

Israel's Standing in American Public Opinion

Mitchell Bard

IN JUNE of this year, Arab terrorists hijacked a TWA jet on a flight from Athens and held its American passengers hostage for more than two weeks, demanding that Israel release over 700 Lebanese imprisoned in a detention camp. The terrorists tried to create the impression that Israel was responsible for the fate of the Americans, and in this effort they were aided by some of their captives who told television audiences that Israel's prisoners were also hostages.

It was widely reported that the American public had accepted this interpretation, and had even begun to abandon its long-time support for Israel. Thus, although in the first week after the hijacking a majority of Americans disagreed with the statement, put to them in two *Washington Post/ABC* polls, that "The United States should reduce its ties to Israel in order to reduce the acts of terrorism against us," by the second week, with the level of tension rising considerably, a third poll found that more people agreed with the statement than disagreed (42 percent to 41 percent). In addition, a majority of the public in each poll believed that Israel had not done what it should have to help resolve the crisis.

These results suggested that American public support for Israel could be undermined by anti-U.S. developments in the Middle East. If this were true, it would give fresh heart to terrorists. But the fallacy of such a conclusion was revealed

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as soon as the hostages were released. A poll taken after the crisis found that a majority of the public again opposed reducing U.S. ties to Israel, and a plurality (47-34 percent) believed that Israel had helped the United States resolve the crisis to the extent of its ability.

The Beirut drama was just the most recent event in a turbulent period. In 1977, Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, reviewing public opinion in the decade following the Six-Day War, found that sympathy for Israel had ranged between 35 and 56 percent while sympathy for the Arabs had varied between 1 and 9 percent.* Since that time, the Camp David peace treaty was signed (1979), Israeli jets bombed Beirut and the Iraqi nuclear reactor (1981), and Israel invaded Lebanon (1982). Still, although there has been a great deal of variation over the years, sympathy for Israel, generally near the 50 percent mark, has always far exceeded that for the Arabs.

THE one exception was a September 1982 survey taken just after the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila. This massacre occurred during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and although it was carried out by Lebanese-Christian militiamen, the general perception was that Israel had played some role in it. A Gallup poll taken at the time found sympathy for Israel reaching a record low, and sympathy for the Arabs doubling its previous high. As happened in 1985 during the hostage crisis, this result was widely cited as evidence that the American public disapproved of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and, what was more, that a fundamental shift in public attitudes was taking place. More astute

observers argued that the finding was a fluke, and that the basic underlying support for Israel had not diminished. The next poll seemed to confirm this as sympathies returned to their pre-Lebanon levels.

In general, it is true, the public did disapprove of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, especially after the siege of Beirut began, even though many Americans were sympathetic to Israel's announced goal of driving the PLO out of Lebanon. This may demonstrate the way opinion often follows national policy as enunciated in Washington: American officials had supported Israel's stated objective of removing the PLO from southern Lebanon, but opposed attacks on Beirut.

In addition, public opinion reacted to the perception that U.S. and Israeli interests were in conflict; a *New York Times/CBS News* poll in April 1983 found a substantial majority of the public in favor of suspending or reducing military aid to Israel "if the United States disapproves of Israel's not withdrawing troops from Lebanon." Yet here too, despite an overall lack of support for Israel's involvement in Lebanon, the public remained only slightly less sympathetic toward Israel than it had been in the past, and neither the Arab states nor the PLO benefited from public disaffection with the war.

Israel, then, remains nearly as popular today as it was in 1967. Surveys have consistently shown a substantial majority believing that Israel is a friend or a close ally of the United States. In a June 1982 Roper poll, for example, Israel was rated as a closer ally than West Germany, Japan, or France. Not that, in a crisis, the public would be willing to give the same support to Israel as to other allies. When in 1981 Roper asked about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the

* "Carter vs. Israel: What the Polls Reveal," COMMENTARY, November 1977.

world, only 26 percent felt that such action would be justified if Arabs invaded Israel. But this limit to public support for Israel parallels that of earlier years, as documented by Lipset and Schneider. And at the same time the public remains unsympathetic to Arab arms requests, with majorities opposing the sale of F-15's, AWACS, and missiles to Saudi Arabia, and missiles to Jordan.

