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### **Secondary sources**

For references to secondary sources in the text see the integrated bibliography at the end of this book.

## **7 Moving away from war**

### Israelis' security beliefs in the post-Oslo era

*Tamar Hermann*

#### **Introduction: coping with change**

Since its embryonic days and well into the fifth decade of its existence as an independent state, the Israeli polity has been involved in a protracted, often violent conflict with the Arab world surrounding it.<sup>1</sup> Both sides in the conflict have developed a zero-sum definition of the relations between them, thereby investing the army and the effective use of force with maximal weight. Such an emphasis on the military and on the use of force is particularly paradoxical in the case of the Jewish/Israeli side in the conflict, as it is in sharp contrast with the usually docile traditional way of life the Jewish people had followed for almost two thousand years. Their subjugation in the countries of the Diaspora made the idea of physical resistance to existential threats so completely non-realistic that 'quietism', a passive acceptance of pogroms and other manifestations of physical abuse, became an integral part of the Jewish exilic culture.<sup>2</sup> The physical weakness of the Jewish people in exile produced an exceedingly and profoundly 'civilian' national culture that was devoid of any military aspects.

However, the situation which the Zionist newcomers encountered when they arrived in Palestine necessitated the development of a way of thinking that was inherently different from the one they had brought with them from their countries of origin. Reacting to the power relations between their neighbours and themselves, the use of force came to play a central role. What began as a need was soon translated into an ideology, and the ability to defend the Jewish population by military means became part of the Zionist movement's goal of 'normalisation', a vital change that would turn the Jewish people into 'a nation like all the nations'.

As will be described in more detail below, violent confrontations between Jews and Arabs erupted every few years from the late 1920s to the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Israeli security outlook that attached so much importance to its military capabilities remained virtually unchallenged for all these years. However, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, several critical developments unfolded and matured in the late 1980s–early 1990s, resulting in changes so significant and potent that a re-examination

and reshaping of this outlook were called for. The first formal move in this direction by the Israeli side was made in 1991 with its participation in the Madrid Conference. The agreement of the Israelis (and, in fact, of the Arabs as well) to take part in this international peace conference was given reluctantly under tremendous American pressure.<sup>4</sup> Despite its immediate meagre results, this conference led to the opening of unprecedented direct negotiations between the protagonists in the Middle East conflict. Less than two years later, in the summer of 1993, the first Oslo Declaration of Principles was signed by Israel and the Palestinians. By doing so, the two principal sides in the conflict openly acknowledged – for the first time – the possibility of resolving their protracted hostilities by political rather than military means. This obviously necessitated a far-reaching transformation of both the strategic policy and the strongly rooted mind-set of each of the two sides.

And indeed, by signing the Oslo Accords, the Labour government, headed by Yitzhak Rabin, had to cross two very bright security-related red lines. The first was Israel's recognition of the Palestinians as legitimate partners for peace negotiations and, thereby, as a nation with a rightful claim to at least certain parts of the 'Land of Israel'. Second, and even more problematic in the eyes of many Israelis at that time, was the admission of a readiness to make considerable territorial compromises in return for peace – and not only with the Palestinians but also with Syria. Such compromises negated the long-held perception that territorial depth is the major strategic means for protecting Israel from the ever-present danger of being invaded and destroyed by the Arab states around it. The Israeli government's weighty undertaking was based on then Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres's conclusion that a peace agreement, even at the cost of far-reaching territorial concessions, would in the long run prove more effective than the greatest military strength and the most extensive strategic territorial depth in guaranteeing Israel's national security. Rabin and Peres translated this evaluation into Israel's new security policy.

The thrust of this chapter is that it was extremely difficult for large segments of the Israeli public to accept, promptly and without further ado, the rapid strategic transformation made by Prime Minister Rabin's government in 1993–95 – which history may well mark as both courageous and far-sighted. Characterised by a high level of interest in foreign and security matters, and embracing quite firm opinions in these realms, it is not surprising that the Israeli public did not automatically and immediately follow its leaders in this instance (Hermann and Yuchtman-Yaar 2000). Many Israelis hesitated then – and more than a few still balk today – at the very idea of abandoning the long-held security outlook that viewed ongoing conflict as the Middle East's 'state of nature', and of replacing it with what they considered a not yet proven set of assumptions about the Arab world's change of intentions along with insufficiently secured

guarantees for non-belligerency. In other words, the deeply rooted security-oriented national outlook – that was fostered prior to the 1990s by all Israeli governments and parties, Left and Right<sup>5</sup> (except perhaps for the Communist party and the tiny peace movement) – boomeranged and impeded for several years the mobilisation of broad enough public support within Israel for the government's new peace policy. The time-lag between the Rabin–Peres government's perceptual transformation and the broad public's recognition of the new reality contributed greatly to Peres's defeat and Netanyahu's victory in the 1996 elections, for Netanyahu had retained and proclaimed his view that relations between Israel and the Arab world were, and remained, fundamentally confrontational. However, the recent sweeping electoral victory of Ehud Barak of Labour in the 1999 national elections, after an intensive campaign in which he had stressed his commitment to a peace policy quite similar to that of the Rabin–Peres government, suggests that this gap has gradually closed, or at least considerably narrowed. It thus seems that in the second half of the 1990s a cognitive transformation in this direction has taken place in the Israeli public's perceptions.

### **Public opinion and foreign and security policy making**

In Chapter 1 it was argued that recent research has been very critical of the earlier 'Almond–Lippmann consensus' on the nature of public opinion on foreign and security policy matters and on its lack of impact on policy making. It has, rather, been demonstrated that public opinion tends to be both stable and consistent and, further, that it plays a role in the decision makers' calculations. It thus constitutes a force to be reckoned with in normative terms. Recent analyses have shown that governments and administrations do take public opinion into account when formulating foreign policy and that policy makers do not see themselves as the omnipotent trustees of the public good and, therefore, as exempt from taking into consideration their constituencies' preferences when shaping national policies (Wittkopf 1990). The acknowledgement of a two-way, bottom-up/top-down, flow of influence has contributed much to the disintegration of the wall separating foreign and security affairs from domestic influences. Today, more and more analysts admit that the old-fashioned foreign policy establishments are now outmoded; they have lost both their bearings and their sway and are more susceptible than ever to grassroots pressures and influence (Clough 1994).

An insufficient amount of attention, both theoretical and empirical, has been paid to the effects of stable and coherent public opinion on the official policy makers' ability to make strategic changes in a state's foreign and security policy. While in the revised theoretical analyses of the linkage between public attitudes and policy making, citizens' attitudinal stability

and coherence are viewed overall as a positive phenomenon, its potential to rigidify an existing outlook in an objectively changing environment has been largely ignored. It is suggested here then that the general public is more concerned than its leaders with, and averse to, the costs involved in a strategic transformation than with its potential gains. In this sense, therefore, under the conditions of a participatory democracy an involved and effective public may play a 'negative' role insofar as the transition from war to peace is concerned. The arguments presented here challenge then in a sense the prevalent assumption that 'domestic factors have "tamed" the aggressive impulses of many states [...] thus creating a disposition to see war as at best a necessary evil' (Jepperson *et al.* 1996: 36, footnote).

