

Anwar Sadat Chair
University of Maryland



Program on International
Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

Americans on Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Program

A Study of American Public Opinion

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The Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development was established at the University of Maryland, College Park in the fall of 1997 in memory of the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The Chair, under the leadership of the Sadat Professor Shibley Telhami, is housed in the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) and makes its academic home in the Department of Government and Politics. The Chair was made possible by the commitment of Anwar Sadat's widow, Dr. Jehan Sadat, to her husband's legacy of leadership for peace. With support from all levels of the University, Dr. Sadat created an endowment for the Chair from the generous support of many individual contributors from around the world.

The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) was established in 1992 with the purpose of giving public opinion a greater voice in international relations. PIPA conducts in-depth studies of public opinion that include polls, focus groups and interviews. It integrates its findings together with those of other organizations. It actively seeks the participation of members of the policy community in developing its polls so as to make them immediately relevant to the needs of policymakers. PIPA is a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes and the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).

The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM), at the University of Maryland's School for Public Policy, pursues policy-oriented scholarship on major issues facing the United States in the global arena. Using its research, forums, and publications, CISSM links the University and the policy community to improve communication between scholars and practitioners.

Knowledge Networks is a polling, social science, and market research firm based in Menlo Park, California. Knowledge Networks uses a large-scale nationwide research panel which is randomly selected from the national population of households having telephones and is subsequently provided internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus is not limited to those who already have internet access).

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2012 concern has mounted that Israel is close to a decision to use airstrikes on the sites and facilities of Iran's nuclear program, in an effort to cripple its progress. Memories of Israel's airstrike against Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1980, along with a number of Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent statements, have fed the perception that Israel views this as a winning strategy.

At the same time, anxiety has risen in the United States that Israel will execute airstrikes and then leave the US with an unmanageable situation in the Middle East. Iran could retaliate by striking US assets, pulling the US into the conflict. And if Israel were to absorb substantial losses from Iranian retaliation, the US could be under pressure to come to Israel's aid.

US policymakers have sent a clear signal discouraging Israel from attacking Iran's program. Members of the Obama administration stress that the recently upgraded sanctions on Iran passed by the UN Security Council should be allowed to exert their effect and insist that there is still time to act if they do not succeed.

Administration leaders have also expressed pessimism about the effectiveness of an attack: Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has said about the effect of a military strike on Iran's ability to make a nuclear bomb, "At best, it might postpone it maybe one, possibly two years."

Israeli leaders stress that the window for an attack on Iran is closing as Iran continues to develop its program. And some Israelis have argued that a strike would be effective in setting back Iran. However, recent polling by the Anwar Sadat Chair finds that Israelis are pessimistic about the value of an attack and only one in five Israelis favor proceeding without US support.

In order to better understand American public attitudes on this issue, the Program on International Policy Attitudes and the Anwar Sadat Chair conducted a poll of the American public over March 3-7. The following are some of the issues examined in the study:

Do Americans prefer an Israeli strike over the path of giving diplomacy with Iran more time? Do they prefer the U.S. to act primarily alone or primarily through the U.N. Security Council?

With the topic of airstrikes being hotly debated in Israel now, what stance do Americans think the US government should take toward Israel at this point?

If Israel does go ahead and conduct airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, how would the US public want its government to respond? Further, what do they think their government would actually do? Do their expectations match up reasonably with their own policy preferences?

If an Israeli airstrike to cripple Iran's nuclear program took place, how effective do Americans assume it would be?

Do Americans assume that an Israeli strike would presage a longer conflict, or do they think it would be a short, sharp event with a clear termination?

When Americans consider what a nuclear-armed Iran would be like, do they suppose it would make rational calculations as a nuclear actor and fit its behavior into a logic of deterrence, or that it would take irrational risks?

METHODOLOGY

The poll was fielded over March 3-7 with a sample size of 727 respondents. It has a margin of error (including sample design effects) of +/-4.5 percent. It was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides a laptop and ISP connection. Spanish only speakers are provided with Spanish questionnaires. Additional technical information is available at http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The key findings of the study were:

1. Support for Continued Diplomacy Rather Than an Israeli Military Strike

Only one in four Americans favor Israel conducting a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program. Seven in ten favor instead the US and other major powers continuing to pursue negotiations with Iran. Three in four say that the US should primarily act through the UN Security Council rather than acting by itself.4

2. US Stance Toward Israel

Only one in seven Americans thinks the US should encourage Israel to strike Iran’s program, but views are mixed as to whether the US should openly discourage Israel or stay neutral.....5

3. If Israel Goes Ahead With a Strike

If Israel goes ahead with a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program and Iran retaliates (but not against American targets), only one in four favors the US providing military support for Israel, and only four in ten favor the US providing even diplomatic support. Few would support open opposition. The most popular position is for the US to take a neutral stance. If Israel strikes Iran even without American approval, slightly more than one in five Americans think the US would provide military support, and a slight majority thinks that it would at least provide diplomatic support.7

