



To: New America Foundation

From: Jim Gerstein

Date: December 3, 2009

Engaging Israelis on the Road to Final Status
Israeli National Survey Results

The results of [New America Foundation's national survey](#) of 1,000 Israelis reveal a very different picture from the narrative that has taken hold regarding Israeli attitudes toward President Obama and American efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite repeated media reports touting a "4 percent Obama approval rating" and arguments that the United States has lost the Israeli public's support for renewed peace efforts, Israelis actually demonstrate a much more supportive and nuanced view of President Obama, and there is solid backing for an American-sponsored final status agreement along the lines of where the parties left off nine years ago at Taba and in the recent Olmert-Abbas negotiations. The survey also shows that Prime Minister Netanyahu has a great deal of political space to sign a peace agreement with the Palestinians, including within his own Likud party.

The survey, conducted by Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications, took place November 8-15, 2009 and followed six in-depth focus group discussions with nearly 60 Israelis from different backgrounds, including Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Russian immigrants, and Israeli adults under 30 years of age. The survey and focus groups examined several aspects of Israeli public opinion and the dynamics underlying the first year of the Obama and Netanyahu Administrations, ranging from attitudes toward President Obama and the relationship with the United States to the aspirations and fears that people have about a peace agreement with the Palestinians to the overall national mood and political landscape that set the context in which policy decisions in Israel are received by its citizens.

This extensive research shows that Israelis believe peace is necessary, but they currently do not feel a sense of urgency to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians. At the same time, the public places a very high value on Israel's relations with the United States, and a majority thinks Barack Obama's election to the presidency is good for the world. As the Obama Administration continues its efforts to assert American leadership to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is very clear that it does so from a position of strength when seen through the prism of Israeli public opinion, and that there are real opportunities for the President and his team to speak directly and convincingly to the Israeli people.

Key findings from the survey include:

- ***Israelis express complex attitudes toward President Obama, and overall have a more positive impression of the President than a negative impression.*** While most Israelis (52 percent) think President Obama's election will be good for addressing the problems facing the world, many have concerns about his approach to their own country, and less than half (42 percent) think he supports Israel. Overall, Obama has a 41 percent favorable / 37 percent unfavorable rating among Israelis, which is notably stronger than opinion toward the Israeli Defense and Foreign Ministers.
- ***The public fundamentally trusts Prime Minister Netanyahu on security matters, and they will support any peace agreement he signs.*** While the Prime Minister has a modest 48 percent job approval, he is remarkably strong on every measure related to security – 69 percent approval on handling security, 62 percent think he is a strong leader, and 76 percent think he 'stands up for Israel.' Netanyahu's security image translates into 59 percent support for 'any agreement Netanyahu reaches with our enemies.'
- ***Israelis view the United States as an absolutely necessary ally, and they do not think there is any alternative.*** By a 65 to 31 percent margin, Israelis believe that the U.S. is the only powerful country that Israel can count on in the world today. Further, they do not believe Israel will be able to build alliances with other powers if relations with the U.S. ever deteriorate.
- ***There is a sense that relations with the U.S. are currently strong, but the public is split over whether American support is guaranteed or could be sidetracked by other factors like the U.S. economy and resolving the Palestinian conflict.*** With just two percent citing 'relations with the United States' as one of their top two concerns, U.S-Israel relations ranks last on a list of 10 issues that Israelis think their government should be addressing. But half the public think the U.S. will not support the status quo forever while the other half thinks U.S. support is secure regardless of whether Israel makes peace with the Palestinians.
- ***There is a great deal of concern that U.S. support could be endangered if Israel rejects a U.S.-sponsored final status agreement.*** Large majorities believe it is likely the United States would reduce financial (64 percent) and military (58 percent) aid if Israel rejects a U.S.-sponsored final status agreement – even if the Prime Minister cited security concerns and the division of Jerusalem as the reasons he opposes the agreement. Ultimately, the public is evenly split (48 percent each) over whether to support or oppose the Prime Minister if he rejects the U.S. proposal.
- ***Israelis believe the country needs to achieve a peace agreement with the Palestinians, but there is little sense of urgency and the country is divided over***



whether it is riskier to reach an agreement or not to reach an agreement.

