

Israeli and Palestinian Youth Attitudes toward the Conflict and Each Other: Cause for Concern, Openings for Hope, Areas for Action

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Key Findings

In spring-summer 2021, the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) commissioned a study of Israeli and Palestinian youth, ages 15-21, to deepen the understanding of the rising generation's views of "the other," and to learn how this generation views the prospects of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The research included both qualitative and quantitative research, and the findings reveal attitudes that should concern and motivate those seeking a just and sustainable resolution of the conflict. They should also lead to greater prioritization and resourcing of efforts to interrupt and alter the variables that have formed and informed these mutually reinforcing perspectives. Serious ongoing deterioration in conditions on the ground, spiraling violence, and severely diminished prospects for peace seem all but inevitable if these attitudinal trends and their drivers are left to fester.

Yet, while the data makes a case for urgency, it does not suggest reason for despair. While many of the findings point to an uphill battle against these trends, other results point toward openings that can be constructively leveraged with the right policy and civil society interventions. The data affirms how little contact there is or has ever been between both sides in this age cohort, but simultaneously shows that only a minority on both sides would fully rule out contact because they deem it illegitimate. It is therefore incumbent on those who care about this conflict and the future of the parties to seize upon opportunities to effect attitudinal change. Such an approach can allow for the development of realistic strategies that are grounded in the realities of the situation today, and account for the attitudes, experiences, values, fears and concerns reflected in the poll's findings.

- In both Israeli and Palestinian communities, there has been a trend in recent years of young people embracing more hardline positions. **Among Palestinian youth ages 15-21, the largest single cohort – over 40 percent of the sample – identify with the ideological designation *Islamiyya*, which can (but does not necessarily) correlate with a harder-line positions toward peace and compromise with Israel. Sixty percent of Jewish Israelis of the same age define themselves as right-wing – a term in Israel that is closely correlated with harder-line positioning toward peace and compromise with the Palestinians.**
- **Among youth on both sides, support for the two-state solution is in serious decline and does not enjoy the support of a majority of respondents. Yet this solution is still more popular than alternative proposals.** Among both Jewish citizens of Israel and West Bank Palestinians, support for two states and for one unequal state (dominated by their respective side) is nearly tied,

with the latter option just ahead in both cases, though within the margin of error. **Among young Arab citizens of Israel as well as Gazan youth, support for two states is significantly higher than support for alternatives.** Small proportions of each cohort – just 12% among Israelis and 13% of Palestinians – favor the status quo as the preferred option, indicating perhaps more interest in disruption and change among youth than is the case for older compatriots, with 41.5% of Jewish Israeli adults favoring the status quo in a 2021 survey conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute.¹

- **Among both Israelis and Palestinians, large majorities believe the chances of a Palestinian state in the foreseeable future are low.** Just about half on each side believe that a political resolution can *actually* bring peace. And by a clear majority, each side believes that violence is the only or best way to achieve concessions from the other side.
- Once violence is removed as an option, the two populations differ in terms of how to change the situation and move towards peace: **nearly two-thirds of Palestinians embrace boycotting the other side, while a plurality, nearly half of Israelis, prefer dialogue.** Among Arab youth in Israel – by contrast to the historic polling trend of clear enthusiastic support for many peace-related themes among their adult counterparts – nearly half express no position on how to interact with the other side. However, about half support dialogue, more than four times as many as those who choose to boycott – presenting a narrow but important opportunity.
- Furthermore, **at the deepest level of accepting the other’s historic, national connection to the land – young people are inclined to reject the legitimacy of such claims. Over 80% of Palestinian youth deny the legitimacy of the Jews’ history and national connection to the land, with a majority of Jewish youth in Israel – 57% – likewise rejecting the Palestinian historic and national connection.**
- **The two sides share a powerful belief in the importance of living in a democratic society, with this value reaching practically a consensus on each side,** even as there is growing support in both societies for solutions to the conflict that would result in non-democratic outcomes. Over 90% of Palestinian youth and 90% of Jewish Israelis believe democracy is important, even if they do not prioritize it relative to other national goals at present.
- **Despite widespread negative emotions, a strong majority on both sides respects the majority religion of the other: Jews respect Islam and Palestinians respect Judaism.** At present, high levels of religious observance correlate strongly with hardline attitudes; but the findings suggest future opportunities for religiously-grounded engagement to bridge divides rather than deepen them.
- **In contrast to the broadly negative opinion trends regarding the conflict, a majority of respondents on both sides expressed the view that peace is possible between the two peoples, and the conflict is mostly about leaders fighting for their own interests.**
- While fewer than 10% of either population has ever engaged in a meaningful way with the other in pursuit of such a goal, and there is skepticism about the efficacy of doing so, **only 30% of Israeli Jews and 29% of Palestinians believe cross-border peacebuilding efforts are illegitimate and that they would therefore not participate.**

¹ <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/with-only-40-percent-support-israelis-still-think-2-states-best-option-poll-675838>

Polls are just one tool for seeking to understand societal attitudes, and responses are best considered as a data point to be examined within a broader complex context. Israelis and Palestinians have been extensively polled over years, allowing for visible trendlines to emerge, and yet the younger cohort that is the sample for this particular study is examined only occasionally. As with all polls, the findings should not be considered determinative, but rather as a valuable snapshot and starting point from which concerned stakeholders can ask questions and cross reference data with other knowledge about the contextual factors that may be driving the responses. While answers to some questions about the deeper future implications are beyond the scope of this study, supplemental lines of inquiry might include whether the mutual rejectionist beliefs evinced in this study indicate immutable attitudes among the communities polled, or to what extent zero-sum conceptualizations of the conflict are grounded in a context of lack of contact between the two sides that can be rectified, to mitigate practices that deepen conflict on the ground? How do we understand and compare the relative responses of the different communities polled in light of their very different daily lived experiences of conflict? And how do we evaluate cause and effect, or explain seemingly contradictory findings as growing support for non-democratic end-game outcomes alongside overwhelming value placed on democracy in both societies?

