

Operation Protective Edge: A Public Opinion Roller Coaster

Yehuda Ben Meir

A well known platitude holds that public opinion on current events, especially security issues, is subject to great fluctuations in the wake of unfolding developments. While true in ordinary times, the observation is especially apt in times of war. In 2006, for example, during the early days of the Second Lebanon War, following the resolute speech by Prime Minister Olmert in the Knesset in which he presented the aims of the war, public support among the Jewish public reached 82 percent. By the end of the war one month later, public opinion completely reversed itself, and under pressure from hostile public opinion and public protest, the Prime Minister was compelled to appoint an investigative commission to look into the war (in other words, its failures). In a survey conducted in March 2007 by the National Security and Public Opinion Project at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), only 23 percent of the Jewish population said that Israel had won the war, while 26 percent said that Hizbollah had won and 51 percent believed that no one had won. Only 34 percent of the public answered that they could trust the government to make the right decisions on questions of national security.¹

Operation Protective Edge followed a similar pattern. Public opinion exhibited much volatility and fluctuation corresponding to developments in the fighting and Israel's various decisions over the 50 days of the operation. This article describes three principal dimensions to public opinion during the operation: the degree of satisfaction with the Prime Minister's performance (which functions as an indirect measure of the public's satisfaction at the course of the fighting and its results); the public's direct evaluation of the results of the fighting (who won); and the public's attitude toward the various

alternatives facing Israel and the decisions taken by the cabinet and the Prime Minister at various junctions during the fighting. Note that the surveys were conducted by different entities and the questions were worded differently, so it is no wonder that at times varying, even radically divergent results were obtained. Consequently, the general picture should be approached with a large degree of caution.

Evaluation of the Prime Minister's performance mirrored the pattern of the Second Lebanon War, exhibiting ups and downs throughout the fighting. A survey conducted by Channel 2 on July 17, 2014, nine days after the beginning of the operation and just before the entry of IDF ground forces into the Gaza Strip, reported that 57 percent of the Jewish public assessed the Prime Minister's performance as good, compared with 35 percent who assessed it as not good. A survey published by Channel 2 one week later, on July 24, nearly one week after the entry of IDF ground forces into the Gaza Strip, showed a dramatic improvement in the rating of the Prime Minister's performance, with 82 percent assessing it as good, compared with only 10 percent as not good.² In a survey conducted on July 20, two weeks after the operation began and three days after the entry of IDF ground forces in the Gaza Strip, 73 percent of the adult Hebrew-speaking Jewish population said they were satisfied with the Prime Minister's performance, compared with 16 percent who were not satisfied.³

Channel 2 surveys charted a continual linear decline as the fighting continued and ceasefires were declared and then violated by Hamas. In a survey published on July 31, 2014, when the IDF was still in the Gaza Strip, 74 percent of the Jewish public assessed the Prime Minister's performance as good, compared with 18 percent who assessed it as not good.⁴ On August 3, two days after the kidnapping in Rafah and one day after the decision to withdraw Israel's forces from the Gaza Strip, another decline was recorded: 62 percent were satisfied and 29 percent were dissatisfied.⁵ A Channel 2 survey on August 5, two days later, showed almost the same results, with 63 percent rating the Prime Minister's performance as good.⁶ A survey conducted the next day on behalf of *Israel Hayom* showed the identical result: 63 percent of the adult Hebrew-speaking Jewish population was satisfied with the Prime Minister's performance in the operation.⁷ In a survey commissioned by *Haaretz* on August 5, one day after a ceasefire that lasted for a few days was declared, 33 percent of the public assessed the Prime Minister's performance as excellent, and an additional 44 percent as good (a total of 77 percent),

compared with 20 percent who assessed it as not good or poor.⁸ In a study conducted on August 11-12 in the framework of the Peace Index project, 61 percent of the Jewish public assessed the performance of Israel's political leaders as very good or fairly good (97 percent of the Jewish public gave these answers in the same survey as their evaluation of the IDF).⁹

