Israeli Public Opinion in the Wake of the 2000-2001 Intifada

Asher Arian

Introduction

Initiated in 1984, the National Security and Public Opinion Project monitors Israeli public opinion on issues related to national security. Surveys undertaken and cited in this report were comprised of representative samplings of the adult Jewish population of Israel. Since 1998, these have included individuals from kibbutzim and from settlements in the Occupied Territories. The margin of error of the 2001 survey was ±3.1 percent. Sample size was 1,216.

The survey presented here was carried out between April 12 and May 11, 2001. During that period, the El-Aqsa Intifada (the uprising of the Palestinians against Israel) was in its seventh month. Terrorist attacks had again begun to threaten Israeli cities.

The surveys cited in this report were comprised of representative samples of the adult Jewish population of Israel. Fieldwork through 1995 was done by the Dahaf Research Institute, in 1996 by Modi'in Ezrachi, and since 1997 by the Almidan/Mahshov Research Institute.

Pragmatism and Realism

The continuous violence waged by the Palestinians since September 2000 seems to have induced Israelis to take a sharp turn to the right on security-related issues. Israelis have also become increasingly gloomy about the short-term prospects for peace and about the state of their nation's security. At the same time, they continued to manifest support for efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the Middle East. In addition, they expressed support for measures that could result in reduced friction with Palestinian Arabs.

> **Despite the eight months of violence, 58 percent expressed their support for the Oslo process compared to 70 percent in both 1999 and 2000.**

This unique amalgam resulted from the breakdown of talks between Ehud Barak's government and the Palestinian Authority, which was followed by the onset of the El-Aqsa Intifada last year. These events affected Israeli public opinion and helped determine the election of Ariel Sharon in the special elections for the Prime Minister, held in February 2001.

Despite the altering of views since the beginning of the uprising, with levels of suspicion and distrust of the Palestinians reminiscent of the period before the signing of the Oslo Accords, support for negotiations and readiness for concessions remained largely in place.

Israelis did not lose their faith in efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, although they supported these efforts at slightly lower rates. Despite the eight months of violence, 58 percent expressed their support for the Oslo process compared to 70 percent in both 1999 and 2000. While 90 percent of Barak supporters favored the continuation of the Oslo process, only a third of Sharon's voters also did so.

The retrospective support for peace-related policies was generally high. Eighty five percent of the sample supported the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, including the extensive concessions involved. Seventy four percent registered their approval of Israel's unilateral withdrawal in May 2000 from Lebanon.

Israeli public opinion in the spring of 2001 was characterized by two patterns — a harsher assessment of Palestinians, Arab-Israelis, and the future, and at the same time, the persistence of positions that would allow for compromise and conciliation. What had changed were expectations of the citizenry and a reassessment as to which policy alternatives were legitimate. The establishment of a Palestinian state was no longer anathema to Israeli politics, and, as we shall see, even the division of Jerusalem had become a legitimate option that could be debated.

Tension between levels of

Figure 1: Perceived Threat from Arabs and Support for a Palestinian State
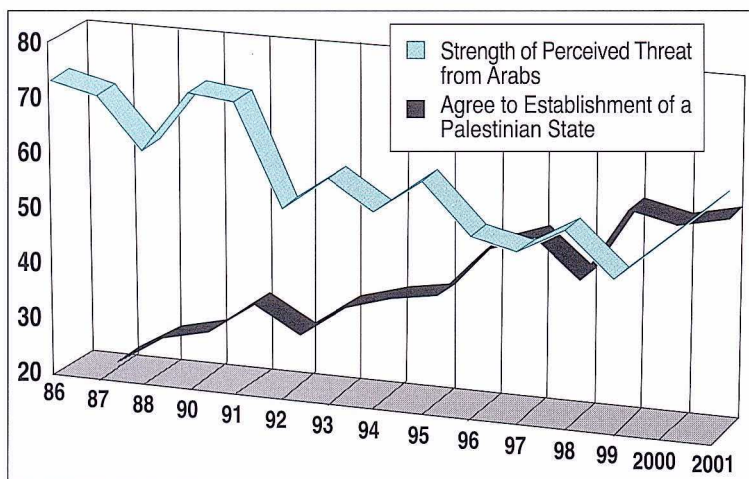
perceived threat and support for conciliatory policies has characterized the Israeli-Arab conflict. Figure 1 displays the rates of those reporting high levels of threat and rates of those agreeing with the establishment of a Palestinian state. Perceived threat and levels support for such a state were inversely related until 1996; as perceived threat decreased, support for conciliatory positions grew. This pattern seems to have changed in the mid-1990s, after which threat and policy positions varied together: no longer did threat drive policy position. This de-linking may have one of two explanations: first, it may reflect the belief that a Palestinian state would be demilitarized, and hence unlikely to pose a serious military threat to Israel. Alternatively, another plausible explanation is that, as troubling as a Palestinian state may be, the demographic threat of the Arabs outnumbering the Jews in Israel is even more worrisome. The severity attributed to this perceived threat could make possible the support of a Palestinian state, which may be seen to increase the likelihood that Israel would maintain a solid Jewish majority. This explanation seems especially likely in light of changing Israeli positions on making concessions in Arab neighborhoods in east Jerusalem (see below). In any case, Israelis seemed to react to the Palestinians in 2001 by expressing a desire to be separated from them, rather than trying to control them or to isolate them politically.