4. Pessimistic Assumptions About Effect and Costs of a Military Strike

Americans think that a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program is not likely to produce much benefit--or to be low in cost. Only one in five believe that a military strike will delay Iran’s abilities to acquire a nuclear weapon for more than five years. Less than half believe that a strike would weaken the Iranian government. Also, few Americans believe that a strike will involve a short exchange: a large majority believes that a strike would lead to at least months of military conflict between Iran and Israel, and half believe that it would go on for years..... 10

5. Assumptions About a Strike and Preferred Policy Positions

Respondents who favor providing military or diplomatic support to Israel in the event of a strike are more optimistic that a strike will substantially delay Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons, and that the strike would not lead to a drawn-out military conflict between Iran and Israel--though even they were not optimistic that the conflict would be short. 11

6. Pessimism About Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

Americans show substantial pessimism about Iran and its nuclear program. Six in ten believe that Iran has decided to try to produce nuclear weapons and is actively working to do so. Nine in ten believe that it is likely that Iran will eventually develop nuclear weapons. 12

7. Pessimism About How Iran Would Behave If It Acquires Nuclear Weapons

If Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, six in ten believe that it is more likely that Iran would use them against Israel, rather than being deterred by the likelihood of retaliation. The largest concern is that Iran would either use nuclear weapons, or that their possession would make Iran more aggressive--less than that it would engender a nuclear arms race in the region..... 13

FINDINGS

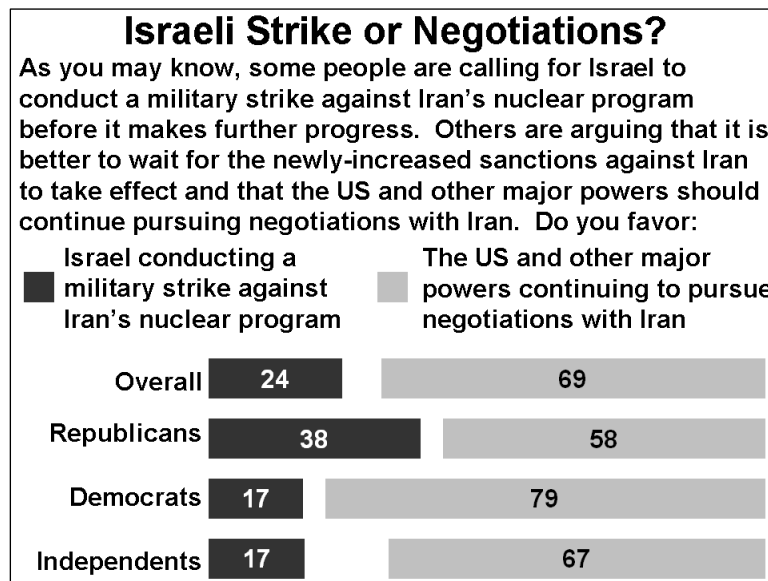
1. Support for Continued Diplomacy Rather Than an Israeli Military Strike

Only one in four Americans favor Israel conducting a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program. Seven in ten favor instead the US and other major powers continuing to pursue negotiations with Iran. Three in four say that the US should primarily act through the UN Security Council rather than acting by itself.

Respondents were presented the question of how to deal with Iran’s nuclear program as follows:

As you may know, some people are calling for Israel to conduct a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program before it makes further progress. Others are arguing that it is better to wait for the newly-increased sanctions against Iran to take effect and that the US and other major powers should continue pursuing negotiations with Iran.

Respondents were then asked to choose between two alternatives. Only 24% favored “Israel conducting a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program” while 69% favored “The US and other major powers continuing to pursue negotiations with Iran.” Respondents were not informed about which was the US government’s position. Support for continued diplomacy was a bipartisan attitude, with 58 percent of Republicans and 79 percent of Democrats preferring to pursue negotiations (independents, 67%).

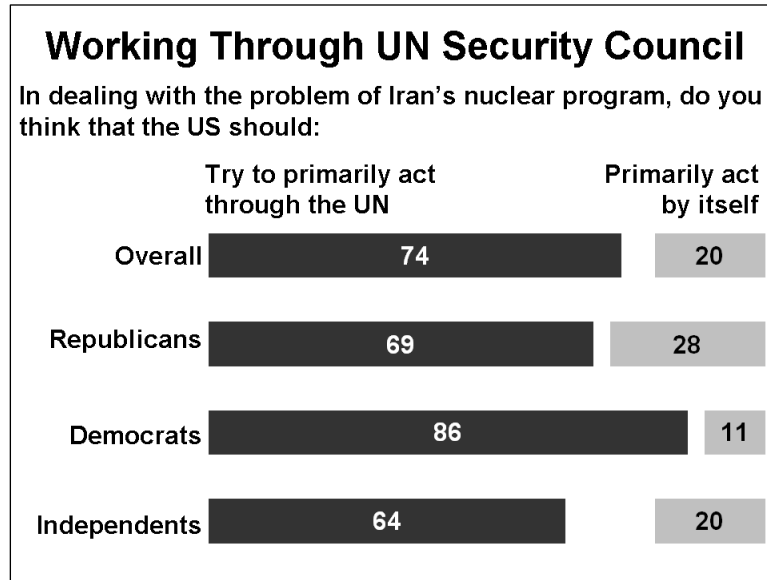


A related question was asked in Israel (February 22-26) in a poll by the Sadat Chair, University of Maryland. Only a small minority of Israelis--one in five--wanted Israel to strike Iranian nuclear facilities without at least American backing.

