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U.S. Jewish Young Adults React to the Gaza Conflict: A Survey of Birthright Israel Applicants

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About This Report

This report is a preliminary description of findings from an August, 2014 Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) survey that assessed reactions of Jewish young adults to the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas. It summarizes survey responses of c. 1,800 American Taglit-Birthright Israel applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—who applied to the program between 2011 and 2013 (for more on Taglit, see Kelner, 2010; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Participants include those whose Taglit trip was their only Israel experience (68%), as well as those who went on the program, but also visited Israel under other auspices before and after Taglit. Nonparticipants include those who have never been to Israel (60%), as well as those who visited Israel before applying to Taglit. Individuals who responded to the survey represent the diversity of U.S.-based young adult Jews who are 18-29 years old.

Data were collected August 6-11, 2014. Survey questions were based on questions developed by CMJS to evaluate Taglit's impact on participants (see, e.g., Saxe, Fishman, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2013; Saxe et al., in press). Several questions were drawn from recent polls of the U.S. population conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014, July) and by Gallup (Jones, 2014, July 24).

Taglit applicants follow news about the conflict closely from a variety of news sources

Taglit applicants indicated that they closely followed news about the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The vast majority of both participants and nonparticipants reported that in the past week they followed news at least “fairly closely.” Participants were significantly more likely to follow the news “very closely” (Table 1).

Applicants also reported that they sought news from a variety of news sources. The vast majority got information from American news media and from social media, with smaller proportions getting information from European or Arab news media. More than half of the participants (53%) compared to

nonparticipants (40%) reported seeking news from Israeli news sources (Table 2).

“I feel the media's portrayal of this conflict in the US has been atrocious...Unfair biases have been cast on Israel due to how the media frames stories. Here in America all we see are kids hurt or killed from the bombing of a school or hospital, but what the media fails to show are the members of Hamas who have placed themselves close to the building and fired rockets at Israel.” (female participant, age 26, follows news “very closely”)

“I have not been following the conflict closely for the explicit reason that there seems to be virtually no unattached, unbiased parties reporting on it. It's an emotional issue but I can't truly learn about it if people - on both sides - continue to scream their beliefs at me.” (female nonparticipant, age 24, follows news “not too closely”)

Table 1: In the past WEEK, how closely have you followed news about fighting between Israel and Hamas?

	Participants	Nonparticipants
Not at all closely	2%	3%
Not too closely	14%	18%
Fairly closely	43%	46%
Very closely	41%	33%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014

Table 2: In the past WEEK, did you seek news about Israel from any of the following sources?

	Participants	Nonparticipants
American news media	88%	85%
Social media	83%	73%
Israeli news media	53%	40%
European news media	48%	47%
Arab news media	27%	26%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014

Taglit applicants dramatically more likely than all U.S. young adults to blame Hamas

In a widely discussed poll conducted at the end of July, the Pew Research Center (2014, July) reported that American young adults were more likely to hold Israel, rather than Hamas, responsible for the violence in Gaza. Questions from this poll of a representative sample of U.S. adults, which was conducted July 24-27, 2014, were repeated in the CMJS survey of Taglit applicants. First, respondents were asked: *Who do you think is MOST responsible for the military conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza?* While more than a third of all U.S. 18-29 year olds (35%) didn't know who was to blame, only a small fraction (7%) of both participants and nonparticipants chose "don't know" in response to this question. Furthermore, half of the nonparticipants and 60% of participants believed that Hamas was

responsible for the conflict, compared to 21% of all U.S. 18-29 year olds. All Taglit applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—were far less likely to blame Israel for the violence compared to all U.S. 18-29 year olds (Table 3).