Thanks to years of intensive polling among Israeli and Palestinian adult populations, one clear observation is that public opinion is dynamic. Public attitudes respond to positive developments in the political and diplomatic context and can often shift attitudes in response to potential confidence-building measures by the other side. Combining this knowledge with some of the openings suggested by this study points to untapped potential for bottom-up approaches and interventions driven by civil society and centered on building partnerships and greater consensus to help prepare the ground for future diplomatic and political efforts.

Introduction

When asked by the press about the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace, following the funeral of Shimon Peres, President Clinton predicted that an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal will happen at some point because the young people in the region will demand it. President Obama, in his landmark address to Israeli youth, struck a similar chord: “You – the young people of Israel – must now claim its future. It falls to you to write the next chapter in the great story of this great nation. And as the President of a country that you can count on as your greatest friend, I am confident that you can help us find the promise in the days that lie ahead.”

Placing hope in the next generation is a time-honored political tradition that can also serve as a useful mechanism for kicking difficult problems down the road for others to solve at a later date. While most analysts agree that in the current moment conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians is a distant prospect, assuming that it will improve over time requires more than blind faith that youthful idealism can be relied upon to resolve the conflict in the future. The emerging generation of Israelis and Palestinians, between the ages of 15-21, was born into arguably the least hopeful era in this conflict’s history. These young people have come of age during and after the second Intifada and witnessed or directly experienced frequent physical and/or structural violence at each other’s hands. The brutal Second Intifada; recurring Israel-Gaza wars; and the most pronounced physical separation between Israelis and Palestinians since 1967--with the regime of walls, permits, closures and blockade--have characterized the only context they have known. What does this generation of Palestinians and Israelis, respectively, think of the “other”, who is at once more distant and more wholly negatively framed within their societies than in the past? How interested are they in knowing more about and working with each other to try to succeed where previous generations have failed?

In November–December 2020, the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) commissioned a joint research project to answer these questions. Surveys were conducted among Israeli and Palestinian youth, ages 15–21. The quantitative survey was conducted among representative samples of this age group among both populations, with a margin of error of 3.5%. Dr. Khalil Shikaki and Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin wrote the survey, supervised the fieldwork, and analyzed the results. All participants were youth between the ages of 15 and 21 years; half were male and half female. Palestinian respondents included both West Bankers and Gazans, and Israeli respondents included both Jewish and Arab Citizens of Israel. While many Arab citizens of Israel also identify as Palestinian (using terms such as Palestinian citizen of Israel to describe their identity), for the purpose of this report and the clarity of comparison with Palestinian respondents in the West Bank and Gaza, we use the terms Arab Israeli or Arab citizens of Israel.

About seven months after the joint poll – in June 2021 – focus groups among Palestinians and Israelis were conducted to add qualitative breadth and understanding to the poll findings. Important to note is that the focus group discussions were not designed to be definitive or assess support or opposition on particular positions – a goal already pursued via the poll. Rather, this significantly smaller pool of respondents was asked to reflect more deeply on some of the questions asked in the poll, and thereby shed more light on some of the dynamics driving certain findings. Overall, the focus group participants expressed more hardline attitudes than the poll respondents overall. This may have been a factor of these discussions, unlike the poll, taking place so recently after the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas and internal fighting within Israel, or might also be explained by the group setting creating a more hardline dynamic.

The results of the research defy generalization, and are worthy of deep interrogation by policymakers, academics and advocates for Israeli-Palestinian peace. It is nonetheless clear that the attitudes of Palestinian and Israeli youth reflect the challenging and hardline context within which they have come of age. They have grown up during an era of cyclical wars and waves of violent escalation; the hard realities of a military occupation; political dysfunction, division, and entrenching or growing authoritarianism in Gaza and the West Bank; and a crescendo of nationalist populism and leadership retreat from a two-state vision in Israel.

