

American Public Opinion on U.S. Aid to Israel

Who wants to pay for nuclear-armed Israel's "Qualitative Military Edge"?

Results of a September 2014 IRmep Online Survey

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Foreword

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U.S. Aid to Israel

Through 2014 the United States has provided Israel with at least \$115 billion¹ in economic and military aid (\$239 billion, adjusted for inflation). American financial, diplomatic, military and intelligence support for Israel is not only massive and unconditional, it has accelerated since the early 1970s. Some attribute that acceleration to Israel becoming a Cold War regional force. However 1970 was also a turning point for U.S. Department of Justice enforcement of the 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The Justice Department abandoned all serious attempts at enforcing FARA on Israel-linked entities after losing large battles with charities lobbying for aid, including the Zionist Organization of America, the Jewish Agency's American Section (which now receives U.S. taxpayer funding) and the American Zionist Council (which transformed into the American Israel Public Affairs Committee six weeks after a 1962 FARA order).² **Israel is now the largest cumulative post-war recipient of U.S. foreign aid.**

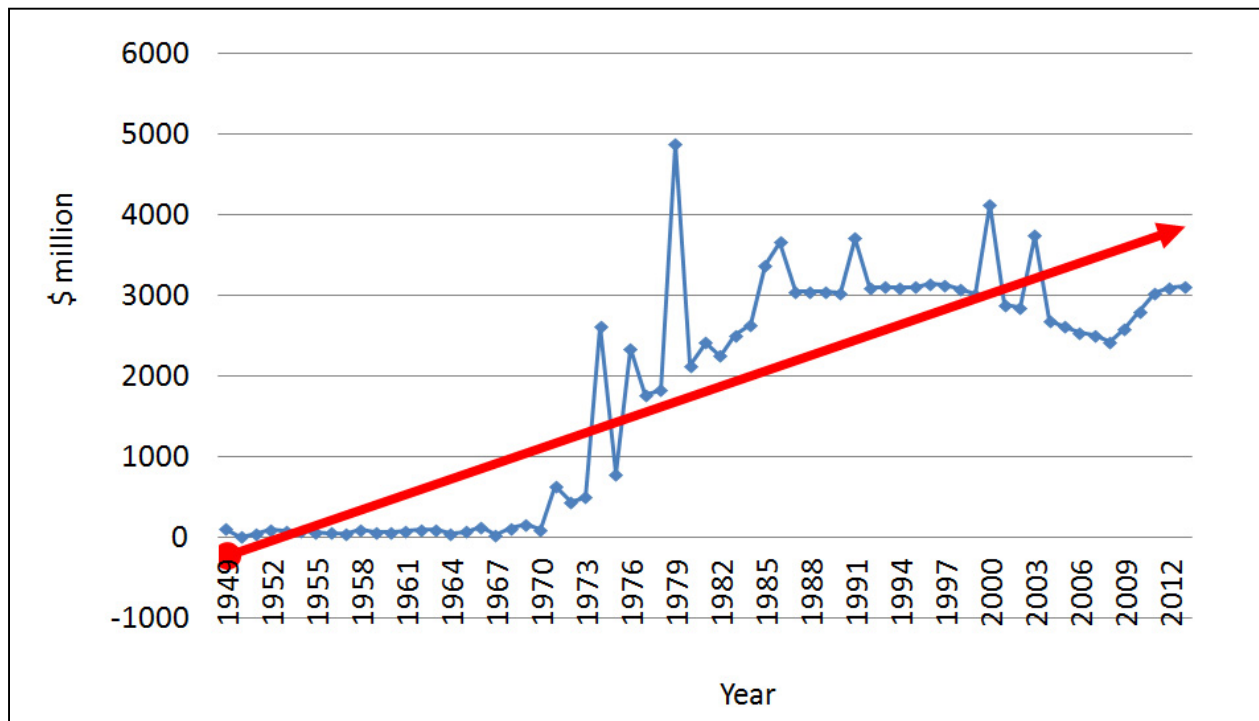


Figure 1 U.S. Aid to Israel³

Academic critics of this unconditional support such as professors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer doubt Israel is a "strategic asset" worthy of such "great benefactor" (U.S.) largesse. They argue convincingly that Israel-oriented ideologues backed by wealthy affinity groups were a deciding factor in driving the United States into the expensive and unnecessary Iraq war.⁴ Many continue to lobby for

