

## HEARTS AND MINDS

By PETER BROOKES

MILITARY operations against terrorism are essential in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, but Islamic extremism will be defeated as much — if not more — in the Muslim heart and mind as on the battlefield.

So, at least, suggests a new Pakistani survey.

The Pakistan branch of ACNielsen did the poll for the D.C.-based nonprofit Terror Free Tomorrow. The key finding: Pakistan — long a hotbed of terrorism and extremism, and still the suspected hiding place for Osama bin Laden, and other senior terrorist leaders — now holds the United States in higher regard than at any time since 9/11.

More: Support among Pakistanis for al Qaeda and terrorism has plummeted to its lowest level in over four years.

What's behind this seismic shift in Pakistani public mood?

Seeing Afghanistan gaining ground may help, but the pollsters point to U.S. humanitarian aid and assistance in the aftermath of October's devastating earthquake in Pakistan.

The quake (7.6 magnitude) killed over 75,000 people, injured tens of thousands and left 3 million homeless. In the tragedy's aftermath, the United States quickly pledged nearly \$500 million for relief/reconstruction efforts, including \$300 million in humanitarian aid, \$100 million to support Pentagon relief operations — plus over \$70 million in private American donations.

And we delivered on those promises, starting right away.... Cut to the poll of 1,450 Pakistanis, surveyed last month:

\* Because of America's response, 78 percent of those asked have a more favorable opinion of the United States, with the strongest support coming from Pakistanis under 35.

\* Positive opinions of the United States in Pakistan *doubled* from 23 percent in May to more than 46 percent in November; negative views fell from 48 percent to 28 percent.

\* Over the same period, support for the "mythical" Osama bin Laden dropped from 51 to 33 percent; those *opposing* the al Qaeda boss jumped from 23 percent to 41 percent.

\* Those who see terrorist suicide attacks as *never* justifiable shot up from 45 percent to 73 percent.

\* Biggest bombshell of all: The United States proved more popular than *both* other Western countries and radical Islamist groups.

Not all the news was good: Pakistanis increasingly oppose the U.S.-led War on Terror — up from 52 percent in May to 64 percent now.

OK, so what does this mean?

First, America humanitarian aid and assistance plainly can make a difference in Muslim-world attitudes about the United States, terrorism and radicalism. (Polls have found a similar story in Indonesia — a nation that's been struck by al Qaeda-affiliate Jemaah Islamiya four times in three years — in the wake of the strong U.S. response to last December's tsunami.)

Second, the military element of the War on Terror remains unpopular in the Muslim world.

This last point can't rule out necessary actions — after all, America's *failure* to answer provocations plainly helped lead to 9/11: Al Qaeda not only grew confident that the United States would retreat whenever attacked, it used its growing series of successes against the United States as a powerful recruiting tool.

That said, it's plainly a mistake to overemphasize the use of U.S. "hard power" when "soft power" can also fight terrorism/radicalism, and support the development of political, economic and social freedom.

Third — and perhaps most important — we must recognize that support for al Qaeda and Islamic extremism has proven to *not* be absolute, but rather circumstantial and weakening. If it can be undermined in a crucible of Islamic radicalism/extremism like Pakistan, it can be overcome anywhere.

So, with a brand-spanking new parliament in Afghanistan, a third successful round of nationwide voting in Iraq — and good news like this from Pakistan — it's no wonder the world hasn't heard a peep from Osama bin Laden in almost a year.

*Peter Brookes' new book is "A Devil's Triangle: Terrorism, WMD and Rogue States."*