

# **American attitudes toward the Middle East (May 2016)**

**Shibley Telhami  
Principal Investigator**

**A survey sponsored by  
The Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development  
at the  
University of Maryland  
fielded by Nielsen Scarborough**

**presented at**

**The Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution  
July 11, 2016**

## **Survey Methodology**

The survey was conducted May 20-31, 2016 with a panel consisting of a probability-based representative sample. The panel was recruited by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger probability-based national panel, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households provided by Survey Sampling International. A total of 1580 panelists completed the survey including a national sample of 855 adults, plus an oversample of 735 millennials (18-34), making for a total sample of millennials of 863. Responses were weighted by age, gender, income, education, race, and geographic region using benchmarks from the US Census. The survey was also weighted by partisan identification and millennials were down-weighted consistent with these groups' incidence rate in the U.S. Census. The margins of error for the national sample and for each subgroup is: National – 855 respondents, MoE: 3.4% Millennials – 863, MoE: 3.3%

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National – 855 respondents, MoE: 3.4%

Millennial (18-34)- 863 respondents, MoE: 3.3%

Valuable assistance was provided by The Program for Public Consultation, especially its director Steven Kull, Evan Lewis, and Clay Ramsay. Neil Schwartz, Scott Willoth, and Jordan Evangelista from Nielsen Scarborough also provided assistance. Brittany Kyser and Rachel Slattery were particularly helpful.

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## **Survey Methodology**

The survey was conducted June 24-30, 2016 with a panel consisting of a probability-based representative sample. The panel was recruited by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger probability-based national panel, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households provided by Survey Sampling International. A national sample of 1312 panelists completed the survey. Responses were weighted by age, gender, income, education, race, and geographic region using benchmarks from the US Census. The survey was also weighted by partisan identification. The margin of error is 2.7%

The margins of error for the national sample are:

National – 1312 respondents, MoE: 2.7%

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# Key Findings

## Central Findings on American Attitudes Toward Islam and Muslims:

(Comparing two new polls, May 2016 and June 2016 with a November 2015 Poll)

**Take Away:** *Remarkably, despite heated campaign rhetoric on Islam and Muslims, and the Orlando shooting, attitudes toward Islam and Muslims have become progressively more favorable from November 2015 to June 2016, and more Americans have come to say that Islamic and Western traditions are compatible over the same period.*

- From November 2015 to June 2016, Americans views on Muslims have gone from 53% favorable to 62% favorable, while Americans with favorable views of Islam have increased from 37% to 44% in June over the same period. During that same time frame, the percentage of people who think that Islamic and Western religious and social traditions are compatible increased from 57% % to 64%.
- Republican attitudes have remained relatively constant in the three polls (November 2015, May 2016, and post-Orlando June 2016) toward both the Muslim people and the Muslim religion. And a majority of Republicans continued to express the view that Islam and the West are incompatible, with little change across the three polls. But the views of both Democrats and Independents became more favorable toward both Islam and Muslims (Democrats jumped 12% and Independents jumped 17% from November 2015 to June 2016 in their favorable views of Muslims), while fewer Democrats and Independents have come to view Islamic and Western values as being incompatible, for example, Democrats dropped from 26% to 17% in viewing these two as incompatible.

## The Orlando Shooting:

(The questions on the Orlando Shooting are from the June 2016 poll)

**Take Away:** *Only one third of respondents said militant Islamist ideology was the most important factor motivating the Orlando shooter. Ending sale of guns to terrorists/criminals ranks first among steps that would reduce the chance of a similar attack; monitoring Mosques/Muslim American groups ranks last.*

- When asked to rate a number of possible factor's behind the Orlando shooter's motives (on a scale of 0-10), hate for the LGBT community ranked first with an average of 7.52, followed by militant Islamist ideology with an average of 7.27, and mental illness with an average of 6.93. When asked to assess the most important factor, 33% said militant

Islamist ideology, 21% mental illness, 19% self-hate, and 16% hate for LGBT community. Only 2% said feeling rejected as a Muslim in America was the most important factor.

- Fifty-seven percent assessed that the shooter acted independently, but was inspired by ISIS ideology, while 34% said he acted for reasons unrelated to ISIS, but claimed link for boasting. Only 8% said they said he was directed by ISIS.
- Sixty-six percent assessed that the shooter was an American born in the United States, while 19% said he was a foreigner who had been living in the U.S. for some years, and 10% said he was an American who immigrated to the U.S.
- Fifty-two percent approved of President Obama's reaction to the shooting, compared to 50% for Hillary Clinton and 42% for Donald Trump.
- When asked to rate the five measures (scale of 0-10) that may reduce the chance of an Orlando-like shooting, Americans rank banning weapons to people with terrorist and criminal records first with an average of 7.84, followed by better security at public venues with an average of 7.32, fighting ISIS abroad with an average of 7.24, and banning the sale of assault rifles with an average of 5.75. Closely monitoring mosques and Muslim American groups rates last with an average of 5.46.
- Similarly, when directly asked what the most likely action would be to reduce the chance of an Orlando-like shooting, banning the sale of weapons to terrorists/criminals is ranked first with 25% of the responses, while closely monitoring mosques and Muslim American groups ranked last with 10% of responses.

