

# A Swing to the Right?

By Zipi Israeli

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major issue in political, public and media discourse in Israel. Since the 1967 war and even more so since the Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and the PLO in 1993, the issue has woven in and out of public attention, as a result of the presence or absence of violent events and diplomatic processes. Israeli discourse on the issue revolves around an argument that divides society and involves emotional, national, historical, religious and security considerations. Public opinion in Israel regarding the conflict [1] is considered highly involved, especially concerning its consequences on Israeli reality and the debate over formulas to resolve it. Opinion polls that examined various aspects of the issue can be traced back to the days after the 1967 war, based on the assumption that substantive discussion about the conflict must take into account the complexity of public opinion on the matter. As explained further on, public opinion concerning the conflict is complex but consistent, and has retained an inner logic over time.

This article is based on findings of the National Security Index – a public opinion study carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). The INSS has consistently followed public opinion trends since 1984 on a variety of issues relating to national security. This article focuses on Israeli positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and especially between the years 2015 and 2018, lending a broad historical perspective. The study was based on personal interviews held in the respondents' homes, relying on a large and representative sample of 800 adult Israeli citizens, both Jewish and Arab.

The first part of this paper presents public views regarding long-proposed solutions for the conflict. The second part focuses on public opinion concerning the possibility of settlement evacuation. The third part discusses public attitudes to the chances of resolving the conflict. The meaning of these findings and their possible implications on Israeli policy are then discussed.

## The Alternatives on the Table

Since the Oslo process was launched in 1993, the dominant paradigm in Israeli discourse regarding a possible solution to the conflict has been that of the two-state solution. This created a division into two camps: one supporting the peace process in order to reach an agreement aimed at establishing a Palestinian state, and the other opposing this solution, arguing that the process is futile and Israel must maintain the existing situation. In recent years, other solutions have emerged, such as annexing parts of the West Bank to Israel or establishing one state for the two peoples. As of 2006, Israelis have been polled about supporting or opposing the two-state solution.

