

Why Shariah?

By NOAH FELDMAN MARCH 16, 2008



The High Court in Cairo. In Egypt, courts must act in accordance with the basic tenets of Islamic jurisprudence. CreditStephanie Sinclair for The New York Times

Last month, Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, gave a nuanced, scholarly lecture in London about whether the British legal system should allow non-Christian courts to decide certain matters of family law. Britain has no constitutional separation of church and state. The archbishop noted that “the law of the Church of England is the law of the land” there; indeed, ecclesiastical courts that once handled marriage and divorce are still integrated into the British legal system, deciding matters of church property and doctrine. His tentative suggestion was that, subject to the agreement of all parties and the strict requirement of protecting equal rights for women, it might be a good idea to consider allowing Islamic and Orthodox Jewish courts to handle marriage and divorce.

Then all hell broke loose. From politicians across the spectrum to senior church figures and the ubiquitous British tabloids came calls for the leader of the world’s second largest Christian denomination to issue a retraction or even resign. Williams has spent the last couple of years trying to hold together the global Anglican Communion in the face of continuing controversies about ordaining gay priests and recognizing same-sex marriages. Yet little in that contentious battle subjected him to the

kind of outcry that his reference to religious courts unleashed. Needless to say, the outrage was not occasioned by Williams's mention of Orthodox Jewish law. For the purposes of public discussion, it was the word "Shariah" that was radioactive.

In some sense, the outrage about according a degree of official status to Shariah in a Western country should come as no surprise. No legal system has ever had worse press. To many, the word "Shariah" conjures horrors of hands cut off, adulterers stoned and women oppressed. By contrast, who today remembers that the much-loved English common law called for execution as punishment for hundreds of crimes, including theft of any object worth five shillings or more? How many know that until the 18th century, the laws of most European countries authorized torture as an official component of the criminal-justice system? As for sexism, the common law long denied married women any property rights or indeed legal personality apart from their husbands. When the British applied their law to Muslims in place of Shariah, as they did in some colonies, the result was to strip married women of the property that Islamic law had always granted them — hardly progress toward equality of the sexes.

In fact, for most of its history, Islamic law offered the most liberal and humane legal principles available anywhere in the world. Today, when we invoke the harsh punishments prescribed by Shariah for a handful of offenses, we rarely acknowledge the high standards of proof necessary for their implementation. Before an adultery conviction can typically be obtained, for example, the accused must confess four times or four adult male witnesses of good character must testify that they directly observed the sex act. The extremes of our own legal system — like life sentences for relatively minor drug crimes, in some cases — are routinely ignored. We neglect to mention the recent vintage of our tentative improvements in family law. It sometimes seems as if we need Shariah as Westerners have long needed Islam: as a canvas on which to project our ideas of the horrible, and as a foil to make us look good.

In the Muslim world, on the other hand, the reputation of Shariah has undergone an extraordinary revival in recent years. A century ago, forward-looking Muslims thought of Shariah as outdated, in need of reform or maybe abandonment. Today, 66 percent of Egyptians, 60 percent of Pakistanis and 54 percent of Jordanians say that Shariah should be the only source of legislation in their countries. Islamist political parties, like those associated with the transnational Muslim Brotherhood, make the adoption of Shariah the most prominent plank in their political platforms. And the message resonates. Wherever Islamists have been allowed to run for office in Arabic-speaking countries, they have tended to win almost as many seats as the governments have let them contest. The Islamist movement in its various incarnations — from moderate to radical — is easily the fastest growing and most vital in the Muslim world; the return to Shariah is its calling card.

How is it that what so many Westerners see as the most unappealing and premodern aspect of Islam is, to many Muslims, the vibrant, attractive core of a global movement of Islamic revival? The explanation surely must go beyond the oversimplified assumption that Muslims want to use Shariah to reverse feminism and control women — especially since large numbers of women support the Islamists in general and the ideal of Shariah in particular.

Is Shariah the Rule of Law?

One reason for the divergence between Western and Muslim views of Shariah is that we are not all using the word to mean the same thing. Although it is commonplace to use the word “Shariah” and the phrase “Islamic law” interchangeably, this prosaic English translation does not capture the full set of associations that the term “Shariah” conjures for the believer. Shariah, properly understood, is not just a set of legal rules. To believing Muslims, it is something deeper and higher, infused with moral and metaphysical purpose. At its core, Shariah represents the idea that all human beings — and all human governments — are subject to justice under the law.

In fact, “Shariah” is not the word traditionally used in Arabic to refer to the processes of Islamic legal reasoning or the rulings produced through it: that word is *fiqh*, meaning something like Islamic jurisprudence. The word “Shariah” connotes a connection to the divine, a set of unchanging beliefs and principles that order life in accordance with God’s will. Westerners typically imagine that Shariah advocates simply want to use the Koran as their legal code. But the reality is much more complicated. Islamist politicians tend to be very vague about exactly what it would mean for Shariah to be the source for the law of the land — and with good reason, because just adopting such a principle would not determine how the legal system would actually operate.

Shariah is best understood as a kind of higher law, albeit one that includes some specific, worldly commands. All Muslims would agree, for example, that it prohibits lending money at interest — though not investments in which risks and returns are shared; and the ban on Muslims drinking alcohol is an example of an unequivocal ritual prohibition, even for liberal interpreters of the faith. Some rules associated with Shariah are undoubtedly old-fashioned and harsh. Men and women are treated unequally, for example, by making it hard for women to initiate divorce without forfeiting alimony. The prohibition on sodomy, though historically often unenforced, makes recognition of same-sex relationships difficult to contemplate. But Shariah also prohibits bribery or special favors in court. It demands equal treatment for rich and poor. It condemns the vigilante-style honor killings that still occur in some Middle Eastern countries. And it protects everyone’s property — including women’s — from being taken from them. Unlike in [Iran](#), where wearing a head scarf is legally mandated and enforced by special religious police, the Islamist view in most other Muslim countries is that the head scarf is one way of implementing the religious duty to dress modestly — a desirable social norm, not an enforceable legal rule. And mandating capital punishment for apostasy is not on the agenda of most elected Islamists. For many Muslims today, living in corrupt autocracies, the call for Shariah is not a call for sexism, obscurantism or savage punishment but for an Islamic version of what the West considers its most prized principle of political justice: the rule of law.

The Sway of the Scholars

To understand Shariah’s deep appeal, we need to ask a crucial question that is rarely addressed in the West: What, in fact, is the system of Islamic law? In his lifetime, the Prophet Muhammad was both the religious and the political leader of the community of Muslim believers. His revelation, the Koran, contained some laws, pertaining especially to ritual matters and inheritance; but it was not primarily a

legal book and did not include a lengthy legal code of the kind that can be found in parts of the Hebrew Bible. When the first generation of believers needed guidance on a subject that was not addressed by revelation, they went directly to Muhammad. He either answered of his own accord or, if he was unsure, awaited divine guidance in the form of a new revelation.

With the death of Muhammad, divine revelation to the Muslim community stopped. The role of the political-religious leader passed to a series of caliphs (Arabic for “substitute”) who stood in the prophet’s stead. That left the caliph in a tricky position when it came to resolving difficult legal matters. The caliph possessed Muhammad’s authority but not his access to revelation. It also left the community in something of a bind. If the Koran did not speak clearly to a particular question, how was the law to be determined?

