



Analysis of Current Israeli and Palestinian Public Opinion Regarding the Two-State Solution

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the cause-and-effect relationship between public opinion and progress towards the Two-State Solution by analysing recent Israeli and Palestinian public opinion data. This paper differentiates between theoretical support for the Two-State Solution, practical support for a comprehensive agreement, and support for the specific components of such an agreement. The analysis sheds light on crucial aspects of negotiations towards a Two-State Solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including the role of political leadership, the red-lines of public opinion, and the limited benefits of ‘packaging’ an agreement. Finally, two possible avenues for progress are shortly presented, one relating to mutual recognition and the other to freedom of movement.

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Introduction

2014 saw the failure of yet another attempt at reaching an Israeli–Palestinian final-status agreement. The US-brokered 2013–2014 round of negotiations was the third major attempt, following the Camp David–Taba process in 2000–2001 and the Annapolis process of 2007–2008.¹ All of these negotiations were all-or-nothing attempts to resolve the conflict. The 2013–2014 official negotiations track was given a nine-month period with the goal of reaching a comprehensive agreement on core issues. In reality, however, rather than engaging the core issues, the sides quickly moved to negotiating a framework agreement, and then to negotiating the extension of the negotiation-period itself.^{2 3 4}

There are two main arguments in support of all-or-nothing negotiations. The first relates to trade-offs between different components of any given deal: each side might concede more on topic A in order to gain more on topic B. Therefore, negotiators are unable or unwilling to deal with topics separately, since progress on one dimension is related to progress on others. The second reason is the lack of mutual trust, which leads to suspicion towards an incremental process, as gradual steps always appear to work to the benefit of one party over the other.⁵ Politically speaking, gradual measures are very unpopular in the court of public opinion, and any concession “can and will be picked apart by opponents on all sides in the absence of a detailed finalized agreement”.⁶

The underlying assumption of the all-or-nothing approach is that a comprehensive deal will be more acceptable to the public due to the ability to ‘package’ such a deal in a way that emphasises gains. According to Goldenberg, in order to get Israelis and Palestinians to accept any possible agreement we must present them with “a packaged final agreement that involves sacrifices for all sides on the key final status issues and – most importantly [...] that the other

1 Others might present a different number of ‘rounds’. I’m following the counting provided (separately) in the public accounts provided by Michael Herzog and Ilan Goldenberg. Ilan Goldenberg, ‘Lessons from the 2013–2014 Israeli–Palestinian Final Status Negotiations’, Center for New American Security, March 2015; Michael Herzog, ‘Inside the Black Box of Israeli–Palestinian Talks’, The American Interest, February 27th 2017.

2 According to Goldenberg, the Americans realised as early as December 2014 that a permanent status agreement was unattainable in the agreed period, and shifted towards negotiating a framework agreement.

3 According to Herzog, the last two months in the nine-month period were dedicated to talks about extending negotiations. Israel insisted that it will release the 4th tranche of Palestinian prisoners only in context of extending negotiations, while the Palestinians demanded a settlement freeze in order to justify the extension.

4 Former Secretary of State John Kerry echoed this sentiment, noting that “the bitter irony is that at this particular moment this fight is over process. It’s not over the substance of a final status agreement, it’s over how you get to a discussion of a final status agreement”. United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, hearing on National Security and Foreign Policy Priorities in the FY 2015 International Affairs Budget, 113th Congress (April 8th 2014) (Testimony of John Kerry).

5 A problem known in International Relations as ‘relative gains’. In contrast to ‘absolute gains’, ‘relative gains’ thinking consist of judging your own gains solely in relation to those made by your adversary; the important factor is not ‘what did I gain?’ but rather ‘did my adversary gain more than I did?’.

