

American Attitudes towards Islam: A Nationwide Poll

Introduction and Methodology

The American Muslim Council poll was conducted from 16-23 March 1993 by the John Zogby Group International, Inc., of New Hartford, New York. A total of 905 adults were contacted by telephone by trained canvassers from the Zogby Group offices. The random sample was stratified to ensure a equitable distribution of respondents by region.

The sample was selected by a procedure of random digiting in order to give listed and unlisted residential numbers an equal chance of selection. All area codes in the contiguous forty-eight states were represented, and each state was represented in the total sample according to its proportion of the total population. Calls were made from 4:00 pm to 9:00 pm in all time zones on weeknights, from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm on Saturday, and from 5:00 pm to 9:00 pm on Sunday. Three callbacks were made to each household where there was no initial contact.

Sample characteristics are described below:

Group	Frequency	% of Sample	Margin of Error
Overall	905	100.0	3
Northeast	220	24.4	6
South	278	30.8	6
Great Lakes/ Central	261	28.9	6
West	144	15.9	8
18-34	281	31.1	.6
35-54	366	40.5	5
55 +	257	28.4	6
HS Graduate or less	318	35.1	6
Some College	353	39.0	5

Group	Frequency	% of Sample	Margin of Error
College Graduate +	234	25.9	6
Roman Catholic	204	25.8	7
Protestant	392	49.5	5
Jewish	30	3.8	-
Muslim	7	.9	-
Other	100	12.6	9
No Affiliation	59	7.4	-
<\$25,000	225	31.5	6
\$25,000 - \$49,999	288	40.4	6
\$50,000 - \$74,999	135	18.9	9
\$75,000 +	65	9.1	-
Men	382	42.3	5
Women	522	57.7	4.5

Weights were not applied, since all demographic subgroups were within the margin-of-error of actual census characteristics.

Results and Analysis

The World Trade Center bombing is having a negative impact on American views of Muslims, according to a nationwide poll of adults. The poll analyzed here has a margin of error of plus or minus three.

The survey found that one in five Americans agree that the "series of events following the World Trade Center bombing will impact negatively on (their) view of Muslims, 55 percent say it will not, and 24 percent are not sure or have no opinion. Even worse for Muslims, four in ten (42 percent) of those polled agree that "there should be restrictions on the

number of Muslims allowed to immigrate to the U.S.," while 31 percent disagree, and 21 percent are not sure.

These findings compound the image problems Muslims already have in the American public eye. The poll revealed that among a select list of religious groups tested, Muslims receive the lowest favorable and highest unfavorable ratings. Only 23 percent give a favorable rating to Islam and Muslims, while 36 percent rate it unfavorably, and 41 percent are not sure. The low rating for Muslims contrasts with American views of other religious groups as seen in table 1.

Table 1: Impressions of Select Religious Groups (%)

Group	Favorable	Unfavorable	Not Sure
Roman Catholic	67	17	16
Presbyterian	65	12	23
Lutheran	60	10	30
Judaism	52	20	28
Fundamentalist Christian	39	24	37
Mormon	35	33	32
Hinduism	23	31	45
Islam	23	36	41

Significantly, two in four are not sure or have no opinion about Islam or Muslims. Muslims are more favorably regarded in the Northeast (33 percent) than any other region (South 19 percent; Great Lakes/Central 22 percent; West 20 percent). Older Americans give the lowest positive rating to Muslims (only 15 percent), but also are the least likely to form an opinion (47 percent not sure). College graduates are twice as likely to view Muslims or Islam favorably (37 percent) than those with high school diplomas or less. The highest income group has the highest impression (36 percent favorable), while there is no substantial difference among the other income categories.

While Hinduism ties with Islam in favorable rating (23 percent), Islam's 36 percent negative rating surpasses Hinduism's 31 percent. As in the case of Islam, 45 percent of the nationwide sample have no opin-

ion. Not surprisingly, Americans have very little understanding of the Eastern world—however, the fact that the image of Islam and Muslims is not significantly worse than that of Hinduism should be cause for some enthusiasm among American Muslim leaders.

At the same time, Muslims receive mixed reviews when specific characteristics are considered. For example, 43 percent agree with the statement that Muslims "tend to be religious fanatics," while only 24 percent disagree, and 33 percent are not sure. Less than a majority (47 percent) feel the same about Fundamentalist Christians. And more Americans are likely to agree that "Muslims are not tolerant of others" (28 percent) than disagree (22 percent), while 50 percent are not sure. At the same time, 30 percent feel that Fundamentalist Christians are not tolerant of others (28 percent disagree, 42 percent not sure), while only 22 percent say that Jews are not tolerant (46 percent disagree, 32 percent not sure).