## Figure 1

*Support for the “two states for two peoples” solution, 2006-2018 (%)*

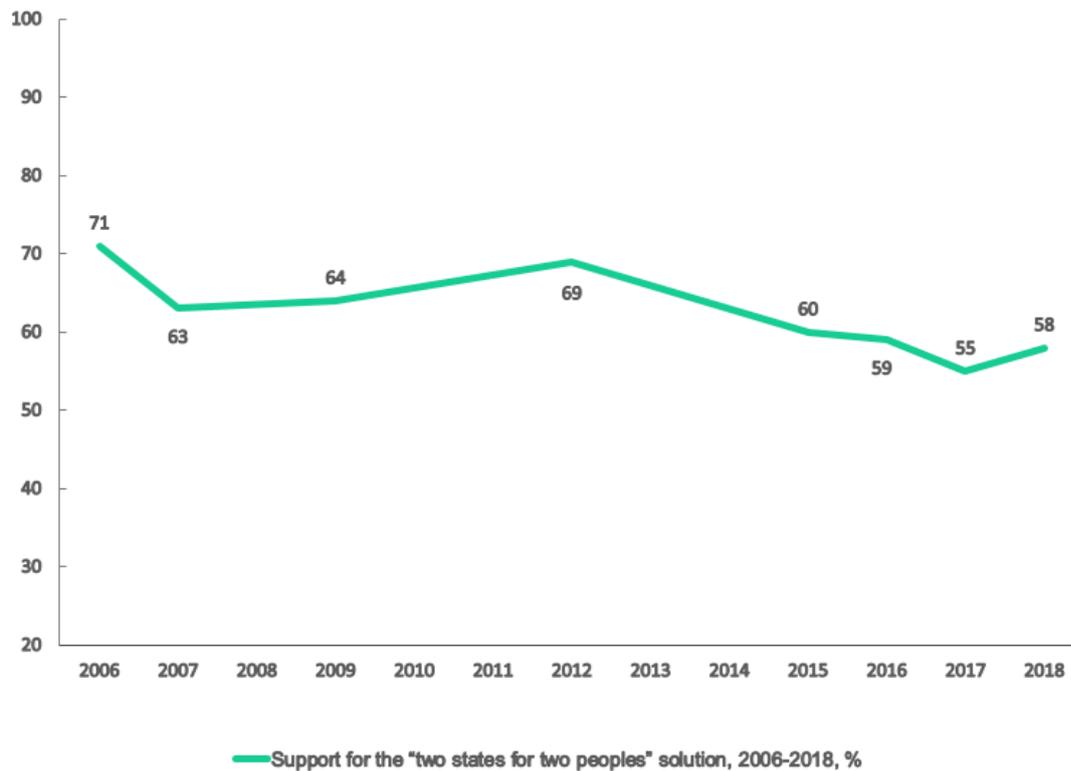


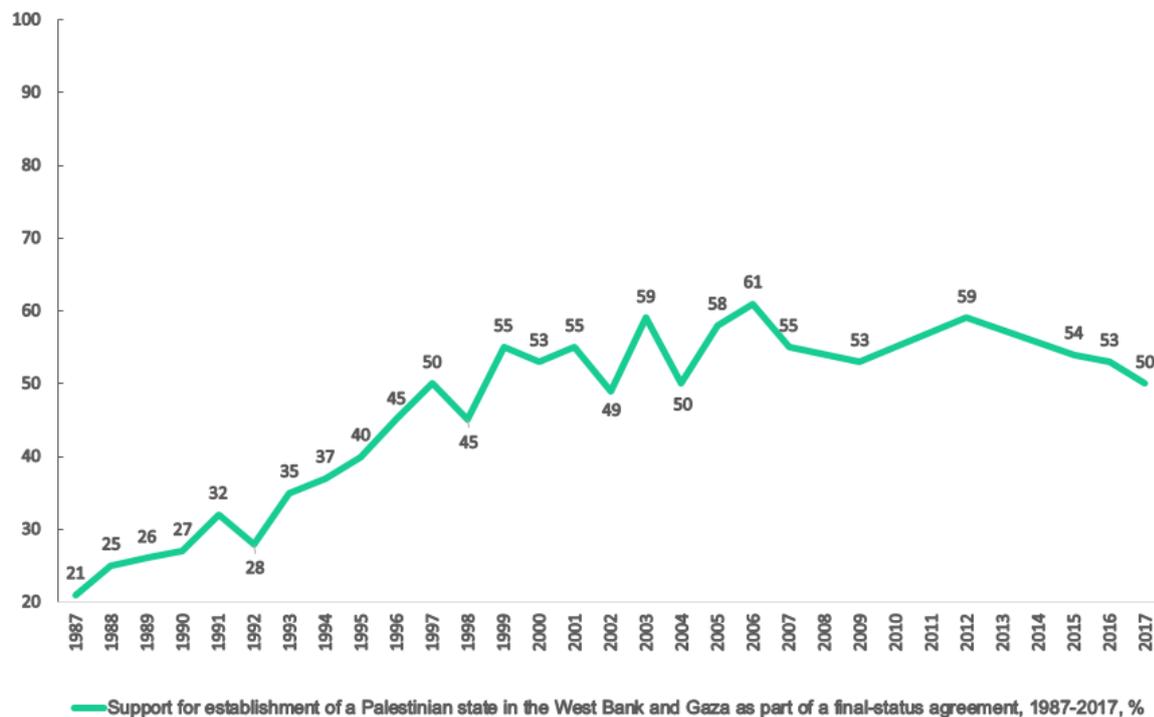
Figure 1 shows that support for “two states” has remained high and stable over the years. It even increased from 2006 to 2012, approaching 70%. In 2015-2018, support for this solution fell but remained high at 55%-60%. The timeline shows support both at times of crisis and in calm periods, with no relation to the identity of the government. This is significant given the diplomatic stalemate, various domestic tensions within Israel, the right-wing governments ruling the country since 2009, and growing conviction in the last decade that it is impossible to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinians.

Among the Jewish population of Israel, support for the two-state solution was higher among secular Israelis (73%) than among the traditionalists (49%) and the ultra-Orthodox (40%), and was significantly lower among religious Israelis (29%). Even larger gaps were found according to political affiliation: predictably, 97% of those who defined themselves as leftists supported two states, along with 78% of self-defined centrists and, surprisingly, even 40% of those who define themselves as rightwing – i.e. nearly every second individual on the right.

The more historical question asked in the study referred to the establishment of a “Palestinian state”. Jewish-Israelis were asked whether Israel should agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of a final-status agreement. Theoretically, responses to this idea should correspond to responses regarding support of the two-state solution, as the two questions are based on the same logic. You cannot support two states without agreeing to a Palestinian state, and vice versa. However, it is important to examine whether the different turn of phrase changes public attitudes.

