

Most Jerusalem Palestinians Want Neither Israeli Rule nor Uprising Against It, as Silwan Neighborhood Stands Out for More Militant Views

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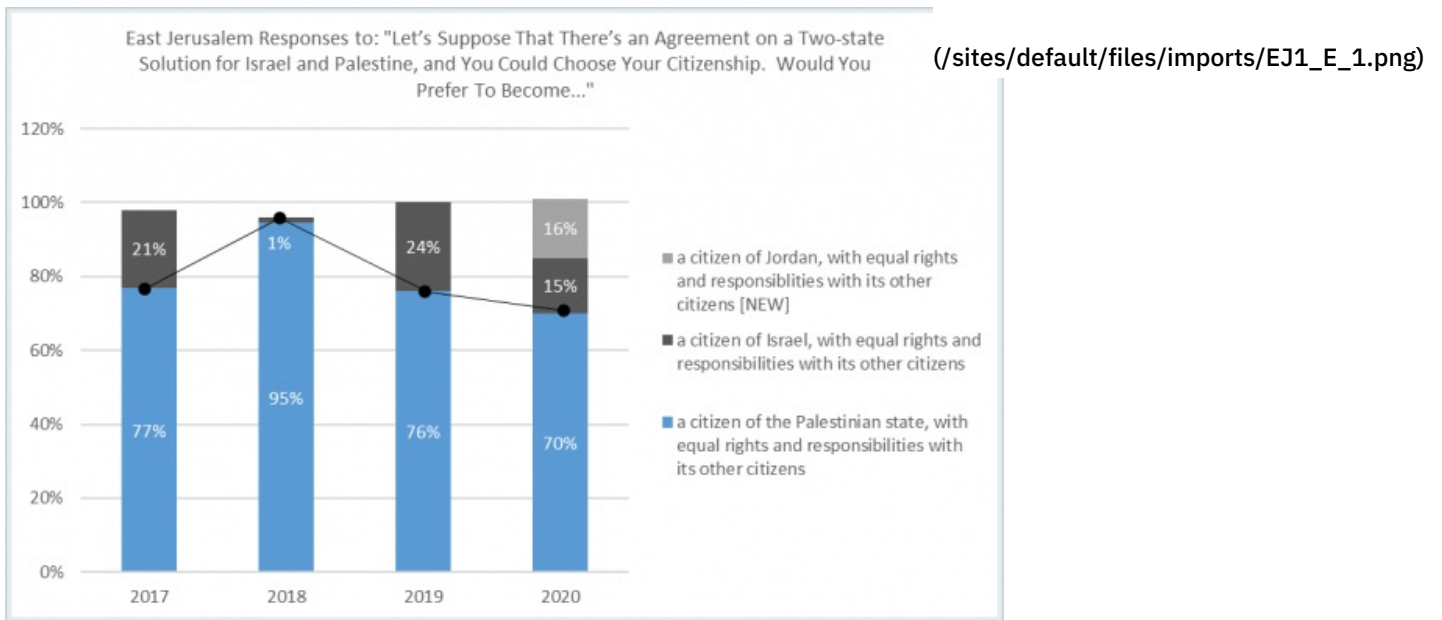
Brief Analysis

The Bellwether Citizenship Question—Palestine Now Trumps Israel: East Jerusalem’s 330,000 Palestinian legal residents, though overwhelmingly not Israeli citizens, have many practical advantages over their West Bank neighbors. Only the former have the right to work, study, and travel freely inside Israel, and to participate in Israel’s extensive social welfare system of healthcare, unemployment, and retirement benefits. As a result, previous surveys demonstrated that a significant segment of these Palestinians gradually came to prefer Israeli to Palestinian citizenship if faced with that stark choice.

