



***US PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD
ISLAM AND MUSLIMS
AFTER THE SEPT. 11 ATTACKS***

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I. Executive summary

If any facts stand out when we review the changes in Western public opinion about Islam in the wake of the events of Sept. 11, they are these four:¹

- ▶ Americans are divided on their feelings about Islam, and their opinions tend to shift significantly in short periods of time.

- ▶ While they profess a tolerance of Muslims in a general sense, a majority of Americans either want or are willing to accept special security measures that single out Muslims.

- ▶ On the whole, the more that Americans know about Islam, the more favorable their view of the religion.

- ▶ More than half of Americans and Europeans seem to make a distinction between Islam and the ideas of some extremists, and believe that Muslims are distinct from those extremists.

The implication is that despite the political goals of Western governments and opinion makers, a window of opportunity remains open for Muslims to explain their faith to the people of the West. At the same time, there remains a danger that Americans' desire for security leaves open a window for persecution and intolerance of Muslims that might yet be exploited by government or opinion makers.

Public opinion in America has gone through a process. In the days immediately following the attacks, attitudes toward Islam and Muslims deteriorated, but not drastically. American opinion was equally divided about Islam, and only a small number felt the US was at war with the religion. Most of the American public felt negatively toward Muslims, but no more so than in the months before Sept. 11.

¹ These conclusions are derived from the research contained within the paper. Each of these major points is addressed in a section of the report, along with the polls or other data from which it was derived.

Only when it came to security measures did Americans feel that Muslims should be treated differently.

As the months wore on, many of those who said they disliked Islam as a faith had more nuanced views and were no longer so opposed to the religion. On most issues, a majority of Americans has either a positive view of Islam's teachings or remains undecided. However, the public's opinion of Islam is volatile and tends to swing considerably.

Two months after the Sept. attacks, the number of Americans with a favorable opinion of Muslims jumped by nearly 15 percent to its highest level in history, providing a major counterweight to the majority's distrust of Muslims in the days immediately after the incidents. The favorability level has since dipped, but not by much. These relatively tolerant attitudes seem to be only theoretical: on a practical level, most Americans tend to favor security procedures and immigration policies that single out Muslims.

Researchers attributed the boost in the public's opinions of Islam and Muslims to the average American's increased familiarity with the religion and its adherents. Surveys revealed that Americans who feel they are familiar with what Islam teaches are much more likely than others to feel it is a peaceful religion and to view it favorably.

Americans tend to have more positive views of Islam as a religion than their European counterparts, though both populations are fairly equally divided between positive and negative opinions. And while less overt hostility against Muslims was reported in Europe than in America, anti-Muslim suspicions in Europe took the form of often extreme calls for special security measures and immigration restrictions.

There have been no formal, scientific polls of mosques to determine whether the rate of conversions has increased, but evidence suggests that it has. What is certain is that several mosques across America and Europe have reported a sharp increase in the rate of conversion to Islam since Sept. 11. The fundamental reason is that people are increasingly familiar with the religion, whether they get their information passively through the media or actively seek the truth behind the headlines.

II. Introduction

Research goals

Our goal is to determine, in the light of the events of Sept. 11, what trends are emerging in Western public opinion—particularly American public opinion—about Islam and Muslims, and to learn how these attitudes and opinions may be affecting the rate of conversion to Islam in the West.

Methodology

How this paper is organized

A section of the paper is devoted to each of the research goals: American public opinion, how it compares with the rest of the Western world, and impact on conversion rates.

The reader will find that each section and sub-section begins with a brief analytical summary, followed by the major findings of that section or sub-section, extracted and listed in bullet points. This is done to alert the reader to the most significant aspects of the research and save him the effort of having to deduce these aspects on his own from the mass of statistics to follow. Each conclusion listed in bullet points is referenced in the text of the section or sub-section, so if the reader is interested in the source material from which the conclusion is derived, he may read further into the section. The same holds for the executive summary which began this paper; each conclusion listed there is extracted from the subsections and is duly referenced therein.

The study is divided into an examination of public opinion in the days and weeks immediately following the attacks, and an examination of opinion in the months that followed. This was done because there is value in taking a separate look at both the American public's immediate reaction to an event of this magnitude, as well as the longer term trends.

There are separate sub-sections in each section devoted to bias against Muslims. In the first, "Unfairness and harassment," we placed data relating to opinions and incidents affecting non-Muslims' direct relationships with Muslims. In the second, "Muslims considered a security risk," we consigned data that related to

opinions about government policies of singling out Muslims for security reasons. We made a distinction between these two types of “unfairness” to reflect their different consequences: the former is usually considered illegitimate and universally condemned, and the latter is usually considered legitimate because of the stated public safety motivation and the involvement of government. When a society or segments of a society act against a minority group based on “illegitimate” bias, redress can be sought within the system. When a society’s government acts against a minority for an apparently legitimate reason and with public approval, bias is institutionalized and the effects can be much more severe.²

Data sources

A survey of news databases was undertaken to locate all known opinion polls and other reliable measures of public opinion in the United States and Europe that gauged attitudes toward Islam, Muslims, or Arabs. Then, when possible, the original reports were obtained from those organizations who conducted the study, and the data was analyzed and compared to other studies to identify opinion trends. In the few cases when it was not possible, then we relied on media reports of those studies.

There was a conscious decision to focus on scientific public opinion polls by reliable organizations as a measure of public opinion, as opposed to other methods (although we did include some other sources, like focus groups and media interviews). This is because, despite their inherent drawbacks, polls are the most accurate means available of measuring public opinion. Since polls were so heavily relied upon for this study, a brief discussion of their accuracy and limitations is appropriate.

Humphrey Taylor, chairman of the respected Harris Poll, writes, in a paraphrase of Winston Churchill, “Polls are the worst way of measuring public opinion and public behavior, or of predicting elections—except for all of the others.”³ And in fact, studies show that opinion polls are indeed accurate. The National Council on Public Polls, an association of polling organizations, analyzed final presidential election polls conducted by the national media for the past 50 years. When compared

² For example, in the United States, the Justice Department investigates bias crimes against Muslims, but, with little public outcry, singles them out among all other minority groups for the enforcement of immigration laws.

³ “Myth and Reality in Reporting Sampling Error,” *The Polling Report* May 4, 1998

with actual election outcomes, average poll error on each candidate was only 1.9 percentage points.⁴

Despite their overall accuracy, it is important to be aware of some of the limitations of opinion polling and the potential biases that can creep in. First, there is the theoretical “margin of error,” a statistical by-product of surveying samples of the population rather than every individual. The average survey sample consists of about 1,000 respondents. Mathematically, the margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 3 percentage points—in other words, a random sample of 1,000 can statistically be expected to accurately reflect the opinions of 95 percent of the entire population to within 3 percent.⁵

There are more significant potential sources of polling inaccuracy, described in the following disclaimer distributed to journalists by the Harris organization along with all its poll results:

“[Potential sources of error] include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data, and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is difficult or impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.”⁶

For this study, in many cases, several separate surveys done by different organizations at different times were compared to one another to measure public opinion trends. This is a standard technique and does not amount to “comparing apples and oranges,” as long as the questions being compared are the same. Gary Langer, director of polling for ABC News, writes of his organization’s own methodology: “It’s so simple to do it right: find a straight, clean question that’s been asked before, re-ask it and look for change.”⁷ Similarly, the charts found herein were created from data drawn from various polls that asked the same questions of samples of the same population,⁸ compared and contrasted to demonstrate trends.

