



January 23-24, 2009:

BRIAN TODD, CNN NEWS CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): A key debate in the president's decision to close Guantanamo Bay just got hotter, the controversy over tracking detainees who were set free.

A U.S. counterterrorism unofficial tells CNN this man, Said Ali al-Shiri, released from Guantanamo in 2007, is now believed to be a key leader in al Qaeda's operations in Yemen. The official says al-Shiri may have been involved in a car bombing outside the U.S. embassy in Yemen last year that killed nearly a dozen people. Analysts aren't surprised if he's there.

STEVE COLL, NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION: The fact that he's in Yemen reflects where Al Qaeda is regrouping on the Arabian Peninsula.

TODD: But between Guantanamo and Yemen, al-Shiri, a Saudi national, was in Saudi custody in the Saudi's government rehabilitation program. Terrorism analyst **Ken Ballen** has been to the Saudi center for rehabilitating former militants and says it's the best program of its kind in the world. While there, he interviewed dozens of men who have gone through the Saudi program. **Ballen** and other experts say that as part of their program, Saudi officials help young Jihadi militants re-integrate into society, giving them and their families' psychological and financial help, as well as finding jobs, even finding wives for some.

Ballen says that equally important, the Saudi program also brings in religious scholars to hit home one important message to the former militants:

KEN BALLEEN, TERROR FREE TOMORROW: That Islam teaches Jihad or holy war should only be defensive, and not to try to convert other religions and other people. They are taught that Jihad should only occur if Muslims are directly attacked. Therefore, what al Qaeda does is not a legitimate Jihad, in the view of learned Saudi Islamic scholars who are teaching the former Jihadis.

TODD: But **Ballen** and other experts tell us they're still not all that surprised that the program didn't work with al-Shiri. They say not everyone can be de-radicalized. **Ballen** says what is surprising is the success of the Saudi program. **Ballen** says that only about five percent of the young men from the Saudi rehab centers go back to the battlefield, much less than the recidivism for criminals in the U.S., where more than two-thirds of criminals end up going back to jail.

Brian Todd, CNN, Washington.

The worst of the worst?

January 23, 2009



Commentary by Ken Ballen, Terror Free Tomorrow and Peter Bergen, CNN National Security Expert

Controversy over the Bush Administration's policy to detain "enemy combatants" at the military's Guantanamo Bay prison has raged since the facility first opened in 2002. The controversy has been fueled primarily by the lack of legal protections afforded the detainees and allegations of their mistreatment, much of which was subsequently confirmed by the FBI.

Now that President Obama has ordered the prison camp to be closed, additional new controversy swirls around the claim made earlier this month by the Pentagon that 61 Guantanamo detainees are believed to have returned to terrorism.

But that number became a little less alarming when the Pentagon clarified that only 18 of the 61 have been confirmed to be engaging in terrorism, while 43 are "suspected of returning to the fight."

In other words, according to the Pentagon's own assessment, of the 520 detainees who have been released, less than 4% have engaged in terrorism. That percentage is quite low, especially contrasted to the more than two-thirds of American prisoners who return to crime within three years of their release from prison.

The Department of Defense has supplied no substantiation for any of its recent assertions about the numbers of detainees engaging in terrorism, and in the past has rather broadly defined what "returning to the fight means" to include acts such as former detainees criticizing the United States after their release from Guantanamo; a not unnatural reaction to years of confinement in a prison camp without charge.

Some detainees released from Guantanamo have undoubtedly engaged in terrorist activists such as Said Ali Al Shiri, a Saudi who was released in September 2007. Like all other Guantanamo detainees released to Saudi custody, he entered a comprehensive reeducation

program managed by the Saudi Ministry of the Interior. Of the 75 or so Guantanamo detainees that have gone through this program and have subsequently been released, al Shiri is the first one known to have returned to terrorism. After al Shiri was released last year, he left Saudi Arabia for Yemen and is now allegedly a leader of al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate.

Similarly, Abdulalh Salih al Ajimi, a Kuwaiti held in Guantanamo for three years, conducted a suicide attack on April 26 2008 in the Iraqi city of Mosul killing six, including two Iraqi police officers.

