

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Public Opinion & Attitudes

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Introduction to Attitudinal Dynamics in Protracted Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents one of the most enduring and complex geopolitical disputes of the modern era, but its persistence is fundamentally rooted in the psychology of the populations involved. Attitudes toward the conflict--defined as relatively stable evaluations, feelings, and behavioral intentions regarding the opposing group, specific policies, or potential peace solutions--are critical determinants of political viability and social cohesion. These attitudes are not merely reflections of objective facts or historical events; rather, they are deeply embedded within complex systems of **social identity**, collective memory, trauma, and perceived existential threat. Understanding these psychological dynamics requires moving beyond simple political alignment to examine the cognitive processes and emotional frameworks that sustain hostility and, conversely, enable movements toward reconciliation. The study of these attitudes is essential for any meaningful effort toward conflict resolution, as even the most carefully crafted political agreement is unlikely to succeed without some degree of attitudinal shift among the affected populations.

Attitudes are formed and maintained through continuous interaction with social environments, including educational systems, media consumption, political leadership, and personal experiences of violence or security. In the context of a protracted conflict, attitudes often become highly polarized and resistant to change, serving protective functions for the ingroup. For both Israelis and Palestinians, attitudes frequently revolve around core issues of land ownership, security, historical justice, and the legitimacy of the opposing national narrative. The intensity of these attitudes is often proportional to the perceived centrality of the conflict to the group's identity and survival. Furthermore, these evaluations are rarely monolithic; they vary significantly based on demographic factors such as geographic location, religious observance, political affiliation, and direct exposure to violence, creating a mosaic of beliefs that complicates unified political action on either side.

The psychological research surrounding this conflict highlights that attitudes operate on multiple levels. At the explicit level, they manifest as expressed opinions on policy--such as support for settlements or the right of return. At the implicit level, they involve deeply held biases, stereotypes, and emotional reactions that often operate outside conscious awareness yet powerfully influence behavior and interpretation of events. A crucial transition in analyzing these attitudes involves recognizing the inherent asymmetry in power and experience, which fundamentally shapes the psychological landscape. While Israeli attitudes often focus on security and the recognition of the Jewish state, Palestinian attitudes are dominated by concerns regarding occupation, human rights, and self-determination. These divergent psychological priorities contribute significantly to the difficulty in finding common ground, necessitating a framework that acknowledges the distinct realities and psychological needs of both groups.

The Psychological Underpinnings of Group Identity and Threat Perception

Attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are fundamentally rooted in the psychological phenomenon of **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**, which posits that individuals derive self-esteem and identity from their membership in social groups. In this context, both Jewish Israeli and Palestinian identities are strongly defined in opposition to the perceived outgroup, leading to intense ingroup favoritism and the devaluation of the adversary. This dynamic is exacerbated by the perception of an existential threat, where the success or survival of one group is frequently viewed as contingent upon the failure or subjugation of the other. For many Israelis, the threat is primarily physical and demographic, rooted in historical persecution and the surrounding geopolitical volatility; for many Palestinians, the threat is structural, involving the ongoing loss of land, political control, and cultural narrative. These deeply institutionalized threat perceptions act as powerful psychological stabilizers for hostile attitudes, making any conciliatory gesture from the ingroup potentially threatening to group cohesion and identity integrity.

The concept of perceived threat is intricately linked to collective memory and historical trauma. Both Israelis and Palestinians possess powerful narratives of historical victimization, which are continuously reinforced through cultural institutions and political rhetoric. For Israelis, the Holocaust serves as a central reference point, profoundly influencing attitudes toward security and the necessity of maintaining a powerful, sovereign state capable of self-defense. For Palestinians, the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) and the subsequent dispossession and occupation form the core of their collective trauma, shaping attitudes around justice, return, and resistance. These competing, often mutually exclusive, historical narratives create a psychological barrier where recognizing the suffering of the outgroup is frequently perceived as undermining the legitimacy and moral standing of the ingroup's own narrative. This zero-sum approach to historical memory ensures that hostile attitudes are passed down across generations, transforming current political disagreements into deeply entrenched, morally charged conflicts.

