

New Polls Show Most Gazans Want Israeli Jobs, Not Hamas Mobs

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Brief Analysis

Over the past weekend, the Hamas rulers of Gaza took one old and two new steps. They launched more incendiary balloons at Israeli villages; they condemned Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's official visit to Sultan Qaboos in Oman; and they equated the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre to the "terror" of "Israeli occupation." Behind these headlines, however, the reality on the ground among ordinary Palestinians in Gaza looks very different.

The proof for this assertion lies in two new, reliable Palestinian opinion polls taken inside Gaza this month. The data demonstrate that the majority of its people actually oppose the violent Hamas border protests -- and at least half would even support a formal cease-fire with Israel. Based on these and related findings outlined below, U.S. policymakers would be well advised to take two steps of their own. First, understand that Hamas has only minority support in Gaza, so it will likely fail in launching mass popular action against Israel. Second, pursue an approach that promises practical economic and humanitarian help to the people of Gaza, not to their Hamas overlords.

Equally surprising, especially compared to the usual media narrative, most Gazans say they want direct personal dialogue with Israelis. Most would like Israeli companies to provide jobs for them inside their Hamas-ruled territory. Most also blame Hamas, the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, the UN, or Egypt -- rather than Israel -- for their economic woes. Moreover, remarkably, a plurality of Palestinians in Gaza say they want Hamas to change its rejectionist position and agree to make peace with Israel.

More specifically, regarding the weekly Hamas-led border protests, just 36 percent of Gazans support this tactic, while 62 percent say they oppose it. Conversely, a formal cease-fire with Israel garners more support than opposition: 73 to 25 percent in one poll; 51 to 45 percent in the other. On the harder question of full peace with Israel, notably, both polls likewise show more popular support than opposition. The question wording is crystal clear: should Hamas "stop calling for Israel's destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders"? One poll shows Gazans say yes by a margin of 53 to 45 percent; the other poll yields a slightly narrower margin, 48 to 44 percent.

Regarding contacts with Israel, even without a peace agreement, the evidence is yet clearer. Despite the official anti-normalization policies and demonization propaganda of their Hamas rulers, both polls show that two-thirds of Gazans want “direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis.” An even higher proportion, three-quarters, also say they “would like to see Israeli companies offer more jobs inside the West Bank and Gaza.”

Even more striking is how few Gazans primarily blame Israel for their current dire economic straits. Asked who is most responsible for the slow pace of reconstruction in their area, the majority pick either Hamas (32 percent) or the Palestinian Authority (22 percent) – compared with just 27 percent who single out Israel. The UN and “no opinion” each get 8 percent of the vote for most at fault. Surprisingly, Egypt is last on this list of perceived villains, with a mere 3 percent.

To be sure, none of this means that most Gazans like, trust, or simply accept the lasting reality of Israel. In both polls, for instance, only about half say that negotiations with Israel have had even “somewhat positive” results to date. Similarly, only about half say that a two-state solution should “end the conflict.” And slightly more than half, 55 percent, still anticipate that “eventually, the Palestinians will control almost all of Palestine” – either because “God is on their side,” or because “they will outnumber the Jews some day.”

Nevertheless, on some final status issues too, Gazans are unexpectedly realistic. On the refugee problem, to cite but one highly emotive example, 68 percent favor accepting a “right of return” only to the West Bank and Gaza but not to Israel, “if that is the very last step required to end the occupation and achieve a real independent Palestinian state.” Among West Bankers, the comparable figure is a full 20 points lower. And the official position of both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas remains steadfastly opposed to such a compromise.

Finally, turning toward views of U.S. policy, Gazans exhibit a comparatively moderate mix of attitudes on that as well. Asked to select from a list “the one thing you’d most like the U.S. to do about the Palestinian issue these days,” the winner is “put pressure on Israel to make concessions,” with 38 percent. But a close second place goes to “increase economic aid to the Palestinians,” at 23 percent, followed by “put pressure on the PA and Hamas to be more democratic and less corrupt, at 14 percent. Only 16 percent say the U.S. should “stay out of Palestinian and Middle East affairs altogether.” On the West Bank, however, that option actually earns top billing, with a stunning 49 percent.

These unexpectedly moderate findings are based on two face-to-face, standard probability surveys taken by two different, reliable Palestinian pollsters among representative samples of approximately 500 randomly selected Gazans, during the period October 3-15. One poll was supervised by the highly experienced, Bethlehem-based Palestine Center for Public Opinion. The other, a condensed version with selected key questions, was run by a different but equally qualified, Ramallah-based organization. To optimize access and validity, both organizations used local Gazan interviewers and field supervisors exclusively.

Adding to their credibility, the data sets from these two polls are broadly similar (though with some differences noted above, almost certainly because the questions in one survey followed a long list of other provocative topics). Also, to ensure maximum reliability, I traveled to the region during the fieldwork to consult in person with the pollsters and interviewers, help edit and translate the questionnaires into Arabic, confirm their technical proficiency and quality controls, and iron out any practical problems -- of which there were mercifully few. In addition, the relatively hardline results from some long-term questions argue convincingly that the tactical moderation expressed on short-term one is not simply a pretense or an artifact of “courtesy bias.” Indeed, it is precisely these mixed-to-negative views about Israel’s distant future that offer greater credence to the relatively pragmatic voices on more immediate issues.

Altogether, then, popular attitudes in Gaza reflect a different reality than either the militant image propagated by

Hamas, or the desperate anger at Israel often portrayed in outside accounts. The findings from these new polls offer a compelling corrective to those stereotypes. So pundits and policymakers on all sides would be wise to pay much more attention to how the people of Gaza themselves see their admittedly very difficult situation, and to the realistic options they prefer for some improvements in their plight. ❖

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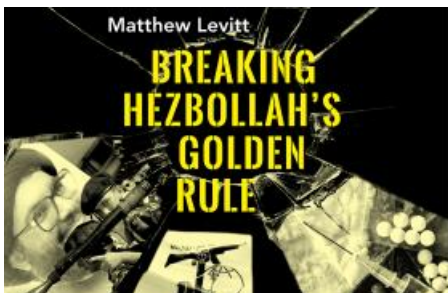
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