

Israeli Public Opinion on Lebanon and Syria, 1999

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Lebanon has been on Israel's public agenda for two decades, and occasionally the policy debate has reached intense and vocal levels. This happened in early 1999, when the security situation in Lebanon again became a hot issue.

The immediate focus of the debate was the presence of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the security zone in southern Lebanon, established in 1984 after the army withdrew from Lebanon following the 1982 "Peace for Galilee" operation. The broader context was Israel's relationship with Syria and the future of the Golan Heights, which Israel had conquered in the

1967 Six-Day War. The Israeli public adopted a more conciliatory position toward Lebanon, but maintained a militant stance on the Golan Heights. Politicians, frustrated by the intractability of the problems and the ambiguous messages the public seemed to generate, found it difficult to respond.

In 1999, a majority of the Israeli public supported unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon (see Figure 1). There had been a clear trend in that direction for a number of years, but this was the first time Jaffee Center surveys showed that more than half (55%) favored withdrawal. Support for

unilateral withdrawal was up from 44% in 1998 and 41% in 1997.

The breakdown shown in Table 1 indicates that those who said "definitely no" to withdrawal had decreased from about a third of the sample in 1997 and 1998 to a quarter of it in 1999.

In general, more women than men supported withdrawal, and older people were more likely to favor a pullout than were younger respondents. People from a European background were more supportive than those from an Asian or African background, with the lowest rate of support coming among Sephardic Jews born in Israel. Among supporters of the left and the Labor Party, and those identifying themselves as secular, there was more support for withdrawal, while greater opposition to it was registered among those who said they would vote for the right or for religious parties. Respondents who had done military service in the territories were less likely to favor withdrawal than those who had not served in the territories, or who had not served in the army.

Questions have been raised about the rationale for the policy of maintaining the security zone in Lebanon. Between 1995 and 1998, the survey posed only one question regarding the role of the security

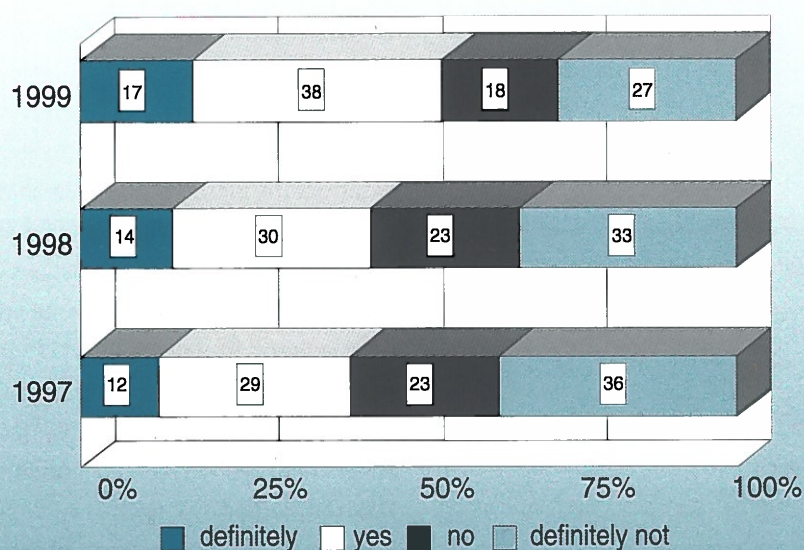


Figure 1: Unilateral Withdrawal from Lebanon, 1997, 1998, 1999

Surveys of the National Security and Public Opinion Project of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies are based on representative samples of the adult Jewish population of Israel. The 1999 survey was conducted between January 25 and March 7, 1999, and comprised 1,203 respondents. Field work was carried out by the Mahshov Research Institute.

Table 1. Policy in Lebanon, 1999

	certainly agree	agree	do not agree	certainly disagree
Israel should withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon.	17%	38	18	27
The problems in Lebanon can be solved without leaving the Golan Heights.	28%	42	20	10
The security zone is not worth the lives of Israeli soldiers.	44%	30	16	10
A great part of the disquiet in South Lebanon is due to Israel's policies.	9%	25	30	36
The security zone is an important bargaining chip if future negotiations with Syria.	27%	45	17	11
The security zone brings quiet to the north of the country.	36%	35	21	8
We are paying the price in South Lebanon for not negotiating with Syria.	30%	42	20	8

zone. In general, there has been a decline in the percentage of those who believed that the security zone in Lebanon made a positive contribution to Israel's security and kept northern settlements safe from terror. In 1998, 64 percent agreed with this statement; in 1997, the figure was 62%; in 1996, 72 %; and in 1995, 77%. In 1998, the remaining 36% (38% in 1997, 28% in 1996,

and 23% in 1995) felt that the security zone was not effective in bringing quiet to the border, and that its toll in terms of the lives of Israeli soldiers was too high.