Israelis were reminded that “there has been increased talk of a military strike by Israel against Iran’s nuclear facilities, even though the United States, the UK, and Germany have advised against it. What do you think Israel should do—strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, even without the support of the US; strike only if Israel gains at least American support; or do not strike?” Only 19 percent (22% of Israeli Jews) wanted Israel to strike even without some international support. Forty-two percent said

Israel should strike only if it had American support, and another 34 percent said Israel should not strike Iranian facilities.

Consistent with their support for a diplomatic approach, a very large majority of Americans prefers that the US act primarily through the UN Security Council. Asked, “In dealing with the problem of Iran’s nuclear program, do you think that the US should primarily act by itself, or try to primarily act through the UN Security Council?” three quarters (74%) chose trying to act through the Security Council. Only one in five (20%) thought the US should primarily act by itself on this issue. Again, this view was highly bipartisan, with 69 percent of Republicans and 86 percent of Democrats preferring the Security Council route (independents, 64%).



2. US Stance Toward Israel

Only one in seven Americans thinks the US should encourage Israel to strike Iran’s program, but views are mixed as to whether the US should openly discourage Israel or stay neutral.

In order to probe public views in greater depth, we offered arguments for three different courses of action by the US and asked respondents how convincing they found each argument. The three courses of action were to encourage Israel to strike Iran’s nuclear program, to discourage it from doing so, or to stay neutral. The argument that the US should discourage Israel was found the most convincing.

Arguments on US Position on Israeli Strike

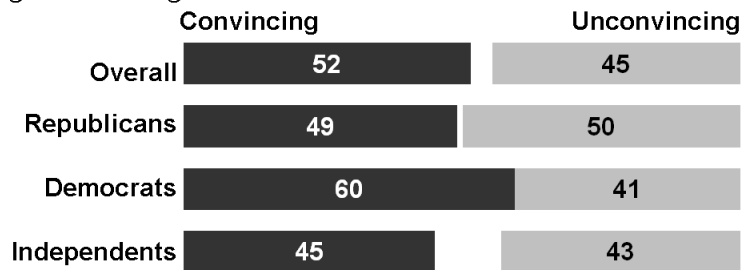
Discourage

The US should discourage Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear program. There are huge risks to US national interests, since Iran may attack US assets in retaliation, pulling the US into a war. Oil prices would skyrocket. Furthermore, US military leaders say the most that could be achieved would be to slow down Iran's nuclear program a bit and probably just lead them to rebuild it underground.



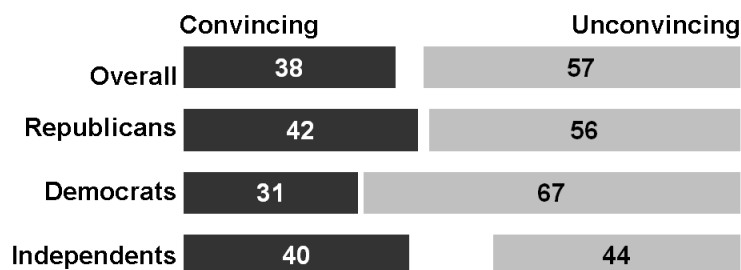
Stay neutral

The US should take a neutral stance. Israel has a right to take actions it sees as necessary for its own defense. Meanwhile, the US should think about its own interests and make a clear statement distancing itself from whatever Israel may choose to do, to reduce the chance that Iran will retaliate against US targets.

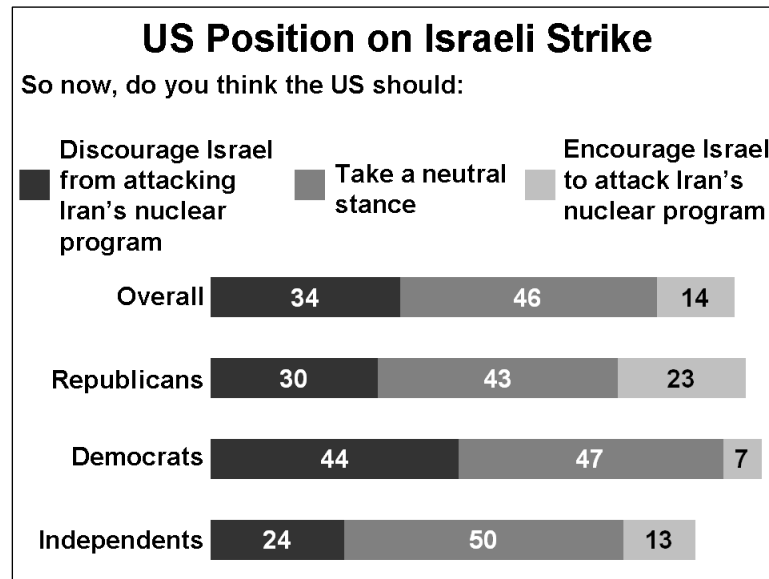


Encourage

The US should encourage Israel to attack Iran's nuclear program. Clearly Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons, and if Israel will take the heat for stopping or at least slowing down the program, all the better for the US. The risk of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons is of greater concern than the fallout from an Israeli strike.



