

# What Do the Arabs of East Jerusalem Really Want?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**According to reliable, face-to-face surveys, more Palestinians in east Jerusalem would prefer to become citizens of Israel rather than citizens of a new Palestinian state.**

**T**he following paper is based on Dr. Pollock's April 28, 2011, presentation at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

## Summary of Findings

- According to face-to-face surveys conducted according to the highest international standards, more Palestinians in east Jerusalem would prefer to become citizens of Israel rather than citizens of a new Palestinian state. In addition, 40 percent said they would probably or definitely move in order to live under Israeli rather than Palestinian rule.
- 44 percent of the Palestinians in Jerusalem say they are very, or at least somewhat, satisfied with their standard of living. This is a very high percentage compared to other populations in the Arab world. Only about 30 percent sympathize with either Fatah or Hamas or with the Israeli Arab Islamic movement. Politics is not a major preoccupation.
- Three-quarters of east Jerusalem Arabs are at least a little concerned, and more than half are more than a little concerned, that they would lose their ability to write and speak freely if they became citizens of a Palestinian state rather than remaining under Israeli control.
- Significantly, 41 percent thought that the armed conflict probably or definitely would continue even after a peace agreement, and this is from the most moderate population of Palestinians. Only a third say that a unilateral declaration of Palestinian independence backed by the UN would have a positive effect on their lives. Two-thirds say that such a unilateral step would have no positive effect.
- For people who tend to assume that a fair and practical solution for the Jerusalem issue is for the Arab neighborhoods to become part of Palestine and the Jewish neighborhoods to become part of Israel, these findings suggest that this

could be somewhat problematic from the point of view of the people who actually live in east Jerusalem.

## The "Arab Spring": The Eruption of Public Opinion

**A**ll around the Middle East we see the eruption of public opinion as an important, and perhaps even a decisive, factor in the politics of various Arab countries. For the first time in recent memory, the ordinary people in these countries are becoming empowered to change the course of their own governments. This indicates how vital it is for us to try to understand and measure not just what the politicians say, but what the people think.

In Egypt during the revolution, in cooperation with Pechter Middle East Polls, we used Arab interviewers to conduct a telephone poll in Cairo and Alexandria at the very moment that thousands of Egyptians were out in the streets demanding the overthrow of Mubarak. We found that the main reasons for the Egyptian revolution were internal economic issues, not issues of Islam, America, Israel, or any foreign policy issues, or even political issues such as democracy or freedom. The issues were more about economic opportunity, inequality, corruption and abuses, and the ineffectiveness of Egypt's government to provide for its own people's basic needs. This is what motivated the people in Egypt to overthrow their government.

In retrospect, these results fit well with another poll that I did in Egypt a year before the revolution. When Egyptians were asked in an open-ended way what was on their mind, they were much more concerned about internal issues, and especially economic ones including corruption.

In a poll that I took in 2011 in Jordan, sympathy for al-Qaeda was around 20 percent. When we asked Jordanians what they would do if they knew there was someone from al-Qaeda in their own neighborhood, some 10 percent were willing to say they would help an al-Qaeda fugitive in their own neighborhood rather than turn him in to the authorities. As never before, people are willing to give honest answers to the toughest questions.

## 300,000 Palestinians in 19 Neighborhoods

**W**hat do the almost 300,000 Palestinians living in 19 Arab neighborhoods in the eastern half of Jerusalem actually think? What do these people want? What do they think about their experiences under Israeli rule? How do they see the future of their city?

We conducted solid surveys conforming to the most rigorous international standards. In east Jerusalem the total sample was 1,039, which means a margin of error of less than 3 percent. The sample covered the entire city, every single neighborhood, and was based on face-to-face interviews. The sample was representative of the overall Palestinian population of the city by age, education, gender, occupation, neighborhood, and income.

Some 44 percent report a monthly household income of NIS 4,800 (\$1,400) or more. Almost half of the total population enjoys a lower middle class or higher standard of living, much better than Palestinians in the West Bank and approximately the same as Arab citizens of Israel inside the 1967 lines, but significantly lower than that of the Israeli Jewish population. In comparison to other Palestinians in the West Bank, and certainly in Gaza, the standard of living of Palestinians in east Jerusalem is reasonably good.

At the end of the survey, once respondents felt reasonably comfortable answering increasingly nosy questions, we came to the bottom line issue: If you had to choose, would you prefer to be a citizen of Israel or a citizen of a new Palestinian state. We found that more Palestinians in east Jerusalem would prefer to become citizens of Israel rather than citizens of a new Palestinian state: 35 percent would prefer to become citizens of Israel, 30 percent citizens of Palestine, and 35 percent either don't know or refused to answer.

