

East Jerusalem Palestinians Say UN Move Would Hurt Them; Many Prefer Israeli Citizenship

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Brief Analysis

The PA's demand for a UN declaration that names east Jerusalem as the capital of a new Palestinian state actually goes against the wishes of much of the city's Palestinian population.

A new and credible poll of east Jerusalem Palestinians shows that nearly half would prefer to become citizens of Israel rather than of a new Palestinian state -- casting fresh doubts on the official Palestinian claim to the city. Only one-quarter (23 percent) of the city's nearly 300,000 Palestinian residents said they would "definitely" prefer Palestinian citizenship, despite the recent surge in nationalist activity leading up to this week's UN debate. Even more remarkably, 42 percent said they would actually move to a different neighborhood if necessary in order to remain under Israeli rather than Palestinian authority, confirming results from a similar survey administered by a Palestinian pollster in November 2010 and cosponsored by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations.

The new survey -- conducted September 4-10 by leading Palestinian pollster Dr. Nabil Kukali of the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, in partnership with Princeton-based Pechter Middle East Polls -- included a representative geographic probability sample of 500 respondents, yielding a margin of error of approximately 4 percent. Every one of east Jerusalem's nineteen Palestinian neighborhoods was sampled in exact proportion to its share of the total population, and the face-to-face interviews were conducted privately by local Palestinians in respondents' homes.

Participants offered several practical reasons for preferring Israeli citizenship: greater freedom of movement under Israel's jurisdiction, higher income, more employment opportunities, and a better social safety net, including health insurance, pensions, and disability benefits. Indeed, two-thirds reported that they travel not just to west Jerusalem, but also to other parts of Israel every week. At the same time, more than half of the respondents said they are concerned about increased corruption and decreased freedom of expression under Palestinian rule.

In another very timely finding, a solid majority -- 59 percent -- said that a UN declaration of a Palestinian state without Israel's agreement would actually have a negative effect on their lives. This figure is up substantially from the November 2010 Pechter poll, as the implications of such a unilateral declaration have become ever more apparent.

East Jerusalem Palestinians remain generally dissatisfied with the amount of income and property taxes they pay, and with the delays in travel caused by checkpoints or by Israel's West Bank security barrier. Yet a comparison of results from last November shows a significant improvement in perceptions of other issues.

For example, a majority (57 percent) are now satisfied with their standard of living, up from 44 percent in November. And just 43 percent now say they are dissatisfied on the issue of obtaining building permits -- down greatly from around 70 percent in the previous survey. Similarly, only 16 percent now report dissatisfaction with Jerusalem municipal officials, a significant improvement compared to 35 percent in November.

Looking ahead, 21 percent say a new intifada in Jerusalem is very likely if peace negotiations with Israel collapse entirely; an additional 36 percent say this is somewhat likely. Surprisingly, these figures are actually down slightly from November 2010. More ominously, however, two-thirds predict that some groups would continue the "armed struggle" against Israel even if the two sides reached a peace agreement.

Views of leading political figures are decidedly mixed. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas scores relatively high with a 49 percent approval rating. But Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Israeli Arab Islamic Movement leader Sheikh Raed Salah are not far behind, with 40 percent and 33 percent each. Remarkably, the Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, is in the same league with 34 percent. By comparison, President Obama's popularity is considerably lower, at just 20 percent.

Overall, the political implications of this new poll are clear: official PA demands, including a UN declaration that east Jerusalem must be the capital of a new Palestinian state, actually go against the wishes of much of the city's Palestinian population. As a result, the United States and other governments are on very firm ground in opposing these demands, even from a democratic Palestinian standpoint.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. ❖

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