

New Palestinian Poll Shows Hardline Views, But Some Pragmatism Too

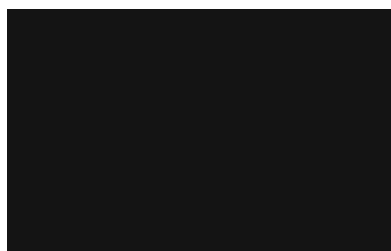
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New survey results show that violence is not a popular option among Palestinians and that Hamas is not benefiting from the current troubles, giving U.S. policymakers some breathing room to concentrate on more urgent crises in Iraq and Syria while backing practical steps to cool tensions.

A reliable new West Bank/Gaza public opinion survey conducted on June 15-17 -- the only such poll since the current kidnapping crisis began -- shows that Palestinian popular attitudes have hardened considerably on long-term issues of peace with Israel. Commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted by a leading Palestinian pollster, the poll comprised face-to-face interviews with a standard random geographic probability sample of 1,200 adult Palestinians, yielding results with a 3% statistical margin of error. The responses indicate that fewer than 30% of Palestinians now support a "two-state solution": a West Bank/Gaza Palestinian state in lasting peace with Israel. At the same time, some surprising signs of short-term pragmatism emerged -- especially, and even more surprisingly, in Gaza.

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TWO-STATE SOLUTION SUDDENLY A MINORITY POSITION

Regarding the longer-term, fundamental issue of a two-state solution, Palestinian public opinion has clearly taken a maximalist turn. Other recent polls, even after the collapse of the latest peace talks, showed a majority or plurality still favoring the goal of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, alongside Israel (though the numbers were gradually declining). But now, a clear majority (60% overall, including 55% in the West Bank and 68% in Gaza) say that the five-year goal "should be to work toward reclaiming all of historic Palestine, from the river to the sea."

On this key question, just 31% of West Bankers and 22% of Gazans would opt instead "to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to achieve a two-state solution." And even fewer, contrary to other recent findings, pick a "one-state solution," in which "Arabs and Jews will have equal rights in one country, from the river to the sea." That is the preferred option of a mere 11% in the West Bank and 8% in Gaza.

This pattern is confirmed by other questions in the survey. For example, just one-third said that a two-state solution "should be the end of the conflict." Nearly two-thirds said "resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated." And only a third said that "it might be necessary to give up some of our claims so that our people and our children can have a better life."

Similarly, only a third said that a two-state solution would be their leadership's final goal. Instead, almost two-thirds said it would be "part of a 'program of stages,' to liberate all of historic Palestine later." This remarkable finding helps explain how a plurality or more of Palestinians can support President Mahmoud Abbas and reject a two-state solution at the same time.

BUT THE PUBLIC WANTS "POPULAR RESISTANCE," NOT VIOLENCE

Despite continuing tensions over the June 12 kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank and Israel's resulting intensive searches and arrests, the Palestinian public is not turning toward large-scale violence. Rather, on tactical questions of relations with Israel, respondents broadly supported a nonviolent approach. The survey did

not ask specifically about the latest kidnapping, which does appear fairly popular among Palestinians judging from traditional and social media content and anecdotal evidence.

In this survey, when asked whether Hamas "should maintain a ceasefire with Israel in both Gaza and the West Bank," a majority (56%) of West Bank respondents and a remarkable 70% of Gazans said yes. Similarly, asked if Hamas should accept Abbas's position that the new unity government renounce violence against Israel, West Bankers were evenly divided, but a majority (57%) of Gazans answered in the affirmative.

Nevertheless, "popular resistance against the occupation" -- such as demonstrations, strikes, marches, mass refusals to cooperate with Israel, and the like -- was seen as having a positive impact by most respondents in both territories: 62% in the West Bank and 73% in Gaza. And in the week since the survey was completed, Israel's shooting of several Palestinians and arrest of hundreds more in the course of searching for the kidnap victims may be turning the Palestinian public in a more actively hostile direction.