Finally, having evaluated the three arguments, respondents were asked to pick one of the three courses of action. Curiously, though the argument for discouraging Israel was found convincing by a much larger majority (71%) than the argument for staying neutral (52%), when asked to choose a slightly larger number elected a neutral position (46%) than elected discouraging Israel (34%). Only a small minority—14 percent—thought the US should encourage Israel to attack Iran’s nuclear program.



3. If Israel Goes Ahead With a Strike

If Israel goes ahead with a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program and Iran retaliates (but not against American targets), only one in four favors the US providing military support for Israel, and only four in ten favor the US providing even diplomatic support. Few would support open opposition. The most popular position is for the US to take a neutral stance. If Israel strikes Iran even without American approval, slightly more than one in five Americans think the US would provide military support, and a slight majority thinks that it would at least provide diplomatic support.

Respondents were asked to “suppose Israel strikes and Iran retaliates by striking back at Israel, but Iran does not attack any US targets,” and then offered a range of six alternatives for what the US should do in this case. Two were supportive:

- Provide whatever help Israel requests, including military forces
- Publicly support Israel’s actions, but not provide military support

Two were neutral:

- Stay neutral and do not get involved
- Stay neutral and actively work to get both sides to stop the fighting

And two involved the US publicly opposing Israel’s actions:

- Publicly oppose Israel’s actions
- Actively distance the US from Israel by stopping military aid

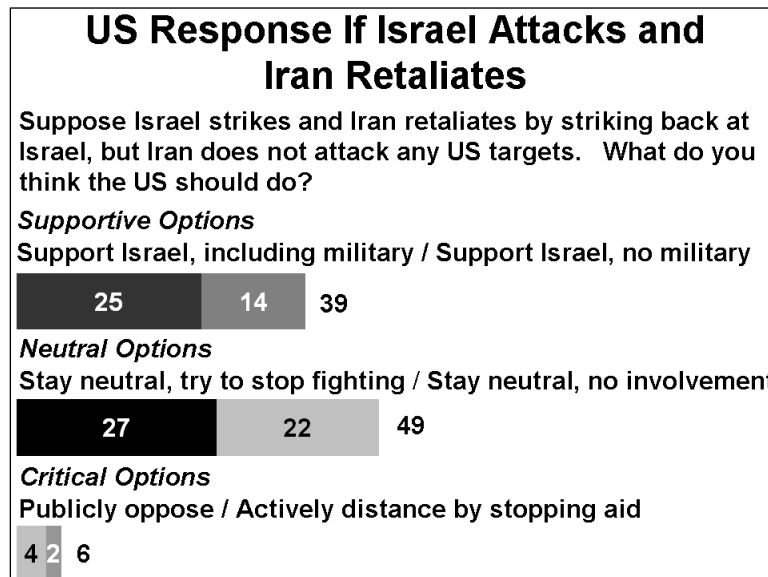
Only four in ten (39%) preferred options that would express support to Israel after an attack on Iran. A quarter (25%) were willing to provide military help if requested, while 14 percent would go as far as offering diplomatic support, but would not provide military support.

About half (49%) preferred options that took a neutral stance. Twenty-seven percent wanted the US to work actively to get both sides to end hostilities, while another 22 percent preferred that the US stay neutral and “not get involved.”

Very few respondents (6%) wanted to take a course of directly opposing Israel in a time of war. Four percent wanted to stop military aid to Israel and another two percent wanted to simply express public opposition.

There were clear partisan differences on this question. Among Republicans, 59 percent wanted to support Israel after an attack on Iran, though a lesser 41 percent were willing for this to include military forces. Thirty-five percent of Republicans wanted the US to stay neutral (work to stop the fighting, 21%). Only 3 percent wanted to oppose Israel’s actions.

Among Democrats, however, three in ten Democrats (31%; independents, 23%) wanted to support Israel, with 16 percent willing to provide military forces. Six in ten wanted the US to stay neutral (59%; independents, 54%), with 34% wanting to US to work to stop the fighting. Only 9 percent of Democrats wanted to take a stance of opposition to Israel (independents, 8%).



