

Staunch Friends

US/Israeli relations post-9/11

By Sid Groeneman and Gary Tobin

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Osama bin Laden and his followers pronounced Israel an enemy of Islam and oppressor of Palestinians. Subsequent news commentaries here and around the world focused attention on the US's relationship with Israel, and some questioned whether America's historically strong ties with that country should be re-evaluated. If the US were less closely associated with Israel, according to this thinking, we would be less a target of future terrorism.

In the two months after the attack, did the American people buy this argument? More generally, did we, as a nation, shift sympathies or policy preferences with regard to Israel's ongoing struggle with the Palestinians and their Arab/Islamic supporters? An analysis of national polls taken during this period, compared, where possible, with pre-September 11 benchmarks, offers insights into Americans' perceptions and preferences.

Did Ties Cause Attacks?

Although this country's relationship with Israel is among the leading factors cited as a "major reason" for the attacks in the two *Newsweek* polls, it is only one of several perceived motivators. In the September 20-21 poll, 68% regarded opposition to US ties to Israel and policies toward the Palestinian situation as a major reason—a figure that dropped 10 points when the survey was repeated approximately two weeks later. One must read the item with care, however: the question was whether respondents think this was a major reason for the attacks—not the major reason. In fact, "resentment of US military and economic power" was selected as often as "US ties to Israel." Sizable proportions attributed the attacks to other reasons. Other polls provided even less evidence that Americans attributed the attacks exclusively or largely to this country's relationship with Israel.

Question:

...[P]lease tell me if you think [each item] is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason why terrorists have targeted the US.

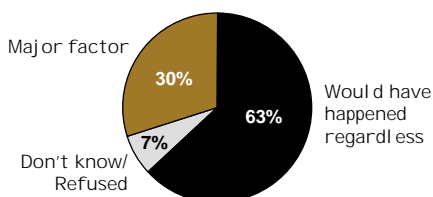
PERCENT RESPONDING MAJOR REASON



Source: Surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates/*Newsweek*, latest that of October 4-5, 2001.

Question:

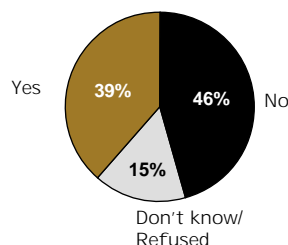
Do you think that the United States' support of Israel was a major factor in the terrorist attacks against the United States, or do you think the attacks would have happened regardless of the United States' support of Israel?



Source: Survey by NAI/*Sun Times*, October 12-14, 2001.

Question:

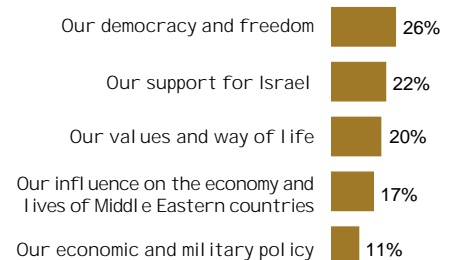
Do you think a major cause of US problems in the Middle East today is that the United States has paid too much attention to Israel and not enough attention to the Arab countries, or don't you think so?



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, October 25-28, 2001.

Question:

Which one of the following do you think is the main reason why those who attacked us and their supporters hate the United States?



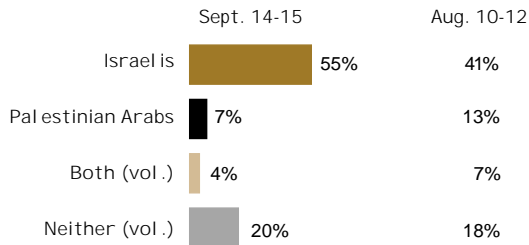
Source: Survey by Harris Interactive, September 19-24, 2001.

Little Shift in Sympathies

Post-attack data contain little evidence of diminished sympathy for Israel. If anything, they indicate movement in the opposite direction, possibly in recognition of international terrorism as a common foe. A consistent majority sympathized more with Israel; far fewer sympathized more with the Palestinians—an imbalance that appeared to have widened after the attacks.

Question:

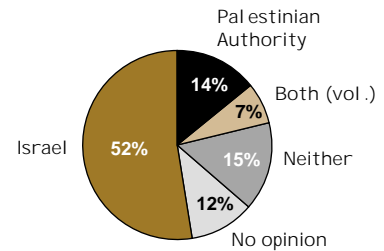
In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinian Arabs?



Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, latest that of September 14-15, 2001.

Question:

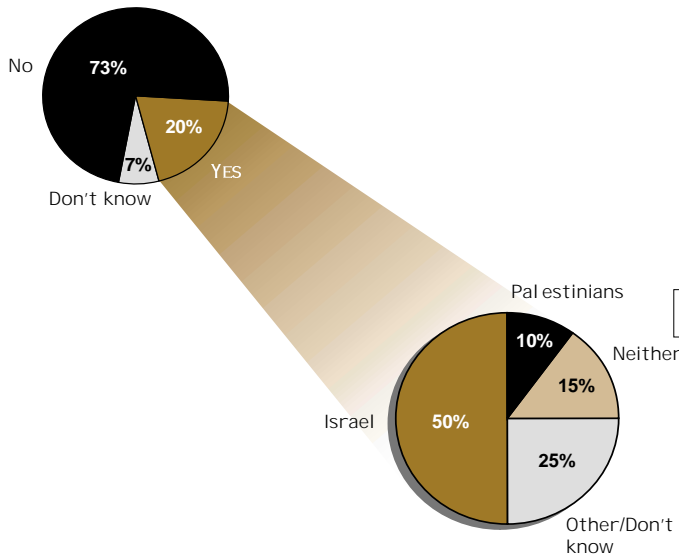
...[I]n the Middle East, are your sympathies more with Israel or more with the Palestinian Authority?



Source: Survey by ABC News, October 8-9, 2001.

Question:

Did the terrorist attack on the United States change your sympathies in the Middle East, or not? [If yes] in which direction?

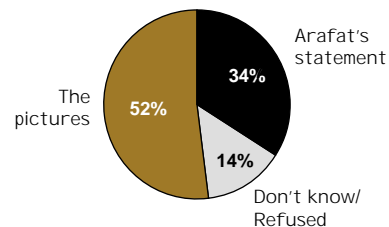


Source: Survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, September 13-14, 2001.

In the *Los Angeles Times* poll, 20% of Americans reported changing their sentiments because of the attacks. But among that segment, more shifted their sympathies to Israel than to the Palestinians—a result perhaps due, in part, to perceptions that many Palestinians hate America.

Question:

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States, a number of news reports showed pictures of Palestinians celebrating in the streets. Yasser Arafat issued a statement condemning the terrorist attacks and asserted that these celebrations do not reflect the feelings of most of the Palestinians. Which do you believe more accurately represents the feelings of most Palestinians...?



Source: Survey by Institute for Jewish and Community Research, September 28-October 2, 2001.

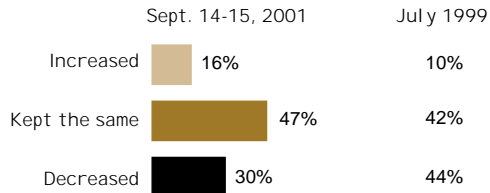
Gary Tobin is president, the Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco. Sid Groeneman is senior research associate with the Institute, and head of Groeneman Research & Consulting, Bethesda, Maryland.

Don't Cut Funding

Among Americans, foreign aid is rarely popular under any circumstances. Gallup's tracking shows that the largest proportion of Americans want military and economic aid to Israel maintained at constant levels. The percentage wanting aid decreased has declined over a two-year period by about 12-14%. The number in favor of increasing military aid, while still modest, has grown.

Question:

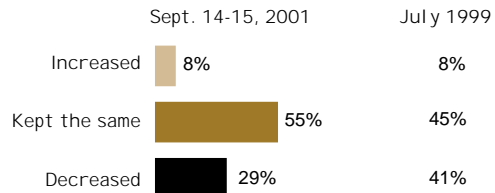
...[D]o you think US military aid to Israel should be increased, kept the same, or decreased?



Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of September 14-15, 2001.

Question:

...[D]o you think economic aid to Israel should be increased, kept the same, or decreased?



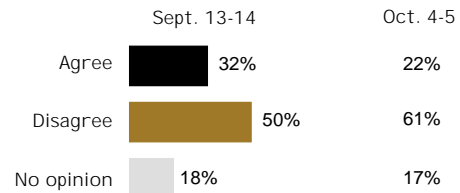
Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of September 14-15, 2001.