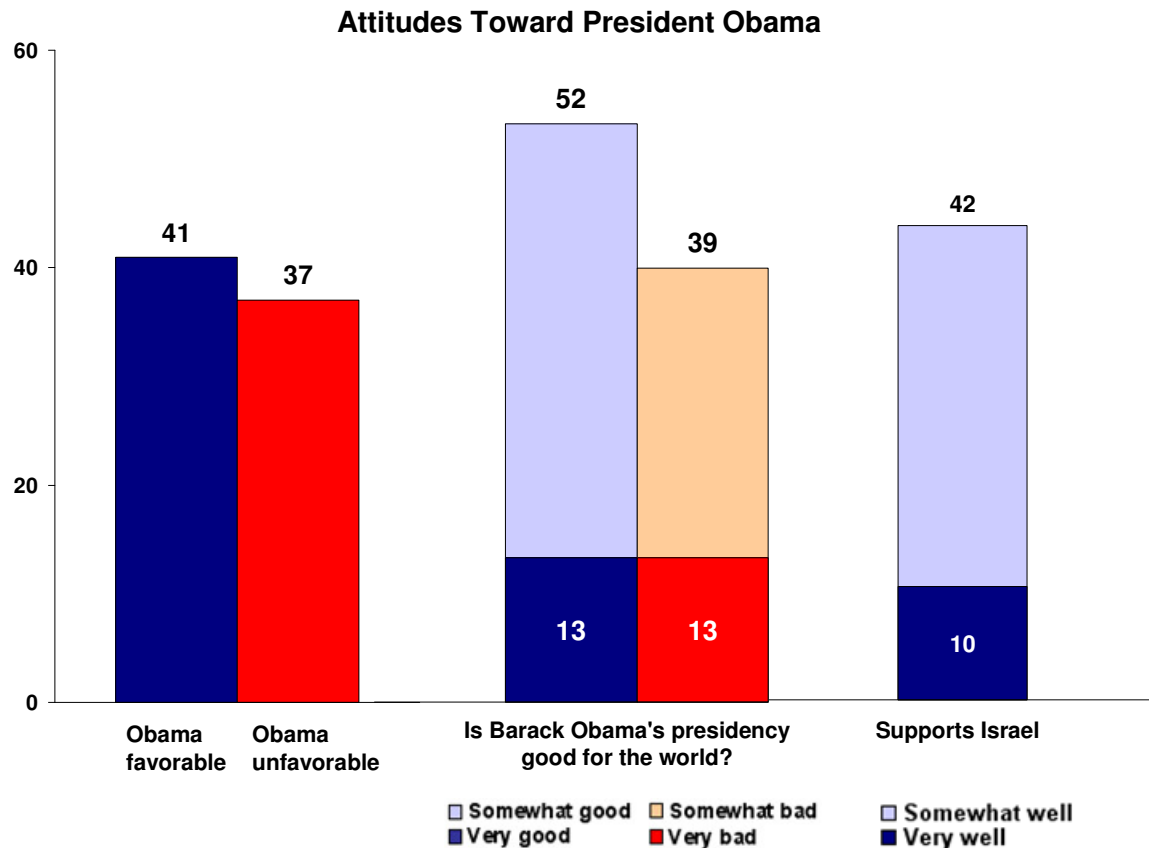
Nearly 3-in-5 Israelis think the country will never achieve security and prosperity without a peace agreement with the Palestinians. However, they are split over whether an agreement must happen in the next few years (50 percent) or whether they should let it take ‘as long as necessary’ (46 percent).

- ***Israelis view quality of life and economic improvements as the potentially good outcomes of a peace agreement, while security and dividing Jerusalem are seen as the potentially bad outcomes.*** The top reasons to support a peace agreement with the Palestinians are ‘a more normal life for our children’ (50 percent) and economic growth (37 percent), whereas the top reasons to oppose an agreement are the release of terrorists from Israeli prisons (35 percent), the inability of Palestinian leaders to prevent attacks from extremists who reject the agreement (34 percent), and the division of Jerusalem (33 percent).