¹ Congressional Research Service report "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel 2012"

² America's Defense Line: The Justice Department's Battle to Register the Israel Lobby as Agents of a Foreign Government by Grant F. Smith, 2008

³ Congressional Research Service report "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel 2012"

⁴ The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 2008

even more U.S.-led military conflicts in the region including attacks on Iran—all in the interest of Israel. The U.S. Congress, however, is unwavering in its support for Israel. By a unanimous voice vote the House passed a resolution backing Israel's right "to defend itself" on July 11, 2014—just three days after Israel began its latest bombardment of Gaza. Six days later, as Israel launched a ground offensive into Gaza, the Senate followed suit. All of Israel's military operations involved the use of sophisticated American weaponry, approved by Congress. They ended up killing over 2,000 mostly civilian Palestinians and leaving Gaza in ruins with tens of thousands homeless. Significantly, the House and Senate votes rated no mention in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The Wall St. Journal*. **Though many politicians claim this support is merely a reflection of the American people's own "unwavering" support for Israel, that assertion has not been substantiated.**

Even the best polls about American attitudes toward foreign policy come up short on this question.

The [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) 2014 survey analysis claims the majority of Americans would keep economic and military aid to Israel, Mexico, Taiwan, Afghanistan Iraq, Egypt and Pakistan "about the same." While only a small percentage of Americans would increase aid, most of the rest would prefer to decrease or stop it altogether. **One major problem identified by the Chicago Council is that Americans believe such U.S. aid is far more than it actually is.** A second issue is that "this question was asked before August violence between Israel and Palestinians..." so it might not have captured widespread American horror at the daily images of carnage. Despite these factors, the Chicago Council concludes "Americans tend to support maintaining or increasing military aid to Israel, Taiwan and Mexico. In a pattern similar to preferences for economic aid, the public tends to favor decreasing or stopping military aid to Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq."

From an outside perspective, the Chicago Council survey suffers an even more problematic third flaw in its foreign aid question—**lack of relevant comparative data presented to respondents.** The 2014 U.S. foreign aid budget⁵ for Mexico for example is \$206 million; Afghanistan is \$749 million while Pakistan is \$881 million with Iraq getting \$73 million. Egypt and Israel, meanwhile receive the largest shares with \$1.6 billion to Egypt and \$3.1 billion for Israel. Measured against the top line, Israel receives 9 percent of the entire U.S. foreign aid budget, while benefiting from Egypt's 5 percent share which is justified principally by the latter's maintaining the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. In Israel's case, the figure understates actual aid levels as Congress is routinely tapped by the Israel affinity movement's top lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) for ever more diplomatic cover, military and economic aid. Thanks to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, Americans now know that since 2009 the Obama administration has provided Israel with controversial covert support in the form of raw intelligence intercepts on Americans.⁶

Generally speaking, polls taken of the public to determine American attitudes toward aid to Israel are few and far between. The same is true for polls measuring Israel's popularity against countries inside and outside the region. One such poll was conducted by *The Washington Post* and ABC News in March,

⁵ Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Assistance, Summary Tables, U.S. Department of State Fiscal Year 2014 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208292.pdf>

⁶ NSA shares raw intelligence including Americans' data with Israel" Glen Greenwald, *The Guardian*, September 11, 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/11/nsa-americans-personal-data-israel-documents>

1989 during the first Palestinian intifada and revealed that “support for cutting aid [to Israel] increased significantly when respondents were first informed about the amount of assistance that Israel now receives, suggesting that some who favor present aid levels might change their minds if they knew how much aid Israel actually receives compared to other countries.”⁷

Half of those polled in 1989 were asked if they thought US aid to Israel should increase or decrease or remain the same. Six percent favored an increase, 26 percent a decrease and 66 percent preferred aid remain “about the same.” The second half, informed about the actual amount of aid, showed a noticeable difference. While those supporting an increase declined a negligible two percentage points to four percent, the number approving a decrease in aid jumped to 43 percent while those believing it should remain the same dropped to 51 percent. In this 1989 poll, when matched against Americans’ attitude towards other countries, Israel also did not fare so well with only a 59 percent favorable rating it trailed well behind England (94 percent), West Germany (81 percent), China (80 percent), Mexico (71 percent) and Egypt (68 percent). Only the Soviet Union (54 percent) and Iran (4 percent) lagged behind Israel in popularity. **There is no evidence that a similar poll has been taken since.**

As Israel becomes ever more intertwined with the United States through the recently-passed "US-Israel Strategic Partnership Act," it is long overdue to once again ask Americans what they really think about U.S. aid to Israel. Equally pressing are their perceptions on another major driver of regional instability—nuclear proliferation.