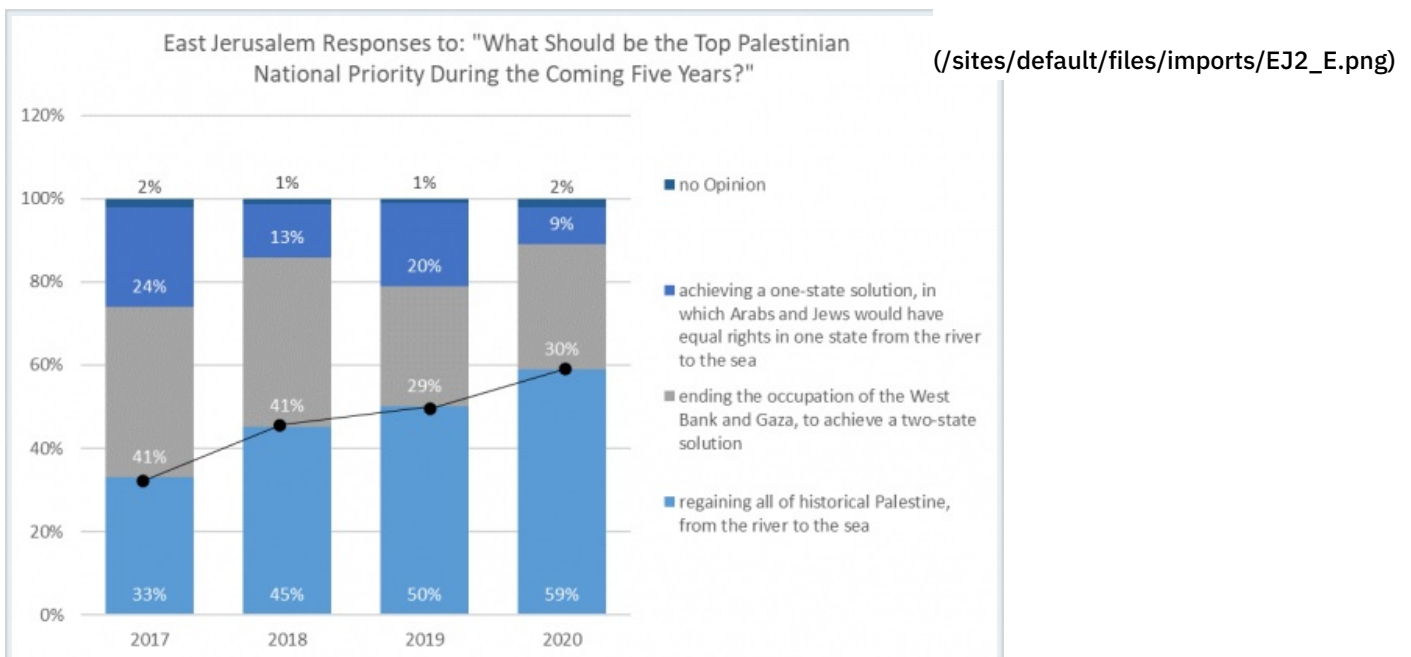
In fact, from 2010 to 2015, the proportion of East Jerusalemite Arabs who said they would prefer Israeli to Palestinian citizenship rose substantially: from 35% to a remarkable 52%. But that number dropped precipitously, to the 10-20% range, once the 2015-16 Palestinian “knife intifada” violently alienated the Jewish and Arab halves of the city from each other. In the current survey, that proportion seems to have stabilized at around 17%—compared with two-thirds who would rather choose citizenship in a Palestinian state.

More light on this question comes from two other related ones. Around one-fourth of the city’s Palestinians agree at least “somewhat” with this provocative assertion: “It would be better for us if we were part of Israel than in Palestinian Authority or Hamas ruled lands.” At the same time, however, three-fourths are inclined to believe that “Israel will never accept a one-state solution that gives the Palestinians equal rights, even if they become a clear majority.”

Jordan retains minority support: In this survey, a new choice was offered as well: Jordanian citizenship. The results showed that option statistically tied with Israel, at 18%. Interestingly, that is close to the 25% of East Jerusalem Palestinians who say they still hold a valid Jordanian passport, more than half a century after Israel captured the eastern half of the city from Jordan in the 1967 Six Day War. In addition, around half of all Palestinians in the city say Jordan should have “a major role” in solving the Palestinian problem. And about two-thirds have at least a “somewhat favorable” view of Jordan’s King Abdullah.

