

WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK OF ISRAEL NOW?

On the surface, the American public seems to have become less favorable towards Israel. For about ten years, between 1967 and 1977, there was scarcely any change in American attitudes towards Israel and the Arabs. More Americans were favorable towards Israel than towards the Arabs, by a 9 to 1 ratio. That is, for every American sympathetic to the Arabs, there were 9 Americans sympathetic to Israel. That ratio stayed the same, despite Arab oil money or propaganda.

In February, 1978, however, the ratio of Americans favoring Israel over the Arabs dropped precipitately: 3 to 1 instead of 9 to 1. The ratio soon recovered somewhat, to about 4 to 1. Americans are still overwhelmingly pro-Israel, but apparently not to the degree they once were.

However, things are not always what they seem to be. The precipitate drop in American favor was a direct result of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November, 1977. The point is that the Arabs are no longer being perceived by Americans as a monolithic group. They see Sadat and Egypt as one thing; the PLO, Syria and Iraq as something else again.

Thus, American sympathy towards Egypt jumped astronomically as a result of Sadat's action. But the PLO did not move up on the popularity polls, nor did the other Arab groups. In March, 1979, about 95 per cent of the American people disapproved of the PLO, its objectives and its tactics.

In other words, it currently makes no sense to ask about American attitudes towards "the Arabs." Americans prefer Israel to the Arabs -- minus Egypt -- as much as they ever did. It is only their comparative attitudes towards Egypt which have

Earl Raab

"What Do Americans Think of Israel Now?"

page 2

changed. Israel still has an edge in public opinion over Egypt -- twice as many Americans say they would trust Israel rather than Egypt in a disagreement -- but that is a more favorable attitude ratio than Americans have towards other Arab groups. And that explains the riddle of the changed polls which ask about Israel and "the Arabs." Such polls hide two different tendencies.

Indeed, this split in American attitudes towards "the Arabs" becomes even more marked. The PLO and the Soviet bloc Arab countries will fall even further in American disfavor if they continue to attack America, Israel, Egypt and the treaty.

But what does this American public approval of Israel and of the Israeli-Egyptian treaty really mean? How far is the American public willing to go? Asked this month whether they "approve of increasing our aid to Israel and Egypt by five billion dollars in the next three years," 72 per cent of the American people answered "no." And asked if they "approve of selling our oil to Israel if it cannot buy oil elsewhere," 66 per cent of the American people say "no." This seems disquieting, since these two conditions have become attached to the treaty itself.

Further, the American people were asked what support they would be willing to give Israel if that nation were attacked by a neighbor. Would they give all-out military assistance to Israel, including the sending of American troops? Only 4 per cent said "yes." Would they give all the supplies and equipment Israel needed, short of troops? 24 per cent said "yes." Would they give Israel "limited military supplies?" 17 per cent said "yes." About 15 per cent said they were not sure what they would do, and the other 40 per cent said they wouldn't want to send *any* military aid to Israel.

That seems like a shaky consensus. But again there is more than meets the eye. The American public has indicated that it will be more supportive of sending arms to Israel if it can see the "Soviet connection" (that is, the factor of direct American national interest). Thus, a few years back, only 14 per cent of the American public agreed that "America should send arms to Israel;" but *in the same poll*, 65 per cent of that same American public said that "America should send arms to Israel, *if the Soviet Union arms the Arabs.*"

There is evidence that the American people are increasingly concerned about the growth of Soviet power. It is in that framework that 52 per cent of Americans want increased defense spending now, as compared to 28 per cent in 1976. It is in that framework that Americans will accept their government's judgement that aid to Israel is necessary vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Thus, the judgement of the White House and of Congress on aid to Israel is most critical for public opinion. And now Iraq, Syria and Libya are more clearly perceived as in a Soviet orbit, while Israel and Egypt are perceived as in an American orbit.

There is another current aspect of public opinion of note. It relates to the thorny negotiation on the "West Bank" which will soon take place. The majority of the American people say that Israel should give up most of the land on the West Bank, *if* it does not jeopardize Israel's security; and not otherwise. For Americans, Israel's security is important because it affects America's security. But Israel's *security* -- not any past history or other set of beliefs -- is the only criterion that will be convincing to Americans on that subject. And the American public will take their cues on that subject from the American administration and Congress.

All of which should give American supporters of Israel some cues on the issues on which they should concentrate in the months ahead.