

# Who in Israel is Ready for a Peace Agreement with the Palestinians?

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## Introduction

The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a major national security concern not only inside Israel, but also in the eyes of Israel's major international partners. The Israeli public is indirectly involved in the ongoing discourse over the implications of domestically and internationally proposed solutions, and it is highly likely that an ultimate decision on the issue will require an act of deliberative democracy, such as, for example, a national referendum. Many Israeli policymakers tend to affirm unequivocally that several constituencies within the Israeli public are not ready for an agreement. Whether or not that is the case, any meaningful discussion of the issue on the political level must take into account the diversity and range of attitudes within Israeli public opinion.

This article analyzes the attitudes of the Israeli Jewish public toward various elements related to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, based on data gathered in January 2014 within the framework of the INSS National Security and Public Opinion Project (NSPOP), a project charting trends in public opinion carried out at INSS since 1985. The poll was conducted among the adult Jewish population in Israel and included questions regarding the willingness of the public to engage in the negotiations with the Palestinians; their assessments of the major obstacles en route to a permanent agreement, and the degree to which Prime Minister Netanyahu has a mandate from various groups of Israelis to pursue the negotiations. The survey was conducted by Market Watch-Ipsos. The sample (N=1223) was extracted

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from a panel of internet users (N=34,000); user penetration rate among Israeli Jews constitutes 74 percent.<sup>1</sup>

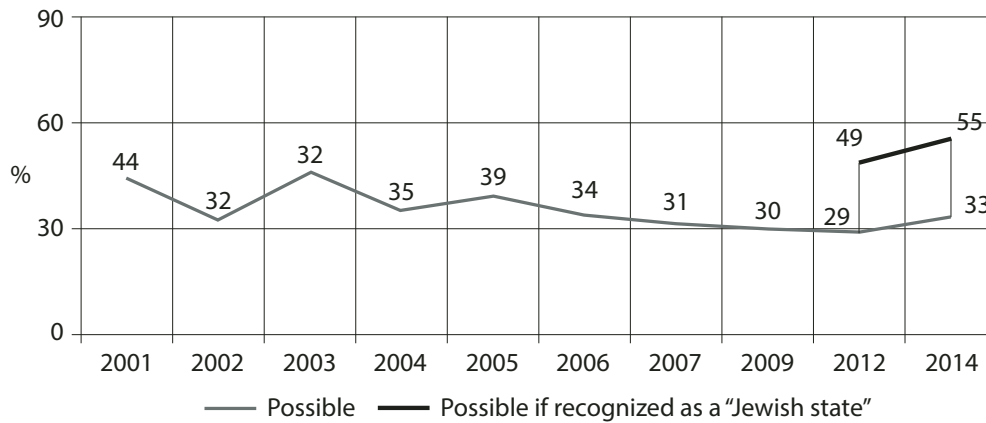
Our analysis suggests that public opinion on the issue of Israeli-Palestinian relations is multifaceted and should be addressed as such by policymakers. On the one hand, demographic trends among Israeli Jews will affect the willingness of the public to accept an agreement. On the other hand, the results imply that the impact of demographic factors may be moderated if specific conditions related to the permanent agreement are consistently popularized among all population groups.

The first section of the article presents the basic perceptions of the Israeli Jewish public on Palestinian society and the Palestinian leadership, and their ability to be partners in the negotiations. The second section presents the attitudes of the Israeli public regarding a number of core issues, namely: “two states for two peoples” and the establishment of a Palestinian state; settlements; refugees; and Jerusalem. The third section contains the analysis of the respondents’ profiles with regard to their voting intentions in a hypothetical referendum and suggests practical implications for policymakers involved in the process of trying to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinians.

### **Attitudes toward the Political Process**

For many years NSPOP surveys have charted the attitude of Israelis regarding the possibility of a peace agreement with Palestinians. Each year respondents were asked if they believed “it is possible to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians” (figure 1). Recent polls introduced a follow-up question that probes the added value of Palestinian symbolic recognition of the state “as a homeland of the Jewish people” (black line above the grey line, asked in 2012 and in 2014).

