

# Palestinians and the Two-State Solution: Hard Data on the Hardest Questions

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Brief Analysis

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**Three experts on Palestinian and Israeli public opinion discuss recent poll results, sociopolitical trends, and potential avenues for expanding bilateral cooperation on smaller ‘non-narrative’ issues.**

*On July 21, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum in conjunction with the release of its new report [A Nation Divided: Palestinian Views on War and Peace with Israel \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-nation-divided-palestinian-views-on-war-and-peace-with-israel\)](#). The speakers included the report's author, David Pollock, who heads the Institute's Project Fikra; Tamar Hermann, academic director of the Guttman Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute; and Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at the Institute and former member of the Palestinian Authority negotiating team. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

# DAVID POLLOCK

**A** *Nation Divided* compiles face-to-face surveys of Palestinians conducted by Palestinians, with data stretching back ten years. Although Palestinian public opinion is usually presented as monolithic, the report focuses on its internal divisions.

One key division is chronological. Over the past decade, Palestinian public opinion has moved in a more militant and less conciliatory direction. In polls as recent as February 2020, support for a two-state solution was a minority position. This does not mean the idea of a binational one-state solution has gained traction—only 10% of the public supported that. Instead, the majority advocated regaining all of historic Palestine. Further, 58% in the West Bank and 62% in Gaza said that even if a two-state solution is reached, conflict with Israel should continue until the Palestinians regain all territory.

A second division is between Palestinians in different territories, as seen in two recent polls (mid-2019 and early 2020) regarding potential Israeli annexations of West Bank territory. According to the more recent poll, just 25% of West Bank respondents strongly agreed that Palestinians should oppose annexation even by force if necessary, a decrease from the previous poll. Support for a third intifada drew similar numbers, showing that the prospect of a West Bank uprising against annexation is relatively low.

In Gaza, however, the percentage who called for opposing annexation by force if necessary was much higher. Generally, attitudes in each territory can differ by as much as 30-40 points. In this case, the discrepancy likely represents how respondents are fine with fellow Palestinians in other areas opening armed confrontation against Israel, but are less inclined to take that risk in their own territory.

As for East Jerusalem, Palestinian residents there have traditionally held much more moderate attitudes toward Israel for practical reasons. Today, though, they express the same views on armed responses to annexation that Palestinians in the West Bank did—a gigantic change over the past five years. Similarly, 52% of them said a decade ago that they would rather be citizens of Israel than a Palestinian state, but that number is only about 10% today. One key factor behind this shift was the 2015-2016 “knife intifada” and subsequent Israeli reaction. Yet even as public opinion has drifted toward more militant aspirations, Palestinians do not usually engage in militant activities, partly because they are concerned about the Israeli/PA security response, and also because they are more focused on conditions in their daily lives.

A third division has emerged between the general population and the elite. On short-term questions regarding economic cooperation with Israel and other tactical considerations, the Palestinian public is much more moderate than the official PA or Hamas party line. Sometimes this goes beyond the tactical; for instance, 60% of the public would accept limiting the right of return to only the West Bank or Gaza, and two-thirds say the PA should stop paying salaries to convicted terrorists in Israeli prisons. In contrast, the PA claims it cannot compromise on the latter issue because of public opinion.

Another division is generational—the younger generation is more moderate than their elders on short-term tactical issues. Yet this division disappears on many longer-term strategic issues.

In the regional context, the majority of Palestinians agree with Arabs in neighboring states that internal political and economic reform is more important than any foreign policy issue. Despite long-term aspirations against Israel, Palestinians are not inclined to rise up en masse, largely because they believe their situation is not as bad as other conflicts in the Middle East.

Fortunately, the current negative trend is not inescapable—Palestinian public opinion toward Israel could swing back in a positive direction under different circumstances (and, potentially, different leadership). One can still envision a different future, one in which Palestinian leaders show their people that peace is the way to end

occupation and fulfill their long-term national aspirations.