⁴ “Answers To Questions We Often Hear From the Public,” National Council on Public Polls, <http://www.pollingreport.com/ncpp.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Myth and Reality in Reporting Sampling Error,” *The Polling Report*, May 4, 1998

⁷ “Responsible polling in the wake of 9/11,” *The Public Perspective*, March/April 2002, Vol. 13, No. 2; Pg. 14

⁸ That is, not restricted to a particular geographic area, unless done purposefully and duly noted—for example, in comparing American and British public opinion

In the case of the section on conversion rates, where scientific opinion polls were not available, we collected local media reports about changes in conversion at individual mosques to piece together a more complete picture of conversion rates across the country, and, using media interviews with recent converts, we identified several categories of triggers for their conversions.

Islam, Muslims, or Arabs?

Throughout this paper, a distinction has been made between public opinion of Islam, and public opinion about Muslims. This is because they are entirely separate issues, both in reality and in the public mind—statistics show a wide disparity in public opinion between the two. For example, between November 2001 and January 2002, about 60 percent of Americans had a positive view of Muslims,⁹ while only around 40 percent had a favorable opinion about Islam as a religion.¹⁰

Our study is of American public attitudes toward Islam and Muslims; however, many of the polls, especially immediately following the attacks, asked the respondents about their feelings toward “Arabs” or “Arabs and Muslims.” This is because in both real and perceived ways, the concepts of “Arab” and “Muslim” are interlinked, and often confused by the public—even by polltakers. For example, a poll conducted by Harris Interactive for *Time/CNN* seemed to confuse the issue by asking respondents how they felt about “Arab Americans,” as opposed to “Muslims living abroad.”¹¹ The public does not regard these terms as completely synonymous, however; in an October poll by Gallup, 66 percent of the American public held a favorable view of Muslims, while only 54 percent had a good opinion of Arabs.¹²

For these reasons we made note of polls that queried respondents about their views of Arabs, but we did not consider “Arab” and “Muslim” as synonymous; i.e., when comparing different polls to identify trends in public opinion about Muslims, we did not include polls that asked respondents for their opinions about Arabs.

In the weeks following the attacks, the image of the culprits shifted from “Arabs” to “religious Muslims,” especially as the military and propaganda campaign

⁹ “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001. Poll of 1,500 people.

¹⁰ “Unfamiliarity with Islam Runs High, Giving Rise to Some Skepticism,” ABC Television Network, Jan. 24, 2002. Conducted by telephone Jan. 2-6, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,023 adults. The results have a three-point error margin.

¹¹ *Time/CNN* Poll conducted by Harris Interactive. Sept. 13, 2001. N=1,082 adults nationwide. MoE ± 3.

¹² *The Gallup Poll*, October 11-14, cited by PollingReport.com

against non-Arab Afghanistan geared up (US officials have publicly stated that America is at war with the ideology of “extremist Islam”), which may have been a reason we encountered less of the interlinking of the “Arab” and “Muslim” concepts in polls.

III. American attitudes toward Islam and Muslims

The Day After

Weighing America's feelings toward Islam and Muslims in the days immediately following the events of Sept. 11 is like trying to decide whether the glass of water is half empty or half full. Our conclusion about this period is that public opinion of Islam and Muslims deteriorated, but not irretrievably. Potentially ominous signs were tempered by positive ones. Hostility and suspicion increased but was not as broadly felt nor as intense as might have been expected. Polls taken in the first days and weeks following the attacks indicate:

- ▶ A similar percentage of Americans had positive, negative, and ambivalent feelings toward Islam as a religion.
- ▶ Most Americans professed a negative overall impression of Muslims and Arabs shortly after the attacks, but no more so than before Sept. 11.
- ▶ Less than half of Americans said they felt more suspicious of Muslims.
- ▶ More than half of Americans felt Arabs should be singled out for special security procedures.

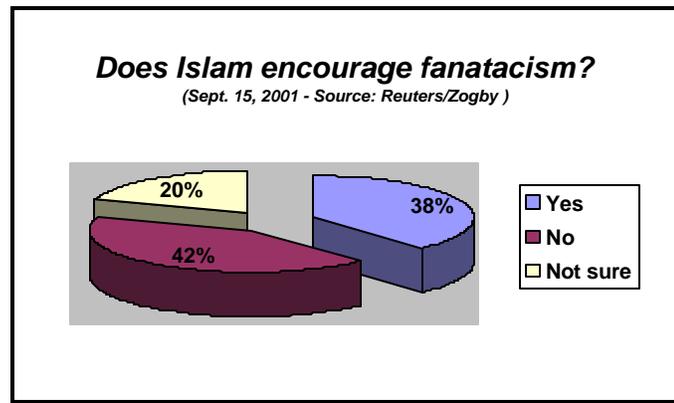
Mixed feelings about Islam

Americans have never been overwhelmingly fond of Islam. For example, a 1998 Roper poll found that 50 percent of Americans believe Islam to be inherently anti-American or supportive of terrorism.¹³

Shortly after the attacks, almost equal percentages of Americans felt positive, negative, and ambivalent about Islam as a religion, while only a small number felt America is at war with Islam itself. A Sept. 15 poll by the Reuters news service and the Zogby International polling firm found that 38 percent believe that Islam is a religion that encourages fanaticism, 42 percent believe it does not, and 20 percent are

not sure.¹⁴ Most were able to distinguish between Islam as a religion and the actions of some Muslims: 84 percent of those surveyed considered the U.S. to be at war with a small group of terrorists who may be Muslim, compared to eight percent who say the U.S. is at war with Islam.

Figure 1¹⁵



Muslims poorly regarded, as before Sept. 11

Most of the American public professed a negative overall impression of Muslims and Arabs in America shortly after the attacks. Amazingly, however, this situation was no different from months before Sept. 11. In March 2001, 45 percent of Americans had a positive opinion of Muslim Americans.¹⁶ Similarly, in a Sept. 15 poll by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, 43 percent of poll respondents rated Muslim Americans and Arab-Americans favorably. It is important to note that even this minority's charitable attitude was reserved for Muslims and Arabs in America. Muslims and Arabs living in the Middle East were viewed positively by only 22 percent of Americans following the attacks.¹⁷

Despite this negative impression, just two days after the attacks, a majority—65 percent—reported they felt no different toward Arab Americans than they had

¹³ "Muslim-Americans gaining respect," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 25, 2002, Pg. 14A

¹⁴ <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=485>. The telephone survey was conducted September 15 - 16, 2001, of 1,018 "likely voters" with a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.2%

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, <http://www.people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=8>. Sample size not reported.

¹⁷ "Proud to be American, even with the jitters," *USA TODAY*, Oct. 9, 2001, Pg. 9D

before.¹⁸ Also balancing this mixed review of Muslims was the fact that the American public was surprisingly confident that Muslims in America sympathized with the rest of the country about the bombings. Seventy-six percent thought American Muslims' sympathies were with Americans, while only 11 percent thought they sympathized with the attackers.¹⁹

Unfairness and hostility

A week after the attacks, fully 90 percent of Americans felt that “Arab Americans, Muslims, and immigrants from the Middle East” would likely be singled out unfairly by their fellow Americans.²⁰ However, in a Sept. 14 poll conducted by CNN and the national daily *USA Today*, only 31 percent said that since the attacks they had personally heard any of their friends, neighbors, fellow workers or acquaintances make negative comments about Arabs living in America.

