

Public Opinion and National Security

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The violence that began in the fall of 2015 placed the issue of security at the center of public discourse in Israel in a year that until then had been largely routine in this respect. In the elections to the twentieth Knesset in March 2015, economic and social issues took center stage and the security issue was pushed to the side. Nevertheless, the possibility of a conflagration was always present, especially in the wake of Operation Protective Edge. This essay will present the public's views on key security issues based on a variety of published public opinion surveys.

The Security Threats

Most of the public fairly consistently rates the level of threats facing Israel as high or very high (74-80 percent).¹ The public's sense of personal security, on the other hand, has fluctuated greatly. Just before Rosh Hashanah in 2015, 40 percent of the public felt no change in personal security, 33 percent reported a worsening, and 23 percent felt improvement.² Only two weeks later, one week after the escalation began, the picture had changed substantially.³ Approximately 80 percent said they felt less safe, and only 21 percent felt the same.⁴ It thus appears that the public's sense of personal security depends on the mood and on changing events as they occur and develop.

In August 2015 the public ranked rocket fire and terror tunnels from Gaza as the number one threat. Next was the Iranian nuclear threat and the threat from the Palestinians, though in 2015, few people were particularly alarmed by the possibility of another intifada.⁵ It is interesting to note that in February 2015, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot asserted that the first

front on which a flare-up was expected was the Palestinian front.⁶ Syria, the Islamic State, and al-Qaeda were at the bottom of the list.⁷ At the time of writing, the public did not perceive the Islamic State as an important threat, which is similar to the view of the defense establishment.⁸ The perception of the threat from Hezbollah varies widely. In some surveys it is rated as a very important threat, while in others, only marginal,⁹ although the chief of staff considers it a dangerous enemy.¹⁰ The public's short memory may have affected its rating. The threat from Hamas, which became clearer in the wake of Operation Protective Edge, is more recent and was thus regarded as more serious than the threat posed by Hezbollah.

What follows is a review of the public's views on the three main fronts troubling Israel: the Gaza Strip in particular, the Palestinian question in general, and the Iranian issue.

Gaza

After Protective Edge ended, the public discussion focused on when the next round would begin. As time passed, the public's attitude toward the operation appeared to be ambivalent. There was agreement across party lines that the decision to undertake the operation was justified (90-95 percent during the fighting, and approximately 80 percent six months to a year later).¹¹ This is not surprising, since the political-security establishment (including the opposition factions) and the media were unanimous in believing that the operation was just. It appears that in this case, the "rallying around the flag" that is characteristic of democratic countries at the beginning of wars continued even after time had passed.

As for the results of the operation, the picture is more complex. With the passage of time, the public became more divided in its level of satisfaction and its belief that the operation had succeeded. This feeling of ambivalence is evident in the responses to several questions. When asked, "Are you satisfied or disappointed?" 41 percent said neither satisfied nor disappointed, 32 percent replied satisfied, and 27 percent said disappointed. Regarding the results of Protective Edge, 50 percent called them good and 47 percent poor.¹² As for the security situation after the operation, 54 percent believed that it had not improved, 32 percent that it had, and 11 percent that it was worse.¹³ Furthermore, the number of Israelis who believe that Israel was the

victor has been declining and the proportion who think that Hamas won has increased. The sense of victory was already fading during the operation. In July 2014, 71 percent said that Israel was winning, but this dropped to 51 percent in August and 46 percent in 2015. The number of those believing that Hamas won, on the other hand, rose from 6 percent in July and 4 percent in August to 20 percent in 2015.¹⁴

The public's ambivalence about the outcome of the operation may be partly due to a dispute about its conduct, which made its way into the public discussion, rather than the substance, on which there was a consensus. For example, some questioned whether everything necessary and possible was being done to keep the threat from recurring and challenging the communities close to the Gaza border fence and Israel generally. This ambivalence was also likely a result of the proximity of the campaigns against Hamas. Even during Protective Edge, most of the public (71 percent) believed there was little chance it would lead to total calm on the Gaza front for at least three years.¹⁵ Now, more than a year after the operation, there is no public expectation that a military campaign would lead to total peace and quiet. The common assumption is that another round of escalation is only a question of time and that the most that can be achieved is to postpone it for as long as possible. The occasional rocket fire over the past year has also naturally influenced the public's views on this question, although the defense establishment believes that Hamas is doing everything it can to prevent this and that the rockets were launched from Gaza by other organizations.