## **American Global Priorities:**

(The questions on American Global Priorities are from the May 2016 poll)

**Take Away:** *The War on ISIS ranks first among several global priorities followed by U.S. immigration policy. Civil Wars in Yemen and Libya ranked last. In an open-ended question, Obama remains as the Democrats most admired leader (40%). Among Republicans, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu tops the list (14%).*

- When given a set of choices and asked to rank American global priorities on a scale of 1-10, the War on ISIS had the highest average with 8.36. Other choices that ranked high were U.S. Immigration Policy (8), the War on al-Qaeda (7.77) and the Trade Deficit (7.41). Americans ranked the Civil Wars in Libya and Yemen as the least important with averages of 5.2 and 5.04, respectively.
- When asked to select the two issues that should be America's top global priorities, the War on ISIS with 61% and U.S. Immigration Policy with 41% were the top choices. As seen in the previous question, the Civil Wars in Yemen and Libya both came in last with

1% each.

- In an open-ended question where respondents were asked to name a national or world leader that they admire most, we see differences in the responses across party lines. For Republicans, Benjamin Netanyahu ranks highest with 14% followed by Ronald Reagan at 6% and Barack Obama at 4%. Barack Obama has a significant lead among Democrats with 40% followed by Pope Francis with 5% and Justin Trudeau with 3%. Barack Obama also ranks highest among Independents, however, with only 9% of responses, followed closely by Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin who both have 6%.

## **The Rise of ISIS:**

(The questions on the Rise of ISIS are from the June 2016 poll)

**Take Away:** *A majority of Americans (55%) say the 2003 Iraq War was most important in the rise of ISIS while 41% say the withdrawal of most American forces in 2011 was most important.*

- Fifty-five percent of Americans believe that going to war with Iraq in 2003 was the most important factor leading to the emergence and growth of ISIS and 41% feel that withdrawing most U.S. troops from Iraq was the most important factor.
- Most Republicans (61%) believe that withdrawing most U.S. troops from Iraq is the most important factor whereas only 22% of Democrats and 44% of Independents feel this way.
- Democrats (74%) and Independents (53%) are more likely to say that going to war with Iraq in 2003 was the important factor.

## **American Attitudes on the Arab-Israeli Conflict:**

(The questions on American Attitudes on the Arab-Israeli Conflict are from the May 2016 Poll)

**Take Away:** *There was only a small change in public attitudes on this issue since November 2015, with most changes being within the margin of error. But polarization of American politics on this issue continues: A majority of Republicans now say they want the U.S. to lean toward Israel (52%), and a majority of Democrats say that Israel has “too much influence in U.S. politics and policies” (53%) and want to impose sanctions/take more serious action over Israeli settlements (51%), including 54% for Hillary Clinton supporters and 50% for Bernie Sanders supporters*

## **U.S. Support for Israel and Palestinians:**

- When asked what kind of future for Israel and the Palestinians the U.S. should be supporting over the long term, most Americans said a two-state solution (34%) or a one-state solution (33%). Maintaining the occupation is the next most popular response with 16% leaving annexation without equal citizenship as the least popular option with just 13%.
- When Americans were asked this question in November 2015, both a two-state solution and a one-state solution were the most popular responses with 35% and 31% of responses, respectively. Maintaining the occupation had 17% of responses and annexation without equal citizenship once again had the least amount of responses with 10%.
- Across party lines, more Democrats chose a two-state solution (41%) over the other three options. However, more Independents (34%) and more Republicans (28%) chose a one-state solution as the option that they believe the U.S. should support.
- Millennials were more likely to choose a one-state solution with 40%. People 35 years and above were more likely to support a two-state solution with 34% for 35-54 year olds and 32% for people 55 and up.
- People who favor Donald Trump were more likely to support a two-state solution and maintain the occupation, which each got 25%. Donald Trump supporters were more than three times as likely to say “maintain the occupation” than both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders supporters, who each had 8% of responses. Hillary Clinton supporters were more likely to support a one-state solution (43%) and Bernie Sanders supporters were more likely to support a two-state solution (40%).

