

American Public Attitudes Toward ISIS and Syria

A survey sponsored by the

Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland

in cooperation with the

Program for Public Consultation

presented at

The Center for Middle East Policy

The Brookings Institution

January 8, 2015

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Steven Kull, Evan Lewis, Clay Ramsay, and Katayoun Kishi provided assistance.

Peyton Craighill provided helpful comments.

Rachel Slattery and Elizabeth Pearce contributed to the presentation.

This probabilistic Internet survey was fielded by GfK
among a nationally representative sample of 1008 Americans, November 14-19, 2014.

Full Report Available Online
www.brookings.edu/ISISopinionpoll

Survey Methodology

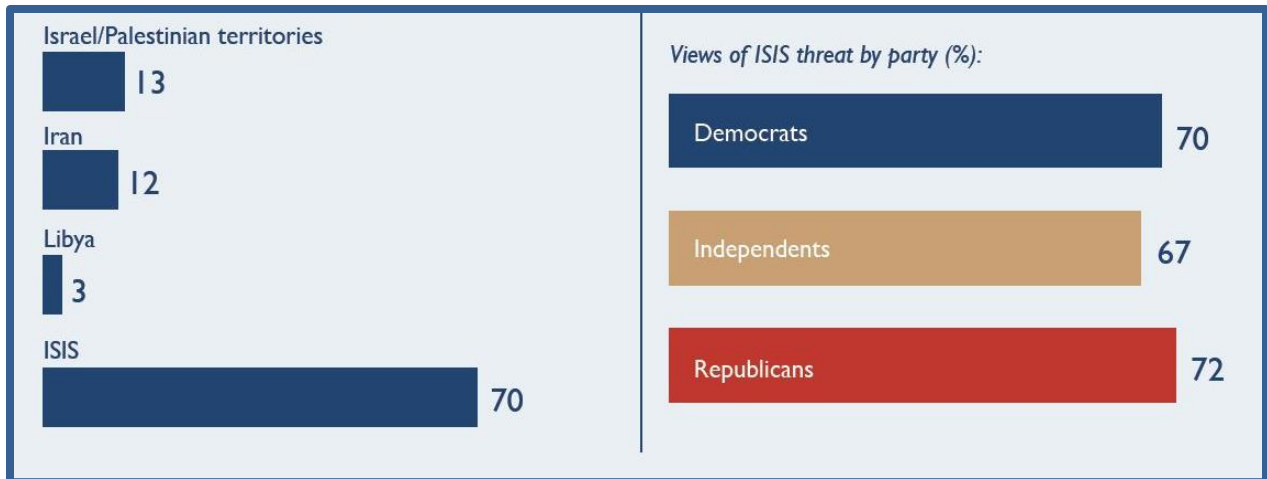
The sample was drawn from a larger standing panel called the KnowledgePanel that is managed by the research company GfK. Though these surveys take place online, this panel is not derived from an “opt-in” by which any online user can volunteer a respondent. Instead, panelists are recruited through a scientific process of selection using two methods: a random selection of residential addresses using the United States Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in GfK’s KnowledgePanel. Those who agree to participate but who do not have Internet access are provided a laptop computer and Internet service. A representative sample is then chosen for a specific survey. Once that sample completes a survey, the demographic breakdown of the sample is compared to the U.S. census. Any variations from the census are adjusted by weighting.

The study was fielded over November 14-November 19, 2014 with a sample of 1008 American adults. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%; with the design effect also taken into account, the margin of error is plus or minus 3.4%. Findings were weighted to census data.

