

JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL

OF SAN FRANCISCO, THE PENINSULA, MARIN AND SONOMA COUNTIES

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AFTER THE HOSTAGE CRISIS: THE NEW PROGRAM NEEDS

The "TWA Hostage Crisis" has been considered by some a critical watershed, marking off a new and more negative period of American/Israeli relations and of American public opinion towards Israel. It is not quite that. There is no sudden, qualitative shift towards anti-Israel hostility. But there are signs of trouble ahead for American support of Israel.

Some observers, especially Jewish observers, have seen a "new watershed" of hostility at every crisis, starting with the oil embargo and long gas station lines of 1973. At that time, there turned out to be no "backlash" against Israel or Jews; the American public measured out the blame somewhat more astutely: towards the oil companies, the American government and the Arabs. And so it was after an earlier Beirut bombing, the Iraqi nuclear reactor bombing, the Lebanese incursion, even after those massacres in Lebanon.

There has been criticism of Israel. There has been media mischief and Jewish self-torment, but American public opinion has remained stably favorable towards Israel, righting itself after many tremors, and American governmental support steadily risen. To the pessimists, it has been necessary to say: the sky has not fallen. And to the optimists, it has been necessary to say: the favorable situation is not immutable.

Again, after the TWA Hostage Crisis, it can be said that the sky is not falling. But it is important to say that this crisis has even more clearly revealed some of the strains in American support. They are not new strains; they have been gathering. But the TWA episode has furthered the strains in a way that more sharply delineates their nature. The strains are not those that conventional Jewish wisdom has supposed them to be; there are more difficult than that. At the very least, the TWA hostage crisis provides an "educable moment," in which we can examine the flaws in some old strategies and refurbish them.

THE NATURE OF "AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL"

"Liking Israel" is not enough

In about 60 national polls between 1967 and 1985 (Gallup, Roper, Harris, Yankelovich) Americans have regularly registered the fact that they are more favorable to the Israeli cause than to the Arab cause.

The results have been remarkably uniform: typically half of the Americans have an opinion and favor one side over the other. On the average, among those with such opinions, there has been about a four to one ratio of Americans favoring Israel.

That favorable ratio has not changed significantly since 1967. It has occasionally dropped to a 3-1 ratio, and occasionally has risen higher; but the percentage of Americans favoring the Arabs is so small, that a change of a couple of percentage points in that column can change the ratio. Usually, when the ratio of support for Israel seemed to drop, it was not because of a rise of sympathy for the Arabs, but because of an episodic rise in indifference to the whole area. (It should be noted that, after Sadat went to Jerusalem, American attitudes became markedly more favorable to Egypt than to other countries, although still much less favorable to Egypt than to Israel).

This constant ratio is instructive in itself, demonstrating the "Halo Phenomenon" in public opinion: if you have strong reason to stick by someone, his peccadilloes will not so easily put you off. This explains why the American public disapproved of Israeli policy towards the Palestinian Arabs, or Israeli moves in Lebanon.

However, being "favorable" to Israel does not yet mean a willingness to support Israel at any sacrifice. The surveys since 1967 show that while the American public has been more favorable to Israel by a four to one ratio, it has been virtually split on providing military supplies to Israel. (On sending American troops to help, the ratio of opposition has been two to one.)

Of course, the willingness to help the Arab nations is much lower. In one survey, for example, the American public said it opposed sending military supplies to Israel by a 49-37 ratio; but it opposed sending military supplies to the Arab nations by an 85-2 ratio. That is the point exactly, made once more: the American public's willingness to support Israel does not depend primarily on its liking or disliking

Israel (or the Arabs, for that matter). There are other more powerful factors in play.

America's willingness to support Israel

Alvin Richman, a top public opinion analyst for the State Department, recently put it this way: "Support for defending various countries depends on overall attitudes towards military intervention, as well as attitudes towards the particular countries involved ..." (Public Opinion, December/January, 1982).