⁷ The Washington Post, April 20, 1989

Today 6 in 10 Americans believe the U.S. gives too much aid to Israel

Surveying Americans about U.S. aid to Israel requires putting it into proper perspective. Given Israel's position as the leading single U.S. foreign aid recipient (by a wide margin), as in 1989 asking the foreign aid question requires embedding relevant data to obtain a bona fide response. When such data is included, the majority of Americans (60.7 percent) believe U.S. aid to Israel is excessive. The major response, that aid to Israel is "Much too much" is 33.9 percent of Americans. Some 26.8 percent believe it is "too much" while 25.9 percent believe it is "about right." Only 13.4 percent of Americans believe U.S. aid to Israel is not enough.

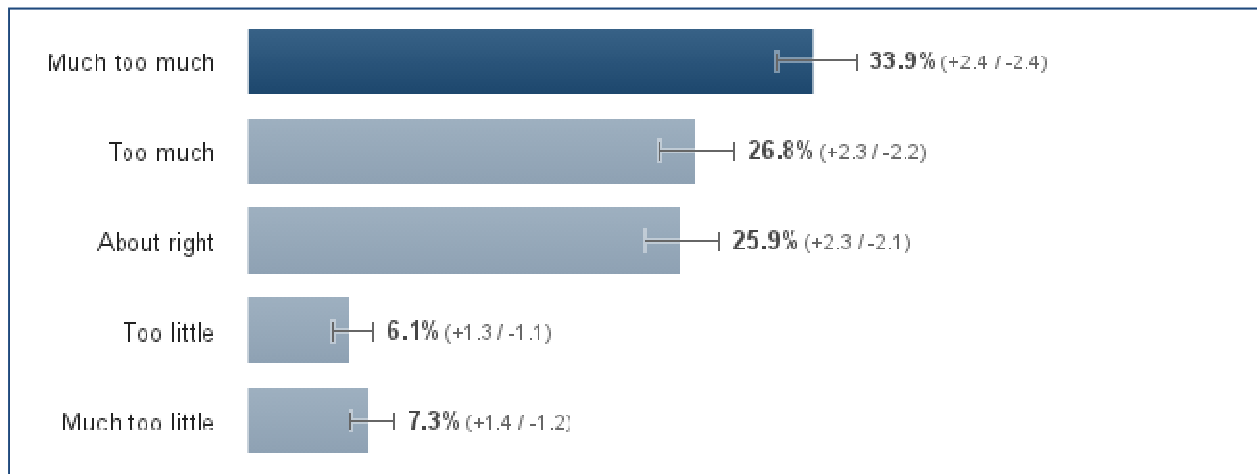


Figure 2 Response "The U.S. gives Israel over \$3 billion annually (9% of the foreign aid budget and more than any other country). The amount is:"

The policy and political implications of this finding are stark. Elected officials passing ever larger aid packages and supplemental spending for Israel simply cannot claim they are representing the majority interests of their constituents. American presidents proclaiming the U.S.-Israel bond is "unbreakable" cannot claim such a bond is willingly underwritten by U.S. taxpayers. The finding also shines yet more light on Israel lobby organizations as the major factor coming between most constituents and their representatives and quietly working to ensure that Israel's majority share of the U.S. foreign aid budget continues.

Younger Americans strongly believe the U.S. gives too much aid to Israel

More granular results are not statistically significant when parsed by age and wealth factors but reveal the need for further research. Initial data cuts signal an generational divide in the willingness to continue supporting Israel with such high levels of aid. Majorities across all age categories believe the U.S. gives "much too much" or "too much" aid to Israel. However, this disaffection increases to an average of 65 percent of those adults aged 34 and under.