Perceived threat was measured by asking what respondents considered the aspirations of the Arabs to be vis-à-vis Israel. The results indicated extremely high levels of pessimism in 2001, reminiscent of the rates recorded when the question was first asked in these surveys in the late 1980s. In 2001, 62 percent of the respondents thought that the Arabs wanted either to conquer the State of Israel (31%), or to kill much of its Jewish population (31%), compared to only 47 percent who gave those two answers in 1999. The two other possible responses for this question were that the Arabs sought to recover all of the territories lost in 1967 (31% in 2001), or that they sought to regain only some of those territories (7% in 2001).

Despite this, 57 percent of respondents expressed agreement with the establishment of a Palestinian State. The percentage of those expressing support for such a state has progressively grown over the years, and the 2001 number was the same as the previous high recorded in 1999.

Still, 60 percent of Israelis opposed a peace agreement with the Palestinians that required concessions of the magnitude contemplated by Israel's previous government led by Ehud Barak, and elaborated in the bridging proposals presented early this year by former US President Bill Clinton. When asked about the details, the respondents answered as follows:

Question: *"Do you support or oppose the following Israeli concessions, in the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians?*

	% Opposed
Territorial exchanges with the Palestinians	56%
A Palestinian State to be established on 95% of the West Bank and Gaza, with Israel retaining settlement clusters	57%
Transfer of the Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem to Palestinian control	59%
The Temple Mount to be transferred to Palestinian control, and the Western Wall to remain in Israeli hands	67%
A limited number of Palestinians to be able to return to Israel	78%
Israel to concede control of the Jordan Valley over the course of several years	82%

Respondents were then asked whether they supported or rejected the plan as a whole:

Question: "Do you support or oppose a peace agreement with the Palestinians whereby the Palestinians would declare an end to the conflict, and that would entail the establishment of a Palestinian state on 95 percent of the territories with Israel retaining clusters of settlements; transferring to the Palestinians Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem; giving up sovereignty over the Temple Mount but retaining the Western Wall; and allowing the return of a limited number of Palestinian refugees to Israel?"

Sixty one percent opposed the plan; 39 percent expressed support for it. The fact that the rate of acceptance for the plan as a whole is higher than the rate for some of the elements in the point-by-point description can be explained by the addition of the caveat "whereby the Palestinians would declare an end to the conflict." In this type of multi-dimensional assessment, the positive valence of ending of the conflict may outweigh the negatives in the point-by-point analysis.

Israelis expressed even greater opposition to concessions required in a peace treaty with Syria. Only twenty five percent of respondents approved of a significant withdrawal in the Golan Heights, compared to 37 percent in 2000. When asked about the details of the proposed treaty with Syria, the rejection rates for proposed elements were as follows:

	% Opposed
The Golan Heights would be demilitarized and neither Israel nor Syria would have armies near the boundary	58%
Mt. Hermon would be returned to Syria, but Israel would have an early-warning system there	68%
Golan Heights settlers could remain there for a limited period of time	74%
The Golan Heights would be under Syrian sovereignty	78%
The international boundary would be the waterline of the Sea of Galilee	86%

Respondents were then asked if they supported the plan as a whole:

Question: And finally, do you support or oppose a peace agreement with Syria whereby the Golan heights would be transferred to Syrian sovereignty; the

Golan settlers would be able to remain there for a limited period of time only; the international boundary would be the waterline of the Sea of Galilee; the Golan would be demilitarized with neither Israel nor Syria maintaining an army along the boundary; and Mt. Hermon would be returned to Syria, but Israel would retain an early-warning system there?