The answer that developed over the first couple of centuries of Islam was that the Koran could be supplemented by reference to the prophet’s life — his *sunna*, his path. (The word “*sunna*” is the source of the designation Sunni — one who follows the prophet’s path.) His actions and words were captured in an oral tradition, beginning presumably with a person who witnessed the action or statement firsthand. Accurate reports had to be distinguished from false ones. But of course even a trustworthy report on a particular situation could not directly resolve most new legal problems that arose later. To address such problems, it was necessary to reason by analogy from one situation to another. There was also the possibility that a communal consensus existed on what to do under particular circumstances, and that, too, was thought to have substantial weight.

This fourfold combination — the Koran, the path of the prophet as captured in the collections of reports, analogical reasoning and consensus — amounted to a basis for a legal system. But who would be able to say how these four factors fit together? Indeed, who had the authority to say that these factors and not others formed the sources of the law? The first four caliphs, who knew the prophet personally, might have been able to make this claim for themselves. But after them, the caliphs were faced with a growing group of specialists who asserted that they, collectively, could ascertain the law from the available sources. This self-appointed group came to be known as the scholars — and over the course of a few generations, they got the caliphs to acknowledge them as the guardians of the law. By interpreting a law that originated with God, they gained control over the legal system as it actually existed. That made them, and not the caliphs, into “the heirs of the prophets.”

Photo



The practical application of Shariah in most Muslim countries (as here, in this Egyptian courtroom) is in matters of family law. CreditStephanie Sinclair for The New York Times

Among the Sunnis, this model took effect very early and persisted until modern times. For the Shiites, who believe that the succession of power followed the prophet's lineage, the prophet had several successors who claimed extraordinary divine authority. Once they were gone, however, the Shiite scholars came to occupy a role not unlike that of their Sunni counterparts.

Under the constitutional theory that the scholars developed to explain the division of labor in the Islamic state, the caliph had paramount responsibility to fulfill the divine injunction to "command the right and prohibit the wrong." But this was not a task he could accomplish on his own. It required him to delegate responsibility to scholarly judges, who would apply God's law as they interpreted it. The caliph could promote or fire them as he wished, but he could not dictate legal results: judicial authority came from the caliph, but the law came from the scholars.

The caliphs — and eventually the sultans who came to rule once the caliphate lost most of its worldly influence — still had plenty of power. They handled foreign affairs more or less at their discretion. And they could also issue what were effectively administrative regulations — provided these regulations did not contradict what the scholars said Shariah required. The regulations addressed areas where Shariah was silent. They also enabled the state to regulate social conduct without having to put every case before the courts, where convictions would often be impossible to obtain because of the strict

standards of proof required for punishment. As a result of these regulations, many legal matters (perhaps most) fell outside the rules given specifically by Shariah.

The upshot is that the system of Islamic law as it came to exist allowed a great deal of leeway. That is why today's advocates of Shariah as the source of law are not actually recommending the adoption of a comprehensive legal code derived from or dictated by Shariah — because nothing so comprehensive has ever existed in Islamic history. To the Islamist politicians who advocate it or for the public that supports it, Shariah generally means something else. It means establishing a legal system in which God's law sets the ground rules, authorizing and validating everyday laws passed by an elected legislature. In other words, for them, Shariah is expected to function as something like a modern constitution.

The Rights of Humans and the Rights of God

So in contemporary Islamic politics, the call for Shariah does not only or primarily mean mandating the veiling of women or the use of corporal punishment — it has an essential constitutional dimension as well. But what is the particular appeal of placing Shariah above ordinary law?

The answer lies in a little-remarked feature of traditional Islamic government: that a state under Shariah was, for more than a thousand years, subject to a version of the rule of law. And as a rule-of-law government, the traditional Islamic state had an advantage that has been lost in the dictatorships and autocratic monarchies that have governed so much of the Muslim world for the last century. Islamic government was legitimate, in the dual sense that it generally respected the individual legal rights of its subjects and was seen by them as doing so. These individual legal rights, known as “the rights of humans” (in contrast to “the rights of God” to such things as ritual obedience), included basic entitlements to life, property and legal process — the protections from arbitrary government oppression sought by people all over the world for centuries.

Of course, merely declaring the ruler subject to the law was not enough on its own; the ruler actually had to follow the law. For that, he needed incentives. And as it happened, the system of government gave him a big one, in the form of a balance of power with the scholars. The ruler might be able to use pressure once in a while to get the results he wanted in particular cases. But because the scholars were in charge of the law, and he was not, the ruler could pervert the course of justice only at the high cost of being seen to violate God's law — thereby undermining the very basis of his rule.

In practice, the scholars' leverage to demand respect for the law came from the fact that the caliphate was not hereditary as of right. That afforded the scholars major influence at the transitional moments when a caliph was being chosen or challenged. On taking office, a new ruler — even one designated by his dead predecessor — had to fend off competing claimants. The first thing he would need was affirmation of the legitimacy of his assumption of power. The scholars were prepared to offer just that, in exchange for the ruler's promise to follow the law.

Once in office, rulers faced the inevitable threat of invasion or a palace coup. The caliph would need the scholars to declare a religious obligation to protect the state in a defensive jihad. Having the scholars on his side in times of crisis was a tremendous asset for the ruler who could be said to follow the law. Even

if the ruler was not law-abiding, the scholars still did not spontaneously declare a sitting caliph disqualified. This would have been foolish, especially in view of the fact that the scholars had no armies at their disposal and the sitting caliph did. But their silence could easily be interpreted as an invitation for a challenger to step forward and be validated.

The scholars' insistence that the ruler obey Shariah was motivated largely by their belief that it was God's will. But it was God's will as they interpreted it. As a confident, self-defined elite that controlled and administered the law according to well-settled rules, the scholars were agents of stability and predictability — crucial in societies where the transition from one ruler to the next could be disorderly and even violent. And by controlling the law, the scholars could limit the ability of the executive to expropriate the property of private citizens. This, in turn, induced the executive to rely on lawful taxation to raise revenues, which itself forced the rulers to be responsive to their subjects' concerns. The scholars and their law were thus absolutely essential to the tremendous success that Islamic society enjoyed from its inception into the 19th century. Without Shariah, there would have been no Haroun al-Rashid in Baghdad, no golden age of Muslim Spain, no reign of Suleiman the Magnificent in Istanbul.

For generations, Western students of the traditional Islamic constitution have assumed that the scholars could offer no meaningful check on the ruler. As one historian has recently put it, although Shariah functioned as a constitution, "the constitution was not enforceable," because neither scholars nor subjects could "compel their ruler to observe the law in the exercise of government." But almost no constitution anywhere in the world enables judges or nongovernmental actors to "compel" the obedience of an executive who controls the means of force. The Supreme Court of the United States has no army behind it. Institutions that lack the power of the sword must use more subtle means to constrain executives. Like the American constitutional balance of powers, the traditional Islamic balance was maintained by words and ideas, and not just by forcible compulsion.

So today's Muslims are not being completely fanciful when they act and speak as though Shariah can structure a constitutional state subject to the rule of law. One big reason that Islamist political parties do so well running on a Shariah platform is that their constituents recognize that Shariah once augured a balanced state in which legal rights were respected.

From Shariah to Despotism

But if Shariah is popular among many Muslims in large part because of its historical association with the rule of law, can it actually do the same work today? Here there is reason for caution and skepticism. The problem is that the traditional Islamic constitution rested on a balance of powers between a ruler subject to law and a class of scholars who interpreted and administered that law. The governments of most contemporary majority-Muslim states, however, have lost these features. Rulers govern as if they were above the law, not subject to it, and the scholars who once wielded so much influence are much reduced in status. If they have judicial posts at all, it is usually as judges in the family-law courts.