And Abdulalh Mehsud, a Pashtun from Pakistan's tribal areas spent two years in Guantanamo. He was released in March 2004 and promptly kidnapped two Chinese engineers working in the tribal region. Mehsud subsequently rose to become a leader of the Pakistani Taliban and was eventually killed by Pakistani forces on July 24 2007.

But these are exceptional cases because the overwhelming majority of Guantanamo detainees were never really "enemy combatants" in the first place.

Given the fog of propaganda surrounding the Guantanamo prisoners—who Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once famously described as "the worst of the worst"—it may be surprising to learn that, according to the Pentagon itself, only 5 percent of all detainees at Guantanamo were ever apprehended by U.S. forces to begin with.

Why is that? Almost all of the detainees were turned over to American forces by foreigners, either with an ax to grind, or more often for a hefty bounty or reward. After U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, a reward of \$5,000 or more was given to Pakistanis and Afghans for each detainee turned over.

While rewards can be a valuable law enforcement tool, they have never in the past absolved law enforcement authorities of the necessity of corroborating the information that motivated the reward. But the U.S. military accepted the uncorroborated allegations of the award claimants with little independent investigation.

At a very minimum, the Pentagon's reward policy should have led to heightened scrutiny by the U.S. military of those turned over and not instead to years of confinement.

Now, under much pressure, the Pentagon has released more than 500 detainees over the past three years, while 245 remain. Based on statistics about the fate of other released prisoners around the world, it would not have been surprising if many of the released detainees had resumed their lives of terrorist crimes and illegal warfare.

After all it is a sad fact of our justice system that once a criminal is released from prison, they usually commit additional crimes relatively soon. The latest numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics show that more than two-thirds of all state prisoners are re-arrested for serious new crimes within three years.

Terrorists are criminals too—indeed ideologically committed ones. Every reasonable expectation would lead to the conclusion that following release from prison, the rate of recidivism for terrorists should be as high, if not higher, as other criminals.

But only a handful of released Guantanamo detainees have gone back to terrorism or the battlefield.

For years Pentagon officials have claimed that the recidivism rate for Guantanamo releases is around seven percent, yet information released by the Pentagon in May 2008 undercuts that

claim. The Department of Defense published a list of named released detainees who had subsequently engaged in militant or terrorist activities anywhere in the world that showed that thirteen had done so, a recidivism rate of just 2 percent.

In fact, based on the Pentagon's own May 2008 account of the released detainees who had "returned to terrorism" there are only six instances where an inmate released from Guantanamo actually took up arms against the United States, a recidivism rate of around 1%.

When recidivism rates for criminals typically run in the more than 60 percent range, and at Guantanamo you have a rate of only 1-2 percent, that means you don't have much of a criminal (or in this case terrorist) population to begin with.

We are not saying that there are no terrorists being detained at Guantanamo. Khalid Sheik Mohammad, the operational commander of the 9/11 attacks, and others who were transferred to Guantanamo from secret overseas CIA prisons in 2006 are certainly members of al Qaeda's hard core.

What we are saying is that for the vast majority of individuals detained at Guantanamo not only were they not terrorists, but they were likely innocent of any crime.

Editor's note: *Ken Ballen is a former federal prosecutor and president of the non-profit organization Terror Free Tomorrow. Peter Bergen is CNN's national security analyst, and author, Holy War Inc. and The Osama bin Laden I Know.*

The Worst of the Worst?

By Ken Ballen, Peter Bergen

October 2008

They told us to overlook the abuses because Guantánamo housed “the worst of the worst.” But new statistics prove that the vast majority of prisoners detained there never posed any real risk to America at all.



Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Finish it: Parts of Guantánamo may be closed, but the stain on America's reputation lingers on.

When a federal judge ordered the release of 17 Guantánamo Bay detainees earlier this month, it was the first real chance in the seven-year history of the prison camp that any of the prisoners might be transferred to the United States. In making his ruling, the judge categorically rejected the Bush administration's claim that any of the released prisoners, who are all Chinese Muslims, were “enemy combatants” or posed a risk to U.S. security. The decision was temporarily suspended by the appeals court, but the judge was on solid ground.