At the end of the operation, a further decline took place in the assessment of the Prime Minister's performance, although its extent varied between different surveys. In a survey published by Channel 2 on August 25, 2014, one day before the end of the operation, when the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip increased, a dramatic fall occurred in the assessment of the Prime Minister's performance, with only 38 percent giving him a good rating, compared with 50 percent who rated his performance as not good.¹⁰ Two days later, one day after the ceasefire was announced, a Channel 2 survey showed a further slide: 32 percent assessed his performance as good, compared with 59 percent who assessed it as not good.¹¹ This reflects the public's clear dissatisfaction with the results of the operation. At the same time, a survey by the Dialog group also conducted on August 27 and published the following day in *Haaretz* showed better results for the Prime Minister, with 50 percent of the public satisfied with the Prime Minister's performance, compared with 41 percent who were dissatisfied.¹² It is very possible that the difference in results occurred because the Channel 2 survey was conducted on the night of August 26, the day the ceasefire was announced and after two members of Kibbutz Nirim were killed, while the *Haaretz* survey was conducted on the night of August 27, one day after a ceasefire was declared, when it became apparent that the operation had indeed come to an end. This explanation, combined with the 18 percent gap between surveys conducted within one day of each other, bolsters the assertion that the public opinion roller coaster in the assessment of the Prime Minister's performance in the operation has not reached its final stop.

An examination of the direct evaluation by the public of Israel's achievements in the operation shows quite a similar picture to its assessment of the Prime Minister's performance, with wide swings throughout the operation. In the framework of the INSS National Security and Public Opinion Project, a survey was commissioned from Rafi Smith at two different points in time in order to probe this question. In a survey of a representative sample of the adult Jewish population, the respondents were asked, "According to your impression, as of now, who is winning in Operation Protective

Edge?” In the first survey, conducted on July 27-28, 2014 at the height of the land-based campaign, 65 percent said Israel was winning, 6 percent that Hamas was winning, 21 percent answered “neither is winning; it is a draw,” and 8 percent had no opinion. Of those expressing an opinion, 71 percent answered Israel, 6 percent Hamas, and 23 percent “neither is winning; it is a draw.” Note that in a survey published one week earlier, on July 22, in *Israel Hayom*, very similar results were obtained: 73 percent of the adult Hebrew-speaking said that Israel could point to achievements in the operation, compared with 4 percent that said that Hamas could point to achievements, 19 percent who said that neither side had achieved anything, and 4 percent who had no opinion.¹³

In the second survey, conducted on August 6 after IDF forces withdrew from the Gaza Strip, 51 percent of those with an opinion answered that Israel had won, 4 percent that Hamas had won, and 45 percent answered “neither is winning; it is a draw.” The proportion of those said that Israel had won declined by 20 percent since the first survey. Note that the increase was not in the proportion of those saying the Hamas won, but in the proportion of those calling the campaign a draw. Almost identical figures were obtained in a survey published on Channel 2 a day earlier, when IDF forces were withdrawing from the Gaza Strip. Asked whether Israel had won, 42 percent answered yes and 44 percent answered no. Among those expressing an opinion, 49 percent said that Israel had won, compared with 51 percent who said that Israel had not won.¹⁴ In a survey published in *Israel Hayom* at the same time (August 8), very similar results were obtained: 45 percent said Israel had won, 5 percent that Hamas had won, and 49 percent that neither side had won.¹⁵ To sum up, at this stage of the operation, when the land-based campaign was over and the ceasefire collapsed, public opinion was divided on the question of whether Israel had won.

Toward the end of the operation, the public’s assessment of Israel’s achievements in the operation became more negative. In a survey conducted on August 11-12, 2014 in the framework of the Peace Index project, 32 percent of the Jewish public expressed satisfaction with the operation, 27 percent expressed disappointment, and 41 percent were in the middle, being neither satisfied nor disappointed. In answer to the question of whether or not the government’s goals for the operation had been achieved, 44 percent said they were all or mostly achieved, 48 percent said that only a small portion had been achieved, and 5 percent said that not a single goal had

been achieved.¹⁶ When the operation was over, the public's dissatisfaction with the results became still more prominent. In a survey published by Channel 2 on August 27, one day after the operation ended, when asked whether Israel had won, only 29 percent said yes, and 59 percent said no.¹⁷ Almost identical figures were obtained in a survey published the next day in *Haaretz*. In answer to the question, "How would you define the results of the fighting," only 26 percent answered that Israel had won, 16 percent that Hamas had won, and a majority of the public (54 percent) answered that neither side had won.¹⁸ Few Israelis believe that Hamas won, but the feeling that the results had been a draw, what the media called "the sour taste," was shared by a majority of the public. At the same time, here too it is unclear whether this is indeed the public opinion roller coaster's last stop – only time will tell.