## Figure 2

*Support for establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of a final-status agreement, 1987-2017, %*



It is clear that support for a Palestinian state among Jewish Israelis grew at a steady rate. This gradual, slow process can indicate a profound change in public opinion. In 1987-1990, only 21%-27% of Jewish-Israelis supported the idea of a Palestinian state. The years 1991 to 1996 saw an increase, with 32%-45% supporting it. At that time, most Israelis still rejected the notion, yet the growing support was significant. It should be mentioned that during that period, the two major parties – Likud on the right and Labor on the left – also rejected the idea. Around the signing of the Oslo Accords, the country’s leaders – Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres – did not believe that the accords would lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The idea of national and territorial separation apparently began to emerge following the First Intifada, which reinforced the public mood of viewing the price of the status quo as too high.

Worth noting is the considerable increase in support as of 1997, after the wave of suicide bombings. From 1997 to 2017, support for a Palestinian state was high, sometimes even exceeding 60%. In recent years, there has been a decline, but still 53%-55% of Jewish-Israelis support the establishment of a Palestinian state.

These figures show that public support for more moderate views regarding possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has grown significantly over the years, and public recognition for the need to resolve the conflict has increased. While in the late 1980s, a negligible minority supported the establishment of a Palestinian state, despite the widespread notion of the Jewish-Israeli public shifting to the right, most Jewish-Israelis – at least on the core issues of the conflict – adopt, even counter-intuitively, views that were once considered leftist.

While in the late 1980s only a negligible minority supported the idea of a Palestinian state, nowadays most Jewish-Israelis adopt views that were once considered leftist.

The results clearly illustrate how important the precise wording of the question is. The rate of respondents who support two states is about 10% higher than those who support the establishment of a Palestinian state. A possible explanation for these skewed results is that the term “Palestinian state” carries a negative connotation for many Israelis. As mentioned, for many years opposition to a Palestinian state was a national

consensus in Israel. Therefore, it is not surprising that for many Israelis, who have come to terms with the two-state principle, the phrase “Palestinian state” generates a more negative emotional response.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that when Jewish-Israelis were asked in 2018 about the possibility of “separating from the Palestinians”, support for the idea of “two states” and a “Palestinian state” rose. Of the respondents, **68%** agreed that the State of Israel must take measures to separate from the Palestinians in order to prevent a decline into a one-state reality. These figures must be viewed with caution, both because the question is new and because of its vague message – what does “separation” mean? Is it a “coordinated and agreed upon separation between the two sides” or rather a “unilateral separation”? Another question asked in 2018 partially revealed Jewish Israelis’ perception of the way to advance separation. According to 50% of respondents, Israel must promote steps to separate from the Palestinians through mutual arrangements; 26% supported unilateral moves by Israel, and only 14% believed that no separation measures should be taken (10% said they did not know). The high level of support among Jewish-Israelis for “separation” indicates the general public perception, and in particular that the term “separation” may be more appealing than terms such as “two states” and “Palestinian state”.

The high level of support among Jewish-Israelis for “separation” indicates that the term “separation” may be more appealing than terms such as “two states” and “Palestinian state”

The dichotomous questions regarding “two states” and a “Palestinian-state”, though indicative of a general direction, do not provide a profound insight into trends in Israeli public opinion. Over the years, a further theoretical question was added to include a practical component: “If the Israeli government approves a permanent agreement with the Palestinians based on two states for two peoples, and the agreement is brought to a referendum, how will you vote?” About half of the respondents said that they would vote for a permanent agreement based on “two states”, just over a third said that they would vote against, and about a fifth said that they did not know what they would vote for or would abstain. The answer to this question also shows that a large part of the public is interested in separating from the Palestinians. Although hypothetical questions must be treated with great caution, it can be reasonably concluded that if the Israeli government brought such an agreement to a referendum, it would win a greater majority, especially in view of the “don’t knows” over the years.

In recent years, other alternatives for resolving the conflict have been on the agenda in Israel. Therefore, a specific question was added, checking what the public thinks is the best option for Israel regarding the conflict in the near future.

