

Anwar Sadat Chair
University of Maryland



Program on International
Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

The American Public and the Arab Awakening

A Study of American Public Opinion

**Released in Conjunction with the
US-Islamic World Forum**

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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).

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Ignited by the self-immolation of a vegetable seller abused by a low-level government official, inflamed publics throughout the Arab world have risen up demanding democracy and denouncing corrupt and entrenched governments. Leaders in the US and other western governments have been reeling as they have seen allied governments in Tunisia and then Egypt tumble and others in the region destabilized with their prospects still uncertain.

These developments have raised profound questions for US foreign policy as the American leaders have both tried to get out in front of the popular demand for democracy and to preserve good relations with governments still standing—at least for now.

While most of this discussion has occurred within the realm of elite discourse, the questions that have arisen are ones that relate to fundamental issues and values that can and do engage many Americans. However the American public has had little chance to weigh in on these questions.

To bring the American public into this discussion the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), both of the University of Maryland, undertook an in-depth survey of Americans' current attitudes toward the Arab world and the unfolding drama in it. The study sought to address the following questions:

Americans are going through a difficult economic recovery: in this context, how many Americans look on relations with the Muslim world as a high priority today?

Some in the policy community are concerned that a movement toward democracy poses a threat to US interests as it may lead to the election of governments that are unfriendly to the US. Does the public look at the potential for democracy with trepidation? And what if elections were to result in an unfriendly government—how would the public feel about the democratic change then?

While Islamist groups were not visible at the forefront when demonstrations began, there are signs that these groups are finding their footing now. Does the US public perceive the uprisings as having a dominant Islamist component?

Some also hold the views that tendencies inherent in Islam or Arab political culture make them incompatible with democracy. Do Americans think it is possible for Arab and Islamic countries to become democratic?

Over the last several years, Americans in general have tended to lukewarm or unfavorable feelings about many Middle Eastern countries—including some that are US allies, as well as some that are not. Has the Arab spring had an impact on these feelings? Beside the government, how do Americans feel about the Arab people and how has this been affected by the uprisings?

Much of the policy debate in the United States has been over what kind of role the US should take in countries experiencing waves of demonstrations. Some argue the US should take a stronger role as the champion of freedom and support the demonstrators; others express concern about the costs for US policy of putting long-time American allies under more pressure to reform. Where does the public come down in this discussion?

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In Libya the US is now committed to an international effort to maintain a no-fly zone and obstruct pro-Qaddafi forces from attacking civilians. Does the public support this effort? And if the air strikes fail would Americans favor going further and supplying the rebels with arms?

Before the wave of demonstrations and uprisings began, the US was facing difficulties in its effort to get negotiations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict off dead center. How does the American public view this effort now—and has the Arab spring had an influence on their views?

Finally, the Arab awakening poses a major new question mark about the possibility of finding common ground between the West and the Muslim world. The democratic wave has provided stirring images of unarmed crowds demonstrating in the face of bullets, both rubber and steel. How do Americans feel about these issues now?

METHODOLOGY

The poll was fielded from April 1 to 5, 2011 with a sample-size of 802 respondents. The margin of error for the full sample was 3.5%. 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. More technical information is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The key findings of the study were:

1. Priority of US-Muslim World Relations

Six in ten Americans view US relations with the Muslim world as at least one of the top five issues in US foreign policy.....4

2. The US and Democracy in the Middle East

An overwhelming majority of Americans think that it would be positive for the US if the Middle East were to become more democratic, and a solid majority would favor this happening even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies.....4

3. Potential for Democracy in the Middle East

Only a small minority believes that the uprisings in the Arab world are primarily about Islamist groups seeking political power, while the most common position is that they are primarily about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy. A slight majority is confident that the changes in the Middle East will lead to more democracy. A clear majority, though, thinks it is possible for Arab and Islamic countries to become democratic, rejecting the idea that Islam and democracy are incompatible.....5

4. Effect of the Uprising on Views of the Arab World

Trend line questions show signs of modest improvement in American attitudes toward Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt. Majorities express favorable views of the Arab people in general, the Saudi people and especially the Egyptian people, putting the Egyptian people nearly on a par with the Israeli people. Substantial numbers say that the uprisings have increased their sympathy for the Arab people and their sense of how similar the aspirations of the Arab world are to theirs. Only very small minorities said that it decreased these feelings and perceptions. 7