In only two important instances do scholars today exercise real power, and in both cases we can see a deviation from their traditional role. The first is Iran, where Ayatollah Khomeini, himself a distinguished scholar, assumed executive power and became supreme leader after the 1979 revolution. The result of

this configuration, unique in the history of the Islamic world, is that the scholarly ruler had no counterbalance and so became as unjust as any secular ruler with no check on his authority. The other is [Saudi Arabia](#), where the scholars retain a certain degree of power. The unfortunate outcome is that they can slow any government initiative for reform, however minor, but cannot do much to keep the government responsive to its citizens. The oil-rich state does not need to obtain tax revenues from its citizens to operate — and thus has little reason to keep their interests in mind.

Photo



CreditStephanie Sinclair for The New York Times

How the scholars lost their exalted status as keepers of the law is a complex story, but it can be summed up in the adage that partial reforms are sometimes worse than none at all. In the early 19th century, the Ottoman empire responded to military setbacks with an internal reform movement. The most important reform was the attempt to codify Shariah. This Westernizing process, foreign to the Islamic legal tradition, sought to transform Shariah from a body of doctrines and principles to be discovered by the human efforts of the scholars into a set of rules that could be looked up in a book.

Once the law existed in codified form, however, the law itself was able to replace the scholars as the source of authority. Codification took from the scholars their all-important claim to have the final say over the content of the law and transferred that power to the state. To placate the scholars, the

government kept the Shariah courts running but restricted them to handling family-law matters. This strategy paralleled the British colonial approach of allowing religious courts to handle matters of personal status. Today, in countries as far apart as Kenya and [Pakistan](#), Shariah courts still administer family law — a small subset of their original historical jurisdiction.

Codification signaled the death knell for the scholarly class, but it did not destroy the balance of powers on its own. Promulgated in 1876, the Ottoman constitution created a legislature composed of two lawmaking bodies — one elected, one appointed by the sultan. This amounted to the first democratic institution in the Muslim world; had it established itself, it might have popularized the notion that the people represent the ultimate source of legal authority. Then the legislature could have replaced the scholars as the institutional balance to the executive.

But that was not to be. Less than a year after the legislature first met, Sultan Abdulhamid II suspended its operation — and for good measure, he suspended the constitution the following year. Yet the sultan did not restore the scholars to the position they once occupied. With the scholars out of the way and no legislature to replace them, the sultan found himself in the position of near-absolute ruler. This arrangement set the pattern for government in the Muslim world after the Ottoman empire fell. Law became a tool of the ruler, not an authority over him. What followed, perhaps unsurprisingly, was dictatorship and other forms of executive dominance — the state of affairs confronted by the Islamists who seek to restore Shariah.

A Democratic Shariah?

The Islamists today, partly out of realism, partly because they are rarely scholars themselves, seem to have little interest in restoring the scholars to their old role as the constitutional balance to the executive. The Islamist movement, like other modern ideologies, seeks to capture the existing state and then transform society through the tools of modern government. Its vision for bringing Shariah to bear therefore incorporates two common features of modern government: the legislature and the constitution.

The mainstream Sunni Islamist position, found, for example, in the electoral platforms of the Muslim Brotherhood in [Egypt](#) and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, is that an elected legislature should draft and pass laws that are consistent with the spirit of Islamic law. On questions where Islamic law does not provide clear direction, the democratically chosen legislature is supposed to use its discretion to adopt laws infused by Islamic values.

The result is a profound change in the theoretical structure underlying Islamic law: Shariah is democratized in that its care is given to a popularly elected legislature. In [Iraq](#), for example, where the constitution declares Shariah to be “the source of law,” it is in principle up to the National Assembly to pass laws that reflect its spirit.

In case the assembly gets it wrong, however, the Islamists often recommend the judicial review of legislative actions to guarantee that they do not violate Islamic law or values. What is sometimes called a “repugnancy clause,” mandating that a judicial body overturn laws repugnant to Islam, has made its

way into several recent constitutions that seek to reconcile Islam and democracy. It may be found, for example, in the Afghan Constitution of 2004 and the Iraqi Constitution of 2005. (I had a small role advising the Iraqi drafters.) Islamic judicial review transforms the highest judicial body of the state into a guarantor of conformity with Islamic law. The high court can then use this power to push for a conservative vision of Islamic law, as in Afghanistan, or for a more moderate version, as in Pakistan.

Islamic judicial review puts the court in a position resembling the one that scholars once occupied. Like the scholars, the judges of the reviewing court present their actions as interpretations of Islamic law. But of course the judges engaged in Islamic judicial review are not the scholars but ordinary judges (as in Iraq) or a mix of judges and scholars (as in Afghanistan). In contrast to the traditional arrangement, the judges' authority comes not from Shariah itself but from a written constitution that gives them the power of judicial review.

The modern incarnation of Shariah is nostalgic in its invocation of the rule of law but forward-looking in how it seeks to bring this result about. What the Islamists generally do not acknowledge, though, is that such institutions on their own cannot deliver the rule of law. The executive authority also has to develop a commitment to obeying legal and constitutional judgments. That will take real-world incentives, not just a warm feeling for the values associated with Shariah.

How that happens — how an executive administration accustomed to overweening power can be given incentives to subordinate itself to the rule of law — is one of the great mysteries of constitutional development worldwide. Total revolution has an extremely bad track record in recent decades, at least in majority-Muslim states. The revolution that replaced the shah in Iran created an oppressively top-heavy constitutional structure. And the equally revolutionary dreams some entertained for Iraq — dreams of a liberal secular state or of a functioning Islamic democracy — still seem far from fruition.

Gradual change therefore increasingly looks like the best of some bad options. And most of today's political Islamists — the ones running for office in Morocco or [Jordan](#) or Egypt and even Iraq — are gradualists. They wish to adapt existing political institutions by infusing them with Islamic values and some modicum of Islamic law. Of course, such parties are also generally hostile to the United States, at least where we have worked against their interests. (Iraq is an obvious exception — many Shiite Islamists there are our close allies.) But this is a separate question from whether they can become a force for promoting the rule of law. It is possible to imagine the electoral success of Islamist parties putting pressure on executives to satisfy the demand for law-based government embodied in Koranic law. This might bring about a transformation of the judiciary, in which judges would come to think of themselves as agents of the law rather than as agents of the state.

Something of the sort may slowly be happening in Turkey. The Islamists there are much more liberal than anywhere else in the Muslim world; they do not even advocate the adoption of Shariah (a position that would get their government closed down by the staunchly secular military). Yet their central focus is the rule of law and the expansion of basic rights against the Turkish tradition of state-centered secularism. The courts are under increasing pressure to go along with that vision.

Can Shariah provide the necessary resources for such a rethinking of the judicial role? In its essence, Shariah aspires to be a law that applies equally to every human, great or small, ruler or ruled. No one is above it, and everyone at all times is bound by it. But the history of Shariah also shows that the ideals of the rule of law cannot be implemented in a vacuum. For that, a state needs actually effective institutions, which must be reinforced by regular practice and by the recognition of actors within the system that they have more to gain by remaining faithful to its dictates than by deviating from them.

