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# What Do Malaysians Think of America and Its Foreign Policy Post 9/11?

The study aims to understand the overall perceptions among Malaysians concerning America in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, with a special focus on the Gulf issues, i.e. the issue of terrorism, the issue of Israel versus Palestine and Lebanon, the issue of Iraq and the issue of Iran's nuclear-arms programme. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in the study. Results of the quantitative analysis express a prominent difference between Malays and other races on every issue, with Malays having less liberal perceptions towards America than other races. The results show that most participants do not blame the American people but put the responsibility on the American government. The qualitative analysis reveals that media does influence the perceptions of the participants towards America. It also illustrates that the participants are aware and discontented with the issues that are going on in Gulf countries. The overall research findings strongly indicate that the Malaysian perception towards the American government and its foreign policy are currently unfavourable.

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On Tuesday morning, 11 September 2001, three hijacked planes hit the World Trade Centre (WTC)—or the Twin Towers—in New York, and the Pentagon building outside Washington, D.C. A fourth hijacked plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. The sudden attacks destroyed the WTC towers and damaged the Pentagon Building, killing about 3,000 people and causing more than US\$100 billion in damage (Johannen, Smith and Gomaz, 2003).

The September 11 attacks had clearly changed the world. The attacks were a watershed, with far-reaching implications for the entire world (Abukhalil, 2002). Immediately after the attacks, the US dramatically changed its foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Gulf countries (Iraq, Iran, Palestine and Lebanon). These countries were greatly affected by the sharp re-evaluation of the US foreign policy.

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After September 11, the US declared a war on terrorism by attacking the Islamic Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had been harbouring the Al-Qaeda terrorist group headed by Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect of the attacks (Ramakrishna, 2003). Subsequently, on 29 January 2002, President George W. Bush branded Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil" because of their research programmes aimed at developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Bush indicated that the overall objective involved not merely disrupting Al-Qaeda cells worldwide but also forestalling the danger of terrorists teaming up with a small group of nations seeking to develop nuclear and biological weapons (Ramakrishna, 2003).

The issue of Iraq, in particular, was perceived differently after September 11. Iraq was seen as a serious threat in the American war on terrorism. According to a source, the single most important factor in the decision to go to war was the change in Bush's position towards Iraq after September 11. The military objective was to eliminate Iraq's WMDs based on the [now flawed] assumption that Saddam Hussein could pass his presumed WMDs to other internationally-based terrorists (Tung Hakan, 2005).

In 2003, the US declared war on Iraq without the consent of the United Nations. After a long and extensive search, the late President Saddam Hussein was caught. But WMDs were never found. Iraq was put under a military authority by the Allied forces until a newly elected government of Iraq was set up. But, to this day,

Iraqis still do not have peace, with bombings and attacks between the ousted militia groups and the Allied forces occurring almost daily.

The relationship between the US and Israel was strengthened after September 11, with the US president's demand for Palestinians to end terrorism, while justifying the Israeli violence as "self-defence" (AbuKhalil, 2002).

The unconditional support of the US towards Israel was further exhibited during Israel's attack on Lebanon in July 2006. Bush openly supported Israel's military incursions into Gaza and Lebanon, citing Israel's right of self-defence. His statement came after his administration vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution by Qatar on behalf of Arab states that called on Israel to immediately end its military incursion in Gaza (*The New Straits Times*, 18 July 2006).

The fact that most of the affected countries—such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran—are Muslim countries has caused intense objections and negative protestation among millions of Muslim in other countries, including Malaysia. However, the situation in Malaysia is a little more complex, as it is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Thus, September 11, which has often been associated with Muslim fundamentalists and terrorists, can be perceived differently by the various ethnic groups of Malaysia.

### Malaysian perceptions towards America

It is difficult to estimate the degree of anti-American sentiments among Muslim Malaysians. The feelings are largely volatile and unpredictable, most often provoked or inflamed by the occurrence of certain incidents affecting Muslims or Muslim countries, such as the war in Afghanistan, the ongoing sanctions on Iraq and the attack on Lebanon by Israel. Israel's recent attack on Lebanon, for example, was carried out with US consent. This has sparked hatred and resentment among Muslim Malaysians, with more than 10,000 people marching in protest of these attacks (*Berita Harian*, 28 July 2006). However, the issue of a nuclear-arms programme in Iran received a moderate reaction from both the Malaysian government and its people.

