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The myth of Muslim support for terror

The common enemy is violence and terrorism, not Muslims any more than Christians or Jews.

By Kenneth Ballen

WASHINGTON

Those who think that Muslim countries and pro-terrorist attitudes go hand-in-hand might be shocked by new polling research: Americans are more approving of terrorist attacks against civilians than any major Muslim country except for Nigeria.

The survey, conducted in December 2006 by the University of Maryland's prestigious Program on International Public Attitudes, shows that only 46 percent of Americans think that "bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians" are "never justified," while 24 percent believe these attacks are "often or sometimes justified."

Contrast those numbers with 2006 polling results from the world's most-populous Muslim countries – Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. Terror Free Tomorrow, the organization I lead, found that 74 percent of respondents in Indonesia agreed that terrorist attacks are "never justified"; in Pakistan, that figure was 86 percent; in Bangladesh, 81 percent.

Do these findings mean that Americans are closet terrorist sympathizers?

Hardly. Yet, far too often, Americans and other Westerners seem willing to draw that conclusion about Muslims. Public opinion surveys in the United States and Europe show that nearly half of Westerners associate Islam with violence and Muslims with terrorists. Given the many radicals who commit violence in the name of Islam around the world, that's an understandable polling result.

But these stereotypes, affirmed by simplistic media coverage and many radicals themselves, are not supported by the facts – and they are detrimental to the war on terror. When the West wrongly attributes radical views to all of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims, it perpetuates a myth that has the very real effect of marginalizing critical allies in the war on terror.

Indeed, the far-too-frequent stereotyping of Muslims serves only to reinforce the radical appeal of the small minority of Muslims who peddle hatred of the West and others as authentic religious practice.

Terror Free Tomorrow's 20-plus surveys of Muslim countries in the past two years reveal another surprise: Even among the minority who indicated support for terrorist attacks and Osama bin

Laden, most overwhelmingly approved of specific American actions in their own countries. For example, 71 percent of bin Laden supporters in Indonesia and 79 percent in Pakistan said they thought more favorably of the United States as a result of American humanitarian assistance in their countries – not exactly the profile of hard-core terrorist sympathizers. For most people, their professed support of terrorism/bin Laden can be more accurately characterized as a kind of "protest vote" against current US foreign policies, not as a deeply held religious conviction or even an inherently anti- American or anti-Western view.

In truth, the common enemy is violence and terrorism, not Muslims any more than Christians or Jews. Whether recruits to violent causes join gangs in Los Angeles or terrorist cells in Lahore, the enemy is the violence they exalt.

Our surveys show that not only do Muslims reject terrorism as much if not more than Americans, but even those who are sympathetic to radical ideology can be won over by positive American actions that promote goodwill and offer real hope.

America's goal, in partnership with Muslim public opinion, should be to defeat terrorists by isolating them from their own societies. The most effective policies to achieve that goal are the ones that build on our common humanity. And we can start by recognizing that Muslims throughout the world want peace as much as Americans do.

- *Kenneth Ballen is founder and president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to finding effective policies that win popular support away from global terrorists.*