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Even al Qaeda supporters can be won over

By Ken Ballen

The relationship of American national security to popular support for terrorists and views of the United States is the key to our future national security. A new study just released by the Rand Corporation and funded by the U.S. Department of Defense agrees. Rand finds that the success of both al Qaeda and the Taliban in re-establishing themselves in Pakistan is in large measure dependent on their popular support.

More than just in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Rand study also found that governments with high levels of popularity were successful in defeating insurgencies, while unpopular governments lost most of the time.

Not only is the popular support of al Qaeda and the Taliban fueled in part by anti-American sentiments, the ability of the Pakistani government to cooperate with the United States against these groups is constrained by widespread anti-American feelings among the people of Pakistan. The Pakistani government's effectiveness against al Qaeda and the Taliban would unquestionably be strengthened if the staunchly anti-American views inside Pakistan could be lessened.

In two recent nationwide surveys of Pakistan, we found that more than six out of every ten Pakistanis — even those who have a favorable view toward Bin Laden and al Qaeda — said their opinion of the United States would significantly improve if the U.S. increased educational, medical and humanitarian aid to Pakistanis, as well as the number of visas to work or study in the U.S.

The fact that a mere 10% of al Qaeda and Bin Laden supporters would not change their view with new American humanitarian policies shows both the softness of support for al Qaeda and the power that direct American aid to ordinary Pakistanis has to fundamentally change perceptions.

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, the Indonesian government, buoyed by popular support, is now winning decisively against the terrorists — with important assistance from the United States. There are a number of factors

responsible, from public revulsion over innocent civilian deaths to increased democratic participation. But the change in public opinion toward the U.S. among Indonesians after American tsunami aid — a change we have documented has been largely sustained — has given the Indonesian government the necessary space to cooperate successfully with the U.S. in shutting down the terrorists.

If we only asked overall opinions of the United States, we find widespread anti-American sentiment, reflecting the pervasive and deep unpopularity of the U.S. war on terror throughout the Muslim world. The point is that our questions went further and also uncovered an equally profound ability of direct American humanitarian aid to change perceptions over a sustained period of time.

Terror Free Tomorrow, the non-profit polling organization I lead, has conducted some 30 nationwide public opinion surveys over the past four years in Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere.

What our surveys uncovered is that the U.S. would witness dramatic improvements in the view of the United States among the overwhelming majority of Muslims, including those who express support for al Qaeda and Bin Laden, if we demonstrate respect and caring for people in their daily lives through practical, relatively achievable steps — such as increasing direct humanitarian assistance (medical, education, food), visas and better trade terms.

And change in perceptions can make a very real difference in combating terrorists and insurgents on the ground — as Rand and the Department of Defense have also concluded.

Ken Ballen is the president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion.

Bin Laden's Soft Support

How the next president can win over the world's most alienated Muslims.

By Kenneth Ballen

On a typically humid spring night in Jakarta in 2005, an Indonesian colleague and I were driven by some Islamist activists through the city's dense back alleyways to the dilapidated offices of a leading radical student publication. We were led up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small room, crammed with young university students. Standing at the center of the room was a thin, bearded man in a skull cap and flowing white robes. He was an imam, a mentor to the students and a popular leader of the PKS, the leading Islamist party in Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim nation.

After a few polite introductory remarks, the imam launched into a litany of complaints all too familiar to my colleague and me, who conduct public opinion research in Muslim countries. America, said the imam, is at war with Islam. America is killing Muslims by the millions. (This number was apparently calculated by holding the United States responsible for every Muslim conflict casualty over the past several decades.) Islamic fighters are striking back with violence, the only language America understands. This was followed by the standard harangue against Jews, the secret but controlling force behind American perfidy. His young followers reacted with fervent delight.

The imam's work done, he departed for the evening. But we decided to stay. There's an Indonesian custom called *jagongan* which holds that the most important conversations occur by talking through the night, and on that evening, we discovered the potency of *jagongan* firsthand.

