Americans on the Middle East

A Study of American Public Opinion

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N E T W O R K S

The Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development was established at the University of Maryland, College Park in the fall of 1997 in memory of the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The Chair, under the leadership of the Sadat Professor Shibley Telhami, is housed in the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) and makes its academic home in the Department of Government and Politics. The Chair was made possible by the commitment of Anwar Sadat's widow, Dr. Jehan Sadat, to her husband's legacy of leadership for peace. With support from all levels of the University, Dr. Sadat created an endowment for the Chair from the generous support of many individual contributors from around the world.

The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) was established in 1992 with the purpose of giving public opinion a greater voice in international relations. PIPA conducts in-depth studies of public opinion that include polls, focus groups and interviews. It integrates its findings together with those of other organizations. It actively seeks the participation of members of the policy community in developing its polls so as to make them immediately relevant to the needs of policymakers. PIPA is a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes and the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).

The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM), at the University of Maryland's School for Public Policy, pursues policy-oriented scholarship on major issues facing the United States in the global arena. Using its research, forums, and publications, CISSM links the University and the policy community to improve communication between scholars and practitioners.

Knowledge Networks is a polling, social science, and market research firm based in Menlo Park, California. Knowledge Networks uses a large-scale nationwide research panel which is randomly selected from the national population of households having telephones and is subsequently provided internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus is not limited to those who already have internet access).

INTRODUCTION

In mid-September 2012, attacks on US diplomatic missions in Libya and Egypt—countries going through revolutionary processes that began with the Arab Spring—shocked Americans in the midst of a closely fought presidential campaign. The very different governments of Libya and Egypt, both new and untested, had to formulate responses to the attacks, which immediately fed in to the American political process.

The University of Maryland's Anwar Sadat Chair and the Program on International Policy Attitudes sought to learn what have been the American public's first impressions of these events, and how attitudes on other issues in the region may have changed. Among the questions this study seeks to answer are:

From what the public has learned about the embassy attacks in Libya and Egypt, does it view these attacks as reflective of attitudes in most of the population, or as expressing the attitudes of small minorities? Were they satisfied with the responses of the governments in Egypt and Libya?

The attack on the US embassy in Egypt came in the midst of discussions about the future course of U.S. foreign aid to that country. How are Americans now feeling about continued aid to Egypt?

The degree of goodwill or ill-will the American public feels for the Arabs as a people has undergone more than a decade of severe testing now. Have these changed with the latest incidents? How high a priority does the public put now on US relations with the Muslim world, or on dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict?

In the midst of these events, the impasse over Iran's nuclear program has continued and has been an intermittent issue in the US presidential campaign, especially in the context of a potential future Israeli airstrike on Iranian nuclear facilities. (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech on the subject to the UN General Assembly took place on the first day this poll was fielded to respondents.) Might US public exasperation with the Middle East spill over into its views on this festering issue?

Similarly, the situation in Syria—possibly the most widely covered ongoing conflict in the world today—continues to worsen. Is the US public more willing, or more reluctant, to take the risks of a deeper involvement if it is done together with US allies?

METHODOLOGY

The poll was fielded from September 27-October 2, 2012 with a sample of 737 adult Americans. The margin of error for the full sample was +/-4.6% when taking into account a design effect of 1.606. It was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides a laptop and ISP connection. More technical information is available at http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The key findings of the study were:

1. Attacks in Egypt and Libya

Most Americans believe the attacks against American diplomatic missions in Egypt and Libya were not supported by majorities in those countries. However, majorities of Americans believe that the governments did not try to protect the missions, less than half believe that they criticized the attacks, and majorities believe they have not tried to apprehend the perpetrators...3

2. Views of Egypt and Libya

A substantially increased majority now wants to reduce aid to Egypt, though few want to stop it altogether. Those who perceive the Egyptian government as having failed to protect the diplomatic missions, to criticize the attacks, or to seek to apprehend the perpetrators are much more likely to want to reduce or stop aid to Egypt. Overall, a modest majority has an unfavorable view of Egypt and a large majority an unfavorable view of Libya. 3

3. America's Role in the Middle East

Americans continue to see US relations with the Muslim world and the Arab-Israeli conflict as a major priority. Only a minority favors American disengagement from the Middle East. A plurality favors the US continuing to support democracy, even if it leads to a less friendly government. However, this support has diminished a bit as perceptions of Arab uprisings have come to be increasingly seen as influenced by Islamists seeking power. 5

