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Palestinian Political Trends 2014-2018: New Data and Prevailing Attitudes

by [Cecilia Panella](#)

Nov 28, 2018

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Cecilia Panella](#)

Cecilia Panella is a Research Intern on Palestinian public opinion issues and data analysis working for Dr. David Pollock at the Washington Institute. She is currently a second-year Master's candidate at Johns Hopkins SAIS concentrating in International Economics and American Foreign Policy.



Brief Analysis

At the beginning of October, the polling data from fieldwork conducted in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and West Bank under the supervision of the Washington Institute's David Pollock highlighted old political fissures and an increasing disenchantment with politics in Palestine. While results indicate a shared lack of enthusiasm towards the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, there are distinct and divergent attitudes between West Bank and Gaza Strip respondents. The resulting data doesn't just detect a singular pulse of Palestine, but rather two distinctive perspectives on political, economic, and social issues in Gaza and the West Bank.

The Gaza Strip

Since 2014, support for the Palestinian Authority "sending officials and security officers to the Gaza Strip to take over the administration there" has steadily declined in Gaza. In 2018, 63% of respondents expressed their support for this measure, reflecting a 14 percentage point drop from 77% in 2017 and a staggering 25 percentage point drop from 88% in 2014. Interestingly enough, support for Hamas operating "politically, openly, and freely" has also declined seven percentage points—from 60% in 2014 to 53% in 2018. As the majority of respondents over all four years still support PA involvement in Gaza as well as Hamas presence in the West Bank, this trend is not necessarily indicative of political apathy or outright antipathy towards Palestinian governments. Rather, an overall drop in net support should be taken as increased frustration or skepticism in the ability of various actors to deliver on their promises to Palestine—not as a total loss of faith in the institutions themselves.

However, the decline in Gazan support for Hamas does suggest a growing frustration with the organization in the past three years. The percentage of Gazans supporting Hamas "maintaining a militia no matter what else happens" has declined somewhat after spiking to 80% in 2015. And while the 2018 support of 53% is only one percentage point lower than last year, the percentage of Gazans who say that Hamas should not keep its militia "no matter what happens" has grown four percentage points, from 30% in 2017 to 34% in 2018. To be sure, these are modest if not

marginal changes, but they too reflect a continuation of a larger trend away from support for Hamas' militia(s) since 2015.

Support for a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has maintained its majority in Gaza, with 2018 showing a 74% majority in 2018 and a four percentage point increase overall since 2014. While it should be noted that the raw percentage of respondents who would support such a ceasefire has gone down since a brief 13 percentage point jump to an 83% majority in 2015, the raw change still leaves 2018 support for a ceasefire four percentage points higher than in 2014. In fact, at no point over the selected time frame, has a plurality, let alone a majority of Gazan respondents favored abandoning a ceasefire.

The West Bank

Unlike Gaza's steady decline, opinions in the West Bank on what role the Palestinian Authority should play in Gaza have vacillated over the past four years. While support for sending PA officials and security officers in 2015 rose by eight percentage points to a high water mark of 81% in the West Bank, that number dropped to 75% in 2017 and plummeted to 53% in 2018. This figure marks a 19 percentage point drop in support from 2014, yet this data also reflects the fact that the majority of West Bank respondents still do support the Palestinian Authority taking over the administration in the Gaza Strip. It is important to note that majority support for an increased role for the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip does not necessarily mandate weakening support for Hamas. In fact, support for Hamas operating "politically, openly, and freely" in the West Bank has risen a firm 14 percentage points from 2017, reaching 52% in 2018. As support for Hamas's freedom of operation in the West Bank enjoyed a comfortable majority in 2014 and 2015, the aforementioned figure suggests that this rise in support is perhaps a return to status quo rather than a dramatic change.

For the first time in four years, support for Hamas's militia has also risen slightly in the West Bank. While the six percentage point-climb from 51% to 57% is not enormous, it is certainly a noticeable shift away from the downward trend of support that West Bank residents have previously shown on this issue. It should be noted, however, that this drop in support is a marginal six percentage points over the past four years—a slight but identifiable difference given Gazan attitudes reflecting slightly more support in this area over the same period. What is significant here is that while support (or lack thereof) for political entities is moving more dramatically, opinion shifts on the role of a militia for Hamas in both the West Bank and Gaza are essentially operating at the margin. These movements should not be taken as an increase in militancy in Palestine, but the divergence in regional attitudes should be closely scrutinized moving forward.

This regional striation is also reflected in attitudes towards the maintenance of a ceasefire. While Gazan respondents appear to wholeheartedly support Hamas maintaining a ceasefire with Israel in the West Bank and Gaza, West Bank residents are consistently less supportive of such a measure. This is not to say that there is no support for a ceasefire in the West Bank—indeed, since 2014, a majority of respondents there were in favor of maintaining ceasefire agreements, with 55% supporting a ceasefire in 2018. Nevertheless, West Bank residents are noticeably less enthused about the prospect than their Gazan counterparts, demonstrated by the 19 percentage point difference between the two sets of respondents in 2018.

Insight and Trends

When looking at the 2018 data alone, none of these changes are dramatic or unexpected. For example, data from 2017 also indicated an increase of skepticism towards political leaders, and these newest data points are in line with this earlier observation. However, this data does suggest that the hypothesis of a unified Palestinian perspective is not reflected in polled attitudes. Indeed, the responses to the questions polled above show that there are noticeable differences in preference and opinion between Gaza Strip and West Bank residents, though data also shows a

commonality in a mistrust of government and mixed views of the importance of a cease fire.

In light of the circumstances facing both West Bankers and Gazans, divergence in opinion is not entirely unexpected. Strong and continued differences in governance have understandably played a role in shaping differing opinions. The political treatment of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip regionally and in the international community may also help explain these outcomes. Moreover, it is important to note that a lack of unified opinion, while notable, should not be understood as reflecting a schism or irreconcilable differences between the West Bank and Gaza.

And as regards to perspectives on the peace process, the trends of the past four years demonstrate that while support for a ceasefire has dropped over time, it still maintains the plurality of support among both populations. In fact, over this period, there is no point at which abandoning the ceasefire was the majority or plurality choice among Palestinians—either in Gaza or the West Bank. This data suggests that public governmental statements regarding the issue tend to be less moderate than the viewpoints of the people themselves. In light of this data, Palestinians as a whole may be said to be both more pragmatic than their governments and more open to cessation of hostilities between these governments and Israel. ❖



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THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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