An Agreement with Hamas

At the end of Operation Protective Edge, the possibility of a long-term cease-fire was raised. This would have included agreement on reconstruction in Gaza and consideration of the possibility that Israel would allow Hamas to build a port and open the border crossings for commerce. In 2015, this issue was virtually absent from the public agenda in Israel. From June to August, there were a few media reports of clandestine negotiations between Israel and Hamas on a long-term arrangement, but they failed to produce results. IDF Intelligence research division head Brigadier General Eli Ben Meir, like others, emphasized that the process of reconstruction in Gaza was a critical factor in preventing the next round of violence. Over the past year, Israel

has largely opened the border crossings to Gaza and is allowing civilian reconstruction materials to enter. It is believed, however, that humanitarian distress there is liable to accelerate processes of escalation and deterioration that could result in another round of conflict between Israel and Hamas. The public does not appear to be invested in this issue, which is not on its agenda. An examination of public opinion over the years on negotiations with Hamas reveals a consistent picture of broad opposition. The same is true of the past year, with some 70 percent opposed.¹⁶ A large proportion of the public (57 percent) also believes that Hamas does not wish to maintain the lull.¹⁷

To summarize, it is likely that Gaza will continue to trouble the Israeli public in 2016, depending on the actual state of security. The contradictions in the public's views reflect a kind of deterministic adjustment to the repeated rounds of conflict. Some would say that this reflects the public's disillusionment and understanding of the nature of the clashes and the constraints under which Israel operates, such as the limited chances for achieving strategic goals in fighting against Hamas.

The Palestinian Theater: The West Bank and Jerusalem

During 2015, the number of terrorist attacks and attempted attacks in Judea, Samaria, and Jerusalem increased. This is a result of the diplomatic stalemate that has existed since April 2014, after talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) mediated by US Secretary of State John Kerry failed. Despite the rise in the number of attacks by Palestinians, the subject had been almost completely absent from the public and media agenda. Only in late September, when a significant escalation occurred, did the Palestinian arena again become important. Findings from public opinion polls reveal a complex picture.

On the one hand, the public has consistently supported negotiations between Israel and the PA (62-75 percent)¹⁸ and believed that continuing deadlock was harmful to Israel's security (about 60 percent). This support continued during the period of escalation (60 percent in favor).¹⁹ On the other hand, only a few people believed that negotiations would really lead to peace in the coming years, and even the escalation since the fall of 2015

has not caused these positions to change (about 20 percent believe this, compared with 70 percent who do not).²⁰

Polls about the possibility of a third intifada conducted over the past year for the Peace Index, a project of the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University, show a changing picture. In October 2014, 32 percent of respondents thought that an organized intifada was beginning, while 58 percent saw the events as locally initiated actions by individuals.²¹ In March 2015, 49 percent believed that the chances of a third intifada were great, compared with 40.5 percent who thought they were small.²² In April, 53 percent of the public believed that without negotiations, a third intifada was very likely.²³ In September, however, shortly after the violence began, 44.5 percent thought that a situation in which there is no agreement could continue only a short time (up to a year). About 20 percent believed it could continue for 2-3 years, and only 26 percent thought that even without an agreement, the current state of relations between Israel and the Palestinians could continue for more than three years without a major outbreak of violence.²⁴ It appears, then, that the public is relatively aware of the consequences of an absence of negotiations. The question is, what solution does it prefer?

