

The American Public on the Islamic World

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Comments By PIPA Director Steven Kull at the Conference on US-Islamic World Relations

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DOHA, Qatar—When Americans look at events in the Middle East, they do not have a clear and simple response. The extent of conflict and instability they see bewilders them. Among all the competing groups, they do not see a side they identify with. And they are not inclined to take sides. They are not even sure it is a good idea for the US to be deeply involved—not because they do not care, but because they are not sure there is anything the US can do that would do much good.

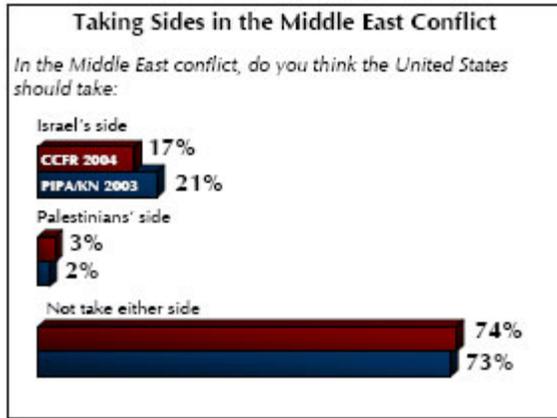
At the same time, the experience of 9/11 has stirred them. They do see a threat emanating from the region. And if they saw a clear target for reducing the threat of terrorism, they might support going after it.

But they are very reluctant to act unilaterally. They think the US tends to play the role of world policeman more than it should, in general and in the Middle East. [1]

In the run-up to the Iraq war, though they believed that Iraq posed a threat, they resisted the idea of the US acting on its own. They did not think the US really had the right to intervene without UN approval—though when the President did act, a majority closed ranks behind him, as they often do.

They did not expect to be greeted as liberators in Iraq. And they are not surprised by the difficulties and conflicts the US now encounters. On balance, a modest majority thinks the costs of the intervention have outweighed the benefits. In a recent poll, 53% said they thought the war had not been worth fighting. [2]

They are very much looking forward to getting out of Iraq, but only 27% think that the US can pull out immediately. [3] However, if the new Iraqi government asks the US to withdraw, 73% say that the US should do so. [4] Two-thirds say they oppose the US having permanent military bases in Iraq. [5]

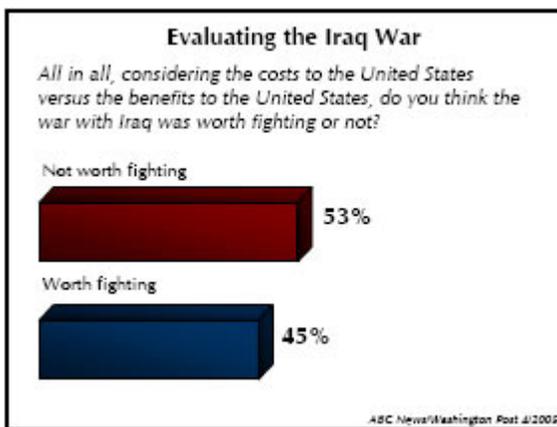


They are willing to accept whatever government the Iraqi people elect. Approximately three-quarters say the US should accept an elected government that is unfriendly to the US or dominated by Islamic fundamentalists. [6]

When it comes to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Americans are once again bewildered. They are not sure what the US can or should do. The most popular principle is that the US should be even-handed in dealing with the parties. In a poll question that has been asked repeatedly for years now, about 7 in 10 consistently say that the US should not take sides. Only about 2 in 10 say the US should take Israel's side. At the same time, 57% say that this is not happening, that the US does favor Israel. [7]

When asked to choose which side they feel more sympathy for, more say the Israelis than the Palestinians. For example, in a recent poll 40% said they sympathized with the Israelis, 13% the Palestinians. But what is more interesting is that 47% refused to answer the question. [8]

