

# The Politics of Peace in Israel from 2003 to 2013

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“Peace is a sort of candy for suckers, a trap...[that the] campaign management is selling, not different from the sale of anything else. The fact that they don’t use peace is evidence that its currency is weak. If they could sell it they would use it.... The political electorate is a currency,”<sup>1</sup> explains Lior Chorev, a political strategist who worked with Ariel Sharon. The peace process and how it is alternately utilized or brushed aside in political campaigns has long been a central part of Israeli politics. This article explores Israeli public opinion on the peace process lens of political campaigns from 2003 to 2013. The findings indicate that political campaigns in Israel are inextricably bound up with the opinion of the electorate, and thus there is a direct correlation between attention paid to the peace process by political campaigns and the public’s prioritization of the issue. The directionality of the issue remains uncertain, with the data and interviews pointing to a complex relationship in which the two components influence each other. What is clear is that the Israeli public appears increasingly detached from the peace process, as the conflict becomes a less salient feature of their daily lives.

As Israel has many political parties, some of which do not survive more than one election, this paper focuses on the parties that presented a viable candidate for prime minister. Over the last decade, these parties were Kadima, Likud, and Labor. In determining the focus of each campaign, the essay concentrates on media campaigns and ads rather than party platforms. The importance of platforms has decreased in Israel to the point that Likud, the largest party in the 2013 election, did not even have a platform in the campaign. As political strategist George Birnbaum notes, “Platforms

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don't matter any more. People pay attention to media. The inputs are so diverse, but people also are used to getting small packets of information."<sup>2</sup> The media is the main instrument for Israeli politicians to communicate with voters, and is therefore the most effective medium for analysis of any politician's central focus and strategy. Journalist Nahum Barnea observes that "the things people say during elections are more important than the platforms, because sometimes people get themselves into trouble trying to blur things. Election coverage tries to shed light on this attempt to blur."<sup>3</sup> The present analysis looks at ads, slogans, and media coverage devoted to issues in the respective election cycles in order to pinpoint the focus.

### The 2003 Election

The 2003 elections pitted Likud's Ariel Sharon against Labor's Amram Mitzna. The backdrop for the 2003 campaign was the "death of Oslo" and the second intifada, yet Likud's campaign focused mainly on Sharon as a personality and less on the security issue. According to Birnbaum, the strategist who built Sharon's campaign, "with Ariel Sharon's ads, we had him with his grandchildren clipping roses on his farm... We made him the grandfather, and his personality became larger than life. Personality campaigns are sometimes so big that nothing else matters."<sup>4</sup> Indeed many of the ads highlighted Sharon himself, and a Likud election slogan was, "The nation wants Sharon,"<sup>5</sup> a spin-off of the popular Israeli slogan "The nation wants peace." Labor's campaign attempted to combat this approach with lines such as, "We will not be in Sharon's government,"<sup>6</sup> or "Only Mitzna can, not the Likud."<sup>7</sup> These slogans further illustrate the focus on personalities rather than on the issue of security. A study by Tsfati et al. on media coverage, which looked at news items on television channels 1, 2, and 10 in the three weeks preceding the 2003 elections, found that only 7.2 percent of coverage dealt with Palestinians and negotiations and 9.6 percent of coverage dealt with terror and security, while 5.8 percent of coverage was dedicated to education, health, and welfare and 33.2 percent to crime and corruption.<sup>8</sup> This study establishes that terror and the peace process were not exclusively at the center of the campaign. Similarly, according to Shamir and Arian, "the 2003 election...was held under the cloud of the ongoing al-Aqsa Intifada...nevertheless the issues pertaining to this round of confrontation did not dominate media coverage."<sup>9</sup> Although the backdrop for the 2003 election was the intifada and security, personalities emerged as the main story.

The stance of public opinion prior to each election can be assessed from public opinion polls conducted by the Peace Index, a renowned public opinion project run by the Israel Democracy Institute and the Open University that systematically follows Israeli public opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, along with other polling data. This data was supplemented with personal interviews to achieve a more comprehensive picture of Israeli public opinion.