A striking number of incidents of anti-Muslim harassment were reported shortly after Sept. 11—although statistically speaking, these were the acts of a small minority and not representative of most Americans' response to the attacks. By the end of September, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) was reporting 625 incidents like beatings, shootings, arson, firebombing, and threats, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' hot line has received 310 calls about anti-Arab or anti-Muslim incidents, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee said it had confirmed 315 anti-Arab threats or incidents of violence, and the FBI said it was investigating 90 hate crimes nationwide.²¹

Many of these incidents were directed at non-Muslims who the perpetrator thought was a Muslim. Two weeks after the attacks, a Sikh web site set up to record hate crimes and harassment had received 274 reports, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund had received 100 reports of hate and bias crimes.²²

At the same time, many Americans were outraged by reports of harassment and made an effort to show support and solidarity for Muslims. Non-Muslim women

¹⁸ Time/CNN Poll conducted by Harris Interactive. Sept. 13, 2001. N=1,082 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 3. Cited by PollingReport.com

¹⁹ Harris Study No. 15003, Harris Interactive, Inc., Sept. 27, 2001. Sample size: 903.

²⁰ CBS News *New York Times* poll of 1,216 adults nationwide, Sept. 20-23, 2001. Survey of 1,216 adults nationwide, MoE \pm 3. Source: PollingReport.com. Fifty percent thought discrimination would be “very likely,” 40 percent said it was “somewhat likely.”

²¹ “Advocates say reports of hate crimes slowing, some considering legal action,” *Associated Press*, Sept. 29, 2001

²² *Ibid.*

in Illinois, California, Washington, D.C., and Michigan staged “Scarves for Solidarity” events, wearing hijabs in defense of Muslim women who had been targeted.²³

Muslims a suspected security risk

A sizeable minority of Americans said they felt more suspicious of Muslims after Sept. 11. In the CNN/USA Today poll, 63 percent of respondents said their level of trust in Arabs living in America had not changed, while 35 percent said they had less trust.²⁴ This was supported by another poll conducted the same day by *The Washington Post*, where 56 percent said they would not be more suspicious of “people who you think are of Arab descent.” Forty-three percent said the attacks would make them more suspicious.²⁵

Despite this claim of trust by a slight majority, when polltakers asked about specific security procedures, most Americans felt Arabs and Muslims should be singled out. A huge majority, 82 percent, said they would either “strongly favor” or “accept as necessary” closely monitoring the whereabouts of legal immigrants to the United States from Arab and Muslim countries—only 20 percent said this was “going too far.” (According to another poll taken the same week, only 32 percent thought “Arabs living in America should be put under special surveillance like some Japanese Americans were after the attack on Pearl Harbor;”²⁶ however, the wording of the question no doubt resulted in a lower number agreeing with this; the US Government recently officially apologized to Japanese Americans for their mistreatment.) In the CNN/USA Today poll, 49 percent of Americans said they felt all Arabs, even U.S. citizens, should have to carry special identification. Fifty eight percent said Arabs should undergo special security checks before being allowed to fly on a plane.²⁷ A September 13-17 Pew Research Center poll showed that 29 percent favored putting legal immigrants from “unfriendly” countries into internment camps.²⁸

²³ “Non-Muslim women wear head scarves to show support,” *Associated Press*, Oct. 18, 2001

²⁴ “Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11,” Gallup News Service - Poll Analyses, Sept. 28, 2001

²⁵ ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. Sept. 13, 2001. N=609 adults nationwide. MoE ± 4. Cited by PollingReport.com; reported in “Anti-Muslim Violence Assailed,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 15, 2001, Pg. A09.

²⁶ Newsweek Poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. Sept. 13-14, 2001. N=1,001 adults nationwide. MoE ± 3. Cited by PollingReport.com.

²⁷ “Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11,” Gallup News Service - Poll Analyses, Sept. 28, 2001.

²⁸ “Past to Future,” *The Public Perspective*, Nov./Dec. 2001 Vol. 12, No. 6; Pg. 34

There is a problem harmonizing the relatively gracious and unwary attitudes toward Arabs expressed in the CNN poll by 63 percent of Americans, with the majority view that Arabs should be singled out for special security procedures. These findings and those from the University of Michigan poll suggest that shortly after Sept. 11, in practical terms, well over half of Americans did not trust Muslims.

The probable reason for the apparently contradictory attitudes is that when asked about abstract, value-laden concepts like "trust," most Americans are not willing to admit, even to themselves, that they make a distinction between people based on race or religion. "When you ask a question like this, a lot of people may not admit to it," says Jeffrey M. Jones, managing editor of the Gallup Poll.²⁹

Asked about specific scenarios, however (especially about air travel, in which thousands of Americans had just died), many were willing to admit they preferred different standards of treatment for a religious or ethnic minority.

Four Months Later

As is the case when analyzing Americans' feelings shortly after Sept. 11, there is no simple diagnosis of how those feelings changed as time and other factors entered the picture. Americans are divided in their feelings about Islam. Positive and negative trends are emerging as public opinion evolves. The bad news is that fewer people feel positively about Islam since Sept. 11; the good news is that many who disliked the religion are now not quite sure it is bad. The major findings:

- ▶ Americans are divided on their feelings about Islam, and their opinions tend to shift significantly in short periods of time.
- ▶ Americans who say they're familiar with what Islam teaches are much more likely than others to feel it is a peaceful religion that teaches respect for non-Muslims, and to view it favorably overall.
- ▶ On questions of certain aspects of Islam, the great majority of Americans has either a positive view of Islam's teachings or remains undecided.

²⁹ "US Attitudes Towards Arabs Souring, According to Poll," *The Boston Globe*, Sept. 29, 2001 pg. A5

- ▶ Two months after the Sept. attacks, the number of Americans with a favorable opinion of Muslims jumped nearly 15 percent to its highest level in history.

Feelings about Islam

The most extensive post-9/11 poll on American's views on Islam, jointly sponsored by the ABC television network and the Beliefnet religion news website, was conducted on January 6, 2002.³⁰ The poll revealed that the percentage of Americans with a favorable view of Islam has dropped slightly, while the percentage with an unfavorable view of Islam has also dropped. In an Oct. 9 poll, 47 percent had a favorable view, 39 percent said unfavorable and 13 percent said they didn't know.³¹ In January, 41 percent said favorable, 24 percent said unfavorable and 35 percent said they don't know.

ABC analysts said that most of those who changed their views had once held a poor opinion of Islam but had by this time moved to the "undecided" camp. Said one analyst about a similar shift: "That's a more sophisticated response than a knee-jerk 'yes' or 'no' and indicates people are withholding judgment until they know more...That's good news for Muslims."³²

Some of the trends the ABC/Beliefnet survey observed in January have not continued, suggesting that Islam remains a volatile subject about which Americans' opinions are liable to shift considerably. In the latest available figures, only 30 percent said they have a favorable view of Islam, a drop in 10 percent in only one month. Thirty-three percent said they have an unfavorable view of the religion, and 37 percent—about the same as in January—said they did not know.³³

