

National Security and Public Opinion in Israel

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A. A.

T. H.

I. T.

A NOTE ON TECHNICAL TERMS

This study relies on the interpretation of statistical data of public opinion research. Technical terms that appear in the text are explained in the endnotes. Statistical analysis is structured so as to enable the lay reader to follow the interpretation of the data without delving into the statistical details.

SUMMARY

Democratic states are necessarily concerned with public support for public policy, especially regarding national security policy. This study undertakes (for the first time) to depict the patterns of public opinion in Israel regarding national security policy.

The world-view of the leaders of Israel has had an enormous impact on the way Israelis relate to the world and to the policies followed in national security matters and foreign affairs. The four major areas of concern were studied by reviewing statements of political leaders; they were then probed using a public opinion survey. The areas of concern were: (1) perceptions regarding the international environment; (2) the orientation toward war and the use of force; (3) evaluations of military force, political flexibility, and freedom of action in the international arena; and (4) the emotional base regarding security and national destiny.

Based on a representative sample of 1,172 Jewish respondents conducted in January 1986, the survey explored topics such as consensus, rationality, army service, and social class.

The survey showed that a large portion of the Israeli population felt that the country could withstand major threats. On the other hand, persistent feelings of being threatened were also evident. On the whole, respondents thought that the state of security had been better five years ago and would be better five years hence compared to the situation when the survey was conducted. Yet, while most of them supported war for defensive purposes, offensive war was generally not supported, nor was the use of nuclear weapons.

A broad consensus regarding security existed. Israelis tended to be confident that the "Guardian of Israel" would prevail. This guardian was most generally identified with the Israel Defense Forces (Israel's army), or the State of Israel, or the Jewish people; the strong core belief was in its potency. This is the basic feature of the way Israelis looked at the world. The leadership often employed symbols of the perils which had historically plagued the Jewish people, and of the Holocaust, and public opinion generally related these to the dangers the country faced.

There existed in Israel in the mid-1980s an over-arching concept of national security that permeated the system and structured the

beliefs and behavior patterns of Israelis. There was broad consensus regarding this concept and it was within this consensus that partisan political differences occurred. Thus competition was not between two world-views, but rather between two plans of political action. Many Israelis seemed to blend two kinds of beliefs: about making definable efforts and thereby achieving observed ends, and about divine intervention and historical determinism.

An important finding was the slight impact of service in the military on attitudes toward national security policy. It was clear in the Israeli case that the consensus regarding the national core values developed from the earliest stages of socialization into the system. Patterns of support for the consensus were little affected by the extent of army service or, for that matter, by the very fact of serving or not serving in the army. In one sense, this finding argued against the notion of a militarized Israel; in another, it indicated how deeply the core belief of national security had permeated the society.

Public opinion was seen to be structured primarily along political rather than class lines. The social institutions that might mediate the public's views were less important in the Israeli case than was the role of political institutions, such as the party and the leader. Israeli politicians were able, accordingly, to channel different social groups into the same political camp and ideology.

This was the attitudinal backdrop that provided Israeli leaders with enormous leeway for flexibility in making Israel's foreign and defense policies. Public opinion must be seen as an important source of support for policymakers in the field of national security policy — but support which can be molded and transposed with proper leadership. While public opinion could have indirect influence on the policy process, generally the attitudes of the public set the parameters of national policy and the limits of elite behavior.

Chapter 1. Public Opinion and National Security Policy

The leaders of every state — and certainly every democracy — must be concerned with the support of the public for their policies. It is the public that will ultimately enjoy or suffer the fruits of the policy. The political leadership of any democratic regime will stand for election in the not too distant future. These factors make the leadership more attentive to public opinion than in other types of regime.

Yet, of the major policy areas, national security seems to be the one least influenced by public opinion. One major point of agreement in the vast literature on national security and foreign policy is that the role of public opinion is marginal compared to political, military and economic factors. Public opinion is often considered a residual category which must be kept in mind, but need not be made the center of attention.¹

Public opinion has played only a minor role in considerations of national security policy research. Yet politicians clearly respect and fear (and try to manipulate) public opinion. Academics and politicians alike seem to feel that the role of public opinion in security matters is of relatively minor import, but the pragmatic politicians are much more concerned with the general mood of the moment. In an indirect manner, this mood does influence policy decisions.

These generalizations are appropriate for the study of the subject in Israel as well. But while lip-service has often been paid public opinion by Israeli analysts and politicians, no systematic research about the role of public opinion regarding national security policy is available. The intention of this study is to begin the process of providing such research.

