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## **Book Reviews**

### *An Analysis of Israeli public opinion*

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## ***Series (Book Reviews)***

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<sup>1</sup> **Vox Populi: Trends in Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2004-2009**, by Yehuda Ben Meir and Olena Bagno-Moldavsk, Tel Aviv, Institute for National Security Studies, 2010.

No country in the world places as much importance on national security as Israel does, and nowhere else does the issue of national security affect public opinion to such an extent. Security and the culture of security, which are widespread among both the elite and the public in Israel, are the main variables in determining the positions of Israelis vis-à-vis politics and different aspects of public life.

It would be difficult to examine the properties of Israeli public opinion without understanding its core values. As a society of immigrants and settlers which has established itself upon the ruins of the Palestinian Arab people, it has ceaselessly produced racist Arabophobic values that seek the expulsion of the Arab population. Such notions sharply contradict the human values that are shared by most societies, especially those of the West. Basic values such as equality, the rights to equal treatment, equal citizenship, freedom, justice, private property and the peoples' right to self-determination are rejected by the vast majority of Israelis when it comes to Palestinians and, more generally, Arabs. Perhaps the best piece of research of racist beliefs and values affecting Israeli public opinion was that of Professor Daniel Bar Tal, an Israeli scholar of political psychology, in his book *Living with Conflict: Socio-Psychological Treatment of Israeli Jewish Society*, which was published in Hebrew in 2007. Bar Tal asserts that the Jewish Israeli society has developed a self-sustaining web of racist values and beliefs that perpetually charge Jewish Israeli society and keep it psychologically primed for a continued conflict with the Arabs.

These racist beliefs and values, which have become part of the psyche of Israeli Jewish society, focus on Israel's "moral" right to expand, and on the "nobleness and justice" of such objectives. Collective and individual security, and that of the state, were placed above all other considerations with Israel assuming the role of the "victim", albeit a victim that kills and oppresses. A positive image of the collective self was created in contravention to facts, and was endowed with values of ethical supremacy and pacifism; while at the same time a "siege mentality" was fostered, rallying patriotic sentiment and national unity in the face of external threat. The assumption was that the state is in constant threat, and this imagined existential threat was linked to the holocaust. In the face of that, the legitimacy of the Arabs' existence – along with their humanity, was denied; they were cast at a lower place and excluded from the ranks of humane society.

Bar Tal explains how these socio-psychological beliefs and values "manufacture" the racist Israeli subject and shape his worldview from cradle to grave. At a very young age Israeli Jews are fed these racist values and beliefs, before and during kindergarten, throughout primary and secondary education, and during the mandatory military service. Even after being released from the Army and returned to society, the Jews in Israel are constantly exposed to these racist

beliefs through the writings and statements of elites, the media, and the various products of cultural life: theatre, movies etc...

In recent years, the level of extremism, racism, and aggressiveness has increased among Israeli public opinion. Furthermore, attempts to hide or mask this racism no longer exist; in fact, there is an emerging audacity in exposing, justifying, and taking pride in racism as if it was a highly prized value. Wherever one looks, in Israel today, one would find expressions of naked racism, in the street, in colleges and schools, and in public and private institutions. Not a day passes without a racist statement by a minister, a rabbi, a general, a television presenter, or an “expert” in Arab affairs. Dozens of rabbis from the highest ranks signed a petition asking the faithful not to rent apartments to Arab citizens of Israel, which was followed by a further petition demanding that they do not mix with Arabs, and so on. In the Knesset, racist laws are passed regularly, with the laws drafted by the government and always with the support of the opposition. A back-log of draft racist laws, still await legislation in the Knesset.

In the streets, demonstrations are rallied against the non-Jews, and in football stadiums, audiences shout “death to Arabs” openly and in front of the media cameras - and often during live broadcasts. Nobody was prosecuted, and nobody will, because there is a problem with who prosecutes who. Racists cannot prosecute other racists for racism.

In November 2010 the National Security and Public Opinion Project (NSPOP), which is affiliated to the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv (INSS), published a book entitled *Vox Populi: Trends in Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2004-2009*. The authors were Yehuba Ben Meir, specialist in the study of Israeli public opinion and decision-making process and director of the National Security and Public Opinion Project; and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, an Israeli scholar affiliated to the Institute for National Security Studies.

