

Anwar Sadat Chair
University of Maryland



Program on International
Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

The American Public on the 9/11 Decade

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).

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago the attacks of September 11, 2001 wrenched the United States into a new sense of threats to its national security and a new set of priorities, foreign and domestic. Both public and policymakers, shocked by a sudden sense of American vulnerability to international terrorism, struggled to find a commensurate response.

Now that a decade has passed, this is a natural time to take a retrospective look at the road the US has traveled and to consider the road ahead. The study sought to better understand public attitudes on the following points.

For ten years the United States has invested in many different kinds of security efforts, military and civilian, in an effort to deal with terrorism. How does the public view these investments? Have they been worthwhile overall? Has the US over or under invested? How have these investments affected the US economy?

There is considerable debate about whether the United States' world power and influence has remained stable factor, or whether it is in decline. What is the public's assessment and how does it relate to the investments the US made in the wake of 9/11?

The war in Afghanistan—the first military action the US undertook after 9/11—is now the biggest military effort the US is conducting. How does the public feel now about the initial decision to go into Afghanistan? What do Americans think the US should do now? How do they regard the current policy of the Obama administration?

While there are debates about whether the war in Iraq was appropriately related to 9/11 it was clearly presented as such to the American people. How do Americans view that war now? How many see it as a valuable contribution to the fight against international terrorism? How many Americans continue to think that Iraq was providing support to al Qaeda or had a WMD program and how do those beliefs relate to their attitudes about the war?

The US is scheduled to withdraw its troops in the next months: if the Iraqi government were to request that some US troops stay for a short time longer, how would the American public feel about the US accepting?

The killing of Osama bin Laden represents a kind of turning point--if not in the overall response to 9/11--then in the use of special forces to combat terrorist groups directly. What level of importance does the public place on bin Laden's death?

While the decade after 9/11 has put great stress on ordinary Americans' level of goodwill toward Islam and Muslim societies, not all the interactions have been negative, and there have been chances to gain some familiarity with a world that was unknown to most. How does the public feel about Islam at this point? What are its impressions of the Muslim people and the Arab people more specifically, and are these similar or different from their attitudes toward Islam? How important do they think the relationship is between the US and Muslim-majority countries?

The coming of the Arab Spring poses the possibility of profound change in Arab countries--and perhaps new beginnings in their relationships with the United States as well. In our April study, the US public was notably optimistic about the Arab Spring—a mood rarely noted when it is asked about the Middle East. How is this optimism holding up?

The Arab-Israeli conflict remains fundamental as a fixed background in a region that is otherwise going through historic changes. How does the US public view the Arab-Israeli conflict now?

METHODOLOGY

The poll was fielded from August 19-25, 2011 with a sample of 957 adult Americans. The margin of error for the full sample was +/-3.2%. 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. The Response to 9/11

A majority of Americans believes that over the last decade the US over-invested resources in some of the responses to the 9/11 attacks and that this over-investment has contributed to America’s economic problems today. The largest numbers believe that the over-investment occurred in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and using aid to build alliances. Small numbers feel the US over invested in pursuing terrorist groups, airport security measures, and preparing first responders. Overall, two in three believe US influence has diminished in the world over the last decade, and this view is highly correlated with the belief that the US over-invested in responses to 9/11.4

2. Dealing with Terrorism

A large majority says that it is necessary to address the sources of hostility in the larger societies that terrorists come from and rejects an approach that relies solely on military force. A growing majority believes that a key lesson of 9/11 is that the US needs to work more closely with other countries.5

3. Afghanistan

A majority feels that going to war in Afghanistan was the right decision, though a plurality believes the US has invested too many resources there. At this point a large majority wants the US to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan, but less than half want them to be withdrawn completely. A very large majority approves of the Obama administration’s policy to gradually turn over the fight in Afghanistan to the Afghan army and government, reduce US forces in stages, and try to bring the Taliban into negotiations.....6

4. Iraq War

A majority believes the US invested too many resources in Iraq, and a slight plurality says the Iraq war was a mistake. However, slightly more say the war helped than say it hurt in the effort to reduce terrorism. Large and undiminishing minorities continue to believe that Iraq was providing support to al Qaeda and had a WMD program or actual WMDs. Large majorities of those with such beliefs believe the war was the right thing and reduced the threat of terrorism, while large majorities without such beliefs have the opposite views. A modest majority believes that the US should withdraw its troops according to schedule even if the Iraqi government asks the US to stay another year.8

5. Killing of bin Laden

Two thirds think that killing bin Laden has weakened al Qaeda, but only one third thinks it has made al Qaeda significantly weaker. 11

6. Views of Muslims and Islam

Since 9/11 views of Islam have grown more negative. However, majorities still feel that the attacks of 9/11 do not represent mainstream thinking in Islam, that the conflict between Islam and the West is not about culture but power, and that it is possible to find common ground between Islam and the West. Views of Arab and Muslim people are moderately warm. Large majorities of Americans perceive that most Muslims have a negative view of US foreign policy and that these negative views contributed to the conditions that led to the 9/11 attacks. A large majority views the US relationship with Muslims and Muslim-majority countries as one of the top five issues for the United States. 11

7. Arab Spring

A growing majority of Americans perceive the Arab uprising as not only about ordinary people seeking democracy but also Islamist groups seeking power, though more people believe it is primarily about the former than the latter. Only one in three perceives the changes there as increasing the threat of another attack like 9/11. A majority would prefer to see a country become more democratic even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies. Views of governments that have resisted change—Syria, Saudi Arabia and even Egypt—have become significantly less favorable. At the same time, large majorities think the US should not express support for either the demonstrators or the governments in Syria and Yemen. But among those who want the United States to take sides, in every case, including for Saudi Arabia, far more want the United States to take the side of the demonstrators. 13