As noted above, 75 percent opposed such a plan; 25 supported it. The issue of the placement of the international border proved to be a significant factor in the decision to support or oppose the plan. Proposing that the border be moved east of the Sea of Galilee increased support of the plan by 11 percent, to 36 percent.

Question: "And what if the same conditions apply as before, with the international boundary east of the Sea of Galilee, would you then support the agreement?"

Figure 2: Shifts in Attitude in Reaction to Intifada, 2001 and 1988
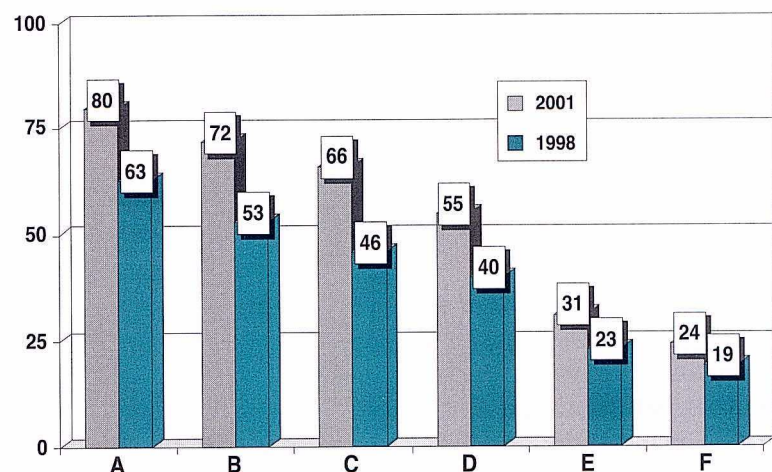
Key: A: National Mood Worse; B: Assessment of Palestinians more Negative; C: Personal Mood Worse; D: Assessment of Israeli Arabs more Negative; E: Intention to Change Vote to Parties of the Right; F: Lower Desire to Live in Israel.

Figure 3: Levels of Confidence in the Effectiveness of Treaties, 1993-2001
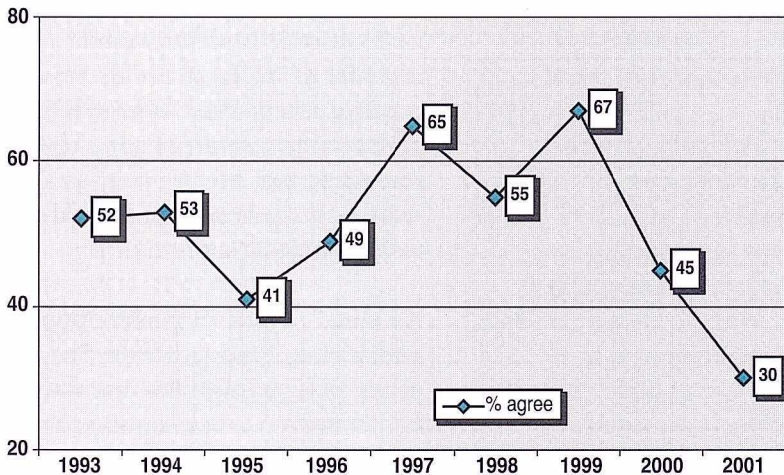
Note: Figures reflect levels of agreement to statement that signed peace treaties indicate a true end of conflict.

As noted above, with this alteration to the international boundary, 64 percent opposed and 36 percent supported.

The current Intifada has soured national and personal moods and has led to more negative assessments of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. It has bolstered the fortunes of parties of the right, and it has encouraged some to reconsider their desire to live in Israel (see Figure 2). These same issues were raised a year after the beginning of the first Intifada. Asking about these issues in 1988 generated the same sorts of reactions as in 2001, though in 2001, the reactions themselves were generally more widespread.

Respondents reported that they had turned sharply to the right after eight months of Palestinian violence. Thirty eight percent of the respondents said that the violence decreased their willingness to make concessions, while only 11 percent said they were now more ready for concessions, with the remainder reporting no change in readiness to make concessions. Beyond that, 31 percent said that the Intifada would induce them to change their vote and cast ballots for parties on the right, compared with only 8 percent that said they would change their vote to parties on the left. Seventy two percent said that their views of Palestinians turned more negative as a result of the violence and 70 percent reported that the prospects for peace have diminished.

