

Straws in the Wind

by Mark. A. Bruzonsky



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“There is still a deep reservoir of affection and support for Israel in the US . . . However, the 13 point slide in sympathy for Israel over a six-month period cannot be lightly dismissed: it is the sharpest, deepest and fastest drop that the Gallup survey has ever found with regard to the Middle East.”

This is the basic conclusion reached by Andrew Kohut in an important report on American public opinion about the Middle East conflict. The report appears in the May/June issue of the new magazine *Public Opinion* which is published by the American Enterprise Institute, the Washington-based think-tank to which President Ford has attached himself and which some consider a Republican shadow government.

A more recent Gallup poll, from March, indicates that 38 percent of the American public have a basic

sympathy for Israel compared to 11 percent for the Arab states. When it is realized that the figures for June 1967 were 56 to 4, for October 1973, 50 to 7 and as short a time ago as October 1977, 47 to 10, the glaring conclusion must be that American perceptions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict are more in flux today than ever before.*

As Kohut indicates, “Events of recent months have shown that American attitudes toward the Middle East are open to change, and that in itself may be of enduring importance in international diplomacy”. “Israel still holds a more affectionate place in

*For the non-white American public the shift is considerably more dramatic. “Between 1967 and 1977”, Kohut reports, “there was a fourfold increase in sympathies for the Arab nations and a significant decrease in support for Israel. By late 1977, among those non-whites who expressed sympathy for either side, support was divided almost equally with 20 percent siding with Israel and 22 percent with the Arabs”.

American hearts than do the Arab nations", Kohut adds, "but sympathies here are much less pronounced than they were only a few months ago".

After fully analyzing the major poll results for the past few years, Kohut finds that "the single most important factor in accounting for a shift of American views was the perception that Israel was the more intransigent in peace negotiations". In fact, a *Newsweek*/Gallup poll late in February which asked "Which country has been most willing to compromise?" resulted in an astonishing 45 to 26 victory for Egypt. This can be considered something of a reversal, Kohut writes, from the findings of last December, when an NCB News poll showed that 52 percent of the public felt that the Arabs should make more concessions to Israel, while only 45 percent felt that Israel should make more concessions to the Arabs.

Analyzing the basic overall trends, Kohut notes that "a major shift might be under way" in American perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict. "There has been a significant erosion" of sympathy for Israel "which leaves many unanswered questions about the future".

An even more striking, but less scientific, poll on Middle East attitudes was released by the Foreign Policy Association in July. FPA is a non-profit, non-partisan citizens'

organization which conducts educational programs on foreign policy throughout the country. In separate meetings with Assistant Secretary of State Hodding Carter, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and House International Relations Committee chairman Clement Zablocki, FPA officials presented the results of their "Opinion Ballots" to representatives of the 3 branches of the US government in late June.

Each year FPA conducts what it calls "Great Decisions" Foreign Policy Seminars in several hundred communities throughout the nation. During 1978 the seminars covered eight topics ranging from human rights to the global power balance, world energy, international development, Japanese-American relations and the Middle East conflict. More than 100,000 Americans were involved in these discussions.

This year, the results of the opinion sampling of participants in the Great Decisions program were especially significant in regard to the Palestinian issue.

Sixty percent of FPA's sample poll either voted to "approve" (34) or "to go along without enthusiasm" (26) with the view that the US should use its influence to persuade Israel to accept "a Palestinian homeland to be created out of territories now occupied by Israel". Only 24 percent opposed this view, with 16 percent expressing no opinion.



Foreign Policy Association Chairman Carter L. Burgess (right) hands over the results of the FPA's 'Great Decisions' poll to Assistant Secretary of State Hodding Carter.

In contrast, only 22 percent approved (9) or went along without enthusiasm (13) with the view that "the US should support the position that Israel's borders should extend to the Jordan River and that no Palestinian homeland should be created". Fifty-six percent opposed this policy and 22 percent had no opinion.

