Coalition interests at home and in the Middle East. Vatanka noted that these two forms of extremism differ in degree of threat and sophistication. While the US has been confronted with Sunni extremism in the form of violent caliphate-seeking groups who also espouse attacks against the far enemy in the West, Shia extremism is an equally pervasive—and perhaps less well understood—threat. It is “tantamount to a totalitarian ideology that will pose a threat to both US interests and those of allies in the region” over time. Vatanka pointed out that the Shia/Sunni split is roughly equivalent in the Middle East, and Shia extremists (back by a powerful, ambitious state, Iran), have the numbers to change the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. They have arguably already been quite successful in doing so through the use of proxy nations and Shia militias.

Hayder al-Khoei of the Centre for Shia Studies warned against drawing a false equivalency between Shia and Sunni extremism. He noted that these two phenomena differ remarkably in terms of beliefs, range of targets, and methods. High profile terrorist attacks that have been carried out in Europe and the United States were not conducted by Shia extremists. He noted

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<sup>1</sup> We were not able to get any experts to opine on how the US/Coalition views Shia and Sunni extremism. We suspect that is because most experts outside of the US Government feel that can only be answered from within the USG or the Coalition. If this is aspect of the question remains vital, we can attempt to elicit responses from within the USG and its Coalition partners.

that “there is a religious hierarchy that exists in Shia Islam which has no equivalence in Sunni Islam, this makes the latter more decentralised, fractured and is what enables groups like ISIS to portray themselves as authentic and legitimate representations of Islam.”

*How do Sunni communities, Shia communities, MENA countries, and media perceive the U.S./Coalition position on combatting extremists?*

According to Hayder al-Khoei of the Center for Shia Studies, Shia communities across the Middle East find the US and Coalition efforts to fight extremism “at best half-hearted and at worst complicit.” There is a fundamental and entrenched belief in the Middle East that the US directly aids and abets ISIS (see also Kaltenthaler & Dagher). Shia communities point to a number of reasons for this belief. Shia politicians in Iraq cite the slow response to the looming threat from ISIS as they bore down on Mosul and other cities in June 2014 as evidence of US collusion. While Shias in Iraq accuse the US of standing by while the threat from ISIS grew, in Syria, Shia observed the US actively funding and arming rebel groups who fluidly shared weapons, funds, and allegiance with al-Qaeda affiliated groups as well as ISIS. Furthermore, Syrian Shia question whether Turkey, a NATO ally, intentionally allowed jihadists into Syria as a way to siphon off troublemakers from European societies. Finally, the United States’ strong relationship with Saudi Arabia—whose promotion of Wahhabism is considered by some as the ideological root of today’s jihadism—is cited as further evidence of US tacit approval and support for Sunni extremism.

Karl Kaltenthaler, University of Akron and Case Western Reserve University, and Munqith Dagher, IIACS, in their work surveying populations in Iraq suggested that Sunnis place a greater amount of trust in the US relationship and its countering violent extremism efforts than Shia communities. Iraqi Kurds, who are largely Sunni, also generally have a positive view of the US, but there is a “significant minority of Kurds who have strong Islamist proclivities and show some sympathy toward ISIL and thus animosity toward the US.”

This polarization was clearly illustrated by a summer of 2016 survey in Iraq conducted by IIACS (Kaltenthaler & Dagher). When asked whether the US/Coalition was in Iraq to defeat ISIS, 82% of Sunni Arab Iraqi respondents agreed while only 32% of Iraqi Shia believed this to be the case. Iraqi Shia attribute US/Coalition action, particularly air strikes, in the region to an anti-Shia campaign. This demonstrates a massive trust deficit between the Shia community in Iraq and the US/Coalition.

