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People in Muslim Nations Conflicted About UN

Favor More Active UN With Broader Powers, But See US Domination and Failure to Deal With Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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College Park, MD—A poll of seven majority Muslim nations finds people conflicted about the United Nations. On one hand there is widespread support for a more active UN with much broader powers than it has today. On the other hand, there is a perception that the UN is dominated by the US and there is dissatisfaction with UN performance on several fronts, particularly in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These are the findings from a WorldPublicOpinion.org survey in Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Indonesia, the Palestinian Territories, and Azerbaijan. Muslims in Nigeria (50% of the general population) were also polled. The survey was conducted in two waves in 2008. Overall, 6,175 respondents were interviewed in the first wave and 5,363 in the second; a total of 11,538 respondents participated in the study. The first wave was conducted January 12-February 18, 2008 though in two nations it was completed in late 2006. The second wave for all nations was completed July 21-August 31, 2008. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 5 percent. Not all questions were asked in all countries.

“While many people in Muslim countries express disappointment with the UN, this actually masks their underlying desire for a UN that is robust and powerful,” comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

Asked about a number of options for giving the United Nations greater powers, nearly all receive strong support. Publics in all nations polled favor the UN Security Council having its own standing peacekeeping force (on average 64%), having the authority to go into countries to investigate human rights violations (average 63%), and having the right to authorize military force to stop a country from supporting terrorist groups (average 76%), or to prevent severe human rights violations such as genocide (average 77%).

Publics in five out of the six nations asked favor giving the United Nations the power to regulate the international arms trade (average 59%) and favor the UN Security Council having the right to authorize military force to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them (average 63%), to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from producing nuclear fuel (average 57%), and to restore by force a democratic government that has been overthrown (average 57%).

Further, publics in all seven nations asked endorse the controversial view that the UN has a ‘responsibility to protect’ populations from severe human rights violations, “even against the will of their own government” (on average 64%).

At the same time Muslim publics distinguish between a United Nations that they feel in principle should be a dynamic actor, and the existing UN which they tend to perceive as dominated by the United States and as achieving mixed results in its current efforts.

In all but one nation the most common view is that “the US basically controls the UN and can almost always make the UN do what the US wants” as opposed to the view that “through its veto the US can stop the UN from doing things, but the US cannot make the UN do things the US wants.” The view of the UN as controlled by the United States is endorsed by 68 percent of Egyptians, 63 percent of Palestinians, 59 percent of Jordanians, and 53 percent of Turks. In Indonesia, 43 percent agree, while 13 percent say the US can only stop the UN from doing things (44% did not answer). The only exception is Azerbaijan, where a plurality says the US can stop the UN, but cannot make it do what the US wants (49% to 36%).

Respondents were also asked to assess a variety of UN efforts, rating them on a scale with 0 meaning “not all helpful” and 10 meaning “extremely helpful.” Ratings are generally lukewarm at best.

The lowest ratings are for UN efforts in “working to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict.” The mean response is 3.7 with the lowest ratings coming from Jordanians (2.5) and Palestinians (2.6). Only Azerbaijanis are above 5 (5.3). Low ratings of UN performance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are highly correlated with the perception that the US controls the UN.

Also very low are ratings of UN efforts to “resolve the conflict in Darfur.” The mean rating is 3.8. The lowest ratings come from the Jordanians (2.6), and the highest come from Indonesians (5.3).

The most positive ratings are for the UN performance in “providing humanitarian aid.” Ratings range from 4.5 (Palestinians) to 7.8 (Indonesians), with a mean of 5.9. Nearly as high are UN efforts in “running peacekeeping operations,” with a mean of 5.3, ranging from 3.5 (Palestinians) to 7.5 (Indonesians). UN efforts to address climate change get mixed reviews with three nations above 5, three below 5 and a mean of 4.6.

The complex mix of feelings—support for a United Nations with broader powers, perceptions of US dominance and varying assessments of UN performance—appear to contribute to highly varied responses on a number of questions.

Asked about the prospect of “the UN becoming significantly more powerful in world affairs,” consistent with their support for broader UN powers, majorities say this would be mainly positive in Iran (70%), Indonesia (53%), and Azerbaijan (51%)—as does a plurality in Turkey (43 to 26%). However in the three countries close to the hotbed of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, views are mostly negative—Palestinians (64%), Jordanians (59%), and Egyptians (57%)—perhaps because this signifies to them a United Nations dominated by the US and favoring Israel.

Respondents in different nations also have highly divergent levels of agreement with the statement, “When dealing with international problems [survey country] should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations, even if this means that [survey country] will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice.” More agree in Nigeria (60%), Egypt (57%), and Turkey (39% to 29%); while more disagree among the Palestinians (81%), Indonesians (50%), and Azerbaijanis (44% to 36%).

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