

Poll Shows 40 Percent of Jerusalem Arabs Prefer Israel to a Palestinian State

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Brief Analysis

The nearly 300,000 Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, regardless of diplomatic rhetoric, are almost evenly divided in choosing between Israeli and Palestinian citizenship.

In the wake of Washington's decision to cut funding to UNESCO, a new phase of diplomatic debate approaches regarding the application for recognition of a Palestinian state "with East Jerusalem as its capital." Yet new research reveals that a surprisingly large number of the Palestinians who actually reside in the city reject that prospect. Forty-two percent say they would even try to move to Israel if their neighborhood became part of a new Palestinian state. And a statistically equivalent 39 percent say they would prefer Israeli to Palestinian citizenship.

These findings are from a survey sponsored by The Washington Institute and conducted September 4-10 by Palestinian pollster Dr. Nabil Kukali of the Bethlehem-based Palestinian Center for Public Opinion (PCPO), in partnership with the Princeton-based Pechter Middle East Polls. The survey used a representative geographic probability sample of 500 respondents, yielding a margin of error of approximately 4 percent. Each one of east Jerusalem's nineteen Palestinian neighborhoods was sampled in exact proportion to its share of the city's total Palestinian population, and all interviews were conducted privately by local Palestinians in Arabic, and in respondents' homes.

Percentage Choosing Israel Is Stable, But More Opting for Palestine

The latest poll numbers confirm findings from a similar survey conducted for the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations by PCPO and Pechter in November 2010, the first-ever credible poll of its kind. In that survey, 40 percent of Jerusalem Palestinians said they would definitely or probably move in order to become citizens of Israel rather than of a new Palestinian state.

As in the 2010 poll, last month's respondents offered a variety of mostly practical motives for preferring Israeli citizenship: higher income, better jobs, and a more reliable social safety net, specifically including healthcare, pensions, and disability benefits. Freedom of movement under Israeli rule also ranked very high; contrary to the common misconception of an "isolated" community, around two-thirds of these Palestinians reported that they visit not just west Jerusalem, but also other parts of Israel and the West Bank at least once a week. By contrast, when asked about the prospect of living in a Palestinian state, over half said they would be concerned about less freedom of expression and more corruption.

Nevertheless, half (53 percent) said they would prefer Palestinian citizenship, compared to just 30 percent in November 2010. Yet fewer than half (44 percent) said they would probably move, if necessary, in order to obtain it. This change suggests that, as discussion of Palestinian statehood and the future of Jerusalem has become more explicit, views have shifted toward this option among the one-third who previously voiced uncertainty or refused to answer these questions.

Only a Third See Practical Gain from UN Bid

Although the situation and attitudes of east Jerusalem Palestinians differ in many ways from those of West Bank and Gaza residents, their views converge in at least one surprising respect. Just one-third (34 percent) of the September respondents said that the UN vote on Palestinian membership would have any positive practical effect on their own lives.

The results from a separate poll of all West Bank/Gaza Palestinians (including a proportional 9 percent subsample in east Jerusalem) were strikingly similar. This poll was conducted by the Ramallah-based Palestinian pollster Dr. Nader Said of the Arab World for Research and Development on October 2-4, shortly after President Mahmoud Abbas's widely reported UN General Assembly speech. Nevertheless, only a minority (37 percent) of respondents expected the UN deliberations to yield any "concrete advance" for the Palestinian cause.

Israeli Citizenship Issues

From an official Israeli perspective, the desire of so many Jerusalem Palestinians to remain under Israel's jurisdiction may be a mixed blessing. On one hand, it seemingly strengthens Israel's case to retain the relevant neighborhoods based on self-determination. On the other hand, it could raise the issue of granting Israeli citizenship to a few hundred thousand additional Palestinians.

In theory, Palestinian legal residents of Jerusalem have had the right to request Israeli citizenship since 1967. But only a small minority have chosen to exercise that right, probably due to complex reasons: social stigma; fear of losing their Jordanian passports; reluctance to engage in a potentially costly, time-consuming, and uncertain bureaucratic process; and the lack of any compelling incentives to change their status. As a result, only about 15,000 east Jerusalem Palestinians are Israeli citizens today, and fewer than 10 percent of the September respondents reported holding an Israeli passport.

Nevertheless, the latest poll suggests that this reticence could change as the possibility of having to choose between Israeli or Palestinian citizenship becomes somewhat more realistic. For example, a majority (62 percent) said that "the ability to vote in Israeli national elections" would be at least moderately important to them if their neighborhood were recognized as part of Israel. And the same percentage said that "social equality as full citizens of Israel" would also be important.

Palestinian Population Growth Outstrips Israeli Growth

Demographic research related to the above surveys produces another clear and counterintuitive conclusion: despite libelous rhetoric about the "Judaization" of Jerusalem, Palestinian population growth in the city has outpaced that of Israelis by far. Since 1967, the city's Israeli population -- including in the new neighborhoods beyond the 1949-1967 armistice lines -- has indeed grown substantially, roughly doubling from under 250,000 to around half a million today. But over the same period, the Palestinian population has more than quadrupled, from around 70,000 in 1967 to 288,000 at last official count in 2010.

The latter increase reflects a combination of factors. Natural growth, migration, and expansion of the municipal boundaries in 1967 to encompass some surrounding Palestinian settlements have all contributed, probably in roughly equal measure. As a result, the Palestinian percentage of the city's total population has increased from under 25 percent in 1967 to 37 percent today.

Building Permits, Evictions, and Discrimination

Only a relatively small minority (24 percent) of east Jerusalem Palestinians now say they are dissatisfied with "the ease or difficulty of obtaining building permits" in the city -- a surprising finding given the preoccupation with this problem among some media outlets and NGOs. This marks a sharp decline from November 2010, when two-thirds (66 percent) reported dissatisfaction on this issue. And while 70 percent of the September respondents said that discrimination in municipal services is at least a "moderate" problem, a mere 7 percent named building permits, evictions, or demolitions as examples of such discrimination in response to an open-ended question.

This counterintuitive finding derives from a combination of important but widely misunderstood underlying factors. First, the two neighborhoods most affected by these problems, Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, represent but a tiny fraction (5.6 percent) of Jerusalem's overall Palestinian population. Second, the number of demolitions, while individually unfortunate, is reported to be low, averaging under fifty per year since 1967. Third, the movement of new Israeli residents into Palestinian neighborhoods has been remarkably minimal over the past twenty years, rising from 1,400 in 1991 to 2,200 today, according to a new estimate by independent Jerusalem expert Daniel Seidemann of the NGO Ir Amim. In other words, almost all of the Israeli growth beyond the city's pre-1967 area is in previously empty land around the city's outskirts -- areas likely to remain in Israel in exchange for other territory in any future border agreement with a Palestinian state. Fourth, and perhaps most important lately, the Jerusalem municipality has sharply increased the planned number of building approvals for Palestinians over the past year, including the city's first entirely new substantial Palestinian neighborhood since 1967.

Policy Implications

The attitudes revealed by this survey point to the desirability of more creative approaches to reconciling the conflicting claims and aspirations of the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. The United States should consider putting greater emphasis on the needs and wants of those residents, whether Palestinians or Israelis, in formulating policies on the city's future. This understanding adds one more compelling reason to reject a unilateral demand for a Palestinian state "with East Jerusalem as its capital" -- a demand that ignores not only the need to negotiate these issues, but also the legitimate desires of the city's Palestinian population.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. In addition, he is the principal advisor to Pechter Middle East Polls. ❖

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