

Israel: Some Surprising Polls

Mitchell Bard

FOR well over a year, Americans have been reading every morning about the mounting casualty toll in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while seeing on the evening television news pictures of Israeli soldiers chasing, beating, and shooting Palestinians, especially young men and children. All this is widely believed to have caused a serious erosion in American support for Israel, both among Jews and among Americans in general. In particular, the *intifada* is thought to have persuaded majorities in the United States and Israel alike to demand the hitherto unthinkable: that Israel should negotiate with the PLO.

Most of these beliefs are false. Although in some influential circles in the U.S. Israel has indubitably suffered a serious loss in stature, American public opinion on the whole shows no erosion of support for Israel. People are of course concerned about the violence in the Middle East, but the fundamental sympathy Americans feel toward Israel remains unshaken. Furthermore, while there is a growing desire to see the PLO included in the peace process, this attitude is conditioned on Yasir Arafat's promises to eschew terrorism and to accept the existence of Israel, and it is contradicted by a general belief that those promises are insincere.

THE best indication of the attitude of the American people toward Israel lies in the response they give to the most consistently asked question about the Middle East: "In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with Israel or with the Arab nations?" In the most recent test, an ABC News/

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Washington *Post* poll conducted this past April, support for Israel was found to have reached an *all-time high* of 69 percent, bouncing back and beyond pre-*intifada* levels and even exceeding by a full thirteen points the level of support in 1967, when it seemed as if all Americans admired the Israeli David for having defeated the Arab Goliath in the Six-Day War.

In the same April poll, to be sure, support for the Arabs was also relatively high. Yet it still stood at only 16 percent. Even when the question was reworded so that Israel was compared not with the Arabs in general but specifically with the Palestinians, support for Israel still came out nearly three times higher, and at over 60 percent.*

No doubt the April figures will decline in future polls, but the basic trend is unlikely to shift. After all, no single event occurred before April that would account for the jump in sympathy. To the contrary, events seemed to be running in the opposite direction. For one thing, neither the *intifada* itself, nor the intensity of media coverage of it, had subsided. For another, Yasir Arafat had only recently made his famous statement "renouncing" terrorism and "recognizing" Israel, thus throwing the onus of responsibility for the conflict on the Jewish state. Yet, despite all this, American sympathy for Israel not only held steady but increased. Indeed, the increase came from those respondents who had previously reported themselves as undecided, suggesting that in addition to its solid base of supporters Israel was gaining new friends.

WHAT is true of Americans in general is truer still of American Jews. According to the most recent annual survey by the American Jewish

Committee (AJC), nearly three-fourths feel that Israel "is a very important part of my being a Jew," and over 60 percent say they feel close to Israel. Nor have recent events dislodged such feelings: in the last three or four years, the numbers of American Jews feeling closer than ever to Israel exceed those feeling more distant than before. Eighty-four percent also say that they are *not* uncomfortable identifying themselves as supporters of Israel.

Jews do have their disagreements with Israel, but 82 percent of those surveyed by the AJC reported that such disagreements have not changed their feelings of closeness. This is particularly remarkable given the divisiveness of the recent controversy over "who is a Jew" and the proposed change of wording in Israel's Law of Return, about which 76 percent said they were somewhat or very upset.

The finding of the AJC survey that received the most publicity concerned an apparent erosion in pro-Israel sentiment among younger Jews: fewer under thirty-five said they felt "very close" to Israel than did their elders, and a similar pattern emerged on several other questions. In attempting to account for this discrepancy, Professor Steven M. Cohen, who conducted the survey, pointed to such bedrock determinants of attachment to Israel as the Holocaust, the founding of the state, and the wars of 1967 and 1973: "The younger the Jew," explained Cohen, "the less likely is he or she to have been

* A Roper poll commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, also in April, showed a much lower level of sympathy for Israel (36 percent), but an even lower level of sympathy for the Arab nations (13 percent) than the ABC News/ Washington *Post* poll. Both of these figures were virtually the same as those of a Roper poll taken a year earlier. As between Israel and the Palestinians, Roper again found a much lower level of support for Israel (34 percent) than did ABC News/ Washington *Post*, but that figure was still two-and-a-half times higher than the sympathy Roper found for the Palestinians (14 percent).

impressed by developments like these, which tended to build or augment pro-Israel sentiments." But another factor may also account for this phenomenon—namely, the "life-cycle effect." That is, younger Jews are simply at a stage of their lives where they are altogether more self-absorbed and less interested in public events or in Judaism. It is quite possible that those who feel less close to Israel today may grow more attached with age.