## **Figure 3**

***What is the best option for Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the near future, 2016-2018***

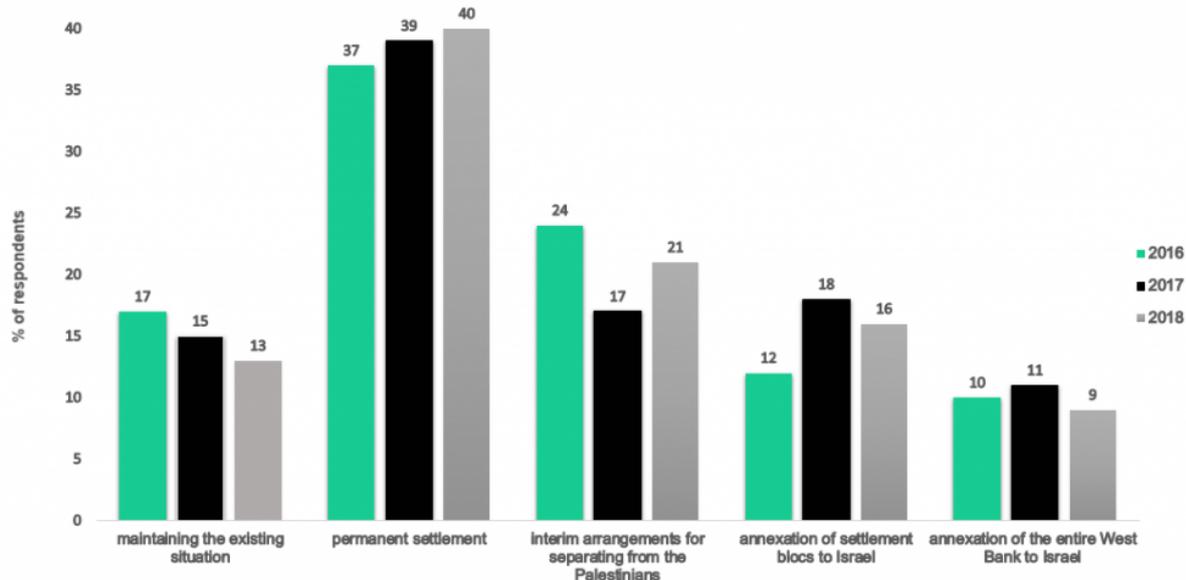


Figure 3 shows that there is consistency with respect to the alternatives offered to respondents. The majority (56%-62%) supported an arrangement, whether a permanent settlement (37%-40%) or transitional (interim) arrangements for separating from the Palestinians (17%-24%). Only 9%-13% supported the annexation of the entire West Bank, and 16% the annexation of settlement blocs. An interesting detail is that only a small group (13%-17%) was interested in maintaining the existing situation. That is actually Israel's policy – to address the conflict in terms of responding to security challenges. A complementary question revealed that the majority of the public (56%-65%) also believes that time is running out, compared to 35%-44% who thought that Israel has time on its side. It seems to be widely understood by the public that Israel's passive policies and political stagnation are detrimental in the long term. In other words, the Israeli public understands that the current situation is problematic and is worried about it.

**It seems to be widely understood that Israel's passive policies and political stagnation are detrimental in the long term**

It is interesting to note that low support for the option of “continuing the existing situation” was found among all sectors, including the religious and those who defined themselves as right-wing. In contrast, there were significant differences between support for the options of “striving for a comprehensive settlement” and “annexation”. While religious and right-wing respondents voiced more support for “annexation”, secular and center-left respondents expressed more support for “striving for a comprehensive arrangement”. Surprisingly, there were no differences in political affiliation regarding the option of “interim arrangements for separating from the Palestinians” in the Occupied Territories.

## Evacuation of Settlements

The future of the territories Israel occupied in 1967 and of the Jewish settlements established there is considered the core issue to resolve. For some Israelis it is an emotional-religious issue, for others a matter of national security. The latter group cites practical concerns such as demographic trends among the growing Palestinian population and the wisdom of seeking sustainable political solutions to avoid military confrontation. Others see such a confrontation as unavoidable and therefore prefer the strategic benefit of retaining the territories. In general, for many years the political discourse in Israel has been polarized on

these questions: the left seeks to end Israeli control over the territories and the Palestinian population there and to work towards the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel; the right seeks to cement Israeli control and expand the settlement enterprise.<sup>[2]</sup> Since the political system was divided, the results obtained in public opinion research varied, depending on the conditions prevailing at the time of the survey and the formulation of the questions.