The 2003 Israel National Election Study pre-election survey found that 67 percent of voters cited peace and the territories as a major voting consideration, 66 percent cited terrorism, 63 percent cited the economy, and 51 percent social policy.<sup>10</sup> Although security still came first in the public mind, socioeconomic issues were a close second. In the January 2003 Peace Index poll, Hermann and Yaar wrote that “in the latter stages of the election campaign most of the main parties’ propaganda efforts focused on the security issues, with social and economic issues pushed to the side. Yet it seems that for the public, the social-economic issue does not lag behind the security issue.”<sup>11</sup> The Peace Index findings confirm the split in public opinion between resolving the conflict and rehabilitating the economy. In addition, they showed that 45 percent of voters believed that rehabilitating the economy should assume first place on the new government’s order of priorities, with 42 percent believing the top priority should be solving the conflict.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis in media coverage on social issues, with less attention to security issues, may be reconciled with the near even split in public opinion, if the focus on personalities and its implications is taken into account as well.

### **The 2006 Election**

The 2006 election followed the withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 and the creation of the centrist political party Kadima by Ariel Sharon in 2005. The 2006 race revolved around Olmert and the Kadima party, versus Peretz and the Labor party, versus Benjamin Netanyahu and Likud.

Peretz shifted Labor’s focus to social and economic issues. This is evidenced by the headline on the home page on the Labor newspaper website, posted in December 2005: “Labor is the only party that presents a real social alternative.”<sup>13</sup> Labor’s main ad poster had the slogan “a social economic plan for many years ahead.”<sup>14</sup> Tsfati et al. found that 11.5 percent of media items dealt with terror, attacks, the intifada, and security, and 13 percent dealt with Palestinians and negotiations, whereas 20.3 percent

dealt with education, health, welfare, and social justice and 19.1 percent with crime and corruption.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the 2003 election, the study found a significant rise in the coverage of social issues over the coverage of terror and the peace process, marking the shift in the campaign focus toward social issues.

Likud and Kadima paid more attention to the conflict in the campaign than did Labor. Likud used slogans such as “A strong Likud, a safe Israel”<sup>16</sup> and the jingle “my future, my security, Likud is right.”<sup>17</sup> Kadima’s campaign rested to a certain extent on Sharon’s personality, combined with the issue of the conflict. Olmert, Kadima’s prime ministerial candidate and guiding force in setting the tone for the 2006 Kadima campaign, explained that “in 2006 I knew I wanted to pull out of all of Judea and Samaria and why I wanted this to be on the agenda. I wanted to receive a mandate from the public so that if it happened they would not say to me after, ‘You asked for a mandate for one policy and pursued a different one.’”<sup>18</sup>

In one telling Kadima television ad, different Israeli politicians speak of Sharon’s leadership and valor. The ad ends with Olmert saying to the viewer, “Say yes to permanent borders, a Jewish state with a Jewish majority, and a stable economy.”<sup>19</sup> Olmert’s words are in a deliberate order, an order that pegs resolving the border issue and ensuring a Jewish majority, two issues that relate directly to the conflict, above the economic issue. Another campaign ad prominently displays the words “Kadima, in Sharon’s path. Strong leadership for peace.”<sup>20</sup>

The combination of attention paid to foreign affairs and to internal issues is indicative of a general movement toward the center of Israeli public opinion. Labor’s campaign shows the increasing appeal of social issues, but Likud’s and Kadima’s campaigns demonstrate that the conflict was also relevant. Israelis cared about both social issues and the conflict.

