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Security Threatened

ISRAELI OPINION ON PEACE AND WAR

Public opinion in Israel on security questions is malleable, and politicians deemed legitimate can lead opinion precisely because of this fluidity. This proposition explains the support for seemingly surprising developments: the Camp David accords of 1978 between Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egypt's President Anwar Sadat that stipulated Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the signing of a peace treaty with Egypt, and the accord of joint recognition signed in 1993 on the White House lawn by Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

These processes were deemed improbable by most observers months before – and even days before – they began. But considered in light of the cumulative record of public opinion survey findings, such developments take on a different complexion. It is not that the breakthroughs on the long path toward peace could have been predicted from the survey data; but a careful reading of the findings indicates that public opinion also presented no obstacle to progress along the tortuous path of negotiation, compromise, and concession. It is not the intention of this volume to “predict the past” once policies change: that is too easy. But it is also too facile to project political paralysis on the basis of a finding that a population is nearly evenly divided on an important matter. Based on the data of Israeli public opinion to be presented here, it has been reasonable to conclude that diplomatic breakthroughs would be accepted if pursued by a legitimate leadership, *and/or* that a toughening of security policy would be supported, if that case were convincingly made.

Two trends characterized security opinion in Israel in the years after the Six Days war of 1967, and especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were a hardening of short-term positions regarding matters which could be perceived to have immediate implications for security, on the one hand, and a softening of positions regarding long-term political issues, on the other. Illustrations of short-term issues included insistence on control over

day-to-day security (such as border crossings), the reaction to the Arab uprising in the territories (the intifada), the fight against terror, and efforts to achieve personal safety; examples of conciliation regarding long-term issues included the growing willingness to return some territories for peace, negotiations with the PLO, and the possible creation of a Palestinian state.

These distinctions between short-term and long-term are fluid and much more discernible after the fact, but they underscore the two key elements which formed the basis of the tension in the area: the simultaneous quest for both peace and security. It is the mix of these two which generated much of the political heat, and at times bloody violence, of the period. Was peace possible? What price security? Was there an interlocutor with whom to negotiate? How best to encourage the emergence of one? If concessions were made, would they make Israel appear more forthcoming or more vulnerable? Could such concessions be reversed, or were they simply points on the compass in the oft-mentioned plan of stages by which the Arabs intended to dismember Israel? And on and on.

The notable dynamic of the story was the slow but consistent movement toward mutual recognition and negotiations for peace. This momentum was very sporadic and was interspersed with violent eruptions of animosity and war. However, with the United States consistently propping up the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) with military hardware and aid, along with the no less insistent prodding of Israel by the Americans to be prepared to concede the fruits of the 1967 war in favor of peace accords, the time finally seemed ripe in the mid-1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf war in 1991, the policy of hanging tough on the battlefield was to be augmented by the equally exhausting endeavor of reaching acceptable agreements between long-standing enemies.

Israeli public opinion accommodated itself to these changes. It would be wrong to say that opinion caused such changes, but it would be equally incorrect to claim that policy shifts consistently brought about changes in public opinion. The pattern was much more complex and subtle, with one pattern more dominant in one situation, and the other more clearly manifesting itself in another. The interplay of the two patterns was facilitated in the case of Israel by the widespread interest in the issues at hand, and by the almost even split in Jewish public opinion regarding two very different visions of the future. Were Israeli public opinion on security questions not malleable, politicians could neither afford policy paralysis at certain times nor shift into action based on tough decisions at others.

These generalizations can be understood properly only in terms of four further clarifications:

