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AFTER THE TWA HOSTAGE CRISIS: NEW PROGRAM NEEDS

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Watershed in American-Israel Relations

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.

The reverberations of the hostage crisis indicated this. At the very least, the hostage situation deepened a trend whose understanding could help American Jews revise some myths they hold about support for Israel. Those myths included:

- The belief that anti-semitism is the drive which threatens American support for Israel.
- The belief that some a priori emotional hostility towards Israel threatens American

support of Israel.

--The belief that the hostility or distortions of the media constitute the main threat to American support of Israel.

--The belief that sheer political strength can remove the threats to American support of Israel.

Like most myths, none of these beliefs is without a seed of truth. But none of them reflects the real contemporary threat to American support of Israel.

The Nature of American Support For Israel

"Liking Israel" is not enough.

In about sixty 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

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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, but the percentage of Americans favoring the Arabs is so small that a change of only 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 for episodic reasons, such as the Lebanon War, or a rise in indifference to the whole area, not because of a long term rise in sympathy for the Arabs. (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.

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

Not surprisingly, 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 a 85 - 2 ratio. This strengthens the point that the American public's willingness to support Israel does not depend simply 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

Alvin Richman, a top public opinion analyst for the State Department, has provided a formula for understanding those factors. He wrote in *Public Opinion*, (December/January, 1982), "Support for defending various countries depends on overall attitudes towards military intervention, as well as

attitudes towards the particular countries involved." He then listed five criteria by which the American public decides whether it will support intervention on behalf of another country. The criteria apply not only 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:

1. *The perceived importance to the U.S. of a threatened country.*

This is the cornerstone criterion. It starts with these prior questions: What is important to America on the world scene? What is America's national interest abroad? How involved should America get on the world scene? Only then does the American public ask: "In 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 No.1. The American public is more willing to intervene when a country is threatened by perceived Soviet expansionism than when the threat is simply regional. In one survey, the American public split on the question of providing arms to Israel threatened by an Arab invasion; but the same Americans in the same survey were dramatically 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 critical question in American consciousness and the criterion which has come most to the fore in the light of the TWA hostage crisis.

The Significance of the TWA Hostage Situation

Some observers, especially Jewish ones, 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, however, there was no backlash against Israel or Jews; instead the American public measured out the blame somewhat more astutely: towards the oil companies, the American government and the Arabs. Similar reactions followed the Beirut bombing of 1978, the Iraqi

nuclear reactor bombing, and 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 over the long run, and American governmental support has steadily risen. To the pessimists, it has been necessary to say that the sky has not fallen, and to the optimists, that the favorable situation is not immutable.

After the TWA hostage crisis, it can be said again that the sky is not falling. However, this crisis has more clearly revealed some of the strains in American support. These are not new strains; they have been increasing. But the TWA episode has exacerbated them in a way that more sharply delineates their nature. The strains are not those that conventional Jewish wisdom has supposed them to be; they 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.

American Frustration

In its concern with successful intervention and avoidance of another Vietnam, the American public has been concerned about intervention in Central America becoming a Vietnam-like quagmire in which it 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 have been sent packing by the terrorists. The TWA hostage crisis was a definitive piece of America's Lebanese experience. Despite the presidency of a "tough" Ronald Reagan, the U.S. was unable to handle the madness of a Middle East jungle in the thrall of Muslim radicalism. The United States was 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, the U.S. has not been able to find a stable and powerful ally on whom it could lean. (This was part of the problem in Vietnam.) In Israel, on the other hand, the U.S. has

found a stable and powerful ally, especially since the 1967 War when Israel established its power. Significantly, it was following the Six Day War that American public opinion favorable to Israel began to soar.

However it is important to note that this image of Israel has been diminishing somewhat. The Lebanese War suggested to some Americans that Israel is not the super power they had perceived it to be. The TWA hostage situation furthered this with Israel seeming just as helpless as the U.S. In addition, there is perceived a diminution of Israeli will. Among other things, that perception derives from Israel's release of over 1000 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. 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 Richman's cornerstone criterion No.1 of perceived importance of a threatened country as it applies to American support of Israel. The U.S. feels increasingly insecure in the Middle East, and the American people feel an increasing impulse to withdraw altogether. If Israel were to be perceived as a weaker reed for the U.S. to lean on, 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 percent of Americans are always in favor of intervening on behalf of their friends and about 25 percent 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 Richman describes. Underlying these criteria, and especially the cornerstone criterion related to American national interest, are fundamental interventionist/non-interventionist tendencies, which are in flux for most Americans.