While it is apparent that Muslim Malaysians' perceptions towards America seem to be negative or hostile, the perceptions among non-Muslim Malaysians towards America remain ambiguous. Non-Muslim Malaysians do not manifest their views in the open. Unlike Muslim Malaysians, they are more reserved. Generally, it can be understood that non-Muslim Malaysians may have a certain level of negative feelings towards America pertaining to the Gulf issues. They may feel a certain degree of sympathy towards the people in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon but they take the issues and evaluate them based on a humanitarian perspective, not a religious one. Some issues, particularly the issue of Palestine, are undeniably religious, while the issue of a nuclear-arms programme in Iran is mostly a political issue involving Muslim countries and the US.

Research regarding Malaysians' perceptions towards

America and its foreign policies in Gulf countries is lacking. Even though there appear to be many instances, such as anti-American demonstrations that clearly display Malaysians' perceptions towards America, prior to this study, these reflections have never been systematically examined in a scientific study. Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand the perceptions of Malaysians towards America pertaining to the Gulf issues, as well as to understand the role of the media in shaping these perceptions.

### Methodology

The study used both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a better understanding of the issues.

A quantitative survey using multi-staged clustered sampling was carried out in four zones: The northwest, the northeast, the southeast and south. In each zone, a state was randomly chosen to represent the area. This led to the selection of four states: Penang, Terengganu, Selangor and Johor, with 250 respondents conveniently chosen from each state.

The total sample comprised 1,000 respondents, with equal allocation given to male and female respondents. This is consistent with the approximately 50/50 distribution of the gender population in the country, according to a 2005 population estimate based on the 2000 Population and Housing Census data. According to the same estimate, the median age of the Malaysian population in 2005 was 24.3 years. Based on this information, the sample was divided into a ratio that consisted of more respondents from the lower age groups and fewer respondents from the higher age groups. For each state, 100 respondents (40 per cent) were 20–30 years old, 75 respondents (30 per cent) were 31–40 years old, 50 respondents (20 per cent) were 41–50 years old and 25 respondents (10 per cent) were above 50 years old. The sample included a balanced composition of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, with slightly half of the sample Malays, about one-third of it Chinese and about one-tenth of it Indian. In terms of religion, the sample included equal representation of both Muslim and non-Muslim respondents.

For the qualitative method, four focus groups were used in the study, the main objective being to provide a richer and a more detailed understanding of the issues. Each group consisted of eight participants. Two of the groups selected (from Penang and Kuala Lumpur) involved a combination of Muslim and non-Muslim participants. The other two groups (from Johor and Terengganu) consisted of only Muslim participants.

This allotment was done in this order to illustrate the different perspectives between Muslims and non-Muslims on the same topic. In order to gain better and more mature responses, all the participants selected were more than 20 years old.

There were three main issues raised in the focus-group interviews. The first issue focused on the awareness, perceptions and feelings among the participants

pertaining to America and its people with regards to the Gulf issues. The next issue was on America and Islam. The questions included why the participants thought America associated terrorism with Islamic countries, and whether they thought America's foreign policy towards Muslim countries would change in the next one to five years. The last issue was on the role that the media played in shaping people's perceptions. The participants were asked about their main sources of information about the afore-mentioned issues and whether the media influenced their perception towards the American government.

### Quantitative Findings

This section discusses quantitative findings based on questionnaires distributed to the respondents. The discussion focuses on the analysis of respondents' demographic characteristics, descriptive analysis on the issues, hypothesis analysis of the issues and the analysis on the role of the media in shaping perceptions.

### Demographic Background of the Respondents

A sample taken for the study comprises similar quantities of male and female respondents, with most of the respondents

from the age range of 20–30 years and 31–40 years. The respondents were highly educated, with the majority holding at least an STPM/diploma or Bachelor's degree. The majority of the respondents earned an individual income of RM1,000–RM3,000 and RM3,000–RM6,000 per month.

### Descriptive Analysis

This section discusses the perceptions of Malaysians towards Americans based on six different issues: terrorism, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran's nuclear-arms programme. The analysis was based on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 denotes "strongly disagree" while 5 denotes "strongly agree". Several negative statements were coded in reverse to make them consistent with other questions. The mean for every statement in the survey was calculated and the overall mean for the issues was analysed in order to gauge the pattern of the respondents' perception.

