

Center for
Middle East Policy
at BROOKINGS

American Attitudes Toward the Middle East and Israel

A public opinion poll by Shibley Telhami

A survey sponsored by the
Sadat Chair for
Peace and Development
at the University of Maryland

In cooperation with the
Program for Public Consultation
fielded by
Nielsen Scarborough

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Survey Methodology

1738 American adults in sample

*National sample of **875** adults, plus oversample of **863** self-identified Evangelical or Born-again Christians*

Fielded November 4 - 10, 2015

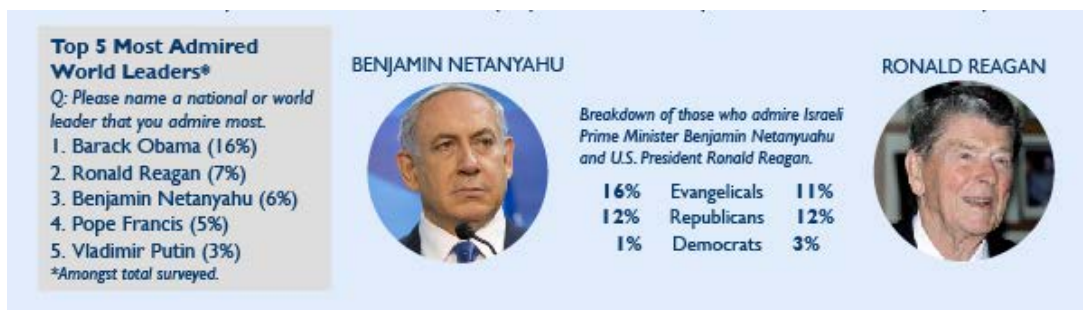
Online survey format

Margin of error is 3 - 4%

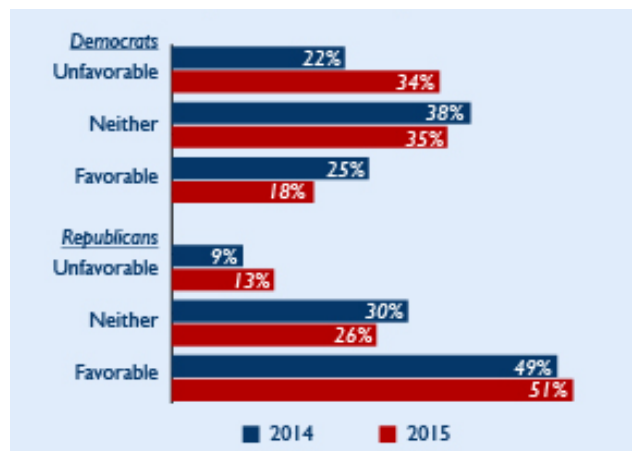
KEY FINDINGS

After a year in the news, the American partisan divide on the Israeli Prime Minister sharpens dramatically:

- In the open-ended question, “Please name a national or world leader you admire most?” Benjamin Netanyahu was most frequently mentioned among Evangelical Christians (16%) ahead of Ronald Regan (11%) and Barack Obama (10%). Among Republicans, Netanyahu ties Ronald Regan (12%), but only one percent of Democrats select Netanyahu as most admired leader.