In the 1999 survey, that single question was replaced by a more comprehensive series of questions. Respondents were asked to react to the following seven statements often heard in the public debate

about the security zone. Table 2 contains the rates of agreement to the statements.

Approximately three out of four respondents agreed, with varying degrees of intensity, that it is possible to deal with the problems in Lebanon without leaving the Golan Heights (70% agreement, including the "certainly agree" and "agree" categories); that the security zone is not worth the lives of Israeli soldiers (74%); that the zone will be an important bargaining chip in future negotiations with Syria (72%); that the security zone brings quiet to the north of the country (71%); and that the price Israel is paying in south Lebanon is due to the absence of negotiations with Syria (72%). About half favored unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon (55%), and about a third thought Israel's policies were at the root of the disquiet in south Lebanon (36%).

Public frustration and ambivalence about policy in Lebanon were obvious from an exploratory statistical analysis regarding the responses to these statements. Although about three-quarters

Table 2. Lebanon, 1985, 1987, 1998, and 1999

	1985	1987	1998	1999
High chances of invading Lebanon again	32%	^a	27%	20%
Lebanese war of 1982 was worth the price	27%	37%	^a	^a
Efforts in Lebanon have been a success	^a	^a	64%	53%
Response if terrorists shell settlements again:				
– Invade South Lebanon and hold territory	7%	7%	12%	7%
– Heavy artillery and air bombardment	24	18	30	37
– Limited military power to destroy bases	36	44	21	20
– Pinpoint air raids against terrorist bases	26	24	33	30
– Seek political solution	7	7	5	6

^a Not asked.

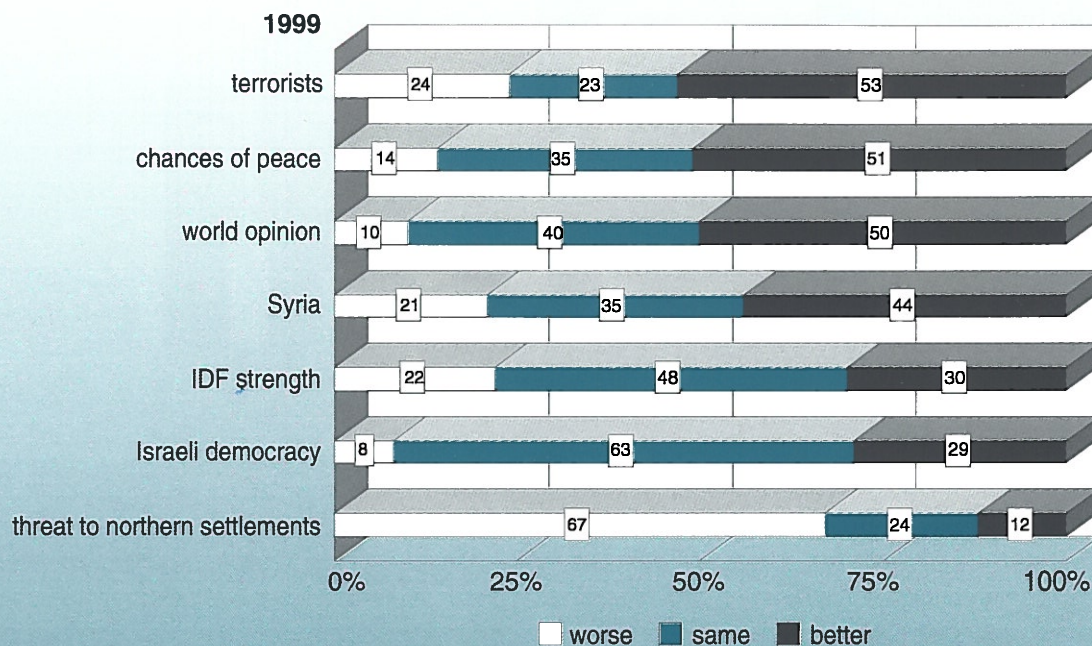


Figure 2: Effects of an Israeli Withdrawal, 1999

of the sample agreed with many of the statements, these majorities were composed of different respondents. That is, not all of the same people agreed with the same statements.

