Tactical Hawks, Strategic Doves:
The Positions of the Israeli Jewish Public (Summer 2002)

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*T*oday many people characterize the period between the summer of 2000 and the present as a severe "crisis" that Israeli society has been confronting. Estimates vary on society's degree of success in the "management" of this crisis: some claim that a number of very disturbing signs indicate acute exhaustion in the national morale; others are convinced that the national morale has not really been weakened, but that elements with political interests prefer, for their own reasons, to present a picture of a society about to collapse. Whatever the case, the common sentiment is that now is a period far different from the preceding years.

The main argument in this article is that from Israeli society's point of view, the last two years have not been a period of crisis that suddenly erupted, but are the "culmination" of a continuing crisis that began with the signing of the Oslo Accords in the early nineties.

The ongoing crisis, launched when the first Oslo accord was ratified (1993), has been manifested simultaneously along two levels. The first is the "external" dimension, an intense, in fact unprecedented, examination of the positions held by the Israeli collective regarding the Palestinian collective, and an examination of basic common assumptions about the conflict, its sources, and its development. The second dimension is an "internal" one, involving an unprecedented exploration of "who we are," based on the assumption (in retrospect, proven false) that after years in which the conflict had pushed society to internecine wrangling and internal rifts, the transition to the "age of peace" permitted an open, forthright handling of these painful subjects.

At the "external" level following Oslo, the Palestinian side had to be redefined, as it was no longer "the enemy" but a partner in dialogue. It became necessary to negotiate directly with Palestinian figures, especially Yasser Arafat, who for many years was regarded as Israel's arch enemy. It was also necessary to acknowledge openly an alternative narrative concerning the roots of the conflict, replete with the operative meanings about a division of responsibility and compensation for the injured. This was a challenge that advanced the post-Zionist concept that responsibility for the conflict and the unfortunate condition of the Palestinian refugees should be laid at least partially if not entirely on Israel's shoulders.

The negotiations over Israeli-Palestinian political borders called for taking the calculated risk of conceding strategic depth, the cornerstone of Israel's security concept since the establishment of the state, and especially since the territorial expansion of the Six Day War. Moreover, it was clear that reaching an agreement, whatever the details of its components, would require a "sacrifice" of interests vital to certain segments of Israeli society, first and

foremost the settlers in the territories, as well as concessions on national-historical traditions, such as historical and holy sites or lands conquered at a high, bloody cost.

Not only were these dilemmas not solved at once, but because of the foot-dragging and desultory handling of the negotiations, they remained unresolved on the national agenda for eight years. In addition, the continued presence of the dilemmas more than dashed the high hopes held by large sections of the public after the signing of the agreements: they also eroded the sense of internal unity and common destiny of the Israeli collective. Opinions were split between two camps approximately equal in size, each made up of rather similar socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics. The camp that opposed the Oslo process and the territorial concessions it entailed consisted primarily of the settlers who, in the eyes of those who believed in compromise, personified the obstacle to the path to peace. The other camp, comprising the supporters of Oslo, was regarded by their opponents as collaborators with the enemy. The long-sought peace slipped out of reach time after time, but the high price in terms of lost unity and mutual responsibility has already been exacted.

Therefore, the collapse of the Camp David talks in July 2000, the rise of the myth "they were offered everything but rejected it," and the outbreak of the second Intifada "solved," or at least relegated to the back burner, some of the external and internal dilemmas, and collective consciousness came back full circle to the pre-Oslo period. Political negotiations were completely frozen, and contacts with the Palestinian side, to the degree that they took place at all, dealt with practical security matters, mainly counter-terror moves. When these contacts came to naught and terrorist attacks grew more frequent, IDF forces entered areas that

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had been handed over to the Palestinians and in effect returned to a de facto state of occupation. In addition, there were the charges leveled and decisions made regarding the irrelevance of the current Palestinian leadership, and of Palestinians in general, as partners in a peace dialogue. With this "volte-face," whether justified or not, the old stereotype of the enemy resurfaced. These developments, along with the sharp rise in the level of violence and the termination of political contacts, created a cognitively coherent condition of "normal" violent confrontation in place of the previous problematic dualism of Oslo that had

included peace negotiations, on the one hand, and terrorist strikes and various attempts at foiling them, on the other.