## Figure 4

### *What is your position on the evacuation of Jewish communities in the West Bank under a permanent agreement? 2004-2018*

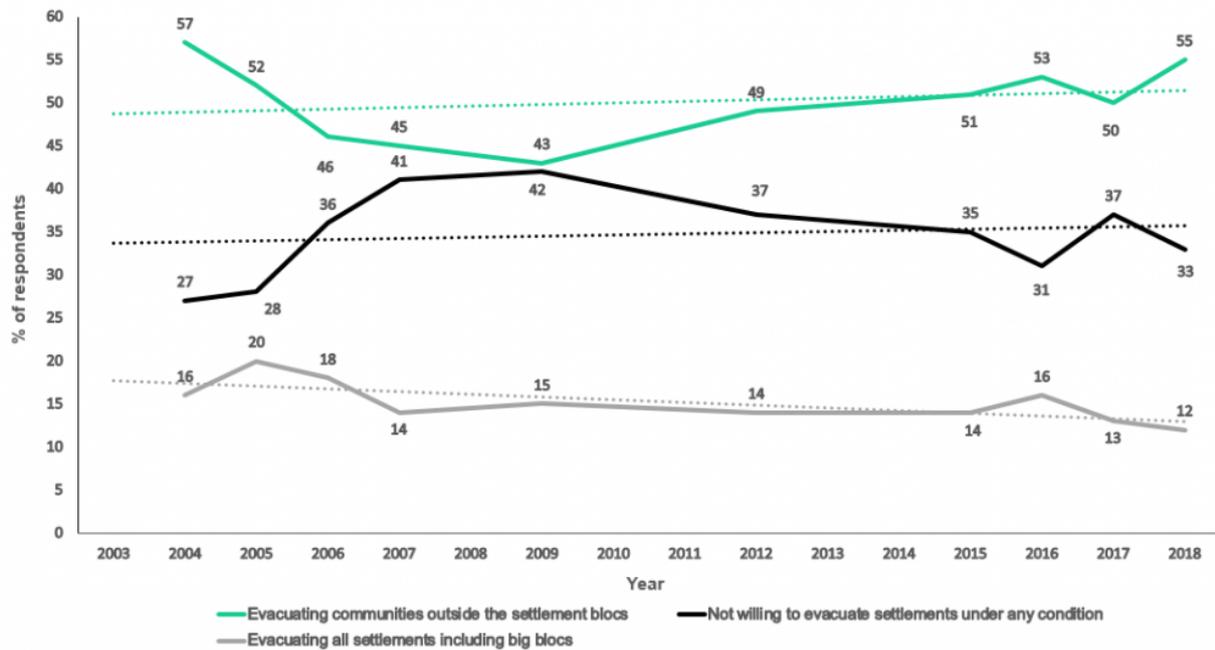


Figure 4 shows that in 2004-2018, most Israelis were willing to evacuate settlements as part of a **final status agreement**, although there have been changes over the years, as detailed below.

- **Evacuating communities outside the settlement blocs** – many Israelis (43%-57%) were ready to evacuate the settlements outside the big blocs. Small, isolated settlements were viewed by many as “political settlements”. In 2004-2005, more than half of the public was willing to do so. In 2006-2012, willingness dropped to less than half (43%-46%) and in 2015-2018, it stabilized at around 50%.
- **Evacuating all settlements** – support for this was minimal. Less than 20% in most periods (12%-20%) were willing to evacuate all the settlements.
- **Not willing to evacuate settlements under any condition** – about one-third of the public was not prepared to evacuate any settlement. This rose to 40% over the years.

In general, support for evacuating some or all settlements peaked in the twilight of the second intifada, 2004-2005 (72%-73%), and decreased steadily from 2006 to 2009 (59%-64%), although still with a solid majority. The decline in support as of 2005 resulted from growing belief among many Israelis that territorial concessions do not lead to peace, but only increase terror and hatred. This view apparently stems from a sense of “disillusionment” about the dominant worldview of relinquishing land for peace, which entered the Israeli mainstream after the withdrawal from Gaza, the second war in Lebanon and the Hamas takeover of Gaza with the steady deterioration of security there.<sup>[3]</sup> In 2012, this trend reversed and support for the evacuation of settlements rose by 5% to the level of 2006. In recent years, support for the evacuation of **some settlements** has been broad and stable, fluctuating around 63%-69%.

It is interesting to note that support for evacuating communities **outside of blocs** under a permanent

agreement was identical among those self-defined leftists and rightists, and among the secular, ultra-Orthodox and traditional (but not Orthodox). Differences were found in the option of evacuating **all** settlements in the framework of a permanent agreement: self-described leftists supported evacuation of this kind more than self-described rightists and centrists; secularists supported it more than traditional, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox respondents. It is also worth noting that about half of the leftists objected to evacuating all Jewish settlements.