President Barack Obama

Israelis express a mixture of emotions and assessments toward President Obama. A majority of 52 percent believe that his election is good for addressing the world’s problems (including 63 percent of Israelis under 30 years of age), and more Israelis give him a favorable rating than an unfavorable rating (41 percent favorable / 37 percent unfavorable). In fact, Obama is better-liked than Israel’s current Defense and Foreign Ministers, and his unfavorable rating is only four points higher than the unfavorable rating for George W. Bush, who is routinely characterized as very popular among Israelis. But there are also a lot of doubts centered on whether the President understands the threats facing Israelis, with large numbers believing he is weak on terrorism (50 percent) and naïve (43 percent). Overall, 42 percent of Israelis believe Obama supports Israel, compared to 55 percent who do not. This is certainly not a high level of confidence for an American President, but it is much stronger than the abysmal and frequently (but incorrectly) reported 4 percent approval rating that has driven conventional wisdom on Obama’s support in Israel.¹

¹ A *Jerusalem Post* poll of 500 Jewish Israelis conducted August 24-25, 2009 shows 4 percent believing Obama’s policies are more pro-Israeli than pro-Palestinian. Some reporting of this poll mistakenly referred to this as Obama’s approval rating while numerous other reports led with the headline that 4 percent of Israelis think Obama is pro-Israel. This reporting neglected to show the rest of the responses which indicated 35 percent consider Obama’s policies neutral. In other words, 39 percent in the *Jerusalem Post* poll believe his policies favor Israel or both sides equally. This figure is a more accurate representation of attitudes toward Obama’s policies and very consistent with the 42 percent in the New American Foundation poll that believe he “supports Israel.”



It is also worth noting that President Bill Clinton remains extraordinarily popular in Israel (59 percent favorable / 19 percent unfavorable) – about the same as the United States as a whole (56 percent favorable / 18 percent unfavorable – and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is also very strong (48 percent favorable / 23 percent unfavorable).

The focus group discussions shed a great deal of light on the complicated feelings toward Obama expressed in the poll. Israelis are impressed with Obama’s rise to the U.S. Presidency, and they view him as a decent man who will do good things for America and the world. A majority (55 percent) believe he is honest and trustworthy –considerably higher than the 36 percent who believe the same of Prime Minister Netanyahu – and 52 percent believe he will strengthen America’s standing in the world. But they are also bothered by a broadly shared sense that he is not on their side when it comes to the conflict with the Palestinians and 36 percent think President Obama shares their values (which is comparable to the 39 percent who think Prime Minister Netanyahu shares their values).

U.S.-Israel Relations

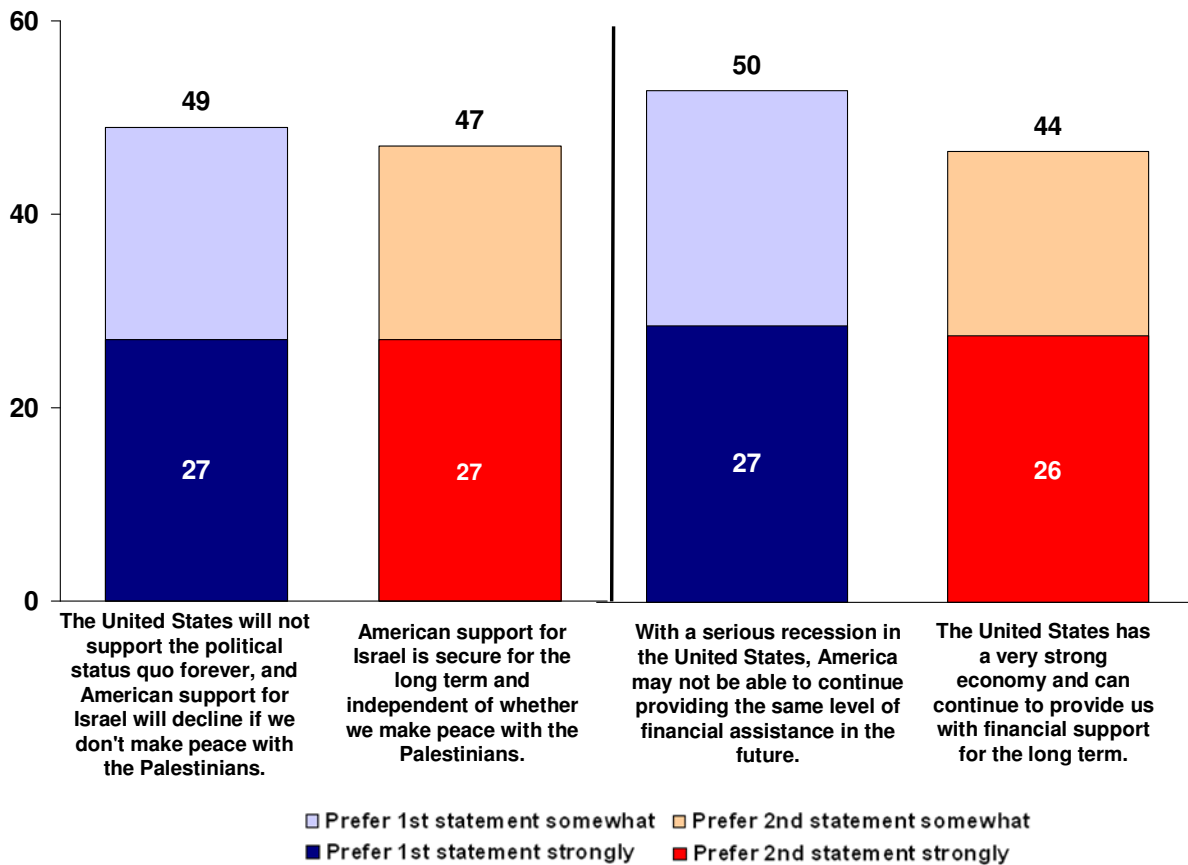
Independent of their ambivalent views toward President Obama, Israelis have a straightforward view regarding the importance of strong relations with America and take their

