



## THE MEANING OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN POLLS: WHAT THEY ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT THEY WANT

By Justin Finkelstein



*Justin Scott Finkelstein is the Harvey Sicherman Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He was previously a Research Intern and then Research Associate in FPRI's Program on the Middle East, and a Program Associate for the Study of the U.S. Institute on Religious Pluralism and Democracy, a State Department-funded program that brings undergraduate students from the Middle East to America for education about religious diversity, democracy and dialogue. Finkelstein received a Master's degree in Near Eastern Studies from New York University in 2012, where he was awarded a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship in the summer of 2011 to study Arabic at the Middlebury Arabic School.*

*This essay is based on a lecture he delivered to FPRI's Butcher History Institute on "[Teaching about Israel and Palestine](#)," October 25-26, 2014. The Butcher History Institute is FPRI's professional development program for high school teachers from all around the country.*

As improbable as it may sound, over the past decade or so about half of Israelis and Palestinians have been willing to accept something akin to the two-state solution (as described in the box below) to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even amidst the mayhem and turmoil in the Israeli-Palestinian arena over the past several months, polls have continued to show that there is no other solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on which Israeli and Palestinian public opinion converge to such a large degree.

Polls that are periodically conducted by a host of different organizations are often difficult to navigate, with some claiming that Israelis and Palestinians support a two-state solution and others claiming to show the complete opposite. However, there are some general "rules" that consistently hold, even through the past several months: when Israelis are presented with a package that includes a demilitarized Palestinian state and extensive security arrangements – such as in the six-point plan below – public opinion usually remains around 50 percent or higher. When presented with only certain elements of such a package, such as refugees and Jerusalem, Israeli support dips considerably below 50 percent.

In polls of Palestinians, there is one key point to remember: that there is a difference between what Palestinians *want* and what they are *willing to accept*. Hence, surveys consistently show that a majority of Palestinians support replacing the state of Israel with one big Palestinian state; yet, when pollsters ask Palestinians (often within the very same polls) whether or not they support a two-state solution or are willing to accept a peace package such as the one above, around 45 percent or more (and often around 50 percent or more) consistently express their support. So while Palestinians do want, ideally, to turn all of Israel into a Palestinian state and believe that they have the right to do so, polls also show that they are consistently willing to accept a two-state solution. The rockets, the bombs, and all the casualties over the past several months have done little to nothing to change this paradigm.

### **A Six-Point Plan for a Two-State Solution\***

- 1) The state of Palestine would encompass the entirety of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, excluding about 3% of the West Bank where most of the Israeli settlers reside. Proportional land swaps will be made.
- 2) Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem will be under Israeli sovereignty, with the rest of East Jerusalem under Palestinian sovereignty.
- 3) The Jewish Quarter and the Western Wall in Jerusalem will remain Israeli. The Temple Mount, the mosques and the Arab quarters in the Old City will be Palestinian.
- 4) The Palestinian state will be demilitarized, with Israel maintaining two security stations in the West Bank for 15 years and an international force deployed to ensure the implementation of the agreement.
- 5) The solution to the Palestinian refugee problem will be based on UN Resolutions 194 and 242. Refugees will return to the Palestinian state, and some Palestinian refugees will be admitted to Israel, based on the sole decision of Israel. All refugees would receive compensation.
- 6) A mutual announcement will be made by the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships that the conflict has ended and there will be no further claims.

\* These six points are based on an outline of the Geneva Initiative presented in a recent poll conducted by the Israeli organization Geneva Initiative (see [Geneva-accord.org](http://Geneva-accord.org)). It also corresponds in large part to the Clinton Parameters and the Arab Peace Initiative. The Geneva Initiative is an unofficial peace plan agreed upon in 2003 by mostly former Israeli and Palestinian officials. The Clinton Parameters were drawn up by President Bill Clinton in his last days in office to try to bridge the then-remaining gaps between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. The Arab Peace Initiative is a document outlining a solution to the Arab-Israel conflict that was unanimously approved by the Arab League in 2002.

### **Palestinians**

There has been a whirlwind of surveys of Palestinians conducted since this past summer that seem to contradict each other to the core but, through it all, the “rules” above still hold.

A poll of Palestinians conducted from June 15-17 by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) has been frequently cited in news articles and by commentators. The survey found a strong majority of Palestinians in support of the proposition that the main Palestinian goal over the next five years should be to conquer the entire state of Israel:<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Pollock, “New Palestinian Poll Shows Hardline Views, But Some Pragmatism Too,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 25, 2014, [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/PalestinianPollingReport\\_June2014.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/PalestinianPollingReport_June2014.pdf). Chart adapted from poll.