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1. The security threat to Israel was great, attested to by the extent and power of the armies and armaments Israel faced. Still, the public's perception of that threat varied among groups and over time.
2. On many security issues there was a high level of consensus, bolstered by an ideology called the People Apart Syndrome. This ideology facilitated coping with the security threat perceived, and was braced by that threat. As perceived threat increased, the circle turned in on itself, to form a tighter knot.
3. The question of the future of the territories taken by Israel in the 1967 Six Days war was key to understanding Israel's security. For many, the issue was emotional, and even religious. But others had more pragmatic arguments: some doves, for instance, tended to stress demographic trends of an expanding Arab population, and the wisdom of seeking durable political solutions to forestall military confrontation; hawks tended to see military confrontation as inevitable, and hence preferred the strategic depth afforded by retaining the territories. Regardless of argument, there was little doubt that public opinion on the issue was divided, and this division gave politicians more, not less, latitude in forming security policies. Public opinion split in a manner that appeared to lead to standstill and paralysis, but that same situation could be mustered by a legitimate leadership into a policy which would commit the nation one way or the other. The more or less equal division of an alert polity may empower a leadership determined to decide, or may be the excuse of one bent on avoiding decision.
4. The demographic cleavages of Israel were useful, if imperfect, guides to an individual's policy position; hawks tended to be younger, less educated, lower-class, more religious, sephardi (Jews of Asian and African origins), while doves were disproportionately found among the older, more educated, higher-class, more secular, ashkenazi (Jews of European origins). Events such as Sadat's coming to Jerusalem, the intifada, and the Gulf war affected opinion; generally this change of policy position had an impact on all groups in the same direction. Shifts seemed to be along the spectrum of more or less, with few individuals changing previous positions in a radical manner. Events often produced polarization, but that took place most noticeably at the extremes of the continuum; the bulk of the population moved in tandem according to a more universal calculus.

SURVEYING THE ISRAELI PUBLIC, 1962–1994

The analyses presented in this book are based largely on public opinion surveys of representative samples of adult Jews in Israel, numbering thousands of respondents (see Appendix I). Carried out in the 33-year period between 1962 and 1994, the surveys were almost always based on representative samples of the adult Jewish population of Israel, excluding individuals from kibbutzim and from the territories occupied by Israel after the Six Days war of 1967. Special supplementary material included a 1962 survey of 300 kibbutz members, and a 1990 survey of West Bank residents. In addition, a two-wave panel (1987 and 1988) and a three-wave panel (1987, 1988, and 1990), in which the same respondents were reinterviewed, were analyzed.

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The time period covered by this study ranges over decades laden with “historical” events, and these events affected the way the public reacted to policy issues. Perspective is a gift conferred by time and distance; it is very difficult to discern the importance of developments when in close proximity. But there can be little doubt that the Six Days war of 1967 will always be identified as a decisive turning point in Israeli history; the events of the decades following that war obviously played a critical role in defining the country’s future.

Public opinion reacted differently to different stimuli. Sometimes the reaction to events was crisp, as with Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and sometimes slower, as with the intifada 10 years later (Stone 1982; Shamir and Shamir 1992). The beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace talks in 1991, following the Gulf war, and the signing of the peace accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, marked other junctures of potential change. All of these highlighted, and were highlighted by, the threats perceived by Israelis as being both of war and of peace. Public opinion reacted to events, and adjusted to the changing view of security over the years (Handel 1973; Yariv 1980; Horowitz 1982; Yaniv 1987a; Horowitz 1993).

A habit of confrontation is perhaps as difficult to give up as any other habit. The ways of peace are difficult for those disciplined in war. As international relations changed in the post-cold-war world, there was no doubt that Israel’s security dilemmas were also changing. Israel was faced with the challenges attendant upon entering into situations of peace or pseudo peace with many of its neighbors, of forgoing immediate gratification for promises of future tranquillity, of believing the promises of leaders of countries which in the not distant past had expressed enmity and disdain. Should Israel take those risks? Part of the answer rested with how such threats were perceived, and the lessons learned, by public opinion in Israel in the past. Another part depended on the quality of the leadership and the direction it chose to take. Public opinion could be led, but it was neither deaf nor dumb.

The 1967–94 years were different from the two decades which followed independence in 1948. The earlier period was characterized by feelings of military insecurity regarding threats from neighboring countries; the development of a secure and stable, if insulated, domestic scene; and the political, economic, spiritual, and cultural dominance of the party in power at the time of independence, Mapai (later known as the Labor party). The period between 1967 and 1994 saw a change in each category: in its international setting, Israel experienced a growing sense of security after the trauma of the Yom Kippur war in 1973. This sense of security was underscored by the initiation of massive American aid, and the signing of peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994. In 1982 Israel even

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initiated war in Lebanon against the PLO and the Lebanese army, risking the wrath of the Syrians and the other powers of the Eastern front. In the 1991 Gulf war, even though it was attacked, Israel did not participate, mostly because of American pressure. The U.S.-led coalition against Iraq, which included Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, might have fallen apart had Israel acted. During this same period, in addition to the SCUD missiles raining down on the country in 1991, Israel was subject to terrorist attacks from outside the country (which was not new), and to the uprising of the Arab population in the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six Days war, intifada, which began in 1987 (which was new). And it went from dominance to competitiveness in electoral politics.

