

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AND BEIRUT

According to the last Gallup poll, done for Newsweek, over 80 percent of the American public placed some blame on Israel for the Beirut massacre. And the level of American public support, among those with opinions, dropped to a slim majority. There are some interesting thoughts to be gleaned from all that.

Some might say that the high number of Americans placing blame on Israel is just the result of media distortion. They are probably wrong.

It is true that there has been something cockeyed about the media coverage. You remember the famous Bishop Berkely approach to trees in the forest: they don't really exist if man is not there to see them. In a similar approach to massacres in Lebanon, the media coverage would suggest that there are no massacres in Lebanon, unless Israel is in the vicinity.

There have, in fact, been a constant vicious cycle of massacres in Lebanon in the last decade: Christians massacred by Muslim groups and the PLO; and vice versa. This last Beirut massacre apparently had a direct, retributive connection to an earlier massacre of 1,500 to 2,000 Christians by the PLO in the village of Damour. It would have happened if Israel had not been in the vicinity.

But Israel was in the vicinity and had accepted responsibility for peacekeeping. Maybe Israel's blunder, in historical hindsight, was being in West Beirut at all. In any case, there was some Israeli blunder somewhere, in the eyes of many people who do understand the background. That crowd of Israelis protesting in Tel Aviv last Saturday night represented the equivalent of about 27 million Americans.

They knew about the background, and they knew about the limits of the Israeli complicity, but they were protesting. Likewise, even if they had been better informed, a substantial number of those Americans would still have felt that Israel made a culpable blunder somewhere in connection with that massacre, although most of them who were disapproving did not believe that Israel was directly involved.

But a significant point is that these Americans who faulted Israel did not suddenly rush over to join the anti-Israel camp in general. While about four out of five Americans blamed Israel in some way, only about one out of five Americans said that they were now generally more sympathetic to the Arabs than to the Israelis. One out of ten had always said that.

Of course, the general level of support for Israel dropped to its lowest point in memory. Americans with opinions were just about split. Apparently a number of Americans withdrew to a "no opinion" position; and a relatively small number actually moved over into the anti-Israel camp. Some of the Americans who felt Israel had some blame in Beirut were obviously registering their protest by saying that they were pulling away from Israel generally.

That is a distressing development. However, it is significant that most Americans who blame Israel for some defection do not immediately join the anti-Israel ranks. Americans support Israel mainly because they think Israel is an important ally of the United States. They are mainly put off when confrontation seems to develop between the American and Israeli governments, as it did in this case.

Similarly, American Jews can ascribe some blame to Israel for its behavior in this situation - as at least half of American Jewry apparently did - without withdrawing basic support from Israel.