Not all the questions which we would want to deal with can be answered here. The body of this report is formed by a single national opinion survey with its attendant limitations. We can only analyze what the respondents told us; we have no evidence regarding processes over time; we have no direct information on the impact of these opinions upon the leadership or on the dynamics of a given decisionmaking situation. Hopefully, some of these issues will be addressed in later efforts of this project. For now, we shall content ourselves with beginning the process of

depicting the orientations of the Israeli public on key national security policy issues, and of analyzing Israeli society in light of these findings.

Our central argument is that there existed in Israel in the mid-1980s an over-arching concept of national security which permeated the system and which structured the beliefs and behavior patterns of Israelis. There was broad consensus regarding this concept and it was within this consensus that partisan political differences occurred. Just as Israeli Jews identified with Judaism and at the same time argued vehemently about the proper way of expressing their religious ties, so too did Israelis concur about the centrality of security while disagreeing about the ways to achieve it. Two world-views are not in competition; two plans of political action are. We shall argue that the core belief of Israelis accepts the notion that "the guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" — and that all the rest is commentary.

In considering public opinion as a factor of national security policy, two central issues emerge. The first is an empirical issue, the second a normative one.² The empirical issue asks whether there is a relationship between policies adopted by decisionmakers, and the values and attitudes of the public. Is it possible to measure these connections, to estimate their direction and their strength? The normative issue inquires whether it is desirable to have foreign and security affairs influenced by public opinion or whether, because so much is at stake, leaders (more experienced and better able to foresee likely developments than the general population) should have a relatively free hand in making policy. The two issues are of course interrelated.

Classical democratic theory posits the central role of the citizenry. The expectation is that public opinion will influence policy, including foreign and defense policy. While there is no categorical claim that the public can influence all aspects of these policies, the public is seen to play an important role in setting the agenda of the nation and in generating the atmosphere within which policy is made and implemented. Demonstrations and petitions, for example, are extreme examples of communication between the mass and the elite, and these are likely to have an impact.³

The truth of the matter is that policymakers are unlikely to ignore public opinion. Whether they do this because democratic

theory demands this of them or because they want to be reelected is, for our purposes, unimportant. They may keep the public in mind because they know that elections are coming up soon or, more dramatically, because they know the public may be called upon to take up arms. Merritt cites the following examples of the West German government's concern for public opinion: the shift in the orientation toward the East and especially toward the Soviet Union, the recognition of the Oder-Niese boundary, recognition of East Germany as a separate and sovereign state, and cancellation of the 1938 Munich laws.⁴ In the United States, the case of Roosevelt reporting that he felt there were limitations to his ability to lead the United States into World War II,⁵ or the case of the United States hesitating to support the French in 1954 after the fall of Dien Bien Phu due to public disquiet over the experience of Korea,⁶ indicate the concern of governments with public opinion. Daniel Ellsberg, in his book on the war in Vietnam, makes the same point in a different way: the American leadership kept the armed forces in Vietnam long after it understood that the war was lost, because of its conviction that the American people would punish the leadership at the polls for losing a war on the ground.⁷

The importance of public opinion can be seen in the boomerang effect felt by some leaders. Since leaders tend to formulate their foreign policy views in clear and concise language, the complexities of international relations are often hidden from the public. If a change in policy takes place, the public is often hard-pressed to come to grips with the shift.⁸ This happened in the United States in the shift from the cold war to detente. A similar difficulty was faced by the Begin government in Israel when the Camp David process led to the return of the Sinai and the abandonment of Israeli settlements there. For at least some members of the public the shift in policies from "not one inch" of territory returned and never abandoning Jewish settlements, to a policy of withdrawal from the peninsula and uprooting of settlements, was a sharp and difficult change.

Yet shifts in foreign policy do not seem to have dire electoral consequences. This is true even in Israel, in which foreign and defense policies are always prominent (if not often decisive) in election campaigns. The lack of consequences is probably explained by the fact that on the whole the policy differences on these issues between the major parties, as perceived by the electorate, are slight.

In addition to the classical democratic view expressed by those who analyze society in terms of its pluralism, there is a second dominant approach. Versions of this conception are to be found in the elitist and Marxist schools.⁹ These scholars argue that public opinion is irrelevant in foreign policy because it is the structural and material interests of the ruling groups that determine foreign and defense policy. Any pretense at including the public is to be seen as manipulation by the elite in order to achieve support for its policies. An example of this analysis that has had great influence on the way people think and talk about politics is the proposition that there exists a military-industrial power elite which really makes policy.