4. Views of Arabs and Muslims

Majorities continue to say that it is possible for the West and the Muslim world to find common ground, and to attribute the conflicts between Islam and the West to political rather than cultural or religious factors, but these majorities have declined. Overall, views of Arabs and Muslims are divided and have not changed significantly with recent events...6

5. Possible Israeli Strike Against Iran's Nuclear Program

Most Americans believe that an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear program would do little or nothing to slow down Iran's nuclear program, that it would lead to Iran striking American bases and draw the US into a war with Iran, drastically increase the price of oil and worsen America's military and strategic position in the Middle East. Still, a slight majority favors taking a neutral stance toward the possibility of Israel carrying out such a strike, though more favor discouraging Israel than encouraging from doing so. 7

6. The Syrian Conflict

Majorities of Americans favor the US, jointly with its allies, increasing diplomatic and economic sanctions against Syria and imposing a no-fly zone over Syria. However, majorities continue to oppose providing arms and supplies to ant-government groups, 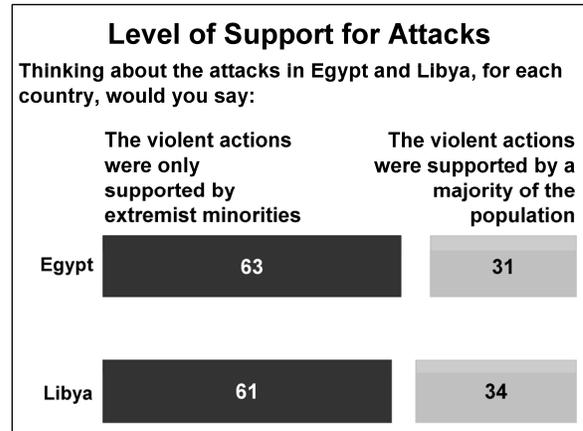bombing Syrian air defenses or sending US troops into Syria.. 9

FINDINGS

1. Attacks in Egypt and Libya
**Most Americans believe the attacks against American diplomatic missions in Egypt and Libya
were not supported by majorities in those countries. However, majorities of Americans believe
that the governments did not try to protect the missions, less than half believe that they
criticized the attacks, and majorities believe they have not tried to apprehend the perpetrators.**

Majorities of Americans say that the attacks
against American diplomatic missions in Egypt
and Libya on September 11, 2012, were supported
only by extremist minorities—not by majorities of
the population (63% for Egypt, 61% for Libya).

However, Americans are dissatisfied with the
response of the Egyptian and Libyan governments.
Majorities say governments didn't try to protect
American diplomats and their staff in Egypt (53%)
and even more so, Libya (63%), where the
American Ambassador Christopher Stevens was
killed.

Level of Support for Attacks
Thinking about the attacks in Egypt and Libya, for each
country, would you say:

	The violent actions were only supported by extremist minorities	The violent actions were supported by a majority of the population
Egypt	63	31
Libya	61	34