Having lived through only failed attempts at diplomacy and the eclipse of a political horizon, the majority of young people on both sides are cynical about peace and skeptical of each other. Further, a deepening trend of each side conceptualizing its own national identity in terms of opposition to the other indicates that without interventions or a change of circumstances, this generation could remain hardline in the long term, making the currently challenging environment for peacemaking even more difficult over time. **However, the surveys and focus group discussions also unearthed positive findings, with points of commonality cohorts as well as openness to engaging in some activities and modes of thinking which could disrupt and reshape some of these attitudes and – in turn – practices over time.**

Both Israeli and (especially) Palestinian societies are far younger than is the case in the United States or Europe, so the attitudes of these young people are primed to play a significant role in determining the trajectory on the ground, alongside the trajectory of what is and is not diplomatically possible. Yet while demography may be destiny, the public opinions of any demographic group are not static. These young people's opinions and ideas are the fruit of their experiences, the failures of previous generations, the radicalization of both Israeli and Palestinian politics, and the injustices and insecurities that characterize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. **Altering those variables may disrupt and rearrange many of these opinions, as may providing opportunities for young people from both societies to meet, discuss and debate these issues, something – as this poll demonstrates – only a tiny minority of each cohort has ever done.** Accordingly, this report, and the study from which it derives, seeks to unearth the attitudes, fears, hopes and interests of this generation as they contemplate their futures within their own societies and in relation to each other, and with the goal of strengthening the relevance and impact of civil society and policy interventions aimed at transforming or resolving the conflict.

Identity, Values and Priorities

In both Israeli and Palestinian communities, there has been a trend in recent years of young people embracing more hardline positions. The root causes have been studied and documented in research over the course of the last decade.² Within this research, there is an attempt to better understand how respondents' sense of their own identity, and the values and ideals that they wish to see reflected in their respective societies relate to these political positions.

Israeli and Palestinian Youth Identities³

In Israel, 61% of Jewish Israeli youth surveyed defined themselves as right-wing, and 32% of Jewish Israeli youth placed themselves on the far right-wing of that spectrum. One-fifth of Jewish young people in Israel identify as centrist and just 12% consider themselves left-wing (either far left, just 4%, or moderate left: 8%), yielding just one-third in total of the Jewish Israeli population who self-identify as left-wing or centrist.

As is consistently the case among their adult counterparts, Arab Israeli youth were reticent about stating their political views. Within the survey, over 60% of this cohort declined to provide self-identification at all. A net plurality of Arab Israeli youth – nearly one-quarter – identified as leftist and only 4% identified as right-wing. The remaining 8% self-defined as centrist. However, like in the Palestinian groups polled and focus grouped in the West Bank and Gaza, **the focus group of Arab citizens of Israel expressed a significant hardline attitude on topics like Israel, Zionism, Israeli politics and policies, and specifically around occupation and the dismal prospects for the conflict's resolution.**

Parallel to Jewish Israeli youth survey results, **a plurality of young Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza situate themselves on arguably the harder-line end of the ideological spectrum of attitudes toward the conflict.** In this poll, over 40% of the total sample identified themselves with the term *Islamiyya*, a markedly higher percentage than the second choice of “mainstream nationalism” (28%). The term – variably translated as “Islamic” or “Islamism” in English – is open to interpretation. As polling and focus grouping over time has suggested, identification with “Islamiyya” is not necessarily or exclusively a self-designation of level of religiosity or political activism. In some cases, the term seems to correlate with a hardline approach to the conflict, but can also more exclusively correlate with those who ascribe to political Islam separate from attitudes toward the conflict. It can also designate an altogether apolitical outlook: an identifier of a respondent who believes society should subscribe to Islamic values.⁴ Gazans are significantly more likely to describe their ideological affiliation as *Islamiyya* – nearly half of the total (49%) – while a plurality of 37% of West Bank youth choose to self-identify this way. Yet, as we will address later in this report, the attitudes of Gazan youth are much more nuanced, often surprisingly, than this broad self-identification may suggest. The second-ranked political position of “mainstream nationalism” is consistent in both regions. Just a tiny portion, 3% of the total, self-defines as leftist, a term typically associated with loyalty to some of the Marxist parties in Palestinian politics, rather than any broader definition, while another 8% holds a “traditional opinion;” a term that tends to denote a greater emphasis on religious values in society than the left and nationalists. The remainder, nearly one-fifth, declined to define themselves.

² See “Israeli & Palestinian Youth Attitudes towards peace, conflict and the other,” prepared by Dahlia Scheindlin for ALLMEP in March 2020, for a comprehensive review of relevant research.

³ To account for distinct political and social contexts in the societies being polled, the choices presented by the questions are differentiated according to whether they are directed at Israelis or Palestinians to account for the terms and dynamics that resonate in their respective contexts.

⁴ To underscore this point, not all who identify with the designation *Islamiyya* are religious; in fact, only slightly more than half (53%) of all Islamists say they are “religious” while 45% describe themselves as “somewhat religious.”

Israeli and Palestinian Youth Priorities and Values

Each group was asked to select its top priority from four defining values for their society. This is a tracking question that has been tested among both Israeli and Palestinian adults in recent years, allowing comparison between different age cohorts.

Jewish Israeli youth responses to this question suggest that overall trends in this group are not fundamentally different from those found in the adult Jewish Israeli population over time, as demonstrated by past polling. A notable exception, however, is that **adult Jewish Israelis polled in 2020 placed a significantly greater priority on a democratic state, placing it in second place overall (with 30% of adults favoring a democratic state vs. 19% of youth).**⁵ Jewish Israeli youth generally express a preference for a Jewish majority and a relatively secular state. However, a closer look at the data shows that Jewish Israeli youth are fundamentally divided on both issues. The clear plurality of the Jewish youth interviewed (37%) ranked the Jewish majority in the State of Israel as the top value, with the value of “Greater Israel” in last place (16%). However, Jewish Israeli youth who identified as leftist and centrist diverged sharply from their right-wing counterparts. Among these cohorts, democracy was ranked as the highest value (by 44% of leftists and 36% of centrists), and peace with the Palestinians was ranked second (38% of leftists and 28% of centrists). The Jewish majority of Israel is ranked in third place for both the self-identified leftists and centrists. By contrast, self-identified right-wing youth place a much higher priority on the Jewish majority (48%), with “Greater Israel” in second place (23%).