At the "internal" level, the intensification of terrorist attacks, which penetrated deeper and deeper into Israeli territory within the borders of the Green Line, blurred to a great extent the distinction between the settlements inside the line and those beyond it, although, in other respects, as we will soon see, the awareness that the settlements are problematic vis-à-vis Israel's national interests has actually grown of late. This is to say that while movement can be seen in some ways towards narrowing the Right-Left divide, in other senses, the gap has widened. Signs also clearly show that the breakdown in relations with the Palestinians was accompanied by a deep alienation between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel, largely due to the events of September 2000, but no less, it seems, from the strong psychological need to differentiate between "them" and "us."

This is the background for the following discussion presenting empirical data on Jewish positions in Israel regarding the conflict with the Palestinians, the prospects for its resolution, and the ramifications of these events and situations on Israeli society.

Has the Israeli Public Ceased its Support of the Peace Process?

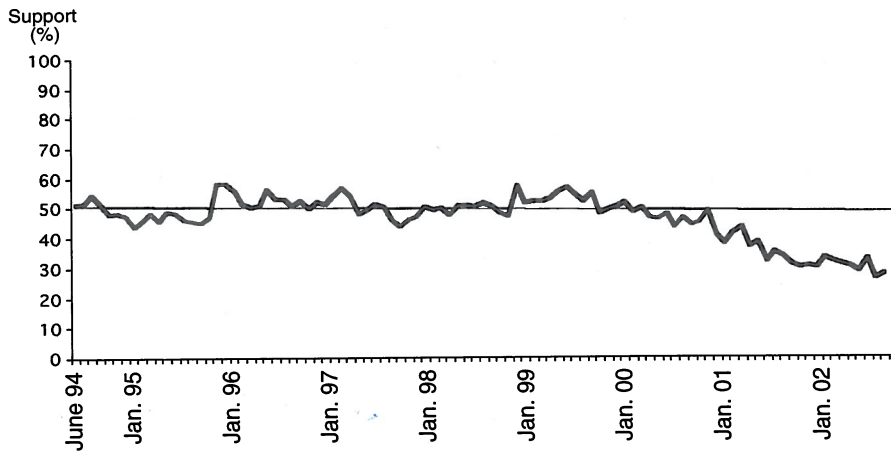The findings of the surveys carried out in the framework of the "Peace

Figure 1: Support within the Israeli Jewish Public for the Peace Process Based on the Oslo Format

Index" show that the answer to this question is not as cut and dried as assumed by many who claim that the latest period has resulted in massive erosion of support for political contact with Palestinians and for the continuation of the peace process. Rather, if the alternative to the "abnormal" conditions of the Oslo period, as described above, means a continuance of confrontation and the absence of a political horizon, then despite the pain and disappointment, the majority of the Israeli Jewish public is still willing to return to the negotiating table.

Figure 1 shows that during most of the years of the Oslo process, the Jewish Israeli public was more or less evenly divided over these questions. However, the data indicates that already in the middle of 1999 there was a decline in support for and belief in the prospect of attaining a peace agreement with the Palestinians according to the Oslo formula.

Support and belief in Oslo suffered even more drastically after the failure of the Camp David Conference and the eruption of violence in autumn 2000. Today the Oslo index (the cumulative score of support and belief in the process) indicates that only one-quarter of the Jewish public supports the Oslo Agreements and believes that this formula will bear fruit in the foreseeable future. These findings thus bolster the claim that the events of summer-autumn 2000 were not the "breaking point" that triggered a reorientation, but a catalyst for accelerating a trend that had already begun.

