

Anwar Sadat Chair
University of Maryland



Program on International
Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

Israeli Public Opinion after the November 2012 Gaza War

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The Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development was established at the University of Maryland, College Park in the fall of 1997 in memory of the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The Chair is under the leadership of the Sadat Professor Shibley Telhami. The Chair was made possible by the commitment of Anwar Sadat's widow, Dr. Jehan Sadat, to her husband's legacy of leadership for peace. With support from all levels of the University, Dr. Sadat created an endowment for the Chair from the generous support of many individual contributors from around the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Unexpectedly for many, November 2012 saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict again take center stage--even in a Middle East that is trying to deal with Syria's long and bloody internal struggle, and is also awaiting the next stage of Egypt's revolutionary process. This episode of the long-running Gaza conflict lasted only a week (November 13-21) before a cease-fire came into place, and yet it has thrown the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into sharp relief.

The moment seems opportune to take stock of the Israeli public's attitudes, beliefs and expectations, in the aftermath of military action—including the Israeli public's direct assessment of the outcome of the fighting.

Relations with the United States have been widely characterized as on a downswing for the last few years, and Israeli views of Obama have been, on average, lukewarm. And there was a pervasive sense that Israelis and their government preferred President Obama's opponent in the campaign for the American Presidency. In dealing with recent Gaza fighting, Obama worked with the post-revolutionary Egyptian government of President Mohamed Morsi to bring about a cease-fire. How does the Israeli public view President Obama and US-Israeli relations?

Israeli concerns over Iran's nuclear program have been aired extensively in Israel's political process, and Prime Minister Netanyahu has at times presented himself as a leader seeking to focus the world's attention to this issue. Is the Israeli public moving toward or away from the idea of executing an Israeli airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities? What is the level of potential Israeli public support for a deal with Iran, whereby Iran would be allowed to enrich uranium at low levels provided that it allows intrusive inspections to assure that it is not developing nuclear weapons? Further, how does the Israeli public respond to the idea of a Middle East nuclear-free zone that would apply to Israel as well?

For decades Syria was a highly predictable element in the Israeli calculus about the region. Now that it is in revolutionary turmoil, how is the Israeli public responding? Are Israelis hopeful that a change of regime in Syria would be better for them?

For many, the recent Gaza combat made even more salient the question of a final settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict through negotiation. What are the Israeli public's attitudes now toward the kind of deal embodied by the Arab Peace Initiative?

Resolution of these outstanding questions would inevitably bring into focus the Israeli debate over Israel's identity as a state. How strong are the religious and the national threads in the weave of Israeli identity? Does the Israeli public weigh the importance of Israel's Jewish identity and its democratic identity? How does it view the status of Arab citizens?

METHODOLOGY

The poll was conducted on November 21 and November 24-25, 2012, through telephone interviews with a sample of 600 adult Israelis (510 Israeli Jews and 90 Israeli Arabs). The margin of error for the full sample is +/-4.0%. The survey was fielded by the Dahaf Institute in Israel. Of the 510 interviews with Israeli Jews, 156 were obtained on November 21 in the hours before the ceasefire took effect at 9 pm that evening. The Jewish subsample was weighted to match political participation in the 2009 Israeli Knesset election.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The key findings of the study were:

1. Gaza War

Less than half of Israelis believe that Israel made strategic gains or prevailed in the Gaza conflict. The most common view is that neither Israel nor Hamas came out ahead. Few believe that a military campaign or reoccupation of Gaza will end the fighting between Israel and the Palestinian groups. Views recorded before and after the ceasefire were not significantly different. Israelis express pessimism that the use of military force will succeed in ending the conflict in Gaza.4

2. US-Israeli Relations

Overall there are some warming trends in Israeli views in relation to the United States. Views of Obama are now quite positive, with 60 percent expressing favorable views—up 6 points from the previous year (and 8 points among Jewish Israelis). Asked which world leader they most admire, among Israeli Jews Obama is now the most frequently cited. More Israelis see American public support for Israeli security interests as having increased than see it as having decreased over the last few years, and more are optimistic than are pessimistic about US-Israel relations in Obama’s second term.5

