Dole’s Jerusalem Effort Receives Little Public Support

Poll Shows Public Favors Negotiated Settlement

Attached are the results of a poll we conducted on U.S. attitudes towards Jerusalem. The poll showed little public support for efforts by Senator Robert Dole (R-KS) to force a move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

By a margin of 46% to 20% those polled preferred the position of the Clinton Administration that "the status of the city should be negotiated between the Israelis and the Palestinians."

The poll also showed public ambivalence to Israel’s claim to "all of Jerusalem as its capital." By a margin of 30% to 19% respondents supported a city divided between Palestinians and Israelis. Significantly 45% had no opinion.

The AAI poll conducted by the John Zogby Group of New York was the first such survey of U.S. public opinion attitudes towards the status of Jerusalem. The poll of 900 registered voters was conducted from July 17 to 20, 1995 and had a margin of error of ±3.3%.

While the poll showed continued U.S. public sympathy toward Israelis (by a margin of 22.7% to 7.2%) over Palestinians - that margin is less than in earlier years, with a significant 24% indicating sympathy with both parties. A high 30% were not sure with whom they sympathized.

Especially interesting are the internal demographic break-outs which are available at AAI. For example, the results indicate a partisan split in attitudes, with those who voted for President Bush in 1992 giving much higher support to Israeli claims than those who voted for President Clinton or Independent Ross Perot, and Catholics much more sympathetic than Protestants.

As we approach the so-called "3000 anniversary" campaign by Israel, this poll should be supplemented by an additional detailed study indicating the demographic groups we need to target and how best to frame our approach on Jerusalem.

The bottom line is, on this issue we are better off than we may have thought - but we have important work to do.

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2) Senator Robert Dole has introduced legislation to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in recognition of Israel's claim that Jerusalem is its capital. The Clinton administration opposes the legislation saying that the status of the city should be negotiated between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Which position do you support?
- Dole's: 19.7%
- Clinton administration's: 45.7%
- Neither: 6.6%
- Not sure/No opinion: 26.0%

3) In the broader dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians with which side do you feel the most sympathy?
- Israelis: 22.7%
- Palestinians: 7.2%
- Both: 24.0%
- Neither: 16.2%
- Not sure/No opinion: 29.9%
Washington Watch

AS PEACE PROCESS DRIFTS
U.S. PUBLIC OPINION SHIFTS
TOWARD BALANCE

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Results of a new poll demonstrate that U.S. public opinion continues to move toward greater balance in its understanding of Middle East issues.

In three distinct areas of investigation -- including evaluations of: U.S. allies in the Middle East, the Middle East peace process, and the U.S. Middle East foreign aid program -- U.S. voters display almost total balance in their attitudes.

The June 1997 poll was conducted for the Arab American Institute (AAI) by Zogby International of New York. With 1,012 registered voters polled, the results have a high degree of accuracy (+/- 3.2%).

These AAI poll results both build on and affirm findings of a number of other polls conducted over the past several months, all of which point to a continuing movement of public opinion toward a balanced view of the Middle East.

The results:

The Value of U.S. Allies in the Middle East

The most striking results of the AAI poll came when U.S. voters were asked to rate the importance to the United States of four Middle East countries. Saudi Arabia bested Israel as well as Egypt and Jordan.

Thirty-six point five percent (36.5%) assessed Saudi Arabia as a "very valuable ally" and about 40% thought Saudi Arabia was "somewhat valuable". That total of over 76% was higher than Israel's combined total of 74.5%. Thirty-five percent (35%) thought Israel was "very valuable" and 39.5% thought it was "somewhat valuable".

While the Saudi edge over Israel is a slight 1.5%, it nevertheless represents an important breakthrough for the Kingdom. During the 70's and 80's, Israel's ratings more than doubled those of Saudi Arabia. Even after the Gulf War, Israel's ratings still edged out all Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia.

The fact that U.S. voters continue to grow in appreciation of the U.S.-Saudi relationship despite persistent negative press accounts is significant.

