

FUTURING AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

American Jews have always been highly vulnerable to two perceptual maladies relating to American support of Israel. These maladies are as disparate in nature as their counterparts in legend: Chicken Little of sky-falling fame and the Head-Burying Ostrich. It is necessary to report that both ailments are flourishing.

That is unfortunate since both malfunctions represent certain failures to understand the dynamics of American support for Israel. The TWA hostage crisis was just a case in point. That event was not a watershed of hostility towards Israel, as the Chicken Littles would have had it. But neither was it a matter of no significance, as the Ostriches would have had it. Something of incremental significance happened, but it was of a different significance than most of the Chicken Littles thought.

Underlying these misunderstandings are various self-delusions about the primary dangers to American support for Israel: the belief that conventional anti-semitism is the drive which endangers American support for Israel; the belief that some a priori emotional hostility towards Israel is the drive which endangers American support for Israel; the belief that hostility or distortions in the media constitute the main threat to American support of Israel; or the belief that sheer Jewish political influence on behalf of Israel can prevail under seriously adverse circumstances.

Underlying these misconceptions is a more basic failure to comprehend that American policy regarding Israel is a function of American foreign policy in general. Israel's survival will depend more on the shape of American foreign policy in general than on any disembodied American feelings towards Israel itself.

The resistances to this comprehension among American Jews are understandable. Most Jews want other Americans to feel the same way that they do about Israel: warm, friendly, fraternally forgiving and embracing under all circumstances. They want the source of America's feeling towards Israel to be more emotional than instrumental. That longing among American Jews is as understandable as it is unrealistic.

There is another understandable resistance to the proposition that American foreign policy in general is the main engine driving American support of Israel. The organized American Jewish community has developed little consensual capacity for dealing with any aspect of American foreign policy which is not related directly and explicitly to Israel.

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 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 drastically.

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 at least half of the American public has at times disapproved of Israeli policy towards the Palestinian Arabs, or some Israeli actions in Lebanon, while still maintaining an overwhelming ratio of sympathy for Israel over the Arab nations. As Gallup put it, in a release of July 7, 1982:

"Although as many Americans disapprove as approve of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the action appears not to have altered Americans' basic loyalties in the Middle East...In an analogous situation last summer, a Newsweek poll conducted by the Gallup organization found that America's reaction to Israel's bombing of PLO positions in Beirut was more critical. Fifty per cent said the bombing was not justified and 31 per cent said that it was. But that survey, too, found no change in Americans' basic sympathies."

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; sometimes supporting, sometimes opposing such military aid by a slight margin. On sending American troops to help, the ratio of opposition has more often 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. Nevertheless, the public willingness to send military aid to Israel is considerably lower than its level of sympathy for Israel.

When we talk, however, about the kind of American "support" which Israel needs in order to survive, we are talking about hard support, not sympathy. More than that, in the circumstance of an Israel surrounded by intractable enemies, we are usually talking about

"support" that has a military dimension. It is gratifying to hear America defend Israel against slander at the U.N. or in Nairobi (and it is a significant matter of education for the American public), but the only serious import of that rhetoric is that America will help Israel maintain its security and integrity.

In this world, certainly in the Middle East, that help is based on the promise of force to be used against force. Peaceful solutions are based on that promise. The visit of an enlightened and inspired Sadat to Jerusalem was based on that promise. "American support of Israel" is largely based on that promise: never, it is to be hoped, American troops (although perhaps the American fleet offshore); but the provision of military supplies, and the provision of funds for military supplies. Certainly "economic aid" is hard support and could be considered an exception to the military promise, but only if that economic aid is not heavily connected to the burden of military expenditure. It is finally that kind of hard support which is meant by "American support of Israel," and that kind of intervention which is finally meant by the promise of American intervention on behalf of Israel.

The American public willingness to support Israel in that fashion does not depend primarily on its liking or disliking Israel (or the Arabs, for that matter). There are other, more powerful factors at play.

America's willingness to support Israel

In the abstract, there is nothing very startling about this proposition. We have always understood that there are larger factors involved. We have always understood, for example, that if the U.S. entered economic bankruptcy, we would not so easily be able to help Israel, no matter how well-disposed America or Americans were towards Israel. And we have always understood that, if the U.S. should ever again be clothed in some serious mood of isolationism, we would not so easily be able to help Israel, no matter how well-disposed America or Americans were towards Israel. We do not have to dig too deep in American history to find models for such possible conditions.

So far those conditions have not become so severe, nor have other catalytic ingredients been present to cause a definitive problem for American support of Israel. During an economic recession, we did send billions of dollars of aid to Israel and in the flush of post-Vietnam isolationist sentiment, massive military aid was sent to Israel at a time of emergency.