8. Israel

Views of Israel and the Israeli people continue to be favorable, though views of Israel have slipped a bit recently. A large majority regards the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of the top five issues for the United States—though somewhat fewer than the number who have this view of US relations with the Muslim people. A clear majority continues to say that the US should lean neither toward Israel nor toward the Palestinians. 15

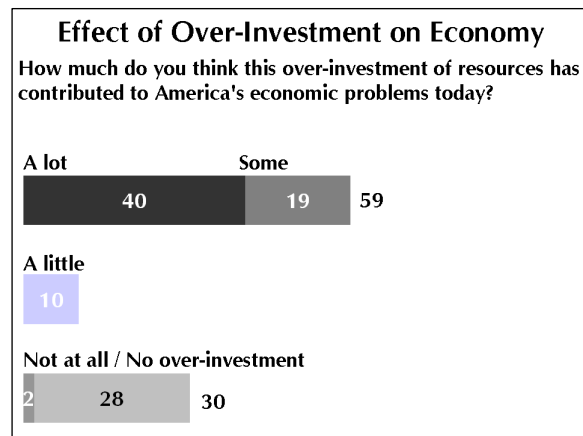
FINDINGS

1. *The Response to 9/11*

A majority of Americans believes that over the last decade the US over-invested resources in some of the responses to the 9/11 attacks and that this over-investment has contributed to America’s economic problems today. The largest numbers believe that the over-investment occurred in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and using aid to build alliances. Small numbers feel the US over invested in pursuing terrorist groups, airport security measures, and preparing first responders. Overall, two in three believe US influence has diminished in the world over the last decade, and this view is highly correlated with the belief that the US over-invested in responses to 9/11.

In the context of a series of questions about 9/11 respondents were asked, “Over the last decade, do you think that the resources the US has invested in each of the following have been too many, too few, or about the right amount?” and were presented six aspects of the response—some international, some domestic. A large majority—71%--said that too many resources had been expended on one or more aspects.

Those who said too many resources had been expended on at least one area were then asked, “How much do you think this over-investment of resources has contributed to America's economic problems today?” A majority (of the whole sample)—59%--said that over-investment in the 9/11 response had contributed some (19%) or a lot (40%) to America’s economic problems. Another 10% said over-investment had contributed a little. Thirty percent either thought there had been no over-investment (28%) or that it had not contributed at all to the US’s economic straits (2%).



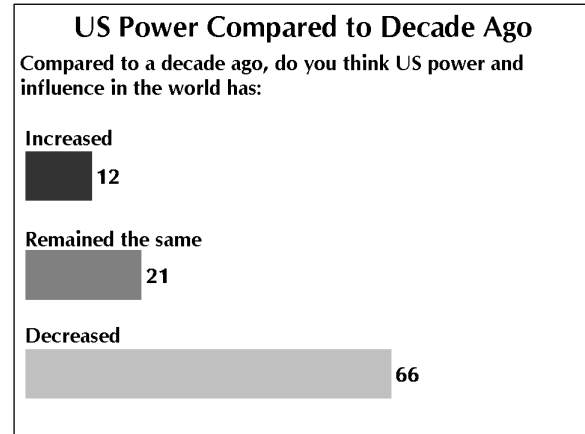
While there was little partisan difference on whether overinvestment from the 9/11 response has made an impact on the economy, only 30% of Republicans thought the impact was “a lot”—compared to 45% of Democrats and 46% of independents.

The areas most widely seen as over-resourced were related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to providing aid to build alliances—all areas involving large amounts of resources. A 55% majority said too many resources have gone to the war in Iraq. On the war in Afghanistan, a 50% plurality felt it too had received too many resources, while 42% thought it had received the right amount (24%) or too few resources (18%). While a significant minority of 44% thought too many resources have gone to aid for alliance-building with other countries, a slightly larger 48% thought these resources have been about right (32%) or too few (16%).

While 65% of Democrats and 57% of independents thought too many resources have been devoted to the Iraq war, a lesser 44% of Republicans agreed. Similarly for Afghanistan, 56% of Democrats and 52% of independents thought too many resources have been invested, compared to 43% of Republicans.

Only small numbers believe that the US over-invested in other areas. Just 27% said the US invested too many resources in airport security measures (right amount 44%, too few 23%). Just one in five (21%) thought the US invested too many resources in the pursuit of al Qaeda and similar groups (right amount 41%, too few 32%).

Most Americans think that the decade since the September 11 attacks has seen some loss of US power. Asked, “Compared to a decade ago, do you think US power and influence in the world has increased, decreased or remained about the same?” two in three (66%) said it has decreased. Only 21% thought it had remained the same (increased: 12%).



The view that US power has declined is highly correlated to the assessment that there was over-investment in the response to the 9/11 attacks. Among those who thought over-investment took place, 7 in 10 also thought the US is in decline; but among those who did *not* think there was over-investment, only about half thought the US is in decline.