Palestinian youth and Arab Israeli youth were asked the same set of questions for this section of the poll, with a focus on priorities and values that historically resonate in those respective communities. 35% of Palestinians interviewed ranked Israeli withdrawal from areas occupied in 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian state as the highest value. This is only one fraction higher than their second choice: the right of refugees to return to the villages left in 1948. Of note is that for youth who are Arab citizens of Israel, this latter value of the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees was the highest value by a large margin: prioritized five times as strongly as the establishment of a Palestinian state. Whereas in Gaza – where a large majority of the population are refugees and their descendants – respondents prioritized Israeli withdrawal and establishment of a Palestinian state at a significantly higher rate than support for the right of return (39% vs. 27%, respectively). The Gaza/West Bank divide, overlapping with refugees versus non-refugees, thus presents itself in a slightly counter-intuitive way, with Gazans prioritizing statehood over the right of return, and West Bankers holding the opposite view. In all groups, the values of establishing a religious society or a democracy are ranked significantly lower than the above-mentioned priorities more directly related to the conflict. A religious society is ranked higher than democracy among the most religious Palestinians and those who identify with the term *Islamiyya*, but only by a slight margin.

Perceptions of “the Other”

The survey results underscored the lack of contact between Israeli and Palestinian youth. **An overwhelming majority of Palestinian youth (82%) and about one third (32%) of Jewish Israeli youth indicated that they had no contact with the other side whatsoever.** Almost half of Jewish Israeli youth (47%) indicated that they had some “minimal” contact with the other side. The gap between Israeli and Palestinian communities in these responses is likely due to the fact that Israeli youth are exposed to tens of thousands of

⁵https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Table%20of%20findings_English%20Joint%20Poll%20%20Oct%202020.pdf

Palestinian laborers who work in Israel while West Bank Palestinian exposure to Israelis is much more limited and usually restricted to minimal – and rarely positive – contacts with soldiers and settlers. The overwhelming majority of Gazans have been sealed off from any contact with Israelis since 2007, when even the oldest respondents to this poll would have been children. Subsequently, respondents were asked if they were willing to have a friend from the other side or, if they had one, whether they would be willing to invite him or her to their homes. Findings show that Israelis, both Jews (52%) and Arabs (63% - Arabs were asked about having a Jewish friend), are more open to inviting friends of the other side to their homes than was the case for Palestinians (12%). On both sides, *the wish* to have a friend from the other side is restricted to a small minority.

The survey sought to map each side's image of the other within the conflict, in order to consider how these perceptions might shift. **One set of questions showed two polarized groups, each deeply entrenched in the notion that “our side is decent, their side is bad.”** The first question tested the commonly held view that the other side only understands force when seeking to gain concessions. **A majority of both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians believe that the other side only understands force: this is equal to two thirds of Jewish Israelis (66%), and nearly three quarters (73%) of Palestinians. Arab Israelis were asked about Jewish Israelis, and they were the only group in which just a minority agreed with the statement (27%).**

The second related question sought to test the potential for *self*-criticism, by asking each constituency to confirm or deny whether the side that they belong to only understands the use of force as a means to extract concessions.

Barely one-quarter of Jews, one-third of Palestinians, and only 17% of Arab citizens of Israel agreed with the statement that *their* side only understands force as a means to draw concessions from the other side.

Despite the mutually aggressive image of the other, there are some positive indicators showing the existence of a significant camp still open to peacemaking. When asked if they agreed with the statement that **“the conflict was mainly a matter of political leaders fighting for their own interests, while regular people could get along,”** a majority on both sides agreed.

Furthermore, when asked whether they viewed a final status political solution as the path for the two sides to reach peace, **just under half of Palestinians agreed that a political solution can bring peace, while a similar proportion disagreed. Among Israelis, 51% of Jewish Israelis and 48% of Arab Israelis agreed that a political solution can bring peace, for a total average of 50%. In general terms, a plurality of both Jewish and Arab Israelis agreed that a political resolution can bring peace.**

However, Israeli focus group discussions revealed that the idea of a formal, agreed-upon political resolution appears remote and abstract, failing to come up organically in discussion without a prompt. **When probed on their understanding of the term “peace”, even the Jewish left-leaning group defined it mostly as a cessation of fighting and violence, coupled with diplomacy and physical improvement, and not as a final status settlement that addresses substantive political issues.**

The Legitimacy of “the Other’s” Narrative

The survey sought to assess perceptions of the other side's historic links to the land. **Despite significant variations within and between groups, the findings are clear: at the deepest level of accepting the other's historic, national commitment to the land, young people are inclined to reject any such legitimacy.** Among the Palestinians, the gap between West Bankers and Gazans is very small as the overwhelming majority in both places reject such Jewish links (83% and 85% respectively). While only 24% of Arab Israelis believed that Jews have a historic and religious connection to the land, this percentage is

more than double that of the number of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (11%) who accept such a connection.