Less than half of Americans believe that Egyptian and Libyan governments criticized the attacks. For
both governments, 47% of respondents said they criticized the attacks, while 42% said they did not.
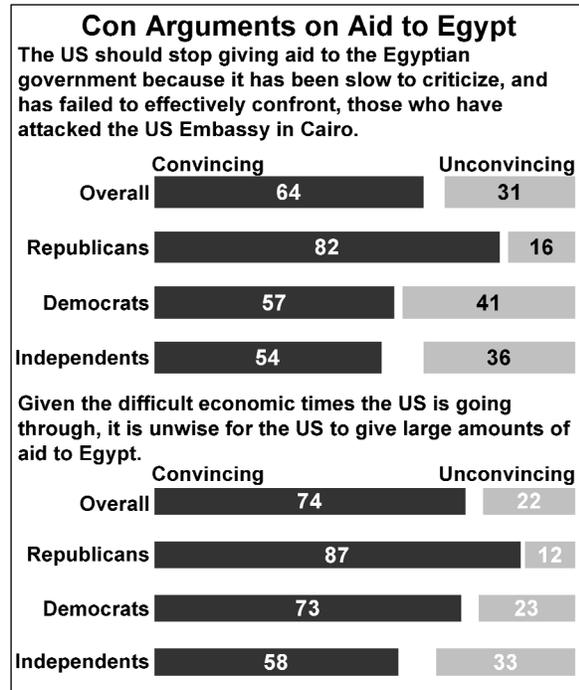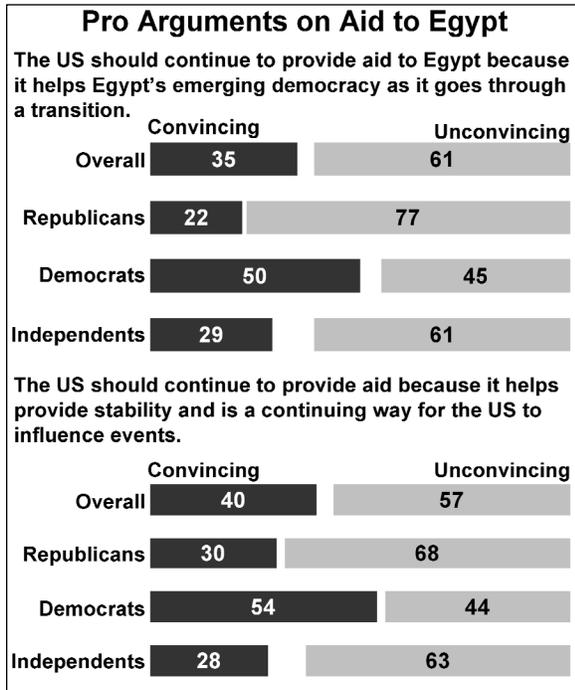
Majorities also believe that governments in Egypt and Libya have not sought to apprehend the
attackers of U.S. diplomatic missions. Regarding Egypt, only 31% thinks its government "has tried
to find and arrest the perpetrators" (57% has not); on Libya, just 34% thinks so (55% not).

2. Views of Egypt and Libya
**A substantially increased majority now wants to reduce aid to Egypt, though few want to stop it
altogether.   Those who perceive the Egyptian government as having failed to protect the
diplomatic missions, to criticize the attacks, or to seek to apprehend the perpetrators are much
more likely to want to reduce or stop aid to Egypt. Overall, a modest majority has an
unfavorable view of Egypt and a large majority an unfavorable view of Libya.**

A large majority now favors reducing aid to Egypt, even after considering a series of arguments for
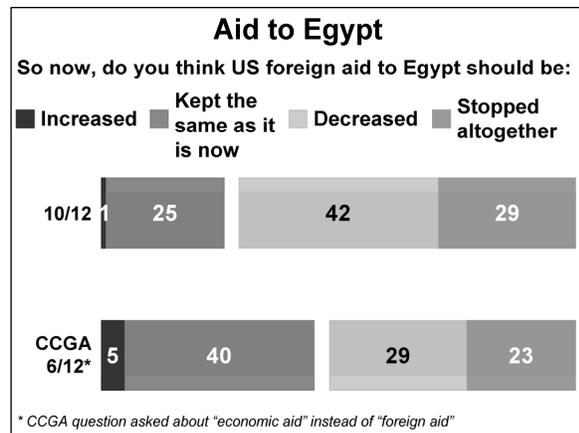and against reducing aid.

Respondents were offered two arguments for, and two against, continuing aid to Egypt; majorities
found both pro arguments unconvincing and both con arguments convincing.

Pro Arguments on Aid to Egypt

The US should continue to provide aid to Egypt because it helps Egypt's emerging democracy as it goes through a transition.

	Convincing	Unconvincing
Overall	35	61
Republicans	22	77
Democrats	50	45
Independents	29	61

The US should continue to provide aid because it helps provide stability and is a continuing way for the US to influence events.

	Convincing	Unconvincing
Overall	40	57
Republicans	30	68
Democrats	54	44
Independents	28	63

Con Arguments on Aid to Egypt

The US should stop giving aid to the Egyptian government because it has been slow to criticize, and has failed to effectively confront, those who have attacked the US Embassy in Cairo.

	Convincing	Unconvincing
Overall	64	31
Republicans	82	16
Democrats	57	41
Independents	54	36

Given the difficult economic times the US is going through, it is unwise for the US to give large amounts of aid to Egypt.

	Convincing	Unconvincing
Overall	74	22
Republicans	87	12
Democrats	73	23
Independents	58	33

An argument in favor of aid based on the value of promoting democracy was found convincing by 35%, while 61% found it unconvincing. An argument phrased in terms of helping stability did a little better (40% convincing) but was still found unconvincing by 57%.

