

# PEACE VERSUS THE PEOPLE

Public Opinion Polls Show that Both Arabs and Jews Want Peace, but Shared Mistrust Puts the Burden on Israeli and Palestinian Leaders to Take the Initiative

*By Khalil Shikaki*

In an interview with the *New York Times* in July 2014, former U.S. Middle East envoy Martin Indyk blamed the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process on “distrust” and “skepticism” between the two peoples. He reported what he felt was the most meaningful personal moment in the previous year’s round of talks, when Palestinian Director of Intelligence Majid Faraj told his Israeli counterparts across the table, “You just don’t see us.” “There is so much water under the bridge,” Indyk told the *New York Times*. “The difficulties we faced were far more because of the twenty years of distrust that built up.” Israeli negotiator Tzipi Livni expressed similar sentiments in a Tel Aviv University conference in January 2014. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, in his assessment of the failure of his 2013–14 peace efforts, declared “negotiations did not fail because the gaps were too wide, but because the level of trust was too low” between Palestinians and Israelis.

The roots of distrust stretch far back into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once the peace process started, the belief that the other side could not be trusted to uphold any agreement served as a barrier to peace building. Although for a short period of time during the mid-1990s, with the Oslo agreement, there was an attempt to build trust, the election of a rightwing government in Israel in 1996, continued violence, particularly in 1995 and 1996, the failure of the Camp David Summit in July 2000, and the outbreak of the Palestinian second intifada in that same year, contributed to increased distrust and brought back the belief that the other side is not a reliable peace partner. The abatement of the intifada in 2004 and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, and restoration of the peace process in Annapolis in 2007, helped to restore some trust. But the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime

▷ A Palestinian flag flutters in front of a West Bank Jewish settlement, Walajeh, August 18, 2017.  
*Mussa Qawasma/  
Reuters*



minister in 2009 brought an end to the progress made the year before between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Distrust between leaders echoes distrust between publics, which contributes further to the stalemate in the peace process. Leaders tend to be reluctant to engage in negotiations or show willingness to accept painful compromises if they believe that their constituencies do not support the required compromises, and that the public shares their assessment that they have no partner on the other side.

In reality, public opinion is more complicated. Public opinion in Palestine and Israel is not an impediment to peace; but at the same time, it is not a force for peace. These are the paradoxical results of Palestinian-Israeli public opinion polls conducted by the Palestinian-Israeli Pulse, a joint survey research project, in June 2016, December 2016, and June 2017. Had Palestinian and Israeli negotiators reached a comprehensive peace agreement at any time during the past two decades, public opinion on both sides would have supported it—just as it would today. Yet, negative attitudes and the mutual perceptions of Israelis and Palestinians during the same period, and today, contribute toward mistrust and sustain conflict.

How can public opinion play such a double role, both pushing toward and hindering peace? Part of the answer lies with small but highly motivated constituencies on both sides: national-religious Israelis and Palestinian Islamists. Both Jewish religious-nationalist and Islamist minorities are potent sources of continued conflict, as both groups tend to eschew compromise toward a two-state solution. Yet most Palestinians are secular nationalists, and not Islamists. Similarly, most Israelis are secular or non-religious traditionalists; only a quarter or so are religious or ultra-religious.

The broader reason public opinion plays a dual role in both supporting and undercutting peace negotiations has more to do with the ambivalence, even hostility, of most Palestinians and Israelis toward each other. Each side believes that the other is not trustworthy, does not want peace, does not support the two-state solution, and entertains deep-seated, if hidden, long-term aspirations to wipe out the other side from existence. The two publics are equally and highly skeptical about the ultimate viability of the two-state solution which, so far, has been the cornerstone of all efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict. This is an alarming trend, as the perception of two-state viability is a critical driver toward a negotiated peace.

