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## **Did October the 7<sup>th</sup> and the Gaza War Put an End to the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process and the Two-State Solution?**



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This brief is the third in PSR series of Critical Policy Briefs for 2024. These briefs address important domestic and foreign policy-oriented issues confronting Palestinian society today.

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# Did October the 7<sup>th</sup> and the Gaza War Put an End to the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process and the Two-State Solution?

Khalil Shikaki

The developments of the past 13 months in Palestinian-Israeli relations generated contradictory outcomes impacting these relations. On the one hand, the interest in resolving the conflict, once and for all, is certainly greater today than it was immediately before these developments. On the other hand, the war has generated highly destructive outcomes at the societal and psychological levels of Palestinians and Israelis. The level of pain and suffering, hate, anger, distrust, and dehumanization is unprecedented. The speed of the decline in support for the two-state solution among Israeli Jews in just two years is also unprecedented. It is true that more Palestinians today, compared to two years earlier, favor that solution. Yet, the majority remains opposed to that solution and an even greater majority of Palestinians believe that the Israeli short-term and long-term goals are either genocide or expulsion. Leaders from both sides, who see that they have no domestic constituency for peace, are unlikely to embark on any serious negotiations to make peace based on that solution. Outside actors, including the US and other external regional and international actors are likely to be deterred from pushing for such a solution knowing the reluctance of such leaders and the strong opposition of the two publics.

Is there a way in which these leaders can be convinced that their publics will indeed support them if they decide to take the risk and engage in serious negotiations in the hope and expectation that the current war would be the last? This Policy Brief shows that despite the tremendous negative developments since October 7, recent evidence from joint Palestinian-Israeli surveys shows that the two publics are not an impediment to peace based on the two-state solution. The two peoples are certainly not a force for peace; but evidence-based research shows that if leaders embark today on serious negotiations to end the conflict, based on that solution, the willingness of the majority of the two publics to support them and to support the outcome of their negotiations is evidently clear.

### **Background:**

The collapse of the US-led peace negotiations in 2014 can be viewed as the turning point after which support among Palestinians and Israeli Jews for the two-state solution begins to gradually decline. By the end of 2017, the majority among both publics expressed opposition to that solution. The main driver for the decline at that time was the belief, shared by both sides, that the two-state solution was no longer practical or feasible given the changes on the ground, such as settlement expansion, and other socio-

political developments including the rising support for the right wing in Israel and the weakening of the PA and the continued division among the Palestinians.

The Palestinian constituency most opposed to the two-state solution includes supporters of Hamas and the youth. The opposition of the Hamas supporters is based on ideology and religious values, but the opposition of the youth is based neither on religion nor on ideology. Instead, it seems to be based on consideration of feasibility and views regarding domestic Palestinian politics and the prospects for democracy. The Palestinian youth tend to be the least religious and most liberal than any other age group in society. As it abandoned support for the two-state solution, the youth showed greater support for a democratic one-state solution with equal rights to Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Nonetheless, among the public as a whole, support for the two-state solution, was higher than the support given by the Palestinians to any other alternative.

Opposition to the two-state solution is higher among Israeli Jews compared to Israeli Arabs. It is also higher among the religious groups, both the ultra-Orthodox and the national religious communities. Similarly, opposition is relatively high among the group that identifies itself as “traditional.” These groups are the most likely to vote for right wing parties, such as the Likud, the extreme right, and the religious parties. Secular Jews show the lowest rates of opposition to that solution. Opposition to that solution is also higher among the youth with the gap in attitudes widening the most between those who are less than 35 years of age and those above 50 years of age. Given Israel’s demographic distribution, Israeli Jewish youth tend to come from those religious, national religious, and traditional backgrounds. For this reason, while Palestinian youth tend to favor a democratic one-state solution, the Israeli Jewish youth tend to favor a non-democratic one-state solution, whereby Palestinians are denied equal rights.

One year before October 7, 2023, a little over one third of Palestinians, one third of Israeli Jews and 60% of Israeli Arabs supported the two-state solution. At the time, these results reflected a significant drop in support compared to the findings of the joint survey two year earlier, in 2020, and represented the lowest level of support for all three groups, Palestinians, Israeli Jews, and Israeli Arabs in all joint Palestinian-Israeli surveys since 2000. In 2020, 43% of the Palestinians and 42% of Israeli Jews supported this solution. Still, in 2022 fewer Palestinians and Israeli Arabs supported the two possible alternatives indicated above, the one state with equality and the one undemocratic state. For Israeli Jews, however, support for one undemocratic state, for the first time since joint Palestinian-Israeli polls were conducted, was greater than the support for the two-state solution.