3. Iran’s Nuclear Program

Concerns about Iran appear to have moderated a bit. While a majority of Israelis thinks it is very likely that Iran will develop nuclear weapons, among Israeli Jews this is down 8 points over the last year. Opposition to a military attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities has risen modestly, and only one in five Israelis now favor attacking without US support. Only one in four believe that an attack would delay Iran’s ability for more than five years. A substantial majority of Israelis favor a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone that would include Israel, though among Israeli Jews this is down a bit from a year ago. Israelis are divided on a possible UN deal whereby Iran would be allowed to enrich uranium at low levels provided that it allows intrusive inspections to ensure that it is not developing nuclear weapons.6

4. Syria

Israelis have mixed views about the possibility of the Syrian opposition gaining power. Four in ten say that it would be worse for Israel, while three in ten say it would be better. Only one in four perceive the uprising in Syria as primarily about Islamist groups trying to take power.9

5. Egypt

A modest majority of Israelis perceive the Arab Spring as being mostly for the worse for Israel. At the same time very few expect the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty to be terminated, though a plurality believe it will be modified. Half say that Egyptian President Morsi’s policies toward Israel have been what they expected, though a few more say they have been worse than say they have been better.9

6. The Palestinian Issue

A majority of Israelis say that they are ready to at least accept as the basis for negotiation the Arab Peace Initiative, whereby Israel withdraws to 1967 borders and a peace agreement is established with all Arab states. Expressions of readiness to accept the basic conditions of such a deal, though, have declined from last year among Israeli Jews and there is growing pessimism that a lasting peace with the Palestinians can be established. Views are mixed about the consequences should prospects of two-state solution collapse. 10

7. The Role of Judaism in Israeli Society

Israelis have mixed views about the role of Judaism in their identity and in Israeli society in general. Half of Israeli Jews say that being Jewish is their most important identity, while for about a third being an Israeli is their most important identity. Views are evenly divided among Israeli Jews about whether the Jewish identity or the democracy of Israel is more important. Few Israelis believe that Arab citizens have full equality with Jewish citizens, though most believe that the discrimination is institutional and social rather than legal..... 11

FINDINGS

1. Gaza War

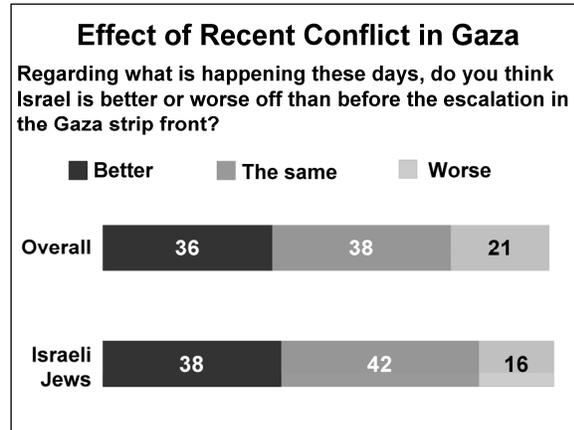
Less than half of Israelis believe that Israel made strategic gains or prevailed in the Gaza conflict. The most common view is that neither Israel nor Hamas came out ahead. Few believe that a military campaign or reoccupation of Gaza will end the fighting between Israel and the Palestinian groups. Views recorded before and after the ceasefire were not significantly different. Israelis express pessimism that the use of military force will succeed in ending the conflict in Gaza.

Fewer than half of Israelis believe that Israel made strategic gains in the Gaza conflict of mid-November, 2012. Asked whether they thought Israel is “better or worse off than before the escalation,” only 36% answered that Israel was better off. Fifty-nine percent felt that Israel was either about the same (38%) or worse off (21%).

Less than half believe that Israel prevailed in the immediate combat--apart from the issue of its strategic value. Just 40% said Israel “won the combat in the Gaza Strip.” A majority said that neither side won (45%) or that Hamas won (11%).

Approximately a quarter of the sample was polled before the ceasefire, while the rest were polled afterward, affording the possibility of comparing the effect of the ceasefire. There were some slight changes, with Israeli Jews becoming less positive about the post- escalation outcome and less confident that Israel won, but these changes were not statistically significant.

Few believe that a military campaign or reoccupation of Gaza will end the fighting between Israel and the Palestinian groups. Respondents were asked to assess the prospects for an end to this long-running conflict and were given four options. Only 27% said that “the fighting between Israel and Palestinian groups in Gaza” will end only through “a major Israeli military campaign” (15%) or “only if Israel reoccupies Gaza” (12%). A much larger 69% said either that the conflict simply will not end (40%), or will end only through a political final status agreement with the Palestinians (29%).