Though a majority of Americans express the view that the US has overinvested resources in the response to 9/11, especially the wars, they are less critical of the response itself. As discussed below, a majority approves of the decision to go to war in Afghanistan and only a plurality says that going to war in Iraq was a mistake. Similarly, when asked about “how the US has acted in response to the 9/11 attacks over the last ten years,” only 33% said that it has “overreacted,” while 36% said the US reacted “just right” 27% said that it “under-reacted”. This suggests a majority supports America’s general response to the attacks, but thinks the US overextended itself financially—especially in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in providing aid to countries whose cooperation the US sought.

2. Dealing with Terrorism

A large majority says that it is necessary to address the sources of hostility in the larger societies that terrorists come from and rejects an approach that relies solely on military force. A growing majority believes that a key lesson of 9/11 is that the US needs to work more closely with other countries.

Respondents were offered the following two positions and asked which was closer to their own view:

Trying to destroy terrorists is not enough because if we are too heavy-handed, it just breeds more hostility and more terrorists. It is necessary to address the sources of the hostility in the larger societies that the terrorists come from.

OR

The only way to counter the threat of terrorism is to find and destroy terrorists. It is naïve and pointless to try to understand their intentions or imagine that we can address any of their concerns.

By about two to one (61% to 33%), respondents selected the first position--that it is necessary to address sources of hostility in the larger society. This result is nearly identical to that of November 2006, when PIPA last asked this question (61% to 35%).

The position that “the only way to counter the threat of terrorism is to find and destroy terrorists” has more appeal for Republicans, but still leaves this group divided, with 50% choosing it and 46% thinking it is necessary to address social sources of hostility that feed terrorism. Seventy-two percent of Democrats choose the latter argument (independents, 62%).

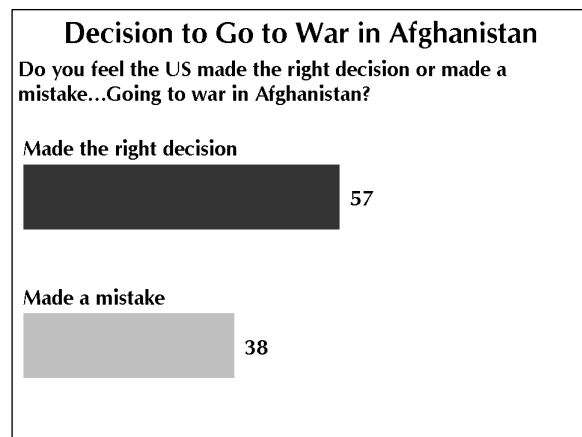
A majority sees it as a key lesson of 9/11 that the US needs to work more closely with other countries, and this majority has grown considerably since 2002, when the 9/11 attacks were still very recent. Respondents were asked, “What do you think is the more important lesson of September 11th—the United States needs to act on its own more to fight terrorism, or the United States needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism?” Seven in ten (69%) said that working more closely with other countries was the more important lesson of the attacks; only 28 percent said acting alone was the more important lesson. This result is up eight points from June 2002, when 61% picked working more closely with other countries and 34% picked acting alone.

Support for a multilateral approach is high among Republicans (68%) and Democrats (79%), though a bit less so among independents (56%).

3. Afghanistan

A majority feels that going to war in Afghanistan was the right decision, though a plurality believes the US has invested too many resources there. At this point a large majority wants the US to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan, but less than half want them to be withdrawn completely. A very large majority approves of the Obama administration’s policy to gradually turn over the fight in Afghanistan to the Afghan army and government, reduce US forces in stages, and try to bring the Taliban into negotiations.

Most Americans still see the initial decision to enter Afghanistan as the right thing to do. Asked about “going to war in Afghanistan,” a clear majority of 57% saw it as the right decision (though only 21% feel this strongly). Thirty-eight percent called going to war in Afghanistan a mistake (strongly, 13%). In a similar question in June 2011, Pew found almost the same result (right decision, 57%, wrong decision 35%).



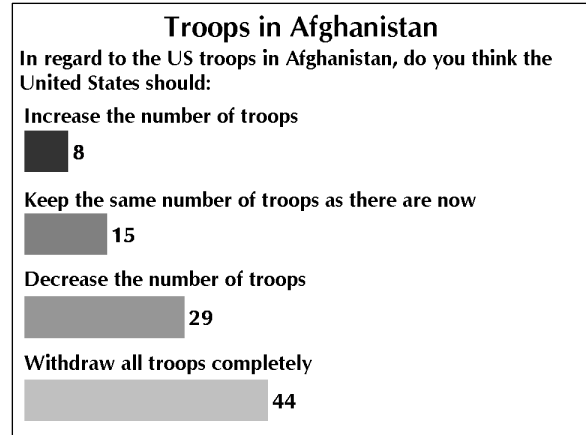
At the same time, though (as discussed in section 1), a plurality believes the US has invested too many resources in Afghanistan. Fifty percent felt that--as an aspect of the US response to the 9/11 attacks over the years--Afghanistan has received too many resources, while 42% thought it has received the right amount (24%) or too few resources (18%).

Independents were divided as to whether the US made the right decision or made a mistake by going to war in Afghanistan, 45 to 44%--while, interestingly, both Republicans and Democrats affirmed the decision, by 66% and 56% respectively. Republicans are most likely to think the resources expended

have been appropriate: while 56% of Democrats and 52% of independents thought too many resources have been invested, only 43% of Republicans agreed.

Keeping Troops in Afghanistan

At this point a large majority wants the US to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan, but less than half want them to be withdrawn completely. Respondents were given four options: to increase the number of troops, keep the current number there, decrease the number, or withdraw all troops completely. Seventy-three percent wanted a drop in the number of troops, but only 44% wanted this number to drop to zero while another 29% wanted only a decrease. A slight majority of 52% picked an option that involved a continuing troop presence: 8% wanted to increase the number of troops, 15% wanted to keep the current level, and, as mentioned, 29% wanted a decrease.



