



**To:** J Street  
**From:** Jim Gerstein  
**Date:** March 26, 2010

*Summary Findings*  
*National Survey of American Jews*

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In the aftermath of Vice President Biden's visit to Israel and headlines of major tensions between the United States and Israeli governments following the Israeli announcement of 1,600 new housing units in East Jerusalem, American Jews are strikingly unmoved in their attitudes toward America's role in the Middle East and their support for President Barack Obama. The results from the latest J Street national survey of 803 American Jews, conducted after the American response to the Israeli announcement and before the House of Representatives vote on health care reform, show that Jews remain steadfastly behind President Obama and American efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict even it means exerting pressure on both Arabs and Israelis.<sup>1</sup>

The survey also examined attitudes toward the specific controversy involving the Vice President's trip and explored whether Jews believe the U.S. should visibly express its policy differences with Israel or keep these squabbles private. On this sensitive issue which goes to the core of American Jewish beliefs on the U.S. position in the Middle East, the survey revealed a serious gap between the attitudes expressed by high profile organizations and leaders who levied strong criticism of the Obama Administration and the attitudes held by the majority of American Jews. In fact, when President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu sat down for their Oval Office meeting, the President's support among Jews significantly surpassed Jewish support for the Prime Minister. For an American Jewish constituency rooted in progressive values and heavily focused on domestic issues, this dynamic is likely to continue with the passage of historic health care reform and growing coverage of the Netanyahu government putting right wing political interests ahead of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

### **The Jewish Political Landscape**

Despite the public statements of numerous Jewish organizational leaders who have offered sharp criticism of President Obama's Middle East approach, it is important to recognize that Jews remain a highly progressive constituency and view the Obama Administration as a refreshing change from the previous Administration. Confidence in the country's direction

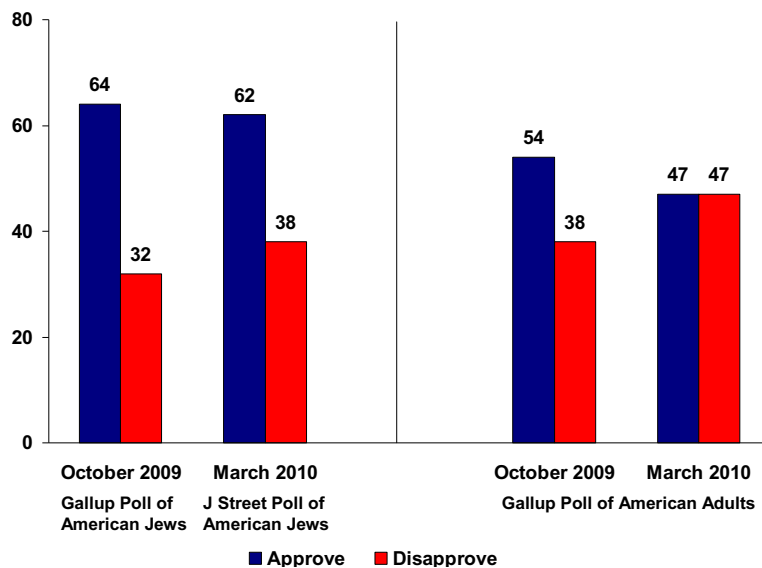
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<sup>1</sup> Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications conducted a survey of 803 American Jews from March 17-19, 2010. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent and the survey methodology is detailed at the end of this memo.



under President Obama is dramatically higher than before he took office, as 41 percent of American Jews now believe the country is headed in the right direction (compared to just 10 percent under President Bush in July 2008). Moreover, as the President’s job approval has fallen with the overall U.S. population (from 54 percent in October 2009 to 47 percent when the March 2010 J Street survey fielded), Jewish assessments of the President are unchanged during this same period and remain 15 points higher than the rest of the country. And after a little more than a year in office which included a highly visible battle over Israeli settlements and the most recent flap over the Israeli announcement of new housing in East Jerusalem, Jews have a considerably higher favorable opinion of President Obama (59 percent favorable) than Prime Minister Netanyahu (44 percent favorable).

**President Obama Job Approval**



Like most Americans, Jews are focused on the economy and health care far more than any other issue. When asked which two issues will determine their vote in the 2010 Congressional election, 55 percent chose the economy and 41 percent chose health care. The next two closest issues were the deficit and government spending (17 percent) and Social Security and Medicare (16 percent). Notably, Israel ranked sixth (10 percent) and Iran last (2 percent) on a list of 14 issues. As highlighted in past J Street surveys, Israel is a threshold issue for Jews – that is, once a candidate or elected official demonstrates sufficient support for Israel, voters move to the kitchen table issues – and President Obama and his Middle East approach certainly passes that threshold. Democrats currently lead the generic 2010 congressional vote by a 3-to-1 margin, and President Obama leads Sarah Palin, his most vociferous and well-known Republican critic on Israel by 70 to 18 percent. Simply put, Jews are a base constituency for President Obama and they stand firmly behind him, even as his support has fallen in the broader electorate.