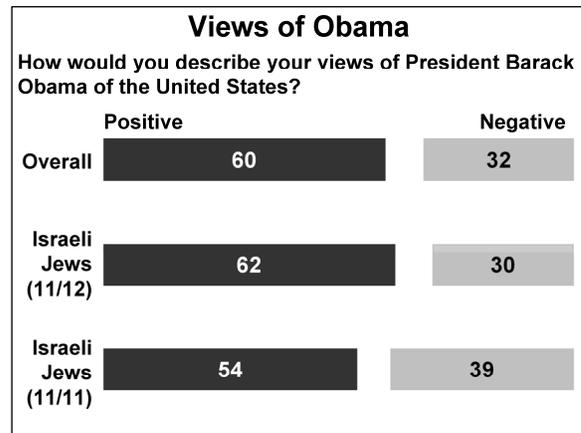


2. US-Israeli Relations

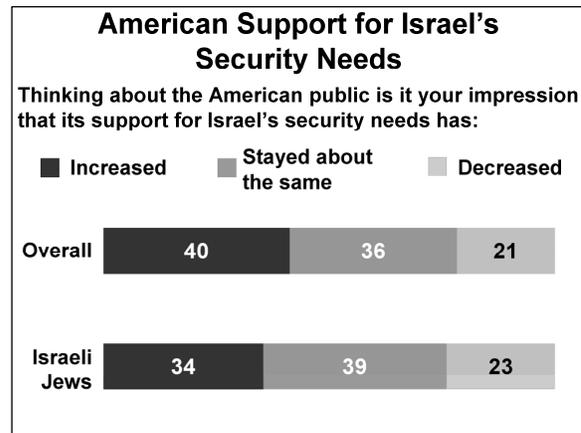
Overall there are some warming trends in Israeli views in relation to the United States. Views of Obama are now quite positive, with 60 percent expressing favorable views—up 6 points from the previous year (and 8 points among Jewish Israelis). Asked which world leader they most admire, among Israeli Jews Obama is now the most frequently cited. More Israelis see American public support for Israeli security interests as having increased than see it as having decreased over the last few years, and more are optimistic than are pessimistic about US-Israel relations in Obama’s second term.

Israeli attitudes toward the United States show some distinct warming trends, notably in their views toward the reelected U.S. President. Israelis’ positive views of President Obama are now fairly strong at 60% (16% very positive). Among Israeli Jews, positive views have risen over the last year from 54 to 62%. When Israelis were asked to name which foreign world leader they most admired, Obama got the second most mentions (13%, after Angela Merkel at 14%).

For Israeli Jews, mentions of Obama showed a striking 9-point rise from when the question was last asked in November 2011 (from 6 to 15%)—making Obama the most frequently cited world leader.



When asked to think about the American public’s support for Israel’s security interests over the last few years, more Israelis see it as having increased than having decreased. Forty percent said that “over the last few years...support for Israel’s security needs” has increased, while only 21% said it has decreased. Another 36% thought it has stayed about the same.



Asked the same question about US public “support for Israel government policies,” a lesser 30 percent thought this has increased, and almost as many (27%) thought it has decreased; 40% thought it has remained the same.

More Israelis are optimistic than are pessimistic about US-Israel relations in Obama’s second term. Asked whether these relations would “get warmer, stay about the same, or get cooler,” 26% thought relations would warm and only 14% thought they would cool; 55% thought there would be little change.

Six in ten perceive that Netanyahu supported Romney in the presidential election—just 16% think he stayed neutral. Nonetheless, 60% said that “the personal relationship” between Obama and Netanyahu would “not make much difference” to American support for Israel, and those who predict that the relationship will increase support (23%) substantially outweighed those who said it would diminish support (11%).

3. Iran’s Nuclear Program

Concerns about Iran appear to have moderated a bit. While a majority of Israelis thinks it is very likely that Iran will develop nuclear weapons, among Israeli Jews this is down 8 points over the last year. Opposition to a military attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities has risen modestly, and only one in five Israelis now favor attacking without US support. Only one in four believe that an attack would delay Iran’s ability for more than five years. A substantial majority of Israelis favor a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone that would include Israel, though among Israeli Jews this is down a bit from a year ago. Israelis are divided on a possible UN deal whereby Iran would be allowed to enrich uranium at low levels provided that it allows intrusive inspections to ensure that it is not developing nuclear weapons.