"...I am appalled at the way that this conflict has been portrayed by the Western media, especially CNN, BBC, and others. I simply don't understand how so many people side with Gaza/Hamas when they are the ones who break the truce every single time. It's extremely obvious who is at fault." (male participant, age 22, thinks Hamas responsible)

"I believe Israel has a right to protect itself, but I wish they would show more mercy and discretion as the more powerful nation. It is hard not to empathize with those in Gaza because of the horrible conditions they live under, though I view Hamas as a dangerous agitator." (male nonparticipant, age 28, thinks both responsible)

Table 3: Who's responsible

	Participants (CMJS)	Nonparticipants (CMJS)	U.S. 18-29 (Pew)
Israel	6%	11%	29%
Hamas	60%	50%	21%
Both	27%	32%	15%
Don't know	7%	7%	35%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014; Pew, July 24-27, 2014

Taglit participants dramatically more likely than all U.S. young adults to believe Israel’s reaction to the conflict was “about right”

A follow-up question asked: *What do you think about the way Israel has responded in the current conflict with Hamas in Gaza?* As with the question about who is responsible for the conflict, Taglit applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—were far more likely to have an opinion than all U.S. 18-29 year olds. Taglit participants were far more likely than either all U.S. 18-29 year olds and nonparticipants to believe that Israel’s response was about right. On the other hand, nonparticipants were more critical of Israel’s response than all U.S. 18-29 year olds (Table 4).

“It is difficult to judge how much force by Israeli military is deemed necessary and/or acceptable in this conflict. Of course it is a shame that many Palestinians are being harmed, but I strongly believe Hamas is at fault. The Palestinian people seem to be victims of Hamas more so than Israel. I believe Israel is responding to a threat, not being the aggressor. From my perspective, Hamas is using innocent people as cover and thus makes Israel the ‘bad guy’ in the eyes of media and other places around the world.” (male participant, age 27, thinks Israel’s response was “about right”)

“No human life is worth more than another. Excessive force by either side will not resolve anything.” (female nonparticipant, age 23, thinks Israel went “too far”)

Table 4: Israel’s response

	Participants (CMJS)	Nonparticipants (CMJS)	U.S. 18-29 (Pew)
Gone too far	25%	38%	29%
Not gone far enough	12%	14%	7%
About right	46%	33%	31%
Don’t know	17%	15%	32%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014; Pew, July 24-27, 2014

Taglit applicants more likely than all U.S. young adults to believe Israel's reactions to the conflict were justified

A second widely reported poll of a sample of Americans was conducted by the Gallup organization on July 22-23, 2014 (Jones, 2014, July 24). Gallup asked respondents whether or not Israel's actions were mostly justified or mostly unjustified. A slightly modified version of this question was asked in the CMJS survey of Taglit applicants. Overwhelmingly, Taglit applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—believed that Israel's actions in the recent conflict were justified. Among Taglit participants 32% said Israel's actions were completely justified and 47% said they were mostly justified. Among Taglit nonparticipants 29% felt Israel's actions were completely justified and 38% felt they were mostly justified (Table 5). This is dramatically different from the views of U.S. 18-29 year

olds: only 25% of all U.S. 18-29 year olds felt that Israel's actions were justified, and half believed they were unjustified.

"...Israel is justified in the actions it has taken against Hamas in Gaza. I am abhorred by the sentiment around the world that Operation Protective Edge was unprovoked and by the amount of anti-Semitism that has surfaced. I stand with Israel today and forever." (female participant, age 20, thinks Israel was "completely justified")

"While it is clear both sides are at fault, I do believe that Israel has gone too far in terms of the death toll in Gaza. I also strongly believe that it is illegal for Israel to have settlements in Palestinian claimed territory." (female nonparticipant, age 24, thinks Israel was "mostly unjustified")

"I 100% am backing Israel; however, I don't like that innocent people are dying as a result of this conflict. I'm not sure what the right decisions would be but I hope that some sort of peace can be established." (male participant, age 26, thinks Israel was "mostly justified")

Table 5: Israel's Actions

	Participants (CMJS)	Nonparticipants (CMJS)	U.S. 18-29 (Gallup)
Completely justified	32%	29%	25%
Mostly justified	47%	38%	
	79%	67%	
Mostly unjustified	16%	24%	51%
Completely unjustified	4%	8%	
	20%	32%	
No opinion	1%	1%	24%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014; Gallup, July 22-23, 2014

Note: The Gallup poll was conducted by phone and recorded "No opinion" responses if they were volunteered by the respondent, but the CMJS survey was conducted via the Internet and did not offer a "No opinion" option. CMJS "No opinion" responses reflect item-missing.