The Preferred Solution to the Conflict with the Palestinians

From 2003 to 2013, public support for the two-state solution was strong and stable at almost 70 percent, even during times of crisis, and irrespective of the government in power.²⁵ This has fallen over the past year but is still high at 50-60 percent, even since the escalation of the fall of 2015.²⁶ Other proposed solutions to the conflict have little support. Only a small proportion of the public, 27-30 percent, want to preserve the status quo, and a minority, 10-30 percent, want to annex the residents of the territories and establish a single state under Israeli rule.²⁷ A majority of the public (52-72 percent) believes that annexing Judea and Samaria would have extremely negative consequences for Israel.²⁸

The slogan “two states for two peoples” has been deeply rooted in Israeli public consciousness for years, yet when questionnaires present the practical implications of this slogan, a more complex picture emerges. If the words “permanent agreement” are included in the question about two states, support for the idea drops to 40-47 percent (and has been declining slightly

in recent years).²⁹ Support for two states falls to 44 percent when the public is asked about mutual recognition of the two people's national identity as part of a permanent settlement, after all issues in dispute are resolved and a Palestinian state established.³⁰ Only 21 percent supported the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for Arab recognition of Israel and normalization of relations after occupation of the territories conquered in 1967 ends and a Palestinian state is established.³¹ The public is also divided on evacuating the settlements in the territories as part of a permanent peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (48 percent are opposed and 46.5 percent are in favor).³² When asked specifically about the settlement blocs, a large majority of the Jews surveyed (68 percent) agreed that the large settlement blocs should remain under Israeli sovereignty as part of a peace agreement.³³ In addition, a majority of the public believed that the settlements contribute to security.³⁴

Jerusalem

The escalation in violence that began in the fall of 2015 placed the issue of Jerusalem firmly on the public agenda. Though the city has always been at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has barely disturbed the Israeli public, and this was the case for most of 2015. The issue did not feature prominently in the media's agenda, and thus the public was likely unaware of the issue of the Temple Mount and the incidents in Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. The concept of a united Jerusalem has been firmly established for years in Israeli discourse, and even in 2015, the public did not perceive these issues as being among the significant security threats to Israel.

Since the start of the violence in late 2015, some initial data have been collected about the Jewish public's views on issues relating to Jerusalem, which have undoubtedly been strongly affected by the violence in the city. In a Peace Index survey, 57 percent of Jewish respondents believed that Jews should be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount.³⁵ However, in a poll for *Maariv* conducted by Panels Politics research institute, a similar proportion supported a total ban on visits by Jews to the Temple Mount until the situation calms down.³⁶ The picture will probably become clear only after the situation in the city stabilizes.

On the issue of partitioning Jerusalem, in late 2014, a large percentage of the public opposed giving away Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, even as part of a permanent peace treaty with the Palestinians (56 percent were opposed, 38 percent in favor).³⁷ However, a survey conducted after the recent escalation in violence gave a different picture, with 69 percent favoring separation from the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and only 24 percent wishing to keep them under Israeli sovereignty.³⁸

In many respects, these findings indicate acceptance of the idea of two states for two peoples, even if they imply that in principle, the public is interested in separation from the Palestinians, sometimes without understanding its consequences.

Iran

In 2015, the Iranian nuclear threat was the focus of the security discussion in Israel, especially in July, when the world powers reached a nuclear agreement with Iran. Surveys conducted during this period show that a large majority of the public believed the agreement endangered Israel (about 77 percent)³⁹ or was an existential threat to it (73 percent).⁴⁰ Furthermore, the public believed that Iran would not actually fulfill its obligations under the agreement (78 percent) and that the agreement would not prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons during the coming decade (74 percent).⁴¹ A majority of the public therefore opposed the agreement (69-70 percent),⁴² and a large proportion (51-60 percent) believed that the Prime Minister should use all available means to persuade Congress to reject it. Thirty-eight percent, however, would have preferred that he try to reach understandings with President Obama.⁴³ In this sense, the public adopted the views of the Prime Minister, partly because almost no establishment figures publicly supported the agreement. The public was divided between those who believed it was a bad agreement and those who believed it was very bad.

On the other hand, on the question of what Israel should do once the nuclear agreement was signed, the picture is more complex, with 32-47 percent of the public supporting a strike against Iranian nuclear sites and 40 percent opposing it.⁴⁴ This is a slight decrease in support for a strike from 2009, when 59 percent supported it and 41 percent opposed it,⁴⁵ and 2012,

when 48 percent were in favor and 52 percent opposed.⁴⁶ In April 2015, three months before the agreement was signed, 60 percent were opposed.⁴⁷

In some respects, the findings reflect the public disagreement among high-ranking political and defense officials since 2011 about an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. In addition, the public did not have a good understanding of the Iranian issue in general and the agreement between the major powers in particular, and the questions asked were rather dichotomous. It is likely that in 2016, the issue will preoccupy the Israeli public less than other threats, and certainly less than before the agreement was signed.