The potentially negative role of the public will be elaborated further in this chapter on the basis of the case of Israeli public opinion although, as argued in Chapter 1, the problem of reconstructing the pillars of a long-held national security doctrine in times of critical changes in the international environment is universal. It usually surfaces when the leaders of a nation realise that the external situation has changed to such an extent that the overall national security outlook should be revised, while the public, whose support for political changes has become more and more indispensable, is often slower to respond to the new realities.<sup>6</sup> The Israeli case study presented here – due to its unique location in a 'zone of turmoil', its clearly delineated time-frame and parameters of change and, in addition, the vast amount of available empirical evidence on the public's reactions to it – constitutes a good 'laboratory' in which to examine the process through which fundamental changes in the national security policy are generated and then accepted or rejected by the public, and to develop a sober assessment of the realistic prospects and time frameworks for such practical and cognitive changes to take root.

In order to meet these goals, this chapter will first discuss in brief the historical background to the development of the Israeli security outlook; second, it will analyse the basic characteristics of the Israeli mainstream's security outlook, including the use of force. Last but not least, we will try to assess, against this background, the extent to which Israeli public opinion on national security has constrained the policy makers' latitude of manoeuvre in either promoting or retreating from the peace process.

### **Israeli security outlook: a brief historical background**

It is almost a truism to state that a nation's security outlook is the product of its historical experience and operative context.<sup>7</sup> Yet, its historical background and operative context carry exceptional weight in the Israeli case because throughout the state's brief but eventful history there has been one over-arching issue: the persistent and often violent conflict with the countries surrounding it. Its history has thus provided Israeli society with

no other, more benign experience of neighbourly relations. Furthermore, it is only against this historical background that it is possible to get to the roots of the ostensible disparity between Israel's objectively superior military capabilities and achievements, on the one hand, and, on the other, the pervasive and ever-present sense of existential threat in the national security outlook. And indeed, as some outside observers have not fully contemplated the significance of this historical background, the centrality of the security issue has led them to maintain that both the Israeli public and the decision-making system are overly obsessed with it, and that this preoccupation frequently has little to do with the objective circumstances.

The first phase of the Israeli-Arab conflict relevant to this discussion began with a flow of Jewish immigrants to Palestine at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Although clearly propelled by the mounting anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, including a series of deadly pogroms, the strongest motivation to migrate to the Middle East was enthusiasm with the Zionist idea; national revival in the land of their forefathers was the vision around which the expanding Jewish-Zionist community in Palestine rallied from its earliest beginnings. This enthusiasm, typical of other national revival movements, led the Zionists, leadership and adherents alike, to be quite blind to the presence of another people on the same land, with its own deep sense of belonging to it.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish-Arab inter-communal conflict thus began virtually unnoticed by the Jewish side until the 1920s, and it continued to gain momentum with no preventive steps taken by anyone until it was too late and violence had already broken out. Great Britain's Balfour Declaration in 1917, which promised the Jewish people 'a national home', laid bare the conflictive nature of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine. It elucidated the fact that the Jewish community in Palestine, and the Zionist movement at large, had political aspirations, plans and interests, and that these were incompatible with those of the Arab inhabitants of the land. An even greater flow of Jewish immigrants, the emergence of a broad network of Jewish political and social institutions, massive purchases of Arab-owned lands by Jews, and the intensification of economic activities, from which the Arabs were often excluded, led to a series of violent Arab attacks on Jewish neighbourhoods, villages and towns in the late 1920s. The first Jewish self-defence units were formed as a result. Inattentive to the implications of their national revival endeavour for their Arab neighbours, the Jewish Zionist pioneers came to see themselves since then as the innocent victims of a groundless Arab hostility that forced them to resort to the use of arms against their will. This definition of the situation constituted the basis of the still prevalent Israeli 'defensive heroism'<sup>9</sup> myth, a perception that precludes the interpretation of any security-related move taken by Israel as aggressive in nature. This interpretation of their situation as innocent victims of Arab animosity was reinforced by the unmistakable demographic gap between the large Arab populace and the small Jewish community in

Palestine. Their different cultures, languages and religions constituted additional crucial negative inputs into what was already a rapidly deteriorating set of relations between Jews and Arabs. Although, already at that time, some small Jewish 'peace groups' emerged and tried to warn their fellow Jews of the negative consequences that would inevitably result from the inculcation of a zero-sum perception of the inter-communal relations, their ominous predictions fell on deaf ears (Hermann 1989).

The sense of being under a constant threat to their very existence, shared by all sectors of the Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*), was undoubtedly intensified in the late 1930s and early 1940s by the open support of several important Arab leaders for Nazi Germany. The virtual annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazis reinforced the pessimistic view that should the Arabs achieve military superiority, physical destruction could be the fate of the Jews in Palestine as well. When World War II ended, the British authorities attempted to mitigate the growing Jewish-Arab tensions in Palestine by preventing the entry of tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors into the country. This policy, as could be expected, evoked a very negative Jewish reaction and led, in the late 1940s, to the launching of a virtual armed national liberation struggle against the British authorities which ended in 1947 with United Nations resolutions to terminate the British Mandate to govern Palestine and to partition the country into two separate entities, Arab and Jewish.

The attack of the Arab countries surrounding the new State of Israel following its declaration of independence on 14 May 1948 led to a war which lasted until mid-1949, and ended only with the signing of ceasefire agreements negotiated by the UN. The Israeli-Arab negotiations of 1949-50 failed, however, to secure peace agreements. It is hardly surprising then that in the mid-1950s regional tensions increased again. Although Israel was now much stronger than it had been in 1948, the national feeling was one of political and military isolation, of having no dependable ally in the region or elsewhere (Israel's special relations with the US developed only after the 1967 War). The situation was exacerbated by the Soviet Union's massive supply of arms to Nasserist Egypt in the mid-1950s. The 'second round' of Israeli-Arab confrontation took place in 1956, when Israel co-operated with Britain and France in a tripartite attack on Egypt. Although Israel captured the entire Sinai Peninsula in this short campaign, it was unable to keep this territorial gain because of extreme pressure from the American administration, a stand that was taken as a further proof of indifference or even malevolence towards the Jewish State.