Key Findings

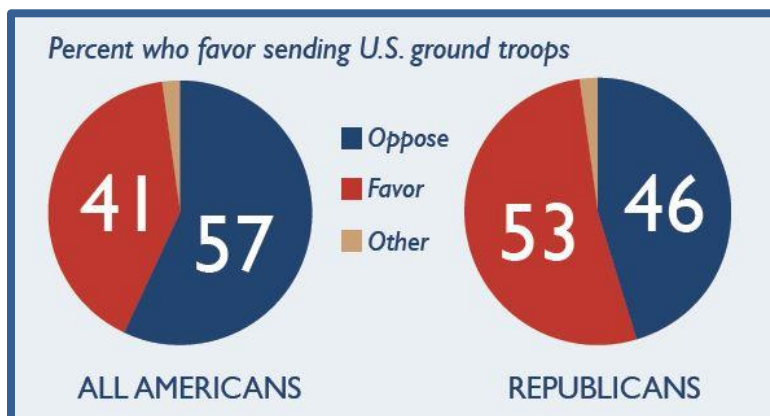
Ranking of the ISIS Threat

Americans overwhelmingly say that ISIS is the biggest challenge facing the United States in the Middle East—well above Iranian behavior and Palestinian-Israeli violence. Overall, 70% say ISIS is the biggest threat, compared with 13% for Palestinian-Israeli violence and 12% for Iranian behavior. Unlike most other policy issues toward the Middle East, there is little variation on this issue across party lines.



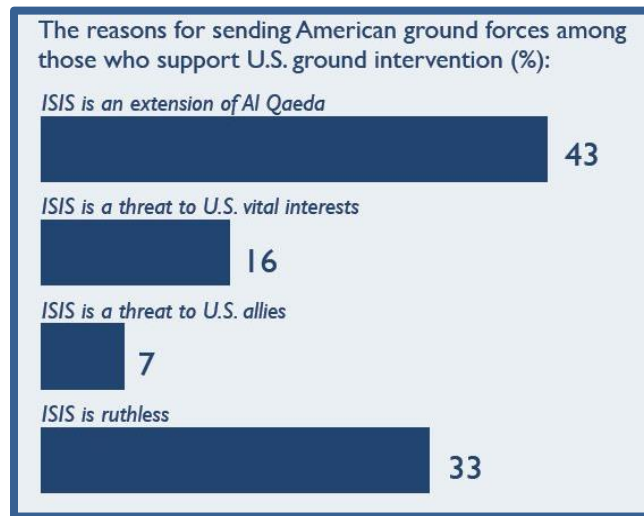
Degree of Support for Deploying Ground Forces

If airstrikes fail to stop ISIS, 57% of Americans oppose and 41% support sending ground forces to fight ISIS. However, there are significant differences across party lines: a majority of Republicans (53%) support sending ground forces compared with only 36% of Democrats and 31% of Independents.



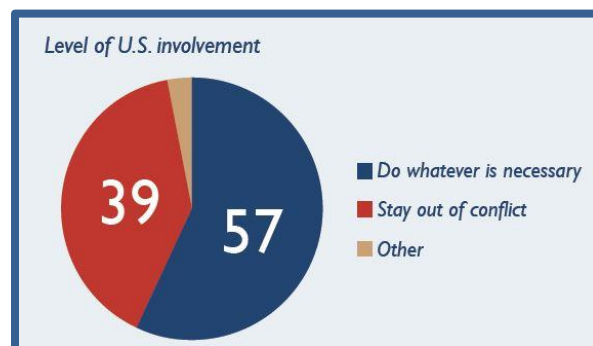
What Justifies Using Ground Forces?

One of the striking findings is the reasoning respondents select for favoring the deployment of ground forces. Among those who support deploying ground forces, 43% say that what justifies such deployment is that ISIS is an extension of Al Qaeda, against whom the United States is in a war that must be finished. The next justification, selected by 33%, is ISIS's ruthlessness and intolerance. These two top categories hold across party lines. In comparison, few respondents select ISIS's threats to allies (7%), or even ISIS's potential to threaten most of America's vital interests, including domestic interests (16%), as justification for deploying ground troops.