On the issue of Israel's handling of the *intifada*, American Jews do not express the outrage they are widely alleged to feel. It is true that, when asked by the AJC, in one sharply worded question, about television pictures of Israeli soldiers beating Palestinian rioters and protesters, more than half responded that Israel was acting wrongly, but the answers to other questions put this figure in context. Thus 65 percent declared that "aside from a few regrettable incidents," Israel has used a reasonable and appropriate level of force in countering recent Arab violence on the West Bank and Gaza. And 79 percent blamed the press for biased treatment of the conflict.

Throughout the *intifada*, attention has been focused on the issue of Israel's "soul," the idea being that Israel must end the occupation to preserve its democratic and Jewish character. Yet most Jews do not seem worried on this score. Only 26 percent in this year's survey said Israel's democratic and humanitarian character would be undermined by the occupation, and only 16 percent expressed concern for the Jewish character of the state.

WHAT about attitudes toward the PLO? The April ABC/Washington Post poll reported 71 percent of Americans supporting direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO.* Yet the same survey showed 81 percent with an overall *unfavorable* view of the PLO. An earlier Lou Harris poll (December 1988) found the overall approval ratio of the PLO to be 14 percent, which represented a doubling over the past, but should be viewed against the figure of 67 percent who regarded the PLO as "not friendly"

to or as "an enemy" of the United States. (In the same poll, a majority agreed with then-Secretary of State Shultz's decision to bar Yasir Arafat from the country.) Finally, according to a January CBS/New York Times poll, a majority of Americans approved of meetings between the United States and the PLO, but a slightly smaller majority also said they did not believe Arafat and the PLO wanted peace enough to make real concessions. The same month, in a Media General/Associated Press poll, 74 percent of Americans thought the PLO had renounced terrorism only for political advantage, and a mere 6 percent believed it was sincere.

American Jewish opinion toward the PLO demonstrates the same skepticism. A little over a third of the respondents in the American Jewish Committee survey agreed that it was good for the U.S. to have opened a dialogue with the PLO, but by an overwhelming margin of 69 to 14 percent, Jews opposed Israeli talks with the PLO without further preconditions. An even larger majority, 86 percent, said the PLO was a terrorist organization; 62 percent thought it was determined to destroy Israel, while only 21 percent believed it would be willing to settle for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

IN Israel itself, a poll by the Dahaf Institute last December found that 54 percent of Israelis favored negotiations with the PLO. This result seemed so startlingly high that it has been cited by virtually every commentator on the Middle East as indicating a decisive change that supposedly pits Israeli public opinion against the Shamir government; such, at any rate, is the interpretation offered by Arafat and other PLO officials and sympathizers who regularly invoke this figure.

However, the Dahaf finding has been misrepresented by the failure of those who cite it to mention a condition that was attached to the question about negotiations—namely, that the PLO keep its promise to stop terrorism in the territories. In addition, in February, a Jerusalem Post poll found

that 89 percent of Israelis did not believe Arafat was interested in peace and only 30 percent were willing to negotiate with the PLO. According to a March poll published in *Haaretz*, 56 percent of Israelis *opposed* talks with the PLO. In April only 18 percent of Israelis surveyed by the New York Times said they were willing to negotiate with Arafat based on his recent declarations.

Almost every survey has also contradicted the notion that Israelis see Shamir as an obstacle to peace. And contrary to the impression of a growing dovishness among them, Israelis consistently say they are prepared to make greater sacrifices for their security and favor harsher measures to quell the uprising.

Of course, just because Israelis think one way about their government does not mean that Americans cannot or should not think another way. But the truth is that on most of the issues facing Israel the two peoples agree. Which is no doubt why Americans continue to support strong ties and high levels of assistance to the Jewish state. When asked, for example, about the ties between the United States and Israel, 89 percent in the ABC/Washington Post poll favored either strengthening them or keeping them the same; this was the identical figure as in January 1987, before the beginning of the *intifada*. In addition, 66 percent said the level of U.S. assistance to Israel should remain where it was, and a majority favored the current level even when the wording of the question was changed so as to inform the respondent that Israel gets more American aid than any other country.