**Figure 1: Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll**

| <b>Please state your view about the main Palestinian national goal for the next five years</b>   | <b>Total</b> | <b>West Bank</b> | <b>Gaza Strip</b> |
|--|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
| The goal should be to work toward reclaiming all of historic Palestine from the river to the sea   | <b>60.3%</b> | 55.4%            | 68.4%             |
| The goal should be to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to achieve a two-state solution   | <b>27.3%</b> | 30.6%            | 21.8%             |
| The goal should be to work for a one-state solution in all of the land: a state in which Arabs and Jews will have equal rights in one country, from the river to the sea | <b>10.1%</b> | 11.2%            | 8.2%              |
| No opinion/don't know  | <b>2.3%</b>  | 2.8%             | 1.6%              |

Furthermore, a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) from August 26-30 found that if mock elections were held in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at that time, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would defeat Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, 61 percent to 32 percent. Hamas as a party would have also defeated Fatah by fifteen percentage points, 46 percent to 31 percent. It further found that 72 percent of Palestinians “favor the transfer of Hamas’ armed approach to the West Bank.”<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, a poll conducted by Al-Najah National University (a Palestinian university located in the West Bank city of Nablus) just two weeks later, September 11-13, found clear majority support among Palestinians for “the two-state solution provided that a Palestinian state is created to live side by side with Israel.”<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2: Al-Najah National University poll**

|                          | <b>Total</b>  | <b>West Bank</b> | <b>Gaza Strip</b> |
|--------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|
| I strongly support       | <b>14.6%</b>  | 11.7%            | 19.6%             |
| I support                | <b>41.8%</b>  | 46.0%            | 34.6%             |
| I reject                 | <b>23.9%</b>  | 27.1%            | 18.4%             |
| I strongly reject        | <b>14.9%</b>  | 13.4%            | 17.6%             |
| No opinion/I do not know | <b>4.7%</b>   | 1.7%             | 9.8%              |
| Total                    | <b>100.0%</b> | 100.0%           | 100.0%            |

<sup>2</sup> “Special Gaza War Poll,” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, September 2014, <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/492>.

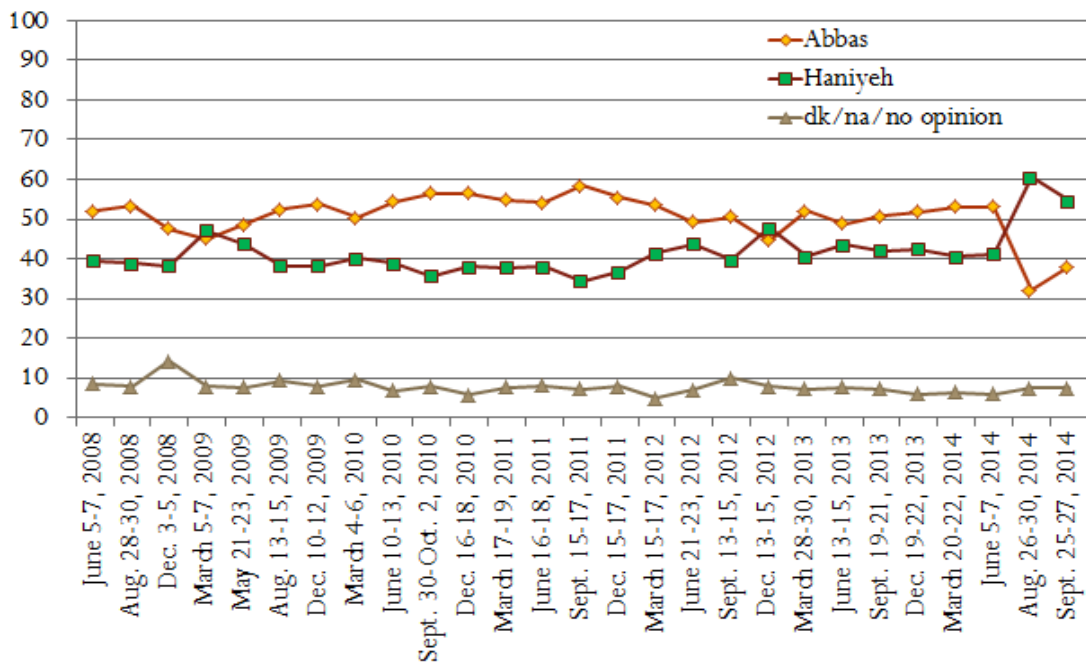
<sup>3</sup> “Results of Public Opinion Poll No. 49,” An-Najah National University Center for Opinion Polls and Survey Studies, September 2014, [http://www.najah.edu/sites/default/files/Centers\\_document/Document/Poll49results.pdf](http://www.najah.edu/sites/default/files/Centers_document/Document/Poll49results.pdf). Chart adapted from poll.