The willingness of almost two-thirds of the respondents to evacuate isolated settlements was limited to the context of a permanent agreement. When the same question was posed, with the same options, except “permanent agreement” was replaced with “independent (unilateral) redeployment”, a somewhat different picture arose. The public was divided – about half were willing to evacuate the settlements outside the large blocs of all settlements. The other half objected to settlement evacuation in any circumstances. That is, when it comes to **evacuation without an agreement**, objection to the evacuation of settlements rose. It is worth noting that, despite the trend of “disillusionment” for the formula of “land for peace” after Israel’s unilateral disengagement from Gaza, half of the Jewish-Israeli population did not dismiss this option.

Interestingly, self-defined centrists supported unilateral evacuation outside the large settlement blocs more than self-defined leftists and rightists. Secular and traditional respondents supported this more than ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox ones.

## Public Attitudes towards Territorial Concessions

The issue of evacuating communities is accompanied by concerns, but there is awareness that no solution can be reached without some kind of territorial concessions. When the public is asked about which areas it is willing to give up, it turns out there is a wide range of approaches towards different areas and considerable differences in the public attitude to the territories, although they are not a large area of land. Respondents were asked, “Under a permanent agreement that will end the conflict with the Palestinians, should Israel be prepared to return any of the following territories or should it continue to hold them even if this thwarts a permanent agreement?” The findings clearly illustrate the public range of approaches towards different geographic areas. For some areas, there is consistent objection to return them, while for others there is consistent support. One can assume the different approaches reflect the different connections of the Jewish public in Israel to each region, namely religious, historical or security significance. In general, the public is sensitive to different areas. Willingness to return land ranges from 9% to 69% depending on the specific area. Although the actual percentages varied from year to year, the order remained more or less constant. The different areas can be classified into three groups:

1. **Territories that there is consistent objection to return** – regarding Gush Etzion, West Samaria and the Jordan Valley, the public consistently objects to returning them, with changes over the years:
  - Gush Etzion** – In 2005, 29% were ready to return this area. Gradually, fewer and fewer respondents are willing to do so, until the rate stabilized in recent years (9%-13% in 2015-2018). Interestingly, in the 1990s there was an increase every year. In 1994, only 14% were willing to return to Gush Etzion, while in 1998, 26% were ready to do so, making the numbers in 2018 even lower than in 1994.
  - West Samaria** – In 2005, 38% were ready to return this area. The rate gradually declined and stabilized around 23%-24% in the last few years. In this case, too, the numbers in the 1990s were higher than today, ranging around 39%-44%.
  - Jordan Valley** – In 2005, 24% were willing to return the Jordan Valley. A gradual process similar to those described for Gush Etzion and West Samaria led to stabilization in recent years around just 12%-15%. In the 1990s, support ranged from 18% to 23%. Unlike other areas, resistance among Jewish Israelis to transfer the Jordan Valley to Palestinian sovereignty is not based on emotional, religious or nationalist principles, but on the perception that this is a vital security asset for protecting the state.<sup>[4]</sup> Willingness to return these three areas, which was low to begin with, seems to have declined even further in recent years and stabilized around low, negligible numbers.

2. **Territories that there is high willingness to return** – these are areas deep in the West Bank that are not part of the major settlement blocs. A large majority (62%-69%) consistently supports withdrawal from these areas. The public seems to clearly distinguish between the large settlement blocs and small, isolated settlements.
3. **Territories that there is medium willingness to return** – these are Hebron and the neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The attitude to these areas **varies based on events on the ground**. Willingness to return Hebron increased significantly from 29% in 2009 to 38%-40% in 2015-2018. It is interesting to probe the attitude to Hebron, which was perceived for years as the city of the Jewish forefathers, with the Tomb of the Patriarchs at its center. The tomb was seen in 1967 as a monument of the utmost importance, whose capture by Israel was one of the greatest achievements of the war. It seems that decades later, the tomb has become a settler site.<sup>[5]</sup> This may be due to Hebron’s central role in the “wave of terror” (2015), and to the fact many terrorists came from there. As for the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, they are a major and significant issue that goes beyond the scope of this article.

## Public Attitudes towards the Likelihood of Peace

Israelis have been asked for many years whether they believe a peace agreement can be reached with the Palestinians in the near future.