### The Issue on Terrorism

On the issue of terrorism, most respondents were skewed towards agreeing that each and every statement had a mean value of more than 2.50. The highest mean was for the statement "The American government also practices

TABLE 1  
Descriptive analysis for the issue of terrorism

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	The incident of September 11 is a mark of revenge for American intervention in other countries.	1	5	3.87	1.152
2.	America's way of handling the issue of terrorism is fair.	1	5	3.66	1.385
3.	It was just for America to attack the Taliban government in Afghanistan to overcome terrorism.	1	5	3.55	1.439
4.	America uses the issue of terrorism to control other countries.	1	5	3.93	1.209
5.	Violence done by America in other countries is far worse than what they had faced during September 11.	1	5	4.05	1.082
6.	The American government also practises terrorism.	1	5	4.06	1.007
7.	The American government equates Islam with terrorism.	1	5	3.93	1.219
Total				3.8641	0.64895

TABLE 2  
Descriptive analysis for the issue on Israel, Palestine and Lebanon

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	America is not fair in handling the Israel, Palestine and Lebanon issue.	1	5	4.22	0.968
2.	America should be responsible for the death of Palestinians and Lebanese by Israel.	1	5	4.20	0.995
3.	America can solve the Israel, Palestine and Lebanon conflict if they want to.	1	5	4.05	1.033
4.	America should stop Israel's cruelty towards Palestine and Lebanon.	1	5	4.28	0.867
5.	America does not support Palestine and Lebanon because it assumes that these countries support terrorism.	1	5	3.84	1.165
Total				4.1172	0.78205

terrorism”, with a mean of 4.06. The lowest mean value was for the statement “It was just for America to attack the Taliban government in Afghanistan to overcome terrorism”, with 3.55. The total mean for the issue of terrorism was 3.8641 (Table 1).

**The Issues on Israel, Palestine and Lebanon**

Regarding the issue on Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, the statement “America should stop Israel’s cruelty towards Palestine and Lebanon” had the highest mean at 4.28. Conversely, the statement “America does not support Palestine and Lebanon because it assumes that these countries support terrorism” had the lowest mean at 3.84. The total mean for the variables was 4.1172 (Table 2).

**The Issues of Iraq**

From Table 3, it is evident that there is a variation in the opinions of the respondents over the six selected items. The statement “The American/Allied forces should leave Iraq now” had the highest mean at 4.32. On the contrary, the statement “The attack on Iraq in 2003 was to overcome terrorism” had the lowest mean at 2.79. The total mean for the statements under the Iraq issue was 3.8747.

**The Issue of Iran’s Nuclear-Arms Programme**

In statements concerning the issue of Iran’s nuclear-arms programme, the statement “America tries to show off that it is a superpower by attempting to control Iran” had the highest mean at 4.24. In contrast, the statement “America should put sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear technology development” had the lowest mean at 2.59. The total mean for all six statements was 3.7954 (Table 4).

**Perceptions towards the American Government**

On the statements for respondents’ perceptions towards the American government, the highest mean was for the statement “The American government ignores the United Nation’s orders”, with a mean of 4.25. The lowest mean was for the statement “The American government is against Islam”, with a mean of 3.97. The total mean for the five statements was 4.1674. For the question “Based on the above issue what are your feelings towards the American government?” the analysis was based on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 denotes “like” and 7 denotes “hate”. The mean achieved was 5.40 (Table 5).

TABLE 3  
Descriptive analyses for the issues of Iraq

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	America should not have attacked Iraq in 2003.	1	5	4.22	0.983
2.	The attack on Iraq in 2003 was due to religious factor.	1	5	3.63	1.225
3.	The attack on Iraq in 2003 was to overcome terrorism.	1	5	2.79	1.459
4.	The attack on Iraq was motivated by the oil factor.	1	5	4.17	0.909
5.	The American/Allied forces should leave Iraq now.	1	5	4.32	0.853
6.	America should be blamed for the instability of the newly established Iraq government.	1	5	4.11	0.996
Total				3.8747	0.71210

TABLE 4  
Descriptive analysis for the issue of Iran’s nuclear-arms programme

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	America should put sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear technology development.	1	5	2.59	1.194
2.	America exerts more pressure on Iran compared to North Korea in the nuclear issue because of religious factor.	1	5	3.94	1.072
3.	America’s action to control Iran’s nuclear development is unfair because America is also developing its nuclear technology.	1	5	4.17	0.957
4.	America tries to show off that it is a superpower by attempting to control Iran.	1	5	4.24	0.936
5.	America fears Iran’s strength in nuclear technology.	1	5	4.04	1.028
Total				3.7954	0.65713

### Perceptions towards Americans

On statements concerning perceptions towards Americans, the largest mean was garnered by the statement “The American people should be blamed for selecting the present government”, with a mean of 3.61. On the other hand, the statement “The American people are against Islam” had the lowest mean at 3.24. The total mean for all the five statements was 3.3803. For the question “Based on the above issue what are your feelings towards Americans?” the analysis was based on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 denotes “like” and 7 denotes “hate”. The mean achieved was 4.67 (Table 6).

