How Americans and Muslims See Each Other

This speech was delivered by Dalia Mogahed in Beverly Hills at the Brookings Forum "Focusing the Lens: Engaging the Muslim World Through the Arts." The event was hosted by Haim and Cheryl Saban in their home and attended by more than 90 producers, writers, directors, and intellectuals.

June 18, 2007

Introduction

The horrific events of 9/11 dramatically intensified what many saw as an ongoing conflict between the U.S. and parts of the Muslim world. Extremism has grown exponentially as Muslims and non-Muslims alike continue to be victims of global terrorism. At the same time, wars raging in Afghanistan and Iraq accumulate human casualties. War and terrorism have already caused the deaths of more than 100,000 civilians since 9/11.

As we face savage actions in a world that seems ever more dangerous and out of control, we are confronted daily by the voices of a vocal fringe on both sides, either demonizing the West as the enemy of Islam, or demonizing Islam as the enemy of the West.

The vital missing piece in this dizzying clamor is the voices of Muslim and American publics. With all that is at stake for the United States and Muslim societies, indeed for the future of the world, the time has urgently come to democratize the debate.

It is the views of this *silenced* majority that I'd like to talk to you about tonight. My analysis is based on a mammoth research study undertaken over the last six years by The Gallup Organization. Gallup conducted tens of thousands of hour-long face-to-face interviews with residents of more than 35 predominantly Muslim nations representing over 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.
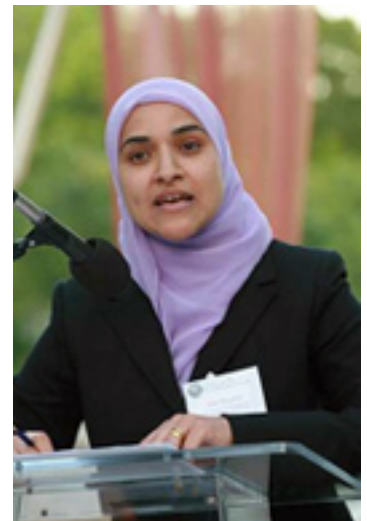
Awareness and Admiration of One Another

What did we find? Muslims and Americans both appreciate democracy and abhor terrorism. But each side has a unique perspective on the nature of the conflict between the global Muslim community and the West.

We've all seen angry mobs of Muslims on TV, waving their fists and burning effigies or American flags. It would seem that nothing was more self-evident than the inherent clash between Muslim and Western culture and values.

However, empirical evidence paints a different image. When asked to describe in their own words what they admired if anything about the West, the most frequent response was in fact its modern technology. The second most frequent? Its democracy.

For example, a respondent from Saudi Arabia said:

"Freedom of the press, opinion, and expression. Also, scientific advancement."

"Social justice and having access to nuclear power. Real democracy."
— Iran

"The way they work hard. It has helped them in developing their countries."
— Pakistan

"Liberty and freedom and being open-minded with each other."
— Morocco

What's more, these same two themes emerged among Americans when asked to describe what they most appreciated about their own civilization.

There was less agreement, however, as to what each side admired most about Muslim societies.

Muslims said what they appreciated most about their own societies was faith and family.

When Gallup asked Americans what they admired most about the Muslim world, their most frequent response was "Nothing." This was followed by "I don't know."

These two responses combined made up the majority.

A few months after 9/11, Gallup asked Americans how much they knew about the views and beliefs of people in the Muslim world. The majority, 54%, said they knew virtually nothing. This is not surprising since pre-9/11, Muslims and Islam were virtually invisible to Americans. Last January, a full six years later, Gallup asked the same question of the American public. This time, that figure was 57%.

A study of media content analysis of TV news in three Western nations found that in America, coverage of Islam was 40 times more likely to be negative than positive. This was worse than in the U.K. and Germany, the other two nations studied.

Perceptions of the Problem

So what can be done? We asked this question of Muslims and Americans. What could the West and the global Muslim community do to improve relations with the other?

When it came to what the West could do to heal the relationship, there was a difference in perceptions.

Contrary to the "they hate our freedom" thesis, the Muslim response did not stem from a hatred of Western values but instead the perception that the West hated Muslim values. From Morocco to Indonesia, respondents called on Western societies to stop regarding Muslims as inferior and moderate their views regarding Islam.

For example:

"A whole lobby of the West is working against Muslims and damaging our image; they should stop and respect Islamic values."
— Pakistan

2

"The West has to change and moderate their attitudes toward Muslims. They have to not look down on our people."
— Morocco

"Don't classify all Arabs as terrorists."
— Lebanon

Other frequently mentioned issues revolved around a more equitable economic and political policy toward their region of the world.

Americans, on the other hand, did not mention respect or policy changes at all. Instead, they characterized the conflict with the Muslim world as one of miscommunication requiring the West to do a better job delivering its message.

Radical Rejection

On the other hand, there was actually quite a bit of agreement as to what Muslims should do to improve relations with the Western world. First, Americans again said greater cultural understanding and interaction was necessary. Similarly, Muslims said they had to do a better job of representing Islam.

In addition, Americans and Muslims both said that Muslims had to help control extremism.

In fact, several recent studies have found that Muslim publics are *at least* as likely as the American public to condemn terrorism.

A recent study shows that only 46% of Americans think that "bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians" are "never justified," while 24% believe these attacks are "often" or "sometimes justified."[1]

Compare this with data taken the same year from some of the largest majority Muslim nations, where 74% of respondents in Indonesia agreed that terrorist attacks are "never justified"; in Iran, that figure was 80%, and in Pakistan, 86%.[2]

Moreover, Gallup found that there was no correlation between one's level of religiosity and sympathy for terrorist acts. The real difference between those who condone terrorism and the vast majority who condemn it stems from political, rather than religious or cultural, distinctions.

Many ask, if Muslims truly reject terrorism, why does it continue to flourish in Muslim lands? What these results indicate is that terrorism is as much an "out group" activity in Muslim communities as any other violent crime. Just as the fact that violent crimes continue to occur throughout American cities is not an indication of Americans' silent acquiescence to them, the continued existence of terrorist violence is not proof that it is tolerated by Muslims. An abundance of empirical evidence would indicate the opposite.

To sum up, Americans and Muslims around the world value democracy and technology, and reject terrorism, but most Americans know and admire very little about Muslim societies. Americans see the conflict with the Muslim world as a public relations issue, while Muslims define it as a respect and policy issue.

Obviously, the importance of what we are trying to do here cannot be overemphasized.

---

[1] Public opinion in Iran and America on key international issues. (2007, January 24). Retrieved July 19, 2007, from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/jan07/Iran_Jan07_rpt.pdf

[2] Ibid. See also Ballen, K. (2007, February 23). The myth of Muslim support for terror. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved July 19, 2007, from http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0223/p09s01-coop.html