

US Mainstream Media and Islamophobia

By [Peter Hart](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

There was a pretty heated discussion of Islam on comedian Bill Maher's HBO show over the weekend. And on Monday night ([10/6/14](#)), Fox host [Bill O'Reilly](#) decided to weigh in.

His first point was that most Muslims support Sharia law, which he portrayed as very troubling:

There are about 1.6 billion Muslims and 35 countries practice some kind of sharia law. That means they are governed by people who abide by principles of Islam that are controversial to say the least. In some places you can even be stoned to death for committing a sin.

A study published by the Pew Research Center last year asked Muslims if they favor sharia law. In Afghanistan, 99 percent do; Pakistan 84 percent; Iraq 91 percent; Egypt 74 percent; Jordan 71 percent.... So you can see that millions of Muslims think their religion should dictate what happens in society.

But "sharia" doesn't mean supporting "stoning people to death." The Pew survey ([4/30/13](#)) he allegedly read explains that sharia

offers moral and legal guidance for nearly all aspects of life—from marriage and divorce, to inheritance and contracts, to criminal punishments. Sharia, in its broadest definition, refers to the ethical principles set down in Islam's holy book (the Quran) and examples of actions by the Prophet Muhammad (sunna).

Or, as Pew puts it elsewhere: "According to the survey findings, most Muslims believe sharia is the revealed word of God rather than a body of law developed by men based on the word of God."

And Sana Saeed wrote a really [great piece](#) about the myths of sharia:

So what does Sharia actually mean? The actual definition of the Arabic term is "path to the watering hole." It consists of moral and ethical principles meant to guide Muslims towards what will nourish their soul. According to Islamic law specialist Dr. Sherman Jackson, Sharia is everything "from honoring one's parents, to helping the poor, to being good to one's neighbor."

So support for sharia law might not be all that revealing. But for Bill O'Reilly, it's a chance to draw the conclusions you wish to draw about Muslims. The Pew poll also makes clear that Muslims do not "think their religion should dictate what happens in society." Most who support sharia law think it should apply *only* to Muslims, and Pew notes that "most Muslims

around the world express support for democracy, and most say it is a good thing when others are very free to practice their religion.”

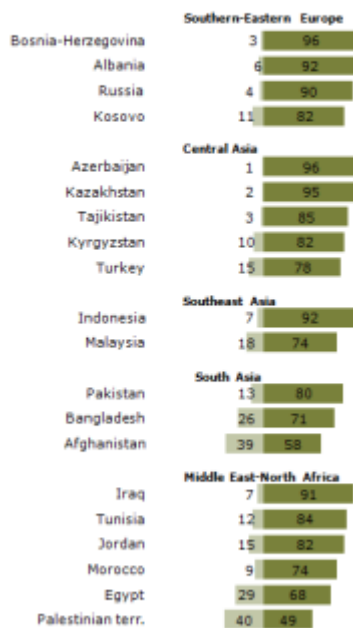
O'Reilly's rant was intended to support Maher's Islamophobia (see Extra!,[8/13](#)):

Mr. Maher is correct on the overall effect Islam is having on the world right now. The truth is many Muslim nations have not confronted Islamic terrorism, have not attacked violence in the name of Allah, and have not even condemned the jihad. There are exceptions to the rule, but they are few.

Majorities Say Suicide Bombing Not Justified

% of Muslims who say suicide bombing in defense of Islam is ...

■ Rarely/never justified
■ Often/sometimes justified



This question was not asked in sub-Saharan Africa. Data for Lebanon are not available due to an administrative error.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q89.

It's never a good idea to conflate "Muslims" with the dictators who lead Muslim countries ("Muslim nations"). But if O'Reilly looked at that same poll he found so useful, he'd notice that [massive majorities](#) of Muslims oppose religious violence:

Muslims around the world strongly reject violence in the name of Islam. Asked specifically about suicide bombing, clear majorities in most countries say such acts are rarely or never justified as a means of defending Islam from its enemies.

Nonetheless, he wraps up this wildly misleading rant by insinuating that while not *all* Muslims cheered the 9/11 attacks, a whole lot of them sure did:

You may remember that hours after America was attacked by Al-Qaeda on 9/11, thousands of Muslims, regular folks, celebrated in the streets. They were happy that more than 3,000 innocent people, including Muslims, were murdered. Again, these people are a minority, but they were not called out in any official way by Muslim nations around the world.

To illustrate this, O'Reilly plays a clip (one that is *very familiar* to Fox viewers) of what appears to be a dozen or people in East Jerusalem. But it is far easier to document the ways Muslims around the world [showed solidarity](#) with the United States, with Muslim leaders and scholars speaking out and clearly condemning the atrocities.

And this “where-were-the-Muslims-on-9/11” line is one’s been using for over a decade. As I wrote in my book *The Oh Really? Factor*:

O'REILLY: “The telling event here is that faced with a violent faction using the name of Allah to kill civilians, Muslims the world over did little. There were no mass demonstrations against terrorism, no peace vigils and no organized condemnation of the Al-Qaeda criminals. In fact, many Muslim countries actually condoned the attacks on September 11 or blamed them on ‘the Jews.’” (column, 8/1/02)

OH REALLY: There was a vigil in Iran shortly after the attacks: “On Tuesday, more than 3,000 mostly young people held a candlelight vigil in Tehran for the victims of the terror attacks, closely watched by security forces” (New York Times, 9/21/01). A few days earlier (9/15/01), the Times reported that “thousands of people attending a World Cup qualifying match between Bahrain and Iran observed a moment of silence.”

None of this is especially new from O'Reilly (see FAIR Blog, [5/13/14](#)), who is careful to include this caveat:

As Talking Points stated last week, most Muslims are peaceful people. Even if they do believe in sharia law, that’s a flaw in their thinking, it doesn’t mean they are violent maniacs.

Whew, that’s good. Though if he believes that, it would indicate a shift from a few years ago (FAIR Blog, [5/20/11](#)):

For every Muslim in the world that wants democracy and wants human rights, there is one who doesn’t. And the one who doesn’t, doesn’t have any rules. And it will blow the hell out of the one that does.

At least his Islamophobia is evolving.

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