Almost eleven quite turbulent years passed until the third round of the Israeli-Arab military conflict erupted. Several weeks of mounting tension and intensive diplomatic activity in May 1967 preceded the Six-Day War. The UN's immediate compliance with the Egyptian order to evacuate its peacekeeping units from the area was taken by Israel as another indication of its international isolation, and public anxiety rocketed. The co-ordinated

Arab war preparations led the deeply worried leaders of Israel to launch pre-emptive strikes on the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. As is well known, this war ended with a stunning Israeli military victory, and with the West Bank, Sinai, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights in Israeli hands. Although most Israelis were euphoric following the relief and the territorial expansion this victory brought, the deepening conviction that the Arabs would never come to terms with Israel's existence and would always resort to the language of force mitigated their joy. This apprehension was strengthened by the bloody 1969-70 War of Attrition. Some individuals and groups disagreed with the general perception of the situation and suggested that Israel translate its victory into an attempt to convince the temporarily crushed Arab states to make peace. These voices, however, were limited, and they were not heeded. It took the shock of Syria's and Egypt's strategic surprise attack in 1973, to indicate that military superiority and territorial depth would not suffice to prevent deadly wars from breaking out. Although Israel emerged from this war victorious from the purely military point of view, its self-confidence was shattered. Arab confidence and pride, on the other hand, were restored, thus enabling a relative calm in the regional relations. The most visible turning point in this direction was the signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1979. The Israeli-Egyptian agreement would, finally, cast some doubt on the zero-sum definition of the overall Arab-Israeli situation. However, for almost fifteen years this course of rapprochement had no follow-up. Moreover, relations between Israel and Egypt did not then, nor later, transcend a state of 'absence of war only', and to this day remain at the level of a 'cold peace'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, no real motivation emerged to change the basic Israeli security view that military power plays a crucial, and perhaps the decisive role in the regional relations.

The next war broke out in mid-1982, with Israel's invasion of Lebanon. According to the government's pronouncements this incursion was meant only to destroy the growing Palestinian military presence in South Lebanon that imperilled the lives of Israeli civilians residing in the Galilee, the area bordering on Lebanon. However, this time the national interest in the planned use of military force was not manifestly evident, as it had been in the past, and for the first time in Israel's history the public did not 'rally 'round the flag' when the guns began to fire. The opposition to what many Israelis considered to be an unnecessary and even counter-productive war grew even more in late 1982 and 1983. In 1984-85, the government had to order the army to pull most of its forces out of Lebanon (although the last Israeli soldier left Lebanon only in June 2000). Since then, it has become quite clear that automatic public support for the security policies fostered by the Israeli government is no longer fully guaranteed.

The outbreak of the Palestinian uprising (the *Intifada*) in December 1987, which was met by a harsh Israeli response, and was followed by Palestinians' indiscriminate, often fatal, stonings of Israeli vehicles on the roads, and of

usually mortal knifings of Israeli civilians on the streets of Israeli towns and cities. These attacks had a strong but differential impact on the perceptions of many Israelis regarding the efficacy of the use of military force to guarantee national and individual security. While some concluded that force was the only way to deal with the *Intifada*, others reached the opposite conclusion: that the circle of violence must and could be stopped. The 1991 Gulf War, which proved that in the era of 'Star-Wars' weaponry even a strong military power such as Israel is incapable of protecting its citizens from an external attack, strengthened the realisation that there was a need for some modification in the national security agenda. This changing perception facilitated the launching of the Oslo Process in 1993, following which a reevaluation of the collective security outlook became clearly unavoidable.

### **The Israeli security agenda**

It is against this problematic historical background that the pre-eminence of foreign and security matters in the Israeli public discourse throughout the years must be understood. The security issue, including the question of when and how to use military force, has overshadowed almost all other concerns – social, political and economic.<sup>11</sup> Security matters, it should be emphasised, have been equally central to the agendas of both major political camps – the Right and the Left. Moreover, as will be shown below, the two camps have traditionally shared a number of core security concepts, a commonality that contributed to the formation of a highly homogenous national security consensus. The launching of the Oslo peace process, however, presented the participants in the public security debate with a new, unfamiliar situation, which in a sense was more problematic for many Israelis to deal with than the eruption of another armed confrontation. For the first time, the State of Israel was faced with a real alternative, and this necessitated an examination of certain core national security beliefs: whether to make peace, but at the price of painful territorial compromises and other significant security risks, or to go on dealing with the well-known external threats, perhaps as successfully as in the past but, due to the changes in the overall internal and external environment, possibly much less so. Paradoxically, it was those same changes in the environment that enabled the launching of the Oslo Process. The heated domestic debate generated by this dilemma splintered the national security consensus to the point of critical fragmentation, as was manifested by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November 1995 by an Israeli extremist of the Right. The attack was a misguided attempt to forestall what this assassin – and others with similar opinions – viewed as the inevitable catastrophe the government's peace-oriented policy would lead to.

The debate over the Oslo Process exposed the fact that Israeli public security outlook encompasses, at one and the same time, two different

security-belief structures. The first structure, created under the pressures and constraints of the ongoing violent Israeli-Arab conflict, and shared by almost all Israelis, of the Left and the Right, dominated Israel security thinking up to the launching of the Oslo Process and is still quite powerful today. It consists of the decades-old and slow-to-change core security beliefs (hereafter: strategic beliefs structure).<sup>12</sup> The distribution of most beliefs included in this structure usually takes a uni-polar shape.

The second security-belief structure, which has gained much greater saliency since the launching of the Oslo Process, is composed of more concrete beliefs (hereafter: operative beliefs structure). This structure reflects various possible solutions to the security dilemmas defined by the strategic beliefs structure. The beliefs included in this operative beliefs structure often take the form of a bi-polar distribution that epitomises the wide gap between the opinions of the parties and groups of the Left and those of the Right in Israel.

It is argued here that this disparity constitutes the major obstacle to the transformation of the public's collective war-oriented mentality into a peace-oriented mind-set. Together with the rapidly changing external circumstances, this perceptual disparity also severely reduced the pertinence of the highly consistent national security consensus that preceded Oslo. The discussion below follows the line of demarcation between the strategic beliefs structures and the operative beliefs structures and tries to bring to light the practical political implications of this division.

### ***The strategic beliefs structure***

The strategic beliefs structure relates to the basic 'rules of the game' in the international arena, and more specifically to Israel's position vis-à-vis the Arab world. In general, although most Israelis are not well versed in the concepts and discourse of international relations theory, by instinct nearly all of them are 'political realists'. As such, they regard the international and regional environments as basically confrontational in nature. The strategic beliefs structure is therefore not beneficial, by and large, insofar as the promotion of the peace process is concerned.

The core of Israeli thinking on national security matters is based on the asymmetry with the Arab world in terms of both population and territory, or as it is often perceived metaphorically, on the image of a tiny Jewish island in the midst of an Arab ocean. Israel's inferiority in both size and numbers created several strategic imperatives: to establish an accumulative deterrence, including the development of nuclear capabilities; to wage only short wars; to deliver the battle outside of Israeli territory; and to achieve a qualitative edge by developing high-technology weapons. Furthermore, under this framing of the situation, any step taken by Israel's neighbours is almost reflexively seen as offensive, whereas the military measures adopted by Israel are self-perceived as basically defensive. Thus,

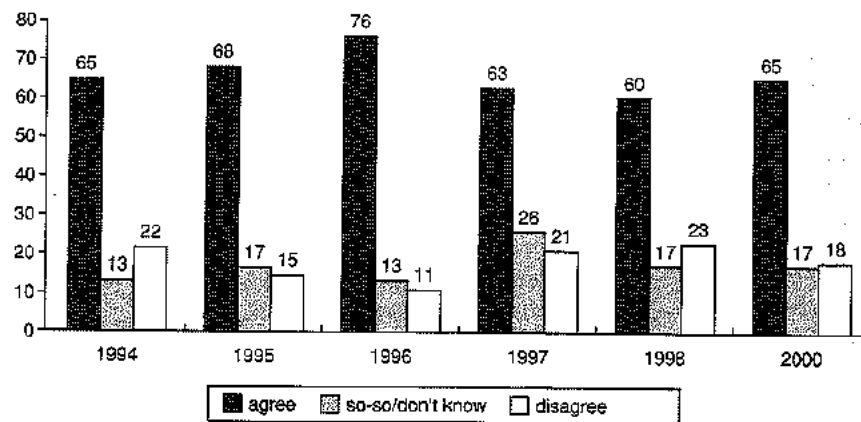


Figure 7.1 Distribution of answers to the question: 'Do you agree that most Arabs have not come to terms with Israel's existence and would destroy it if they could?' (in %).

almost every war in which Israel was involved, and even the 1967 War in which Israel struck the first blow, are seen from this perspective as 'wars of no choice'.<sup>13</sup> The name of Israel's army, 'Israel Defence Forces' (IDF), also reflects this perception.

