



PDA

PROJECT ON DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES

COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE ■ CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
617-547-4474 ■ WWW.COMW.ORG/PDA ■ PDA@COMW.ORG

Losing Hearts and Minds: World Public Opinion and post-9/11 US Security Policy

Carl Conetta

Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Memo #37
14 September 2006

Gone are the days...when 200,000 Germans marched in Berlin to show solidarity with their American allies, or when *Le Monde*, the most prestigious French newspaper, could publish a large headline, 'We Are All Americans.'"

– Richard Bernstein, *New York Times*, 11 September 2003.{1}

The sympathy and support for the United States that surged worldwide in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks{2} began to ebb as soon as US bombs began falling on Afghanistan.{3} Supportive sentiments continued to recede through 2004, driven increasingly by the Iraq war and eventually settling at levels unseen since the early 1980s. The trend has temporarily reversed in some places at some times, either in response to hopeful news from Iraq (such as the December 2004 elections) or in reaction to local events (the November 2005 terrorist bombing in Jordan). Also, there are national exceptions to the trend (Israel) and partial exceptions (India). On balance, however, the United States today finds world opinion substantially at odds with its foreign policy and its leadership on most particulars.

This memo reviews the polling evidence on current world attitudes regarding the United States and its leadership in the area of security policy. The survey concludes by examining some of the political repercussions of these popular attitudes, especially in the Muslim world.

Among allied nations: pro-US sentiments plummet

Polls conducted by the Pew Research Center show a precipitous decline in positive attitudes about the United States since the year 2000 in eight of 12 countries for which multi-year comparisons can be made.{4} According to the Pew polls, the proportion of the population feeling positively toward the United States has plummeted in Great Britain from 83 percent to 56, in France from 62 percent to 39, in Germany from 78 percent to 37, and in Spain from 50 percent to 23. Japan, too, has seen a decline.

Similarly, polls by the German Marshall Fund and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs have found a significant and uniform decline in positive feelings toward the United States between 2002

and 2006 in the European countries they surveyed.^{5} Today, in France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Poland – all of them NATO allies – negative feelings about the United States are almost as frequent as positive ones. In Spain, negative sentiments predominate.

Among Muslim populations: Fear and disapproval grow

The steepest declines found by the Pew polls, however, occurred in Indonesia, Jordan, and Turkey – all three notable as moderate or democratic Muslim-majority states. Positive attitudes toward the United States are shared by only 30 percent of Indonesians and 15 percent or less of Jordanians and Turks. Only in Nigeria have attitudes toward America notably improved since 2000. Positive attitudes in Pakistan have marginally improved since 2000 – to 27 percent today (although this is much improved from the 10 percent level recorded in 2002).

By contrast, China scores much better than the United States in all six Muslim countries queried in the Pew polls. Russia also scores better than the United States – and usually much better – in all but one country, Morocco.

Very low US popularity ratings in the Arab world also have been recorded in several Zogby International polls.^{6}

- In Egypt and Saudi Arabia the segments feeling positively toward the United States has receded and now stands at 14 and 9 percent, respectively.
- Positive feelings have receded in Morocco and Jordan, too, although the segments feeling positively are not as small: 33 and 34 percent, respectively.
- In the UAE and Lebanon, the population segments feeling positively toward the United States actually grew larger between 2000 and 2006 (although only marginally so in Lebanon). Even with this improvement, however, only 28 percent of the UAE's population and 32 percent of Lebanon's feel positively toward America.

Perhaps more troublesome than America's low popularity rating in Arab and Muslim countries are widespread perceptions in these countries that the United States might target them.^{7} Significant majorities of between 59 and 80 percent in Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon believe that the United States could pose a military threat to their homelands.

War against what?

Majorities in Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, and Pakistan have expressed doubts about America's sincerity in the global war on terrorism (GWOT). (Majorities in France and Germany have expressed similar doubts). Popular alternative explanations (especially in the Muslim world) are that America actually seeks through the GWOT to control world oil supplies, target unfriendly Muslim governments, achieve world hegemony, and/or support Israel.{8}

Suspicion also runs high among Muslims in GWOT lead countries: the United States and the United Kingdom. A BBC poll in 2002 found 70 percent of Muslims in the United Kingdom not believing Tony Blair's assurances that the "war on terrorism" was not actually a "war on Islam".{9} In the United States, a poll conducted by Zogby International for Hamilton College found about one-third of American Muslims perceiving the "war on terror" as a "war on Islam." {10}

Since 2002, the Pew Center has routinely tracked support for the US-led GWOT in a number of countries.