Furthermore, the mechanisms of **ingroup solidarity** play a critical role in maintaining polarized attitudes. Deviation from the ingroup's dominant narrative--such as expressing empathy for the outgroup or supporting policies viewed as compromising security or national rights--is often met with social sanction, marginalization, or accusations of disloyalty. This pressure for attitudinal conformity ensures that even individuals who might privately harbor moderate views are often reluctant to express them publicly, thereby reinforcing the perception that the ingroup holds a unified, hardline stance. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced during periods of heightened violence, where the need for group cohesion against a perceived external threat overrides internal dissent. Consequently, political leaders who adopt more extreme, uncompromising attitudes often gain greater popular support, as they are seen as better protectors of the group's interests and emotional well-being, further solidifying the prevailing hostile psychological climate.

Attitudinal Heterogeneity within Israeli Society

Israeli attitudes toward the conflict are far from uniform, exhibiting significant heterogeneity based on key demographic, ideological, and religious divisions. Broadly, attitudes can be mapped along a spectrum ranging from the political right, which prioritizes security, territorial integrity (especially the retention of settlements), and the maintenance of a unified Jerusalem, to the political left, which generally supports a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders and views continued occupation as detrimental to Israel's democratic and moral character. However, this political spectrum intersects crucially with religious observance. The **National Religious sector**, for instance, often holds attitudes rooted in theological claims to the entirety of the land (Judea and Samaria), viewing withdrawal as a religious and historical transgression, regardless of security considerations. This deep ideological commitment makes this segment particularly resistant to peace initiatives involving territorial concessions.

A significant dimension of attitudinal variation involves the differing experiences of various Jewish ethnic groups. While often subtle, the attitudes of Mizrahi Jews (descendants of communities from Middle Eastern and North African countries) sometimes differ from those of Ashkenazi Jews (descendants of European communities), particularly concerning security and political trust. Furthermore, the attitudes of **Israeli Arab citizens** represent a unique and complex internal dynamic. While they are citizens of Israel, their ethnic and national identity often aligns them with the Palestinian people, leading to attitudes that are often critical of Israeli government policies, particularly regarding the occupation and the treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Their attitudes toward the conflict are often characterized by a dual loyalty dilemma, balancing civil rights within Israel against national solidarity with the Palestinian cause, creating a psychological strain that manifests in various political and social stances.

The primary psychological cleavage within Israeli society, transcending specific political party lines, is the trade-off between **security and political resolution**. For many Israelis, attitudes toward peace are not determined by abstract political principles but by a pragmatic assessment of risk. Periods of intense violence, such as the Second Intifada or subsequent conflicts in Gaza, dramatically shift attitudes toward the hardline end of the spectrum, increasing support for aggressive military actions and reducing trust in diplomatic solutions. Conversely, during periods of relative calm, support for unilateral or negotiated withdrawals may increase. This sensitivity to immediate security conditions means that Israeli attitudes are highly volatile and reactive, making long-term planning for peace challenging, as public opinion can rapidly revert to hostility following a single security incident, regardless of prior diplomatic progress or psychological willingness to compromise.

Attitudinal Heterogeneity within Palestinian Society

Palestinian attitudes toward the conflict are equally complex and heterogeneous, shaped by geography, political leadership, and the specific nature of lived experience under occupation or in the diaspora. A major division exists between Palestinians living in the **West Bank**, those in **Gaza**, and those residing in the vast **diaspora community**. West Bank residents, living under varied degrees of Israeli military and civil control, often exhibit attitudes oscillating between support for negotiation-based resistance (often associated with the Palestinian Authority and Fatah) and more militant forms of opposition. Gaza residents, having endured multiple major conflicts and a severe blockade, often hold more radical attitudes, reflecting intense disillusionment with the possibility of a political solution and greater support for groups like Hamas, which prioritize armed resistance.

