



**To:** J Street  
**From:** Jim Gerstein  
**Date:** March 23, 2009

*Summary Findings*  
*National Survey of American Jews*

---

In the aftermath of the war in Gaza and elections in the United States and Israel that resulted in sweeping changes in leadership in both countries, J Street's latest national survey of 800 American Jews reveals that Jews continue to support assertive American leadership to achieve a two-state solution and resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental attitudes about the conflict and America's role in the Middle East remain unchanged from J Street's national survey conducted eight months ago, and demonstrate that firmly held beliefs about the critical importance of American leadership have not been shaken in the wake of major events. As the Obama Administration introduces a new Middle East policy featuring assertive diplomacy across the region, American Jews unquestionably support this fresh attempt at re-asserting American influence to achieve peace between Israelis and Arabs.

In addition to tracking questions on key measures asked prior to the elections and war in Gaza, this survey examined recent developments which are shaping the new political landscape in Israel and the United States. Whether it is the appointment of George Mitchell and renewed American involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict by a popular President and Secretary of State or concern about the leadership role of Avigdor Lieberman in Israel's new government, unfolding events are reinforcing the existing "pro-Israel, pro-peace" attitudes that prevail among American Jews. Even the possible development of a Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas receives strong support, and indicates the openness of American Jews to break controversial taboos.

The survey also probed deeply into Jewish perspectives of this winter's military action in Gaza. The results demonstrate complex attitudes among American Jews, who are torn between support for Israel at a time of war and doubts about the effectiveness of military action that results in large civilian deaths. The data indicate a similar ambivalence regarding Iran and how America should address the threat of Iranian nuclear development. It is very clear from this survey that American Jews have a sophisticated approach toward the Middle East and the challenges Israel faces, which contrasts sharply from conventional wisdom and the hawkish or

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications conducted a survey of 800 American Jews from February 28-March 8, 2009. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent, and the survey methodology is detailed at the end of this memo.

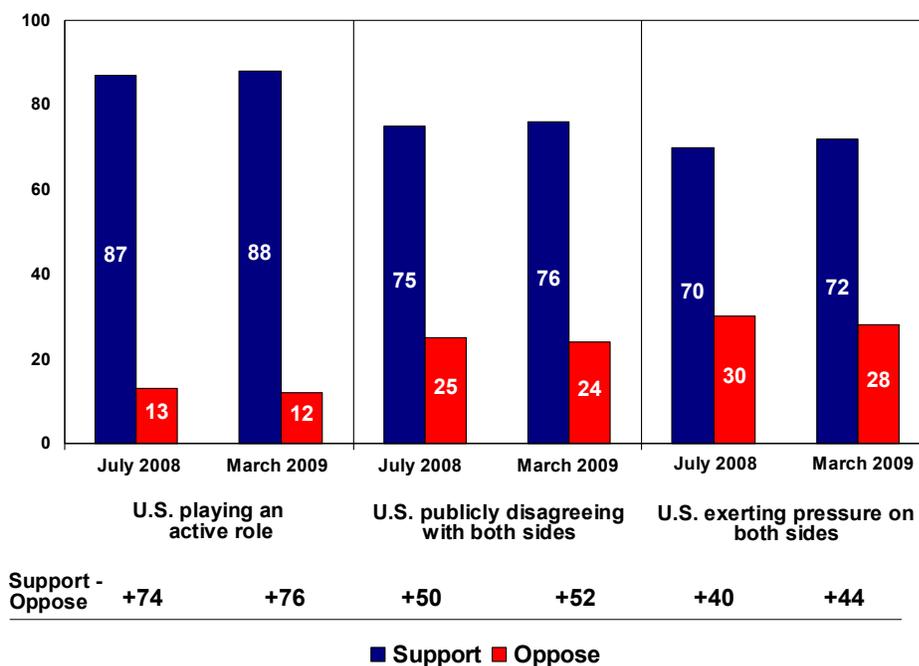


hard line characterization of Jewish attitudes often suggested by some Jewish organizational leaders.