One year before October 7, we also found that support by Palestinians and Israeli Jews for a detailed comprehensive peace package based on the concept of the two-state solution was the lowest compared to all previous rounds of the joint poll, starting in 2016. A little over a quarter of the Palestinians and a little less than a third of Israeli Jews supported the detailed package while support among Israeli Arabs was higher than 60%. Fifty four percent of all Israelis, 62% of Israeli Jews, and 72% of Palestinians were opposed to this two-state comprehensive package. The peace package outlined the following components that address all the main elements of the two-state solution: a de-militarized Palestinian state, an Israeli withdrawal to the Green Line with equal territorial exchange, family unification in Israel of 100,000 Palestinian refugees, West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, the Jewish Quarter and the Western Wall under Israeli sovereignty and the Muslim and Christian quarters and the al Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount under Palestinian sovereignty, Israeli and the future state of Palestine will be democratic, the bilateral agreement will be part of a larger peace

agreement with all Arab states, the US and major Arab countries will ensure full implementation of the agreement by both sides, and the end of the conflict and claims.

### **The unseen psychosocial damage inflicted on the two societies since October the 7th:**

The events of the past 13 months inflicted dramatic negative psychosocial damage on the two societies. The trauma associated with the ongoing conflict continues to exact a price from normal people making them anything but normal. Findings from the most recent joint Palestinian-Israeli survey, conducted in July 2024, show the extent of the damage. On both sides, among other things, people are unwilling to accept the humanity of the other side, distrust it beyond all previous levels, and view its own victimhood as greater than any other.

Vast majorities Palestinians and Israeli Jews justify the violence committed by its own side, Hamas on October the 7<sup>th</sup> and the Israeli government and military since that time, against the other by what the other had done. Israeli siege and blockade over the Gaza Strip are seen by the Palestinians as justifying what Hamas did. The Hamas attack on October 7 is seen by Israeli Jews as justifying what the Israeli military is doing in the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, close to 90% of Palestinians believe that the short-term goals of Israel in the current war is to commit genocide or conquer the land and expel the Palestinians from their homeland. In a mirror image, more than 90% of Israeli Jews believe that Hamas' goal on October 7 was to commit genocide or conquer the land and expel the population from their homeland. Perception of the long-term aspiration of the other side is also grim with similar vast majorities on both sides believing that the other side wants to conquer the land, kill the population, expel them, or deny them political rights.

These destructive perceptions are amplified by strong perception of victimization on both sides. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians and Israeli Jews tend to view their own suffering as the worst compared to all other peoples who suffered from persecution and injustice. Three quarters on both sides view the conflict with the other sides in zero-sum terms, when one gains, the other loses; anything good for one side must, by definition, be bad for the other. The current level of distrust, about 90% or higher, is the highest ever recorded in the joint surveys since 2016 when the question was first systematically asked. It is not surprising under these conditions to find that while each side is readily able to humanize its own people by almost identical scores, close to 90 points on average, only 6 Palestinians and 14 Israeli Jews out of a hundred, on average, are willing to do the same for the other side. This wartime sweeping dehumanization of the other should be seen not only in terms of one's perception of inherent qualities of the other but also as a statement regarding its behavior on October the 7<sup>th</sup>, for the Israeli public, and throughout the current war in Gaza, for the Palestinians.

These psychosocial outcomes seem to generate two important political implications, one impacting perception of land ownership and the other impacting perception of the way out of the conflict. The belief that the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river, or historic Palestine, belongs to one's own side, and not the other, has always been evident in our previous joint polls. But the intensity of this belief, particularly among Israeli Jews, has increased in the aftermath of October 7 and the ongoing war. Today, more than 90% of Palestinians and Israeli Jews believe that the land belongs entirely to their group. Moreover, the vast majority on both sides, but particularly among the Palestinians, deny that the land also belongs to the other side.

Finally, the war impacted attitudes regarding a way out of the conflict between a diplomatic and a military solution. Surprisingly, the findings of the joint poll show different public responses to this question among Palestinians and Israeli Jews. While a majority on both sides believes they have a military way out of the conflict, by defeating the other side, the Palestinians are more optimistic than Israeli Jews, 48% and 38% respectively, that diplomacy provides a viable route to ending the conflict.

