

Palestinian Public Opinion Turns Pragmatic as Peace Talks Open

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

As Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas prepares to begin peace talks with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Washington this week, two just-released Palestinian polls offer some promising news, at odds with the tragic echoes of last night's Hamas terrorism in Hebron. Until now, much of the media has speculated about Palestinian popular opposition to the negotiations. But the two new polls, taken separately in the first half of August, show that the people of the West Bank and Gaza are now swinging solidly behind compromise positions on several contentious core issues.

Admittedly, recent history suggests that these shifts may be fragile, reversible, or perhaps even irrelevant. New Israeli-Palestinian clashes, a fresh round of perceived provocations, or failed talks would likely spark a popular backlash. And Hamas aside, Palestinian political figures are deeply divided even within Fatah. In addition, Palestinians outside the West Bank and Gaza -- who are not represented in the new polls -- almost certainly harbor more hardline views. Even inside the territories, most of the public remains highly skeptical about the actual prospects for peace, while a large and vocal minority remains adamantly opposed. Indeed, most Palestinians objected to resuming direct negotiations without advance commitments on timetables, terms of reference, and an Israeli settlement freeze.

Background

As the two August polls were in their final stages of preparation, the author spent time with each of the lead researchers in Ramallah and Bethlehem: Dr. Nader Said of Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), and Dr. Nabil Kukali of the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion (PCPO). These meetings reconfirmed the integrity, technical competence, and analytical acumen that previous professional acquaintance with both men had long demonstrated, dating back to the infancy of Palestinian polling in 1993. Given their track record, the general acceptance of opinion polling by Palestinian society, and the fortunate coincidence of two nearly simultaneous but independent surveys covering very similar topics, these findings should be considered quite credible.

Key Issues

Two-state solution and end of conflict. The PCPO poll showed a two-to-one preference for separate states of Israel

and Palestine (55%) rather than "one binational state in all of Palestine" (28%). Similarly, 62% of the AWRAD respondents viewed a two-state solution as at least "tolerable." More dramatically, AWRAD reported that an overwhelming majority (95%) of Palestinians would agree to "consider a comprehensive peace agreement, if implemented, as the end of the conflict." Yet when asked whether "Palestinians and Israelis will coexist if Palestinians gain their own independent state," a mere 17% answered "yes," compared to 38% "maybe" and 42% "no."

Still, the generally positive findings are broadly consistent with surveys conducted in early March and early June by Dr. Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR). Those polls showed around 60% support for a two-state solution and end of conflict, and even for "mutual recognition of Israel as the state for the Jewish people and Palestine as the state for the Palestinian people." Moreover, they documented an upward overall trend in support of these and other compromises with Israel since August 2009.

Land swaps. According to the AWRAD poll, two-thirds of Palestinians said that adjusting "the 1967 border through agreement to equivalent exchange of land" would be at least "tolerable." Even more pointedly, nearly half (47%) would also acquiesce to "moving [Israeli] settlers to large blocs and exchanging land." That is a significant shift: reliable unpublished polls from this spring showed that land swaps were previously an important sticking point among Palestinians.

"Right of return." In addition, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the AWRAD respondents said it would be at least "tolerable" for refugees to "return to Palestine (West Bank/Gaza) within agreed borders" as part of a peace agreement -- implicitly excluding any actual return to Israel (though still refusing to concede their claimed historical right to do so). And fully half of the respondents would accept a UN decision "to close the refugee camps and resettle them with compensation outside of Israel."

Jerusalem. Nearly half (46%) of the AWRAD respondents were willing to tolerate the option of "dividing the city according to Palestinian and Israeli neighborhoods" -- implicitly conceding that Israel would retain the large post-1967 areas it annexed to the Jerusalem municipality, currently populated by nearly a quarter million Jewish residents. Moreover, exactly half of the Palestinian public would acquiesce to a compromise in which "the Western Wall will be under Israeli sovereignty," as long as "Christian and Muslim holy sites, including the Temple Mount, will be under Palestinian sovereignty."

Border security. In the same poll, although a majority (58%) of West Bank/Gaza Palestinians rejected the idea of "Israeli observation posts in the Palestinian state," half said that they could live with an "agreed period" in which Israel has "access to the Jordanian border, for reasons of security." Once again, this marks a significant shift toward a more flexible stance; previous polls showed predominant opposition to this scenario. In addition, a solid majority (78%) would at least tolerate the proposition of an international force, not just Palestinian troops, maintaining security on the West Bank border with Jordan.

Fayad's Government Gaining on Hamas

Another important recent trend is increased support for PA prime minister Salam Fayad's government, amid decreasing support for Hamas. A majority of respondents in the PCPO poll (57%) said that Fayad's administration has "advanced the reform process in the Palestinian Authority." Similarly, most viewed his performance as either better than (54%) or equal to (23%) that of the previous, Hamas-led government. Around half (52%) credited him with decreasing "the rate of corruption" and "improving internal security and safety (44%); a mere 15% cited deterioration in either of those areas. Overall, most West Bank and Gaza Palestinians preferred either his "current government with a majority of independents" (47%) or "a government with a Fatah majority" (33%). Only 14% would opt for a Hamas-led government.

This important shift does not stem from satisfaction with the Palestinian economy. In fact, in the PCPO poll, two-thirds indicated that they are worried about "the subsistence of their family"; nearly half (44%) rated either jobs or money as their "main concern at present"; and only a third called their personal economic situation "good." Rather, the shift indicates that the Hamas political line is losing favor. In the AWRAD poll, only a third (37%) disagreed with the statement that "Hamas should recognize Israel if Israel agrees to withdraw from the Occupied Territories." These changes in public opinion are broadly consistent with those found in the mid-June PCPSR survey.

Palestinian Dreams vs. Realities

To be sure, a majority of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians still dream of maximalist claims despite all the pragmatic positions they label at least "tolerable." More than three-quarters said that the "right of return or compensation" for refugees and the recognition of "historic Palestine from the river to the sea" as their "national homeland" should be "essential" elements of any peace agreement. And a large minority (around 40%) still voiced support for some forms of violence, though such support has declined modestly since January 2010.

Moreover, most Palestinians remain skeptical that the new round of peace talks will actually yield the desired results. For example, two-thirds said that President Obama is incapable of achieving an independent Palestinian state -- almost exactly the same figure found in polls from January and March.

Policy Implications

Recently, reports have surfaced of U.S. government funding for social media messages from a Palestinian-Israeli NGO, advertising Palestinian readiness for peace. The lesson of the August poll results, however, is that the PA's own vibrant domestic media have ample material to report this message if they so desire. They do not need American funding for this purpose; quite the contrary, such funding almost surely undermines that objective.

More important, the surveys offer some evidence that peace is no longer just a political slogan, but also a project that has become more "tolerable" to Palestinian public opinion, at least in the West Bank and Gaza. Although many difficult issues continue to divide the two sides, and many spoilers lurk on the sidelines, this shift at least makes peace less improbable as new talks open. President Abbas now has a new opportunity to demonstrate real leadership by reinforcing this positive trend among his own most important constituents -- the Palestinian people.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author its June 2010 report on regional polling, [Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for U.S.-Arab Relations \(/templateC04.php?CID=331\)](#). ❖

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