

What Do Palestinians Want?

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Jul 23, 2021

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Also published in *American Purpose*

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Articles & Testimony

Those who support permanent peace with Israel are in the minority even among the younger generation, but Washington should still prepare for the future by working around the economic edges.

This article, written in 2021, is based on polling data collected in 2020. For our latest analysis and July 2023 Palestinian polling data, click [here \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-institute-2023-polling-and-analysis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-institute-2023-polling-and-analysis).

In the wake of the recent ten-day conflict between Israel and Hamas, which began after the Israeli Supreme Court suspended its anticipated ruling on the eviction of Palestinians from the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and clashes flared at the Al-Aqsa mosque, a **June report (<http://pcpsr.org/en/node/843>)** from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) found that a “paradigm shift” had taken place in Palestinian public opinion: There is now growing support for Hamas and armed struggle. This change, along with the Biden Administration’s intention to reverse Trump Administration policy and become involved in the issue, has returned the conflict to the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Does the current state of Palestinian opinion reflect just the recent escalation? To see whether this is the case, we must take a closer look at public opinion over recent years. The [Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s](#)

Palestinian public opinion polls (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nation-divided-palestinian-views-war-and-peace-israel>) from 2014 to 2020, conducted with the Beit Sahour-based Palestine Center for Public Opinion and several other Palestinian polling organizations, enable us to do so. The results are unexpected, bearing good and bad news.

First, while the current U.S. administration has recently emphasized its continued commitment to the two-state solution, this is no longer a popular position among Palestinians. Less than 40 percent of the Palestinian public—in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem—supports it over one-state alternatives. Support for a two-state solution has declined steadily since 2018.

Further, most Palestinians believe that a two-state solution is unlikely to emerge from the conflict. Instead, a majority of them say they prefer to reclaim all of historic Palestine, including the pre-1967 Israel. A one-state solution with Arabs and Jews holding equal rights comes in second. Similarly, **recent polling (<https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/823>)** from PCPSR finds support among Palestinians and Israeli Jews for a two-state solution has dropped to 43 percent and 42 percent, respectively.

This changed political reality poses threats to U.S. policy objectives: peace, stability, democracy, and human rights. But do the trends also reveal areas of opportunity, in which U.S. efforts and Palestinian and Israeli policies could influence Palestinian public opinion to make peace more likely?

Polling is not an iron-clad process, and it is not a science. Responses by the same populations can and do change significantly between one year and the next or after a slight rewording of a question. But the professionals conducting these particular polls made concerted efforts to ensure accuracy, interviewing face-to-face rather than by phone or internet and assuring participants of strict confidentiality, especially when questions dealt with controversial or taboo topics.

Over the six years of these polling data, views on a number of salient issues have shifted, sometimes dramatically. Palestinian public opinion is not static: Views respond to changing events and expectations that create positive or negative feedback loops. Also, Gazan and West Bank views diverge significantly on some points, including several key issues relevant to U.S. policy, in contrast with the more modest differences that emerge on the basis of other factors, like age.

A majority of East Jerusalem respondents once supported a two-state solution. In contrast, throughout the six-year polling period a plurality of respondents in the West Bank and Gaza have generally chosen “regaining all of historical Palestine from the river to the sea” as their preference. There was an exception in 2017, when 44 percent of West Bank respondents, a seven-point plurality, said that ending the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to achieve a two-state solution was their main goal. By 2020, however, West Bank support for a maximalist Palestine rose sharply to two-thirds—even higher than in Gaza, where the option garnered 56 percent support.

These numbers are not the same as popular support for a single state “from the river to the sea” with equal rights accorded to Arab and Jewish citizens, as in recent international proposals. In 2020 polls, only about 10 percent of West Bank and Gazan respondents favored this option over either a Palestinian state or two states. Notably, a theological premise underpins the one-state preference: A majority of the Palestinian respondents believe that “eventually, the Palestinians will control almost all of Palestine, because God is on their side”—that is, not because Palestinian control will flow from demographic changes or from a joint arrangement with Israel.

Palestinians remain split on whether a successfully negotiated two-state solution should “end the conflict with Israel and open up a new chapter in Palestinian history” or, in contrast, whether the conflict “should not end, and resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated.” Palestinian West Bank support for peace after a negotiated two-state solution has dwindled steeply since 2018. As of 2020, 40 percent of Gazans but just 26 percent

in the West Bank believe that the negotiated two-state solution should end the conflict.