Taglit applicants feel support for Israel, although some remain critical

Taglit applicants overwhelmingly felt support for Israel during the conflict. The vast majority of both participants and nonparticipants said that they “very much” or “somewhat” supported Israel, although participants were more likely to be “very much” supportive. Levels of connection to Israel were also high: three quarters of participants felt at least “somewhat” connected to Israel and half of nonparticipants felt the same. Despite high levels of support and connection to Israel, there was a small but significant group of Taglit participants who felt estranged from Israel: 9% felt “very much” estranged and an additional 19% felt “somewhat estranged.” Among the nonparticipants, the share of those who felt estranged from Israel was larger: 18% felt “very much” estranged and an additional 21% felt “somewhat estranged” (Table 6).

“I wish there was more coverage for the Israeli side. Many people do not know the constant pressure and horror many Israelis feel daily nor do people understand or know about the high risk situation Israel is in, today, in this conflict or any time a leader of a nation threatens to wipe Israel off the map. I understand many of the Palestinians are innocent civilians who are also terrorized by Hamas. I hope they are freed from this threat as well...” (female participant, age 22, supports Israel “very much” and feels “not at all” estranged)

“I feel that supporting Israel to any extent in this conflict is something scary to say publicly. I am worried about anti-Semitism...” (female nonparticipant, supports Israel “very much” and feels “somewhat” connected to Israel)

“It has made me very very sad, in large part because of the tragic deaths, but also because of the complex feelings that I have developed towards Israel in response. It has made me question a lot.” (female nonparticipant, age 28, supports Israel “a little” and feels estranged “somewhat” from Israel)

Table 6: Feelings about Israel

	Support for Israel		Estranged from Israel		Connected to Israel	
	Participants	Nonparticipants	Participants	Nonparticipants	Participants	Nonparticipants
Not at all	6%	15%	49%	39%	2%	11%
A little	14%	17%	23%	22%	21%	38%
Somewhat	20%	23%	19%	21%	35%	26%
Very much	60%	45%	9%	18%	42%	24%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014

More than half of all Taglit applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—voiced their opinions on social media during the conflict by forwarding articles and/or Tweeting, blogging, or otherwise making their thoughts about the situation public. A minority attended a rally or event expressing solidarity with Israel and/or contributed money to a charity on behalf of Israel (Table 7). On these two measures of engagement, there were no significant differences between Taglit participants and nonparticipants.

Taglit applicants are predominantly liberal

The Pew poll revealed a wide partisan divide over views of the Gaza conflict, with conservative Republicans overwhelmingly

blaming Hamas and approving of Israel's response, and liberal Democrats equally likely to blame Israel and Hamas as well as more likely to view Israel's response as excessive (Pew Research Center, 2014, July). Because Millennials are more liberal than older generations (Pew Research Center, 2014, March), the partisan divide explains some of the negative views of Israel held by U.S. young adults. At the same time, the partisan divide makes the views of Taglit applicants—both participants and nonparticipants—all the more unusual, given that they are far more liberal than U.S. young adults as a whole: almost two-thirds considered themselves liberal, compared to less than one-third of all U.S. young adults (Table 8).

Table 7: Taking Action During the Conflict

	Participants	Nonparticipants
Posted or forwarded articles and/or Tweeted, blogged or otherwise made public your own thoughts about the situation	56%	51%
Attended a rally/event expressing solidarity with Israel and/or contributed money to a charity on behalf of Israel	16%	14%
Attended a rally/event expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza and/or contributed money to a charity on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza	3%	5%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014.