## Iraqi Views of Coalition Airstrikes

Karl Kaltenthaler (University of Akron/Case Western Reserve University)  
and  
Munqith Dagher (IIACSS)

- Overall, 58% of Iraqis support coalition airstrikes against ISIL
- Views of the airstrikes are deeply colored by sectarian orientation and ethnicity
- 85% of Sunni Arabs support the airstrikes but only 33% of Shi'a Arabs do
- 67% of Kurds support the airstrikes
- 57% of Iraqis view the airstrikes as inaccurate and harming civilians, but with many more Shi'a Arab Iraqis believing this than Sunni Arabs or Kurds
- Iraqi views on the airstrikes are shaped by greater general Sunni Arab and Kurdish trust in the US and significant distrust among Shi'a Arabs toward the US

The following tables are breakdowns of Iraqi views toward coalition airstrikes. The data was taken from a survey carried out by IIACSS in the summer of 2016 in government controlled governates of Iraq. Various questions were asked to ascertain levels of support, views on effectiveness of the airstrikes, who is being targeted in the airstrikes, goals of the airstrikes, and negative consequences of the airstrikes. Our main analytic goals were to gauge overall Iraqi views on the airstrikes but also, and very importantly, to determine how the coalition airstrikes are viewed through sectarian and ethnic lenses. Our analytical prior coming into this exercise is that there would be stark differences in views on the airstrikes based on the sectarian and ethnic (Kurdish) identity of the respondents. The airstrikes are judged very much by who the respondent views as his/her ally or opponent. The logic of the enemy of my enemy is my friend plays out here. Iran is a major unspoken variable in this analysis. Because of the issue of how collective identity colors how people view other countries, Shi'a Iraqi Arabs tend to be positive about Shi'a Iran and negative toward the United States because it is viewed as the enemy of Iran, and thus the enemy of Shi'as. If the respondent is a Sunni Arab Iraqi, s/he tends to be more favorable toward the United States for the opposite reason and because ISIL is a more immediate threat to Sunni Arabs. Also, Iraqi Sunni Arabs would have more first-hand information about the effects of the airstrikes on ISIL because of their proximity to combat operations compared to Shi'a Iraqis. Kurds are more positive toward the coalition airstrikes than Shi'a Arabs but less positive than Sunni Arabs. The reason for this is that while most Kurds tend to view the U.S. positively, there is a significant minority of Kurds who have strong Islamist proclivities and show some sympathy toward ISIL and thus animosity toward the US.

**Q51: As you may know, a coalition of Arab and Western countries have been engaging in military airstrikes against the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Do you support or oppose these airstrikes? Is it strongly or somewhat?**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Strongly support</i>	25%	39%	7%	36%	24%
<i>Somewhat support</i>	33%	46%	26%	31%	30%
<i>Somewhat oppose</i>	20 %	7%	28%	11%	26%
<i>Strongly oppose</i>	17%	6%	34%	9%	17%
<i>DK/NR</i>	5%	2%	5%	12%	3%

The table above shows that, overall, 58% of Iraqis support the coalition airstrikes to some extent. But when differences between Sunnis and Shi'a are examined, it is clear that Sunnis are much more supportive than Shi'a. Eighty-five percent of Sunnis support the airstrikes but only 33% of Shi'a Arab Iraqis do. Among Kurdish respondents, 67% support the airstrikes. This shows the more mixed attitudes among the Kurds toward the US compared to Sunnis who are generally more positive and Shi'a who are generally more negative.

**Q52: How effective do you think the coalition has been in combatting ISIL?**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Very effective</i>	18%	22%	4%	39%	16%
<i>Somewhat effective</i>	38%	60%	26%	26%	37%
<i>Somewhat ineffective</i>	23%	11%	32%	15%	27%
<i>Very ineffective</i>	17%	4%	34%	9%	18%
<i>DK/NR</i>	4%	2%	5%	10%	3%

The same pattern of airstrikes being viewed very differently through sectarian and ethnic lenses appears when the effectiveness of airstrikes is judged by respondents. Eighty-two percent of the Sunni Arab respondents view the airstrikes as effective, whereas only 30% of Shi'a Arabs view them as effective. Once again, the Kurds are in between Sunnis and Shi'a in their views on the airstrikes with 65% viewing them as effective.