Table 1.1 lists the security and political highlights of the 1967-94 period. Six of Israel's first eight prime ministers were active in this period. All but the first two, David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett, who were in power until 1963, led the government at various times during these years. Labor gained electoral strength at the end of the 1960s, but declined in the 1970s until it lost power in 1977. Then it began a slow and unsteady recovery; the Likud's record was the mirror image of Labor's.

As already noted, the analyses in this volume are based on surveys of attitudes of representative samples of Israeli Jews. Two topics this study does *not* deal with are Arab opinion and elite opinion. Arab citizens of Israel (not territories residents) constitute almost 20 percent of the population of Israel, and some 17 percent of the electorate. However, they do not take part in the security debate in Israel, although they are sometimes a topic in that debate (Smooha 1978, 1989, 1992; Rouhana 1989; Al-Haj 1995), and hence they are not included in these analyses. What this exclusion says about Israeli society, and about whether or not it is "democratic" to omit Arabs from the security debate in Israel, are topics beyond the scope of this book. But in terms of research strategy, it certainly makes good sense to focus on Jewish respondents. Israel defines itself as a Jewish state and one of its cherished values is to prepare itself as a home for future Jewish immigrants. Arabs do not serve in the armed forces, nor is it legitimate in the Israeli political culture for a governing coalition to rely on the support of Arab political parties to provide the swing votes in decisions about territories and peace proposals.

The reasons why such a large minority group can be excluded in a study of public opinion in a democracy explain a good deal about the political culture of Israel and about the limitations of public opinion in its strict sense. If only numbers mattered, then most Israelis (half the Jews and all the Arabs) would support dovish policies. But more than numbers matter: distribution, concentration, intensity, and leadership also matter. Most important, politics matters.

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SECURITY THREATENED

Table 1.1. *Security and Political Highlights 1967-1994*

Security and foreign affairs	Domestic politics
	1963-69 - Levi Eshkol prime minister
1967 - Six Days war	1967-70 - National Unity Government including Dayan and Begin
1968-69 - War of Attrition	1969 - Golda Meir prime minister 1969 - Labor's biggest victory
1973 - Yom Kippur war	1973 (after war) - Labor wins but strength diminished
1974 - disengagement agreements	1974 (after agreements) - Yitzhak Rabin prime minister 1977 - Likud victory; Menachem Begin prime minister
1977 - Sadat visit to Jerusalem	
1978 - Camp David accords	
1981 - cease-fire agreement with PLO in Lebanon	1981 - close race; Likud victory; large 2-party vote
1982 - Lebanon campaign	1983 - Yitzhak Shamir prime minister 1984 - close race; Labor victory but smaller 2-party vote; rotation agreement; Shimon Peres prime minister
1987 - intifada begins	1986 - Shamir again prime minister 1988 - close race; Likud victory but smaller 2-party vote
1991 - January: Gulf war - October: peace conference in Madrid	
1993 - mutual recognition ("Jericho-Gaza first") accord with the PLO	
1994 - Syria expresses willingness for peace treaty; peace treaty signed with Jordan	1992 - Labor victory; Rabin again prime minister

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The views of the political elite are on display in the positions taken by their parties, by the speeches they make, and by the policies they advocate (Heradstviet 1974; Brecher 1972, 1980; Yaniv and Pascal 1980; Peri 1983; Yishai 1987; Inbar 1991; Shamir 1991). The strengthened linkage over time between them and the public is expressed in the growing importance of issue-based voting in Israel, analyzed in Chapter 5. In this study, many questions relate to the assessment of leaders, parties, and policies, but the questions are asked only of the public.