### Hypotheses testing: Perceptual difference towards America based on demographic background

Descriptive analyses as described above exhibited negative sentiments among Malaysians, especially regarding the American government. Further analyses using statistical tests were conducted to see whether there were perceptual differences among the various demographic backgrounds of the respondents towards Americans and the American government.

Results in Table 7 show no difference between genders

TABLE 5  
Descriptive analysis for respondents' perceptions towards the American government

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	The American government is against Islam.	1	5	3.97	1.153
2.	The American government ignores other countries' opinion about Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran issues.	1	5	4.19	0.926
3.	The American government ignores the United Nation's orders.	1	5	4.25	0.875
4.	The American government uses its power to bully other countries.	1	5	4.24	0.954
5.	The American government should be blamed for Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran issues.	1	5	4.19	0.985
6.	Based on the above issue, what are your feelings towards the American government?	1	7	5.40	1.371
Total				4.1674	0.86356

TABLE 6  
Descriptive analysis for respondents' perceptions towards Americans

<i>Item</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	The American people are against Islam.	1	5	3.24	1.160
2.	The American people ignore other countries' opinions about Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran issues.	1	5	3.34	1.143
3.	The American people don't respect the United Nations (UN).	1	5	3.43	1.130
4.	The American people should be blamed for the Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran issues.	1	5	3.29	1.202
5.	The American people should be blamed for selecting the present government.	1	5	3.61	1.192
6.	Based on the above issues, what are your feelings towards Americans?	1	7	4.67	1.476
Total				3.3803	0.99407

TABLE 7  
T-test on perceptual difference between genders

<i>Issues</i>		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean difference</i>	<i>T-value</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceptions towards the American government	Male	4.1800	0.2475	0.451	0.652
	Female	4.1553			
Perceptions towards the American people	Male	3.4365	0.11025	1.748	0.081
	Female	3.3263			

TABLE 8  
ANOVA on perceptual difference among different age groups

Issues	Mean	F	p	
Perceptions towards the American government	20–30	4.0848	4.203	0.006
	31–40	4.1486		
	41–50	4.2291		
	> 51	4.4250		
	Total	4.1674		
Perceptions towards the American people	20–30	3.2177	9.741	0.000
	31–40	3.3818		
	41–50	3.4793		
	> 51	3.8091		
	Total	3.3803		

TABLE 9  
ANOVA on perceptual difference among education levels

Issues	Mean	F	p	
Perceptions towards the American government	SRP/PMR	4.2073	0.878	0.477
	SPM	4.1617		
	STPM	4.2598		
	Degree	4.1344		
	Master's/PhD	4.0400		
	Total	4.1689		
Perceptions towards the American people	SRP/PMR	3.3670	5.680	0.000
	SPM	3.5233		
	STPM	3.4402		
	Degree	3.2704		
	Master's/PhD	2.8240		
	Total	3.3804		

with regard to their perception towards Americans and the American government.

In terms of age, Table 8 illustrates that perceptions towards the American government show a significant difference,  $p = 0.006$ . The results also show that there is a significant difference in perceptions towards the American people among different age groups,  $p = 0.000$ . This further shows that people from the higher age groups tend to have a more negative perception compared to the respondents from the lower age groups.

Results in Table 9 indicate that there are significant differences in the perception of the American people by Malaysians with different education levels,  $p = 0.000$ , which further exhibits that respondents with lower educational levels seem to be less tolerant and more critical of the American people compared to those of higher educated respondents.

The ANOVA test on perceptual difference among respondents with different household income ranges, as exhibited in Table 10, shows that there is significant difference for the perception towards the American people,  $F = 9.724$ ,  $p = 0.000$ .

