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Poll Finds Widespread International Opposition to US Bases in Persian Gulf

US Approach to Muslim World Given Poor Grades by Many Nations

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College Park, MD—A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 21 nations around the world finds widespread opposition to the United States having naval forces based in the Persian Gulf. Most also believe that most people in the Persian Gulf region oppose such bases.

In general, America's approach to the Middle East and the Muslim world gets poor grades around the world. The United States is widely viewed as disrespectful of the Muslim world. Its support for democracy in the Muslim world is seen as limited to cases where the government is cooperative with the US. More publics than not believe the US is not really seeking the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

The poll of 21,740 respondents was conducted between July 15 and October 24, 2008 by WorldPublicOpinion.org in 21 nations (in Iran: January 13-February 9). Margins of error range from approximately +/-2 to 4 percent. Most of the world's largest nations were included (China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia), as well as several nations in the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Azerbaijan, and Turkey). Also included were Mexico, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Kenya, Pakistan, Thailand, and Ukraine, as were publics in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Not all questions were asked in all nations.

Asked whether the US having naval forces based in the Persian Gulf is a good idea or a bad idea, 14 of 20 nations say it is a bad idea, three say it is a good idea, and three are divided. On average across all publics polled, just 22 percent say it is a good idea for the US to have naval bases in the Gulf, while 52 percent say it is a bad idea.

Majorities opposing US naval bases in the Gulf are highest in the Middle East: Egypt (91%) the Palestinian Territories (90%), Turkey (77%), Jordan (76%) and Azerbaijan (66%). The only countries where majorities say US naval bases in the Gulf are a good idea are the United States (70%), Nigeria (60%—including 54% of Nigerian Muslims), and Kenya (53%).

Even in Europe views lean negative. US bases are opposed by a majority in Germany (52%) and a plurality in Italy (43% to 31%). Publics are divided on the issue in Britain (43% positive, 39% negative) and France (41% positive, 43% negative).

Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org comments, “What is striking is that a major purpose of US naval forces in the Persian Gulf is to ensure the flow of oil to US allies, but in no case do the publics in these countries express majority support for the US having forces there.”

The US itself only receives about 10 percent of its oil supply from the Persian Gulf.

In all but one nation most people think the people of the Middle East disapprove of US naval bases in the Gulf—a correct perception based on the six nations polled in this study. On average across all nations, 64 percent believe Middle Eastern publics disapprove and only 14 percent believe they approve.

Negative views of the US military presence in the Gulf are part of a broader negative view of US relations with the Muslim world. Worldwide most people think the United States is disrespectful of the Muslim world, though only a minority thinks this is done purposefully. Given three options, on average only 16 percent say “the US mostly shows respect to the Islamic world.” Sixty-seven percent think the US is disrespectful but 36 percent say this is “out of ignorance and insensitivity,” while 31 percent say “the US purposely tries to humiliate the Islamic world.”

The view that “the US purposely tries to humiliate the Islamic world” is endorsed by majorities in three Islamic countries—Iran (64%), Egypt (56%), and Pakistan (52%)—and in Mexico (55%) as well as by large numbers of Palestinians (49%), Turks (43%), and Jordanians (39%). Only Americans have a majority saying the US mostly shows respect to the Islamic world (56%).

In both Muslim and Western countries there is a widespread perception that the United States does not unequivocally support democracy in Muslim countries. This question was asked to seven Muslim publics and five Western publics. In no nation does a majority think the US favors democracy unconditionally; on average only 15 percent hold this view. Fifty percent think instead that “the US favors democracy in Muslim countries, but only if the government is cooperative with the US.” Another 22 percent think simply that “the US opposes democracy in Muslim countries.”

More publics than not think that the US is not really trying to bring about a Palestinian state. Across 20 nations polled, 11 say it is not a US goal “to see the creation of an independent and economically viable Palestinian state,” while 9 nations (including the US) think it is a goal. On average 44 percent think this is not a US goal while 36 percent think that it is.

Interestingly, a majority of Palestinians themselves say that a Palestinian state is a US goal (59%). However, other nations in the region think it is not: Egypt (87%), Azerbaijan (79%), Jordan (63%), and Turkey (52%).

In 18 of the 21 nations interviews were conducted in the framework of WorldPublicOpinion.org’s collaborative research project, involving research centers from

around the world and managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. In three countries—Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia—interviews were conducted in the framework of the START consortium at the University of Maryland.

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