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## We Get More Benefit from Long-Term Food Aid Programs

By [Mauro De Lorenzo](#)

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ARTICLES

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Resident Fellow  
Mauro De Lorenzo

Feeding the hungry is the archetype of humanitarian action, and the United States is the world's largest supplier of food aid. But you would never know by reading the polls. The main riddle of U.S. public diplomacy is why we derive so little political benefit from our humanitarian efforts abroad. Indeed, we sometimes feel disliked by our allies and clients almost as much as by our enemies.

In Latin America or Africa, this is exasperating. In Muslim countries, however, the failure goes to the heart of our central national security challenge. We are missing an opportunity in the current global food crisis to "win friends and confound enemies". We should give more food and be less shy about taking credit for our generosity.

Two images make the case: The success of American disaster relief in Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami and in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake, and the idea that the popularity of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood is built on their efficient welfare programs.

**We should give more food and be less shy about taking credit for our generosity.**

There is truth in both images, but I think they should lead us to different conclusions.

One-off humanitarian efforts, no matter how well-marketed, will not lead to durable gains in favorability for the United States. The data from the multi-year Pew Global Attitudes Survey paint a much more ambiguous picture than the Terror Free Tomorrow poll that the *L.A. Times* editorial on food diplomacy cites. In Pakistan, for example, favorable views of the United States rose from 23% in 2005 to 27% in 2006, when memory of the U.S. earthquake response was fresh, but then collapsed to 15% in 2007. Indonesia recorded a 38% favorability share in 2005 after Navy ships became the symbol of rescue for the people of Aceh, but fell to 30% in 2006 and 29% in 2007.

This is not a failure of marketing, though we could certainly do that better. It is psychology. What is salient and remembered is what just happened. That is the difference between our crisis-based aid tools, and the private welfare programs that undergird the political power of Islamist parties like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Our efforts are a bright starburst that rapidly fades; their programs are sustained year-after-year, built into the social fabric of neighborhoods and villages.

Islamist parties derive political benefits from their aid programs because families are dependent on them, and there are no alternatives. The U.S. derives few benefits because our efforts are "gifts" that may or may not be repeated.

With this understanding, I think there are many targeted efforts the United States could undertake using food, health care, and plain old cash to weaken the power of Islamist social welfare networks. We can attempt to disrupt them, but we can also inundate them with competition, giving citizens more choices. The right measure of success is a slackening in support for Islamists, not an increase in support for the United States.

But here is the deeper question: What relationship is there, if any, between favorability polls and U.S. national security? The U.S. has low favorability ratings among the populations of allies, such as Germany, France, Turkey, or South Korea, none of which are seen as security threats. And the increased U.S. favorability in Pakistan in 2005-6 did not translate into gains against Al-Qaeda in the Tribal Areas.

If we measure our national security by asking how much people like us, and build our policy around getting those numbers up, are we missing the point? Are we safer?

*Mauro De Lorenzo is a resident fellow at AEI.*

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