### **Divergent views on the peace process:**

As we saw in the preference for diplomatic vs. military way out, in which the Palestinians come out of the ongoing traumatic conditions more optimistic than Israeli Jews about the prospects of diplomacy, findings of the 2024 joint poll show additional divergent views between the two sides. The joint poll findings show differing political responses in other areas of political attitudes regarding Palestinian-Israeli relations, most importantly the two-state solution. While the Israeli Jewish support for the concept of the two-state solution declines in less than two years from one third (34%) to a little over a fifth (21%), a 13-point drop, Palestinian support for the same concept rises by 7 points from 33% in 2022 to 40% in 2024. Support for the same concept increases also among Israeli Arabs, from 60% to 72% during the same period. Among Israeli Jews, the current support for the two-state solution is the lowest since the peace process started more than 30 years ago.

The hardening of the Israeli Jewish attitudes after October the 7<sup>th</sup> can also be seen when exploring changing attitudes regarding alternatives to the two-state solution. The findings show an increased support for the “annexation of the West Bank without granting equal rights to Palestinians.” Support among Israeli Jews for this unequal and non-democratic one-state solution stands today at 42%, the highest ever recorded in the joint polls. In 2022, Israeli Jewish support for this annexation without equal rights to Palestinians stood at 37%. Among Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, support today for a one-state solution without equal rights for Israeli Jews stands at 33% and 17% respectively. In 2022, Palestinian support for this unequal, and non-democratic one-state solution stood at 30%. A second alternative to the two-state solution is a democratic and equal one-state. In July 2024, 25% of Palestinians and 14% of Israeli Jews supported it compared to 23% among Palestinians and 20% among Israeli Jews two years earlier. The support for these three solutions, the two-state, the democratic one-state, and the non-democratic one-state was measured in three separate questions. A review of the attitudes of those who support the democratic one-state solution shows that most of them also support the two-state solution and that some of the supporters of the non-democratic state also support the two-state solution.

Indeed, when one measures the total net support for the three solutions, while giving the priority to the two-state solution, that is without the overlapping support to other solutions, the total comes out to much less than one hundred percentage points. In fact, the 2024 findings show that 44% of all Palestinians and 34% of all Israeli Jews do not support any solution at all. In 2022, the size of this group, which one can call the “undecided,” stood at 47% among the Palestinians and 27% among Israeli Jews. This finding might be good news to supporters of the two-state solution. Indeed, almost half of the total increase in the Palestinian support for the two-state solution (3 percentage points) came from this group and half of the decrease (7 percentage points) in Israeli Jewish support for the two-state solution moved to this group rather than embraced a clearly defined alternative. In other words, the “undecided” might be the easiest group to convert back to the two-state solution

A further exploration of the 2024 findings adds further evidence demonstrating the divergent attitudes in the post October 7 and the Gaza War environment. When Palestinians and Israelis were presented with a detailed 11-point peace package, based on the two-state solution (as described above in the last paragraph of the background section of this Brief), identical to the one presented to them in three previous joint polls between 2018 and 2022, findings show a drop in Israeli Jewish support by 6 percentage points and a rise in Palestinian support by 7 points compared to the 2022 findings. Today's support for this detailed peace package stands at 69% among Israeli Arabs, 34% among Palestinians and 25% among Israeli Jews. The opposition to the peace package stands at 65% of Israeli Jews, 63% of Palestinians, and 13% of Israeli Arabs. It is worth noting that while the support of the Palestinians for the detailed peace package is a 6-point lower than their support for the undefined concept of the two-state solution, the support of the Israeli Jews for the detailed package is actually a 4-point higher than their support for the concept of the two-state solution. This Israeli Jewish finding is contrary to all other joint poll results during all previous joint polls, where respondents were more willing to support the concept but reject its detailed description.

### **Still, joint findings show that public opinion is not an impediment to peace based on the two-state solution:**

The first post October 7 joint poll sought to assess the willingness of the two publics to show flexibility under various scenarios and conditions of negative and positive incentives. The negative incentives are those scenarios generated by fear of war expansion into the West Bank, Lebanon, and the region, with the participation of Iran. The positive incentives are those that seek to address the vital needs of the two sides, with or without granting a similar concession to the other side. Findings show that fear of war can serve as a driver for peace and can illicit greater willingness to compromise. Moreover, incentives remain highly effective in reversing hardline views and bringing about a majority support among the two publics for the detailed peace package described above.

*Fear of regional war:* Most of the Palestinians and Israelis expect the current on-going war to expand into the West Bank and expect it to eventually expand into a regional war with the direct participation of Iran. This is the view expressed by 53% of the Palestinians and 62% of Israeli Jews. When asked who might win such an expanded war, a small majority of Palestinians (53%) expressed the view that the winner will be the forces opposed to Israel while only 20% expected Israel to win. Among Israeli Jews, 79% expect Israel to win and only 8% expect the other side to win.

