

Palestinians Want Hamas In, but Want Peace Talks Too

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Jun 6, 2014

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Brief Analysis

West Bank and Gaza residents alike still appear more receptive to Fatah than Hamas viewpoints.

New findings from three public opinion polls in the West Bank and Gaza show overwhelming support for a new "unity" government backed by both Hamas and Fatah -- even as a narrower majority still supports peace talks and peaceful coexistence with Israel.

The idea of a Palestinian unity government, as announced this week, enjoys very broad backing among West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, according to a reliable poll by Ramallah-based Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) conducted May 24-26. Three quarters in both territories support integrating Fatah and Hamas security services and including Hamas in the Palestine Liberation Organization. An even larger majority supports reconciliation even if it results in U.S. economic sanctions or Israeli political pressure. In a related finding, overall optimism has surged 15 points since March, with an especially large jump in Gaza, from 46 to 71 percent.

At the same time, a bare majority of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians support the statement by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas that the new government "would recognize Israel, renounce violence, and honor all previous international agreements." But the margin in favor is somewhat higher in the West Bank (54 percent vs. 40 percent) than in Gaza, where the public is almost evenly split on this question.

A narrow majority of Palestinians also still accept "the principle of a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state living side by side in peace with Israel." Here again, the margin of support is significantly higher in the West Bank (58 percent vs. 39 percent) than in Gaza (52 percent vs. 47 percent). An intriguing, counterintuitive finding is the perceived "most significant impediment" to reaching this solution: it is the issue of Jerusalem, rather than of refugees -- with the margin even higher (46 percent vs. 33 percent) among the largely refugee-origin Gazans.

More immediately, half the Palestinian public still backs the resumption of peace talks, with very little difference between West Bank and Gaza opinion. That proportion rises to a surprisingly high two thirds if Israel accepts two

Palestinian conditions: a fourth round of prisoner releases and a three-month settlement freeze. A mere 15 percent of West Bankers, and 24 percent of Gazans, favor "the approach advocated by Hamas" to achieving Palestinian independence.

The continuing interest in peace talks helps explain why, in a separate Zogby poll also conducted last month, two thirds said "it is important for their country to maintain good relations with the U.S.," even though a mere 29 percent had a favorable opinion of the United States. Sixty percent said the United States is at least "trying" to develop good ties with their country. Those figures are confirmed by the AWRAD survey, which shows 55 percent terming the United States "important to the conduct of negotiations and the eventual resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

But the most urgent task in Palestinian eyes, especially in Gaza, is a new national election: this is the priority for 69 percent of Gazans and 45 percent of West Bankers. By contrast, only around 10 percent overall select any of the other options offered: resuming peace talks, joining more United Nations and international bodies, nonviolent resistance, or violent resistance. If an election were held, Abbas and Fatah would be favored over Hamas candidates by margins of around 45 percent to 15 percent -- although nearly 40 percent of Palestinians say they are either undecided or unlikely to vote.

Remarkably, when asked about the most important priorities for U.S.-Arab relations, under half (47 percent) of Palestinians picked the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nearly as many (39 percent) chose ending the Syrian conflict or helping Syrian refugees. That sentiment is broadly in line with results from the April Pew Research Center poll in the territories, showing two thirds of Palestinians strongly disapproving of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

These data demonstrate that a U.S. policy of holding the new Palestinian government to previous commitments regarding nonviolence and negotiations with Israel would enjoy majority acceptance at the Palestinian popular level. Moreover, looking forward, the West Bank and Gaza publics both appear more receptive to the Fatah than to the Hamas side of their new national unity arrangement. This could offer U.S. policymakers some prospect of working to preserve the option of a two-state solution, despite Hamas's continuing rejection of that ideal.

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



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