

CURRENT OPINION ON ISRAEL

It is good, every now and then, to get some real facts on what Americans think about Israel and the Middle East. We so often guess. We now have some new reliable information, as of July, from the Yankelovich outfit, one of America's best. The American Jewish Committee, American Jewry's prime research center, often commissions Yankelovich for surveys.

The first few findings seem a bit foreboding. Among those with opinions, about half of non-Jewish Americans believe that the Arabs living in Israel are "treated badly" ... about half believe that Israel's attitude towards a Palestinian State on the West Bank is "unreasonable" ... about half believe that Israel is "wrong" in refusing to negotiate with the PLO.

But then we move to some other findings among the *same* people. Asked who they would sympathize with in case of a war in the Middle East, despite their complaints about Israel, 94 per cent of the non-Jewish Americans who made a choice, chose Israel; 6 per cent chose the Arabs.

And then, there is the most important, practical question of all -- the real test of support: "How do you feel about U.S. military aid to Israel?" Among those with opinions, 71 per cent of the non-Jewish Americans said that American military aid to Israel should continue at the same level or even be increased. Only 29 per cent called for that military aid to be cut back, in an economy-conscious, war-shy population.

What does that discrepancy mean? It's been found before, it apparently still exists, and its meaning is worth repeating. Americans may disapprove of a lot of things that Israel does from time to time -- but they are going to support Israel strongly anyway, *as long as* they are convinced that it is in American national interest.

Thus, the educational job is not to defend every Israeli action, but rather to buttress the overall understanding that Israel's security is important for America. Apparently, there has simply been *no* drop-off in *basic* American public support of Israel in recent years.

Incidentally, these findings indicate that many American Jews are just plain wrong in their assessment of American public opinion. According to last week's *Newsweek*, about half of American Jews believe that Begin's policies are hurting American support for Israel. But, according to Yankelovich -- and other surveys -- Begin's policies have *not* hurt basic American support for Israel.

As a matter of fact, it is interesting to see that those American Jews, according to the *Newsweek* survey, who tend to feel uneasy about Begin's image, have not themselves withdrawn basic support from Israel. About half of them say they are more sympathetic to Israel than they were before Begin took over; and only about one out of ten say they are less sympathetic.

In other words, American Jews have a fundamental commitment to Israel which will prevent them from withdrawing their basic, important support from Israel, even if they are unhappy about some of the things which any given Israeli government may do. And non-Jewish Americans also have a fundamental commitment -- except that their commitment is based on an assessment of Israel's importance to America.

Of course, Israel can have America's friendship and commitment and still be placed in hazard by some American actions. For example, the push for the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia is not so much the result of any negative feelings about Israel, but rather a mistaken strategy with respect to the Saudis. Begin made it clear that he felt the AWACS would be a serious mistake and danger to Israel's security, but that he did not want that issue to destroy basic American/Israeli relations or commitments.

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The American public's commitment to Israel is conditional on the assessment of Israel's importance to America, and that assessment can change. But it has not been changing. And it will not change as long as we continue to see front-page statements by our President about "the need to strengthen strategic ties between the United States and Israel to counter a Soviet threat to the United States." Nor will it change so easily as long as we continue to see front-page stories about the fundamental instability of all other Middle Eastern countries, including, now, Egypt.

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