While these general views are concerning—and may call for scrutiny of internal [Palestinian Authority \(PA\) messaging \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mixed-messages-abbas-and-palestinians-israel-2014-16\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mixed-messages-abbas-and-palestinians-israel-2014-16)—they are not necessarily a general endorsement of Hamas policies. While the most recent PCPSR polls do suggest a spike in support for Hamas, data from Washington Institute polling demonstrate some countervailing trends in Gaza. Since 2017 a small majority of Gazans have supported the idea that Hamas should “stop calling for Israel’s destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.” Likewise, while support for this position in the West Bank has fluctuated, a notable 65 percent of West Bank respondents supported this view in 2020. A majority of respondents in both places have also consistently expressed support for the idea that Hamas should give up its armed units and the Palestinian Authority should “take over the administration” of Gaza (though support for this idea has declined slightly in the West Bank and more in Gaza, along with dwindling support for the Palestinian Authority as an institution). In fact, in 2020 frustration with Palestinian governance led a shockingly high 40 percent of Gaza respondents and 36 percent in the West Bank to say they would prefer being part of Israel to being in “PA or Hamas-ruled lands.”

Moreover, in 2020 Gazans, compared with West Bank respondents, were much more likely to believe, at least “somewhat,” that most Israelis would accept a two-state solution as a basis for permanent peace. Since 2018 that number has doubled to 70 percent; in contrast, only 32 percent of West Bank respondents say they believe that. This viewpoint among Gazans may help explain their growing relative flexibility on several key issues. A majority of Gazans—in contrast with just 7 percent of West Bank respondents—said they would accept limiting Palestinian refugees’ “right of return” to just the West Bank and Gaza if this limitation were the “very last step required to end the occupation and achieve a real independent Palestinian state.” (The Gazans’ position may be related to a view by an increasing majority of Palestinians that “regardless of what’s right...most Palestinian refugees will not return to the 1948 lands.”)

Gaza’s dire economic situation has provided an impetus to increased economic coordination with Israel. All survey respondents between 2015 and 2018 ranked “making enough income to live comfortably” as their top priority over the establishment of a Palestinian state; a plurality also noted the paramount importance of a “good family life.” In Gaza, in particular, a strong, if waning, majority has preferred economic cooperation with Israel to support of Hamas policies, though this preference has dipped sharply in the West Bank.

The recent conflict likely affects these views. After the 2014 war in Gaza, 2015 polling saw the proportion of Gazans who “definitely” rejected a two-state proposal double from the previous year to 36 percent; but the number decreased over time.

As the repeated cancelations of Palestinian elections have demonstrated, neither the PA nor Hamas runs a democracy. In both places, public opinion has only a limited impact on policy. Yet where there is current popular support for policy coordination, there may be stronger popular support for more comprehensive compromises and solutions over time.

Where official Palestinian policy enjoys solid popular support, active U.S. opposition to such a policy risks a backlash. Without some compelling reason to take that risk, the United States should probably avoid it. In contrast, discrepancies between official Palestinian policy and public opinion, especially in Gaza, along with strong Palestinian support for better governance, could open avenues through which the United States can pursue immediate changes to the status quo, even apart from any question of mediating future negotiations. Ideally, such U.S. initiatives would be accompanied by corresponding adjustments in Israeli policy.

When it comes to the two-state solution, the clear divergence in Palestinian popular attitudes between short-term

tactical pragmatism and long-term maximalism presents policymakers with both an opportunity and a big challenge. The polling shows receptiveness in Gaza to practical U.S. economic interventions. In light of present reconstruction efforts, this may be the area in which the United States should concentrate its most urgent efforts, even where Hamas' dominance complicates implementation. Areas where public opinion favors tactical compromise provide windows for conflict resolution—while suggesting that a policy focus on “final” status issues may be misplaced.

Shifts in Palestinian public opinion also suggest that Israeli overtures, or at least Israeli restraint, may prompt more moderate Palestinian attitudes. Conversely, hardline Israeli policies—whether on settlements, security, or economic relations—may negatively shift Palestinian public opinion. For example, the 2020 polling data reflect a period in which former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly stated that Israel would annex parts of the West Bank. American interests in both short-term stability and medium-term coexistence might counsel underscoring this connection to our Israeli partners.

Even so, the sobering reality is that there is still no Palestinian popular majority that supports permanent peace with Israel, including a majority even among the younger generation. Beyond the practical challenges of negotiating the final status of a two-state solution, real reconciliation remains a distant dream. U.S. efforts to promote progress on the ground and encourage the new Israeli government to make overtures to its neighbors might soften this hardline grassroots attitude over time. Still, when policymakers advocate a two-state “land for peace,” they should remember to plan for practical steps that could foster goodwill, or at least nonviolent coexistence, until the parties come closer to compromise on the contours of lasting peace.

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