TABLE 10  
ANOVA on perceptual difference among respondents with different household income

Issues	Mean	F	p	
Perceptions towards the American government	< 1,000	4.2312	0.863	0.460
	1,001–3,000	4.1586		
	3,001–6,000	4.1591		
	> 6,000	4.0351		
	Total	4.1675		
	Perceptions towards the American people	< 1,000	3.4376	9.724
1,001–3,000		3.5051		
3,001–6,000		3.0984		
> 6,000		3.1965		
Total		3.3799		

TABLE 11  
ANOVA on perceptual difference among zones

Issues	Mean	F	p	
Perceptions towards the American government	South-East (Selangor)	3.9774	52.515	0.000
	North-West (Penang)	4.2988		
	North-East (Terengganu)	4.6135		
	South (Johor)	3.7644		
	Total	4.1674		
Perceptions towards the American people	South-East (Selangor)	3.2560	64.388	0.000
	North-West (Penang)	3.6769		
	North-East (Terengganu)	3.7983		
	South (Johor)	2.7608		
	Total	3.3803		

Table 11 further displays the ANOVA test result for the perceptual difference among the zones and proves that all the concerned issues are significantly different with a  $p$ -value of 0.000. This shows that the area where they were staying at the time of the survey affects the perceptions of the respondents.

As shown by results in Table 12, there are significant differences in the mean among the respondents with different religions, at the  $p$ -value of 0.00, regarding their perceptions towards Americans and the American government.

TABLE 12  
ANOVA on perceptual difference among respondents of different religions

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	
Perceptions towards the American government	Islam	4.6472	146.761	0.000
	Hindu	3.5884		
	Buddha	3.6953		
	Christian	3.4301		
	Others	3.5200		
Total	4.1674			
Perceptions towards the American people	Islam	3.8364	89.793	0.000
	Hindu	3.1273		
	Buddha	2.6783		
	Christian	2.8159		
	Others	3.2400		
Total	3.3803			

TABLE 13  
Perceptual difference among ethnic groups

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	
Perceptions towards the American government	Malay	4.6420	171.496	0.000
	Chinese	3.6350		
	Indian	3.5957		
	Others	4.1333		
Total	4.1674			
Perceptions towards the American people	Malay	3.8312	109.571	0.000
	Chinese	2.7387		
	Indian	3.1333		
	Others	3.3833		
Total	3.3803			

The results exhibited in Table 13 show that perceptual differences among respondents from the different ethnic groups are parallel to the perceptual difference among the respondents with different religions. This is evident in the significant difference of each issue's mean with a  $p$ -value of 0.000.

## The role of the media in shaping perceptions

In analysing the role of the media in shaping the opinions of the respondents, four pertinent questions consisting of four different elements were prepared for the survey. The respondents were asked questions regarding their sources of information, the types of images the Malaysian media projected of the American government, their perceptions of the American government due to the media's influences, and whether those perceptions influenced certain practices.

### Sources of information on Gulf issues

According to Table 14, it can be noted that the most used source of information regarding the Gulf issues is the newspaper, with 871 respondents. The television is the second-most used source of information, with 754 respondents. A total of 511 respondents use the radio while the Internet has 453 users among the respondents. The least used source is the magazine, with 381 respondents, while only 49 respondents claimed that they have used other unlisted sources to access information.

TABLE 14  
Respondents' sources of information

<i>No.</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Frequency of respondents saying "Yes"</i>
1.	Newspaper	871
2.	Television	754
3.	Radio	511
4.	Internet	453
5.	Magazines	381
6.	Others	49

### Kinds of images of the American government projected by the Malaysian media

The results in Table 15 show that the Malaysian media inadvertently projected a negative image of the American government to the Malaysian audience. This is illustrated by the high percentage of respondents who perceived a negative image (about 70 per cent) compared to a positive image (about 20 per cent). Specifically, regarding the issue on terrorism, it has been found that the use of the Internet has elicited the most responses for a negative image among the respondents, where 78.4 per cent of the respondents subscribed to that idea. The highest response for a positive view comes from the newspaper, with 29.7 per cent in favour, the most compared to other sources. On the Iraq issue, the television has portrayed the most negative image, at 85.9 per cent. Magazines, denoting a third, or 33.3 per cent, of the total respondents, initiate the most positive image. As for the issues on Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, it has been found that the television, with 81.8 per cent of respondents choosing



it, has broadcasted the most negative image to the respondents compared to other sources. The radio has been chosen as the most positive source on the topic, with 34.6 per cent of respondents vouching for it. The television has also been chosen as the source with the most negative image portrayed on the issue of Iran's nuclear-arms programme, with 81.2 per cent of respondents who have been influenced by the negative image. The Internet portrays the most positive image on this issue, with 30.3 per cent of respondents agreeing to it.

