

For a State, Palestinians Would Cede "Right of Return"—and More

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Brief Analysis

Two surveys conducted by different Palestinian pollsters in October show unexpected popular flexibility on core issues of an eventual peace deal with Israel, despite widespread skepticism among Palestinians about current prospects. These findings suggest that American, Israeli, and Arab policymakers should all pay more attention to what the Palestinian people really want and less attention to what their politicians or partisans say they “should” want.

More concretely, the data suggests that a peace plan advancing Palestinian aspirations, even at the price of major concessions, would be accepted at the popular level—despite its likely rejection by both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas. This analysis focuses on responses regarding three of the most controversial final-status issues: refugees, end of conflict, and recognition of Israel as a “Jewish state.” On each issue, findings indicate that Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem are significantly more open to compromise than Hamas or even the PA.

REFUGEES AND THE “RIGHT OF RETURN”

The most startlingly moderate and unequivocal results from these two surveys center on this issue, which are based on not just one or two but a whole battery of related questions. This moderate view is especially strong in Gaza, where most residents are themselves descendants of the Palestinian refugees.

Two-thirds of Gazans say Palestinians should accept that the “right of return” not apply to Israel, but only to the West Bank and Gaza, if that is the price of a Palestinian state. When asked about their own personal preferences, a mere 14 percent say they would “probably” want to move to Israel, even if they could. Moreover, the overwhelming majority, 79 percent, would accept the “permanent resettlement” of Palestinians from other countries in just the West Bank or Gaza, “even if that is not where their families originally came from.” A solid if somewhat smaller majority, 59 percent, say it would be a good idea if “Arab states offered extra economic aid in order to resettle Palestinian refugees in the West Bank or Gaza, but not inside Israel.”

Attitudes on these questions are also relatively moderate, though more mixed, in the West Bank. West Bankers are

approximately evenly split on the suggestion that refugees not enter Israel: 48 percent would accept this suggestion, though 52 percent are opposed. But a mere 5 percent say they would probably move to Israel even if they could. Moreover, two-thirds would accept the permanent resettlement of diaspora Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza even if their families originated inside Israel.

Expectations regarding refugee resettlement are even more modest than the preceding preferences, especially in the West Bank. Both surveys show that a solid majority of West Bankers think that “regardless of what’s right, the reality is that... most Palestinians will not return to the 1948 lands.” Gazans agree, but by a narrower majority—61 percent in one poll; 54 percent in the other.

ISRAEL AS A JEWISH STATE

On this issue, Palestinians are again significantly more open than the public positions of their political leaders would imply. If Israel “recognizes an independent Palestinian state and ends the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza,” the percentages of Palestinians who would accept Israel as “the state for the Jewish people” are as follows: Gaza, 55 percent; West Bank, 36 percent; and East Jerusalem, 60 percent.

In sharp contrast, PA leaders from President Mahmoud Abbas on down have consistently emphasized that they will “never” agree to any such formulation. Hamas persistently states that it will never recognize Israel at all, let alone its Jewish character. In so saying, both governments are taking a much more rigid stance than is expressed by many of their own people.

END OF CONFLICT

This essential (but rarely posed) question asks if a two-state solution should either (a) “end the conflict and open up a new chapter in Palestinian history,” or (b) “not end the conflict, and resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated.” West Bankers pick “end the conflict” by a sizeable margin, 50 to 37 percent, with the remainder responding “no opinion.” Meanwhile, Gazans are almost evenly split: 47 to 49 percent. East Jerusalem Palestinians, who maintain everyday contact with Israelis, decisively choose “end the conflict,” by a margin of 73 to 22 percent.

Related to this long-term question is a more immediate issue: should Hamas “stop calling for Israel’s destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders?” Results are clearest in Gaza, where two separate polls show that more people favor than oppose this radical, peaceful policy shift. West Bankers are also clearly supportive in one poll by a margin of 58 to 30 percent; the other poll, with a slightly larger margin of error, shows a narrow majority opposed.

On this issue, however, East Jerusalem Palestinian opinions trend in the opposite direction: 36 percent say Hamas should accept peace with Israel, but more—47 percent—say that it should not. An unusually high proportion, 17 percent, refuse to answer the question. This surprisingly divided picture may reflect the growing presence or appeal of Hamas among East Jerusalem Palestinians, many of whom feel neglected by both Israel and the PA.

These findings are based on personal interview surveys conducted by two different reputable Palestinian pollsters during the period of October 3-19, 2018, using standard geographic probability sample techniques. One poll comprised a representative sample of 732 West Bank and East Jerusalem Palestinians and 468 Gazans, yielding margins of error of approximately 3.7 and 4.1 percent respectively. The other poll, conducted by the Palestine Center for Public Opinion based in Beit Sahour in the West Bank, comprised representative samples of 500 each in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, yielding margins of error of approximately 4 percent in each territory. Full methodological details are available on request. ❖

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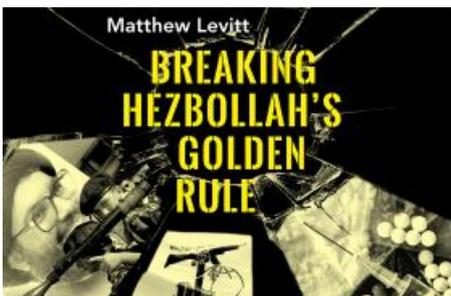
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