

Jerusalem Palestinian Poll Shows How Events Shift Attitudes Sharply, Pro and Con

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Brief Analysis

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Mideast pundits often speak in terms of “age-old” ethnic and religious conflicts, or of “deeply entrenched” attitudes or prejudices. A closer look at the evidence, however, reveals that Arab public opinion can sometimes change dramatically, both for better and for worse, in the space of just a year or two. Another common cliché, also undermined by the evidence presented here, is that Arab youth are more militant than their elders. The data to disprove both false assumptions come from the very timely case of the Palestinians in Jerusalem, now at the center of intense controversies over the fate of the city and its holy places.

In late May, during the ten days just before Ramadan, I personally supervised a unique, systematic professional public opinion poll of east Jerusalem’s Palestinian population. The fieldwork was conducted entirely by qualified native Palestinians, employed by the Palestine Center for Public Opinion based in the nearby West Bank town of Beit Sahur. The survey comprised face-to-face interviews with a representative, geographic probability sample of 512 Jerusalem Palestinians, with a margin of error of approximately 4 percent.

On the surface, the Palestinian neighborhoods we surveyed, home to approximately 350,000 people with official resident status (including work, travel, education, and social welfare benefits) but not Israeli citizenship, appeared quite peaceful. Under the surface, however, the survey revealed a much more mixed picture. The findings dramatically demonstrate how recent events have transformed public opinion in this crucial arena. And more broadly, these findings suggest how misleading is the conventional wisdom about “immutable” Mideast mindsets.

On a few bellwether issues of attitudes toward Israel, Jerusalem’s Palestinians are somewhat more moderate than West Bankers or Gazans. But on other key issues, the trend over the past two years is toward greater alienation from Israel. Some views have shifted sharply. Yet in previous years, views shifted just as sharply in a more moderate direction. Indeed, that is how the city’s Palestinian attitudes moved from 2010 to 2015, on the key question of preference for Palestinian or Israeli citizenship. In other words, attitudes are a function of events, at least as much as the other way around.

The other widespread stereotype exposed as false by this survey is that the younger generation is more “radical” than their elders. In this population, at least, the evidence belies that assumption. Demographic analysis of the data shows clearly that younger Palestinians in Jerusalem are typically no more hardline than those over 35 years old.

But comparing overall Jerusalem responses with West Bank and Gaza answers reveals some important differences. For example, in Jerusalem, the majority of Palestinians – 56 percent – say a two-state solution “should end the conflict with Israel.” Only a third say “resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated”; 12 percent offer no opinion. By comparison, West Bankers or Gazans are about 15-20 points more militant on this question. Similarly, Jerusalem Palestinians are slightly more inclined than West Bankers or Gazans to say that “Jews have some rights to this land, alongside Palestinians.” The numbers are: east Jerusalem (inside the wall), 15 percent; West Bank, 6 percent (with an atypically high 21 percent “don’t know”); Gaza, 8 percent.

Yet on other questions, east Jerusalem’s Palestinians are, as a group, actually more nationalistic -- and also more religious – today than before. Perhaps most telling of all, the proportion who say they would prefer Israeli to Palestinian citizenship has dropped sharply since the previous poll in September 2015, shortly before the “knife intifada” erupted in the city: from a remarkable 52 percent then, to just 21 percent now. The decline is even sharper among those living outside the Israeli security barrier that cuts through the municipality’s northeastern outer limits.

A few basic demographics set the stage for closer analysis. Of east Jerusalem’s Palestinians, two-thirds live inside this security barrier, with relatively easy access to jobs, schools, hospitals, and travel in Israel. But the remaining third, over 100,000 people, live beyond the barrier, in areas like Kafr Aqqab, Shuafat refugee camp, and Atarot/Al-Ram. Those Palestinians must pass through checkpoints to reach the main urban center, and receive even fewer municipal services in their home neighborhoods.

In part as a result, average household incomes are much lower than those inside the wall. And among this segment, a mere 6 percent now say they would prefer to become Israeli rather than Palestinian citizens. An unusually high 22 percent can’t or won’t specify their preference, probably reflecting the higher level of suspicion or secretiveness toward any outsiders in these comparatively isolated and almost “ungoverned” areas.

Looking to the quarter-million Palestinians living inside the Jerusalem barrier, the economic picture improves considerably. Two-thirds report a household income of over 4,800 shekels (\$1,300) per month. By comparison, just 5 percent of West Bankers, and only 1 percent of Gazans, say they are in that income bracket.

Yet subjectively, these Jerusalem Palestinians are not so satisfied with their lot. Only 30 percent say their lives are better than in the West Bank. And just 5 percent say their lives are “about the same as Israelis.”

And asked to pick their top personal priority from a list of four options, Jerusalem’s Palestinians are now somewhat more likely than their West Bank/Gaza counterparts to choose religion. Inside the capital city’s security barrier, the top choices are still “making enough income to live comfortably (38 percent) or “having a good family life” (34 percent). But 19 percent select “being a good Muslim or Christian.” The comparable figures elsewhere, remarkably, are lower by half: West Bank, 9 percent; Gaza, 7 percent. This evidence of a new Jerusalem Palestinian trend toward religiosity is supported by personal observation and anecdotal reporting by both Palestinian and Israeli experts.

Moreover, outside the wall, the rise of religious and also nationalist priorities appears even more pronounced. In that population, 23 percent pick “being a good Muslim or Christian” as their top personal priority. And an absolute majority – 64 percent – say that Palestinian independence or the return of refugees are their highest personal priorities. This is a significant population segment whose geographic, economic and social isolation seems to have produced a high level of political and religious radicalization.

But what explains the recent disillusionment of so many Palestinians inside the Jerusalem security barrier, who

continue to be more integrated into everyday Israeli life? This latest survey clearly reverses the trend of previous years, when a growing percentage of them said they would opt for Israeli over Palestinian citizenship: 35 percent in 2010, 42 percent in 2011, and 52 percent in 2015, versus just 21 percent today. True, more individual Jerusalem Palestinians than before – over 1,000 annually – are applying for Israeli citizenship lately; but that remains a tiny fraction of the total population in question.

The answers probably lie in a complex combination of factors. Among them are: mutual polarization and fear between Jews and Arabs in the city since the previous poll, due largely to “the knife intifadah” and Israeli reactions to it; greater popular concern with Islam and especially Al-Aqsa, due partly to the perceived failure of secular alternatives and repeated incidents and incitement at holy sites; disenchantment with failed promises of equal treatment and improved services and living conditions; and perhaps also a greater effort by the PA, Hamas, and the Israeli Arab Islamic and nationalist movements to appeal to east Jerusalem’s Palestinians over the past two years.

Such interpretations naturally go beyond the data. The policy implications of these findings go even further beyond the data. Yet one conclusion seems clear: any future discussions on Jerusalem would do well to take into account the shifting attitudes of the city’s residents, both Palestinian and Israeli. ❖

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