6 Goldenberg, March 2015.

side has already agreed to”.⁷ The logic being that the parties might not be over-excited about some components of the deal, and even outright hate parts of it, but they will be willing to accept some difficult concessions in order to achieve their main goals and protect their core interests. Thus, the common notion about a comprehensive peace deal is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

A main problem of the all-or-nothing approach is that repeated rounds of negotiations fail to build enough (or indeed, any) trust between the sides over time. All-or-nothing negotiations are uniquely vulnerable to the inherent problem that ‘nothing’ happens more often than ‘all’ (as the saying goes, negotiations only need to succeed once). This means that in spite of what John Kerry called “a narrowing of differences”⁸ inside the negotiations, the public sees repeated attempts as repeated failures, and reacts accordingly. Thus, failed attempts might actually weaken public support for substantive negotiations by fostering a ‘no partner’ sentiment, rendering a peaceful resolution even less likely. Without public support for bold moves, a comprehensive agreement will continue to be elusive.

This paper seeks to explore the cause-and-effect relationship between public opinion and progress towards the Two-State Solution by analysing recent Israeli and Palestinian public opinion data. This paper differentiates between theoretical support for the Two-State Solution, practical support for a comprehensive agreement, and support for the specific components of such an agreement. The data sheds light on crucial aspects of negotiations towards a Two-State Solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including the role of political leadership, the red-lines of public opinion, and the limited benefits of ‘packaging’ an agreement. Finally, two possible avenues for progress are briefly presented, one relating to mutual recognition and the other to freedom of movement.

Background: Conflict, Negotiations and Public Opinion

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is often regarded as a single problem with a single solution, solvable through a single comprehensive agreement achieved in a relatively short round of negotiations or even a single summit. Despite widespread apprehension of US President Donald Trump’s ‘good deal’ rhetoric,⁹ it essentially follows similar logic to those of previous American administrations. Since the beginning of the Peace Process era in the early 1990s, and especially after the 2000 Camp David summit and the presentation of the Clinton Parameters, the Two-State Solution has been widely accepted by the main local and international actors as the end-goal of negotiations; the ultimate deal to be sealed.

However, an alien observer would be surprised to learn that long after the Two-State Solution became the official public position of both Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), as well as the relevant international actors, there has been precious little progress

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hearing of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, April 8th 2014.

⁹ On November 11th, shortly after winning the presidential elections, Trump told the Wall Street Journal that “as a deal maker” he sees the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as “the ultimate deal”. After meeting Netanyahu on February 15th he announced that the United States will seek “a great peace deal”. After meeting Abbas on May 3rd he recalled that he has “always heard that perhaps the toughest deal to make is the deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians”.

on the ground towards this vision. Instead of the Two-State Solution becoming more realistic with time, or even inevitable, the opposite seems to happen.

Explanations for the stalemate often resort to blaming the political leaders of one or both sides. Political leaders, it is said, do not pursue peace with the required determination or even negotiate in bad faith.¹⁰ According to Martin Indyk, the outlines of the agreement are clear, and what's needed now from the leadership is "great courage and reasonable compromise; a will to take the really tough decisions".¹¹ Similarly, President Obama commented that the "solutions are obtainable, the challenge now is political".¹² According to Obama, solving the conflict will "require leadership among both the Palestinians and the Israelis to look beyond tomorrow or next year or even five years from now and look at 20 years from now, and that's the hardest thing for politicians to do".¹³

A cursory glance at opinion polls reveals just why it is so hard for Israeli and Palestinian politicians to 'look ahead', and could exonerate political leaders to some extent. At present, and perhaps throughout the Peace Process era, public opinion on both sides has yet to reach a critical mass needed to force political leaders to make the concessions necessary for reaching a comprehensive agreement.¹⁴ In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, "we attribute to politicians what should be attributed to the community they serve".¹⁵ As Goldenberg argued, in order to achieve peace we need "leaders who are risk takers – leaders who are willing to take bold steps that go beyond what conventional wisdom says their constituents might be willing to accept".¹⁶ However, under current public opinion, it is perhaps overly-optimistic to hope for brave steps towards peace from leaders of highly suspicious societies, and we should therefore not expect much leadership from them.