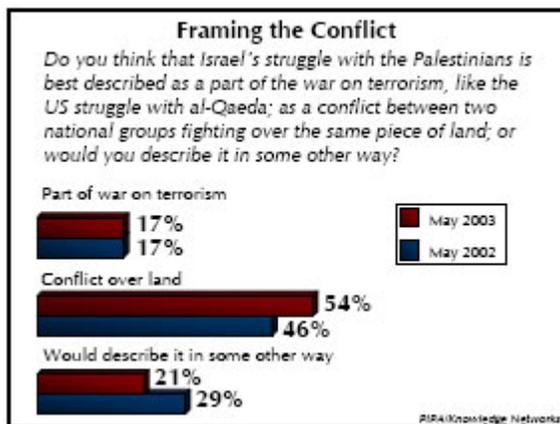
And when the question gives them opportunity to be evenhanded, clear majorities go for that position. For example, asked who they blame for the conflict, only 24% said they blamed the Palestinians more, 6% said the Israelis, while 65% said they blamed both sides equally. [9]



Some have tried to elicit support for Israel by framing Israel's conflict with the Palestinians as part of the war on terror. However, this does not go over well with the public. When asked how they would characterize the conflict, only 17% said that they saw it as part of the war on terror. Fifty-four percent saw it as simply a conflict between two groups, while 21% described it some other way. [10]

Consistent with this desire to be evenhanded, majorities express a readiness to put pressure on Israel as well as the Palestinians. In a poll taken at the time the road map plan first came out, asked what the US should do if Israel does not take the steps called for in the road map, 65% favored holding back military aid, 63% favored holding back economic aid, 60% favored holding back spare parts for advanced weapons, and 53% favored no longer vetoing UN resolutions that criticize Israel. [11]

Likewise, when asked what the US should do if the Palestinians refuse to take the steps in the road map, 74% favored holding back economic aid, 62% favored pressuring other countries to stop aiding the Palestinians, and 53% favored telling the Palestinian leadership they will no longer deal with them.



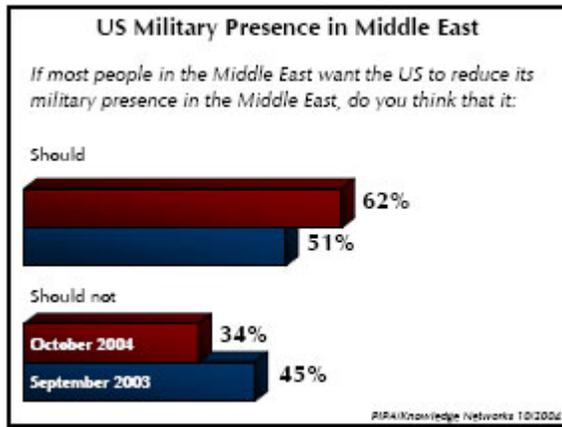
Furthermore, 60% favored putting pressure on the Arab states to do their part in the road map. A follow up question asked about putting pressure on the Arab states that provide oil to the US, such as Saudi Arabia, and 56% still said the US should do so. [12]

However, at the same time Americans show very little confidence that such US efforts will make much of a difference. They do not perceive either side as very motivated to take the necessary steps and express pessimism that the parties will ever reach agreement. The idea of the US taking a major initiative, spelling out the terms of a final agreement and imposing it on the parties is only endorsed by 38%. [13]

Even with the recent positive developments, there is little enthusiasm for a renewed US initiative. In a poll conducted just a few months ago, 64% rejected the idea of stepping up US efforts. [14]

The kind of approach Americans like the most is one that involves other countries, even if that means that the US will have less control. For example, in a poll question that asked

about the US working through the quartet (the US, Russia, the EU and the UN), only one in four endorsed the argument that “this is a bad thing, because the US will not have as much control over the process, leading to pressures on the US to make compromises that could be harmful to Israel.” Rather, 64% endorsed the argument that working through the quartet “is a good thing, because it means that the US will not have to bear all of the political and economic costs on its own, and that with the help of others, success is more likely.” [15]

