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Who Occupies Whom in Israel-Palestine? Don't Ask an American

By Eric Schuler
April 1, 2016

A new poll published by the Institute for Research: Middle Eastern Policy, shows that a plurality of Americans misunderstand a fundamental fact about the Middle East. Specifically, a statistically representative sample of Americans and three other nationalities were asked a simple question about Israel and Palestine. The wording of the question and the results are shown below:

Figure 1: IRmep Google Consumer Research polls

(Note that respondents were allowed to give their own custom response as well; those that did are included within the Other category.)

As you can see, the American responses differ significantly from the other countries'. America is unfortunately unique in having a plurality of Americans, 49.2%, who answered the question wrong, believing that Palestinians occupy Israeli land.

In reality, the Israelis occupy Palestinian territories in the West Bank and have an ongoing blockade of the other Palestinian patch of land known as the Gaza Strip. The occupation has been continuous since the Israelis won the Six-Day War of 1967 against its Arab neighbors. In the nearly 5 decades since, Israelis have gradually "settled" on some of the occupied territory, formally displacing the original owners and claiming parcels of land as their own. In other

words, it's kind of like what the US did in the Nineteenth Century as to Native Americans as part of what was euphemistically termed Manifest Destiny. The difference is that most Americans understand that our conquering and displacement of Native Americans ranks up with slavery as stains on our country's record. Meanwhile, the idea of Greater Israel, is openly accepted and promoted right now in the year 2016.

And the fact that many Americans do not understand this very basic aspect about the Middle East, probably explains why Americans also have much more favorable views of Israel than most of the world. In a recent global opinion survey, Israel was viewed as one of the top three most negatively viewed countries, with Iran and North Korea. In that same poll, Americans had the second most positive view of Israel (second to Nigeria). Americans misunderstanding on the present state of affairs in Israel-Palestine also probably explains why virtually all leading American politicians can get away with supporting Israel's actions unconditionally.

For me, this poll on Israel reminded me of a survey that was conducted regarding the 2014 coup in Ukraine. In that case, people were first presented a global unlabeled map (showing political boundaries) and then asked to click on the country they believed to be Ukraine. After they completed that step, they were then asked questions about what kind of actions they would like the US to take in response. In the end, the people who were the furthest away from correctly identifying Ukraine on the map, were also the most likely to support military intervention. Thankfully, this was still a minority, but it was revealing and predictable at the same time. Apparently, the less one knows, the more likely they are to support a) the US intervening, and b) taking the unjust side when it does. (We'll leave a thorough discussion of the Ukraine episode for another day.)

I realize that may seem like a bold claim at first glance, but it actually makes a lot of sense. First, we should note that effectively every recent war has been sold with some kind of lie or half-truth. For instance:

- Vietnam – Gulf of Tonkin incident
- Kosovo – Supposedly, a genocide killing 100,000 or more people was happening at the time, but when investigators tried to find evidence of this claim after the war, they found very little that could support it. Indeed, it has been suggested that the NATO intervention might have literally killed more people than the calamity it was preventing.
- Afghanistan – In fact, the Taliban were willing to negotiate with the US and give up Osama bin Laden. The US didn't like its terms, however, and decided to do a regime change instead.
- Iraq – The fake weapons of mass destruction
- Libya – The US claimed that Qaddafi was about to commit a genocide and needed to back the rebels. Unfortunately, the rebels were dominated by jihadists sympathetic to Al Qaeda.
- (Almost) Syria – The US nearly staged a significant military intervention on the pretense that Assad had used chemical weapons in a massacre that was captured on video. Subsequent reporting, however, revealed that it was a false flag attack by the rebels, done to try to induce US intervention.

And although in some of these cases, the proof of the lie could not be verified until after the fact, it's still true that journalists and antiwar activists, at least from Kosovo onward, were debunking the lies in real time. Thus, people who read and know more about global affairs will also tend to oppose war and other harmful interventions.

That reality is why the recent poll on Americans' understanding of Israel is both important and depressing. Facts shape our opinions. When those facts are wrong, the opinions tend to reflect that.