**How perception towards the American government influenced practices**

This section examines how Malaysians' perception towards the American government influenced some of the respondents' actions. The first question on whether respondents "still watch news programmes such as CNN" produced 46.6 per cent, or 463 respondents, affirmative responses while 53.4 per cent, or 531 respondents, gave negative responses. More than half of the respondents, amounting to 65.1 per cent or 684 people, denied that they "still read American magazines such as *Asiaweek* and *Cosmopolitan*", while 34.7 per cent, or 345 respondents, gave a favourable reply. Most of the respondents confirmed that they "still watch American films such as Superman". Only 18.6 per cent, or 182 respondents, claimed that they no longer watched any American movies. The same trend was observed when respondents were quizzed on whether they were "still buying American food/drink products such as KFC, Pizza and Coke", with 84.9 per cent or 844 respondents, saying "Yes" and 15.1 per cent, or 150 respondents, saying "No". The next statement, "Still buying American brands such as Levi's, Calvin Klein and Polo", polled 63.5 per cent, or 632, positive responses, as opposed to 36.5 per cent, or 363, negative responses. More than half of the respondents disagreed when asked whether

they would "still visit America", with 54.4 per cent or 635 respondents, while 45.6 per cent, or 488 respondents, insisted that they would "still visit America" (Table 16).

TABLE 16  
**How perception towards the American government influences practices**

No.	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Still watching news programme such as CNN.	46.6	53.4
2.	Still reading American magazine such as <i>Asiaweek</i> and <i>Cosmopolitan</i> .	34.7	65.1
3.	Still watching American film such as Superman.	81.4	18.6
4.	Still buying American's food/drink products such as KFC, Pizza and Coke.	84.9	15.1
5.	Still buying American's things such as Levi's, Calvin Klein and Polo.	63.5	36.5
6	Still visiting America.	45.6	54.4

**Qualitative findings**

**Perceptions towards America and its people**

From the focus group interviews, results indicate that all of the participants were aware of the issues pertaining to America and its conflict with the Gulf countries. However, the depth of their knowledge varied. Some participants had vast information and understanding on the matter while others hardly knew anything at

TABLE 15  
**Respondents' view on images projected onto the American government by the Malaysian media**

Media issues	Radio		Television		Newspaper		Internet		Magazine	
	Negative image	Positive image	Negative image	Positive image	Negative image	Positive image	Negative image	Positive image	Negative image	Positive image
Issue on terrorism	728 (75.1%)	242 (24.9%)	664 (73.0%)	246 (27.0%)	671 (70.3%)	284 (29.7%)	706 (78.4%)	194 (21.6%)	643 (72.2%)	247 (27.8%)
Iraq issue	745 (77.4%)	217 (22.6%)	824 (85.9%)	135 (14.1%)	739 (78.5%)	202 (21.5%)	677 (72.7%)	254 (27.3%)	601 (66.7%)	300 (33.3%)
Issues on Israel, Palestine and Lebanon	622 (65.4%)	329 (34.6%)	774 (81.8%)	172 (18.2%)	688 (74.1%)	240 (25.9%)	631 (73.9%)	216 (25.3%)	723 (79.3%)	189 (20.7%)
The issue of Iran's nuclear programme	623 (75.0%)	208 (25.0%)	739 (81.2%)	171 (18.8%)	647 (74.5%)	222 (25.5%)	611 (69.7%)	266 (30.3%)	630 (77.0%)	188 (23.0%)
Total	679.5	249	750.25	181	686.25	237	656.25	232.5	649.25	231

all, except for the fact that America is at war with the concerned countries.

When asked about his or her feelings towards the American government, every participant felt that the government had been unfair and cruel. There were ample comments on Israel's alliance with America. The following are some of their explanations.

"For me, American government is inhuman. They want to show off their power and the world must follow their orders."

"I am mad, not particularly because I'm a Muslim, but more because the actions taken by them are unfair and unjust to the humankind, regardless of their race."

"...Angry and sad because mainly those who died are Muslims. But then again, not only Muslims suffered, people of other religions are also victimised. It's like the American government is heartless..."

"...Sad and angry... because they generalise all Muslims as terrorists..."

"They are, like, inhuman, because they kill so many people in the process of finding terrorists. So, I think they are unfair."

Most of the participants did not blame Americans in isolation for what is happening in the Arab countries. They said that it is not fair to blame them, as most Americans are against the war as well. The following are some of their feelings on this matter.

"I do not have hard feelings for the Americans for what had happened. I think many of them are not even aware of this matter. They should not be blamed for their government's actions."

"Not every American supports Bush. There are NGOs who are against him. So we should not blame the Americans."