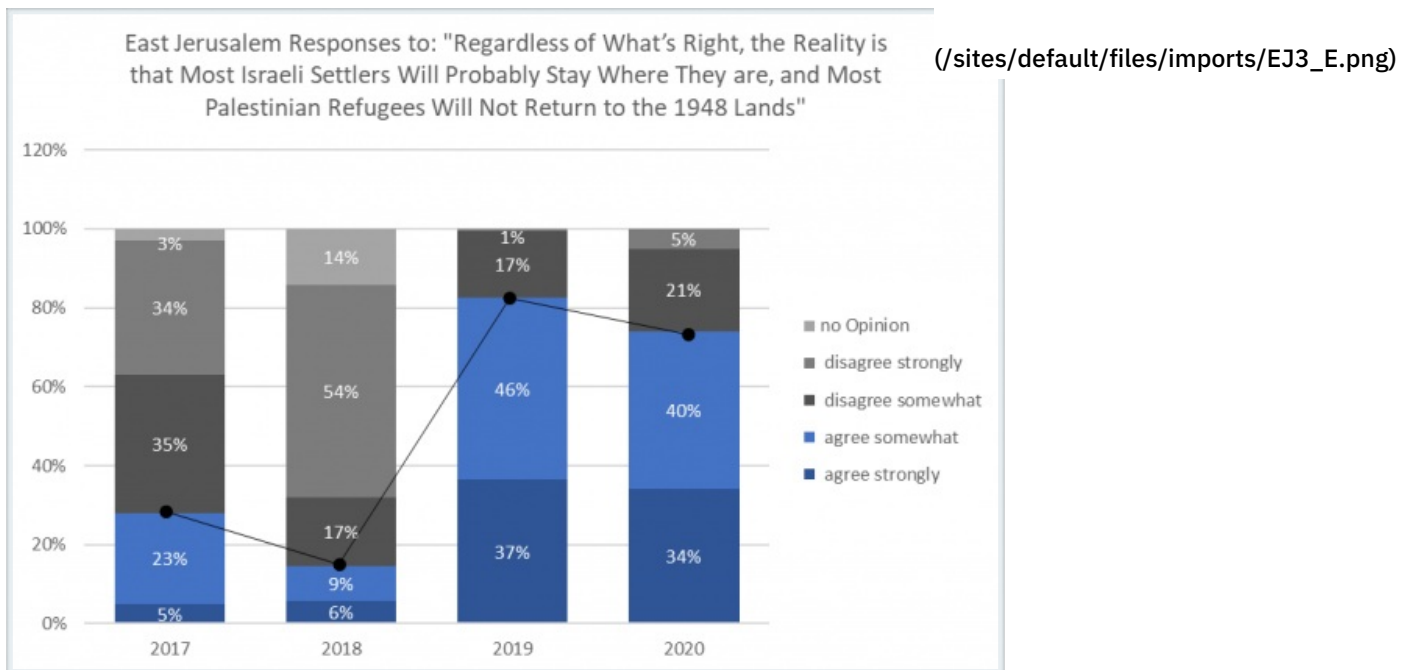


And the dream to regain all of Palestine persists: Like their West Bank and Gaza cousins, the majority (57%) of East Jerusalem Palestinians now prefer a five-year goal of “regaining all of historical Palestine for the Palestinians, from the river to the sea,” rather than just “ending the occupation to achieve a two-state solution” (32%). Similarly, a follow-up question asked about next steps in case “the Palestinian leadership is able to negotiate a two-state solution.” Less than one-fifth said “that should end the conflict with Israel,” while over two-thirds said “the conflict should not end, and resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated.” Around 15% expressed no opinion on the matter.



This pattern is also evident in response to several other relevant questions. Around three-quarters say “any compromise with Israel should only be temporary.” Nearly as many think that “eventually, the Palestinians will control almost all of Palestine”—either because “God is on their side” or because “they will outnumber the Jews someday.” Even about Jerusalem itself, around two-thirds of its Arab residents agree at least “somewhat” with this maximalist position: “We should demand Palestinian rule over all of Jerusalem, east and west, rather than agree to share or divide any part of it with Israel.” The exception lies in the relatively comfortable, outlying, mixed Arab/Jewish neighborhood of Abu Tur, where just 42% endorse that hardline opinion.

Yet when such questions are phrased in terms not of “rights” but of realistic expectations, a much less sanguine view emerges. For example, three-quarters agree at least “somewhat” with this assertion: “Regardless of what’s right, the reality is that most Israeli settlers will probably stay where they are, and most Palestinian refugees will not return to the 1948 lands.” That terminology reveals a much more ambivalent attitude toward Israel’s longevity, if not its legitimacy.



Social distancing even before coronavirus: The prevailing Palestinian sense of alienation from Israel is to a significant extent personal, as well as political. Respondents were asked about “your own personal contacts with Israelis, like at work, school, shopping, or on the bus or train.” In most Palestinian neighborhoods, 55% called those interactions “very bad,” plus 24% who answered “fairly bad.” In mixed Abu Tur, the numbers were no better: 50% “very bad” plus 37% “fairly bad.”