The NSPOP was founded in 1985 to study the posture of Jewish Israelis on public issues relating to national security, and to constantly track their opinion and conceptions on these matters. The Project is considered to be the most capable in providing data and information on the Israeli public opinion when it comes to issues of Israeli national security. Since its founding, the project has effectuated 23 studies of Israeli public opinion, using a representative sample of Israeli Jewish society consisting of around one thousand respondents who were interviewed face-to-face with the use of a questionnaire containing one hundred questions. The original intention of the Project was to maintain the same questions every year, in order to track public opinion changes on the same issues, but over time, some questions became obsolete and were removed, while changing conditions necessitated the addition of new questions. But the survey has maintained the majority of the questions used at the launch of the program, as well as the framework it uses to analyze questions of national security.

Since its founding, the Project polls Jewish Israelis exclusively, excluding the opinion of Arab Israelis who represent around 20% of the Israeli population, arguing that their positions and opinions, as explained in the introduction of the work under review, differ from the opinion of Jewish Israeli society, often contradicting it when it comes to the question of national security.

The book consists of 115 pages including an introduction and eight chapters, and polls Israeli public opinion on the issues of Israeli political society, the national mood, the threats endangering Israel, the Iranian nuclear threat, the Israeli nuclear posture, the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, the potential fate of Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967, settlement, and the state of Jewish-Arab relations inside Israel and the tensions within Israeli society.

### **The Results of the Survey**

The book consists of two major parts: the first part deals with extensive data regarding the survey itself and the results of the poll; the second part deals with the commentary of the authors who went to great lengths to justify racism and extremism. In this review, I shall present the data derived from the survey and neglect the authors' comments, since the topic at hand is Israeli public opinion and not the authors' justifications of racism and bigotry.

The survey results clearly show a trend among the Israeli public towards further intransigence, extremism, and racism. By comparing the results of the last poll conducted in May 2009 with previous polls, we conclude that Israeli society has shifted towards further extremism, aggressiveness, and racism in virtually every matter the Israelis were polled on.

The 2009 survey shows that Israeli society, as a whole, has shifted by an 8% margin, rightward. The survey divided Israeli society into five categories: extreme left, moderate left, center, moderate right, and extreme right; and the poll shows an 8% gain in the ranks of the moderate and extreme right. The extreme left lost a portion of its adherents to the moderate left, which lost to the center, which lost to the moderate right which, in turn, lost a percentage to the extreme right.

### **Demography and Geography**

The survey reveals that the "demographic question" has constantly remained the dominant concern for Israeli public opinion. The questionnaire asks the respondents to rank four values in order of importance: 1- Jewish majority in Israel, 2- the Democracy of the state, 3-the land of Greater Israel, and 4- a situation of peace. The first value, "Jewish majority in Israel," has maintained the first rank in the 2009 survey, as it had in all previous surveys. 72% of respondents placed the Jewish majority value as their first or second choice. It is apparent that

what Israelis call “the demographic threat” occupies the most prominent position in shaping Israeli public opinion over the question of a political resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. “The demographic threat” is a euphemism for the mere existence of the Palestinian people on its land, and the possibility that Israel would transform, if it continues its occupation of Palestinian 1967 lands, into a bi-national rather than a Jewish state.

As a result, there are two main values that are constantly at odds in the mind of the Zionist Israeli society: demography and geography. In other terms, “a Jewish state with a clear and decisive Jewish majority” vs “*Eretz Yisrael*” which does not contain a Jewish majority and, in fact, presents a bi-national reality with the proportion of Palestinians steadily increasing to the point where, in two or three decades, they will form a clear majority within Mandatory Palestine. The last survey confirms what other polls have shown, which is that a large majority of Israelis opposes halting settlement activities and believes in the possibility of continued expansion into large Palestinian territories on the one hand, while restricting the densely populated Palestinian areas to a state established on a portion of the West Bank - as little as half of the original size of the West Bank - on the other.

### **The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

The survey shows, regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, that the Israeli society is drifting towards further intransigence, aggressiveness, and extremism in all matters relating to the conflict and covered by the survey: the concept of land for peace, the future of Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, settlements in their varying definitions, unilateral withdrawal, and the Palestinian state.