### **The Bad News**

Over the past decade, hostility among Palestinians and Israelis toward a two-state solution, the basis of peace negotiations since the late 1980s, has risen. Recent survey results show a drop in support for the two-state solution, during the period between 2006 and June 2017, from 71 percent among the Palestinians to 52 percent today, and

a parallel drop in Israeli support from 68 percent to 53 percent. However, the most recent findings reflect a large increase in Palestinian support compared to December 2016 when, right after the election of President Donald Trump, support stood at only 44 percent. It is worth noting that support among Israeli Jews in June 2017 stood at only 47 percent compared to 50 percent six months before.

Most troubling of all, youth lead in the declining level of support for the two-state solution. Palestinians and Israeli Jews between the ages of 18 and 22 are the least supportive of the idea. Among Israeli Jews, only 27 percent, compared to 52 percent among those who are over 50 years old, are still supportive. While among the Palestinians the gap for the same two groups is narrower, 42 percent to 58 percent respectively, the fact that age is such a decisive factor is highly instructive; the future could bring even smaller levels of support among the two peoples. Palestinian youth are shifting toward support for a one-state solution in which Jews and Palestinians are equal. Among Israeli Jewish youth, the shift is much more dramatic, as a plurality of those between the ages of 18 and 22 are now in favor of a one-state solution in which Israel discriminates against Palestinians—i.e. an apartheid state.

Other poll results confirm the trend in declining support for compromise. Support for a comprehensive peace agreement package—along the terms of the Clinton Parameters of 2000, the Geneva Initiative of 2003, and the outcome of the 2008 bilateral negotiations between Abbas and Olmert—has dropped over the past fifteen years. While in December 2004, following the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, support for a comprehensive peace package stood at 54 percent among Palestinians and 57 percent among Israeli Jews, attitudes shifted by December 2014 when only 38 percent of Palestinians and 41 percent of Israeli Jews supported that same package. In June 2017, in response to a similar, but not identical, package, only 43 percent of the Palestinians and 32 percent of Israeli Jews gave their support.

Another critical gap opinion polls reveal is the difference in attitudes toward the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, which would represent the bulk of an independent Palestine's territory under any two-state solution. Israelis are content with the status quo of the West Bank's occupation, while Palestinians are highly dissatisfied with it. The more content with the status quo Israelis are, the more likely the Israeli public will continue to gravitate toward rightwing politics and politicians. Most Israelis, including the mainstream political center, remain opposed to the dismantlement of settlements built by Israel in the West Bank, an essential requirement in any peace agreement.

Yet, Palestinians show significant flexibility on the issue most important for Israelis: the maintenance of a Jewish majority in Israel. On the other hand, Palestinian geopolitical divisions between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and the inability to transition to a democratic political system and

a pluralistic civil society, constitute an impediment to mutual confidence-building with Israeli society. Israelis tend to view Palestinian divisions and the slide to authoritarianism in the Palestinian political system as an impediment to peace. Palestinians, particularly the youth, on the other hand, tend to become more alienated from their own political system and thereby less willing to support their own leadership.

### **Two-States, One Solution**

Despite the bad news, the public preference for diplomacy over armed conflict or maintenance of the status quo remains relatively high. No other concept is more popular than the two-state solution—and though support may be weakening with both publics, incentives designed to increase support for compromise are highly effective. The nature of national leadership is again decisive in swaying public opinion behind a settlement.

Today, about half of Palestinians and half of Israelis prefer reaching a peace agreement as the best means of changing the status quo. Only one-fifth or less on either side favors violence or armed struggle as the preferred means of change. Alternatives to the two-state framework, such as a democratic one-state solution, an apartheid one-state reality (one in which one side is denied equal rights by the other side), and expulsion (one in which one side expels or “transfers” the population of the other side) remain less popular than the two-state solution. The core constituencies for these alternatives—those who would support these, and only these alternatives—are not great. The largest single constituency is the one that supports the two-state solution. Once these two-stators are excluded from the sample and the remaining public is assigned one alternative at a time, the public splits almost equally on each side, between the three alternatives without any one emerging as the most preferred.

