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American Sentiment on Israeli-Palestinian Fight: No Favorites; Just Make Peace

March 14, 1989 | SHIBLEY TELHAMI and JON KROSZNICK | *Shibley Telhami is a professor of political science, and Jon Krosznick is a professor of psychology and political science at Ohio State University.*

The Middle East has moved high on the Soviet Union's agenda, reflecting growing international pressure for superpower action in that region. For political, strategic and moral reasons, the Bush Administration will be increasingly inclined to launch its own initiative for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. But, as usual in our democratic system, the Administration will first weigh public sentiment: Where do Americans stand on this issue?

Two interpretations of public sentiment have been gaining currency. One, relying on recent polls, is that the continuing Palestinian uprising is seriously undermining the American public's support for Israel. The second is that the key to U.S. policy in the Middle East is not public sentiment in general; what really matters is the stance of people to whom the Arab-Israeli conflict is very important personally, and who therefore are likely to vote and act on the basis of this sentiment. Most of the people in this category are, according to this view, American Jews whose continued support of Israel is unaffected by the Palestinian uprising, and who will demand unconditional U.S. support for Israel.

Given the results of a national poll that we conducted, we believe that both interpretations are inaccurate. (The survey was conducted by telephone with a nationally representative sample of 500 American adults in late December. The sampling error is plus or minus 5%.)

We found that most Americans are undecided about their general sympathies toward Israel and the Arabs. We found that the people most concerned about the Arab-Israeli conflict are much more diverse than conventional expectations suppose. And we found that a significant majority of Americans agree on two relevant issues that the Administration is likely to pursue. In short, we found that public opinion is sufficiently balanced as to allow the Administration to pursue whichever policy it deems necessary for American interests.

Some of our findings were surprising. To begin with, it turned out that a large number of Americans are highly concerned about the Arab-Israeli conflict: 19% of the people interviewed said that it is one of three political issues most important to them personally; 5% ranked it as the most important one. As expected, those people who cared a great deal about the Arab-Israeli conflict tended to reflect that interest in their voting and other political activity.

This finding suggests that American Jews, who constitute 2.5% of the population, are a small part of those to whom the Arab-Israeli conflict is very important. Who are the others? On the basis of some indirect indicators, we suspect that many of them are evangelical Christians and African-Americans.

Surprisingly, there was little difference between people who are highly concerned with the Middle East conflict and those who are not, in terms of general sympathy with Arabs and Israelis. Approximately 23% of both groups said that they were generally more sympathetic toward the Israelis, and about 7% of both groups said that they were generally more sympathetic toward the Arabs. Significantly, the largest segment of both groups, 65%, had equal sympathy for each side, no sympathy, or were uncertain. This suggests that most people who are concerned about the Arab-Israeli conflict are not driven by an inherent commitment to one side or the other, which should give the Administration important flexibility in formulating its Middle East policy.

How did the Palestinian uprising affect the opinions of Americans to whom the Arab-Israeli conflict is very important? Interestingly, 28% became more favorable to Israel and 20% became more favorable to the Palestinians. However, the majority of this group, as well as the majority of those who are not highly concerned about the issue, said that the uprising hadn't changed their sympathies in any respect. This suggests that the commitment to Israel is not as seriously undermined by the uprising as some observers have assumed.

Most important, we found that a majority of Americans were in agreement on the two proposals most relevant to the policy debate: initiation of Israeli dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in exchange for peace. On these issues, there were no significant differences between the opinions of Americans who consider the conflict very important to them and those who don't: 51% of both groups favored Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in exchange for peace, 15% opposed it. About 60% favored Israeli initiation of dialogue with the PLO; 24% were opposed. These opinions suggest support, and a strong possibility of consensus, for the direction that U.S. policy seemed to be taking in establishing dialogue with the PLO.

Taken together, these results indicate that American public opinion on the Arab-Israeli conflict is not likely to erect barriers in the way of an American political initiative. First, most Americans are neutral in their general sympathies toward both the Arabs and the Israelis. Americans who are highly concerned about the conflict constitute a much larger and more pluralistic group than conventional expectations would suggest—and their views are not substantially different from those of the rest of the population.

All this should be welcome news to the Bush Administration as it contemplates its Middle East course in the face of mounting international pressure over the continuing Palestinian crisis. Public opinion appears simultaneously balanced and concerned, allowing the Administration to choose the policy options that are recommended by strategic interests without being overly concerned with domestic sentiments.