While outsiders tend to see Israel as a regional middle-power with highly skilled and well-equipped military units, and with conventional and non-conventional capabilities, the prevalent self-perception is that of a 'nation that dwells alone' (or, in the words of a popular Israeli aphorism, 'the whole world is against us'). In fact, the events of the last hundred years in the Middle East are usually interpreted through the prism of the long Jewish history of persecution by the gentiles (Bar-Tal and Jacobson 1998: 27). All developments on the regional level are interpreted in the light of this view. For example, in the Middle East of the 1990s, two contending courses are seen: moderation and accommodation on one side, and extremism and fundamentalism on the other. Israeli thinking has considered the latter combination as a much more potent factor in a situation evaluated as particularly life-threatening to Israel, the only non-Islamic state in the region. As shown in Figure 7.1, even after the signing of the Oslo Accords most Israelis' assessments of the basic intentions of the Arabs are negative. Only a minority disagrees with the statement that the ultimate aim of the Arabs is to destroy Israel if they could.

These perceptions apparently account for another prevalent assessment i.e. that a 'New Middle East' is not going to prevail in the foreseeable future. As Figure 7.2 suggests, Israelis' scepticism in this regard has increased rather than decreased in recent years. While this can be attributed to the disappointment caused by the slowdown in the peace

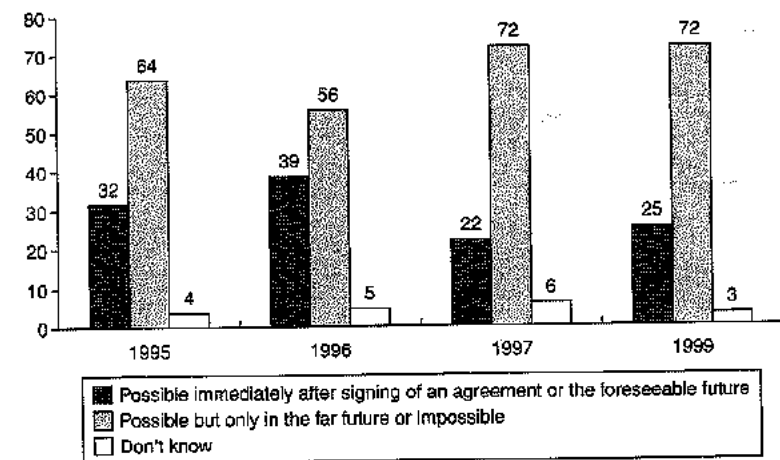


Figure 7.2 Distribution of answers to the question: 'Is it or is it not possible that, after peace agreements between Israel and all Arab countries are signed, a "New Middle East" is established?' (in %).

negotiations during Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister, it is probably influenced by other factors as well: recurrent Iraqi military threats; the thus-far 'cold peace' with Egypt; the frequent military encounters that take place in South Lebanon where the Hizbullah activities are clearly supported by Syria and Iran; and so on.

Ever-impending war is also a determining factor in Israeli security thinking. Even in 1995, when the peace process was making its most rapid progress, about 47 per cent of the Israelis maintained that should the peace process stop for some reason, a war between Israel and the Arab world would break out before long.<sup>14</sup> Only 27 per cent thought that a war scenario was unlikely to develop in the foreseeable future (the remainder had no clear opinion). In 1997, after almost a year of a virtual freeze in the peace process, the figures were not much different: 44 per cent assessed that war was likely to break out within a short time should the process stop, while 26 per cent believed that the chances of war were minimal.<sup>15</sup> In other words, with or without a forward-moving peace process many Israelis still perceive an imminent danger of war. It is not surprising then that the notion of a 'just war' is central to the Israeli security consensus and, as Table 7.1 shows, this includes more than an unequivocally defensive war, as shown by the following empirical findings of a public opinion survey (Arian 1997).

One of Israel's most closely kept secrets has to do with its nuclear military capability. Although the Israeli government has never acknowledged it, most experts – and apparently the majority of the Israeli public – are convinced that Israel has nuclear weapons. Thus, some surveys tried to ascertain the circumstances under which Israelis think that such weapons should be

Table 7.1 'Is it justifiable for Israel to initiate war in each of these situations?'  
(% saying 'yes')

In defence, to prevent the destruction of the country	94
To prevent or stop a war of attrition	72
To destroy terrorist infrastructure aimed at Israel	72
To prevent the enemy from taking over territories that Israel occupied in the past	68

developed and utilised, if they are indeed available. In 1998, 92 per cent believed that Israel should develop nuclear weapons, similar to 91 per cent in 1991 and over 87 per cent in 1987 (Arian 1998b: 31). In other words, support has grown along with the peace process, perhaps in reaction to the Iraqi missile attacks on Israel during the first and threats during the second Gulf crises as well as in response to the fears caused by the past and future territorial compromises prescribed by the peace process. Although there were significant fluctuations in the percentages of those justifying the use of nuclear weapons, it is quite clear that the great majority of the Israeli public considers the nuclear option a legitimate one. Furthermore, while in 1986 only 36 per cent recognised circumstances under which the use of nuclear weapons was permissible (e.g. in response to a nuclear, biological or chemical attack or in a desperate military situation), shortly after the Gulf War in 1991 this number increased dramatically, to 88 per cent. Since 1993 it has settled at about 65 per cent (Arian 1995: 70-1).