Where the third aspect is concerned, i.e., the public's view of the various alternatives facing Israel and decisions taken by the cabinet and the Prime Minister during the fighting, the public wanted and expected that Hamas would be hit much harder, which explains its dissatisfaction with the final result. At the same time, the public greatly objected to occupation of the entire Gaza Strip. In the first survey by Rafi Smith commissioned by INSS and conducted on July 27-28, while IDF soldiers were engaged in destroying the tunnels in the Gaza Strip, the public was asked how Israel should continue Operation Protective Edge. Among those expressing an opinion (93 percent of the sample), 3 percent answered, "Halt the operation immediately," 26 percent said, "Finish dealing with the tunnels and halt the operation," 43 percent said, "Expand the operation and severely damage the military wing of Hamas, but do not occupy the Gaza Strip," and only 28 percent answered, "Occupy the Gaza Strip and overthrow the Hamas regime." A survey published by Channel 2 on July 31, when destruction of the tunnels was nearing completion, showed that the Jewish public was divided over the continuation of the operation – 46 percent supported ending the operation, and 46 percent said, "Continue the operation until Hamas rule is overthrown."¹⁹

In the second Rafi Smith survey, conducted on August 6 after IDF forces withdrew from the Gaza Strip, a somewhat similar picture emerged. In answer to the question of their views of the government's decision to accept the Egyptian ceasefire proposal and remove IDF forces from the Gaza Strip, one third (34 percent) supported the government decision, while half (50 percent) of the Jewish public believed it should have "expanded the operation

and severely damaged the military wing of Hamas, but without occupying the Gaza Strip,” and only 16 percent believed it should have “occupied the Gaza Strip and overthrown the Hamas regime” (only half of those who supported this alternative in the first survey).

There is no doubt that the Israeli public is clearly opposed to sending IDF soldiers to occupy the Gaza Strip. The public has accepted the assessment that such an operation involves heavy losses on both sides, while its purpose and advantages for Israel are unclear. At the same time, most of the public expected far more impressive and clearly visible damage to Hamas, especially its military wing. There is a feeling that the government did not allow the IDF to exercise its full capabilities, particularly in the land-based campaign. At the same time, even on this issue it is not clear whether the last word has been spoken. It can be assumed that the public opinion roller coaster’s final stop will be determined by the length of time there is quiet in the south.

Notes

- 1 Yehuda Ben Meir and Dafna Shaked, *The People Speak: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2005-2007*, Memorandum No. 90 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007).
- 2 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” July 24, 2014.
- 3 Haim Schein, “73%: Israel Achieved More,” *Israel Hayom*, July 22, 2014.
- 4 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” July 31, 2014.
- 5 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 3, 2014.
- 6 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 5, 2014.
- 7 Aharon Lapidot, “Resilient Home Front in Operation Protective Edge,” *Israel Hayom*, August 8, 2014.
- 8 Yossi Verter, “Haaretz Survey: The Public is Satisfied with Netanyahu...,” *Haaretz*, August 6, 2014.
- 9 “Peace Index,” Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute, August 25, 2014, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexmonth.aspx?num=283>.
- 10 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 25, 2014.
- 11 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 27, 2014.
- 12 Yossi Verter, “Hamas Bruised: Support for Prime Minister Plunges 27% in 3 Weeks Fighting” *Haaretz*, August 28, 2014.
- 13 Schein, “73%: Israel Achieved More.”
- 14 Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 5, 2014.
- 15 Aharon Lapidot, “Resilient Home Front in Operation Protective Edge,” *Israel Hayom*, August 8, 2014.
- 16 “Peace Index,” August 25, 2014,
- 17 Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 27, 2014.
- 18 Verter, “Hamas Bruised.”
- 19 Published on Channel 2, “A Look at the News,” August 30, 2014.