

Israel and the Palestinians: An End-of-Year Assessment (Part I)

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Brief Analysis

In 2003, a new debate is underway about the future of Israel. The question is not about whether a grand deal with the Palestinians is possible; now the debate focuses on the political implications of current demographic trends that reflect a sharp increase in the region's Palestinian population. Within a decade, Israeli Jews will be a minority within the region comprising Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, although they are expected to remain an 80 percent majority in Israel proper. Amnon Dankner, editor of Ma'ariv, wrote a column this month entitled "We Don't Have Time." He argues that failure to disengage from the Palestinians will erode Israel's demographic majority and thus its Jewish character.

Some Palestinians have talked openly about a one-state solution. Israelis see this as a euphemism for the destruction of Israel, given the upward demographic trends of the Palestinian population. In a survey by Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 67 percent of Israelis said they fear the possibility of a one-state solution. This concern seems to be driving an increase in support for partition, dramatized recently when leading Likud Party member, Israel's vice prime minister Ehud Olmert, announced a bombshell initiative, effectively calling for the pullout from all of Gaza and most of the West Bank (except for settlements blocs near the 1967 boundary—part of the estimated 14.5 percent of the West Bank east of the fence). Olmert, a veteran politician known for his sense of the public mood, says his initiative is predicated on his concern of a Palestinian majority. A similar initiative, advanced by Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna earlier this year, was rejected by the Israeli mainstream. Now some of his principles are being reconsidered.

Interestingly, this sense of ferment has not translated into a feeling that a grand deal with the Palestinians is possible. Gaps in opinion on final-status issues are wide, and distrust of the Palestinian Authority (PA) remains high. Squaring this circle between the desire for partition on one hand, and utter disbelief that a grand deal is possible due to distrust of Yasir Arafat on the other hand, is the overwhelming majority of Israeli support for a fence. In October 2003, 83 percent of Israeli Jews supported a fence, according to the Steinmetz poll. Yet as support for the fence grows, so too does the recognition that Israel will need to unilaterally pull out of settlements. Accordingly, support of unilateral withdrawal from an unspecified number of settlements received 55 percent approval, according to the

recent Dahaf Poll in Yediot Aharonot.

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's speech last week, which called for the pullout of some West Bank settlements, shattered an ideological taboo for him; it was a significant step in light of his stature as the historic architect of settlement movement. His remarks, however, should be seen against the backdrop of a series of forces: increasing concern about demographic trends; overwhelming public support for a fence; growing willingness to focus on unilateral political steps including the removal of settlements; and emerging grassroots initiatives like that of Olmert, the principles outlined by Ami Ayalon and Sari Nusseibeh, and the Geneva Accord of Yossi Beilin-Yasser Abd Rabbo.

The Israeli press focused on Sharon's groundbreaking declaration of intent to take down settlements and all unauthorized outposts, thereby avoiding a confrontation with the Bush administration. He also expressed a willingness to demarcate a line to judge settlement expansion. Media coverage outside of Israel, however, questioned whether Sharon was driven by a strategy to encircle the Palestinians within the West Bank and set up a Palestinian enclave—a move perceived by the international community as seeking to impede a two-state solution. The test for Sharon will be whether he establishes an eastern fence (or encirclement fence) west of Jordan Valley, making it safe for Israel to stay in about half of the West Bank; or if, as currently projected, Sharon sticks with the Israeli Ministry of Defense route along the western edges of the West Bank—in other words, a buffer fence.

Much Continuity and Limited Change Among the Palestinians

A comparative analysis of ten polls, conducted between 2000-2003 by Khalil Shikaki's Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, revealed more continuity than change in Palestinian sentiment. Nonetheless, the polls showed evidence of incremental change in public opinion; these stirrings of debate signal that old taboos are slowly breaking. A number of factors could explain why continuity dominates change in Palestinian public opinion: circumstances of continued violence, absence of effective leadership, and authoritarian censure of public debate may hinder the people's will for change.

Support for Leadership

In general, the intifada has not been good for Arafat's popularity. Remarkably, Arafat averaged an approval rating of only 35 percent during the intifada—much lower than the pre-intifada period, when he enjoyed 46 percent of popular support after the Camp David peace talks in July 2000. When Sharon's government threatened to expel Arafat this fall, the Palestinian leader's popularity received a short-lived boost, soaring to 50 percent approval in the polls. The surge proved ephemeral, however, as Arafat's popularity ratings dropped twelve points since October.