5. How US Should Deal With Uprisings

About two thirds believe that the US should take a neutral position relative to the government and the demonstrators in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Jordan. However, among those who want the US to take a side, they overwhelmingly favor the US siding with the demonstrators. 8

6. The Conflict in Libya

A majority, though a declining one, approves of the use of US airpower, together with that of other countries, to defend Libyan civilians. If the air campaign does not succeed, a majority of respondents say they would oppose providing arms to the rebels. 9

7. The Israeli-Palestinian Issue

The uprisings in the Arab world have had little effect on American views of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Two thirds continue to have a favorable view of Israel, but also continue to favor the US not lean toward favoring either side in the conflict. The dominant view continues to be that the Obama administration's efforts to resolve the conflict are at about the right level; among the rest, as recently as November more said that the Administration was not trying hard enough, but now that number has gone down and an equal number say that the Administration is trying too hard. 9

8. Compatibility of West and Islam

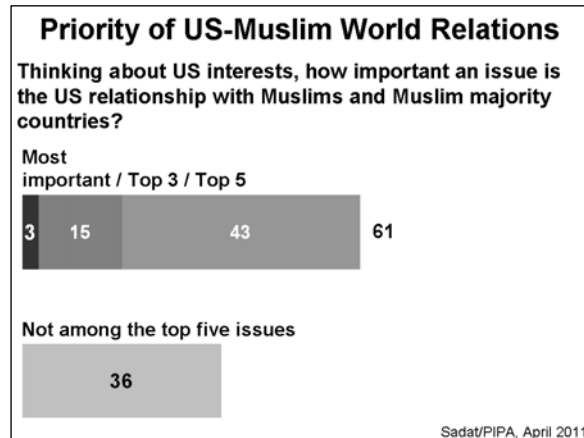
Majorities reject the view that violent conflict between Muslim and Western cultures is inevitable and believe that their nations can peacefully coexist. However, a majority continues to believe that there are more violent extremists within Islam than in other religions.. 10

FINDINGS

1. Priority of US-Muslim World Relations

Six in ten Americans view US relations with the Muslim world as at least one of the top five issues in US foreign policy.

A majority of Americans see the relations between the US and the Muslim world as among the several most important issues the US faces in its foreign policy. Respondents were asked, “Thinking about US interests, how important an issue is the US relationship with Muslims and Muslim majority countries—the single most important issue for the US; among the top three issues; among the top five issues; or not among the top five issues?”

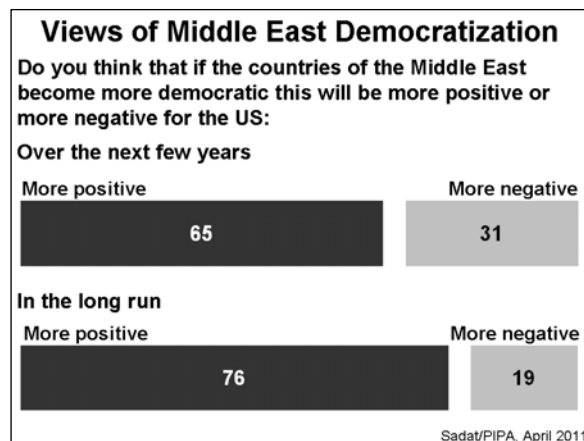


Sixty-one percent rated “the US relationship with Muslims and Muslim majority countries” as *at least* among the top five issues for US interests, with 43% rating it among the top five issues, 15% going further and rating it among the top three, and 3% calling it the single most important issue. Only 36% said relations with the Muslim world were not among the top five issues for US interests. This view-- virtually unchanged from the fall of 2010--has apparently not been influenced by the pro-democratic wave in Arab countries.

2. The US and Democracy in the Middle East

An overwhelming majority of Americans think that it would be positive for the US if the Middle East were to become more democratic, and a solid majority would favor this happening even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies.

