

Peace Index: October 2005

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Despite the ongoing and widespread disappointment with Oslo, the prevailing view today is that Yitzhak Rabin's decision to enter the process was correct, and that the decision was his own rather than forced on him by the circumstances. At the same time, it is generally believed that even if he had not been assassinated and had continued to serve as prime minister, the process Rabin began would not have brought a peace agreement with the Palestinians to this very day.

As for Rabin's leadership, the prevailing view in the Jewish public is that he was a moderately good leader, with the other opinions divided between those who see him as an outstanding one and those who think he was average or lower as a leader. These assessments jibe with the responses to a question on who, in another fifty years, will be considered the best prime minister Israel had had until then: Rabin came in third, after Israel's two mythological leaders David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, and only a little before current prime minister Ariel Sharon.

The percentage of those who think Israeli society has not been changed by the assassination is much larger than the rate of those who think it was changed by it for the better, and also considerably larger than the rate of those who say it was changed for the worse. However, regarding the permeation of the basic ideas of Oslo—and primarily the idea of conceding territories for peace—we find a dominant view that this has become part of the national consensus. At the same time, an overwhelming majority of the Jewish public believes that even if Israel evacuates all the territories beyond the Green Line and the occupation ends, Palestinian violence will not stop and may even intensify.

The deep mistrust of the Palestinians is also evident in views on the current situation. A decisive majority believes Sharon is justified in refusing to meet with Abu Mazen, despite the perception that Abu Mazen wants to prevent terror attacks but is unable to.

A clear majority also says that even if Hamas becomes part of the government after the PA elections, it will not moderate its positions toward Israel nor its involvement in terror attacks. There is, however, a division into two more or less equal camps on whether, in such a case, Israel should or should not hold negotiations with the Authority.

Those are the main findings of the Peace Index survey for October 2005, which was carried out on Monday and Tuesday, October 31 and November 1.

A full ten years after Rabin's murder and with the ongoing violence in Israeli-Palestinian relations, we checked whether, in retrospect, the decision to enter the Oslo process appears sound or mistaken to the Israeli Jewish public. Half the respondents assessed the decision as right, 39% as errant, and the rest did not know. A segmentation according to degree of religiosity (self-rating) shows clearly that the greater the religiosity, the greater the negative assessment of Rabin's decision on this issue. Whereas 62% of the secular approve of the decision and 26% view it as mistaken, over 70% of the religious and haredi criticize it and only a small minority approves. In the Arab sector the view is much more positive, with 85% in favor and only 10% against (the rest have no opinion).

As for the extent to which the decision to launch Oslo was Rabin's own initiative or, under the conditions of that period, any prime minister would have acted similarly, about half the Jewish public answered that it was Rabin's own decision and 34% saw it as an outcome of the circumstances. Among the Arabs the gap is smaller but the direction is similar: 48% credit the decision to Rabin himself and 42% to the exigencies of the hour. However, on whether, if Rabin had not been assassinated and had continue to serve as prime minister, an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would have been concluded by now, there is a large gap between the two sectors. Among the Jews, the highest proportion—48.5%—answer negatively, while 39% say an agreement would have been signed by now if Rabin had not been killed. Among the

Arabs, however, a huge majority of 85.5% think that if he had continued to serve, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would have been reached by now.

How does the public rate Rabin as a leader in retrospect? The prevailing view—44%—is that he was a moderately good one. Twenty percent see him as an outstanding leader, and about the same number as average. Only a small minority of 8% define Rabin as a moderately poor or failed leader. This positive, though not glowing assessment, tallies with the finding that whereas 31% think that in another 50 years Ben-Gurion will be considered the best prime minister and a similar rate (29%) say so regarding Menachem Begin, only 13% believe Rabin will be considered the best leader and 12% think so about Sharon. One possible explanation for this finding is the time effect, Ben-Gurion and Begin having already entered the pantheon of Israel's mythological leaders. Indeed, a segmentation of the preferences by age reveals that Ben-Gurion wins the most esteem among older age groups, whereas Rabin, and even more so Sharon, among the younger ones. A second—and not contradictory—explanation for Rabin's relatively low rating (along with Sharon's) is that the burning question he dealt with and that Sharon is dealing with today—relations with the Palestinians—is still at the heart of the Israeli public debate, unlike the challenges that confronted Ben-Gurion and Begin. There is a certain reinforcement of this explanation in the link between position on the Oslo process and assessment of Rabin's leadership: among those who today support Oslo, 18% ranked Rabin as the best prime minister, while only 8% of the Oslo opponents did so. The Arab public, however, sees Rabin as the best prime minister—61%—with Begin and Sharon trailing far behind at 7% each, and Ben-Gurion, whom this public apparently holds responsible for the *nakba*, getting only 6%.

The most common view—43%—is that Israeli society was not changed by the Rabin assassination. Thirty percent think it was changed for the worse, and 16% for the better. Harsher views are found in the Arab sector, with 61% saying a change for the worse occurred, 25% that the situation has remained as it was, and 10% that things have improved. As for the extent to which the basic idea of the Oslo process—ceding

territories for peace—is today part of the Israeli national consensus, 49% of the Jewish public think it is, compared to 42% who think otherwise. The Arab shows a clearer direction: 56.5% believe a territorial compromise is part of the consensus and only 10% do not (the rest have no clear opinion on the matter).

The Jewish public's pessimism can apparently be ascribed to the state of affairs today, which leads an overwhelming majority of 74% to expect that even if Israel withdraws from all the territories beyond the Green Line and the occupation ends, Palestinian violence will not stop and may even intensify. Only 19% of the Jewish sector thinks ending the occupation and leaving the territories will bring an end to the violence. A segmentation of the responses by voting reveals that the view that ending the occupation will end Palestinian violence garners a majority of voters for Labor (52% vs. 37%) and Meretz (50% vs. 14%). But among voters for Likud, Mafdal (the National Religious Party), Shas, Torah Judaism, and the National Union there is a consensus (89%, 85%, 86%, 100%, and 87%, respectively) that ending the occupation would not cause a decline in Palestinian violence or would indeed increase it. Shinui voters are closer on this issue to the Right, with 67% saying an end to the occupation would not cause a drop in the violence and 30% saying it would. As expected, among the Arabs the majority—61%—believes that ending the occupation would bring an end to the Palestinian violence and only 16% think it would not (the rest have no opinion on the issue).

What of the situation today? Beyond the dominant view in the Jewish sector that ending the occupation will not prevent terror attacks, even with a majority (61%) believing that Abu Mazen would want to prevent the attacks but is unable to, 70% justify Sharon's refusal to meet with him in the context of the worsening of relations. Moreover, the majority—60%—thinks that even if Hamas receives key positions following the coming PA elections, this will not moderate its opposition to Israel nor its involvement in terror attacks (28% think such a moderation in the organization's positions would occur). At the same time, the public's views are divided on whether, in such a case, Israel should or should not conduct negotiations with the PA, with

46% affirmative and 43% negative. A segmentation of these responses by voting reveals that among Meretz, Labor, and Shinui voters a majority (86%, 67%, and 56%, respectively) favors negotiating with the PA in such a case, while in the rest of the parties the majority opposes negotiations if Hamas holds positions in the PA.

Indexes:

General Oslo—39.6; Jews—36.6

General Negotiation—53.4; Jews—50.6

The Peace Index Project is conducted at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies and the Evans Program for Conflict Resolution Research 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 October 31 and November 1, 2005, and included 585 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 about 4.5% in each direction.