

American Anxiety over Middle East Buffets Public Support for US Presence in the Region

Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion & Foreign Policy

Craig Kafura, Research Associate

Key Points

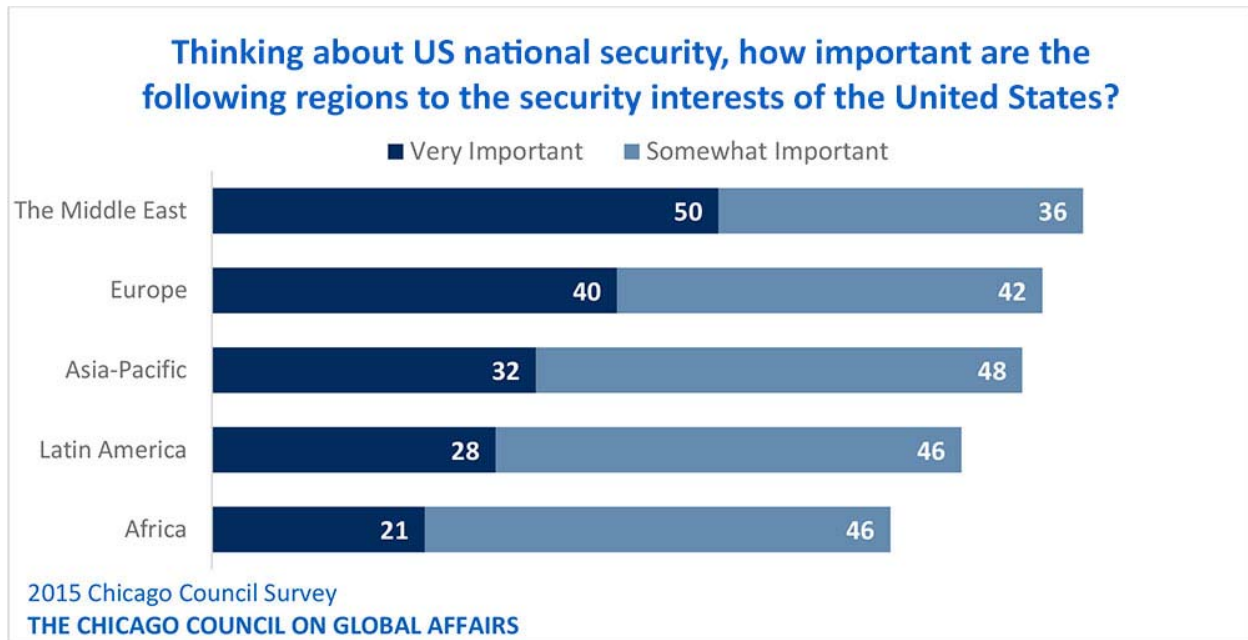
- While both Republicans and Democrats feel warmly towards Israel, there are partisan divisions on Israel's role in resolving key problems in the Middle East and on the creation of an independent Palestinian state.
- Americans' top threats to US security emerge out of the ongoing conflict in Syria, including international terrorism, the rise of violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, and the possibility of those groups carrying out a major terrorist attack in the US.
- In response, Americans support using US troops to fight against violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria.