Table 8. Political Views

	Participants (CMJS)	Nonparticipants (CMJS)	U.S. Millennials (Pew)
Liberal	64%	64%	31%
Moderate	23%	20%	39%
Conservative	13%	16%	26%

CMJS August 6-11, 2014; Pew, March 2014, (4% Don't know/Ref)

Conclusion

The present survey was designed to understand the reactions of Taglit-Birthright Israel applicants to the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas. The results make clear that Taglit applicants, regardless of whether they ultimately went on a Taglit trip, are concerned with the situation. These Jewish young adults follow the news closely and attend to both U.S. and Israeli news sources. Furthermore, although their general political views are liberal, and they are concerned about the loss of innocent Palestinian lives, they overwhelmingly believe that Israel's actions in the conflict were justified.

The headline of one of the recent articles reporting on American attitudes to the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas is that “Young Americans take a dim view of Israel's actions” (Blake, 2014, July 29). Clearly, Taglit applicants do not share these views. The results of the present survey, which are based on responses to the same questions that were the basis for the headline, make clear that Jewish young adults have a different assessment of the situation.

Furthermore, Taglit participants—who recently experienced an educational, peer trip to Israel—were significantly more supportive of Israel than nonparticipants. Their attitudes more closely resemble those of Jewish Israelis, 90% of whom felt that Israel's military actions in Gaza were justified (Yaar & Hermann, August 2014). As Israel experiences become

more widespread among Jewish young adults, overall support for Israel among American Jews is likely to increase.

Some have suggested that Taglit attracts only right-wing applicants and that liberal Jews are not welcomed, but that claim is belied by the finding that almost two-thirds of Taglit participants and nonparticipants consider themselves liberal. It has also been suggested that Taglit gives participants a one-sided view of the situation. To be sure, Taglit participants did not have a chance as part of the program to visit Gaza (or the West Bank) and to engage with Palestinians from these areas. Yet, Taglit participants demonstrate considerable sympathy for victims on both sides of the conflict. A significant sub-group believed that Israel has gone “too far” in responding to Hamas, while at the same time, believing that Hamas, not Israel, is responsible for the conflict.

There has been substantial discussion about whether or not Jewish young adults are “distancing” themselves from Israel (Cohen & Kelman, 2007, 2010; Sasson, Kadushin, & Saxe, 2010). The present findings make clear that those who have applied to Taglit are not distanced—rather, they are highly engaged, even those who ultimately did not go on a Taglit trip. The degree to which they follow the news and the passion expressed in their comments suggests that Jewish young adults have a thirst for more information and more involvement.

Notes About Methodology

The findings reported here are derived from a survey conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University in response to the conflict in Gaza. Data was collected via an online questionnaire August 6-11, 2014. Respondents were offered an opportunity to win one of two \$100 Amazon.com gift cards. The sample for this survey was drawn from eligible U.S. Taglit applicants who applied to participate on a trip between the summer of 2011 and winter 2013/2014. The population included those who went on the trip (“participants”) and those who applied to go on the trip but did not go (“nonparticipants”). While some individuals applied to Taglit multiple times between 2011 and 2014, the application database was de-duplicated to include only a single record per applicant, dropping all but the most recent eligible application, which in the case of Taglit participants was necessarily the round in which they participated.

The frame was stratified by participation status and round of application, and a stratified random sample of 15,924 individuals was drawn. Participant strata were sampled at a 10 percent rate, and nonparticipant strata were sampled at a 20 percent rate, to ensure sufficient sample size for analyses. Weights were calculated to compensate for both the differential probability of selection and differential response rate between strata. The total number of respondents was 1,756: 1,122 participants and 634 nonparticipants. The overall response rate was 11.0%, 13.4% for participants and 8.4% for nonparticipants.

The analyses contained in this brief report exclude 73 nonparticipants who went to Israel after applying to Taglit. They also exclude respondents who are currently living in Israel (n=13) or are over 29 years old (n=18). To allow comparison with the Pew and Gallup findings, findings are described in terms of weighted tabs. When statistical models are used to control for differential Jewish background among participants and nonparticipants, the findings are essentially the same: patterns of significance are the same across each of the outcomes.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they had anything to add about their feelings with respect to the conflict in Gaza. Thirty-one percent of respondents left a comment in the text box provided. These comments are included throughout the report.