However, it would be a serious mistake for us to therefore assume that Israel will in the future be an untouchable exception to America's larger foreign policy considerations. What are those considerations?

The axiom goes that any country's foreign policy must finally be based on the morality of survival. But, especially for powerful nations, that often begs the question. There are different kinds of survival needs.

Americans, by and large, remain gravely patriotic, an old-fashioned term whose meaning in this country is heavily laced with a commitment to certain political ideas and institutions. While recent evidence suggests that Americans have lost considerable confidence in the people who run their political institutions, the fundamental commitment to the values which underlie those institutions is still strong in the American mainstream. In international surveys, many more than 9 out of 10 Americans aged 18 to 24 say that they are "proud" to be American, about the same ratio as older Americans and a much higher ratio than in any other western country. When asked about the reason for that pride, more than 7 out of 10 Americans will designate "freedom or liberty," as against other generalities such as opportunity or prosperity. Further, at least 4 out of 5 Americans today believe that America has "a special role to play in the world" with respect to those American political values.

There is a strong public sense of the need to protect American national interest abroad. That national interest abroad has something to do with the nature of America and its political values at home -- and at the very least, if we return to the bedrock of the morality of survival, has something to do with a preference for allies whose political values are compatible with those of America. By the same token, it is a fact that the central enemy of that American national interest abroad is pervasively seen as an expansionist Soviet Union, with its countervailing ideas and institutions. There are at play here strong ideas of freedom and anti-freedom, however rough and unsophisticated they may seem at times.

It is into this configuration that American support of Israel fits. The indispensable basis of American support of Israel is the perception of Israel as important to American national interest. The fact is that American support was lowest after World War II, when Israel was established as a refuge for victims of Nazism -- and that support grew, not as a sentimental gesture, but as a direct result of events, such as the successive collapse of Arab governments, which helped to demonstrate Israel's importance to American national interest.

However, despite the continuing commitment to those values, to America's national interest abroad and even to the belief that America has a special role to play in the world -- there has long been evidence of a basic ambivalence between those commitments and, on the other hand, a deepset, even historic, American aversion to foreign entanglements which might mean military involvement, of the varieties which constitute "hard support." That ambivalence has grown sharper in recent years.

That ambivalence has always been weakened by acts of Soviet expansionism and intensified by American failure on the world scene. Twice as many Americans were willing to use military force to protect Japan and South Korea in 1950, on the heels of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, than were willing to do so in 1974. But American failures in foreign policy to no avail, as in Vietnam, sharpened the ambivalence.

"Ambivalence" is another way to express the discrepancy between belief and how much an individual or a nation is willing to sacrifice for that belief; between sympathy and hard support. If things become too sticky, if confidence wanes, if America seems unable to prevail without drastic sacrifice, the commitment to protecting national interest abroad becomes more selective.

At what point Israel might get selected out in that process is problematic. While the popularity of the Israeli cause over the Arab cause remains high in America, that popularity again does not in itself indicate the degree of sacrifice that Americans would make to save Israel under given adverse circumstances. Attempts to measure that kind of selectivity have always come up with the fact that Canada, Mexico, England, the Philippines and West Germany always rate well over Israel.

All of this has to do not with ambivalence about Israel itself, but with an ambivalence about American foreign policy in general. A pattern of American debacle and failure of influence, such as in Lebanon or in Central America, could lead to a further ambivalence about American interventionism in general, and in some cases could lead to a further ambivalence about intervening on behalf of Israel in particular.

Alvin Richman, a top public opinion analyst for the State Department, 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 necessarily includes 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 of 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 comes to the fore during frustrating episodes such as the TWA hostage crisis.

Willingness to Intervene: Two 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. That suggests there are fundamental interventionist/non-interventionist tendencies, in flux for most Americans. In fact, both tendencies are qualified and selective in their application, but they represent enough of a difference in policy bias to warrant their labels.

In foreign policy, "interventionism," like "support," carries the willing promise to provide or implement the use of force against force. The main weight of the difference between interventionism and non-interventionism lies in the willingness, however reluctant, to use or support force. Aside from a few devout pacifists and a few pathological war-lovers, most people have a relative rather than absolute leaning towards or away from interventionism. That may be affected somewhat by differences in temperament, or even of strategic perceptions, but for most people, as Richman's criteria suggest, the leaning one way or another is selective, based on who is to do the intervening and on behalf of whom.

In some cases, for example, the non-interventionist tendency is based on a "third world" ideology, or more general 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, seen as a value of predominant importance.

