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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



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Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Summer, 1985), pp. 117-121

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2537127>

Accessed: 10-03-2015 19:46 UTC

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Nation-wide Public Opinion Survey of US Attitudes on the Middle East

Conducted by the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) on behalf of the International Center for Research and Public Policy (Washington, D.C.).

*The survey results, * released in mid-April, ** reveal that more than two-thirds of the American public feel the US should pursue a more even-handed policy in the Middle East. The survey also confirmed the thinking of Americans in a 1982 Gallup survey which showed that a majority favors a separate and independent Palestinian state.*

Major Findings and Interpretation

1. A significant majority (55 percent) of the American people think that peace in the Middle East will come only when the Palestinians have a state of their own on the West Bank. They do not think that such a state will constitute a threat to Israel's security.

Only 27 percent of the public think that

a Palestinian state on the West Bank would be a threat to the security of Israel. The 1982 Gallup survey commissioned by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations shows that the American public supports, by a two to one margin the formation of a separate and independent Palestinian state [John E. Reilly, ed., *American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy* 1983 (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1983), p. 5].

The US Government's hostility to a Palestinian state therefore reflects the views of a minority of the US public, most likely what Seymour Lipset identified as

*Specifications of the study are included at the end of the document.

**The text of the document was obtained from Washington Middle East Associates.

the hard-core support for Israel in the United States (25 percent) that clusters around the pro-Israel lobby.

2. Although most Americans are aware that the US government favors Israel, the majority (70 percent) think US policy should be evenhanded and not favor one side over the other. The great majority of Americans think it is important for the US government to maintain friendly relations with Israel as well as with the Arab countries in conflict with Israel. Again the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations study confirms this finding: "Overall, public opinion now shows more sympathy for both sides than has been the case in the past" (p. 5). Consistent with previous studies (Lipset), some 20 percent insist that the US government should favor Israel only.

3. A majority of the respondents think present levels of aid to Israel (2.6 billion dollars a year) and Egypt (2.0 billion) are too high.

Most people, however, do not think that foreign aid should be used as an instrument to pressure an ally such as Israel to comply with the policy favored by the United States. Those who are willing to use aid as an instrument of pressure favor reducing aid rather than cutting it off or suspending it temporarily.

4. A majority of the respondents think the US government should participate in an international conference along with all the parties in order to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The parties include the Soviet Union, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO. It is quite clear that even though the general public views the PLO negatively, they still think it should be included in peace negotiations. The US government's refusal to have anything to do with the PLO within the context of peace negotiations is therefore at odds with

the sentiment of the majority of the American public.

5. Of the leaders involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, President Mubarak of Egypt, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and King Hussein of Jordan are perceived by those who know something about the Middle East as actively seeking a settlement, more so than Prime Minister Peres of Israel, Chairman Arafat, or President Assad of Syria.

Nevertheless, the majority of the population admit to a great lack of knowledge about peace efforts and say that they lack adequate information about the various countries in the region.

Summary Findings:

- Most people consider Central America and the Arab-Israeli situation as the two most explosive international problems that deserve special attention by the Reagan administration:

Q. "In your opinion, which of the following international problems is the most explosive and therefore deserves special attention by the administration: Poland, Central America, the Arab-Israeli situation, or Afghanistan?"

Poland	5%
Central America	44%
Arab/Israeli	25%
Afghanistan	11%
All equally	3%
Don't know/N.A./other	13%

- Most Americans, in fact a very high percentage (70 percent), think the US should not favor one side over the other in the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. Only 20 percent think the US should favor Israel. This figure is consistent with what Seymour Lipset had obtained (roughly 25 percent) as the hardcore support for Israel among the American public.

Table I: US Attitudes toward a West Bank State

	1	2	3
First statement (pro-WB state)	(25.3)	(28.9)	55%
Second statement (anti-WB state)	(14.8)	(11.8)	27%
Both	(0.6)	(0.6)	2%
Neither	(3.4)	(2.7)	7%
Don't know	(2.9)	(2.9)	6%
No answer	(3.4)	(2.7)	7%

There is, therefore, overwhelming support for an evenhanded US policy in the Middle East:

Q. "In the Middle East conflict, do you think the United States should favor Israel, favor the Arab countries, or should the US not favor one side over the other?"

- Favor Israel.....20%
- Favor neither side.....70%
- Favor Arab countries.....0.2%
- Don't know/N.A./other.....12%

In addition, most Americans think it is as important to maintain friendly relations with Israel as with the Arab countries in conflict with Israel:

Q. "How important is it that the US maintain friendly relations with Israel? Is it very important, somewhat important, or not important at all?"

- Very important48%
- Somewhat important39%
- Not important.....6%
- Don't know/other.....8%

Q. "How important is it that the US maintain friendly relations with the Arab countries in conflict with Israel? Is it very important, somewhat important, or not important at all?"