Current Public Opinion: Theoretical Hope, Practical Problems

While the Two-State Solution remains the official public position of both Israel and the PLO, public opinion does not necessarily correlate with these official positions. A recent (December 2016) opinion poll, named the Palestinian-Israeli Pulse, conducted by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, allows us to analyse current public opinion regarding the Two-State Solution.¹⁷ When asked broadly about their position regarding a peace agreement based on the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, 49.9% of Israeli Jews and 44.3% of Palestinians expressed their support.¹⁸ This is our 'theoretical support'

10 Alon Ben Meir, for example, listed the absence of bold leadership as one of the reasons for the failure of negotiations. According to Ben Meir, "there has been a serious absence of courageous and visionary leadership that could move against the political current for the sake of a larger purpose by making important concessions to each other to advance the peace negotiations". Furthermore, he argues, "this leadership malaise will have to be cured before a new round of negotiations begin, but is not likely to happen without intense and consistent external pressure".

Alon Ben Meir, "Why Have Past Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations Failed?", The Huffington Post, November 18th 2015.

11 Martin Indyk, speech at J Street's 2013 Gala Dinner, September 30th 2013.

12 The New York Times, 'Exclusive Interview: Obama on the World', August 10th 2014.

13 Ibid.

14 The collapse of Barak's government during the days of Camp David 2000, for example, exemplifies just how quickly political repercussions can subdue leaders who seem to outrun their constituency.

15 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (Clays Ltd, 1993), p. 18.

16 Goldenberg, March 2015.

17 The English version of the survey is available at <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/680>, while the Hebrew version is available at <http://peace.tau.ac.il/index.php/active-research/176-psr>.

18 I purposefully refer to Jewish Israeli public opinion in this paper. While Israeli Arabs / Palestinian citizens of Israel have a large role to play in the peace process, both politically and socially, the Jewish population remain the main 'target audience' of any movement towards a Two-State Solution in Israel, given both the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the structure of the Israeli political scene.

baseline of comparison, and not a particularly encouraging one as such.¹⁹

However, the theoretical support for such a broad idea is not necessarily indicative of support for various implementation schemes of the Two-State Solution. Even among those who theoretically support a Two-State Solution, different arrangements might raise opposition. The survey delves into specific components of a comprehensive agreement, with both sides being asked to support or oppose nine separate components before being presented with a comprehensive agreement comprised of these components.²⁰

On the Jewish Israeli side (Figure 1), mutual recognition with end of claims and end of conflict received the most support (66.3%), while a demilitarised Palestinian state received 57.2% support. On the low end, the item of a shared capital in Jerusalem received 28.8% support, while the refugee item received the lowest support with 20.3%. The ‘practical support’ rate for this comprehensive agreement was 40.8%.