Initially, the students took up their leader's refrain. Osama bin Laden, they told us, was a hero because he gave up his worldly possessions to defend Muslim freedom and stand up to America. But he was not responsible, they insisted, for the attacks of 9/11, which were clearly the work of the CIA and the Israeli intelligence service—how else to explain the fact that there were no Jews in the World Trade Center when it was destroyed?

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Our discussions went on for hours, and though they were sometimes heated, there was an underlying friendliness to the students' manner that contrasted with their extreme rhetoric. As the night wore on, the tone began to shift. The students were surprised to learn that I knew Jews who had been killed in the Twin Towers and their relatives who still struggle with their loss. My Indonesian colleague talked about Indonesian and other Muslims he knew in the United States and their daily lives and views. A tentative human bond developed between us and the students. Not long before dawn, as morning prayers approached, their insistent questioning took an unexpected turn: how could they obtain visas to study in the United States?

After that, whenever we had the chance to speak with young radicals in Indonesia, out of the hearing of their leaders and late at night, we'd always ask: How many of you want to study in America? Invariably, almost everyone said yes, and those who still disdained the Great Satan were eager to study in Canada, Australia, or France instead.

We were intrigued. What if supporters of al-Qaeda in countries like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia felt the same way as young Indonesians? Was their support for al-Qaeda—and their hatred of America—really as intense as it had first appeared?

Terror Free Tomorrow, our nonprofit polling organization, decided to pursue this question further. Over the past several years, we have conducted some thirty nationwide public opinion surveys in Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Muslim world. In the process, we've assembled the first comprehensive picture of how people who are sympathetic to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden feel about America—and what can be done to change their resentment.

Our findings will probably surprise you. Like most analysts, we had assumed that radical views in the Muslim world were the outgrowth of a deeply held ideology, unshakeable without profound shifts in American foreign policy. We were wrong. American actions may inflame Muslim opinion. But the solutions that can cool that hostility aren't always the ones you'd expect.

Since September 11, many Americans have been understandably alarmed by polls showing that a sizable minority of the world's Muslims express sympathy for al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, or the Taliban. Our own polls confirm this general pattern. In recent surveys, 15 percent of Saudis said they support bin Laden. Twenty four percent of Pakistanis said the same.

The first key fact to understand about such numbers is that people who say they support al-Qaeda or bin Laden aren't in any obvious or measurable way very distinguishable from their compatriots. Our surveys showed that those who express support for bin Laden and al-Qaeda mirror their countrymen in almost every respect, from gender to level of educational achievement. Al-Qaeda and bin Laden supporters are no more fervently Islamic in their practices or beliefs than other Muslims. Nor are they poorer or more disadvantaged—if anything, al-Qaeda and bin Laden sympathizers tend to earn more and to be better off than their fellow citizens.

More important, those who express sympathy for bin Laden turn out to have views that are remarkably similar to those who *don't* support bin Laden. Like their compatriots, people who favor al-Qaeda and bin Laden are principally motivated by their perception of Western hostility to Islam. In all our surveys, and those of others, the view of American antagonism is an almost universally held belief among Muslims everywhere. The U.S.-led war on terror, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, even our post-9/11 restrictions on visas (stories of upstanding Muslims denied entry to the United States for seemingly arbitrary reasons are a staple of the Muslim press) are seen as assaults on Islam in general and on Muslims in particular. At its core, Muslims feel that the United States does not respect their views, values, identity and the right to determine their own affairs.

None of this is necessarily surprising. More unexpected is this finding: both bin Laden supporters and non-bin Laden supporters hold remarkably similar political goals for their countries—goals that are often anathema to the ideology espoused by al-Qaeda. Three recent nationwide public opinion surveys of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 illustrate our findings best.

Like other Pakistanis, bin Laden supporters consider an independent judiciary, free elections and economic improvement the most important goals for their government.