A majority of Jewish Israeli youth – 57% – likewise reject the Palestinian historic and national connection, though the cohort also shows greater willingness to acknowledge the other’s links to the land (43%). These views correlate heavily with the left-right divide. Among the firm-right, a near-consensus (81%) rejected Palestinian historic and religious connection to the land, and almost three-quarters of the total right-wing responded this way in the survey. This trend is almost reversed among the left and center, where clear majorities acknowledged the Palestinian historic and religious connection to the land (83% among the left, and 65% among the center).

The right-wing Jewish focus group expressed these sentiments clearly. Some of the participants rejected the notion of a Palestinian nation altogether. These young Israelis argued that the Palestinian people did not fit the definition of a nation, or that the nation was a fiction, or at best, if there is a Palestinian nation, that it emerged only in response to Zionism.

Engaging “the Other”

One of the deepest divisions between Israeli and Palestinian youth is on the question of whether the two sides should even engage with one another. Here there is no mirror image, but rather two communities that largely hold different worldviews on the utility and legitimacy of engagement. The poll asked both sides:

“In order to advance a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which do you think will be more effective:

[For Israeli Jews] Do not engage with Palestinians until they embrace non-violence (and/or) recognize Israel as a Jewish State

[For Palestinians & Arab Israelis] Anti-normalization or boycott talks with [Jewish] Israelis until occupation is ended

OR

Talk, bold dialogue with the other side first, in order to agree on demands and move ahead”

Nearly two-thirds of Palestinians chose anti-normalization or boycott of talks, until the occupation is over, with barely one-third supporting dialogue.

By contrast, a plurality of Jewish Israelis believes in dialogue over boycotting the Palestinian side. However, one sobering observation is that even among Israelis just 48% of the total chose this option (49% among Jews, and 45% among Arabs, who were asked about engagement with Jewish Israelis). Among Jewish Israelis, 35% preferred boycott. While an equal number of Arab Israelis chose “don’t know” as chose dialogue, only 10% of this group definitively supported the boycott of Jewish Israelis as a mechanism to achieve conflict resolution.

Unsurprisingly, when the same question is tested against ideology, substantial divisions appear within Israeli society. A strong majority of leftist and centrist youth (79% and 66% respectively) support dialogue with Palestinians, rather than boycott. Moreover, there is an interesting division within the right-wing cohort, in which **a plurality of moderate Israeli Jewish right-wingers support dialogue (48%) over boycott (38%), whereas the far-right strongly supports boycott (55%) over dialogue (28%). A strong majority (62%) of self-defined religious Jews also prefer boycott over engagement.**

Participation in Joint Activities with “the Other”

Despite the varied responses regarding perceptions of the efficacy of joint socio-political activities, attitudes shifted when the survey asked if the respondent is currently participating or is willing to participate in such activities. **Twenty-two percent of Israelis and 30% of Palestinians indicated either current (or past)**

participation or else willingness to participate in such activities in the future. **With less than one fifth of Israeli Jews and less than a third of Palestinian youth participating or showing immediate willingness to participate, these findings at first appear to be discouraging.** Yet on the other hand, only a minority on each side views such efforts as beyond the pale. **Only 30% of Jewish Israelis and 29% of Palestinians believe that these efforts are illegitimate and would not participate, suggesting majorities in each society who could, under the right conditions, be open to engaging in such activities.**

Gazan responses to this question present an interesting case for consideration. **While a plurality of Gazans have not been active in joint activities, with participation all but impossible due to the regime of closure that has been in place for most of their young lives--not to mention Hamas intimidation of those who are able to find avenues to engage⁶-- still, 33% are interested in such activities.** It is worth dwelling on these findings, as research conducted by Notre Dame University in 2019 showed that participation in such activities was very effective in halting or reversing some of the more worrying attitudes expressed elsewhere in this survey, with participants-- up to five years after participation in such projects-- reporting more positive attitudes toward “the other” and an increased belief in the possibility of peace.⁷ Amid much other data that is troubling in this survey, one may wonder how those findings might be different if the very large number of Israeli and Palestinian youth who are potential participants in such programs had the opportunity to avail themselves of them. **It is notable that attitudes towards engagement and the receptivity toward the other’s narrative is higher among Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel than among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. While additionally a matter of speculation, this raises a question about the impact that more consistent and longstanding contact between Jewish and Arab citizens of the state has had on softening attitudes and fostering mutual understanding.**

The questionnaire also proposed various specific activities and asked each side whether it viewed them as legitimate and if they would be willing or ready to engage in them. **The findings show that both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are likely to view activities such as economic ventures and tourism as legitimate, while denying legitimacy to most others.** It should be noted that Palestinians are rather internally divided: large majorities of West Bankers find some of these activities legitimate, while majorities of Gazans refuse to describe *any* of the proposed activities as legitimate. Palestinians overall significantly extend legitimacy to medical visits, which have been a critical matter during the coronavirus pandemic when Palestinians relied heavily on coordination with Israel to combat the virus. By contrast, Israeli Jews are likely to extend legitimacy to peace and dialogue programs (47% of total Israelis), together with economic ventures (44%) and tourism activities (39%) However, it is striking once again how low support for the legitimacy of these activities is among Israelis, with no single option achieving over 50% among the general sample, and especially low levels of legitimacy among Arab citizens of Israel.

