# Gallup Pakistan History Project's Weekend Read 34:

## Public Opinion on Pakistan's Relations with the United States of America: Some Trends from Gallup Pakistan History Project Polls Data by Abdullah Waqar Tajwar, Research Executive at Gallup Pakistan

Abstract: *The conclusions and interpretations presented in this article are predicated on the **empirical findings of four surveys carried out by Gallup Pakistan**. The first of these surveys was conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 1991 and was repeated in 2015 with the objective of empirically determining the change in opinions of Pakistanis regarding the level of trust they place in the American people. In the year 1991 (24 years ago), only 11% of Pakistanis said that they consider Americans trustworthy. 13% of the public expressed an indifference towards them whereas a majority of 60% did not consider Americans trustworthy. In 2015, a slightly higher percentage of respondents (18%) said that they trust the Americans. 17% of the people were indifferent while 56% said that they did not trust the Americans. In another survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 2006 for gauging public opinion about the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the US yielded the following empirical results. 37% of the respondents were of the view that these attacks had been orchestrated by US groups. Only 14% viewed the United Stated as a victim in these attacks while 54% considered the US to be the transgressor. The majority, standing at 77%, were convinced that these attacks had brought problems for the Muslims worldwide. 17% thought that they had been beneficial for the Muslims. Only 6% of the Pakistani people thought well of the US government and of the US. In a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan to gauge the views of Pakistanis on the death of Osama bin Laden, a representative sample was asked whether the American Operation against Osama bin Laden had resulted in a breach of Pakistan's sovereignty. It was found that More than two third Pakistanis (68%) believed the sovereignty of their country was severely compromised in the American Operation in Abbottabad against Osama Bin Laden, while 28% disagreed. In another survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, a nationally representative sample was asked, "Recently, with regards to the political situation in the country America has given a statement in favor of the current Pakistan government. In your personal opinion, should America give any statements about Pakistan's internal problems or not?" Responding to this question, 65% of the respondents said that America should not be giving statements about Pakistan's internal problems, 16% respondents said that America should give statements about Pakistan's problems and 19% did not respond.*
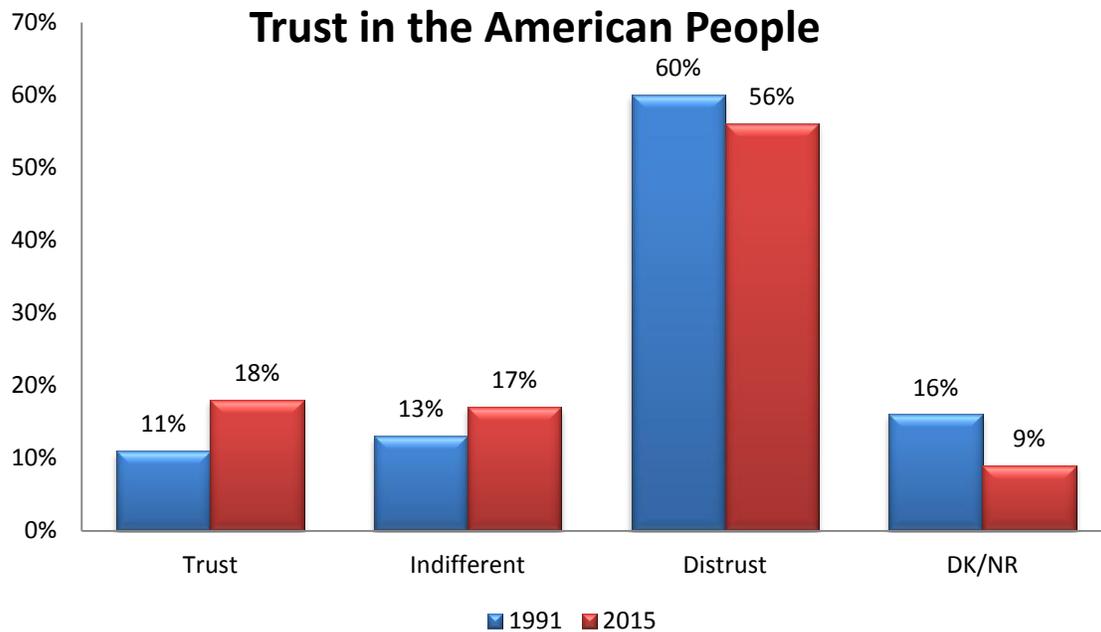
The nation state of Pakistan was born against the backdrop of the Second World War. As the once mighty European empires of Britain and France waned, a new world order emerged. An order dominated by the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). As more nation states gained independence, these two superpowers immediately began grappling for power and influence within newly emerging nation-states. Thus, very early on in Pakistan's existence, the nascent state was faced with a decision of either siding with the United States or putting faith in the USSR. Faced with this choice, Pakistan's then policy makers found the US to be a better option in comparison to the communist USSR which had already established cordial ties with India. Thus began the journey of Pakistan and United States' bilateral relations. Over the course of proceeding decades, this relationship would experience a number of highs and lows. Furthermore, the United States of America would end up having a profound impact on Pakistan's relationship with its neighboring country, India as well as Pakistan's political, social and economic fortunes. The remainder of this article, however, will focus on how the public of Pakistan has begun to view the United States of America and its people during the course of the last two and a half decades.

