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The Jewish Week

The Jewish Week

September 30, 2009

Jewish Majority Now Backs Attack On Iran, Disagrees with Obama on Settlements

by James D. Besser
Washington Correspondent

American Jews have taken a sharply hawkish turn on Iran, with a majority now supporting a U.S. military strike to end that country's nuclear weapons program, according to this year's Survey of American Jewish Public Opinion, released on Wednesday by the American Jewish Committee.

And that dramatic reversal from past AJC surveys came in a poll taken before the developments of the past two weeks, which included President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bellicose United Nations speech, revelations of a secret Iranian uranium enrichment plant and tests of missiles capable of hitting Israel — and beyond.

In part, the dramatic shift is the result of "the passage of time, and a growing awareness of the increasing Iranian threat," said AJC Executive Director David Harris, who stressed

that there was no data confirming his interpretation. "The other variable is the change in the American administration. For some respondents the change in administration may invite more confidence in an American decision to consider the military option."

At the same time, the AJC poll suggested that while American Jews are becoming more critical of the Obama administration's Mideast efforts, the feeling so prevalent in Israel that the U.S.-Israel relationship is in crisis is almost entirely absent from American Jewish life.

Eleven percent of Jews surveyed said U.S.- Israel relations today are "very positive," another 70 percent saying they are "somewhat positive." Only 16 percent said relations were "somewhat negative" or "very negative," pointing to a yawning gap in perception between Israeli and American Jews.

But the numbers also suggest that President Barack Obama's decision to make Jewish settlements in the West Bank an initial and very public priority in his relaunched Mideast peace drive may have backfired.

In the survey, 51 percent disagreed "with the Obama administration's call for a stop to all new Israeli settlement activity, with 41 percent agreeing with that policy.

"That's a significant shift, and the Obama administration is at fault for putting too much emphasis on the issue of settlements," said Seymour Reich, a former president of the dovish Israel Policy Forum (IPF). "As a result, the Netanyahu government has outfoxed the administration — and taken American Jewish public opinion along with them."

Polls by Mideast advocacy groups such as the Zionist Organization of America and J Street inevitably generate accusations of questions framed to produce predetermined results. The annual AJC survey is more widely, if not universally, accepted as a public opinion standard in Jewish life. Eight hundred "self-identifying" Jews were polled by telephone in this year's survey, conducted by Synovate, formally known as Market Facts.

Missing this year — AJC officials privately say it was because of cost — were detailed questions about a range of domestic concerns and more extensive questioning about anti-Semitism. This year's survey included only two questions on that issue, with a slim majority of respondents predicting anti-Semitism worldwide will stay at current levels or decline.

Also, year-to-year comparisons are difficult, since the AJC pollsters repeat only some questions as they try to keep up with shifts in the Jewish community's focus.

While most questions revealed consistency or modest shifts in opinion, the Iran results were nothing short of stunning.

Two years ago, 35 percent of American Jews said they would support U.S. military action against Iran; last year the number jumped to 42 percent.

But in August and early September of this year, when the 2009 survey was conducted and just before a series of Iranian provocations, 56 percent of the Jews surveyed said they would support “the United States taking military action against Iran to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons,” with 36 opposing.

Jennifer Laszlo-Mizrahi, founder and president of The Israel Project, said there has been a “dramatic groundswell of change” on the Iran issue in recent months — in the Jewish community and among the public at large.

In the AJC poll, a plurality — 49 percent — say they approve of the Obama administration's handling of the issue, with 35 percent disapproving and 15 percent “not sure.”

But Mizrahi said that as the administration reacts to recent developments by considering a range of tough economic sanctions and other tools for isolating the Tehran regime, support for its Iran policy may be on the rise.

“What we are seeing is an emerging consensus that the Obama administration is now moving in the right direction on the issue,” she said. “American Jews — and Americans in general — aren't confident sanctions will work, but they want them to be tried.”

Laszlo-Mizrahi cited an August Israel Project poll claiming that support among Americans in general for “targeted military strikes by the United States and its allies against Iranian nuclear facilities” is at an all-time high — 58 percent in August, contrasted to the 29 percent in March who supported strikes by the United States alone.

But University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato has his doubts.

“Few support Iran, of course, but just about everybody understands that a military strike would embroil us in a third foreign war simultaneously along with Iraq and Afghanistan,” Sabato said. “We don't have the will, and we don't have the money to spare. It's not as though the Iranians would just sit back and take it.”

A decision to attack Iran might win initial support because the “public usually backs” presidents when they decide to take military action, “but I'd be willing to bet that support would be short-lived,” he said.

On other foreign policy questions, a slim majority of Jewish respondents say they approve of the Obama administration's handling of Israel-U.S. relations — 54 percent approving, with 32 percent disapproving. (Seventy percent of Orthodox respondents were in the “disapprove” column.)

The finding that 51 percent disagree with the Obama administration's call for a “stop to all new Israeli settlement construction” stands in contrast to earlier polls by J Street, the pro-peace process lobby and political action committee, which were interpreted as showing strong Jewish support for U.S. pressure on Israel to advance the peace process and other surveys showing limited sympathy for settlers and settlements.

Even a very slim plurality of Reform Jews — 46 percent — said they disapproved of the settlement squeeze (74 percent of the Orthodox disapproved).

Why the apparent shift?

“There's clear evidence American Jews don't like Israel being pressured,” said Colby College political scientist L. Sandy Maisel, a close student of Jewish politics. The early administration focus on settlements, he said, struck even many Jews who voted for Obama as misplaced.

Asked if Israel should be willing to dismantle settlements as part of an agreement with the Palestinians, 60 percent said “all” or “some”; 37 percent said “none.”

And opposition to a “compromise on the status of Jerusalem as a united city under Israeli jurisdiction” held steady at 58 percent, compared to 2007 — the last time the question was asked.

The poll did not ask questions about overall support for Obama from a Jewish community that voted 78 percent for him

last November — but several observers noted that the results suggest unease with administration positions on some key foreign policy issues.

While some Middle East positions seemed to be hardening, the trend was far from universal. Support for Palestinian statehood, which plunged to minority status in 2007, crept up three points, to 49 percent.

In a barb probably aimed mostly at the upstart J Street, the AJC's Harris said that, taken together, the poll results reveal that “the ideologically driven groups with a specific agenda — whether on the right or the left — are misrepresenting the totality of the Jewish community's views. They are either cherry picking data that reinforces their particular perspective or framing questions to get the answers they seek.”

His group's survey, he said, shows “a continuing, clear and continuous centrism, with American Jews tilting to the left on some issues and tilting to the right on others. The suggestion that groups that represent the center are somehow fossilized is shattered by these results.”

Date: 9/30/2009