

Remarks of Andrew Kohut to The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing:
AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD
FEBRUARY 27, 2003

I am delighted to help this committee achieve a better understanding of how the United States is perceived in the Islamic world. I am not here to make recommendations about how to solve America's image problems, but rather to give you as much as I can on the nature of the problem.

While this committee is primarily interested in the image of United States in the Islamic world, I will put my remarks in context by also discussing attitudes toward the United States around the world more generally. The *Pew Global Attitudes Project* surveyed 38,000 people in 44 countries. We released our results, "What the World Thinks in 2002," in December and you all should have copies of our report.

Despite an initial outpouring of public sympathy for America following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, discontent with the United States has grown around the world over the past two years. Images of the U.S. have been tarnished in all types of nations: among longtime NATO allies, in developing countries, in eastern Europe and, most dramatically, in Muslim societies.

Since 2000, favorability ratings for the U.S. have fallen in 19 of the 27 countries worldwide where trend benchmarks are available. While criticism of America is on the rise, however, a reserve of goodwill toward the United States still remains. The *Pew Global Attitudes* survey finds that the U.S. and its citizens continue to be rated positively by majorities in 35 of the 42 countries in which the question was asked.¹ True dislike, if not hatred, of America is concentrated in the Muslim nations of the Middle East and in Central Asia, today's areas of greatest conflict.

The most serious problem facing the U.S. abroad is its very poor public image in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East/Conflict Area.² Favorable ratings are down sharply in two of America's most important allies in this region, Turkey and Pakistan. The number of people giving the United States a positive rating has dropped by 22 points in Turkey and 13 points in

¹ These survey questions were not permitted in China, and were not asked in the U.S.

² Countries included in the Middle East/Conflict Area are Egypt (Cairo), Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

Pakistan in the last three years. And in Egypt, a country for which no comparative data is available, just 6% of the public holds a favorable view of the U.S.

Fully three-quarters of respondents in Jordan, the fourth largest recipient of U.S. assistance, have a poor image of the United States. In Pakistan and Egypt, an even-larger aid recipient, nearly as many (69%) have an unfavorable view and no more than one-in-ten in either country have positive feelings toward the U.S. In Jordan, Pakistan and Egypt, the intensity of this dislike is strong – more than 50% in each country have a *very* unfavorable view.

Public perceptions of the United States in Turkey have declined sharply in the last few years. In 1999, a slim majority of Turks felt favorably toward the U.S., but now just three-in-ten do. As is the case in Pakistan, Jordan and Egypt, the intensity of negative opinion is strong: 42% of Turks have a very unfavorable view of the U.S. The same pattern is evident in Lebanon, where 59% have a poor opinion of the U.S.

Uzbekistan, a new U.S. ally in the fight against terror, is a notable exception to this negative trend. By nearly eight-to-one (85%-11%) Uzbeks have a positive opinion of the United States and more than a third (35%) hold a very favorable view of the U.S.

Dislike of America undoubtedly reflects dislike of U.S. policies in the Middle East. In a survey of opinion leaders released by the Pew Research Center in December 2001 (“America Admired, Yet its New Vulnerability Seen as Good Thing, Say Opinion Leaders”), a majority in Islamic countries told us that U.S. support of Israel is the top reason that people in their countries dislike America.

But backlash against the U.S.-led war on terror is also a big part of the problem. Unlike in much of the rest of the world, the war on terrorism is opposed by majorities in 10 of the 11 countries predominantly Muslim country surveyed by Pew. This includes countries outside the Middle East/Conflict Area, such as Indonesia and Senegal where majorities still held favorable opinion of the US. While they still like us, they don’t like our war on terrorism. The principal exception is the overwhelming support for America’s anti-terrorist campaign found in Uzbekistan, where the United States currently has troops stationed.

Jordanians, in particular, are overwhelmingly opposed to the war on terror (85%-13%). Majorities in Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey and a plurality in Pakistan, a key U.S. ally in the region, also oppose the U.S.-led war on terror. In Pakistan, Lebanon and Egypt, Muslims are more likely to oppose these efforts to fight terrorism than non-Muslims.

The prevailing opinion among people in this region is that the United States ignores the interests of their countries in deciding its international policies. This view is as dominant in Turkey (74%), a NATO ally, as it is in Lebanon (77%). More specifically, the Pew survey finds a strong sense among most of the countries surveyed that U.S. policies serve to increase the formidable gap between rich and poor countries. Moreover, sizable minorities feel the United States does too little to help solve the world's problems.