The years under consideration represent more than half of the years of Israel's existence up to this time. It was a period characterized by conflicting trends: steady growth of the Jewish population yet faster growth of the Arab population under Israel's jurisdiction; a strengthened security position yet increasing dangers from nonconventional weapons; a growing economy over time yet one which was not spared the occasionally grave problems of inflation, unemployment, and erratic growth.

Israel's population within its pre-1967 borders increased by 77.3 percent from 1969 to 1993 (see Table 1.2); growth in the territories was greater at 83.9 percent. Change stemmed from the natural growth of births over deaths, from the waves of immigration of Jews, especially the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union since 1989, and from emigration. Table 1.2 includes inhabitants in pre-1967 Israel and in the territories (the West Bank and Gaza) taken in the Six Days war (see Benvenisti 1986, 1988). The population of pre-1967, Jews and Arabs (line 2), were citizens of Israel and had the right to vote in elections; the surveys on which the analyses of this book are based focus on Jews only (line 2.a).

Jews and Arabs within the pre-1967 borders generated different growth rates during this period (see Table 1.2 and Figure 1.1). Both populations grew, for the Jews at about 69 percent, and for Arabs above 125 percent. In 1969, Jews made up about 64 percent of the total population, and 86 percent within the pre-1967 borders. The corresponding figures for 1992 were 63 percent and 82 percent. In the pre-1967 borders, the Arab population more than doubled its size between 1969 and 1992, while Jews were only two-thirds again as numerous; from 14.4 percent of Israeli citizens in 1969, Arabs constituted 18.3 percent in 1992.

The imbalance between Jews and non-Jews grew despite the efforts of the Israeli government to increase Jewish population by encouraging immigration and by discouraging Israeli Jews from leaving, or by granting them benefits if they returned. Not only Jews left Israel; there has been a steady out-migration of Arabs as well; the Arab Christian community has especially shrunk in size, although it never made up a large fraction of the Arab population. Many Arabs of the territories, living under military occupation and facing uncertainties of livelihood in a politically charged

Table 1.2. Population in Israel and Territories, 1969-1992 (in 000s)

	1969	1973	1977	1981	1984	1988	1992	Increase 1969-1992
1. Total population	3,892	4,392	4,800	5,179	5,503	5,961	6,965	79.7%
2. Pre-1967 borders	2,930	3,338	3,653	3,978	4,200	4,477	5,196	77.3%
a. Jews	2,507	2,845	3,077	3,320	3,472	3,659	4,243	69.2%
b. non-Jews	423	493	576	658	728	818	953	125.3%
3. Territories (a+b)	962	1,054	1,147	1,201	1,303	1,484	1,769	83.9%
a. West Bank	598	652	696	732	793	895	1,052	75.9%
b. Gaza Strip	364	402	451	469	510	589	717	96.8%
c. Jews	^a	2	11	27	46	66	110	^a
Jews as % of total (2a+3c/1, in %)	64.4	64.8	64.3	64.6	63.9	62.5	62.5	^c
Jews ^b as % in pre-1967 borders (2a/2, in %)	85.6	85.2	84.2	83.5	82.7	81.7	81.7	^c
Territories of total (3/1, in %)	24.7	24.0	23.9	23.2	23.4	24.9	25.4	^c

^a No 1969 population.^b Numbers include Jews in territories.^c Not relevant.Source: Compiled from *Statistical Abstracts of Israel*, various years.