Conclusion

This essay reviewed the Israeli Jewish public's views on Israel's three main security issues: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gaza, and Iran. Given the nature of the Gaza situation, the public discussion on this subject will likely depend on developments in the field. One isolated event is liable to lead to a general escalation on the Gaza front (and others). The Iranian question is not likely to occupy a central position in public discourse in 2016. The agreement between Iran and the world powers is a fact, and it is reasonable to assume that there will be no Iranian nuclear provocations during this period and no significant opposition to the content or terms of the agreement. Public opinion will therefore focus primarily on the possible consequences of the agreement, such as US indemnification for Israel's military power or Iranian intervention in Syria. However, an initiative by interested parties to return the Iranian issue to the public agenda in order to divert the discussion away from topics they seek to downplay cannot be completely ruled out.

At the same time, the Palestinian theater will likely remain a focus of attention in 2016. Despite the political deadlock and the deteriorating security situation, there is still public support for a political agreement with an emphasis on "two states for two peoples." This support raises a question, since it involves a point of view that has survived despite the growing polarization in almost every facet of Israeli life and the right wing government. In particular, the forecast on the issue of Jerusalem should be emphasized. A certain change may be taking place in the public's views on

this issue, but it remains to be seen whether this is a passing mood or a real change regarding the practical elements of an arrangement for Jerusalem.

Studies on public opinion show that most people hold inconsistent views and that only on the fringes are there small groups with strong opinions whom it is difficult to influence. Generally, public opinion is “on hold,” dormant yet subject to influence and recruitment, and it dictates the mood, though not necessarily the political and defense agenda. And if public opinion can be changed and shaped, then a legitimate leadership has room to maneuver. Studies also emphasize the role of decisive leadership, which can influence public opinion.⁴⁸ Therefore, and as a conclusion from the findings that served as an empirical basis for the analysis in this article, at this time, Israel’s leaders have a public mandate for a political process. In the public discourse, there are already signs of new ideas for solutions that have not been mentioned in the main public and media discussions and thus are still not reflected in polls. The very fact that the current government is right wing might perhaps enable the Prime Minister to show flexibility on political and security issues without having to contend with determined resistance from the Knesset opposition.

Notes

- 1 For example, see Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, Israel Democracy Institute, “Peace Index – May 2015,” <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=292&monthname=מאי>, and “Peace Index – July 2015,” <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=295&monthname=יולי>.
- 2 See Ben Caspit, “*Maariv*’s Annual Survey: Gideon Saar Puts Up Fight against Netanyahu,” September 13, 2015. According to another survey, 70 percent believed that their personal situation had not changed. See “We’re Proud To Be Israelis,” Rosh Hashanah 5776 survey, *Israel Hayom* holiday supplement, September 13, 2015, pp. 4-5.
- 3 The level of anxiety can also be inferred from police figures for calls to 110, the non-emergency police hotline. When the terrorist incidents began in the first week of October, there were 20,000 calls. In the next two weeks, the number leveled off at some 15,000 a week, compared with 6,000-7,000 in ordinary times.
- 4 Mano Geva and Mina Tzemach, Midgam Research Institute in cooperation with iPanel, Channel 2 News, and *Meet the Press*, October 10, 2015, http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/politics-q4_2015/Article-3ad3eabe7325051004.htm.