So why no Jerusalem intifada? Given the general Palestinian rejection of Israeli rule and the lack of any credible peace process, why is there no intifada (uprising) in East Jerusalem, as in some previous periods—including the sporadic “knife intifada” of 2015-16? Instead of speculating, we turned to crowdsourcing, by asking the locals themselves for their answers to this key question. The results point to a variety of factors, with some divergences by neighborhood.

First of all, only around a fifth of East Jerusalemites say that an intifada should now become the top Palestinian priority, when asked about a range of responses to their current predicament. The corresponding figure is almost the same in the West Bank. And only a relatively small minority feel “strongly” that Palestinians should resort to force even if Israel moves to annex more West Bank territory.

But why? In most of East Jerusalem, a plurality (around a third) selects two “major factors” behind the absence of an intifada: “many people are more preoccupied with their personal lives than with politics”; and “many people are concerned about tough Israeli reactions to any disturbances.” Somewhat fewer, around a quarter, also cite four additional popular attitudes as “major factors” in this context: concern about “tough PA or Hamas reactions to any disturbances”; preference for a peaceful approach; lack of trust in their own leaders; and hope for some outside intervention on their behalf.

A separate question came at this problem from a different direction. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with this statement: “When I think about what’s happening in Syria or Yemen and other places, I feel that my situation is actually not bad.” All around East Jerusalem, the majority agree at least “somewhat” with that sentiment. This, too, probably helps explain why these Arab residents, even in the more militant neighborhoods, are not rising up

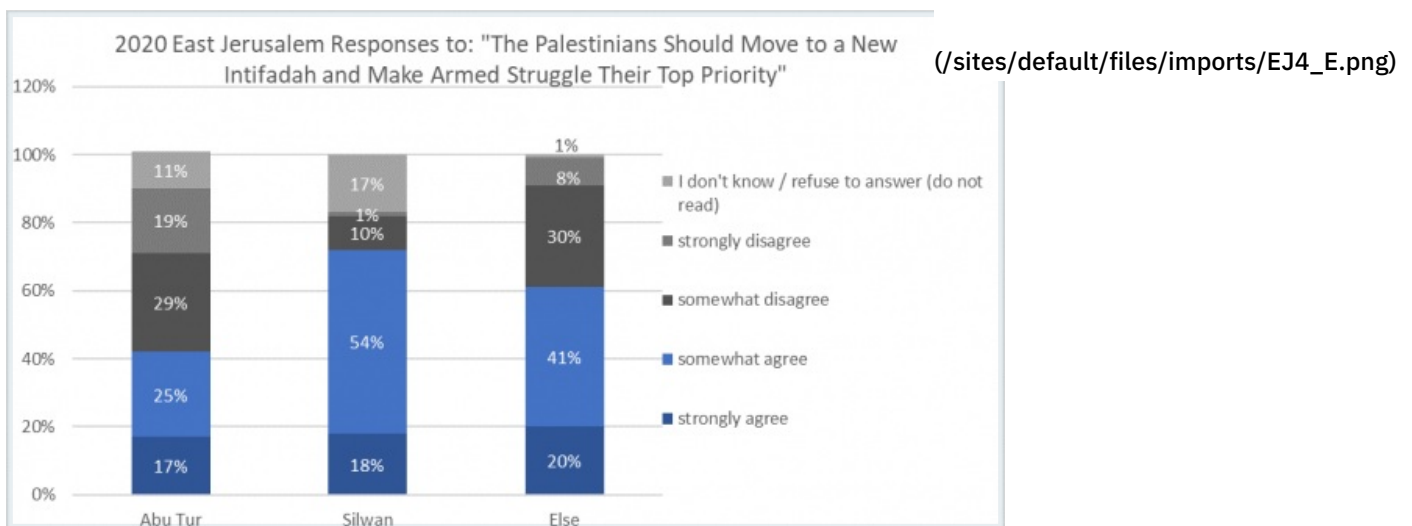
en masse these days.

Silwan and Abu Tur differ from others, and each other: For purposes of this analysis, two neighborhoods are singled out for comparison, both with each other and with the rest of Jerusalem’s Palestinian population. The two are Silwan, a small, hilly, poor, and densely packed area overlooking the Old City, which has at times been a flashpoint of Jewish and Palestinian activism and tension; and nearby Abu Tur, a larger, more modern and middle-class area with some Jewish residences mixed in. The Silwan and Abu Tur boosted subsamples are small, at 100 respondents each, so the findings should be taken with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, they provide a valid and useful contrast, along with an intriguing lesson in how complex and counterintuitive local attitudes may be.

