

Poll: Anti-Muslim sentiment grew after bin Laden death

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(RNS) Many Muslim Americans had hoped that the death of Osama bin Laden would improve their image among other Americans, but according to a new survey, just the opposite has happened.

Rather than being mollified, anti-Muslim sentiment has intensified since Navy Seals killed the al-Qaida leader in a May 1 raid in Pakistan, according to a new report by researchers from the Ohio State University School of Communication, Cornell University's Survey Research Institute, and the University of New Hampshire Survey Center.

In the weeks before bin Laden's death, nearly half of respondents described Muslim Americans as "trustworthy" and "peaceful," researchers said. After bin Laden's death, that figure dropped to one-third of respondents.

For Muslims, perhaps the most troublesome finding was that these negative shifts had occurred among political liberals and moderates, a constituency that had been seen as the most sympathetic to Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Conservatives have been the least likely group to support Muslims. Robert Jones, CEO of the Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute, noted last month that while overall favorable views about Muslims had dropped from 41 to 30 percent since 2005, most of that erosion of support was among conservatives.

Researchers attributed the rise in negative views about Muslims to wall-to-wall media coverage that accompanied bin Laden's death that focused on terrorism, bin Laden's religious views, and the role of

Muslim-majority Pakistan in sheltering bin Laden.

"The frenzy of media coverage reminded people of terrorism and the Sept. 11 attacks," Ohio State researcher Erik Nisbet said, "and it primed them to think about Islam in terms of terrorism."

Salam Al-Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a Muslim advocacy group in Los Angeles, agreed the media contributed to negative images of Muslims, but said Muslim Americans need to do a better job answering questions about their religion.

"The average American can't distinguish what Pakistan does from what the average American Muslim thinks," Al-Marayati said.

The poll was based on 500 interviews between April 7 and May 1 (when bin Laden was killed) and another 341 interviews between May 2 and May 24. The number of respondents who said Muslims living in America "increased the likelihood of a terrorist attack" rose from 27 percent before May 1 to 34 percent after.

The survey also said the number of respondents unwilling to have a Muslim as a close friend rose from 9 to 20 percent; people who agreed that Muslims are supportive of the United States declined from 62 to 52 percent; and the percentage of liberals who said Muslims made America more dangerous tripled, from 8 to 24 percent.