- 5 Molad, "Security Threats, Policy Opportunities, and Operation Protective Edge," May 2015.
- 6 See Amos Harel, "East Jerusalem's Leading Role in Terror Attacks Catches Israel Off Guard," *Haaretz*, October 17, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.680771>.
- 7 See various approaches to ranking the threat: Molad, "Security Threats," and "Public Opinion Survey," findings presented at the INSS annual conference, "Security Challenges of the 21st Century," February 16-17, 2015, <http://heb.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4354&articleid=8843>.
- 8 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2015," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=297&monthname.#ספטמבר=VogiHWBuljo>; "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015.
- 9 "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015; Molad, "Security Threats."
- 10 See Harel, "East Jerusalem's Leading Role."
- 11 For example, see Molad, "Security Threats"; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – July 2014," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=276&monthname.#יולי=Vogiv2Buljo>, and "Peace Index – August 2014," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=283&monthname.#אוגוסט=Vogi32Buljo>.
- 12 For example, see Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2014," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=283&monthname.#אוגוסט=Vogi32Buljo>, and <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=284&monthname.#ספטמבר=Vogjg2Buljo>.
- 13 Molad, "Security Threats."
- 14 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2014"; "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015.
- 15 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – August 2014."
- 16 Yehuda Ben Meir, "The People's Voice: Results of a Public Opinion Survey on National Security Issues," *INSS Insight* No. 114, June 14, 2009, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=2041>; Yehuda Ben Meir and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, *The Voice of the People: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security*, Memorandum No. 130 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2013); Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2014."
- 17 Ben Meir, "The People's Voice"; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – August 2014," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=296&monthname.#אוגוסט=>.
- 18 Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *The Voice of the People*; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – October 2014."
- 19 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2014."

- 20 Khalil Shikaki and Ifat Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, June 2015, http://truman.huji.ac.il/?cmd=joint_polls; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – April 2015," [http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=291&monthname.אפריל=](http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=291&monthname.אפריל=;); "Peace Index – July 2015"; and "Peace Index – September 2015."
- 21 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – October 2014," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=285&monthname.אוקטובר=Vogms2Buljo>.
- 22 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – March 2015"; "Peace Index – September 2015."
- 23 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – April 2015," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=274&monthname.אפריל=Vogm7mBuljo>.
- 24 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2015."
- 25 Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *Voice of the People*; Shikaki and Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," June 2015; Peace Index surveys.
- 26 Shikaki and Ifat Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," June 2015; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2015"; "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015.
- 27 "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015.
- 28 Shikaki and Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," June 2015.
- 29 Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *Voice of the People*; "Public Opinion Survey," INSS conference, February 16-17, 2015.
- 30 In a survey conducted in December 2014, 54 percent of Israelis supported such mutual recognition and 36 percent opposed it. See Shikaki and Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," June 2015.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Molad, "Security Threats."
- 33 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – December 2014."
- 34 Molad, "Security Threats."
- 35 Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – September 2015," <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=297&monthname.ספטמבר=VognZGBuljo>; Shikaki and Maoz, "The Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll (JIPP)," June 2015.
- 36 Ben Caspit, "Some 70% Favor Separation from East Jerusalem Arab Neighborhoods," *Maariv*, October 18, 2015, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=298&monthname.אוקטובר=>; Yaar and Hermann, "Peace Index – October 2015." A Midgam Research Institute survey for Channel 10 News found that 42 percent of respondents believed that Jews should not be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount, while 36 percent believed that they should be. See "Poll:

- Israelis Give Netanyahu Failing Grade for Handling of Terror,” *Nana10 News*, <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1157247>.
- 37 Yaar and Hermann, “Peace Index – December 2015.” In 2012, 47 percent were willing to return the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem. See Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *Voice of the People*.
- 38 Caspit, “Some 70% Favor Separation.”
- 39 Galit Edut, “Poll: 47% of Israelis Favor an Attack on Iran Following the Nuclear Agreement,” *Maariv*, July 17, 2015; Caspit, “*Maariv*’s Annual Survey.”
- 40 Yaar and Hermann, “Peace Index – August 2015.”
- 41 Sarid Institute for Channel 10 News, July 15, 2015.
- 42 Yaar and Hermann, “Peace Index –August 2015”; Sarid Institute, July 15, 2015, <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1137624>.
- 43 Edut, *Maariv*, July 17, 2015; Sarid Institute, July 15, 2015.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ben Meir, “The People’s Voice.”
- 46 Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *Voice of the People*.
- 47 Yaar and Hermann, “Peace Index – April 2015,” <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonth.aspx?num=291&monthname=אפריל>.
- 48 For example, Asher Arian, *Security Threatened: Surveying Public Opinion on Peace and War* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies and Papyrus, Tel Aviv University, 1999); Ben Meir and Bagno-Moldavsky, *Voice of the People*; Dan Caspi, *Pictures in our Heads: Public Opinion and Democracy* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 2001).