Arguments against aid to Egypt did much better. An argument that focused on the Egyptian government's delayed response to the embassy attacks was found convincing by a 64% majority (unconvincing, 31%). Almost three quarters (74%) found convincing an argument that economically, the U.S. cannot afford large amounts of aid to Egypt (unconvincing, 22%).

After evaluating the arguments, when respondents were asked whether U.S. foreign aid to Egypt should be increased, kept the same, decreased, or stopped altogether, the most common answer was to decrease aid (42%) with a lesser 29% wanting to stop it. Thus a large majority of 71% wanted to go in the direction of reductions. Twenty-six percent wanted to either keep aid the same (25%) or increase it (1%). Overall, two thirds (67%) would support continuing at least some aid to Egypt.

Aid to Egypt

So now, do you think US foreign aid to Egypt should be:

Legend: ■ Increased ■ Kept the same as it is now □ Decreased ▨ Stopped altogether

	Increased	Kept the same	Decreased	Stopped altogether
10/12	1	25	42	29
CCGA 6/12*	5	40	29	23

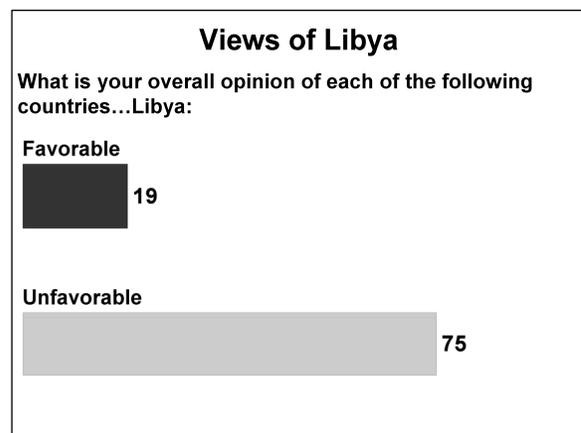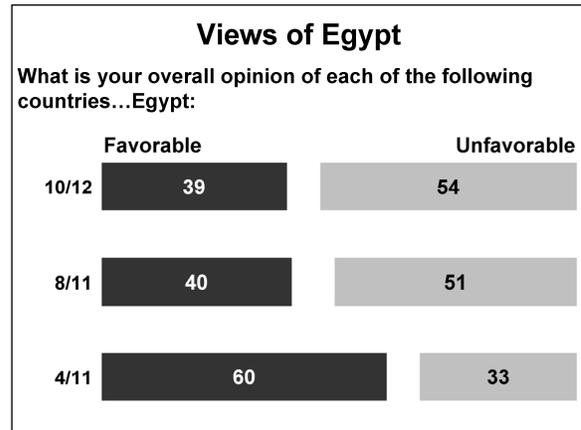** CCGA question asked about "economic aid" instead of "foreign aid"*

When this finding is compared to two very similar questions asked in June 2012 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, it appears that the majority preferring lower aid to Egypt has grown significantly. In June, a lesser 52% wanted lower economic aid to Egypt, with 29% wanting to decrease it and 23% wanting to stop it. Forty-five percent wanted to keep aid the same (40%) or increase it (5%). Asked in another question about military aid, 28% wanted to stop it (5 points higher than for economic aid), but otherwise the results were virtually the same as for economic aid.

Those who perceive the Egyptian government as not having tried to protect the diplomatic missions, to criticize the attacks, or to seek to apprehend the perpetrators are much more likely to want to decrease or stop aid to Egypt.   Among those who perceive no effort to protect the missions, 85% want aid decreased (39%) or stopped (46%); among those who *do* perceive such effort, a lesser 55% want it decreased (45%) or stopped (10%).   Among those who believe the government has not criticized the attacks, 84% want aid decreased (37%) or stopped (47%); among those who *do* believe the government has criticized the attacks, 64% want aid decreased (46%) or stopped (18%).   And among those who think the government has not sought the culprits, 80% want aid decreased (37%) or stopped (43%); among those who believe the government *is* attempting this, 59% want aid decreased (50%) or stopped (9%).

Republicans are most likely to want to lower aid to Egypt, with 85% wanting to go in this direction (44% decrease, 41% stop).   Among Democrats, 64% want to lower aid, but few want to cut it off (49% decrease,15% stop); 36% want to at least maintain its level (increase, 3%).   Among independents, 63% want to lower aid, with a third wanting to stop it (27% decrease, 36% stop); 27% want to at least maintain its level (increase, 2%).

