The Real Issue Is Political Leadership

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Recent polls indicate that Middle Eastern public opinion is becoming more amenable to Israeli-Palestinian peace, but at a time of immense regional upheaval, such sentiments are not pushing governments in that direction.

Around half of Israelis, Palestinians, and some other key Arab publics, according to various opinion polls taken in the past decade, support something like the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, whose basic concept is peace and Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for Israel's full withdrawal from the territories it captured in the 1967 war. Similarly, around half of each one of these publics would also support other analogous proposals focused more narrowly on "land for peace" in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, such as the unofficial Palestinian-Israeli Geneva initiative of 2003 or the Clinton parameters of December 2000.

Given such statistics, is this glass half empty or half full? These results suggest that political leadership could move these societies toward peace based on mutual compromises. But whether such political leadership can be found, whether the devilish details of a peace agreement can be successfully negotiated, and whether any such agreement could withstand the shifting winds of public opinion -- all these are different questions entirely.

For now, more specifically and potentially significantly, at least a narrow majority of West Bank/Gaza Palestinians supports such compromise proposals -- even when the questions are worded to include some territorial swaps beyond the 1967 lines and to exclude an unlimited "right of return" for Palestinian refugees. And Israelis tend to support such proposals even when worded to provide for sharing Jerusalem and to omit any mention of recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state."

At the same time, Palestinians are somewhat more likely, and Israelis somewhat less likely, to support the Arab Peace Initiative as compared to the other proposals mentioned above -- almost certainly because of the former's inclusion of an ambiguous reference to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 on the "right of return." For a significant number of Israelis, this issue seems to outweigh even the prospect of recognition by the entire league of Arab states. And for a significant number of Palestinians, this issue seems to expand their willingness to accept

peace with Israel -- although, as just noted, a majority has usually been prepared to accept that even without provision for refugee movement into that country's pre-1967 territory.

The most recent polls from Egypt and Jordan, however, show that the publics in those two countries -- the only Arab ones officially at peace with Israel, after Israel ceded them all the land they claimed -- are actually, and unfortunately, turning against those very peace treaties. A reliable Pechter Middle East Polls survey in Jordan in April/May 2011 shows something over half of that public opposed to peace with Israel. The latest Pechter Poll of Egypt, conducted during the revolution there in early February, showed this public roughly evenly divided on this matter, but with around a third responding "don't know" or refusing to answer the question. But since then, two other polls suggest that Egyptians are moving into the opposing column. The Pew Poll, taken in April, records 54 percent saying their country should cancel its peace treaty with Israel.

Of course, a great deal depends upon the precise timing, wording, and sample selection of each one of these (or any other) surveys. That is all the more reason why polls asking not about the Arab Peace Initiative specifically, but about other loosely similar proposals, can only be a rough guide to public opinion on these issues. And even polls that ask explicitly about the API must be taken with the proverbial grain (or more) of salt, depending upon their individual context, technical specifications, and overall credibility of the pollster. Nevertheless, the very brief additional selection of relevant results presented below may be useful.

The Geneva initiative, when taken as a whole document, has recently garnered narrow majority or at least plurality Israeli and Palestinian support. In March 2010, the International Peace Institute reported that 56 percent of Israelis support the Geneva initiative, with about half of the Palestinian population supporting it. The group's poll from December 2008 had shown similar results, with a 51 percent support rating among Israelis, but about 41 percent among Palestinians. Palestinian support, measured in November 2010, increased to 67.6 percent when respondents were asked specifically about the clause concerning Israeli withdrawal from East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, with no more than three percent land swaps.

The Brookings Institution has reported on opinions about the concept of land-for-peace in six Arab states: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. In 2010, 56 percent of those polled said that they would be prepared for comprehensive peace with Israel if it pulled out of the 1967 territories, but that they do not believe Israel would do so. This number was the highest of the past three years.

According to the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research, as of March 2011 Palestinians still displayed a relatively high level of support for the API: 54 percent supported it, but this was down from 64 percent in August of 2009. Other Palestinian polls generally show comparable levels of support for the notions of "land for peace" and a "two-state solution," though usually without specific reference to the API.

Israeli opinions on the API, measured in late 2010 by the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, were reported to be at a support level of 52 percent, a number significantly higher than previous years. Yet a Brookings survey taken at almost exactly the same time strongly suggests that such a yes/no finding is actually simplistic: while just 40 percent of Israeli respondents that they would be ready for a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders with slight modifications, as against 30 percent clearly opposed, fully 30 percent responded that they had a view different from either of those two alternatives.

What then is the political, rather than the purely statistical, significance, of all these numbers? As noted above, political leadership is at least as important as public opinion. For the time being, both Palestinian and Israeli political leaders are adding conditions to peace, above and beyond the bare minimum that their own publics require. And elsewhere in the region, where public opinion now matters as never before, political leaders are struggling just to maintain some semblance of stability in the face of unprecedented uncertainty. As a result, even if public opinion

may permit peace, it is certainly not pushing governments in that direction today.

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