How Muslims and Americans View Each Other

Comments by Steven Kull, editor of WorldPublicOpinion.org, at the US-Islamic Forum in Doha, Qatar, February 18, 2007.

For some years now, as part of developing the web resource WorldPublicOpinion.org, we have been conducting studies of public opinion in the Muslim world and the United States. We have been conducting focus groups, and tracking the polls of other organizations, as well as conducting our own polls.

As you may expect, the news is certainly not all good. There is a tremendous amount of mutual suspicion. The US is viewed negatively in virtually all Muslim countries. In a multi-country poll we just did for the BBC, we found that in all Muslim countries polled, majorities said that the US is having a mostly negative influence in the world and that the US military presence in the Middle East provokes more conflict than it prevents.

In some polls, views of the American people are not quite as negative as views of the United States or its government, but they are still mostly on the negative side.

When Americans are asked about Muslim countries as a whole, their views are fairly neutral. But when asked about some specific countries, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, majorities of Americans have unfavorable views.

But despite all of these negative feelings, polls do reveal more common ground than one might expect and even some potential directions for resolving some conflicts. An example is a recent study that we did in Iran and in the US. Both Iranians and Americans expressed fairly negative views of each others' country. But when we probed deeper into the areas of conflict, we found some interesting areas of potential agreement.

Naturally, a major focus was Iran's nuclear enrichment program. Iranians show a strong commitment to Iran having such program: nine in 10 say that it is important for Iran to have a full-fuel-cycle nuclear program (84% very important). When we offered a long list of possible incentives that the US might provide to Iran to forgo this program, these were largely brushed off as insignificant.

The reasons Iranians gave for having such a program were multiple. At the top of the list was securing Iran's energy needs. Also high on the list was to improve its status as a regional power. There was also the goal of deterring other countries from trying to dominate it, which implies a military dimension.

Now Americans overwhelmingly perceive Iran as trying to develop nuclear weapons. In this they are not alone. In a poll we did for the BBC of 25 countries around the world, this was the most common view in every country. However, the Iranian people insist that this is not their intention. Two-thirds approve of Iran being part of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, even when reminded that this forbids Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Only 15 percent favor Iran withdrawing from it.

Does this mean that Iranians are not at all thinking about the weapon potential of uranium enrichment? No, I think it is clear that they are. So, how does that fit with their support for the NPT? Iranians perceive the NPT as somewhat precarious. A large majority believes that there are other countries with secret programs for developing nuclear weapons. In the long run, they think that it is more likely than not that more countries will develop nuclear weapons. And it appears that they want Iran to be in a better position should the NPT regime unravel.

But it also appears that most Iranians do not want that to happen, that they support the NPT per se.

How do Americans feel about the prospect of Iran acquiring enrichment capacities? Well, obviously they do not like it. But they do not want to deal with the problem by military force. Seventy-five percent say that the US should deal with Iran primarily by trying to build better relations, while only 22 percent favor pressuring it with implied threats that the US may use military force against it. And in a CNN poll taken in the last few weeks, 68 percent of Americans said they would disapprove if the US government were to take military action against Iran.

So what do Americans think should be done? What we found was that 55 percent of Americans are open to the idea of accepting Iran enriching uranium, but on two conditions: First, that this enrichment be limited to the very low levels that would be adequate for nuclear energy needs (5%), but not to the higher levels needed for nuclear weapons (over 90%). And

second, that UN inspectors be allowed full access to verify that Iran is limiting its enrichment to these low levels.

The poll also found other areas of common ground.

Some may have the image of Iranians as being deeply rooted in a revolutionary ideology intrinsically opposed to all aspects of the prevailing world order. However large majorities of Iranians actually seem quite comfortable with it. Sixty-three percent have a positive view of globalization. And despite the pressure that the UN Security Council is currently putting on Iran, 70 percent favor the idea of a stronger UN; 54 percent even have a positive view of the IAEA

Of course, another troubling area for US-Islamic world relations is the situation in Iraq. But here too, we have found some interesting areas of common ground. For example, 60 percent of Americans and 78 percent of Iraqis agree that the US military presence in Iraq is "provoking more conflict than it is preventing."

Interestingly, Iraqis and Americans are not even very far apart on the question of what the US should do now. Both Iraqis and Americans want the US to commit to withdraw within a limited time period, rather than having an open-ended commitment.