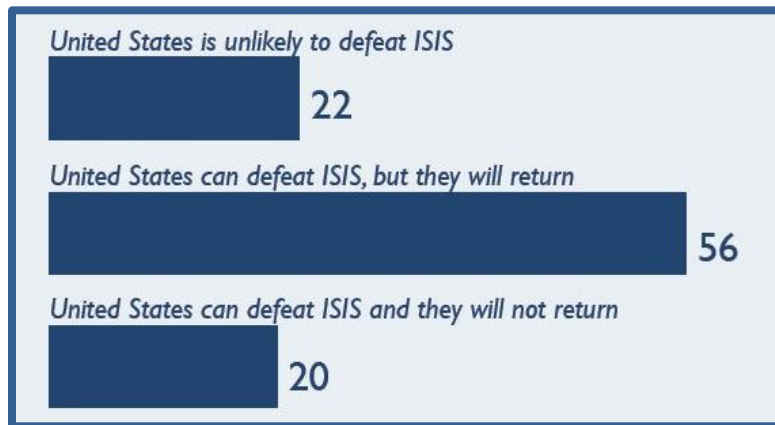
American Public Ambivalence

Despite expressing opposition to deploying ground forces, Americans indicate strong feelings about the need to confront ISIS. Given a choice between two views, one suggesting that the United States should stay out, and another suggesting intervening at the “necessary level”, more respondents chose the latter (57% overall, including 67% of Republicans and about half of Democrats and Independents).



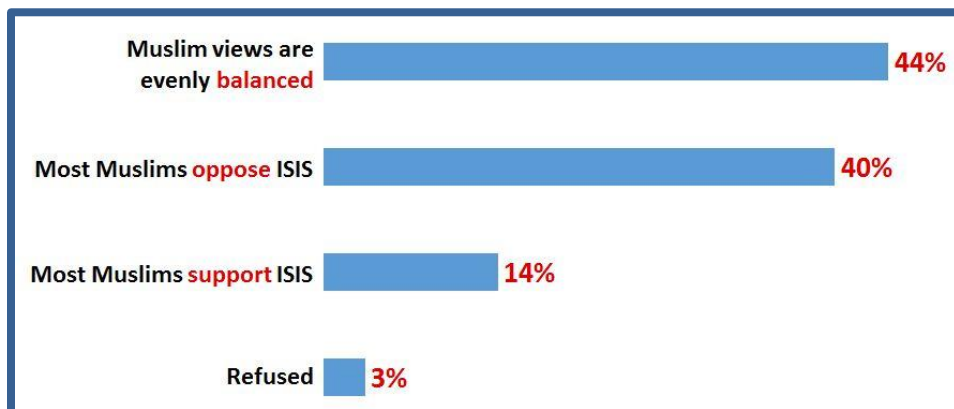
Explaining Ambivalence: Force Cannot Ensure That ISIS Will Not Return

One reason that Americans on the one hand want to intervene at the “necessary level” while on the other hand want to exclude ground forces may be their assessment of the prospects for success or failure. Only 20% of respondents say that the United States can defeat ISIS and ensure that they will not return. A majority (56%) say ISIS can be defeated, but it, or something like it, will return as soon as the United States withdraws. This holds across party lines.



