

Oslo at 30: Israeli and Palestinian Youth Attitudes in Crisis

Background

In September 1993, the world was stunned to learn of secret negotiations that had been occurring just outside Oslo, where Israelis and Palestinians had concluded an interim agreement that promised to transform relations between both peoples, setting them on a course that most assumed would result in a two-state solution. Many of the young people at the time, often called the “Oslo generation” were among the most strident supporters of this process, imbuing the moment with a sense of youthful optimism, and representing to many a new generation who might put the past behind them, and shape a new reality for Israelis and Palestinians. Many of those same young people were present at the pro-peace rally where Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin was assassinated two years later. And far too many of them were among the Palestinian and Israeli victims of the ensuing Second Intifada. For the youngest bracket of today’s Israeli and Palestinian youth neither the lessons of the terrible violence of that period, nor the optimistic days that had preceded it, serve as a reference point.

In July 2023, looking ahead to the 30th anniversary of the Oslo Accords, 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 better understand this rising post-Oslo and post Intifada generation’s views of “the other,” and to learn how they view the prospects of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The research is the second iteration of this project, building off a similar survey of the same age cohort conducted in December 2020, and allowing us to track changes in attitudes over this period. In each instance, research was led by Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin in Israel, and Dr. Khalil Shikaki in Palestine.

Since the December 2020 survey, available [here](#), violence has reached levels not seen since the Second Intifada. There was the devastating May 2021 violent escalation that began in Jerusalem and rippled across the West Bank, Gaza, and throughout several mixed cities in Israel, marked by military and militant engagement – but also internecine violence between ordinary citizens, and a steadily increasing pace of terror attacks against the other’s civilians. The end of 2022 saw the formation of the most ultra-nationalistic government in Israel’s history; an unprecedented protest movement rising in opposition to its policies that are perceived to threaten democratic norms; and a further weakening of the Palestinian Authority to the point of its having lost control in several key cities where militancy is on the rise. We have also seen Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations within West Bank cities at a scale not witnessed since 2002, including the three-day operation in Jenin, which overlapped with the data collection for this survey, from July 2nd-12th, 2023.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the 2023 data reflects a dramatic negative slide in attitudes since the 2020 poll results. The window between the two studies corresponds with a period of profound crisis for Israelis and Palestinians in general, but especially for this cohort, aged 15-21

that, unlike previous generations, has never experienced meaningful Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, functional diplomacy, or a realistic expectation of conflict resolution that could suggest a more hopeful future amid the current upheaval and deterioration. The urgency to create different dynamics that might help arrest this trajectory, is clear.

Key Findings

The survey findings portray a fundamentally negative environment for Israeli and Palestinian youth, and significant deterioration in numerous indicators since 2020. Attitudes have hardened with respect to each side's perception of the conflict, while preferences for a solution are becoming more hardline and attitudes towards the other have mostly become more negative. Yet, there are still small openings found in the survey that can help guide thinking about how to lay the groundwork for a future peace.

1. Values and Ideology

In Israel, the pro-democracy protests often feel all-consuming, but they do not appear to have yet had a significant impact on how many young Israelis view life, society, politics, and the conflict.

- “Democracy” has risen moderately as a priority, compared to 2020 when Israeli Jews were asked to rank four competing national values, now coming in second place (compared to third place in 2020). Yet it remains, for now, highly stratified by ideological leaning, with less movement on this value as one moves rightward on the political ideology spectrum.
- When respondents were asked about the urgency of various challenges, rather than their prioritization of values, security/terror is top-ranked as the “most urgent problem,” while “strengthening democracy” ranks near-last on a list of eight items. **More than ten times as many Jewish youth chose security/terror as the most urgent problem facing their society, over those who chose strengthening democracy (44% to 4%).**
- The portion of Israeli youth who define themselves as right, left or center has hardly changed since 2020, with **62% of Jewish Israeli youth identifying as right wing.**
- The portion of Jewish youth who say Israeli democracy is important or very important has risen to over 90%, but the 2020 finding was just a few points below this; and the rise is more significant among Arab citizens. There, we have noted a jump of more than 30% since 2020. **Ninety-Six percent of Arab citizens find a democratic society to be either important or very important, which is the highest level of support among any group in Israel/Palestine.**