Let's start with Pakistan, the second largest—and the only nuclear-armed—Muslim nation, now home base to bin Laden, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In our latest survey this January, almost a quarter of the respondents said that they had a favorable opinion of bin Laden. But upon closer examination, this cohort was no more likely to have radical views than those Pakistanis who are not sympathetic to extremist groups. Like the rest of Pakistanis, bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters consider an independent judiciary, free press, free elections and an improving economy the most important goals for their government. In fact, more than eight in ten bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters chose these goals as

their highest priority—significantly greater than the percentage that selected implementing strict Islamic Sharia law as their highest priority.

We found similar opinions in Saudi Arabia— home country of bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen September 11th terrorists. In December 2007, our nationwide survey revealed that Saudis with a favorable opinion of bin Laden and al-Qaeda don't generally have implacable anti-American attitudes, or even support terrorist attacks. For the 15 percent of the Saudi population with a positive opinion of bin Laden, addressing the problem of terrorism is the most important priority they have for the Saudi government, chosen by more than 90 percent—about the same percentage as those who do not have a favorable view of bin Laden or al-Qaeda.

Why would so many Saudis and Pakistanis express sympathy for terrorist organizations and yet also favor democratic reforms and crackdowns on terrorist violence? One possibility is that these bin Laden supporters are not telling the truth to pollsters. Recent events in Pakistan, however, suggest that's not the case.

Before Pakistan held elections on February 18, 2008, we conducted a poll asking voters whether they would vote for al-Qaeda if it appeared on the ballot as a political party. Only 1 percent of Pakistanis said yes—a far smaller percentage than the 18 percent of Pakistanis who told us that they sympathize with al-Qaeda. The Taliban would have drawn just 3 percent of the vote. As it turned out, our survey almost exactly mirrored the actual election results. In areas near or in the home base of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Islamist parties sympathetic to these groups suffered stinging defeats. In the North West Frontier Province, the Islamist parties lost fifty-seven of their sixty-eight seats in the provincial assembly. Evidently, professed support for al-Qaeda or the Taliban doesn't mean that Pakistanis actually want these groups to *rule* them.

So what makes some Pakistanis say they support al-Qaeda when they don't in the voting booth? The answer seems to be that they, like nearly all Pakistanis, are angry. They're angry at President Pervez Musharraf for his heavy-handed authoritarian rule, and angry at the United States for a host of real and perceived sins, including (until very recently) the Bush administration's strong backing of the Musharraf regime. Declaring solidarity with al-Qaeda or the Taliban is a way for Pakistanis to express this anger. If there is a difference between those who sympathize with bin Laden and those who do not, it is that bin Laden supporters feel their resentment more intensely.

Our polls show that the anger Muslims around the world feel towards the United States is not primarily directed at our people or values—even those who say they support bin Laden don't, for the most part, "hate us for our freedoms," as President Bush has claimed. Rather, what drives Islamic public opinion is a pervasive perception that the United States and the West are hostile towards Islam. This perception, right or wrong, is fed by a variety of American actions, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the overarching global war on terror. These actions are seen as profoundly disrespectful and humiliating because they amount to America forcing its will on the Muslim world.

A good illustration comes from our most recent survey of Saudi Arabia. It showed that among the highest priorities for Saudis are free elections and a free press. Yet it also showed that the least popular American policy is the U.S. push to spread democracy in the Middle East. The point is that Saudis want to determine their own affairs and not have the United States impose its values, even when they share those values.

Significantly, however, our polling indicates that there are steps that the United States can undertake that could dramatically reverse anti-American attitudes born of this sense of disrespect—if we ask first, rather than thinking we know what's best. Indeed, these steps are relatively easier to take than more fundamental changes, such as an immediate withdrawal from Iraq or Afghanistan.

For instance, six out of every ten Pakistanis who have a favorable view toward bin Laden and al-Qaeda said their opinion of America would significantly improve if the United States increased educational, medical and humanitarian aid to Pakistan, as well as the number of visas available to Pakistanis to work or study in the United States. In fact, *more* bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters said their opinion of the United States would improve with such American policies than did non-bin Laden supporters. Not everyone would change their mind: One in ten bin Laden and al-Qaeda supporters said that their opinion of the United States would not change no matter what America does. This is al-Qaeda's real, far smaller core of fervent and intractable support.