Israelis continue to show a pessimistic view in regard to the likelihood that Iran will develop nuclear weapons. Asked “How likely do you think it is that Iran will eventually develop nuclear weapons?” 51% of Israelis called it very likely, with another 36% calling it somewhat likely (not very likely, 7%; not at all likely, 3%).

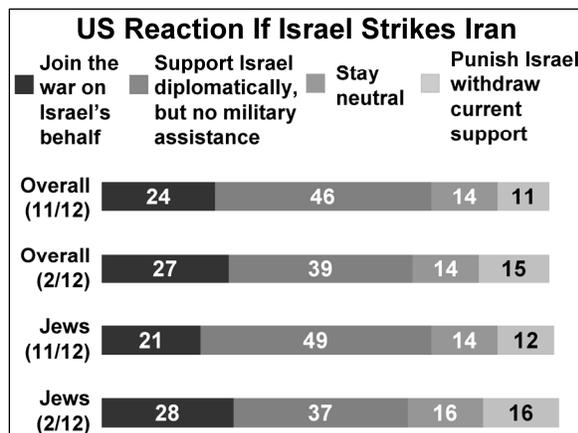
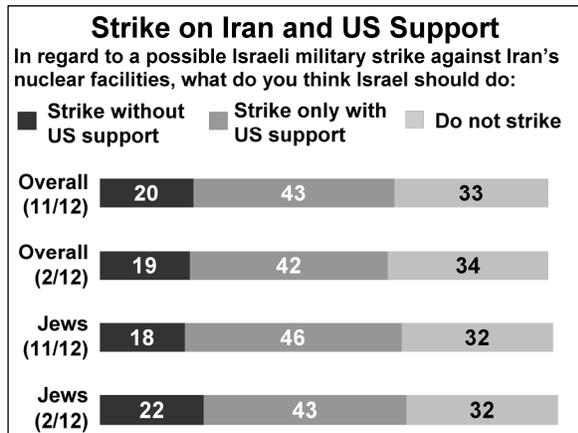
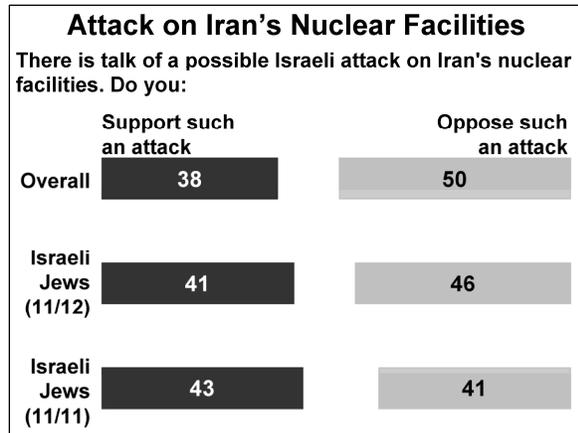
However, there has been an eight point drop among Israeli Jews holding this pessimistic view over the last year, with the number saying it is very likely dropping from 62% in 2011 to 54 percent today.

Reminded that “there is talk of a possible Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities” and asked whether they would support or oppose it, half of Israelis overall (50%) oppose such an attack while 38% support it.

Among Israeli Jews opposition has risen from 41% a year ago to 46% today, with 41% now supporting it.

But when asked explicitly in another question about whether to proceed with an attack unilaterally, only with U.S. support, or not at all, only one in five Israelis favor proceeding without US support. Among Israeli Jews, those ready to proceed without US support has dropped from 22% a year ago to 18% now.