- Moreover, the meaning of democracy in Israel is highly qualified in terms of commitments to political equality:
 - o **Among Jewish Israelis who say democracy is important, 70% consider full equality of political rights for minorities such as Arabs to be important** (only one-third say they are “very” important)
 - o **Fully 88% of Jewish Israelis who say democracy is important believe Israel can continue to be a democracy even if it minimally maintains its current degree of control over Gaza and the West Bank, with no voting rights for Palestinians who live there.**

Among West Bank and Gazan Palestinian youth, despite some decline in support for democracy as a political system for their future state, a vast majority, 84%, believe democracy is important. While fewer, **60%, believe that there should be full equality and minority rights for Jews** in the future Palestinian state, it is nonetheless noteworthy that it is a majority view, considering the contradictory endorsement of final status arrangements that would deny those very same rights. (see below)

- o Democracy, or lack thereof, is not among the top five national problems and does not rank high among Palestinians’ top national goals.
- o **Despite articulated support for democracy and for minority rights, Palestinians, like their Israeli neighbors, show dramatically increased support for a one-state solution without equal rights for the other side.**

Instead, Palestinians’ focus is placed on the occupation and conflict with Israel; the economy; corruption; and internal division. Corresponding with the violent escalation in Palestinian-Israeli relations, the data from this poll reveals an escalation in hardline approaches to national aims, and an increased **prioritization of the goal to “obtain the right of return for refugees to their 1948 towns and villages”** over the goal of building a Palestinian state.

Almost half of the Palestinian youth surveyed are unwilling to associate themselves with currently dominant ideological and political forces: the Islamist Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the nationalist Fatah, or the left and nationalist third parties, with 44% selecting “none of the above.” Those who do associate themselves are split evenly, with 28% each associating with Islamists or with secular nationalists. In Gaza, support for Islamists reaches almost 50%, while **61% of West Bank respondents choose “none of the above,” up from 26% in the 2020 poll.** This suggests a significant generational transition taking place, where young Palestinians lack ideological or party-political affiliations, and may be particularly susceptible to new ideas and strategies, both

good and bad.

2. Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

For Israeli youth, attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict— Jewish and Arab citizens alike— are still fundamentally reflective of the overriding right-wing political environment. Among Jewish citizens, their impressions of both the conflict and the other side derive from indirect information (media, social attitudes) rather than personal contact. Israel’s Jewish youth have become even more hardline regarding the conflict and potential solutions, while the country’s Arab youth have become more despairing.

- **Jewish youth in Israel prefer an unequal Jewish dominated single state to a two-state solution by an almost 2:1 margin:** 42% compared to 23% respectively. The contrast with older Israeli Jews is striking. Although the Tel Aviv University Peace Index uses a slightly different methodology, the March 2023 Index showed 38% of adult Jewish Israelis support a two-state solution, ten points more than those who supported a single unequal state.
- **61% of Arab youth in Israel prefer a two state solution**, continuing the consistent trend whereby Arab citizens of Israel— the population most familiar with both Israelis and Palestinians, most likely to speak both Arabic and Hebrew, and most likely to have relationships on both sides of the Green Line— is, by a wide margin, the community between the Jordan and the Mediterranean that is most likely to support a two-state outcome.
- Only 39% of all Israeli youth (36% of Jews – 15-point decline compared to the same question in our 2020 survey –and half of Arabs) believe it is possible to find a political resolution to the conflict; **a majority of 56% think no political solution can end the conflict.**
- **In 2023, the number of Israeli Jews who say nothing the Palestinians could do would convince them “that [the Palestinians] are serious, and to support negotiations” has now doubled from 16% in the 2020 survey to 32%.**
- Fully 80% of Israeli Jews support the use of force if Israel is threatened, even at the cost of civilian harm, with the largest group (37%) choosing the highest level of agreement with this statement. 80% of Israeli Jews believe that Palestinians “only understand force.”

