



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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## DO ISRAELIS THINK LEFT AND VOTE RIGHT?

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It is expected that on January 22, when Israelis go to the polls, the merged Likud-Yisrael Beitenu party will secure a plurality of seats in the Knesset and, in coalition with other parties, a majority of seats, leaving Prime Minister Netanyahu at the helm. What is peculiar is that the governing coalition is expected to consist largely of right-wing parties that are skeptical of or opposed to the two-state solution, though Netanyahu explicitly endorsed the two-state solution in his June 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan University and has reiterated his support for such a solution ever since. Moreover, polls of the Israeli public consistently show that a majority of Israelis favor a two-state solution. How to explain this seeming contradiction between the way Israelis think and the way they vote?

Of course, the way Israelis vote revolves around issues beyond the two-state solution, most notably, socioeconomic issues and security issues broadly. Surveys show that socioeconomic issues are either just as important to the Israeli public as security issues or, in some polls, even more important.<sup>1</sup> The polls reveal that the center-left Labor Party is viewed by the electorate as being better on socioeconomic issues than the other parties, while Netanyahu is preferred by a wide margin when it comes to dealing with security.<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps even more important in explaining the apparent contradiction in the Israeli public's voting behavior is that while Israelis support a two-state solution, the majority of Israelis are at the same time skeptical that the Palestinians are interested in making peace with Israel for the foreseeable future. In the Israeli view, a variety of peace offers have already been refused and an uncompromising Hamas has taken over Gaza. In the perceived absence of a partner in peace, Israelis vote for the party that will provide the most security. That being the case, it will not be the first time that the Palestinians have elected Netanyahu.

While some surveys purport to show Israeli opposition to the two-state solution, an examination of these surveys finds that they only present interviewees with one aspect of such a peace agreement. Some surveys have shown, for example, that when asked only about a withdrawal to the 1967 lines with modifications in return for peace, a plurality or even a majority of the Israeli public is sometimes opposed to the two-state solution.<sup>3</sup> Yet

<sup>1</sup> See Stephan Miller, "For 43% of likely voters, economic issues — not the Palestinians or Iran — are top priority," *The Times of Israel*, January 8, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/for-43-of-likely-voters-economic-issues-not-the-palestinians-or-iran-are-top-priority/> and "The Peace Index—November 2012," <http://peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20-%20November%202012.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Peace Index—December 2012,"

<http://peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20%E2%80%93December%202012.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See "Israelis Clearly Oppose Two-State Solution," Angus Reid Global Monitor, February 18, 2009,

when presented with all the main components of a two-state peace plan similar to the ones that have been seriously considered by both Israeli and Palestinian officials since 2000—which include a de-militarized Palestinian state, a multinational force to monitor the implementation and observance of the agreement, and an official Palestinian proclamation that the conflict is over and that no further claims will be made—majority Israeli support has been steady and consistent.

Statistics from the Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll—a series of polls periodically conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research—show that the situation was very similar for the 2009 Israeli elections. A joint poll completed just before the 2009 elections that brought Netanyahu to power presented Israelis with a peace plan based on the Clinton Parameters and the Geneva Initiative—peace plans virtually the same as the one described above—and found that 52% of Israelis supported (and only 43% opposed) these proposals.<sup>4</sup> Yet just two months later, the Israeli electorate voted for a Knesset in which 54% of its seats went to parties that are officially *against* the Clinton and Geneva peace plans.<sup>5</sup>

While support for Netanyahu and the right-wing has remained steady until today, the joint polls actually indicate an *increase* in Israeli public support for the Geneva and Clinton peace plans since 2010. Although the first joint poll completed after Netanyahu was elected in February 2009 found that 46% of Israelis approved and 46% opposed the Clinton and Geneva peace plans, the three joint polls since then have found an average of 55.3% of the Israeli public in support of them. Moreover, since the joint polls began surveying the Clinton and Geneva peace plans in 2003, an average of about 54% of the Israeli public has supported them.