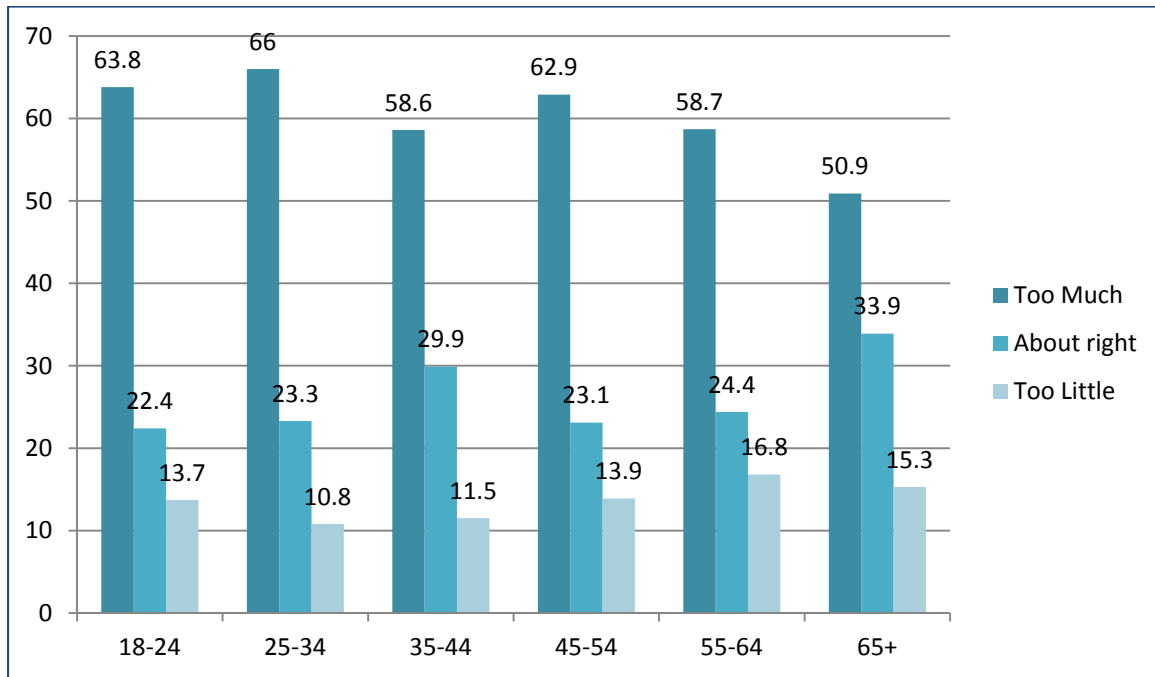


Figure 3 Percent Opposition and Support for U.S. Aid to Israel by Age Category

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Only the Wealthiest Americans believe U.S. aid is "about right"

The only category of Americans (47.6 percent) who believed U.S. aid for Israel is "about right" is the segment earning \$150,000 or more (although even 42.9 percent in that category thought aid was too high). The next lower income category, \$100,000-149,000 is the most vehemently opposed to aid, with 79.5 percent believing it is too high (42.9 percent responding "much too much" and 36.6 percent "too much.")