country's relationship with the United States very seriously. The starting point is a highly favorable opinion of the United States (56 percent favorable / 18 percent unfavorable), which is seen as Israel's strongest and irreplaceable ally by 65 percent of the public. Israelis closely follow American pop culture and news, which was very evident in the focus groups as people cited the details of the latest stories in the American press. Unlike other areas where Israeli public opinion is deeply divided, the appreciation for America and its importance for Israel hold true across the political spectrum.

Despite the tensions between the U.S. and Israel over settlements, Israelis currently do not see a serious problem or crisis with America. Only two percent cite relations with the United States as one of the top two issues that the government should be addressing, and they give Prime Minister Netanyahu a 61 percent approval rating on his handling of U.S.-Israel relations. To the extent that they have seen any tensions, Netanyahu is seen as standing up for Israel by three-quarters of the public. Simply put, Israelis do not feel any real stress on the relationship with America.

But the public is divided over whether the U.S. will indefinitely continue its current level of support for Israel due to economic and political considerations. By a narrow margin (50 to 44 percent), Israelis believe the U.S. economy may cause America to scale back some of its financial assistance to Israel instead of America being able to sustain its level of financial aid over the long term. The country is similarly divided (49 to 47 percent) over whether the United States will continue supporting Israel if the political stalemate with the Palestinians continues. These results do not reflect any great concern or confidence about the future of American political or economic support for Israel. What they do show is a divided Israeli public on the perception of changes taking place in America and the world that potentially create a new set of circumstances for Israel. Interestingly, orthodox Jews are the most likely to believe support will erode over time, but they are the least concerned about the relationship with America. This contrasts with secular Jews, who place a high value on the U.S. relationship but are the least likely to think American support may decline.

Division Over Long-Term U.S. Support



There is little sense among the Israeli public that the U.S. is about to launch a campaign to pressure Israel on various fronts. But with the public sensitive to maintaining strong ties with the U.S., they are not eager to resist U.S. efforts. When presented with a comprehensive American final status proposal that the U.S. asks Israelis and Palestinians to sign – including a final border with land swaps, Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem becoming part of the new Palestinian state, and allowing some Palestinian refugees to live in Israel – a national referendum to ratify the agreement passes by 8 points (53 to 45 percent).² If Prime Minister Netanyahu were to reject this agreement, citing Israeli security concerns and the division of Jerusalem, the public is evenly divided (48 percent each) over whether to support or oppose the Prime Minister’s decision. This is a remarkable result given Netanyahu’s tremendous standing on security issues, even among his political detractors.

² Details of the agreement were presented as follows: “This agreement includes an official end to the conflict with no further claims to be made by the Palestinians; a demilitarized Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza; internationally recognized borders that include some land swaps allowing for most Jewish settlers in the West Bank to be inside Israel while the Palestinians get equal land areas in return; international forces to monitor the new Palestinian state and border crossings; Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem become part of the new Palestinian state while Israel retains control of Jewish neighborhoods and the Western Wall in Jerusalem; and financial compensation for Palestinian refugees while allowing some refugees to live in Israel if they meet specific family reunification criteria and the Israeli government approves.”