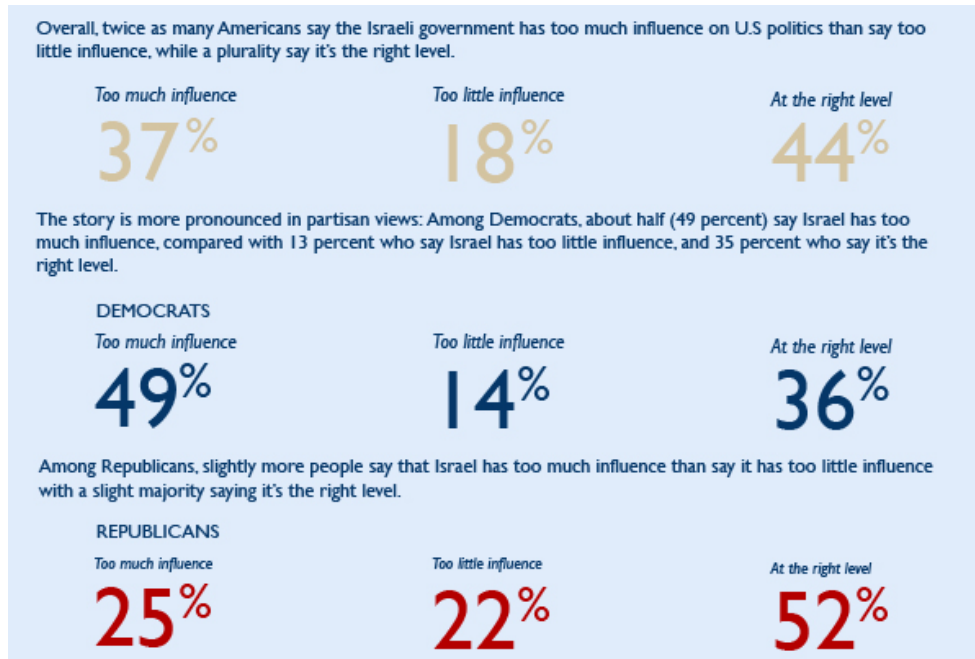


- While Republicans overall have a much more favorable views of Netanyahu than unfavorable ones, Democrats have a more unfavorable view of the Israeli leader by a ratio of about two to one. In general, older Americans admire the Israeli leader far more than the younger ones. Netanyahu’s unfavorable ratings among Democrats have risen substantially from a year ago from 22% to 34%; in comparison, favorable views of Netanyahu among Republicans stayed within the margin of error of last year’s results from (51% compared to 49% in 2014) while unfavorable views increased slightly from 9% to 13%.



How Much Influence Does the Israeli Government Have in American Politics?

- Overall, twice as many Americans say the Israeli government has too much influence (37%) than say too little influence (18%), while a plurality (44%) say it's the right level. The story once again is more pronounced in the partisan views: Among Democrats, about half (49%) say Israel has too much influence, compared with 14% who say Israel has too little influence, and 36% who say it's the right level; Among Republicans, slightly more people say that Israel has too much influence (25%) than say it has too little influence (22%) with a slight majority (52%) saying it's the right level.



- Americans who identify themselves as Evangelical Christian are more likely to say that Israel has too little influence (39%) compared with 23% who say it has too much influence, with 38% saying it's the right level.
- When looking at the different age groups, as we go up in age, the percentage of people who think that Israel has too little influence increases. 8% of 18-24 year olds feel this way in contrast to 17% of 25-44 year olds, 20% of 45-64 year olds, and 22% of those who are 65 years of age and older.

American Views of the Current Escalation of Violence Among Israelis and Palestinians

- Twenty nine percent of Americans say they are very concerned about events in Israel and the Palestinian territory and an additional 38% say they are somewhat concerned. Who do they believe is most responsible for the escalation of violence? A plurality, 31%, believe that the absence of serious peace diplomacy is most responsible, while 26% equally blame continued Israeli occupation and settlement, expansion in the West Bank, and Palestinian extremists. Only 6% each blame Israeli extremists and Palestinian authority ineffectiveness.
- Partisan differences are significant: a plurality of Democrats, 37%, blame continued Israeli occupation and settlement expansion, followed by 35% who blame the absence of serious peace diplomacy, while 15% blame Palestinian extremists. In contrast, 40% of Republicans blame Palestinian extremists first, followed by 27% who blame absence of serious diplomacy, and 16% blame continued Israeli occupation and settlement expansion.
- Among those who are concerned about the escalation of violence, 47% say that their concern is mostly related to human rights or international law, while 32% say their concern relates to America's interest, and 13% to religious beliefs, while 7% express concern for Israel's interests. Among Democrats and Independents, a majority (57% and 56% respectively), say their concerns mostly relate to human rights or international law, while 28% of Democrats and 25% of Independents say their concerns relate to America's interests. In contrast, 38% of Republicans say their concerns relate to America's interest, 33% to human rights and international law, 17% to their religious beliefs, and 11% to Israel's interest.

Public Support for A Two-State Solution vs. One-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

- Overall, the American public's preferences for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have not changed much since 2014, with most categories remaining within the margin of error of last year's poll. Those who advocate a one-state solution, 31%, are now comparable to those who advocate a two-state solution, 35%. The most notable change is that Republicans this year equally support a two-state solution vs. one-state solution (29% each), and support for both one state and two states among Independents has diminished from last year, while the percentage of Independents who support Israeli annexation of the West Bank increased from 6% to 14% in 2015.
- Among those who advocate a two-state solution as their preferred solution, 73% say they would support a one-state solution if the first option were no longer possible (in comparison to only 66% in 2014). The most noticeable change is among Republicans:

68% now say they would then support a one-state solution, in comparison to only 51% in 2014.

- Strong American majorities continue to favor Israel's democracy over its Jewishness in the absence of a two-state solution (72% in 2015, compared with 71% in 2014). The most noticeable change is the decline of those who favor Jewishness over democracy among Republicans and Independents (37% to 31%; and 25% to 17% respectively).

What Role Do Americans Want the United States to Play in Mediating the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?