### Figure 5

*Can a peace agreement be reached with the Palestinians in the near future? 2000-2018*

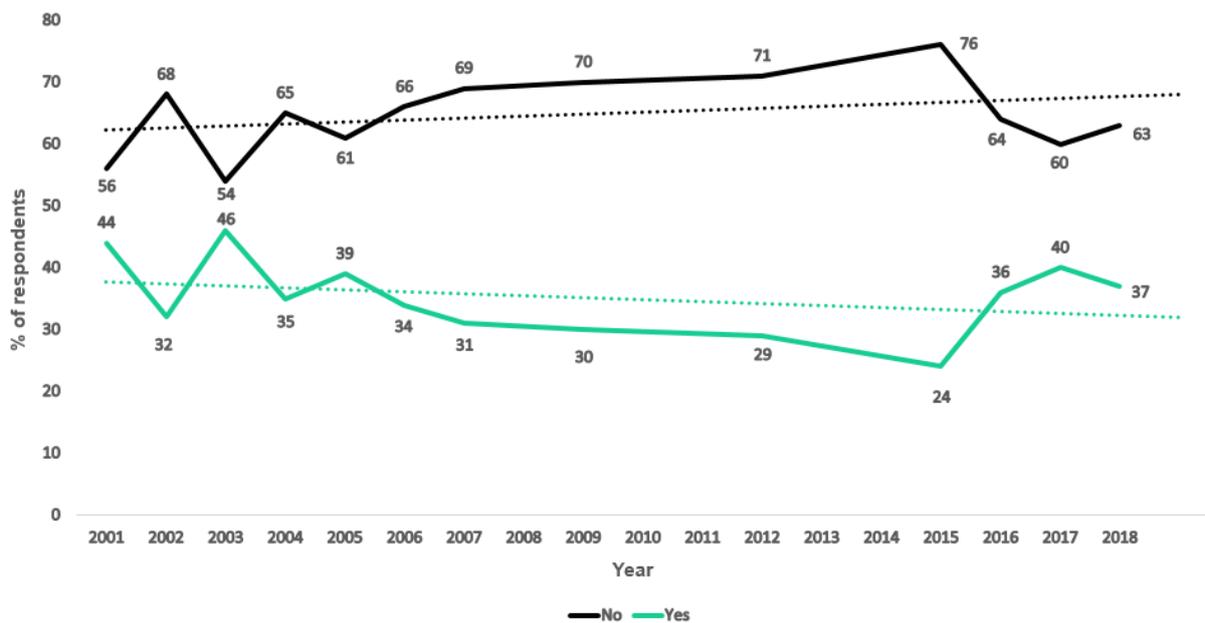


Figure 5 shows that the public has been pessimistic for years – about 60%-70% believe that a peace agreement cannot be reached. The pessimism rose at times of crisis such as at the height of the second intifada or in the “wave of terrorism”. As of 2005, there has been a consistent increase in pessimism. In recent years, the numbers have stabilized around 60%-64% who hold that it is impossible to reach a peace agreement. A possible explanation is the fact that during this period, no progress towards resolution of the conflict has been made. The estimated chances of reaching a peace agreement were higher among secularists as opposed to traditional, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox respondents, and among those who defined

themselves as center-left as opposed to rightists.

From a broader historical perspective, this sense of pessimism has existed for decades and perhaps forever. Thus, for example, in the 1990s the question was formulated differently yet even then, the public was pessimistic about the prospects of resolving the conflict. In 1993, at the height of the peace process, despite public support for continued negotiations, 52% believed that a peace accord did not mean the end of the conflict. Similar figures were found after the signing of Oslo II. The public doubted the conflict was over.<sup>[6]</sup> The question is what is the underlying cause of this deep pessimism, and whether there are ways to change the situation. To a large extent, the following question closes a circle. As of 2017, respondents have been asked what they think will be the consequences of another failure in the Israeli-Palestinian political process. A large proportion (42%) believe that the existing situation would continue, 15% that the international community would force Israel to end its control over the territories, 10% that Israel would have to take unilateral steps on the ground such as annexing Ma'ale Adumim, and 28% that an intifada would break out.

## Conclusion

**In conclusion**, this article shows that despite the recurring violent clashes, the dominance of the right-wing parties and failed peace negotiations, public opinion among Jewish-Israelis regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been fairly stable and consistent throughout the years. Most Israelis oppose the continuation of the current situation, want an arranged solution and separation from the Palestinians, and are even prepared to evacuate some settlements in the West Bank to achieve that goal. It appears that while the general public sees the Oslo process as a failure, its guiding principle is recognized and supported. On the other hand, the public does not believe the conflict can be resolved, and many assume that the status quo will continue.

It appears that while the public sees the Oslo process as a failure, its guiding principle is recognized and supported<sup>[7]</sup>

As most Israelis favor a solution based on separating the two peoples into two states, and only a small fraction supports the continuation of the status quo, while a minority believes progress towards a peace agreement is possible in the near future, a reasonable assumption is that the public feels helpless. That is, most Jewish Israelis are interested in change, but do not feel it is possible.