Surveys, 1962–1964

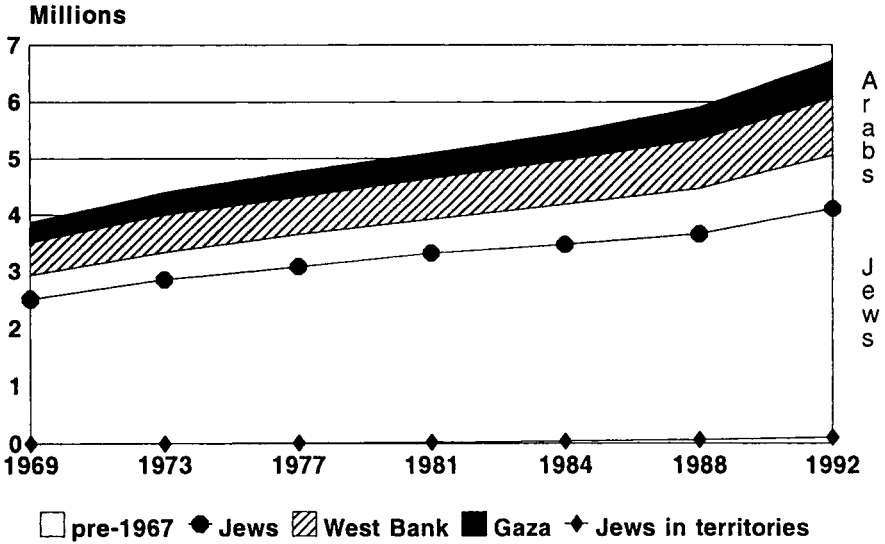


Figure 1.1. Population of Israel, 1969–1992.

environment, opted to leave. Fertility rates (representing the average number of children a woman may bear during her lifetime) fell for all groups in Israel, but mostly among Moslem Arabs: the total fertility rate for that group in 1970 was 8.95 and 4.70 in 1990. The comparable figures for Arab Christians and Jews, respectively, were 3.62 and 2.57, and 3.41 and 2.69. Despite the falling Arab fertility rate and the dual policy of encouraging the immigration of Jews and the emigration of Arabs, the higher rate of Arab population growth was not stemmed (Friedlander and Goldscheider 1979; Goldscheider 1992a, 21, and 1992b).

The Israeli economy grew dramatically in the same period, and the standard of living rose for all in the population, although after the 1973 Yom Kippur war the growth of per capita product began to drop (Aharoni 1991). Inflation soared in the 1980s, unemployment in the 1990s (Shalev 1992, 239–40); by the mid-1990s growth had picked up impressively and unemployment was shrinking. The gross domestic product per capita in constant prices was 14,424 for 1969 and 22,435 for 1991 (*Statistical Abstracts of Israel*). While both groups showed improvement, growth among Jews was higher than among Arabs. In 1994, a World Bank report of the standard of living of the nations of the world listed Israel in 18th place (*Ha'aretz*, January 21, 1994).

Military expenditure as a percentage of gross national product fell to

12.8 percent in 1989 and continued downward in the 1990s; it was as high as 24.4 percent in 1984 and 25.5 percent in 1982 (*Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbooks*); the world percent rates of military expenditure as a percentage of GNP for those years were 4.9, 5.9, and 6.0 percent, respectively. This decline expressed less military budget relative to a national budget burdened with many other pressures; it also could be lowered because of the growth in the size of the economy, and the relative lessening of hostility levels of Israel's neighbors. But given the military threats Israel faced and the political risks it considered taking, it was not surprising that the downward slide of the military budget caused concern in many quarters. These and other factors are the backdrop for change in public opinion.

POLICY MAKING IN A DEMOCRACY

Shrewd politicians have two eyes on the target: one on where the public is, and one on where the public is going. Politicians clearly respect, fear, and try to manipulate public opinion. The leaders of every state – and certainly every democracy – are concerned with the reaction of the public to their policies, and it is the public which will ultimately enjoy or suffer the fruits of these policies. The political leadership of a democratic regime will stand for election in the not too distant future. In the analysis of security policy, the role of public opinion seems marginal compared to political, military, and economic factors. But politicians understand that there is truth in the old adage “all politics is local politics”; politicians are correct in according public opinion an important place in their considerations (Russett 1990).

Public opinion does not make policy; policy is made by politicians; the distribution of public attitudes is thus a crucial datum for politicians and decision-makers (Holsti and Rosenau 1984, 1986; Lijphart 1984). In democracies, the impact of public opinion on policy is through the selection of politicians who will ultimately make decisions. Policy, in turn, affects public opinion; the leadership has the authority to define the security agenda, and has access to the media. As the next elections approach, this situation is balanced to a degree, but it still favors those who wield power. As Key (1966, 2, 7) points out:

The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input . . . [But] voters are not fools . . . the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it.

There has been a spirited debate among those who study opinion about the public. Earlier U.S. studies characterized the citizenry as uninformed