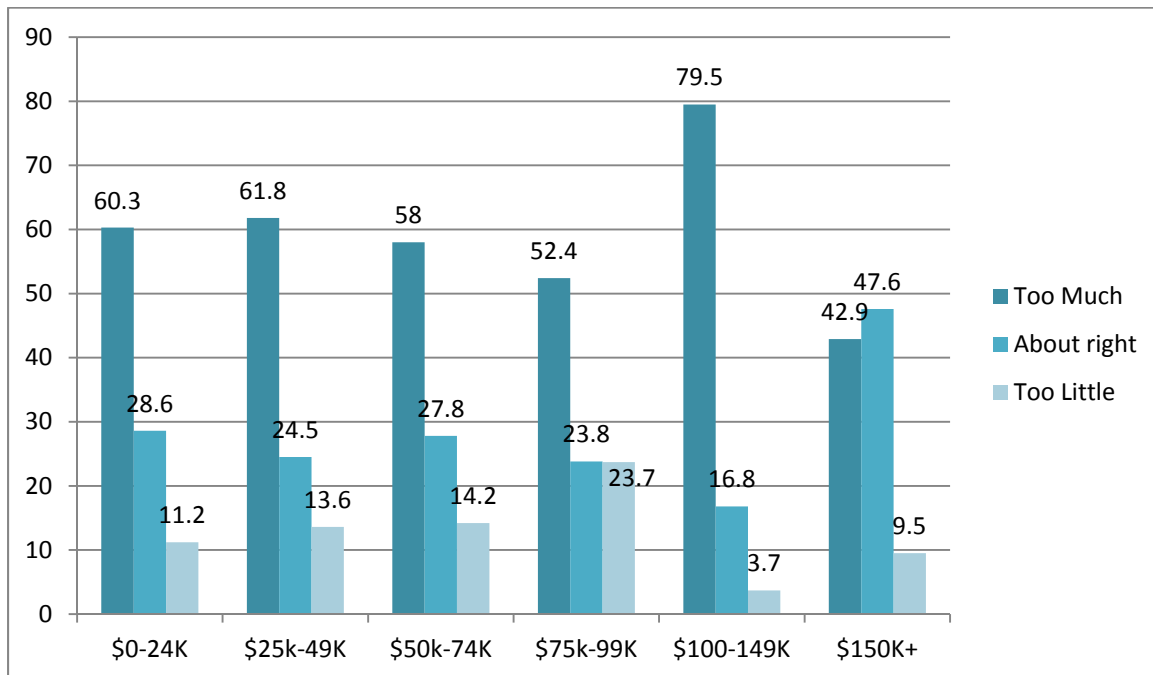


Figure 4 Percent Opposition / Support for Aid to Israel by Income Category

Most Americans Believe Israel Possesses Nuclear Weapons

Among the aid justifications that Americans hear most often from pundits and politicians is that Israel is an island of democracy in a sea of hostile countries ready to pounce on it and is America's "only reliable friend in the Middle East." Every president since Lyndon Johnson has therefore publicly and privately committed to maintaining Israel's "qualitative military edge." This policy means that American taxpayers must purchase and give (not sell) the most advanced weaponry developed by the U.S. arms industry to Israel while pursuing joint programs such as the Arrow and "Iron Dome" missile defense shield that protect Israel, but offer few benefits to the United States. A recent example is the production by Lockheed Martin of the F-35 stealth fighter jet which is expected to cost between \$148 and \$337 million each, depending on its configured capabilities. Nine U.S. allies have already invested millions down payments in anticipation of receiving jets on order. Israel will not only get its F-35s at no cost to the Israeli taxpayers, Israel Aerospace Industries Ltd, which is owned by the government of Israel, reportedly will be subcontracted to produce portions of the F-35s in its own factories. On January 8, 2011, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the previous October, Israel "purchased" its first squadron of 20 F-35s for delivery in 2017 for \$2.75 billion. According to the paper, it also had "recently dispatched" two officers to the US to work with the Pentagon in configuring the F-35 for Israel and "the integration of Israeli technology into the fighter jet." Moreover, *Defense News*, on August 23, 2010, reported that Lockheed Martin had pledged \$4 billion in F-35-related work for Israeli industry, with prospects of upping that amount by at least another \$1 billion over the next decade.

If Israel truly merits top-shelf U.S. military gear for free—with lucrative contracts piled on top—how can Americans object to paying for it all through the largest single slice of the foreign aid budget? **The answer may be that Americans overwhelmingly—63.9 percent—believe that Israel possesses nuclear weapons.**

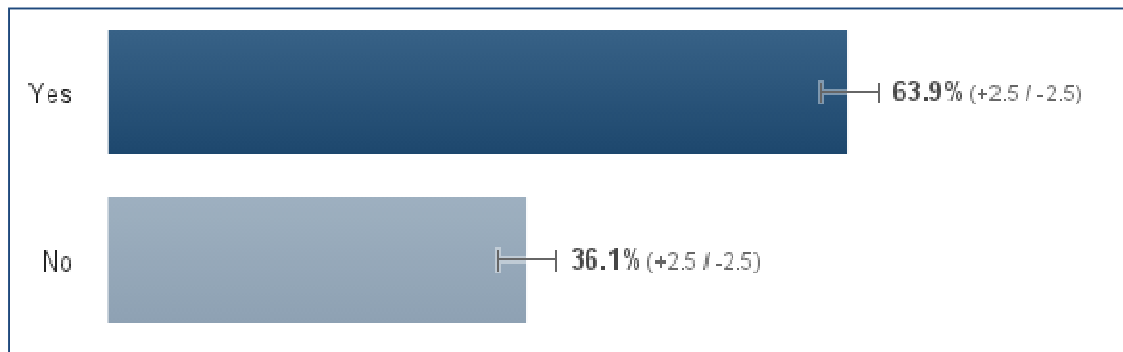


Figure 5 Response "Do you believe Israel has nuclear weapons?"