Controversy over the Bush administration's policy to detain enemy combatants at Guantánamo has raged since the facility opened in 2002—fueled primarily by the lack of legal protections afforded the detainees and allegations of their mistreatment. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that most of these detainees have never posed any real risk to America, for the simple reason that the vast majority of them were never “enemy combatants” in the first place. Indeed, striking new data we have obtained show that, if anything, the 17 innocent Chinese men are far from exceptional.

Before we get to the new statistics corroborating this startling fact, a quick review of how the detainees got to Guantánamo in the first place is helpful. Given the fog of propaganda surrounding the Guantánamo prisoners—whom former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once famously described as “the worst of the worst”—you might be surprised to learn that, according to the Pentagon itself, only 5 percent of detainees at the prison were ever apprehended by U.S. forces to begin with. And only another 4 percent were ever alleged to have actually been fighting at all.

Why is that? Almost all of the detainees were turned over to U.S. forces by foreigners, either with an ax to grind or, more often, for a hefty bounty or reward. After U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, they doled out rewards of about \$5,000 or more to Pakistanis and Afghans for each detainee turned over. Contrary to standard law enforcement practice, the U.S. military accepted the uncorroborated allegations of the award claimants with little independent investigation.

Now, under much pressure, the Pentagon has released more than 500 detainees over the past three years, while some 270 remain. Based on statistics about the fate of other released prisoners in other contexts, it would not have been surprising if many of these men had resumed their lives of terrorist crimes and illegal warfare. In the United States, more than two thirds of state prisoners are rearrested for serious new crimes within three years, according to the Department of Justice.

Terrorists are criminals too—indeed, ideologically committed ones. Every reasonable expectation would lead to the conclusion that the rate of recidivism for terrorists should be as high as, if not higher than, it is for other criminals. But guess what happened to the more than 500 terrorist detainees that the United States has released during the last three years? Only a handful has gone back to terrorism or the battlefield.

Almost a quarter of the Guantánamo detainees who have been released have been sent back to Saudi Arabia. Facing a substantial threat from terrorism in their own country, the Saudi authorities have been rigorous—some might say harsh—in imprisoning and punishing any terrorist deemed a danger. Yet in new statistics provided to us by the Ministry of Interior in Riyadh, zero of the 121 Guantánamo detainees received by the Saudis were deemed dangerous and ineligible for release.

It gets worse. Of those detainees returned to Saudi Arabia from Guantánamo, more than half have been released and are now free, most after spending a period of time in a halfway house designed to promote a smooth return to society. Only six former Guantánamo detainees have been rearrested in Saudi Arabia for any reason—an astonishingly low recidivism rate of less than 9 percent among those released.

Although the Saudi efforts to reintegrate these prisoners into society are certainly commendable, the only reasonable explanation for such a low recidivism rate is that the detainees were never guilty of terrorist acts in the first place. For years, Pentagon officials have claimed that the recidivism rate for prisoners released from Guantánamo is about 7 percent. Information released in May by the Department of Defense further buttresses the Saudi findings of a very low recidivism rate. The department's list of named released detainees who have subsequently engaged in militant or terrorist activities anywhere in the world shows that 12 have done so, a recidivism rate of just 2 percent. In fact, the Pentagon can cite only six instances in which an inmate released from Guantánamo actually took up arms against the United States.

When recidivism rates for criminals typically run in the more than 60 percent range, and when at Guantánamo you have a rate in only the single digits, you don't have much of a criminal (or in this case terrorist) population to begin with. We are hardly saying there are no terrorists at Guantánamo. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the operational commander of the 9/11 attacks, and others who were transferred there from secret overseas Central Intelligence Agency prisons in 2006 are certainly members of al Qaeda's hard core.