The results suggest two conclusions. First, in 2014 about two thirds of the public do not see the prospects for peace as feasible. Second, symbolic recognition of Israel “as a national home of the Jewish people” is likely to bring considerably more people to the camp of these who positively assess the possibility of peace. In 2014, 22 percent of the public switched from a “not possible” to a “possible” assessment, when the question included the condition of recognizing “Israel as the national home of the Jewish people.” This attests to the sensitivity of the public to what is implied by this specific rhetoric, and suggests that there is an opportunity for the policymakers



**Figure 1.** Possibility of peace with Palestinians and the added value of “if the Palestinians recognize Israel as a state of the Jewish people”

to mold and channel the mood of the public by means of carefully chosen rhetorical signals.

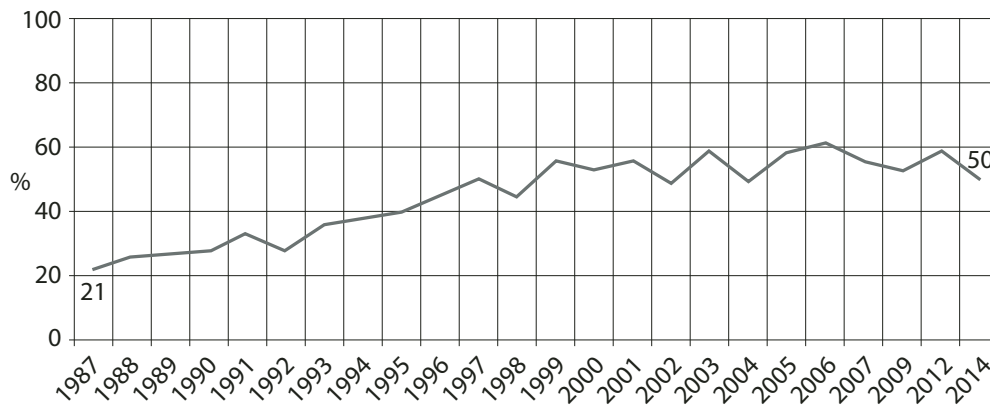
The trend charted in figure 1 shows that since 2001 between 29 to 46 percent of the public have positively assessed the possibility of peace with their neighbors, but over the last decade the number of “optimists” declined and has vacillated around 30 percent (33 percent in January 2014). The reasons for the decline can be many: in 2014, 34 percent blamed the “recalcitrance of the Palestinian Authority” for the stalemate in negotiations, 9 percent blamed the “lack of flexibility on behalf of the Israeli government,” and half of the respondents attributed the stalemate to the sense that “the gap between the two parties is too large”; only 7 percent believed that the internal split within the Palestinian political leadership (between Fatah and Hamas) is the cause of the deadlock.

Thus, Israeli Jews in 2014 are pessimistic about the chances of reaching a peace agreement, but they do not put the blame for the lack of an agreement on the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> It is the “gap between the sides” that is held responsible by at least half of the Israelis for the lack of progress.

### Attitudes toward some Core Issues

The next set of questions probes in greater depth public attitudes regarding elements of a peace agreement that policymakers should consider while formulating the core clauses of the agreement. The clauses of a future agreement have a tendency to multiply as the negotiations evolve, but for almost three decades several central issues have dominated the negotiations

lexicon. First, the Israeli public has come a long way toward internalizing the idea of a Palestinian state (figure 2). When the question first appeared in the survey in 1987, only 21 percent were in favor. Support for the idea peaked in 2006 at 61 percent, but in 2014 it was still supported by 50 percent of the public.