- In Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Poland, the proportion of citizens supporting the US effort equaled or surpassed 60 percent early in the period. Since then, support has fallen in each country by an average of 20 percentage points.
- In some other nations, the decline has been even more significant – for instance: in Spain, popular support for the US effort has fallen from 63 percent to 19 percent; in Japan, from 61 to 26 percent; and in Turkey, from 30 to 14 percent.
- In Lebanon, support for the GWOT has declined modestly from 38 to 31 percent. Interestingly, support for the US effort has risen somewhat in Indonesia (from 31 to 39 percent), Jordan (13 to 16 percent), and Pakistan (20 to 30 percent), while remaining a minority position. The results in Indonesia and Pakistan may partially reflect the effects of US humanitarian aid to those countries in response to natural disasters. The Jordanian case may reflect a reaction to the November 2005 terrorist bombing there, which killed 57 people.
- No comparative data is available for Egypt, but in 2006 only 10 percent of the population expressed support for the US campaign.{11}

Iraq rejected as an example; war seen to bolster terrorism

Turning to assessments of the Iraq war: support for the effort was weak from the start outside of the United States and a few other countries. A 2006 poll sponsored by the BBC found that in 33 of the 35 countries surveyed the most common opinion was that the war in Iraq has increased the threat of terrorism.{12} On average 60 percent had this view, while 12 percent thought it had

decreased the threat. The 35 countries represented a sampling of five continents and the Middle East.

The Bush administration has viewed Iraq as pivotal to democratic transition in the region, hoping that it would serve as a positive example of democratization. Instead, nations in the region have come to see it as a negative example. This is confirmed by polls conducted during 2004 and 2005 by the University of Maryland and Zogby International in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE.^{13}

US becoming pariah state

In light of the above, it is not surprising that a 2005 poll of 23 nations found large percentages of citizens feeling that, on balance, the United States was having a mostly negative influence on world affairs.^{14} Majorities or pluralities held this view in 16 of the 23 nations surveyed. France and China were perceived much more positively and, in 20 of the 23 countries surveyed, there was majority support for a greater European role in the world and a smaller American one.

Although global public sentiments regarding the United States do not directly or immediately translate into policy change, voters in several allied countries – the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain – have punished their governments for pro-American stances. Political effects are more evident in Arab and Muslim countries.

Political advance of Islamic fundamentalism

Parallel with America's post-9/11 wars and counter-terror efforts, radical Islamic parties have increased their political influence substantially in more than a dozen nations, often campaigning explicitly against what they describe as a "war against Islam". Winning more votes during the past five years than ever before, such parties have advanced their positions in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

In Turkey and the Palestinian territories they now lead governments and probably could win power in Egypt, too, should fully free elections be conducted there. In Iraq, fundamentalist parties dominate government; in Iran, the conservative former mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, rose to presidential office in a campaign explicitly challenging US policy. In Lebanon, the influence and popularity of Hizbullah grew substantially during the post-9/11 period. Even its miscalculation in raiding Israel in July 2006 has not dented its support, with one poll showing more than 80 percent of Lebanese backing its confrontational stance.^{15}

In Bangladesh, Islamic parties have consolidated their position in the post-9/11 period, after winning a major role in government in October 2001. And, in Somalia, the Supreme Islamic Courts Council has become the predominant force in the country, although not by electoral means. US support for the opposing Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism and likely

US support for the Ethiopian incursion into Somalia have only rebounded to the Courts' favor, which is attracting increasing support from warlord groups on the basis of nationalist appeals.

A broader disaffection: the "Muslim street" and pan-Islamic action

Although popular protests in the Arab and Muslim worlds have occasioned the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and some of these protests were quite large, neither the "Arab street" (nor the Muslim one) have risen up in persistent, active opposition to US policy. But common expectations about the volatility of the "Arab street" betray a naive view of social process. They also may overestimate the intensity of pan-Arab and, especially, pan-Islamic solidarity.

