

The Second Intifada and Israeli Public Opinion

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The second intifada was undoubtedly one of the most important security events in the State of Israel in the past decade, and it is reasonable to assume that the intifada had no small influence on Israeli public opinion on national security issues. There are, however, three major questions in this regard. First, is it possible to identify any pattern in the influence of the intifada on public opinion? Second, if the answer to the first question is in the affirmative, what was the direction of the influence and what changes in public opinion occurred in the wake of the intifada? Third, were the changes short lived and reversible, or were they long term changes that have left their mark to this day?

It is generally agreed that the violence that launched the second intifada erupted in late September 2000, but there is no agreed-upon date for the end of the uprising. The height of the intifada was in March 2002; following Operation Defensive Shield in March–April 2002, the violence declined slowly over the subsequent years. This article considers a period of five years, from 2001 to 2005, to be the period of the intifada, with 2002 as its peak.

As part of the National Security and Public Opinion Project (NSPOP) conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies since 1985, public opinion polls were carried out on a representative sampling of the adult Jewish population in Israel in each of the years of the intifada (2001–2005), as well as in prior years (1998, 1999, 2000) and succeeding years (2006, 2007, and 2009). This series of studies provides a good picture of the intifada's influence on public opinion in Israel.

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That said, public opinion is nonetheless a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. For example, there is a large difference between guiding political values (e.g., the State of Israel as a Jewish state, Greater Israel) that reflect one's central beliefs and are relatively impervious to change, and positions and opinions on concrete issues under discussion (e.g., a Palestinian state, land for peace, willingness to remove settlements as part of a permanent agreement). While characterized by a certain amount of stability, positions such as these are more subject to change as a result of significant external events and developments that by their very nature are fluid and dynamic. Examples of these positions are assessments of the national and individual moods, threat perception, and the perception of the arena's other actors.

Considering the severity of the events of the second intifada, especially during its most intense years, i.e., from the second half of 2001 through the first half of 2003 – in terms of losses to society and the central place it filled in public discourse in those years – there is reason to presume that the intifada had a far reaching and lasting impact on public opinion in Israel. However, the data indicates that the influence of the intifada on the Jewish public's positions on the main issues of national security was rather complex and far from unequivocal. Furthermore, to the extent that the events of the intifada had any real influence on public opinion, in most cases it was reversible, and to a large degree it waned as the intifada's violence ebbed.

Values

The intifada had a limited, short lived influence on the values of Israeli Jews. From the beginning of the public opinion project, respondents have been asked to rank the relative importance of four basic values: "a state with a Jewish majority"; "Greater Israel"; "a democratic state"; and "a state of peace." Figure 1, which summarizes the results for the years 1998–2009, shows that the results from 2009 are very similar to those from 1998 – eleven years later, after the intifada and the events of 2006–2009 (including the Second Lebanon War, the disappointment with the unilateral disengagement from Gaza, the Hamas takeover of Gaza, Gaza's transformation into a terror base against Israel, and Operation Cast Lead). If the intifada had an influence, it was mainly in the direction of strengthening the dominance of the demographic consideration. In