Beliefs on How the US Would Actually Respond if Israel Goes Ahead

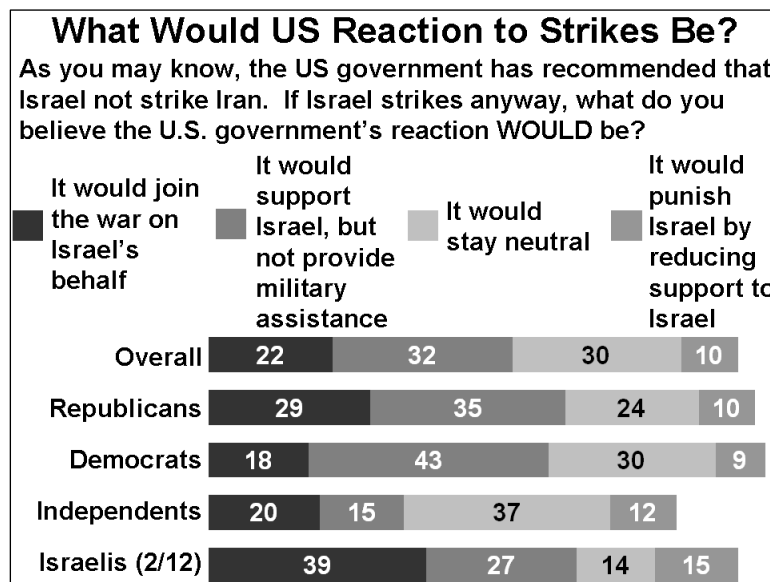
After respondents had expressed their preferences in this hypothetical situation, they were asked what they “believed the US government’s reaction would be.” In this question, respondents were offered the same four options that had been offered when the question was put to a representative sample of Israelis in the Sadat Chair poll mentioned above. The options were:

- It [the US government] would support Israel diplomatically, but not provide military assistance
- It would join the war on Israel’s behalf
- It would stay neutral
- It would punish Israel by reducing its current support to Israel

The most common answer was that in the hypothetical situation, respondents supposed the US government would support Israel diplomatically, but not provide military assistance (32%). Another 22 percent thought the US would join the war—making a modest majority (54%) who thought the US government would be publicly supportive. Thirty percent thought the US government would stay neutral, and only 10 percent thought the US would reduce its current support.

Among partisan groups there were a few noteworthy differences: a higher 43 percent of Democrats thought the US government would support Israel, but only diplomatically; and a higher 37 percent of independents thought the US would stay neutral.

When Israelis answered this same question, 39 percent thought the US government would support Israel diplomatically and another 27 percent thought it would join the war. Thus a larger 63 percent of Israelis supposed the US government would have a supportive reaction (compared to 54 percent among Americans). A much lower 14 percent of Israelis thought the US government would stay neutral (compared to 30 percent of Americans). Fifteen percent thought the US would reduce its current support—higher than the 10 percent of Americans who thought this.



To summarize: although not all the questions are exactly parallel, it appears that were Israel to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities, less than a majority of Americans would want the US to publicly support it. A modest majority, however, expects that in this case the US government would support Israel’s actions; and a larger majority of Israelis believes the US would do so.

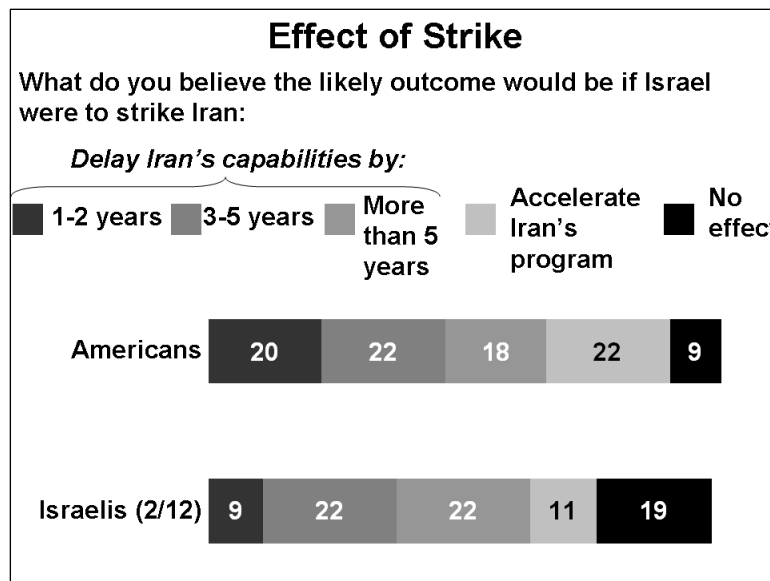
4. Pessimistic Assumptions About Effect and Costs of a Military Strike

Americans think that a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program is not likely to produce much benefit—or to be low in cost. Only one in five believe that a military strike will delay Iran’s abilities to acquire a nuclear weapon for more than five years. Less than half believe that a strike would weaken the Iranian government. Also, few Americans believe that a strike will involve a short exchange: a large majority believes that a strike would lead to at least months of military conflict between Iran and Israel, and half believe that it would go on for years.

Respondents were asked what they thought the likely outcome if Israel were to strike Iran’s nuclear program. Three levels of delay in Iran’s progress were offered: delaying capabilities by 1-2 years, 3-5 years, or more than 5 years. Respondents could also choose the possibility that a strike would have no effect on Iran’s nuclear program, or that it would even accelerate the program.