IF ARAB arms requests remain unpopular, however, there has been a dramatic change over the years in the basic levels of support for the Arabs in general: that support has trebled since 1967, and has increased by 50 percent since 1977. Whereas in 1974, for example, only 1 percent believed either Saudi Arabia or Egypt was a close ally of the United States, by 1982 more than 10 percent believed Saudi Arabia was a close ally and as many as 35 percent of the respondents to Harris polls agreed that Egypt was a close ally. Although Israel still received higher margins of support, a majority now saw these Arab states as friendly to the U.S., a reversal of the attitudes of a decade ago.

Of course, there are Arabs and there are Arabs. For one thing, the public distinguishes between "moderate" Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and the more radical Arab states like Syria and Libya which are regarded as hostile to the United States.

For another thing, the public distinguishes between Arab states and the Palestinians. Thus, Gallup asks people to score nations on a scale of plus five to minus five, with the positive number indicating a favorable opinion and the negative an unfavorable one. On this scale Israel has been rated even more favorably than on the one recording basic sympathies. But when, during the Lebanon war, the scale was used to rate support for the Palestinian people, as distinguished from the more typical "Arabs," their overall favorable rating was the same as that for Israel. (This result may be related to the timing of the poll, which was taken after Sabra and Shatila.)

Similarly, and perhaps more significantly, support has increased to

a near-majority for the creation of an independent Palestinian state. In 1975, only 36 percent of the public favored such a state, while 29 percent believed the Palestinians should continue to live as they do now in Israel and in the neighboring Arab countries. By 1982, the proportion favoring a Palestinian state had increased to 46 percent, with 23 percent opposing. It is important to bear in mind, however, that this does not translate into support for the PLO, which has minimal appeal to the American people.

The increase in public sympathy for the Arabs over the last decade is a significant development. But equally significantly, that sympathy seems to have its limits—it remains at a fairly trivial 12 percent. Moreover, it has *not* come at the expense of support for Israel; most of it has been a result, rather, of a decline in the "neither" or "no-opinion" responses to surveys. A solid 40-50 percent of the American public remains sympathetic to Israel.

AS FOR the bases of that sympathy with Israel, it is positively correlated with income, occupational status, and education (although college-educated people, who are more pro-Israel than the general public, are also more pro-Arab). If we look at the population by age, a similar pattern emerges: Lipset and Schneider, for example, found that older liberals (New Deal, Fair Deal) were more supportive of Israel than younger liberals (New Politics, New Left).

If support for Israel is examined by partisan identification, Republicans, perhaps surprisingly, emerge as consistently more sympathetic toward Israel than Democrats. This may be related to other changes, such as the erosion of liberal identification with Israel noted by Lipset and Schneider; increasingly, Israel's perceived role as the underdog in the Middle East conflict is being replaced by a view of the Palestinians as underdogs. Higher levels of Republican support, by contrast, may be explained by a tendency to rely less on moral arguments altogether and to focus instead on Israel's role as a strategic ally of the West.

Although some data published last year indicated strong black support for Israel, Gallup polls through 1982 show that non-whites are significantly less sympathetic to Israel than whites. Most of the "establishment" black politicians, however, have remained supporters of Israel.

Finally, Jewish support for Israel is still extremely high. Although it is frequently claimed by critics of the Israel lobby that its spokesmen do not reflect the sentiments of the majority of American Jews, the data do not confirm such a contention. There are, to be sure, divisions over particular Israeli policies, such as those regarding the occupied territories, but overall Jewish support for Israel is nearly unanimous, exceeding 90 percent.