Among Palestinian youth, a reflection of the current deterioration is evident in almost all the questions about the conflict. Hardline attitudes from 2020 have grown more so, including greater militancy compared to 2020. Only one-fifth, compared to about half in 2020, believes that a political solution is even possible.

- **Support for the two-state solution– the favored solution in 2020– has dropped by 12 points to 21%.** The number of those who opted for one unequal state has risen by 14 points to now become the largest group by a significant distance (16%), while the number of those still favoring one equal state for the two peoples remain relatively low at 14%.
- As a means to advancing a resolution to the conflict, almost two-thirds believe that not talking to Israelis until Israel ends the occupation would be most effective, while only 29% favored talking now as the most effective means to reaching the same goal.
- Half of the Palestinians favor armed resistance as the most effective way to end the conflict ; 71% express support for the use of arms when threatened, even at the cost of civilian harm to the other side, and 74% believe the Israelis only understand force.
- However, despite this strong preference for armed resistance as the most effective tool under current conditions, **64% are willing to support negotiations if Israel stopped settlement construction, allowed freedom of movement to Israel, and agreed that the basis of negotiations is the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.**
- **A majority supports international involvement in advancing peace, but with a combination of the US with other third party actors.** Only a small portion wants either just the US or other countries without the US as negotiation facilitators.

3. Engagement with the Other: Personal Contact, Perceptions, Openness

With Israeli-Palestinian separation more profound than ever before, with media and political contexts that relentlessly present the “other” in the most negative and stereotypical light, and within the wider context of crisis and lived reality, there has been a drastic reduction in the willingness of both populations to engage with each other.

- Just a minority of all groups have participated in activities that involve meeting one another, or would like to; 26% of Jews, 10% of Palestinians and one-third of Arabs in Israel. However, the percentage of those who thought that these activities are legitimate, even if they don’t want to be involved has remained steady at 19% for both Israelis and Palestinians.
- The rate of Palestinians who feel such activities are not legitimate has risen sharply from 2020, from 29% to 58%; though this metric has not changed for Jewish Israelis (30%).
- Both sides show growing skepticism about whether joint activities in which Israelis and Palestinians interact can be effective. The rate of Palestinians has fallen from 2020, while among Jews, the certainty about effectiveness has dropped: 20% of Jews in 2020 thought

these activities were “very effective,” but just 11% in 2023.

- Among Arab citizen youth of Israel, over half want to have a Jewish friend, while only one-quarter of their Jewish counterparts would like to have a Palestinian friend; among the Palestinians only 10% express the wish to have an Israeli Jewish friend.
- **Both Israelis and Palestinians show a decline in the portion who believe the other side has a legitimate historic and religious connection to the land.** Just over one-third of Israelis agree (a 9-point drop from the 2020 data); and only 7 percent of Palestinians agree (a 4-point drop), while **70% of Palestinians and 65% of Israeli Jews do not believe the other side intends to reach peace.**

Despite everything, opportunities exist, though the current challenge and trajectory of attitudes is clear. For example, despite the clear contradiction in relation to current sense of urgency and long-term conflict-trajectory vision, both sides express a commitment to democracy and to minority rights. Israelis, both Jewish and Arab citizens, show openness in terms of perceptions towards the other and the value of dialogue. The slide in Palestinian opinion on this point seems to track the more general deterioration on the ground for Palestinians— since the same question was asked in December 2020, when Palestinians and Israelis were equally likely (30%) to think cross-border peacebuilding efforts were illegitimate, and thus refuse to participate. This suggests that a change in conditions may facilitate greater openness to these encounters.