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Appendix

The following tables compare 6 groups of Taglit applicants:

1. Nonparticipant applicants who have never been to Israel
2. Nonparticipant applicants who had been to Israel BEFORE applying to Taglit, but did not go to Israel AFTER applying to Taglit
3. Nonparticipant applicants who went to Israel AFTER applying to Taglit
4. Participants who have been to Israel on the Taglit trip only
5. Participants who had been to Israel BEFORE applying to Taglit, but did not go to Israel AFTER their Taglit trip
6. Participants who went to Israel AFTER their Taglit trip

Comparisons between the groups are made on measures of Jewish background—Jewish parents, hours of formal Jewish education and identifying as Orthodox—as well as on measures related to the Gaza conflict.

Table 1: Israel Experience

	Percent	95% CI LB	95% CI UB	N
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	18%	17%	20%	350
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	8%	7%	9%	153
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	4%	3%	5%	73
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	47%	45%	49%	712
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	14%	12%	16%	213
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	8%	7%	9%	112
All applicants				1,613

Table 2: Israel Experience X Mean Hours Jewish Education (in thousands of hours)

	Mean	Std. Error
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	0.921	0.078
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	2.428	0.228
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	3.883	0.392
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	0.931	0.054
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	1.851	0.156
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	1.615	0.178

Note: Average hours of Jewish education were calculated based on an analysis of supplementary schools in the in the United States in the 2011-12 school years (Boxer, 2012). One year of supplementary school was estimated to equal 130 hours of instruction, one year of day school to equal to 650 hours of Jewish education, and one year of Sunday school was estimated to equal 65 hours. These estimates are lower than those of Himmelfarb (1977), but were deemed more accurately representative of Jewish supplementary education in more recent years.

Table 3: Israel Experience X Parental Inmarriage

	Inmarried parents	Conversionary inmarried parents	Intermarried parents	No Jewish parents
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	43%	15%	41%	1%
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	71%	12%	16%	1%
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	75%	13%	12%	0%
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	48%	12%	39%	1%
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	71%	13%	15%	1%
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	66%	12%	22%	0%
All applicants	55%	13%	31%	1%

Table 4: Israel Experience X Orthodox at Time of Most Recent Taglit Application

	Identified as non-Orthodox	Identified as Orthodox
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	97%	3%
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	83%	17%
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	72%	28%
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	99%	1%
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	95%	5%
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	96%	4%
All applicants	96%	5%

Table 5: Israel Experience X Responsible for Conflict

"Who do you think is MOST responsible for the military conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza?"				
	Israel	Hamas	Both	Don't know
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	13%	43%	36%	8%
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	8%	65%	21%	6%
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	1%	81%	15%	3%
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	7%	56%	29%	8%
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	5%	64%	25%	6%
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	1%	75%	20%	4%
All applicants	7%	58%	28%	7%

Table 6: Israel Experience X Israel's Response

"What do you think about the way Israel has responded in the current conflict with Hamas in Gaza?"				
	Israel has gone too far	Israel has not gone far enough	Israel's response has been about right	Don't know
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	43%	8%	30%	18%
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	25%	27%	38%	9%
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	20%	31%	45%	5%
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	28%	8%	45%	18%
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	23%	16%	46%	15%
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	11%	29%	49%	10%
All applicants	28%	13%	42%	16%

Table 7: Israel Experience X Israel Justified

"Do you think the Israeli actions in the current conflict with Hamas have been ... ?"					
	Completely justified	Mostly justified	Mostly unjustified	Completely unjustified	No response
Non-participant, has never visited Israel	21%	40%	29%	9%	2%
Non-participant, visited Israel before application	48%	33%	14%	5%	1%
Non-participant, visited Israel after application	62%	25%	10%	1%	1%
Participant, has only visited Israel on Taglit	27%	50%	19%	4%	1%
Participant, has also visited Israel before application	38%	44%	13%	4%	1%
Participant, has also visited Israel after application	50%	43%	4%	3%	0%
All applicants	32%	44%	18%	5%	1%

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The Steinhardt Social Research Institute, hosted at CMJS, is committed to the development and application of innovative approaches to socio-demographic research for the study of Jewish, religious, and cultural identity.

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