Perceptions of Libya are strikingly unfavorable, with 75% saying they have unfavorable views. Only 19% express favorable views.

Views of Egypt are also unfavorable, though less so. Fifty-four percent have an unfavorable view and 39% favorable--essentially unchanged from August 2011, when 51% had an unfavorable view and 40% a favorable one, but it contrasts sharply with the American public's perceptions of Egypt shortly after the revolution in April 2011 when 60% expressed favorable views of Egypt.

Views of Egypt

What is your overall opinion of each of the following countries…Egypt:

	Favorable	Unfavorable
10/12	39	54
8/11	40	51
4/11	60	33

Views of Libya

What is your overall opinion of each of the following countries…Libya:

Favorable — 19

Unfavorable — 75

3. America's Role in the Middle East
Americans continue to see US relations with the Muslim world and the Arab-Israeli conflict as a major priority. Only a minority favors American disengagement from the Middle East. A plurality favors the US continuing to support democracy, even if it leads to a less friendly government. However, this support has diminished a bit as perceptions of Arab uprisings have come to be increasingly seen as influenced by Islamists seeking power.

There has been little change in the public's ranking of the US relationship with Muslims and Muslim-majority countries among US interests since the August 2011 poll, and a slight increase in the perceived importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Two thirds continue to express the view that both issues are among the "top five issues."

In light of the recent events in the Middle East, Americans' most common response (46%) was that the United States should maintain its current level of diplomacy in the region. Thirty-four percent said the US should decrease its diplomatic involvement, and 14% said diplomatic involvement should be increased.

Support for promoting democracy has cooled a bit since the Arab Spring. Presented the statement, "I would want to see a country become more democratic even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies," 50% now agree—down from 57% in April 2011. Forty-two percent disagree—essentially unchanged—but those not giving an answer has risen from 4 to 8%.

Perceptions of popular uprisings in the Arab world have changed. They have shifted away somewhat from a view that the uprisings are about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy (down from 45% in April 2011 to 15% now) to a perception that they are more about Islamist groups seeking power (up from 15% to 38%). The most common view, though, is that they are about both of these equally (up from 37% to 42%).

US Diplomatic Involvement in Middle East

In light of recent events in the Middle East and thinking about broad U.S. interests in the region, do you think the US should:

Increase its diplomatic involvement in the region
14

Maintain its current level of diplomatic involvement in the region
46

Decrease its diplomatic involvement in the region
34

Arab Popular Uprisings

Do you think the popular uprisings in the Arab world are:

More about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy

More about Islamist groups seeking political power

Both equally

	Ordinary people	Islamist groups	Both equally
10/12	15	38	42
8/11	33	17	45
4/11	45	15	37

Presumably this shift is prompted by the different character of the recent uprisings as compared to those during the Arab spring.
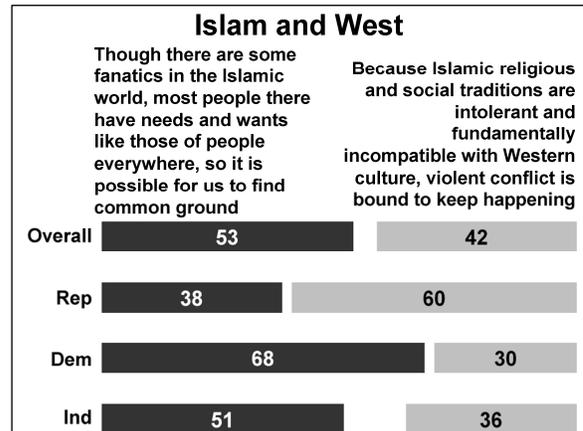
Those who perceive Arab uprisings as primarily about Islamists seeking power are less likely to unequivocally support democracy. Only 48% of this group do so, saying "I would want to see a country become more democratic" even if it were more likely to oppose US policies, compared to 59% of those who see the uprisings as more about ordinary people seeking freedom.

