



Kenneth Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion.

Look who's pro-U.S. now: Saudi Arabia

It's now one of the most pro-US and antiterrorist Muslim countries.

By Kenneth Ballen

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Washington--President Bush is expected to make his first state visit to Saudi Arabia Jan. 14. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and home to its holiest places. It is also the home country of Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 Sept. 11 terrorists.

What Mr. Bush will find in Saudi Arabia would surprise most Americans – indeed, most Muslims around the world, who look to Saudi Arabia as their spiritual home.

For in this country most sacred to Muslims, Mr. bin Laden's countrymen have dramatically turned against him, Al Qaeda, Saudi fighters in Iraq, and terrorism itself. And they have also equally dramatically turned in favor of bin Laden's chief enemy: the United States. The people of Saudi Arabia are now among the most pro-American and antiterrorist of any in the entire Muslim world.

These are just some of the startling findings of a rare opinion survey conducted in Saudi Arabia last month by the nonprofit polling group I lead, Terror Free Tomorrow, and by D3 Systems.

Fewer than 1 in 10 Saudis has a favorable opinion of Al Qaeda, and 88 percent approve the Saudi military and police pursuing Al Qaeda fighters. Only 15 percent of Saudis have a favorable opinion of bin Laden himself. (A Saudi poll late in 2003 showed 49 percent favorable.)

Even for Saudis with a favorable view of bin Laden and Al Qaeda, addressing the problem of terrorism is one of their most important priorities, as it is to all Saudis, chosen by close to 90 percent. Only unemployment and inflation weighed more heavily on the Saudi public.

Saudis reject terrorism nearly unanimously. They aren't clamoring for radical rule from bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Indeed, more than two-thirds support stronger, closer relations with the US. Three-quarters of Saudis also said their opinion of America would significantly improve if the US took certain actions, such as increasing visas or signing a free-trade treaty with Saudi Arabia. These are practical, achievable steps that should be on Bush's agenda.

In fact, compared with the most populous Muslim countries, Saudis are among the most favorable to the US. While only 40 percent currently have a favorable opinion, that's twice or more the percentage of those in Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Indonesia. For Saudis, this is a profound turnaround from just a year and a half ago, when, in a limited Terror Free Tomorrow survey, only 11 percent had a favorable opinion of the US. That figure has now more than tripled, while unfavorable ratings have plummeted from 89 percent to just half.

Two factors help explain this major shift: 1) US policies are perceived to be less hostile, and 2) Saudi King Abdullah has promoted moderation.

While Saudi citizens have been reported by the American military to make up almost half of the foreign suicide bombers in Iraq, the Saudi public itself is strongly opposed to any Saudis fighting in Iraq. Sixty-three percent of Saudis oppose their fellow citizens fighting against Shiite militias in Iraq. An even higher percentage – 69 – favors Saudi Arabia working with the US to resolve the Iraq conflict.

On many issues, Saudis fault the current US agenda, and sometimes even that of their own king. Particularly when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, only a third of Saudis support the king's peace plan and a two-state solution. Roughly half favor all Arabs continuing to fight until there is no state of Israel. This is clearly an area where stronger leadership is needed to shift Saudi public opinion.

Yet to the question many in the West have repeatedly asked – "Where is the voice of the moderate Muslim majority who stand against Al Qaeda, bin Laden, and terrorism?" – the people of Saudi Arabia have delivered a definitive answer.

The people of Islam's spiritual home clearly and unequivocally reject Al Qaeda, bin Laden, Iraqi insurgents, and terrorism. They also just as forcefully look forward to the day when the US and Saudi Arabia can have closer and stronger relations.

This gives Bush a unique opportunity to forge a deeper alliance not just with King Abdullah, but the people of Saudi Arabia themselves – and Muslims everywhere.

