

Congressional Testimony

FOREIGN ASSISTANCE, SUPPORT FOR EXTREMISM AND PUBLIC OPINION IN MUSLIM MAJORITY COUNTRIES

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Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion

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Nonproliferation, and Trade.

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I. Introduction: Terror Free Tomorrow's Research

Since 2004 when my organization Terror Free Tomorrow was established, we have worked to find the facts why people support or oppose extremism. We have conducted more than thirty public opinion surveys in Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines and elsewhere, and have interviewed over 100 extremists. In the process, we have assembled the first comprehensive picture of how people sympathetic to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden feel about America—and what can be done to change their resentment. For this statement, we report on what drives public opinion, not why a particular individual may have radical views or even become a terrorist, which is another focus of our work.

Our findings are surprising. Like most analysts, we had assumed that radical views in the Muslim world were the outgrowth of a deeply held ideology, unshakeable without profound shifts in American foreign policy. We were wrong. American actions may inflame Muslim opinion. But the solutions that can lessen that hostility are equally surprising.

II. The Nature of Radical and anti-American Views in Muslim Majority Countries

Since 9/11, many Americans have been understandably alarmed by polls showing that a sizable minority of the world's Muslims express sympathy for al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Our own polls confirm this general pattern.

Yet we found that people who support al-Qaeda or bin Laden are not in any measurable way different from their compatriots. Our surveys show that those who express support for bin Laden and al-Qaeda mirror their countrymen in almost every respect, from gender to level of educational achievement. Al-Qaeda and bin Laden supporters are no more fervently Islamic in their practices or beliefs than other Muslims. Nor are they poorer or more disadvantaged—if anything, al-Qaeda and bin Laden sympathizers tend to earn more and to be better off than their fellow citizens.

More important, those who voice sympathy for bin Laden turn out to have views that are remarkably similar to those who do not support bin Laden. Like their compatriots, people who favor al-Qaeda and bin Laden are principally motivated by their perception of Western hostility to Islam. In all our surveys, and those of others, the view of American antagonism is an almost universally held belief among Muslims everywhere. The U.S.-led war on terror, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, even our post-9/11 restrictions on visas (stories of upstanding Muslims denied entry to the United States for seemingly arbitrary reasons are a staple of the Muslim press) are seen as assaults on Islam in general and on Muslims in particular. At its core, many Muslims feel that the United States does not respect their views, values, identity and the right to determine their own affairs.

Unexpectedly, however, we found that both bin Laden supporters and those opposed hold almost identical political goals for their countries—goals that are an anathema to the ideology espoused by al-Qaeda.

Pakistan, for instance, is the second largest and the only nuclear-armed Muslim nation, now home base to bin Laden, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In our latest survey, almost a quarter of Pakistanis said that they had a favorable opinion of bin Laden. But upon closer examination, this cohort was no more likely to have radical views than those Pakistanis who are not sympathetic to extremist groups. Like the rest of Pakistanis, bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters consider an independent judiciary, free press, free elections and an improving economy the most important goals for their government. In fact, more than eight in ten bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters chose these goals as their highest priority—significantly greater than the percentage that selected implementing strict Islamic Sharia law as their highest priority.

We found similar opinions in Saudi Arabia, home country of bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 terrorists. Our nationwide survey revealed that Saudis with a favorable opinion of bin Laden and al-Qaeda do not generally have implacable anti-American attitudes, or even support terrorist attacks. For the 15 percent of the Saudi population with a positive opinion of bin Laden, addressing the problem of terrorism was the most important priority they had for the Saudi government, chosen by more than 90 percent—about the same percentage as those who do not have a favorable view of bin Laden or al-Qaeda.