- Very important44%
- Somewhat important42%
- Not important.....6%
- Don't know/other.....9%

● By a 2 to 1 margin, Americans think that peace in the Middle East will come

only when the Palestinians have a state of their own. Most of the respondents do not think that a Palestinian state would be a threat to the security of Israel:

Q. I will read two statements, and then I would like to know which of the two you agree with more.

The first statement is:

Peace in the Middle East will come only when the Palestinian people have a state of their own on the West Bank.

The second is:

A Palestinian state on the West Bank would be a threat to the security of Israel.

Which statement do you agree with most? (See Table I.)

(Methodological explanation: The total sample was split: the first 325 respondents were asked the questions as stated above. The next 330 respondents were asked the same question with the order of the statements reversed so as to eliminate bias. No significant statistical difference emerged when the statements were reversed. The percentages in column 3 represent the total number of respondents as a percentage of the sum total of the entire sample.)

● A majority of Americans think the present level of US military and economic aid to Israel (2.6 billion dollars a year) is too much. A similar majority think that aid to Egypt (2 billion dollars a year) is also too much:

Table II: US Perceptions of Middle Eastern Leaders

	Fav.	Unfav.	Don't recog.	Other
Peres of Israel	41%	11%	32%	18%
Assad of Syria	24%	37%	25%	17%
Hussein of Jordan	45%	20%	20%	17%
Arafat of PLO	11%	65%	13%	13%
Mubarak of Egypt	41%	11%	34%	17%
Fahd of Saudi Arabia	41%	15%	28%	18%

Q. "The US Government has agreed to give Israel 2.6 billion dollars a year in military and economic aid. Do you think this aid is the right amount, too much, or not enough?"

Too much.....54.2%
 Right amount30.7%
 Not enough3.9%
 Don't know/no answer.....11.4%

Q. The US government has agreed to give Egypt 2 billion dollars a year in military and economic aid. Do you think this aid is the right amount, too much, or not enough?"

Too much.....55.6%
 Right amount30.3%
 Not enough3.9%
 Don't know/no answer.....10.4%

● Sixty-five percent of the respondents think the US should participate in an international conference to settle the Arab/Israeli conflict that includes the PLO as well as all other participants. Only 24.4 percent, the hard core Israeli supporters, do not think the US should participate:

Q. "Some people suggest that an international conference including the US, the Soviet Union, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and the PLO should convene and try to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. Do you think the US should participate in such a conference?"

Yes.....66%
 No25%
 Don't know/N.A.10%

● King Hussein of Jordan has the highest favorable rating among the US public (45 percent), followed by Mubarak of Egypt, Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and Peres of Israel with 41 percent each. Chairman Arafat of the PLO has the least favorable opinion (11 percent), while President Assad of Syria has 24%. (See Table II.)

Nevertheless, nearly one-third of the sample do not recognize Peres of Israel or Mubarak of Egypt. A quarter of the sample say they don't recognize Assad of Syria, Hussein of Jordan, or King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, while only 13% fail to recognize Arafat's name.

A significant majority (between 56 percent and 67 percent) of respondents do not know whether these same leaders are actively seeking a settlement (30 percent, 28 percent, and 26 percent, respectively). Nineteen percent of the sample think that Peres is actively seeking a settlement. Arafat and Assad are perceived as trying to block peace efforts. (See Table III.)

● A great majority of Americans feel that they lack information about the various national groups in the Middle East. The best known are the Israelis, followed by the Egyptians. The least known are the Syrians, followed by the Jordanians, the Saudis, and the Palestinians. (See Table IV.)

Table III: US Evaluations of Leaders' Peace Records

	Seeking peace	Blocking peace	Don't know	Other
Peres	19%	7%	67%	8%
Assad	10%	23%	61%	8%
Hussein	26%	13%	56%	8%
Arafat	9%	43%	41%	8%
Mubarak	30%	6%	59%	8%
Fahd	28%	9%	57%	8%

Table IV: US Information on Middle Easterners

	Know enough	Lack information	Other
Syrians	7%	86%	8%
Palestinians	18%	76%	8%
Israelis	30%	63%	8%
Saudis	17%	76%	8%
Egyptians	20%	73%	7%
Jordanians	11%	82%	7%

Specifications of the Study

1. The study used a nation-wide telephone interview with a probability sample of US households, using random digit dialing telephone sampling methods.
2. Each month, the Survey Research Center conducts a total of approximately 650 interviews, 370 with a new random cross-section sample of US telephone households and 280 by reinterview of the cross-section sample from six months past. The total sample for this study is 655 interviews.
3. The margin for error for the total

sample is ± 4.1 .

4. The study was conducted during the month of February 1985.
5. The sample was split in order to eliminate question order bias. One part of the sample (330) was interviewed with the question order given. In the other part (325), the question order was reversed.

This poll conforms to the code of ethics of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

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