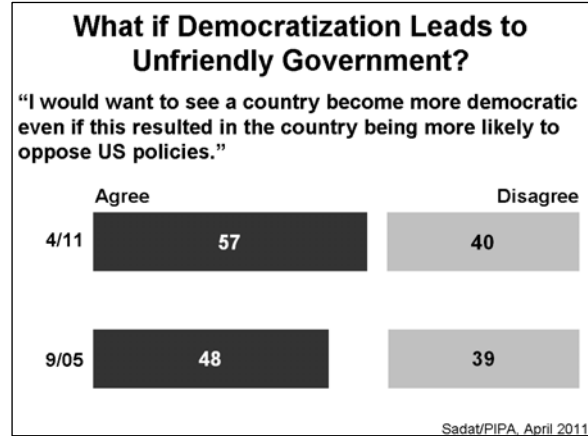
When asked “Do you think that if the countries of the Middle East become more democratic, this will be more positive or more negative for the US over the next few years,” two in three (65%) said this would be a positive development for the United States, and only 31% thought it would be more negative.



When asked how a more democratic Middle East would affect the United States not just in the next few years, but “in the long run,” a larger majority of 76% thought this would be more positive, while only 19% saw it as more negative.

Among those who rated US-Muslim relations among the top five issues for US foreign policy views were even more positive. For the near term 68% thought it would be more positive; while among those rating US-Muslim relations lower, this was 62%. In the long term 80% viewed democratization as positive for the US, as compared to 72% of those who saw it as a lower priority.

A clear majority welcomes a greater measure of democracy, even with increased risk of opposition to US policies. Offered the statement, “I would want to see a country become more democratic, even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies,” 57% said they agreed. This is up 9 points from when the same question was asked in 2005. In the current poll 40% disagreed with the statement, unchanged from 2005. “Don’t know” responses dropped from 12% to 4%, suggesting that Americans have come to greater clarity on the issue.

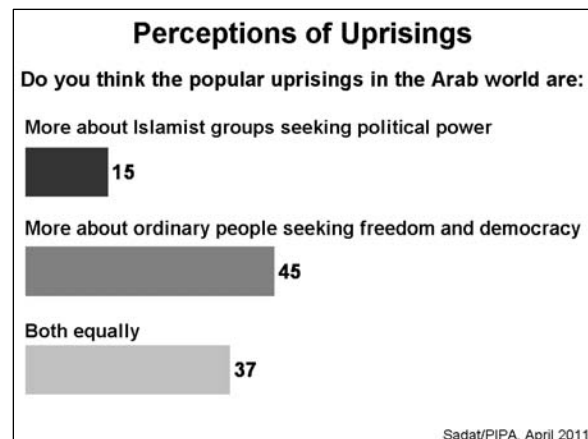


Among those who rated US-Muslim relations among the top five US foreign policy issues, 60% agreed with the statement; among the rest, this was 52%.

3. Potential for Democracy in the Middle East

Only a small minority believes that the uprisings in the Arab world are primarily about Islamist groups seeking political power, while the most common position is that they are primarily about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy. A slight majority is confident that the changes in the Middle East will lead to more democracy. A clear majority, though, thinks it is possible for Arab and Islamic countries to become democratic, rejecting the idea that Islam and democracy are incompatible.

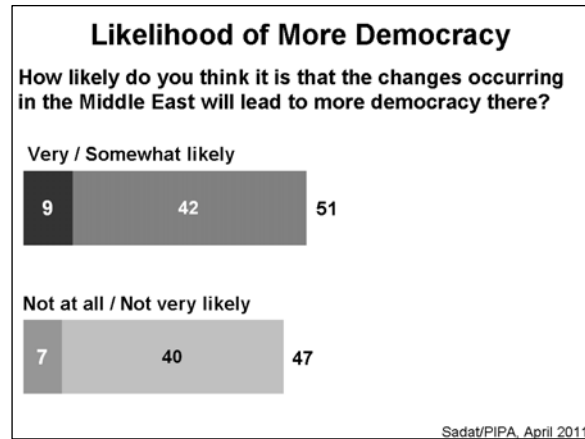
When Americans look at the political changes sweeping the Arab world, they do not perceive them as having a dominant Islamist component. Asked whether they thought “the popular uprisings in the Arab world are more about Islamist groups seeking political power, more about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy, or both equally,” just 15% said they were more about Islamist groups seeking power. A much larger 45% said the uprisings were more about people seeking democracy. Thirty-seven percent said they were about both things equally.



Among those who rated US-Muslim relations among the top five US foreign policy issues, 51% said the uprisings were more about people seeking democracy (13% Islamist groups, 34% both equally); among the rest, 37% said they were more about people seeking democracy (17% Islamist groups, 41% both equally).

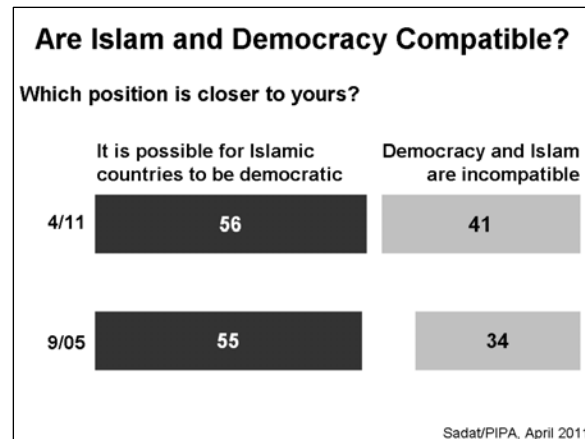
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Americans only lean slightly to an optimistic view about the likelihood of democracy resulting from the current wave of change. A slight majority of 51% thought it likely that “the changes occurring in the Middle East will lead to more democracy there,” but only 9% called this very likely, while 42% said it was somewhat likely. Forty-seven percent thought an outcome of more democracy was unlikely, but only 7% said it was not at all likely, while 40% said it was not very likely.



Those who rated US-Muslim relations among the top five issues were considerably more positive: 58% of this group said more democracy was likely; among the rest, only 40% thought so. Views also divide sharply along partisan lines with 64% of Republicans pessimistic, 63% of Democrats optimistic, and independents leaning to the optimistic side (52% to 47%).

However, a larger majority views democracy in Arab and Islamic countries as a definite possibility. Respondents were asked to choose one of two positions: that “it is possible for Islamic countries to be democratic,” or that “democracy and Islam are incompatible.” A clear majority of 56% said this was possible, while 41% thought democracy and Islam are incompatible. When this question was asked in 2005, the majority seeing democracy as possible was almost the same (55%).



Respondents were also asked later in the questionnaire whether it is possible for “Arab countries” to be democratic--again counterposed against the argument that democracy and Islam are incompatible. The results were virtually the same: 54% said it is possible for Arab countries to be democratic, while 42% said that democracy and Islam are incompatible.

These questions, though, were a point of partisan difference. While a large majority of Democrats (69%) and a modest majority of independents (52%) said that it is possible for Islamic countries to be democratic, Republicans were divided, with only 47% taking this position and 51% saying that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Numbers were similar for the question about Arab societies--but among Republicans only 43% said it is possible for Arabs to be democratic, while a 55% majority said that democracy and Islam are incompatible.

4. Effect of the Uprising on Views of the Arab World

Trend line questions show signs of modest improvement in American attitudes toward Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt. Majorities express favorable views of the Arab people in general, the Saudi people and especially the Egyptian people, putting the Egyptian people nearly on a par with the Israeli people. Substantial numbers say that the uprisings have increased their sympathy for the Arab people and their sense of how similar the aspirations of the Arab world are to theirs. Only very small minorities said that it decreased these feelings and perceptions.

When asked whether their views of some key Arab countries are favorable or unfavorable, there are signs of a modest but definite warming in the US public compared to the past.

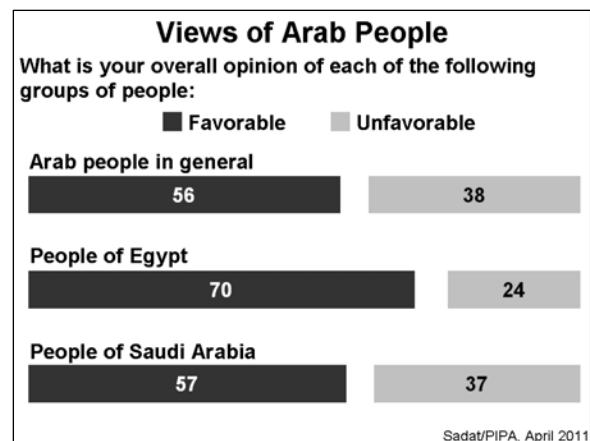
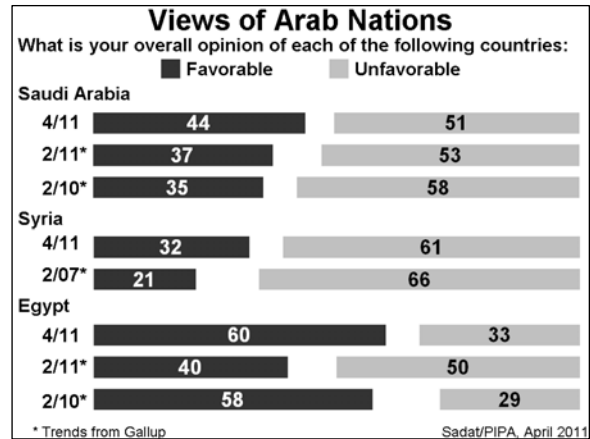
A little under half (44%) expressed favorable views of Saudi Arabia, up 9 points from when Gallup last asked this question in 2010. In the current poll 51% expressed an unfavorable view, down 7 points from 2010. The last time Gallup found this level of warm feelings for Saudi Arabia was before 9/11.

Views of Syria, while still largely unfavorable, are also warmer than any levels Gallup has found in recent years. Currently, 32% express favorable views, up 11 points from the 21% that Gallup found in 2007 and higher than Gallup has ever found. Unfavorable views are still substantial, though, at 61%--down from 66% in 2007.

For Egypt, a majority of 60% said they have a favorable view, while 33% have an unfavorable view. This is a sharp improvement over just two months earlier in February—during the peak of the crisis--when only 40% were favorable toward Egypt (Gallup). However, this is not a significant increase over the favorability ratings in previous years.

When respondents were asked about the *people* in Arab countries, their answers were more positive than when they were just asked about the countries themselves. “Arab people in general” were also viewed favorably by 56%; 38% viewed them unfavorably.

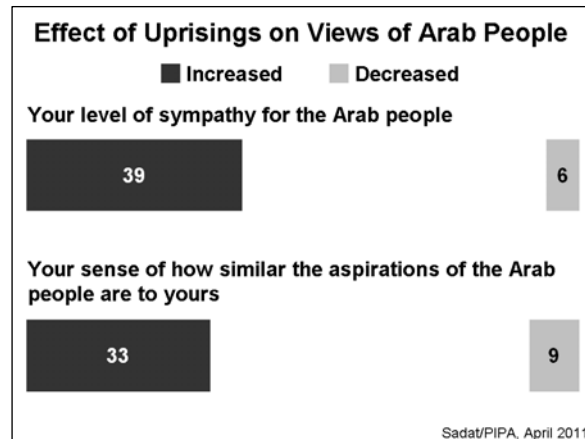
Fifty-seven percent had favorable views of the people of Saudi Arabia—13 points higher than their favorable views of the country-- while 37% had unfavorable views.



Interestingly, a large majority of 70% viewed the Egyptian people favorably—10 points higher than their favorable views for the country--and only 24% had unfavorable views. Interestingly, this is only a little less the number who view the Israeli people favorably (73%).

There are indications that some of these favorable views may be related to the Arab uprisings. Respondents were asked how “the popular uprisings in the Arab world” affected their views on a number of areas.

A substantial number reported changes related to their views of the Arab people. Thirty-nine percent said that their “level of sympathy for the Arab people” had increased a little (27%) or a lot (12%), while only 6% said their sympathy had decreased (54% said there had been no change). Thirty-three percent said their “sense of how similar the aspirations of the Arab people are to yours” had increased a little (25%) or a lot (8%); only 9% said this sense had decreased for them (56% said there had been no change).

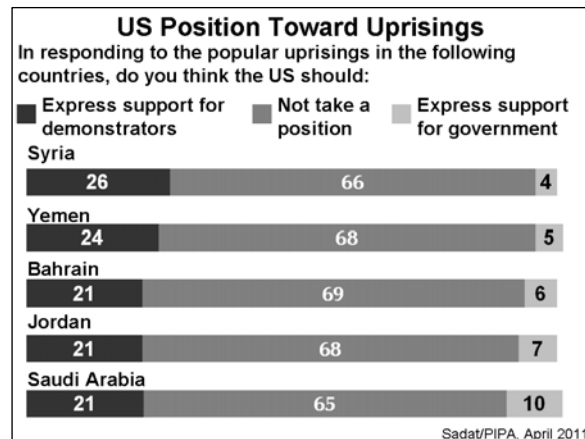


However, when asked about the effect of the uprisings on their optimism, the net effects were more modest. Twenty-seven said their “optimism about relations between the US and the Arab world” had increased, while for 17% it had decreased. Twenty-nine percent said their “optimism that peaceful change is possible in the Arab world” had increased, though 24% said it had decreased.

5. How US Should Deal With Uprisings

About two thirds believe that the US should take a neutral position relative to the government and the demonstrators in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Jordan. However, among those who want the US to take a side, they overwhelmingly favor the US siding with the demonstrators.

Respondents were asked whether “in responding to the popular uprisings in the following countries,” the US should “express support for the demonstrators, express support for the government, or not take a position.” They were asked this question relative to five countries: Syria, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Across the five countries, 65-69% said the US should not take a position about the uprisings in those countries (Syria 66%, Bahrain 69%, Jordan 68%, Saudi Arabia 65%, Yemen 68%).



However, among those who wanted the US to express support in one direction or the other, the weight went overwhelmingly toward supporting the demonstrators. Though some countries are allies of the US and others are not, there was little variation in this pattern. Thus for Syria, 26% wanted to express support for the demonstrators, 4% for the government; for Bahrain, 21% wanted to support demonstrators, 6% the government; for Jordan, 21% for the demonstrators, 7% for the government; for Saudi Arabia, 21% for the demonstrators, 10% for the government; and for Yemen, 24% for the demonstrators and 5% for the government.

6. The Conflict in Libya

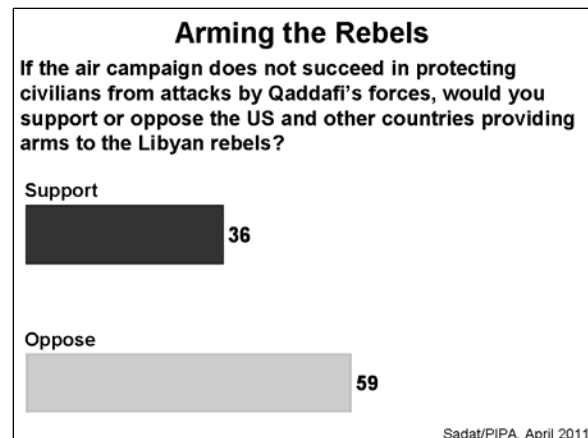
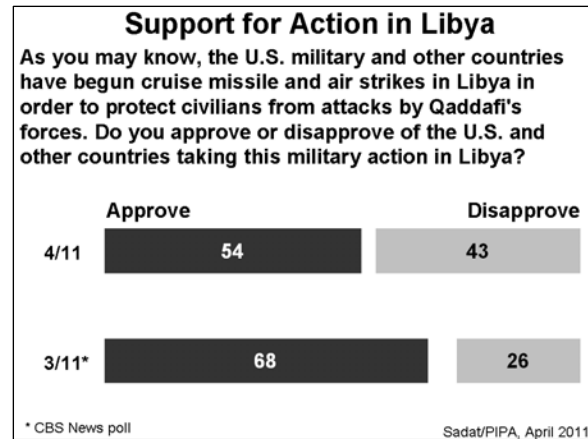
A majority, though a declining one, approves of the use of US airpower, together with that of other countries, to defend Libyan civilians. If the air campaign does not succeed, a majority of respondents say they would oppose providing arms to the rebels.

At the time of polling, the airstrikes in Libya by the US and other countries had been in progress for about two weeks. Respondents were asked a question first used by CBS News:

As you may know, the U.S. military and other countries have begun cruise missile and air strikes in Libya in order to protect civilians from attacks by Qaddafi's forces. Do you approve or disapprove of the U.S. and other countries taking this military action in Libya?

A majority of 54% approved the airstrikes, while 43% disapproved. This represents a 14-point dropoff in support from the 68% that CBS found March 20-21, starting the day after airstrikes began. It is common that the moment after initiating military action is also the action's highest point of support in polls. While 63% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans approved, independents were divided (48% approve, 49% disapprove).

Respondents were also asked to consider what to do in the event the airstrikes fail to achieve their goal. Asked: "If the air campaign does not succeed in protecting civilians from attacks by Qaddafi's forces, would you support or oppose the US and other countries providing arms to the Libyan rebels?" A majority opposed this idea by 59% to 36%.

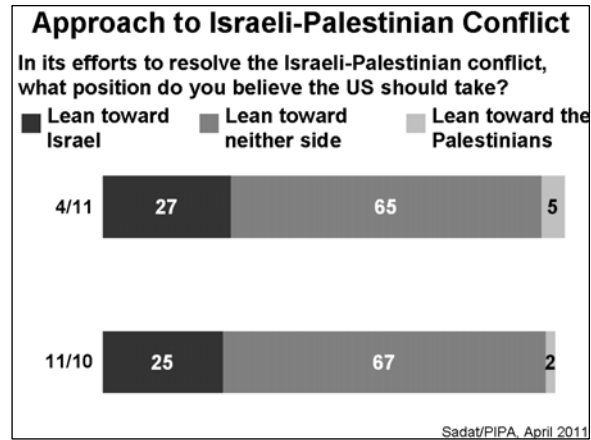


7. The Israeli-Palestinian Issue

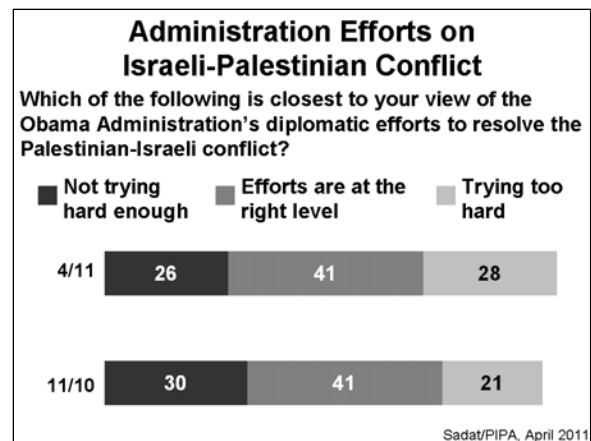
The uprisings in the Arab world have had little effect on American views of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Two thirds continue to have a favorable view of Israel, but also continue to favor the US not lean toward favoring either side in the conflict. The dominant view continues to be that the Obama administration's efforts to resolve the conflict are at about the right level; among the rest, as recently as November more said that the Administration was not trying hard enough, but now that number has gone down and an equal number say that the Administration is trying too hard.

A large majority continue to have a favorable view of Israel—69% (21% very, 48% mostly). This is virtually no different from the level Gallup found at the height of the Egyptian uprising (68%) or that CNN found in 2010 (67%). Thus Americans reactions to the Arab uprising do not appear to be having an effect on their generally favorable attitude toward Israel.

At the same time, though, Americans continue to favor by a large margin the US not taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Asked, “In its efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what position do you believe the US should take—lean toward Israel, lean toward the Palestinians, or lean toward neither side?” 65% said the US should lean toward neither side. Only 27% said the US should lean toward Israel, and 5% that it should lean toward the Palestinians. This is almost identical to the result of this question in a Sadat Chair poll in November 2010, just before the Arab uprisings began.