Only 18 percent believed that such an attack would delay Iran’s capabilities by more than 5 years (there was no partisan difference). Twenty-two percent thought it would bring 3-5 years’ delay, and another 20 percent thought it would bring just 1-2 years’ delay. Another 22 percent thought it would result in accelerating Iran’s program; 9 percent thought it would have no effect.

When the same question was asked in the poll of Israelis, Israeli assessments were strikingly similar to those of Americans. Only 22 percent thought an attack would result in more than 5 years’ delay of Iran’s capabilities. Twenty-two percent thought it would bring 3-5 years’ delay, while 9 percent thought it would bring 1-2 years’ delay. Nineteen percent believed an attack would have no effect on Iran’s program, but Israelis were less likely than Americans to think an attack would actually accelerate the program (11%, compared to 22%).

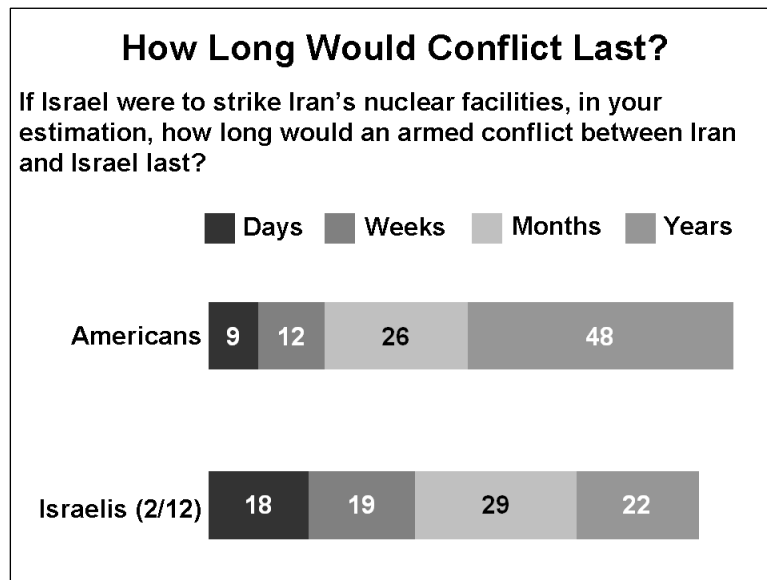


Less than half of respondents said that they believed that Israeli airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities would have the effect of weakening Iran’s government. Asked “If Israel were to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities, in your view, how would this affect the Iranian government?” only 42 percent thought the Iranian government would be weakened, while 51 percent thought it would either have no effect (21%) or the government would actually be strengthened by the attack (30%). (No partisan group had a majority believing Iran’s government would be weakened.)

Among Israelis, the responses to the same question were fairly similar: 45 percent thought Iran’s government would be weakened but 44 percent thought it would be strengthened (no effect: 4%).

Few Americans believe that an Israeli strike on Iran would involve a short exchange. Respondents were asked, “If Israel were to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities, in your estimation, how long would an armed conflict between Iran and Israel last?” Only 21 percent thought it would be a matter of days (9%) or weeks (12%). Instead, 74 percent thought such a conflict would run on for months (26%) or years (48%).

Israelis were relatively more sanguine than Americans about the length of possible hostilities. Thirty-seven percent thought such a conflict would take days (18%) or weeks (19%); 29 percent thought it would take months and only 22 percent thought it would take years—compared to the 48 percent of Americans who thought this.

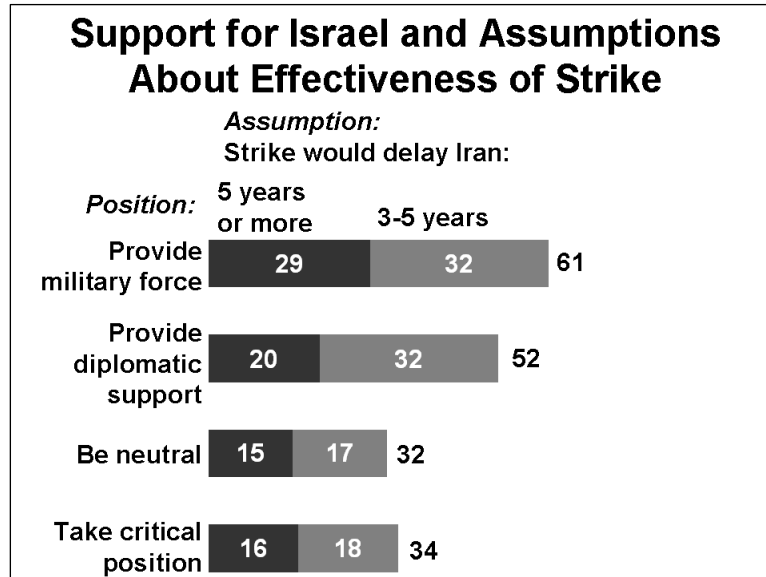


5. Assumptions About a Strike and Preferred Policy Positions

Respondents who favor providing military or diplomatic support to Israel in the event of a strike are more optimistic that a strike would substantially delay Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons and that a strike would not lead to a drawn out military conflict between Iran and Israel--though even they were not optimistic that the conflict would be short.