The Gallup Pakistan History Project utilizes Gallup Pakistan's vast repository of past public opinion polls and compares their results with the same polls and surveys conducted in the present day in order to assess and analyze the changes that have occurred in public opinion over the passage of time. With regards to the topic under discussion today, Gallup Pakistan conducted a survey in the year 1991 in which a representative sample of the Pakistani Public was asked the following question: **'Please tell us how much trust do you have in the people of America?'** This question was asked again in 2015 in order to observe the changes, if any, which had occurred over the course of over two decades. The results of the two surveys are shown in a table with the intent of elucidating the changes in opinion of the Pakistani public regarding the level of trust they place in their American counterparts.

## Trust in the American People



| | Trust | Indifferent | Distrust | DK/NR |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1991 | 11% | 13% | 60% | 16% |
| 2015 | 18% | 17% | 56% | 9% |

*Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)*

As can be seen rather vividly in the table, **public opinion in Pakistan has remained relatively consistent on this particular question over a period of twenty four years**. When asked about the level of trust that they place in the people of America in 1991, only 11% of Pakistanis found Americans trustworthy. In 2015, this percentage had only risen by a meager 7 percent. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis (60%) distrusted the American people, back in 1991. This distrust of the American people has remained the mantra of Pakistan's majority to the present day, falling only by four percentage points in twenty four years to 56% of the Pakistani population. Upon being asked this question in 1991, 13% of Pakistanis felt indifferent towards Americans. In 2015, the percentage of Pakistanis who expressed indifference towards the Americans increased to 17% of the total public. The significance of these results can by no means be understated since they offer an invaluable insight into public opinion regarding the broader question of Pakistan-US relations.

The fact that an absolute majority of Pakistanis continue to view America and the American people with suspicion and lack of trust has its roots in the historical relations between the nation states of Pakistan and the US as well as the role that America has played in international affairs since the end of the Second Great War; an event that led to a rearranging of the world order as the imperial powers of
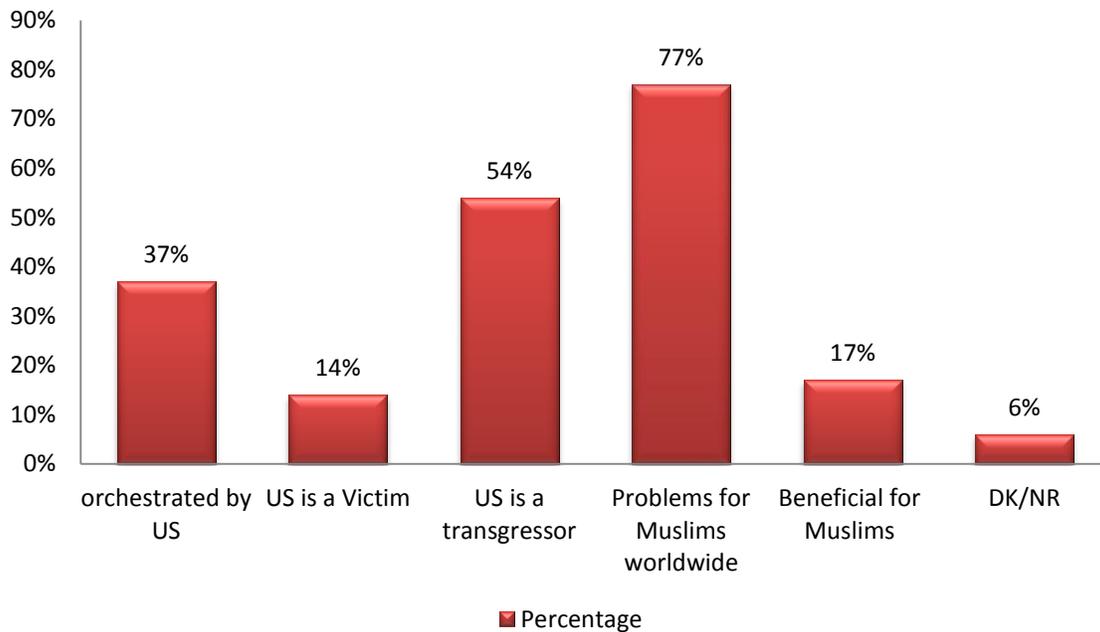
Europe waned and the United States of America announced itself as a global super power. However, much of the current mood amongst Pakistanis against America has to do with America's forays into the Middle East since the early 90s, a region that is overwhelmingly comprised of Muslim states. These excursions, which began with US's funding of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war and military operations against Iraq in the Kuwait War, ultimately culminated in America's ill-fated 'War on Terror', which started against the Taliban in Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and then shifted to Iraq, as the armed forces of the United States remained engaged in a war against terrorism and extremism for over a decade, from the Horn of Africa, all the way to Pakistan in South Asia. Since the extremist threat was predominantly Muslim, be it Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or even Saddam Hussein, this War on Terror was bound to alienate Muslims from America the world over.