He then listed the five criteria by which the American public decides whether it will support "intervention" on behalf of another country. The criteria apply not just to direct military intervention, but also to the provision of military supplies by the U.S., and even to the provision of economic aid to a foreign country, when that aid constitutes a serious sacrifice by the American public. The five criteria are these:

1. The Perceived Importance to the U.S. of a Threatened Country.

This is the cornerstone criterion, which starts with these prior questions: What is important to America on the world scene? What is America's national interest abroad? What is America's role on the world scene? How involved should America get on the world scene? Only then does the American public ask: "In the light of all that, what is the importance of country X?"

2. The Seriousness of the Threat Perceived to be Facing That Foreign Country.

3. The Source of the Threat to That Country.

This is a crucial issue related directly to Richman's criterion #1. The American public is more willing to intervene when, for example, a country is threatened by perceived Soviet expansionism than when the threat is simply regional. In one survey, the American public split as usual on the question as to whether America should provide arms to an Israel threatened by Arab invasion; but the same Americans in the same survey were drastically more willing to provide arms to Israel to answer the threat of "Soviet-provided" arms.

4. The Perceived Need for U.S. Intervention to Save the Situation

5. The Perceived Likelihood of Intervening Successfully and Avoiding "Another Vietnam".

This has become a crucial question in the American consciousness. And this is the criterion which now most comes to the fore in the light of the TWA hostage crisis.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TWA HOSTAGE SITUATION

American Frustration

In its concern with Alvin Richman's criterion #5, the American public has long been worried about our intervention in Central America becoming a Vietnam-like quagmire in which we could not really win.

That same kind of American public concern has become evident in the Middle East since the Lebanese events starting in 1983. The presence of the American Marines made no dramatic difference, and indeed the Marines seemed to be sent packing by the terrorists. The TWA hostage crisis was a definitive piece of America's Lebanese experience. Despite the presidency of a "tough" Reagan, the U.S. was unable to handle the madness of a Middle East jungle in the thrall of Muslim radicalism. We were perceived as humiliated and helpless.

Israel and Its Importance to America

The difference between Central America and Israel has so far been obvious to the American public. In Central America, we have not been able to find a stable and powerful ally on whom we could lean. (This was part of our problem in Vietnam.) But in Israel we found a stable and powerful ally, especially in 1967 when Israel established its power, after which American public opinion favorable to Israel began to soar.

But that image of Israel has been diminishing somewhat. The Lebanese war suggested to some Americans that Israel is not the super power that they had thought. And, in the TWA hostage situation, Israel was just as helpless as we were.

Furthermore, there is perceived a diminution of Israeli will. Among other things, that perception derived from Israel's release of Arab terrorists in exchange for several Israeli captives.

Not unrelated is the deep economic distress in Israel. Economic stress affects national will in any country, especially as it relates to initiatives outside that country. And there is always a relationship between economic and military capacity. The internal conflicts in Israel can also adulterate perceptions of national will.

All of this has to do not only with deepening the American public's frustration about the Middle East -- but also with

Alvin Richman's cornerstone criterion #1, as it applies to American support of Israel. If Israel were to be perceived as a weaker reed for the U.S. to lean on in a Middle East in which the U.S. feels increasingly insecure, and from which the American people feel an increasing impulse to withdraw altogether -- then the fundamental reasons for supporting Israel would begin to evaporate.

The Effect on the Two American Publics

One analysis of the various surveys suggests that about 15 per cent of Americans are always in favor of intervening on behalf of our friends; about 25 per cent are generally opposed to intervening on behalf of anyone. More than half of the American public makes its decisions on the basis of the more pragmatic criteria Alvin Richman describes. But underlying all those criteria, and especially the cornerstone criteria related to American national interest, there are fundamental interventionist/non-interventionist tendencies, in flux for most Americans.

In some cases, the non-interventionist tendency is based on a "Third World" ideology, more general or anti-American sentiments, the belief in a diminished role for the U.S. in the world (as "policeman," it is sometimes put) because the U.S. is not seen as a healthy force on the world scene. Perhaps more often, the non-interventionist tendency is based on the sentiment that we should spend more of our energies and resources on unsolved domestic problems, and less on foreign affairs.

The interventionist tendency, on the other hand, is often based on a strong perception of America as the critical leader of the free world, and an important force for freedom, which is seen as a value of predominant importance.