**Q55: Regardless of whether you support or oppose the coalition against ISIL, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding coalition actions in Iraq...**

**a. Coalition airstrikes mainly target PMF forces**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Agree strongly</i>	17%	6%	28%	1%	22%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	33%	32%	43%	9%	36%
<i>Neutral</i>	2%	1%	1%	5%	2%
<i>Disagree somewhat</i>	27%	41%	20%	26%	23%
<i>Disagree strongly</i>	18%	18%	4%	54%	14%
<i>DK/NR</i>	3%	3%	4%	4%	2%

The above table illustrates the amount of distrust that exists among Iraq's Shi'a Arabs toward the US-led coalition. Seventy-one percent of Shi'a Arabs believe that the airstrikes primarily target the largely Shi'a PMFs. This view is likely due to stories spread in the Iraqi media by Shi'a politicians that the US is using the airstrikes to target the PMFs. Only 38% of Sunni Arabs believe this and 10% of Kurds concur with this view.

**b. Coalition forces mainly help ISIL**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Agree strongly</i>	13%	5%	22%	0%	17%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	36%	35%	46%	4%	40%
<i>Neutral</i>	2%	1%	2%	4%	3%
<i>Disagree somewhat</i>	27%	38%	21%	27%	24%
<i>Disagree strongly</i>	19%	20%	5%	61%	14%
<i>DK/NR</i>	3%	3%	4%	4%	3%

The question explored above is also a useful indication of the trust that the various sectarian and ethnic groups in Iraq have of US combat operations in Iraq. Sixty-eight percent of Shi'a Iraqi Arabs believe that the airstrikes mainly *help* ISIL. Forty percent of Iraqi Sunni Arabs believe this. While this is a minority of Sunnis, it still indicates uneasiness about the airstrikes. There is a widely held conspiracy theory in Iraq that the US intentionally created ISIL. Thus, these results must be viewed with this in mind. It is likely that while most Sunni Arabs support the airstrikes and believe that they are carried out with good intentions, the collateral damage may be perceived to be creating some sympathy for ISIL. Kurds overwhelmingly do not believe the airstrikes help ISIL, with only 4% believing this to be the case.

**c. Coalition airstrikes mainly help Iraqi forces battling ISIL**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Agree strongly</i>	17%	24%	4%	35%	16%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	40%	58 %	28%	35%	38%
<i>Neutral</i>	3%	1%	2%	5%	3%
<i>Disagree somewhat</i>	26%	12%	39%	7%	31%
<i>Disagree strongly</i>	11%	3%	23%	12%	9%
<i>DK/NR</i>	3%	2%	4%	6%	3%

The converse of the previous table can be found in the table above. When asked if the airstrikes are helping Iraqi forces battling ISIL, 82% of Sunni Arab Iraqis believe this to be the case. Only 32% of Shi'a Arab Iraqis believe the airstrikes are mainly helping Iraqi forces fighting ISIL. Once again, the Kurds are more positive than the Shi'a but less positive than the Sunni Arabs about how the airstrikes are helping Iraqi forces fight ISIL. Seventy percent of Kurds believe the airstrikes are primarily helping Iraqi forces battle ISIL.

**d. Coalition airstrikes are inaccurate and harm civilians**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Agree strongly</i>	15%	11%	15%	4%	21%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	43%	48%	53%	12%	45%
<i>Neutral</i>	5%	1%	3%	17%	5%
<i>Disagree somewhat</i>	22%	27%	18%	28%	19%

<i>Disagree strongly</i>	9%	11%	5%	24%	5%
<i>DK/NR</i>	6%	2%	7%	15%	5%

The question responses shown above are a very good indication of the general view respondents have about the airstrikes because of collective identity predispositions toward and knowledge of the airstrikes. A majority of Sunni Arabs (59%) believe the airstrikes are inaccurate and harm civilians. Likely, this is a result of stories they have heard or having directly experienced some degree of collateral damage from airstrikes. But Shi'a Arabs, who have not been in areas with airstrikes, are even more negative toward the damage they do to civilians because of their negative predispositions toward the US. Sixty-six percent of Shi'a Arabs believe the airstrikes are inaccurate and harm civilians. Kurdish respondents are much more positive about the effects of the airstrikes on civilians, with only 16% believing that the airstrikes are inaccurate and harm civilians.