The same poll also found only 26 percent of Palestinians in support of “a one-state solution in which Palestinians and Israelis enjoy equal rights.” It found an overwhelming majority, 68 percent, in opposition to such a solution.

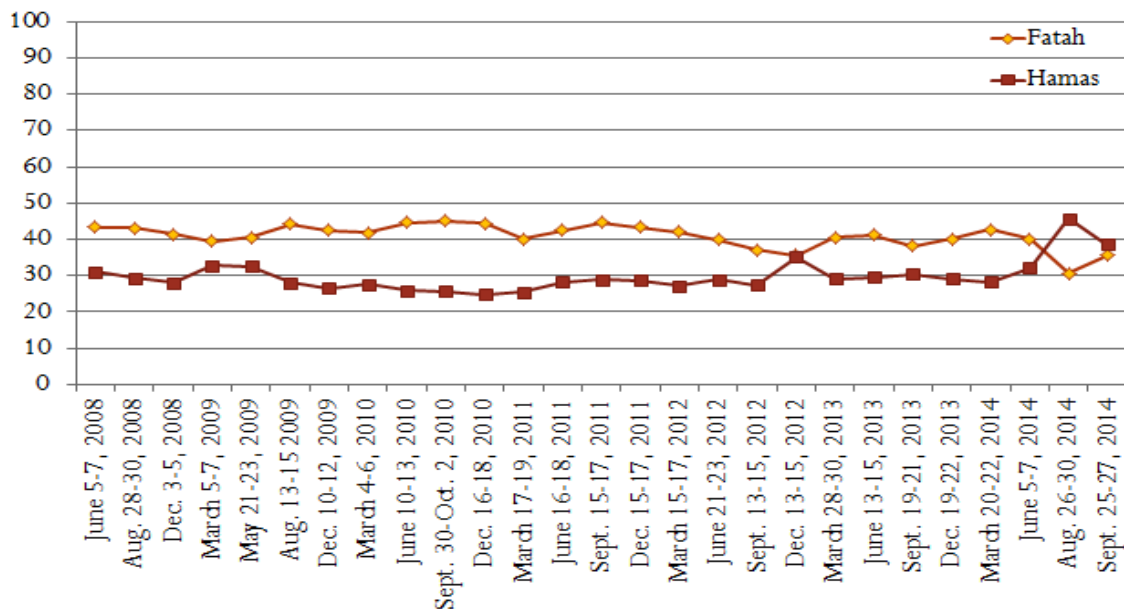
Supplementing the findings of the poll conducted by An-Najah National University, a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion (PCPO) October 15-28 found 54.3 percent of Palestinians in favor of the two-state solution.<sup>4</sup>

But what about the rise in support for Haniyeh and Hamas? PSR’s post-war findings of a drastic spike in their support can be better understood by looking at the big picture, particularly at all of the results of mock elections PSR has conducted in its polls since before the first Gaza war (December-January, 2008-2009):<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 3: Abbas vs. Haniyeh**



**Figure 4: Fatah vs. Hamas**



<sup>4</sup> “Poll No. 194,” Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, November 6, 2014, <http://pcpo.org/index.php/polls>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/154> for polls upon which charts are based.

Evidenced by this bird's eye view, Palestinian support historically spikes after each Gaza war, only to revert back to pre-war attitudes that have Fatah and Abbas in the lead. Ironically, there are at times a significant number of Palestinians who support Hamas and/or its tactics *and* are willing to accept a two-state solution to the conflict. For instance, the same poll that found 72 percent of Palestinians in favor of transferring Hamas' armed approach to the West Bank also found almost half of Palestinians still in favor of a two-state solution.

