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World Publics Reject Torture

But a Substantial Number Make Exception for Terrorists

A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 19 nations finds that in 14 of them most people favor an unequivocal rule against torture, even in the case of terrorists who have information that could save innocent lives. Four nations lean toward favoring an exception in the case of terrorists.

However, large majorities in all 19 nations favor a general prohibition against torture. In all nations polled, the number saying that the government should generally be able to use torture is less than one in five.

On average across all nations polled, 57 percent opt for unequivocal rules against torture. Thirty-five percent favor an exception when innocent lives are at risk. Just 9 percent favor the government being able to use torture in general.

The four publics that favor an exception for terrorists when innocent lives are at risk include majorities in India (59%), Nigeria (54%), and Turkey (51%), and a plurality in Thailand (44%).

Support for the unequivocal position was highest in Spain (82%), Great Britain (82%) and France (82%), followed by Mexico (73%), China (66%), the Palestinian territories (66%), Poland (62%), Indonesia (61%), and the Ukraine (59%). In five countries either modest majorities or pluralities support a ban on all torture: Azerbaijan (54%), Egypt (54%), the United States (53%), Russia (49%), and Iran (43%). South Koreans are divided.

Amnesty International's 2007 State of the World Report documents numerous cases of torture by governments around the world, including cases where governments actively use torture as well as cases where governments have failed to take action against police or other officials who have used torture.

"The idea that torture by governments is basically wrong is widely shared in all corners of the world. Even the scenario one hears of terrorists holding information that could save innocent lives is rejected as a justification for torture in most countries," comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

"Further," Kull adds, "since such a scenario is exceedingly rare, this poll suggests that virtually all torture used by governments is at odds with the will of the people."

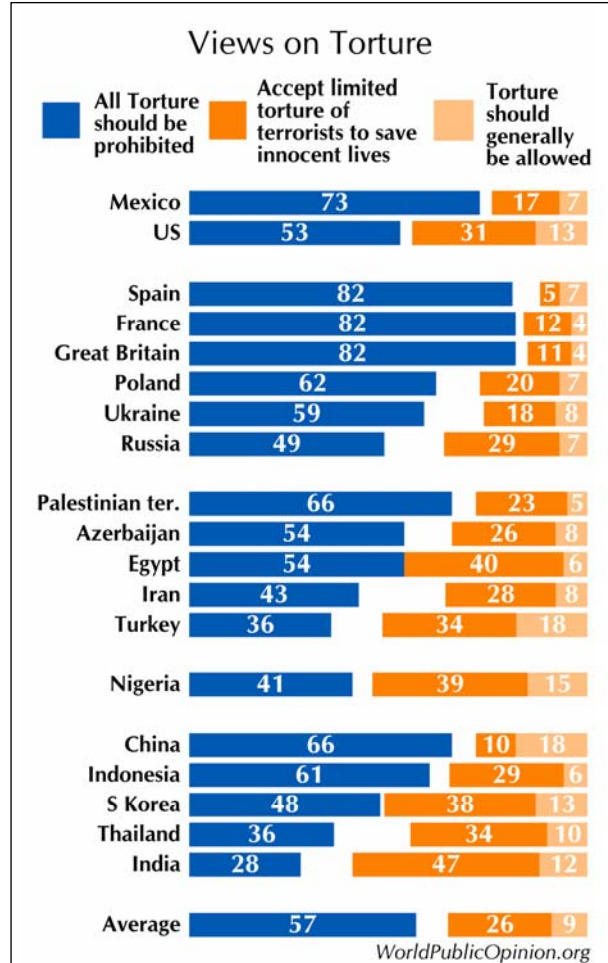
WorldPublicOpinion.org is releasing this poll in advance of International Victims of Torture Day (June 26), a date recognized by the United Nations and observed around the world. This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the UN General Assembly’s adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “No one shall be subjected to torture.”

WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative project involving a worldwide network of research centers under the management of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.

The poll of 19,063 respondents was conducted in 19 nations, including most of the largest countries—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Mexico, Britain, France, Poland, Spain, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Iran, Turkey, Thailand and South Korea. The nations included represent 60 percent of the world population. The survey was fielded between January 10 and May 6. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percent. The primary funder of this project is the Oak Foundation.