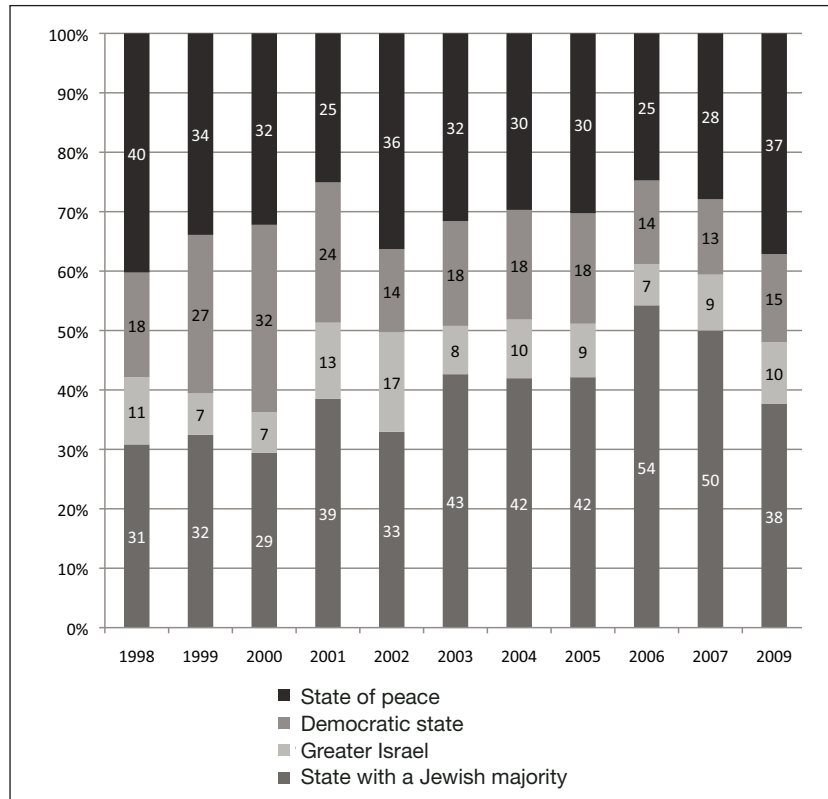


Figure 1. Most important value, 1998–2009

the years prior to the intifada, as well as in 2002, the most important value was “a state of peace,” while starting in 2003, “a state with a Jewish majority” was ranked as the most important value. The importance of this value grew until 2006, with more than half of the Israeli Jewish public ranking it as the leading value. The demographic issue was a central rationale for the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, and to a large extent was the basis of the Kadima party platform in the 2006 elections. It is reasonable to assume that the increase in the importance of the demographic consideration is the result of a number of events, with the intifada among them.

In two peak years of the intifada, 2001 and 2002, a certain increase was evident in the importance attributed to the value of “Greater Israel.”

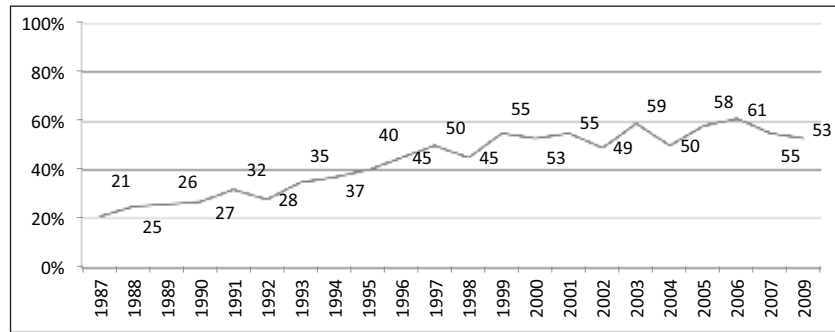


Figure 2. Support for the establishment of a Palestinian state, 1987–2009

However, except for those two years, the percentage of respondents ranking this value as the most important ranged from 7 to 11 percent. With the exception of 2002, it was always ranked as the least important of the four values. There is perhaps a certain influence of the intifada in the decline in the importance of “a democratic state,” which was defined as “equal political rights for all.” In 1999, 27 percent ranked it as the most important value, and in 2000, this value became the most important one for 32 percent, that is, for about a third of the Jewish population. However, starting in 2002, there was a clear decline in the importance of this value, and it ranged from 14 to 18 percent. At the height of the intifada (2002) it was even ranked as the least important value. This perhaps reflects the strengthening of negative feelings toward Arabs, including Israeli Arabs, as a result of the intifada. Additional results that will be presented below reinforce this hypothesis. After many fluctuations reflecting the events of the decade, in 2009 the picture resembled the 1999 configuration, that is, it showed relative parity between the value of a Jewish majority and the value of peace.