But—this might surprise you—getting out within 6 months is only favored by 37 percent of Iraqis and 18 percent of Americans. Seventy-one percent of Iraqis do want the US to commit to withdraw within a year or less. Forty three percent of Americans agree, with another 18 percent saying the US should commit to being out within two years.

This commitment to a timeline is key: 77 percent of Iraqis believe that the US plans to have permanent bases in Iraq; 78 percent assume that if the Iraqi government were to ask the US to withdraw that it would not.

Interestingly, Americans agree that the US would not withdraw if asked. And Americans are uncomfortable with that. If either the Iraqi government or the Iraqi people want the US to make a commitment to withdraw in a year three-quarters of Americans think the US should.

This is part of a larger orientation Americans have on foreign policy. In a Chicago Council poll Americans were asked: "If a majority of people in the Middle East want the US to remove its military presence there, do you think the US should do so?" Fifty-nine percent said that it should.

Americans are also not intent on staying in Iraq until it is just the way they would like it. Seven in 10 say that even if the Iraqi people elect an Islamic religious leader who wants to institute Islamic law or is unfriendly toward the US, the United States should accept such a government.

Now, looking beyond Iraq and Iran, numerous polls have found a number of areas of agreement between Americans and Muslims.

First, as a general principle, we asked, "Thinking about Muslim and Western cultures, do you think that violent conflict between them is inevitable or that it is possible to find common ground?" We found majorities in Morocco, Indonesia, and Iran as well as the US saying that it is possible to find common ground. In a poll of 27 countries around the world that we have done for BBC and will release on Monday, we found this was also a widespread view around the world.

There is also rather strong support for democracy in the Muslim world. A Gallup International poll found 78 percent in the Middle East as a whole agreeing that "Democracy may have problems but it is the best form of government." Pew found that most Muslims reject the argument that "democracy is a western way of doing things that would not work in most Muslim countries."

The United Nations elicits complex feelings because many believe that it is dominated by the US. Nonetheless, when we asked about the prospect of the UN becoming significantly more powerful in world affairs this was seen as something positive for 77 percent of Indonesians, 58 percent of Lebanese as well as 70 percent of Iranians. A more modest plurality of Turks agreed.

Now some people might say, "wait a minute this is not common ground, Americans do not want a stronger UN." This is a common misconception.

Two thirds of Americans do want a stronger UN. Furthermore a Chicago Council poll found that 60 percent of Americans say, "When dealing with international problems, the US should be more willing to make decisions

within the United Nations even if this means that the US will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice." Seventy-six percent of Americans feel the US plays the role of world policeman more than it should and would like to see the UN play a more dynamic role.

Now, on the subject of attacks against civilians, there is also a good deal of agreement. Muslims are often more unequivocal than Americans on this question. Majorities in Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan and Iran say they that such attacks can never be justified. Forty-six percent of Americans say such attacks can never be justified while 27 percent say they can rarely be justified. Egyptians and Jordanians are approximately the same as Americans.

When the subject of Palestinian attacks on Israelis comes up, though, some Muslims make an exception. But it is clear from polls and focus groups that Muslims very much want to embrace this principle.

In an encouraging sign, these numbers have been growing significantly over the last few years. A few years ago, in Jordan and Pakistan, less than half said such attacks can rarely or never be justified. These numbers have since increased by more than thirty percentage points to more than seven in ten.

Concurrently, support for Bin Laden and al Qaeda has been sliding downward throughout the Muslim world. Over the last few years, confidence in Bin Laden has dropped 36 points in Jordan, 25 points in Indonesia, 13 points in Pakistan. At this point, in no country polled does a majority have a positive view of Bin Laden. The Sunnis in Iraq also overwhelmingly reject him.

In closing, by pointing to these many convergences in American and Muslim thinking, I don't mean to downplay the difficulty of the present conflicts. These are indeed difficult.

But we could have found something that would be more worrisome. We might have found that Americans and Muslims believe that violent conflict is inevitable. We might have found key differences on fundamental questions about the preferred world order, or the morality of attacks on civilians. Instead we found many shared values and even some shared ideas about what to do on some key problems.

Shared values among publics do not solve the conflicts we face. But they are something that leaders should be aware of and they do give us a foundation on which to build.