The odds of success in the endeavor to deliver the rule of law are never high. Nothing is harder than creating new institutions with the capacity to balance executive dominance — except perhaps avoiding the temptation to overreach once in power. In Iran, the Islamists have discredited their faith among many ordinary people, and a similar process may be under way in Iraq. Still, with all its risks and dangers, the Islamists' aspiration to renew old ideas of the rule of law while coming to terms with contemporary circumstances is bold and noble — and may represent a path to just and legitimate government in much of the Muslim world.

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A version of this article appears in print on , on page MM46 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Why Shariah?.

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APRIL 30, 2013

The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society

Chapter 1: Beliefs About Sharia



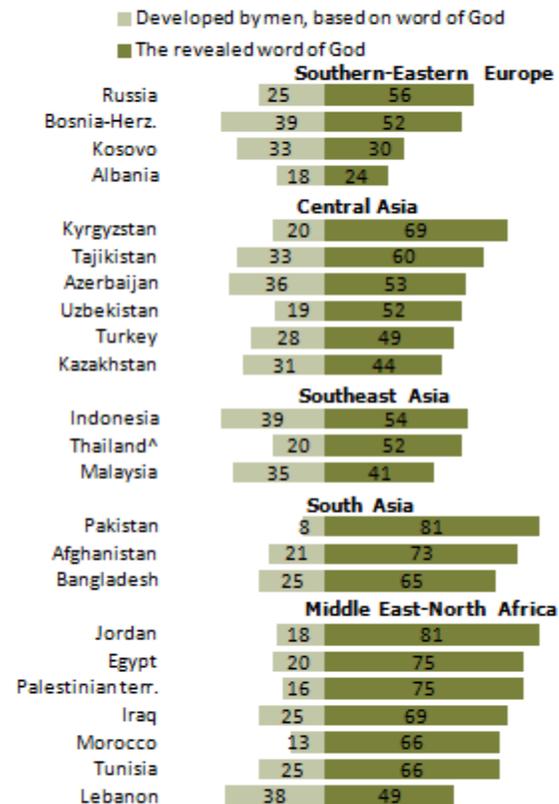
According to the survey findings, most Muslims believe sharia is the revealed word of God rather than a body of law developed by men based on the word of God. Muslims also tend to believe sharia has only one, true understanding, but this opinion is far from universal; in some countries, substantial minorities of Muslims believe sharia should be open to multiple interpretations. Religious commitment is closely linked to views about sharia: Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely to say sharia is the revealed word of God, to say that it has only one interpretation and to support the implementation of Islamic law in their country.

Although many Muslims around the world say sharia should be the law of the land in their country, the survey reveals divergent opinions about the precise application of Islamic law.¹⁴ Generally, supporters of sharia are most comfortable with its application in cases of family or property disputes. In most regions, fewer favor other specific aspects of sharia, such as cutting off the hands of thieves and executing people who convert from Islam to another faith.

Sharia as Divine Revelation

Sharia as the Revealed Word of God

% of Muslims who say sharia is ...



[^]Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q66.

In 17 of the 23 countries where the question was asked, at least half of Muslims say sharia is the revealed word of God. (For more information on sharia see [text box](#).) In no country are Muslims significantly more likely to say sharia was developed by men than to say it is the revealed word of God.

Acceptance of sharia as the revealed word of God is high across South Asia and most of the Middle East and North Africa. For example, roughly eight-in-ten Muslims (81%) in Pakistan and Jordan say sharia is the revealed word of God, as do clear majorities in most other countries surveyed in these two regions. Only in Lebanon is opinion more closely divided: 49% of Muslims say sharia is the divine word of God, while 38% say men have developed sharia from God's word.

Muslims in Southeast Asia and Central Asia are somewhat less likely to say sharia comes directly from God. Only in Kyrgyzstan (69%) do more than two-thirds say Islamic law is the revealed word of God. Elsewhere in these regions, the percentage of Muslims who say it is the revealed word of God ranges from roughly four-in-ten in Malaysia (41%) to six-in-ten in Tajikistan.

Views about the origins of sharia are more mixed in Southern and Eastern Europe. At least half of Muslims describe sharia as the divine word of God in Russia (56%) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (52%). By contrast, three-in-ten or fewer hold this view in Kosovo (30%) and Albania (24%).

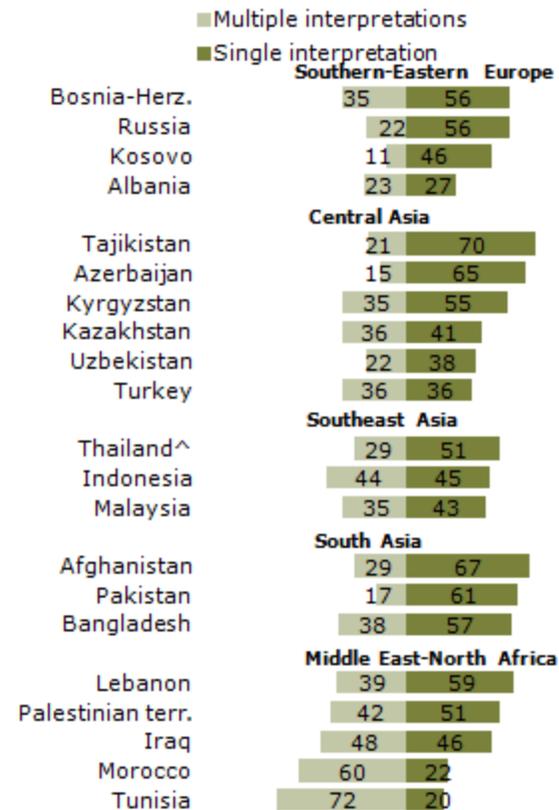
Overall, Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely to believe that sharia is the revealed word of God than are those who pray less frequently. This is the case in many countries where the question was asked, with especially large

differences observed in Russia (+33 percentage points), Uzbekistan (+21), Kyrgyzstan (+20) and Egypt (+15). Views on the origins of sharia do not vary consistently with other measures, such as age or gender.

Interpreting Sharia

One or Multiple Interpretations of Sharia?

% of Muslims who say sharia has ...



[^]Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only. Data from Egypt and Jordan are not available due to an administrative error.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q67.

Muslims differ widely as to whether sharia should be open to multiple understandings. While many say there is only one true interpretation, substantial percentages in most countries either say there are multiple interpretations or say they do not know.

A majority of Muslims in three Central Asian countries – Tajikistan (70%), Azerbaijan (65%) and Kyrgyzstan (55%) – say there is only one way to understand sharia. But elsewhere in the region there is less consensus, including in Turkey, where identical proportions (36% each) stand on either side of the question.

Muslims in Southern and Eastern Europe tend to lean in favor of a single interpretation of sharia. However, only in Bosnia-Herzegovina (56%) and Russia (56%), do majorities take this position.

Across the countries surveyed in South Asia, majorities consistently say there is only one possible way to understand sharia. The proportion holding this view ranges from 67% in Afghanistan to 57% in Bangladesh. But more than a quarter of Muslims in Afghanistan (29%) and Bangladesh (38%) say sharia should be open to multiple interpretations.

In the Middle East-North Africa region, belief in a single interpretation of sharia prevails in Lebanon (59%) and the Palestinian territories (51%). But opinion in Iraq is mixed: 46% say there is only one possible way to understand sharia, while 48% disagree. And in Tunisia and Morocco, large majorities (72% and 60%, respectively) believe sharia should be open to multiple interpretations.

In Southeast Asia, opinion leans modestly in favor of a single interpretation of sharia. The biggest divide is found in Thailand, where 51% of Muslims say there is only one possible understanding of Islamic law, while 29% say it should be open to multiple interpretations.

