

Iran's Claim to Their Cause, As Palestinians See It

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Although Iran cannot be counted out as the long-term popular champion of the Palestinian cause, a new poll indicates that the Palestinian street is up for grabs.

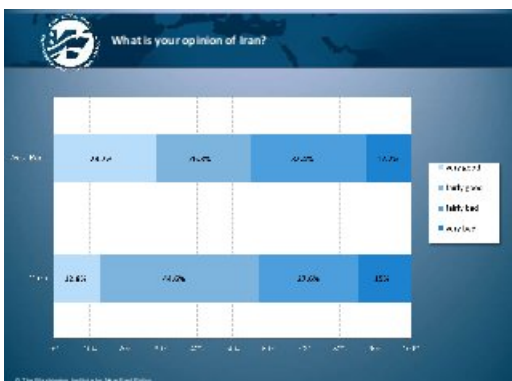
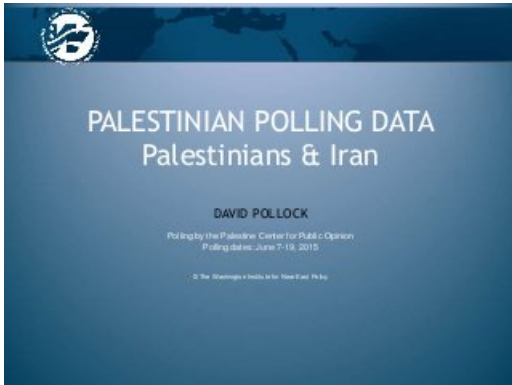
The current debate over the Iran nuclear deal includes a fair amount of speculation about how that deal might affect other regional countries, from Syria to Yemen and Bahrain -- and Israel. Much ink has been shed especially on how Israelis view Iran today. But one intriguing aspect of this conundrum that has received almost no attention, despite its potential importance to Israel and to the entire region, is how Palestinians view Iran and its rivals for influence in the region.

The Iran deal is part of a larger context of Middle East power politics, with strains of Persian/Arab ethnic and Shiite/Sunni sectarian identity issues overlaid on multiple Islamic, national, and geopolitical concerns. In that context, Iran professes to champion Palestinian "resistance" to occupation or oppression, while Arab governments claim the Palestinian cause as their own and resist Iran's "interference" in Arab affairs. Which way the Palestinians themselves see this struggle is an important indicator of how the region is likely to fare in the future, particularly when the nuclear debate is done.

A Palestinian public opinion poll commissioned by The Washington Institute last month, as the Iran deal was nearing completion, provides some unique hard data about this question. The poll, fielded by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion based in Beit Sahour near Bethlehem in the West Bank, consisted of personal interviews with a

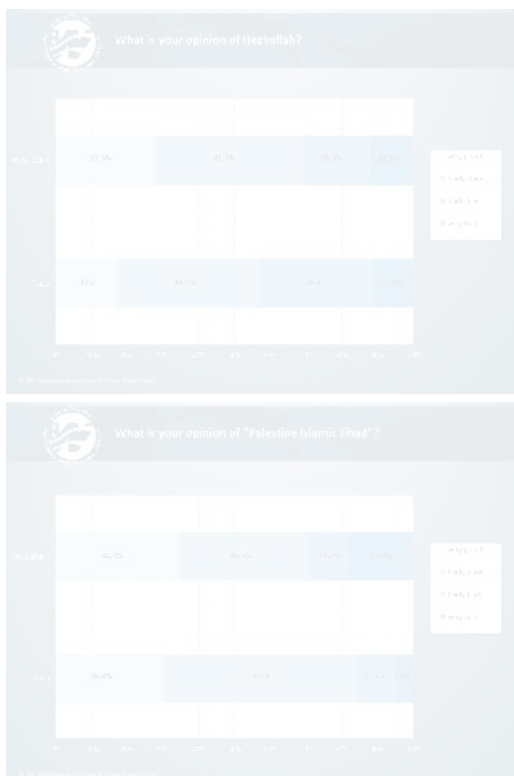
representative geographic probability sample of 919 respondents, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3.5%.