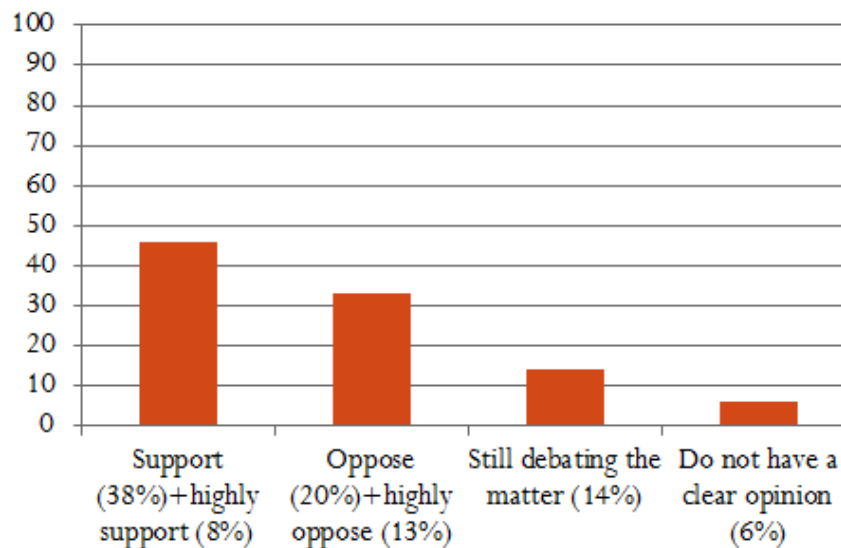
And what about the WINEP poll that found a strong majority of Palestinians in favor of working towards conquering all of Israel over the next five years? That poll fleshes out perhaps an even more important pattern in Palestinian public opinion, again reflective of the "rules" outlined above: when presented with the option, Palestinians prefer to conquer all of Israel and replace it with a Palestinian state. But, when they are presented only with a two-state solution in a "take it or leave it" scenario, most Palestinians usually express acceptance of such a solution. The WINEP poll received the results it did only because it presented Palestinians with the maximalist option.

## Israelis

Throughout the summer, the pattern of seemingly contradictory polls has continued for Israelis as well. One notable poll was conducted from June 8-15 by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Harry S. Truman Center for the Advancement of Peace. The poll asked Israelis if they supported a two-state solution to the conflict, to which over 60 percent of Israelis responded in the affirmative.<sup>6</sup> (It may be noted that the three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped in the West Bank on June 12<sup>th</sup>; news did not break that they had been murdered until June 30<sup>th</sup>).

A poll commissioned by the Israeli organization Geneva Initiative and conducted by the nonpartisan Israeli agency New Wave Research in mid-September found similar sentiments among the Israeli public. It found a plurality of 46 percent of Israelis in support of a solution very similar to the six-point proposal above and only 33 percent opposed to it:<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 5: Poll commissioned by Geneva Initiative and conducted by New Wave Research**



However, one poll, conducted by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA) in mid-October, complicated matters. It found only 15 percent of Israelis in favor of some proposals very similar to the key compromises proposed in the six-point plan above.<sup>8</sup> Its question about the division of Jerusalem sums up its findings:

<sup>6</sup> "Joint Israeli-Palestinian Poll – June 2014," Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, June 2014, <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/467>.

<sup>7</sup> Geneva-Accord.org, "Majority of Likud voters believe Gaza War should be followed by an Israeli Peace Initiative leading to a two-state solution," September 2014, <http://www.geneva-accord.org/mainmenu/majority-of-likud-voters-believe-gaza-war-should-be-followed-by-an-israeli-peace-initiative-leading-to-a-two-state-solution>.

<sup>8</sup> "New Poll: 75% of Israeli Jews Oppose a Palestinian State on the 1967 Lines, Israeli Withdrawal from the Jordan Valley, and the Division of Jerusalem," October 19, 2014, <http://jcpa.org/poll-israeli-jews-oppose-palestinian-state/>.

**Figure 6: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA) poll**

5. Do you support or oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state if it means the division of Jerusalem?

|                      | Total | Ideology |        |       | Group    |             |
|----------------------|-------|----------|--------|-------|----------|-------------|
|                      |       | Right    | Center | Left  | Veterans | Former USSR |
| Support              | 16.2% | 6.9%     | 20.8%  | 51.5% | 18.8%    | 3.6%        |
| Oppose               | 76.2% | 89.1%    | 64.8%  | 39.7% | 74.3%    | 85.7%       |
| Don't know/no answer | 7.5%  | 3.9%     | 14.4%  | 8.8%  | 6.9%     | 10.7%       |

JCPA pollsters surveyed very similar levels of support for 1) “the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines,” 2) “the establishment of a Palestinian state if it means an Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley,” and 3) a “replacement of the IDF with international forces in the Jordan Valley.”

As decisive as the poll seems to be, the “rules” of Israeli public opinion outlined above again explain this apparent contradiction between the polls. The explanation in this instance is fairly straightforward: nowhere in the JCPA survey do the pollsters tell the interviewees that the Israeli concessions they propose would take place in the context of a peace agreement. The four questions that received only 15 percent support among Israelis were asked in a complete vacuum; the poll therefore received predictable results.