### **Land for Peace**

The survey shows that opposition to the concept of swapping land in exchange for peace has increased among the Israeli public. In the 2009 poll, 60% opposed the concept of “land for peace” while 28% approved of it and 12% expressed neutrality. In 2005, by contrast, 38% opposed, 48% favored, and 12% took no position, which means that opposition to the concept of land for peace has increased by 22%, a very elevated rate by any standard, while support for this concept has dwindled by 20%.

### **The Future of Occupied Palestinian Territories**

The survey shows a weakening of support for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and an increase in opposition to such proposals among the Israeli public. Those polled were asked to answer a question on the topic and were presented by four choices: only 13% supported the option of “major territorial concessions,” while another 13% favored a unilateral disengagement including “territorial concessions,” and 29% opted for a partial solution including “minimal

territorial concession,” and 45% of respondents rejected all the above solutions. This hardening and extremism in Israeli public opinion is clear in the second question: If Israel reaches a permanent solution with the Palestinians that would end the Israel-Palestinian conflict, would you favor Israel returning the following territories, or should Israel retain them even if that does not lead to reaching a permanent solution? The responses were as follows:

- Only 13% support withdrawal from the Jordan Valley, as opposed to 24.1% in 2005.
- 17.5% are in favor of withdrawal from al-Aqsa mosque (with the exception of the Wailing Wall), compared to 27.8% in 2005.
- 14.8% support withdrawal from Gush Etzion, situated between Bethlehem and Jericho, compared to 28.8% in 2005.
- 46% favor withdrawal from the Eastern part of “Samaria,” which includes a few small and isolated settlements, as opposed to 66.5% in the 2005 survey.
- 26.1% are in favor of withdrawal from “Western Samaria” compared to 38.1% in 2005.
- 40% approve of withdrawal from the Arab neighborhoods of occupied East Jerusalem, as opposed to 46.3% in 2005.

### **The Settlements**

The survey also revealed that the Israeli public’s stance on settlements has hardened and grown more extreme compared to recent years. The responses to a question regarding the possible evacuation of settlements in the West Bank (except for those in East Jerusalem) in the context of a permanent solution were as follows:

- 42% stood against evacuating settlements under any circumstances, compared to 28% in 2005.
- Only 43% approved of dismantling small and isolated settlements, as opposed to 52% in 2005.
- Only 15% supported the complete dismantling of settlements in the entire West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) compared to 20% in 2005

### **The Peace Process**

The survey shows that the Israeli public is fully aware of its leadership’s need to verbally support the peace process. While public opinion staunchly defends settlement activity and the continuation of the occupation of large Palestinian territories, the majority of the public opinion also favours maintaining the peace process and negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and is opposed to their halt. This demonstrates an awareness of the peace process’ usefulness to Israel, as it uses the peace process and negotiations as a cover to pursue settlement activities, and



to avoid international pressure – especially from the United States. 59% of respondents approved of the continuation of the peace process and negotiations, against 19% in opposition; in 2005 64% approved of the peace process while 23% were against it.

### **The Palestinian State**

We can glean the posture of the Israeli public vis-à-vis a Palestinian state by reading its positions that staunchly reject a return to the 1967 borders, support settlement and retaining large Palestinian territories, and its position regarding other elements of the Palestinian cause. As the survey makes clear, the “Palestinian state” represents for the Israeli public something completely different than an independent Palestinian state established along the June 1967 borders. Rather, it is a state on a portion of Palestinian land that is divided and fragmented by settlement blocks, the separation wall, and military bases. It would be a solution to what Israelis call “the demographic problem,” so that Israel can rid itself of the Palestinians while sequestering them in ghettos named “the Palestinian State” within half, or slightly more than half, of the West Bank, making it easier for Israel to control and contain them in a more suitable manner than direct occupation.

Despite all this, the approval ratings for a Palestinian state have fallen to 53% from 58% in 2005.

### **The Chances of Political and Military Solutions**

The survey shows that 30% believe in the possibility of reaching a political solution with the Palestinians, while 70% do not; as opposed to 39% and 61%, respectively, in 2005. The survey also shows that 44% of Israelis believe in 2009 that a majority of the Palestinians wants peace, compared to 52% in 2005.