Political Positions

One main finding indicates that the intifada had a rather limited influence on the public’s political positions. For twenty years, respondents were asked if they would support or oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of a permanent agreement. Figure 2 shows that support for the establishment of a Palestinian state grew from 21 percent in 1987 to 61 percent in 2006 (with 55 percent in

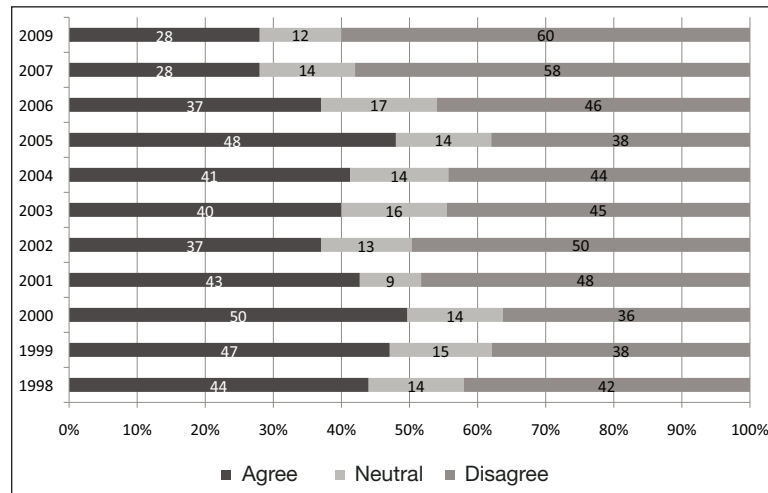


Figure 3. Support for the principle of “land for peace,” 1998–2009

2007 and 53 percent in 2009). From 1999 to 2009, the level of support ranged from 50 percent to 60 percent, with fluctuations in one direction or another, including during the years of the intifada. It is true that in 2002, support decreased to 49 percent, but by 2003 (still the height of the intifada), it rose to 59 percent. In 2004 it again dropped to 50 percent, but in 2005 it rose to 58 percent, and in 2006 it reached a new height of 61 percent. It is thus difficult to detect a real influence of the events of the intifada on the willingness of the Jewish public in Israel to support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the framework of a permanent agreement that signals an end to the conflict. The decline in support for a Palestinian state in 2007 and 2009 is not connected to the intifada, but to the events of 2006–2009. In the 2009 survey, conducted before Prime Minister Netanyahu’s June 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan University, 64 percent of the public supported a solution of “two states for two peoples.”

Another possible parameter as to the influence of the intifada on political positions concerns the principle of “land for peace.” Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1–7 their agreement with the proposition, “Territories should be returned in exchange for peace.”

On this question, in fact, the intifada had a clear influence (figure 3). In 2000, 50 percent agreed with this principle, and only 36 percent

expressed lack of agreement. The longer the intifada lasted, the more the idea of “land for peace” lost its popularity, and only two years later, in 2002, there was a reversal of the trend: only 37 percent agreed, while 50 percent disagreed. Nevertheless, this influence was clearly subject to change, as after 2002, once the intifada began to wane, support for this principle rose again. In 2005, the numbers returned to the level of 2000, with 48 percent agreeing and 38 percent expressing disagreement. The dramatic decline in the idea of land for peace from 2006 to 2009 is not connected with the intifada; rather, it reflects the influence of the events of those years, which caused a great many Israelis to have serious doubts about the benefit of withdrawing from territories (as occurred in southern Lebanon and Gaza). The 2006 decline in support for the principle of land for peace, which also constitutes a change in direction from 2005 (a majority opposed, instead of a majority in favor), reflects the initial disappointment over the withdrawal from Gaza, especially the Hamas victory in the elections and the continuation of terrorism from Gaza. The continued decline in 2007 and 2009 resulted from the Second Lebanon War, the increase in terrorism from Gaza, and Operation Cast Lead.

The response to the events of 2006–2009 also accounts for the large gap between the position on land for peace and the support for a Palestinian state (whose establishment involves Israeli withdrawal from the territories). This disparity demonstrates the complexity of Israeli public opinion, the importance of the exact wording of each question, and the fact that certain expressions have specific connotations for the Israeli public. The large majority of the Jewish public was disappointed by the results of the unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, and therefore the idea of land for peace lost its credibility. The public has ceased to believe that withdrawal from the territories in and of itself will bring peace. Nevertheless, the public is aware of the demographic problem and the need to find a solution, even if it is very pessimistic about the prospects of achieving such a solution. Thus in the interest of separating from the Palestinians, the majority is willing to support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the context of a permanent agreement.