Moving from the level of national security to that of personal security, the signing of the documents that marked different stages of the peace process has not thus far improved significantly the feelings of most Israelis. Personal security is still assessed by the vast majority as a major cause of anxiety (Arian 1998a). The percentage of 'worried' or 'very worried' respondents was 85 per cent when first measured in January 1993, that is before the Oslo Process was launched, and this figure has decreased only slightly in the years 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997: 76, 85, 78 and 77 per cent respectively. The concern for personal security is clearly a sweeping one, and it crosses the lines between the major political camps. This is quite understandable in view of the considerable number of violent and very lethal attacks on civilians carried out since the peace talks were launched, by Palestinian organisations, mainly the Islamic Jihad and Hamas, both of which oppose the Oslo Process. This sense of insecurity goes hand in hand with the prevalent view that even the conclusion of peace agreements with all the Arab states and with the Palestinians will not put an end to Arab terrorism in the foreseeable future (see Figure 7.3).<sup>16</sup>

Such attacks were not a new phenomenon, but for several reasons Israelis viewed those carried out from the early 1990s onwards as being different from those of the 1960s and 1970s. First and foremost, they occurred against the background of the peace dialogue and not in the context of an ongoing armed conflict. Thus, public opinion surveys indicate that most

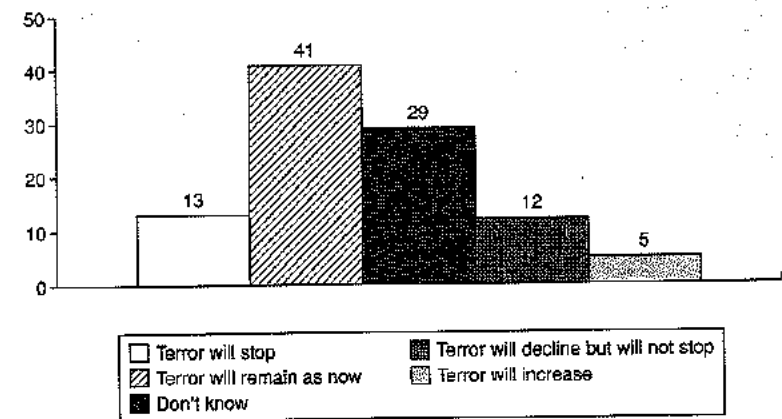


Figure 7.3 Distribution of answers to the question: 'In your opinion, how will Arab terror against Israeli targets be influenced by the signing of peace agreements between Israel and all Arab states and Palestinians?' (in %).

Israelis believe that a significant majority of Palestinians support violent attacks on Israeli civilians.<sup>17</sup> Second, the openly declared targets of these violent acts were Israeli citizens, regardless of their age, sex, political views or places of residence. Third, the number of casualties in these attacks was much higher after 1993 than in the past. And last but not least, most of them were carried out within the 'Green Line', that is, within the pre-1967 War borders of Israel, areas which are not negotiable even in the eyes of the strongest supporters of the peace process in Israel.

The concerns and perceptions described above explain why all means to prevent future terror attacks are seen as legitimate by most Israelis. These include, for example, the use of military force within the areas controlled by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), an action which clearly transgresses the norms of international law and halts, at least temporarily, all negotiations with the Palestinians.<sup>18</sup> These attitudes also explain why no real public opposition emerged in Israel when the systematic use of torture by Israel's security forces to extract terror-related information from Palestinian detainees was made public.

The psychological stress generated by the common belief in the ever-present danger of war and terrorist attacks is further aggravated by the difficulty most Israelis have in identifying a trustworthy external power able and willing to assume responsibility for the security of the country, a belief which in its turn has put self-reliance at the top of the scale of national security priorities. The United States is the only external actor that is recognised as Israel's ally. When asked in 1998, during a standstill in the peace process, whether they were for or against deeper involvement of various different countries, the West European countries, Egypt, or Russia in order

to push the process ahead, the number of those favouring such involvement was 77 per cent for the US, but only 43 per cent for West European countries, 37 per cent for Egypt, and 26 per cent for Russia. And yet, even the US is not considered unconditionally pro-Israeli: 50 per cent of the respondents in the same survey thought that the US is an impartial arbitrator in the Palestine-Israel peace negotiations, while 24 per cent, less than half, said that it is essentially pro-Israeli (20 per cent that it is more pro-Palestinian, and 6 per cent had no opinion).<sup>19</sup>

The constant sense of national and personal insecurity contributed to the development in Israel of a strongly positive and trusting attitude towards the military. Public opinion surveys have repeatedly shown that although, for various reasons, it has in recent years lost some of its past highly luminous aura (Poper 1998), the IDF is regularly rated higher on the public's confidence scale than Israel's various political institutions, religious bodies and the media. For example, in the summer of 1996, 77 per cent of the respondents in a public opinion survey expressed full confidence in the IDF, compared to 62 per cent who felt this way towards the High Court, 60 per cent towards the General Security Services (the *Shabak*) 46 per cent towards the police force, and 22 per cent towards both the Israeli Parliament (the *Knesset*), and the government. The media got 15 per cent and the political parties only 6 per cent.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the IDF has maintained a highly positive image in both major political camps. Paradoxically, even some peace activists base their political recommendations on their military experience.

The inevitable question that arises is: Does this belief structure make Israel a militaristic society? Certain critical historians and social scientists maintain that Israel is indeed at least a militarised, if not a militaristic society, and as such can move only very slowly from war to peace. In the eyes of these scholars the prevalent concept of 'a nation in uniform' is a manipulative notion that is used by the political and military elites to mobilise the Israeli Jewish population for war and for the fashioning of a reality that obfuscates the distinction between wartime and peacetime (Ben Eliezer 1995; Kimmerling 1993). However, mainstream historians and social scientists contend that Israeli society is not and has never been a militaristic one. It has never adopted a highly offensive security doctrine and an ethos that sustains policies that are substantially unrelated to the country's objective's strategic situation; neither war nor heroism were ever glorified; and the army has never been the supreme formative factor or regulator of social norms in the political, economic and the cultural realms (Lissak 1998). Moreover, in recent years, the civilian character of Israeli society, it is argued, has become even more strengthened: the share of the national budget dedicated to defence expenses has been reduced, the military-industrial complex has shrunk considerably, and anti-militarist and openly civil orientations have become much more prevalent at both the elite and the grassroots levels.

### *The operational beliefs structure*

As said before, while the distribution of attitudes on these strategic security beliefs is quite homogeneous (uni-polar), the distribution of the operative beliefs is fairly heterogeneous, indeed often bi-polar. The citizens of Israel are apparently divided in their assessments of the efficacy of political negotiations as compared with military means for enhancing national security. In a series of public opinion surveys seeking to ascertain Israeli preferences between peace talks and military strengthening in order to avoid war with the Arabs, a preference for peace talks was expressed in 1998 by only 54 per cent of the respondents (Arian 1998b: 16). It is interesting to note that prior to 1994 between two-thirds and three-quarters of the respondents consistently espoused peace negotiations. However, in 1994, with negotiations already under way, only 52 per cent chose peace talks, while in 1995 a small majority of respondents even preferred military capacity over peace talks. How can these changing proclivities be explained? First, it is possible that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the respondents' inclination towards the option of peace negotiations was influenced by their reaction of shock to the forcefulness of the Palestinian *Intifada*, which laid bare the ineptitude of the military in dealing with such under-conventional security threats. As the first startling impact of the *Intifada* diminished, and under the devastating impression of the Iraqi missile attacks on Israeli cities, the former predisposition towards the security policy of military strengthening re-emerged. Furthermore, the alternative of a negotiated peace, that looked so appealing to many Israelis when viewed on a theoretical level in the late 1980s, seemed considerably less attractive when the complex realities and practical costs began to become visible in the 1990s.