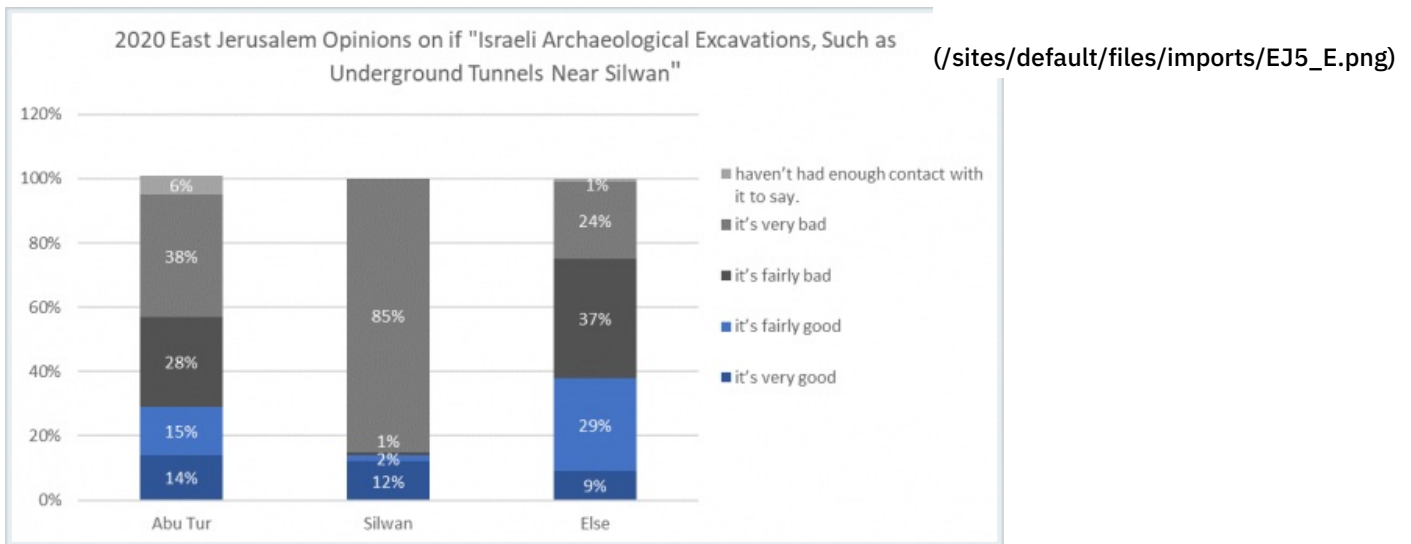
In these two adjacent southeastern neighborhoods, popular explanations for the absence of an intifada took a different, more sullen turn. In those two areas, on average, only around 10-15% cited any of the above five options as a “major factor” behind the surface calm on their streets. Instead, much higher proportions volunteered “don’t know” responses, or simply refused to answer these questions.

In Silwan, especially, fully 40% ducked a response to the following two prompts: “many people don’t see any leaders they trust to help organize an intifada or armed confrontation against Israel”; and “some people believe that an external force will help the Palestinians.” This pattern probably reflects a higher prevalence of very private expectations, perhaps for support from Turkey, Hamas, the Israeli Arab Islamic movement, or other controversial outside actors that have been particularly active in that neighborhood in recent years.

But more broadly, on almost the entire range of political questions, from rejection of a two-state solution to rejection of a new intifada, and many more such issues, attitudes in Abu Tur are approximately in line with those in most other Palestinian neighborhoods. By contrast, attitudes in Silwan are exceptionally militant. To cite but one instance, here are the percentages who agreed with this simple sentence: “I hope someday we can be friends with Israelis, since we are all human beings after all.” In Abu Tur, that figure is 29%; in most other neighborhoods, 33%. But in Silwan, a mere 4% agree—compared with 90% who “strongly” disagree.