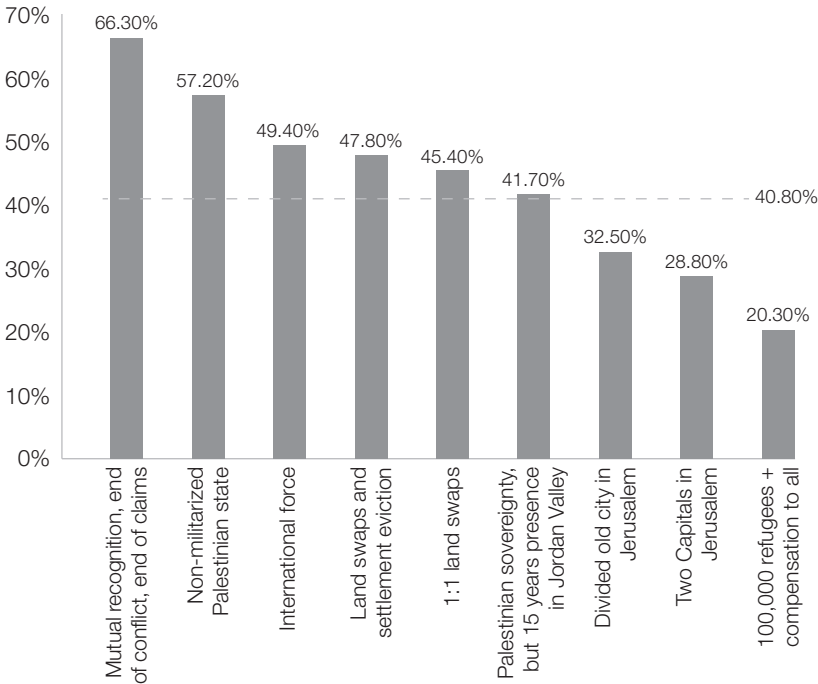


Figure 1: Support for specific components of a comprehensive agreement among Jewish Israelis, compared to the practical support for a comprehensive agreement comprised of these components.

19 However, given the lack of fruitful negotiations in recent years, and the general atmosphere of hopelessness surrounding the conflict, these can also be seen as encouraging numbers. If and when popular leaders will present their nations with a credible case for sincere negotiations, these numbers may increase rapidly.

20 The comprehensive agreement presented in the survey is comprised of 9 components. Shortly, these are: Mutual recognition, end of conflict and end of claims; Demilitarisation of the Palestinian state; International force to ensure security of both sides; Palestinian sovereignty but 15 years of Israeli presence in early warning stations in the West Bank; Land swaps of some settlement blocks, and eviction of all others; 1:1 land swaps; Two Capitals in Jerusalem; divided sovereignty in the Old City of Jerusalem; Israel would absorb 100,000 Palestinian refugees, while all others will be resettled in the Palestinian state or financially compensated.

On the Palestinian side (Figure 2), the item on refugees received the highest support (52.3%), while mutual recognition, end of claims and end of conflict received 42.6% support. On the low end, 26.9% of Palestinians support a shared capital in Jerusalem, while only 21.6% support a demilitarised Palestinian state. The ‘practical support’ rate for this comprehensive agreement was 42.3%.

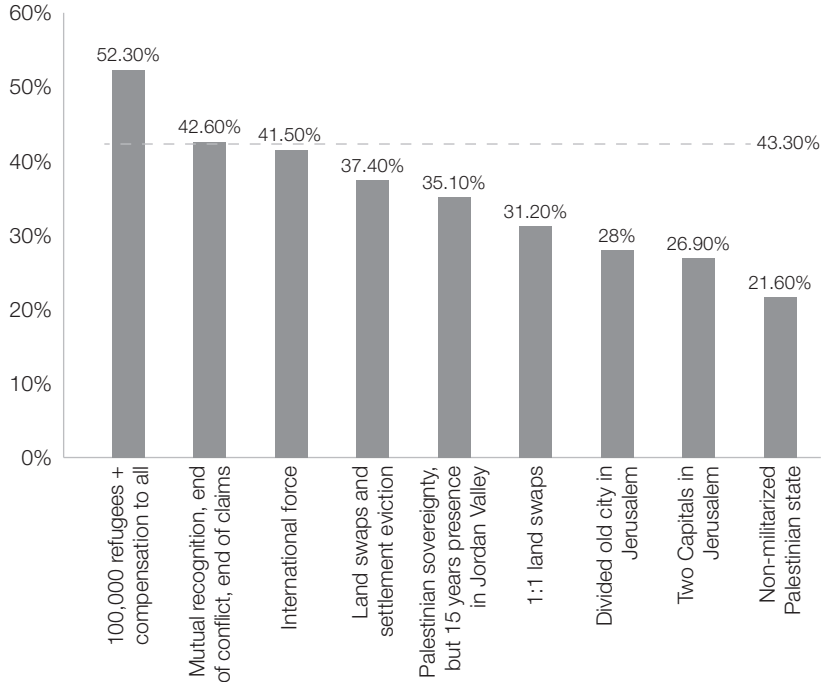


Figure 2: Support for specific components of a comprehensive agreement among Palestinians, compared to the practical support for a comprehensive agreement comprised of these components.