But the news from the poll is not entirely bad for Muslims. Nearly two in five (38 percent) agree that Muslims "tend to lead clean and respectable lives," while only 15 percent disagree, and 48 percent are not sure. More agree that "the vast majority of Muslims hate terrorism" (34 percent) than disagree (17 percent). By way of comparison, 66 percent agree that Jews lead clean and respectable lives, and 50 percent feel the same way about Fundamentalist Christians.

The significant finding is that *large* percentages are not sure or have no opinion about Muslims despite years of negative images and stereotypes presented in the media and entertainment. The fact that one-third to two-fifths of all those surveyed are not sure about their views of Muslims means that substantial numbers of Americans want (and need) more evidence and are willing to not rush to judgment. It also means that a real window of opportunity exists *both* for American Muslims to better integrate themselves into American life and to be more visible. As the survey data suggests, such minority religious groups as Jews and Fundamentalist Christians seem to benefit by their visibility and interaction in American public and community life. American Muslims, who represent the fastest growing and perhaps the second largest non-Christian religious group in the United States, can benefit by their concentration in major American metropolitan centers, their representation in the professions, small business, the work force, and by accentuating very positive religious values.

The poll shows that Americans are willing to be fair to Muslims and support their further integration into American life. About four in ten (42 percent) agree that "there is a tendency to discriminate against Muslims in the United States"; 22 percent disagree and 36 percent are not sure. By contrast, 19 percent agree that Fundamentalist Christians are discriminated against, while 42 percent disagree, and 38 percent do not know.

Nearly four in ten of those polled (38 percent) agree that "Muslim men and women should be allowed to take time off from work on Fridays to pray," while 34 percent disagree. And almost six in ten (58 percent) feel that "Muslim women should be allowed to wear veils to work if they desire," while only 20 percent disagree. Only one in five (20 percent) agree that the "Muslim population in the United States is growing too rapidly," while 28 percent disagree, and 52 percent are not sure.

But again, the poll yielded a mixed bag of results. Almost half (49 percent) disagree that "American Muslims should be allowed days off with pay for major Muslim holidays, while 24 percent agree, and 37 percent are not sure.

A number of international issues involving Muslims are currently facing American policymakers today. Table 2 shows American public views on rival groups in several hot spots.

Table 2: American Views of Crises Involving Muslims (%)

Question: In the conflict between the following groups, the United States should support:

Serbs and Bosnian Muslims			
Serbs	Bosnian Muslims	Neither	Not Sure
5	12	37	45
Israel and Palestinians			
Israel	Palestinians	Neither	Not Sure
21	8	36	35
Neo-Fascist Germans and Muslim Immigrants			
N-F Germans	Mus. Immigrants	Neither	Not Sure
4	23	35	37
Israel and Deported Muslims			
Israel	Dep. Muslims	Neither	Not Sure
19	13	29	40

With the exception of the issue of neo-fascists and Muslims in Germany, no groundswell of public sympathy for Muslims was detected. Interestingly, 18-34 year olds were more likely to sympathize with the deported Muslims, while Northeasterners are evenly split. Perhaps the most significant figure in each test case is the substantial number of those who express uncertainty or no opinion—indicating clearly a lack of knowledge and interest and an opportunity for Muslims to present a better case.

Until (and if) that effort begins, Muslims can expect to be hurt by recent events. In addition to the 22 percent who say that the World Trade Center bombing will impact negatively on their view of Muslims, 56 percent feel that it will "likely have a negative impact on Arab Americans." Respondents are evenly split among those who believe that it was more a "part of a wider conspiracy involving a foreign nation" (33 percent) and those who feel it was "the act of a few terrorists" (32 percent).

The Next Step

Influential observers in the United States agree that, with the end of the Cold War, the new focus for American policymakers will be Islamic nations and movements. As Professor Shaw Dallah argues in *The Link*, there is now "an all-out effort to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the Muslim world." The evidence is clear that "Islam is the new enemy and that major world flash points involve Islamic people and movements." The stakes are very high and, to date, American sympathy and understanding of Muslims is not very good. On the other hand, those who profess no knowledge or opinion of Muslims—in the face of a barrage of negative images—are high. This suggests that opportunities exist for programs to enhance understanding and create and project a positive image.

A joint project involving Muslim nations and American Muslim leaders is needed. Resources must be utilized in the form of a public relations campaign aimed at the very source of the problem—the media. Television advertising, charitable contributions, and human interest stories can serve to project a softer image of Muslims. Funding of television specials, insistence on the use of positive Muslim characters in films and television shows, and the promotion of visible events to raise money for charity can go a long way towards building positive images and a bridge to the mainstream public. American Muslims *must become less isolated and more involved in community affairs*. Learning packages, including audio-visual aids, should be prepared and distributed to schools and community groups. American Muslims must seek inclusion and increasing participation in ecumenical services and local projects. The poll shows that the door is wide open for significant image enhancement efforts.