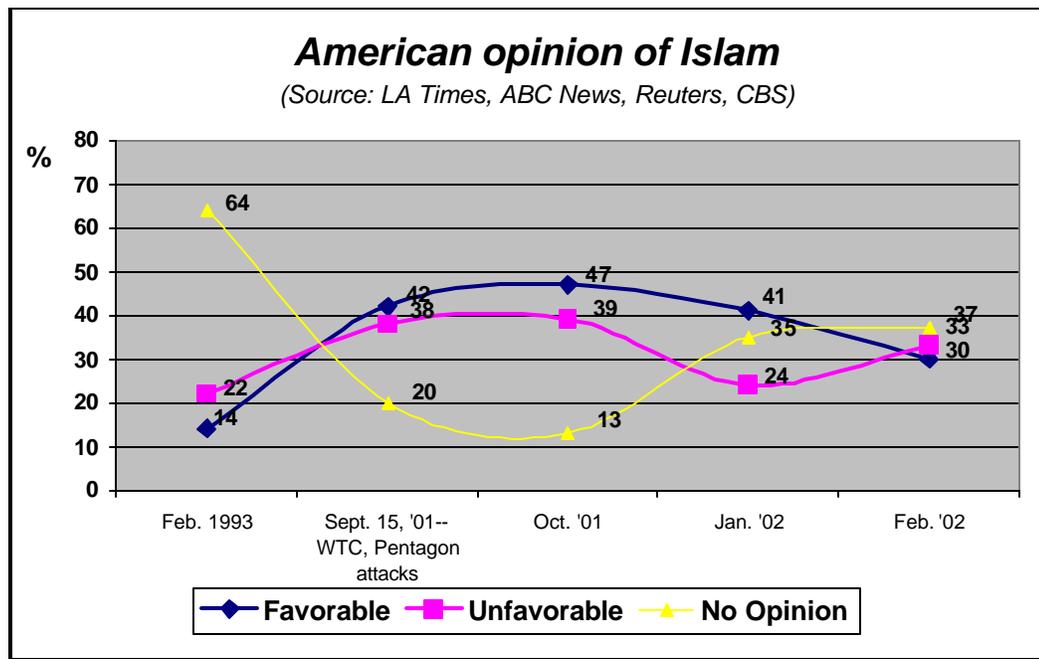
³⁰ "Unfamiliarity with Islam Runs High, Giving Rise to Some Skepticism," ABC Television Network news release, Jan. 24, 2002. Conducted by telephone Jan. 2-6, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,023 adults.

³¹ Ibid. The ABC release does not specify who took the earlier Oct. 9 poll; the organization simply cites it as a bench mark. The survey was apparently conducted by ABC and not reported at the time.

³² *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1995, Pg. B4

³³ "Poll: Americans Feel Safer," CBS News website, Feb. 28, 2002

Figure 2³⁴



A significant segment of Americans consider themselves more knowledgeable and more interested in Islam. In a February poll by CBS, more than half of the public said they now know more about the faith.³⁵ In December, 37 percent of Americans said they were more interested in Islam than they were before the attacks, with only 5 percent saying they were less interested.³⁶

The ABC/Beliefnet poll found a direct connection between this increased familiarity with Islam and positive views toward the religion. Their researchers said that Americans who feel they're familiar with what Islam teaches are much more likely than others to feel it is a peaceful religion that teaches respect for non-Muslims, and to view it favorably overall.

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in mid-November came to a similar conclusion. Those who said they know at least something about Islam are

³⁴ Data extracted from: *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1995, Pg. B4; Zogby International news release, Sept. 17, 2001; ABC Television Network news release, Jan. 24, 2002; and "Poll: Americans Feel Safer," CBS News website, Feb. 28, 2002.

³⁵ "Poll: Americans Feel Safer," CBS News website, Feb. 28, 2002. This poll was conducted among a nationwide random sample of 861 adults, interviewed by telephone February 24-26, 2002. Margin of error: plus or minus 3%.

³⁶ Harris Study No. 15271, Harris Interactive, Inc., Dec. 5, 2001. National sample of 992 persons 18 or older.

more than twice as likely to see Islam as having a lot in common with their own religious beliefs.³⁷

These poll results “show that the American public wants to make an informed decision about Islam,” says the director of Georgetown University’s “Muslims in the American Public Square” project. “The silver lining for Muslims is that if they tell their story, the general opinion of them will be more favorable.” Muslims have a lot of work to do: less than one-third of Americans say they are familiar with Islamic teachings, a percentage that has not changed from a few months ago.³⁸

On most issues, the great majority of Americans has either a positive view of Islam’s teachings or remains undecided. Thirty-one percent said they think Islam and their own religion have a lot in common, 52 percent think they are very different, and 17 percent did not know or would not answer. Forty-two percent think the religion teaches tolerance for the beliefs of non-Muslims. An almost equal number, 38 percent, are unsure whether Islam is tolerant or not, and only 22 percent think it is not. Fifty-seven percent see Islam as a peaceful religion, 14 percent think mainstream Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims, and 29 percent are unsure. Thirty-eight percent think Islam has more violent extremists than other religions, 41 percent say it has about the same number, and 17 percent are unsure whether this is the case. Only 5 percent think it has fewer.

This relatively positive trend has held up since the November survey by Pew. In a March poll by CNN and *USA Today*, almost 50 percent of Americans said that Islam does not encourage religious violence any more than other religions around the world. Twelve percent said it encourages violence less, and 35 said it encourages violence more.³⁹ A study by Pew in March that followed up their November survey found opinions largely unchanged.⁴⁰

Some researchers cautioned that more mixed feelings lie beneath the surface of this apparently positive trend. Although most say Islam is not more likely to

³⁷ “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted.” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 6, 2001. <http://www.people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=8>. Sample of 731 adults.

³⁸ According to both the Pew Research Center in November and the ABC/Beliefnet poll in January.

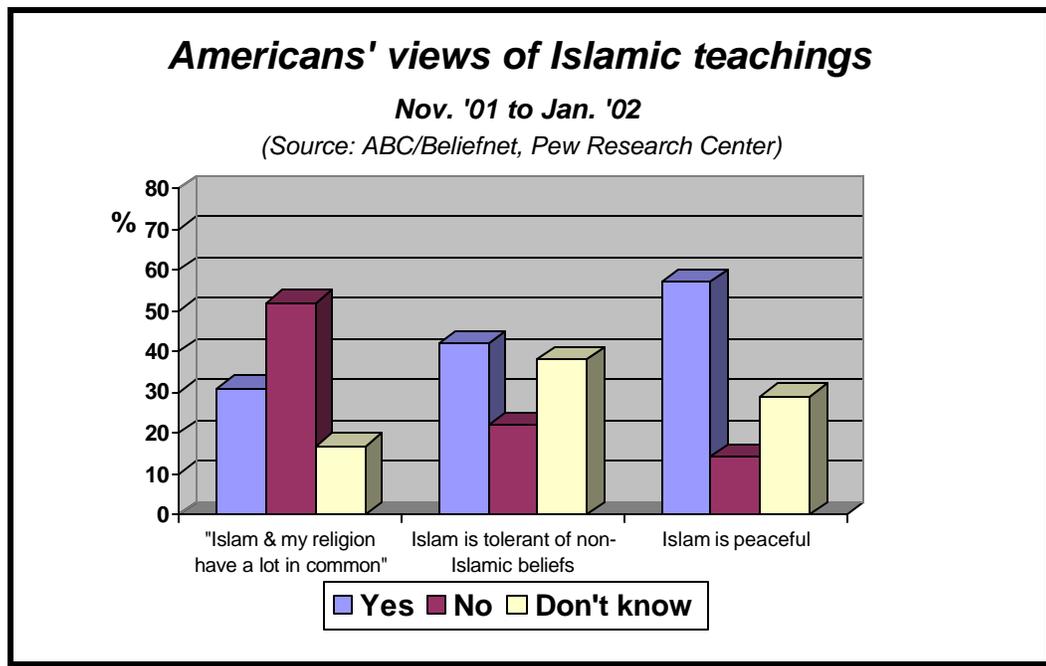
³⁹ Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, taken March 1–3 of 863 persons nationwide. Cited by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

⁴⁰ “Churches Enjoy Widespread Favor, Americans Divided On Islam,” *The White House Bulletin*, March 20, 2002. Report on a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life of study of 2002 adults conducted February 25 -- March 10, 2002 (+/- 2.5%)

encourage violence than other religions, a plurality of Americans believes that, in general, “some religions” are more likely than others to encourage violence. Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center, said these findings reveal a “closet concern in the linkage between Islam and violence.”⁴¹

Ideological, gender, and racial groupings tend to guide how Americans feel about Islam. Political conservatives are less likely to view Islam favorably or to think it teaches respect for others. Better-educated people are more likely to think so. Whites are more likely than non-whites to think there are disproportionate numbers of violent extremists within Islam, and men are somewhat more likely than women to think so.⁴²

Figure 3⁴³



⁴¹ “Americans Struggle With Religion's Role at Home and Abroad,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, news release via *AScribe Newswire*, March 21, 2002, about the above poll.