Different population groups are statistically characterized by different tendencies in the matter of intervention. The Black population is less interventionist than the white population; it is understandably more preoccupied with domestic needs. That population which styles itself politically liberal is less interventionist than the population which styles itself conservative.

An atypical question was put to the American public in the course of the TWA hostage crisis: Do you favor reducing ties to Israel in order to reduce the danger of terrorism to the U.S.? If Americans did not "blame" Israel for the highjacking, nor fall away in the ratio of their general favoritism to Israel over the Arabs, this was a question which measured the frustration of Americans in the Middle East, and the impulse for "withdrawal or "non-intervention" in the Middle East. It was not the overall response which was most interesting, but the differential response of

population groups. Black Americans favored reducing ties for that reason by a 45 to 30 ratio. Self-identified Democrats (including most of those Blacks) favored reducing ties to Israel for that reason by a 48 to 31 ratio. Republicans were opposed to reducing ties for that reason by a 56-31 ratio, even that being a much lower ratio than the usual index of favoritism towards Israel. These figures may have revealed only flash vulnerabilities in the heat of a crisis, but they have at least that significance.

It is reasonable to suggest that a growing American sense of frustration and impotence in the Middle East can only feed the impulses of those population groups which tend to be generally non-interventionist or even isolationist.

And it is reasonable to suggest that those American publics which tend to be interventionist are somewhat less willing to commit themselves to lean on Israel specifically when they perceive it as a weaker reed.

And those American publics whose attitudes towards intervention abroad are heavily affected by their concern with domestic situations can use this frustration in the Middle East as a potent argument for their case, especially if the economic situation worsens in this country. Since those publics are part of major political coalitions in this country, they can exert influence beyond their own strength.

The U.S. Congress will be the last to succumb to these impulses. Despite the fact that Congressmen are the chief targets of America's comedians, these Congressmen do tend to be more sophisticated about foreign affairs than the American public at large. They are more aware of America's stake in Israel than the public. In fact, it is America's policy makers who have largely shaped American public opinion on the subject.

In other words, it has not been a highly active public opinion which has pushed Congressmen to adopt their favorable policy-making on behalf of Israel. The more sophisticated foreign policy understanding of Congressmen (and many U.S. elites) has taken the initiative in supporting Israel, operating in a permissive climate of public opinion on this matter. That policy initiative has constantly strengthened the Israel-favorable attitudes of the mainstream American public. By and large, the American public has been convinced by policy and policy makers that Israel was somehow important to the U.S. in that foreign policy premise which the American public does heartily embrace: resistance to Soviet expansionism. And the public has also been convinced by policy and policy makers that support of Israel satisfied the other criteria described by Richman.

Objective circumstances seemed to support that position (e.g., Israel's strength, and the communality of the enemies of Israel and the U.S.). Note: It has, of course, been easier for the American public to support Israel because they have felt a more cultural similitude with the Israelis than with the Arabs. In the surveys, Americans say "they are like us" in comparing Israelis with Arabs. Part of that familiarity has to do with a likeness in political culture, which links directly to the question of national interest. But in general that cultural affinity has proved subordinate to the overall matter of national interest (e.g., favorable American public opinion towards Israel became overwhelming only after the national interest context had been established, after 1967; and American public opinion constantly suggests that the mainstream public is much more willing to make interventioo sacrifices for Western Europe or for Mexico than for Israel).

Under conditions whereby the American public remains favorable to Israel in the manner described; and whereby the politically influential Jewish public is hyperactive on behalf of Israel; and whereby there is no serious countervailing public, American policy makers have found no difficulty in pursuing their conviction that support of Israel is important to America. But there have been notable occasions when the foreign policy proclivities of the politicians have been curbed by boundaries established by a self-propelling public opinion. Frustration and a resultant impulse to withdrawal has often been the hallmark of public opinion on those occasions (e.g., Vietnam, the dismantling pace of American forces after World War II).

REMEDIES

It is important to note that any reduction in American support for Israel will probably come from impulses for withdrawal -- whose primal source is not anti-semitism or intrinsic hostility towards Israel. Holding conventional and easy beliefs to the contrary will only lead pro-Israel forces in America down the wrong remedial road.

