

# Palestinian Public Opinion: Internal Affairs and the Peace Process

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## Brief Analysis

**P**alestinian National Reconstruction: The past few years have witnessed enormous progress in the process of Palestinian national reconstruction. Yet, major problems persist. Most notably, the constitutional basis for Palestinian Authority (PA) institutions is lacking. There are no clear rules dictating a separation of powers or the particular roles of government institutions. The result of the void has been the centralization of power in the hands of the executive, the marginalization of the legislature, and the weakening of the judiciary. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) has little ability to oversee public finances, which are in poor shape. The Palestinian security forces are largely unaccountable to anyone. The huge public sector is putting an increasingly heavy burden on Palestinian society. Civil society, largely in the form of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), is coming increasingly under siege.

Public opinion about the domestic PA situation is more grim now than at any point since 1995. Over the past four years, approval ratings for Palestinian institutions have been as high as 80 percent. Currently, however, those ratings are at an all-time low of 40 percent to 50 percent, a drop of almost 80 percent. Perceptions of corruption have also skyrocketed, from 50 percent to 70 percent, and whereas 30 percent to 40 percent believed three years ago that corruption was likely to continue, today 60 percent or more hold that opinion. Positive perceptions of Palestinian democracy have also dropped considerably, from 50 percent to 60 percent three years ago, to 25 percent to 30 percent today. This is in stark contrast to Palestinian perceptions about democracy among their neighbors: a steady 70 percent to 80 percent of Palestinians have positive perceptions of Israeli democracy, and an increasing proportion of Palestinians have positive perceptions about Jordanian and Egyptian democracy. Palestinian positive perception of Egyptian democracy has risen to 30 percent, a slightly higher percentage than that accorded the PA.

Palestinian Public Opinion and the Peace Process: Palestinian support for the peace process has remained reasonably static over the past few years, at approximately 70 percent. What has changed, however, and proven to be a far more sensitive indicator of Palestinian public opinion, is support for violence. Support for violence against Israel was at its highest when the peace process began, at 57 percent. When the peace process seemed to be moving in the right direction in late 1995 and early 1996, support for violence was low, at 18 percent; during the period of the bus-bombings in early 1996, support for violence was actually never higher than 20 percent to 22 percent. Since Binyamin Netanyahu's election in 1996, however, support for violence has risen, and with Netanyahu's freezing of Wye implementation, support for violence actually reached 51 percent, the highest since the beginning of the process. Today, support for violence stands at 45 percent. Ehud Barak's election as prime minister has done little to change that.

Obviously, if support for the peace process is 70 percent and support for violence is 45 percent, some people support both. For some Palestinians, support for the peace process reflects an overall strategic outlook, while support for violence reflects a tactical one; that is, some see violence as a useful tactic to advance the Palestinian side in the peace process.

> Support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad has gone down considerably. In 1993, Hamas and Islamic Jihad were supported by 30 percent to 35 percent of the Palestinian population; today, Islamic Jihad can count on support from around 2 percent and Hamas from 12 percent to 14 percent. But the decline for the Islamist groups has not been matched by an increase in support for Fatah. Most of the former supporters of the Islamist groups joined the ranks of the unaffiliated, a group that jumped from 9 percent in 1993 to 40 percent today. Thus, if the Islamists can regain the initiative, they may be able to regain their supporters.

Regarding the terms of a "final-status" agreement, Palestinian public opinion is less supportive than is Israeli opinion of the plan proposed by Yossi Beilin and Abu Mazen. Three surveys were conducted among Palestinians and Israelis and reported that approval for the plan was approximately 10 percent higher among Israelis than among Palestinians. A considerable majority of Palestinians, including a majority of the Fatah elite, opposed the terms concerning Jerusalem and borders. For the majority of Palestinians, nothing less than a return to the 1967 borders will be acceptable. About 40 percent to 50 percent of Palestinians are, however, willing to accept the continued presence of settlements in territory that will become a Palestinian state.

Palestinian Expectations of the Barak Government: Among the Palestinian population at large, expectations of the Barak government are low; two-thirds of Palestinians do not expect Barak to implement the agreements in the Wye River Memorandum, and more than half expect no change in settlement policy. Palestinians had very high expectations in 1993 after Oslo was first signed; two-thirds expected major gains from the peace process. Most of those expectations were not met, and Palestinians have learned to be more skeptical.

In stark contrast, members of the Palestinian political elite have high expectations of Barak. The political elite has a clear stake in making progress on the peace process. That elite has a real problem, in that there is little prospect of progress on its main domestic agenda items, namely, cleaning up government corruption, strengthening public institutions, and democratization. Progress on the peace process would therefore do much to legitimize the elite's authority.

> The political elite will first look to reestablish trust in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Israeli implementation of Wye and the freezing of settlements are key issues in reestablishing that trust. The Palestinian political elite hopes that Israel will make a commitment not to try to prejudice future agreements by establishing facts on the ground. It also wants to develop a shared vision of the future with Barak. Its members want to begin discussing long-term issues like the nature of a Palestinian state, as well as regional economic and security cooperation. They will seek assurances from Israel that United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 continues to serve as the basis for negotiations and that settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem are still issues for negotiation.

The Palestinian elite also has expectations that Barak will not use negotiations with Syria as leverage in peace talks with the Palestinians, and that Barak will not make a deal with Jordan that will undermine the Palestinian position. Palestinian political leaders also hope that Barak will allow the United States to continue its active role in upholding commitments and in monitoring compliance. They believe that the United States agreed to put pressure on Israel concerning settlement activity in return for the Palestinian decision not to declare a state in May, and they expect the United States to follow through on that agreement.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Harlan Cohen.

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