

Ordinary Muslims

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

Muslims: Values and Culture

Since the attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, Muslims are talked about as a security risk. Governments work to seal borders and restrict visas while public debate focuses on the latest rhetoric from the vocal extremists capturing the headlines. As a result, the voices of the people — the 1.3 billion ordinary Muslims around the world — have been lost.

Gallup, in its mission to “help people be heard” surveyed the silent majority of Muslims in nine countries in 2001 and 10 countries in 2005 and 2006. The results shed light on the key characteristics of Muslim populations: Who are they? What do they value? What are their hopes and dreams? How different are they from Americans?

Muslims and Americans: Do They Have Common Values?

Conventional wisdom says that Muslims resent the freedom the West has to offer, and that this indicates there is an insurmountable cultural chasm between Western and Muslim societies.

However, Gallup data suggest that there are many similarities between Muslims and Americans that transcend culture, tradition, and religion. Strikingly, citizens of predominantly Muslim countries and Americans, for example, are critical of “moral and ethical corruption” and excessive personal freedom.

Americans and Muslims also are in agreement regarding what they admire about Western societies. The most frequent response among Americans — a near majority of 48% — when asked what they admire most about Western culture is “fair political system, respect for human values, liberty, and equality.” The response to the same question is given by a significant minority of those in predominantly Muslim countries — 23% of Jordanians; 22% of Saudi Arabians and Iranians; 37% of Moroccans, and 40% of Lebanese.

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Large percentages of Muslim populations associate the phrase, “own citizens enjoy many liberties,” with the United States in particular, as opposed to other Western democracies such as Britain, France, and Germany. Sixty-eight percent of Iranians say this about citizens of the United States versus only 39% who say the same about Britain, 36% about France, and 24% about Germany.

Deep Spiritual Commitment

Gallup surveys also paint a picture of Muslims as people who value faith, family, and a bright future. In this way they are not dissimilar to Americans. Gallup polling suggests that, on some issues, Americans’ views are closer to those of Muslims than Western Europeans. For example, a question measuring the purposefulness of life reveals a surprising pattern: 94% of Americans believe their lives have an important purpose. This compares with only 68% of French citizens and 69% in the Netherlands. On the other hand, 96% of Indonesians express this sentiment, as do 91% of Saudi Arabians.

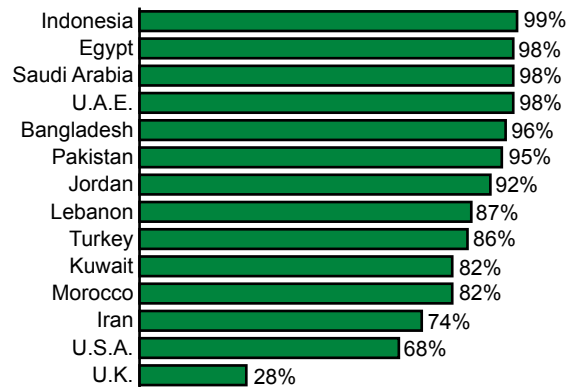
Another question measuring optimism produced similar results. When asked if they feel enthusiastic about their future, 86% of Americans answer in the affirmative, compared with only 69% of French citizens and a surprising 36% of Polish respondents. In contrast, 89% of Saudis and 84% of Jordanians agree.

The inner happiness among Muslims could be based in a strong faith and emphasis on maintaining a deep spiritual life. According to polls in 2001 and again in 2005 and 2006, Muslims in many of the countries surveyed rate “having an enriched religious spiritual life” as something they cannot live without. What’s more, when asked what they admire most about the Muslim world, Muslim

populations’ No. 1 response is “people’s sincere adherence to Islam.” In many countries, majorities say religion is an important part of their daily lives.

Importance of Religion in Daily Life

Is religion an important part of your daily life?



Muslims and Americans Enjoy a Dynamic Life

Despite common perceptions that Muslims are destined to lead rigid lives dictated by a strict faith, Gallup analysts have uncovered a different reality. When assessing the emotional well-being of the world’s populations, Gallup found that majorities in many predominantly Muslim countries as well as the United States report experiencing enjoyment, smiling and laughing, and enjoying good-tasting food.

This may not surprise those who have traveled in many parts of the Muslim world. Egyptian comedies, produced in Cairo, the Hollywood of the Middle East, have been shown throughout the Arab world. Similarly, Beirut is historically known for producing legendary vocalists who in life and death play a prominent role in Arab culture. In some cases, their popularity has reached Western capitals, from London to New York and Paris.

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When Gallup asked citizens around the globe if they have “a lot of love” in their lives, the results again showed similarities between Muslims and Americans. Ninety-four percent of Americans say they do as well as 96% of Lebanese, 90% of Pakistanis, 95% of Egyptians, and 92% of Saudi Arabians, but only 80% of Japanese.

Happiness and love likely stem from strong family bonds in Muslim societies. This bond is particularly apparent with regard to the role of the mother, considered in Islam to be the nucleus of life. Asked to define “motherhood,” respondents in the 2001 Gallup Poll offered statements such as “a gift of God, a source of everything.” It is common in Arab families for the mother to live with one of her sons and his wife and children, if her husband is deceased.

Contrary to popular perceptions that Muslims view life as a temporal experience, when surveyed about the present — not the afterlife — many Muslims express joy as well as excitement for a bright future. Even in countries where economic hardship and political oppression are rampant, Muslims appear hopeful; majorities in all predominantly Muslim countries surveyed say they are enthusiastic about their future.

When asked their wishes for the future, the most frequent response of Americans and Muslims was financial security: 16% of Americans hold this view and 29% of respondents in predominantly Muslim societies agree.

The second priority for Muslim respondents is acquiring a good education, especially for their children. For example, this percentage is particularly high in Egypt — home of one of the world’s oldest universities Al-Azhar, an Islamic

university founded in 988 and named after a woman — Fatima al-Zahra. Today, it is considered the top authority in Sunni Islam.¹

However, while al-Azhar remains the center of learning for Sunni Islam, Muslims are concerned that general university education in many countries, though readily available to men and women, needs improvement. For example, 32% of Saudis associate “a good educational system” with Muslim societies while 52% associate the same attribute to Western societies. In some cases, state-run institutions suffer from lack of funding, which inspires the best and the brightest to flee to attend Western institutions with more research opportunities. This emphasis on education is consistent with other Gallup Polls in which Muslims say they admire the technological advances in the West. While only 30% of Jordanians associate a scientifically and technologically bright future with the Muslim world, 77% associate “technologically advanced” with Western societies. Even though the sciences play a dominant role in their education, the perception among Muslims is that their academic and technical training lags behind.

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¹ <http://www.islamfortoday.com/alazhar.htm>



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