Several Peace Index polls are noteworthy regarding public opinion in the run up to the 2006 elections. A November 2005 poll showed that 52 percent of voters named socioeconomic considerations as the major factor in their voting decisions, while 27 percent named security-political issues.<sup>21</sup> A Peace Index poll in February 2006 showed that 47 percent of the electorate saw security as the paramount factor in deciding the elections, while 37 percent thought socioeconomic issues would decide the election.<sup>22</sup> While it is difficult to pinpoint the cause of the change between November and February, the polls show that both socioeconomic and security concerns were strong. This campaign, with one party focusing exclusively on socioeconomic issues,

demonstrated that although the conflict was never far from people's minds, other issues began to take precedence. Likewise, the public opinion polls of the 2006 election, with security and socioeconomic issues trading places at the top of people's voting considerations as the reality on the ground changed, establish the rising prominence of social and economic issues, even as security concerns remained strong.

### The 2009 Election

Looming over the 2009 elections were both the recent war in Gaza and the worldwide economic crisis. The two viable candidates for Prime Minister were Tzipi Livni of Kadima and Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud. Media coverage showed a focus on the security issue. Tsifti et al. analyzed all of the political party broadcasts aired on television by the major parties in 2009, as well as the video segments each party posted on its website, and found that 28.3 percent of party broadcasts dealt with terror, attacks, intifada, or security, and 6 percent with negotiations.<sup>23</sup> Only 23 percent of party broadcasts dealt with education, health, welfare, and social justice, and a mere 2.3 percent dealt with economy and finance. This study also found that 19.9 percent of the news items on major channels dealt with terror, attacks, intifada, and security; 10.6 percent with Palestinians and negotiations with Palestinians; and 18 percent with Israeli Arabs. In contrast only 14.9 percent dealt with education, health, welfare, and social justice, and 11.8 percent with crime and corruption.<sup>24</sup> The number of news items devoted to terror and negotiations was markedly higher than in previous elections, whereas the number of pieces dealing with crime and social issues decreased from 2006 to 2009.

Likud's campaign focused on the peace process from the standpoint of security threats. One Likud ad presented Tzipi Livni as a security threat, depicting outcomes of voting for smaller parties and ending with Tzipi Livni dividing Jerusalem, returning to 1967 lines, and Qassam rockets falling on Israel. The ad then declared, "Only Likud will stop the withdrawals, beat terrorism, and protect Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. A large Likud means a strong Israel."<sup>25</sup>

Kadima's campaign also centered on the conflict. In an ad that tells the story of her rise to power, Livni appeals to the viewer to vote for her in order to ensure that the conflict is dealt with in a pragmatic manner.<sup>26</sup> Against the background of the military campaign in Gaza that ended a

few weeks before the election, the 2009 campaign evinced a general shift in focus back to the conflict.

Regarding public opinion in the run up to the 2009 elections, an October 2008 Peace Index poll found that 47 percent of interviewees said the parties' positions on security and peace were most important, 23 percent named social and educational issues, and only 13 percent cited the economy.<sup>27</sup> Another survey taken a few months after the new government was formed showed that the majority of Israelis (62 percent) believed that the economic crisis was the most important problem facing the government, and only 27 percent named negotiations with Palestinians.<sup>28</sup>

### The 2013 Election

The 2013 election campaign avoided the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more than any previous campaign in Israel. Likud retained its slogan of "a strong Israel"<sup>29</sup> but there was no mention of security. Instead its signs read, "Free education from the age of 3" or "Lowering the price of gas,"<sup>30</sup> indicative of the focus on people's wallets rather than on the peace process. Labor's campaign evoked the protests of 2011, which called for social justice and economic equality; it even used pictures of the social protests in its posters. One sign read, "Fighting for our home,"<sup>31</sup> the slogan used by the social protesters in their campaign to lower housing costs. Labor's signs and campaign messaging made almost no mention of the conflict. One *New York Times* article on the eve of the election declared, "In this campaign... voters here...said the issues that have been staples of Israeli politics for generations have been largely invisible, and social values or pocketbook concerns have been front and center."<sup>32</sup>