• *Kenneth Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion. This nationwide survey of Saudi Arabia was conducted in partnership with D3 Systems by telephone in Arabic. It had a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. [Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)*



Poll: Most Saudis oppose al Qaeda

Story Highlights

Survey: 10 percent of Saudis polled have a favorable view of al Qaeda

Poll interviewing 1,004 Saudis says most are opposed to peace with Israel

The numbers reflect a more positive feeling toward the U.S. than Pakistan has
15 of the 19 September 11, 2001, hijackers were Saudi nationals

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Most Saudi Arabia citizens interviewed in a poll oppose terrorism and want closer ties with the United States. But many Saudis remain opposed to making peace with Israel, according to what researchers call an unprecedented survey of the kingdom.

Ten percent of Saudis have a favorable view of the al Qaeda terrorist network, according to a survey by Terror Free Tomorrow, an international public opinion research group based in Washington.

Fifteen percent said they have a favorable view of al Qaeda's leader, Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, the poll found.

"I think that the people of Saudi Arabia have so overwhelmingly turned against bin Laden, al Qaeda and terrorism in general that nine out of 10 of them look at all three unfavorably," the group's president, Ken Ballen, said Monday.

Though the desert monarchy's ruling family has close ties to the United States, it was also the home of 15 of the 19 suicide hijackers behind al Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.

The kingdom also has been the target of a spate of [al Qaeda](#) attacks since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the origin of a large share of the Islamic militants implicated in suicide bombings in Iraq.

Pollsters questioned 1,004 Saudi adults in Arabic between November 30 and December 5, according to the group. The survey had a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Saudis also have a better opinion of the United States than in other countries in the Muslim world, with 40 percent saying they view the U.S. favorably. That compares to 19 percent in Pakistan, according to a poll taken by the same group in August, and 21

percent of Egyptians, according to a May survey by the Pew Research Center.

CNN terrorism analyst Peter Bergen said a spate of al Qaeda attacks on Saudi targets starting in 2003 appeared to have turned the Saudi public against the group.

"The results, while a little surprising, seem fair enough considering the circumstances," he said.

But while the poll was encouraging, "It's not all Kumbaya," he added. Bergen said a "substantial minority" of Saudis -- 30 percent -- support fighting against U.S. and coalition troops in Iraq, and 52 percent would support [Saudi Arabia's](#) development of nuclear weapons.

Most Saudis oppose al Qaeda, the survey suggests, and it also found limited support for two other groups the United States has branded terrorist organizations -- Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic movement that rules Gaza, and Hezbollah, Lebanon's Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim militia that fought a month long war with Israel in 2006.

"Finally, some good news," Ballen said.

Thirty-three percent of Saudis viewed Hezbollah favorably, compared to 42 percent unfavorably. When asked about Hamas, 37 percent had a positive response, while 38 percent viewed the group unfavorably.

But Ballen said the survey shows the Saudi population is now one of the most pro-American in the Muslim world, with 69 percent of those surveyed supporting close ties between Riyadh and Washington.

"We had done a limited survey there about a year and a half ago and found very strong anti-American attitudes, so I was quite surprised by the results," he said.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq was seen as the most important step in improving U.S.-Saudi ties by 85 percent of those surveyed. Most Saudis said they opposed their countrymen fighting in Iraq and favored helping the United States reach an end to the nearly five-year-old war there.

Support was also strong for increasing visas for Saudis to come to the United States, with 74 percent calling that a step that would improve their opinion. And 71 percent favored a free-trade pact between Washington and Riyadh, while 52 percent said a U.S.-brokered peace treaty between the Israelis and Palestinians would be an improvement.

Saudi King Abdullah is the leading advocate of an Arab League proposal that would normalize relations with the Jewish state in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to the

frontiers it held before the 1967 Mideast War.

But his support for a comprehensive Mideast peace "definitely does not carry over at all," Ballen said: Thirty percent of Saudis support a peace treaty, even if it resulted in the establishment of a Palestinian state, the survey found.