**Figure 2.** Support for the establishment of a Palestinian state

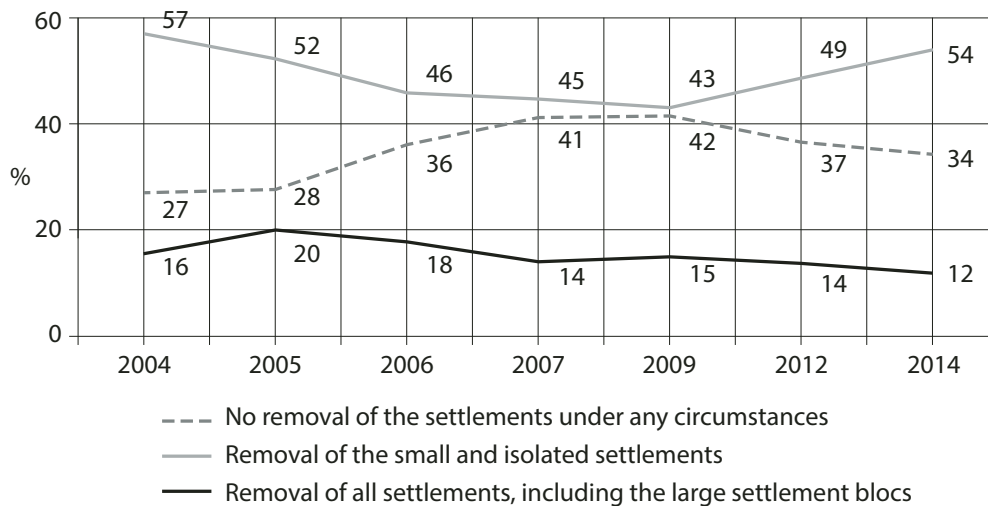
Second, the “permanent” status of the agreement is critical to the support of 17 percent of the public, and thus only 33 percent (as opposed

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to 50 percent) believe that Israel should agree to the establishment of the Palestinian state in the context of a long term temporary agreement. This suggests that part of the public is particularly sensitive to the wording of clauses that convey the nature and duration of a future agreement. The principle of “two states for two peoples” is supported by the majority, and the level of support has not dropped below 60 percent since the question was introduced in 2006 (64 percent in 2014). The wording that contains “the support for the establishment of a Palestinian state,” which may have a negative connotation among some Israelis, prompts a drop of about 13 percent of supporters (50 percent support), while substitution of “permanent solution” with “temporary long term solution” reduces the number of supporters even further to 33 per cent.

The future of the settlements is another core issue. For ten years, the NSPOP has tracked the willingness of the public to evacuate settlements.

In 2014, similar to previous years, about one third of the respondents (34 percent) unequivocally opposed the idea of settlement evacuation. Fifty-four percent were ready to evacuate small isolated settlements, and only 12 percent said they were willing to evacuate all the settlements in the context of a permanent settlement (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Attitude toward the removal of settlements in the context of permanent agreement, 2004-2014

The question, then, arises as to basic preference of the public with regard to the settlement of the conflict. In 2014, 11 percent chose a permanent agreement that would include substantial territorial concessions, including part of Jerusalem; 28 percent preferred a partial agreement with limited territorial concessions that leaves Jerusalem under Israeli control; 23 percent preferred unilateral disengagement from Palestinians, while only 5 percent supported a one-state solution. One third of the public (33 percent) opposed all these scenarios: this group, which is ideologically the most opposed to the idea of an agreement, comprises primarily young religious respondents.

In order to probe the level of support for or opposition to an agreement with the Palestinians, respondents were asked if in a referendum they would support or oppose an agreement that is based on: the principle of “two states for two peoples,” a