⁴² “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted.” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 6, 2001. <http://www.peoplepress.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=8>

⁴³ Data drawn from: “Unfamiliarity with Islam Runs High, Giving Rise to Some Skepticism,” ABC Television Network news release, Jan. 24, 2002, “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001.

Feelings about Muslims

“Some predicted a greater dislike of Arabs and Muslims would be the result [of the 9/11 attacks], but survey data did not back them up,” observes Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey, which measures a wide variety of long-term public attitudes.⁴⁴ On the contrary: two months after the Sept. attacks, the number of Americans with a favorable opinion of Muslims jumped by nearly 15 percent to its highest recorded level,⁴⁵ providing a major counterweight to the majority’s distrust of Muslims in the days immediately after the incidents. The trend has held up, with favorability ratings for US Muslims in March 2002 having dropped off only slightly since the surge in favorability documented in November 2001. (At the same time, when Americans were asked what they thought of Muslims without identifying them by nationality, i.e. as “American Muslims,” Muslims’ favorability rating dropped to 47 percent.)

Again, though, researchers urged caution against being overly optimistic. “Under the surface there’s potential for much more reaction down the road,” the Pew Research Center’s Kohut said. “I don’t think we can be complacent because there is so much fragility in the measures.”⁴⁶ This warning is supported by several studies showing Americans’ tendency toward bias against Muslims with respect to security measures and immigration, which will be discussed shortly.

A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press shows that 59 percent of Americans had a favorable view of U.S. Muslims in November, compared to 45 percent in March of 2000. The percentage of those with an unfavorable view of Muslims dropped from 30 percent four days after the hijackings to only 17 percent in November. Favorability had dipped only slightly in a March 2002 follow-up study by Pew. (By comparison, only 32 percent now view atheists favorably, while 49 percent have an unfavorable view.)⁴⁷

As with the opinion shift on Islam, researchers attribute the jump in the public’s opinion of Muslims to the average American’s increased familiarity with the

⁴⁴ “U.S. Attitudes About Politics Shift,” *Associated Press*, March 8, 2002

⁴⁵ “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001.

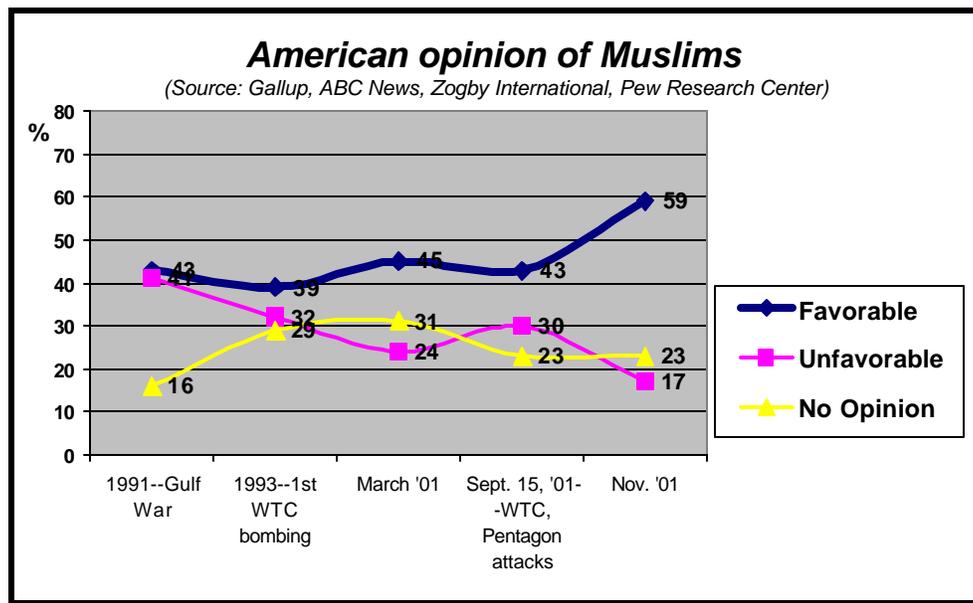
⁴⁶ “Americans Struggle With Religion’s Role at Home and Abroad,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, news release via *AScribe Newswire*, March 21, 2002 Survey of 2002 adults conducted February 25 – March 10, 2002 (+/- 2.5%)

⁴⁷ “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001.

religion and its adherents. In a March 2002 study by the Pew Forum, almost three-quarters of those who say they are somewhat knowledgeable about the Islamic faith have a favorable view of Muslims in America. For those who know little or nothing, the figure is barely 50 percent. “In other words, information trumps prejudice, at least for a good portion of the American people,” wrote Luis Lugo, director of Pew’s religion program.⁴⁸

Others credited President Bush's positive public statements on Islam (64 percent of Conservative Republicans now say they feel favorably toward Muslims, compared to 35 percent in March), although, noted Beliefnet, “primarily, he has done this to further his anti-terrorism goals.”⁴⁹ Another factor may have been sympathy, stirred by numerous reports of anti-Muslim incidents: “Most Americans are disgusted by wanton attacks against Arab-Americans, Muslims and others mistaken for Muslims,” wrote the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in an editorial explaining the opinion shift.⁵⁰

Figure 4⁵¹



⁴⁸ “Muslim-Americans gaining respect,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 25, 2002, Pg. 14A

⁴⁹ “Americans' Surprising Take on Islam,” BeliefNet.com, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/97/story_9732.html

⁵⁰ “Getting to know you,” *St. Louis PostDispatch*, Dec. 11, 2001, Pg. C14

⁵¹ Data drawn from: “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001; “Unfamiliarity with Islam Runs High, Giving Rise to Some Skepticism,” ABC Television Network news release Jan. 24, 2002;

Unfairness and hostility

During the two months following the attacks, a research firm conducted 23 focus group sessions across the country to get a handle on the American public's response to the attacks on a wide variety of issues. The firm's director reports there was a

“...fairly tolerant attitude toward Muslims in America expressed in all of the focus groupsit is striking that during the many weeks of focus -group discussions, hostile comments from participants toward foreigners and Muslims were few and isolated. The events of September 11 did not unleash expressions of pent-up prejudice.”⁵²

Though the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported 1717 incidents of harassment against Muslims between Sept. 11 and the beginning of February,⁵³ the frequency of reports subsided in the months after the attacks. For example, a survey by California's state attorney general said reports of those crimes dropped from nearly 10 a day in September to less than one a day in January.⁵⁴

Despite this, a large majority of Americans—about 80 percent—continued to feel that Muslims and Arabs were likely to be unfairly singled out by other Americans.⁵⁵ This has not changed significantly since the week after the attacks, when 90 percent thought such bias was likely.⁵⁶

Muslims still a suspected security risk

Americans' stated level of trust in Muslims and Arabs did not change at all in the months after Sept. 11—five separate surveys taken between September and March

<http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=485>; and "Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11," Gallup News Service - Poll Analyses, Sept. 28, 200

⁵²“‘We’—Not ‘Me’; Public opinion and the return of government,” *The American Prospect*, Dec. 17, 2001, Pg. 25. Democracy Corps sponsored the study, and it was conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.

⁵³“Anti-Muslim incidents,” <http://www.cair-net.org>, Feb. 2, 2002 (not updated as of April 2); see also <http://www.cair-net.org/html/bycategory.htm>

⁵⁴“Hate letters containing white powder investigated,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 13, 2002

⁵⁵ Conducted by CBS News, January 5-January 6, 2002 and based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,060. Cited by PollingReport.com.