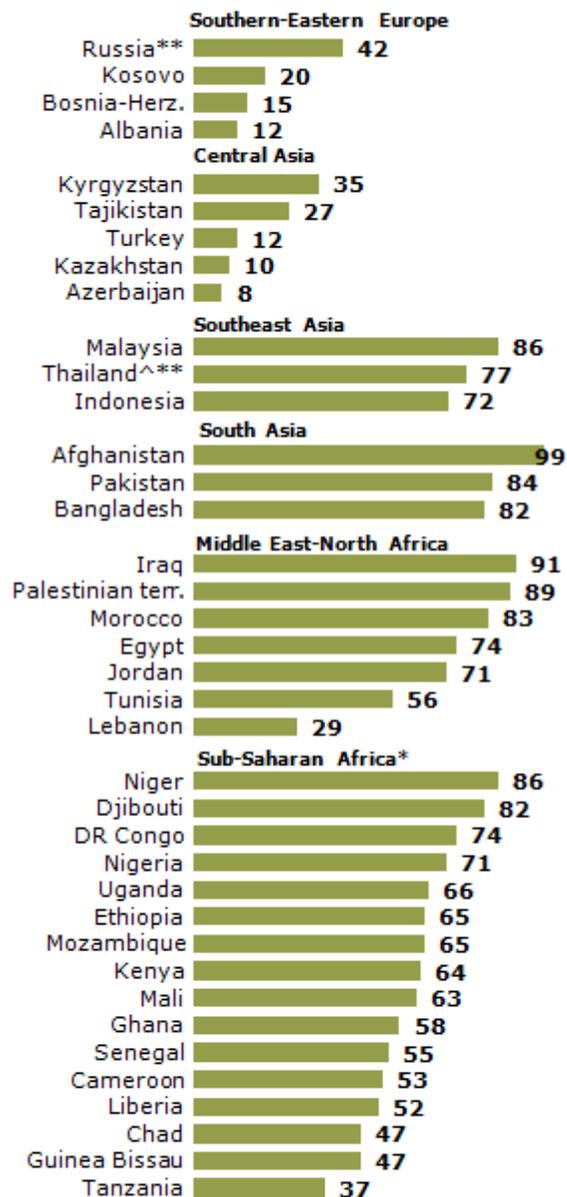
In a number of countries, significant percentages say they are unsure whether sharia should be subject to one or multiple understandings, including at least one-in-five Muslims in Albania (46%), Kosovo (42%), Uzbekistan (35%), Turkey (23%), Russia (21%), Malaysia (20%) and Pakistan (20%).

An individual's degree of religious commitment appears to influence views on interpreting sharia. In many countries where the question was asked, Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely than those who pray less often to say that there is a single interpretation. The largest differences are found in Russia (+33 percentage points) and Uzbekistan (+27), but substantial gaps are also observed in Lebanon (+18), Malaysia (+16) and Thailand (+15).

Sharia as the Official Law of the Land

Favor or Oppose Making Sharia the Law of the Land?

% of Muslims who favor making Islamic law the official law in their country



*Data for all countries except Niger from "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa."

^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

**Question was modified to ask if sharia should be the law of the land in Muslim areas.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79a.

Support for making sharia the official law of the land varies significantly across the six major regions included in the study. In countries across South Asia, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East-North Africa region most favor

making sharia their country's official legal code. By contrast, only a minority of Muslims across Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe want sharia to be the official law of the land.

In South Asia, high percentages in all the countries surveyed support making sharia the official law, including nearly universal support among Muslims in Afghanistan (99%). More than eight-in-ten Muslims in Pakistan (84%) and Bangladesh (82%) also hold this view. The percentage of Muslims who say they favor making Islamic law the official law in their country is nearly as high across the Southeast Asian countries surveyed (86% in Malaysia, 77% in Thailand and 72% in Indonesia).¹⁵

In sub-Saharan Africa, at least half of Muslims in most countries surveyed say they favor making sharia the official law of the land, including more than seven-in-ten in Niger (86%), Djibouti (82%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (74%) and Nigeria (71%).

Support for sharia as the official law of the land also is widespread among Muslims in the Middle East-North Africa region – especially in Iraq (91%) and the Palestinian territories (89%). Only in Lebanon does opinion lean in the opposite direction: 29% of Lebanese Muslims favor making sharia the law of the land, while 66% oppose it.

Support for making sharia the official legal code of the country is relatively weak across Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe. Fewer than half of Muslims in all the countries surveyed in these regions favor making sharia their country's official law. Support for sharia as the law of the land is greatest in Russia (42%); respondents in Russia were asked if sharia should be made the official law in the country's ethnic-Muslim republics. Elsewhere in Central Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe, about one-in-three or fewer say sharia should be made the law of the land, including just 10% in Kazakhstan and 8% in Azerbaijan.

Muslims Who Pray More Frequently Are More Likely to Favor Sharia as Law of the Land

% of Muslims who favor implementing Islamic law as the law of the land

	Pray several times a day	Pray less often	Diff.
Russia*	65	28	+37
Lebanon	39	11	+28
Palestinian terr.	95	68	+27
Tunisia	64	39	+25
Kyrgyzstan	54	30	+24
Bosnia-Herz.	29	12	+17
Malaysia	90	74	+16
Morocco	88	73	+15
Indonesia	74	64	+10
Turkey	18	8	+10
Bangladesh	88	79	+9
Kosovo	25	16	+9

*Question was modified to ask if sharia should be the law of the land in Muslim areas. Only countries where differences are statistically significant are shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q61 and Q79a.

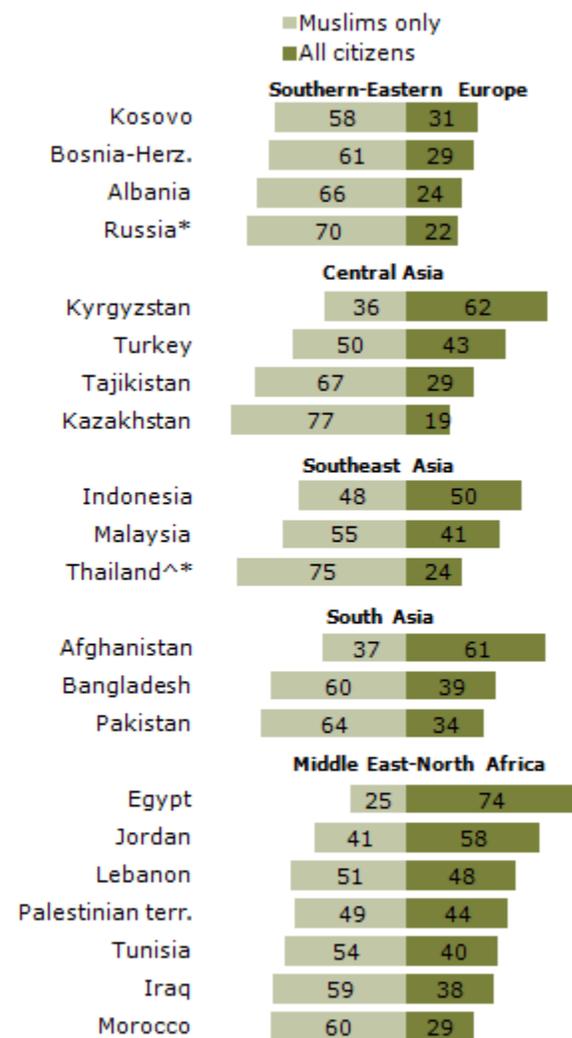
Again, level of religious commitment makes a big difference in attitudes about the implementation of sharia. Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely than those who pray less frequently to favor Islamic law as the official law of the land. The difference is particularly large in Russia (+37 percentage points), Lebanon (+28), the Palestinian territories (+27), Tunisia (+25) and Kyrgyzstan (+24).