The same trend holds in Saudi Arabia, which, of course, borders Iraq. While the leading step that would improve opinion of the United States would be an immediate withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, this was closely followed by a desire for the United States to increase visas and free trade. Like their fellow citizens, 88 percent of Saudis who have a favorable opinion of bin Laden cited U.S. withdrawal from Iraq as a policy change that would significantly elevate their view of the United States. Three-quarters cited increased visas to and free trade with the United States. And more than half of both supporters and non-supporters of bin Laden said that these actions would improve their opinion of the United States a great deal.

The prospect of the United States brokering a comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians is distant, but if it became a reality, our surveys suggest that this would significantly change perceptions of America in the Muslim world, especially among Palestinians and Syrians. But right now in Saudi Arabia, less than a quarter of Saudis believe that a successful peace process would improve their opinion of the United States a great deal. By contrast, twice as many

Saudis said that increased trade and visas would improve their disposition towards the United States a great deal. And Muslims who live further away from the Middle East place even less importance on the peace process. When Indonesians and Bangladeshis, for example, were given a menu of choices for future American policies, including increased educational scholarships, direct medical assistance, free trade, and stronger American support for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the latter finished last or next to last.

This last finding shouldn't be surprising. While people everywhere may care strongly about the suffering of their co-religionists in foreign lands, they are naturally more focused on the problems they face at home. Consequently, it is often easier to win them over with actions that affect their lives and those of their countrymen directly. If the United States demonstrates that it respects people by helping to make tangible improvements in their daily lives, even the anti-American attitudes of those who have a positive opinion of al-Qaeda are likely to change dramatically as well.

As it happens, we have proof of just how effective such changes can be. After a massive tsunami struck Indonesia on December 26, 2004, the United States led an extraordinary international relief effort for the victims. Of course, America dispenses aid to many countries, but the money is normally funneled through governments, and ordinary citizens rarely see or experience the results. The Indonesian relief effort, by contrast, consisted of on-the-ground, people-to-people assistance, and was broadcast non-stop on Indonesian television. The assistance not only saved lives but demonstrated to Indonesians that America sincerely cared about their well-being.

Afterwards, public opinion among Indonesians dramatically swung in favor of the United States. This gain in America's reputation was accompanied by a corresponding decline in backing for the perceived symbols of the most radical anti-American views—bin Laden, al-Qaeda and their local Islamist allies.

To be sure, American aid wasn't the sole reason that the public turned against the radicals. The deaths caused by terrorist attacks and increased democratic participation inside Indonesia also contributed. But the U.S. humanitarian mission was one of the most important factors. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that this shift in Indonesian public opinion towards America is "one of the defining moments of this new century."

The Indonesian example is not the only one. After a devastating earthquake hit Pakistan in 2005, America stepped in with a similarly intensive relief effort. Afterwards, our surveys found that 79 percent of self-identified bin Laden supporters thought well of the United States because of the humanitarian mission. Among all Pakistanis, the U.S. government was more popular than al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or any Pakistani Islamist radical group—even among Pakistanis who thought favorably of these groups.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the United States can simply increase direct aid and visas without changing its overarching policies in the Muslim world. Again, America's relief efforts in Indonesia and Pakistan are instructive. Indonesia is ruled by a democratic government. And the United States has supported that government, in part with military training and assistance in its fight against domestic terror groups, rather than direct U.S. military action against those groups. Consequently, goodwill towards America among Indonesians has, for the most part, been sustained. Nearly three years after the tsunami, almost 60 percent of Indonesians said that American assistance had made them favorable towards the United States.

Helping hand: American soldiers dispense aid to victims of the 2004 Indonesian tsunami. The relief effort caused Indonesian impressions of the U.S. to improve dramatically.

Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images

In Pakistan, on the other hand, America has unabashedly supported the unpopular and repressive rule of General Musharraf, and has also carried out military strikes inside Pakistan. Combined with the specter of the war on terror, these policies have dissolved the warm feelings generated by America's earthquake relief. In surveys we conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2008, we confirmed that the positive feelings that stemmed from the relief effort have almost entirely dissipated. Humanitarian policies provide an opening. Yet, absent other political and economic factors, they are unlikely to

result in sustained, long-term improvements in public opinion.

Our polls provide three useful lessons for the next president. The first is this: don't be too alarmed by the apparent high level of support for bin Laden in the Muslim world. Such support is soft, and can be made softer still with the right policies.

The second lesson is that in order to repair the dismal impression that many Muslims have of the United States, a new president doesn't need to pull all troops out of Iraq right away, or solve the Israel-Palestine conflict overnight. More modest—if still politically tricky—actions can have an immediate and dramatic impact. It is essential for the United States to adopt policies that reveal a different side of American power—one that demonstrates respect and compassion by improving the lives of individual Muslims. Such policies include increasing student and work visas, direct humanitarian aid, and trade agreements. Since much of the Muslim anger towards the United States and the West is fueled by the widespread perception of a lack of respect, all of these people-based policies send a powerful, tangible message that we care about Muslims and regard them as equals.

The third lesson is that these practical, direct-to-the-public policy initiatives should be seen as an opening to a new American stance that, in both word and deed, manifests respectful relations between people. These initiatives need to be followed up with meaningful action on the major geostrategic issues that fuel Muslim resentment. We need to create more effective counterterrorism strategies, break the logjam on peace with Israel, and resolve the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Otherwise, whatever goodwill we create is likely to fade.

To repair the dismal relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world, a new president doesn't need to pull out of Iraq right away or solve the Israel-Palestine conflict overnight.

That goodwill is an invaluable asset to our national security. Negative public opinion towards the United States acts as a real political constraint on the leaders of Muslim countries, limiting their ability to work with America and its allies on everything from counterterrorism operations to negotiating peace agreements. When public opinion towards America has improved and support for terror organizations has declined, governments—even with the overt help of the United States, as in Indonesia and the Philippines—have been able to isolate and target the terrorists.

In the wake of 9/11, America fell into a vicious cycle in which our major security policies, aimed at combating terrorism, actually made the threat of terrorism worse by inflaming popular sympathy for extremism. Turning that opinion around could be the first step towards finally getting our counterterrorism strategy right. And while first steps are often said to be the hardest, in this case, the opposite is true. Indeed, as we learned that night in Jakarta, the most important first step is the easiest. It is to listen. WM

Kenneth Ballen is the president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization which has conducted international polling in Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Turkey and elsewhere. The results of the surveys are at www.terrorfreetomorrow.org.

How We Can Help al-Qaeda Ruin its Own Reputation

Terror Free Tomorrow's surveys reveal some good news: In many Muslim countries, public support for extremism is in decline. In Pakistan, for instance, popular regard for bin Laden and al-Qaeda has decreased by half in just six months. In the North West Frontier Province, near the Afghan border where al-Qaeda is based, that support has plunged from 70 percent last summer to single digits this year.

These changing attitudes are largely the result not of America's actions, but al-Qaeda's: citizens in Pakistan and other countries are becoming increasingly disgusted with the group's barbaric violence. This shift in mood is significant because history shows that success against terrorism almost always occurs when local residents turn on the terrorists themselves. Even more important, when al-Qaeda and the Taliban become unpopular, a democratically elected Pakistani government can aggressively isolate and pursue them without taking as many domestic political risks.

But the new Pakistani government's hand would be strengthened even further if the staunchly anti-American views of its citizens could be diminished. Don't forget, it is bin Laden's potency as an anti-American icon that drives much of his support. And as we saw in Indonesia, when opinion towards America improves, support for bin Laden and al-Qaeda declines as well. Put these two dynamics (declining sympathy for terrorists and rising regard for America) together, and you have a powerful tool against terrorists.