⁵⁶ CBS News *New York Times* poll of 1,216 adults nationwide, Sept. 20-23, 2001. Source: PollingReport.com. Fifty percent thought discrimination would be “very likely,” 40 percent said it was “somewhat likely.”

by three polling organizations show virtually zero variance in public opinion on this issue. A small majority of Americans—61 percent—told a CNN poll in March that their level of trust in “Arabs” had not changed,⁵⁷ exactly the same percentage in a CNN poll taken days after the attacks,⁵⁸ and virtually identical to a *Washington Post* poll from the same week in September.⁵⁹ These percentages are exactly the same as those in an October poll by ABC News.⁶⁰

At the same time, Americans’ tendency to favor special security measures for Muslims remained strong. The same focus group study that reported tolerance of Muslims also reported that “respondents clearly favored tighter border controls and limiting the number of immigrants, views that are also reflected in the polls.”⁶¹

In November, nearly 80 percent of Americans supported the government’s plan to interview about 5,000 young men from the Middle East in the US on temporary visas, knowing that some said this singles out these men unfairly on the basis of their national origin.⁶² In a March poll by Gallup, almost 60 percent said Muslim immigration should be reduced or ended completely.⁶³

Europe vs. America

As with America, a study of European public opinion reveals mixed feelings about Islam and Muslims, with Europeans seemingly tolerant in response to abstract questions about the religion and its adherents, but appearing much more antagonistic on questions of security and immigration.

⁵⁷ CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll. March 8-9, 2002. N=802 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 4. Cited by PollingReport.com.

⁵⁸ “Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11,” Gallup News Service - Poll Analyses, Sept. 28, 2001

⁵⁹ ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. Sept. 13, 2001. N=609 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 4. Cited by PollingReport.com; reported in “Anti-Muslim Violence Assailed,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 15, 2001, Pg. A09.

⁶⁰ ABC News Poll, Oct. 8-9, 2001. N=1,009 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 3. Field work by TNS Intersearch. Cited by PollingReport.com.

⁶¹ “‘We’—Not ‘Me’; Public opinion and the return of government,” *The American Prospect*, Dec. 17, 2001, Pg. 25

⁶² ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. Nov. 27, 2001. N=759 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 3.5 (total sample). Field work by TNS Intersearch. Cited by PollingReport.com.

⁶³ “Muslim nations, U.S. have opposite views,” *Gannett News Service*, March 4, 2002. Forty-two percent said Muslim immigration should be reduced, 16 percent say it should be ended completely. The March 1-3 poll by USA TODAY-CNN-Gallup Poll of 863 adults has a MoE \pm 4.

- ▶ Americans tend to have more positive views of Islam as a religion than their European counterparts, though both populations are fairly equally divided between positive and negative opinions.
- ▶ Both Americans and Europeans tend to make a distinction between the actions of some Muslims and the rest of the Muslim population.
- ▶ Fewer overtly hostile acts towards Muslims was reported in Europe than in America, with anti-Muslim suspicions in Europe taking the form of calls for special security measures and immigration restrictions.

Feelings toward Islam

Americans tend to have more positive views of Islam as a religion than their European counterparts. British polls show that a large majority is convinced that Islam “has a lot of fanatical followers,”⁶⁴ and 50 percent of French say the word “fanaticism” is the word that best describes their idea of Islam.⁶⁵ By comparison, only 38 percent of Americans say that Islam is a religion that encourages fanaticism.⁶⁶ Forty-three percent of Italians describe the Islamic religion as intolerant,⁶⁷ but only 22 percent of Americans think Islam is intolerant.⁶⁸

As is the case with Americans, however, large majorities of British also have positive things to say about Islam. Nearly two-thirds of Britons said they do not regard Islam as a threat to “western values.” About 75 percent believe Islam is “a strongly spiritual religion and opposed to materialism.”⁶⁹

If the lessons of American surveys apply, Britons’ mixed feelings about Islam may be related to their lack of familiarity with the religion. Eighty-three percent admitted knowing “only a little” or “nothing at all.” Only 17 percent claimed to know “a good deal” or “a fair amount” about the Islamic faith.⁷⁰ Americans, on the other

⁶⁴ “Britons’ views of Muslims unchanged after US attacks,” *The Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 12, 2001, Pg. 2. The newspaper did not specify the percentage.

⁶⁵ “French Muslims massively against attacks on US – poll,” *Agence France Presse*, Oct. 4, 2001

⁶⁶ <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=485>. The telephone survey was conducted September 15 - 16, 2001

⁶⁷ “Arabi, quattro Italiani su dieci non si fidano,” *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 29, 2001, Pg. 9

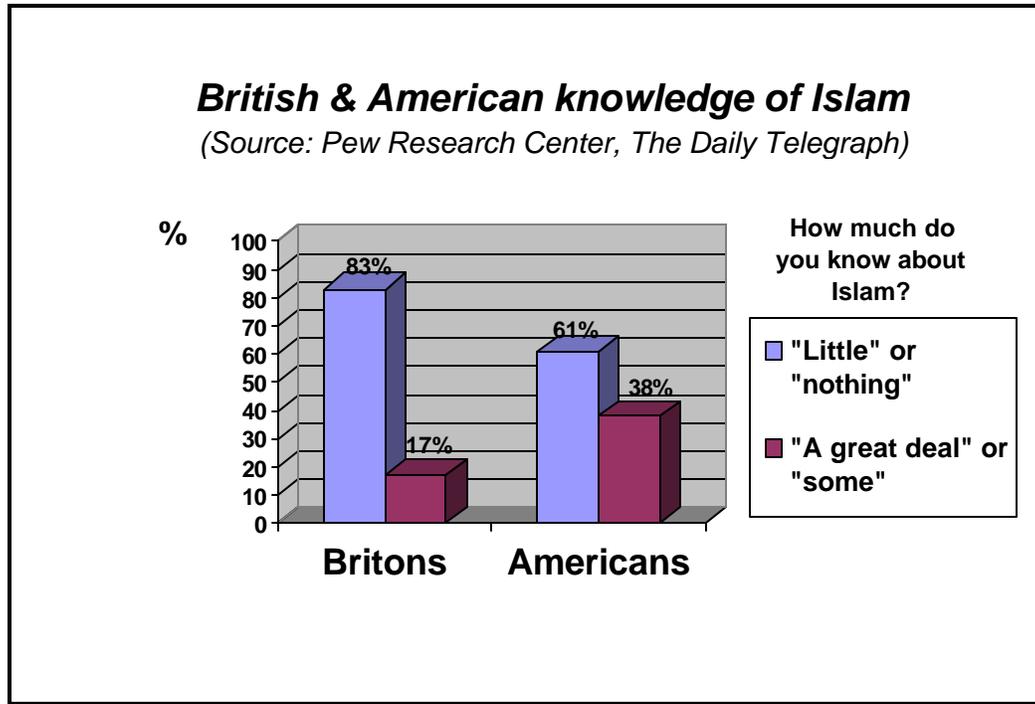
⁶⁸ “Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted.” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 6, 2001. <http://www.people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=8>

⁶⁹ *The Guardian* (London), October 12, 2001, Pg. 4

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

hand, claim to know more, with 38 percent saying they know “some” or “a great deal.”⁷¹

Figure 5⁷²



Feelings toward Muslims

Perhaps understandably, more Americans than Britons reported a decline in their opinions of Muslims. While 65 percent of Americans reported they felt no more unfavorably toward “Arabs” than they had before Sept. 11,⁷³ 82 percent of Britons said their feelings towards Muslims had not worsened.⁷⁴ Only 13 percent said they now held a “less favorable” view of British Muslims than they did before September 11.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ "Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001