## **Israel’s Jewishness v Its Democracy:**

- A majority of Americans (69%) favor Israel’s democracy more than its Jewishness. This is a slight decrease from November 2015 where 72% of Americans felt this way.
- Republicans, Democrats, and Independents all favor Israel’s democracy more than its Jewishness. However, Democrats favor Israel’s democracy over its Jewishness more than Independents and Republicans. Eighty-one percent of Democrats feel this way compared to 67% of Independents and 57% of Republicans. Republicans are more likely to favor the Jewishness of Israel (39%) more than its democracy compared to both Democrats (16%) and Independents (24%).
- Across all age groups, Israel’s democracy is favored more than its Jewishness. 78% of Millennials, 68% of 35-54 year olds, and 63% of those 55 and up feel this way.
- Those supporting Donald Trump are three times more likely to say that they favor the Jewishness of Israel more than its democracy (42%) than Hillary Clinton and Bernie

Sanders supporters (14% for each). However, a majority of supporters for each of the three candidates favor Israel's democracy more than its Jewishness.

### **The United States' Role in Mediating the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:**

- In both November 2015 and May 2016, a majority of Americans (66% in 2015 and 63% in 2016) said that they believed the U.S. should lean toward neither Israel nor the Palestinians when asked what role they want the United States to play in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lean toward Israel was the second most popular response with 32% of responses in 2016 and lean toward the Palestinians was the least popular with only 4% in 2016.
- More than half of Republicans (52%) want the U.S. to lean toward Israel whereas only 15% of Democrats and 30% of Independents want this. A majority of both Democrats and Independents want the U.S. to lean toward neither side with 78% and 65%, respectively.
- A majority of all age groups want the U.S. to lean toward neither side with 68% of Millennials, 64% of 35-54 year olds, and 57% of those 55 and over responding this way.
- A majority of Donald Trump supporters (55%) want the U.S. to lean toward Israel, however, only 14% of Hillary Clinton and 15% of Bernie Sanders supporters want this. A large majority of both Hillary Clinton supporters (80%) and Bernie Sanders supporters (78%) want the U.S. to lean toward neither side.

### **Palestinian Statehood and the UN Security Council:**

- From November 2015 to May 2016, the percentage of people who believe the U.S. should vote in favor of endorsing the establishment of a Palestinian state has remained the same with 27% in both years. On this question too, there was increased polarization: Republican support for voting against a Palestinian state went up from 43% to 53%, while Democratic support went up from 15% to 19%.
- Millennials are more likely to think that the U.S. should abstain from voting (41%) than 35-54 year olds (33%) and those 55 and older (31%).
- There is a significant difference among Donald Trump supporters compared to Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders supporters in regards to Palestinian statehood. A majority of those favoring Donald Trump (56%) think the U.S. should vote against endorsing the establishment of a Palestinian state. This is almost three times more than Hillary Clinton supporters (18%) and Bernie Sanders supporters (20%). Those favoring Hillary Clinton are more likely to vote in favor of the establishment of a Palestinian State (44%) and those favoring Bernie Sanders are more likely to think that the U.S. should abstain from voting (39%).

### **U.S. Reaction to Settlements:**

- There has been only small changes in Americans' views of how they think the U.S. should react to new settlements from November 2015 to May 2016. Fifty-nine percent of Americans in May 2016 believed the U.S. should do nothing/limit opposition to words compared to 58% in November 2015. Thirty-nine percent of Americans say the U.S. should impose some economic sanctions/take more serious action in May 2016 compared to 37% in November 2015.
- Republicans are far more likely than both Democrats and Independents to believe that the U.S. should do nothing/limit opposition to words with 73% of Republicans believing this compared to 56% of Independents and 47% of Democrats who believe this. Democrats (51%) are almost twice as likely as Republicans (26%) to believe the U.S. should impose some economic sanctions/take more serious action.
- Fifty-four percent of Hillary Clinton's supporters want the U.S. to impose some economic sanctions/take more serious action in reaction to Israeli settlements, compared with 50% of Bernie Sanders' supporters, and 24% of Donald Trump's supporters.

### **Israeli Influence on American Politics:**

- From November 2015 to May 2016, there has only been a few percentage points change in Americans' views of the Israeli government's influence on American politics and policies. Republicans (23%) and Independents (21%) are almost three times as likely as Democrats (8%) to say that the Israeli government has too little influence on American politics and policies. More than half of all Democrats (53%) think that the Israeli government has too much influence. Forty-six percent of Independents believe this and only 27% of Republicans do. Republicans are more likely to say that the Israeli government has about the right level of influence (48%) than Democrats (38%) or Independents (34%).
- People who favor Donald Trump (24%) are twice as likely as those favoring Bernie Sanders (12%) to believe the Israeli government has too little influence and four times as likely as those favoring Hillary Clinton (6%) to believe that it does. More than half of those supporting Bernie Sanders (57%) believe that the Israeli government has too much influence and only a little over a quarter of those supporting Donald Trump believe that it does (27%). Both Donald Trump supporters (47%) and Hillary Clinton supporters (44%) are more likely to say that the Israeli government has about the right level of influence on American politics and policies.