

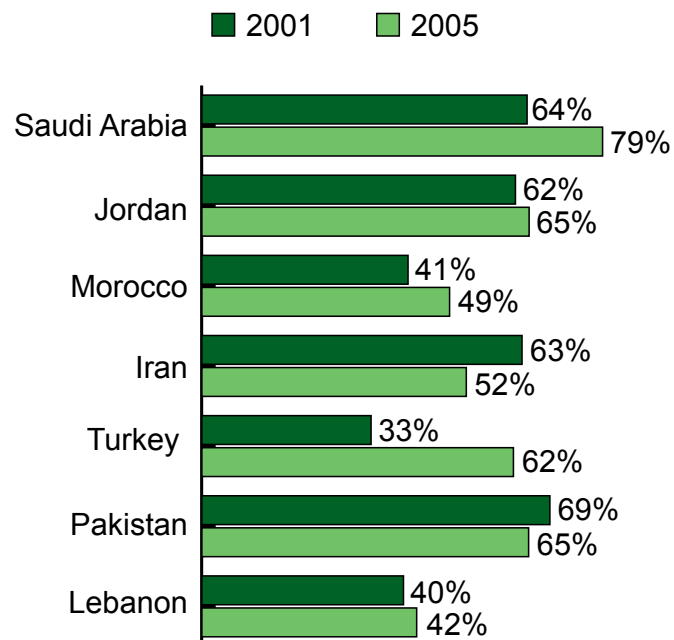
## Muslims and Americans: The Way Forward

by Dalia Mogahed, Executive Director, The Gallup Center for Muslim Studies

Relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world have been strained for some time, yet many residents of these nations are concerned about this issue and offer their views on what can be done about it.

Relations between Muslims and Americans have deteriorated since 2001, resulting in increasingly unfavorable opinion of the United States in many predominantly Muslim nations. Similarly, a recent Gallup Poll in the United States found that anti-Muslim sentiment is fairly common; 39% of Americans admit to feeling at least some prejudice toward Muslims. This growing polarization has led many in the West to believe that Muslims do not admire Western values or culture and have little interest in improving relations. At the same time, Muslims feel humiliated and assume the Western world is trying to impose its principles both on their faith and through government policies inside their own countries.

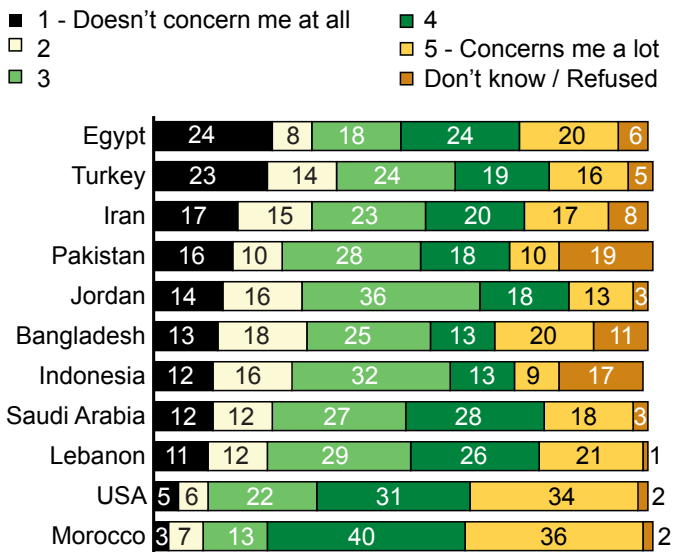
Percentage Unfavorable View of the United States



# Special Report: Muslim World

However, results from recent Gallup surveys, conducted in 2005 in 10 predominantly Muslim countries and in 2006 in the United States, found that the increasing divide has little to do with an irreconcilable conflict between “Islam and the West.” Despite recent global events, majorities on both sides care about improving relations and actually have similar views on some issues. Only a minority of Americans — 11% — say reaching a better understanding between Western and Muslim cultures is a low-level concern for them. Among citizens in the Muslim countries surveyed, the data show only a minority say improved relations do not concern them much or at all, ranging from only 10% in Morocco to 37% in Turkey. In some cases, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Lebanon, those respondents who expressed concern outnumbered those who did not by a margin of 2 to 1.

*Level of Concern for Better Understanding Between Western and Arab/Islamic Cultures*



These data contradict the American perception that Muslims are not concerned about better relations with the West. In fact, 58% of Americans believe Muslims do not care about improving relations. The data also dispel notions among citizens of Muslim countries that the West has little concern for narrowing the divide.

## The Fallacy Behind “Why Do They Hate Us?”

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, it became conventional wisdom among Americans that Muslims envy the Western world for its technological and economic superiority and despise Western democracy, freedom, and human rights. Within this conventional wisdom, which is still believed today, is also the assumption that many Muslims — not just the militant fringe — have negative attitudes toward Westerners in general, not only the policies of some Western governments.

However, Gallup surveys contradict this conventional wisdom. The data provide surprising evidence that, while Muslims have negative attitudes toward Western foreign policies, their attitudes toward the West are more positive. When Muslims were asked what they admired most about the West, only 2% in Iran, 6% in Saudi Arabia, and 10% in Egypt said “nothing.” When Americans were asked the same question about the Muslim world, 32% of respondents said “nothing.”

## Common Values Among Muslims and Americans

Americans and Muslims share common values, such as a high regard for liberty and equality. The most frequent response among Americans — a near majority of 48%

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— when asked what they admire most about Western culture is “fair political system, respect for human values, liberty, and equality.” This same response is also given by a significant number of citizens in the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed: 23% of Jordanians; 22% of Saudi Arabians and Iranians; 37% of Moroccans; 40% of Lebanese. Therefore, what many Muslims admire most about Western societies are values Americans also admire.

Perhaps even more startling, large percentages in most of the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed associate the idea of liberty with the United States more than they do other Western democracies, such as Britain, France, and Germany. For example, 68% of Iranians say citizens of the United States enjoy many liberties, compared with only 39% who say the same about Britain, 36% about France, and 24% about Germany.

Just as there are commonalities between Americans and Muslims regarding what they like about the West, they also share views about what they do not like. Citizens of predominantly Muslim countries and Americans are critical of a perceived “moral and ethical corruption” in the West, as well as excessive personal freedom. These responses reflect both societies’ religious sensibilities — 68% of Americans say religion is an important part of their lives, as do majorities in the predominantly Muslim nations surveyed, ranging from 74% in Iran to 98% in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

## Ways to Bridge the Gap

While Muslims and Americans have similar views on some issues, they voiced diverse remedies for bridging the gap. When asked an open-ended question, “What can the Muslim world do to improve relations?” both Americans and citizens in the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed mentioned reducing extremism. U.S. respondents mentioned this was something both the Muslim world and the West could do to improve relations, while those in the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed only mentioned it as a responsibility of the Muslim world. And while some Muslims recommended that their co-religionists “better understand the West,” and “respect the West better,” and “demonstrate more flexible attitudes toward the West,” some Americans offered other remedies. They did not feel that the U.S. government should make policy changes toward Muslim countries; instead, they characterized the rift as one of mutual cultural misunderstanding.

Muslims voiced a consistent theme that has appeared frequently in recent Gallup surveys — their desire for the West to “respect Islam” and stop interfering in the internal affairs of predominantly Muslim states.

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