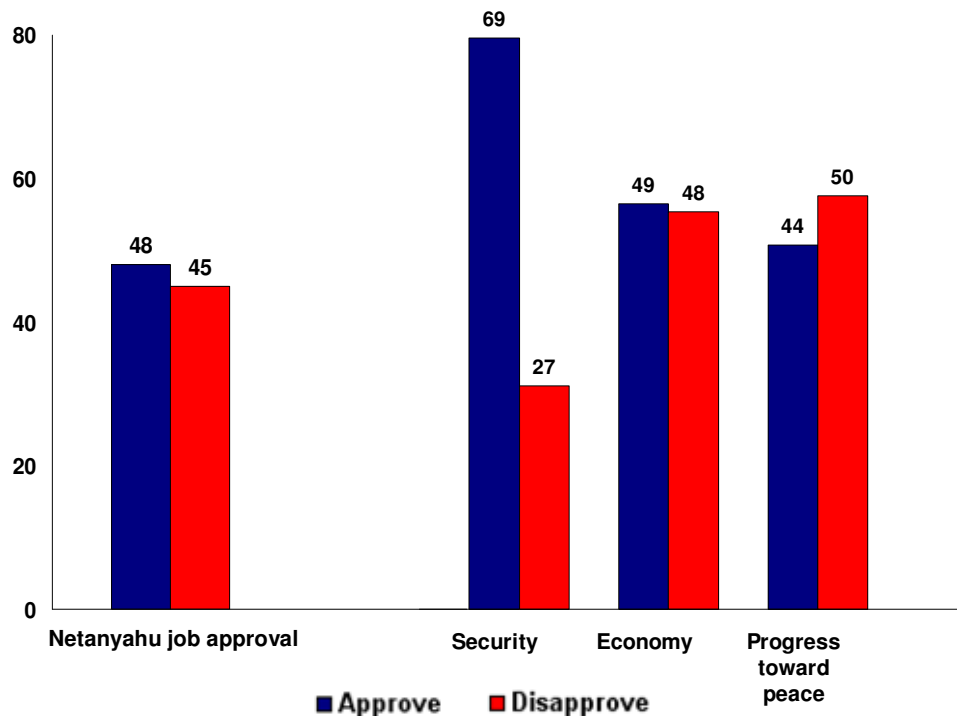
This deep division reflects the worries that Israelis have about the consequences of rejecting an American proposal. Large majorities believe it is likely the U.S. will reduce economic aid (64 percent) and military aid (58 percent) if Israel rejects an American final status proposal that is accepted by the Palestinians. Fewer people express concern over the likelihood of other potential consequences such as ending support in international institutions (43 percent) and not working with Israel to address Iranian nuclear development (43 percent).

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

Unlike their complicated and evolving attitudes toward President Obama, Israelis have rather certain attitudes toward Prime Minister Netanyahu whose lengthy time in the public eye has given the Israelis several years to get to know and judge him. At the center of Netanyahu's image is security. The Prime Minister's 69 percent approval rating on handling security is strikingly strong in such a politically divided country and exceeds approval for his handling of other issues, including relations with the United States (61 percent), the economy (49 percent), progress toward peace with the Palestinians (44 percent), and violent crime (30 percent). Netanyahu's security image spans the political spectrum, including with Kadima voters (66 percent approval on security) and self-identified centrists (67 percent approval on security). Even among Israel's left wing, which gives him a mere 25 percent favorability rating, Netanyahu has a 51 percent approval rating on handling security.

Despite the strong support for Netanyahu's efforts on security, the public has many personal doubts about the Prime Minister and is evenly divided on his overall performance (48 percent job approval / 45 percent disapproval). Not surprisingly, attitudes toward Netanyahu reflect political and ideological differences: the right wing thinks very highly of his performance (69 percent approval) while the left wing (23 percent approval) and the center (39 percent approval) think poorly of his performance.