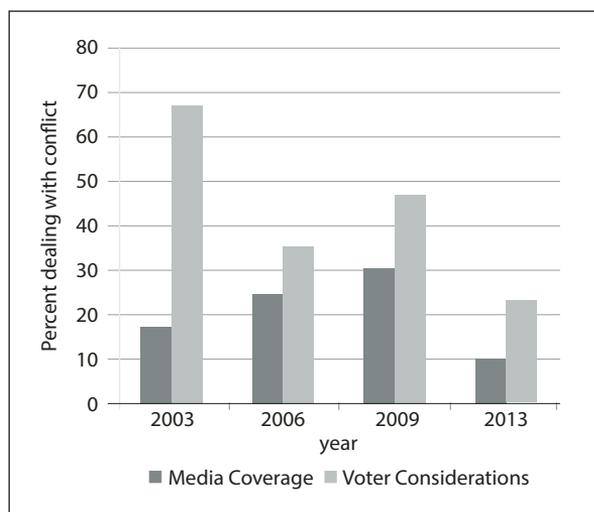
Public opinion is reflected in the 2013 Peace Index poll, which found that 51 percent of Jewish voters cited domestic issues (religion, society, and the economy) as the issues driving their vote, while only 22.8 percent of voters cited foreign and defense issues. The Peace Index report declared that in the 2013 elections "domestic issues are paramount."<sup>33</sup>

### The Story of the Interaction

The data shows the gradual but steadily declining interest of the public in the peace process. At the same time, the number of Israelis supporting a two-state solution has remained relatively constant. A poll commissioned by the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace showed that between 2003 and 2013, there was a strong consistent majority among

Jewish Israelis of 50-70 percent in support of a two-state solution.<sup>34</sup> These numbers remained high even during times of war and crisis. In an interview with *Yediot Ahronot* in July 2013, Mina Tzemach, an Israeli polling veteran, explained that over the years Israeli support for a peace agreement has remained relatively stable, around 67 percent, regardless of the government or the situation on the ground.<sup>35</sup> These findings demonstrate that it is not Israelis' support for peace that has changed, rather their prioritization of the peace process relative to other issues.

The analysis of campaign focus versus public opinion shows a clear correlation; figure 1 shows the comparison on an election-by-election basis. The graph relies on data of Tsfati et al. on media coverage as a quantitative indicator of the focus of election campaigns, and data from the Peace Index and National Election Studies as a measure of public opinion. The graph clearly points to a positive correlation between the focus of election campaigns and public opinion on the peace process. The only discrepancy is the change from 2003 to 2006. The discrepancy in the trends in media coverage and public opinion may be corrected by inclusion of ads focused on Sharon in the category of security for 2003; alternatively, the discrepancy may be a result of a different source of public opinion data for 2003. Peace Index data was unavailable for that year so the data was taken from the National Election Studies, which may conduct surveys in different ways



**Figure 1. Campaigns and Voter Considerations**

and therefore report different public opinion estimates. Otherwise, the past decade as a whole shows public opinion and election campaigns moving together in their emphasis on the conflict.

The directionality of the interaction between public opinion and political parties remains unclear, with evidence pointing to the two components influencing one another. Former Prime Minister Olmert asserted that, "If I were PM I would do what the nation needed and make the people understand that and accept it. This is the test of leadership, to do what the nation needs and rally the people to support it."<sup>36</sup> Politician Meirav Cohen echoed this sentiment, explaining, "Sometimes you need to do what Ben Gurion once said, 'not only what the people want but what is good for the people.' The people are sometimes confused and we lack someone who will say, I know what is good and set the tone instead of optimizing the vote."<sup>37</sup> These statements represent the view that politicians shape public opinion through their own actions and personal values.