### **Actualizing a Peace Agreement**

How could the political leaders on both sides go about achieving the broadest support among their peoples for a two-state solution? If the constellation of contradictory polls conducted of Israelis and Palestinians over the past decade and beyond can be navigated, perhaps the findings can be used to formulate a peace plan that would receive the strongest majority support on both sides.

Based on the data, the following would likely garner robust majority acceptance among both Israelis and Palestinians: The Israeli Prime Minister and Palestinian Authority President hold a joint press conference in which they each announce they have reached a two-state solution based on the six points above. Pamphlets containing all elements of the proposal or some sort of visual to the same effect would be disseminated to the media. At the same time (or on the same day), the Arab League would declare its full backing of the agreement. And finally, the Israeli Prime Minister would publicly state that with the agreement, he accepts the Arab Peace Initiative. Finally, on the same day the international community would announce a fund of tens of billions of dollars to help Palestinian refugees, and another fund of equal amount to support the new state of Palestine.

This is not an outline merely of a peace *plan* but a peace *scenario*. Polls have shown that certain circumstances surrounding a hypothetical agreement are positively correlated to levels of support on both sides. For instance, more than one poll has shown that if Netanyahu were to accept a two-state solution – even the Arab Peace Initiative – Israeli public opinion would follow.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Palestinian support for the Arab Peace Initiative has consistently polled higher than other proposals,<sup>10</sup> and one very reputable poll conducted by the Brookings Institution in late 2013 found that Palestinian support for a two-state solution very similar to the six-point plan above would jump by almost twenty percentage points (to nearly 60 percent) if Israel announced it accepted the plan.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Nir Hasson, “Despite it all, most Israelis still support the two-state solution,” July 7, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israel-peace-conference/1.601996> and Akiva Eldar, “Most Israelis Back Arab Peace Initiative,” Al-Monitor, May 27, 2013, [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/most-israelis-back-arab-peace-initiative.html?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/most-israelis-back-arab-peace-initiative.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter).

<sup>10</sup> See polls of Palestinians conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, pcpsr.org.

<sup>11</sup> “Israeli and Palestinian Public Opinion on Negotiating a Final Status Peace Agreement,” The Brookings Institution, December 6, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2013/12/06%20public%20opinion%20israel%20palestine/israel%20palestine%20opinion%20>

## With a Consensus, Why no Peace?

Although the past several months in the Israeli-Palestinian arena have been among the most turbulent since perhaps the Second Intifada, a modest consensus between Israelis and Palestinians on a two-state solution has continued to hold.

With such a durable consensus, why is there no peace? Why has a two-state solution not been reached? Books could be written to answer this question, but probably some of the most important parts of the answer are found in the very polls that have exposed the fragile consensus in the first place.

Many of the same organizations that have conducted polls which have found majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians willing to accept a two-state solution have also found stronger majorities on both sides that do not believe the other side is capable of or can be trusted to deliver the goods on such a solution. In addition, majorities are often found on both sides that believe the two-state solution is no longer relevant, only a small plurality (if that) of Palestinians believe negotiations are the best way to gain independence (as opposed to going to the UN/international bodies, demonstrations, violence, etc.), a considerable minority of Palestinians support the targeting of Israeli civilians in attacks against Israel, and a super-majority of Israelis do not believe that negotiations with the Palestinian Authority would achieve peace in the coming years.<sup>12</sup>

In such an environment, it becomes easier to understand why what people are ultimately willing to accept as a solution to the conflict gets completely drowned out. Why would the majorities of Israelis and Palestinians who accept a two-state solution call on their leaders to work toward such a goal when most of those same people do not even believe that outcome is actually possible?

Since at least the outbreak of the last Gaza war, every day the parties seem to drift further away from achieving the only solution on which there is any sort of consensus between Israelis and Palestinians. But that underlying consensus accepting of a two-state solution still endures for the simple reason that, as Bernard Wasserstein has put it (paraphrasing Winston Churchill), “the two-state solution is like democracy: it’s the worst solution except for all the others.”<sup>13</sup>

---

[20poll%202.pdf](#).

<sup>12</sup> See pcpsr.org for polls of both Israelis and Palestinians. For Israelis, also see The Israel Democracy Institute’s “The Peace Index” polling series at <http://en.idi.org.il/tools-and-data/guttman-center-for-surveys/the-peace-index/>.

<sup>13</sup> See Bernard Wasserstein, “[The Partition of Palestine](#),” *Footnotes*, December 2014.

---

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 103, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).