A closer examination of the split within the Palestinian side shows that support for the two-state solution is greater than support for any of the alternatives in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, among supporters of all factions—including Hamas. A similar examination of the Israeli Jewish side shows that support for the two-state solution is highest only among secular and traditional Jews, but not among the religious (who prefer apartheid over all other options) and the Ultra-Orthodox (who prefer expulsion over all other). When looking at the Israeli political spectrum, support for the two-state solution is highest among those who place themselves on the left and the center but not among those who place themselves on the right. Those who place themselves on the right side of the Israeli political spectrum prefer apartheid over all others.

Survey research shows that support for a comprehensive agreement can be significantly increased, to levels that exceed two-thirds on both sides, if various constituencies are given a stake in its success. For Palestinians, the most effective incentive—the one that has the widest level of persuasion—is the release of Palestinian prisoners as part

of the agreement. This incentive alone can increase the support for the comprehensive package to 70 percent. Similarly, access to the Israeli labor market and free movement for the two peoples between the two states are almost as effective. Intangible incentives, when offered to Palestinians, can be equally effective. For example, an Israeli acknowledgment of the historic and religious roots of the Palestinians in historic Palestine or an Israeli recognition of the Arab and Islamic character of the Palestinian state are highly effective. Similarly, an Israeli acknowledgment of responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem and/or an Israeli apology to the refugees for the suffering they had to endure since the Jewish state's founding in 1948 can change the attitudes of a large minority of those opposed to compromise. Finally, leadership can significantly increase the Palestinian public's willingness to accept compromise: the support of Marwan Barghouti, regarded by many as the leader of the Second Intifada and held in prison by Israeli authorities since 2004, for a comprehensive peace package can convince a third of the Palestinians to switch position from opposition to support.

Similarly on the Israeli side, tangible and intangible incentives—including decisive leadership—can increase the level of support for such a comprehensive package that implements the two-state solution from a large minority to two-thirds. Effective tangible incentives include the following: compensation to Israeli Jews whose property was confiscated by Arab countries when they immigrated to Israel after 1948; a defense treaty with the United States; and the normalization of all political, economic, and trade relations with the Arab World. A combination of only two such incentives can increase support among Israeli Jews to more than 60 percent. Intangible incentives such as a Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, and an acknowledgment of Jewish historic and religious ties to the land, are also highly effective. Public endorsement of the peace package by leaders, such as Prime Minister Netanyahu, can also be an incentive for support.

### **Time Is Not on Our Side**

Decades of conflict, and repeatedly disappointed hopes for a successful peace settlement, bode badly for the future. Both the Israeli and Palestinian publics are becoming more pessimistic with time. Three factors contribute to the decline in support for the implementation of the two-state solution among Palestinians and Israelis: the prevailing perception that the two-state solution is no longer viable; the belief that the other side does not support the two-state solution; and the belief that the support for such a solution is not the shared normative view of their respective societies.

Findings show that viability matters: support for the two-state solution, and for a combined permanent peace package, is highly dependent on the perception of the two-state solution's viability—and Israeli settlement expansion is vital in determining perceived viability. As of June 2017, poll results show that more than half of Palestinians

and Israeli Jews believe that due to settlement expansion the two-state solution is no longer viable. Pessimism is much higher when thinking about the potential establishment of a Palestinian state in the next five years. About three-quarters (71 percent of Palestinians and 79 percent of Israeli Jews) do not expect to see such a state in the next five years.

Over the years, skepticism about viability, which reduces support for the two-state solution, is often tied to public perceptions of Palestinian, Israeli, and American leadership (the United States has been the main broker in bilateral peace negotiations since President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s). For example, the election of Netanyahu in 2009, and later the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, adversely influenced Palestinian and Israeli public perceptions of viability. Among Palestinians who believe that the two-state solution is still viable, support for that concept rises to 76 percent and opposition drops to 23 percent and support for the permanent status package rises to 58 percent and opposition drops to 38 percent. Lack of viability forces people to reconsider their own support for the two-state solution and to begin a search for alternatives. The dynamic among Israeli Jews is almost identical.