The focus groups allowed further exploration of the conditions and variables that might affect participants’ willingness to engage with the other side and also provided more complexity -- and at times even contradicting -- the poll findings. **In the Palestinian focus groups, almost all Gazan participants found it legitimate and acceptable to have contacts with Israeli Jews when it came to all humanitarian matters. Gazan participants were also more likely to support youth political dialogue, explaining that such contacts should expand to include “joint demonstrations against the occupation,” a type of joint activity often branded as “co-resistance.”** Most West Bankers who participated in the focus groups found dialogue with Israeli Jewish youths productive, and therefore legitimate, and some expressed willingness to engage in it “because it would provide an opportunity to expose the crimes of occupation and

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/09/hamas-arrests-gaza-peace-activists-for-zoom-chat-with-israelis>

⁷ “Expanding the Reach of Impact Evaluations in Peacebuilding: A Retrospective Evaluation of CMM P2P Activities in Israel/West Bank.” Danice Brown Guzman and Lila Khatiwada, Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TVV3.pdf

make them understand Palestinian suffering.” Others, mostly from the West Bank, supported dialogue because “we have no alternative as Palestinians are captives.” Some West Bank participants also argued that Israel is an advanced country in medicine and education and “we need to engage with Israeli Jews on such matters like these, but not necessarily [on other matters] like the promotion of peace.” **Importantly, the minority of West Bank focus group participants who thought dialogue and contact was unacceptable for all Palestinians, nevertheless found it legitimate for those in need of education or health care.**

Despite the contradictory polling evidence, **Israeli Jewish focus group participants did not tend to question the legitimacy of such interactions. However, demonstrating how remote such programs are to the lives of most Israeli youth, the very idea appeared completely new to most** – only 2-3 focus group participants (out of 24) had ever participated in cross-communal programs (though others had contact from organic interaction or physical proximity to Arab communities). Most participants expressed a mixture of curiosity, and indifference or skepticism about the purpose of such contact.

The Conflict: Attitudes toward Solutions

Polling shows that Israeli and Palestinian political realities have led to a steady erosion of support for the two-state solution among both publics over the last decade, even as it still narrowly retains pride of place as the most popular option among other alternatives. Among the key drivers for the erosion of support for the two-state solution is the perception of low prospects for its feasibility. In this survey, respondents were asked whether they believed there were chances for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the next five years. On this question, the answers of young people differed little from that of the adult population that is regularly polled on this question: nearly three quarters (73%) of Israeli youth (and 80% of the Jewish Israeli sample) believe the chances are low or very low. Two thirds of Palestinians (66%) gave the same assessment. **Although support for a two-state solution is highest in Gaza, it is also where despair is highest: 75% give low or very low chances, compared to 61% of youth in the West Bank.**

The study then asked respondents to rank their preferences from among four general directions of the conflict: a two-state solution, a single state dominated exclusively by one group, an equal one-state solution, and the status quo. Arab citizens of Israel were asked the same question as Palestinians. **The results showed that the only sectors who ranked the two-state solution clearly as the top choice were the youth in Gaza and, to a lesser extent, Arab citizens of Israel.**

- 44% of Gazan respondents selected “two states for two people”, with a 26-points margin over the second ranked choice (one equal state, which was statistically tied with the two remaining options). **This makes Gazan Palestinians -- by a strong margin -- the most supportive cohort of a two-state solution among any cohort polled;**
- Arab citizens of Israel ranked the two-state solution as the top option (26%), followed by 21% who chose an equal democratic state. Only 12% of this group chose a Palestinian-dominated single state;
- **Among West Bank respondents, the two-state solution and an unequal Palestinian dominated one-state were tied at 26% each,** with the two remaining options also statistically tied;
- **Among Israeli Jews, one Jewish-dominated unequal state was ranked at the first place, with 29% of respondents choosing this option – though this option ranked only two points higher than the two-state solution (27%), and within the statistical margin of error.**

The ideological designation that emerges as meaningful in regard to this question among Palestinians is

Islamiyya versus mainstream nationalism. Together, these groups make up nearly 70% of the youth sample. Among mainstream nationalists, the two-state solution is the favorite approach (41%), well ahead of the Palestinian dominated one state (23%). Those who identify as *Islamiyya* also rank a two-state solution as the preferred option, but at a significantly lower rate: 32%, while 20% support one unequal Palestinian state.

Among young Jewish Israelis, the question exposes deep divisions based on ideology and levels of religiosity, revealing fundamentally different worldviews. Young national religious and ultra-orthodox Jews support a Jewish-dominated single state by a wide margin over all other options, the former ranking it at an absolute majority of 53% and the latter at 41%. Secular respondents ranked the two-state solution highest, but only by a ten-point margin over the single state options, tied at 22% each for the equal and unequal version. Traditionalists ranked the two-state solution and a Jewish-dominated one state almost identically: 29% and 28% each. This finding reinforces long-standing polarization based on religious observance among Jews. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind the religious trends: at present, ultra-orthodox and national religious Jews make up 21% of Jewish adults in Israel (approximately 16% of the entire adult population) and their population growth rate is significantly higher than secular and traditionalist Jews.⁸

Steps toward Conflict Resolution

Respondents were also asked to choose what they viewed as the most effective means of advancing an acceptable resolution of the conflict. They were offered four options: military means, negotiations, citizen engagement through civil society, or “I don’t know.” **Half of Palestinians, with minimal variation between Gaza and the West Bank, preferred military force as the most effective means of ending the conflict. Among Jewish Israelis, the clear plurality – 41% – preferred direct negotiations.** The findings reflect the widespread feeling among Palestinians that negotiations have not only failed to achieve their goals but have also corresponded to a period during which Palestinians feel that their situation has deteriorated. Research demonstrates that support for the use of military force on both sides tends to increase when diplomacy is viewed as ineffective.

