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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.