For most people in the Muslim world, national, tribal, or local identity tends to be as strong or stronger than Islamic identity – as shown in recent Zogby polls of the Middle East.^{16} "Islam" may be an integral part of these national and local identities. But the fact that national or local concerns, perspectives, and interests predominate, means that feelings and acts of solidarity are attenuated. This does not mean, however, that solidarity does not function; both the polling and electoral data show that it does – but usually in ways subtler than the "Arab/Muslim street" trope suggests.

Obviously, repressive political conditions also limit mass expressions of solidarity. Additionally: avenues for effective action regarding distant events may seem lacking, which can make protest seem pointless. Nonetheless, on occasion, the "street" does erupt in response to some "distant event" – as it did in May 2005 over the alleged desecration of the Quran at the US Guantanamo prison camp and again in Fall 2005 over the Danish publication of offensive caricatures of Mohammed.

The Guantanamo-Quran report prompted demonstrations and disturbances in more than nine countries, resulting in the deaths of at least 15 people. In response to the Mohammed caricatures, protests or riots occurred in at least 18 Muslim-majority nations. The largest involved more than 70,000 people. As many as 150 were killed in cartoon related violence in Nigeria; perhaps 30 were killed in violence elsewhere.

The two sets of protests should be viewed, substantially, as "condensation points" for anger arising from America's three post-9/11 wars. The events of 2001-2005 provided the fuel, if not the spark. Certainly, this is how some leaders of the protests framed them. Yet, neither of these series of protests were motivated principally by "solidarity" with Iraqis or Afghans or anyone else. They were instead prompted by perceived insults to Islam, which directly engaged believers across the world. In both cases, this was the spark or precipitating factor.

It is also noteworthy that, for the participants, the protests were not principally meant to achieve some remote effect. Instead, they were affirmations of devotion and identity. As such, they were inherently "efficacious". Finally, in many countries, the demonstrations were enabled by political authorities, perhaps for reasons of legitimation.

It may be that only direct challenges to Islam – whether real or perceived – have the power to precipitate mass pan-Islamic action. Such “assaults” may not *engage* a “worldwide Muslim community” as much as they *constitute it* – bringing together what is otherwise, usually disaggregated or divided into national or tribal communities. If this is so, then there is good reason to be concerned about the Bush administration’s decision to re-invent the “war on terror” as a war on radical Islamic movements. It may help precipitate the threat it purports to defend against.

Recent US military strategy explicitly lists a number of defining characteristics of Islamic extremism. Among these are adherence to such concepts as the Caliphate, Jihad, and Islamic Law. Unfortunately, under various interpretations, some or all of these enjoy at least mild assent among a very substantial percentage of the world’s Muslims – the vast majority of whom are not insurgent, violent, or even especially political. But it may not escape their attention that important tenets of Islam, like Sharia, now figure centrally in Pentagon threat assessment and strategy. As noted above, substantial percentages of Muslim populations already suspect that the “war on terrorism” is, in fact, a “war on Islam”. In trying to “ideologize” the threat, present policy inadvertently encourages such beliefs.

Conclusion: the World Against Us

Since the advent of the Afghan war, world public opinion has trended strongly against US global leadership, both generally and, especially, regarding national security affairs. This, as a response to a set of US policy practices – particularly the Iraq war and conduct of the “war on terrorism”. The political counterpart to this trend has developed unevenly – thus, opening gaps between some governments and their citizens. These gaps may slowly close, as they have in Spain and Italy, materially diminishing allied support for US policies. Otherwise, effective political resistance to US initiatives has been sporadic, although a tipping point may come. Of course, even sporadic opposition or passive opposition to US policies can significantly reduce their effectiveness or increase their cost. This was made clear by Turkish refusal to allow transit of its territory and overflights during the opening phase of the Iraq war. This prevented the opening of an effective northern front in that war; subsequently, the areas to the north of Baghdad became a haven for fleeing Baathists and a redoubt for insurgents. Pakistan, China, Russia, Germany, and France also have been able to impede some important US policy initiatives.

Perhaps the greatest concerns about the drift of world opinion is that (1) in the Muslim world it is increasing the political power of fundamentalist parties and providing a more fertile environment for the activity of terrorist organizations, while (2) also creating favorable opinion worldwide for powers that purportedly seek to balance against the United States – namely China and Russia.