Introduction

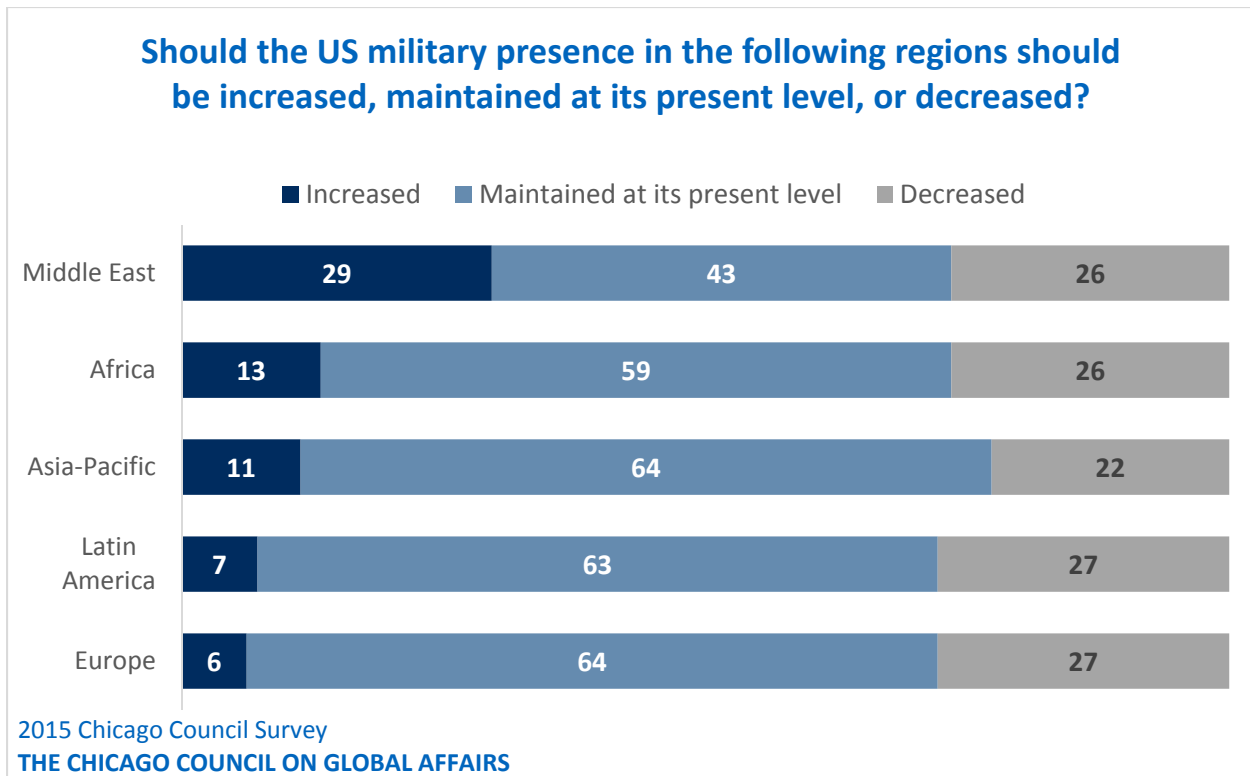
In the last year, conflict in the Middle East has exploded, presenting vexing challenges for the United States. The Islamic State (ISIS) now occupies large portions of Iraq and Syria and has committed unimaginable brutalities. Consequently, after several years of reducing the US military presence in the region, the Obama administration has ramped up military operations with sustained airstrikes against ISIS as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Meanwhile, the Syrian civil war between the Assad regime and various rebel factions continues to grind on, producing an international refugee crisis and threatening to destabilize neighboring countries including Jordan and Turkey. And just over the past month, violence between Israelis and Palestinians has broken out once again with Palestinian knife attacks against Israeli soldiers, police, and civilians.

Middle East Seen as Most Important Region for US Security Interests

Americans have taken notice of these developing situations, and say that among all regions of the world, the Middle East is the most important for US national security. Fully half (50%) of Americans say the Middle East is very important for US security interests, with one in three (36%) saying it is somewhat important. This places the Middle East ahead of Europe, home to long-running US alliances and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as the Asia-Pacific, where Americans see a lesser threat in the rise of China.



As a testament to the region's importance, a plurality of Americans (43%) favor maintaining the US military presence in the Middle East, while three in ten (29%) favor increasing it. Only about a quarter of Americans (26%) favor decreasing it. This is a notable difference compared to other areas of the world. For all other regions, twice as many Americans favor decreasing than increasing the US military presence, with majorities preferring to maintain current levels.