In some cases, the non-interventionist tendency

is based on a pro-Third World orientation which includes a belief in a diminished role for the U.S. in the world as policeman, 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 old isolationist sentiment that Americans should spend more of their 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 vital leader of the free world, and an important force for freedom, which is seen as a value of predominant importance.

Different population groups can be characterized statistically 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. The 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.?" This question was designed to measure the frustration of Americans regarding the Middle East, and the impulse for withdrawal or non-intervention in the region as a whole. It was not the overall response which was most interesting, but the differential response of the various 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 by a 48 to 31 ratio. Republicans were opposed to reducing ties by a 56 - 31 ratio, but even that was 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 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. Those American publics who tend to be interventionist are somewhat less willing to commit themselves to lean on Israel specifically when they perceive it as a

weaker reed.

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 in the U.S. worsens. Since those publics are part of major political coalitions, they can exert influence beyond their own strength.

The U.S. Congress will be the last to succumb to these impulses. Congressmen 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.

It has not been a highly active public opinion which has pushed Congressmen to adopt their favorable policy-making stance on behalf of Israel. The more sophisticated foreign policy understanding of Congressmen (and many U.S. elites) has caused them to take the initiative in supporting Israel, operating in a permissive climate of public opinion on this matter. That policy initiative has constantly strengthened the pro-Israel attitudes of the mainstream American public. By and large, the American public has been convinced by its policy makers that Israel was somehow important to the U.S. in that foreign policy premise which the American public heartily embraces: resistance to Soviet expansionism. The policy makers have also convinced the public that support of Israel satisfied the other criteria described by Richman. Objective circumstances seemed to support the policy makers' views that Israel is strong and that the enemies of both Israel and the U.S. have a common cause. It has, of course, been easier for the American public to support Israel because they have felt a far greater cultural similarity 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 similarity in political culture, which connects directly with the question of national interest. However, cultural affinity generally 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 the polls consistently reveal that the mainstream public is much more willing to make intervention sacrifices for Western Europe or for Mexico than for Israel).

As for the media, their reporting of the objective circumstances as they apply to Richman's five criteria is more important in shaping American support for Israel than is the media's sensationalism or editorial slant on more irrelevant matters related to Israel. Most of the reporting on Israel which Jews properly find offensive is without effect on American public opinion.

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 the United States. It must be born in mind, however, that 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 have often been the hallmark of public opinion on those occasions (e.g., Vietnam or 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 prime source is not anti-semitism or intrinsic hostility towards Israel. Holding conventional and simple 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. One 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 the United States. But those Americans, by and large, do not object to those ties

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

If analysis of American support for Israel is clarified through application of Alvin Richman's five criteria, then the remedies to the possible reversal of that support shall be clarified by also applying those criteria.

1. The Perceived Importance of Israel to the U.S.

Supporters of Israel shall emphasize:

- 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. The same lack of regard applies to the next two items.
- b. The importance of the "free world" to the United States.
- c. The necessity for the United States to take an active role in helping to maintain the principle of world freedom.
- 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 shared enemies of freedom by the United States 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

Supporters of Israel should stress the clear intent of the enemies of Israel and of the United States to wipe out Israel and to attack the United States through Israel.

3. The Sources of the Threat to Israel

They shall point out the witting or unwitting complicity of the moderate Arabs and appeasers in the above. This is necessary 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. Supporters of Israel shall emphasize the continuing strength of Israel: as a democratic society; as a

military entity; as an economically viable state.

b. They should foster understanding of the possibility of blunting terrorism by minimizing its victories; through allied unity; and by massively increasing anti-terrorist intelligence efforts.

Summary

None of this suggests that the pro-Israel community in America can have its way through some abstract educational program, nor that a set of ideas can replace the objective situation. The programmatic targets are no 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.

AIPAC is not being cynical or misleading 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 through which we can be persuasive on the merits of the case. The formula applies as well to the media and the other programmatic targets.

The point is that the curriculum of persuasion has some serious new strains -- which means that the future of American support for Israel has new strains. Those strains are related to a possible growth

of the impulse of the American public to withdraw from deep involvement in the Middle East, not primarily or initially out of hostility towards Israel or the Jews, or sympathy for the Arabs, but for other reasons. If that comes to pass, one of the reasons 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 address those problems relating to Israel and the large framework of American foreign policy.

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