"He's not backed by his own citizens on that," Ballen said.

Saudis expressed support for a free press and free elections, though 79 percent also said they continued to support an absolute monarchy -- and 15 percent supported the recent sentence of 200 lashes and six months imprisonment of a 19-year old Shiite woman for being with a male acquaintance before she was gang-raped by seven men.

Abdullah announced Monday the woman would be pardoned.

Despite the kingdom's somewhat forbidding reputation among Westerners, Ballen said those contacted were far more receptive to pollsters than most Americans. The poll's response rate was 61 percent, compared to 10 to 15 percent for most U.S. surveys.



Reza Aslan, CNN AC 360 Contributor and noted Middle East Commentator:

"Terror Free Tomorrow's poll of opinions in Saudi Arabia toward al-Qaeda and the US is good news, no doubt.

90% of those polled had an unfavorable view of al-Qaeda (85% held unfavorable views of bin Laden) while a surprising 40% held favorable views of the United States.

These are important numbers and we should all be grateful to Terror Free Tomorrow, an international public opinion research group based in Washington, for providing them. This should take the wind out of the sails of those pundits who love to shout from their perches (usually on Fox) about how the Arab world feels about us, despite having never actually been to the Arab world, or spoken to an actual Arab (Fouad Ajami doesn't count)."



Hailed by the major Arabic press as “a survey of profound importance” (*Al-Watan; Asharq Al-Awsat*), *Terror Free Tomorrow*’ s results have been extensively reported in front page coverage in major Arabic media, and by important Arab commentators, both in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

According to *Al-Watan*, for instance, the poll constitutes:

“...a rare and remarkable in-depth study of the Saudi society and evidence of a significant rejection by the Saudi Street of terrorism” that can help “bear witness to a new consciousness in the Arab and Muslim world.”

INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

June 15, 2008

“Even people who say they dislike America want to have strong bilateral relations with the U.S, and attitudes are fluid. A highly regarded study last year by *Terror Free Tomorrow*, for example, found that 40 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia had a positive view of the United States, compared with just 11 percent 18 months earlier.”

The Washington Post

December 19, 2007

Saudis back government against al Qaeda: study

RIYADH (Reuters) - Most Saudis oppose Osama bin Laden and back the government in its campaign against al Qaeda, but say they want more democracy in the U.S.-allied Islamic country, according to poll findings released this week.

The study conducted by U.S. group "Terror Free Tomorrow" showed 15 percent of respondents had a favorable view of Saudi-born al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and 88 percent approve of the government's efforts to pursue militants inside the kingdom.

[Saudi Arabia](#), the world's biggest oil exporter, is a key U.S. ally in the Middle East but is also home to 15 of the 19 hijackers who carried out the September 11 attacks in the United States. Bin Laden was at one time a popular figure in the kingdom.

Al Qaeda-linked militants launched a campaign to destabilize the country, an absolute monarchy with no elected parliament, in 2003 with attacks on foreign residents, energy installations and government buildings.

Washington-based Terror Free Tomorrow said it carried out its research by telephone this month with around 1,000 Saudis. Opinion polls on political issues are rare in Saudi Arabia.

The study showed 52 percent of respondents had an unfavorable opinion of the United States, although 40 percent had a favorable opinion and 69 percent wanted better relations.

A smaller study in May 2006 showed 89 percent with a negative view of America and 11 with a positive one.

"Considering the most populous Muslim countries of the world, Saudi Arabia is among the most favorable to the United States," said the report, published on the Internet (www.terrorfreetomorrow.org).

While 95 percent of respondents said they had an approving view of King Abdullah, who came to power in 2005 promising reforms, 80 percent said free elections and a free press should be a government priority.

However, the report also showed that 79 percent support the "absolute monarchy," suggesting that understanding of democratic political systems remains limited.