That is precisely what happened in Pakistan as well, and more. As President Parvez Musharraf caved in to international pressure to lend support to the US in its fight against militants in Afghanistan, Pakistan became embroiled in a war that would have far reaching consequence for the country and its people for years to come. Memories of the widely despised American drones operating on Pakistani soil with carte-blanche are still fresh in the memory of many Pakistanis even today. Even though the US came and left Afghanistan, its operation against supposed militants only helped to fuel extremism in neighbouring Pakistan. Nowadays, the Operation Zarb-e-Azb and others before it that the Pakistani Army has engaged in over the past couple of years to purge militancy from Pakistan serve as a sardonic ode to a Country that perhaps should have stayed out of a war to which it did not belong. The horrific incident at the Army Public School in Peshawar where innocent school going children unfortunately bore witness to the shocking barbarity of terrorists represents the sheer magnitude of suffering that Pakistanis have experienced at the hands of religious extremism. A Gallup Poll conducted in 2006 accurately describes the public sentiment in Pakistan regarding the attacks of September 11th and the global events that followed them. The results of the survey, albeit shocking, were nevertheless predictable. 37% of the respondents were of the view that these attacks had been orchestrated by US groups. Only 14% viewed the United States of America as a victim in these attacks while a resounding 54% of the respondents considered none other than the US itself to be the transgressor. Tellingly, the largest percentage and the outright majority, standing at **77%, were convinced that these attacks had brought nothing but problems for the Muslims worldwide.** Only a meager 17% thought that they had been beneficial for the Muslims. For Pakistan, undoubtedly, the chain reactions of events inspired by the attacks on September 11 have brought nothing but more problems for the people of Pakistan. This negativity among the Pakistanis has also been heightened by the religious forces at play in Pakistan. Pakistan gained independence on the basis of Islam and thus Islam remained forever associated with the foundational principles of the country. However, since the 1980s, Islam was institutionalized in Pakistan

and experienced a renaissance of sorts as it invaded the realm of politics and grew its tentacles ever more widely in the social demographic of the country with the aid of an exponentially growing number of religious seminaries and madrasahs. Thus, when America launched its War on Terror, Pakistan's religious clergy strongly condemned it for it was seen as an attack on Islam. America began to therefore be seen as an enemy of Islam, and subsequently of Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan's involvement in this war came under extreme scrutiny because it was perceived as Muslim fighting against Muslim, at the behest of an outsider who was against Islam from the outset. Thus, this anti-Americanism gradually became a staple of religious rhetoric in Pakistan and also played a significant role in conditioning public opinion against the US.
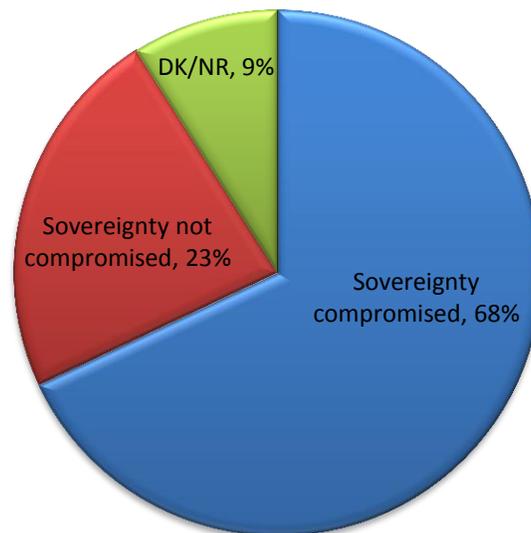


*Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)*

Additionally, this continual distrust and resentment of Pakistanis against the Americans has also been fuelled by growing American criticism of Pakistan's handling of the terrorist threat within its borders as well other internal policies of the country with regards to maintaining security and tackling extremism and militancy. This growing tension between the two countries has also been accentuated by certain incidents in the near past, particularly the killing of one Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, who was brought to his death in Operation Neptune Spear by US Navy Seals in 2011 as he hid in a compound in the city of Abbottabad, Pakistan. The US launched the operation from Afghanistan without taking into

consent Pakistan's armed forces or the Pakistani Government before enacting it. Thus, apart from breaking various national and international laws, such as the violation of Pakistani airspace as well as the legality and morality of killing an unarmed man instead of taking him in alive, this operation caused another strain between the relations of the two countries. Not only did this covert raid by the Americans put a visible blotch on Pakistan's security forces, which were unable to detect the American Choppers flying over their territory, it also represented a clear violation and casual disregard of Pakistan's sovereignty. To this end, Gallup Pakistan conducted a survey in May 2011 in which a representative sample of Pakistanis was asked the following question: **'Some people say Pakistan's sovereignty has been severely compromised by the operation of American military in Pakistan. Others disagree with this view. What is your view?'** In response to the question, **more than two-thirds of the Pakistani public (68%) felt that the sovereignty of Pakistan was completely compromised in the American Operation in Abbottabad**. Only a minor proportion of the public (23%) disagreed.
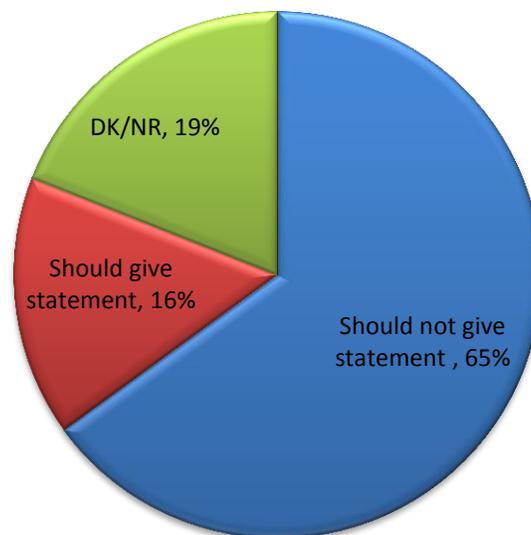


*Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)*

It is incidents like these as well as statements made by America against the incapability of Pakistan to deal with its internal issues that have driven a deeper wedge of mistrust and hostility between the two

**Disclaimer:** The views and inferences expressed in the article are that of the author himself and Gallup Pakistan does not take any responsibility in this regard. Moreover, Gallup has taken utmost care in collection of data and in other processes.

countries and their respective people. This growing resentment associated with America's growing criticism of and involvement in the domestic affairs of Pakistan can be seen from the results of a Gallup Pakistan Survey carried out in August-September 2014 in which a representative sample of the population was asked the following question: **'Recently, with regards to the political situation in the country America has given a statement in favor of the current Pakistan government. In your personal opinion, should America give any statements about Pakistan's internal problems or not?'** The outright majority of Pakistanis were opposed towards the notion of the United States of America passing judgments and statements on Pakistan's internal matters. The results indicate that around two-thirds of the public (65%) stated that America should give such statements. In comparison, a paltry (16%) Pakistanis were of the opinion that it was alright for the US to give out statements on Pakistan's domestic matters. A pie-chart of the results of this survey is given.



DK/NR, 19%

Should give statement, 16%

Should not give statement , 65%

*Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)*

## Conclusion

As has been empirically validated by a number of polls conducted by Gallup Pakistan, public sentiment on the relationship between Pakistan and the US has remained consistently negative. The main culprit behind this persistent negativity has undoubtedly been America's War on Terror and the implications that it has had on Pakistan in the form of terrorism which has claimed countless lives in the country over a period of many years. Rocky relations between the two countries have also been compounded by America's public disapproval and criticism of Pakistan's internal policies as well as America's perceived violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. Even though Pakistan became the largest receiver of American aid as a result of its participation in the War on Terror, the internal state of peace and security within the Pakistani state deteriorated rapidly and the country became engulfed in terrorism and extremism; a problem that the state has found difficult to subdue for many years now. The accompanying dip in Pakistan's social and economic fortunes has therefore ensured that the Pakistani public continues to eye America with suspicion, distrust and resentment, at least for the foreseeable future.