- Israelis show respect for the religion of the other; Israeli Jews show a strong majority (77%, over three-quarters) who say they respect Islam as a religion, while 88% of Arab youth say they respect Judaism. The Palestinian youth are divided almost in half, on average, over respect for Judaism.
- Among Jewish Israeli respondents, a slight majority still believe peace activities with Israelis and Palestinians can be effective (53%)
- 34% of Jewish citizens agree that Palestinians have a legitimate historical claim; a decline from 2020 but representative of more than the only 12% of those Jews who see themselves as “left wing” (a political/ideological grouping where one might have more readily expected such an attitude).
- 35% of Jewish citizens disagreed with the perception that Palestinians don’t intend to reach peace; a majority of Arab citizens disagreed with this perception of Jews (52%)
- 31% of Jewish Israelis are prepared to be self-critical, admitting that Jews have as many negative characteristics as Palestinians.

- A majority of Jewish Israelis (51%) and Arab Israelis (58%) prefer to talk rather than boycott the other side to engage on the issue of conflict and occupation.
- Among Palestinians, the lack of ideological commitment among almost half may be considered an indication of openness to new ideas that one can target for greater engagement, particularly in the West Bank, where 61% are unaffiliated, and only 14% identify as Islamists. Though more work would need to be done, perhaps in focus group discussions, to develop this theory. In this light, the rise in support for one unequal state is perhaps an expression of frustration and loss of hope rather than the outcome of firmly held ideological commitments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The period between December 2020 and July 2023 has been the most prolonged period of violence, political instability, and hopelessness that Israelis and Palestinians have experienced since the Second Intifada. We now have empirical evidence that this crisis is having a profound impact on, or minimally reflecting, the attitudes of the region's youth, with a dramatic shift on many key questions that relate to the possibility of peace between both peoples. With a median age in Israel of 29 and in Palestine of 19 (by comparison, in the US it is 39 and in the EU it is 44), this cohort will have an outsized impact on developments in the region, framing and driving events for years to come. Yet we also know— and as the comparison between these two surveys makes clear— that the attitudes of young people are particularly malleable, impacted by their lived experiences, their fears and— should they exist— their hopes for the future.

If this survey data creates a sense of alarm among those who care about the people of the region and the prospects of peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the tragedy would be for it to engender a sense of fatalism or hopelessness. The drastic shift demonstrated over a relatively short period suggests that correlation of lived reality and the overall situation— not some sort of essentialized or innate characteristics— drive attitudes. We can derive this from the trajectory of attitudes in relation to positive developments over now-decades of general population polling¹. Those conditions are man-made, and can be disrupted through thoughtful, professional, and relevant policy and civil society intervention if a societal base in support of peace, equality and eventual co-existence is to be shaped. The alternative, absent such intervention, seems almost certain

¹ Attitudes tend to be highly influenced by perception of feasibility or optimism. Attitudes during the Annapolis process in 2008, for example, were much more moderate and willing to compromise than the response to similar questions both before and afterwards. Similarly, in March 2021, Palestinians thought parliamentary elections would indeed take place in May 2021. Comparing attitudes between September-December 2020 and March 2021 shows support for violence dropping and support for diplomacy rising. Then the PA canceled elections, and the May 2021 war ensued. Findings on the June 2021 poll then showed a dramatic spike in favor of violence and a dramatic decline in support for diplomacy.

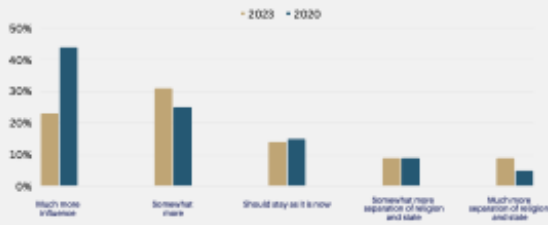
to engineer populations more inherently opposed to the other's mere presence on the land, less willing to extend to each other the rights to safety, security, and self-determination, and more likely to preference the use of violence in the furtherance of their increasingly incompatible goals.