A related question concerns the removal of settlements as part of a permanent agreement. Figure 4 reveals that while the public’s positions on this issue have changed over the decade, the influence of the intifada

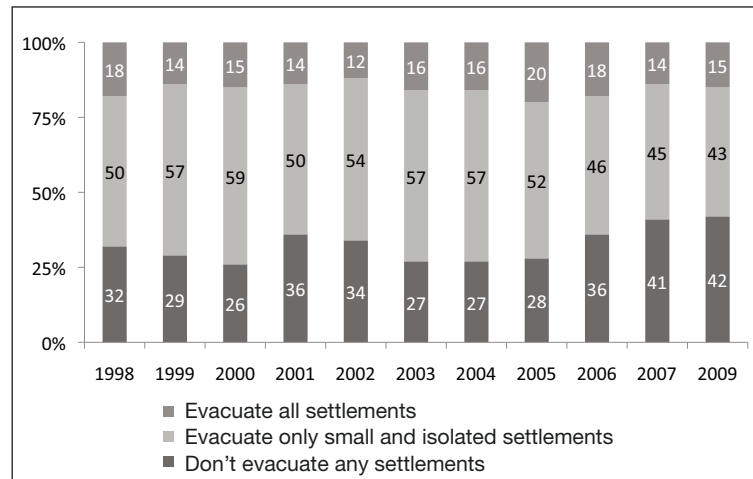


Figure 4. Support for removing settlements as part of a permanent agreement, 1998-2009

was rather limited. Although at the height of the intifada (2001 and 2002) the portion of the public that was not prepared to remove settlements under any conditions increased (by about 10 percent), from 2003 to 2005 the situation reverted to the level of the pre-intifada years. The rise from 2006 to 2009 in the percentage of people opposing any removal of settlements is apparently a result of the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the events of 2006–2009.

The Perception of the Other

An important dimension in public opinion, especially regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, includes the perceptions, impressions, and assumptions about the intentions and aspirations of the other side. Here too the intifada had a significant though not irreversible influence. Respondents were asked to what extent they thought “most Palestinians want peace.” Figure 5 juxtaposes the results for 1998–2009 with the support for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the territories in the framework of a permanent agreement (as shown in figure 2).

The findings indicate that support for a Palestinian state rises and falls, but in the entire period, there is a great deal of stability, with support ranging from 50 to 60 percent. The picture changes regarding Israelis’ perception of the Palestinians’ desire for peace. In 1999, 63 percent –

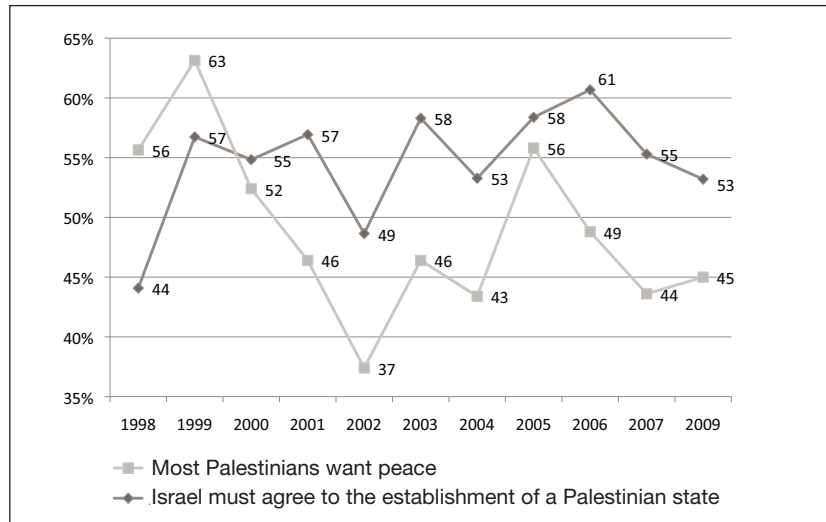


Figure 5. Support for a Palestinian state and percent who think that most Palestinians want peace, 1998–2009

almost two-thirds of the Jewish public – believed that “most Palestinians want peace.” Three years later, the percentage who believed this fell by almost half to 37 percent, slightly over one-third. Yet while the influence was dramatic, it was far from permanent. By 2005, the last year of the intifada, the percentage of those who believed that most Palestinians want peace returned to its level of 1998, 56 percent, although this was still significantly lower than the 1999 peak. The decline from 2006 to 2009, like other statistics, is apparently connected to the events of those years.

