

New Polls: West Bankers Oppose Both Armed Revolt and U.S. Talks

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Two fresh public opinion polls taken in October paint a strikingly mixed picture of popular attitudes among the roughly 2.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The biggest surprise is that on many peace process issues, these Palestinians voice a harder political line than do their kinfolk in Gaza (see my previous post, "[Most Gazans Want Israeli Jobs, Not Hamas Mobs](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-polls-show-most-gazans-want-jobs-not-mobs)").

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Only one-quarter of West Bankers want to resume diplomatic discussions with the United States aimed at a peaceful response to their problems, though on the other hand just one-quarter say they want "armed struggle" against Israel now.

For U.S. policymakers, the implications of these findings are clear. Pressing the Palestinian Authority (PA) to come back to the table, let alone to make concessions, would have precious little popular resonance in the West Bank and could even backfire. But apprehension over an explosion of mass anger in that territory is probably also misguided. Instead, popular attitudes are surprisingly more receptive to practical U.S. economic interventions in Gaza; perhaps this is where the most urgent U.S. efforts should be concentrated.

The rejection by most West Bankers of violent resistance against Israel is in line with their current personal priorities. The vast majority say their top priority is either "having a good family life" (49%) or "making enough income to live comfortably" (38%), rather than "working to establish a Palestinian state" (11%). Even as a second priority, just 23% pick that political option.

For progress toward their national goals, most West Bankers prefer "peaceful resistance," international recognition, or even negotiations with Israel—if the latter offers some concessions first. The top three picks in that category, each with one-quarter of the responses, are: build a highway for West Bankers to bypass the Jerusalem checkpoints; stop building settlements beyond the wall; or stop settler violence. By comparison, releasing prisoners or "sharing Jerusalem as a capital" have dropped lower on this list of desired gestures of Israeli goodwill.

Significantly, one other Palestinian political option that attracts great popular support, though rarely if ever polled

before, is the suggestion to “work more closely politically with Palestinians inside the 1948 lines.” In the two separate new polls reported here, three-quarters of West Bankers endorse this position, including nearly a third who say it would have “very positive” results. Given the recent nationalist political activism among Israel’s roughly 2 million Arab citizens, nearly equal in numbers to their counterparts just across the (largely imaginary) Green Line in the West Bank, this is an orientation that bears closer examination in future surveys and other analysis.

As for an American role, the rejection of talks with the United States is in line with low Palestinian expectations regarding that approach. A mere 11% think it likely that President Trump “will make a serious effort to help solve the Palestinian problem.” Asked what they would most like the United States to do for them, half pick “stay out of Palestinian and Mideast affairs altogether” (Among Gazans, in sharp contrast, just 16% are interested in this option). A distant second place goes to “put pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians,” with 22% of West Bankers selecting this option.

Alongside these negative attitudes, awareness of recent U.S. pressure seems high. Three-quarters say they have heard at least a fair amount about the funding cutoff for the UN Relief and Works Agency (though just 18% think this will yield any changes). Even more (82%) know about the U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem. The majority also say they have heard about closing the PLO office in Washington. It must be noted, however, that 36% say they have heard more than a little about “the start of official American negotiations with Hamas”—an entirely fictitious prompt, and one not actually even rumored lately, but used as a “control variable” for this question.

On another all-too-real issue, less than half (43%) claim to be familiar with the Taylor Force Act, which cuts funding to the PA because of its payments to convicted terrorists. Nevertheless, on that very controversial issue, an equally and unexpectedly large proportion agree that the government “should give prisoners’ families normal social benefits like everybody else—not extra payments based on their sentences or armed operations.” This confirms the highly counterintuitive finding first reported in a [previous poll](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/palestinian-public-are-tactical-moderates-but-strategic-militants-where-doe> from May 2017.

On a tactical level, again surprisingly, West Bank views are also significantly more militant than Gazan views. For example, just 36% of West Bankers want Israeli firms to provide more jobs in their territory. Somewhat more (42%), but still a minority, want “direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis, to support those who want peace.”

More ominously, at least the same proportion in one of our latest polls favor “ending security coordination with Israel.” Findings from the other poll, where fewer respondents volunteered a “don’t know” response, are even worse: 63% say that stopping this security coordination would have at least a “somewhat positive” effect.

Notably, too, West Bank attitudes toward their own government in Ramallah are skeptical at best. Both polls show a solid majority (62-67%) saying, in opposition to current PA practice, that Hamas “should be allowed to operate politically in the West Bank in a free and open fashion.” Asked about the PA’s future prospects, only 20% expect it to remain in power more or less as it is today. The remainder are divided among a variety of other prognoses: either anarchy, or else greater control of the West Bank by Hamas, by local authorities, or even by Israel. Nevertheless, a mere 21% of West Bankers would favor “dissolving the PA and forcing Israel to take over full responsibility” for the entire territory.

The findings discussed in this article come from two independent, face-to-face surveys conducted during the period October 3-19 by highly respected Palestinian pollsters based in Ramallah and Beit Sahour. Both used standard geographic probability techniques, interviewing representative samples of 732 and 500 randomly selected respondents, respectively. Full methodological details are available on request. ❖

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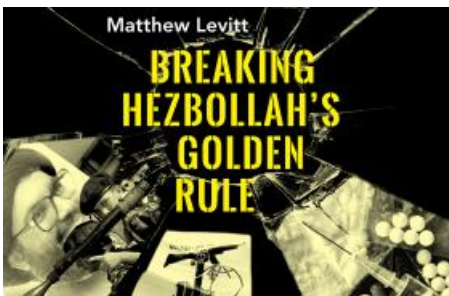
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