While it is not possible to establish whether such beliefs are causal, respondents who favored providing military support to Israel or diplomatic support were more optimistic about the effectiveness of a strike. Among those who were ready to provide military support, 61% assumed that the strike would delay Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons by 5 years or more (29%) or

delay them 3-5 years (32%). Among those who favored only diplomatic support, 52% assumed 5 years or more (20%) or 3-5 years (32%). However among those who favored a neutral position, only 32% assumed 5 years or more delay (15%) or 3-5 years (17%). And among those who favored a critical position toward Israel, 34% assumed 5 years or more delay (16%) or 3-5 years (18%).

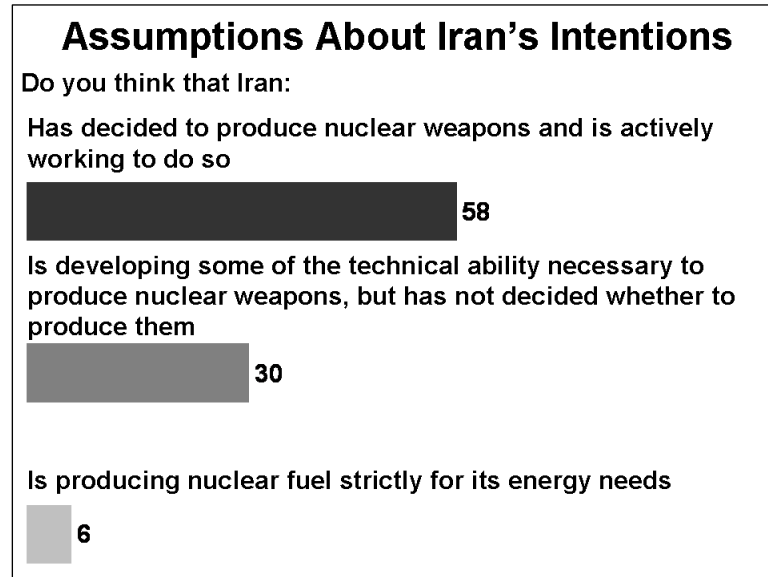


Those who favored support for Israel were also more optimistic that the strike would not lead to a drawn-out military conflict between Iran and Israel. Among no group did a majority think that the conflict would last less than “months.” But a majority of those who favored military support thought that the conflict would last no more than months (56%), as did this who favored diplomatic support (66%), while a majority of those who favored neutrality thought it would last years (68%) as did those who favored opposing Israel (58%).

6. Pessimism About Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

Americans show substantial pessimism about Iran and its nuclear program. Six in ten believe that Iran has decided to try to produce nuclear weapons and is actively working to do so. Nine in ten believe that it is likely that Iran will eventually develop nuclear weapons.

Given three options, 58 percent of respondents said they thought Iran has decided on nuclear weapons and working to produce them. Only three in ten (30%) thought along lines similar to the views of the US intelligence community: that Iran “is developing some of the technical ability necessary to produce nuclear weapons, but has not decided whether to produce them.” Only 6 percent said Iran is “producing nuclear fuel strictly for its energy needs.”



Among partisan groups there were meaningful differences. Seventy-three percent of Republicans thought Iran has decided to produce nuclear weapons, while 24 percent thought it has not yet decided. A lower 56 percent of Democrats thought Iran has decided to produce nuclear weapons, while 35 percent thought it has not decided. Among independents, however, only 44 percent thought Iran has decided to produce nuclear weapons (not decided, 32%).

Nine in ten Americans think it likely “that Iran will eventually develop nuclear weapons.” Forty-nine percent called this prospect very likely and 40 percent somewhat likely. Republicans, however, are the only partisan group with a majority (63%) calling this very likely (Democrats 44%, independents 39%).

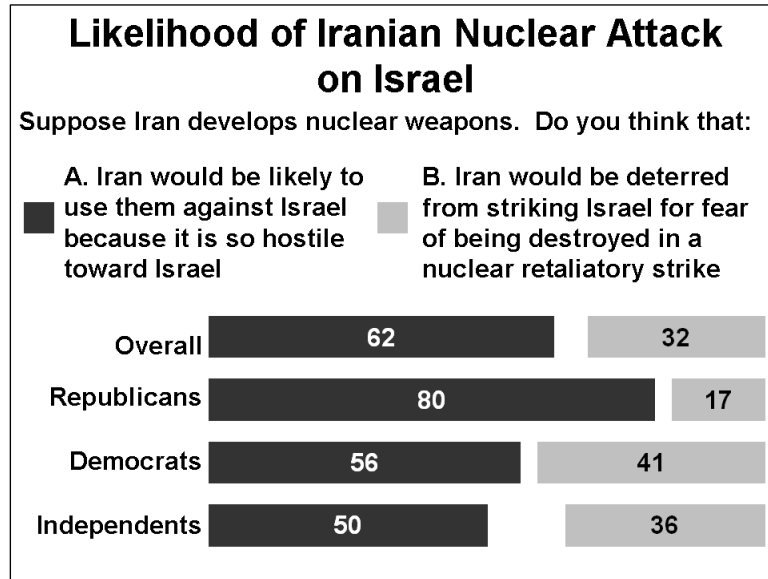
7. Pessimism About How Iran Would Behave If It Acquires Nuclear Weapons

If Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, six in ten believe that it is more likely that Iran would use them against Israel rather than being deterred by the likelihood of retaliation. The largest concern is that Iran would either use nuclear weapons, or that their possession it would make Iran more aggressive--less than that it would engender a nuclear arms race in the region.