4. Views of Arabs and Muslims
Majorities continue to say that it is possible for the West and the Muslim world to find common ground, and to attribute the conflicts between Islam and the West to political rather than cultural or religious factors, but these majorities have declined. Overall, views of Arabs and Muslims are divided and have not changed significantly with recent events.
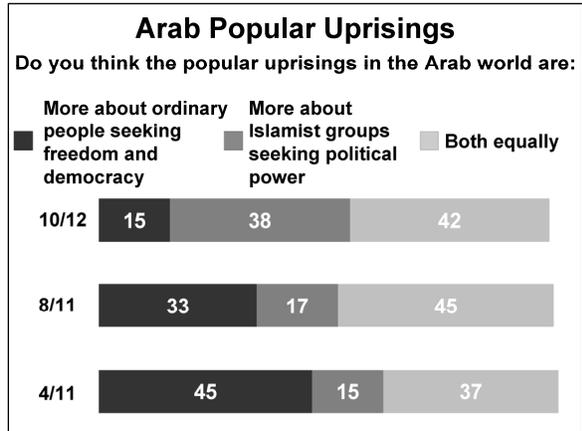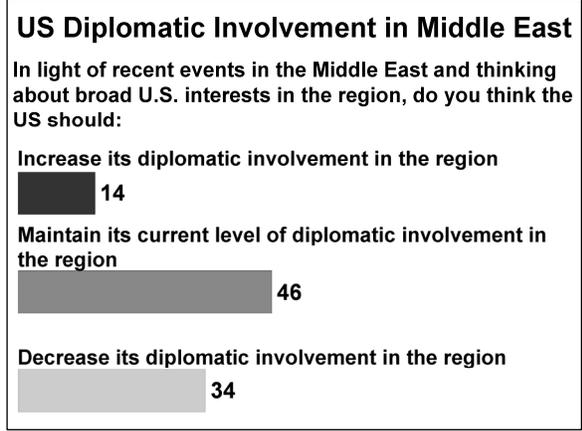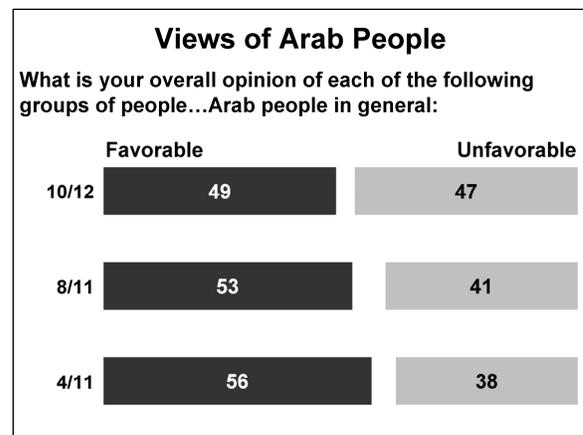
A majority rejects the idea that Islamic culture and Western culture are fundamentally incompatible and conflict is inevitable, and says instead that it is possible to find common ground. Offered two statements, only 42% thought that "violent conflict is bound to keep happening," while 53% agreed with the statement that "Though there are some fanatics in the Islamic world, most people there have needs and wants like those of people everywhere, so it is possible for us to find common ground." However, this majority has eroded over time—down from 59% a year ago and 68% shortly after the 9/11attacks. Sixty-eight percent of Democrats and 51% of independents prefer the view that common ground is possible, while 60% of Republicans see violent conflict as inevitable.

Islam and West

	Though there are some fanatics in the Islamic world, most people there have needs and wants like those of people everywhere, so it is possible for us to find common ground	Because Islamic religious and social traditions are intolerant and fundamentally incompatible with Western culture, violent conflict is bound to keep happening
Overall	53	42
Rep	38	60
Dem	68	30
Ind	51	36

A majority (51%) continues to think that the tensions between Islam and the West are more about conflicts of power and interests than of differences of religion and culture (43%).   This is down, however, from one year ago, when 57% thought the tensions were more about power and interests and 38% more about religion and culture. It is noteworthy too that 56% of Republicans, compared with 36% of Democrats and 38% of independents, attribute the tensions to differences of religion and culture.
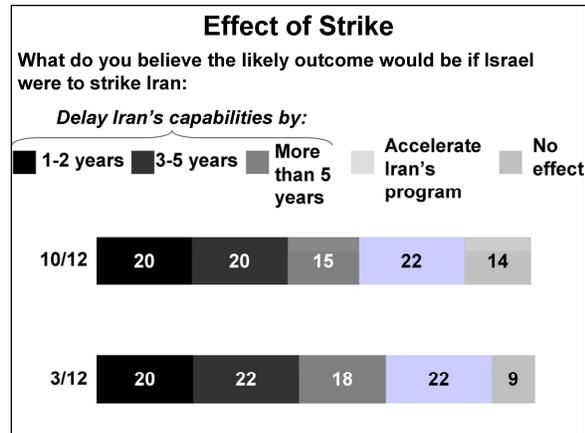
Perceptions of Arab people in general are divided, with 49% expressing a favorable and 47% an unfavorable view; this is slightly down, though not statistically significant, from a 53% favorable view in August 2011.   Views of Muslim people in general are evenly divided at 48%, similar to a year ago.

