

PAKISTAN

U.S. kindness wins some Muslim hearts

BY KENNETH BALLEEN

kballen@terrorfreetomorrow.org

Osama bin Laden has issued another warning of an imminent attack by al Qaeda in the United States. While the United States recently launched an air strike in Pakistan against some of bin Laden's alleged lieutenants, the critical question remains: What else can the United States do to successfully hunt down bin Laden and weaken his support, particularly in his likely home base of Pakistan?

Results from a recent poll of Pakistanis deliver a stunning new message on the United States' course for future success. If American efforts are focused on a positive rebuilding and vision for the future, the foot soldiers for bin Laden and radical Islam will desert. Islamist extremism can indeed be effectively defeated in Muslim hearts and minds.

The second-largest and only nuclear-armed Muslim nation, Pakistan -- considered by many to be the most anti-American country in the world -- has long been a stronghold for Islamist radicals, including al Qaeda.

No more: Pakistanis who have a favorable opinion of the United States doubled to more than 46 percent today from 23 percent in May 2005. According to a poll conducted by the nonpartisan organization Terror Free Tomorrow with fieldwork by ACNielsen Pakistan, for the first time since 9/11 more Pakistanis are favorable to the United States than unfavorable.

Yet the recent poll from Pakistan has an even more important finding for the war on terror: Muslim opinion toward bin Laden, and indeed terrorism, moves in tandem with opinion of the United States. As Pakistan witnessed a surge of pro-American sentiment, more unexpectedly there was a concomitant and dramatic drop in support for bin Laden and terrorism. Tellingly, Pakistanis who disapproved of bin Laden doubled at almost the exact same percentage as those who became favorable to the United States (23 percent to 41 percent disapproval of bin Laden; 23 percent to 46 percent approval of the United States).

But the most interesting and important finding is why the Pakistani public changed its view of terrorism and the United States -- and why some antipathy still remains.

The reason is clear: American assistance to the victims of the devastating Oct. 8, 2005, earthquake in Pakistan. In fact, 78 percent of Pakistanis said that American aid to earthquake victims has made them feel more favorable to the United States. Even 79 percent of Pakistanis who have confidence in bin Laden now have a more-favorable opinion of the United States because of U.S. earthquake assistance.

Another surprise: The United States fared much better in the opinion of Pakistanis than either other Western countries who furnished substantial relief, or al Qaeda's radical Islamist allies themselves, who also made a much-publicized effort to provide earthquake aid.

However -- and here's the critical point -- while directly linking falling support for terrorism and bin Laden to their more-favorable view of the United States, it is U.S. humanitarian assistance that results in this change of opinion, and not specific American policies in the war on terror. In fact, the Pakistani public continues to strongly oppose U.S.-led efforts against terrorism by an even larger majority than last May (64 percent now to 52 percent in May).

The data from Pakistan are buttressed by similar findings elsewhere. A February 2005 poll found that 65 percent of Indonesians had a more-favorable opinion of the United States because of tsunami relief. A similar poll last summer showed that an overwhelming majority of Palestinians would feel favorably toward the United States if it became more involved in resolving the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

The message spanning the Muslim world, from Indonesia to Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority, is loud and unmistakable. If American intervention is based on positive humanitarian needs, then support for the United States soars, and support for bin Laden and terrorism withers away.

There is no immutable "clash of civilizations" dictating an inexorable and unending conflict between Islam and the West. It seems that if the United States actually helps people in their everyday lives -- whether through tsunami relief in Indonesia, earthquake aid in Pakistan or leadership in resolving the Palestinian/Israel conflict -- then the empirical evidence is compelling: The appeal of radical Islam fades.

Kenneth Ballen served as counsel to the House Iran-Contra Committee and chief counsel to the Senate Special Committee on Investigations. He is president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization in Washington.