

Want your enemies to trust you? Put on your baby face

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Abdullah II of Jordan

Do baby-faced opponents have a better chance of gaining your trust? By subtly altering fictional politicians' faces, researchers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem examined whether minor changes in appearance can affect people's judgment about "enemy" politicians and their offer to make peace. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the research showed that peace offers from baby-faced politicians had a better chance of winning over the opposing population than the exact same offer coming from more mature-looking leaders.

"The Face of the Enemy: The Effect of Press-reported Visual Information Regarding the Facial Features of Opponent-politicians on

Support for Peace" was authored by Dr. Ifat Maoz, Associate Professor in the Noah Mozes Department of Communication and Journalism, and Head of the Smart Family Institute of Communications, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Prof. Maoz provided Jewish-Israeli respondents with a fictional news item containing a peace proposal and a fictional Palestinian leader's photograph. The photograph was manipulated to appear as either baby-faced or mature by making a 15% change in the size of eyes and lips. Respondents were then asked to evaluate the peace offer and rate the [trustworthiness](#) of the politician who offered it.

Although both images were based on the same original, the baby-faced politician was judged as more trustworthy and his peace proposal received greater support than the same offer from the mature-faced politician.

"People generally associate a baby face with attributes of honesty, openness and acceptance," explains Prof. Maoz, "and once you trust your adversary, you have a greater willingness to reach a compromise."

Previous studies have shown that viewers can form [judgments](#) of trustworthiness after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to a novel face. Certain facial features evoke feelings of warmth, trust and cooperation while minimizing feelings of threat and competition. People with babyish facial characteristics like large eyes, round chin and pudgy lips are perceived as kinder, more honest and more trustworthy than mature-faced people with small eyes, square jaws, and thin lips. Baby-faced people also produce more agreement with their positions.

But while past research indicates that the appearance of [politicians](#) from one's own country affects attitudes and voting intentions, this is the first study that systematically examines the impact of politicians' faces from

the opposing side in a conflict.

These conclusions are especially important as the dominance of TV and Internet, combined with the proliferation of photo-ops, photo-shopping and image consultants, means politicians' faces are seen more than ever and their appearance has a greater chance of affecting the impressions, attitudes and opinions of media consumers.

The study also gauged how manipulating [facial features](#) affected populations with different pre-existing attitudes, by overcoming hawkish and dovish participants' resistance to change and increasing their perceptions of opponents as trustworthy. Surprisingly, while study participants with hawkish positions held markedly negative initial attitudes towards peace and the opponents in a conflict — attitudes that tend to be rigid and resistant to change — they showed a more significant response than dovish [respondents](#) to differences in facial maturity.

The study suggests that in situations of protracted conflict, the face of the enemy matters. [Visual information](#) conveying subtle, undetected changes in facial physiognomy were powerful enough to influence perceivers' judgments of the opponent-politician and of the proposal he presented for resolving the conflict.

The findings of this study also have important practical implications regarding the mobilization of public opinion in support of conflict resolution. Previous research has shown that images of politicians are often manipulated in media coverage to appear more or less favorable and that such manipulations affect citizens' attitudes and voting intentions towards politicians from their own state and country. This study shows that manipulating the favorability of media images of opponent political leaders in intractable conflict may also have a marked effect on public attitudes, and that media coverage presenting favorable

images of opponent leaders may have the potential to mobilize public support for conflict resolution through compromise.

Maoz adds that there are situations in which a baby-face is not advantageous: "Although features of this type can lend politicians an aura of sincerity, [openness](#) and receptiveness, at the same time they can communicate a lack of assertiveness. So people tend to prefer baby-faced politicians as long they represent the opposing side, while on their own side they prefer representatives who look like they know how to stand their ground."

Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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