Netanyahu Job Performance

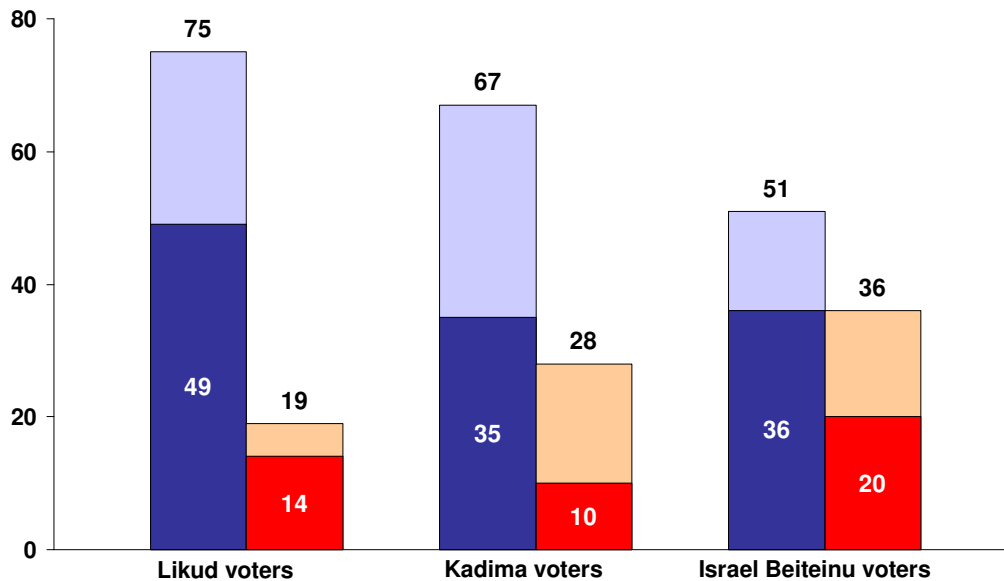


The disconnect between Netanyahu’s security image – in a country so clearly focused on security issues – and assessments of his overall performance is rooted in some dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister on the peace process and other doubts related to character and whose side he is on when it comes to domestic issues. Only 39 percent of Israelis think the Prime Minister shares their values, and just 36 percent think he is honest and trustworthy. But Netanyahu has skillfully overcome these challenges in the past, and his bigger difficulties are found in the view that he ‘puts political interests ahead of the country’s interests’ (52 percent think this describes him well) and that he puts ‘rich people ahead of everybody else’ (53 percent). These challenges are reinforced by the facts that only 29 percent believe the country is going in the right direction and the coalition government has a much lower approval rating than the Prime Minister.

Overall, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s strengths outweigh his weaknesses for Israelis, and his strong foundation on security issues gives him tremendous political room to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians. By a 25-point margin (59 to 34 percent), the public trusts Netanyahu to safeguard Israel’s security and will support ‘any agreement he reaches with our enemies.’ This holds true across the political spectrum, including among Likud voters (75 to 19 percent), Kadima voters (67 to 28 percent), and Israel Beiteinu voters (51 to 36 percent). The country may be divided over Netanyahu’s performance as Prime Minister, but Israelis are united in their support for him to make a peace agreement. As far as the public is concerned, the Prime

Minister is not constrained politically, and they will stand by him if he decides to break from his current coalition in order to reach a final status agreement.

Broad Support for Netanyahu to Reach Peace Agreement



First statement: I trust that Prime Minister Netanyahu would not agree to a peace deal that endangers Israel's security, and I will support any agreement he reaches with our enemies.

Second statement: I do not trust Prime Minister Netanyahu to sign a peace deal that adequately protects Israel's security, and I might oppose an agreement that he reaches with our enemies.

■ Prefer 1st statement strongly
 ■ Prefer 2nd statement somewhat
■ Prefer 1st statement somewhat
 ■ Prefer 2nd statement strongly

Attitudes toward a Final Status Agreement

The Israeli public certainly wants to end the conflict with the Palestinians. A clear majority (58 percent) believe Israel will never achieve security and prosperity unless it reaches a peace agreement with the Palestinians, compared to 34 percent who believe they have a reasonably secure and prosperous life and a peace agreement is not critical. And most Israelis support a final status agreement along the Clinton parameters where negotiations concluded at Taba nine years ago. But three reinforcing dynamics foster an atmosphere that currently depresses a public outcry for movement to reach peace:

Lack of urgency. There is very little sense of urgency to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. The demographic argument championed by former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and others has only 51 percent support compared to 42 percent who are not concerned about Jews becoming a minority in the territory covering Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. The country is also split over whether Israel ‘cannot afford to continue the current situation...and must reach a secure peace within 2-3 years’ (50 percent) or whether it ‘can continue the current

situation as long as necessary and should not rush into a peace agreement' (46 percent). While Israelis want peace, they seem to think that it can wait because there is no immediate political force, security threat, or real consequences that make the status quo untenable.