The claim that there was a sharp, all-inclusive turning point against the peace process is, as stated earlier, open to question, since the past year has proven that there still exists a firm majority in the Jewish public – 60% or more at each check – that supports political contact with the Palestinians. In other words, a large percentage of

Oslo opponents and the public that has lost faith in this process continue to advocate negotiations with the Palestinians. In this sense, it may be argued that the Oslo process, even if it failed to achieve a peace treaty, brought about a deep cognitive change, part of which means seeing political contacts with the Palestinians, despite the surge in violence, as an inseparable and even desired feature of the Middle East reality. One Palestinian public figure encapsulated this stance when he claimed that rather than speaking about a permanent peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, it was more realistic to speak about permanent peace negotiations.

Added to the support for political contacts with the Palestinians is the continued support by the majority of the Jewish public (60% in the March 2002 "Peace Index" survey) for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. This view stems from a pragmatic starting point and affirms that a Palestinian state is specifically in Israel's interest. From this perspective, the Jewish public's position has been consistent for over five years. Paradoxically, although the Oslo process has collapsed, it has not disappeared, and in fact, it seems it has penetrated profoundly into the Israeli consciousness with the "two states for two nations" formula.

The continued support of the Israeli Jewish public for contact with the Palestinians and for the establishment of a Palestinian state does not reflect a naïve evaluation of any capacity to bring about an

absolute halt to violence. On the contrary, according to the vast majority of the Jewish public, terror will not disappear even if Israel and the Palestinians come to an agreement on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Thus, in March 2002 the most common estimate (44%) was that the creation of a Palestinian state might lead to a reduction of terror, but not to its end. About one-quarter (25%) of those interviewed felt that if a Palestinian state were established, terror would intensify; 14% thought that the terror level would stay the same (that is, high); and only 10% were convinced that terror would disappear with the signing of a peace agreement and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Significantly, at the height of the Oslo process the same estimates prevailed, and at no stage in the process was the majority of the Jewish public convinced that achieving an agreement – whether it seemed close at hand or not – would result in absolute quiet in the region. For example, in August 1995 only 8% felt that a signed peace treaty with all of the Arab countries and the Palestinians would end terror completely. Forty-three percent felt that the terror would decrease but not disappear; 33% thought that it would continue at the present level; and 12% thought that terror would increase.

Dealing with the Political-Security Situation

The awareness that at present, a time of ongoing acts of outrageous terrorism, only a minimal chance exists for reaching a settlement through political contacts, as desirable as that may be, resulted in the Jewish public's massive support for the government's policy of force. In April 2002, 90% of the Jews interviewed claimed that the decision to launch operation "Defensive Shield" was justified, while only 7% considered it wrong. At the same time, a 54% majority estimated that the operation

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hurt Israel's political interest (e.g., its image with the international community). The policy of targeted killings also won consistently high support, despite the widespread estimate that military action alone would not achieve decisive results. In February 2002, 26.5% of those interviewed were convinced that if Israel were to employ greater force, it could alter the situation, but 27% believed that only a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative could bring about a change, and 17% pointed to an international initiative as the way out of the entanglement (23% said that the situation was unchangeable, and the rest did not know). In other words,

the majority regarded non-military factors as the best vehicle for change.

The desire to take an active step to "extricate the country from the mud" resulted in a concentration of the majority of the Jewish public (a consistent 70% or more) in the group that supported unilateral withdrawal from the territories and the construction of physical barriers between the sides. It should be recalled that support for unilateral withdrawal runs counter to the position repeatedly endorsed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, but is consistent with the desire for separation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, as expressed by the majority of the public according to surveys of the "Peace Index" throughout the Oslo process. In the shadow of the present acute crisis and the feeling that since there is no agreement then an alternative strategic step should be taken in order to calm the situation, the public is opting for a move – unilateral separation – that goes against the logic of both the Left, since it is not negotiated, and the Right, since the demarcation line of separation entails a de facto definition of the borders of the future Palestinian state. (In February 2002, 43% of the respondents claimed that the establishment of buffer zones would, in effect, determine the border of the Palestinian state, while 37% were convinced that this step was only of a security nature).