"There are demonstrations in America against the war. Not only Muslims participate in the demonstrations, many other races participate as well."

"...Especially parents whose children are in the war, they are heavily against the war...they always protest the idea of having war and want their children to come back home... they always ask the government to stop the war..."

There were a few points given on the American's role in this issue. According to the participants, Americans could do more in terms of putting pressure on the government to stop the war. The following comments were given.

"For me, the American people are guilty if they choose and support their government..."

"The Americans can, more or less, be blamed because they have chosen that government. They could, if they want to, force the government to

change their policy towards the Islamic countries by picketing or other actions. Too badly, they are not doing anything to stop the unjust actions taken by their government to the Islamic countries."

### America and Islam

The next issue concerns America and Islam. The participants were asked to give their views on America's reasons for associating terrorism with Islam. Interestingly, a pattern emerged where most of the non-Muslim participants associated the conflict with economic reasons, while most of the Muslim participants thought that it is due to religious reasons. The economic reasons given were due to the fact that Arab countries possess oil, a commodity much sought after by global nations, and which America wants to take control of. Some of the comments on economy are as follows (given mostly by non-Muslims interviewees).

"I think there's a reason for America's act...maybe it's a political reason, but I think most probably it's not political reason, more because of economic reason... when they're having war, most of the reason is because of the oil. Because most of the country at war they have oil. So I think this is the main reason."

"...I think it's because of economy factor, because most Islam countries have oil source, so it's an advantage if America succeeds in controlling the countries."

"America wants to take control of the gulf countries because of the oil. They want to control the countries' oil to improve their economy. America does not have intention to bring peace to the gulf countries."

"In my opinion, I agree with them, that America is more focused on the economy. They want to conquer the world's economy, that's why they attack Iraq."

The participants also aggressively stated their opinions on the religious reasons that had dictated America's actions. They highlighted how America had discriminated against Islam as well as their growing hatred for Israel. These are some of the excerpts from their deliberation (Muslim participants).

"I think they regard Islam as terrorist, that's why they attack the Islamic countries, not because of economic reasons."

"For me, historically, Israel wants to build a powerful and terrifying nation through various channels, through alliances. They want to appear as the best in economics and such."

When the participants were asked whether they thought that the American foreign policy towards Muslim countries would change in the next five years, most answered "No". They were of the opinion that America had developed a negative view over their relationship

with the people from Muslim countries. Some of the reasons given involve time span.

"It's not going to change, because it has been happening five years ago, so it will still happen in the coming five years."

"I don't think the situation will change because it has become a norm. It has been going on for a long time already."

Another reason involves religious matters, including Israel's influence over America. Many people felt that due to Israel's influence over America, chances that American policy would change were also rather remote. The following are the excerpts taken from some respondents.

"I don't think their policy will change, because the Jews will continue to influence America."

"I think America will continue with its foreign policy considering their current development, along with Israel's support, and their veto power in PBB (UN), also their support to Israel's attacks. For me, America's foreign policy will not change in the next five years"

"Referring to the current development, it does not seem that America is going to lessen the attacks. On the other hand, they are providing extreme help for ... Israel ... in terms of the nuclear weapons and such. I read in the newspaper that the Jews are asking for more nuclear weapons. So, looking at these developments, I don't see that America is going to change soon."

Apart from the issues regarding Israel and religious differences, another reason given on why the participants thought that the policy would not change was due to economic reasons. America was said to be interested in taking control of the Arab countries' revenues in oil. Some citations are as follows.

"It's not going to change in the near future because every President, like Clinton, still attacks the countries with economic importance to America. So it's really up to the President, whether they want to change or not. But most probably they will not..."

"I am certain that America is greedy to take all the oil in the gulf countries. They cannot just ignore this asset. It does not matter who is the President, they would still want the oil, only with different methods."

A couple of participants said that there is a possibility of America changing its policy within the next five years. One participant said that it could be because of pressure from the American people themselves, while another said that it would depend on the president who would replace Bush, or if Bush would be willing to change his stand (opinion given in January 2006).

"I hope the next election will bring changes to the American foreign policy...but only if President Bush is replaced."

"Maybe it will change because of pressure from the American citizens."

"...Depends if the President is willing to change or not..."

"I think depends on the new president, depends on the new management. But I have a strong feeling that it might change."

### **The role of the media**

Everybody agreed that they had gained information about the issues from the mass media. They were also of the opinion that the media had played a role in shaping their perceptions and views towards the issues. Their perceptions were thus shaped by whatever themes the media exuded in their messages. The following are some of the participants' comments.