The poll results show that neither Fatah nor the Islamists seem to dominate Palestinian politics. In December 2003, when given the choice between Fatah and a selection of Islamist groups (Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and others), 34 percent of Palestinians preferred "none of the above," outpacing the Islamists and Fatah, at 31 percent and 25 percent respectively. After three years of violence, a plurality of Palestinians are uncommitted to their leadership, suggesting that they could be swung by change.

Utility of the Intifada

Levels of support remain consistent—in the sixtieth percentile—among those who believe that intifada violence has been more successful than negotiations in securing Palestinian rights. (The polls offer no evidence as to why this is the case.) Even before the violence began in September 2000, 63 percent of Palestinians supported the emulation of Hizballah's methods against Israel if negotiations failed. Moreover, support for attacks against Israeli soldiers and settlers consistently receive approval ratings close to 90 percent. However, support for the killing of Israeli citizens inside Israel dropped incrementally, down from 58 percent in July 2001 to 48 percent in December 2003—the first time since the start of the intifada that the figure dropped below 50 percent.

Support for a Mutual Ceasefire

Palestinian support for a mutual ceasefire continues to remain very strong, rising from 76 percent in November 2002 to 83 percent this month. Consistently, 80 percent of Palestinians fear that such a ceasefire will lead to civil strife. Yet in the past year, more than half of Palestinians consistently supported PA action against ceasefire violators—perhaps a euphemism for a crackdown on the violence. The growth of this figure, which rose as high as 59 percent in October 2003, is interesting; its climax matches the 1996 high-water mark of support for a crackdown against the spate of suicide bombers during the height of Oslo. Consistently, a full three quarters of Palestinians believe that without such action, negotiations with Israel cannot resume.

Confidence in the Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) Government

Just as with the government of former Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), only 37 percent of Palestinians support the current government of Abu Ala. Less than 40 percent believe that Abu Ala will be able to carry out political reforms, fight corruption, control security conditions, or enforce a ceasefire. However, 67 percent hope he can renew negotiations with Israel, and 45 percent believe he can improve economic conditions. These figures are strikingly similar to those assessing Abu Mazen's success six months earlier, although Abu Mazen scored higher in terms of hope for improving economic conditions.

Dealing with Israel after a Peace Agreement

Since July 2000, three quarters of Palestinians have consistently expressed the hope for open access to Israel after an agreement is signed. Almost as many favor joint economic projects. Yet far fewer Palestinians (around 40 percent) favor laws to halt incitement against Israel, and only 10 percent favor curriculum changes to drop "irredentist aspirations"—a reference to the right of return.

Grassroots Initiatives

On both sides, Israeli and Palestinian public attitudes do not converge in support of a grand deal. Not surprisingly, what is popular with one side is unpopular with the other.

Initial support in Israel for the Geneva Accord dropped as the public became aware of the full extent of its implications. Every household was mailed a summary of the accord's policies, which include yielding sovereignty over the Temple Mount and moving 110,000 settlers. Support for the accord apparently also dropped because of its identification with Yossi Beilin, who is viewed as Israel's leading dove. In addition, because of the accord's European support, the Israeli public perceived it as an outside initiative. When the accord was viewed as a local initiative, it received a higher level of support. Moreover, at nearly 50 percent, opposition to the Geneva Accord was much greater than the 37 percent figure of those opposed to the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative. The Israeli public considers the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative as less objectionable for a number of reasons: the initiative does not allow right of return, it does not designate sovereignty over the Temple Mount, and it does not demarcate a border, thereby enabling settlers to remain so long as the one-to-one swap formula is upheld. Finally, by not drafting a virtual treaty and by keeping European governments out of the mix, the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative avoids the question of appropriateness that rankled some Israelis about Geneva.

Of the Palestinians who received a summary of the Geneva Accord, 58 percent opposed the accord, while 44 percent supported it. Regarding specific provisions of the accord, 55 percent of Palestinians opposed ending the conflict; 72 percent opposed the implied concession on the refugee issue; 76 percent opposed limitation on sovereignty; and 46 percent opposed the Jerusalem provisions that gave the Palestinians all Arab neighborhoods in east Jerusalem and sovereignty over the Temple Mount, leaving Israel with Jerusalem's Jewish neighborhoods, the Jewish Quarter, and the Western Wall.

In general, old taboos are falling away, but the differences between the sides on a grand deal remain wide.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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