Across the countries surveyed, support for making sharia the official law of the land generally varies little by age, gender or education. However, in the Middle East-North Africa region, Muslims ages 35 and older are more likely than those 18-34 to back sharia in Lebanon (+22 percentage points), Jordan (+12), Tunisia (+12) and the Palestinian territories (+10).

Should Sharia Apply to All Citizens?

Should Sharia Apply to Both Muslims and Non-Muslims?

Among Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land, % who say it should apply to ...



Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land.

*Question was modified to ask if sharia should be the law of the land in Muslim areas.

^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

Results for Azerbaijan not shown due to small sample size.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79a and Q81.

Among Muslims who support making sharia the law of the land, most do not believe that it should be applied to non-Muslims. Only in five of 21 countries where this follow-up question was asked do at least half say all citizens should be subject to Islamic law.

The belief that sharia should extend to non-Muslims is most widespread in the Middle East and North Africa, where at least four-in-ten Muslims in all countries except Iraq (38%) and Morocco (29%) hold this opinion. Egyptian Muslims (74%) are the most likely to say it should apply to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, while 58% in Jordan hold this view.

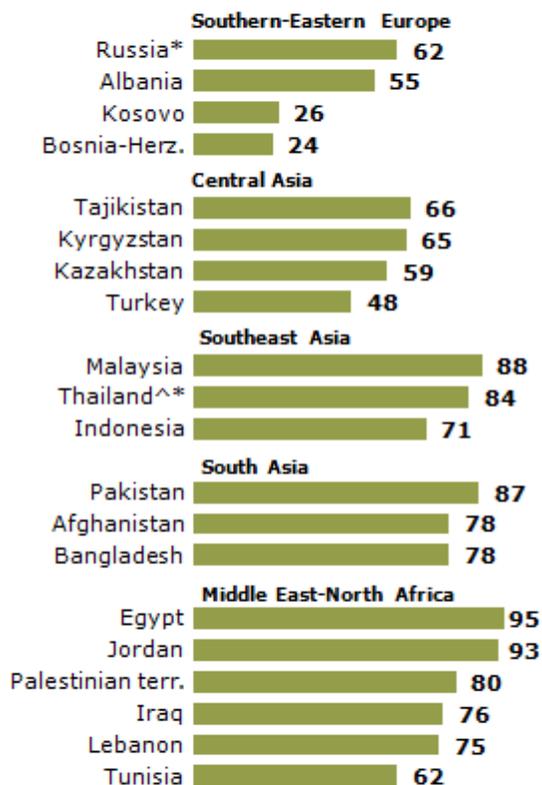
By contrast, Muslims in Southern and Eastern Europe who favor making sharia the official law of the land are among the least likely to say it should apply to all citizens in their country. Across the nations surveyed in the region, fewer than a third take this view. This includes 22% of Russian Muslims (who were asked about the applying sharia in their country's ethnic Muslim republics).

In other regions, opinion varies widely by country. For example, in Southeast Asia, half of Indonesian Muslims who favor sharia as the official law say it should apply to all citizens, compared with about a quarter (24%) of those in Thailand. (Thai Muslims were asked if sharia should be made the official law in the predominantly Muslim areas of the country.) Similarly, in Central Asia, a majority of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (62%) who support making sharia the official law say it should apply to non-Muslims in their country, but far fewer in Kazakhstan (19%) agree. Meanwhile, in South Asia, Muslims who are in favor of making sharia the law of the land in Afghanistan are 27 percentage points more likely to say all citizens should be subject to Islamic law than are those in Pakistan (61% in Afghanistan vs. 34% in Pakistan).

How Should Sharia Be Applied?

Should Religious Judges Decide Family or Property Disputes?

Among Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land, % who say that religious judges should decide domestic and property disputes



Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land.

*Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law in Muslim areas.

^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

Results for Azerbaijan not shown due to small sample size.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER q79a and Q92a.

When Muslims in different regions of the world say they want sharia to be the law of the land, do they also share a vision for how sharia should be applied in practice? Overall, among those in favor of making sharia the law of the land, the survey finds broad support for allowing religious judges to adjudicate domestic disputes. Lower but substantial proportions of Muslims support severe punishments such as cutting off the hands of thieves or stoning people who commit adultery. The survey finds even lower support for executing apostates.

Family and Property Disputes

Islamic law addresses a range of domestic and personal matters, including marriage, divorce and inheritance.¹⁶ And most Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land in their country are very supportive of the application of Islamic law in this sphere. Specifically, in 17 of the 20 countries where there are adequate samples for analysis, at least half favor giving Muslim leaders and religious judges the power to decide family and property disputes.

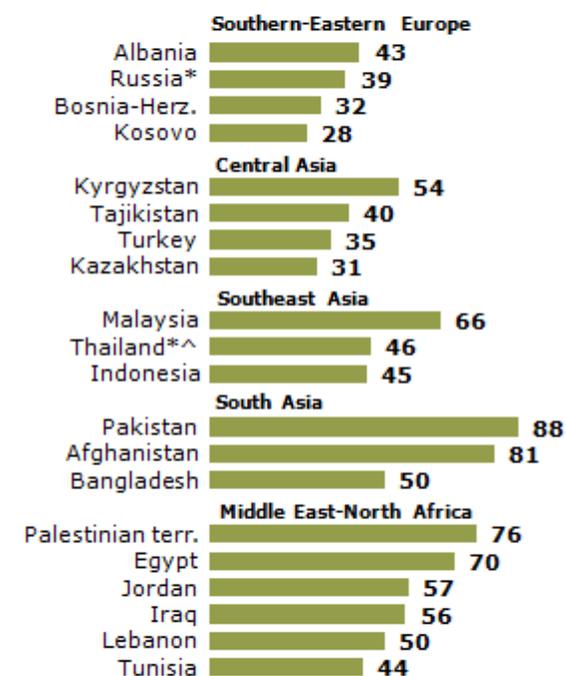
Support for allowing religious judges to decide domestic and property disputes is particularly widespread throughout Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East-North Africa region. Across these three regions, at least six-in-ten Muslims who support the implementation of sharia as the official law say religious judges should decide family and property matters. This includes more than nine-in-ten in Egypt (95%) and Jordan (93%), and nearly as many in Malaysia (88%) and Pakistan (87%).

In Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe, Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land are somewhat less enthusiastic about having religious judges decide matters in the domestic sphere. Across these two regions, fewer than two-thirds favor giving religious judges the power to decide family and property disputes. The least support for allowing religious judges to decide matters in the domestic sphere is found in Kosovo (26%) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (24%).

Penalty for Theft or Robbery

Do You Favor Corporal Punishments for Crimes Such as Theft?

Among Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land, % who favor corporal punishment



Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land.

*Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law in Muslim areas.

^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

Results for Azerbaijan not shown due to small sample size.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79a and Q92c.

Among those who want sharia to be the law of the land, in 10 of 20 countries where there are adequate samples for analysis at least half say they support penalties such as whippings or cutting off the hands of thieves and robbers.¹⁷ In South Asia, Pakistani and Afghan Muslims clearly support hudud punishments (see [Glossary](#)). In both countries, more than eight-in-ten Muslims who favor making sharia the official law of the land also back these types of penalties for theft and

robbery (88% in Pakistan and 81% in Afghanistan). By contrast, only half of Bangladeshis who favor sharia as the law of the land share this view.

