

## Palestinian Attitudes during the Bush/Sharon Era

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Brief Analysis

**A**mong the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there are three perspectives as to why violent confrontations began in September:

- 1) The Camp David II negotiations uncovered underlying differences in Israeli and Palestinian interests that are simply unbridgeable. Recent confrontations are basically the product of these differences. In this scenario, no return to negotiations is going to improve the situation.
- 2) The current situation reflects domestic political constraints in both societies. Weak leaders, populations that are not prepared for the compromises needed for a final settlement, coalition politics, and questions of legitimacy are working against a solution. In this scenario, a permanent settlement is possible but certainly not easy.
- 3) The two negotiating teams could have wrapped up the talks if they had had more time; indeed, they came very close to a compromise at Taba in January. According to this scenario, a matter of procedural difficulty—a miscalculation, misperception, or simply a lack of time—probably impeded the finalization of an agreement at Taba, while violence was still flaring in the territories.

Most Palestinians are of the second school of thought. They did not believe that a deal was imminent at Camp David II or at Taba. Indeed, the belief that a comprehensive deal is imminent has eroded over time. Yet most Palestinians continue to hope that strong leaders in Israel and among the Palestinians can make essential compromises. Recently, a prominent perception among the Palestinian public was that Israel's weak government initiated the violence after Camp David II because Israel wanted the Palestinians to accept something that they had rejected. This perception, plus the heavy casualties and the collective punishment sustained over the past few months, has helped to radicalize Palestinian society.

The Future of the Peace Process Palestinians have not given up on the peace process. Public opinion surveys conducted during the recent confrontations indicate that there has actually been an increase in the level of support for the peace process. At the same time, however, there has been no decline in the support for the continuation of the violence. The belief that peace is attainable—difficult, yet possible—has been one of the most significant accomplishments of the Oslo accords. Despite all the shortcomings of Oslo, it has been a major success in terms of changing the psychological environment on both sides. Public opinion in Israel and among the Palestinians has been transformed in some fundamental and irreversible ways since Oslo. There have been some temporary ups and downs along the way, but in the end public opinion always comes around to accepting the peace process. The psychological environment—with regard to how Palestinians and Israelis perceive each other and to how they perceive the possibility and probability of peace—has been very positive and will not change despite the current difficulties. At the same time, the breakdown of talks and the current confrontations have affected five important areas:

- 1) The level of confidence in Palestinian institutions has been reduced. Most of these institutions, other than education and health organizations, have done miserably in response to the current crisis. The siege has

significantly curtailed their ability to provide services. This was inevitable given that these institutions were weak to begin with.

2) The legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been challenged. The two sources challenging the legitimacy of the PA are the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which has been distancing itself from the PA and asserting its own legitimacy, and Fatah. Fatah's claim to revolutionary legitimacy has been strengthened by the belief that the PA is a product of the peace process, and could go if the peace process itself goes. According to this argument, once people start questioning the legitimacy of the peace process, they will then question the legitimacy of the PA, which could gradually lead to diminishing confidence in the PA as the legitimate representative of the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

3) The Palestinian economy has been devastated. Not only have economic prosperity and long-term economic prospects been affected, but the financial stability of the PA has been affected as well. Economic hardships and the inability to pay salaries could have a very serious impact on the PA's legitimacy. It could also affect a most vital part of the PA, which is the Palestinian security service. It is important to note that security organizations will not disintegrate as long as the PA is able to pay their salaries.

4) The balance of power within the Palestinian territories has changed. This is the most important change since the beginning of the peace process. This shift in power relations could have some serious ramifications for the peace process.

5) Public opinion is more supportive of violence. In 1995 and 1996, Palestinian support for suicide attacks stood at 20 percent. Today, it is close to 70 percent. In 1996, Palestinians clearly distinguished between attacks on settlers, civilians inside Israel, and Israeli army targets. Today, this distinction has disappeared. This is a most serious change in public attitude among the Palestinians, a change that will complicate the process of putting a stop to the violence. When and if there is a possibility to return to negotiations, it will not be easy for Arafat to persuade the bulk of the Palestinian public to reject violence. Following the suicide attacks in Israel in 1996, a clear majority supported Arafat's crackdown on Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This time, Arafat's ability to restrain these organizations will be limited by the overwhelming public support for violence.

Next Steps What is needed now is a stabilization package aimed at improving public perceptions on both sides and building trust. This package should seek to create conditions that would allow the parties to resume the process of negotiations. On the Palestinian side, it should be linked to the cessation of all violence, the resumption of security coordination, and an attempt to address Israeli concerns about security issues such as incitement and weapon collection. On the Israeli side, it should include a freeze in settlement activity, troop redeployment, the release of prisoners, and acceptance of international monitors to provide both sides with a certain level of assurances in the other side's intentions. In addition, the package would have to tackle economic and governance issues in order to help the Palestinians overcome the difficulties of the past months and rebuild and reform their institutions.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ashraf Zeitoon.

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