While in office, American presidents refuse to comment on Israel's nuclear arsenal. The Kennedy administration fought bitterly to inspect Israeli nuclear weapons facilities and prevent the country from going nuclear. The "no comment" policy apparently began as a political deal between the Nixon Administration and Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meier to maintain "ambiguity" over the program.

Recently declassified Nixon administration files reveal fears of a "Zionist campaign to try to undermine" U.S. resistance to Israel going nuclear were a major factor in the compromise.⁸

Since that time, U.S. government officials have been ordered not to discuss or write about Israel's growing arsenal, under the penalty of dismissal and criminal prosecution. The consequence of allowing Israel to develop and deploy a nuclear arsenal with second strike capabilities has been the erosion of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NNPT) and ongoing (but unsuccessful) calls by regional governments to make the Middle East a "Nuclear Free Zone." In 2008 former president Jimmy Carter estimated Israel had "150 nuclear weapons."⁹ **Declassified and leaked accounts of Israeli covert operations to obtain American know-how, weapons-grade nuclear material¹⁰ and nuclear weapons technology¹¹ from the U.S. are compelling. They signal "strategic ambiguity" may be more of a U.S. government cover-up of its inexplicable laxity over such breeches of sovereignty, the Atomic Energy Act and non-compliance with the NNPT than a rationally selected U.S. national security strategy.**

For policymakers and pundits heavily invested in "strategic ambiguity," the question raised by this new survey response is "who, precisely, do you think you're fooling?" Americans, apparently, are not fooled. **They may even resent being asked to underwrite unnecessary arms give-aways to a country that has long possessed the ultimate deterrent. However, Israel and its U.S. affinity groups have a response to such doubts—double down on claims that Israel is in mortal danger.**

Most Americans Also Believe Iran Possesses Nuclear Weapons

A majority of Americans also believe—incorrectly—that Iran already possesses nuclear weapons. Iran never fares well in American public opinion polls, particularly for questions that ask "who do you like more, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran or Israel?" It is the consensus among most western intelligence agencies that Iran does not have nuclear weapons. Nevertheless its civilian nuclear program (Developed as a signatory to the NNPT and subject to International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring) has made it a target. Iran is subject to economic boycotts, continual foreign covert actions aimed at disruption including assassinations and cyber attacks. Tense high-level international negotiations proceed under continual threat of being negated by the U.S. Congress.

⁸ Israel's Nuclear Weapons Program, ISCAP declassification, March 18, 2014
<http://www.archives.gov/declassification/iscap/pdf/2009-076-doc1.pdf>

⁹⁹ Israel has 150 nuclear weapons, BBC News, May 26, 2008 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7420573.stm

¹⁰ "The Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC) and the diversion of US government weapons-grade uranium to Israel" Declassified government document archive.
<http://www.israellobby.org/numec/default.asp>

¹¹ "Netanyahu Worked Inside Nuclear Smuggling Ring" Grant F. Smith, Antiwar.com July 4, 2012
<http://original.antiwar.com/smith-grant/2012/07/03/netanyahu-worked-inside-nuclear-smuggling-ring/>

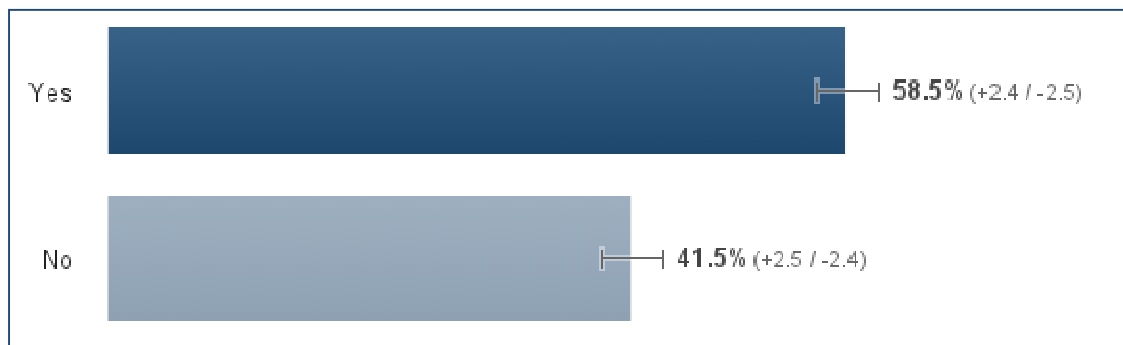


Figure 6 "Do you believe Iran has nuclear weapons?"