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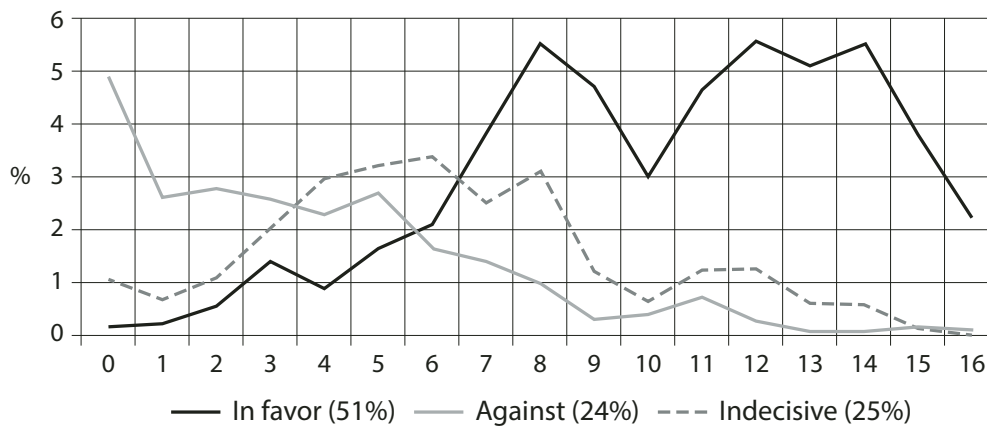
Palestinian state established on 93 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza, including the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem; recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people; Israeli control of the settlement blocs, including the Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem and the Old City, and a military presence in the Jordan Valley; a declaration by the Palestinians of the end of the conflict and an end to all claims; a return of Palestinian refugees only to the Palestinian state; and a Palestinian affirmation that the Temple Mount will be under divine sovereignty. The results for this question indicate that in 2014, 51 percent would vote in favor, 24 percent would oppose, and one fourth remains indecisive.

The results presented so far suggest that slightly more than one third of the Jewish public views any attempts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians absolutely negatively, and about 15 percent would agree to any concessions in order to reach an agreement. The remaining 50 percent hold views that can be influenced by the terms and perhaps even the wording of the agreement, the positions and stands taken by key opinion leaders, and other events that may occur en route to the agreement (e.g., major terror attacks, economic downturns, or massive protest actions).

### **Who in Israel is Ready for a Peace Agreement, and under What Conditions?**

For over 25 years the NSPOP has published studies that attest to the high political diversity of the Israeli body politic. If in the past, one's country of origin (Western versus North African), level of education, and economic status played a significant role in these divides, by 2014 these characteristics lost most of their effect on political attitudes. To understand the profile of the Israeli body politic that vacillates in its attitude toward a peace agreement with the Palestinians, we calculated an index of support for the agreement that consists of the following questions: Is it possible to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians? Is it possible to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians if they recognize the State of Israel as a national home of the Jewish people? Do you support or oppose the formula of "two states for two peoples"? Do you believe that the majority of Palestinians want peace? Do you think that Israel should or should not agree to the establishment of the Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of the permanent agreement? The bivariate correlation among the items always acceded  $=.5$ , and the index varied between 0, that is, opposed to all suggestions related to an agreement, and 16, i.e.,

indicating full support and readiness to compromise (figure 4). Quite naturally, these who plan to vote in favor in a hypothetical referendum are on the average significantly more supportive of the idea of an agreement (average index score 10) compared to both those who oppose it (score 4 on average) and those who are indecisive (score 6 on average). The analysis of means suggests that the distance between an average respondent who is in favor of an agreement and the average respondent who is indecisive is 4 index points ( $10-6=4$ ), while the distance between the respondent who is against and the one who is indecisive constitutes 2 index points ( $6-4=2$ ). In other words, it is potentially easier for political actors who oppose the agreement to influence and attract the indecisive respondents toward their side, while the political actors supporting the agreement will have to make more efforts to win over an average indecisive respondent.



**Figure 4.** Results of a hypothetical national referendum on the issue of a permanent agreement with the Palestinians as a function of place in the index of the core conditions, 2014

Further analysis of socio-political profiles of the respondents implies that the aggregate weight of attitudes toward the core issues is important for defining the position of a respondent (support vs. oppose vs. indecisive) during the referendum. For example, for a 64 year old, non-religious, university educated, upper middle class individual, with the score of support for the core issues 5, the probability of being in favor of the agreement constituted .48, while the probability of being indecisive or against the agreement constituted .19 and .33, respectively. On the other hand, a respondent from the same age cohort with post-secondary education and low income, whose score of support for the core issues is higher (11), has .87 probability of voting in favor, .04 probability of voting against, and

.10 probability of being indecisive. This comparison suggests that among the secular public, support for the agreement during the referendum would depend on the attitudes toward the core issues rather than on socio-demographic characteristics. Policymakers may have the greatest leverage over the public mood among this group by downplaying the rhetoric around sensitive phrases that decrease the level of support and emphasizing the clauses that may increase it.