The central attitudinal conflict within Palestinian society revolves around the core issues of resistance strategy and the acceptance of a two-state framework. While historically the two-state solution enjoyed broad international and local support, attitudes have hardened significantly over time, driven by the expansion of Israeli settlements, the perceived failure of the Oslo Accords, and internal political fragmentation. Consequently, attitudes increasingly favor either a return to armed resistance (reflecting deep distrust in diplomacy) or the adoption of a **one-state solution**--a framework often viewed by Palestinians as a means to achieve full equality and the Right of Return, fundamentally challenging the Jewish character of the state of Israel. These competing visions generate internal friction, making it difficult for Palestinian leadership to present a unified diplomatic front or secure broad public endorsement for any major concession.

The psychological impact of the **Right of Return (RoR)** is paramount in shaping Palestinian attitudes, particularly among refugees and the diaspora. For millions of Palestinians, RoR is not merely a political demand but a deeply symbolic and moral imperative tied to historical justice, dignity, and family honor. Attitudes that compromise this right, even slightly, are often viewed as betrayal of the national cause. This emotional intensity surrounding RoR makes it one of the most intractable psychological barriers to peace, as any solution that fully satisfies the Palestinian demand for RoR is perceived by most Israelis as an existential threat. Therefore, Palestinian attitudes toward any peace plan are often rigorously evaluated based on how closely they align with the restoration of historical rights and the recognition of past injustices, further highlighting the centrality of historical narrative over pragmatic political expediency.

The Influence of Narrative and Media Framing

The construction and dissemination of national narratives are arguably the most powerful psychological tools shaping attitudes toward the conflict. Both sides maintain distinct, often contradictory, official histories that are reinforced through state-controlled education, public memorials, and mass media. For Israelis, the narrative emphasizes historical connection to the

land, the necessity of Zionism as a response to anti-Semitism, and the defensive nature of all military actions. For Palestinians, the narrative centers on historical dispossession, resistance against occupation, and the continuity of national presence. These narratives function as cognitive filters, ensuring that incoming information about the conflict is interpreted in a manner consistent with the ingroup's moral righteousness and the outgroup's culpability. This leads to a pervasive issue of **confirmation bias**, where individuals actively seek out and internalize media and information that validate their existing hostile attitudes, while rejecting or minimizing credible information that challenges their worldview or humanizes the adversary.

Media framing plays a critical role in attitude maintenance by selectively presenting events, often resorting to language that dehumanizes or delegitimizes the opposing side. Psychological research demonstrates that exposure to biased media coverage significantly increases levels of prejudice, reduces empathy, and strengthens support for aggressive military policies. For example, the framing of Palestinian resistance actions as purely "terrorism" by Israeli media, or the framing of Israeli security measures as purely "oppression" by some Palestinian media outlets, simplifies complex realities into moral dichotomies. This simplification is highly effective in mobilizing public opinion and ensuring psychological distance from the suffering of the outgroup. When the adversary is consistently portrayed as inherently malicious or irrational, attitudes supporting negotiation or compromise become psychologically untenable, as negotiation with an existential threat is perceived as weakness or self-destruction.

Furthermore, the advent of digital and social media has introduced new complexities, enabling the rapid spread of highly polarized and emotionally charged content. While social media theoretically allows for greater exposure to diverse viewpoints, psychological patterns of selective exposure often lead individuals to inhabit echo chambers, where their existing attitudes are constantly reinforced by like-minded individuals and algorithms. This environment cultivates a sense of moral certainty and reduces the psychological friction required to maintain hostile attitudes. The lack of gatekeepers in social media often allows for the proliferation of extreme rhetoric and conspiracy theories, which further harden attitudes by providing simplistic, emotionally satisfying explanations for the conflict's complexity, thereby undermining efforts by moderate voices to introduce nuance or promote empathy.