At the same time, public opinion molds political campaigns because politicians appeal to the public interest in trying to win votes. Strategist Lior Chorev explained, "The considerations are purely electoral...Your job as the manager of a campaign is to get your politician elected."<sup>38</sup> Birnbaum reinforced the idea that campaigns manipulate what is already on people's minds in their favor, explaining that the right wing parties always use the security issue.<sup>39</sup> Dan Meridor commented that "the question became what the public wants to hear rather than what I want to say."<sup>40</sup>

Though it is unclear whether public opinion is the dependent or independent variable in the interaction with political campaigns, the data shows a decline in the public's commitment to the peace process. The pattern of disinterest appears to result from a combination of causes. Nahum Barnea spoke of a lack of a sense of urgency regarding the peace process on the part of the Israeli public, a perception that because there is no terror and "the issue is beyond the fence,"<sup>41</sup> it does not present a pressing threat that must be addressed right away. The second reason for public disinterest is the feeling of despair and exhaustion attached to peace efforts. A 22-year-old Israeli soldier active in politics said, "We are tired of hearing about this issue. It's all we have been hearing about our whole lives. We want to solve other issues that affect us every day."<sup>42</sup> The third reason for Israeli attitudes is what Barnea characterized as "benign neglect," the perception that nothing can be done that will move the issue forward in any case so there is no added benefit to thinking about it. Professor

Reuven Hazan explained that “two thirds of the electorate were born into the situation of Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and together with the sense of continued failure of negotiations, this creates cynicism...People understand that there is nothing to be done right now about the peace process.”<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Analysis of public opinion and election campaigns reveals a correlation between the two and a growing disinterest in the peace process among Israelis. It is difficult to determine whether public opinion is the independent or dependent variable because they are so interrelated. The evidence is also unavoidably circumstantial. Nevertheless, there emerges a clear trend of disregard for the peace process on the part of the Israeli public that is reflected in the election campaigns. Remedying this distraction or demoralization is a necessary first step toward peace. The 2015 elections are fast approaching, and with them a new set of campaigns and another chance for leaders to sway public opinion through campaigns and the public to choose leaders who care about peace.

## Notes

- 1 Personal interview with Lior Chorev, July 4, 2013.
- 2 Personal interview with George Birnbaum, July 1, 2013.
- 3 Personal interview with Nahum Barnea, June 28, 2013.
- 4 Personal interview with George Birnbaum, July 1, 2013.
- 5 “Israel votes Likud. The nation wants Sharon,” The National Library of Israel, Israel, 2003, Election Collection, [http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections\\_materials/Pages/elect\\_ephemera\\_2003.aspx](http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections_materials/Pages/elect_ephemera_2003.aspx).
- 6 “We will not be in Sharon’s government,” The National Library of Israel, Israel, 2003, Election Collection, [http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections\\_materials/Pages/elect\\_ephemera\\_2003.aspx](http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections_materials/Pages/elect_ephemera_2003.aspx).
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- 8 Yariv Tsfati et al., “War on the Agenda: The Gaza Conflict and Communication in the 2009 Elections,” in *The Elections in Israel 2009*, eds. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), pp. 225-50.
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- 10 Michal Shamir and Asher Arian, "Israel National Election Studies," [www.ines.tau.ac.il](http://www.ines.tau.ac.il).
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- 15 Tsfati et al., "War on the Agenda: The Gaza Conflict and Communication in the 2009 Elections."
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- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Personal interview with Ehud Olmert, July 16, 2013.
- 19 "Kadima Political Advertisement in Israel," The National Library of Israel, Israel, 2006, Election Collection, [http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections\\_materials/Pages/elect\\_videos\\_2006.aspx](http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/collections/treasures/elections/elections_materials/Pages/elect_videos_2006.aspx).
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- 36 Personal interview with Ehud Olmert, July 16, 2013.
- 37 Personal interview with Meirav Cohen, July 1, 2013.
- 38 Personal interview with Lior Chorev, July 4, 2013.
- 39 Personal interview with George Birnbaum, July 1, 2013.
- 40 Personal interview with Dan Meridor, July 11, 2013.
- 41 Personal interview with Nahum Barnea, June 28, 2013.
- 42 Personal interview with Ahinoam Mauda, June 28, 2013.
- 43 Personal interview with Reuven Hazan, July 11, 2013.