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We interviewed hundreds of Israelis and Gazans – here's why we fear for the ceasefire

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As the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas enters its fourth week, attention is now focusing on its more difficult second phase. And already the prospects of this proceeding as originally planned are looking extremely fragile.

Hamas said it will delay the release of more Israeli hostages, arguing that Israel has breached the ceasefire conditions. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has responded with the threat that if the hostage exchange doesn't take place as scheduled then the fighting in Gaza would start again.

Any agreement can only hold if it is supported by ordinary people, and if it reflects their perspectives – something easily overlooked in the public debate and foreign policy engagement.

We conducted large representative surveys in Israel and Gaza in early January, days before the ceasefire was announced. This consisted of interviews with over 1,400 respondents in a demographically matched online panel of the Jewish Israeli population, and as part of an in-person survey in Gaza. Respondents were matched by age, occupation, gender, education and religious group.

Our findings have not been peer reviewed yet, but a preliminary report is available at the Open Science Foundation repository.

Our data shows why 16 months of extreme violence and suffering have created psychological barriers to peace. They also suggest ways to achieve a more positive future.

The immediate findings are sobering. In Israel, opposition to a two-state solution remains at an all-time high, with 62% of participants rejecting the idea – up from 46% before October 7.

Nearly half of Israelis we spoke to were against living side by side, and one in five dismissed even the possibility of personal contact with Palestinians.

In Gaza, the prospects of living side by side with Israelis are equally deemed unrealistic. Less than 31% of respondents supported any interpersonal contact. And less than half saw the formation of two states as an option to end the conflict.

Contrary to one popular belief, direct exposure to the war does not by itself explain these increased hostilities. The attacks by Hamas on and since October 7 have left profound scars and reopened historical trauma for many, as have Israel's relentless military attacks throughout Gaza.

But according to our data, having immediate family members affected by the war or experiencing displacement was not associated with more extreme attitudes. For all the aggression taking place so far, the psychological blast radius is bigger than the physical one.

Love and hate

The key roadblock to peace may lie in each side's understanding of why the other engages in violence. We asked Israelis and Palestinians why people from their group supported violence during the war, and why people from the other side supported violence. We found a profound asymmetry in both populations.

Palestinians and Israelis said that attacks from their side were more motivated by what psychologists call "ingroup love" (care and concern for their own people) than by "outgroup hate" (passionate dislike of the other side). Yet both Israelis and Palestinians thought that the other side's violence was more motivated by hatred.

Why is this important? Social psychological studies demonstrate that the belief that we are hated by another group decreases our desire and optimism for diplomatic solutions, instead leading to an inclination to either separate from or destroy the other. Indeed, surveys conducted in September 2024 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that most Israelis and Palestinians believed that the other side intended to commit genocide.

Intractable conflict? The more that Israelis and Palestinians believe the other side hates them, the less chance there is for peace. EPA-EFE/Atef Safadi

Our data now shows that the more Israelis believed that Gazans were more motivated by outgroup hate than ingroup love, the more likely they were to believe that the October 7 attacks indicated genocidal intent.

On both sides, it was this belief that the other was motivated by hate that explains the strengthened desire for social separation and blocking acceptance of reconciliation proposals. Nobody wants to interact with a group they think is predominantly hate driven.

This is bad news for those attempting to implement and expand the ceasefire against these challenges. Perceived outgroup hate weakens their ability to recruit popular support for peace and strengthens the hand of spoilers.

Bridging the divides

Not all indicators are worsening, however. Snapshots of public opinion do not capture the way views can change. Compared to six months ago, more Israelis now favour diplomatic efforts over continued military action to resolve the crisis. And if the new hostage release deal holds firm, this trend may continue.

Our research suggests that there is a hardened radical group making up about 20% in both populations who appear to resist any compromise on their moral and political beliefs. But most populations show fluctuating attitudes over time and in response to changing conditions. As violence becomes less salient, views may shift.

Nevertheless, we should not ignore each side's misperception of the motives of the other, but instead try to correct them. Research shows that correcting misperceptions of norms can be difficult, but when successful can change attitudes and behaviour.

The risk now lies in a too narrow focus among current decision-makers – a delegitimised and fragmented Palestinian leadership, an infighting Israeli government, and a transaction-minded administration in Washington – seeking to secure political deals that deliver results on paper.

For the ceasefire to endure, the policy focus will need to shift to bridging a deeper psychological divide.