Before Pakistan held elections on February 18, 2008, we conducted another poll asking voters whether they would vote for al-Qaeda if it appeared on the ballot as a political party. Only 1 percent of Pakistanis said yes—a far smaller percentage than the 18 percent of Pakistanis who told us that they sympathize with al-Qaeda. The Taliban would have drawn just 3 percent of the vote. As it turned out, our survey almost exactly mirrored the actual election results. In areas near or in the home base of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Islamist parties sympathetic to these groups suffered stinging defeats. In the North West Frontier Province, the Islamist parties lost fifty-seven of their sixty-eight seats in the provincial assembly. Evidently, professed support for al-Qaeda or the Taliban does not mean that Pakistanis actually want these groups to *rule* them.

Those who voice support for al-Qaeda or bin Laden, like nearly all Pakistanis, are angry. They are angry at their own government and at the United States for a host of real and perceived sins. Declaring solidarity with al-Qaeda or the Taliban is a way for Pakistanis to express their anger. If there is a difference between those who sympathize with bin Laden and those who do not, it is that bin Laden supporters feel their resentment more intensely.

Our polls show that negative opinions Muslims around the world have towards the United States is not directed at American people or values. Rather, what drives much of public opinion in Muslim majority countries is a pervasive

perception that the United States is hostile towards Islam, imposing its own will on others.

A good illustration comes from our survey of Saudi Arabia. It showed that among the highest priorities for Saudis are free elections and free press. Yet it also showed that the least popular American policy is any U.S. effort to spread democracy in the Middle East. The point is that Saudis want to determine their own affairs and not have the United States impose its values, even when they share those values.

III. New American Policies Can Change Radical and anti-American Views

Importantly, however, our polling indicates that there are steps that the United States can take that could dramatically reverse anti-American attitudes born of this sense of disrespect—if we ask first, rather than thinking we know what’s best.

For instance, six out of every ten Pakistanis who have a favorable view toward bin Laden and al-Qaeda said their opinion of America would significantly improve if the United States increased educational, medical and humanitarian aid to Pakistan, as well as the number of visas available to Pakistanis to work or study in the United States. In fact, *more* bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters said their opinion of the United States would improve with such American policies than did non-bin Laden supporters. Not everyone would change their mind: One in ten bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters said that their opinion of the United States would not change no matter what America does. This small minority is al-Qaeda’s real, narrow core of fervent and intractable support.

The same trend holds in other countries. Among the leading steps that would improve opinion of the United States in Saudi Arabia, for example, were for the U.S. to increase visas and trade. Like their fellow citizens, three-quarters of Saudis who have a favorable opinion of bin Laden cited increased visas to and free trade with the United States. And more than half of both supporters and non-supporters of bin Laden said that these actions would improve their opinion of the United States a great deal.

If the United States demonstrates that it respects people by helping to make tangible improvements in their daily lives, even the anti-American attitudes of those who have a positive opinion of al-Qaeda are likely to change as well.

We have proof of how effective these changes can be. After a massive tsunami struck Indonesia on December 26, 2004, the United States led an extraordinary international relief effort for the victims. Of course, America dispenses aid to many countries, but the money is normally funneled through governments, and ordinary citizens rarely see or experience the results. America’s relief effort in Indonesia, by contrast, consisted of on-the-ground, people-to-people assistance. It was broadcast non-stop on local Indonesian television and had a clear

American brand. The assistance not only saved lives but demonstrated to Indonesians that America cared about their wellbeing.

Afterwards, public opinion among Indonesians dramatically swung in favor of the United States, with 65 percent of Indonesians expressing a favorable opinion as a direct result of American aid, including 71 percent of bin Laden supporters. This gain in America's reputation was accompanied by a corresponding decline in backing for the perceived symbols of the most radical anti-American views—bin Laden, al-Qaeda and their local Islamist allies.

Over time, American aid was not the only reason that Indonesians turned against the radicals. The deaths caused by terrorist attacks and increased democratic participation inside Indonesia also contributed. But the U.S. humanitarian mission was one of the most important factors. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that this shift in Indonesian public opinion towards America is “one of the defining moments of this new century.”

