

Are Regional Leaders in Sync with Public Opinion? The Israeli-Palestinian Case

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Brief Analysis

Two renowned pollsters share their latest findings and debate what surveys can tell us about the current Arab-Israeli climate.

On February 7, Tamar Hermann and David Pollock addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Hermann is a political science professor at the Open University of Israel and academic director of the Israel Democracy Institute's Guttman Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research. Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

TAMAR HERMANN

In Israel, only a small minority of poll respondents do not see eye to eye with their government on foreign and security policies; most are pleased with the leadership and support its actions and agenda. Many Israelis hope to move past traditional left/right political divisions and form a new political center, but when it comes to key issues such as the Palestinian conflict, the center's positions are very similar to those of the traditional right.

Indeed, the political map has shifted dramatically to the right since the time of the Oslo Accords. Today, 62% of Israeli Jews define themselves as politically right wing, a record figure since 2001 (a quarter identify as centrist, and only 11% as left wing). The strongest predictor of political beliefs is level of religiosity: 72% of ultraorthodox Jewish

respondents identify as right wing, along with 92% of orthodox Jews, 72% of traditional religious Jews, and 60% of traditional nonreligious Jews. Yet of the 46% who define themselves as secular, only 28% identify as right wing, compared to 36% left wing and 30% centrist.

Overall, Israeli poll respondents are rather pleased with their country's situation. From 2003 to 2018, the percentage who described this situation as "good or very good" rose from around 10% to 53%, while the percentage who answered "bad or very bad" plummeted from over 60% to 16%. The majority are especially happy with the booming economy and lower rates of violence. Yet these views differ sharply between the political blocs: 71% of right-wing Jews characterized Israel's situation as "good or very good," compared to 49% of centrist Jews and only 27% of left-wingers.

On the whole, the Israeli public is not in any particular rush to change anything, and there is not much of an appetite for replacing Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu or returning to the negotiating table with the Palestinians. Only 6% of Jewish respondents state that reaching a peace agreement should be the government's main focus, compared to a small plurality of Arab Israelis who feel that way. Overall, Jews and Arabs seem to agree that probability of a positive breakthrough in the near future is low.

Most Israeli respondents do not seem to mourn the Oslo Accords—in fact, half of right-wing Jews believe that things would be better if those agreements had never been signed, while the majority of centrist and left-wing Jews believe things would be roughly the same. Most Jewish respondents—80% of the right and 59% of the center—blame the failure to reach a peace agreement on the Palestinians, whereas half of left-wingers believe both sides are equally to blame. Even so, around 60% of Israelis indicate they would support new negotiations, though less than 40% believe they would be effective.

Although most centrist and left-wing Jewish respondents believe that Palestinians have the right to an independent state, only half of Israel's overall Jewish public shares this view. Support for the two-state solution is only 46.8%, the lowest it has been since 1998, and the figure plummets to around 25% on the right end of the spectrum.

If a permanent political agreement were to be signed, most Israeli respondents indicate that they would expect continued hostility from the Palestinian side. As of August 2018, 63% of Jews polled believe that the majority of Palestinians have not yet come to terms with Israel's existence and would destroy the country if they could. Respondents from all political blocs generally agree that Palestinians must unconditionally recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people before peace talks can be revived. They also expect Palestinians to forfeit the "right of return," leave Jerusalem undivided and under Israeli rule (not including the surrounding Arab neighborhoods), and agree to allow large settlement blocs to remain in place, with border swaps deemed acceptable if necessary.

Regarding Israel's upcoming national elections, former chief of staff Benny Gantz recently entered the political arena, giving many left-wing and centrist respondents hope (even though his positions **are not yet completely clear** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israels-battle-of-the-benjamins-netanyahu-vs.-gantz>)). Despite the **criminal investigations** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/netanyahus-political-and-legal-challenges-in-the-next-elections>) surrounding Netanyahu, however, his Likud Party will likely win numerous votes in April given the popularity of various candidates on its list.

DAVID POLLOCK

Polls conducted in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates indicate that popular opinion has become surprisingly moderate in some of these countries. In most cases, the public's positions on foreign policy align with those of the government. A full two-thirds of respondents support the two-state solution. Moreover, while each public largely disapproves of American foreign policy and the Trump administration, the percentage who believe it is important to maintain good relations with the United States is much

higher.

Respondents in these countries also share their governments' animosity toward Hezbollah and Iran. In each case, 80 to 90% of the public disapproves of Iran, Iranian proxies, and Hezbollah. The only exception to this trend is Lebanon's Shia community, which largely support the group and its patrons in Tehran. Yet even this support is dropping, and only 30% of Lebanese Shia believe Hezbollah should confront Israel.

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a small plurality of respondents in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon still see it as a top foreign policy priority, but the issue is low-priority in the Persian Gulf states. Support is high in all countries for giving both sides incentives to adopt more moderate positions. Yet support is generally low for collaborating with Israel on technology and similar issues before a peace agreement is signed with the Palestinians—around 20% in total, albeit a little higher in Egypt and Jordan.

Meanwhile, Hamas retains some popularity, though favorable views are dropping. Support for the organization hovers around 30%-40%, indicating that a sizeable minority still backs a hardline stance against Israel despite significant support for the two-state solution.

The public's relatively moderate positions on Israel do not mean that regional governments will face popular pressure to normalize relations with Israel or take an active role in promoting the peace process. Yet they do signify that if these governments choose to support peace, they will not face a huge backlash—more likely, they will enjoy at least passive support for these efforts. Furthermore, respondents in many countries expressed support for good-faith gestures toward Jews, while a growing segment would like to see Islam interpreted in a more moderate manner.

This summary was prepared by Tamuz Avivi.

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