Key findings from the survey include:

- President Obama begins his Middle East efforts with extraordinarily high personal favorability (74 percent favorable) and job approval (73 percent) among American Jews. He is considerably more popular than Israeli Prime Minister-designate Netanyahu (58 percent favorable) and has about the same level of support as former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (76 percent favorable). Jews believe that President Obama is honest and trustworthy (76 percent), shares their values (73 percent), and that he is restoring America's standing in the world (78 percent). Trust in the new American President also extends to his Middle East policy, with 72 percent approving of the way he is handling the Arab-Israeli conflict, 76 percent believing that he supports Israel, and 69 percent thinking that he "has a good vision for advancing Middle East peace."
- Following a Presidential election where the Democratic candidate received 78 percent of the Jewish vote, conservative critics of Obama – ranging from Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin (73 percent unfavorable each) to the Republican Party as a whole (72 percent unfavorable) – are highly unpopular and will not be able to gain traction if they decide to attack President Obama's efforts to pursue Arab-Israeli peace.
- Despite the major political and military developments that have taken place over the last four months in the U.S. and Israel, Jewish attitudes remain remarkably stable and highly supportive of a more assertive American effort in its Middle East peace efforts. In this survey, we repeated an exercise conducted in last summer's J Street survey which asked whether people supported the United States playing an active role in helping the parties resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Initial support for this general statement remains astoundingly high at 88 percent (compared to 87 percent eight months ago). Following this initial statement, 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. Again, as we witnessed last July, support remained remarkably strong after these harder tests that gauged reactions to public disagreement (76 percent now, compared to 75 percent eight months ago) and pressure (72 percent now, compared to 70 percent eight months ago). "Firm support" – that is, the number of people who supported all three statements – is 69 percent (compared to 66 percent eight months ago) and reveals that the extraordinarily strong base of people who seek active American engagement is firmly established.





- We introduced an additional component to this exercise in this latest survey, and provided half the sample with the language cited above and provided the other half of the sample with language that focused exclusively on publicly disagreeing with or pressuring just Israel instead of both Israelis and Arabs. Not surprisingly, support for America playing an active role drops off considerably if it means disagreeing only with Israel (support drops 88 to 58 percent) or pressuring only Israel (support drops from 88 to 57 percent). These findings underscore how strongly Jews want the U.S. to assert itself to achieve peace, but also how much more effective it is when America is even-handed and addresses both sides instead of just one side.
- In addition to the test we repeated regarding the U.S. playing an active role to help the parties achieve peace, we also repeated some of the fundamental choice questions that we asked last summer. Again, we see that key measures on Jewish attitudes toward America's role and what brings Israel security remained constant. By a 51 to 32 margin (compared to a 55 to 30 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. Similarly, our test on the basic dichotomy of whether a peace agreement (49 percent) or military superiority (36 percent) better provide Israeli security (compared to a 50 to 34 percent margin eight months ago) was remarkably consistent. These sentiments carry over to actual events unfolding as Jews





overwhelmingly want George Mitchell to act as a “fair and impartial broker” instead of siding with Israel (57 percent to 25 percent).

- While the growing strength of Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman has created a great deal of controversy in Israel, his views are resoundingly rejected by American Jews. Lieberman is already known by 62 percent of Jews and after hearing his campaign message of no citizenship for Arab Israelis if they do not sign a loyalty oath, 69 percent of Jews say they oppose Lieberman’s positions. His prospective role as Israel’s chief international diplomat and public face presents potential divisions with American Jews, as a shocking 32 percent say that this single appointment to a senior level cabinet post would weaken their personal connection to Israel because Lieberman’s positions go against their core values. This rises to 40 percent among Jewish adults under 30 years of age, and raises concerns about the relationship that younger generations in the U.S. will have with Israel.
- As the Israeli settler movement in the West Bank gains influence in the new Israeli government and as George Mitchell has highlighted the problems caused by these settlements, public attention toward settlements is likely to grow. By a 60 to 40 percent margin, American Jews oppose the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank based on “what they know.” After receiving short statements by supporters and opponents of settlement expansion, the results do not move. Simply put, attitudes toward settlements are highly negative and firmly held. Not surprisingly, opposition to settlements is higher among Reform (64 percent oppose) and unaffiliated Jews (69 percent oppose), in contrast to Orthodox Jews who strongly support settlements (80 percent support). But one very interesting demographic finding is the strong opposition (72 percent oppose) among Jews who give money to political campaigns. In fact, political donors stand out from the overall population on a variety of areas, including their more Democratic and progressive self-identification, greater support for peace initiatives and more negative attitudes toward Avigdor Lieberman and Benjamin Netanyahu.
- American Jewish public opinion is at odds with official U.S. and Israeli policy when it comes to diplomatically engaging a Palestinian unity government. Sixty-nine percent of Jews support the U.S. working with a unified Hamas-Palestinian Authority government to achieve a peace agreement with Israel, even when informed that the U.S. does not recognize Hamas because of its terrorism and refusal to recognize Israel. This result shows an interesting common ground between American Jews and Israelis on the issue, according to a March poll conducted by the Truman Institute at Hebrew University which reports 69 percent of Israelis think Israel should negotiate with a joint Hamas-Fatah government.
- Attitudes toward the recent military action in Gaza reveal the deep commitment and sophisticated understanding that American Jews have when it comes to Israel.





