

World view of US betters; Israel, Iran low

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THINGS ARE LOOKING UP - U.S. President George W. Bush (front) and Laura Bush with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko in Kiev on April 1st. Things are looking up for the United States, if the latest check on global public opinion of the superpower is anything to go by. But Bush might not be able to claim credit for it. (ABACAPRESS.COM via Newscom)

AMMAN – The United States is perceived across the globe in a less negative light after four years of declining public opinion ratings, while the world continues to regard Iran and Israel as the most unfavorable countries of all, a BBC public opinion poll has revealed.

The BBC World Service Poll, released on Wednesday, surveyed 17,457 people in 34 countries. It showed that whereas the United States and its influence in the world remained largely negative, public perception of it improved slightly for the first time since the poll began in 2005.

Positive views of the United States progressively declined from 2005 to 2007, with 38% favorable in 2005, dropping to 32% (2006) and 28% (2007), and modestly gaining this year to 32%.

The negative opinion of U.S. influence, which in 2007 was 52% lessened this year to 47%.

U.S. foreign policy seems to have played a major role in the poll's findings, where Lebanon and Egypt gave American influence the highest negative ratings while Israel rated it very positively.

Lebanon's negative view of the United States worsened (58% in 2007 to 67% in 2008), matching Egypt's worsening negative rating of the U.S. (59% in 2007 to 73% in 2008).

Bucking that trend were a large majority of Israelis who expressed a positive opinion (68%), underscoring their satisfaction with Washington's support.

U.S. popularity among the Arab public has consistently declined under the presidency of George W. Bush, namely for its invasion and occupation of an Arab country, Iraq, and this U.S. administration is often described as one of the most pro-Israeli to take the helm of power since the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948.

Nevertheless, 11 of 23 countries have shown greater favor toward the United States, according to the BBC survey, conducted by the international GlobeScan polling firm and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.

Director of PIPA, Steven Kull, attributed the more positive outlook toward the United States to a general hope for change in policy with the upcoming U.S. presidential elections.

"It may be that as the U.S. approaches a new presidential election, views of the U.S. are being mitigated by hope that a new administration will move away from the foreign policies that have been so unpopular in the world," Kull said in a statement.

Iran, locked in a crisis with the West over its nuclear program, continued to remain at the top of the list of most unpopular countries, where negative views of its influence remained steady at 54%, while only 20% viewed it positively. The poll said 19 countries gave Iran a negative view, two gave it positive and three were divided.

The two countries that gave Iran positive ratings were again Egyptians (62% in 2008, up from 51% in 2007); and the United Arab Emirates (29% in 2007 to 38% in 2008). But in the UAE, which claims three islands occupied by Iran, there was an equivalent increase in negative views as well.

The largest majority showing an unfavorable opinion toward Iran was Israel, at 80%, followed by Spain at 77% and Japan with 65%.

Interestingly though, Iran's negative rating dropped in countries like the United States (63%, 2007; to 55%, 2008), France (86%, 2007; to 70%, 2008) and Canada (76%, 2007; to 67%, 2008).

Remarking on the results, GlobeScan president Dough Miller said in a statement that the poll "suggests that Iran continues to pay a price for its nuclear standoff with the United Nations."

The U.N. Security Council recently imposed a third set of economic sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, which Iran insists is only for peaceful energy purposes, but which the West fears would lead to the building of atomic weapons by the Islamic republic.

Israel came in a close second to Iran's unpopular image. Israel's global negative rating eased from 57% last year to 52%, but positive international perception remained stable at only 19%.

Not surprisingly, the Lebanese public gave Israel a 94% negative rating, up from 85% last year; while 87% of Egyptians viewed Israel negatively, up from 78% in 2007.

But the negative views of Israel by two Muslim countries, the UAE and Turkey, have lessened this year in the UAE (73%, 2007; to 58%, 2008). Turkey's positive rating for Israel went up (2%, 2007; to 11% 2008).

Americans polled showed an increasingly negative view of Israel's influence, up from 33% last year to 39% this year, while 43% of Americans polled favorably to the Jewish state.

Germany, rated for the first time in the BBC poll, got the highest positive ranking of all countries included in the survey this year: 56% said it has a positive influence and 18% gave it a negative rating, with not a single country giving it a majority negative rating.

Japan came in as second most popular, also with 56% approving its influence, but a slightly higher disapproval rating at 21%.

Russia could lay claim to the country showing the largest popularity increase (29%, 2007; to 37%, 2008) and negative attitudes lessening from 40% of people negative in 2007 to 33% in 2008.

The poll was conducted between Oct. 31, 2007 and Jan. 25, 2008, with an error margin of plus or minus 3.4 to 4.6 percent.