



To: J Street
From: Jim Gerstein
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Summary Findings
National Survey of American Jews

J Street's national survey of 800 American Jews¹ reveals a remarkable gap between the attitudes of American Jews and the conventional wisdom about how Jews view America's role in the Middle East. Instead of holding the hawkish or hard line positions often expressed by many established Jewish organizations and leaders, American Jews overwhelmingly favor assertive peace efforts and support an active U.S. role in helping Israelis and Arabs to resolve their conflict – even if it means publicly stating American disagreements with the parties or exerting pressure on both parties to make the compromises necessary to achieve peace. When presented with choices on fundamental issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jews consistently express a world view that Israel has been poorly served by current Middle East policy and that resolving the conflict is a core American interest that requires serious attention.

This survey addressed several issues and dynamics that are central to the public debate over America's Middle East policy, offering a unique look at how Jews react when offered the different arguments characterized by “two-state solution” advocates on the one hand and those who claim America should not push Israel into risky peace deals on the other hand. Key findings include:

- Israel is an important political issue that serves as a threshold for many American Jews. In fact, when asked if it plays a big role in someone's vote, 58 percent say it does. But when considered among the other issues facing the country, Israel is actually in the bottom tier of issues, and **only 8 percent** of Jews identify it as one of the top two most important issues in deciding their vote for President and Congress. Instead of being uniquely focused on Israel, Jewish voting priorities resemble those of other Americans, with the economy (55 percent) as the driving factor in this year's Jewish vote followed by the war in Iraq (33 percent).
- Compared to the U.S. population overall, American Jews are even more dissatisfied with the ways things are going in the country (90 percent say we are seriously off on the wrong track), more negative toward President Bush's job performance (16 percent approval), and more supportive of Barack Obama over

¹ Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications conducted a survey of 800 American Jews from June 29-July 3, 2008. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent, and the survey methodology is detailed at the end of the memo.





John McCain (62 to 32 percent) and the Democrats over the Republicans in Congressional races (69 to 27 percent).

- Jews firmly remain a very progressive Democratic constituency and it should not be surprising that their attitudes toward the Middle East – from Iran to Iraq to the Arab-Israeli conflict – dramatically diverge from the Bush Administration’s policy. In fact, 61 percent of Jews believe that Israel is less secure as a result of President Bush compared to 25 percent who believe Israel is more secure as a result of his presidency.
- By a 55 to 30 percent margin, Jews believe Middle East peace is a core American interest and they want the United States to pursue assertive diplomacy, instead of believing that only the parties themselves can make peace and the U.S. should let them work out the conflict on their own. Perhaps, more remarkable is their attitude on the basic dichotomy that often captures the debate – that is, when push comes to shove, does military superiority or a peace agreement better provide Israeli security. On this fundamental question (exact wording below), Jews favor a peace agreement by a 50 to 34 margin:

Israel cannot rely on peace agreements with its enemies to provide security, and in the long run, Israel can only achieve real security by maintaining its military superiority.

OR

Israel must always maintain its strong military, but in the long run, Israel can only achieve real security through peace agreements that end conflicts and establish internationally recognized borders

- Jews want America to be much more aggressive in its Middle East peace efforts than it is today. We conducted an extensive exercise in the survey, first asking people whether they supported the United States playing an active role in helping the parties resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Initial support for this general statement was a remarkable 87 percent. Then, we asked if they would still support America assuming an active role if it meant the U.S. taking tough positions such as publicly disagreeing with both the Israelis and Arabs or exerting pressure on both parties to make compromises. Support remained very strong after these harder tests that gauged reactions to public disagreement (75 percent) and pressure (70 percent). “Firm support” – that is, the number of people who supported all three statements – was 66 percent and represents an extraordinarily strong base of people who seek active American engagement. After we presented a mixture of hawkish and pro-peace messages, we re-asked this series of questions and the “firm support” number was unchanged. In other words, when the debate is engaged by both sides, Jews strongly support America taking major steps to pursue peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.





- In light of the upcoming Christians United for Israel (CUFI) conference led by Reverend John Hagee, we explored Jewish attitudes toward the organization and whether they believe it is beneficial for Jewish groups to form alliances with Rev. Hagee. It is very clear that Rev. Hagee is fairly well-known among Jews (65 percent name identification) and quite disliked (7 percent favorable and 57 percent unfavorable). Several other findings demonstrated Rev. Hagee's toxicity among American Jews and the implications for perceptions of CUFI:

-without any description other than "CUFI is led by Reverend John Hagee and works to build support for Israel among evangelical Christians," 51 percent of Jews have a negative impression of CUFI while only 19 percent have a positive impression