Two other questions asked regarding the Palestinians showed even greater sympathy for them, including support for the PLO on the condition the PLO would agree to mutual recognition with Israel. 69 percent supported (42) or accepted without enthusiasm (27) the view that "the

Foreign Policy Association "Great Decisions" poll		June 1978		
TOPIC 3: MIDDLE EAST	Approve	Go Along Without Enthusiasm	Oppose	No Opinion
1. In its approach to the Arab-Israeli dispute, the US should:				
a. Use its influence to support the position of the Israeli government.	17%	28%	39%	16%
b. Make it clear that the US will intervene with its armed forces if Israel's existence is threatened.	15	21	50	14
c. Work with NATO allies and the Soviet Union to bring about a settlement based on Israeli withdrawal from most of the occupied territories in exchange for secure borders and full diplomatic recognition by the Arabs.				
	56	22	15	7
d. Be prepared to join with NATO allies and the Soviet Union in guaranteeing such a settlement.	45	26	14	15
2. In regard to the Palestinian problem, the US should:				
a. Insist that the PLO recognize Israel's right to exist within secure borders as a condition of its participation in negotiations for a settlement.	66	18	9	7
b. Insist that Israel negotiate with the PLO in return for such recognition.	42	27	18	13
c. Use its influence to persuade Israel to accept a Palestinian homeland to be created out of territories now occupied by Israel.	34	26	24	16
d. Support the position that Israel's border should extend to the Jordan river and that no Palestinian homeland should be created.	9	13	56	22

US should insist that Israel negotiate with the PLO in return for PLO recognition" — with only 18 percent opposed and 13 percent having no opinion.

84 percent of the approximately 5000 Great Decisions participants who completed and mailed to New York the questionnaire approved (66) or accepted without enthusiasm (18) the view that "the US should insist that the PLO recognize Israel's right to exist without secure borders as a condition of its participation in negotiations for a settlement" — with only 9 percent opposed and 7 percent expressing no opinion.

Another series of questions highlighted the serious deterioration in Israel's image which has taken place since Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud coalition came to power just over a year ago. Only 17 percent approved of the view that "the US should use its influence to support the position of the Israeli government". 28 percent agreed to this without enthusiasm, but 39 percent opposed, while 16 percent had no opinion.

Asked if "the US should make it clear that the US will intervene with its forces if Israel's existence is threatened", only 15 percent approved and 21 percent went along without enthusiasm while 50 percent opposed and 14 percent had no opinion.

However, when asked if the US should "join with NATO allies and the Soviet Union" in guaranteeing "a settlement based on Israel's withdrawal from most of the occupied territories in exchange for secure borders and full diplomatic recognition by the Arabs", 45 percent approved, 26 percent went along, 14 percent opposed and 15 percent had no opinion.

Results from other public opinion polls, which Kohut discusses in *Public Opinion*, have shown some of the characteristics apparent in FPA's opinion balloting, but not the same reluctance to support Israeli policies or such pronounced support for almost total Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, creation of a Palestinian homeland and participation by the PLO in peace negotiations.

Persons who participate in the Great Decisions program tend to be more highly educated and from higher income brackets than the general population. Such persons are usually public opinion leaders in this country

and consequently the FPA results may portend an important shift in American public opinion in the near future.

FPA notes that "This expression of views by participants in Great Decisions 1978 who have voluntarily taken the time to study and discuss the issues is of special significance to the nation's foreign policy decision-makers". Zbigniew Brzezinski told FPA's officers when he met with them in late June that their survey is the "one repeated sampling of interested grass-roots opinion" that exists in the US today.

What does all this mean? Hisham Sharabi, who edits the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, teaches Arab history at Georgetown University and is the newly elected President of the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), told me in a recent interview that Sadat's visit to Jerusalem "changed the image of the Arab in the US and also in Western Europe". There is, he added, "a corresponding new perception of

Israel's true posture on the question of peace or war in the Middle East. Sadat put Israel to the test and showed that the Israelis are more interested in preserving territory than achieving peace. As long as they have military superiority they will not accept peace with the Arabs except on their own terms, which are very close to unconditional surrender".

While American public opinion in general has not yet reached the same conclusion as has Sharabi, there is a clear and unmistakable shift toward what William Scranton, when he visited the Middle East in 1968 as the emissary of President-elect Nixon, described as "even-handedness".

The basic significance of all this is that when and if the current American administration, or its likely successor in 1980, decides to pursue with determination a comprehensive Middle East settlement — on the lines of George Ball's "How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself" thesis — American public opinion will probably no longer be so insuperable a roadblock. ■