U.S. Foreign Policy and the War on Terror: Conflict Area				
Conflict Area	U.S. foreign policy considers others		U.S.-led war on terrorism	
	<u>Yes</u> %	<u>No</u> %	<u>Favor</u> %	<u>Oppose</u> %
Uzbekistan	56	38	91	6
Jordan	28	71	13	85
Pakistan	23	36	20	45
Lebanon	20	77	38	56
Egypt	17	66	5	79
Turkey	16	74	30	58

The Gallup Poll, which conducted nationwide surveys in nine predominately Muslim countries in January 2002, summed it up well. They concluded that “the perception that Western nations are not fair in their stances toward Palestine fits in with a more generalized that the West is unfair to the Arab and Islamic worlds...it is one of several examples of Western bias that might extend to Afghanistan, Iraq Gulf oil and other situations”

‘Americanization’ Rejected

But it is all not one way - even in Muslim countries, opinions about the U.S. are complicated and contradictory. As among other people around the world, U.S. global influence is simultaneously embraced and rejected by Muslim publics. America is nearly universally admired for its technological achievements and people in most countries say they enjoy U.S. movies, music and television programs.

Very large majorities of the publics in most of the world admire U.S. technology. This is the case even among people with a low regard for the United States generally. In Jordan, where just a quarter have a favorable opinion of the U.S., 59% say they admire U.S. technological achievements. Even in Pakistan, where one-in-10 have a positive image of the U.S., a 42% plurality says they admire U.S. scientific advances.

Opinion of American popular culture is mixed, but more positive than one might expect. In Lebanon, where most have an unfavorable view of the U.S., 65% say they like American music, movies and television. In African countries with significant Muslim populations such as Senegal and Nigeria, majorities say they like American popular culture. But majorities in Jordan and Cairo dislike U.S. culture, as does a plurality in Turkey. Pakistan stands alone in the extent of its dislike of American popular culture. Eight-in-ten Pakistanis dislike American music, movies and television.

Although people in some Islamic countries like American popular culture while others reject it, there is more of a consensus that people do not like the spread of “Americanism.” In general, the spread of U.S. ideas and customs is disliked by majorities in almost every country included in this worldwide survey. In the Middle East/Conflict Area, overwhelming majorities in every country except Uzbekistan have a negative impression of the spread of American ideas and customs. Just 2% of Pakistanis and 6% of Egyptians see this trend as a good thing. Even in generally pro-American Uzbekistan, 56% object to the spread of American ideas and customs.

War in Iraq

The unpopularity of a potential war with Iraq can only further fuel hostilities—almost no matter how well such a war goes. At the Pew Research Center, we got some sense of this when we conducted another survey in addition to our 44-nation poll. In November, we also surveyed the people of five countries Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and Russia, about their attitudes toward a potential U.S.-led war in Iraq.

Unlike western Europeans and Russians, Turkish respondents were divided on whether the regime in Baghdad is a threat to the stability of the region, and were divided over whether ending Saddam Hussein’s rule would be good or bad for Turkey. Further, and of particular interest to this committee, a 53% majority of Turkish respondents believe the U.S. wants to get rid of Saddam Hussein as part of a war against unfriendly Muslim countries, rather than because the Iraqi leader is a threat to peace.

Summary: Opinion of U.S. Linked to Views of Policies

In summary, antipathy toward the U.S. is shaped by how its international policies are interpreted. Gallup’s findings reflected that clearly in showing that large majorities in their nine-nation survey said the West doesn’t respect Muslim values, nor show concern for the Islamic and Muslim worlds.

Improving America’s image is a tough charge unless we can prove that our critics in the Muslim world are wrong about our intentions and the consequences of our policies. Until that happens, U.S. communication efforts in the region can only be defensive, doing the best possible in a bad situation – correcting misinformation, softening hostility by playing to aspects of America that are still well regarded. But in the end, we will only be affecting opinions on the margins.

However, I think there are some bigger opportunities down the road as I look at the second wave of the Pew “Global Attitudes” polling. We will show a very substantial level of democratic aspirations among Muslim people. Valuing freedom of expression, multi-party systems, equal treatment under the law runs very high in Muslim countries – in fact, higher than in some nations

of eastern Europe. Our upcoming release this spring will detail these aspirations, and show how they exist side-by-side with a desire for a strong role for Islam in governance.

American policies that are seen as encouraging democratization might help establish, or bolster, constituencies for the U.S. in Muslim countries, especially outside of the Middle East--in Africa, particularly, where America's Palestinian policies have not so inflamed opinion. In the Middle East, the establishment of democratic institutions in Iraq after Saddam Hussein could prove to be an important first positive step in that most problematic part of the Muslim world.