This analytic track allows us to reveal underlying red-lines, and issues of compromise in both societies. As Figure 1 shows, Israeli Jews support six components more than they support the comprehensive agreement. This means that overall support for the overall agreement is undermined by the other three components: the two aspects concerning Jerusalem and the item on refugees. The picture rising from this comparison is highly complex. 25.5% of Israeli Jewish society support the end-goal of mutual recognition, end of conflict and end of claims, but do not support the comprehensive agreement due to other concerns. On the other hand, 20.5% of Israeli Jews oppose the component regarding refugees but are willing to accept it as part of a comprehensive agreement.

On the Palestinian side, the picture is markedly different. Palestinians support only two components more than they support the comprehensive agreement (the item on refugees and mutual recognition, end of conflict and end of claims). The complexity is visible here as well: 20.7% of Palestinians oppose the de-militarisation of the Palestinian state, but are willing to accept it as part of a comprehensive agreement. At the same time, 10% of Palestinians support the specific offer on refugees but still oppose the comprehensive agreement.

An additional examination is possible through the comparison of average public support for the components to the 'practical support' for an agreement. It is here where the benefits of packaging are rumoured to exist in the form of a 'synergy' in public opinion: if a grand-bargain is so attractive that people would be willing to support it despite their objections to specific components, support for the comprehensive deal should be higher than the average support for its components. Support for a comprehensive deal should be pulled up by the promise of gains, rather than pushed down by the pain of concessions.

Sadly, this assumption seems to break down upon contact with the reality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Figure 3). The average support for the nine components of the deal was 43.2% on the Israeli side, and 35.1% on the Palestinian side. When compared to the support for the deal itself, the problem immediately appears. On the Palestinian side, the support for the comprehensive agreement is 7.1% higher than the average for its components, which supports the existence of significant benefits to packaging. However, on the Israeli side support for the comprehensive agreement is 2.5% lower than for the average component. The whole, it seems, is not necessarily greater than the sum of its parts, and support for a comprehensive agreement does not necessarily rise much above its less-attractive components. Packaging, it seems, has considerable benefits, but clearly has its limits as well, and should not be viewed as a panacea.

Additionally, it is important to also compare the practical support to the average component support and the theoretical support (Figure 3), since the transition from theory to practice affects public opinion. On the Palestinian side, public support weakens slightly, from 44.3% to 42.3%, with support for the average component trailing behind. However, on the Israeli side, the downward shift is much more dramatic: in the transition from theory to practice, support for the agreement drops from 49.9% to 40.8%, while average support for the components lies in between.