The other Arab countries included in this poll, Egypt and Jordan, were also rated valuable as U.S. allies. Egypt's combined score was 65.6% and Jordan's rating was 59.6%.

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The U.S. Foreign Aid Program

Voters show an equal degree of support for and opposition to U.S. foreign aid to Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian National Authority.

About 21% believe that U.S. aid to the Palestinian National Authority is either "just the right amount" or "should be increased" -- the exact same number that supports the U.S. program for Israel. On the other hand, 63% of those polled feel that the Palestinian aid program is too high, while 64% feels Israel receives too much aid.

U.S. aid to Egypt is supported by 18%, with 66% feeling that the amount is too high.

This near balance in support of and opposition to aid to all three countries is noteworthy in light of recent Congressional votes to punish the Palestinians and Egypt. The attacks on both were quite intense, as were the threats to retaliate by cutting their U.S. support levels.
By focussing only on Egypt and the Palestinian National Authority and refraining from criticizing the high level of U.S. aid to Israel, Congress is clearly out of touch with public opinion.

In general, the U.S. public is opposed to all foreign aid. The untouchable nature of Israel's aid program is a function of Congressional politics and not a reflection of public support.

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The Middle East Peace Process

Continuing the trend that was first observed in the April 1997 Zogby poll, American voters held both Palestinians and Israelis to blame for the impasse in the peace process. Thirteen percent (13%) blame Israel, 19% blame the Palestinians, but 42% said both parties are equally to blame.

When asked whom the U.S. Administration should pressure "to get the peace process moving again", 4% said Israel, 4% said the Palestinians, and 44.5% said both should be pressured equally. Once again, evidence that U.S. voters are displaying a new sense of balance.

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What makes these results important is not only the fact that they reflect continued movement of U.S. opinion in the direction of evenhandedness, but that this trend toward balance occurs in the face of an all out assault on the Palestinian Authority and Egypt by supporters of Israel and continuing press coverage of the bombing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. And none of these efforts have been directly countered by a pro-Arab public opinion campaign. While the behavior of the Netanyahu government has certainly contributed to the change in U.S. attitudes, recent public statements of balanced concern made by President Clinton have also played a role in helping to bring about this shift in public opinion.

It is, therefore, significant to note that this shift occurs as the Clinton Administration weighs policy options in an effort to salvage a floundering Middle East peace process. While the Administration is coming under some domestic criticism for its apparent passivity, there are indications that the President and his advisors are deeply concerned about the collapse of the process and the dangers that a collapse poses to U.S. allies and interests in the broader region.

Recent public comments by the President and comments by some White House and State Department officials make it clear that the President is actively engaged in discussing options to deal with the crisis.

Weighing heavily on the Administration is the realization that U.S. vital interests are at stake should the drift in the Middle East continue. Absent movement toward peace, there are dangerous developments that can lead the region toward renewed conflict. There is also grave concern that should the three and one-half (3 1/2) year-old effort collapse, there will be a loss of confidence in the possibility of achieving a negotiated settlement. Should this occur the U.S. will have squandered significant political assets which can threaten its future standing in the region.

In this context, recent warnings by Crown Prince Abdullah have served as an important reminder that concerns over the fate of the peace process are shared by an important U.S. ally.

Also weighing heavily on the Administration, of course, is the highly unstable internal political situation in Israel and the reaction that any dramatic U.S. initiative will generate from pro-Israel forces in the U.S. and in Congress.

Shifts in U.S. opinion should, therefore, tell Washington that American voters will support a balanced and firm approach to peace and will welcome an evenhanded U.S. plan to restore momentum and confidence in the peace process.

The ability of hardline anti-peace advocates to influence U.S. public attitudes is limited. A strong display of leadership will receive strong public support.
As reported in this paper last week, it is clear that the U.S. public has moved toward a greater sense of balance and fairness in its understanding of the Middle East.