The survey also reveals that 58% of Israelis believe in the impossibility of a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with 25% believing in the existence of a political solution. The results in 2005 were, respectively, 52% and 33%. Also, the proposition “there is no military solution to the conflict” was considered valid by 40% of respondents and opposed by 45%, while in 2005, 38% were in favor and 50% against.

### **The Arab Peace Initiative**

Numbers show increased popular opposition to the Arab peace initiative, with only 19% of respondents in 2009 supporting a favorable Israeli response, with 60% in opposition. In 2007, 27% supported a positive response to the Arab initiative while 49% opposed.

### Threats and Concepts of Security

In order to study the perception of threats to Israeli national security, the respondents were given a number of scenarios, asking them to arrange these scenarios in descending order of perceived threat to Israeli national security. The answers were as follows:

In the first place came Iran's possession of nuclear weapons; second, was the existence of biological and chemical weapons in enemy hands; third, the renewal of terrorism at a high intensity; fourth, a deep socio-economic *crisis* in Israel; fifth, corruption in the public sector in Israel; sixth, the emergence of a non-democratic regime in Israel; seventh, war with Syria; eighth, returning occupied land in exchange for peace.

The polled sample was then asked to express their view of Israel's capacity in confronting different threat scenarios. In what follows, we will describe these scenarios and cite the percentage that responded in 2009, that Israel would successfully face these forms of challenges, and we will compare the results with those of the 2004 survey:

- A general war between Israel and all Arab states: 75% in 2009 and 67% in 2004.
- A war waged by Syria against Israel: 97% in 2009 and 96% in 2004.
- An enemy state attacking Israel with chemical or biological weapons: 76% in 2009 and 70% in 2004.
- An enemy state attacking Israel with a nuclear weapon: 67% in 2009 and 52% in 2004.
- Large and sustained terrorist attacks: 89% in 2009 and 84% in 2004.
- An insurgency by the Arabs in Israel: 91% in 2009 and 52% in 2004.
- Internal (Jewish) Israeli split over the fate of the occupied territories and peace: 91% in 2009 and 85% in 2004.
- An attack against Israel with surface-to-surface missiles: 92% in 2009 and 86% in 2004.
- Religious and social divisions (between Jews): 89% in 2009 and 72% in 2004.
- Reducing American aid to Israel: 78% in 2009 and 53% in 2004

### The Iranian Nuclear Threat

For over a decade, what Israelis term "the Iranian nuclear threat" has been the top priority of Israeli national security. The Israeli public still considers in 2009 that the potentiality of Iran seizing a nuclear device to be the most imminent threat to Israeli national security. Responding to the following question; "What should Israel's response be if it discovers Iran's possession of nuclear weapons" 59% stood in favor of Israel attacking Iranian nuclear installations, while 41% opposed such an action. On the question on Iran's actions once it has nuclear weapons, 21% said that Iran would attack Israel with nuclear arms, with 35% answering that Iran would threaten

Israel with nuclear weapons and abstain from using them in fear of Israeli retaliation; 26% said that Iran would pressure states in the region, including Israel, and blackmail them to achieve its ends. 13% said that Iran would instruct Hezbollah and Hamas to increase attacks on Israel, and only 4% said that Iran would act cautiously and with pragmatism.

### **The Israeli Nuclear Posture**

The survey shows that 90% of Israelis believe that Israel possesses nuclear armaments while eight percent are unsure. It also reveals that 80% of Israelis support the policy of nuclear ambiguity that Israel has pursued for over five decades. Meanwhile, 19% support Israel pronouncing itself a nuclear power as a deterrent towards enemies, and only 1% want Israel to abdicate its nuclear armaments. A large majority of Israelis, exceeding 87%, are against making the Middle East into a nuclear-free zone, even if Iran possessed nuclear weapons, with a mere 13% supporting nuclear disarmament throughout the Middle East in such an eventuality. Regarding what Israel should do if Iran becomes a nuclear power and decided against attacking Iranian nuclear sites, 39% said that Israel should develop its power of deterrence, 42% said that anti-missile systems should be developed, and 18% saying that Israel should build shelters for its citizens.

