



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 936, June 15, 2017

Jerusalem – “The Eternal and United Capital of Israel”?: Trends in Public Opinion

Zipi Israeli

In 2017, Jerusalem Day marked the “fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Jerusalem.” During the celebrations, numerous Israeli leaders and official spokespeople proclaimed Jerusalem to be the “eternal and united capital of Israel.” Over the years, numerous slogans have become permanently fixed in the Israeli discourse regarding Jerusalem—slogans such as: “united Jerusalem,” “greater Jerusalem,” “Jerusalem – the eternal capital of the Jewish People,” “peace with Jerusalem,” and others. Slogans are, by nature, efforts to convey short, simple messages. Their aim is to capture the attention of the public and, in so doing, to cause it to internalize the message in question. Slogans pertaining to Jerusalem play a particularly important role; although Jerusalem has always been at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has almost never been on the Israeli public agenda. The Israeli public has not viewed the question of Jerusalem as an arena of conflict or as posing a serious security threat, except for in the context of terrorist attacks. In this way, Jerusalem has been mentioned in the course of election campaigns for the Knesset, typically as parties seek to convince the electorate that they do not intend to divide the city (in the 2015 elections, this issue hardly came up), or during the period leading up to Jerusalem Day (with an emphasis on suggestions for things to do in the city).

This being the case, it is reasonable to assume that the Israeli public, the large majority of which tends not to visit the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, is unaware of the issues of profound importance and the dilemmas regarding the city. The slogan “united Jerusalem” remains fixed in Israeli discourse for years, without a profound understanding of the issue, its complexity, or its political impact and implications.

The large number of violent events that constituted the “wave of terrorism” of 2015–2016 in Jerusalem sparked a shift in the Israeli public’s attitude toward the issue of Jerusalem. This period was characterized by a flood of proposals for new political plans aimed at solving the issue of Jerusalem. The common denominator of these plans was the idea of separating Israel from some of the neighborhoods and villages of the eastern section of the

city. These plans included the mayor of Jerusalem’s proposal to remove the neighborhoods that lie beyond the security fence from the city’s municipal jurisdiction, a plan advanced by the “Movement to Save Jewish Jerusalem,” and one pursued by Yitzhak Herzog, the leader of Israel’s Zionist Camp party.

It is important to understand the public opinion surrounding these and other plans—which were formulated against the background of the violent events that occurred in the city—from the perspective of time. For years, a majority of the Israeli population regarded united Jerusalem as a single unit and opposed its division. Between 1994 and 1998, some 80% of respondents to the “Peace Index” survey expressed the belief that Jerusalem needed to remain united, including in the context of a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Opposition to division of the city remained high even when the division was presented as being the only issue on which an agreement depended. In 1999–2000, public opinion underwent a shift on this issue, with approximately 65–70% of respondents to the surveys of the Peace Index and the Institute for National Security Studies opposed to dividing the city. Also during the Second Intifada, when the public was asked about the option of unilateral disengagement—and even though the question clearly reflected that the aim was “the division of Jerusalem in order to reduce terrorism”—70% of the public still opposed the idea.

Between 2004 and 2014, public opinion on the issue remained stable. On the one hand, approximately 60–65% of the public opposed returning the Arab neighborhoods to the Palestinians. On the other hand, support for the division of Jerusalem increased when the issue was presented as a condition for an overall comprehensive settlement. The summer of 2014 witnessed a deterioration in the security situation in Jerusalem (including the murder of Palestinian youth Mohammed Abu Khdeir by right-wing Israeli extremists) and, at the same time, an increase in the number of attacks carried out by the Palestinians (the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails at the Jerusalem Light Rail, vehicle ramming attacks, and the shooting attack at the synagogue in Har-Nof). During this period, the Palestinian struggle for Jerusalem was conducted under the banner of “The War for Jerusalem.” Even during this time, however, a sizeable portion of the public (approximately 60%) opposed transferring the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem to the Palestinians, including within the framework of a final status agreement. A major change occurred during the “wave of terrorism” of 2015–2016. According to an ad-hoc survey carried out immediately following the beginning of the escalation, approximately 69% of the public was interested in disengaging from the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem.

The National Security Index, a survey conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies during the 2015–2016 wave of terror attacks and the following year in a period of relative calm, provided a more in-depth picture. As part of the survey, respondents were asked: “In the current situation, what, in your opinion, is the correct solution for the issue of Jerusalem?” The findings of the survey revealed that approximately 22% of the Israeli

public supported maintaining the status quo in Jerusalem whereas the rest preferred a degree of change in the city, including concession and/or a new solution: approximately 29% was in favor of maintaining the status quo while increasing physical separation in East Jerusalem; some 26% favored transferring the Arab neighborhoods to the control of the Palestinian Authority; and approximately 23% expressed support for the establishment of a separate local authority for the Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. Even though establishing a separate authority for the Arab neighborhoods was a new idea, it is particularly interesting to note that two separate public opinion polls regarding the idea yielded comparable findings.

What can we learn from these findings?

First, we can conclude, with the requisite caution, that Israeli public opinion regarding the practical components of a settlement in Jerusalem is currently in the midst of change. Contrary to the situation in the past, only a small portion of the Israeli public currently remains in favor of maintaining the status quo. Most of the population, on the other hand, believes that the current reality is problematic and will be difficult to maintain indefinitely. As a result, the Israeli population is more open than it was in the past to new and partially new ideas.

Second, the increasing openness regarding a new solution for Jerusalem is consistent with the idea of separation that underlies the solution of “two states for two peoples,” which enjoys the support of a majority of the Israeli population (approximately 65% support). The public is interested in separation, with an emphasis on safeguarding security. It is interested in reducing friction, at times regardless of the price and without an understanding of the significance of such measures, especially in the context of the complex reality of the city. It is important to once again emphasize that when the division of Jerusalem appears as part of a complete package agreement, the package enjoys the support of a majority of the population.

Third, it is also important to consider why the changes in public opinion regarding the future of Jerusalem occurred when they did, as violent events have also taken place in Jerusalem in the past. The most recent wave of terrorist attacks, which were perpetrated by young Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, appears to have played a significant role in bringing about this change in public opinion. The violent events disproved the premise that the status quo could be maintained, and the cement checkpoints that were set up in East Jerusalem, albeit for only a brief period, created a division in practice between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods. This division itself was reflective of a change in consciousness: for the first time, division appeared to be possible, especially because it was implemented by a right-wing government. Public opinion was ripe for change, for, as noted, surveys had

shown signs of change even earlier. This suggests that the Israeli leadership would benefit from considering the events’ impact on public opinion, as situations of crisis sometimes produce the opportunity for change, whereas periods of calm, when relative peace is restored, are often characterized by the disappearance of a sense of urgency along with a desire for change.

Looking ahead and given the trends described in this article, it can be assumed that as long as the period of calm continues, support for the approach of unity with regard to Jerusalem will continue to grow stronger.