All of the countries polled are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and parties to the Geneva Conventions forbidding torture and other forms of abuse. All but three have also ratified the 1987 UN Convention against Torture. India has signed but not ratified the convention, while Iran has not signed it. The Palestinian territories are not eligible to be a party to the agreement.

The survey presented respondents with an argument in favor of allowing the torture of potential terrorists who threaten civilians: “Terrorists pose such an extreme threat that governments should now be allowed to use some degree of torture if it may gain information that would save innocent lives.” In fourteen nations, a majority or plurality rejected this argument in favor of the unequivocal view: “Clear rules against torture should be maintained because any use of torture is immoral and will weaken international human rights standards against torture.”



Those who favored an exception for terrorists were also asked whether government should generally be allowed to use torture. On average across all nations polled, just 9 percent say there should be no rules against torture. China and Turkey have the largest percentages (18% in both) who believe governments should generally be allowed to torture while France and Great Britain (4% in both) have the lowest.

Trends

In a June-July 2006 poll conducted for the BBC World Service by GlobeScan and PIPA, 15 of the 19 nations polled in the present study were asked the same question about making an exception to rules against torture in the case of terrorists. While there has been little change on average, there have been some dramatic shifts in specific countries.

Only India had even a modest plurality favoring an exception for terrorists in 2006. In the current survey three countries (India, Nigeria, and Turkey) have a majority supporting such exceptions, Thailand has a plurality and South Korea is divided.

Four countries included in both surveys show dramatic increases in support for allowing the torture of terrorists: India (from 32% to 59%), Nigeria (39% to 54%), Turkey (24% to 51%), and South Korea (31% to 51%). Substantial increases also occurred in Egypt (25% to 46%) and the United States (36% to 44%).

At the same time there have been equally dramatic increases among those favoring a complete ban on torture. Support has grown substantially in Mexico (rising from 50% to 73%), Spain (65% to 82%), China (49% to 66%), Indonesia (51% to 61%), Britain (72% to 82%), and Russia (43% to 49%).

On average, support for an exception has gone up six points while support for an unequivocal rule has gone up two points. Thus the net increase in favor of an exception is just four points.

Why has support for allowing the torture of potential terrorists increased in certain countries since 2006? Civilians from three of the six have suffered terrorist attacks over the past year and a half: India has endured attacks attributed to Kashmiri separatists and Turkey has been plagued by Kurdish rebels. South Koreans underwent a six-week hostage drama in July and August 2007 after Taliban rebels in Afghanistan kidnapped 23 Christian volunteers and then executed two of them. And the US public receives a steady stream of news reports about terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Of the six countries with largest jumps in support for an unequivocal rule against torture, four (Spain, Britain, Indonesia and Russia) suffered major terrorist attacks before the 2006 poll but have not suffered major attacks since then.

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY RESULTS:

AMERICAS:

MEXICO

[Reforma](#)

Mexicans widely endorse existing norms against using torture, even in cases of terrorism. Support for rules against torture has increased the most dramatically in Mexico among publics polled in both 2006 and 2008.

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) reject the use of torture in all cases, while 24 percent favor an exception for terrorists when innocent lives are at risk. Only 7 percent fell that torture should generally be allowed.
- Mexican support for unequivocal rules against torture has grown from 50% in 2006 to 73%, while the number supporting an exception in case of terrorism remains steady at 24%.

UNITED STATES

[Program on International Policy Attitudes](#) / [Knowledge Networks](#)

While Americans oppose the use of torture on the whole, the majority endorsing an unequivocal rule against torture is more modest than in other countries and has declined since 2006.

- A modest majority (53%) feels that torture should unequivocally not be allowed, while forty-four percent favor an exception for terrorists. Thirteen say torture should be allowed in general.
- Support for making exceptions for torture in the case of terrorists has grown among Americans since 2006 (44%, up from 36%), while the majority opposing the use of torture in all cases has fallen slightly (53%, down from 58%).

EUROPE:

FRANCE

[Efficiency 3](#)

France has one of three publics (along with Britain and Spain) with the largest majorities in favor of unequivocal rules against torture and one of the smallest minorities that favor allowing the use of torture in general.

- 82% oppose the use of torture under any circumstances, while just 16% favor an exception to protect innocent lives. A mere 4% say governments should be allowed to use torture in general.

- Support for firm rules against torture has risen in France since 2006 (82%, up from 75%), while those in favor of allowing torture in cases of terrorism has remained largely stable (16%, down from 19%).