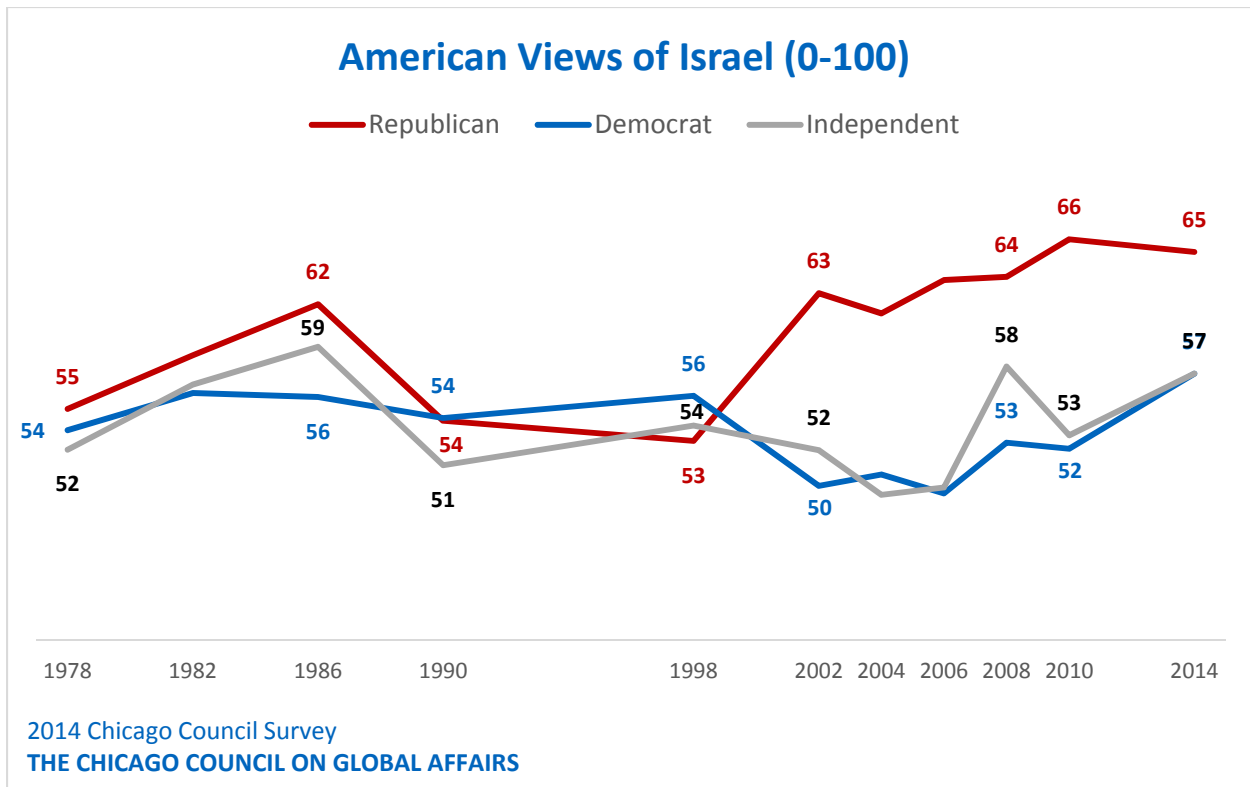


Bipartisan Support for Israel

The US-Israel alliance is a key factor in American foreign policy toward the Middle East and its importance to US security has been upheld by succeeding American administrations. Over the past year, the bilateral relationship has been scrutinized closely as a result of deep partisan divisions in Washington over the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s objections to the deal.

But if the past is any indication of the future of the US-Israel relationship, public opinion trends suggest the relationship will continue to be a warm one. Results from the 2014 Chicago Council Survey show that favorable feelings toward Israel have increased among supporters from both parties in recent years. Republicans’ favorable views of Israel have increased 12 percentage points since a low point in 1998. A majority of Democrats also continue to feel favorably toward Israel, up from a low point of 50 percent in 2002. Gallup surveys conducted in 2014 and 2015 corroborate these trends. In both years, seven in ten Americans expressed favorable views of Israel, suggesting that events over the last year did not affect American support for Israel.¹

¹ Lydia Saad. [“Seven in 10 Americans Continue to View Israel Favorably.”](#) February 23, 2015.