A similar trend is seen on the question of Arab intentions and aspirations (the question stipulated Arabs in general, not “Palestinians”). Respondents were given four possibilities: recovering part of the territories conquered in 1967, recovering all the territories, occupying the State of Israel, and occupying the country and destroying a significant portion of Israel’s Jewish population. Figure 6 shows the results for the years 1998–2009.

For the sake of this analysis, the first two possibilities are seen as legitimate Arab aspirations, and the other two possibilities are considered illegitimate and highly negative. From 1998 to 2000, the public was more or less divided in its view of the Arabs’ aspirations. In 2000, 47 percent perceived these aspirations as less negative, while 54 percent perceived

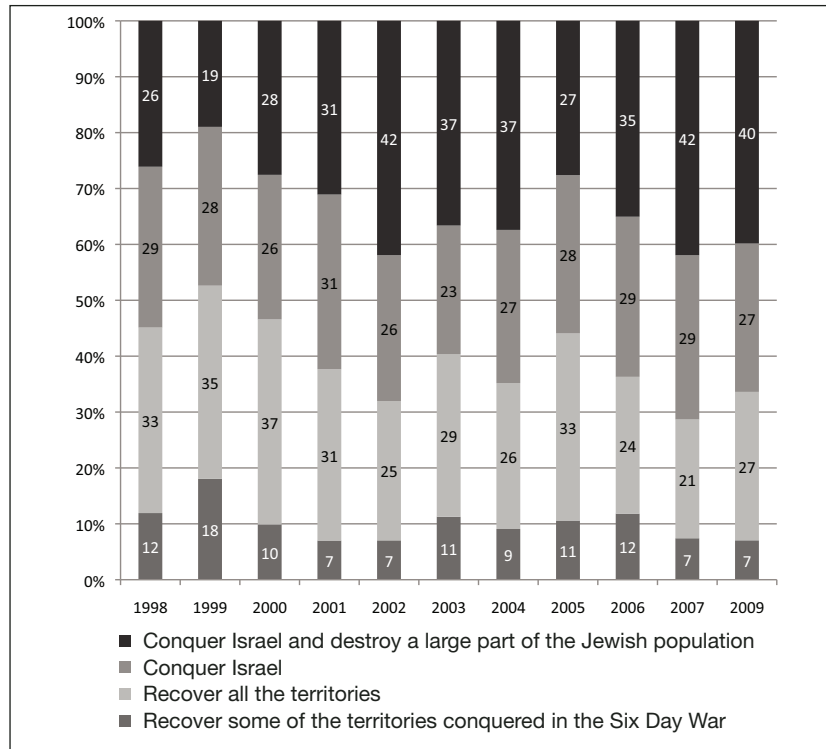


Figure 6. Ultimate Arab aspirations, 1998–2009

them as very negative. In 2002, only one-third (32 percent) considered them less negative, versus two-thirds (68 percent) who believed that the Arabs' aspirations were at least the destruction of the State of Israel. However, even on this question the influence appears to some extent reversible: in 2005, the numbers were almost exactly those of 1998.

National Mood and Threat Perception

Taken together, respondents' subjective assessments of the country's national security are an indication of the collective national mood, and the assessments of their personal state are an indication of the individual mood. Presumably the national mood and the individual's mood would be highly influenced by events such as the intifada. Respondents were asked to rank their perception of the state of Israel's national security on a scale of 1–9: at the time of the study; five years prior to the study; and