The Indonesian example is not the only one. After a devastating earthquake hit Pakistan in 2005, America stepped in with a similarly intensive relief effort—again widely reported in local media and clearly identified as American aid. Afterwards, our surveys found that 79 percent of self-identified bin Laden supporters (78 percent of all Pakistanis) thought well of the United States because of the humanitarian mission. Among all Pakistanis, the U.S. government was more popular than al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or any Pakistani Islamist radical group—even among Pakistanis who thought favorably of these groups. Indeed, the number of Pakistanis who voiced a favorable opinion of the United States doubled from 23 percent six months before the earthquake to 46 percent one month after American aid began. At the same time, the number of Pakistanis who disapproved of bin Laden doubled at almost the exact same percentage as those who became favorable to the U.S.

This does not mean that the United States can solely increase direct aid and visas without changing its overarching policies in the Muslim world. Again, America's relief efforts in Indonesia and Pakistan are instructive. Indonesia is ruled by a democratic government. And the United States has supported that government, in part with military training and assistance in its fight against domestic terror groups, rather than direct U.S. military action against those groups. Consequently, goodwill towards America among Indonesians has, for the most part, been sustained. Nearly three years after the tsunami, almost 60 percent of Indonesians said that American assistance had continued to make them favorable towards the United States.

On the other hand, America has carried out military strikes inside Pakistan. Combined with the specter of the war on terror, these policies have dissolved the warm feelings generated by America's earthquake relief. In surveys we conducted over the last four years, the positive feelings that stemmed from the relief effort have almost entirely dissipated.

Humanitarian policies provide an opening. Yet, absent other political and economic factors, they are unlikely to result in sustained, long-term improvements in public opinion.

IV. Three Lessons for Future American Policy

Terror Free Tomorrow's research provides three useful lessons. The first: don't be alarmed by the apparent level of support for bin Laden, al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Muslim world. This support is soft, and has been consistently declining over time. These changing attitudes are largely the result not of America's actions, but al-Qaeda's: citizens in Pakistan and other countries are becoming increasingly disgusted with the group's barbaric violence.

The second lesson is that in order to repair the dismal impression that many Muslims have of the United States, modest actions can have an immediate and dramatic impact. It is essential for the United States to adopt policies that reveal a different side of American power—one that demonstrates respect and compassion by improving the lives of individual Muslims. These policies include increasing student and work visas, direct humanitarian aid, and fairer and freer trade. Since much of the Muslim anger towards the United States and the West is fueled by the widespread perception of a lack of respect, all of these people-based policies send a tangible message that we care about Muslims and regard them as equals.

The third lesson is that practical, direct-to-the-public policy initiatives should be seen as an opening to a new American stance that, in both word and deed, manifests respectful relations between people. These initiatives need to be followed up with meaningful action on the major issues that fuel Muslim resentment. We need to create more effective counterterrorism strategies, work to break the logjam on peace with Israel and resolve the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Otherwise, whatever goodwill we create is likely to fade over time.

That goodwill is an invaluable asset to our national security. Negative public opinion towards the United States acts as a real political constraint on the leaders of Muslim countries, limiting their ability to work with America and our allies on everything from counterterrorism operations to negotiating peace agreements. When public opinion towards America has improved and support for terror groups has declined, other governments—even with the overt help of the United States—have been able to isolate and target the terrorists. Indonesia and the Philippines are both successful examples.

On the frontlines in Pakistan, the Pakistani government's hand would be strengthened if the staunchly anti-American views of its citizens can be eased. It is bin Laden's potency as an anti-American icon that drives much of his support. And as in Indonesia, when opinion towards America improves, support for bin Laden and al-Qaeda declines as well. Declining sympathy for terrorists and rising regard for America, acting together, are a powerful force against extremists.

Statement of Kenneth Ballen House Committee on Foreign Affairs

In the wake of 9/11, America fell into a vicious cycle in which our major security policies, aimed at combating terrorism, actually made the threat of terrorism worse by inflaming popular sympathy for extremism. Turning that opinion around could be the first step towards finally getting our counterterrorism strategy right. And while first steps are often said to be the hardest, in this case, the opposite is true. Indeed, the most important first step is the easiest. It is to listen.