**e. The coalition's main goal is to defeat ISIL**

	All	Sunni Arab	Shi'a Arab	Kurd	Other
<i>Agree strongly</i>	18%	24%	6%	31%	17%
<i>Agree somewhat</i>	40%	58%	26%	41%	36%
<i>Neutral</i>	3%	2%	4%	4%	3%
<i>Disagree somewhat</i>	23%	12%	34%	9%	28%
<i>Disagree strongly</i>	12%	2%	25%	7%	12%
<i>DK/NR</i>	4%	2%	6%	8%	3%

The final question explored in this analysis is about Iraqi perceptions of whether the coalition's main goal is to defeat ISIL. Eighty-two percent of Sunni Arab Iraqi respondents believe the coalition's main goal is to defeat ISIL. Only 32% of Iraqi Shi'a Arabs believe this to be the case. Thus, most Iraqi Shi'a Arabs believe the coalition has ulterior motives for its airstrike campaign. Based on evidence cited in the tables above, particularly the table related to targeting PMFs, the campaign is viewed more as an anti-Shi'a campaign than an anti-ISIL campaign. This shows a massive gap in trust between Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs toward the US-led coalition. Kurds are much more positive than Shi'a about coalition goals, with 72% believing the coalition's main goal is to defeat ISIL.

## Response to R2.8

Hayder al Khoei (European Council on Foreign Relations)

How do Sunni communities, Shia communities, MENA countries, and media perceive the U.S./Coalition position on combatting extremists?

Generally speaking, Shia communities across the Middle East find the U.S. position on combatting extremists **at best half-hearted and at worst complicit**.

Whilst the Shia-dominated government in Iraq relies heavily on US military support to combat ISIS and seeks a strong partnership with the US to balance its relations with Iran, many Shia politicians in Iraq lament the slow response from the US to the rising ISIS threat before they occupied Mosul and other cities in June 2014. The pro-Iran Shia politicians in Iraq go one step further and accuse the US of directly supporting groups like ISIS. On a popular grassroots level, **the theory that the US supports ISIS is one of the most widely believed** across Shia-dominated southern Iraq.

After the outbreak of civil war in Syria, US policy towards both Syria and Iraq further enforced the perception within the Shia community that the US is not really serious about fighting extremism. **In Iraq, the US was disengaged and stood by as the jihadist threat grew, whilst in Syria, the US was actively involved in funding and arming rebels** who often coordinated with, shared weapons with, or later joined Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

That thousands of jihadists from across Europe were able to enter Turkey unhindered and then cross the border into Syria to join the war also raises many questions within the Shia community over the role that European and American security and intelligence agencies played. The belief is that these **jihadists were deliberately allowed to use NATO ally Turkey as a transit point to Syria** because it both cleansed European societies from extremist jihadists and also played a useful role in further weakening and isolating the Assad regime. The role that the CIA played in partnership with Saudi intelligence to arm rebel groups in Syria it knew had strong ties to Al-Qaeda further illustrates this point.

More broadly, the strong US relationship with Saudi Arabia is also a cause for concern for Shia communities given that Saudi Arabia uses its petrodollars to export the hateful and violent interpretation of Islam (Wahhabism) that forms the ideological foundations of extremist Sunni groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Shia actors argue that **US military, political and diplomatic support provided to Saudi Arabia, allowed Wahhabism to become the potent force it is today**. Over the last half century, Saudi Arabia would not have been able to undermine more tolerant and pluralist interpretations of Islam without US cover.

Additional response provided at a later date:

There is an attempt by many to draw an equivalence between Sunni and Shia extremism, and whilst both forms of extremism do exist, they are not even close in terms of beliefs, range of targets or methods.

If we look at terrorist attacks in the West for example: 9/11, 7/7 in London, Boston, Madrid, Paris, Nice, Berlin... the list goes on but none of these high-profile terrorist attacks were carried out by Shia extremists. I thought it necessary to point this out given Alex's response to this.

There is a religious hierarchy that exists in Shia Islam which has no equivalence in Sunni Islam, this makes the latter more decentralised, fractured and is what enables groups like ISIS to portray themselves as authentic and legitimate representations of Islam.



## Response to R2.8

Alex Vatanka (Middle East Institute)

Shia extremism should be viewed as no different or smaller threat than Sunni extremism. They play a much smarter game than ISIS and other violent Sunni groups but the Shia extremist worldview (mostly backed by Iran) is tantamount to a totalitarian ideology that will pose a threat to both US interests and those of US allies in the region. And they have the numbers too. In Middle East core, the Shia/Sunni split is roughly 50-50 and that should not be forgotten as we weigh the ability of Shia extremists to recruit and shape the region.