Both the kidnapping and a Palestinian hunger strike in Israeli jails have also maintained public attention on the prisoner issue. Asked what Israel could do "to convince Palestinians that it really wants peace," a large plurality picked "release more Palestinian prisoners." That option far outranked the others, each in the 15-20% range: "share Jerusalem as a joint capital," "stop building in settlements beyond the security barrier," or "grant Palestinians greater freedom of movement and crack down on settler attacks."

HAMAS IS NOT GAINING POLITICAL GROUND FROM THE CRISIS

Most striking, and contrary to common misperception, Hamas is not gaining politically from the kidnapping. Asked who should be the president of Palestine in the next two years, a solid plurality in both the West Bank and Gaza named Abbas (30%) or other Fatah-affiliated leaders: Marwan Barghouti (12%), Muhammad Dahlan (10%), Rami Hamdallah (6%), Mustafa Barghouti (4%), Salam Fayyad (2%), or Mahmoud al-Aloul (1%). These findings strongly suggest that the Palestinian public as a whole has little or no desire to carry out any threats to "dissolve" the Palestinian Authority.

In stark contrast, Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Mashal rated a combined total of just 9% support in the West Bank and 15% in Gaza. Another intriguing finding is that Dahlan has significant popular support among Gazans, at 20%. Also notable is that not one of the other old-guard Fatah figures, such as Abu Ala, Nabil Shaath, or Jibril Rajoub, attracted even 1% support in either the West Bank or Gaza.

MAJORITY WANT ISRAEL TO OFFER JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Some additional and unexpected signs of short-term pragmatism showed up concerning bread-and-butter issues. Over 80% said they would "definitely" or "probably" want Israel to allow more Palestinians to work there. Around half said they would personally take "a good, high-paying job" inside Israel.

Moreover, despite narrow majority support for boycotting Israel, a larger majority said they would also like Israeli firms to offer more jobs inside the West Bank and Gaza. Nearly half said they would take such a position if available. This kind of pragmatism was particularly pronounced among the younger generation of adult Palestinians, those in the 18-to-35-year-old cohort. In a similar vein, among West Bankers in that group, more than three-quarters said they would like a new north-south highway bypassing Israeli checkpoints around Jerusalem. Among older West Bankers, that figure was somewhat lower, at around two-thirds.

DECRYING ISRAELI PRESSURE, BUT ALSO LOCAL CRIME AND CORRUPTION

As Israel continues its search for the kidnap victims, Palestinian respondents voiced widespread concern about Israeli behavior in the territories -- but also about unrelated Palestinian behavior. In the West Bank, three-quarters see a "significant problem" with "threats and intimidation from Israeli soldiers and border guards," and with "delays and restrictions at checkpoints." Somewhat fewer West Bankers, but still a majority (63%), see "threats and intimidation from Jewish settlers" as a significant problem. These figures were all a bit lower in Gaza, where Israel's presence on the ground is much less intrusive.

Yet putting those numbers in perspective is the widespread negative perception of some Palestinian behavior. Among West Bankers, 72% view "corruption by Palestinian government officials" as a major problem; among Gazans, the proportion is 66%. Similarly, 77% of West Bankers and 71% of Gazans see local crime as a significant problem.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These counterintuitive findings -- demonstrating that violence is not a popular option among Palestinians, and that Hamas is not benefiting from current troubles -- should give U.S. policymakers some needed breathing space to let the dust settle in this arena while concentrating on more urgent crises in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, the unexpected combination of short-term Palestinian popular pragmatism and long-term maximalism revealed by this survey suggests that U.S. policy should seriously consider abandoning all hope of a near-term, permanent

Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. In its place, Washington should focus on immediate steps to lower tensions, improve practical conditions, and perhaps set the stage for more moderate attitudes and more fruitful diplomatic discussions at some later date.

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