After the interviews were completed, we did a statistical analysis of the 35 percent who said they did not know, and analyzed their responses to other questions in the survey in order to make a judgment. We determined that the people who said they did not know or would not answer were in the middle in their views on all the different issues

that make up their lives. Statistically speaking, that 35 percent leans slightly in the direction of the people who say they would prefer Israeli rather than Palestinian citizenship. Out of 50 different variables that we analyzed, the people that said "I don't know" or "I refuse to answer," answered more like the people who preferred Israel on 27 of those 50 variables, more like the people who said Palestine on 17 of those variables, and exactly in the middle on the rest of the 50 variables.

Pollsters often use a sort of trick question when they are asking about very controversial issues. In order to make it safer to answer, we ask people what they think their neighbor thinks, or what do people like them think about the issue. When we asked that question, we found that slightly more, 39 percent, said they thought that most of their neighbors would prefer Israeli to Palestinian citizenship. This gives us an indication that the answers to this question are probably honest. When people say roughly the same thing about what they think and what they think their neighbors think, that is usually an indication in polling practice that people are telling you candidly what their real opinions are.

We went a step further and asked people an even harder question: Would they move in order to be a citizen of whichever side they preferred if that choice became a necessity as part of a peace settlement or as part of a division of the city between Palestinian and Israeli rule? When we asked people whether they would move into Palestine, most said no, but when we asked whether they would move in order to become a citizen of Israel if their existing neighborhood came under Palestinian rule, fully 40 percent of the Palestinians in east Jerusalem said they would probably or definitely move in order to live under Israeli rather than Palestinian rule.

We presented these results to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington and New York, and there were Palestinian activists present. As one of these Palestinians put it, the PA has a problem with this population -- they are not on their side. We also presented these results to a Palestinian audience in east Jerusalem and found that they are convinced that these are valid findings. They conform to their own experiences and perceptions of the people around them.

In addition, we found that there is not a whole lot of difference in most demographic categories on most questions. In other words, young and old, rich and poor, better educated and less educated are not that different. The younger segment of the population is slightly more inclined to say that they would prefer Israeli citizenship, but not by a whole lot.

Even in Shuafat refugee camp, where attitudes are the least moderate, you do not get a majority saying that they would rather be Palestinian citizens, which is incredible and even counter-intuitive.

## **Why Palestinians Feel the Way They Do**

**W**hy do these people feel that way? They are Palestinians after all. Why would so many of them become Israeli rather than Palestinian citizens, and even move to Israel in order to make that choice possible?

First, 44 percent of the Palestinians in the city say they are very, or at least somewhat, satisfied with their standard of living. This is a very high percentage compared to other populations in the Arab world that I have studied.

Second, we found that many of these Palestinians are generally pretty satisfied with a lot of important issues in their daily lives, including education, access to a nearby place of worship, health care, and basic services such as electricity and water. There is a significant percentage that has a neutral or even a negative view of these issues, but in every case, the majority is satisfied with all of these aspects of life. It actually turns out that less than half of the Palestinians in east Jerusalem are dissatisfied with their personal interactions with Jews in the city, with their ability to obtain travel documents, with their personal interactions with municipal officials, or with disability benefits.

To be fair, we found that a majority of Palestinians in east Jerusalem -- 56 percent -- did report that they feel there is

a great deal or a fair amount of discrimination against them by the municipality. In other words, they feel there is official, not social, discrimination against them. Yes, they are reasonably satisfied with a lot of things, but that does not mean that they feel, on the whole, that they are being treated equally.

At the same time, almost half of the Palestinians report that corruption by PA officials is a big or at least a moderate problem for them personally.

Palestinians in east Jerusalem have a special status and blue identity cards like Israelis, which enable them to travel into the West Bank or into Israel. Unlike West Bank or Gaza Palestinians, they are very mobile and not isolated either from Palestinians or from Israelis. There is a high incidence of travel to west Jerusalem, to other areas of Israel, to the West Bank, and also quite a high level of interaction with Jewish citizens of Israel. This is a population which often works in the western side of the city and has often been educated in Israeli institutions.

We found that identity as a blue card holder is almost as important to these people as their identity as Palestinians or even as Muslims. That helps to explain why such a high percentage, if faced with the choice, would choose to be citizens of Israel and preserve some special status and their access to education, employment, travel, and social benefits, rather than give up those benefits and privileges in return for Palestinian citizenship.

In east Jerusalem, only about 30 percent sympathize with either Fatah or Hamas or with the Israeli Arab Islamic movement. This is a population whose political sympathies are not that strong or well-defined in comparison with their focus on their own personal identities -- either religious, national, economic, or social. Politics is not a major preoccupation.