- Overall, there is little change from last year on this issue, with 66% of Americans saying they would like the United States to lean towards neither side, while 30% want the United States to lean towards Israel. Only 3% want the U.S. to lean towards the Palestinians. The differences remain largely partisan, with three quarters and more of Democrats and Independents wanting the U.S. to lean towards neither side, while nearly half of the Republicans want the U.S. to lean towards Israel. However, it is notable that while a slight majority of Republicans, 51%, wanted the U.S. to lean towards Israel, vs. 46% towards neither side in 2014, these numbers reversed in 2015, with 51% of Republicans wanting the U.S. to lean towards neither side, and 45% wanting the U.S. to lean towards Israel.

Support for U.N. Security Council Resolution Endorsing Establishment of a Palestinian State

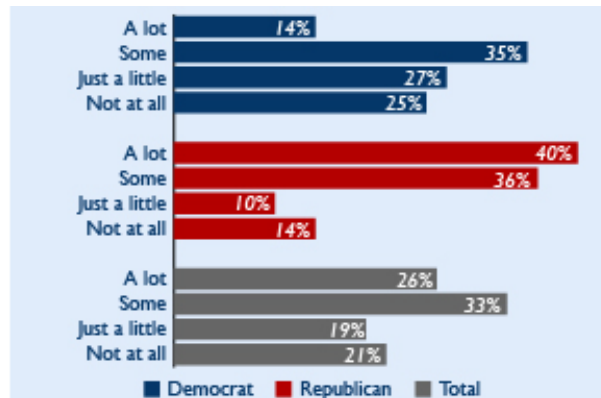
- On this issue as well, there is little change from 2014, with 45% of Americans supporting abstaining if such a resolution comes up at the U.N., 27% recommending endorsing the resolution, and 26% recommending voting against it. As in 2014, a plurality of Republicans, 43% (47% in 2014), recommend voting against endorsing the establishment of a Palestinian state, while 37% recommend abstaining, and 18% recommend endorsing.

American Public Views on How the U.S. Should React to Israeli Settlement Construction

- Overall, 31% recommend that the U.S. limits its opposition to words, 27% recommend that the U.S. do nothing, while 27% recommend economic sanctions, and 10% recommend taking more serious action. It is notable that among Democrats, more people (49%) recommend either imposing economic sanctions or taking more serious action, than those recommending doing nothing or limiting U.S. opposition towards (46%).

When Americans decide to vote for a candidate in Congress or for president, how much do they consider the candidates' position on U.S. policy towards Israel?

- Overall, 26% say that a candidate's position on Israel matters a lot to them, and another 33% say it matters some. Only 21% say it does not matter at all. Republicans care most: 40% say a candidate's position on Israel matters a lot, compared to 22% for Independents, and 14% for Democrats. The issue matters even more to those who identify themselves as Evangelical Christians, 55% of whom say a candidate's position on Israel matters a lot to them when they decide for whom to vote.



- Republicans who say they care a lot about candidates' positions on Israel favor Ben Carson first (35% in comparison to 26% for Republicans overall) followed by Donald Trump with 27% (compared to 28% of Republicans overall).