Cognitive Biases and Moral Disengagement

Hostile attitudes are sustained not only by external factors like media but also by powerful internal cognitive mechanisms. One of the most significant is **attribution bias**, where individuals attribute the ingroup's negative actions (e.g., violence, aggression) to situational necessity or self-defense, while attributing the outgroup's identical actions to inherent malice, cruelty, or irrationality. This asymmetrical attribution maintains the ingroup's moral high ground and justifies retaliatory measures, regardless of the objective circumstances. Coupled with the fundamental attribution

error, this bias ensures that individuals consistently view the opposing side as the primary obstacle to peace, thereby absolving the ingroup of responsibility for perpetuating the conflict and maintaining high levels of distrust.

The psychological process of **dehumanization** is a critical precursor to extreme attitudes and violence. By portraying the outgroup as less than fully human--often through animalistic metaphors or by denying their capacity for complex emotions--individuals can morally disengage from the consequences of their actions against the adversary. Dehumanization serves to reduce empathy and guilt, making it psychologically easier to support policies involving collective punishment, excessive force, or indifference to the suffering of the outgroup. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, dehumanizing language is frequently employed by political and religious extremists on both sides, transforming the conflict from a political dispute over resources into a moral struggle against an inherently evil enemy, thereby hardening attitudes against any form of reconciliation or shared future.

Finally, **zero-sum thinking** acts as a pervasive cognitive barrier to peace. This bias involves the belief that any gain for the adversary must necessarily come at the expense of the ingroup, preventing the perception of mutually beneficial outcomes. When attitudes are dominated by zero-sum calculations, compromise is viewed not as a strategic necessity but as a loss of national integrity or security. This mindset is particularly visible regarding core issues like Jerusalem or water resources, where a psychological inability to conceive of shared solutions leads to rigid, uncompromising attitudes. Overcoming zero-sum thinking requires not only political maneuvering but also profound psychological reframing to demonstrate that peace and stability can yield non-zero-sum benefits for both groups, such as enhanced economic prosperity and long-term security.

Attitudes toward Peace Mechanisms and Conflict Resolution

Attitudes toward specific peace mechanisms, such as the two-state solution, normalization, or economic cooperation, reflect the deepest levels of trust and hope held by the populations. Currently, while the two-state solution remains the internationally favored framework, attitudes among both Israelis and Palestinians show declining support, driven primarily by perceived infeasibility and mutual distrust. For Israelis, declining support is linked to concerns over security guarantees, the difficulty of dismantling settlements, and the lack of a unified, reliable Palestinian negotiating partner. For Palestinians, declining support reflects the belief that decades of settlement expansion have rendered a viable, contiguous Palestinian state impossible, leading to attitudes of profound cynicism regarding the diplomatic process. This pervasive sense of pessimism acts as a powerful inhibitor, reinforcing the belief that the conflict is insoluble and that only military or unilateral action can secure national goals.

The psychological concept of **trust** is the single most important variable influencing attitudes

toward peace. Trust is required to believe that the opposing side will honor agreements, refrain from violence, and genuinely commit to a shared future. Decades of failed agreements, broken ceasefires, and continuous violence have severely eroded this trust on both sides. When trust is absent, attitudes shift toward prioritizing maximalist security measures and minimal concessions. Psychological interventions aiming to shift attitudes toward peace must therefore focus heavily on rebuilding interpersonal and institutional trust, often through sustained, meaningful contact and demonstrated reliability by political leadership. Without a psychological foundation of mutual trust, even minor provocations can instantly trigger a reversion to hostile, defensive attitudes.

Attitudes toward **normalization**--the establishment of typical diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations--also reveal deep divisions. Among Israelis, normalization is often viewed as a necessary step toward regional stability and security, and there is generally high support for agreements that bypass the Palestinian issue (such as the Abraham Accords). Among Palestinians, however, attitudes toward normalization are often negative, viewing it as a betrayal of the national cause and a mechanism to sideline the occupation. The attitude that normalization is only acceptable after a just resolution of the conflict reflects a profound psychological commitment to the idea that national rights must precede regional expediency, demonstrating that political attitudes are deeply intertwined with moral frameworks of justice and solidarity.