Assessed Support for ISIS

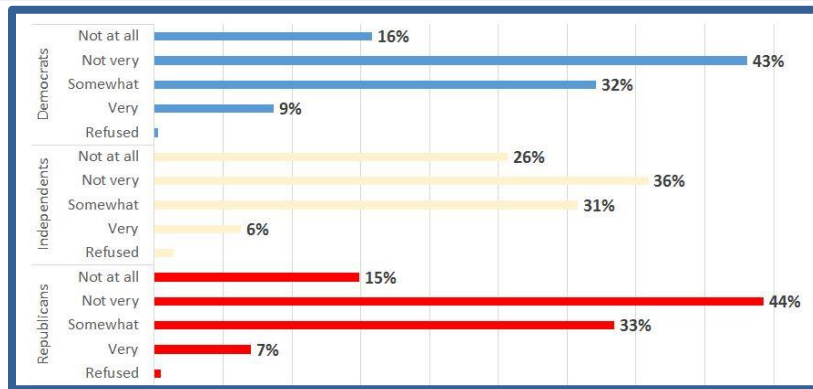
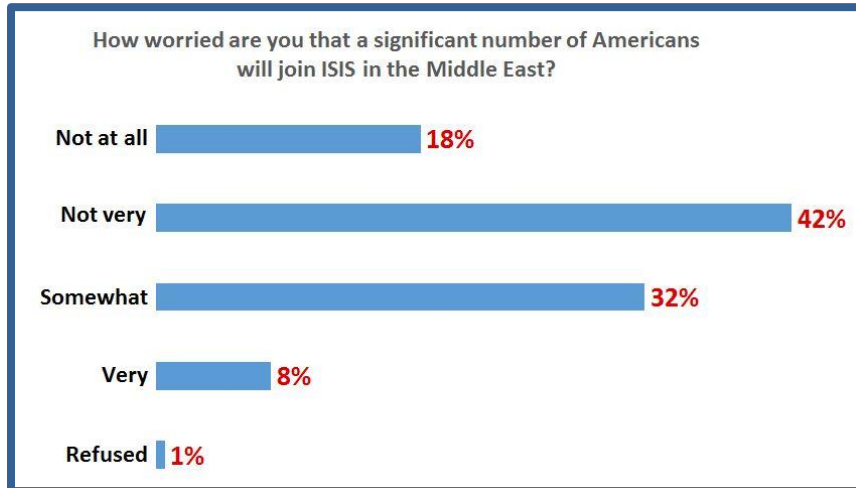
Only a minority of Americans (14%) believe that ISIS has support among the majority of Muslims around the world. The rest are divided between those who say that Muslims are evenly split (44%) and those who say there is only minority support (40%). However, there are major differences across party lines: 22% of Republicans believe that a majority of Muslims support ISIS compared with 6% of Democrats and 13% of Independents.



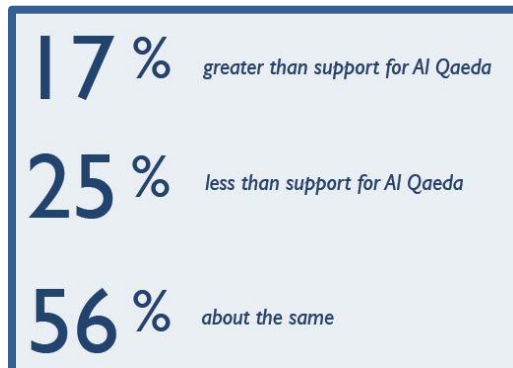
22 PERCENT

of Republicans believe that most Muslims support the Islamic State, compared to 13 percent of Independents and six percent of Democrats. A plurality of Americans believe that Muslims are evenly divided on this issue.

Americans are evenly divided among those who are and are not worried that a significant number of Americans will join ISIS and carry out attacks in the United States. Democrats and Independents are somewhat less worried than Republicans. But, to put this in perspective, Americans are a little less worried about possible American support for ISIS than American support for Al Qaeda: 56% say it's about the same, 25% say possible American support for ISIS would be less than for Al Qaeda, and 17% think it would be more than for Al Qaeda.

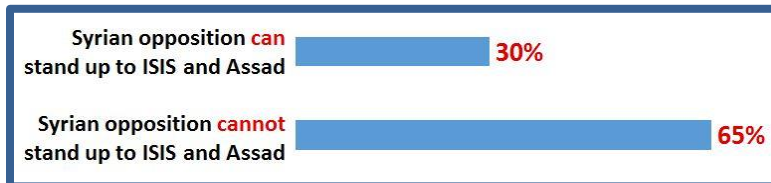


Americans believe support for ISIS is likely to be:

