

Survey: Killing of bin Laden worsened Americans' views of US Muslims

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Instead of calming fears, the death of Osama bin Laden actually led more Americans to feel threatened by Muslims living in the United States, according to a new nationwide survey.

In the weeks following the U.S. military campaign that killed bin Laden, the head of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda, American attitudes toward Muslim Americans took a significant negative shift, results showed.

Americans found [Muslims](#) living in the United States more threatening after bin Laden's [death](#), positive perceptions of Muslims plummeted, and those surveyed were less likely to oppose restrictions on Muslim Americans' [civil liberties](#).

For example, in the weeks before bin Laden's death, nearly half of respondents described Muslim Americans as "trustworthy" and "peaceful." But only one-third of Americans agreed with these positive terms after the killing.

Most of the changes in attitude happened among political liberals and moderates, whose views shifted to become more like those of conservatives, the [survey](#) found.

The shift in views can be explained by the fact that bin Laden's death reminded some Americans of why they may fear Muslims in the first place, said Erik Nisbet, assistant professor of communication at Ohio

State University, and one of the leaders of the survey project.

"The death of bin Laden was a focusing event. There was a lot of news coverage and a lot of discussion about Islam and Muslims and Muslim Americans," Nisbet said.

"The frenzy of [media coverage](#) reminded people of terrorism and the Sept. 11 attacks and it primed them to think about Islam in terms of terrorism."

In fact, while prior to bin Laden's death only 16 percent of respondents believed a [terrorist attack](#) in the United States was likely in the next few months, 40 percent believed an attack was likely after the killing.

"That is going to have a negative effect on attitudes," Nisbet said.

The researchers' ability to find out how American attitudes changed after bin Laden's death was accidental, Nisbet said. Nisbet and Ohio State colleague Michelle Ortiz, also an assistant professor of communication, had commissioned the Survey Research Institute of Cornell University and the University of New Hampshire Survey Center to jointly conduct a national telephone poll of Americans beginning in early April. The survey focused on perceptions and attitudes about Muslim Americans.

Interviews started on April 7, 2011, and 500 interviews were conducted prior to May 1, when [bin Laden](#) was killed. The remaining 341 interviews were conducted following the death.

Many of the survey responses changed significantly after the killing, Nisbet said.

After bin Laden's death, 34 percent of Americans surveyed agreed that Muslims living in the United States "increased the likelihood of a

terrorist attack." That was up from 27 percent prior to the killing. The percentage of respondents agreeing the Muslims in the United States are supportive of the country dropped from 62 percent to 52 percent.

Americans were less likely to oppose restrictions on Muslim American civil liberties after the killing, Nisbet said. For example, public opposition to profiling individuals as potential terrorists based solely on being Muslim dropped from 71 percent to 63 percent. Likewise, opposition to requiring Muslims living in the United to register their whereabouts with the government dropped from two-thirds of respondents to about one-half.

Changes in attitudes were not related just to preventing a possible terrorist attack, but also included attitudes about religious tolerance of Muslims. For example, nearly one in three respondents surveyed after bin Laden's death agreed that "Muslims are mostly responsible for creating the religious tension that exists in the United States today." That was up from about one in five respondents before the killing. Correspondingly, opposition to a nationwide ban on mosque construction in the United States fell to 57 percent from 65 percent.

The negative feelings even carried over to personal relationships. The percentage of respondents who said they were unwilling to have a Muslim as a close friend doubled after the death, going from 9 percent to 20 percent.

"That's important because research has shown that the best way to reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations is through personal contact," Nisbet said. "That won't happen if people avoid contact with Muslim Americans."

Many of the changes in attitudes after Bin Laden's death were almost entirely due to political liberals and moderates changing their opinions

about the threat posed by Muslims in the United States, the survey found.

The percentage of liberal respondents who agreed that Muslims in the United States "make America a more dangerous place to live" tripled after bin Laden's death, going from 8 to 24 percent. The percentage of moderates believing this increased from 10 percent to 29 percent.

In contrast, the percentage of conservatives who believed this were essentially unchanged – 30 percent before bin Laden's death and 26 percent following.

"Liberals and moderates essentially converged toward conservatives in their attitudes about Muslim Americans," Nisbet said.

Nisbet said it is unclear whether these changes in attitudes would last long-term or not. But research suggests these negative feelings can be dangerous even if they are short-lived.

"Every time these anti-Muslim feelings are activated by media coverage, it makes them that much easier to get reactivated in the future," Nisbet said. "These feelings and attitudes become more constant the more you experience them."

The telephone survey involved adults in the continental [United States](#), including cell-phone only homes, and was designed to be representative of the U.S. population. All percentages reported here were adjusted to control for differences in the characteristics of survey respondents interviewed before and after bin Laden's death. The researchers controlled for age, gender, race, education, political ideology, whether the respondents were evangelical Christians, and their knowledge about Islam.

That means any differences in attitudes between respondents polled before and after the death are not the results of any difference on these personal attributes.

More information: A copy of the researchers' survey report is available here: www.eriknisbet.com/files/binladen_report.pdf

Provided by The Ohio State University

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