## Biographies

### Dr. Munqith Dagher



Dr. Munqith Dagher conducted Iraq's first-ever public opinion poll and since that time has been responsible for conducting over 1.5 Million interviews for a range of agencies and topics. Munqith established IIACSS in 2003 while he was a Professor of Public Administration/Strategic Management at Baghdad University. He has managed more than 300 public opinion projects and various market research projects. He has lectured widely and published several articles and books in different countries around the world. Recently, and since ISIL took over Mosul on June 2014, Munqith has dedicated most of his time to studying the reasons behind the sudden uprising of this terrorist organization and how to defeat it. For this reason, he has run three rounds of quantitative and qualitative research in Iraq. Munqith published the some of these results in the Washington post and gave number of talks and presentations in the most well known think tanks in the world, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington and King's College in London.

Munqith holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the University of Baghdad, College of Administration and Economics, Master degree in Human resources and Master degree in war sciences. He was professor of public administration and strategic management in Baghdad, Basrah and the National Defense Universities. Munqith has also finished the course in principles of marketing research at the University of Georgia, USA.

On June 16th 2015, Munqith was awarded the Ginny Valentine Badge of Courage, on behalf of the Research Liberation Front, for Bravery in keeping the research alive in multiple conflict zones.

### Karl Kaltenthaler

Professor Kaltenthaler received his Ph.D. from Washington University in 1995. His research has centered on how publics in various countries think about issues such as political violence and terrorism as well as international and domestic policy issues such as welfare provision, privatization, economic integration, and trade. He has a particular interest in how individual social psychology affects how people think about politics. He is currently working on a series of projects on how terrorism and the U.S. "war on terror" are perceived in the Islamic world. Professor Kaltenthaler is currently running a nation-wide survey project in Pakistan focusing on public attitudes toward Islamist militancy and media consumption.



### Hayder al-Khoei



Hayder al-Khoei is research director of the Centre for Shia Studies, a London-based research centre on Shia Muslim affairs. He is also research associate at the Centre on Religion and Global Affairs. He is currently a doctoral researcher at the University of Exeter, focusing on U.S. foreign policy and ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq.

### Alex Vatanka

Alex Vatanka is a Senior Fellow at the *Middle East Institute* and at *The Jamestown Foundation* in Washington D.C.

He specializes in Middle Eastern regional security affairs with a particular focus on Iran. From 2006 to 2010, he was the Managing Editor of *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*. From 2001 to 2006, he was a senior political analyst at Jane's in London (UK) where he mainly covered the Middle East. Alex is also a Senior Fellow in Middle East Studies at the US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) at Hurlburt Field and teaches as an Adjunct Professor at DISAM at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.



He has testified before the US Congress and lectured widely for both governmental and commercial audiences, including the US Departments of State and Defense, US intelligence agencies, US Congressional staff, and Middle Eastern energy firms. Beyond *Jane's*, the *Middle East Institute* and *The Jamestown Foundation*, he has written extensively for such outlets as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest*, the *Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of Democracy* and the *Council of Foreign Relations*.

Born in Tehran, he holds a BA in Political Science (Sheffield University, UK), and an MA in International Relations (Essex University, UK), and is fluent in Farsi and Danish. He is the author of *"Iran-Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy, and American Influence"* (2015), and contributed chapters to other books, including *"Authoritarianism Goes Global"* (2016). He is presently working on his second book *"The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy: Contested Ideology, Personal Rivalries and the Domestic Struggle to Define Iran's Place in the World."*



**Sarah Canna** applies her open source analytic skills to regions of vital concern to US Combatant Commands, particularly the Middle East and South Asia. To help military planners understand the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play in evolving conflict situations, she developed a Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa™) tool, which is designed to rapidly respond to emergent crises by pulsing NSI's extensive subject matter expert (SME) network to provide deep, customized, multidisciplinary analysis for defense and industry clients. Prior to joining NSI, she completed her Master's degree from Georgetown University in Technology and Security Studies. She holds a translation certificate in Spanish from American University and has been learning Dari for three years.