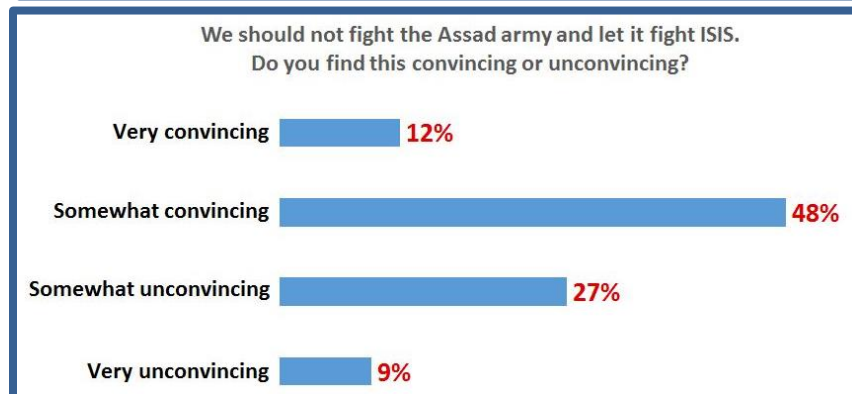
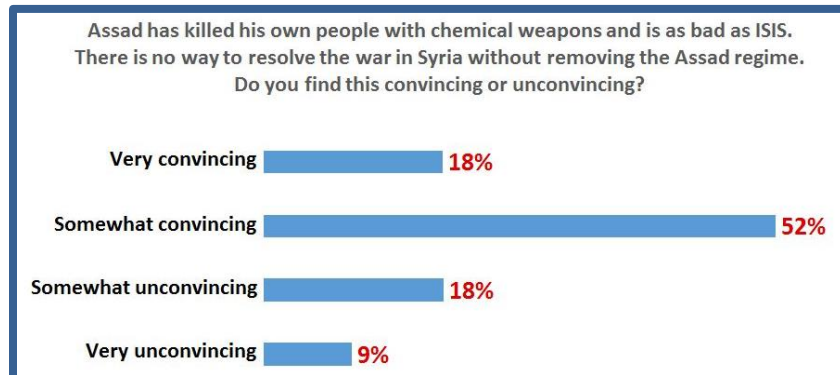


Syria and ISIS

Two-thirds of Americans say that the Syrian opposition is too weak and divided to stand up to the regime of Bashar al-Assad and to ISIS, even with significantly more resources. This roughly holds across party lines with 69% of Republicans and 62% of both Democrats and Independents expressing this view.



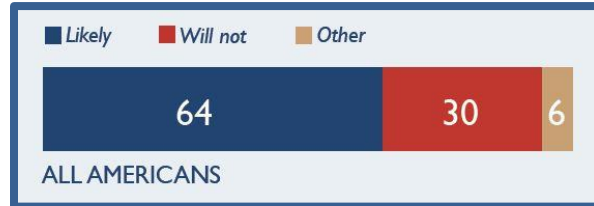
Americans have ambivalent feelings about dealing with Assad. On the one hand, 70% are persuaded by the argument that Assad is as bad as ISIS and that the war cannot be resolved without removing his regime. On the other hand, 60% are convinced that the United States should not fight Assad's army and should allow them to fight ISIS instead.



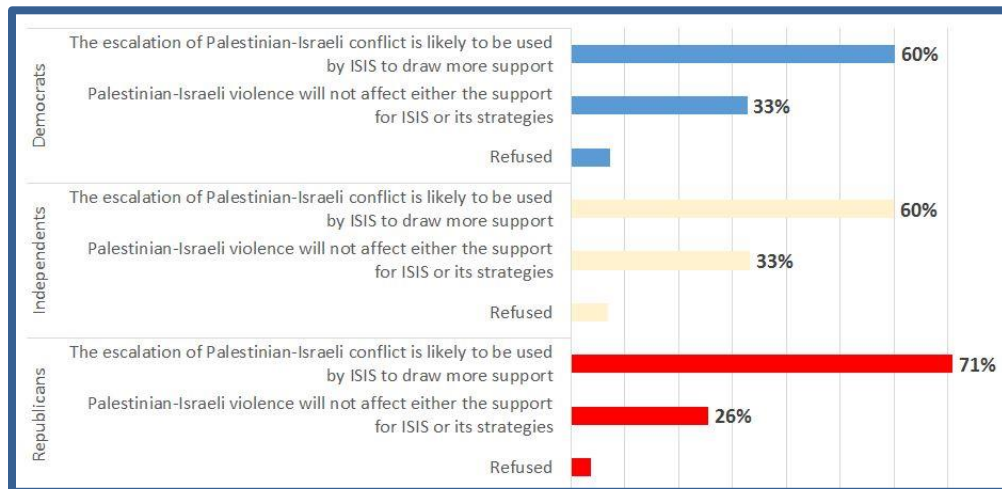
Despite expressing strong anti-Assad sentiments, the bottom line is that Americans remain strongly opposed to American military operations against Assad's army in Syria, with 72% opposing and 25% supporting such operations. This holds almost identically across party lines.