Views of Arab People

What is your overall opinion of each of the following groups of people…Arab people in general:

	Favorable	Unfavorable
10/12	49	47
8/11	53	41
4/11	56	38

5. Possible Israeli Strike Against Iran's Nuclear Program

Most Americans believe that an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear program would do little or nothing to slow down Iran's nuclear program, that it would lead to Iran striking American bases and draw the US into a war with Iran, drastically increase the price of oil and worsen America's military and strategic position in the Middle East. Still, a slight majority favors taking a neutral stance toward the possibility of Israel carrying out such a strike, though more favor discouraging Israel than encouraging from doing so.
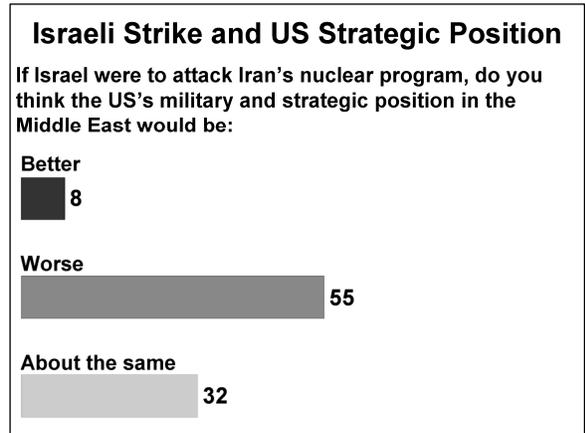
Americans are very pessimistic about the benefits of Israel making a military strike on Iran's nuclear program. Only 15% believe that it would delay Iran's capabilities to develop nuclear weapons by more than five years. A majority believes that it either would have no effect (14%), would even accelerate Iran's program (22%) or would just slow it down 1-2 years (20%). Another 20% think it would slow it down 3-5 years.

Effect of Strike

What do you believe the likely outcome would be if Israel were to strike Iran:

Delay Iran's capabilities by:

	1-2 years	3-5 years	More than 5 years	Accelerate Iran's program	No effect
10/12	20	20	15	22	14
3/12	20	22	18	22	9

Americans also express very negative views about the possible consequences for the United States were Israel to strike Iran's nuclear program. Almost all—86%--see it as likely that such an Israeli strike would mean "the price of oil would increase drastically" (very likely, 59%). A miniscule 9% saw this prospect as unlikely. The public was somewhat less sure that in the wake of an Israeli strike, "Iran would attack US bases and forces in the region and draw the US into war with Iran." Still, a 70% majority saw this as likely (very likely, 28%).

The expectation is also that such a strike would worsen "the US's military and strategic position in the Middle East," with 55% taking this view. Only 8% thought the US position would be improved, while 32% thought it would remain about the same.

Israeli Strike and US Strategic Position

If Israel were to attack Iran's nuclear program, do you think the US's military and strategic position in the Middle East would be:

Better
8

Worse
55

About the same
32

A slight majority favors taking a neutral stance toward the possibility of Israel carrying out such a strike, though more favor discouraging than encouraging Israel from this course. Respondents evaluated three arguments for encouraging Israel, staying neutral, or discouraging Israel from attacking Iran.

The argument for discouraging Israel got a strong positive response, with 63% calling it convincing (very, 19%). It read,

> "There are huge risks to US national interests, since Iran may attack US assets in retaliation, pulling the US into a war. Oil prices would skyrocket. Furthermore, US military leaders say the most that could be achieved would be to slow down Iran's nuclear program a bit and probably just lead them to rebuild it underground."
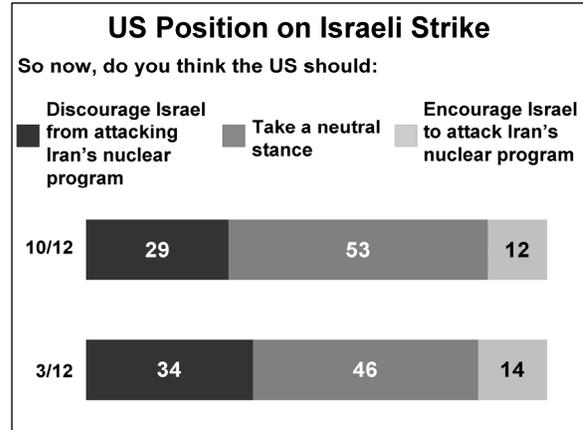
It was the best received of the three arguments, though the course of action it proposed came in second.