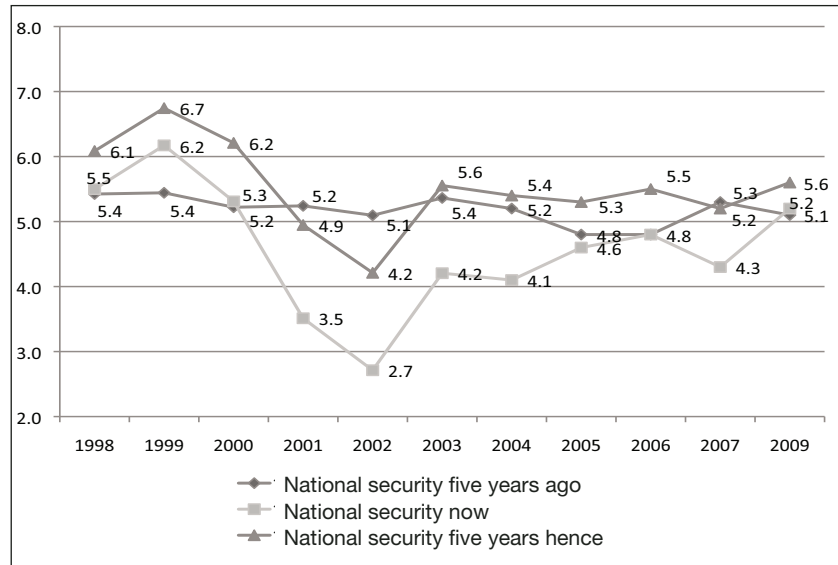


Figure 7. National mood: perception of Israel's national security 1998–2009

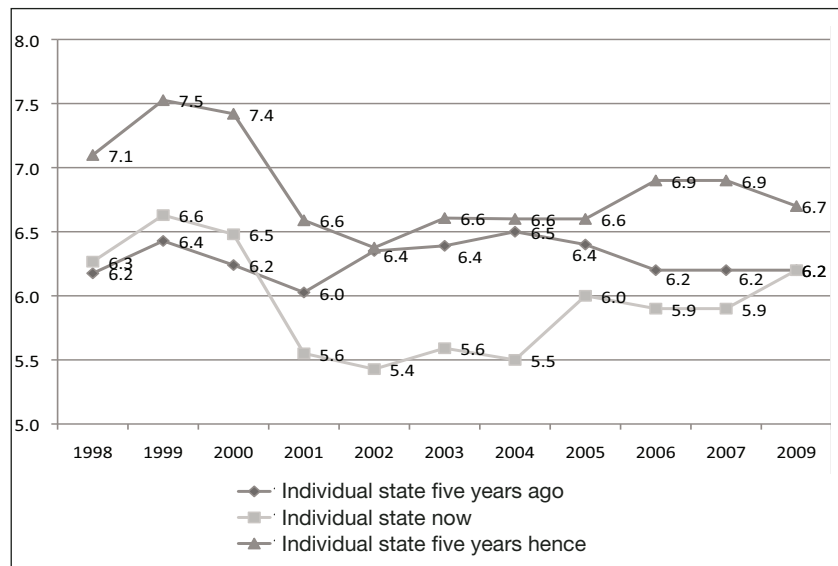


Figure 8. Individual mood, 1998–2009

five years hence. They were also asked to rank their individual state on a similar scale at similar times. The results are displayed in figures 7 and 8.

As expected, the results reflect the strength of the intifada's influence on public opinion for the short term, especially concerning the assessment of the country's national security. The sharp decline in the assessment of Israel's national security over the course of three years (from 6.2 in 1999 to 2.7 in 2002) indicates that in real time, the Jewish public saw the intifada as a very serious security event. The nadir of 2002 was unprecedented, and to this day the assessment of Israel's situation has not yet returned to the high point of 1999. True, there was an impressive recovery in the national mood from 2002 to 2009, especially in 2009 (apparently as a result of Operation Cast Lead), but it is still one full point below the 1999 level.

The picture regarding personal mood is similar, although less dramatic, which indicates that on the individual level, the influence of the intifada was limited, even in real time. The decline from 1999 to 2002 is only 1.2 points, and the result for 2009 is close to that of 1999. In general, there is a significant gap between the assessment of the country's mood and the individual's assessment of his/her own situation. This gap is a known phenomenon that recurs in many studies, including in other countries. People's perceptions of the general situation in their country or society tend to be more negative than the assessments of their own situation.