Pro-semitism was not the reason for American support for Israel; and anti-semitism will not be the reason for withdrawing that support. Indeed, some of the population groups traditionally prone to anti-semitism have been muted in that regard because of their patriotic backing of American support for Israel. Conversely, a growth in American anti-semitism is likely to follow any impulse towards withdrawal from support of Israel. A quarter to a third of Americans consistently say that they believe American Jews to be at least as closely tied to Israel as they are to America. But those Americans, by and large, do not object to those ties as long as those Americans are

themselves friendly towards Israel. But if Israel were seen as less important in the foreign policy equation, then, given the certain continuation of American Jewish efforts on behalf of Israel, hostility towards the Jews and towards Israel would predictably ensue.

The Curriculum

If the hazards to American support for Israel become more clear by way of Alvin Richman's five criteria, then the remedial message might also become more clear by way of those criteria.

1. The Perceived Importance of Israel to the U.S.
 - a. The importance of political freedom as a primary value. This is an essential element of this criterion, but it is not one that the Jewish community has paid much attention to transmitting, at least not recently.
 - b. The importance of the "free world" to the U.S. See above.
 - c. The necessity for the U.S. to take an active role in helping to maintain the principle and world of freedom. See above.
 - d. The role of Israel as an instrument and symbol of freedom and of the free world in the Middle East.
 - e. An understanding of the enemies of freedom (and of the U.S. and Israel): totalitarianism, the Soviet Union and radical Islamic fundamentalism.
 - f. The role of Israel as a stable ally of the U.S. in the Middle East.

2. The Seriousness of the Threat Perceived to be Facing Israel
 - a. The clear intent of the enemies of Israel and of the U.S.: to wipe out Israel and to attack the U.S. through Israel.

3. The Sources of the Threat to Israel
 - a. See above -- but also, the witting or unwitting complicity of the "moderate" Arabs and appeasers. This is to set the boundaries of a genuine peace process, compatible with the needs of the U.S.

4. The Perceived Need for U.S. Intervention to Save the Situation

5. The Perceived Likelihood of Intervening Successfully and Avoiding "Another Vietnam"
 - a. The continuing strength of Israel: as a democratic society; as a military entity; as economically viable.
 - b. The possibility of blunting terrorism: by minimizing its victories; by allied unity; by massively increasing intelligence.

SUMMARY

None of this is to suggest that the pro-Israel community in America can have its way through some abstract educational program. Nor that a set of ideas can overtake the objective situation.

Nor are the programmatic targets any different than they have always been: the policy makers, their policies and their public espousal of those policies; the media, the schools, community groups and elites.

But AIPAC is not being cynical or misdirecting when it states that the purpose of "political power" -- on a subject like this, and for a group like the Jews -- is not self-executing; the purpose of that political power is to gain the access with which we can be persuasive on the merits. The formula applies as well to the media and the other programmatic targets.

The point is that curriculum of persuasion has some serious new strains -- which means that the future of American support for Israel has some new strains. Those strains are related to a possible growth of the impulse of American publics to withdraw from deep involvement in the Middle East (not primarily initially out of hostility towards Israel or the Jews, or sympathy for the Arabs). If that comes to pass, one of the factors involved will be a pervasive frustration, of the kind engendered by the recent hostage crisis, multiplied. None of this is destined to happen, but our hasbarah should be better shaped to try to prevent it from happening.

Program Implications

The suggestion is that the entire program be reviewed to align it with the new needs:

- . Policy Makers (Congressmen, etc)
 - . How should the regular community delegations to Congressmen be best designed?
 - . Are special sessions with these policy-makers indicated?
 - . Other?
- . Media
 - . How should the regular briefings of media people be best designed?
 - . Are special sessions indicated?
 - . Are special TV and radio programs indicated?
 - . Other?
- . Schools
 - . How should ongoing projects (including Holocaust-education projects) be affected?
 - . How about school policies on educational goals?

- . Other?
- . Community Groups
 - . Should new projects with labor, business, religious leaders, etc., be redesigned?
- . Jewish Community
 - . New leadership education projects?
 - . New "Write Now" projects?
 - . Other?