Some of the questions relevant in the late 1990s were posed in the first security survey in 1985, in the 1987 survey, and again in 1998. Public opinion has clearly soured on the Lebanese experience, and

does not see another invasion of Lebanon as very likely (see Table 2). The percentage of those who feel such an invasion may occur dropped from a third in 1985 to a fifth in 1999.

Respondents were asked if conditions were likely to warrant entry by a large-scale Israeli force into Lebanon. In 1999, 20% said that chances of this happening were high, 61% saw a low probability, and

19% saw no chance at all. In 1998, the corresponding numbers were: high probability, 27%; low probability, 65%, and no chance at all, 8%. The corresponding numbers in 1985 were 32%, 57% and 11%.

Respondents were asked if the Israeli army's efforts in Lebanon have been a success or not. Little more than half answered yes in 1999, compared with almost two-thirds in 1998. When asked in 1985, during the process of extricating the IDF from Lebanon after the 1982 war, only 27% thought the Lebanese war had been worth the price paid by Israel in casualties, material and tarnished international image. Two years later, the percentage replying that the Lebanese war had been worthwhile jumped 10 points to 37%.

Respondents were asked how Israel should respond if settlements in the north

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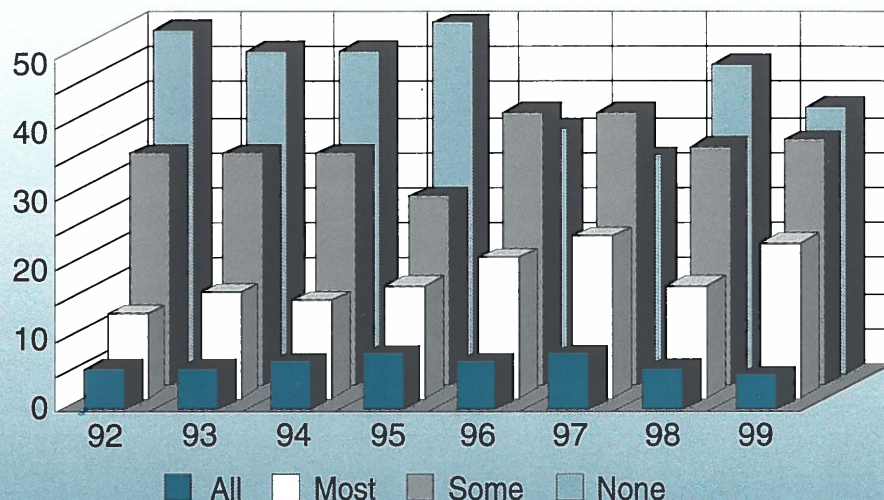


Figure 3: Returning the Golan Heights

were shelled by terrorists; their replies reflect changes in Israeli public opinion. In 1998 and 1999, a plurality favored air strikes and bombardment. In 1985 and 1987, the preferred solution was limited military action to destroy terrorist bases. This land action, fraught with casualties and danger, was only half as popular in 1998 as it had been in 1987. Faith in the effectiveness of air strikes rose; hope for seeking a political solution did not.

However, in 1999, there was less than majority support for an attack on the Syrians as a response to the shelling of northern settlements. Forty-six percent agreed to such a proposal (14% to a great extent, 32% to a certain extent), compared with 54% who disagreed (23% strongly disagreed, 30% disagreed).

Another series of questions asked in 1999, 1998 and 1985 had to do with the results of policy in Lebanon. In 1998 and 1999, the questions referred to the effects

of a hypothetical unilateral withdrawal by Israel from the security zone, and respondents were asked to say whether conditions would be better, stay the same, or worsen. In 1985, respondents were asked to compare the situation before the 1982 war with the situation in 1985, and assess whether Israel was stronger, the same or weaker as a result. Results are displayed in Figure 2.

One striking feature of the 1999 survey, compared with that of 1998, is the changed assessment regarding the impact of a pullout on chances for peace. Between 1998 and 1999 the percent of respondents who felt that such a move would enhance peace increased from 35% to 51%. There was also a subdued assessment of the possible harm involved in a withdrawal from Lebanon. Thus, in 1998, 66% thought that such a move would strengthen the terrorists, while 55% said that it would be good for Syria. By 1999, with withdrawal fever

growing, the assessment that the terrorists would benefit dropped to 53%, while 44% felt Syria would benefit. On the other hand, more respondents felt that the strength of the IDF (from 22% in 1998 to 30% in 1999) and Israeli democracy (from 19% to 29%) would be improved if a withdrawal were to take place.

