

## **Negative Attitudes toward the United States in the Muslim World: Do They Matter?**

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[Transcript of hearing](#)

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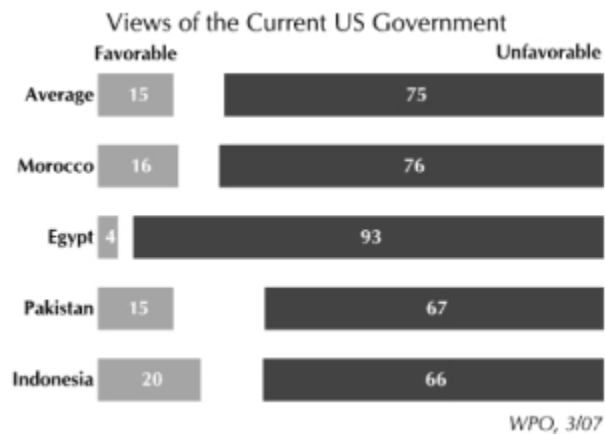


As I discussed the last time I testified to this subcommittee, in the world as a whole negative views of the United States have increased sharply in recent years. A key factor contributing to these feelings is that the United States is perceived as unconstrained in its use of military force by the system of international rules and institutions that the US itself took the lead in establishing in the post war period.

Today I will focus on attitudes in the Muslim world. Clearly the Muslim world is of particular interest as it is a major source of violence against the US. As you have already heard, it is also an area of the world with particularly negative feelings toward the United States.

The question I wish to address today is whether this is important. It is not self-evident that it is. Popularity is not intrinsically good.

In particular I want to address the question of whether negative feelings toward the US have an important impact on the US effort to deal with al Qaeda and its related groups.



In this context some have argued that what is important is not that people in the region like the US, but that they fear it. When forced to make a choice between the US and al Qaeda, it is surmised, this fear will increase the likelihood that people in the region will choose the US.

Others have argued that negative feelings toward the US drive Muslims into the arms of al Qaeda; that people in Muslim countries are so angry at the US that this leads them to actively support al Qaeda in its fight against America.

According to our research, neither of these views is quite correct. However, I will say from the beginning that our research does show that anti-American feelings do make it easier for al Qaeda to operate and to grow in the Muslim world.

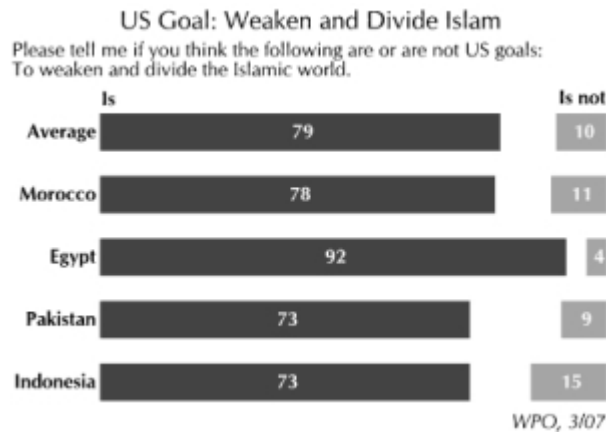
This conclusion is based on a review of publicly available surveys from the Islamic world as well as the in-depth study of Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Indonesia that we conducted this year in conjunction with the START Center at the University of Maryland. START is a center of excellence funded by the Department of Homeland Security and stands for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism. The study included focus groups which I conducted in all four countries as well as in-depth surveys. Detailed data from these studies can be found at our web site [www.WorldPublicOpinion.org](http://www.WorldPublicOpinion.org).

Not surprisingly we did indeed find negative views toward the US government even though the governments of the countries surveyed, by and large, have a positive relationship with the US government. Most negative were the Egyptians—93% expressed an unfavorable view with 86% very unfavorable. In Morocco, 76% had an unfavorable view with 49% very unfavorable. In Pakistan, 67% had an unfavorable view with 49% very unfavorable. The most moderate responses were in Indonesia where 66% did have an unfavorable view but a more modest 16% had a very unfavorable view.

However these numbers do not capture what I think is the most important dynamic in the Muslim world today.