In the short term, the desire for separation of any kind grows in times of crisis and is seen as a way to deal with security threats. This happened, for example, following the first intifada and after the wave of suicide bombings in the 1990s. These events illustrated the dangers of Israeli control over the territories. Not only did this control not guarantee public order in the territories themselves, but it also did not prevent acts of terror within sovereign Israel. In other words, support for separation is a way to maintain security.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **In the long run, the main explanation for Jewish-Israelis' desire to separate from the Palestinians is the unequivocal weight of demographic considerations**

In the long run, the main explanation for Jewish-Israelis' desire to separate from the Palestinians is the unequivocal weight of demographic considerations, compared to geographical ones. Maintaining a Jewish majority has, over time, become the most important concern in public discourse among the Jewish population in Israel. Over the past decade, it has become the dominant value for most segments of this population. In contrast, support for the ideal of Greater Israel, which is antithetical to separation from the Palestinians, has dropped to the lowest priority.<sup>[8]</sup>

Nevertheless, several critical barriers such as perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and feelings in Israeli society

stand in the way of advancing the resolution of the conflict. Key among these are:

- The developed capacity of Israeli society to live with the current situation. On the one hand, Jewish-Israelis are accustomed to the notion of “living by the sword”, with a pessimistic sense of constant threat, fear of terrorism and future military clashes. On the other hand, these concerns are counterbalanced by confidence in Israeli society’s ability to deal with the threats and challenges it faces, and optimism about the state’s position from the standpoint of national security. In addition, the majority of the public (72%) does not believe that Israel’s control of the Palestinian population in the West Bank amounts to a state of occupation (note that this relates to the moderate formulation of “Palestinian population” as opposed to “the territories”). It seems that all these contribute to a public desensitization to the realities of conflict and occupation, which contributes to strengthening the status quo and weakening motivation to resolve it.
- The deep controversy regarding the conflict in Israeli society. The conflict is considered a divisive element in Israeli society and indeed, there are major demographic divides based on religiosity and political affiliation. This variety of groups and opinions may be an opportunity for the country’s leadership to take the initiative and shape policy as it sees fit, but in most cases it can lead to political stagnation and paralysis of the political system, which will find it difficult to choose a solution and “go with it”.
- The lack of confidence among Jewish Israelis in the Palestinians and in their wish for peace. There is a great deal of suspicion among Jewish-Israelis concerning the Palestinians’ intentions and motivation. In the 1990s, until the second intifada broke out in 2000, a large portion (55%-65%) of the public believed that most Palestinians want peace. This dropped to 42%-46% in recent years. Another finding is the common belief that the Palestinians remain committed to the destruction of Israel.

This description highlights the gap between the fears and hopes of Israeli society. Fear is an emotion that rather relates to what exists in the present, while hope ties into desiring more than what already exists. Fear affects people quickly, while the creation of hope is a complex cognitive process that requires time and effort. The dominance of fear often reduces the chances that hope emerges or persists.<sup>[9]</sup> As the barriers described above relate more to fear, they impede any significant steps to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and may block the way to its resolution for the foreseeable future.

---

[1] This article only focuses on the public opinion among Jewish-Israelis.

[2] Asher Aryan, *Security Under Threat: Public Opinion in Israel regarding Peace and War*, The Yaffe Center for Strategic Studies and Papyrus, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 1999.

[3] Yehuda Ben-Meir and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion in Israel on National Security Issues*, Memorandum 130, INSS, Tel Aviv, December 2013.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Michael Feige, *Two Maps of the West Bank: Gush Emunim, Peace Now and Space Design in Israel*, Magnes and Eshkolot, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 2004.

[6] Asher Aryan, *Security Under Threat: Public Opinion in Israel regarding Peace and War*, The Yaffe Center for Strategic Studies and Papyrus, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 1999.

[7] Gad Barzilai, “The Political and Legal Culture in Israel”, in: Ephraim Ya’ar and Ze’ev Shavit (eds.), *Trends in Israeli Society*, The Open University, Tel Aviv, 2003, pp. 821-707.

[8] Yehuda Ben-Meir and Gilead Sher, “Separation from the Palestinians – Public Opinion in Israel”, *Strategic Assessment for Israel, 2013-2014*, INSS, 2014, pp. 133-144.

[9] See more about the psychological aspects in Daniel Bar-Tal, *Living with the Conflict: A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Jewish Society in Israel*, Carmel, Jerusalem, 2007.

---