

PolicyWatch 1731

## **Palestinian Public Opinion: Tactically Flexible, Strategically Ambitious**

[David Pollock](#)

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Amid the latest setback in the peace process -- the ongoing failure to agree on a "peace talks for settlement freeze" deal -- Palestinian public opinion trends reveal unexpected flexibility on short-term tactics, but also troubling long-term intentions. Five public opinion polls of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians taken by five different reputable pollsters in October-November 2010 show a very mixed picture.

On the positive side, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the Palestinian public backs a resumption of peace talks with Israel, even without preconditions. Surprisingly, support for rejectionist actors such as Hamas or Iran is very low by recent standards. And several polls show that a majority of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians would accept a two-state peace solution with Israel, with half even willing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state alongside a Palestinian one.

At the same time, when asked explicitly about whether a settlement freeze should be a precondition for resuming direct negotiations, Palestinians are widely in support. Moreover, although a majority of them claim to back a two-state solution, an even larger majority clearly continue to harbor irredentist claims over pre-1967 Israel as well. These findings raise questions about whether the Palestinian Authority (PA) is leading or following public opinion -- and whether peace talks, even if they can be renewed, will ever result in an agreement grounded in enduring popular acceptance.

### Background

In July-August 2010 and again in November, the author traveled to the region to meet with Palestinian pollsters and observe their work in Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. This article is based on those consultations and on reported results from the following five survey organizations: the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, Arab World for Research and Development, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.

All five polls were conducted in the weeks after the PA suspended peace talks upon the expiration of Israel's moratorium on new settlement construction. Each poll involved face-to-face interviews with a representative geographic probability sample of 1,000-1,200 Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza, yielding an approximate error margin of plus-or-minus three percentage points. Palestinian pollsters have argued convincingly that, by using local interviewers and data processors, they are able to conduct credible polls even under Hamas rule in Gaza (though both official and social harassment appear to be on the rise).

### Backing Talks with Israel, Rejecting Most Alternatives

On the question of resuming peace talks with Israel, much depends on how the issue is framed. Specifically, three different polls demonstrate that if a settlement freeze is mentioned as a possible precondition for negotiations, the majority of Palestinians (54-62 percent) support that demand. However, if asked simply about negotiating with Israel, without any mention of preconditions, two other polls show majority backing simply for resuming peace talks, with no apparent strings attached. An explanation for this attitude emerges from a different question: nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Palestinians say they need successful negotiations more than Israel does. And the same proportion of Palestinians, in a different poll, say that Israelis are "interested in making peace with the Palestinians," at least "to some extent."

Earlier this month, PA president Mahmoud Abbas began to publicly discuss the option of dissolving the PA altogether if the impasse with Israel continues. The Palestinian public, however, clearly opposes that action. In one poll, for example, only one-quarter of respondents deemed that proposal "appropriate" or agreed that Palestinians could "bear the consequences." Another poll shows only marginally higher support (30 percent) for such a drastic step.

Popular support for violence against Israel or a renewed "armed intifada," although higher, is still the minority view in most polls, ranging from 25 to 40 percent depending on the question's wording. And only about half of the Palestinian public backs either a "resort to popular nonviolent and unarmed resistance" or a unilateral declaration of independence. Surprisingly, Gazans are only slightly more inclined than West Bankers to favor such options.

The only alternative to gain clear majority support is an appeal to the UN Security Council for recognition -- and three-quarters of Palestinians believe the United States would veto such a measure.

### Hamas, Iran, and Ahmadinezhad Rate Surprisingly Low

The new polls confirm a two-year trend: the PA and its leaders continue to outpoll Hamas and its leaders, currently by more than a two-to-one margin. Fatah, Mahmoud Abbas, and PA prime minister Salam Fayad generally score an approval or confidence rating in the range of 45 to 60 percent. By comparison, Hamas and leader Ismail Haniyah generally score in the 15-25 percent range.

For the most part, these numbers show only modest differences between Gazans and West Bankers. For example, one reliable poll taken October 20-22 showed that Abbas would receive 38 percent of the vote in Gaza if new elections were held, compared to just 11 percent for Haniyah. This is in line with widespread views of each government's performance in reducing corruption, improving security, and providing public services, and with Palestinian perceptions falling under the general category of "how things are going for your family." In all of these areas, attitudes have been considerably better in the West Bank than in Gaza lately.

In sharp contrast to a common misconception, Iran's radical policies currently enjoy relatively little support in either the West Bank or Gaza. Only 29 percent of Palestinians say that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would likely yield a positive outcome for the region. A third (37 percent) say that an Iranian nuclear breakout would not matter, and another third (34 percent) say it would have negative regional effects. A separate poll showed negative overall views of Iran and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, in both the West Bank and Gaza. On a 100-point scale, Iran received an average rating of just 39 in the West Bank and 43 in Gaza. Ahmadinezhad's scores were similarly low: 42 in the West Bank and 37 in Gaza. Since July 2009, these numbers have been stable in Gaza and have declined by about ten points in the West Bank.

### 'Two-State' or 'Two-Stage' Solution?

On December 6, Fayad told an EU audience that "a majority on both sides favor a two-state solution" in which a new, independent Palestinian state would arise as part of a permanent peace accord with Israel. Several of the new polls do show continued Palestinian majority acceptance of this formula in both the West Bank and Gaza. And on the related question of recognizing Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people in such a peace accord, a clear majority of West Bankers (57 percent) say they would accept that proposal. That figure drops significantly in Gaza, however, to just 37 percent.

At the same time, when presented with a choice of longer-term options, clear majorities in both the West Bank and Gaza say "the actual [al-fi'li] goal should be to start with two states but then move it all [to] being one Palestinian state." Only a minority -- 34 percent of West Bankers, and 23 percent of Gazans -- choose the alternative formulation: "the preferred [al-afdal] goal" is for a two-state solution that keeps two states living side by side. This is probably because roughly 60 percent of respondents in both territories say they are "not so certain" that "Israel will exist twenty-five years from now as a Jewish state with a Jewish majority."

Similarly, another poll shows a solid majority (65 percent) saying it is "essential" that "historic Palestine from the Jordan River to the sea" be "part of a peace agreement" -- even though just half as many (31 percent) call this "the most realistic or achievable scenario." In the achievability category, the two-state solution garnered a plurality (45 percent), while small minorities opted for either a one-state, binational solution in which Israelis and Palestinians "share power and are equal citizens" (14 percent) or confederations with Jordan and Egypt (11 percent).

### Policy Implications

Just as these messages from the Palestinian public are mixed, so, too, are their policy implications for the United States. The tactical flexibility evident on the Palestinian "street" regarding the immediate issue of resuming negotiations, and the widespread popular recognition that there are no good alternatives to this path, suggest that Washington would be on firm ground in encouraging the PA and Israel to find their way back to the negotiating table. But once the real bargaining over peace terms begins, these findings underline the importance of U.S. support for confidence-building steps by both sides -- and for the most serious consideration of concrete ways to ensure that a final Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement is truly final.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2010 study [Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for U.S.-Arab Relations](#).