Against the position of the Prime Minister and the Israeli Right, the public has shown an increasing

readiness to dismantle settlements in order to implement a physical separation. In a "Peace Index" survey in May 2002, 67% of the respondents supported the removal of settlements for that purpose. In the same survey the interviewees were also asked: "In today's reality, do the settlements contribute to the weakening or strengthening of Israel's national interest?" Fifty-four percent replied that the settlements weaken or considerably weaken national interests; only 35% stated that national interests were somewhat or considerably strengthened by the settlements; and approximately 11% said they did not know. The response to an identical question last summer (July 2001) yielded the opposite emphasis: at that time the majority was convinced that the settlements contributed positively to the national security. It appears that this turnaround stems from the awareness of the heavy price being exacted for the defense of the settlers, and we may venture to suggest that the change bears witness that the Israeli consciousness has been influenced by the Palestinian claim that the settlements are a major obstacle to the path of achieving any kind of Israeli-Palestinian agreement, even in the distant future.

What Influence did the Events have Internally in Israel?

In the article "A State for Every Israeli" (*Ha'aretz*, May 15, 2002), Lili Galili claimed that, "even war no longer unites the people of the country. At least not the war being waged now, that has awakened the sense of a privatized war. . . . In the past, solidarity and social unity were synonymous with Israel's wars, or at least an integral part of the myth. The last few months have left Israeli society as divided as ever. The only unifying social cement is the fear of terror." To prove her argument, Galili pointed to recent demonstrations and

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protests on social and economic issues, which until the present crisis never took place when the cannons were firing. Other phenomena that seemingly sustain Galili's argument should also be mentioned, the most outstanding being the refusal of army reservists to report for duty; this is a development that has reached dimensions that cannot be ignored even if it is not a mass movement. Approximately 500 reservists signed an officers' letter and declared their refusal to serve in the territories, while thousands more supported this phenomenon, including organized peace groups, individuals, intellectuals, public figures, and Knesset members.

However, other empirical data raises doubts about the theory of social disintegration that Galili and others who analyze the situation in this way describe. More precisely, it is doubtful whether this outlook accurately reflects the public feeling about the degree of collective Israeli-Jewish unity today in terms of the ability to cope with the Palestinian uprising. In a public opinion poll taken by the "Peace Index" in March 2002, the following question was presented: "In your opinion have recent events, including terrorist attacks and operation "Defensive Shield," strengthened or weakened the sense of national unity in the Israeli Jewish public?" An overwhelming majority (86%) replied that the events strengthened national unity, and only 9.5% claimed that national unity was injured (the rest did not know). In contrast, shortly before the fiftieth anniversary of the State of Israel, those interviewed were asked to rank three goals according to importance: achieving peace, improving the economy, and strengthening national unity. The largest percentage selected strengthening national unity, more than peace or improving economic welfare, as the primary objective, a choice that conclusively reflects the deep fear characteristic of the nineties, namely, that differences of opinion on the peace issue will lead to an irreparable rift in the nation.

Not only was the sense of unity strengthened, but the public also shared a widespread feeling (65% of

the respondents in February 2002) that Israeli society's ability to "hang on" in the present confrontation is greater than that of Palestinian society. This does not in any way imply that Israeli society has overcome its internal divisions, but I contend the situation would be even worse without the unifying factor of a strong external threat and the dread of terrorist strikes. "The situation," which almost everyone complains about today, serves as a meeting point for various sectors, groups, and individuals in the Jewish Israeli public, without which they would have little in common.