In the Middle East and North Africa, many Muslims who support making sharia the official law also favor punishments like cutting off the hands of thieves. This includes at least seven-in-ten in the Palestinian territories (76%) and Egypt (70%), and at least half in Jordan (57%), Iraq (56%) and Lebanon (50%). Only in Tunisia do fewer than half (44%) of those who want Islamic law as the law of the land also back these types of criminal penalties.

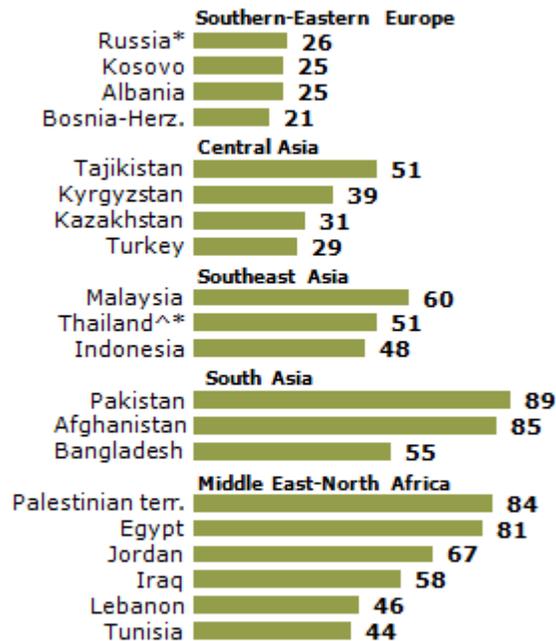
In Southeast Asia, about two-thirds (66%) of Malaysian Muslims who want sharia as the law of the land also favor punishments like cutting off the hands of thieves or robbers, but fewer than half say the same in Thailand (46%) and Indonesia (45%).

In Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe, relatively few Muslims who back sharia support severe criminal punishments. Across the two regions, only in Kyrgyzstan do more than half (54%) support punishments such as whippings or cutting off the hands of thieves. Elsewhere in these two regions, between 43% and 28% of Muslims favor corporal punishments for theft and robbery.

Penalty for Adultery

Stoning as Punishment for Adultery

Among Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land, % who favor stoning as a punishment for adultery



Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land.

*Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law in Muslim areas.

^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.

Results for Azerbaijan not shown due to small sample size.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79a and Q92d.

In 10 of 20 countries where there are adequate samples for analysis, at least half of Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land also favor stoning unfaithful spouses.¹⁸

Some of the highest support for stoning is found in South Asia and the Middle East-North Africa region. In Pakistan (89%) and Afghanistan (85%), more than eight-in-ten Muslims who want Islamic law as their country's official law say adulterers should be stoned, while nearly as many say the same in the Palestinian territories (84%) and Egypt (81%). A majority also support stoning as a penalty for the unfaithful in Jordan (67%), Iraq (58%). However, support is significantly lower in Lebanon (46%) and Tunisia (44%), where less than half of those who support sharia as the official law of the land believe that adulterers should be stoned.

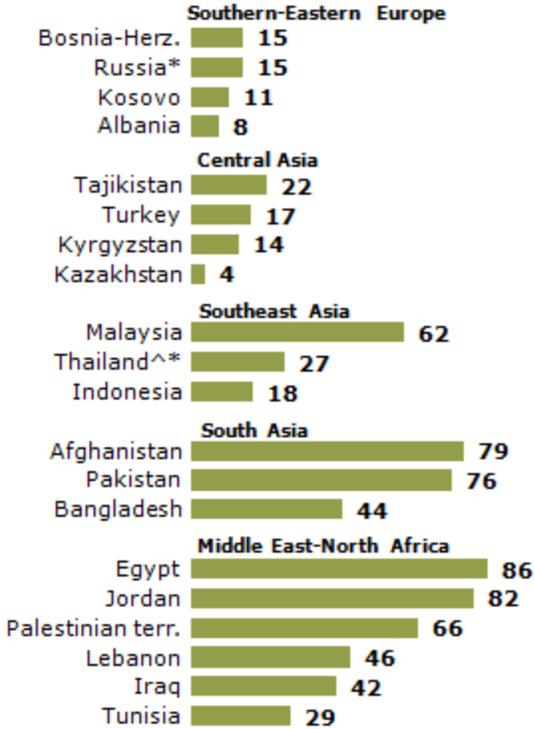
In Southeast Asia, six-in-ten Muslims in Malaysia consider stoning an appropriate penalty for adultery. About half hold this view in Thailand (51%) and Indonesia (48%).

Muslims in Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe are generally less likely to support stoning adulterers. Among those who favor Islamic law as the official law of the land, only in Tajikistan do about half (51%) support this form of punishment. Elsewhere in the two regions, fewer than four-in-ten favor this type of punishment, including roughly a quarter or fewer across the countries surveyed in Southern and Eastern Europe.

Penalty for Converting to Another Faith

Death Penalty for Leaving Islam

Among Muslims who say sharia should be the law of the land, % who favor the death penalty for converts



Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law of the land.
 *Based on Muslims who favor making sharia the law in Muslim areas.
 ^Interviews conducted with Muslims in five southern provinces only.
 Results for Azerbaijan not shown due to small sample size.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79a and Q92b.

Compared with attitudes toward applying sharia in the domestic or criminal spheres, Muslims in the countries surveyed are significantly less supportive of the death penalty for converts.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in six of the 20 countries where there are adequate samples for analysis, at least half of those who favor making Islamic law the official law also support executing apostates.

Taking the life of those who abandon Islam is most widely supported in Egypt (86%) and Jordan (82%). Roughly two-thirds who want sharia to be the law of the land also back this penalty in the Palestinian territories (66%). In the other countries surveyed in the Middle East-North Africa region, fewer than half take this view.

In the South Asian countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan, strong majorities of those who favor making Islamic law the official law of the land also approve of executing apostates (79% and 76%, respectively). However, in Bangladesh far fewer (44%) share this view.

A majority of Malaysian Muslims (62%) who want to see sharia as their country’s official law also support taking the lives of those who convert to other faiths. But fewer take this position in neighboring Thailand (27%) and Indonesia (18%).

In Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe, only in Tajikistan (22%) do more than a fifth of Muslims who want sharia as the official law of the land also condone the execution of apostates. Support for killing converts to other faiths falls below one-in-ten in Albania (8%) and Kazakhstan (4%).

Views on Current Laws and Their Relation to Sharia

How Closely do the Country's Laws Follow Sharia?

% of Muslims who say...

	Very/ Somewhat closely	Not too/ Not at all closely	DK
Southern-Eastern Europe			
Bosnia-Herz.	23	68	9
Russia	27	61	12
Kosovo	10	59	30
Albania	10	43	48
Central Asia			
Tajikistan	51	38	10
Kyrgyzstan	37	54	9
Azerbaijan	16	69	15
Kazakhstan	15	72	13
Southeast Asia			
Malaysia	58	29	14
Indonesia	54	42	4
South Asia			
Afghanistan	88	11	2
Bangladesh	48	49	3
Pakistan	41	45	15
Middle East-North Africa			
Iraq	56	37	7
Morocco	54	26	20
Jordan	41	57	1
Tunisia	40	56	4
Palestinian terr.	39	59	2
Egypt	39	56	6
Lebanon	9	79	13

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q68.