A similar division in opinions emerges when one examines the public's views on how Israel should react to Palestinian terror attacks. While around 60 per cent believed that a long-range solution was attainable only through negotiations with the Palestinians, about 40 per cent thought that such negotiations were bound to cease immediately with any instance of a Palestinian terror attack (Arian 1997: 5). A similar even division of opinions was found in the respondents' answers to the question of whether the peace process should be halted if Arafat unilaterally declared the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.<sup>21</sup>

This leads us to the next and perhaps most cardinal operative policy on which Israeli public opinion is presently divided: the Oslo Process. Several studies have correctly indicated that, when the 1970s or the 1980s are taken as the point of departure, a significant downtrend can be observed in the formerly widespread opposition in Israel to territorial compromises in return for peace, as well as a decline in the past unwillingness to recognise Palestinian national rights and the PLO as a legitimate partner for peace negotiations (e.g. Shamir and Shamir 1993). However, when the data



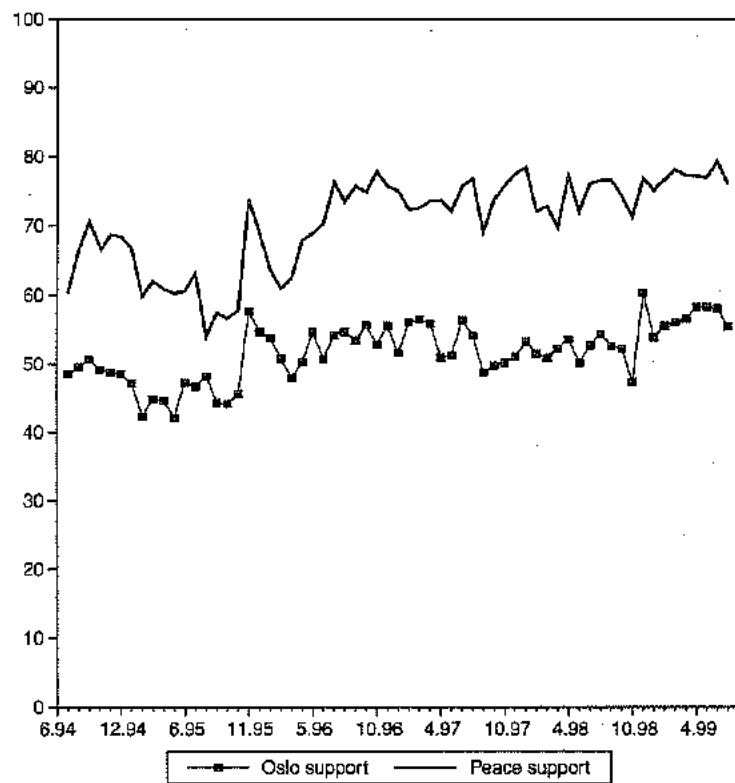


Figure 7.4 Scores of peace support and of Oslo support (monthly averages: June 1994–April 1999).

gathered after the peace process with the Palestinians was launched in the early 1990s are examined, a different picture emerges. The stability of the division between supporters of the process and those who oppose it or are undecided is quite indicative. Although it can be stated that the Israeli public is generally slightly more supportive of the Oslo Process than against it (the average support for the Oslo Process between mid-1994 and early 1999 was 52 points on a scale of 0–100),<sup>22</sup> it is also obvious that many Israelis have not yet come to terms with it. The average scores of the level of support for the Oslo Process, as measured monthly between June 1994 and April 1999, are presented in Figure 7.4. The upper line on the graph represents the monthly averages of support for the 'Middle East regional peace process', which, due to its greater ambiguity, gets higher levels of support.

Figure 7.4 suggests that Israeli public opinion in this respect is fairly stable in both structure and content. Neither the ups and downs in the negotiations in the years 1993–95 nor the prolonged standstill since mid-1996 seem to have significantly affected the basic structure of Israeli attitudes.

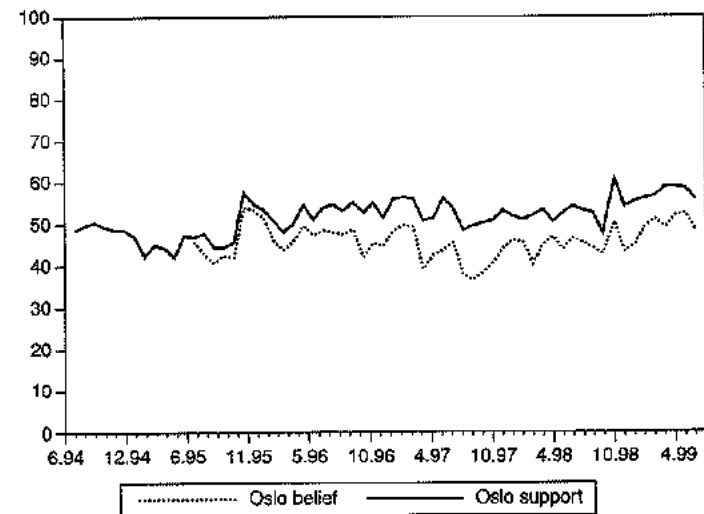


Figure 7.5 Oslo belief and Oslo support (monthly averages: June 1994–April 1999).

The impact of several lethal terror attacks has also proved to be short-lived as far as attitudes towards the process are concerned.<sup>23</sup> The *Peace Index* surveys also indicate that the number of those who 'strongly support' the Oslo Process is in most cases considerably lower than those who only 'fairly support' it, while the number of those who 'strongly oppose' the process outnumber those who only 'fairly oppose' it. Furthermore, a striking incongruity between the two security beliefs structures is revealed among the supporters of the Oslo Process. When the two issues are cross-tabulated it appears that a noticeable number of the supporters of Oslo believe that most Arabs have not abandoned their fundamental desire to destroy Israel. (No such incongruity complicates the opposition to the peace process; the strategic belief regarding the Arabs' basic hostility towards Israel goes hand in hand with opposition to the peace process.) Another and perhaps stronger indication of the incongruity between the two security beliefs structures is manifested in the different levels of support for the Oslo Process on the one hand and the levels of belief in the prospect of its bearing fruit in the foreseeable future on the other, as shown in Figure 7.5. The level of support is noticeably and constantly higher than the belief in the feasibility of the process (average support –52 points; average belief –45.2). In other words, it is not unusual to find Israelis who support the Oslo Process but who are also fairly or very pessimistic about its results.