Asked their view of Iran's policies, a narrow majority give a favorable response: 55% in the West Bank, and a statistically identical 57% in Gaza. But only minorities give Iran's policies a "very good" rating: 29% of West Bankers and a mere 13% of Gazans. And a substantial proportion of Palestinians in both places -- 45% in the West Bank and 43% in Gaza -- give Iran's policies a "fairly bad" or even "very bad" rating.



Furthermore, Palestinians have little use for theocratic models, Iranian or other. Remarkably, three-quarters of both West Bankers and Gazans say it would be "a good idea" to "reform or interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern way." A mere 10% of Gazans, and even fewer West Bankers, pick "being a good Muslim" as their top personal priority, far behind "having a good family life" or "making enough money to live comfortably." And the approval rating for ISIS is way down in the low single digits in both the West Bank and Gaza -- just as it is in every other Arab society recently polled.

To fully understand Palestinians' attitudes toward Iran, it is useful to look at the way they perceive Iranian policies and Iran's key Arab allies. Hezbollah, for example, garners a remarkable 69% approval rating among West Bankers. Among Gazans, that figure is somewhat lower -- yet still an impressive 57%. Hezbollah's popularity is much higher among Palestinians than among any other Arab public recently polled. The most plausible explanation is that many Palestinians still focus on and admire Hezbollah's past record of uncompromising, violent opposition to Israel, while many other Arabs have come to resent Hezbollah's subservience to Iran and support for another Iranian client, Bashar al-Assad's brutal dictatorship in Syria.



One other group that gets high approval is another Iranian extremist client, with a record of smaller attacks against Israel: the tiny but very vocal terrorist organization, based mostly in Gaza and frequently on tour in Tehran, known as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). That group gets a 71% favorable rating in the West Bank -- and a stunning 84% in Gaza. PIJ's popularity there far eclipses that of Gaza's own Hamas ruling faction, and indeed may in part reflect a kind of "protest vote" against Hamas failure, repression, and misrule.

More broadly, Palestinian attitudes toward Israel show some affinity with (or at least ambivalence toward) Iran's rejectionist position. Unlike Iran, about half of West Bankers and Gazans do say they accept the principle of a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and would agree to certain tactical compromises with Israel. About half would even agree to recognize Israel as "the state of the Jewish people" -- poles apart from the official position of Iran, or even of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Nevertheless, when asked about their long-term vision, a clear majority in both the West Bank and Gaza say that two states should not be the end of the conflict -- and that the struggle (including armed struggle) to "liberate all of Palestine" should persevere until it prevails someday.



And yet, to put this picture in perspective, one must compare Iran's popularity on the Palestinian street with that of other regional powers -- including the two neighboring states that have formally made their peace with Israel, namely Egypt and Jordan. Egypt's recent policies rate about the same approval as Iran's: 57% among West Bankers and 54% among Gazans. And Palestinians are much less likely to blame Egypt than to blame Israel, or even Hamas or the PA, for the snail's pace of Gaza's postwar reconstruction over the past year. Moreover, Jordan scores even better than Egypt, with a 62% favorable rating in Gaza and an impressive 74% favorable score in the West Bank.

Still higher ratings are achieved by some of Iran's other regional competitors. Qatar gets 72-73% favorable reviews in both the West Bank and Gaza. Saudi Arabia, perhaps Iran's archrival, enjoys an 83% approval rating in the West Bank and only a bit lower in Gaza, at 73%. Best of all is non-Arab Turkey, with 84% approval among West Bankers and a top-of-the-charts 89% approval rating in Gaza, where the Turks have tried hard over the past several years, albeit with varied success, to provide high-profile political and material support.

Given this evidence, the following conclusions may reasonably be drawn. First, while being Sunni seems to count for something, over the long run Iran cannot be counted out as popular champion for the Palestinian cause. And second, relatedly, the Palestinian street is up for grabs: about regional partners, both Arab and non-Arab, and even about Israel. Palestinians respond to whichever party they see as reflecting their priorities or meeting their needs, and they have both moderate and radical impulses. Whether Iran can exploit the latter is probably a function of what alternatives the Palestinians think they have. So whatever happens in the Iran nuclear deal debate, all interested parties -- Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs, and others -- should work hard to make dignified coexistence their most realistic and attractive option.

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