Many Muslims say their country's laws do not follow sharia, or Islamic law. At least half take this view in 11 of the 20 countries where the question was asked. Meanwhile, in six countries, at least half of Muslims believe their national laws closely adhere to sharia.

Muslims in Southern and Eastern Europe and Central Asia are among the most likely to say their laws do not adhere closely to Islamic law. A majority of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina (68%), Russia (61%) and Kosovo (59%) take this view. Roughly four-in-ten Muslims in Albania (43%) also say their country's laws do not follow sharia closely, and about half (48%) are unsure.

In Central Asia, at least half of Muslims in Kazakhstan (72%), Azerbaijan (69%) and Kyrgyzstan (54%) say their laws do not follow sharia closely. In Tajikistan, by contrast, 51% say the laws of their country follow sharia.

In the Middle East-North Africa region, Muslims differ considerably in their assessments on this question. Lebanese Muslims (79%) are the most likely to say their country's laws do not follow Islamic law closely. At least half of Muslims in the

Palestinian territories (59%), Jordan (57%), Egypt (56%) and Tunisia (56%) say the same. Fewer Muslims agree in Iraq (37%) and Morocco (26%).

In the two countries in Southeast Asia where the question was asked, at least half of Muslims say their country's laws adhere to sharia. By a 58%-to-29% margin, most Malaysian Muslims say their laws follow sharia; in Indonesia, the margin is 54% to 42%.

Is It Good or Bad that Laws Do Not Follow Sharia Closely?

Among Muslims who say country's laws do not follow sharia, % who say this is ...

	Good	Bad	Neither/DK
Southern-Eastern Europe			
Russia	10	47	42
Bosnia-Herz.	50	29	21
Albania	32	28	40
Kosovo	50	26	23
Central Asia			
Kyrgyzstan	26	47	27
Tajikistan	25	32	43
Kazakhstan	42	18	40
Azerbaijan	47	13	39
Southeast Asia			
Malaysia	11	65	23
Indonesia	22	65	13
South Asia			
Pakistan	5	91	4
Afghanistan	13	84	3
Bangladesh	10	83	7
Middle East-North Africa			
Palestinian terr.	5	83	12
Morocco	13	76	11
Iraq	9	71	20
Jordan	21	69	10
Egypt	25	67	8
Tunisia	25	54	21
Lebanon	41	38	21

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q69.

Muslims in Afghanistan stand out for the high percentage (88%) that says their laws follow sharia closely. Fewer Muslims in the other countries surveyed in South Asia believe their laws closely follow sharia (48% in Bangladesh and 41% in Pakistan).

Across the countries surveyed, many Muslims who say their laws do not follow sharia believe this is a bad thing. Muslims in South Asia are especially likely to express this sentiment, including at least eight-in-ten Muslims in Pakistan (91%), Afghanistan (84%) and Bangladesh (83%). In Southeast Asia and the Middle East-North Africa region, too, Muslims who believe their country's laws depart from sharia tend to say this is a bad thing. At least six-in-ten in the Palestinian territories (83%), Morocco (76%), Iraq (71%), Jordan (69%), Egypt (67%), Malaysia (65%) and Indonesia (65%) hold this view. Somewhat fewer Muslims in Tunisia (54%) say the same.

In the Middle East-North Africa region, Lebanon is the only country where opinion on the matter is closely divided. Among Lebanese Muslims who say their laws do not follow sharia closely, 41% say this is a good thing, while 38% say it is a bad thing, and 21% have no definite opinion.

Muslims in Southern and Eastern Europe and Central Asia are less likely to say it is a bad thing that their country's laws do not follow sharia. Among Muslims who believe their country's laws do not follow sharia, fewer than a third in most countries surveyed in these regions say this is a bad thing, while many say it is neither good nor bad, or express no opinion. The two exceptions are Russia and Kyrgyzstan, where almost half (47% each) say it is a bad thing that their country's laws do not adhere closely to Islamic law.

Footnotes:

14 For analysis of views about sharia among Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, see the Pew Research Center's April 2010 report "[Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa.](#)" ([return to text](#))

15 In Thailand, respondents were asked if sharia should be made the official law in the predominantly Muslim areas of the country. ([return to text](#))

16 See Quran 4:22-4; 65:1-6; 4:11-2. See also Hourani, Albert. 1991. "A History of the Arab Peoples." Harvard University Press, page 65. ([return to text](#))

17 Certain hadith specify that some crimes, including theft, merit corporal punishments, such as whipping or the cutting off of hands. See Sahih al-Bukhari 81:771, 81:778, and 81:780. ([return to text](#))

18 Certain hadith prescribe stoning as the appropriate penalty for adultery. See Sahih al-Muslim 17:4192 and 17:4198. ([return to text](#))

19 Certain hadith either state or imply that the penalty for apostasy, or converting to another faith, is death. See Sahih al-Bukhari 52:260 and 83:37. ([return to text](#))

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Appendix B: Glossary



Fiqh

Islamic jurisprudence based on the study of the Quran, the sunna and other sources. Several legal schools of Islamic jurisprudence have been developed over the centuries. The most commonly practiced and referenced today include four major Sunni schools – Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali – and the Shia Jafari school.

Hadith

Sayings or deeds ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad. In the first centuries after Muhammad’s death, Islamic scholars established a ranking system for the reliability of each reported hadith. However, there continues to be disagreement over the validity of various hadith. For Sunnis, hadith contained in the volumes Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim are the most widely referenced, although other compilations exist. Shia Muslims favor hadith with a chain of transmission through the family of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad.

Hudud (Hadud, Hudood) Punishments

A class of punishments prescribed by the Quran and the sunna for crimes considered to be against God. Although interpretations by Islamic jurists vary, such crimes commonly include theft, adultery, making unproven accusations of adultery, consuming intoxicants, armed robbery and apostasy. The prescribed punishments range from lashes to banishment to death. Strict evidence is required for conviction, such as four credible eyewitnesses to prove adultery. In addition, the crime must have been committed by a willful and sane adult.

Quran

The Muslim holy book and highest Islamic jurisprudential authority.

Sharia

The moral and legal code of Islam. The word sharia derives from an Arabic word meaning “path” or “way.” In its strictest definition, sharia refers to divine principles and laws as set down explicitly in the Quran and the hadith and sunna. To some Muslims, sharia also may broadly include Islamic jurisprudence and interpretation (fiqh). Sharia offers moral and legal guidance for nearly all aspects of life, including contracts and transactions; politics and crime; civil and family relations; worship; and personal conduct such as diet, attire and hygiene.

Shia

One of the two main branches of Islam. The name is a shortened form of the historical term Shia-t-Ali, or “party of Ali,” and refers to one of the factions that emerged from a dispute over leadership succession soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. Over time, the political divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims broadened to include theological distinctions as well as differences in religious practice.

Sunna

The practices of the Prophet Muhammad, including his habits, statements and characteristics. The sunna is considered the second-highest Islamic jurisprudential authority and serves as a guide for Muslims in their behavior and understanding of Islam. The sunna has been recorded and passed down over the centuries in the form of hadith.

Sunni

One of the two main branches of Islam. Sunni Muslims make up a majority of the world’s Muslim population. The name comes from Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jammah, or “people of the Sunna and the community.” Sunni Islam is associated with norms of Muslim conduct based on the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly as enshrined in the four major schools of jurisprudence – Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali.

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