The intifada influenced not only mood, but also – and perhaps even more so – the public's level of optimism concerning the future. This phenomenon was seen on both the national level and the personal level. In 1999, the Jewish public expressed a great deal of optimism concerning the future of the country (6.7), and even more so concerning their personal future (7.5). One decade later, the levels of optimism are still significantly lower than at their peak (5.6 and 6.7, respectively). Nevertheless, the noticeable improvement that has occurred since 2002, and especially in 2009, indicates a high level of national resilience.

The intifada's influence on threat perception was also examined. Respondents were asked about the chances that war would break out in the next three years, and starting in 2005, they were also asked about the chances of a new wave of terrorism in the next three years. As shown in figure 9, in 1999 less than half of the public (45 percent) feared that there

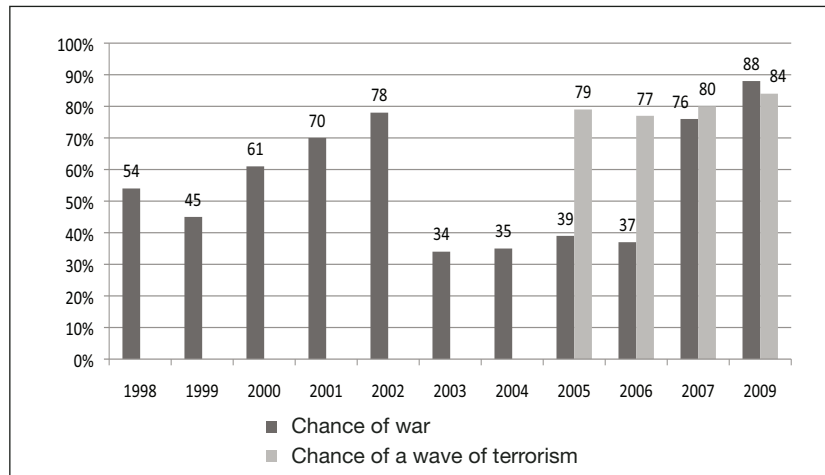


Figure 9. Chances for war or wave of terrorism in the next three years, 1998–2009

would be a war in the coming years. Three years later, in the peak year of the intifada, over three-quarters of the public (78 percent) believed that there was a high probability of war in the near future. Nevertheless, here too the influence was reversible. The clearer it became that Israel was overcoming the intifada, the more the fear of war declined. From 2003 to 2006, only one-third of the Jewish public had this fear. The Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead greatly sharpened the fear of another war among the Jewish public “in the north or the south,” and today, almost everyone (88 percent) shares this concern.

The picture is different regarding the danger of terrorism. Here, no recovery from the trauma of the intifada is evident. True, there is no point for comparison (since the question was not asked before the intifada), but the data indicates that at least starting in 2005, the Israeli public’s level of anxiety about the renewal of terrorism has been very high, with some 80 percent of the public harboring this fear.

Conclusion

Any conclusions drawn from this analysis must be predicated on two caveats. First, as in any non-experimental study, the existence of a connection does not necessarily indicate causality. It can be assumed that the changes in public opinion during the years of the intifada are

connected to some extent to the events of the intifada, especially in light of the centrality of these events for the population in Israel. Nevertheless, there were also undoubtedly other factors coming into play at the same time that had an influence on public opinion. Public opinion is thus a combined result of a complex set of factors.

Second, in a democratic state, decision makers are influenced by and attentive to public opinion. Nevertheless, here too the connection is not unidirectional. The positions of the leaders have a notable influence on forming the public's positions, and in certain circumstances leaders may act against the public opinion prevailing at the time.

The al-Aqsa intifada caused changes in Israeli public opinion while it was underway, but the large majority of these changes were temporary. Security events that occurred afterwards, including the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, also blurred the influence of the intifada to a great extent. Overall, the data indicates that it is not possible to identify a consistent and irreversible influence of the intifada on public opinion. The events of the intifada significantly reduced the feeling of security among the Israeli public, although as the intifada waned, the sense of security, the general societal mood, and people's personal mood improved. At the same time, the position regarding the lack of good will from the Arab side (both the Palestinians and the Arab states) was strengthened.

Overall, then, most of the fluctuations in public opinion that occurred as a result of the intifada were short term. The al-Aqsa intifada thus entailed severe events that stirred up public opinion at the time, but their influence on most of the positions and political values was relatively reversible and short lived.