Unlike the secular public, religious respondents are influenced by their religious beliefs (see Appendix), but even for this group the attitudes toward the core issues are more decisive for their vote in the hypothetical referendum, compared to adherence to the religious tradition. For example, a low income 31 year old ultra-Orthodox man who has had a higher education and scored 0 on the index of support has a zero probability of voting in favor, and a very high probability of being against ( $p=.81$ ), while the probability of being indecisive stands at  $p=.16$ . If the person with the same socio-demographic characteristics would be moderately oriented toward the agreement (e.g., score of support=6), he would still vote against it, but the

probability of being against the agreement drops to  $p=.43$  (indecisive  $p=.31$ , in favor  $p=.26$ ).<sup>3</sup>

Overall, change in the level of religiosity from secular to ultra-Orthodox on average decreases the probability of supporting the agreement by  $p=.10$  (all other conditions are kept equal), while a similar “price” is associated with belonging to the youngest cohort (18-31) as opposed to the cohort of baby boomers (+65). However, as shown by the analysis, the most decisive effect on the probability of voting for the agreement relates to the index of support toward the core issues.

### Implications

The data suggests several general conclusions. First, the demographic situation among Israeli Jews makes it costlier (and less probable) for policymakers to find support for a peace agreement with the Palestinians in the long run, because younger cohorts of Israelis are more religious and less oriented toward an agreement to settle the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Therefore, the strategy of “avoiding the moment” and postponing an

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agreement may be favored by the policymakers who oppose the settlement, and would be counterproductive for these interested in bringing it to life.

Second, there is a parallel trend among those who become accustomed to certain “verbal signals” that recur repeatedly for a sufficiently long time, “two states for two peoples” being a canonical example. Similarly, over the last 25 years the Israeli public has clearly internalized the idea of a Palestinian state: while in 1987 it was highly unpopular (21 percent), by 2014 it became part of the stable consensus.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, policymakers interested in the settlement may adopt a long term strategy and stick to popularization of the familiar “signals” that are likely to be contained in the statement presented for the referendum, rather than switching between different formulas or trying to popularize new ideas that are unlikely to be present in the referendum statement.

Overall, in 2014, about one third of Israeli Jewish public is not ready to support the referendum under any circumstances, while about a half of the population may change its opinion depending on the mood created by the media and the policymakers around the framework proposed for the permanent settlement.

## Appendix

The vote on the hypothetical referendum as a function of political attitudes and demographic characteristics (“against the permanent settlement deal” = reference)

	In favor (vs. against)	Indecisive (vs. against)
	b(sig.)	
Age	.005***	-.011
Religiosity (1=secular, 1-4)	-.367**	-.204
Level of income (1-5)	.038	-.044
Level of education (1-6)	-.012	-.084
Index of support (0-16)	.472***	.219***
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	.208	-.538**
Intercept	-2.197	.496
Nagelkerke pseudo R	.46	
Likelihood ratio	chi square =523.2 (p=.000)	
N	1023	

\*\*\*p<.000; \*\*p<.001

## Notes

- 1 Until 2014, the data for the National Security and Public Opinion Project (NSPOP) was gathered in face-to-face interviews, which is the most reliable way to survey political attitudes among various population groups. The survey in 2014 was conducted using a panel of internet users. Overall, internet surveys are less reliable compared to the conventional telephone and face-to face techniques, but in Israel the high user penetration rate makes internet surveys less problematic compared to other countries.
- 2 The number of respondents who believe that the Palestinian public wants peace is about 82 percent (15 percent think that Palestinian public wants peace “a great deal,” 34 percent chose “somewhat,” 33 percent chose “little,” and 18 percent choose “not at all”).
- 3 The regression table with the data used to calculate expected probabilities is in the Appendix.
- 4 The idea of the “two states” in 2014 is still completely rejected by about 7 percent of the secular, 18 percent of the traditional, and about 42 percent of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox publics.