Maintain Close Ties

Despite biased question wording, a majority of Americans in the September 13-14 *Newsweek* poll disagreed that we should reduce our ties to Israel, and this number grew in the three weeks following the attacks. The results of the NBC News/ *Wall Street Journal* and the Institute for Jewish and Community Research polls are strikingly similar: all indicate a plurality in favor of no change in our relationship. And among those who favored a change, most felt we should develop *closer* relations with Israel rather than distance ourselves.

Question:

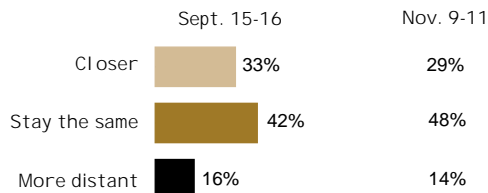
Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement... The US should reduce its ties to Israel in order to lessen the acts of terrorism against us.



Source: Surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Newsweek, latest that of October 4-5, 2001.

Questions:

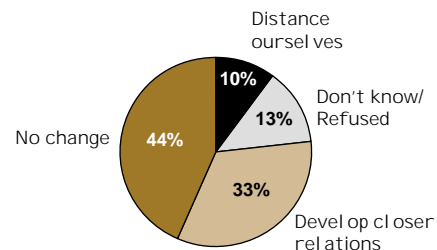
[Have Tuesday's events/Has the war on terrorism] made you think that the United States' relations toward Israel should be closer, more distant, or stay the same?



Source: Surveys by NBC/Wall Street Journal, latest that of November 9-11, 2001.

Question:

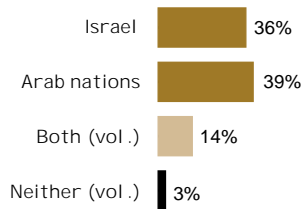
Do the events of the last week say to you that the US should develop closer relations with Israel, that we should begin to distance ourselves from Israel, or there should be no change in our current relationship?



Source: Survey by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, September 14-18, 2001.

Question:

What do you feel is more important at this time—US relations with Israel or US relations with the Arab nations?



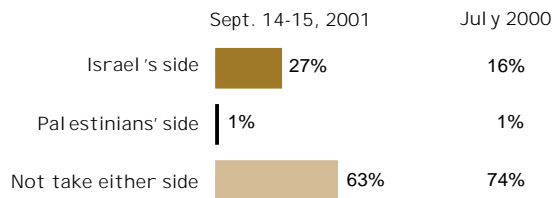
Source: Survey by ABC News, October 8-9, 2001.

Who Should We Support?

An ABC News poll question asking the public to choose sides, using what some might consider an oversimplified, either-or question, indicates a nearly even split. One must recognize "at this time" as a key qualifier when this poll was taken, less than one month after September 11. The response might, in part, reflect the Bush administration's high-profile efforts to assemble an anti-terrorism coalition of Arab countries. It is plausible that many Americans take US relations with Israel as a given over the long term and recognized the overriding need for Arab cooperation "at this time."

Question:

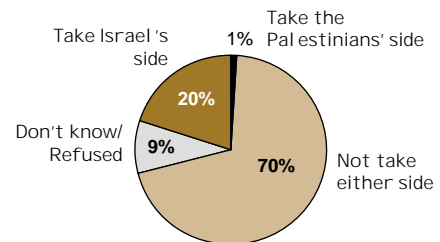
In the Middle East conflict, do you think the United States should take Israel's side, take the Palestinians' side, or not take either side?



Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of September 14-15, 2001.

Question:

In the Middle East conflict, do you think the United States should take Israel's side, take the Palestinians' side, or not take either side?

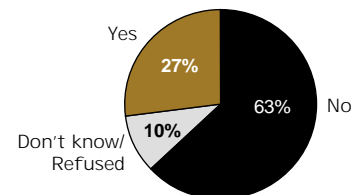


Source: Survey by the Program on International Policy Attitudes, the University of Maryland, November 1-4, 2001.

Gallup's polls show an 11-point swing in the 14-month period preceding the attacks, away from neutrality in the direction of taking Israel's side. Support for official neutrality is substantiated in a poll taken two months after the attacks by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.

Question:

Do you think that reducing US ties to Israel would reduce the amount of terrorist acts directed against the United States?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Newsweek, October 4-5, 2001.

It's Academic

Lastly, most people reject the idea that diminished ties to Israel would reduce acts of terrorism in the US.