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**The National Security Index:
Public Support for an Arrangement Based on the Two-State Solution
Zipi Israeli**

In recent months, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has returned to the public agenda in Israel, in part because the political and security establishment in the United States has become more preoccupied with the issue. Joining the public opinion polls on the topic that frequently make the headlines is the National Security Index carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). The INSS annual poll represents a survey carried out since 1984, designed to monitor public opinion trends on a variety of issues relating to national security. The uniqueness of the study lies in the fact that it allows for an in-depth longitudinal examination of processes and issues based on an extensive, regularly updated database.

Like the previous polls conducted as part of this public opinion research project, the most recent one, from November-December 2016, was based on a representative sampling of approximately 800 respondents selected from adult citizens of Israel, both Jewish and Arab, with face-to-face interviews conducted in the respondents' homes. What follows are some of the most prominent findings of the most recent National Security Index based on the answers of the Jewish respondents.

The Most Serious Threat: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The study shows that most of the public (56 percent) believes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the major threat facing Israel (21 percent believe a nuclear Iran is the major threat, 12 percent – Hezbollah, and 11 percent – the Islamic State). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was likewise considered Israel's principal threat in the previous National Security Index, which coincided with the surge in terrorist incidents that began in October 2015. This is a significant increase in the assessment of the conflict's importance compared to previous polls; in 2014, for example, only 19 percent of respondents thought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the major threat. It seems that the Israeli public now believes that this is a key issue demanding a resolution. The polls also indicate that support for the two-state solution remains solid (59 percent of the Jewish public and about 70 percent of the entire Israeli public, including Arab citizens of Israel). Strong support for the two-state solution remained steady from 2003 to 2013 (approximately 70 percent), including during crisis periods, regardless of the composition of the government. Although the idea has since become somewhat less popular, support remains ongoing and significant, despite the

deadlock in the political process; the decidedly right wing bent of the government; the security escalation since 2015; and the political and social divides within Israeli society.

When the public was presented with the practical implications of the two-state formula in the framework of a possible referendum, support dropped somewhat, but remained high. In other words, the Israeli public is interested in separating from the Palestinians in one way or another. Were the Israeli government to submit some such agreement for a vote in a referendum, therefore, it would presumably receive an even larger majority, especially given the high proportion of “don’t know” and “undecided” respondents, constituting 20-27 percent of the sampling.

The responses to a new question added in the most recent poll provide a clearer picture. The respondents were asked what they think is Israel’s best option for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the foreseeable future. Most respondents (61 percent) are interested in an agreement, whether this is a “permanent” agreement (37 percent) or “interim agreements toward a permanent agreement” (24 percent). Only 10 percent expressed any interest in annexing all of Judea and Samaria, and only 17 percent expressed support for maintaining the current situation.

Thus it can be surmised that most Israelis think that time is not on Israel’s side regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They appear to feel that Israel’s policy of passivity and the political deadlock are detrimental in the long run. In other words, the public understands the problem inherent in a bi-national reality and expresses its concern that such a reality might come to pass.

Public Support for Settlement Evacuation

The desire for separation was also expressed with reference to the heart of the disagreement, i.e., the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Similar to the results of the previous poll, the current poll indicates that the majority of the public (69 percent) is prepared to evacuate settlements in Judea and Samaria as part of a permanent agreement: 16 percent expressed willingness to evacuate all the settlements, and 53 percent supported evacuation of the settlements outside the large blocs. By contrast, 31 percent said they opposed of the evacuation of settlements under any conditions.

Another finding was the possibility of evacuating settlements as part of renewed independent (unilateral) Israeli action. If in the past, particularly after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, the public opposed unilateral evacuation of settlements, there is now, similar to the findings of the previous poll, support for the idea (59 percent).

It seems that the combination of the interval since the Gaza Strip disengagement and the longstanding political stalemate and Palestinian terrorism has readied the public to evacuate settlements even without a permanent agreement, and to do so unilaterally. The public’s attitude to evacuation is not free of worry, but there is awareness of the difficulty, if not inability, to promote any type of solution without some territorial concession. This finding is particularly

striking when the question about territorial concession is presented in the context of specific areas. An analysis of the poll's findings shows clearly there is a range of attitudes to different areas, reflecting the differential connection Israelis feel toward each, depending on its religious, historical, and/or security significance. In the last decade, there is consistent opposition to withdrawal from the Etzion bloc, western Samaria, and the Jordan Valley. Only 13-24 percent of the respondents are willing to concede these areas. By contrast, there is a great deal of willingness – 69 percent support in the most recent poll – to concede territories deep within the West Bank that are outside of blocs. Note that the recent poll changed the language from “returning isolated settlements” to “areas that are not part of the blocs” and the percentage of support rose from 63 to 69. That is, according to the findings of the sample, more than two-thirds of the public are prepared to evacuate Jewish settlements in some format, even absent a permanent arrangement. There is also a clear distinction between large settlement blocs and small, isolated settlements.

In addition, the poll examined public opinion on questions of the policy Israel should adopt on settlement construction. The findings pointed to the fact that the majority is interested either in construction solely in the settlement blocs (38 percent) or in no construction at all (20 percent). More specifically, 21 percent believe that construction in all the settlements should occur only for the sake of keeping pace with natural population growth; an identical rate of respondents expressed support for large scale development in all of Judea and Samaria.

The INSS public opinion polls indicate that the Israeli public's attitude to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been stable over the years. In many ways, the findings express a centrist voice that if not overly loud, has nonetheless been consistent over time. The findings are a challenge to the political status quo because they reflect the public belief in a political solution and willingness to evacuate some of the settlements, despite the awareness of the difficulty in attaining a permanent resolution in one fell swoop. The discourse on the conflict is based on the two-state paradigm shaped by the Oslo Accords rather than on a continuation of the current situation. At the same time, the findings leave much room for creativity and maneuver on the part of the political leadership in the context of the political process with the Palestinians, as long as the guiding principle is a separation of Israel from most of the Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria.

