

'Large majority in favor of peace talks'

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Both Jewish and Arab Israelis support peace talks with the Palestinian Authority by a large majority, but also trust the government's handling of Israel's security challenges, according to the latest Tel Aviv University "War and Peace Index" survey.

Fully 72.5 percent of Israelis support negotiations toward peace, with just 20.9% opposing it.

This support for negotiations, however, did not translate into optimism that the efforts would result in peace in the near term.

Asked if the security situation will change in 2010, 57% of Jews said it will not, compared to 19% who think there will be progress toward peace and 13% who predict another round of fighting between Israel and Palestinians. Among the Arab public, there were almost twice as many optimists, with fully 35% saying there would be progress towards peace in the coming year.

Alongside the general support for negotiations, Israelis trust the government's handling of Israel's security challenges.

Fully 78% of Israelis believe the government is functioning "well or even better," or "medium" (42% and 36% respectively) in dealing with Israel's security challenges. Just 16% say it is functioning "poorly." (In contrast, the government earned a failing grade on social issues, with 60% of Israelis giving it a "poor" grade, and just 6% saying it has functioned "well or even better" on these issues.)

This trust was reflected in different ways in the survey. For example, asked if the government was correct in rejecting the latest Hamas offer to exchange Gilad Schalit for terrorists "with blood on their hands," a majority (53%) said they supported the government's decision. Just 35.5% disagreed with the government's position.

According to the study's authors, this figure marks a change from previous polls in which Israelis said Schalit should be exchanged even at the cost of freeing the "heaviest" terrorists held by Israel.

"It appears that as the moment of decision approaches, the public tends to rely on the government's judgment on this painful issue," the authors wrote.

Support for the prisoner exchange was noticeably higher among Jewish women than among Jewish men, with support for the deal reaching 41% (compared to the overall 35.5%).

Similarly, the Jewish public tended to support the government's position on the issue of opening Road 443 to Palestinian traffic. Some 63% support the government-backed status quo, which leaves the major artery to Jerusalem closed to Palestinian traffic from nearby villages out of fear that such traffic will bring with it terrorist attacks. Less than half, 30%, support the High Court of Justice's ruling that the current policy violates international and Israeli law and must be changed.

The poll found most of the support for the High Court's position coming from those identifying with the political Left, with 100% of Meretz voters and 54% of Labor voters siding with the Court.

Israeli Arabs overwhelmingly sided with the Court (83%), though at a lower rate than Meretz voters.

In general, the poll found that Israeli Arabs do not share the same trust expressed by the Jewish public on the government's handling of security matters.

Fully 57% said the government had erred in rejecting the Hamas offer for Schalit, though -unexpectedly - 20% said the government had acted correctly.

A similar gap between Jews and Arabs was found on the question of who was responsible for the relative calm that the country experienced in 2009.

Noting that the IDF has called 2009 "a particularly quiet year in security terms," the poll asked Israelis who they believed was responsible for the quiet. A majority of Jews (54%) said it was the result of the actions of Israeli security forces, while just 19% gave the majority of the credit to the Palestinian leadership. Among Israeli Arabs, however, a "prevailing assessment" (49%) said it was due to the decision of the Palestinian leadership to lessen the violence, while only 19.5% gave Israeli security forces most of the credit.

The "War and Peace Index" is funded by the Evans Program for Conflict Resolution Research of Tel Aviv University. It is considered an important ongoing barometer of Israelis' opinions on issues affecting the peace process and the conflict in the region. It has been ongoing since 1993.

The telephone interviews were conducted by the B. I. Cohen Institute of Tel Aviv University on January 4-5, 2010, and included 525 adult Israeli interviewees, including in the West Bank and the kibbutzim. The sampling error for a sample of this size is 4.5%.