Lack of confidence. Israelis express a great deal of concern over whether the Palestinians – particularly Abu Mazen and Fatah – can keep extremists on their side from attacking Israel after an agreement is signed. This lack of confidence in Fatah is evident in the 55 percent who believe Fatah is incapable of enforcing an agreement, and it explains why a public that expresses such a strong desire for peace is so divided over whether they are more worried about the dangers of not reaching peace (50 percent) or more worried about the risks in making peace (45 percent). This tension is also on display when asked whether Israel should be negotiating with Fatah or Hamas – 38 percent choose Fatah and 19 percent choose Hamas, but 15 percent reject the premise and voluntarily say Israel should be negotiating with both Fatah and Hamas. With ongoing efforts to secure the release of Gilad Shalit, negotiating with Hamas is not necessarily the same taboo as it has been in the past, but it is noteworthy that nearly the same number of Israelis think Israel should negotiate with Fatah as those who think Israel should negotiate with either Hamas or both Hamas and Fatah.

Disparity between the reasons to support a peace agreement and the reasons to oppose a peace agreement. The public sees many good reasons for Israel to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and they believe these things are likely to happen as a result of an agreement. But the potentially good outcomes they see resulting from peace center on kitchen table issues like a more normal life or an improved economy, whereas the potentially bad outcomes they see resulting from peace center on the more evocative issues of security and Jerusalem. The top reason people give for supporting a peace agreement – cited by 50 percent – is 'less tension in the country and our children will lead a more normal life.' This is followed by unprecedented economic growth (37 percent) and the ability to reduce military spending and invest in domestic priorities like jobs and education (26 percent). Other reasons which center on security and international alliances are seen as less likely to happen and are significantly less important reasons. These contrast sharply with the reasons people have to oppose a peace agreement – 35 percent cite the release of terrorists who will be released from Israeli jails and return to violent acts, 34 percent cite the inability of Palestinians to control extremists who will launch attacks on Israel, and 33 percent cite the division of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

When considering Israeli public opinion, it is critical to understand that Israeli attitudes are very dynamic. This is reflected in a vibrant democracy that has held five national elections and elected four different Prime Ministers in the last ten years. Not to mention the frequent and volatile peaks and valleys for the country's major parties. For now, the government appears very stable, and the New America Foundation survey shows that Netanyahu has public backing to proceed on the peace process as he wishes. Since Netanyahu has become Prime Minister and established a government dominated by the right wing, the Obama Administration has

encountered a great deal of resistance in its efforts to advance a resolution to the Palestinian conflict.

But the Obama team has a strong card in its deck, which has been vastly underestimated because of a misleading claim about the President's standing in Israel that has taken hold as conventional wisdom. President Obama is seen as an honest and trustworthy leader who Israelis are inclined to like personally. After nearly a year of unanswered attacks and innuendo against the President and his team, Israelis unquestionably have concerns about the President's agenda. But they respect this President and he has the personal support of over 40 percent of the Israeli public. More importantly, they look to America as their sole ally of true relevance, and Israelis do not want to be in the position of opposing America's efforts.

Advancing the peace agenda will be very hard for numerous reasons. If approached properly through security reassurances and American leadership, Israeli public opinion can become a valuable and necessary asset for moving its own government to work constructively with an American-led effort to finally resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

#####

Methodology

Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications designed the questionnaire for this survey of 1,000 Israelis conducted November 8-15, 2009. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent with a 95 percent confidence level. Gerstein | Agne contracted the Israeli-based research company TNS Teleseker to administer the survey by telephone interviews in Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic. The Hebrew and Arabic speaking populations were called randomly among adults over 18 years of age; the Russian speaking population was called randomly using TNS Teleseker's database of Russian speakers over 18 years of age which has been developed over several years through other surveys conducted by random calling. TNS Teleseker was established in 1983 and is a leading market research company in Israel.