Finally, we asked the Palestinians directly and in an open-ended way why they wanted to be a Palestinian citizen or an Israeli citizen. For most Palestinians who said they wanted to be citizens of Israel, approximately 35 percent said it was practical issues that dominate -- freedom of movement, higher income, health insurance, job opportunities, prosperity, more shops, and much lower down the list came issues of politics, culture, and law and order. Much higher on the list were practical concerns. When we looked at the Palestinians who said they would rather be citizens of Palestine, for 30 percent, practical issues were not very important. Issues of nationalism, identity, religion, and getting rid of discrimination were the issues that dominated among this group.

People were concerned that if they became a citizen of Palestine, they had significant worries about losing employment in Israel, free movement in Israel, Israeli health care, and reduction in city services. They were also concerned about an increase in corruption and most of all about the possibility of losing access to the Old City and the Al Aksa mosque, which was highest on their list of concerns.

Many of the concerns that these people have are very similar to the top concerns that are being expressed all over the region in public opinion and in the Arab uprisings that we are now witnessing from Egypt to Tunisia to Yemen.

People are concerned most of all about economic opportunities, about corruption, and about freedoms, such as the freedom to write and speak freely. Three-quarters of east Jerusalem Arabs are at least a little concerned, and more than half are more than a little concerned, that they would lose their ability to write and speak freely if they became citizens of a Palestinian state rather than remaining under Israeli control.

If they became part of Israel, their concerns about the moral misconduct of their children were fairly high on the list. They are, generally speaking, a religious and conservative group. Even though educated and young, on the whole, a fairly high proportion of the population are concerned about what they see as the more lax moral standards or more progressive atmosphere in Israeli society compared to their ideal of Muslim society and culture. Interestingly, 60 percent cared about access to the beach. They travel in Israel quite a lot, so they think about access to the beach when they consider their future.

# Will There Be an End to the Conflict?

**T**oday the peace process is going nowhere. Even if the peace process does produce an agreement, this will not necessarily be more than a piece of paper, nor will it necessarily be the end of conflict. We asked the Palestinians in Jerusalem: If there is an agreement, will the conflict continue anyway? Significantly, 41 percent thought that the armed conflict probably or definitely would continue even after a peace agreement, and this is from among, in other respects, the most moderate population of Palestinians.

Then we asked: How did they think people in their own neighborhood would react to an agreement? Some 31 percent said that about half or more of the people in their own neighborhood would support the continuation of the armed struggle against Israel even after a peace agreement.

We also asked: If the negotiations collapsed, how likely is a new intifada in east Jerusalem? Only 27 percent said very likely, but an additional 37 percent said somewhat likely. In other words, putting those two figures together, almost two-thirds of east Jerusalem Palestinians said that a new intifada is at least somewhat likely if peace negotiations completely collapse.

Only a third of the Palestinians in east Jerusalem say that a unilateral declaration of Palestinian independence, even one backed by the United Nations, would have a positive effect on their own lives. Two-thirds say that such a unilateral step would be no more than an empty declaration and would not have a positive effect on their lives. If the Palestinians proceed down this path, it could be a recipe for trouble within their own population because of the expectations that are being raised. The almost inevitable disappointment that is likely to follow could lead, in my view, to an intifada not only against Israel but against the Palestinian Authority, along the lines of the uprisings that we have seen in other parts of the Arab region in recent months.

Most Arabs who are polled do not like and are really afraid of Iran. This holds true for Egypt, Jordan, everybody but the Shiites in Lebanon, and the Saudi public, which really does not like Iran. In many of these countries, 40 percent or more support sanctions against Iran. That is a very high percentage in support of international pressure against a fellow Muslim country. A third of the Saudi public said that they wanted the United States to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. Iran has few friends in the region among the ordinary people, and that is good to know. On the other hand, the Palestinians have a terrible opinion of the United States and are more favorable towards Iran than most Arabs.

## Implications of the Findings

**I**n my opinion, these findings should have an effect at least in refining the discussion of Jerusalem, and it is also important from an American government or a broader international perspective. For people who tend to assume that a fair and practical solution for the Jerusalem issue is for the Arab neighborhoods to become part of Palestine and the Jewish neighborhoods to become part of Israel, these findings suggest that this could be somewhat problematic from the point of view of the people who actually live in east Jerusalem.

This factor needs to be taken into account or we are going to end up with a very disgruntled population of Palestinians who will be forced to come under Palestinian rule when a plurality do not want that. At a minimum, there needs to be some arrangement that responds to people's personal needs and aspirations, not just to their collective identity or political leadership.

*David Pollock, the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served as senior advisor for the Broader Middle East at the State Department.* ❖

*Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs Issue Brief*

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