

Has Public Opinion Shifted On Middle East Situation?

By Earl Raab

(Jewish Bulletin Columnist)

During the weeks since the Arab attack on Israel, there have, in fact, been many more pro-Israel responses on those Bay Area radio call-in shows that there have been pro-Arab responses. But there are hundreds of Jews in the Bay Area who would swear to the contrary. That is known in technical circles as "The Partisan Syndrome."

The Partisan Syndrome is simple: A person who is emotionally committed to a viewpoint is outraged by the public expression of a contrary point of view, and its impact on him is great. The expression of a point of view similar to his tends to be taken for granted and has less impact on him.

That's why a newspaper can run six editorials and stories favorable to some position, then run one that is slanted the other way, and the cry will go up: "That newspaper's against us." Of course, there are those who would like to blank the opposing positions altogether in the mass media. But they're in the wrong country for that.



Raab

A little perspective is needed on the matter of American public opinion with respect to Israel. It's not as good as it was in 1967—but for different reasons than many people suppose.

The opinion polls show that a little less than half of the American public is partisan to Israel; a little less than half of the American public doesn't know or doesn't care one way or

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another; about five percent of the American public is partisan to the Arab nations in this conflict.

The percentage of Americans (five percent) who are partial to the Arab nations has *not* risen since 1967, and is inconsequential.

But there is a hidden factor in these opinion polls, called "salience"—which means: how strongly, and to what extent are these American people favorable to Israel? To put it more bluntly, what are they willing to give up because of their partisanship for Israel?

For example, there are some who say "Yes, I am very favorable to the Israeli cause, and am opposed to this Arab aggression"—but who would stop short of asking America to send unlimited arms to Israel, out of a post-Vietnam fear of America getting involved overseas. As one San Franciscan comments: "These are the people whose love for Israel is of a memorial nature: they just want to send flowers to the grave."

Then there are those who would like Israel to win, but not if it's going to cause any trouble for them. Now, there's no reason why non-Jews should love Israel in the way Jews do. There are two main reasons for non-Jewish Americans to have a favorable interest in Israel: out of a sense of justice and compassion, just as some Americans had for, say, Biafra; and, most of all, because Israel's security is vital to America's national interest.

So the public opinion problem is not a matter of persuading Americans to love Israel, or to dislike the Arab nations. The main problem is to persuade them that, against the background of Israel's cause being just, the security of Israel is vital to American national interest. The second problem is to persuade Americans that the kind of "national interest" involved is more important to them personally than a hypothetical weekend gasoline squeeze or a tax rise. Patriotism is not an automatic response of Americans these days.

If it were just a matter of generally favorable public opinion towards Israel, there would be no great problem. For every Terence O'Flaherty column taking a crack at Israel (he enjoys it a little too much), there are at least 10 serious columns in the same paper which basically support Israel. Throughout the mass media, as a whole, that same 10-1 ratio prevails, as a matter of sheer fact: at least 10 to one impacts are supportive of Israel. This ratio, is, of course, not a matter of "Jewish influence," but accurately reflects American public opinion as it exists.

And that generally pro-Israel opinion shows up, not just in the opinion polls, but symptomatically in the responses of publicly elected officials: For example, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors just unanimously passed a resolution, introduced by Dorothy Von Beroldingen, deploring the Arab aggression and supporting secure borders for Israel; and, at last count, 21 out of the 24 Congressmen from Northern California had already signed the important Congressional Resolution for unlimited arms credit to Israel.

But even if the overwhelming sentiment is still pro-Israel rather than pro-Arab, this grass-roots public opinion problem still remains: how far are Americans willing to go to back up their still-favorable feeling towards Israel? And, the critical underlying question is *not* how much people love Israel, but rather, how much they understand the importance to America of Israel's security; and indeed how much Americans are willing to sacrifice for America's long-range national interest.