Given the importance to Israelis of not acting alone, it is interesting to note Israelis’ expectations of how the US would react if Israel did go ahead with a strike on Iranian facilities. Only one in four Israelis (24%) think the US “would join the war on Israel’s behalf.” Almost half (46%) think the US “would support Israel diplomatically, but not

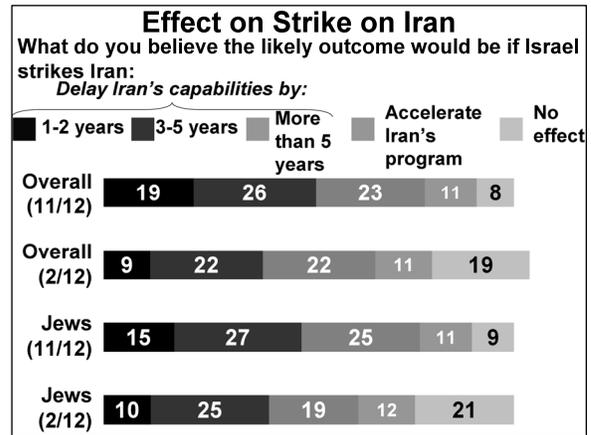


provide military assistance.” Another quarter thought the US would either stay neutral (14%) or “would punish Israel by withdrawing its current support” (11%).

Among Israeli Jews, it should be noted that those expecting the US would join Israel in fighting have dropped from 28 to 21% over the last year.

Only one in four Israelis believe that a military attack would delay Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons by more than five years [see chart].

But there has been some increase among Israeli Jews in the belief that an attack would have some effect. The number of Israelis who think a strike would create a one-to-two year delay in Iran’s capabilities has risen from 9 to 19%; those who would expect a three-to-five year delay have also risen slightly, from 22% to 26%. However, those who would expect a delay longer than five years were stable at 23%. Another fifth thought a strike would either have no effect (8%, down from 19%) or would accelerate Iran’s program (11%, unchanged).



Middle East Nuclear Free Zone

A substantial majority of Israelis favor a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone that would include Israel, though among Israeli Jews this is down a bit from a year ago.

This issue was presented to respondents in three separate questions: one about an initial agreement to a system of full international inspections, including Iran and Israel; second, about a commitment by all countries in the region to not have nuclear weapons; and third, a question that summarized the whole plan. All questions received majority support (55-58%). For the summary question, support among Israeli Jews was 58%, down slightly from 64% in 2011.



Possible Agreement with Iran

Israelis are divided on a possible UN deal whereby Iran would be allowed to enrich uranium at low levels, provided that it allows intrusive inspections to ensure that it is not developing nuclear weapons. Respondents were reminded that “there is some talk about possible negotiations between Iran and the United States about Iran’s nuclear program” and asked to consider the following proposal:

If Iran were to allow UN inspectors permanent and full access throughout Iran, to make sure it is not developing nuclear weapons, do you think Iran should or should not be allowed to produce low level nuclear fuel that could only be used for producing electricity?

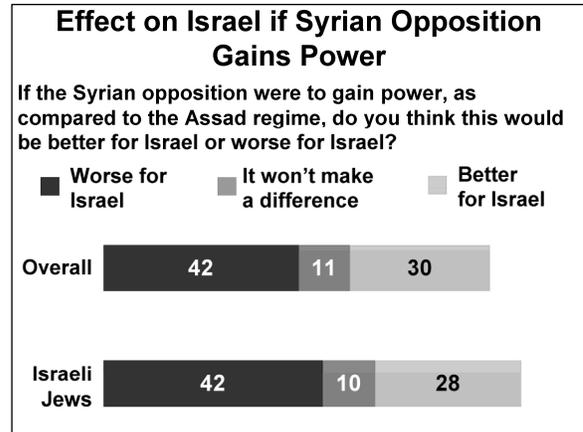
Forty-six percent of Israelis said they would approve such a deal, while 47 percent said they would not.



4. Syria

Israelis have mixed views about the possibility of the Syrian opposition gaining power. Four in ten say that it would be worse for Israel, while three in ten say it would be better. Only one in four perceive the uprising in Syria as primarily about Islamist groups trying to take power.

Respondents were asked, “If the Syrian opposition were to gain power, as compared to the Assad regime, do you think this would be better for Israel or worse for Israel?” Four in ten (42%) said such a shift would be worse for Israel, while three in ten (30%) said it would be better. A large number either did not give an answer (18%) or volunteered that there would be no difference (11%).