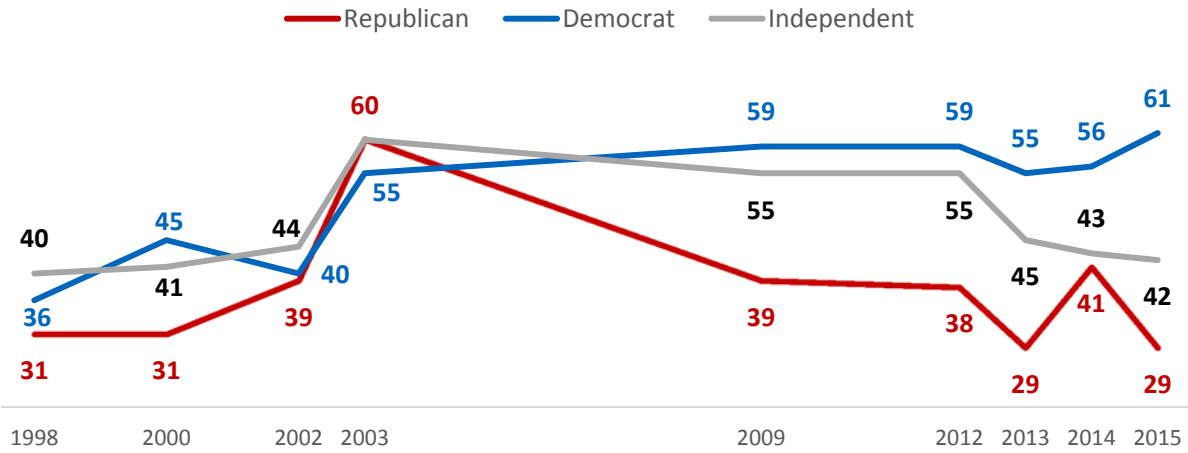


In addition, support for coming to Israel’s defense has been stable over time. According to the 2015 Chicago Council Survey, if Israel were attacked by its neighbors, a majority of Americans (53%) would support using US troops to defend Israel. In fact, support for using US troops for this purpose is currently at the highest level recorded among Republicans (67%), Democrats (49%), and Independents (46%) since The Chicago Council began asking this question in 2010.

Sharp Partisan Divides on Two-State Solution

There is bipartisan goodwill towards Israel, but partisans diverge on a two-state solution for the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. While the overall US public is divided, a majority of Democrats support “an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip” (61%) compared to minorities among Republicans (29%) and Independents (42%). But opinions on this issue were not always so partisan. Until 2003, when President George W. Bush attempted to persuade Israel and the Palestinians to accept the Road Map for Peace, including a two-state solution, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents generally expressed similar views on an independent Palestinian state.

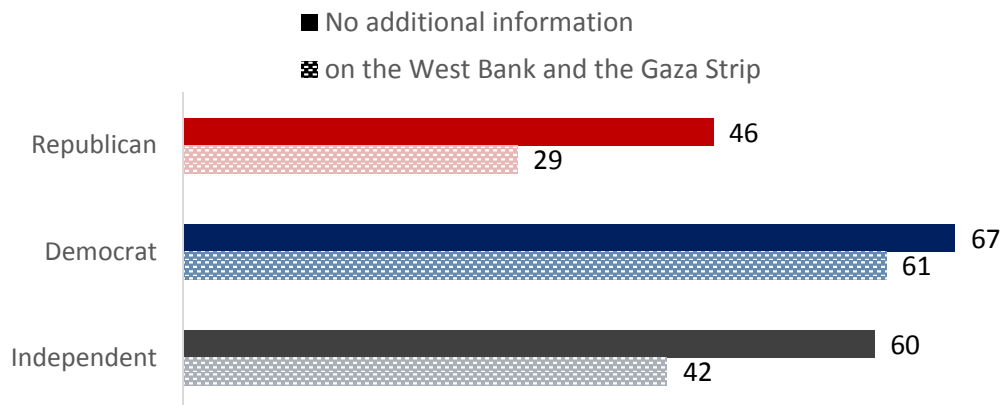
Do you favor or oppose the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? (% favor)



Source: Gallup; 1998, 2002, 2015 Chicago Council Surveys
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There is greater support among Republicans and Independents when the question is posed in a more abstract way, asking about support for “an independent Palestinian state” without specifying the West Bank and Gaza. In this formulation, Republican support for the principle of a Palestinian state increases from three in ten (29%) to nearly half (46%). A similar increase also occurs among Independents, with support rising from four in ten (42%) to six in ten (60%). The variance in question wording does not have much of an impact on Democrats’ support for a Palestinian state.

Do you favor or oppose the establishment of an independent Palestinian state?



2015 Chicago Council Survey
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The lack of progress in advancing a two-state solution may help to explain Democrats' more critical views of Israel's role in resolving problems in the Middle East. While the overall US public is evenly divided on whether Israel plays a positive or negative role in resolving regional problems, a majority of Democrats say Israel plays a negative role (54% to 41% positive) while a majority of Republicans say that Israel plays a positive role (61% vs. 34% negative).

Partisan Divisions on Iran's Nuclear Program

Results from the 2015 Chicago Council Survey, conducted in the weeks before the official nuclear agreement with Iran was finalized, also found that public opinion runs along partisan fault lines.² Majorities of Democrats (74%) and Independents (57%) supported the framework for the nuclear agreement with Iran, while just less than half of Republicans (46% support, 51% opposed) favored it. If Iran commits a violation of the accord, only among Republicans do a majority (53%) favor sending US troops to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities (44% Democrats, 37% Independents).

Surveys conducted after the agreement was signed have found that overall public support has since substantially declined, though Democrats and Independents are still more likely than Republicans to favor the deal. At best, the most recent polls find that public opinion is divided.³

In Syria, Americans Prioritize Fight against ISIS

Americans are most concerned about the multitude of threats emerging out of the ongoing conflict in Syria, though the actual conflict between the Assad regime and opposition groups in Syria seems to be of lesser concern. Large majorities consider international terrorism (69%) and the rise of violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria (64%) to be critical threats to the United States. However, when asked about "the ongoing conflict in Syria" without mention of violent extremists, only 35 percent consider the situation in Syria a critical threat to the United States.

