

December 19, 2005

COMMENTARY

Sentiment Shifts in the Muslim World

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So much for the popularly peddled view that anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is so pervasive and deep-rooted it might take generations to alter. A new poll from Pakistan, a critical front-line in the war on terror, paints a very different picture -- by revealing a sea change in public opinion in recent months.

Long a stronghold for Islamic extremists and the world's second-most populous Muslim nation, Pakistanis now hold a more favorable opinion of the U.S. than at any time since 9/11, while support for al Qaeda in its home base has dropped to its lowest level since then. The direct cause for this dramatic shift in Muslim opinion is clear: American humanitarian assistance for Pakistani victims of the Oct. 8 earthquake that killed 87,000. The U.S. pledged \$510 million for earthquake relief in Pakistan and American soldiers are playing a prominent role in rescuing victims from remote mountainous villages.

Released today, the poll commissioned by the nonprofit organization Terror Free Tomorrow and conducted by Pakistan's foremost pollsters ACNielsen Pakistan shows that the number of Pakistanis with a favorable opinion of the U.S. doubled to more than 46% at the end of November from 23% in May 2005. Those with very unfavorable views declined to 28% from 48% over the same period. Nor is this swing in public opinion confined to Pakistan. A similar picture is evident in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. Again that's largely because of American generosity in the wake of a natural disaster. A February 2005 poll by Terror Free Tomorrow showed that 65% of Indonesians had a more favorable opinion of the U.S. as a result of American relief to the victims of last December's tsunami. If these changes in Pakistan and Indonesia influence thinking in other countries, then we could be looking at a broader shift in public sentiment across the Muslim world.

While support for the U.S. has surged, there's also been a dramatic drop in support for Osama bin Laden and terrorism. Since May, the percentage of Pakistanis who feel terrorist attacks against civilians are never justified has more than doubled to 73% from less than half, while the minority who still support terrorist attacks has also shrunk significantly. There's been a similar increase in the number of Pakistanis disapproving of bin Laden, which rose to 41% in November up from only 23% in May.

The important point is that direct contact with Americans on a humanitarian mission, including military personnel, has a positive impact on how Muslims view America. In

Pakistan, 78% of those surveyed said that American assistance has made them feel more favorable to the U.S. America also fared much better in the opinion of ordinary Pakistanis than the other Western countries that also provided aid, or even local radical Islamist groups that made a much-publicized effort to provide earthquake relief.

That doesn't mean there isn't still more work to be done. The Muslim "street" is still not sold on specific American policies, with the poll finding the Pakistani public now opposes current U.S. policy in the war on terror by a larger margin than in May. But the overall message from Pakistan, pointing towards a potential trend in the Muslim world in general, is a positive one. By cutting out the middlemen who all too often portray a poisonous image of the U.S., direct American engagement in humanitarian assistance not only ensures its aid reaches those in need, but can also play a powerful role in marginalizing the foot-soldiers for bin Laden and other supporters of extremist Islamic causes.

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