Recall these results:

- two Arab leaders, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek and Jordan’s King Hussein were viewed as being more committed to peace than Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu;

- Americans view Israel and the Palestinians equally at fault for the current crisis in the Middle East peace process;

- by almost five to one Americans oppose Israel’s settlement construction in East Jerusalem and want it to stop;

- by four to one Americans support the Palestinian’s right to statehood;

- by a significant majority Americans want U.S. Middle East policy to be more balanced and less pro-Israel; and

- Americans are divided over whether Jerusalem should be under sole Israeli control or divided between Israeli and Palestinian control -- with a plurality supporting a divided city.

Reviewing U.S. polls taken during the 1970’s and 1980’s demonstrates just how dramatic the change has been:

- Only Egyptian President Sadat had higher ratings than an Israeli leader. And no Israeli leader has ever had a net negative rating. Even Begin during the 1982 assault on Lebanon had a strong positive rating;
• Americans always gave greater sympathy to Israel and greater blame to the Palestinians. Israel usually bested the Arabs in American opinion 10 to 1 -- during the war in Lebanon this dropped to 4 to 1, but quickly recouped;

• Americans never before expressed strong opposition to an Israeli move. Israel’s in Lebanon was supported by U.S. popular opinion, as were past Israeli settlement developments -- even when they were called illegal by the State Department;

• When asked whether U.S. policy should support Israel or be balanced, Americans almost always gave stronger support to a policy that would favor Israel; and

• In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when asked who should control Jerusalem, American support for sole Jewish control over the city was in the 67 to 72% range, with the divided city option always receiving less than 25%.

There have been significant factors that account for this shift:

• Camp David, despite Arab opposition, created a breakthrough in U.S. opinion. For the first time: an Arab leader emerged as a peace maker; the U.S. became a partner in the search for peace; the issue of Palestinian rights was put on the table to be debated in public opinion; and Israeli transigence was put to the test;

• The Israeli assault on Lebanon exposed Americans to Israel’s brutality. Even though Americans continued to support Israel’s objectives in the war, ultimately Israeli behavior in Lebanon took a toll on U.S. support for that country;

• The Palestinian intifada brought home once again Israeli brutality. The drama of a mass Palestinian uprising created a swell of support and won more allies for Arab causes;

• The Bush-Baker design for a Middle East peace process and the obstinance of the Likud government established once again the tremendous importance that the U.S. places on the search for Middle East peace. This peace process also projected for the first time the Palestinian voice directly to a large and increasingly receptive U.S. audience;

• With the Clinton Administration, Americans once again, as in the Carter years, found themselves fully immersed in the search for peace.

While some Arabs have opposed the conduct of President Clinton, especially his refusal to publicly criticize Israel, Americans have read him especially in several key instances (the White House ceremonies, the Washington Summit, and his meetings with Arab leaders including Palestinian Authority President Yasir Arafat) as being committed to balance; and in other instances, of being disturbed by Israeli behavior;

• The election of Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has contributed greatly to changing American opinion. He is articulate but considered glib and untrustworthy -- in some ways Netanyahu is too much like the prototypical American politician that Americans simply do not trust; and

• Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role played by emerging Arab American organizations that have: provided an American voice to Arab
concerns, challenged the press and politicians to show greater fairness and understanding in dealing with Middle East issues; and built coalitions and mobilized politically in the U.S. arena.

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This much is known. There is a new political context in the U.S. The dominant pro-Israel construct that held sway over opinion and culture for more than a generation is crumbling. Politicians can deliver strident pro-Israel speeches but only before pro-Israel audiences -- but the press and the broader public now greet such displays with a cynical edge.

The stage is set for both press and public opinion to be even more responsive to Arab concerns.

The question remains, "what will we do about it?" Both Arabs and Arab Americans must define strategies, each in its own way, to meet this challenge. Information work, and political organizing efforts must be intensified. Arab leaders must communicate directly with the U.S. press and public. And embassies should increase their political and educational outreach efforts.

Arab Americans must step up their work; taking their challenge to Congress and by organizing the constituencies of key members of Congress. If politicians insist on adhering to the old, unbalanced, pro-Israel construct, then their constituents should be informed and organized to act.

While the significance of this moment cannot be underestimated, neither can the possibility that this opportunity may pass if it is not acted upon.