The Surprising Opinions of Palestinians

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

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New polling data indicates that West Bank and Gaza residents are not as hostile to President Trump's posture as Americans probably assume.

President Trump returned from Jerusalem and Bethlehem with no agreements in hand. But behind the scenes, a new poll reveals that much of the Palestinian public actually agrees with several key points Trump raised.

The poll was conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, and comprised face-to-face interviews May 16-27 among a representative sample of 1,540 Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, under my overall direction. Its surprising findings offer unexpected room for political and diplomatic maneuvering, and perhaps even some hope of progress, during the coming months.

The most startling finding concerns the Palestinian Authority bonuses paid to convicted terrorists. Israel, the U.S. Congress, and lately the Trump administration have all decried this "pay for slay" policy. The PA has claimed that popular pressure compels it to persist in this practice. In fact, the survey shows that two-thirds of Palestinians think "the PA should give prisoners' families normal social benefits like everybody else, not extra payments based on their sentences or armed operations." Among West Bankers, the exact figure is 65.9%; among Gazans, 67.2%.

Similarly, on the controversial issue of moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the Palestinian public is less militant than its leaders. In the West Bank, amazingly, the majority (56%) say this issue is "not so important" or even "not important at all." Gazans are more opposed; but just one-quarter of them label moving the U.S. embassy a "very important" issue.

Surprisingly, too, another Trump administration suggestion also gets majority public support. This is the idea of a "regional approach" to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, in which "Arab states would offer both sides incentives to take more moderate positions." In the West Bank, 58% approve; in Gaza, 55% do.

Equally revealing are the answers to this question: "What is the one thing you'd most like the U.S. to do about the Palestinian issues these days?" A plurality (34%) of West Bankers pick "put pressure on the PA and Hamas to be more democratic and less corrupt" -- more than those who prefer "pressure on Israel to make concessions" or "increased economic aid to the Palestinians." Among Gazans, economic aid comes first, followed closely by pressure on Israel; democracy and anti-corruption are the top choice of just 20%, probably because their other problems are so pressing and the prospect of reforming Hamas so dim.

Overall, Trump's Mideast agenda gets mixed Palestinian reviews. Thirty percent think it likely that Trump "will make a serious effort to help solve the Palestinian problem" -- though twice as many disagree. At the same time, the Palestinian public shows a strong pragmatic streak. Asked what they would most like Israel to do, West Bankers say "allow more Palestinian freedom of movement" (27%), "free more Palestinian prisoners" (24%), or "stop violence by the settlers" (22%); a mere 14% say "stop building in settlements beyond the wall." And nearly half (43%) want "Israeli companies to offer more job opportunities for Palestinians inside the West Bank."

Moreover, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza continue to prioritize their personal lives over politics. Among West Bankers, 49% pick "having a good family life" as their top priority, followed by "making enough income to live comfortably" with 30%; just 12% pick "working to establish a Palestinian state." In Gaza, too, family comes first, with 40%; income and state-building tie for second place there, at approximately 25% each.

And significantly, concerning Hamas, most Palestinians now seek to defuse its conflict with Israel. Among West Bankers, 55% say Hamas should preserve a cease-fire with Israel; among Gazans, that figure rises to a remarkable 80%. Even more striking are responses to this provocative question: "Should Hamas stop calling for Israel's destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders?" In the West Bank, fully three-quarters say yes. The proportion in Gaza is a bit lower, but still a solid majority at 62%.

None of this means that the Palestinian public endorses Israel's legitimacy. Indeed, the percentage who say that "Jews have some rights to this land" is only in the single digits. Yet while most deny Israel's right to exist, most accept the necessity to coexist. Among West Bankers, a 60% majority agree with this stark statement: "Regardless of what's right, the reality is that most Israeli settlers will probably stay where they are, and most Palestinian refugees will not return to the 1948 lands." Even among Gazans, nearly half (46%) accept that assessment. If the Trump administration proceeds on this realistic basis, rather than on the inflated rhetoric of previous efforts, then it will forge a genuine path to give Mideast coexistence a chance.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra. ❖

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