Evidence also shows that support for the two-state solution and the permanent peace package is dependent on how each side perceives the attitude of the other regarding that solution and package: those who believe that a majority on the other side does indeed support that solution and package are likely to support it, and alternatively, those who think a majority on the other side does not support that solution and package are likely to oppose it. Similarly, those Palestinians and Israelis who believe that the majority of their own public is opposed to that solution and package are more likely to oppose it themselves and vice versa. Again, this would suggest the room for maneuver for national leaders, who can effectively communicate with their publics, build trust, and offer meaningful concessions to the opposing side, is relatively wide.

### **A Public without Peacemakers**

But what if Palestinian and Israeli leaders fail to reach a peace agreement at all? Can one count on the two publics to provide a momentum or a push for peace? The verdict from survey research is a definite no: Palestinian and Israeli public opinion is not an independent force for peace. The preceding evidence suggests that despite the continued decline in support for the two-state solution, the two publics remain open to compromise—but such readiness assumes that the framework for an agreement, offering meaningful incentives to both publics, has been worked out by Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

Why is the verdict so certain and so bleak? The answer lies in the reality in which the two sides live, and more importantly in the way they view each other. The first problem lies in one glaring difference between the two publics: Israelis are content with the status quo, and the Palestinians are not. As of June 2017, a joint

Palestinian-Israeli survey showed that Jewish settlers are the most satisfied with the status quo and Gazans are the least satisfied. Two-thirds of Israeli settlers and 54 percent of Israeli Jews in general believe that conditions in Israel are good or very good. Among Palestinians, only 9 percent of Gazans and 26 percent of West Bankers describe conditions in Palestine as good or very good. This asymmetry reinforces Palestinian suspicions that the Israelis are not interested in peace.

This heightened threat perception underlines current perceptions of mutual fear. Most Palestinians fear Israelis soldiers and armed settlers, and most Israeli Jews fear Palestinians. Indeed, most Palestinians believe that Israelis do not want peace and most Israelis entertain a similar belief; only one-third of Israeli Jews, in June 2017, believed that Palestinians want peace. Among Palestinians, 78 percent believe Israel wants to extend its borders from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean and expel the Palestinian population or deny them their civil and political rights. Among Israeli Jews, almost two-thirds believe that Palestinians hold one of two maximalist positions: take over the entire state of Israel from pre-1948 borders, or conquer Israel and destroy much of the Jewish population.

Threat perception and fear are reinforced by a prevailing perception on both sides that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is characterized by a zero-sum game. In June 2017, most Israeli Jews (53 percent) and almost three-quarters of the Palestinians agreed with the statement that “Nothing can be done that’s good for both sides; whatever is good for one side is bad for the other side.”

Distrust, like many of the other attributes mentioned in this section, erodes willingness to take risks and make compromise. Not surprisingly given all of the above, an overwhelming majority of Palestinians (87 percent) and Israeli Jews (77 percent) indicated last June that the other side is untrustworthy. Findings show that among those who think the other side is trustworthy, support for painful compromise, as in accepting a permanent peace package, can rise to 56 percent among Israelis and 61 percent among Palestinians. By contrast, distrust diminishes willingness to compromise, reducing it to 27 percent among Israelis and 40 percent among Palestinians. More importantly, the skyrocketing levels of mutual distrust lead to the conclusion that neither side is a force for peace.

By fearing and refusing to trust the other side, Palestinian and Israeli public opinion contributes to the resilience of the conflict. In its role as the carrier of the national narrative, public opinion therefore sustains conflict. Yet, in its ability to choose from among differing priorities and in its search for stability, peace, and economic prosperity, public opinion has the ability to overcome historic, religious, and ideological narratives, but only if leaders show courage and take the initiative.