Notes

1. Richard Bernstein; "Two Years Later: World Opinion; Foreign Views of US Darken after Sept. 11," *New York Times*, 11 September 2003.
2. "Southeast Asian leaders adopt anti-terror statement," *Agence France Presse*, 4 November 2001; OIC Press Release, *The OIC Secretary General Strongly Condemning the Terrorist Attacks that Caused the Death of a Great Number of Innocent People* (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Organization of the Islamic Conference, 1 October 2001); "A country by country look at actions taken internationally as United States plans retaliatory moves," *Associated Press*, 17 September 2001; "Arabs support war against terrorism, refrain from backing military action," *Agence France Presse*, 15 September 2001; Suzanne Daley, "Russia Condemns Attacks on the U.S. and Vows to Aid NATO," *New York Times*, 14 September 2001; Robert Wielaard, "Stunned EU Vows to Stand by US," *Associated Press*, 12 September 2001; and, "Palestinian leadership condemns US attacks, denies celebrations," *Agence France Presse*, 12 September 2001.
3. "US-Arab relations 'in crisis'," *BBC News*, 10 November 2001; "Jakarta increases pressure on US to end bombing," *The Age*, 4 November 2001; Karen DeYoung, "Job of Maintaining Coalition Toughens; World Response to Bombing Ranges From Silence and Support to Public Protests," *Washington Post*, 10 October 2001, p. 17; Matthew Engel, "Muslim allies break ranks with US: Key Muslim allies Saudi Arabia and Pakistan break ranks with US over bombing," *The Guardian* (London), 16 October 2001; Arie Farnam, "Bombings hit unintended target: European opinion," *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 November 2001; Paul Mann and Michael A. Taverna, "Europe Wary Of Prolonged Bombing," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 22 October 2001; Alissa J. Rubin, "Bombing Alters Afghans' Views of US," *LA Times*, 5 November 2001; and, Kevin Sullivan, "War Support Ebbs Worldwide; Sept 11 Doesn't Justify Bombing many say," *Washington Post*, 6 November 2001.
4. *America's Image Slips, but Allies Share US Concerns Over Iran, Hamas* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 13 June 2006); and, *US Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, June 2005).
5. *Transatlantic Trends 2005* (Washington DC: German Marshall Fund, 2005); and, *World Views 2002* (Washington DC and Chicago IL: German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002).
6. James Zogby, *Attitudes of Arabs: An In-depth Look at Social and Political Concerns of Arabs* (Washington DC: Arab American Institute and Zogby International, 2005); and, Dafna Linzer, "Poll Shows Growing Arab Rancor at US," *Washington Post*, 23 July 2004, p. 26.
7. *A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, March 2004).
8. *A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists* (Washington DC: Pew Center, March 2004).
9. Robin Aitken, "Islam Poll," *Today show, BBC Radio 4*, 23 December, 2002; http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/politics/muslim_poll.pdf

10. Hamilton College and Zogby International, *Muslim America Poll* (Clinton NY: Hamilton College, 20 May 2002).
11. *America's Image Slips, but Allies Share US Concerns Over Iran, Hamas* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 13 June 2006); and, *US Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, June 2005).
12. *World Public Says Iraq War has Increased Global Terrorist Threat* (Washington DC: Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), February 2006).
13. James Zogby, *Attitudes of Arabs: An In-depth Look at Social and Political Concerns of Arabs* (Washington, DC: Arab American Institute and Zogby International, 2005); and, Shibley Telhami, *Arab Attitudes Toward Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy, and the Media* (College Park, MD: Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, October 2005).
14. *In 20 of 23 Countries Polled Citizens Want Europe to Be More Influential Than US* (Washington DC: Program on International Policy Attitudes, April 2005).
15. Beirut Center for Research and Data, *Poll finds support for Hizbullah's retaliation; Opinions diverge on sectarian lines - but not completely* (Beirut: 29 July 2006).
16. James Zogby, *Attitudes of Arabs: An In-depth Look at Social and Political Concerns of Arabs* (Washington DC: Arab American Institute and Zogby International, 2005). On the nationalistic character of Islam, see: Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).