Saudi Arabia is enjoying huge budget surpluses due to record world oil prices, dampening enthusiasm for political change. But a recent surge in inflation has soured the oil boom for many in a country where wealth distribution remains a problem.

The New York Times

December 17, 2007

Poll: Saudis Oppose Qaida, Split on US

WASHINGTON (AP) -- People in Saudi Arabia deeply dislike countryman [Osama bin Laden](#) and al-Qaida, yet have only lukewarm views about the United States, one of the kingdom's allies, a poll showed Monday.

Bin Laden is seen favorably by just 15 percent of Saudis, and the al-Qaida terror organization he founded gets approval from only 10 percent, the survey found. The Saudi government has been battling al-Qaida for years and recently launched an anti-terrorism crackdown aimed at preventing violence during the annual Muslim hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, which just began.

President Bush is viewed positively by 12 percent of Saudis, less than half the number with a good impression of Iranian President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#).

Forty percent have favorable opinions of the U.S. -- a lower rating than they gave China, Iran and all four other countries tested. By 44 percent to 36 percent, most favored limiting Saudi oil exports to the U.S. because of Washington's policies.

The poll also found 15 percent agreed with a Saudi court's sentencing of a young woman to 200 lashes and six months in prison after she was gang raped. In the survey, taken before King Abdullah pardoned her, 38 percent opposed the sentence while the rest gave no opinion. She had been convicted of violating strict Islamic prohibitions against socializing between genders because she was with a male acquaintance before the attack.

The poll was conducted for Terror Free Tomorrow, a bipartisan group whose goal is undermining worldwide support for terrorism. Its advisory board includes Sen. [John McCain](#), a Republican presidential candidate, and former Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind.

"People around the Muslim world look up to Saudi Arabia," said Ken Ballen, the group's president. "The fact that al-Qaida and bin Laden are so overwhelmingly rejected in Saudi Arabia is a significant thing."

The poll also highlighted the depth of anti-Israel feelings in the kingdom. By 51 percent to 30 percent, most said they favor Arabs fighting Israel until the Jewish state no longer exists, rather than a peace treaty recognizing Israel and an independent [Palestine](#). Just 6 percent said they have a favorable view of Jews.

Saudi Arabia has pursued al-Qaida militants since a 2003 series of attacks against foreigners in the kingdom. The poll showed that about nine in 10 Saudis support the effort against al-Qaida in the country.

Underscoring discomfort with the United States, only 45 percent support U.S. military help in hunting for al Qaida inside the kingdom.

While only 40 percent have favorable opinions of the U.S., that is better than many Muslim countries' views in other recent surveys. Only 19 percent of Pakistanis see the U.S. positively, an August poll by Terror Free Tomorrow showed, while surveys last spring in eight Muslim nations by the [Pew Research Center](#) found stronger pro-U.S. sentiment in only Kuwait and Bangladesh.

A strong majority favor Saudi Arabia working with the U.S. to end the war in Iraq. But 36 percent said they favor Saudi citizens fighting U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq. U.S. and Iraqi officials have said many foreign fighters there are from Saudi Arabia.

Given several choices for actions that would improve their views of the U.S., the most -- 85 percent -- chose the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Least popular, at 36 percent, was one of Bush's foreign policy objectives: the U.S. spreading democracy through the Mideast.

The survey also found:

--By 49 percent to 33 percent, Saudis would rather see the U.S. reduce its involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

--Thirteen percent said suicide bombings are justified at least sometimes.

--About four in 10 have a favorable view of Christians.

--Only 27 percent favor Iran obtaining nuclear weapons. By 38 percent to 27 percent, more favor the U.S. taking military action to block Tehran from gaining nuclear weapons.

The poll was conducted for Terror Free Tomorrow by D3 Systems of Vienna, Va., and KA Europe SPRL. Telephone interviews of 1,004 randomly chosen Saudi adults were conducted in Arabic from a country near Saudi Arabia from Nov. 30 to Dec. 5. The poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.