IN SUM, the evidence does not support the notion that American popular support for Israel is eroding. On the contrary, as the *intifada* wears on and its emotional impact lessens, public opinion has, if anything, shifted in Israel's favor. That

* On this point, the April 1989 Roper poll found only 32 percent of Americans supporting such negotiations, while 42 percent thought that Israel was right to refuse to negotiate with the PLO.

being so, whence the conviction of erosion and decline?

One factor has to do with temporary fluctuations that have taken place in the overall picture. Thus, in February of this year, an earlier ABC/Washington *Post* survey found that a majority of Americans did not think Israel was a reliable ally. This was the first time more than half of those polled doubted Israel's dependability. Similarly, a majority in the February poll rated Israel unfavorably. But these results, as we have seen, were atypical, and were indeed reversed within two months.

Another, more salient factor has to do with the *response* to such temporary dips on the part of those, either sympathetic to the PLO or on other grounds hostile to Israel, who seize on the slightest indication of wavering support for Israel as evidence of a deep structural change. To these people, the saturation coverage of the *intifada* by the media—a coverage itself patently sympathetic to the Palestinian rioters—*must* have produced the effect they desire. When, as in the February poll, this seems to be confirmed, they applaud loudly. On the other hand, when, as in the April poll, it is disconfirmed, they are silent or they resort to misrepresentation and distortion. A similarly selective use is made of survey results from within Israel, as the Dahaf Institute example suggests.

Poll sponsors are themselves not

above engaging in this sort of behavior. In fact, in recent months, perhaps on the inspiration of the February ABC/Washington *Post* poll, several surveys were conducted with the all-but-explicit purpose of further documenting its findings of relatively low support for Israel. It is safe to assume that ABC and the Washington *Post* themselves would not have taken their April poll if they thought it would show sympathy for Israel at a record *high*. And even when the facts were in, the *Post* did its best to play them down by focusing in its news story on the majorities calling for direct negotiation between Israel and the PLO. The headline of the story was: "Americans Polled Urge Israeli-PLO Talks." Not until the tenth paragraph did the *Post* acknowledge that "sympathy for Israel is higher now than it has been at any time since the *Post* and ABC began measuring it in 1982."

THE fundamental reasons underlying American popular support for Israel have often been remarked upon and need no elaboration: a common political system; common social, cultural, and religious values; and common strategic and economic interests. It is also the case that Americans remain fundamentally *unsympathetic* to Arabs, and although this has softened somewhat as Palestinians have come to be seen as victims, the basic perception has simultaneously

been reinforced by ongoing horrors like the terrorist explosion of a Pan Am passenger jet last December.

Then, too, in the present case the incessant and blatantly one-sided coverage of the *intifada* in the American media may have backfired somewhat, or at the very least made Americans impatient with the refusal of Palestinian leaders so far to strive for a genuine political accommodation with Israel and thus alleviate their people's pain. By contrast, Yitzhak Shamir's proposal on his March visit to Washington that free elections be held in the territories seemed to represent a spirit of compromise in keeping with American values.

None of this necessarily means that Israel can afford to maintain the status quo indefinitely without risking the loss of American support. Nor, for that matter, does the presence of such support necessarily guarantee that U.S. policy in the Middle East, which responds to other factors besides popular sentiment, may not shift toward greater sympathy for the idea of a PLO state. But it does mean that the much-heralded erosion of public sympathy for Israel, like the much-heralded split within the American Jewish community over Israel's policy, is still a figment, or, perhaps better, an invention of those who for one reason or another want Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza in favor of a PLO state.

Mr. Yankee Goes Home

Arturo J. Cruz, Jr.

IN MY hometown of Granada in Nicaragua, the great radio show of the 60's belonged to Julio Vivas Benard; his program began at 7 A.M. What spark in the man! But Don Julio's real trick was his mas-

tery of the English language. His morning commentary turned on what was said in *Time* magazine, which he would leaf through brazenly in the middle of his show, mumbling, "Let's see what Mr. Yankee is up to."

"Mr. Yankee" was the American ambassador, whose residence was established on a hill, high above the rest of Managua. For years, the

American envoy had been more than a mere ambassador. In the endless days of the American occupation in the 1920's and 30's, the country would hardly breathe without consulting the American ambassador. As a prominent citizen of Granada used to exclaim: "Praise be to God in heaven, and to the Yankee who represents Him on earth."

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