For whatever combination of reasons, 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.? Americans did not "blame" Israel for the highjacking, nor did they fall away in the ratio of their general favoritism to Israel over the Arabs. This was a question which measured the frustration of Americans, and the impulse for "withdrawal or "non-intervention" in the Middle East. The TWA hostage crisis was a definitive part of America's Lebanese experience. Despite the presence of a tough-talking Reagan, the Marines had been sent packing by the terrorists; neither the U.S. nor Israel could deal satisfactorily with the hostage situation; the U.S. was generally unable to handle the madness of a Middle East jungle in the thrall of Muslim radicalism. We were widely perceived as humiliated and helpless.

It was not the overall response to the question about pulling back from the Middle East 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 had 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. For example, 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. They are buttressed by more ideological elements which advertise America's apparent impotence in the Middle East as an index of America's general malevolence or insensitivity in the "third world."

And it is reasonable to suggest that, if those American publics which tend to be generally interventionist out of their frustration perceive Israel as a somewhat weaker reed to lean on, they could become less specifically interventionist with respect to Israel. The Lebanese war suggested to some Americans that Israel is not the military super-power they had thought. And in the TWA hostage crisis, Israel was just as helpless as we were.

Furthermore, there is perceived in some quarters a diminution of Israeli will. Among other things, that perception derived from Israel's mass release of Arab terrorists in an exchange. Pertinent

also are the deep economic distress in Israel and the highly publicized internal conflicts within Israel. If Israel were to be perceived as a weaker reed for the U.S. to lean on in a Middle East in which many Americans feel increasingly insecure and an increasing impulse to withdraw from altogether -- then the fundamental reasons for supporting Israel would begin to evaporate.

It must be emphasized again that even if the "interventionist" public suffers some withdrawal from Israel, it will not be because of some moral judgement on that nation but because of a frustration and judgement about our foreign policy and Israel's effective role in it. And the chances are that will only happen in conjunction with the growth of a non-interventionist tendency in general.

Effect on American Policy

American policy makers, including the White House and Congress, are not immune from such withdrawal impulses, general and specific, but would predictably be the last to succumb to them. Despite the fact that they are the chief targets of America's stand-up comics, these policy makers do tend to be more sophisticated about foreign affairs than the American public at large. Operating in a more highly informed environment, they are more aware of America's stake in Israel. In fact, it is America's policy makers who have largely shaped American public opinion on the subject.

It has not been a highly active public opinion which has pushed the policy makers to adopt their favorable stance towards Israel. The policy makers have taken the initiative in supporting Israel and it is that initiative which 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. as measured by the Richman criteria and the foreign policy premise which the American public does heartily embrace: resistance to Soviet expansionism.

American Jewish "political power" did not create that collective conviction on the part of the policy makers although it may have tipped the balance in some marginal cases, and the access it provided to policy makers often deepened their informed environment. Nor by the same token could American Jewish political power prevent the erosion of that collective conviction under the impact of changed conditions and perceptions. Again, those changed conditions and perceptions are more likely to relate to American foreign policy in general than to Israel particularly. In the past two years, some Congressmen who are highly sympathetic to Israel have for the first time voted against foreign aid bills critical for Israel, because of other foreign relations matters contained in those bills.

Nor should it be forgotten that there have been notable occasions when the foreign policy proclivities of the policy makers have been curbed by boundaries established by a self-propelling public opinion.

Frustration and a resultant impulse to withdrawal have been the hallmarks of public opinion on those occasions, e.g.: Vietnam and the dismantling pace of American forces after World War II.

In short, general non-interventionist tendencies may be developing which would necessarily affect American support for Israel. And fed by the same frustrations about the Middle East, the interventionist public may be losing some of its impulse for intervention on behalf of Israel.

REMEDIES

It is of more than academic interest 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.

As for the media, their reporting of the objective circumstances and viewpoints applicable to Richman's criteria are more important in their effect on American support of Israel than are the media's sensationalism or editorial slant on more irrelevant matters related to Israel itself. Most of the reporting on Israel which Jews properly find offensive is without serious effect on American public opinion.

Approaching the "Two Publics"

It has been pointed out that there are two different American publics whose stances towards American support of Israel could come into jeopardy. One public comprises those prone to a non-interventionism which could be variously fed by frustration abroad, domestic problems at home and specific disenchantment with Israel's ability to keep us out of a Vietnam-like quagmire. The other public is determinedly interventionist, but vulnerable to becoming less willing to depend on Israel as an interventionist ally, because of frustrations abroad and disenchantment with Israel's capacities.

Richman's criteria apply variously to the concerns about both publics. Some of the indicated remedy calls for interpretation of Israel which more sharply focuses on the current realities of American support of Israel: Israel's inherent economic strength, inherent democratic strength and continuing military strength. There has been a tendency

to make these points in a piecemeal fashion, defensively, in conjunction often with an irrelevant preoccupation with the motivation of the attackers.