Regardless of the approach adopted, research has largely ignored public opinion in considerations of national security policy. Most research on foreign policy in general, and on the strategy of national security in particular, has focused on elite decisionmaking.¹⁰ There are good reasons for this focus:

1. The elite defines the national interest, a concept which is at the heart of discussions in these matters. It follows that in order to understand a nation's behavior in pursuit of its national interest, one must first understand the individual and group perceptions and cognitions of the elite.¹¹ In his work, for example, Alexander George has posited a "cognitive map" (the "operational code" in his terminology) which allows the systematic categorization of the beliefs of political leaders in order to determine likely decisions in international situations. The centrality of the map in this approach obviously relegates other considerations (such as public opinion) to a marginal status.

2. Participation of the population seems to be more illusion than reality. This is another reason to focus research on the elite. It is widely assumed that the public is apathetic regarding foreign policy issues, and that therefore its role in the parallelogram of forces which determines policy is unimportant. Science must overcome sentiments which may obscure reality. Almond formulates this in the following way:

The treatment of problems of public opinion and foreign policy in the United States has been obscured and distorted by ethical bias and inhibition. All political systems have their myths, and democracies are not exceptions in this regard. The democratic myth is that the people are inherently wise and just, and that they are the real rulers of the republic.

These propositions do have meaning; but if they become, as they do even among scholars, matters of faith, then scientific progress has been sacrificed in the interest of a morally satisfying demagoguery.¹²

In order to understand how misinformed is the approach which looks for public influence in these matters, according to Almond, one must merely look to political reality:

If we examine any problem of public opinion and public policy with this type of structural analysis, the shortcomings of the democratic myth immediately become apparent. For example, can any people in the mass grasp with justice and wisdom the complex issues and strategies of foreign policy in the present era? Can any people in the mass and in the modern era make foreign policy in the specific sense of that term?¹³

The role of the public, then, is that of a passive observer, who may or may not interact on these matters with other passive members of society, who are also watching from afar, as the drama of international relations unfolds.

Survey research strengthens the argument of those who characterize the public as apathetic regarding foreign and security matters. Surveys of the American public show that between 70 and 90 percent are not attentive to foreign matters and have limited knowledge and interest.¹⁴ Merritt found similar results for West Germany;¹⁵ this is significant: the perceived external threat in West Germany is much greater than in the United States, and we might reasonably expect higher levels of interest and information there than in the United States. The results of the research indicate that low levels of interest and knowledge are not uniquely an American problem but that they seem to be endemic to modern democracies.

Verba and Brody's research on the role of public opinion during the Vietnam War in the United States also supports the argument that public opinion plays only a slight role in policy formation. In 1967, they interviewed a national sample in the United States (some 1,500 respondents).¹⁶ Two-thirds of the sample reported that they thought the war in Vietnam was the most critical issue facing the nation. But only 13 percent reported that they had tried to convince someone else to change his or her view regarding the war, and only 3 percent had acted in any way to change national policy (e.g., by writing a letter to the editor or to a congressman, senator,

or the president). Less than 1 percent reported participating in a demonstration. Considering the intensity of the political debate in the United States over the war at that time, and the effect reported by the politicians of their awareness of public opinion, these figures are lower than might have been reasonably expected.

As in many other matters, social class or social location is related to attentiveness and knowledge about foreign and security matters. Galtung divided the public into the following groups: (1) decisionmakers, (2) the social center — those socio-economic groups that enjoy the highest social payoffs, and (3) the social marginals who do not enjoy positive rewards and must at times even confront social rejection.

According to one theory that Galtung develops, those at the social center formulate policy and transmit it to those at the periphery. Those at the periphery have little knowledge, interest, or critical ability regarding foreign and national security policy, and therefore they accept wholly the positions of those at the social center. This tends to increase support for the status quo. A second theory that Galtung develops posits that those at the periphery are less affected by pragmatic considerations than are those at the social center. This is expressed in greater alienation from the system and support for revolutionary policies not supported by the social center.¹⁷

Almond's classification scheme is similar: (1) the nonattentive mass, (2) the attentive population — about 10 percent of the population which is knowledgeable, interested and has crystallized attitudes on foreign affairs, and (3) the leading elite. Members of the latter two groups tend to develop clear attitudes regarding questions of foreign and security policy, while members of the first group are concerned with foreign affairs issues only when there is some clear and immediate connection with economic or personal issues which affect them directly.

The summary of the research done on the topic indicates that higher education, urban dwelling and higher class membership are all positively associated with having more information regarding what is going on in the world and with being interested in what the country is doing in the world. Within each group, men are more likely than women to know more and to be more interested. The Verba-Brody, Merritt, and Galtung studies also showed that those who have more knowledge and interest regarding foreign affairs