Three speakers from Jewish advocacy groups on the centre and centre-left agreed that current prospects for Mideast peace are poor, with one blaming the lack of a partner on the Palestinian side for the impasse.

Hosted by Oraynu, Toronto’s congregation for Humanistic Judaism, and held at the Borochov Cultural Centre, the March 22 panel featured Steve McDonald, deputy director of communications and public affairs at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIIA); Karen Mock, a human rights consultant and a founder of JSpaceCanada; and Joan Garson, chair of the New Israel Fund of Canada (NIFC).

They answered questions from moderator Rabbi Denise Handlarski, Oraynu’s spiritual leader, about prospects for peace in Israel, the secular/religious divide among Israeli Jews, Israel’s economic challenges and the role Canada should play in supporting and criticizing Israel.

On the question of peace, Mock said what’s needed is mutual recognition followed by bilateral negotiations based on pre-1967 borders and leading to Palestinian statehood.

She added that the Palestinians must abandon the notion of pre-1948 borders as a starting point for talks, disavow violence and “demonstrate a willingness to stay the course of negotiations.”

Garson said a lasting peace should be based on the values of Israel’s founders as stated in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, namely, the upholding of full social and political equality for all citizens, regardless of race, creed and sex.

In addition to stressing that Israel must oppose racism and “expand the shrinking democratic state,” Garson said, “we must end the occupation and show we’re not looking to build a state from the river to the sea, while remaining committed to Israel’s security.”

She conceded that currently, “with ISIS perched on the Syrian border,” security feels more tenuous, but “without mutual respect for all communities and passion to seek peace, even if it seems far away today, that peace won’t come.”

McDonald took a harder line on prospects for peace, saying resistance on the Palestinian side has made it “elusive.”

Since 1967 and through the Oslo process of the 1990s, he argued, Israel has tried to withdraw from land in exchange for peace. Since 2000, Israeli prime ministers have made three different offers that would have created a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, he said, but all were rejected without a counter proposal.

Most Israelis support a two-state solution, he said, yet recent polls showed that a large proportion of Palestinians support the stabbing campaign against Israelis.

“If an election were held today, [Palestinian President] Mahmoud Abbas would win. He has neither the credibility or will to make peace,” he said.

McDonald added that the path to peace is one in which Israel works – ideally with the Palestinians, but if not, unilaterally – “to create economic opportunities for Palestinians, improve conditions in the territories and hope the Palestinians will one day have a leader... who’s a partner for peace.”

On divisions between religious and secular Israelis, Mock and Garson denounced circumstances they said have caused many secular and non-Orthodox observant Jews to feel like second-class citizens.

“The balance of power is in the hands of the Orthodox. They get to say which schools get more money and who’s exempt from military service, and they maintain a grip on the laws of marriage and conversion,” Mock said, suggesting that electoral reform could help resolve these issues.

McDonald said he sees the religious/secular divide in Israel as a “greater existential conflict than that between Israel and Palestine.”

He praised efforts being made in the haredi community to integrate its members into the military and work force.

He said the haredi community’s primary concern is losing children to secularization and that Israelis’ ultimate goal should be “unity, not uniformity,” since “the last thing we should do is tear ourselves apart from within.”