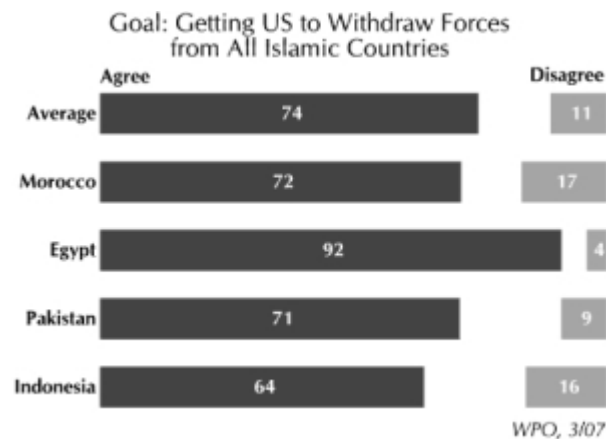
For decades, polls in the Muslim world and the statements of Muslim leaders have shown a variety of resentments about US policies. Muslims share the worldwide view that the

US does not live up to its own ideals of international law and democracy. There have also been specific complaints that the US favors Israel over the Palestinians and the Arab world as a whole, that the US exploits the Middle East for its oil and that it hypocritically supports non-democratic governments that accommodate its interests. These attitudes persist.



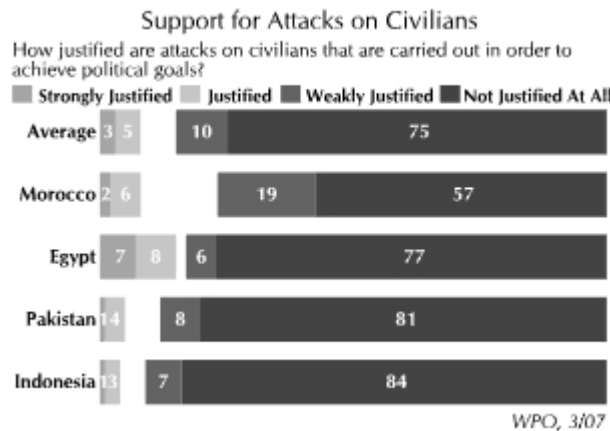
But now there is also a new feeling about the US that has emerged in the wake of 9-11. This is not so much an intensification of negative feelings toward the US as much as a new perception of American intentions. There now seems to be a perception that the US has entered into a war against Islam itself.

I think perhaps the most significant finding of our study is that across the four countries, 8 in 10 believe “weaken and divide the Islamic world.”



We do not have trend-line data to demonstrate that this is something new. But in the focus groups this was described as something that has arisen recently from American anger about 9-11. America is perceived as believing that it was attacked by Islam itself and as having declared war on Islam. People repeatedly brought up the fact that President Bush's used the term "crusade" and cited this as evidence of these underlying intentions.

In this context it is not surprising that three out of four respondents favor the goal of getting the US to withdraw its military forces troops from all Islamic countries. Most disturbing there is widespread support for attacks on US troops. Overall about half of all the Muslims polled approve of attacks on US troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf. Support reaches as high as nine in 10 in Egypt. It appears that American troops stationed throughout the region are widely perceived as occupiers.



In the focus groups, some respondents said that this sense of Islam as being under siege has enhanced people's identification with Islam. Polling done by the Anwar Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland in Arab countries over the last few years has found a dramatic increase in the number citing their Muslim identity as primary. In our poll seven in 10 approved of the goal of requiring "a strict application of sharia law in every Islamic country."

So does this mean that all these negative feelings toward America have driven Muslims into the arms of al Qaeda? It does appear that Muslims are embracing the type of religiously-based interpretation of the conflict with the US that is consonant with views that al Qaeda has also long promoted.

But in fact al Qaeda is not popular. Across the four countries only about 3 in 10 express positive feelings toward Osama bin Laden and only 1 in 7 say they both share al Qaeda's views of the US and approve of its methods.

Perhaps most significant, very large majorities reject attacks on civilians. Overwhelming majorities in all countries also specifically reject attacks on civilians including attacks on US civilians in the United States and US civilians working in Islamic countries. Most agree that such attacks are contrary to Islam.