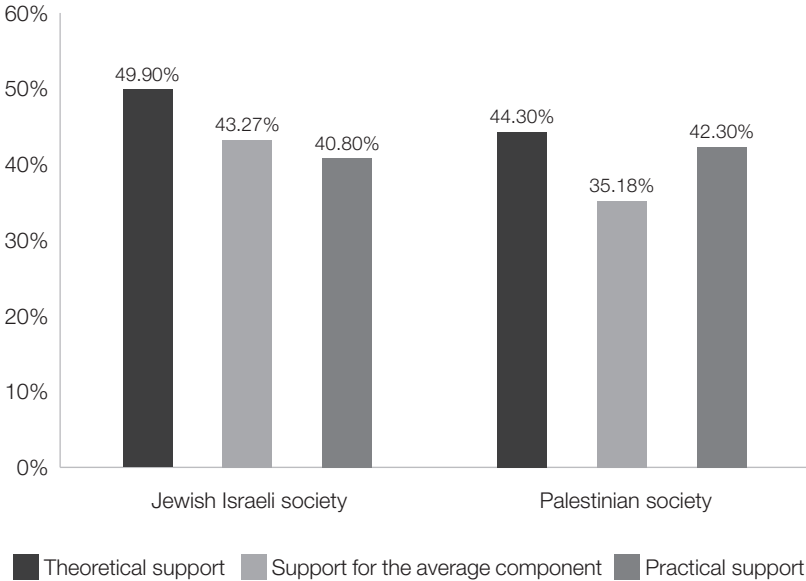


Figure 3: Support for Two-State Solution among Jewish Israeli and Palestinian societies. On the Jewish Israeli side, practical support is lower than the average component support, while both are substantially lower than the theoretical support. On the Palestinian side, theoretical support and practical support are very similar, while average component support is much lower.

The drop in support on the Israeli side is no less than cataclysmic, and begs further exploration. Even if the transition from theory to practice necessitates a ‘reality tax’ due to the materialisation of painful concessions, this should have been balanced by an opposite materialisation of substantive gains. Ideally, the gap between theoretical and practical support would be narrowed down by the benefits of packaging. However, in the absence of a significant leap in public support between specific components and the comprehensive deal due to packaging, the Israelis who supported the Two-State Solution in theory but opposed the practical offer reveal a deep problem in the efforts to resolve the conflict.

Discussion: Existing Constraints of Public Opinion

Two things are evident from the previous analysis. First, a wide gap exists between theoretical support for a Two-State Solution and practical support for a specific framework. In the framework suggested by the survey, the drop was much more dramatic on the Israeli side, but other frameworks would yield different outcomes (imagine the impact of a change in the crucial component regarding Palestinian refugees). Second, packaging, while beneficial, has its limits, and cannot be relied upon to close the gap between theory and practice.

It seems that the specific deal presented in the survey falls short of the expectations of many Israeli Jews who support the Two-State agreement in theory. Even among those Israeli Jews who theoretically support the Two-State Solution, an influx of 100,000 Palestinian refugees to Israel and the division of Jerusalem might constitute red-lines, which cannot be moved by mere packaging. The crucial

question, it seems, is not 'can the sides agree on a broad vision of the Two-State Solution?', but rather 'can the sides agree on a specific version of the Two-State Solution?'. The answer is not necessarily positive, even if the sides agree on the theoretical merits of a Two-State Solution.

The main constraints on public opinion are well known. Israelis and Palestinians are nearly diametrically opposed on the issue of Palestinian refugees. Probably even more problematic is the issue of Jerusalem, with vast majorities on both sides wholly rejecting compromise.²¹ When the time comes for politicians to spend political capital on advocating for a solution, Jerusalem will be the main drain of such capital. But in order to bring about a situation in which political capital can be effectively invested on encountering difficult issues on both sides, initial public opinion must be considerably more supportive.

Conclusions: Avenues for Progress

The lukewarm theoretical public support – and even lower practical support – for the Two-State Solution compels us to find new avenues of progress. The goal of these new avenues must be to either attach attractive additional components to the framework of a final-status agreement, or to engage in substantive positive progress in parallel to, or wholly independent of, final status negotiations. Such avenues must increase public support on *both* sides of the conflict, and should ideally be viewed positively by both societies regardless of progress in other components of an agreement. Preferably, it should be added, such avenues have to be somewhat realistic.²²

The survey presents several questions to the people who opposed the comprehensive deal on both sides, in an attempt to discover what measures will make them support the deal. As a caveat, it should be mentioned that a serious flaw in this platform is that we do not see the effect of new measures on the baseline of support, i.e. how many people who supported the comprehensive deal would move to oppose it due to the addition of new components.²³

Two avenues emerge from such an opposition analysis. The first is the avenue of free-movement. Perhaps surprisingly, guaranteeing the freedom of movement of Israelis and Palestinians in the entire area could generate a strong wave of support from many people who opposed the comprehensive deal. 25% of Israeli Jews and 39.9% of Palestinians who opposed the comprehensive deal would move to support if this component was included.²⁴ This would bring total support to roughly 55% and 65% respectively. If planned wisely, a system of 'closed borders; free movement' would increase economic and cultural interaction between the communities, facilitate deeper

21 Merely 32.5% of Israeli Jews and 28% of Palestinians support the division of the Old City and the Holy Basin, while only 28.8% and 26.9% respectively support having two Capitals in Jerusalem.