The other dynamic driving the Jewish political environment is the lack of credibility among Obama’s critics and neo-conservatives. The Republican Party is extraordinarily

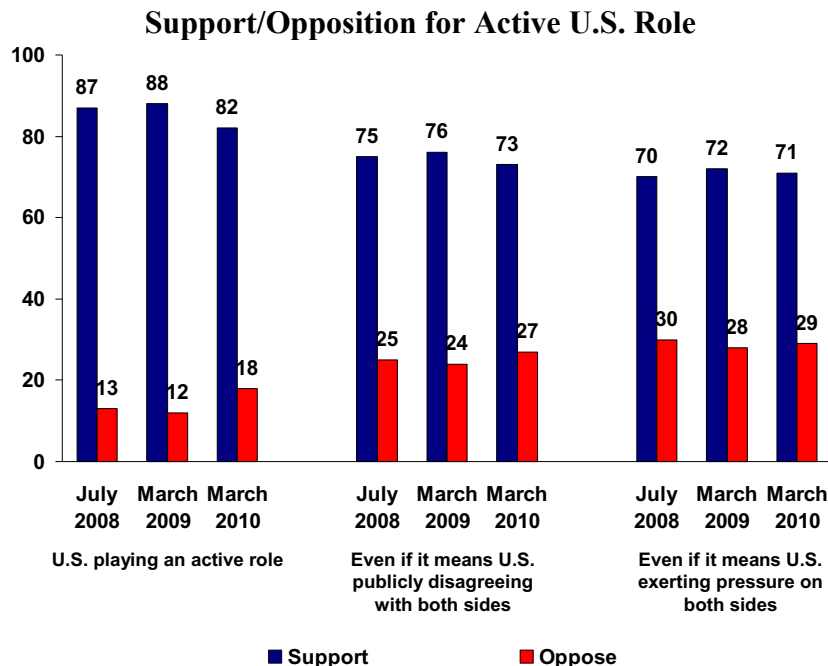


unpopular with Jews (18 percent favorable / 71 percent unfavorable), as are leading conservative figures like Dick Cheney (13 percent favorable / 78 percent unfavorable) and Sarah Palin (14 percent favorable / 79 percent unfavorable).

### Support for Assertive U.S. Leadership Remains Strong

As noted above, Jewish support for President Obama is rooted in shared values on the domestic priorities facing the country. But support goes beyond domestic agenda, and these shared values carry over to Middle East policy where American Jews seek assertive U.S. leadership to help resolve the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Dating back to the first J Street survey conducted in July 2008, we have seen remarkably consistent results on the questions of whether the U.S. should play an active role and what are the limits of that role. By an 82-18 percent margin, Jews believe the United States should play an active role to help the parties resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. When pushed to see whether they would continue to support the U.S. playing an active role if it meant America publicly disagreeing with Israelis and Arabs, an overwhelming majority of 73 percent continue to support an active U.S. role. Support moves to 71 percent when the language changes to “the United States exerting pressure on both the Israelis and Arabs to make the compromises necessary to achieve peace.” While the wide margins demonstrate the breadth of support among Jews for proactive American involvement to resolve the conflict, the fact that these margins are virtually the same as other survey results in the last 20 months – marked by changes in governments in both countries, Operation Cast Lead, the Goldstone Report, a battle over settlements, and the recent public tensions over East Jerusalem housing – reveals how deeply ingrained these beliefs are for American Jews.



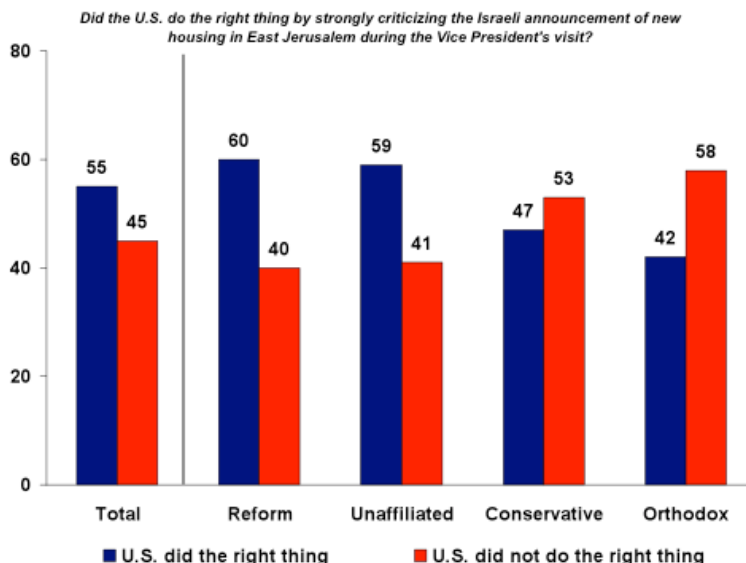


It is important to note that support for an active U.S. role drops significantly if public disagreements or the exertion of pressure is applied solely to Israel. When Israel gets singled out, support is reduced from an overwhelming majority to a roughly even split (52 percent support public disagreements with Israel and 50 percent support exerting pressure just on Israel). While J Street has repeatedly stated that this is not the organization’s position, this data shows a divided community on this issue and that it is far more effective to speak – as the Obama Administration has done – in terms of holding both sides accountable.