GREAT BRITAIN

[Chatham House \(Royal Institute of International Affairs\)](#) / [GlobeScan](#)

Like their European neighbors in France and Spain, Britons are among those with the largest majority opposing the use of any torture, even when presented an argument introducing the threat of terrorism. Support for rules against torture has also increased significantly in Britain.

- More than four in five (82%) in Britain support unequivocal rules against torture, and very few favor an exception for terrorists (16%). Just 4%—among the lowest polled—favor allowing torture in general.
- The majority opposing torture under any circumstances has risen 10 points in Britain since 2006 (82%, up from 72%), while those saying “terrorists pose such an extreme threat” that exception should be made have fallen from 24% to 16%.

RUSSIA

[Levada Center](#)

More Russians favor unequivocal rules against the use of torture than say exceptions should be made for terrorism. However only a plurality takes this position and support is less widespread than in other publics.

- Approximately half (49%) oppose the use of torture under any circumstances, while 36% make an exception in the case of terrorists. Seven percent favor governments being allowed to use torture as a general rule.
- Russian opposition to all torture has risen somewhat since 2006 (49%, up from 43%), while those saying its use should be allowed in cases of terrorism has remained steady (36%, from 37% in 2006).

SPAIN

[Elcano Royal Institute](#)

Spain is has the largest majority endorsing norms against the use of torture (along with Britain and France) and has had one of the largest increases in majority support for unequivocal rules against torture among publics asked in recent years.

- A large majority (82%) supports rules against the use of torture in any circumstances, and just 11% say that exceptions should be made for cases like terrorism. Six percent favor allowing governments to use torture in general.

- Spanish opposition to the use of torture has increased significantly since 2006 (82%, up from 65%) while the number of those who favor allowing its use in cases of terrorism has fallen somewhat (11%, down from 16%).

UKRAINE

[Kiev International Institute of Sociology](#)

Most Ukrainians continue to reject the use of torture under any circumstances, and very few favor allowing governments to use torture in cases of terrorism or in general.

- Nearly six in 10 (59%) endorse norms prohibiting the use of torture in all cases, while 26% say limited torture should be allowed in the exceptional case of terrorism. Eight percent believe that governments should be allowed to use torture in general.
- Opposition to the use of all torture has risen slightly in Ukraine from 2006 (54%) to 2008 (59%).

MIDDLE EAST/EURASIA:

AZERBAIJAN

International Center for Social Research

While most Azerbaijanis believe that any use of torture should be prohibited, this majority is slightly lower than average.

- A majority (54%) of Azerbaijanis endorse unequivocal rules against torture, while slightly more than one in three (33%) support the limited use of torture against terrorists to protect innocent lives. Just 8% believe that the torture should be generally allowed.

EGYPT

Attitude Market Research

While a majority of Egyptians favor maintaining clear rules against torture, Egypt has one of the largest numbers endorsing making exceptions in the case of terrorism. This minority has also grown substantially since 2006.

- A modest majority (54%) believe that clear rules against torture should be maintained, while a sizable minority (46%) believes that some degree of torture should be allowed in the case of terrorists. Just 6% say that governments should be allowed to torture in general.
- Egyptians' support for the limited use of torture in cases of terrorism has risen 21 points since 2006 (46%, up from 25%), while the majority endorsing clear rules against all torture has dropped significantly (54%, down from 65%).

IRAN

WorldPublicOpinion.org

While more Iranians endorse clear rules against torture than support an exception for terrorists, this number is relatively small. However the numbers favoring the government's right to use torture more generally is quite low.

- A plurality of Iranians (43%) support clear rules against torture, while 35% say exceptions can be made in the case of terrorists. Eight percent believe that governments should be allowed to use torture in general.

PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

[Palestinian Center for Public Opinion](http://PalestinianCenterforPublicOpinion.org)

An exceptionally large majority of Palestinians express opposition to the use of all torture, and an exceptionally small minority says that torture should be allowed in general.

- Nearly two-thirds (66%) believe that governments should maintain clear rules prohibiting all torture. Twenty-eight percent say that governmental use of torture against terrorists to save innocent lives is acceptable; while a mere 5% say the use of torture in general should be allowed.