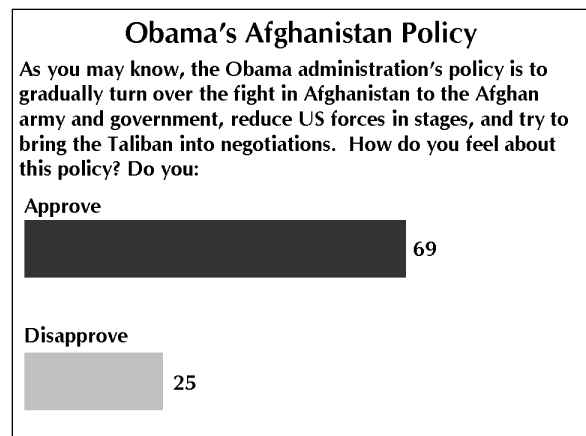
Attitudes about withdrawing troops are correlated with attitudes about the original decision to go to war there. Among the majority who think it was the right decision, 68% want to keep a troop presence, while 30% think the US should now withdraw completely. In the minority who think it was a mistake, 31% still want to keep some troop presence while 68% think the US should now withdraw completely.

Republicans are alone in having a majority that wants to keep a troop presence in Afghanistan (66%--14% increase, 22% keep same, 30% decrease). Only half of Democrats agreed (49%) and even fewer independents (41%).

Obama's Current Policy

When asked what they think of the Obama administration's strategic choice to try to strengthen the Afghan army while reducing US forces and attempting negotiations with the Taliban, a very large majority approves (see box). Seven in ten—a 69% majority--approved of this policy (24% strongly, 45% somewhat). Twenty-five percent disapproved (16% somewhat, 9% strongly).

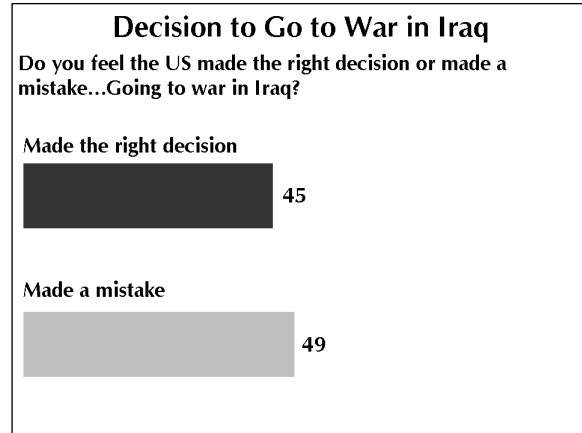
While majorities of all three groups approved of the administration's policy, this approval was lower among Republicans (60%) and independents (62%) than among Democrats (83%).



4 Iraq War

A majority believes the US invested too many resources in Iraq, and a slight plurality says the Iraq war was a mistake. However, slightly more say the war helped than say it hurt in the effort to reduce terrorism. Large and undiminishing minorities continue to believe that Iraq was providing support to al Qaeda and had a WMD program or actual WMDs. Large majorities of those with such beliefs believe the war was the right thing and reduced the threat of terrorism, while large majorities without such beliefs have the opposite views. A modest majority believes that the US should withdraw its troops according to schedule even if the Iraqi government asks the US to stay another year.

As discussed above, 55% said too many resources were spent in the Iraq war, while 24% thought the right amount was spent and 13% thought too few resources were spent. A slight plurality of 49% called going to war in Iraq a mistake and 45% called it the right decision. This is a bit less than in other polls that asked similar questions in 2010 and found majorities ranging from 51 to 62% saying that it was not the right decision.



However a slightly more say the war helped than say it hurt in the effort against terrorism. Respondents were asked: “Thinking about the US effort to reduce the threat of international terrorism after 9/11, do you think going to war in Iraq helped or hurt that effort?”

Forty-eight percent said the Iraq war helped the effort while 44% said it hurt the effort.

As expected, the Iraq war remains the highly partisanized subject it was in the past. Thus while 66% of Republicans thought the war was the right decision, only 31% of Democrats and 38% of independents agreed. Similarly, 69% of Republicans thought going to war in Iraq helped the US effort against international terrorism, while 35% of Democrats and 40% of independents agreed.

Beliefs about Iraq, al Qaeda and WMDs: Relationship to Support for War

Despite the various commissions that concluded that Iraq was not providing support to al Qaeda and did not have a WMD program a large and undiminishing minority of Americans continues to believe these were both the case. These beliefs are highly correlated with support for the war.

Respondents were asked about Iraq’s links to al Qaeda in two ways. In one question respondents were asked, “Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al Qaeda terrorist organization?” While 54% said the US has not found such evidence, a large minority (38%) said that it has.

Among those who believed the US did not find such evidence, 64% thought the US made a mistake in going to war and 58% thought it hurt in the effort against terrorism. But among those who believed the US has found such evidence, only 33% thought the US made a mistake, while 63% said it was the right decision and 64% said it helped in the fight against terrorism.

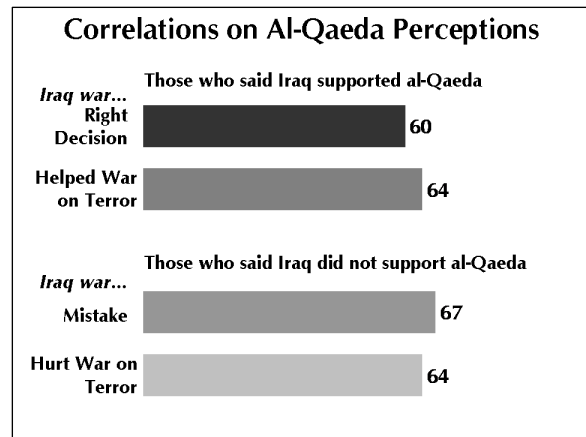
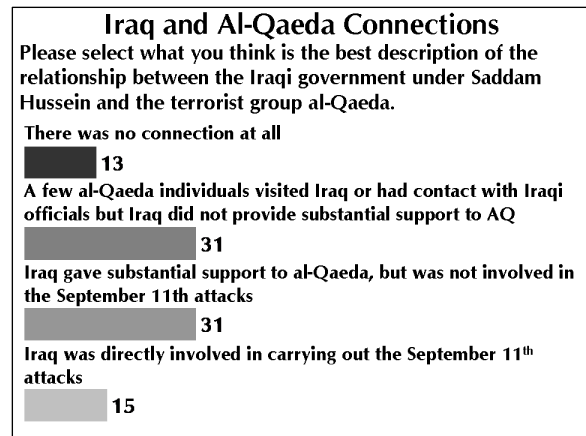
Later, respondents were offered a different question on Iraq and al Qaeda that allowed a wider range of responses. They were asked “what you think is the best description of the relationship between the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein and the terrorist group al Qaeda”:

- There was no connection at all
- A few al Qaeda individuals visited Iraq or had contact with Iraqi officials, but Iraq did not provide substantial support to al Qaeda
- Iraq gave substantial support to al Qaeda, but was not involved in the September 11 attacks
- Iraq was directly involved in carrying out the September 11th attacks

Forty-six percent thought Iraq gave al Qaeda substantial support (31%) or thought it was directly involved in 9/11 (15%). Forty-four percent held the views that “a few al Qaeda individuals visited Iraq” (31%) or that there was no connection (13%). These responses have been fairly stable since late 2004.

Among those who believed that Iraq gave al Qaeda substantial support or thought it was directly involved in 9/11 60% said that the war was the right decision and 64% said that it helped in the fight against terrorism. Among those who believed that at most there were only some contacts, 67% said the war was a mistake and 64% said it hurt the fight against terrorism.

On WMD, first, respondents were asked simply whether it was their impression that the US ever found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or not. A very large 78% answered (correctly) that WMD were never found, while 16% answered that they were found. (These responses have been fairly stable since November 2003.) Among those who said correctly that such weapons were not found, 56% called the war a mistake while 42% said it was the right decision. Among those who did believe WMD were found, 69% said going to war was the right decision.



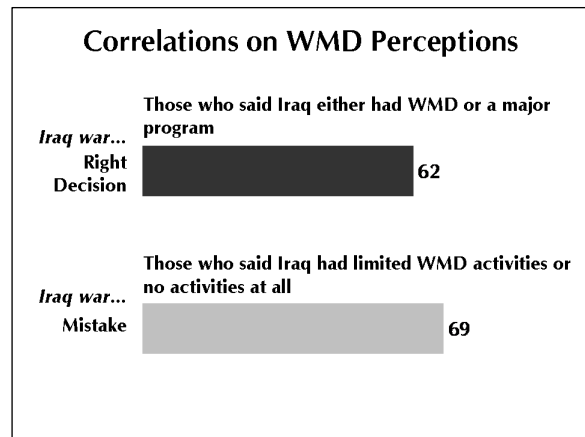
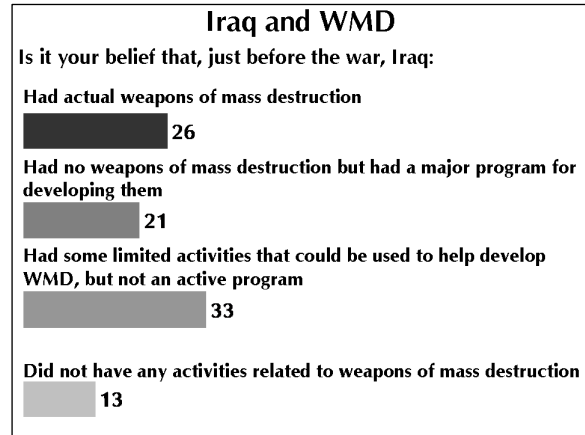
Later, respondents were asked whether it was their belief that just before the war Iraq:

- Had actual weapons of mass destruction
- Had no weapons of mass destruction but had a major program for developing them
- Had some limited activities that could be used to help develop weapons of mass destruction, but not an active program
- Did not have any activities related to weapons of mass destruction

Nearly half—47%--believed that before the war Iraq either had actual WMD (26%) or had a major program (21%). Forty-six percent believed that Iraq had some limited activities that could be used toward WMD (33%) or believed Iraq had no such activities (13%). Responses to this question have been roughly similar since 2004.

Among those who believed Iraq had actual WMD or a major program, 62% said going to war was the right decision. Among those who said it had some limited activities or no activities at all 69% said it was a mistake.

Though there were no meaningful partisan differences as to whether the US found WMD in Iraq or not, a larger minority of Republicans (41%) believed Iraq had actual WMD before the war, compared to 15% of Democrats and 23% of independents. Similarly, 43% of Republicans believed Iraq gave substantial support to al Qaeda, compared to 23% of Democrats and 27% of independents.



Extending US Military Presence in Iraq

Respondents were asked to weigh in on the debate as to whether the US should--if the Iraqi government makes a formal request--slow down its withdrawal timetable and allow some troops to stay for a longer period. The issue was put to respondents in these terms:

As you may know, the United States is currently scheduled to withdraw its troops from Iraq by the end of this year. The Iraqi government has entered into discussions with the US about possibly requesting that a limited number of US troops remain a while longer. If the Iraqi government requests that the US keep some troops in Iraq for an additional year, do you think the US should withdraw its troops by the end of this year, as presently scheduled, or should be willing to keep some troops in Iraq an additional year?

By a modest majority of 53%, respondents preferred to withdraw its troops by the end of this year; 42% were willing to keep some troops in Iraq for another year.

On the issue of extending the US troop presence in Iraq, 57% of Republicans were willing to do this, compared to only 36% of Democrats and 31% of independents.

5. Killing of bin Laden

Two thirds think that killing bin Laden has weakened al Qaeda, but only one third thinks it has made al Qaeda significantly weaker.

Osama bin Laden's death at the hands of a US Navy SEAL team in May has had only a modest effect on the public's assessment of al Qaeda's strength. Respondents were asked: "Now that Osama bin Laden has been killed, do you think al Qaeda is much weaker, somewhat weaker, a little weaker, or not at all weaker?"

Sixty-five percent thought that al Qaeda was now weaker. Only 32% thought the death of bin Laden has not weakened al Qaeda at all.

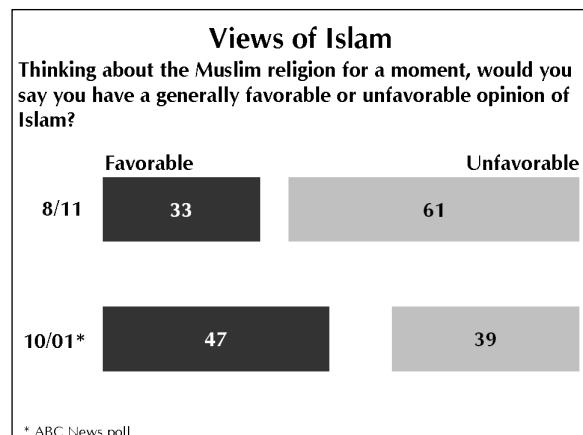
However only a third saw this weakening as substantial with 29% calling it somewhat weaker and another 5% much weaker. Thirty-one percent said it was just a little weaker.

Democrats were most likely to see al Qaeda as weakened significantly (44% somewhat or more) than Republicans (30%). Independents were most likely to see no effect at all (40%).

6. Views of Muslims and Islam

Since 9/11 views of Islam have grown more negative. However, majorities still feel that the attacks of 9/11 do not represent mainstream thinking in Islam, that the conflict between Islam and the West is not about culture but power, and that it is possible to find common ground between Islam and the West. Views of Arab and Muslim people are moderately warm. Large majorities of Americans perceive that most Muslims have a negative view of US foreign policy and that these negative views contributed to the conditions that led to the 9/11 attacks. A large majority views the US relationship with Muslims and Muslim-majority countries as one of the top five issues for the United States.

In October 2001, just weeks after the 9/11 attacks ABC News asked respondents, "Thinking about the Muslim religion for a moment, would you say you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of Islam?" At that time 47% gave a favorable response and just 39% an unfavorable response, with 13% not answering. Over the subsequent years the question was re-asked by several firms as well as by ABC News: the favorable number declined and both the unfavorable number and the "don't know" response grew.



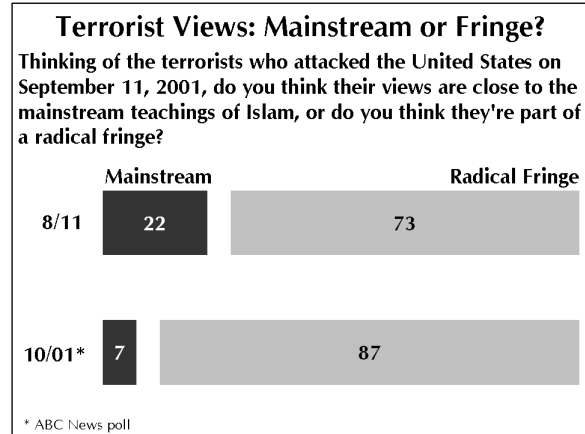
In the current poll only a third—33%--had a generally favorable opinion, while six in ten (61%) had an unfavorable opinion.

At the same time, a stable majority continues to think that the 9/11 attacks do not represent mainstream Islam. Asked in another trend question, "To what degree do you believe the attacks on America—on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001—represent the true teachings of Islam," a 55% majority said not very much (23%) or not at all (32%). This is very similar to the 57% majority recorded in June 2002 (Chicago Council on Global Affairs) or the 53% in

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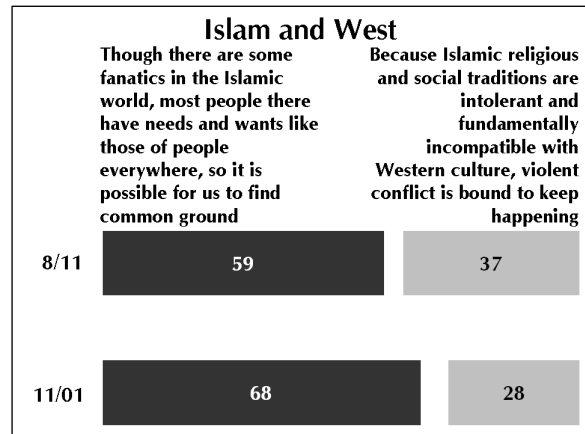
September 2001 (Wirthlin). In the current poll, 39% thought the attacks did represent true Islamic teachings to some degree (24%) or to a great degree (15%).

Similarly, in another question 73% said the terrorists who conducted the 9/11 attacks were “part of a radical fringe”; only 22% said “their views are close to the mainstream teachings of Islam.” In October 2001, when ABC News first asked this question, a higher 87% judged the terrorists were a fringe group and only 7% thought they were mainstream.



Over the years a growing number of Americans have come to view the conflict between Islam and the West as driven more by political than cultural factors. Asked whether the “tensions between Islam and the West...arise more from differences of religion and culture or from conflicts about political power and interests,” a clear majority of 57% said they arise from power conflicts—up from 49% in 2006 (BBC World Service). The number thinking the tensions arise more from religious-cultural differences remained the same at 39% (38%, 2006).

There is also fairly strong confidence that it is possible to find common ground between Islam and the West, though this number is down somewhat from 2001 shortly after the attacks. Fifty-nine percent said it is possible to find common ground (down from 68% in November 2001), while 37% said conflict is inevitable (up from 26%).



Republicans differ from the general majority on some of these issues. They are divided over whether the tensions between Islam and the West arise more from religious-cultural differences or from conflicts about power. They are also divided over whether violent conflict is inevitable or it is possible to find common ground. On both these questions Democrats and independents follow overall majority views.

Arab and Muslim People

Interestingly, though views of Islam have become somewhat negative the American public has moderately positive views of the Arab people and the Muslim people. However we do not have trendlines that go back to 2001 for these questions.

Americans are moderately warm in their views of Arab people in general, and this warmth has been sustained since the early phase of the Arab Spring. A 53% majority said their views of Arab people in general were very (5%) or mostly (48%) favorable, largely unchanged since April 2011 when 56% had a favorable view (7% very, 49% mostly). Currently 41% have views that are mostly (30%) or very (11%) unfavorable.

This question was also asked about “Muslim people in general.” Here the margin was narrower, with 49% very (5%) or mostly (44%) favorable and 45% mostly (31%) or very (14%) unfavorable. When Pew asked a similar question about Muslims in spring 2011, it found a higher 57% with favorable views, while 26% were unfavorable.

Large majorities of Americans perceive that most Muslims have a negative view of US foreign policy and that these negative views contributed to the conditions that led to the 9/11 attacks. Respondents were asked about a number of attitudes that may be held by the Muslim people to varying extents. Majorities felt that several attitudes were held “some” or “a lot” by the Muslim people, including: “generally unfavorable views of the US” (73%); “opposition to Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories” (75%); “opposition to US support for Israel” (76%); and “opposition to American support of dictators in Muslim countries” (71%), “hatred for America’s values” (71%) and “jealousy toward the US” (67%). For each of the attitudes that respondents felt were present, they were asked whether they contributed to the conditions that led to the 9/11 attacks. For the attitudes just mentioned, 62 to 71% of the full sample regarded them as having contributed “some” or “a lot.”

US Relations With Muslim World

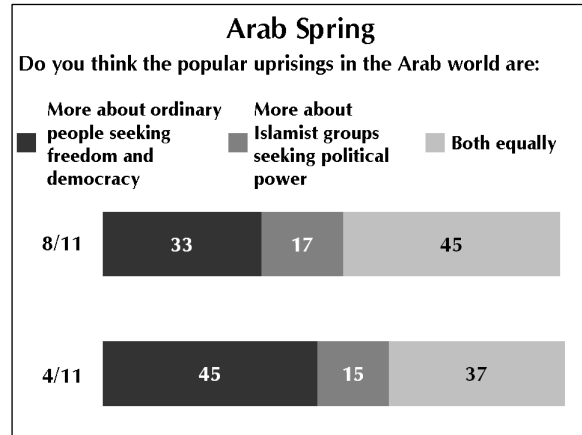
A large majority views the US relationship with Muslim-majority countries as one of the top five issues for the United States. Respondents were asked, “Thinking about US interests, how important an issue is the US relationship with Muslim and Muslim-majority countries?” Sixty-nine percent put it among the top five issues or higher, with 43% saying it was among the top five, 22% among the top three, and 4% that it was the single most important issue for the US. Only 24% said it was not among the top five issues.

Since November 2010, when the question was first asked, those saying the issue is not among the top five issues have diminished by 13 points from 37 to 24%.

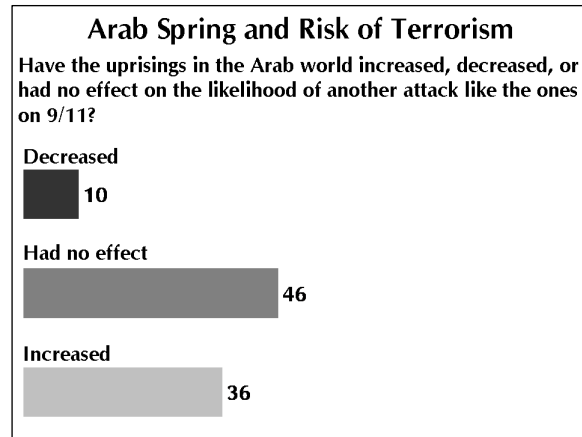
7. Arab Spring

A growing majority of Americans perceive the Arab uprising as not only about ordinary people seeking democracy but also Islamist groups seeking power, though more people believe it is primarily about the former than the latter. Only one in three perceives the changes there as increasing the threat of another attack like 9/11. A majority would prefer to see a country become more democratic even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies. Views of governments that have resisted change—Syria, Saudi Arabia and even Egypt—have become significantly less favorable. At the same time, large majorities think the US should not express support for either the demonstrators or the governments in Syria and Yemen. But among those who want the United States to take sides, in every case, including for Saudi Arabia, far more want the United States to take the side of the demonstrators.

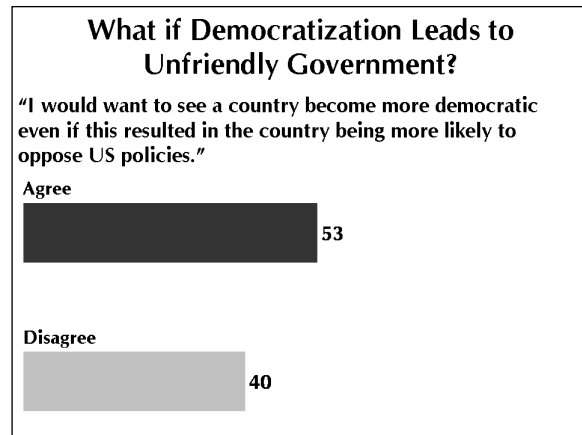
Americans' most widely held picture now of the ongoing events of the Arab Spring is that they are about both a struggle for democracy and an effort by Islamist groups to seek political power. Asked about this issue, 45% said the popular uprisings in the Arab world were about both of these factors equally (up from 37% in April). Thirty-three percent said the uprisings are "more about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy" (down from 45% in April). However, only a small minority thought the Arab Spring is "more about Islamist groups seeking political power"—17% (15% in April).



A majority feels the events of the Arab Spring have not increased the risk of a terrorist attack on the United States. About a third (36%) thought the risk has increased because of the uprisings. Forty-six percent said the uprisings have not affected the likelihood of a future attack like 9/11, and another 10% thought the uprisings have decreased this likelihood.



A majority would prefer to see a country become more democratic even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose US policies. When this proposition was put to them as a question, 53% agreed—a level down slightly from 57% in April, but higher than in 2005, when only 48% agreed. From 2005 to now the numbers disagreeing have been stable at 39-40%.



Since April it has become much clearer that governments in the Middle East have the option of entrenching themselves and strongly resisting calls for change. Views of governments that have resisted change—Syria, Saudi Arabia and even Egypt—have become significantly less favorable. Only 17% expressed a favorable view of Syria, down from 24% in May (CNN). Twenty-seven percent were favorable toward Saudi Arabia, down from 44% in April. And for Egypt, where the army is now in charge and the government's attitude toward the forces of change is often ambiguous, 40% have a favorable view—down from 55% in May (CNN).

At the same time, large majorities think the US should not take a position in the struggle between the demonstrators and the government in Syria and Yemen. For Syria, just 26% said that "in responding to the popular uprisings" the US should express support for the demonstrators while 62% said the US should not take a position (express support for the government: 7%). For Yemen, a similar 23% said the US should express support for the demonstrators while 64% said it should not take a position. These results show virtually no change from the public's view in April.

8. Israel

Views of Israel and the Israeli people continue to be favorable, though views of Israel have slipped a bit recently. A large majority regards the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of the top five issues for the United States—though somewhat fewer than the number who have this view of US relations with the Muslim people. A clear majority continues to say that the US should lean neither toward Israel nor toward the Palestinians.

While the majority's views of Israel and the Israeli people continue to be favorable, there has been some slippage. Fifty-six percent have a favorable view of Israel (down from 65% in May; CNN) with 15% having a very favorable view, down from 23%. Favorable views of the Israeli people are broadly unchanged at 70% (April: 73%), but very favorable views are at 14%, down from 21%.

Six in ten see the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of the most important issues for US interests. Respondents were asked: "Thinking about US interests, how important an issue is the Arab-Israeli conflict—the single most important issue, among the top three issues, among the top five issues, or not among the top five issues?" Sixty-one percent put the Arab-Israeli conflict among the top five issues for the US—slightly fewer than the 69% who said this for the US's relationship with majority-Muslim countries (this figure is essentially unchanged from April). Twenty-three percent put the Arab-Israeli conflict among the US's top three issues, and 7% called it the most important issue.

More Republicans tend to place a high importance on the Arab-Israeli conflict as an issue for the United States. Seventy-three percent of Republicans place it in the top five issues for US interests, compared to 58% of Democrats and 48% of independents.

A clear majority continues to say that the US should not take sides in its efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Offered the options of leaning toward Israel, leaning toward the Palestinians, and leaning toward neither side, 61% said the US should lean toward neither side (April: 65%). The numbers wanting to lean toward Israel (27%) or toward the Palestinians (5%) have been statistically unchanged since November 2010.

While large majorities of Democrats and independents want the US to lean toward neither side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—by 71% and 67% respectively—the Republicans are more divided on the issue. Fifty percent of Republicans say the US should lean toward Israel and 45% say it should lean toward neither side. Those Democrats and independents who want the US to lean toward one side want it to lean toward Israel over the Palestinians by a ratio of 2:1--while among Republicans, the ratio is 50:1.