### Reactions to Vice President Biden’s Visit

When considering Jewish opinion about the controversy surrounding Vice President Biden’s visit to Israel, it is important to understand that Jerusalem is the one final status issue where American Jews have expressed difficulty reaching a compromise. While previous J Street surveys have demonstrated the passion that American Jews have for Jerusalem and how discussion of compromises in Jerusalem reduces support for a two-state solution, it is particularly striking that 55 percent majority of American Jews feel that the U.S. did the right thing in strongly criticizing the Israeli announcement to build 1,600 new units in East Jerusalem.

The nature of the controversy struck a nerve with American Jews, putting them in a complicated position of being caught between their concerns about America’s international standing and their emotional ties to Jerusalem. Ultimately, Jews are very divided, primarily along denominational lines, on this thorny issue. Among reform and unaffiliated Jews, who together constitute approximately 60 percent of American Jewry, large majorities believe the U.S. was right to strongly criticize Israel over the East Jerusalem announcement (60 percent say the U.S. did the right thing compared to 40 percent who said the U.S. did not do the right thing). This sharply contrasts with conservative Jews (47 percent right / 53 percent not right) and orthodox Jews (42 percent right / 58 percent not right).



With some Jewish organizations arguing that America should not make public demands on Israel and others arguing that public criticism is warranted, the controversy surrounding the Biden visit put a spotlight on this ongoing debate. Overall, people are not concerned by criticism over Israeli policy by American Jews (by a 53-31 percent margin, Jews say it does not bother them when American Jews publicly disagree with Israeli government policy). And when presented with detailed arguments – invoking the actual language used by different organizations in the latest controversy – a 53 percent majority sided with the argument that the Biden incident warranted the public criticism compared to 47 percent who said the Obama Administration should work with Israel “in a manner befitting strategic allies.”

	Agree Much More	Agree Much / Somewhat More
Some Jewish organizations in the United States say that America has a special relationship with Israel and we must support our democratic ally, but this latest incident that took place during Vice President Biden's visit to Israel was an insult to America and damages our interests in a region where we are fighting two wars. The relationship between the United States and Israel must be a two-way street that allows an honest public discussion, and even criticism, when our two countries disagree.	20	53
Other Jewish organizations in the United States say that Israel is America's closest ally in the Middle East, and the Obama Administration's recent statements regarding the U.S. relationship with Israel are a matter of serious concern. The Obama Administration should work closely with Israel in a manner befitting strategic allies, make a conscious effort to move away from public demands and unilateral deadlines directed at Israel, and take immediate steps to defuse tension with the Jewish state.	17	47

Again, differences are evident across the different Jewish denominations as reform and unaffiliated Jews are more supportive of the argument presented by traditionally peace-oriented groups while conservative and orthodox Jews more supportive of the argument of traditionally hawkish groups. Perhaps, most interesting on this highly political question is the reaction of Jews who contribute to political campaigns – these activists were the group most supportive of the American response (64 percent felt the U.S. did the right thing and 58 percent agreed with the argument of the peace groups).

### Final Note

While much has been said and written about the American and Israeli actions over the last two weeks, there is a clear disconnect between the views expressed by traditional Jewish organizations and leaders on the one hand and American Jews on the other hand. As Obama, Clinton, and Biden have all highlighted America’s unbreakable bonds with Israel, the other

unbreakable bond appears to be that of American Jews' commitment to supporting assertive U.S. leadership to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The findings in this survey point to an American Jewish constituency that holds firm beliefs about America's role in the Middle East, and is unmoved by developments such as public disagreements over settlements and East Jerusalem. In the end, Jews feel that the Obama Administration has properly handled the Israeli announcement of new housing in East Jerusalem during the Biden visit..

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## **Methodology**

Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications designed the questionnaire for this survey of 803 self-identified adult American Jews, conducted March 17-19, 2010. 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 Mountain West Research Center and Opinion Outpost to administer the survey by email invitation to its web-based panel, which is regularly updated and consists of nearly 900,000 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 are listed in the survey results and reflect those in other surveys of American Jews, including the 2009 Gallup Survey (reported on January 11, 2010), the 2008-2009 American Jewish Committee Annual Surveys, and the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey.