

# The Influence of President Obama's, Middle Name on Middle Eastern and U.S. Perceptions

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**Abstract** In a series of cross-cultural experiments, we explore whether mentioning President Obama's middle name facilitates or impedes his delicate position as a peace broker. Our results show that including Obama's middle name affects perceptions of Obama and his proposals for the Middle East among Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. We examine whether the use of Obama's middle name inspires the same reactions in the United States by replicating the study among those who sympathize with Israelis and those who sympathize with Palestinians. Results show that the effect of Obama's middle name differs in the United States. This study has important implications, not only for the President Obama's standing in the Arab world and for the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but also for our understanding of subtle ethnic cues and biases across cultural contexts.

**Keywords** News · Priming · Israeli–Palestinian conflict · Ethnic cues · Reactive devaluation · Obama

## Introduction

“Much has been made of the fact that an African–American with the name Barack Hussein Obama could be elected President.”—President Obama in an address to the Muslim world from Cairo

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“I refer to him as B. Hussein Obama. He’s half white and half black, half Christian and half Muslim and half atheist. Something there for every Democrat.”—Ann Coulter, conservative commentator

“Nothing will move us from Hebron, not even Hussein Obama”—Ayoob Kara, Israel’s Deputy Minister for the Development of the Negev and Galil

“It is going to be very difficult for Mideast leaders to demonize someone whose full name is Barack Hussein Obama.”—Hisham Melhem, Al-Arabya Washington bureau chief

On Wednesday, July 7, 2010, Israel’s Channel 2 News interviewed President Barack Obama about his recent meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Not surprisingly, Obama talked about Israeli/Palestinian negotiations and the possibility of a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran. Surprisingly, Obama used some of his interview time to comment on another controversial topic: his middle name. As *Haaretz* News Service (2010) reports, “when confronted with the anxiety that some Israelis feel toward him, Obama said that ‘some of it may just be the fact that my middle name is Hussein, and that creates suspicion.’” In contrast to the anxiety expressed by Israeli Jews, those in the Arab world have greeted Obama’s presidency with cautious enthusiasm. To many, Obama is the first U.S. president in decades who could serve as an honest broker between Palestinians and Israelis. This perception is attributable, at least in part, to Obama’s connection (based on his paternal lineage) to the Muslim world. Even for those less familiar with American politics, Obama’s Arabic roots are conveyed subtly by his Arabic middle name.

In the United States, Obama’s middle name also has raised controversy. One prominent example from the 2008 campaign is illustrative. After conservative radio host Bill Cunningham introduced Obama’s Republican rival, John McCain, with a speech filled with references to “Barack Hussein Obama,” John McCain promptly distanced himself from these comments. When asked whether the use of Obama’s middle name was appropriate, McCain responded “No, it is not. Any comment that is disparaging of either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama is totally inappropriate.” Uses of Obama’s middle name have been seen by many as a strategy to undermine Obama’s candidacy and later, his presidency.

Priming research long has shown that exposure to subtle cues can influence perceptions of political officials, candidates, and issues (for a review, see Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. 2009). Other research shows that names can serve as subtle cues; a name can serve as a discriminatory cue in the workplace (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004) and among political candidates (Byrne and Pueschel 1974). How priming theory applies to President Obama’s name in the international arena, however, is not altogether clear. Can a subtle cue, such as the inclusion of someone’s middle name, alter pre-existing, well-established perceptions about a widely known political figure like the U.S. president? It is important to examine the extent to which Obama’s middle name shapes domestic and international public opinion given that public opinion about foreign policy can have an important influence on government action (Page and Shapiro 1983; Sela 2007). In a series of cross-cultural experiments, we examine the influence of Obama’s middle name on reactions to the U.S. president and his policies.

## Priming Research and Ethnic Cues

Political judgments depend, in part, on what information is most accessible in a person's mind. The most accessible ideas and considerations in our heads are the ones likely to be used in subsequent decision-making tasks (Taylor and Fiske 1978). This is the premise behind examinations of priming in political contexts; "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, p. 63). By making certain topics such as the economy or security more salient, media priming can alter the public's evaluations of politicians (Sheafer and Weimann 2005) and presidents (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; McGraw and Ling 2003). In this series of studies, we examine whether a subtle change—the inclusion or exclusion of Obama's middle name— affects citizens' political attitudes and beliefs.

The appropriate theory to guide this study requires clarification. Some have considered wording changes that trigger different responses as framing (e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). Others examine changes in images as priming (e.g., Valentino et al. 2002). The manipulation in our study is subtle,<sup>1</sup> making it likely that effects would be based on the increased accessibility of thoughts about Obama's ethnic background. As priming effects occur due to accessibility, we believe that priming is the most appropriate theoretical explanation for our research (Price and Tewksbury 1997; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

Research repeatedly has shown that subtly embedded cues can influence citizen reactions. The racial composition of individuals pictured in candidate advertisements affect candidate preferences (Valentino et al. 2002). Even subliminal racial cues, such as exposure to the Confederate flag, can lessen subjects' willingness to vote for a Black presidential candidate (Ehrlinger et al. 2011). Shifting to verbal information, word choices, such as "inner city" to describe crime, influence policy preferences (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). Further, immigration thoughts are affected depending on the type of immigrants (Latino vs European) referenced (Brader et al. 2008).

Although there are notable differences between race relations in the United States and ethnic relations in the Middle East, the two have some commonalities. Tsfati (2007), for example, draws from work on African Americans' perceptions of media fairness, finding similar patterns among Israeli Arabs. Although noting differences between African-Americans and other groups, McClain et al. (2009) note some similarities between African-American group attitudes and the attitudes of other minority groups, such as Arab-Americans. Ho et al. (2012) examine social dominance, "an individual's preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality" (p. 2) in both Israel and the United States. Again noting the presence of differences between race relations in the United States and ethnic differences in Israel, the author(s) nonetheless find some similarities. Factor analyses revealed a similar factor structure for social dominance in both contexts and several of the correlates of social dominance were constant across cultures. These studies suggest that the

<sup>1</sup> Few students indicated an awareness of the study manipulation.

research inspired by race relations in the United States may have bearing in examining the Israeli context.

In view of the Arabic roots of Obama's middle name, we suspected that use of this name would influence people's opinions of the president. This builds from research on race in the American context, where subtle changes affected respondents' attitudes (e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). In this study, we extend previous research on priming effects by looking at reactions to an identical individual who is merely referenced differently to understand whether this subtle variation can influence perceptions.

Given the focus of previous priming research on background pictures and word choices, this study adds a new dimension to the analysis of priming effects by examining whether a name can influence reactions to a popular political figure. There are good reasons to hypothesize that names can affect perceptions. Examining voting behavior in California, Byrne and Pueschel (1974) found that candidates with Italian and Eastern-European names garnered fewer votes in lower ballot races compared to candidates with Scandinavian and English names. A randomized experiment adds to the idea that names are influential. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that "job applicants with African-American names get far fewer callbacks for each resume they send out" in comparison to applicants with Caucasian names (p. 1011). Both of these studies suggest that names matter, but they are limited in their ability to tell us how people will react to variations in a well-known political figure's name. Byrne and Pueschel examined what voters do when they have little information about for whom to vote. In the Bertrand and Mullainathan study, potential employers had little additional information about the applicants. In contrast to these studies, the focus of our attention is widely known and there is hardly anyone who has not formed an opinion about him. Whether a name associated with a prominent political figure can influence political perceptions is unclear.

Decades of research confirm that the source of a message moderates reactions to the message (see, for example, Hovland and Weiss 1951/1952). Even an identical message can be evaluated differently depending on the reported source of the message and his or her perceived characteristics (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). The same source can engender trust among some respondents and distrust among others. Here, Hussein may inspire trust among Israeli Arabs, but not among Israeli Jews.

The psychological concept of *reactive devaluation bias* helps to explain how these two groups may react differently to Obama's middle name. As Ross (Ross and Ward 1995) explains, proposals put forth by an opposing party during negotiations are devalued because the proposals are assumed to serve the interests of the opposition. In Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, for example, concessions are evaluated quite differently depending on who supposedly proposed the concessions (Maoz 1999, 2006; Maoz et al. 2002). When evaluating concessions attributed to Palestinians, Israeli Jews rate the concessions less favorably than *identical* concessions attributed to Israelis (Maoz 2006). Much the same, Israeli Arabs rate concessions attributed to Palestinians more favorably than *identical* concessions attributed to Israelis (Maoz et al. 2002). These findings parallel the results of the names research reviewed earlier (e.g. Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), but directly speak to the Israeli context where we conduct our research. Most important for this

study, reactive devaluation biases can be minimized when concessions are proposed by a third-party, such as the United States. In one study, proposed concessions attributed to the United States were seen more positively by Israeli Jews in comparison to identical concessions attributed to Palestinians (Maoz 1999). Although third-party negotiators *can* reduce reactive devaluation bias, it is unlikely that all third-party negotiators will have the same effect. When a third-party negotiator is seen as partial to one side of the negotiations, reactive devaluation bias should result. Building on Maoz's research, we examine whether the use of the word Hussein will influence people's impressions of whether a proposal is fair to both Israelis and Palestinians. More specifically, we predict that Israeli Arabs and Jews will believe that Barack Hussein Obama is more favorable toward Palestinians and less favorable toward Israelis compared to Barack Obama. Consistent with reactive devaluation bias, we predict that this will lead Israeli Jews to perceive Obama and his proposals for negotiations in the Middle East more negatively. The opposite should occur for Israeli Arabs. For this group, the word Hussein and the resultant perception that Obama favors Palestinians should lead them to view the U.S. president more positively and to find his proposals fairer. This yields the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1** The use of President Obama's middle name, Hussein, will lead to perceptions that the U.S. president is more favorable toward Palestinians and less favorable toward Israelis.

**Hypothesis 2a** Among Israeli Jews, the perception that Obama is more favorable toward Palestinians and less favorable toward Israelis will lead to more *negative* perceptions of Obama and his proposals.

**Hypothesis 2b** Among Israeli Arabs, the perception that Obama is more favorable toward Palestinians and less favorable toward Israelis will lead to more *positive* perceptions of Obama and his proposals.

Although we hypothesize that Obama's middle name will influence both Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, we do not expect that the reactions of these two groups will be of the same magnitude. Instead, we suspect that the magnitude of the effect will be stronger among Israeli Jews than among Israeli Arabs. As the name "Hussein" signals sympathies with Israeli Arabs, the cue should be more negative for Israeli Jews than for Israeli Arabs. Psychological research consistently shows that negative information affects judgments more strongly than positive information (see Baumeister et al. 2001 for a review). Evidence confirms that this is the case when people form impressions of other individuals (Hamilton and Zanna 1972). Whether impression formation about an American president, as opposed to another individual, is influenced similarly requires additional research.

Political scientists have extended this line of research to show that negative information also influences political judgments (see an overview by Druckman and Lupia 2000). Evidence is consistent with findings from psychology; negative information about political figures (Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1985) and issues (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997; Soroka 2006) affects political attitudes and behaviors more strongly than positive information. Soroka (2006), for example, demonstrated that

public opinion about unemployment was more influenced by negative (as opposed to positive) economic news. Although these studies provide guidance for our inquiry, it isn't altogether clear that the subtle cue we examine is enough to produce asymmetric reactions. In prior research, there is little question about the presence or absence of negativity. In some research, negative news in the media is ascertained or negative messages are purposely constructed (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997; Soroka 2006). Other studies look at negative or positive information recalled by study respondents (Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1985). This study departs from previous work by examining a far more subtle negative indicator embedded in media coverage.

There are reasons to suspect that a subtle, negative political cue will be more influential on political judgments than a positive cue. Partisan reactions are influenced by subtle partisan cues (Goren et al. 2009; Ladd 2010). For example, Goren et al. (2009) found that when political values are connected with partisan and ideological cues (e.g. “*Liberal Democrats* believe that our country would be much better off if people were treated more equally”), citizens react to these values on the basis of their political leanings more than if the political values are unconnected with partisan and ideological leanings (e.g. “*Some* believe...”). Most pertinent to this study, Goren and colleagues found that out-group cues—cues indicating that a value is held by those with an *opposing* political leaning—influence judgments more strongly than in-group cues. Considering the similarities between party affiliation and religious affiliation (Goren et al. 2009; Green et al. 2002), the same process may occur when examining responses to Obama's middle name. With the exception of Block and Onwunli's study (2010), no other studies have examined reactions to a subtle cue about a prominent political figure. The manipulation here also leaves the referent constant—Barack Obama is the same person as Barack Hussein Obama. Previous research has *changed* the referent—“liberal Democrats” are different from “some people,” for example. Whether a subtle change about a constant referent will produce different reactions amongst Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs requires additional study.

Given psychological and political science research, we anticipated that there would be asymmetries in the degree to which Obama's middle name influences perceptions among Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. When Obama's middle name is a *negative* cue, we expected that respondents' judgments would be more powerfully influenced than when Obama's middle name is a *positive* cue, as detailed in hypothesis 3.

**Hypothesis 3** The magnitude of the effect of using Obama's middle name compared to not using his middle name on evaluations of Obama's sympathies toward Israelis/Palestinians, and perceptions of Obama and his proposals for the Middle East will be greater for Israeli Jews than for Israeli Arabs.

### Cross-Cultural Priming Research

Several studies have examined the reactions of participants in different countries (see, for example, Gardner et al. 1999; Lee et al. 2000) and ethnic groups (see, for

example, Maoz et al. 2002). Cross-cultural comparisons raise unique concerns. As respondents are not randomly assigned to these categories, the studies are quasi-experimental. Differences between cultures—such as the average amount of education obtained or the age at which citizens obtain their education—will be present in any cross-cultural comparison. This makes isolating the causal mechanism more challenging. Yet the variability in life experiences is precisely why we might anticipate that cultures would differ from each other.

Matsumoto and Yoo (2006) review several phases of cross-cultural comparison research. The first phase, according to the authors, is the examination of similarities and differences between cultures. Although noting that this is helpful, Matsumoto and Yoo encourage scholars to pay more attention to understanding why differences may occur. In this vein, we examine not only whether “Hussein” results in different beliefs and attitudes, but also whether the name yields different cognitive reactions among U.S. and Israeli participants.

Few studies have examined how priming effects vary across cultural contexts. Those that have suggest that priming can have different effects depending on the cultural context. White (2007), for example, examined differences in how African Americans and White Americans react to racial cues. His findings demonstrate that African Americans increasingly rely on racial attitudes when exposed to *explicit* racial cues while White Americans rely more heavily on their racial attitudes when exposed to *implicit*, rather than explicit, racial cues. Most directly related to this research, Maoz et al. (2002) compared the reactions of Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews to proposed concessions. As described earlier, these two groups responded quite differently to proposed concessions depending on whether the concessions were attributed to an Israeli or Palestinian source.

It is particularly important to conduct cross-cultural research in this instance given that Obama’s middle name has a different connotation in various cultures. In the United States, the name “Hussein” is most closely associated with Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator who opposed the United States in two major military operations in the Middle East. When used in connection with Obama, “Hussein” was seen as a campaign tactic, employed to garner distrust among citizens. In Israel, the same name has a different connotation, connected closely with various groups. For Israeli Jews, the name is associated with an Arabic out-group and inspires distrust. For Israeli Arabs, the name signals a possible in-group member. This could mean that Hussein acts as a negative cue for *all* respondents in the U.S., negatively influencing their reactions to both the president and his proposals. In other words, the effect in the U.S. may not be moderated by sympathies toward Israelis or Palestinians. It also is conceivable that those in the U.S. will have far more muted reactions to the manipulation given their greater familiarity both with the president and his middle name. For example, a study evaluating participant reactions to a correction of the factual inaccurate claim that Obama is a Muslim found that many corrections did not alter beliefs (Nyhan et al. 2009). When corrections did have effects, they were contextual and dependent on the interviewers’ race. In another recent article, Block and Onwunli (2010) found that Obama’s middle name had very modest effects on American citizens. Although it reduced republicans’ low opinions of Obama and improved his rating among Independents, his middle name had no

effect on democrats. Further, regardless of party identification or political ideology, his name presentation had no effect on the probability of voting for Obama. Given that the name “Hussein” may prime different connotations which in turn may activate different processes across cultures, we pose the following research question:

**Research Question 1** Are there differences between the United States and Israel in how citizens respond to the use of President Obama’s middle name?

## Method

### Research Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a post-test only experiment. The U.S. president was referenced as “President Barack Hussein Obama” in the first condition and as “President Barack Obama” in the second condition.

### Participants

In Israel, 410 students participated in the study, either as volunteers or for extra credit. Sixty-seven percent of participants identified as Israeli Jews and 33 percent as Israeli Arabs. Fifty-five percent of respondents were female and the average age was 24.71 ( $SD = 5.57$ , Range = 19–62). Students also were asked to report their political leanings towards the peace process (1 = hawk, 7 = dove,  $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) and religiosity (1 = orthodox/very religious, 4 = secular,  $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .62$ ). There were no significant differences between conditions on gender ( $\chi^2(1) = .32$ ,  $p = .57$ ), religiosity [ $t(400) = .21$ ,  $p = .84$ ], or political leanings [ $t(385) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .12$ ]. There were, however, significant differences between the conditions on age (Obama  $M = 25.58$ ,  $SD = 6.66$ ; Hussein Obama  $M = 23.89$ ,  $SD = 4.14$ ;  $t(322$ , equal variances not assumed) = 3.04,  $p < .01$ ). For this reason, we control for age when analyzing the Israeli data.

In the United States, 308 students at a large southwestern university participated in the experiment. Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication courses for extra credit and from Israeli and Palestinian student organizations for a small donation to their organization. Respondents were asked: “In the dispute between the Israelis and Palestinians, which side do you sympathize with more, the Israelis or the Palestinians?” Forty-nine percent of participants sympathized more with Israelis, 30 percent more with Palestinians. We do not include students who were undecided in our analyses given their small numbers and our substantive interest in Israeli and Palestinian reactions. There were no differences between conditions in terms of Israeli/Palestinian sympathies [ $\chi^2(1) = .14$ ,  $p = .70$ ].

Obviously, the Israeli–Palestinian dispute is less salient in the United States than in Israel. Nevertheless, Americans, who have little knowledge about other nations, are highly informed about Israel and historically have been supportive of it (Cavari 2012).

Due to long term historic strategic alliances, common democratic principles and a shared Judeo-Christian religious core, American sympathies have remained fairly steady over time; The Pew Research Center reports that more Americans sympathize with Israel (40 % in September, 2011) than with Palestinians (10 %). For comparability to the Israeli data, we test whether these sympathies influence reactions to the president's middle name. It is possible, however, that in the U.S. context, reactions to Hussein occur irrespective of respondents' sympathies. We test for this possibility.

In the United States, 68 percent of participants were female. On average, participants were 21.51 years of age ( $SD = 5.08$ , Range = 18–66). When asked about their partisan leanings, 34 percent identified as Republicans and 37 percent as Democrats. Furthermore, 28 percent identified as conservative and 34 percent as liberal. Finally, we asked respondents to report how frequently they attended religious services from 1 = more than once a week to 5 = never ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). There were no differences between conditions on these variables, providing evidence that random assignment to condition was successful [Age:  $t(236) = .27$ ,  $p = .79$ ; Gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .31$ ; Ideology:  $t(238) = .85$ ,  $p = .40$ ; Party:  $\chi^2(2) = .72$ ,  $p = .70$ ; Attend religious services:  $t(239) = .92$ ,  $p = .36$ ].

## Procedure

The study was conducted between April and November, 2010. Participants were told that they would be viewing a news clip and then providing their thoughts about the news segment. They then watched 3 min and 40 s of President Obama delivering his remarks at the beginning of a trilateral meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Abbas on September 22, 2009. The news clip included the CNN Live logo to enhance realism. In the two conditions, the news clip was identical in all ways except that at four points during the news clip, a ticker appeared at the bottom of the screen for about 5 s each and identified the speaker as either "President Barack Obama" or as "President Barack Hussein Obama." Since a pre-test indicated that many Israelis experienced some difficulty in understanding President Obama's remarks in English, we included Arabic subtitles for Israeli Arabs and Hebrew subtitles for Israeli Jews. In order to enhance realism and subtle the manipulation, the subtitles were layered on the name ticker, reducing the name's actual screen time to about 10 s. After watching the video clip, respondents answered questions about their reactions to the clip. The questionnaire was completed in the respondents' mother tongue.

## Measurement

Respondents were asked to report their perceptions of Obama's Israeli/Palestinian sympathies, his character traits, and his proposals.

### Perceptions of Whether Obama Favors Israelis or Palestinians

Respondents reported whether they believed that Obama's statement was pro-Israeli and whether they believed that Obama favors Israelis. These measures were

averaged (Israel:  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ,  $r = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ ; U.S.:  $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = .96$ ,  $r = .63$ ,  $p < .01$ , Range = 1–7). Respondents also reported whether they believed that Obama’s statement was pro-Palestinian and whether they believed Obama favors Palestinians. These measures also were averaged (Israel:  $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $r = .69$ ,  $p < .01$ ; U.S.:  $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $r = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Perceptions that Obama was pro-Israeli were moderately correlated with perceptions that Obama was pro-Palestinian (Israel:  $r = -.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ; U.S.:  $r = -.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Perceptions of Obama

Respondents were asked their perceptions of Obama on a series of traits: trustworthy, competent, honest, warmth, intelligent, fair, considerate, peaceful, and generous. These measures were averaged to form a single measure, with higher values indicating more positive impressions of Obama (Israel:  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .84$ , *Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .88$ ; U.S.:  $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ , *Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .92$ , Range = 1–6).

### Perceptions of Obama’s Proposals

With response options from 1 = not at all to 6 = very much, respondents were asked to report the degree to which they believed that President Obama’s statement moved negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians forward, the degree to which they thought that President Obama’s statement was fair to both sides, and the extent to which they agreed with his proposals. These items were averaged (Israel:  $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ , *Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .83$ ; U.S.:  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ , *Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .78$ ).

## Results

The results for the experiment conducted in Israel are shown in Table 1 and the results for the experiment conducted in the U.S. are shown in Table 2. The means by experimental condition and ethnicity/ethnic sympathy are shown in the tables. For example, study participants rated the extent to which Obama was pro-Palestinian from 1 to 7, with larger values indicating that Obama was more favorable toward Palestinians. Israeli Arabs in the “Obama” condition rated Obama a 3.62 and those in the “Hussein Obama” rated Obama a 3.79.

As the independent variables, the experimental condition and ethnicity/ethnic sympathies, were expected to affect multiple correlated dependent variables, we utilized a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to analyze all dependent variables conjointly (see Johnson and Wichern 2007). For the Israel data, we contrast Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. For the United States data, we contrast those who sympathize with Palestinians and those who sympathize with Israelis.

For the data from Israel, the multivariate test of the interaction between the experimental manipulation of Obama’s middle name and ethnicity was not

**Table 1** Effects of Obama’s middle name, Israel

Mean (SE)	Israeli Arab		Israeli Jew		F (1,388)	
	Obama	Hussein Obama	Obama	Hussein Obama	Obama vs. Hussein Obama	Israeli Arab vs. Israeli Jew
Obama pro-Palestinians	3.62 (.22)	3.79 (.17)	4.86 (.08)	4.98 (.08)	1.79	70.85**
Obama pro-Israelis	5.36 (.16)	4.98 (.17)	4.11 (.10)	3.77 (.10)	8.54**	68.33**
Obama positive traits	3.86 (.13)	3.75 (.11)	4.21 (.06)	4.00 (.06)	5.14*	16.18**
Favors Obama’s proposals	2.98 (.18)	3.03 (.15)	3.82 (.09)	3.48 (.09)	4.21*	28.87**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  raw means shown in the first four columns. MANOVA results, controlling for age, are shown in the last two columns. Interactions between ethnicity and the name manipulation were not significant and are excluded from the model

**Table 2** Effects of Obama’s middle name, United States

Mean (SE)	Sympathize with Palestinians		Sympathize with Israelis		F (1,238)	
	Obama	Hussein Obama	Obama	Hussein Obama	Obama vs. Hussein Obama	Palestinian vs. Israeli sympathies
Obama pro-Palestinians	3.66 (.13)	3.62 (.14)	3.99 (.11)	3.93 (.10)	.12	6.88**
Obama pro-Israelis	4.78 (.13)	4.66 (.15)	4.41 (.12)	4.49 (.11)	.00	4.46*
Obama positive traits	4.12 (.17)	4.06 (.14)	4.01 (.10)	4.13 (.12)	.28	.06
Favors Obama’s proposals	3.42 (.17)	3.24 (.16)	3.41 (.12)	3.62 (.12)	.23	1.61

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  raw means shown in the first four columns. MANOVA results are shown in the last two columns. Interactions between sympathies and the name manipulation were not significant and are excluded from the model

significant ( $Wilks' \lambda = .99, F(4, 384) = .90, p = .47$ ). Removing the non-significant interaction and looking only at the main effects, ethnicity was significant ( $Wilks' \lambda = .73, F(4, 385) = 36.25, p < .01$ ), as was the experimental manipulation ( $Wilks' \lambda = .97, F(4, 385) = 3.44, p < .01$ ). In the U.S. context, the multivariate test of the interaction between the experimental manipulation of Obama’s middle name and sympathies with Israelis/Palestinians also was not significant ( $Wilks' \lambda = .99, F(4, 234) = .65, p = .63$ ). Removing the non-significant interaction and looking only at the main effects, sympathies with Israelis/Palestinians was significant [ $Wilks' \lambda = .96, F(4, 235) = 2.56, p < .05$ ] and the experimental manipulation was not [ $Wilks' \lambda = 1.00, F(4, 235) = .15, p = .96$ ]. When significant, we report tests of between-subjects effects for the individual dependent variables below. They also are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

Compared to Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs believed that Obama was less pro-Palestinian [ $F(1, 388) = 70.85, p < .01$ ] and more pro-Israeli [ $F(1, 388) = 68.33, p < .01$ ] irrespective of the use of his middle name. The same was true in the United States, where those with sympathies toward Palestinians believed that Obama was less pro-Palestinian [ $F(1, 238) = 6.88, p < .01$ ] and more pro-Israeli [ $F(1, 238) = 4.46, p < .05$ ] than those with sympathies toward Israelis.

The experimental manipulation of Obama's name did have a significant effect. It influenced perceptions of whether Obama favored Israelis, but only in the Israel experiment. Labeling the U.S. president "Barack Hussein Obama" led respondents from Israel to believe that he was less pro-Israeli than when his middle name was not included [ $F(1, 388) = 8.54, p < .01$ ].

The manipulation also affected respondents' perceptions of Obama's traits in the Israel experiment. The presence of Obama's middle name depressed evaluations of Obama's positive traits, irrespective of whether respondents were Israeli Arabs or Israeli Jews [ $F(1, 388) = 5.14, p < .05$ ]. There was, however, a main effect of ethnicity [ $F(1, 388) = 16.18, p < .01$ ]. Israeli Jews rated Obama more favorably compared to Israeli Arabs. Neither the experimental manipulation, nor sympathies with Israelis or Palestinians affected perceptions of Obama's traits in the United States.

When asked about Obama's proposals for the Middle East, Israeli Arabs evaluated his ideas less favorably than Israeli Jews [ $F(1, 388) = 28.87, p < .01$ ]. Yet again, the experimental manipulation of Obama's middle name affected perceptions in Israel—those seeing the president's middle name evaluated his proposals less positively [ $F(1, 388) = 4.21, p < .05$ ]. It is noteworthy that when an interaction between the experimental manipulation and ethnicity is included in the Israeli data, it approaches significance [ $F(1, 387) = 2.36, p = .13$ ]. There were no effects of sympathies or the experimental manipulation in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

How respondents evaluate Obama and his proposals depends not only on their ethnicity, but also on their beliefs about which ethnic group Obama favors. We predicted that the more Israeli Jews believed that Obama favored Israelis, the more

<sup>2</sup> We also evaluated whether political knowledge moderates the effect of Obama's middle name on the dependent variables considered here. Items asking respondents basic political facts, tailored to their cultural context, were incorporated on each survey (Israel:  $M = 2.45, SD = 1.81, Cronbach's \alpha = .82, Range = 0-5$ , U.S.:  $M = 6.94, SD = 2.17, Range = 0-10, Cronbach's \alpha = .71$ ). For the Israeli data, there were significant three-way interactions between political knowledge, Israeli Jew/Arab, and whether the president's middle name was used when predicting beliefs that Obama is pro-Israeli [ $F(1,374) = 3.97, p < .05$ ] and beliefs that Obama is pro-Palestinian [ $F(1,374) = 7.82, p < .01$ ]. The same interactions did not appear in the U.S. data. Using a median split on the political knowledge variable and post hoc comparisons with a Sidak adjustment for multiple comparisons, several differences appear in the Israeli data. Politically knowledgeable Israeli Jews rate Obama as less pro-Israel when his middle name was used compared to when it is not used and compared to Israeli Jews with lower levels of political knowledge. Politically knowledgeable Israeli Arabs rate Obama as *more* pro-Israeli and *less* pro-Palestinian when his middle name is used compared to Israeli Arabs with lower levels of political knowledge. Among Israeli Arabs who did not see the president's middle name, those with lower levels of political knowledge rated the president as less pro-Palestinian compared to Israeli Arabs with higher levels of political knowledge. Put in another way, Hussein led politically knowledgeable Israeli Jews to evaluate the president as less pro-Israel and politically knowledgeable Israeli Arabs to evaluate the president as less pro-Palestinian.

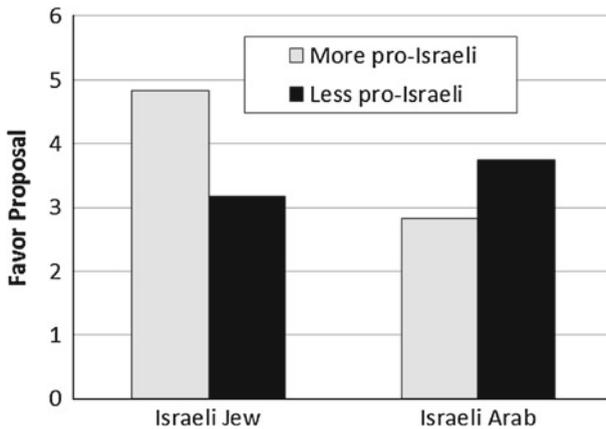
*positively* they would evaluate Obama and his proposals. For Israeli Arabs, however, we predicted that the more Israeli Arabs believed that Obama favored Israelis, the more *negatively* they would evaluate Obama and his proposals. As shown in Table 3, this is precisely what we find. There are significant interactions between ethnicity and perceptions of Obama in line with our expectations. The relationship is shown graphically in Fig. 1 for Israeli respondents' assessments of Obama's proposals.

These findings provide more insight into how the manipulation of Obama's middle name affects perceptions of the U.S. president and his policies. For both Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, the presence of Obama's middle name reduces the

**Table 3** Regression analysis of favoring Obama's proposals, Israel

Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	Obama's positive traits		Favoring Obama's proposals	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Hussein Obama	-.20 (.08)*	-.15 (.08)	-.25 (.12)*	-.14 (.10)
Age	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.004 (.01)
Israeli Jew	.38 (.09)**	.33 (.10)**	.72 (.13)**	.72 (.12)**
Obama pro-Israelis (OPI)	-	-.21 (.05)**	-	-.33 (.06)**
Israeli Jew OPI*	-	.50 (.06)**	-	.93 (.08)**
Constant	4.06 (.20)**	4.13 (.19)**	3.35 (.29)**	3.39 (.25)**
R-square	.05	.19	.08	.37

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$



Note: Beliefs of whether Obama is pro-Israeli are calculated as +/-1SD from the mean.

**Fig. 1** Favoring Obama's proposals by ethnicity and beliefs about whether Obama is Pro-Israeli, Israel, Note beliefs of whether Obama is pro-Israeli are calculated as  $\pm$  1SD from the mean

perception that Obama favors Israelis (Table 1). The idea that Obama is less pro-Israeli, however, is evaluated differently by Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. For Israeli Arabs, less favoritism toward Israelis is good news; hence, they evaluate Obama and his proposals more positively. For Israeli Jews, less favoritism toward Israelis is bad news; hence they evaluate Obama and his proposals more negatively.

In other words, the presence of Obama's middle name affects perceptions of Obama's proposals *indirectly* through perceptions of whether Obama is pro-Israeli. This indirect effect, in turn, is moderated by ethnicity. We test this using the moderated mediation model described by Preacher et al. (2007). Supporting this idea, the conditional indirect effect of Obama's middle name on evaluations of his proposal is significant both for Israeli Jews [95 % bootstrap CI (-.45, -.12)] and for Israeli Arabs [95 % bootstrap CI (.06, .30)]. The same is true for the conditional indirect effect of Obama's middle name on perceptions of Obama's positive traits [Israeli Jews 95 % bootstrap CI (-.22, -.06); Israeli Arabs 95 % bootstrap CI (.04, .21)]. This supports H2a and H2b.

In the United States, neither the experimental manipulation nor respondents' ethnic sympathies influenced perceptions of Obama's proposal (Table 2). We replicated the analysis in Table 3, however, to understand whether ethnic sympathies and perceptions that Obama favors Israelis affect perceptions of Obama and his proposals in the United States as they do in Israel. As shown in Table 4, the interaction between respondents' perceptions of how much Obama favors Israelis and respondents' ethnic sympathies was significant in both analyses. The interactions are similar to the relationship depicted in Fig. 1 for Israel. In the United States, however, the relationship was not related to the experimental manipulation.

In order to test the cognitive processes primed by the name "Hussein", we recruited an additional 156 Israeli students (74 % Israeli Jews and 26 % Israeli Arabs) and 104 American students (60 % pro-Israeli, 22 % pro-Palestinian, and 18 % neutral), who completed the study between November and December, 2011 for extra credit. All respondents were from the same American and Israeli universities.

**Table 4** Regression analysis of favoring Obama's proposals, United States

Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	Obama's positive traits	Favoring Obama's proposals
Hussein Obama	.04 (.12)	.03 (.13)
Sympathize with Israelis	-.001 (.13)	.15 (.14)
Obama pro-Israelis (OPI)	-.12 (.11)	-.42 (.11)**
Sympathize with Israelis OPI*	.48 (.13)**	.74 (.14)**
Constant	4.09 (.12)**	3.38 (.13)**
R-square	.09	.12

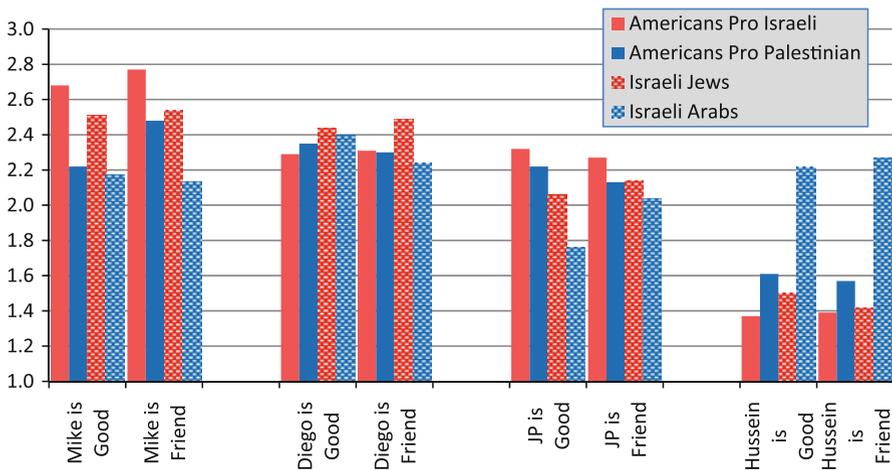
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . In contrast to Table 3, only one model per dependent variable is shown since the experimental manipulation of Obama's middle name does not affect the dependent variables

Measurement

Participants were asked to write three words or phrases that came to their minds when they heard the names Mike, Diego, Hussein and Jean-Pierre, and to rate each name on 3-point scales, from Bad to Good and from Enemy to Friend.

The name ratings clearly indicate that except for Israeli Arabs, the only name which carries an average negative valence is “Hussein” (Fig. 2). Unlike “Hussein”, both “Mike” and “Diego”, and to a lesser degree “Jean-Pierre” were rated as more friend than foe and more good than bad. Even among Pro-Palestinian Americans, “Hussein” gains a negative valence score of 1.61 out of 3 on the bad-good scale and 1.57 on the foe-friend scale. These scores demonstrate that there are indeed cultural differences in how citizens respond to the use of President Obama’s middle name.

But what is the source of these cross-cultural differences? Probing deeper by examining the words and phrases that came to the minds of our respondents upon reading the name “Hussein” we find that among Americans, Hussein was most closely associated with Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, whereas among Israelis, it was King Hussein of Jordan, who unlike Saddam Hussein is viewed favorably by most Israelis (see Table 5). Israelis Jews, more than any other groups view “Hussein” as an Arab name, an out-group that inspires distrust. Americans, on their part, associated it with terrorism, clearly a negative cue for *all* respondents in the U.S. Finally, Americans and Israeli Jews associated the name with negative traits, while Israeli Arabs with positive ones. In sum, these tokens demonstrate that Americans and Israeli Jews are more apt to perceive “Hussein” as a threat and Israeli Arabs tend to see the name as a friend.



Note: Ratings range from 1 (Bad / Enemy) to 3 (Good / Friend).

**Fig. 2** Name ratings on good-bad and friend-enemy measures, by group. *Note* ratings range from 1 (bad/enemy) to 3 (good/friend)

**Table 5** Attributes associated with the name Hussein among Americans and Israelis, by group

	American			Israeli	
	Pro Israeli ( <i>N</i> = 62)	Pro Palestinian ( <i>N</i> = 23)	Neutral ( <i>N</i> = 19)	Jews ( <i>N</i> = 116)	Arabs ( <i>N</i> = 40)
Saddam Hussein	23.5 %	25.0 %	21.2 %	16.4 %	7.8 %
King Hussein of Jordan	–	–	–	19.7	40.3
Arab	13.7	8.3	13.5	21.9	10.3
Muslim	6.6	5.0	7.7	6.6	10.2
Obama/President	4.4	6.7	5.8	8.4	3.9
Negative traits	12.1	8.3	17.3	8.4	2.9
Positive traits	–	3.3	–	3.3	13.8
Osama	2.2	1.7	1.9	–	–
Hosni Mubarak	–	–	–	1.5	2.1
Foreign—not middle east	6.5	8.3	1.9	–	–
Terrorism	16.9	13.3	13.5	2.6	–
War	–	–	–	2.6	–
Other	14.2	20.0	17.3	8.4	7.0
Total number of attributes	180	64	57	276	73

*Attributes include* negative traits (crazy, intimidating, mean, nazi, Hitler), positive traits (leader, intelligent, serious), terrorism (terrorist, 9/11), foreign-not middle east (Russian, European, Indian)

## Discussion

The results of our experiments provide partial support for our hypotheses. Consistent with H1, messages delivered by President Barack Obama were seen as more favorable toward Israeli Jews compared to messages delivered by President Barack Hussein Obama among our Israeli respondents. Perceptions of whether Obama favors Palestinians did not vary depending on the presence of the president's middle name, although the results trended in the expected direction. Consistent with H2a and H2b, the impact of perceiving that Obama favors Israelis differed for Israeli Arabs and for Israeli Jews. For Israeli Jews, impressions that Obama *favors* Israelis translated into more positive evaluations of the president and his proposals. For Israeli Arabs, the perception that President Barack Hussein Obama *was less favorable* toward Israelis translated into more positive perceptions of the president and his proposals. We found little evidence supporting H3. It is the case that perceiving that Obama favors Israelis appears to affect perceptions of his proposals more strongly for Israeli Jews than for Israeli Arabs (Table 3; Fig. 1). The indirect effects of the experimental manipulation, however, are similar for both Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, as can be seen by comparing the confidence intervals reported in the results section. Although the effects are in opposite directions, their magnitudes are similar. Furthermore, there were no significant interactions between ethnicity and the manipulation of Obama's middle name. In sum, we have little evidence that

the experimental manipulation produced differently sized effects for Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews.

Our research question asked whether the effects would be different in a United States context. Amongst participants in the United States, we found no significant differences in opinions based on the use of Obama's middle name. This may be, in part, because those in the United States are more familiar with Obama—and his middle name—making them less swayed by this manipulation. Further, in the United States, “Hussein” may not call to mind an Arabic name, which may be a pre-requisite for the effects we document in the Israeli context. Rather, Hussein, when used in reference to the president, may be seen more as a common African-American Muslim name, much like Shaquille or Mohamed, which carries little relevance to the Middle East conflict.

The observed cross-cultural differences are potentially the result (a) different samples, (b) different impressions of whether Hussein is a subtle cue, or (c) different cognitive responses. We address each in turn.

First, there are reasons to suspect that the differences are not the result of different samples. Prior research has shown little difference between adult and non-adult populations within the same cultural context. As Druckman and Nelson (2003) report, “A growing body of work shows that framing and analogous processes do not differ between student and nonstudent samples (Kühberger 1998, p. 35; Miller and Krosnick 2000, p. 313)” (p. 733). Chong and Druckman (2007), connecting priming and framing studies, also find no differences between adults and non-adults in their study (see also Druckman 2004). If students react psychologically in ways similar to adults, as prior work suggests, then the cultural differences observed here are more likely to be the result of differences across the cultures than differences in the composition of our participants.

Second, we have reason to conclude that our manipulation of Hussein could be regarded as a subtle cue. The use of Hussein in this experiment is consistent with the definition of an implicit cue. In the context of race relations, implicit cues are instances in which race is not directly mentioned, but is activated in processing (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002). One could plausibly deny that an implicit racial cue was used to evoke racial considerations. That Hussein is the president's middle name and that even the president had used his middle name make it plausible for a broadcast using his middle name to deny that the use was motivated. Yet as our results demonstrate, the cue did have an effect on attitudes. Further, there is some evidence within our data that Hussein was not an overly salient explicit cue. Respondents in our study were asked an open-ended question about their perceptions of whether the clip they had viewed was biased in favor of or against President Obama. Looking only at respondents in the “Hussein” condition, 6 percent of U.S. respondents mentioned the use of the President's middle name and only 1 of the Israeli respondents. Although not definitive—participants may neglect to mention an explicit cue—it seems unlikely that the cue had a substantial conscious effect. Despite low levels of noting the presence of the president's middle name, we cannot rule out the possibility that the cue was seen as explicit by U.S. audiences, hence minimizing any effect.

The third possibility for our cross-cultural differences, that audiences had different cognitive responses, seems more likely. As our follow-up analysis documents, respondents' reactions to the name "Hussein" varied based on culture and ethnicity. Most distinct were Israeli Arabs, who displayed a more positive evaluation of the name "Hussein." The basic priming process may occur in similar ways across cultures. What differs, however, is what is primed. For Israeli Arabs, the name "Hussein" primes a very different reaction in comparison to other study participants.

To summarize, our experiments contribute to previous research in four ways. First, we examined priming effects across cultures. Research has shown that even subtle cues may elicit emotional and attitudinal responses that vary across nations, ethnic groups, and cultures (Kam 2007; White 2007). Given the different connotations of the name Hussein, it was important to examine whether different cultures responded differently to its use. This research confirms that the influence of ethnic cues is culture-specific.

Second, we expanded reactive devaluation research by examining a context with high external validity and looking more deeply into the effects of a third-party negotiator. Previous work has assessed how people respond to actual concessions that were manipulated as to who proposed the concessions. In other words, concessions that were *actually* proposed by Palestinians (or Israelis) were manipulated and attributed to the other side of the negotiations (Maoz 1999). Here, we kept the source of the proposal constant and manipulated only how we referenced the source. Given that references to Obama sometimes use his middle name and sometimes do not, our manipulation has strong external validity. We also extended reactive devaluation research by manipulating the third-party negotiator. Previous research has looked at what happens when the source of concessions is the United States in general (Maoz 1999). Here, we documented that even third-party negotiators can be subject to reactive devaluation biases.

Third, we evaluated whether the manipulation of a prominent and well-known political figure's name—the American president—can elicit changes in public opinion about public policy issues and proposals. Previous research has examined instances in which a racial or ethnic cue is transmitted via coded words, unfamiliar candidates, unknown job applicants, and background visuals (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Byrne and Pueschel 1974; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Valentino et al. 2002). We were able to show that even a very subtle change in referencing a prominent political figure can affect opinions.

Fourth, previous research has shown that impressions of others in general, and candidates in particular, are disproportionately influenced by negative, as opposed to positive, information (Baumeister et al. 2001; Druckman and Lupia 2000; Hamilton and Zanna 1972; Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1985). We did not find evidence of this differentiated reaction here. It could be that subtle manipulations are less subject to this negativity bias.

Although cues such as names can have significant effects on decision makers (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), others have found that once additional information is added, such as a person's photograph, the effect of a name becomes significantly weaker (Hensley and Spencer 1985). In the United States, where

Obama's middle name did not affect perceptions of the president, familiarity with the president may explain this effect. Contrary to this idea, however, are our results from Israel. Even when people have vast access to information about a prominent political figure, such as president Obama, they *still* can be influenced by subtle cues. This study thus strengthens the external validity of previous work on cues and confirms that names should not be taken lightly by candidates—or by citizens. The study also opens additional opportunities for understanding the effects of names. For example, future research could analyze the accidental use of “Obama” when reporting on Osama bin Laden's death in 2011.

Romeo and Juliet teach us that once a name is given, it carries with it a certain destiny. Had President Obama's parents known that their son will be running for president in the post 9/11 era, they may have chosen a different middle name. Nevertheless, since he never renounced it, like President Hiram Ulysses Grant did to his first given name in his youth, nor did he make it the staple of his identity, like his predecessors Thomas Woodrow Wilson or John Calvin Coolidge, he cannot ask media outlets in Tel Aviv to drop it and ask Al-Jazeera to add it in bold. In a global media market, even something as subtle as referring to his middle name in a speech, like he did in his Cairo address, can have positive consequences in some parts of the globe and negative consequences in others. His decision of when to emphasize his own name, therefore, should not be taken lightly as it can significantly influence audiences.

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