At the same time, if there is a chance of winning support for negotiations in the future, the survey was able to pinpoint at least one clear condition which could convince each group that the other side is serious. **When asked what might convince them that the other side is genuinely committed to negotiations, and would cause them to support such negotiations, a plurality of Palestinian youth (28%) chose the option in which Israel would offer greater freedom of movement.** The urgency of easing movement restrictions has appeared in the regular joint surveys of adults conducted by these same researchers, where freedom of movement has emerged as a strong incentive for Palestinians, who otherwise reject a final status agreement, to change their minds. For Palestinians, the second most convincing incentive was that Israel cease settlement construction (21%), followed closely by Israel accepting the ’67 lines as a basis for negotiations (19%). **Among Israelis, a plurality (35%) chose the item stating that “*Palestinians declare a major effort to review all school textbooks for anti-Israel incitement or anti-Semitism and replace them.*”** This finding is consistent with incentives tested in the joint survey conducted among adults.⁹

⁸ Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, “Annual Social Survey, 2019” Jerusalem: CBS publication #1829, June 2021. https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/DocLib/2021/seker_hevrat19_1829/h_print.pdf. Note that this figure relates to the adult population; the data is based on a CBS survey rather than census figures (such surveys are conducted annually to supplement census data). The report cites 10% of Jewish adults who self-identify as Haredi and 11% who are national religious, for a total 21%. The Jewish population is 78% of Israel’s adult population, hence the religious groups mentioned represent just over 16% of the total adult population.

⁹ See page 7: https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Table%20of%20findings_English%20Joint%20Poll%20%20Oct%202020

Conclusions and Recommendations

We are all products of our environment, and the conditions and events that mark a person's youth can often play an outsized role in their attitudes and perceptions throughout their lives. After three decades of failed diplomacy, and within a context of repeated wars between Israel and Hamas-led Gaza; settlement expansion; terrorist attacks; movement and access restrictions; populism; racism and political dysfunction: it is sadly not unexpected that many of the attitudes uncovered in this poll are cause for serious concern. The Israelis and Palestinians of this generation, born after the collapse of the Oslo Accords and into the violence of the Second Intifada and its aftermath of profound separation, are the victims of political decisions and diplomatic failures that they had no part in. Yet they could also still be the beneficiaries of smart policy decisions taken now, with the sense of urgency and focus that many of these results demand.

The current general hardline environment bodes poorly for the success of diplomatic attempts at conflict resolution that do not take account of this reality. The overwhelming denial of the legitimacy of the other's connection to the land and to the validity of their very identity should alarm all those concerned with a more just and peaceful future for both peoples. **But meaningful portions of each population hold attitudes conducive to peacemaking in the future. Nearly half of Palestinians and half of all Israelis believe that there is a political solution worth striving for and avoid the conclusion that each side must simply advance its own interest.**

Over half of Israelis and forty percent of Palestinians believe joint efforts to advance peace are very or somewhat effective, and only a minority on both sides – one-quarter of Israelis and 29% of Palestinians – believe that cross community work is not legitimate. This opens an opportunity for policymakers with the political will to address this conflict, allowing tools that have been proven¹⁰ to be effective at ameliorating some of the most worrying ideas and attitudes in this poll to be exploited at a scale that can have a meaningful impact on a majority of the region's young people. This is not a substitute for a diplomatic and political horizon, which is not only the best but also the only mechanism which can fully address the attitudinal crisis that this poll reveals. In fact, it can be a catalyst for such a horizon. **It is worth considering what sort of new political dynamics and fresh ideas might emerge from facilitating engagement between the two-thirds of Israeli and Palestinian youth who think it legitimate to engage one another.**

Based on the findings of this poll, several policy recommendations stand out for international and local political actors who are willing to invest in moving this conflict toward resolution:

1) Invest Meaningfully and Multilaterally in Peacebuilding

It is clear that both Israeli and Palestinian youth lack real opportunity to engage one another, and that significant proportions of both populations are potential participants in such encounters. A long-held misperception about the Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding field, and one that has fueled some skepticism about its impact given the persistence of the conflict, is that it has benefited from massive amounts of funding over the years. While the U.S. government and the broader international community have invested in Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding programs, relative to the scope of the challenge, these investments have been minimal, uncoordinated across donors, and inconsistent, falling short of what is needed to enact wide-spread change.

¹⁰ "Expanding the Reach of Impact Evaluations in Peacebuilding: A Retrospective Evaluation of CMM P2P Activities in Israel/West Bank": https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TVV3.pdf

By contrast, in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict the United States, alongside other governments, created and funded the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) –a precedent to the recently-passed Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) in the United States. Beginning a dozen years before the Good Friday Agreement, the IFI invested heavily in both social and economic advancement projects, encouraging dialogue and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists throughout Ireland. The comparative amount of investment is striking. For three decades, beginning 12 years before The Good Friday Agreement peace treaty—and paving the way toward it—the international community spent the equivalent of \$44 per capita annually on peacebuilding priorities in Northern Ireland. By contrast, today in the deeply entrenched Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the international community spends \$1.50 per capita among Israelis and Palestinians. With the passage of MEPPA there now exists a well-resourced tool that can help take advantage of such an opportunity. The resources are substantial, but with around 14 million people living in the region, including some of the youngest demographics in the Middle East, more investment will reinforce the ability to disrupt the attitudes found in this study. MEPPA has paved the way for international contributions, and the opportunity to have other international actors, as well as major private philanthropy, join this effort and provide the scale and long-term investment that the findings of this poll demand. Such a multilateral strategy, pooling of resources and coordinating of joint strategy should be urgently encouraged, taking advantage of the interest apparent in the US, UK and EU, alongside possible engagement from Arab actors in the context of the Abraham Accords and other normalization agreements.

2) Revive the Trilateral Commission on Incitement

The Trilateral Commission on Incitement was formed as part of the Wye River Agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in October 1998, under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Its members were experts appointed by the government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United States, and it met every two months, until the outbreak of the Second Intifada, in order to discuss issues of incitement. This commission should be revived and reconstituted, with a particular focus on youth and should include international mediators and independent experts, with renewed governance language that can ensure that rather than being used as a stage for denunciations of either party's policies, it is focused on good faith efforts to disrupt incitement and radicalization among both Israeli and Palestinian youth.

3) Hone in on Practical Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)

One of the more positive findings in this survey is that when youth were presented with a list of actions that might “convince them that the other side is genuinely committed to negotiations, therefore allowing an opening towards the same direction,” the most popular choices were eminently practical steps, even in the current political environment. For Palestinians, the most popular option was greater freedom of movement. For Israelis, it was a good faith effort to review and reform Palestinian textbooks. That such politically viable steps were favored over more difficult-to-implement policies such as freezing settlements or recognizing Israel as a Jewish state is notable. And while they should not be pursued as a substitute for addressing more complex but vital conflict drivers, efforts should be made by international actors to encourage the implementation of CBMs that address the concerns of youth, as well as effective communication of those CBMs and their rationale – as well as their reception – among and between youth constituencies on either side of the Green Line and in Gaza.

4) Establish and Legitimize Parallel Youth Parliaments

The survey reveals a significant level of frustration and disassociation with regards to political leaders and institutions. With Palestinian elections repeatedly cancelled or postponed, and the political volatility in Israel that led to four elections in two years, this is not a surprising finding. Alongside

efforts to address macro-level democratic deficits and the absence of democratic processes, youth Parliaments, such as the type modeled in the European Union, could be an effective model for connecting disenfranchised young Israelis and Palestinians to the political process, giving them a voice and sense of agency in their communities. Further, connecting those institutions to each other – and perhaps to parallel entities in the wider region and around the world – would help to create greater connection between, and awareness of, each other’s societies and beyond to the global community.

5) Leverage Media as a Tool

Media can drive the public discourse as much as it reflects it. As the polling and focus group data affirm, there is scant faith on the part of Israeli and Palestinian youth that the other is a partner for peace; minimal interaction between the two sides to challenge that skepticism; and yet strong evidence to suggest that greater exposure to the other side could impact attitudes in a way that unlocks space for constructive engagement. We also know that in a “plugged-in” social media environment, consumers tend to be captive to their own echo chambers and silos, missing opportunities to be exposed to views that may challenge static attitudes. As such, there should be a sustained strategy aimed at harnessing social and conventional media platforms that have a high degree of engagement with younger audiences. Large numbers of Israeli and Palestinian youth will continue to have little to no contact with each other. Media can function as a tool to break this lack of contact and awareness and can serve as a steppingstone toward more meaningful engagement. Furthermore, the lack of awareness that both Palestinian and Israeli focus group participants conveyed regarding peacebuilding programs could be disrupted if those same programs were amplified significantly via social media, so that every young Israeli and Palestinian was at least aware that there was an opportunity to meet their counterparts from the other side, and to work together to bridge, as this survey shows, the very significant gaps that exist in their understanding of each other and the conflict between them.

6) Invest in Further Research on Youth Attitudes

This report’s findings are complex, full of contradictions and not conclusive – a snapshot of a few particular groups’ attitudes at a particular time. Results should be examined within the broader complex context from which they derive and concerned stakeholders should use this data as complementary to other research about the contextual factors that may be driving the responses.

Much more work is needed to understand these groups. While Israelis and Palestinians are frequently polled, the youth demographics targeted in this research are surveyed only occasionally. Public opinion – like the societies it represents – is dynamic. Public attitudes respond to positive developments in the political and diplomatic context and can often shift attitudes in response to potential confidence-building measures by the other side. Those working to prepare the ground for future diplomatic and political efforts at peacemaking would benefit from greater understanding of the rising generation’s opinions and worldviews, as well as bottom-up approaches that may help top-down efforts find traction. A regular youth poll could track trends rather than just capturing a moment in time. Further, using a similar approach with participants and beneficiaries of some of the interventions suggested above could also measure how peacebuilding programs and confidence building measures impact the attitudes of both Israeli and Palestinian youth.