The notion that the Israeli public is more flexible on peace issues than their elected representatives is corroborated by a study commissioned by the Israeli Dahaf Institute after Netanyahu was elected in 2009. This study, published in January 2010, specifically investigated the relationship between the positions of Israeli members of Knesset (MKs) and the general public on the two-state solution by interviewing a representative sample of both groups. It presented interviewees with a slightly less far-reaching proposal than the Clinton and Geneva peace plans (yet still based on the 1967 lines).<sup>6</sup> According to the survey, only 46% of MKs supported the proposal, while 53% opposed it (similar to the percentage of seats occupied in the Knesset by parties with similar positions). On the other hand, 67% of the Israeli public supported the proposal, while only 29% opposed it.<sup>7</sup> The most striking disparities between MK and voter support for the proposal were found among the Likud and Yisrael Beitenu parties—the two largest parties in the current governing coalition. Figure one below takes a look at these numbers, as well as the corresponding statistics for the two largest parties currently in the Israeli opposition.

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[http://www.angusreid.com/polls/35198/israelis\\_clearly\\_oppose\\_two\\_state\\_solution/](http://www.angusreid.com/polls/35198/israelis_clearly_oppose_two_state_solution/) and David Lev, “Poll Shows Two-State Solution Losing Steam Among Israelis,” Arutz Sheva, January 3, 2013,

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/163836#.UO8jwORbaSp>.

<sup>4</sup> “Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll, December 2008,” December 16, 2008, <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2008/p30ejoint.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The political parties comprising this 54% of the seats in the current Knesset are Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, Shas, United Torah Judaism, National Union and Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home).

<sup>6</sup> The only significant differences from the Clinton and Geneva peace plans were that the peace plan the Dahaf Institute presented specifically included Israel as “the state of the Jewish people” and that the Palestinian refugees would only have the right to return to the state of Palestine.

<sup>7</sup> Dahaf Institute, “Public Poll Findings: Positions of the Israeli Public and the Political Leadership (MKs) Regarding a Possible Peace Agreement,” January 2010, <http://www.centerpeace.org/Publicpolljan10.pdf>.

**Figure 1: Voter vs. MK Support for Two-State Solution.<sup>8</sup>**

	Party	MKs			Voters		
		Support	Oppose	No Response	Support	Oppose	No Response
<b>Governing Coalition</b>	Likud	27%	73%	-----	50%	45%	5%
	Yisrael Beitenu	17%	83%	-----	50%	35%	15%
<b>Opposition</b>	Kadima	68%	32%	-----	86%	13%	1%
	Labor	100%	-----	-----	88%	5%	7%

With respect to the Palestinian side, virtually none of the Palestinian leadership—including current Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas—has publicly expressed support for the Clinton or Geneva peace plans. In addition, with the Palestinians divided between a Hamas leadership in Gaza that proclaims it will never accept Israel’s existence and the more moderate Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, prospects for a two-state solution look especially slim. Moreover, although joint polls show that a significant number of Palestinians are willing to accept the Clinton and Geneva peace plans, the majority of Palestinians (53.1%) are consistently opposed to them.<sup>9</sup>

Although the prospects of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement are hardly propitious – in fact, they are less so than they have been in years – the fact that the Israeli public still favors a two-state solution means that, under the right circumstances, an agreement is still possible. How to bring the stars into alignment? That is a task for statesmanship.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The only two-state peace plan that consistently garners majority support among the Palestinian public (according to the Joint Israeli Palestinian Poll) is the Arab Peace Initiative. However, this peace plan calls for a *full* Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines in return for peace, and as such is beyond the pale of a realistic two-state solution. In addition, the Arab Peace Initiative as presented to the interviewees in the joint poll is rather vague on the issue of Palestinian refugees, allowing interviewees to interpret the language to their liking. Additionally, as may be expected, only about one-third of the Israeli public consistently supports the Arab Peace Initiative, while a solid majority is consistently opposed to it.