But an essential part of the remedy, intertwined with a sharper interpretation of Israel and its importance to the U.S., is an interpretation of the desired foundations of American foreign policy in general.

But how can the Jewish community possibly become engaged with that larger American foreign affairs framework? Perhaps there must first be an avenue by which American Jewry might itself more self-consciously and systematically return to a central vision of America -- its meaning -- and integrate that vision with American foreign policy considerations.

That might also be called an exercise in the ecology of Jewish survival. It would start with the perception that we are at the climax of a spectacular conjunction of fate between America and Jews -- American Jews, Israeli Jews, world Jews. One reason for this conjunction is not just the existence of a strong American Jewry, and not just that the U.S. is a free society; but that for various historical reasons America has brought the idea of individual and political freedom, human rights, the open society and democratic pluralism to their highest realization in history. Despite some shameful failures in the past and undoubtedly in the future, these qualities are America's political essence. They embody the essential American Idea.

The survival of these qualities in the world depends upon the survival and leadership of the U.S. as a free nation. And the fate and survival of Jews everywhere depend particularly on the survival of that American idea. In the ancient and medieval worlds, the Jews could often survive within despotic societies. Such survival is less likely in the efficient and ideological world of modern despotism.

In a narrower vein, Israel as a nation can probably only survive in the foreseeable future with the economic, military and diplomatic aid of America. And that support will only be forthcoming from an America which is seeking to protect itself as the citadel of the American Idea.

But of course that kind of dynamic must take into account the existence of forces in the world which are antithetical to the American Idea and which are expansionist in ways that threaten the U.S. or its free allies. To actively defend against the imperialistic expansion of such forces is the basis of an American foreign policy marked by enlightened self-interest. It is the kind of cogent American foreign policy which is needed to protect Israel as well as America. It is the framework of an American foreign policy within which is defined that national interest which legitimates American support of Israel.

To advance this vision into the practical, let us delineate two idealistic principles of American foreign policy -- idealistic in that they are designed to reflect America's meaning, to further human rights and political freedom in the world. One principle is simply for American foreign policy to encourage the practice of human rights and political freedom and to offer "hard support" against their violation, whenever feasible. The other principle is to actively defend against the imperialistic expansion of totalitarian and despotic forces when that expansion threatens the U.S. or its free allies. The latter is as important as the first to the goal of furthering human rights and political freedom around the world.

Those two idealistic principles are obviously sometimes in conflict. They were in conflict during World War II when we actively supported, economically and militarily, a totalitarian society whose violation of human rights were massive and intensive -- the Soviet Union: millions killed, millions in concentration camps. We supported that brutal society -- properly and necessarily -- because it was totalitarian Nazi Germany which at the time was imperialistically threatening the U.S. and its free allies.

In short, establishing these two idealistic principles in re human rights does not yet establish exactly what position we should take in every situation -- in Lebanon or Central America or anyplace else. There may be different judgments, for example, as to whether a given situation abroad is strictly internal, although threatening human rights, or an expansionist act threatening the U.S. and the principle of human rights. In a given situation, there are many different strategic and tactical judgments to be made.

We do not have, and are not likely to have, a Jewish consensus on those specific judgments of fact or tactic; nor are many of those judgments part of the expertise of the various Jewish agencies. However, under the circumstances, neither does that absolve us of the responsibility to establish an informed forum in which the underlying considerations are laid forth in an informed manner.

One of those considerations, for example, is that Jewish fate, Israel's fate, America's fate, the fate of freedom in the world are today indivisible, in hard fact as well as in the rhetoric of hasbarah. Another consideration is the special stake that Jews have in the principle of enlightened interventionism. Yes, Jews have a special stake in world peace -- and in the understanding that there can be a symbiotic relationship between American interventionism and peace. Associated is the consideration that Jews have a special stake in an American response to the complex of terrorism which exceeds piety and will not build layers of frustration.

A more informed Jewish consciousness can, as it has in the past, help to shape the American consciousness on these considerations. And that Jewish consciousness can stand on a consensual platform which fully captures the vision of America's meaning, and integrates that vision with American foreign policy. That in itself would serve to

reintegrate the public affairs agenda of the organized Jewish community.

But at the same time it would put us in a better position to deal effectively with problems of American support of Israel. Those problems will not arise in the foreseeable future because of anti-Israel feeling, or anti-Jewish feeling, or such things as a bad press for Israel. Those problems will primarily arise because of prior shifts in American foreign policy in general. Those shifts are not inevitable, but there are signals that they are quite possible. And we are not paying attention.

JCRC

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