So does that mean then that the Muslim public is basically with America against al Qaeda? The answer is no. While al Qaeda may not be popular, large majorities said that they perceive al Qaeda as seeking to “stand up to America and affirm the dignity of the Islamic people” and equally large majorities agreed with this goal.

Though al Qaeda and America are both seen as largely illegitimate, America is seen as the greater threat. It is as if Muslims are living in a neighborhood where there are two warlords operating. They do not like either one, but one is much more powerful. As long as the weaker one is standing up to the stronger one, it makes sense that they are inclined to play down their dislike for the weaker one.

And in the focus groups people clearly resisted criticizing al Qaeda. Having rejected attacks on civilians as wrong they became uncomfortable and somewhat defensive when asked about 9-11. They strongly insisted that there was no proof that al Qaeda was behind the 9-11 attacks.

This pattern was present in the survey as well. When we asked respondents who they thought was behind 9-11, in no country did more than one in three identify al Qaeda as the culprit and in Pakistan the number was a mere 2 percent. Some respondents blamed the US itself, some blamed Israel, and many refused to even make a guess.

In the focus groups when I brought up the fact that there are videos in which al Qaeda leaders brag about the 9-11 attacks a common answer was: “Hollywood can create anything.”

While this may sound very strange, we should remember that it is not unusual for people to ignore evidence that is, shall we say, ‘inconvenient.’ During World War II when the Soviet Union was America’s ally against Hitler, Americans probably stopped paying attention to Stalin’s gulags. In the 1980s when the mujahideen were fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan with CIA aid, we probably did not pay too much attention to their ideology.

Enemies of one’s enemies are not necessarily one’s friends. But it is pretty normal to not spend a lot of time scrutinizing their faults.

This brings us back to the question we started with: What are the consequences of anti-American feelings in the Muslim world?

Our study has found that anti-American feeling is by itself not enough to lead one to actively support al Qaeda. To approve of attacks on civilians one must have views that—I am pleased to report—are quite unusual in the Muslim world.

However, anti-American feeling can lead Muslims to suppress their moral doubts about al Qaeda. This makes it politically more difficult for governments to take strong action against al Qaeda, it makes general publics more likely to passively accept al Qaeda and it creates an environment where it is more likely that individuals will cross the threshold into actively supporting al Qaeda. In other words it gives al Qaeda more room to maneuver.

In closing, I will not go so far as to make policy recommendations, but I would like to point out a few of the policy implications of what we have found. When the US decides whether to expand its military presence in a region clearly there are many factors that need to be taken into account. The impact on public opinion is only one. But the impact on public opinion can have significant consequences on the ground as we are seeing vividly in Iraq today. When the US acts on its own initiative, without multilateral approval, these public feelings are also apt to be highly focused at the US itself.

It is also not easy to judge in advance what those public reactions will be, though it is easy to formulate what sound like plausible assumptions. When, the US greatly expanded its military footprint in the Muslim world after 9-11, some assumed that this expansion would not intimidate the general population, that people would perceive it as targeted against a highly circumscribed enemy that did not include them. But the population does not perceive the target of US military presence as separate from them. Rather the target is widely seen as the religion with which they deeply identify.

Others assumed that this dramatic expansion would induce a kind of awe in the general population that would draw people closer to the US and away from America's enemies. The Muslim people are indeed awed by American power, but it appears that this awe quickly turned to fear leading people to pull away from the US and to take a more accommodating view of those, like al Qaeda, who defy America.

There may be some steps that America can take at this point to mitigate these unintended consequences. Above all the challenge now is to provide reassurance through credible evidence that the US has not targeted Islam itself. There may well be symbolic steps that could have some moderating effects. What is most important, however, is how the US comports its military force and how it communicates its long-term intentions.

Equally important, though, is for America to learn from its experience. We will no doubt face challenges in the future and it is critical that we have a clear-eyed view of the likely side effects for the United States when it uses military force. These side effects are likely to be more pronounced when the US acts without the legitimizing and diffusing effect that comes from a multilateral process. And they are likely to be stronger in a region where relations with the US have become laced with the intensity of religious convictions. We may well decide that the costs are worth the strategic objective, but we should not assume that the costs will not be high.

Thank you for your attention.