One of the reasons so many Americans wrongly believe Iran has nuclear weapons is a massive and ongoing Israel lobby propaganda campaign. In the book "Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare" investigative reporter Gareth Porter details the decades-long campaign to focus international attention on Iran and away from Israel through phony evidence, constant threats, false allegations and public relations strategies. Unlike American beliefs about Israel's all-too-real nuclear arsenal, belief in the existence of an Iranian bomb is a measure of the effectiveness of the propaganda campaign rather than a useful guide for American regional policy.

Conclusions

Given its outsize share of the U.S. foreign aid budget, it is troubling that American taxpayers are largely kept in the dark about the extent of US aid to Israel and not asked more frequently their opinions about it. Whatever value Israel may have as a strategic asset to the United States, it does not explain the massive public and secret government flows of economic and military support to Israel. It does not explain why it is possible for a member of Congress to publicly criticize an American president of either party but not a prime minister of Israel. It does not explain why a Joint Session of Congress would give Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu 29 standing ovations in 2011 just three days after he had publicly insulted the President of the United States. It did not explain why, during the era of South African apartheid, members of Congress refused to sponsor or support legislation targeting that racist regime as long as it contained a provision that would penalize Israel for providing it with arms. Perhaps the situation was best explained by a pro-Israel member of Congress to *The New Republic's* Morton Kondracke in the August 7, 1989 edition of the magazine: "It's not out of affection anymore that Israel gets \$3 billion a year. It's from fear that you'll wake up one morning and find that an opponent has \$500,000 to run against you."

Concerned Americans must more closely examine the activities of Israel affinity groups. This includes quid pro quo funding of political campaigns through bundled contributions, dark money and political action committees. Serious attention must also be paid to the huge constellation of nonprofit Israel affinity groups that mount major pressure on U.S. media to toe a pro-Israel line and the constant lobbying of Congress for massive aid increases. Such lines of inquiry will provide answers to the key question of why such aid continues when it enjoys so little current American support.

Methodology

This report is based on the results of a survey commissioned by the Institute for Research: Middle Eastern Policy. It is the seventh IRmep survey but the first that was not fielded in-house to an expert panel.

The survey was conducted from September 26 to September 29, 2014 to a representative sample of 2,108 adults in the United States. The sample was drawn from the national adult internet population. The estimated margin of sampling error is 2.2%. The survey was fielded by Google Consumer Surveys, which has a reputation for accuracy, reach, respondent demographic data and sample size capabilities and speed.¹² The Google Consumer Survey samples internet users, selecting visitors to websites and through mobile apps organizations that have agreed to allow Google to administer one or two questions. In 2012 there were about 80 sites in their network including a mix of large and small publishers (such as *New York Daily News*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Reader's Digest*, *Lima, Ohio News* and the *Texas Tribune*). Google Consumer Surveys also appear on as major sites such as YouTube, and Pandora among others.

Because each of the questions above was fielded separately to a different sample, no cross-tabulation between respondent questions is possible. The survey questions were presented with the answer order randomly reversed to minimize bias. The questions appeared as "pop-up" multiple choice questions that users could opt to answer in order to obtain access to premium content.¹³

¹² Which Polls Fared Best (and Worst) in the 2012 Presidential Race?, Nate Silver, New York Times, November 10, 2012 http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/which-polls-fared-best-and-worst-in-the-2012-presidential-race/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

¹³ Additional cross-tabulations and raw responses to each survey question available at:

Foreign aid to Israel

<http://www.google.com/insights/consumersurveys/view?survey=ajghtw3i4spqy&question=1&filter=&rw=1>

Israeli nukes

<http://www.google.com/insights/consumersurveys/view?survey=7gfftskexqbf4&question=1&filter=&rw=1>

Iranian nukes

<http://www.google.com/insights/consumersurveys/view?survey=cbykabh2p3an4&question=1&filter=&rw=1>

Because the questions asked concerned Israel, special attention was paid to detect any suspicious swings while the survey was in the field. Pro-Israel activists, alerted through online tools such as "Megaphone" have in the past targeted online surveys in order to flood responses that would present Israel in the best possible light. The random, vast, distributed nature of this survey seemed to mitigate against the likely success of such a campaign. Response levels in each answer category did not vary much between observations at the 100, 400, 1,000, 1500 and 2000 responder observations. Visits to websites fielding the survey revealed no reliable way to access or "intercept" questions while they were in the field.