22 For example, a peace agreement under a wider umbrella of Israeli-Arab peace is too wide – and frankly too obvious – to be considered under the scope of this paper. Such a proposal has been on the table for the past 15 years in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative and has achieved minimal results, and even less official responses from Israel. Using a wider Arab-Israeli umbrella to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement follows the same logic used in Catch-22 by Nately's Old Man who wisely pointed out that "It is better to live on one's feet than die on one's knees".

23 Imagine the impact of the inclusion of the recognition of a Jewish State: Israeli Jewish support will increase, while Palestinian support would decrease. As a result, I simply added additional support to the pre-existing practical support for a comprehensive agreement. These should be viewed as an optimistic best-case scenario numbers, which assume no negative effects from the added components.

24 This means that public support for this specific component is even higher, since some people would support this component but would still oppose the comprehensive agreement.

security coordination, and allow access to historical and religious sites paramount to many on both sides, while still answering Israeli security concerns.

The second avenue is that of mutual recognition. This avenue will require both sides to recognise each other's historical, cultural, and religious connection to the land, without addressing any particular political demands rising from that connection. Palestinian recognition of Jewish connection to the land will convince 34.4% of the Israeli Jews who opposed the deal, while 43.7% of Palestinians who opposed the deal will be convinced by the mirroring measure, which would bring total support up to 60% and 66.3% respectively. In addition to the significant increase in numbers, this measure may serve to circumvent Israel's demand to be recognised as a Jewish State in a way that would be accepted to both parties. Indeed, the issue of a Jewish State has wide traction in the Israeli public, and as Mike Herzog said "for many Israelis, this is *the* core issue".²⁵ However, public opinion shows that the wider recognition of Jewish connection to the land might have an even wider appeal in the Israeli Jewish public.²⁶ Additionally, such a recognition will presumably encounter less Palestinian opposition, especially if tied to a mirroring recognition by Israel. Thus, this measure will provide a way of manoeuvring past the 'Jewish State' stare-down, while achieving substantive gains for a Two-State Solution on both sides.

Importantly, both of the suggested avenues for progress can be implemented regardless of progress in final-status negotiations, as means of building mutual-trust and facilitating future compromises by increasing public support for a comprehensive agreement. In light of current public opinion on both sides, an attempt at reaching a final-status agreement at the moment seems unrealistic, and its failure might even hinder future attempts. Before political capital can be effectively spent on dealing with core issues, public support must be significantly increased. When the time comes, political leadership and civil-society may be able to convince the public to swallow a few bitter pills for long-term peace and security. At the moment, however, the order of the day is to make the pills less bitter.

²⁵ Herzog, February 27th 2017.

²⁶ At least among those who opposed the comprehensive agreement offered would move to support it if Israel would be recognized as a Jewish state, while 34.4% would move to support with a broader recognition of Jewish connection to the land. The numbers among the general population might be different, but are less relevant to the goal of increasing support for an agreement.

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David holds an MA in International Relations and a BA in political science and the “Ofakim” Honors program in the Humanities, both from the University of Haifa. His MA thesis explored nationalism and violent conflicts in the Horn of Africa since the end of the Cold War. During his studies, David worked as a Teaching Assistant at the University of Haifa and taught Introduction to International Relations. Additionally, he participated in the Paths to Peace Fellowship at New York University (NYU) and spent a semester at the University of Warsaw. Before arriving to ICSR, David worked in the office of Congressman Jim McDermott in the United States House of Representatives in Washington DC as a Lantos-Humanity in Action Congressional Fellow, where he focused on Foreign Policy, International Development and Human Rights issues.

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