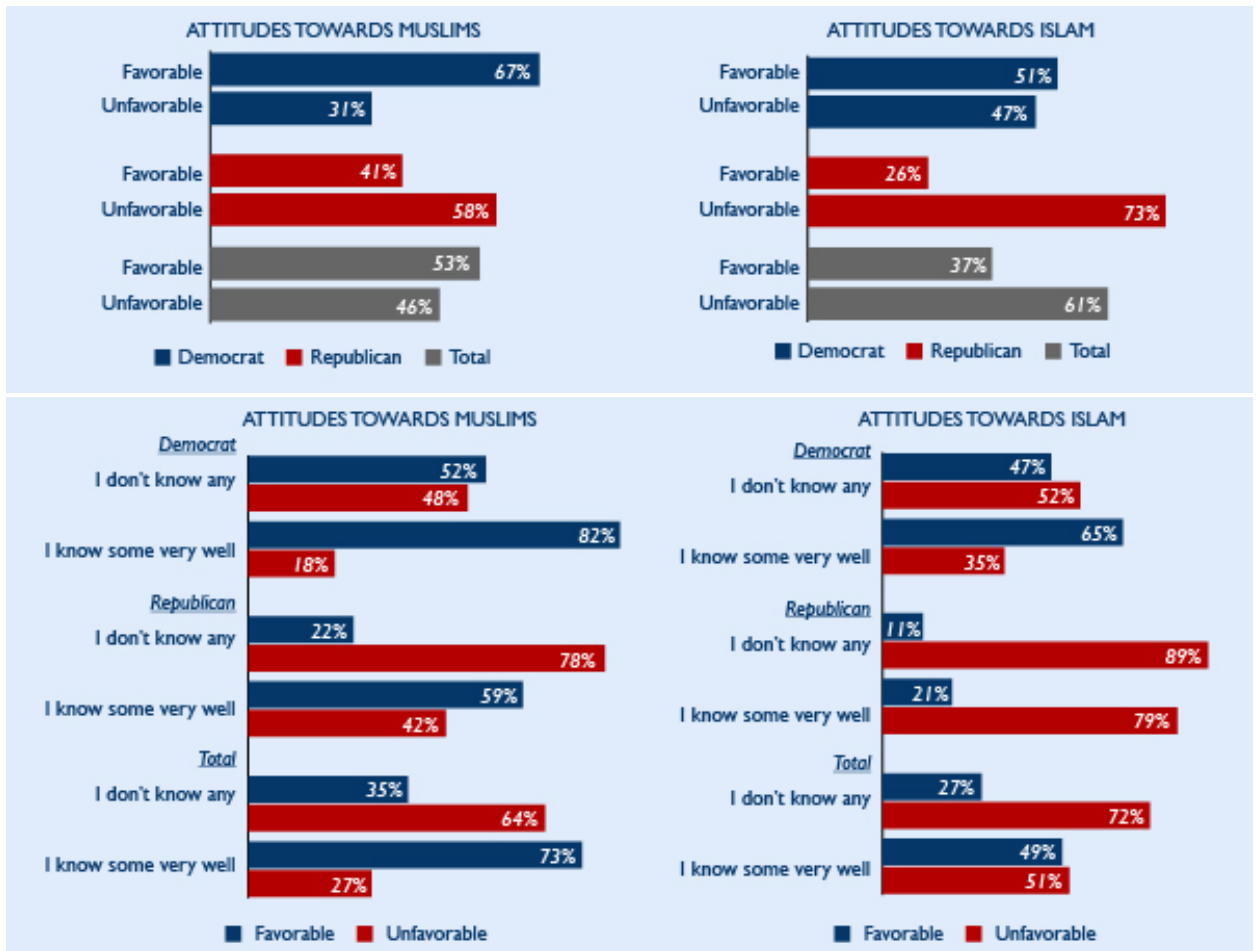
How Americans Rank Threats Emanating from the Middle East

- Despite intensive focus on the Iranian nuclear threat in American, especially in Congressional politics, if the Iranian nuclear deal were not stopped—there is no increase in the expressed perception of an Iranian threat, compared with last year: Sixty nine percent of the public said ISIS is the biggest threat (compared with 70% in 2014) while 14% ranked Iranian behavior as the biggest threat (compared with 12% in 2014)—even though the poll was conducted before the ISIS Paris attacks.

Attitudes Toward Muslims and Islam

- When asked how they felt about Muslim people, Americans overall had a more favorable than unfavorable view. In contrast they have a more negative view of Islam.
- Democrats had a more favorable view of the Muslim people, with almost double the respondents having favorable views as compared to an unfavorable views of Muslims (67% favorable and 31% unfavorable).

- Americans who said they knew some Muslims well, across the political spectrum, tended to have much more favorable views of Muslims than those who said they didn't know any.
- Americans have a more unfavorable view of the Muslim religion (37% favorable and 61% unfavorable). However, this sentiment is not reflected among Democrats, where slightly more responding say they view the Muslim religion favorably (51% favorable and 47% unfavorable).



- For comparison, strong majorities of Americans across the political spectrum say they have favorable views of Jews and of the Jewish Religion.

Evangelical Attitudes toward Israel

- Overall, Evangelicals tended to express a more pro-Israeli stance than non-Evangelical Christians, with many relating the current, on-going conflict to their religious beliefs.
- Regarding the end of times and the return of Christ, 5% of Christians and 12% of Evangelicals thought it would happen in their lifetime. Most, 72% of Christians and 81% Evangelicals, believed it would happen but were not sure whether it would be tomorrow or in a thousand years.
- Among Christians who say Christ will return, 55% overall and 75% of Evangelicals say that things need to happen in Israel before Christ returns. More specifically, 63% of Evangelicals compared to 51% of non-Evangelical Christians say that for the rapture or Second Coming to occur it is essential for current-day Israel to include all the land they believe was promised to Biblical Israel in the Old Testament.
- Among those who say Christ will return, 73% of Evangelicals say that world events would turn against Israel the closer we get to the rapture or end times compared to 49% of non-Evangelical Christians. 79% of Evangelicals say that the unfolding violence across the Middle East is a sign that the end times are nearer compared to only 43% of non-Evangelical Christians.