The fragmented operative belief structure has other dimensions as well. The pattern of an even division is seen, for example, in Israeli attitudes towards territorial compromises. The number of those preferring 'absolutely no return' reached 44 per cent in 1998, after it was already as low as

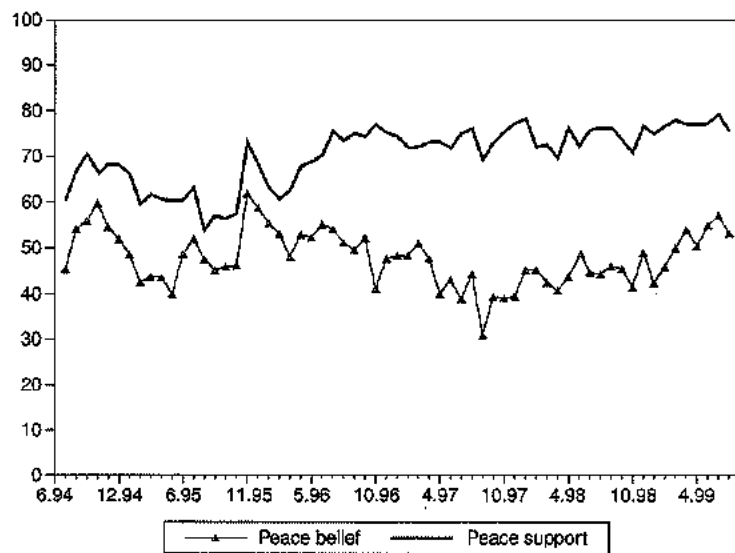


Figure 7.6 Monthly scores of peace support vs. peace belief (June 1994–April 1999).

31 per cent in 1997. This was paralleled by a sharp drop in the number of those who thought that Israel should return at least parts of the Golan Heights to Syria, from 66 per cent in 1997 and 61 per cent in 1995, to 48 per cent in 1998 (Arian 1998b: 30).

It should be noted, however, that a uni-polar shape of distribution also characterises certain attitudes, which are part of the operative belief structure. Yet, these consensual operative beliefs are often non-conductive to peace building. Perhaps the most notable example of this is how Israelis view the functionality of Israeli–Palestinian physical separation. Because their dread of terrorist attacks and the mistrust of Palestinian intentions are so great, the vast majority of Israelis would like to see the two peoples separated by a closed and clearly demarcated border, even if and when a peace agreement is reached. The figures of those favouring such a physical separation have hardly changed over the years, with 83 per cent favouring such separation in 1999.<sup>24</sup>

### Moving away from war?

Against the historical background outlined above, and in the perspective that the analysis of the Israeli security agenda hopefully provides, an interim assessment of the developments in the Israeli security outlook since the signing of the Oslo Agreements seems both possible and in place. This in turn may constitute something of an answer to the question of whether

there are any signs of an Israeli collective movement from a war mentality to a peace mentality. And, if so, what does this imply in terms of the political leaders' latitude of manoeuvre?

Since 1993 the Israeli–Arab conflict has been managed, by and large, in non-violent or sub-violent ways. However, security has not ceased to be a major issue on Israel's national agenda. As of mid-1999 Israel still faced a broad range of security concerns that separately and together contribute to its citizens' unabated sense of vulnerability: the Southern Lebanon impasse, the untiring efforts of Iran to attain a nuclear capability, open Iraqi hostility, and so on (Bar-Tal and Jacobson 1998: 30). Although perhaps a cause-and-effect cycle in certain respects, Israelis' strong sense of threat remained undiminished, as reflected in the strategic security beliefs structure discussed above, and national attitudes towards the external environment have therefore remained highly distrustful. As a result, and despite the dramatic change in relations with the Arab world arising from the Oslo Process, the assessed functionality of the military option did not decline significantly.

Admittedly, the imperative, following the launching of the Oslo Process, to transform their modes of thinking into terms of mutual or co-operative security instead of national security was a quite difficult challenge for Israelis, leaders and rank and file alike. It is very difficult, for example, to adhere to the requirement of the peace process to de-emphasise the traditional strategy of deterrence and pre-emption, which the Arab states perceived as constituting a permanent existential threat. Greater transparency regarding military capabilities and manoeuvres was also very difficult to adopt, although it is clearly essential as a confidence building measure with Israel's Arab partners in the peace dialogue. The hesitancy in making the strategic shift required by the Oslo Process as a step along the way to a permanent status agreement was intensified by the prevalent view in Israel that the Arabs' readiness to sit at the negotiation table was the successful result of the traditional, deterrence-based security strategy, which for years had enabled the country to overcome many of the negative aspects of its threatening environment.

The desire to live in peace on the one hand, and the fear that the compromises required by the Oslo Process could prove to be disastrous on the other, a fear rooted in the belief that the Arabs continue to have hostile intentions towards Israel, have created the incongruity of two security beliefs structures. In retrospect it would seem that the early 1990s indeed did not provide incontestable indications that the old, zero-sum-based security agenda was losing its relevance. This, at least, is one explanation for the deepening of the polarisation in the attitudes manifested in the operative beliefs structure regarding the concrete measures necessary for dealing with the Israeli–Arab conflict, and in particular the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, during this period. This polarisation left many Israelis not only quite bewildered, but also even resentful of any policy changes that could further aggravate this disturbing cognitive dissonance.

The highly visible and unmitigated distancing from the deeply-rooted zero-sum definition of the situation, which the Rabin government's innovative peace policy of 1993-96 entailed, needed more than a few months or even a year or two for the Israeli public to resolve. Israelis, however, were not allowed much time to internalise the new, non-confrontational definition of the situation, mainly because the successive Oslo Accords signed by the leaders determined that the first moves towards implementation, for example, the redeployment of the IDF forces in the occupied territories, would take place within a few months and the final ones in less than five years.

The pressure to act with considerable haste came not only from the outside, that is, from the American administration and Arab partners to the negotiations, but from some domestic imperatives as well. These had to do with the democratic electoral cycle.<sup>25</sup> Although the public clearly still needed time to adjust to the new reality, the Labour leaders had to produce some tangible results before the 1996 elections. Having to make a decision about priorities, however, they invested more efforts in the negotiations with the Palestinians and failed to deal with the problem of the attitudes of Israelis at home. They hardly addressed or tried to alleviate the fears of those opposed to the peace process, and to win their support. Instead, they denounced the opposition of the Right as irrational and fanatic. Thus, the small gap between the two roughly equal political camps widened, leaving the Labour leaders preaching to the converted half of the population, and the other half believing that their security concerns were being virtually sacrificed for a worthless piece of paper. At this point, more than ever, the use of force appeared to constitute in the eyes of some Israelis the means of avoiding a national catastrophe, as manifested by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. The recognition of the functionality of the use of force was observed mainly among those opposed to the peace process, but it could be noticed in the pro-peace camp as well: for example, when the Labour government launched the 'Grapes of Wrath' operation against Lebanon in April 1996, the pro-peace camp hardly protested.

The results of the 1996 elections suggest that a large part of the Israeli public accepted the Right's contention that the Labour government was buying peace from the Palestinians too quickly and at too high a price. As a result, Netanyahu, the right-wing Likud candidate who promised the voters 'Peace and Security', clearly part of an ongoing process of social construction of the security-threat, defeated (albeit narrowly) the incumbent Peres, the Labour candidate who promised a 'New Middle East'. However, with the decrease in the frequency and fatality of Palestinian terrorist attacks in the mid-1990s, and with the gradual realisation that the entire peace process was in danger of collapsing under the leadership of Netanyahu, whose unconcealed resentment and distrust of the Arabs were growing in the eyes of many observers, a swing back to the non-military option reap-

peared. In the second half of the 1990s the advantages of political solutions to the basic security problems have apparently become more evident to wider public sectors within Israel than ever before. Regardless of the standstill at the decision makers' level between June 1995 and May 1999 when Netanyahu was in power, there were some significant indications that Israelis' security-beliefs structures have been undergoing a major change.