"The stories and pictures shown in the media can show us how the Palestinians are the victims of Israel. The Americans on the other hand seems to support the Israelis."

"The media influences me because as we know, the news is not based from rumours. The reporters actually look for the news. I believe all the news reported by the media."

"The media influences my perceptions as it is through the media I can gather the motive of the American government's actions."

Nevertheless, there are a couple of participants who think that the media does not influence them. Their opinions are as follows:

"I am very open with it and not influenced by the reports given by the reporter."

"Media is one of the important sources for me to know about the issues. However, media do not influence my perception about this issue."

The type of media that the participants claimed to have used in order to gain information are mainstream and alternative. The mainstream media are as follows.

"My source for information is mainly mainstream media such as newspapers like Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian. I also watch news from TV1, TV2, TV3 and ASTRO."

"The Internet has a lot of information but sometimes they are not so reliable, so I prefer electronic media like CNN."

The alternative media are as follows.

"I also read Harakah."

"In my opinion, electronic media and the internet can give more information. Print media does not have much freedom to carry out their freedom of speech compared to the Internet. The internet is a freer medium to spread information on issues like this."

## Conclusion

The overall objective of this study was to obtain an overall picture of Malaysians' perception towards Americans, their government and American foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11. The research findings show that most Malaysian respondents think that America is biased towards the Muslim community, which in the end explains why most respondents, irrespective of age and gender, have an unfavourable opinion towards the American government. However, many people are aware of the distinction between the government and the people of the country. Some argue that the government is representative of the people but the stand of the government does not necessarily translate directly into the decision of all the people of the concerned country.

In order to further understand the perception among Malaysians, the study also categorised the Malaysian respondent's perceptions based on four issues: (a) the issue of terrorism; (b) the issue of Palestine and Lebanon; (c) the Iraq issue; and (d) the issue of Iran's nuclear-arms programme

Most respondents perceived each of the above issues as one issue at large instead of perceiving each issue separately. The majority of the respondents felt that the American government was often unfair and biased towards the Muslim community and relates Islam with terrorism. Due to the American government's biased perceptions of Islam, they discriminate against Muslims on issues such as the issue regarding Israel vs. Palestine, and the nuclear-arms programme in Iran.

The research findings show that there are discrepancies in perceptions due to demographic factors. The majority of the respondents with a lower education level seem less tolerant of the American government and its policy compared to the more educated respondents. This indicates the successful impact of "agenda setting" set by the media, especially through television. In other words, it can be deduced that the less-educated people have probably placed a high level of trust in the contents of the media, while the better-educated people tend to be more analytical in their thinking and may think logically; they follow their head and not their heart.

With such strong sentiments against the American government, the majority of the Malaysian respondents felt that American troops in Iraq should leave the country because they are not contributing anything to the people of Iraq. The American government has also been labelled as arrogant because they have refused to abide by a United Nations' order not to invade Iraq. The American government was also criticised in the misuse of its power to bully other countries instead of helping them. This notion supports why Malaysian respondents have not seen the Iran nuclear-arms programme as a threat or danger to the world at large. Instead, respondents believe that the American government's intervention in the Iran nuclear power programme is based on their biased perceptions against Islam more than for the welfare of society. Due to unfavourable perceptions of Malaysian respondents towards the American government and its

policy, at least 15 per cent of the respondents declared that they had refrained from buying American brands, watching American movies, dining at American food outlets or visiting America. Although the number is still small, this boycott indicates a form of silent resentment and protest by Malaysians towards the American government's current stand and policy.

There are also great differences among the perceptions of the American government's actions and its foreign policy between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. Muslim respondents have many negative perceptions and feel that the American government practises discrimination towards the Muslim community. Non-Muslim respondents, however, look at it from a different perspective. They feel that economic reasons caused the American government to attack the Gulf countries more than anything else.

The same result was obtained from analysis between different ethnic groups. There is a prominent difference between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents on every issue studied, where Muslims have stronger feelings and are more sensitive towards the issues at large. There is a significant difference in the perceptions among respondents with different household incomes towards the American people. People with higher incomes can distinguish that the American government's actions on most issues do not represent the American people. The respondents with lower incomes do not feel the same way.

All of the respondents have one common opinion: the majority of the respondents feel that many innocent people have suffered throughout the Gulf War, and that American foreign policy will not change in the next five years. To conclude, the research findings strongly indicate that the Malaysian perception towards the American government and its foreign policy is currently unfavourable.

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