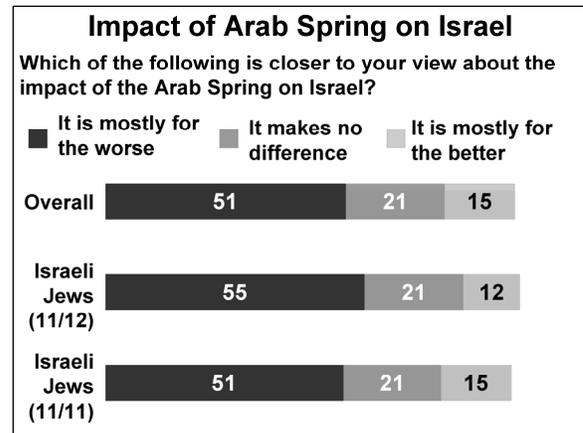


However, Israelis do not particularly see the turmoil as fundamentally a political Islamist struggle. Respondents were asked whether they would characterize the conflict as “mostly about ordinary Syrians seeking freedom from a repressive regime,” as “mostly about Islamist groups trying to take power, or as a “civil war among ethnic factions.” Just 27% said it was mostly about Islamist groups trying to gain power, while the most common answer (37%) was that the conflict was mostly about ordinary Syrians’ aspirations. Another 28% said it was primarily an ethnic conflict.

5. Egypt

A modest majority of Israelis perceive the Arab Spring as being mostly for the worse for Israel. At the same time very few expect the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty to be terminated, though a plurality believe it will be modified. Half say that Egyptian President Morsi’s policies toward Israel have been what they expected, though a few more say they have been worse than say they have been better.

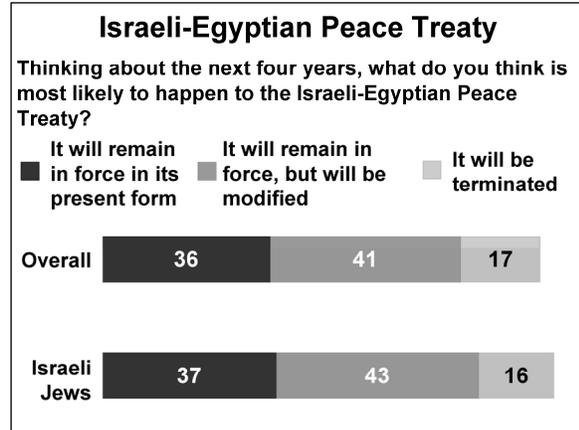
A bare majority of Israelis (51%) see the changes brought by the Arab Spring as worsening Israel’s situation, while just 15% see it as being for the better. Twenty one percent see no difference.



Among Israeli Jews there has been a slight increase in pessimism: last year 51% saw the Arab Spring’s impact on Israel as for the worse, and this is now up four points to 55%.

Nonetheless, most expect the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty will survive, perhaps with changes in its terms. Asked to think about the treaty over next four years, only 17% say the treaty will be terminated. Forty-one percent say it will remain in force but will be modified, and another 36% say it will remain in force in its present form.

Up to this point, the policies of the new Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi have not been a source of shock for Israelis. Asked whether his policies toward Israel have been better or worse than—or about the same as—the respondent expected, almost half (48%) expressed their lack of surprise. Slightly more found Morsi’s policies worse than they expected (23%) than found them better than they expected (17%).



6. The Palestinian Issue

A majority of Israelis say that they are ready to at least accept as the basis for negotiation the Arab Peace Initiative, whereby Israel withdraws to 1967 borders and a peace agreement is established with all Arab states. Expressions of readiness to accept the basic conditions of such a deal, though, have declined from last year among Israeli Jews and there is growing pessimism that a lasting peace with the Palestinians can be established. Views are mixed about the consequences should prospects of two-state solution collapse.

Respondents were reminded that “In 2002, Arab countries offered the Arab Peace Initiative, a comprehensive peace deal with Israel based on Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 war and full peace agreements between Israel and all Arab states.” They were then asked to consider the possibility of this offer being renewed “with support from Egypt’s new government,” and asked how the Israeli government should react. Fifty-two percent said the government should either “accept the offer as the basis for negotiation” (39%) or “accept the offer as proposed” (13%). Four in ten (42%) said the Israeli government should reject it. Among Israeli Jews 50% said that the government should either accept the offer as a basis for negotiation (43%) or simply accept it (7%).