-when presented with a statement of purpose by CUFI (in their own words) and statements opposing CUFI (one critiquing Hagee's public comments about Catholics, women, gays, and Hurricane Katrina and another critiquing his ties to extremists in Israel who oppose the peace process), Jews said that Jewish organizations and leaders should not form alliances with CUFI by a 4-to-1 margin

-various statements highlighting Hagee's positions about Iran, undue American pressure on Israel, liberal Jews, and Armageddon resonate with particularly high intensity among American Jews

- Jews are very wary of military action against Iran, and when presented with several statements about the Middle East by a Congressional candidate, respondents were most supportive of someone who said talking with Iran is not appeasement and that America should pursue direct diplomacy. Forty-two percent said the following statement would make them much more likely to vote for this candidate (and 69 percent in total were more likely):


Iran poses a serious threat to Israel and to American interests in the Middle East that should be addressed. But President Bush's policies and the Iraq war have actually strengthened Iran's influence in the region while failing to prevent Iran's uranium enrichment program. Unlike George Bush who said talking with our Iranian enemies would be appeasement, I believe America should pursue direct and tough diplomacy that offers incentives for Iran to abandon its nuclear program but also includes consequences like damaging financial and international isolation if they refuse to cooperate.

- Statements invoking military action against Iran test poorly throughout the survey. For example, only 26 percent of respondents were much more likely (and 48 percent total more likely) to support a Congressional candidate arguing that America should support Israel if it preemptively strikes Iran.



- Other statements by candidates for Congress illustrate some of the complexities of the Middle East conflict as people respond favorably to both hawkish and two-state solution language. When presented on their own and without engagement from the other side, respondents supported a candidate who said Israel's peace offers have been repeatedly rejected by the Arab world (42 percent much more likely to support, 65 percent total more likely). At the same time, candidate statements about peace and highly engaged U.S. leadership receive similar levels of support. But when the arguments are pitted against each other and the debate plays out, support for active U.S. involvement – including public disagreements with Arabs and Israelis and even pressure on both sides to compromise – remains very strong (67 percent support).
- Attitudes about the issues under Israeli-Arab negotiations are very favorable toward the compromises and positions outlined at the 2000 Camp David summit and other negotiations. Large majorities support negotiating with Israel's worst enemies (76 percent), withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for full peace like the arrangements with Egypt and Jordan (58 percent) and withdrawal from most of the West Bank (59 percent). Even without a peace agreement, a striking 52 percent agree that the U.S. should "tell Israel to end settlement expansion." Attitudes are much different when it comes to Jerusalem as only 44 percent support Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem becoming part of the new Palestinian state. But even opposition to this specific issue is overcome by an overwhelming belief that the Israeli government would not agree to a dangerous peace deal, and 81 percent of Jews "will support any agreement the Israelis make with their Arab enemies."
- Throughout the survey, there is a definite pattern of attitudes broken down by denomination. Reform and unaffiliated Jews are the most supportive of peace efforts and American engagement, followed by Conservative Jews who generally provide majority support – though less than among Reform and unaffiliated Jews – on the numerous measures in the survey. Orthodox Jews express very different, and considerably more hawkish, views on nearly every question from Iraq and Iran to American engagement and the various compromises being considered in Arab-Israeli negotiations.

The findings in this survey consistently point to an American Jewish public that strongly supports a two-state solution, seeks active American involvement to help achieve Arab-Israeli peace, and opposes current U.S. policy that holds back from exerting its leverage over both parties to make the necessary compromises for peace. It is important to note that the demographics (such as denomination, synagogue attendance, age, region) and political measures (party identification, 2008 Presidential vote) in this survey reflect those in other surveys of American Jews, including the 2007 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the 2006 American



Jewish Committee Annual Survey, and the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey. The results of the J Street survey, which sought to capture both sides of the debate over American involvement in the Middle East, firmly suggest that J Street has enormous opportunities to give voice to a Jewish public that holds beliefs and values which are very different from the positions regularly conveyed by many Jewish leaders and organizations.

Methodology

Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications designed the questionnaire for this survey of 800 self-identified adult American Jews, conducted June 29 - July 3, 2008. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent; the margin of error in the split samples is +/- 4.9 percent. Gerstein | Agne contracted the research company YouGovPolimetrix to administer the survey by email invitation to its web-based panel, which is regularly updated and consists of 1.2 million Americans.

Conducting reliable and affordable surveys of American Jews is a challenging task due to the small number of Jews as a proportion of the overall United States population. Advances in technology and sophisticated web-based panel techniques have greatly helped researchers seeking to gain a trustworthy understanding of small populations, such as American Jews, and web-based panels are a rapidly growing method across numerous audiences that are difficult to reach by traditional land line telephone surveys.

