

Peace Index: November 2007

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Many assume that if the Israeli decision-makers were to openly change their position on the conflict and its resolution, the public would throng after them en masse and support the agreement that was reached. The present survey, like the findings of earlier surveys we conducted, shows that this assumption is very flimsy and the people are not hurrying to get on the peace train the Olmert government is driving. And apparently, despite the wide media coverage of the Annapolis conference and the prime minister's proclamation that it marked a political turning point of historic importance, the Israeli Jewish public's level of interest in the conference remained quite low; as in the period before the conference, the majority did not follow it with any regularity. Furthermore, notwithstanding the joint statement and the positive spirit in which the conference ended, the overall public assessment of its outcomes in terms of a basic clarification of the disagreements between Israel and the Palestinians, or advancing the chances of peace between them, tends in the negative direction. Many more in the public remained skeptical, or did not change their opinion about the chances of reaching a lasting peace with the Palestinians, than were encouraged by the event and became optimistic about the chances for peace.

Not surprisingly, the public believes almost unanimously that both the Israeli government and people genuinely want to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Surprisingly, today there is also a majority, albeit small, that thinks the Palestinian Authority genuinely wants the same, while views regarding the Palestinian people are divided with a very slight advantage for those leaning to the positive side. Moreover, a considerable majority of the Jewish public sees the Palestinians' demand for an independent state as just and thinks Israel can allow itself to agree to the establishment of such a state. The source of the Jewish public's skepticism and even pessimism is apparently the widespread expectation that a peace agreement based on "two states for two peoples" would not lead, for the

Palestinians, to the end of their historic conflict with Israel. The distrust of the Palestinians' intentions is also evident in the Jewish public's clear, ongoing preference for a closed border that would not enable free passage from one side to the other even if the two-state solution was implemented. However, the Jewish public does not think this desirable solution is in reach; the prevailing view is that without the agreement of Hamas there is no chance of arriving at a peace agreement, and that the sides will have a hard time overcoming their disagreements on the core issues.

As in the past, this time too we found that the main issues on which the public thinks the sides will have trouble reaching a compromise—in this order—are Jerusalem and the right of return for the Palestinian refugees, though compared to the end of the 1990s less weight is ascribed to Jerusalem and considerably more to the refugee issue.

Those are the main findings of the Peace Index survey that was carried out on Monday and Tuesday, 3-4 December.

According to the reports of the interviewees themselves, despite the heavy media coverage, less than one-quarter of the Israeli Jewish public (24%) regularly followed what happened at the Annapolis conference, 47% followed the events only "sometimes," and 26% not at all—almost an identical segmentation to those we found two months and a month before the conference was held. In other words, the positive attitude that the Israeli, Palestinian, and American decision-makers showed toward the gathering did not carry along the public, most of which remained skeptical or pessimistic. That detachment is evident in assessments of the outcomes: 63% think the conference did not bring about a basic clarification of the disagreements between Israel and the Palestinians and a similar percentage says it did not increase the chances of reaching a peace settlement.

This skepticism or pessimism apparently also explains the segmentation of views on whether the positions that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed at the conference were

too tough—only 8%, too conciliatory—31%, or appropriate, that is, not too tough and not too conciliatory—32% (28% had no opinion on the matter, unlike past conferences when the public showed great awareness and strong opinions about the positions that the Israeli representatives presented). The segmentation of responses to the question of how the conference influenced the interviewees' optimism or pessimism about the chances for peace also reflects a low degree of public involvement in the event: 29% said they were more optimistic, 38% that they were more pessimistic, and 33% did not change their attitude, had not heard of the conference at all, or did not know.

As in the past, the dominant view in Israel is that the Israeli government and people are interested in peace—78% and 80%, respectively. Surprisingly, though, today there is also a majority—albeit small—saying that the Palestinian Authority under Abu Mazen's leadership also desires peace (55%). Regarding the desire for peace among the Palestinian people in general, the opinions are divided with a very slight lead on the positive side: 48% think the Palestinians want peace, 45% think they do not. Notwithstanding all the events in recent years, a majority of the Jewish public also views the Palestinians' demand for an independent state as justified—62% (compared to 34.5% who see it as unjustified). As in the past, there is also a majority—58%—for those who are sure or who think Israel can allow itself the establishment of an independent Palestinian state (32% think or are sure that it cannot, and the rest do not know).

However, despite the positive attitude toward the “two-state” solution both in terms of justice and pragmatism from the Israeli standpoint, a large obstacle is the widespread belief in the Israeli Jewish public that even if a peace agreement is signed along these lines, it will not constitute the end of the historic conflict for the Palestinians. Whereas 61% hold this pessimistic assessment, only 31% believe an agreement according to the two-state formula would end the conflict from the Palestinians' standpoint. Furthermore, a large majority of 71% believes it is impossible to reach a peace settlement with the Palestinians without Hamas's consent, with only 21% claiming the opposite. Given the

perception of Abu Mazen's weakness, it is clear why this assessment also contributes to the lack of belief in the feasibility of a peace solution.

All this apparently explains the preference of the majority of the Israeli Jewish public—some 53% vs. 26%—that, even if an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is signed based on the “two states for two peoples” formula, the border between the two states should remain closed (5% prefer that it be closed to the Palestinians and open to the Jews; 1%, open to the Palestinians and closed to the Jews; and 15% do not know).

In light of the upcoming resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, we asked the interviewees what they see as the most difficult issues for a solution between the two sides. Out of a list of six issues, the question of Jerusalem came out on top (39%). Yet, compared to the findings of the November 1999 Peace Index, it appears there has been a significant decline in that assessment (it then came to 57%). There has been, however, a considerable increase in the importance ascribed to the refugee question as the most important obstacle, from 5% in 1999 to 32% today. Other matters of dispute—the borders, the settlements, the independent Palestinian state, and water—lag far behind, in the Israeli Jewish public's view, in terms of the difficulties they pose for reaching a peace agreement, in this order: borders—14%, settlements—8%, establishment of an independent Palestinian state—6%, and the water problem—1%.

Indexes:

General Peace Index: 48.1 (Jewish sample—45.6)

Oslo Index: 36.9 (Jewish sample—34.5)

Negotiation Index: 50.7 (Jewish sample—47.7)

The Peace Index Project is conducted at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Evens Program in Mediation and Conflict Resolution of Tel Aviv University, headed by Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Prof. Tamar Hermann. The telephone interviews were conducted by the B. I. Cohen Institute of Tel Aviv University on 3-4 December 2007, and included 592 interviewees who represent the adult Jewish and Arab population of Israel (including the territories and the kibbutzim). The sampling error for a sample of this size is 4.5%.

For the survey data see: <http://www.tau.ac.il/peace>