At a time of war, Jews rallied behind Israel and 75 percent approved of Israel's military action. But at the same time, 59 percent felt that the military action had no impact on Israel's security (41 percent) or made Israel less secure (18 percent) while only 41 percent felt it made Israel more secure. Other survey results reflect these ambivalent feelings about supporting Israel during military action, but simultaneously doubting its effectiveness. Nearly 7-in-10 Jews felt that Israel's military action was not disproportionate, yet 56 percent believe that military action that kills Palestinian civilians – even if it targets terrorists – actually creates more terrorism instead of preventing terrorism. This figure is unchanged from the 54 percent who agreed with the statement when we asked it five months before the war began.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the survey was conducted prior to the recent news coverage in Israel and the U.S. regarding allegations by Israeli soldiers about the military's conduct in Gaza. Given the attention given by American Jewish toward the issue, attitudes on this issue may be still evolving.

- In the wake of America's experience in Iraq, American Jews – like other Americans – are wary of going to war again in the Middle East. But there is also concern among Jews about Iran's nuclear development, and Jewish views are mixed when it comes to what America should do regarding Iran. When given the fundamental choice of whether the U.S. should militarily attack Iran if they are on the verge of developing nuclear weapons, Jews are split evenly 41-40. An unusually high 16 percent could not even bring themselves to a decision and just chose "neither." There is a similar 39-37 result when asked to choose between direct negotiations that provide Iran incentives to abandon their nuclear weapons program and sanctions that force Iran to choose between nuclear weapons and international isolation.
- Support for a comprehensive final status peace agreement is very strong. In this survey, we presented a very detailed description of a proposed agreement nearly reached during the Camp David and Taba peace talks eight years ago. By a 76-24 margin, Jews supported this agreement<sup>3</sup> which has the backing of large majorities of Reform (84 percent support), Conservative (69 percent support), and unaffiliated Jews (79 percent support). Support for this comprehensive proposal is consistent with the findings from last July's J Street survey which showed strong support for the different components of a two-state solution.

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the J Street survey was conducted prior to the recent news coverage in Israel and the U.S. regarding testimony by Israeli soldiers about the military's conduct in Gaza. Given American Jews' complex views on the military action in Gaza, attitudes may still be evolving on this topic.

<sup>3</sup> Details of the agreement include: a demilitarized Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza; internationally recognized borders that include some land swaps allowing for most Jewish settlers in the West Bank to be inside Israel while the Palestinians get comparable land areas in return; Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem become part of the new Palestinian state while Israel retains control of Jewish neighborhoods and the Western Wall in Jerusalem; international forces to monitor the new Palestinian state and border crossings; and financial compensation for Palestinian refugees while allowing some refugees to return to Israel if they meet specific family reunification criteria and the Israeli government approves.

The findings in this survey provide a clear understanding of how American Jews view America's role in the Middle East as new governments take control in Israel and the United States. Jews overwhelmingly support President Obama and they seek active American leadership and engagement that will serve as a fair and impartial broker to help achieve a peace agreement between Israelis and Arabs. After the emotional and human toll of the war in Gaza, Jewish attitudes remain remarkably stable and committed to the objective of a peace agreement that serves America's interest and enhances Israel's security. J Street's worldview reflects the beliefs and values of most American Jews, and there is real opportunity to turn last year's inaugural successes into a game-changing grassroots movement.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Methodology**

Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications designed the questionnaire for this survey of 800 self-identified adult American Jews, conducted February 28-March 8, 2009. 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.

It is important to note that the demographics (such as denomination, synagogue attendance, age, region) and political measures (party identification) in this survey reflect those in other surveys of American Jews, including the 2007 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the 2008 American Jewish Committee Annual Survey, and the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey.