The argument for a neutral stance was second most popular. While it argued that "Israel has a right to take actions it sees as necessary for its own defense," it also made room for the U.S. to dissociate itself from Israel, saying "Meanwhile, the US should think about its own interests and make a clear statement distancing itself from whatever Israel may choose to do, to reduce the chance that Iran will

retaliate against US targets." A modest majority of 52% found this convincing (very, 14%), while 43% found it unconvincing (very, 15%).

A majority rejected the argument for encouraging Israel to use airstrikes, which said that 'Clearly Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons, and if Israel will take the heat for stopping or at least slowing down the program, all the better for the US." Fifty-seven percent found this unconvincing (25% very) while 36% found it convincing (very, 9%).

When asked to choose, a modest majority (53%) preferred to take a neutral stance—up from 46% in March—while only 29% chose discouraging Israel—down from 34%. This pattern is the same as was found earlier this year: the most convincing argument was not chosen as the policy. One could speculate that taking a neutral stance seems more likely and realistic for the US to some respondents, who would otherwise prefer the US to be more definitive with Israel about the perceived drawbacks of the policy. Only 12% wanted to encourage Israel (March, 14%). There was no difference across party lines on the choice to take a neutral stance.

US Position on Israeli Strike

So now, do you think the US should:

	Discourage Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear program	Take a neutral stance	Encourage Israel to attack Iran's nuclear program
10/12	29	53	12
3/12	34	46	14

6. The Syrian Conflict
Majorities of Americans favor the US, jointly with its allies, increasing diplomatic and economic sanctions against Syria and imposing a no-fly zone over Syria. However, majorities continue to oppose providing arms and supplies to ant-government groups, bombing Syrian air defenses or sending US troops into Syria.

When respondents were offered five policy options for the US to act "jointly with its allies" to deal with the Syrian conflict, they were willing to support two, including one that involved the use of military assets, but rejected the others.

"Increasing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Syria" was the most popular option at 60% support, with 29% opposed. Interestingly, both Republican and Democratic support was higher than this—at 69 and 65%, respectively—but among independents support was a plurality, 42 to 37%. "Enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria" was

Potential Actions in Syria

Would you support or oppose the United States, jointly with its allies doing each of the following actions with respect to the conflict in Syria?

Increasing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Syria
60

Enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria
59

Sending arms and supplies to anti-government groups
22

Bombing Syrian air defense
21

Sending troops into Syria
13

almost the same: 59% supported it, and this was 63% each among Republicans and Democrats, while a plurality of independents supported it by 48 to 32%.
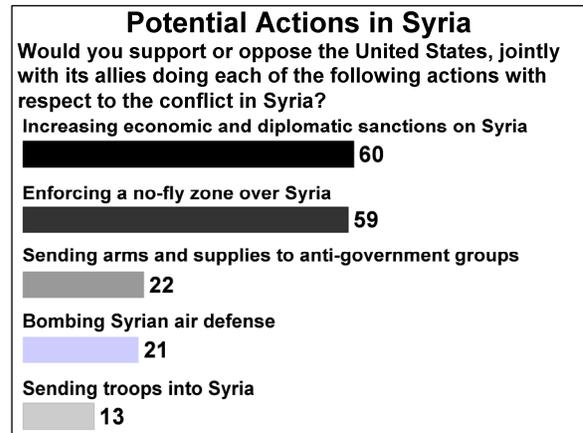
The options of "sending arms and supplies to anti-government groups" and "bombing Syrian air defenses" were both rejected by two-to-one margins. For sending arms and supplies 67% were opposed and only 22% in favor; there was no meaningful variation in support by party. For bombing Syrian air defenses, 68% opposed this idea and 21% supported it.

Finally, "sending troops into Syria" was the most unpopular option and was opposed by three in four respondents (77%), while it was supported by 13%.