

Peace Index: February 2008

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Although the Jewish public is divided on how to react to the missile fire in the south, it prefers military means over a ceasefire based on dialogue with Hamas. An overwhelming majority of the Jewish public thinks that under current conditions, Israel should not agree to Hamas's offer of a ceasefire in return for Israel stopping its attacks in the Gaza Strip and its operations against Hamas members in the West Bank. The majority also rejects the idea of reaching a ceasefire with Hamas until Israel has effective weapons against missiles, instead favoring the opposite idea of acting immediately to halt the suffering of the southern residents and the damages from the missile attacks. As for preferred solutions: only a small minority of less than one-fifth believes negotiations with Hamas provide the best possibility of preventing further missile fire, and a negligible proportion favors a policy of relative restraint like the one that prevailed until the IDF's recent offensive. The highest preference, held by about one-third of the public, is for limited military operations after which the IDF would exit Gaza. In second place is reoccupying all of Gaza, which about one-quarter of the public supports.

In the domestic sphere, a majority of the public thinks that because of the southern communities' remoteness from the center of the country, the government is not according enough urgency to their security problems. However, the public is self-critical to almost the same extent, a majority agreeing that these communities' remoteness from the center also negatively affects the citizenry's degree of interest in their problems. At the same time, the overwhelming majority does not agree that the residents of "the state of Tel Aviv"—a term the media uses to describe those in the center of the country—do not identify with the southern residents' suffering and are less patriotic than those in other parts of the country. Furthermore, a very high proportion of the public is prepared to contribute personally to helping the southern residents in various practical ways, including hosting families for an extended period,

making purchases in the area under attack, and contributing to social organizations that assist these residents. However, only a minority is prepared to contribute via a tax increase for funding physical protection and the like—possibly because the public believes that civilian organizations will use monies more properly than the government.

Finally, it appears that the ongoing missile fire on Israel is not affecting the “national fortitude,” at least insofar as the Jewish public continues to want to live in Israel. If the missile fire has any influence in this regard, it tends more to strengthen the willingness to remain here than to weaken it. At the same time, about half the public now favors a national unity government in the belief that it would cope better with the situation, while about one-third are prepared to rely on the present government.

Those are the main findings of the Peace Index for February 2008, according to the survey conducted on 3-4 March.

Given the worsening missile fire on the southern residents, we checked what response the public sees as most suitable under the current circumstances. First, a clear majority—71%—says Israel should not accept Hamas’s offer to stop the fire in return for Israel ceasing its attacks in Gaza and its pursuit of Hamas leaders. However, the public is divided as to whether Hamas is escalating the fire so as to drag Israel into a large-scale operation that will get it militarily and politically entangled and intensify internal dissension—so that Israel should resist the temptation. Forty-three percent hold that view while 46% reject it.

What response, then, does the public see as most suitable? Although it does not overwhelming favor any one approach, the clear winner is a military operation that should preferably be limited. Whereas only 4% support the ongoing policy of restraint and 17% favor negotiating a ceasefire with Hamas, about one-quarter (26%) call for reoccupying Gaza and staying there for an unlimited time, while one-third want a limited military operation in Gaza after which the IDF would depart. As for the timing

of the response: only a small minority—17%—think Israel should work out a ceasefire with Hamas until it has effective technological means against the missile fire. An overwhelming majority of 75% reject waiting until such means are developed and instead favor acting immediately to halt the ongoing suffering of the southern residents and damages from the missile fire.

Note that there are clear disparities here based on voting in the most recent Knesset elections. For example, whereas 44% of Meretz voters and 40% of Labor voters are prepared to conduct ceasefire negotiations with Hamas, only 21% of Kadima voters, 20% of Likud voters, 10.5% of Shas voters, and 0% of National Religious Party-National Union voters would do so. Conversely, regarding a long-term reoccupation of Gaza, 45.5% of National Religious Party-National Union voters are in favor along with 32% of Likud voters and 31% of Shas voters, compared to only 6% of Meretz voters and 8% of Labor voters. Interestingly, though, just as there is no decisive majority of left-wing voters supporting negotiations with Hamas, no decisive majority of right-wing voters wants to reoccupy Gaza.

Recently a persistent question has been whether Israel's response to the ongoing missile attacks is related to the fact that those on the receiving end are peripheral communities of the south. It turns out that a majority—56%—indeed thinks the government fails to assign supreme urgency to tending to these communities' security problems because of their remoteness from the central region, and would not practice restraint to the same extent if the center of the country was under attack. Only a minority of 37% disagrees. However, the public also shows an impressive degree of self-criticism on this issue, though with a smaller gap between agreement and disagreement: 51% assented that the citizenry is less interested in the southern residents' security problems because of their remoteness from the center while 42% dissented.

In this context we checked attitudes toward the phenomenon known as “the state of Tel Aviv.” We asked: “Recently various public figures and the media have used the

term ‘the state of Tel Aviv’ to describe those living in the center of the country, as opposed to those living in the southern or northern periphery. Those who use this term charge the residents of ‘the state of Tel Aviv’ with a lack of interest in the suffering of those in the periphery. Do you agree or disagree with this view?” It turns out that the public has not been swept away by the accusations against “the state of Tel Aviv.” A majority of 55% denied that the residents of the center are uninterested in the suffering of the south, while 38% said they were. An even larger majority of 64% rejected the claim that those in “the state of Tel Aviv” are less patriotic Israelis than those in other parts of the country (38% agreed and the rest had no clear opinion on the matter).

As for the “the state of Tel Aviv’s” identification with the southern residents’ suffering, there are clear disparities between voters for the different parties. Whereas only 26.5% of Labor voters and 28% of Kadima voters agree that the “state of Tel Aviv” residents do not identify with this suffering, 63% of Shas voters and 43% of National Religious Party-National Union voters accept that claim. Similarly regarding the patriotism of those in “the state of Tel Aviv,” while 75.5% of Labor voters, 78% of Kadima voters, and 73% of Meretz voters deny that they are less patriotic, among the right-wing and religious parties the rates are lower: 56% of Likud voters, 48% of National Religious Party-National Union voters, and 46% of Shas voters.

Willingness to personally assist the southern residents is high at least on the declarative level, though not without restrictions. Over two-thirds—67%—are prepared to host people from the hard-hit south in their homes, 63% are prepared to travel there and make purchases to help the residents economically, and 70% are ready to contribute to social organizations that assist the southern residents. However, apparently within the context of lack of trust in the state, 49% are against paying more taxes to finance physical protection and the like, while a minority of 44% are willing.

To what extent do the escalating security problems make citizens want to move to other places? A majority of 55% say the rocket attacks do not affect their desire to

keep living in Israel, one-quarter say they only strengthen that desire, while for 18% the attacks increase their desire to live elsewhere.

To the question: given the political and security situation, do you favor establishing a national unity government or relying on the current government?—a majority of 51% responded that a national unity government is preferable while 30% are prepared to rely on the current one. Compared to previous instances when this question was posed over the years, the present rate of supporters of a national unity government is among the lowest.

Indexes:

Oslo Index, entire sample: 30.1; Jewish sample: 26.7

Negotiation Index, entire sample: 44.1; Jewish sample: 40.3

The Peace Index Project is conducted at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Evens Program in Mediation and Conflict Resolution of Tel Aviv University, headed by Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Prof. Tamar Hermann. The telephone interviews were conducted by the B. I. Cohen Institute of Tel Aviv University on 3-4 March 2008 and included 590 interviewees who represent the adult Jewish and Arab population of Israel (including the territories and the kibbutzim). The sampling error for a sample of this size is 4.5%.