A PARTICULARLY serious concern of the American Jewish community is how it is perceived by the public. There is a great fear of a backlash if the community should seem too powerful or appear to be "controlling" Congress, as its critics sometimes contend it does. Polls indicate, however, that the American people do not share the view of these critics; in fact, Americans see Arab and business interests as far more powerful and malevolent than Jewish interests.

For example, in a Gallup poll conducted several weeks after the Senate vote on the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia, although 53 percent of the public agreed that *Israel* had "too much influence" on American policy, only 11 percent felt that way about American Jews. By contrast, 64 percent said Saudi Arabia had too much influence, 70 percent believed oil companies were too influential, and 46 percent felt unions were too influential. In a March 1982 Gallup poll asking which groups have "too much" political influence, only 10 percent named Jews. Business corporations and unions were considered the most powerful by over 40 percent of the respondents, with Arab interests next at 24 percent. Similar results have been found in more recent polls.

In general, foreign policy is not affected by public opinion. This is also true of U.S. policy toward the

Middle East. Public opinion does provide a context, however, in which policy is made, and it sets the parameters for change. The fact that the American public remains so sympathetic toward Israel is bound to give policy-makers pause before they consider any shift in Middle East policy.

It is true that the public will turn on Israel when its interests are thought to be contrary to those of the United States, as was the case

during the Beirut hostage affair and during much of the Lebanon war. It is also true that the Arabs have made impressive strides in improving their standing with the public, a trend that coincides with the increasingly intense and sophisticated propaganda effort currently being waged by the Arab states in this country. Unfortunately for the Arabs, however, greater support for their cause has not eroded support for Israel.

Moreover, it will be much harder for the Arabs to go from 10 to 20 percent than it was to go from 1 to 10 percent; sympathy for them has oscillated between 11 and 14 percent for the last six years, and is now nearer the low figure. Arab leaders may continue to call on the United States to adopt an "evenhanded" policy in the Middle East, but the American public remains committed to supporting Israel.

"Our Genius": Norman Mailer & the Intellectuals

Carol Iannone

IF THERE is one thing the case of Norman Mailer teaches us, it is that ideas matter, that they shape the common life both of the individual and of the culture. For the ideas propagated by Norman Mailer, along with those of such figures as Norman O. Brown and Paul Goodman, exercised a tangible influence in dragging America out of the Eisenhower years into the Aquarian age of the 60's and beyond. And in advancing those ideas, Mailer had the enthusiastic support of a perhaps surprising number of the major intellectuals of our time.

At this point it may be hard to see just what was so magnetic about Mailer in the first place. To date,

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his prolific but uneven output has yielded a number of notable books, but he can hardly be said to have borne out the ecstatic expectations that many once attached to him (and some still do). The fact is, however, that it was not entirely in terms of literary excellence that he exercised his appeal on people languishing in the supposedly arid air of the late 50's; he spoke, rather, to a hungering need for getting the life of the mind into touch with the life of the instincts. As Irving Howe sums it up for the "New York intellectual group" in Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times*, a 700-page compendium of reminiscences by family, friends, associates, and colleagues,* "We were essentially rationalistic people for better or worse—he was still able to get at certain things we could not. We admired it, I think even envied it. He was our genius."

Peter Manso, author of three other books (one on Mailer's 1965

campaign for the New York City mayoralty) and a friend of Mailer, has here done a skillful job of editing the interviews he conducted with some 150 people from all corners of his subject's life—Brooklyn childhood, Harvard, the army, New York, European travel, Hollywood, Provincetown, etc. We hear from actors, artists, sports figures, writers, editors, scholars, lawyers, policemen, army buddies, college chums, secretaries, as well as assorted family and friends. Some knew Mailer personally, some professionally, some both. Manso has arranged the reflections chronologically, so that we get a sense of ongoing biography and have the advantage of hearing many (often conflicting) voices describe an incident or period. The book occasionally bogs down in details too small for a reader to care about, and, toward the end especially, it degenerates

* Simon & Schuster, 718 pp., \$19.95.