⁷² "Britons' views of Muslims unchanged after US attacks," *The Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 12, 2001, Pg. 2; "Post September 11 Attitudes: Religion more prominent; Muslim-Americans more accepted," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 6, 2001

⁷³ Time/CNN Poll conducted by Harris Interactive. Sept. 13, 2001. N=1,082 adults nationwide. MoE ± 3. Cited by PollingReport.com

⁷⁴ The value of this comparison is limited since the American poll asked about “Arabs,” where the British poll asked about Muslims. No American poll with a similar question referring specifically to a change in opinion of “Muslims” is available.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Both Americans and Europeans tend to make a distinction between the actions of some Muslims and the rest of the Muslim population, at least theoretically. Eighty-four percent of Americans surveyed considered the US to be at war with only “a small group of terrorists who may be Muslim.”⁷⁶ A post-9/11 survey of Europeans asked whether they agreed with the statement that “terrorists do not act like real Muslims,” and a majority in all European Union countries agreed. The least convinced were the Greeks, of whom only slightly more than half agreed; the most convinced were the British, with nearly 80 percent making a distinction between Muslims in general and the attackers.⁷⁷ In a separate survey of Britain, almost 90 percent of respondents said most British Muslims were not linked to the attacks in any way and thought it “unfair” to make such a connection.⁷⁸

Unfairness and hostility

Anti-Muslim incidents were much less widely reported in Europe than in the United States. Two weeks after the attacks in New York and Washington, Arab shopkeepers in Paris said they had not noted any rise in racist reactions.⁷⁹ In contrast, CAIR had reporting 625 anti-Muslim incidents in America by that time.⁸⁰ At the same time, like in the US, non-Muslim women in England joined in “Scarves for Solidarity” events, wearing hijabs to show solidarity for Muslim women.⁸¹

France, not usually seen as particularly tolerant of Muslims, has even showed some positive signs since Sept. 11. An October study by *Le Monde* concluded that fewer French people object to the building of mosques or the election of Muslim mayors. “There has been an improvement in the extent to which French society accepts Islam,” the publication said.⁸²

⁷⁶ <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=485>. The telephone survey was conducted September 15 - 16, 2001

⁷⁷ “Blair wins plaudits for anti-terror stance,” *Press Association*, Dec. 4, 2001

⁷⁸ “Britons' views of Muslims unchanged after US attacks,” *The Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 12, 2001, Pg. 2

⁷⁹ “French hold suspected Bin Ladin associates,” *Sunday Business Post*, Sept. 30, 2001

⁸⁰ “Advocates say reports of hate crimes slowing, some considering legal action,” *Associated Press*, Sept. 29, 2001

⁸¹ “Non-Muslim women wear head scarves to show support,” *Associated Press*, Oct. 18, 2001

Muslims a suspected security risk

While about 40 percent of Americans say they are more suspicious of Muslims,⁸³ substantial numbers of Europeans are also increasingly suspicious of Muslims and feel that their presence in their countries is a security risk. For example, a late October poll of almost 5,000 Italians showed that about one-third of Italians have grown more suspicious of Muslims since Sept. 11. Only 27 percent said their level of mistrust had not changed as a result of the attacks.⁸⁴

As in the United States, very large majorities in European countries support security measures that would target Muslims, especially with regard to law enforcement and immigration. Public opinion polls show that the majority of Germans support Interior Minister Otto Schily's extensive crackdown on Islamic organizations. "The dimension of this Islamic threat was much bigger than we presumed," Schily has said.⁸⁵

The decision by some European countries to link immigration and anti-terrorism measures has created "an atmosphere of insecurity and intolerance, especially in cases where Muslims are presented as an 'internal security threat,'" states a report on Sept. 11's impact on the European Union by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia.⁸⁶

This trend can be noticed in several countries across Europe. In traditionally liberal Holland, forty-six per cent of the 18- to 30-year-olds polled said they favored zero Muslim immigration.⁸⁷ A quarter of Italians surveyed said that they believed that Muslim immigrants should be expelled from the country, and about ten percent said that Italy should accept only Christian immigrants and reject Muslim immigrants.⁸⁸ Opinion polls show that increasing numbers of the citizens of Denmark worry that their communities harbor terrorists.⁸⁹ The leader of the Danish People's Party, Denmark's third-largest party, says "it's a problem in a Christian country to have too

⁸² "Plus Pratiquants, les Musulmans de France sont aussi mieux integers," *Le Monde*, Oct. 5, 2001, Pg. 10

⁸³ Several polls showed this, for example: "Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11," Gallup News Service - Poll Analyses, Sept. 28, 2001

⁸⁴ "Arabi, quattro Italiani su dieci non si fidano," *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 29, 2001, Pg. 9

⁸⁵ "German Security Guru Shrugs Off Leftist Past," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 2002, Pg. A14

⁸⁶ "A Turn From Tolerance," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2002; Pg. A1

⁸⁷ "Dutch youth back far-right immigration policy," *The Guardian*, Feb. 23, 2002

⁸⁸ "Arabi, quattro Italiani su dieci non si fidano," *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 29, 2001, Pg. 9

⁸⁹ "A Turn From Tolerance," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2002; Pg. A1

many Muslims.”⁹⁰ By comparison, Americans seem almost equally unenthusiastic about having more Muslims in their country, with about 60 percent say Muslim immigration should be reduced or ended completely.⁹¹

⁹⁰ "The twilight of the left," *New Statesman*, Jan. 21, 2002

⁹¹ "Muslim nations, U.S. have opposite views," *Gannett News Service*, March 4, 2002. Forty-two percent said Muslim immigration should be reduced, 16 percent say it should be ended completely. The March 1-3 poll by USA TODAY-CNN-Gallup Poll of 863 adults has a MoE ± 4 .

IV. Impact on conversions

There have been no formal, scientific polls of mosques to determine whether a reported increase in conversions actually exists. What is certain is that several mosques across America and Europe have reported a sharp increase in the rate of conversion to Islam since Sept. 11. The reasons for this are often unique to the individual convert, but general patterns emerge in interviews with them that suggest some common threads in their motivation.

Anecdotal evidence of increase in conversions

A wealth of anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an increase in the rate of conversions to Islam since September 11, in both America and Europe. “The September 11 terrorist attacks on America, paradoxically, have swelled the numbers of Westerners converting to Islam,” Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* reports.⁹² Canada’s *National Post* writes of “a curious trend: a surge in conversions since Sept. 11 both in the United States and in Europe.”⁹³

Many Muslim leaders, while certain that interest in Islam is high, are hesitant to predict how conversions have been affected, and there have been no formal surveys done to gauge the phenomenon. However, the media has reported on several cases as evidence of an increased rate of conversions.

Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Masjid al-Taqwah in Brooklyn, New York, says his mosque’s rate of conversion has increased. The Islamic Center of Connecticut reports such a significant number of new converts since September 11 that it plans to launch new programs to accommodate the increased demand. Masjid Muhammad mosque in New Haven, Connecticut reports a recent rise in converts.⁹⁴ Some mosques, especially on America’s East Coast, report up to four times the average number of converts, many of them women.⁹⁵ The *Seattle Times* reported on a Muslim women’s study

⁹² “My dad buys me books about Islam,” *Sunday Telegraph Group*, December 30, 2001, Pg. 9

⁹³ “New Muslims,” *National Post*, Jan. 19, 2002

⁹⁴ “Walker’s odd odyssey a search for pure faith,” *The Hartford Courant*, Dec. 30, 2001, Pg. 2

⁹⁵ “Islam is attracting more female converts in the United States.” *The Houston Chronicle*, Jan. 12, 2002, Pg. 4

group in Bellevue, Washington, whose members include “many” converts since Sept. 11, including three who converted in the past few weeks.⁹⁶

In Europe, there is evidence that conversions are on the increase. The New Muslims Project, based in Leicester, England and run by a former Irish Roman Catholic housewife, reports a “steady stream” of new converts. One Manchester mosque has reported 16 conversions in the past few weeks alone.⁹⁷ An Islamic center in Holland claims a tenfold increase.⁹⁸

Reasons for increased conversions

The apparent increase in rate of conversion to Islam is the result of America’s increased familiarity with the religion, an attraction for some to Islam’s controversial image, a widespread feeling of sympathy that prompts many to search for the true Islam beyond the poor public image, and the tendency for crises such as the Sept. 11 attacks to prompt those who have already decided to convert to Islam to publicly declare their conviction to do so.