In this context, the growing alienation between the Jewish and Arab sectors in Israel should be mentioned. In a poll taken in February 2002, a 55% majority of the Jewish respondents stated that if a Palestinian state were created, Arab-Israeli citizens would be more loyal to Palestine than to Israel; only 19% of the Jews believed that Israel's Arabs citizens would be more loyal to Israel; and the rest did not know or felt that the Arabs would be equally loyal to both states. Against this backdrop, the large support expressed by the respondents for a territorial swap may be explained (ceding the "Triangle," including Arab villages and their residents, in exchange for the annexation of large settlement blocs in the territories): 52% of the Jews supported this territorial swap and 36% opposed it.

In addition to the fear of terror, another sentiment, an extremely problematic one from the point of view of democracy, is shared by much

of the Jewish public: the comprehensive, critical erosion of public faith in political institutions and the government's ability to handle the tasks facing it. In February 2002, for example, only 20% estimated that the Sharon-led government was managing the security-political issue well or very well; 33% felt the handling of it was poor or very poor; and 40% claimed the government's

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showing was fair. Regarding the degree of public trust in political institutions, the picture was far worse: in November 2001, only 37% said that they had some trust or much trust in the executive government; only 29% had some trust or much trust in the Knesset; and 16% in the political parties. (Despite the volume of criticism leveled at the army's performance in recent years, the IDF still topped the scale of national institutions concerning every area related to public trust – 85% claimed it trusted the military. Yet even this was a manifestation of declining trust in the army, since in the past over 90% of the people interviewed had

consistently expressed their trust in the IDF and its general staff.) The public is united, then, in its distrust of three of Israeli democracy's main political institutions. This is an extremely serious situation that requires an all-out effort for dealing with the ominous internal and external challenges facing the Israeli collective.

The public's reservations towards the government and the success of its administration can also explain the considerable willingness to grant legitimacy to "rebellious" moves, such as refusal to obey military orders when in service. In February 2002, for example, one-quarter (!) of the respondents recognized the right of reservists, from the Left and the Right, to refuse donning a uniform on conscientious grounds (serving in the territories, or the reverse, dismantling the settlements in the territories). It is customary to recognize the right to refuse as an offshoot of one's opposition to the government's policy in the territories. However, the broad overlap among supporters of this privilege and "leftist" and "rightist" refuseniks raises an alternative possibility: this is the tip of the iceberg in upsetting the much discredited government's legitimacy to make controversial political decisions.

Conclusion

The nature of the events in the spring and summer of 2002 precipitated a decline in the support for and belief in the Oslo process, a process that was plagued by disappointment, failed to achieve peace and prosperity, and

resulted in a blood-stained confrontation and economic collapse. Little wonder, then, that on the tactical level a decisive majority of the Israeli Jewish public supports the government's policy of applying massive military force. Concurrently, the collapse of the peace process and escalation in the level of violence has strengthened the sense of national unity in the Jewish public and its estimate of its national endurance capability vis-à-vis the Palestinian side.

However, the situation has not completely returned to square one. On the strategic level, several cornerstones of the Oslo process remain on the agenda – first and foremost the desire for political contact with the Palestinians, and the acknowledgement of the "two states for two peoples" solution, that serves, it seems, as the basis of the major

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widespread support for the plan of unilateral withdrawal/separation. In addition, there has been a recognized decline in willingness to preserve Israeli settlements beyond the Green Line at any price. Today settlements are seen by the majority as more damaging to national security than contributing to it. In other words, from the perspective of the public's willingness to pay the costly price for conflict resolution, the post-October 2000 events have not brought about a retreat in the Israeli public's positions, but a development of insights in the direction of practical if not ideological readiness to make concessions – a shift that was less visible in over seven years of peace negotiations. In general, then, we may say that the intensification of the crisis has converted the Israeli Jewish public into tactical hawks and strategic doves, and, in effect, has blurred the traditional distinction between dovish "Left" and hawkish "Right."