The attitudes toward Israel's Arab citizens have also turned sour. Fifty five percent said that their views of Israeli Arabs had become more negative. Seventy five percent now opposed allowing Israeli Arabs to participate in decisions on vital matters related to determining the state's boundaries, compared to 65 percent in the survey of 2000. In 2001, only 30 percent thought that signing treaties would mean a true end to the conflict, compared to 67 percent in 1999 (see Figure 3).

In separate questions, respondents were asked to assess the probability of peace and the probability of war over the next three years. The possible answers were "high," "moderate," "low" and "very low." Seventy percent assessed the likelihood of war between Israel and an Arab state with the next three years as either "high" or "moderate," compared with 39 percent who did so in 2000. For the first time since the introduction of these questions into our polls, the likelihood of war was assessed to be greater than the chances of peace in the near future. In the public mind, the chances of peace have never been lower, nor has

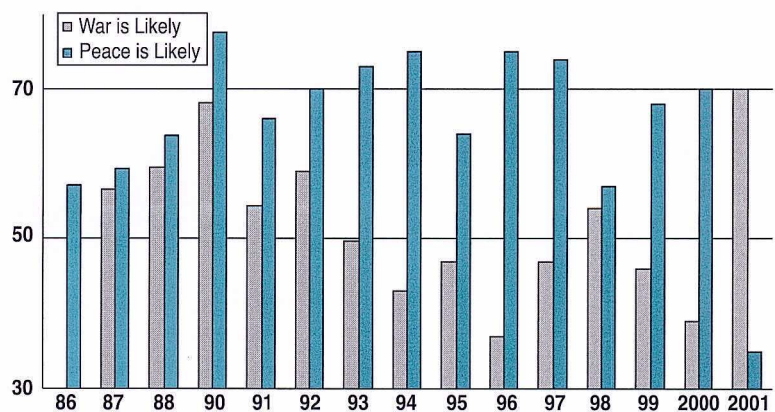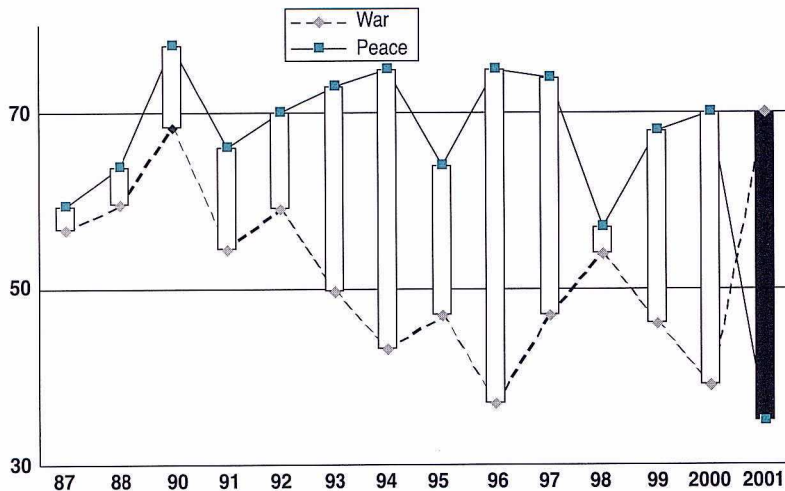**Figure 4: Perceived Likelihood of War and Peace, 1986-2001**

## Figure 5: Difference in Likelihood of War and of Peace, 1987-2001

the likelihood of war ever been higher (see Figure 4).

In 2001, only 35 percent thought that peace would last for the next three years, while 70 percent thought there were high or very high chances for the outbreak of war. This is seen in Figure 5, which displays the differences between the two sets of probabilities.

Trust and optimism declined dramatically. Eighty five percent of the sample thought that the confrontation with the Palestinians would escalate further; only 44 percent thought it possible to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Similarly, only 46 percent of the sample thought that most Palestinians want peace, down from 64 percent in 1999 and 52 percent in 2000. The assessment of the condition of the country had never been lower than in these surveys (see Figure 6). Only 16 percent of this year's respondents reported that the condition of the country was good or very good.