A majority of Americans say that the outcome in Syria that is most threatening to US interests is a victory by violent Islamic extremist groups (58%). Another quarter name instead a continuing civil war in Syria (27%). Few Americans see a victory by the Assad regime (7%) as the biggest threat to US interests.

In response to the threat of violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, a majority of Americans (57%) support the use of US troops against such groups, even if it is a unilateral deployment by the United States.⁴ And according to an August survey by CNN/ORC, three

² Dina Smeltz, Craig Kafura. "[Americans Favor Deal with Iran; Willing to Back with Force.](#)" July 6, 2015.

³ CNN/ORC, conducted September 4-8, 2015. Margin of error: ± 3.0 percentage points.

⁴ When asked about an explicitly unilateral deployment of US troops to combat violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, six in ten Americans (61%) were in favor.

in four Americans (75%) say it is very or somewhat likely that the US campaign against ISIS will eventually involve ground troops engaged in combat operations in Iraq or Syria.⁵ The public also sees the fight against ISIS and related groups as a long one: seven in ten Americans (73%) say that the US will be involved in military action to defeat violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria for more than three years. However, Americans are not upbeat on how the campaign against ISIS is going: according to an October poll by CNN/ORC, six in ten Americans (67%) say things are going badly for the US in the fight against ISIS—a sharp increase from a year prior, when only half of Americans (49%) said the same.⁶

As a result of the violence within Syria, millions of Syrians have fled their homes, creating a refugee crisis in the region that now extends into Europe. In 2014, Chicago Council Survey data showed that Americans were not supportive of taking in Syrian refugees: only four in ten (42%) supported accepting them into the United States. Several recent surveys reflect a similarly ambivalent sentiment towards Syrian refugees. In a September Pew survey, a slim majority of Americans (51%) said that they approved of the US taking in more refugees.⁷ However, a Quinnipiac poll around the same time found that only four in ten Americans (41%) favored taking in 10,000 refugees over the next year.⁸ And an NBC/WSJ survey also conducted in September found that only two in ten Americans (21%) favored taking in more than ten thousand refugees, with one in three (35%) saying this is the right amount, and one in four (24%) saying the US should take none at all.⁹

Reflecting the growing partisan divide on immigration more generally, American views on what the US should do about Syrian refugees are heavily colored by partisanship. While seven in ten Democrats (69%) approve of taking in more refugees, only three in ten Republicans (30%) agree.¹⁰ One reason for that hesitation comes through in a September Quinnipiac poll: six in ten Americans (58%) say that admitting ten thousand Syrian refugees to the US would pose a threat to the security of the United States.¹¹ That concern is more prevalent among Republicans than among Democrats: eight in ten Republicans (81%) say admitting refugees would pose a threat to US security, while only one in three Democrats (34%) say the same.¹²

Conclusion: American Views on the Middle East

The Middle East remains a key concern for Americans and the locus of what they perceive as the leading threats to US security, including international terrorism, the rise of violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, and the possibility of a major terrorist attack in the US. Americans support military actions in response to these direct threats or to an

⁵ CNN/ORC, conducted August 13-16, 2015. Margin of error: 3.0 percentage points.

⁶ CNN/ORC, conducted October 14-17, 2015. Margin of error: ± 3.0 percentage points.

⁷ Pew Research Center. September 22-27, 2015. Margin of error: ±2.9 percentage points.

⁸ Quinnipiac University. September 17-21, 2015. Margin of error: ±2.5 percentage points.

⁹ NBC News/Wall Street Journal. September 20-24, 2015. Margin of error: ±3.1 percentage points.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. September 22-27, 2015. Margin of error: ±2.9 percentage points.

¹¹ Quinnipiac University. September 17-21, 2015. Margin of error: ±2.5 percentage points.

¹² Ibid.

attack on Israel by its neighbors. However, there is much less support for getting involved in the civil war in Syria—or even accepting Syrian refugees into the United States—with few considering that conflict a direct threat to US interests.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2015 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy. The 2015 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using the KnowledgePanel, a nationwide online research panel recruited through an address-based sampling frame. The survey was fielded between May 25 to June 17, 2015 among a national sample of 2,034 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error ranges from ± 2.2 to ± 3.1 percentage points depending on the specific question, with higher margins of error for partisan subgroups.

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