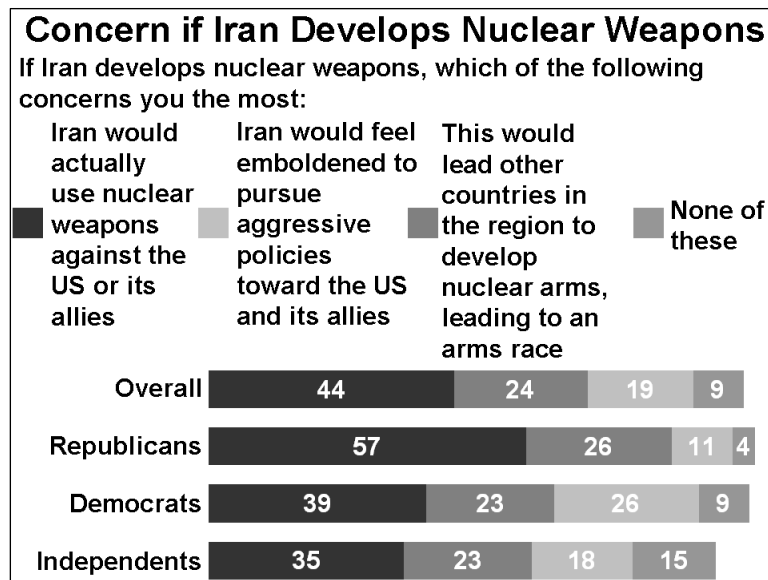
Respondents were asked to “suppose Iran develops nuclear weapons” and to say which of two alternatives they thought more likely to occur:

- Iran would be likely to use them against Israel because it is so hostile toward Israel
- Iran would be deterred from striking Israel for fear of being destroyed in a nuclear retaliatory strike

Three in five (62%) thought Iran would be likely to use nuclear weapons against Israel; only 32 percent thought Iran would be deterred (It should be noted that the study did not measure how many respondents were aware that Israel has nuclear weapons). Eighty percent of Republicans thought Iran would be likely to use nuclear weapons, as did 56 percent of Democrats and a plurality of independents.

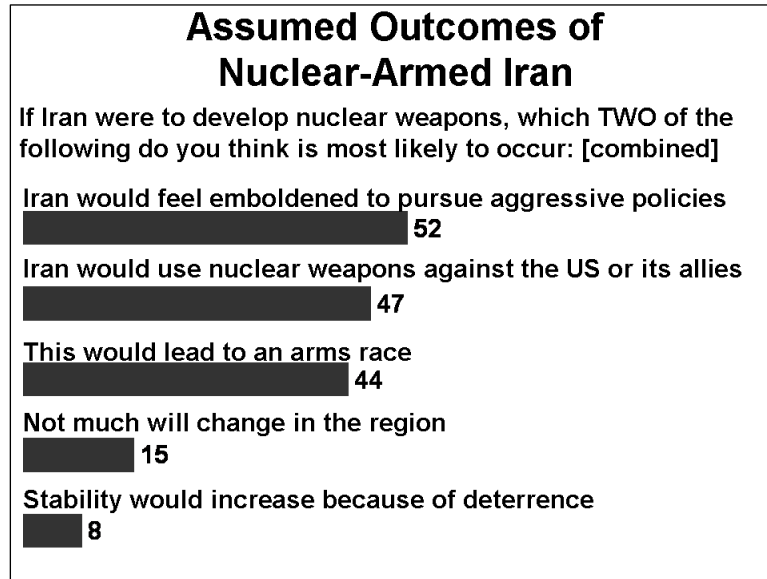


Americans' largest concern is that Iran would either use nuclear weapons or that it would make Iran more aggressive—less than that Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would engender a nuclear arms race in the region. Respondents were offered a number of possible situations that could follow Iran developing nuclear weapons. In one question, they were asked which situation most concerned them.



A majority of Republicans (57%) were most concerned that Iran would actually use nuclear weapons, while among Democrats and independents this was a lesser 39 percent and 35 percent, respectively.

In a second question, respondents were asked which two situations they thought most likely to occur.



The most frequently chosen possibility (52%) was that Iran would feel emboldened to pursue aggressive policies. After this, essentially tied for second place, were that Iran would use nuclear weapons (47%) or that there would be a regional arms race (44%). Well behind them were that not much would change (15%) or that stability would increase (8%).