In 1985, respondents felt terrorist organizations were weakened by the war in Lebanon, and the threat to Israel's northern settlements relieved. On the other hand, the war was seen as damaging to world opinion of Israel, and harmful both to Israeli democracy and the chances of peace with the Arabs. On balance, respondents saw the effect on the IDF as positive.

Relations with Syria and the future of the Golan Heights have been important components of any policy regarding Lebanon. It is thus important to note that while willingness to leave Lebanon

increased, this was not true with regard to the Golan. In the 1999 survey, a large number of respondents still rejected a return of the Golan Heights to Syria: 73% were willing to give back none or only a small part of the Golan. The proportion of respondents declaring that there should be "absolutely no return" stood at 38%, down from 44% in 1998. The lowest figure was 31% in 1997; 35% in 1996.

In the past, most respondents considered the Golan Heights non-negotiable property. Between 1968 and 1978, in surveys conducted by the Guttman Institute, those rejecting the return of any part of the Golan Heights ranged from 74 to 96%. In 1986, when asked if Israel should be willing to return the Heights to Syria in exchange for a peace treaty, 86% said no. Even in 1995, with talks

between the Israelis and Syrians in the news, and frequent rumors about possible arrangements between the Rabin-Peres team and Syria's President Assad, the rate of refusal to return any of the Golan to Syria remained about 50%. The rate of willingness to return "some" grew.

Figure 3 details the responses to a four-choice question about returning the Golan Heights to Syria in conjunction with security arrangements acceptable to Israel. This question was used in a Dahaf survey in September 1992 ($N = 582$), and in the Jaffee Center surveys between 1993 and 1999.

In addition to their personal opinions, respondents were also asked: "Not taking into account your personal preference, do you estimate that within the next 10 years Israel will give the Golan Heights to

Syria?" That assessment was shared by 54% in 1999, compared with 48% in 1998, much lower than the 66% in 1997 and 1996, or the 61% in 1995 (see Figure 4).

There is a correlation between willingness to return the Golan and the assessment that Israel will give it up in the future. The strength of the correlation varies over time, from a low of .290 in 1995 to a high .460 in 1999. When there are signs that negotiations are getting serious, the relationship seems to strengthen, as it did in 1996. The coefficient then was .421.

The Israeli public understands the close connection between the issues in Lebanon and the problems the country faces with Syria. Yet, while opinion on Lebanon became more conciliatory and ambivalent in 1999, it was still militant with regard to Syria. The difficulty in unraveling that knot makes Lebanon a perennial issue in Israeli politics, and is a focus of the attention of political leaders.

Although, as noted above, the country's leadership has found it difficult to resolve the Lebanon-Syria dilemma, the very ambivalence of public opinion should actually make it easier. The basic contours of Israeli public opinion - informed, interested, concerned, articulate and relatively evenly balanced - provide the leadership with enormous latitude. Politicians are relatively free to do as they choose, and there are many examples of this in Israeli political and security history, including the case of Rabin and the Oslo accords and Netanyahu's signing of the Hebron and Wye Plantation agreements.

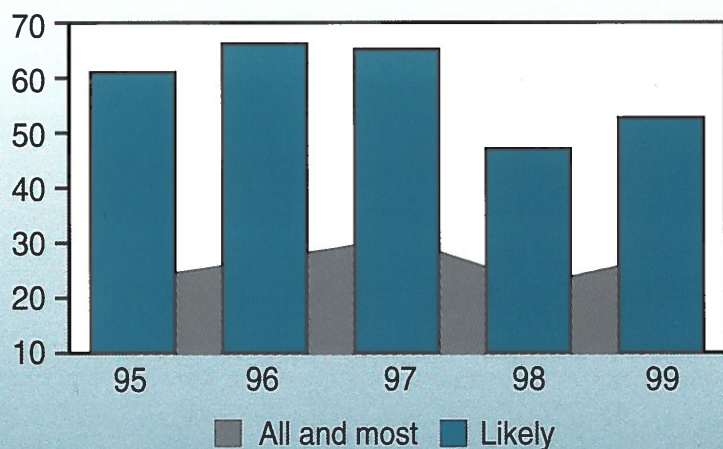


Figure 4: Return the Golan Heights and Likelihood of Return in 10 Years