*Support for the US vision for peace:* The joint poll explored support for the peace vision outlined by the Biden Administration in the aftermath of the October 7 attack and the subsequent war in Gaza. The vision was described as having four components that begin with a ceasefire agreement and release of hostages and prisoners, a revitalized PA, a two-state solution with irreversible steps in that direction, and regional peace and Saudi-Israeli normalization. A slim majority on both sides expressed opposition: 51% of Palestinians and 54% of Israeli Jews; only 17% of Israeli Arabs expressed opposition. Support stood at 83% among Israeli Arabs, 46% among Israeli Jews, and 45% among Palestinians. Clearly, the widening of the circle of peace to include the entire region and the linkage created by the US vision between the ceasefire, the two-state solution, the strengthening of the PA, and the regional peace were highly effective in increasing the support for two-state solution among both publics from the original

levels (40% among the Palestinians and 21% among Israeli Jews) to more than doubling it among Israeli Jews and increasing it by 6 points among the Palestinians.

*Forcing a choice between bi-lateral and regional peace and regional war:* When the question to the respondents became blunt, a forced choice between the two possibilities mentioned above, the expansion of the war or the embrace of the two-state solution and regional peace, the two publics made yet another enormous leap. Almost two-thirds of the Palestinians (65%), 55% of Israeli Jews, and 89% of Israeli Arabs preferred peace; the opposition among the Palestinians stood at 29% and among Israeli Jews at 45%.

*Incentives work:* Incentives are policy measures that leaders can negotiate with the other side in order to garner greater public support among their constituencies. Since June 2016, in eight experiments, the joint poll tested dozens of such incentives in order to assess their effectiveness in doing exactly that, making the detailed two-state package more attractive. These experiments produced a successful set of one-sided incentives that were later paired to produce meaningful two-sided incentives in which one side receives an important concession from the other side and in return agrees to grant an important incentive to the other side. Yet, given the considerable psychosocial damage inflicted on the two societies since October 7, it would be reasonable to question the continued utility of incentives that might have proven effective under very different conditions in the past. The 2024 joint poll sets out to test the continued utility of these incentives. The findings show that they are as effective today as they were in the past or even more so.

Six one-sided incentives aiming at raising support for the detailed two-state solution package were offered to each side. These included measures such as security cooperation, ending mutual incitement, allowing Palestinian laborers to continue to work in Israel, allowing Israeli factories to continue to operate in the future Palestinian state, acknowledgement of historic and religious links and recognition of national identity, easing the absorption of refugees by providing them with homes and lands, and release of Palestinian prisoners, can each produce a majority support on both sides, increasing it, among the Palestinians up to 55%. The results among Israeli Jews were even better, give the lower baseline of support, showing one-sided incentives leading to a majority support for the peace package, increasing it up to 60%.

When these incentives were paired, according to which each side receives an incentive but must grant an incentive to the other, they were obviously expected, as we saw in all previous experiments, to be less successful than the one-sided measures. But here too the findings were also promising. Five out of the six pairs increased Israeli Jewish support and one (fighting incitement in textbooks on both sides) produced a majority Jewish support for the package, increasing it from 25% to 61%. The results on the Palestinian side were almost as successful: four pairs increased support and one increased it from 34% to 54% (allowing Palestinian laborers to continue to work inside Israel in return for the continued operation of the current Israeli West Bank factories in the future Palestinian state).

## Conclusion

More than a year of brutal war has hardened public opinion among Palestinians and Israelis and poisoned mutual perception of each other. Although similar developments have been seen before during previous wars, the current development is unprecedented in its intensity. However, as we saw in previous wars, such intensity normally weakens within months after the end of the violence. Moreover,



survey research among the peoples of the two societies shows no evidence that the current change is the product of ideological or religious transformation. Instead, the change reflects greater fear and pain that can be reduced by calculated policy change by the leaders of the two sides. Fear can also be positive: fear of war can be capitalized on to generate greater public support for peace. This conclusion however only emphasizes the necessity for strong, legitimate, and courageous leaderships committed to the goal of peace that neither side now has.

Under the right conditions, with a strong leadership in place, policy measures in the form of incentives specifically designed as unpaired (one-sided benefits) or paired (two-sided, providing benefits and imposing costs), continue to play a critical role in reducing the hardening of attitudes leading to a significant reversal of hardline attitudes and producing majority support for permanent peace and end of conflict on both sides.

These conclusions lead to two policy implications:

- (1) Public opinion today is clearly not a force for peace; but evidence shows that it is also not an impediment to peace.
- (2) While societal forces are important in leading societies toward peace, only strong, legitimate, and credible leadership can produce the desired change that can transform the environment to one conducive to peacemaking.

## **Critical Policy Brief**

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November 2024

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