The National Security and Public Opinion Project has not published all the questions and the answers to them. And in a lecture he presented in a symposium on “the Middle East in the Nuclear Age,” Yehuda Ben Meir revealed a number of previously unpublished questions that were posed by the Project in the 1980s and early 1990s, showing that 80-90% of Israeli society favorably views Israel’s efforts to develop its nuclear capabilities. Ben Meir also said that, during that timeframe, the proportion of Israelis that believe in Israel’s right – under conditions of nuclear monopoly by Israel - to use these weapons against Arab countries has steadily increased. In 1986, a third of Israelis thought that Israel had the right to use – and not just possess – nuclear weapons, while two-thirds did not. By 1993, however, the percentage of those believing in Israel’s right to use nuclear arms had risen to two-thirds, with one-third now in opposition. Meir revealed in the lecture that a vast majority of those who support Israel’s right to use its nuclear weapons not only in the event of an existential threat, or as retaliation to a nuclear, chemical, or biological attack; but also in order to avoid military defeat with conventional weapons. Ben Meir revealed another important and dangerous trend in his lecture, consisting of the fact that – during the same timeframe – the proportion of Israelis approving the use of nuclear weapons to minimize Israeli casualties has ranged between a third and half of Israelis polled, and that is in a

scenario where no attack with Weapons of Mass Destruction is waged against Israel, and under the assumption that Israel has a monopoly on nuclear arms in the region.<sup>2</sup>

### **Opinions on Palestinian Arabs in Israel**

The racist and aggressive trends among the Israeli public is not only apparent in its posture and actions towards the Palestinian Arab people in the 1967 Occupied Territories, or towards other Arab countries; but also in its opinions and positions towards Palestinian Arabs who are also Israeli citizens, who constitute 20% of the Israeli population. The survey results also showed an increase in the proportion of Israeli Jews who are in favor of encouraging Arabs to emigrate from Israel; in 2009, this percentage reached 72% while it was 50% in 2001, rising to 63% in 2006 and 66% in 2007. Furthermore, the survey results show that 70% of Israelis are in favor of expulsion – “transfer” – of large or limited numbers of Arabs from their villages and towns out of Israel; a percentage that approaches those of years past, which shows that the idea of “transfer” has become well-established among the Israeli public.

As to how Israel should treat Arab citizens, the poll shows that 55% of Israelis support the state taking further punitive measures against the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, rather than granting them equality. Results also reveal that 77% of respondents refuse the participation of Arab citizens in the making of important political decisions, and 70% oppose the existence of Arab parties, or Arab ministers, in the cabinet coalition.

Despite the fact that two decades ago, all Arab states unanimously adopted peace with Israel as the sole strategic choice, and despite successive concessions over Palestinian rights, which all Arab states and the Palestinian leadership offered Israel and despite the Arab Peace Initiative, which was agreed upon by all Arab states, Israeli public opinion continues to shift towards further aggressiveness, extremism, and racism towards Palestinians in particular and the Arabs in general. It may be closer to the truth to state that it was because of the positions of the Palestinian leadership and the Arab states – and not in spite of them – that Israeli public opinion shifted further towards extremism, aggressiveness, and racism. There can be no misunderstanding on this issue, the Israeli public is fully aware that Arabs want to reach a full and comprehensive peace with Israel on the basis of the 1967 borders, leaving Israel with 78% of historic Palestine. But that is rejected by the Israeli public, which wants much more. The vast majority of Israeli public opinion, wants to maintain the occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights, and to annex as much as possible of the occupied West Bank to Israel, and this is what the survey proves without doubt. Israeli public opinion totally disregards the positions of the Arab states

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<sup>2</sup> The Elazar Papers 16, Toward A Nuclear Middle East, Tel Aviv: The Jaffa Centre for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1993, pp. 60-61.

and the Palestinian leadership, as far as the future of the occupied Arab territories is concerned. What really affects and causes concern to Israeli public opinion, according to the survey regarding withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied in 1967, is the American position and the 'demographic problem'.

Since racism, expansionism and anti-Arab positions are deeply rooted in Israeli public opinion, as the survey shows, there is very little hope for change unless the United States and the international community impose sanctions upon Israel and/or there is a significant change in the balance of power in the region.