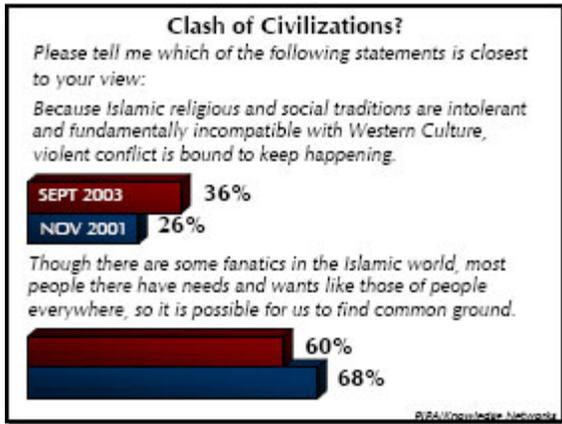


Now turning to US military presence in the Middle East, Americans show uncertainty about whether the US should have any military presence there. Even before it was proposed in 2003, two out of three Americans favored the US pulling its military forces out of Saudi Arabia. [16]

Americans are very responsive to the idea that the US should not be in the region if it is not welcome. In a poll conducted last October, 62% said that if the majority of the people in the Middle East want the US to remove its military forces, then the US should do so.

And even without such pressure, 64% say that over the next 5-10 years the US should reduce its military presence in the region. [17]

Americans do see oil as critical to the US economy. And under some circumstances a modest majority says they would consider using force to ensure access to oil. [18] But it is hard to convince them that this means it is necessary for the US to be involved militarily in the Middle East. Even in the run-up to the first Gulf War, the argument that the war was necessary to preserve US access to oil was not persuasive to the public. The argument that did persuade them was that Iraq had violated the international law against cross-border aggression.



Consistent with this general hands-off posture, Americans are not very responsive to the idea of pressing democracy on the region. Asked whether the US should “put greater pressure on countries in the Middle East, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to become more democratic,” 57% said that it should not. [19]

In closing, I will say a few words about how Americans feel about Islam per se, Americans once again show complex and somewhat uncertain views. There is some wariness. Two-thirds perceive that in the Islamic world attitudes toward the US have gotten worse. [20] A growing number—most recently a plurality of 46%—say that Islam does not teach respect for the beliefs of non-Muslims. [21] And a plurality of 46% says that the Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers. [22]

But asked how they feel about Islam per se they lean in the positive direction, though not by much. [23] When asked about Muslims as people, views are somewhat warmer. Less than a third say they have an unfavorable view of Muslims, while about half say they have a favorable view. [24]

Asked if Muslims can go to heaven only 12% said they cannot, 50% said they can and 24% said they do not believe in heaven. [25] It would be interesting to find out how Muslims would respond to such a question about Christians.

But perhaps not importantly, Americans reject the idea that there is an inevitable clash of civilizations between Islam and the US. Remember that the belief that people of different cultures can get along is a cornerstone of American culture. A recent poll presented the argument that,

“Because Islamic religious and social traditions are intolerant and fundamentally incompatible with Western Culture, violent conflict is bound to keep happening” — but only 36% agreed.

Rather, 60% agreed with a statement that is one that probably most here would also agree with, and will end my remarks.

“Though there are some fanatics in the Islamic world, most people there have needs and wants like those of people everywhere, so it is possible for us to find common ground.”
[26]

1. PIPA/KN, Sept. 2003.
2. ABC News/Washington Post, Mar. 10-13, 2005.
3. PIPA/KN, Dec. 2004.
4. Ibid.
5. PIPA/KN, Oct. 2004.
6. PIPA/KN, Nov. 2003.
7. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Jul. 2004; PIPA/KN, May 2003.
8. Pew Research Center, July 2004.
9. PIPA/KN, May 2003.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. See note 3.
15. See note 9.
16. PIPA/KN April 2003.
17. PIPA/KN Sept. 2003.
18. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, July 2004.
19. See note 6.
20. See note 17.
21. ABC News, Sept. 2003.
22. Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, July 2004.
23. Ibid.
24. Pew Research Center, Feb. 2004.
25. Newsweek, May 2004.
26. PIPA/KN, Sept. 2003.