Growing Awareness, Growing Interest

The events of recent months have necessitated that Americans become more aware of Islam; it is impossible to leave a television on or read a newspaper and not be exposed to the religion or its members in some way. In a February poll by CBS, more than half of the public said they now know more about Islam than they did before September.⁹⁹ The apparent jump in conversions is part of the same phenomenon as the generally positive public opinion shift on Islam and Muslims, attributable to the average American’s increased familiarity with the religion.

This awareness is not just passive: Americans are actively seeking out information. In a December poll, 37 percent of Americans said they were more interested in Islam than they were before the attacks, with only 5 percent saying they were less interested.¹⁰⁰ *Publishers Weekly* reports that before Sept. 11, none of the top 1,000 religion books on Amazon.com dealt with Islam. By October, four of the top 10

⁹⁶ “Islam is attracting more female converts in the United States.” *The Houston Chronicle*, Jan. 12, 2002, Pg. 4

⁹⁷ “My dad buys me books about Islam,” *Sunday Telegraph Group*, December 30, 2001, Pg. 9

⁹⁸ “Allah came knocking at my heart,” *The Times*, Jan. 7, 2002

⁹⁹ “Poll: Americans Feel Safer,” CBS News website, Feb. 28, 2002

¹⁰⁰ Harris Study No. 15271, Harris Interactive, Inc., Dec. 5, 2001. National sample of 992 persons 18 or older.

titles in religion dealt in part or entirely with Islam. In the month following the attacks, 23 percent of Internet users were searching for information about Islam, according to a December survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The Middle East Institute in Washington, DC reports that applications for Arabic courses had doubled by October.¹⁰¹

Islamic centers around the country report a considerable increase in the amount of inquiries about Islam,¹⁰² and at the same time are engaging in an active, coordinated national outreach campaign. Several open houses at the Islamic Society of Boston attracted so many people they spilled over into the parking lot,¹⁰³ a familiar scene in dozens of communities around the country.¹⁰⁴ The Embassy of Saudi Arabia mailed packages of information about Islam to schools around the country.¹⁰⁵

The resulting increased awareness leads to more conversions simply by increasing the pool of potential converts. And, as recent polls cited in this paper indicate, that familiarity with Islam very often leads to positive views toward the religion¹⁰⁶—another necessary ingredient on the road to conversion.

Indeed, a study of recent history reveals a pattern of increased rates of conversion following “crises” involving Muslims. Similar surges followed the outbreak of the Gulf War (during which 5,000 Americans were said to have converted), the Bosnian conflict and Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie.¹⁰⁷ As even Daniel Pipes, a well-known Zionist commentator and harsh critic of Islam, wrote in February: “In my observation, exposure to Islam—even an Islam presented negatively—does win it new converts.”¹⁰⁸

Although they often come to learn about Islam under less than ideal circumstances, many Americans have shown an exceptional ability to differentiate between the message of Islam and the Muslims whose actions initially brought the religion to their attention.

¹⁰¹ “America the sensible” *The Economist*, Oct. 2001

¹⁰² For example, see *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Dec. 11, 2001, Pg. C14

¹⁰³ “New Muslims,” *National Post*, Jan. 19, 2002

¹⁰⁴ The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is in the process of conducting a survey to determine the level of success of their nationwide mosque open house campaign, of which the Boston events were a part.

¹⁰⁵ “Suspicious Saudi packages send educators scurrying” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 25, 2002

¹⁰⁶ See the section “*Feelings about Islam: familiarity breeds goodwill*” in this paper.

¹⁰⁷ “Allah came knocking at my heart,” *The Times*, Jan. 7, 2002

¹⁰⁸ “Islam here,” *Commentary*, February 2002

Andrea Useem, a 28-year-old journalist, converted to Islam while covering the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, which also were attributed to Usama bin Ladin. When she began interviewing prominent Muslim leaders, she learned enough about the religion to become convinced it was for her. She now leads a women's Islamic study circle that includes at least six who converted after the Sept. 11 attacks. "I converted in spite of [Bin Ladin], not because of him," she says.¹⁰⁹

Attracted to Controversy

For some, it is not just awareness of Islam that attracts but Islam's controversial image. Luis Alejandro, a Puerto Rican New Yorker, explains: "The more controversial something is, the more people it attracts. But attraction is just the first step. After that, you have to believe, and the message of Islam is so simple, without any of the Holy Trinity mysteries." Alejandro says that every week, someone converts at his Long Island mosque.¹¹⁰

The controversial image holds an attraction not only in a youth culture that values rebellion but in the academic world as well. Mohammed Siddique Saddon, 41, a convert and researcher at the Muslim Institute in Leicester, UK, says "There is resurgence. The constant de monization of Islam has awakened the Western inquisitive mind to ask what is so evil."¹¹¹

Sympathy

Another major factor in the rise in the rate of conversion appears to be a widespread feeling of sympathy that arises from a sense that Islam unjustly suffers from an image problem due to stereotyping and high-profile un-Islamic characters. "Has anything in American history done as much for Islam as the suicide hijackings of September 11?" writes one reader of a right-wing Jewish journal, angry about the phenomenon. "Large numbers of Americans, thanks to the strenuous efforts of civil libertarians and universities, now believe that it is Islam itself and not the thousands of people massacred by Islamists that is the aggrieved party."¹¹² It is this effort by a

¹⁰⁹ "New Muslims," *National Post*, Jan. 19, 2002

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ "My dad buys me books about Islam," *Sunday Telegraph Group*, December 30, 2001, Pg. 9

¹¹² "Islam here," *Commentary*, February 2002

segment of academics, commentators, and ordinary people to search beyond the poor public image that leads some to discover Islam.

“Since Sept. 11, a lot of people have gone out and started reading about Islam,” said Sharifa Alkhateeb, president of the North American Council for Muslim Women in Great Falls, Va. “(And) quite a lot of women . . . reached out to Muslims just as concerned citizens. I think these events made them feel more closeness toward Muslim women.”¹¹³

One woman, a student at the University of Massachusetts, relates that after Sept. 11, she felt a “lingering sadness for Islam.” She wrote a note of sympathy and slipped it under the door of the Islamic students' group. Less than a month later, she converted to Islam at Islamic Society of Boston.¹¹⁴

Already on their way

It might seem that a terrorist attack associated with Islam would discourage someone who might have been considering converting. But evidence shows that another way in which a crisis such as the Sept. 11 attacks can affect conversion rates is by prompting those who have not yet had publicly to declare their conviction to do so. The events “served as a kind of a catalyst...propelling them forward on a long and sometimes hesitant spiritual journey toward conversion,” writes the *National Post* about a group of American women converts.

One woman says: “Instead of running away, I felt myself running toward Islam. My heart had already opened to the religion and I knew that what had happened [in New York and Washington] was not Islam at all.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ “Islam is attracting more female converts in the United States.” *The Houston Chronicle*, Jan. 12, 2002, Pg. 4

¹¹⁴ “New Muslims,” *National Post*, Jan. 19, 2002

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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