It seems that a new and presently still nebulous assemblage of security beliefs has begun to emerge in Israel. This, for the time being is not much more than a 'public mood', and it is apparently the outcome of the Israeli public's cognitive effort to deal with numerous antithetical considerations: a strong desire for peace on the one hand and apprehension of the security risks it entails on the other; the realisation that although the intentions of the Arabs may still be hostile, it is they with whom peace must, at some point, be made; a strong attachment to and longing for the land of their forefathers and the realisation that parts of it must be given up in return for peace; the sense that territorial depth is essential to forestall any future surprise attack and the realisation that further territorial compromises, harmless or fraught with danger in terms of national security, are about to be made in the future because of external pressures or due to various legal obligations that Israel must fulfil, and so on.

The new 'mood' was translated into practice in the election of Ehud Barak as Prime Minister in May 1999. Formerly a bright military commander (like Rabin before him), Barak was elected on the basis of his advocacy of the peace process, undoubtedly a reflection of the Israeli public's accumulated fatigue from continuous engagements in military confrontations that seem to have no clear security benefits.

At the time of writing this chapter, about three months after the 1999 elections, the public political discourse in Israel is relatively sedate. This is probably because the peace/security agenda of the recently elected government is not yet quite clear and because the Right has not recovered thus far from the still fresh memory of its electoral defeat. It seems that the victory of Ehud Barak over Benjamin Netanyahu indeed indicated widespread readiness among the Israeli public to move ahead with the peace option and away from war. However, not at all costs. As was shown above, security considerations are no less dominant in the agenda of the incumbent government than they were in that of the former, and the public is far from turning pacifist.

Are there any general conclusions to be learned from this case? First, it substantiates the model, first presented by Galtung, which predicted that the political periphery is often much slower than the political centre in replacing a war mind-set by a peace mentality (Galtung 1964). Second, it points to the perhaps unbridgeable gap between the need of politicians in democratic systems to react quickly to a changing environment (and to produce quick dividends in order to be relocated) and the much longer time needed for the public to build some confidence in its former enemies

before sweeping changes are undertaken. Last but not least, it seems to prove the contested assumption that, today, the political top echelons and the rank and file no longer operate independently, and that the public, even if relatively less informed and less sophisticated politically than the decision makers, has indeed gained significant influence over matters of 'high politics' in general and in matters of foreign policy matters in particular.

## Notes

- 1 The Arab-Israeli conflict has been the subject of political and academic interest throughout the world for the past four or five decades. Bernard Reich correctly observes that the bibliography alone of the vast literature written about this conflict would fill several volumes (Reich 1996: 629).
- 2 For a discussion of this Jewish cultural trait see Breur (1978).
- 3 The single, though very important exception being the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty in 1979.
- 4 In fact, even after Madrid, the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Sharnir, was not convinced that the basically hostile intentions of the Arabs towards Israel had changed in any meaningful way. Thus, in a meeting with the press one year after Madrid, he summarised his view of the then-current situation compared to the pre-Madrid era by saying: 'Well, the sea is the same sea and the Arabs are the same Arabs', meaning that he saw no reason to replace the assumption of an existential threat that was the underlying principle of Israel's strategic outlook.
- 5 It should be noted that unlike the case in Europe, in Israel the Left-Right dichotomy refers not to differences in the two political camps' socio-economic agendas but mainly to their two antithetical security outlooks: the former, held by the left, considers the Israeli-Arab conflict solvable and therefore advocates the 'land for peace' formula, while the latter sees the conflict as basically zero-sum and hence opposes the making of significant territorial concessions by Israel, as these are taken to be highly risky.
- 6 Thus, as Alexander George (1980) skilfully demonstrated, in the early 1940s it took the shock of Pearl Harbor to enable President Franklin Roosevelt to convince the American nation that the US should revoke its isolationist policy and join the anti-German coalition, together with its formerly most frightening ideological rival, the Soviet Union. Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, on the other hand, found it equally difficult in the late 1940s and early 1950s to change this policy of co-operation again, and persuade the Americans of the need to withdraw from Roosevelt's friendly alliance with the USSR and support his Containment Doctrine. For an updated analysis of the perceptual gaps between the leaders and the general public see Page and Banabas (2000).
- 7 For the major significance of the environment to the state's identity see Jepperson *et al.* (1996).
- 8 This reading of the situation is suggested by the 'New Historians' school. For such a view see, e.g. Pappé (1995). A sharp criticism of the 'New Historians' school can be found in Karsh (1997).
- 9 For a detailed analysis of this myth see Shapira (1992).
- 10 In a public opinion survey conducted in January 1999, twenty years after the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, the average mark given to Egypt by a representative sample of Israeli Jews aged 18 and above between 1 (full ally)

- and 5 (enemy) was 2.8 (*Peace Index*, January 1999). The findings of all surveys conducted since June 1994 in the framework of the Peace Index Project, headed by Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Dr Tamar Hermann, of the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University, can be found at <http://www.tau.ac.il/peace>, or requested by email from [steinmet@ccsg.tau.ac](mailto:steinmet@ccsg.tau.ac). The samples include 500 interviewees each and represent the adult Jewish population of Israel. The questions cited here were originally presented in Hebrew.
- 11 For a multi-faceted analysis of the influence of security concerns on Israeli political, social and cultural functioning see Bar Tal *et al.* (1998).
  - 12 Security beliefs or, rather, insecurity beliefs, are often defined as: 'an appraisal of a perceived danger in the environment by which a person feels threatened. [...] People form beliefs about being secure when they do not perceive threats or dangers, or even when they perceive threats or dangers but ones that can be overcome by them or coped with successfully' (Bar-Tal and Jacobson 1998: 21).
  - 13 It should be mentioned here that, along the line of their overall criticism of the Zionist endeavour, which they consider colonialist, the New Historians challenge this common perception as well, and maintain that no war was really a 'no choice' one from the Israeli perspective.
  - 14 *Peace Index*, March 1995.
  - 15 *Peace Index*, March 1997.
  - 16 *Peace Index*, August 1997.
  - 17 See, for example, *Peace Index*, April 1997.
  - 18 *Peace Index*, September 1994.
  - 19 *Peace Index*, May 1998.
  - 20 *Peace Index*, July 1996, January 1997.
  - 21 *Peace Index*, March 1999.
  - 22 The support for peace with Syria in return for full Israel withdrawal from the Golan Heights is even lower, around 35 per cent. For a more detailed analysis of Israelis' perceptions of the unfolding peace process based on the *Peace Index* findings, see, e.g. Hermann and Yuchtman-Yaar (1997).
  - 23 In fact, only one significant change occurred between the end of October and early November 1995, when, following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November, support for the Oslo Process rose by almost 12 points (from 46.0 to 57.9). However, as can be seen in Figure 7.4, this noticeable impact dissipated within a few months, although support for the Oslo Processes has never returned to its low pre-murder levels. *Peace Index*, 8 November 1995.
  - 24 *Peace Index*, February 1999.
  - 25 On the issue of time as a factor in democratic functioning see Linz (1998).