TURKEY

[ARI Foundation](http://ARIFoundation.org) / [Infakto Research Workshop](http://InfaktoResearchWorkshop.org)

Turks now show majority support for making exceptions for using torture in cases of terrorism, a dramatic shift from the majority that endorsed clear rules against torture in 2006. Turks also have the largest minority (along with China) among the publics polled that favor allowing governments to use torture in general.

- In Turkey, a slight majority (51%) believe that governments should be allowed to use some degree of torture for exceptions such as terrorists, including 18% that feel governments should be allowed to use torture in general. A significant number (36%), though one of the smallest, says that unequivocal rules against torture should be maintained.
- Support for making exceptions to use torture in the case of terrorists has risen dramatically from 2006 and is now a majority (51%, up from 24%), while those endorsing clear rules against using torture in any circumstance have decreased just as significantly (36%, down from 62%).

AFRICA:

NIGERIA

Market Trends Research International

Nigerians are one of few publics with a majority saying that limited torture should be allowed against terrorists if it can save innocent lives. This number has risen dramatically since 2006.

- A majority (54%) of Nigerians favor allowing torture in cases of terrorism, while 41% say that rules against torture under any circumstances should be maintained. However just 15% endorse the government using torture in general.
- Support for allowing torture in cases of terrorism has grown dramatically since 2006, shifting from a plurality unequivocally opposing the use of torture (49% to 39%) to a majority saying it should be allowed in cases of terrorism (54% to 41%).

ASIA/PACIFIC:

CHINA

WorldPublicOpinion.org

While a large and growing majority in China rejects the use of torture in all cases, it also has one of the largest minorities that believes torture should generally be allowed.

- Two-thirds (66%) of Chinese support unequivocal rules against torture, while 28% feel that exceptions should be made for terrorists. Almost one-fifth (18%), think that torture should be allowed in general.
- Chinese support for clear rules against torture has risen 17 points since 2006 (66%, up from 49%), while those that feel there should be exceptions for using torture against terrorists decreased from 37% to 28%.

INDIA

[Team CVoter](http://TeamCVoter)

India has the largest number saying that there should be exceptions for allowing the use of torture against terrorists, as well as the lowest support for unequivocal rules against torture. Among all nations polled in both 2006 and 2008, India also has the largest increase in support of making exceptions for torture in the case of terrorism.

- A majority of Indians (59%) support governments allowing exceptions for the use of torture against terrorists, including 12% that believe torture should generally be allowed, while 28% overall say that all torture should be prohibited.
- Indian support for making exceptions for the use of torture against terrorists has increased from 32% in 2006 to a majority of 59%. At the same time, the number of those that reject torture with no exceptions also rose from 23% in 2006 to 28%. It should be noted that in 2006 28% of Indians gave an answer of “neither” or “depends” on this question.

INDONESIA

[Synovate](#)

A very large majority of Indonesians endorse unequivocal rules against torture, even in cases of terrorism, a figure that has increased significantly in the past two years.

- 61% of the Indonesian public says that governments should maintain clear rules against torture, while 34% endorse exceptions for terrorists and only 6% feel that torture should generally be allowed.
- Indonesian opposition to the use of torture in any case has grown substantially since 2006 from a slight majority (51%) to a large majority (61%). Support for allowing exceptions for the use of torture in the case of terrorists has decreased from 40% to 34%.

SOUTH KOREA

[East Asia Institute](#)

South Koreans are divided on the issue of the use of torture in cases of terrorism, with roughly half endorsing existing norms and half endorsing an exception for terrorists. This is a dramatic shift from 2006, when a majority of South Koreans rejected the use of torture.

- While approximately half of South Koreans (51%) feel that there should be exceptions for allowing torture, a statistically equivalent number (48%) say there should be clear rules against torture in all cases. Just 13% say that torture should generally be accepted.
- South Korean support for making an exception for terrorists and allowing the use of torture has risen significantly from 31% in 2006 to 51%. Conversely, those that reject any use of torture decreased from a majority of 66% in 2006 to 48%.

THAILAND

[ABAC Poll Research Center, Assumption University](#)

A plurality of Thais feels that there should be an exception made for terrorists on the issue of the use of torture.

- A plurality of Thais (44%) agree that governments should allow some degree of torture against terrorists, though only 10% that say that torture should be allowed in general. Thirty-six percent of Thais reject the use of torture no matter the circumstances.