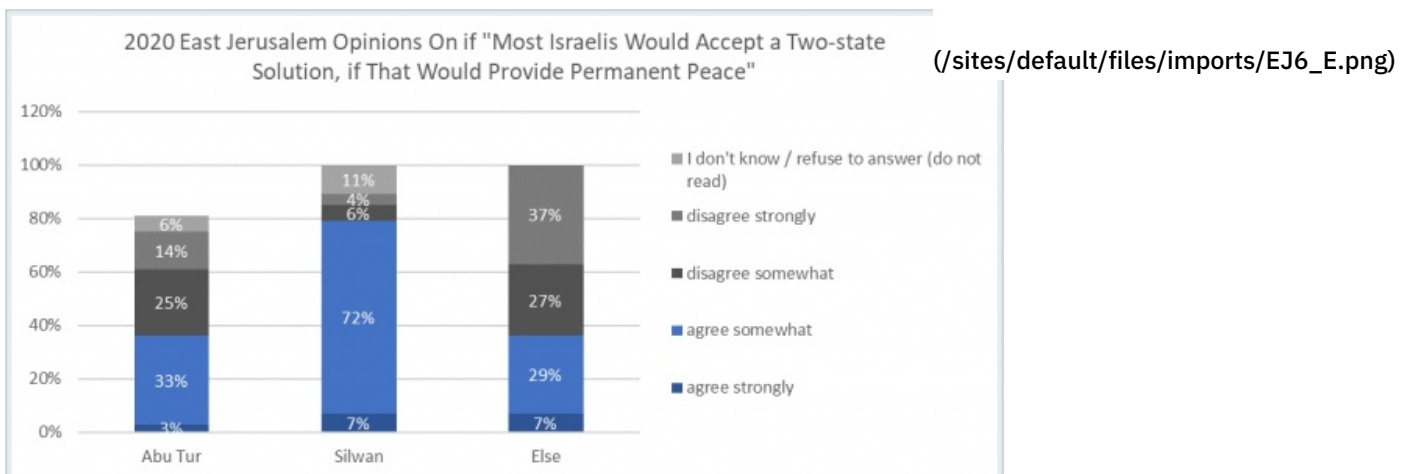


Other special aspects of Silwan: In addition, this small neighborhood, right on the edge of major Jewish archaeological digs around the ancient first and second temple “City of David” site, stands out with exceptionally negative views of that activity. Fully 85% in Silwan call these excavations “very bad”—compared with only half in nearby Abu Tur, and just one-quarter elsewhere in the city. The conclusion is that this is primarily a highly localized problem, at least from a public opinion (if not necessarily a broader political) perspective.



There are, however, a few questions on which Silwan residents express more favorable views than anyone else. One concerns “recent infrastructure projects by the city, like new roads or sewage pipes.” Remarkably, 39% in Silwan say these improvements are “very good,” with an additional 59% calling them “fairly good.” By comparison, only half their neighbors in Abu Tur, and just 30% elsewhere, say that the municipality’s new infrastructure projects are even “fairly good.”

Also surprisingly positive are Silwani views on this proposition: “Most Israelis would accept a two-state solution, if that would provide permanent peace.” In Silwan, 79% agree at least “somewhat” with that statement. But in all other neighborhoods combined, that figure drops to just 36%. This highly counterintuitive finding is probably related to another one: despite the occasional headlines about friction between Silwanis and some Jewish activists in their area, more Silwanis (24%) than in other Palestinian neighborhoods report that their own personal interactions with Israelis are at least “fairly good.”



Yet as previously noted, one other finding stands out about Silwan: the unusually high proportion of “don’t knows” or refusals to answer specific questions. In this context, 22% would not comment on their everyday contacts with Israelis, compared with 8% in Abu Tur and less than 1% elsewhere. Silwani responses to certain other questions, whether personal or political, show a similar pattern. The impression is that their neighborhood is more insular, suspicious, reticent, and relatively fearful or just reluctant to express an opinion on selected issues.

Methodological note: This analysis is based on a face-to-face survey conducted January 23-February 11, 2020, by the Palestine Center for Public Opinion, based in Beit Sahour in the West Bank, among a representative sample of 650 legal Arab residents of East Jerusalem. Respondents were chosen using standard geographical probability methods, yielding

a margin of error for the total sample of approximately 4% (although significantly larger for the two boosted neighborhood subsamples). The author personally traveled to the West Bank and Jerusalem to consult closely with the project managers and the local field team during the survey period, ensuring quality control, high technical proficiency, and strict confidentiality. Comparisons are with a parallel survey conducted during the same timeframe among representative samples of 500 each in the West Bank and Gaza. Additional methodological details are readily available on request. ❖

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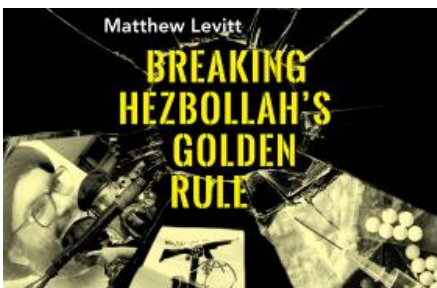
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