Israeli and Palestinian Youth Attitudes toward the Conflict and Each Other

CAUSE FOR CONCERN AND ACTION—NOT FATALISM—TO HALT AND REVERSE TRENDS

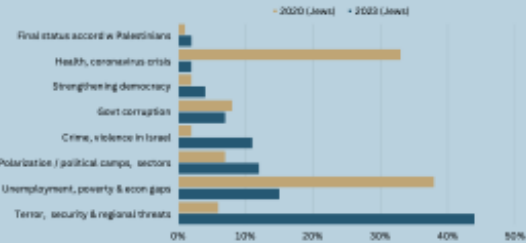
Changes on key attitudes tracked between December 2020 and July 2023, amid period of profound violence, political volatility, and diplomatic inertia

Palestinians: more influence of religion on PA Institutions or separation of religion and state? 2020-2023: Minor total change but change in intensity



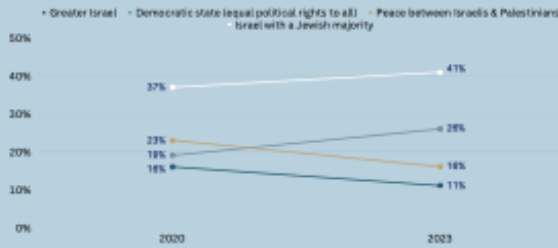
National priorities 2023 and 2020: Israeli Jews

Thinking about Israel and its problems, what is the top problem to be addressed? (Total, Jews)

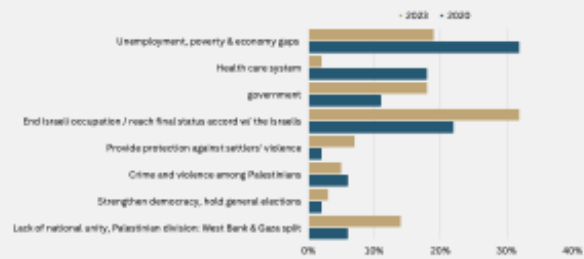


Jewish Israeli values over time (2020-2023)

Of these four values, which is the most important to you? (Israeli Jews, total & by ideology)

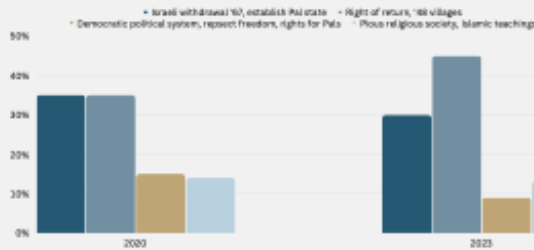


Top Palestinian problem that should be addressed most urgently (2020 - 2023)



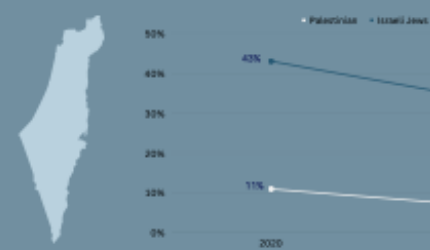
Palestinian values over time

Of these four values, which is the most important to you? (Palestinians)



Decline: Respecting Historical Claims

Do Jews/Palestinians have a legitimate, historic connection to the land? % Yes



2020-2023: Engaging the Other - increasingly not legitimate for Palestinians

Have you ever participated in meetings focused on Israelis meeting or working together with Palestinians (vice versa)? (% "Not Legitimate/Don't want to")



Jewish Israelis 2020-2023: Sharp Rise for Jewish-dominated unequal state

Israeli-Pal conflict: Which of the following option is best for Israel? (Israeli, Jews)

