

Israelis Agree with Bibi

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A reliable new poll of Israeli public opinion shows that attitudes on the Gaza blockade are heavily hawkish -- in diametric opposition not only to most international reactions, but also much of the Israeli media's own commentary. This finding is the first detailed measurement of Israeli views following the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) violent boarding of the Gaza-bound Mavi Marmara, which resulted in the deaths of nine people. The poll surveyed Israeli Jewish opinion and was conducted by telephone interviews on June 7 by Pechter Middle East Polls, a young, Princeton, N.J.-based survey research and analysis firm working with pollsters throughout the region.

In the aftermath of the recent ship-boarding incident, three-quarters of Jewish Israelis say Israel should not open the Gaza Strip to international aid shipments. Narrower, yet still solid, majorities also say Israel should not accept an international investigation, nor adjust its tactics to win favorable international consideration.

Even more surprising, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's job-approval rating has now climbed into positive territory: 53 percent of respondents were satisfied with his performance, while 40 percent were dissatisfied. By contrast, 71 percent voiced dissatisfaction with U.S. President Barack Obama, and a clear majority, 63 percent, are also dissatisfied with the overall U.S. reaction to the Gaza flotilla controversy so far.

To put this reaction in context, it helps to first look at popular assessments of the deadly ship-boarding operation itself. The sole previously reported survey on this point, from a June 4 Maariv newspaper poll, concluded that a majority of Israelis thought that the operation should have been conducted "in a different way." However, in the subsequent Pechter poll, Israelis Jews were asked to consider how they think IDF soldiers should have acted once confronted with violent activists aboard the ship. A plurality, 46 percent, thought Israel used the "right amount of force" aboard the Mavi Marmara, and nearly as many, 39 percent, said Israel used "not enough force" in boarding the Turkish ship. Only 8 percent thought that the IDF used too much force.

The Israeli public appears even more inclined to hawkish solutions when it comes to future attempts to breach the Gaza blockade. The poll noted media reports about Iran's purported plan to send Red Crescent vessels to Gaza, asking respondents if Israel should "let them in quietly" or "stop them whatever it takes." The results are strikingly lopsided: 84 percent would stop them, whatever it takes, while just 7 percent would let them in quietly. Similarly, when asked what Israel should do if the Turkish navy and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally attempt to break the Gaza blockade, as some reports have suggested might happen, three-quarters said Israel should

stop them at any cost.

Alternative policies garner only minority support from the Israeli public. Just one-fifth (22 percent) of respondents advocate opening Gaza to international humanitarian shipments. More incremental shifts elicit a slightly more sympathetic popular response, but fall well short of gaining majority support. Two-fifths (37 percent) of those surveyed would support "an international inquiry committee that will investigate the recent ship incident." Almost as many (35 percent) agree with the general proposition that Israel should "adjust its tactics to elicit a more favorable international reaction."

This data carries a number of important political implications, both for Israeli domestic politics and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Of most immediate importance, Netanyahu's job is not in jeopardy as a result of this latest international imbroglio. If the Israeli public were to blame any of its elected officials for this diplomatic setback, it would be Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who represents the Labor Party. The new Pechter poll shows that Barak's approval rating, unlike Netanyahu's, is now in negative territory: Just 41 percent are satisfied with his job performance, against 52 percent dissatisfied. Even so, around 75 percent of Israelis reject the notion that Barak should resign his post, according to last week's Maariv poll.

The Israeli public's hawkish stance also constrains Netanyahu's ability to substantially alter Israel's Gaza policy in the wake of the Mavi Marmara incident. In moving toward acceptance of some kind of international presence on an investigative commission and toward some increase in Israel's allowance of humanitarian aid to Gaza, Netanyahu is reaching the outer limits of what the Israeli electorate could realistically be persuaded to accept.

The survey also found extremely high levels of intensity among respondents, a fact that makes it particularly difficult for the Israeli government to move against the tide of public opinion. In my 30 years of professionally analyzing Israeli and Arab polls, I have rarely seen such a passionate response from those surveyed. For example, among the very large majorities who said Israel should do whatever it takes to block Iranian or Turkish vessels from reaching Gaza, extraordinarily high percentages said they feel "strongly" about the issue: 68 percent for Turkish boats, and an even higher proportion, 78 percent, regarding Iranian blockade-runners.

The one methodological caveat to this conclusion concerns Israel's Arab citizens, who constitute approximately 18 percent of its adult population and vote freely in its elections, but are usually considered separately in survey analysis. Had they been included in this latest poll, previous research suggests that the overall numbers would have shifted modestly in a more dovish direction. However, Arab Israeli opinion will almost certainly not be a major factor considered by the current Israeli government, which relies on the support of Jewish Zionist parties to maintain power.

These findings, however, do not spell doom for hopes of a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Crucially, the Israeli public's stance on Gaza coexists with relatively dovish views on other key Palestinian issues. For nearly a decade now, even during wars or major surges in terrorist attacks, a solid majority of Israeli Jews have consistently supported a two-state solution to the dispute. This fundamental fact was again attested as recently as March, in the latest Hebrew University/Truman Institute poll, which showed 68 percent in favor of that option. Moreover, that poll showed a narrow majority explicitly willing to accept "dismantling most of the settlements" in the West Bank as the price for peace.

Netanyahu's challenge is to translate these opinions into a policy that can bring both long-term security and peace to his people. Given the Israeli public's hawkish views toward Hamas-ruled Gaza, but their willingness to explore concessions in the West Bank under Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, the most realistic way forward is surprisingly straightforward: Keep pushing Israel and the Palestinian Authority toward new, practical, political agreements. Find better ways to help the people of Gaza, but not their Hamas rulers -- whom Israelis rightly view as a

threat, not only to their own security, but also to any prospect of Palestinian-Israeli peace. In other words, work with Abbas, against Hamas.

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