## TAMAR HERMANN

The title *A Nation Divided* is also very applicable to Israel, which used to be divided on the Palestinian issue but has now become more broadly fractured between left and right. According to recent polls, approximately 15% of Israelis now define themselves as being on the left, 35% in the center, and 50-60% on the right. And those in the majority right camp believe that a two-state solution would not end the Palestinian desire for one state. Even if the implications of Pollock's data are true—that this desire remains mostly an aspiration, not an action item—there is currently little chance of mobilizing Jewish or even Arab Israeli public sentiment in favor of a two-state solution.

Younger Israelis likewise tend to be more hawkish than the older generation, partly because they grew up during the second intifada and have just completed their military service. At the same time, orthodox and ultraorthodox Jews—who tend to lean right politically—have seen their share of the population increase because of their higher birthrates. In short, the younger generations on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side are largely uninterested in the idea of compromise.

On the question of violence, almost 60% of Jewish Israeli respondents in an April poll said they expected a third intifada to break out if annexation proceeds. This shows there is some correlation between what the Palestinians are willing to do and what Israelis expect them to do.

The COVID-19 pandemic is another reason why the two-state solution is nonexistent in Israeli discourse today. In fact, Israelis are no longer talking about any solution—when asked about the likeliest outcome with the Palestinians, most respondents say that no solution will work and the status quo will continue. Occupation and the two-state approach are still central to their collective cognition, but these concepts are no longer their focus. Very few Jewish Israelis support the idea of a binational state either (around 5%). And when annexation seemed imminent earlier this year, the majority of them predicted that it was not going to happen. For many Israelis, the current Palestinian situation is good because they are not paying a substantial price in terms of economics, national security, or international public opinion.

## GHAITH AL-OMARI

Since the promise of the two-state solution and diplomacy failed in recent years, the younger generation has seen only the worst of the other side and now believes there is no partner. This mutually reinforcing cycle of deep distrust does not mean a binational state is the only option; rather, more people on both sides are embracing maximalism. Yet the two-state solution was never about embracing the other side's narrative—it simply meant acknowledging that the land needed to be divided if both parties were to achieve their national aspirations.

Regarding the distinction between tactical and strategic concerns, it is more difficult for leaders to compromise when their publics oppose compromise. Yet this contrast is not necessarily fatal to formal peacemaking, as seen in Israel's treaties with Jordan and Egypt. Even today, it is difficult to find Jordanian or Egyptian citizens who believe in Israel's right to exist, but the peace between their countries has been stable for decades. In the Palestinian case, both sides need incentives to find a stable peace and refocus on practical matters instead of clashing narratives.

Leadership can shape public opinion, as it did during the Oslo process and Camp David. Yet such influence requires credible leadership, and credibility is hard to find on the Palestinian side these days given the **PA's worsening legitimacy gap (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-contest-to-succeed-abbass-is-shaping-palestinian-options>)**. Yasser Arafat engaged with the public one-on-one, but President Mahmoud Abbas is not very responsive to popular politics. He is more sensitive to elite views, and often uncomfortable using public support to offset these views.

In the near term, it is important to counter policies ([including annexation \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-annexation-in-the-west-bank-scenarios-and-implications\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-annexation-in-the-west-bank-scenarios-and-implications)) that reinforce the move away from two states. Peace plans and other “big policies” that are doomed to fail will do more harm than good right now. Instead, the parties should focus on Palestinian governance as a prerequisite to creating a political reality that aligns with the two-state paradigm. Successful bilateral projects can also create momentum and show Palestinians that they have an Israeli partner; for instance, their cooperation on fighting COVID-19 has been a positive dynamic. The Palestinian public would support more such moves. It also retains the capacity to surprise, as seen in the past when many Palestinians backed Oslo and the Gaza disengagement.

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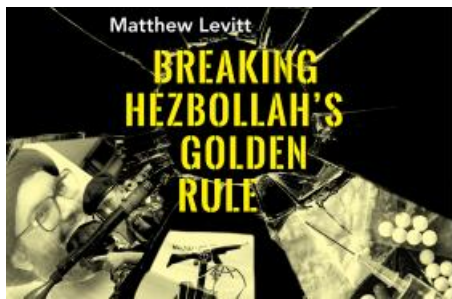
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