Linking Issues

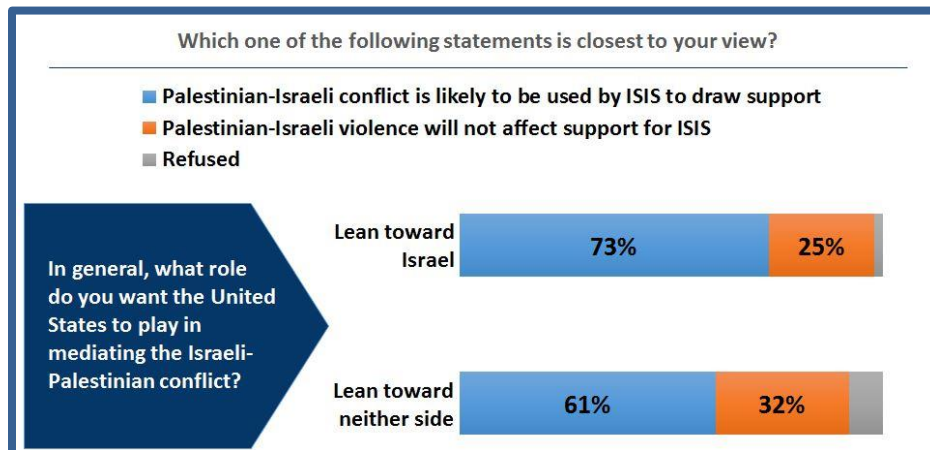
Sixty-four percent of respondents say that escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is likely to be used by ISIS to draw more support and to focus attention on confronting Israel and the United States. Meanwhile, 30% say support for ISIS is unaffected by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.



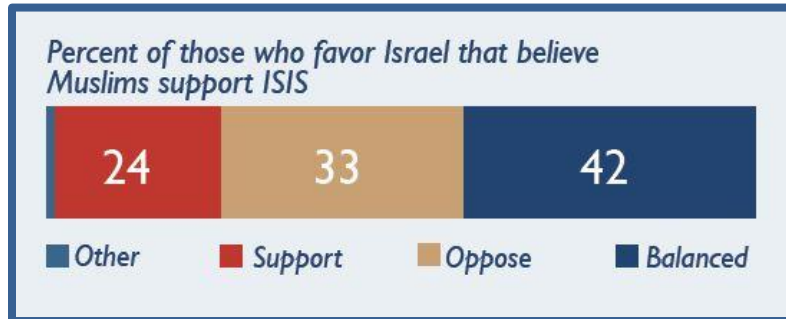
Republicans are even more likely to see a linkage between the two issues (71%, compared to 60% for Democrats and Independents).



Interestingly, those Americans who want the United States to lean toward Israel in its diplomacy are also more likely to see a linkage in these issues (73%).



Those who want the United States to lean toward Israel are also more inclined to say that most Muslims support ISIS (24% compared with 8% of those who want the United States to lean toward neither side).



More strikingly, a majority of those who want the United States to lean toward Israel (61%) support U.S. ground forces against ISIS, compared with only 31% of those who want the United States to lean toward neither side.

