

Earl Raab

October 10, 1977

PUBLIC OPINION AND ISRAEL

Congressman John Burton of San Francisco was asked whether he thought that the Bay Area Jewish community had "over-reacted" in its firestorm of protest to the White House last week.

"No!" he exclaimed. "Not in the least! If there had been any less protest, the situation might have deteriorated even further."

That sums it up: 1) If the protest had not been so strong, the situation would have been worse; 2) the situation is still not good.

In brief, the situation is still not good because the American-Soviet pact on the Middle East still stands. As long as it stands, it means that there has been a shift of White House position towards acceptance of an unreconstructed P.L.O. and a Palestinian state before negotiations.

It also means a possible erosion of American public opinion on Israel.

Whoever sits in the White House almost single-handedly shapes American public opinion on Israel. Americans are overwhelmingly sympathetic to Israel. (A constant 9 to 1 favorable to Israel). But Americans have other concerns than that of Israel, notably: their own economic welfare, and avoidance of war, while maintaining this nation's ability to withstand Soviet world domination.

These items of American national interest outweigh any intrinsic sympathy for Israel. Indeed, the overwhelming American sympathy for Israel is based on the perception that that there is no conflict between those concerns and support for Israel. But this

popular perception, on such a tangled subject as the Middle East, stems mainly from Washington, D.C., and the White House.

For example, about three quarters of Americans said they were opposed to sending arms to any country, including Israel, before the Yom Kippur War in 1973. They still say so today. But after the White House sent arms to Israel in the Yom Kippur War, there was a reversal of opinion: about three-quarters of Americans approved of the action already taken. They accepted the White House's assessment that it had to be done in America's national interest.

The American Public's attitudes towards the Palestinian Arabs are conditioned in the same way. Actually, when Americans are asked whether "Israel mistreated Arab refugees," as many of them will answer "yes" or "no." There is also a fifty-fifty split when Americans are asked whether the "P.L.O.'s desire for a Palestinian homeland is right." And about 70 per cent of Americans agree that "if the P.L.O. recognizes Israel, Israel should accept a Palestinian Homeland."

But despite these background sentiments, Americans are 9 to 1 in favor of Israel because of perceptions they have been given of America's national interest.

That "American national interest" has very much to do with the perceived American need to repel Soviet imperialism. Thus, when Americans are asked simply whether America should arm Israel, only about a quarter of them will answer "yes." But when they are asked whether America should arm Israel in a situation where the Soviet Union is arming the Arabs, about two thirds of all Americans will say "yes."

That is why the final confusion for the American public is to see the White House signing a joint statement with the Soviet Union, the effect of which is to pressure

Israel. If Israel is not an important ally of the U.S. against the Soviet Union, then why should the American public be so sympathetic to Israel?

That is why it is so important for Congressmen, at least, to tell their constituents about their unhappiness with the American-Soviet pact on the Middle East. Senator Cranston has done that. So, according to our latest records, have Congressmen Philip Burton, John Burton, George Miller, Don Clausen, Leon Panetta, Norman Mineta, Don Edwards and John Krebs. Other Northern California Congressmen have not been heard from yet.

If there is no backfire, it may turn out that American public opinion on Israel - and on American Jews - will have been eroded not by Arab propaganda, but by the White House.