What we are saying is that new statistics from the Saudi Ministry of Interior, corroborated by the Pentagon's own findings, show that the overwhelming majority of individuals detained at Guantánamo not only were not terrorists, but were likely innocent of any crime. Given the sad history of detaining men without charges or proof, proven instances of harsh confinement, and now, persuasive evidence to indicate that most detainees were innocent of any terrorist activity, it should be among the highest priorities of the next U.S. president to close Guantánamo promptly.

Guantánamo has been a powerful recruitment tool for extremists and a stain on the reputation of the United States. Now we can say, with little doubt, that it did not even serve to remove terrorists or insurgents from the battlefield.

Ken Ballen is a former federal prosecutor and the president of the nonprofit organization [Terror Free Tomorrow](#).

Peter Bergen is a fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of [The Osama bin Laden I Know](#) (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Los Angeles Times

June 14, 2008

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.



July 23, 2008

Public opinion surveys recently conducted in Muslim countries by Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonprofit polling organization, show that the anger Muslims around the world feel towards the United States is not primarily directed at Americans. According to the polls, what drives Islamic public opinion is a pervasive perception that the United States is hostile towards Islam...But the polls also show that most Muslims, even those who support Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, would change their point of view with new American policies. And these policies are not the ones you would think of either. According to the pollsters, if the US gave more visas to Muslims, as well as increased American trade and aid, a majority of Muslims in countries ranging from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia would change their negative views of the US. Even Bin Laden supporters would have a new and more positive view of the US with more visas to come here and study.



Congressional Quarterly
August 5, 2008

"Don't be too alarmed by the apparent high level of [support](#) for Osama bin Laden in the Muslim world. Such support is [soft](#), and can be made softer still with the right policies," [Kenneth Ballen](#) adjures in The [Washington Monthly](#).

July 30, 2008

Sometimes the answer to a problem isn't as hard as we think it is. In fact, it may be downright easy. But something in our makeup prevents us from either seeing or pursuing the answer. We continue to tread the more arduous path and, in the process, not only perpetuate, but compound the problem.

In a *Washington Monthly* article, "[How many of you want to study in America?](#)," Kenneth Ballen reports on the extensive polling that his organization, Terror Free Tomorrow, has done around the world. First, he describes a meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia with young Muslims in apparent thrall to bin Laden. Though they didn't give him credit for 9/11, which, Ballen writes, they felt was 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?"

The students, however, were surprised to learn that Ballen knew Jews who had been killed in the Twin Towers. Then, after a night of conversation, "their insistent questioning took an unexpected turn: how could they obtain visas to study in the United States?"

The truth comes out. Ballen continues:

"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."

You can't help but laugh at how quick radical Muslims (those, that is, who are sympathetic to, but not actual members of terrorist organizations) are to sell out. Showing their cards that fast suggests not only a lack of conviction but of pride.

Maybe, but Ballen writes that "stories of upstanding Muslims denied entry to the United States for seemingly arbitrary reasons are a staple of the Muslim press." Extending to them the right to study in the US and Europe is, instead, a symbol of what they most crave from the West -- respect.

"Like most analysts," he continues, "we had assumed that radical views in the Muslim world were the outgrowth of a deeply held ideology. [Instead] Muslims feel that the United States does not respect their views, values, identity and the right to determine their own affairs." Extending student, as well as work, visas to Muslims is perceived as a show of respect, as are humanitarian aid and trade agreements.

The trouble is that many in the West believe that any expression of support for bin Laden, no matter how reflexive, is the deepest form of disrespect you can show us. If we make concessions like inviting them into our country to study, they'll think they can walk all over us (not to mention form terrorist cells while on spring break from Caltech).

In fact, Ballen writes, the next president doesn't even, as progressives assume, "need to pull all troops out of Iraq right away, or solve the Israel-Palestine conflict overnight."

Hold on a minute: No problem wants to be solved that easily. All that time and energy spent wrestling with radical Muslim terrorism can't be swept away just because the answer is staring us in the face. The entire defense establishment -- from policy wonks to the military -- has too much invested in the concept of an implacable foe.

Dangle a degree in front of your enemy's face and he's putty in your hands -- where's the fun in that?



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?

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

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

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.

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 percep-

tion 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



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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.