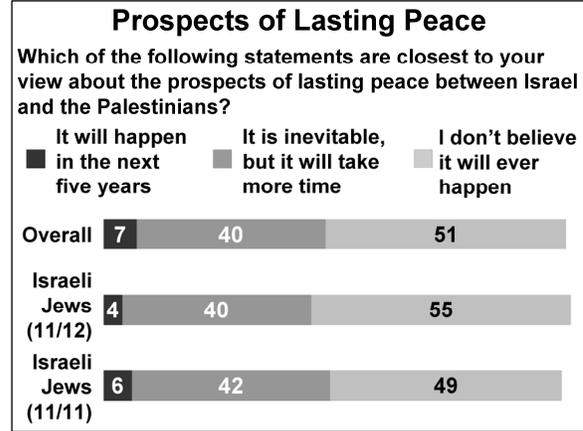


At the same time, though, Israeli Jews’ readiness to accept such a deal’s basic conditions has declined over the past year. In a different question, respondents were asked to choose between two statements or to reject both of them. Just 33% of Israeli Jews chose the one saying “I am prepared for...peace with the Arabs based on the 1967 borders with agreed modifications and the establishment of a peaceful Palestinian state”—down 10 points from November 2011. (It must be remembered that the poll was fielded at the end and immediately after a week of combat with Gaza, a time when many Israelis may have been unready to revisit the broad outlines of the Palestinian conflict.) Thirty percent of Israeli Jews chose the statement saying that “even if all the Arab states accept and recognize Israel, I still oppose” such a deal (no change from 2011). A large number declined to choose either statement--33%, up from 24%.

There is substantial pessimism that a lasting peace with the Palestinians can be established in the near future. Asked about the prospects for this, a majority of Israelis said “I don’t believe it will ever happen,” (51%) while another 40% said “it is inevitable but it will take more time.” Only 4% thought it would happen in the next five years.

Pessimism seems to be growing. Among Israeli Jews those saying peace will never happen rose from 49 to 55% over the last year.

Views are mixed about the consequences should prospects of two-state solution collapse. Respondents were offered four options. Almost equal numbers said that if the two-state solution idea collapses, “the status quo will continue with little change” (37%), or that this “will lead to a state of intense conflict for years to come” (35%). Only 13% thought the result would be a one-state solution, and only 6% thought “Palestinians will eventually surrender to Israeli power, give up and integrate into other societies.”

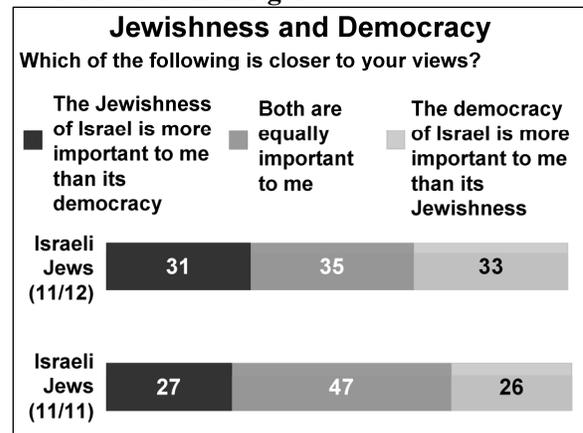


7. The Role of Judaism in Israeli Society

Israelis have mixed views about the role of Judaism in their identity and in Israeli society in general. Half of Israeli Jews say that being Jewish is their most important identity, while for about a third being an Israeli is their most important identity. Views are evenly divided among Israeli Jews about whether the Jewish identity or the democracy of Israel is more important. Few Israelis believe that Arab citizens have full equality with Jewish citizens, though most believe that the discrimination is institutional and social rather than legal.

When Israeli Jews were asked about their primary sense of identity, there was no clear majority view. More focused on their Jewish identity (50%) than focused on their Israeli identity (37%); another 12% instead described themselves as citizens of the world (9%) or pointed to their families’ countries of origin (3%).

There is an extensive ongoing debate in Israel about the comparative importance of Jewish identity and democracy in the makeup of Israel’s national identity. The views of Israeli Jews on this debate appear quite evenly divided. Thirty three percent chose the statement that “The democracy of Israel is more important to me than its Jewishness,” while 31% put Jewish identity first. Thirty five percent would not choose one over the other, saying “both are equally important to me.”



Few Israelis believe that Arab citizens have full equality with Jewish citizens, though most believe that the discrimination is institutional and social rather than legal. A majority of 55% chose a description of Israel as having “legal equality, but institutional and societal discrimination” regarding its Arab citizens. A quarter (28%) said there is full equality between Arab and Jewish citizens; at the other end of the spectrum, only 12% chose to call the situation an “apartheid relationship.”