Although people reported that they felt they had turned to more militant positions, the rate of support for conciliatory ones was quite relatively stable. Forty two percent agreed to the principle of returning land for peace, very similar to the rates of 1996 and 1998, but 11 points lower than the 53 percent recorded in 1997. Support for the position that the peace talks should be stopped, even if doing so were to mean a higher probability

Figure 6: Condition of the Country, 1994-2001
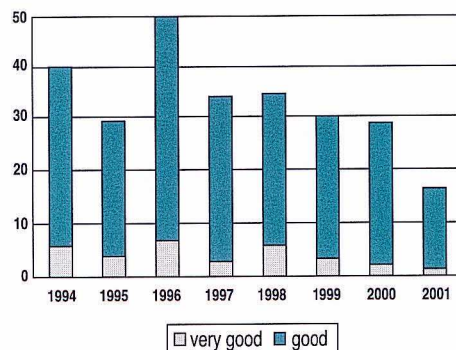
of war, has grown steadily, but from a low base. From a low of 13 percent support in 1997, the 2001 percentage rose to 28.

On the other hand, a plurality (46 to 41 percent) disagreed with the statement that there was no military (as opposed to diplomatic) solution to the conflict. Respondents favored harsher measures to fight terror and terrorists by a margin of 52:34. A policy of sharp and immediate response to provocation (75%) was preferred in general to a policy of restraint (25%).

Until the renewal of talks with the Palestinians, the sample agreed at the noted rates that Israel should do the following:

'Eliminate' those active in terror	89%
Use tanks and fighter aircraft	71%
Use closures and economic sanctions	68%
Invade areas under Palestinian civil and security control ('A' areas)	57%
Sign an interim agreement that would be valid for the next few years	50%
Agree to station an international force between Israel and the Palestinians	48%
Unilaterally withdraw from settlements to make defending the border easier	33%
Relinquish territories as part of the third Oslo redeployment	33%

The respondents were evenly split about whether to recognize or not to recognize a Palestinian state, should it be declared unilaterally. When given various policy options, the responses were as follows:

Recognize the state and negotiate
with it   13%
Recognize it and accept
present borders   19%
Recognize it and annex areas B
and C   18%
Not recognize and not negotiate 36%
Not recognize and invade
Palestine   14%

Table 1. Support for the Return of Specific Territories, by Area

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Western Samaria	30%	30%	38%	44%	39%	41%	51%	39%
Gush Etzion	14%	18%	20%	26%	26%	32%	33%	31%
Jordan Valley	18%	19%	20%	20%	23%	23%	32%	18%
East Jerusalem	10%	9%	12%	20%	17%	21%	24%	51%ª

ª In 2001, "Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem."

Israelis also expressed support for measures that might reduce friction with their Palestinian neighbors. Support for conceding the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem in the framework of a peace agreement has reached an all-time high — 51 percent. Fifty five percent expressed consent for abandoning all but the large settlement blocs. As we have seen, 57 percent now approve of the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza in the framework of a peace agreement. Seventy four percent supported separation between Israelis and Palestinians, and 62 percent thought that such separation was a feasible idea. However, if separation was a widely shared goal, most Israelis did not think that the way to achieve it was by unilateral action. A majority (63%) rejected the proposal that Israel ought to declare what its borders are unilaterally and then withdraw to those borders and defend them.

The rates of support for the return of specific territories to the Palestinians resembled past patterns. The rates of agreeing to return Western Samaria (39%), Gush Etzion (31%), and the Jordan Valley (18%) were similar to those of the late 1990s but lower than 2000 (see Table 1).

> **Support for conceding the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem in the framework of a peace agreement has reached an all-time high – 51 percent.**

The notion of returning "Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem" was supported by 51 percent of the respondents. This is a major shift compared to less than half that rate in the past, when respondents were asked how they felt about the return of "areas of East Jerusalem." The change of wording in the question was intended to reflect the manner in which the topic has been introduced into Israeli political discourse. Increased support for this position, as noted above, may be related to shifting demographic concerns among Israeli Jews.

Security opinion in Israel has undergone a loss of innocence, shifting from mild optimism to pragmatic realism. Public opinion is sensitive to political developments and to terror attacks and assesses the situation accordingly. While it has lost its innocence and naive optimism, public opinion on policy issues has not reverted to the more militant positions prevalent before the signing of the Oslo Accords.

The split in Israeli public opinion is decided by the shifting center group of voters; after giving its support to conciliatory positions since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the data suggest that right wing parties will benefit from the Intifada and the inability to resume peace negotiations. This loss of innocence – characterized by a harsher assessment of the Palestinians while retaining some conciliatory positions – is likely to increase if the security situation continues to deteriorate.