As was true in late 2010, the dominant view of “the Obama Administration’s diplomatic efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” is that “the Administration’s efforts are at the right level”—41%, both in this study and in 2010. However, there has been an interesting shift among the remaining respondents. In November 30% faulted the Administration for “not trying hard enough”—more than the 21% who thought it was “trying too hard.” Now those who think the Administration is trying is not trying hard enough is down four points to 26%, while those saying it is trying too hard is up 7 points to 28%, so that views are essentially balanced.

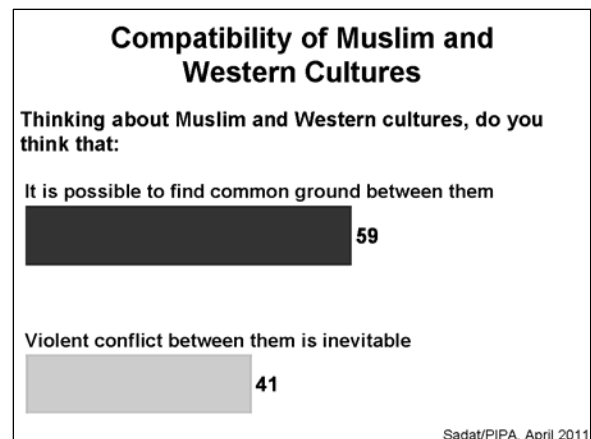


8. Compatibility of West and Islam

Majorities reject the view that violent conflict between Muslim and Western cultures is inevitable and believe that their nations can peacefully coexist. However, a majority continues to believe that there are more violent extremists within Islam than in other religions.

Asked to think about Muslim and Western cultures, and say whether “it is possible to find common ground between them” or whether “violent conflict is inevitable,” three in five--59%--said they thought it was possible find common ground. A lesser 41% thought violent conflict is inevitable.

The study also asked about the relations between Western and Muslim nations. Asked whether “Western nations and Muslim nations can find a way to peacefully coexist in the world today,” or whether “violent conflict between them is inevitable, the answer was essentially the same.



Fifty-five percent said Western and Muslim nations can coexist, while 44% said conflict was inevitable.

Those who rate the US-Muslim world relationship among the top five issues for US interests are significantly more likely to think common ground can be found between Western and Muslim cultures. Among this group 64% said it was possible to find common ground—13 points higher than the 51% found among those who accord less importance to the relationship.

Attitudes also differ by party, though; 68% of Democrats and 59% of independents think common ground can be found, while 52% of Republicans say violent conflict is inevitable.

Events since 2002 have brought a majority to feel that there are more violent extremists within Islam compared to those in other religions, and more in the Arab world than in other cultures. The study probed this view with two questions, widely separated in the questionnaire. Sixty-two percent said that “compared to other religions,” “there are more violent extremists within Islam”; 31% thought their numbers were about the same as in other religions (6% said there were fewer). When asked about Arabs, a slightly lower 59% said that “compared to other cultures,” “there are more violent extremists among Arabs”; about a third (35%) said it was “about the same number as in other cultures” (fewer, 4%).

This was quite different from when this question was asked in February 2002—shortly after the initial victory in Afghanistan—by ABC News. At that a 46% plurality said the number of violent extremists was about the same as in other religions (41%) or fewer (5%); only 38% said there were more within Islam. By March 2006, however—the start of the Iraq war’s fourth year—ABC News found a majority attitude had formed that Islam harbored relatively more violent extremists (58%).

The fact that this view remains essentially unchanged in the current poll suggests that the fact that Arab demonstrators showed remarkable restraint has not affected this view of Islam. Respondents also report that on balance the character of the demonstrations did not affect surprise them. Respondents were asked: “When you watched the Arab popular uprisings, as compared to what you expected, were the demonstrators more violent, more peaceful, or about the same as you expected?” A 53% majority said the demonstrators’ actions were about what they had expected. Among the rest, approximately the same number said demonstrators were more violent than expected (23%) as said they were more peaceful than expected (19%).

Respondents also reported that overall the “numerous popular uprisings in the Arab world” had little affect on their “sense of how widespread religious fanaticism is among Arabs.” Two thirds (64%) said there had been no change; 26% said their sense of this had increased, while 9% said it had decreased.

