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New Poll Shows Most Palestinians for Practical Progress, Tactical Compromises with Israel

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Fikra Forum

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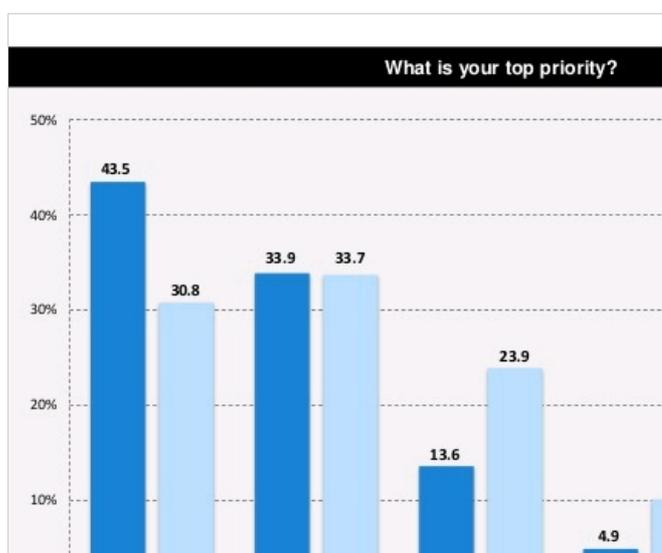
Outside advocates and political figures would do better to stray from their well-traveled hard line and follow the relatively pragmatic lead of the Palestinian people instead.

As Mideast experts and advocates conclude their debate about the Iran nuclear deal, their attention may well revert to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. A new poll demonstrates that Palestinians now have surprisingly nuanced views on many current and controversial issues.

By way of example, majorities in both the West Bank and Gaza still want to "liberate all of historic Palestine" someday, and meanwhile voice support for "armed struggle and car attacks against the occupation." Yet majorities also desire economic cooperation and a Hamas ceasefire with Israel -- and around half even accept the principle of "a state for the Jewish people," one to which Palestinian refugees would have no "right of return." One reason for these surprises is simply that this poll asked some questions that other pollsters typically do not.

For this reason, as part of our effort to better understand popular attitudes in the region, The Washington Institute sponsored a public opinion survey this month by a leading Palestinian pollster: the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, based in Beit Sahour in the West Bank. The poll was conducted June 7-19 by personal interviews among representative samples of 513 Palestinians in the West Bank and 408 in Gaza, yielding results with a margin of error in each case of approximately 4.9 percent.

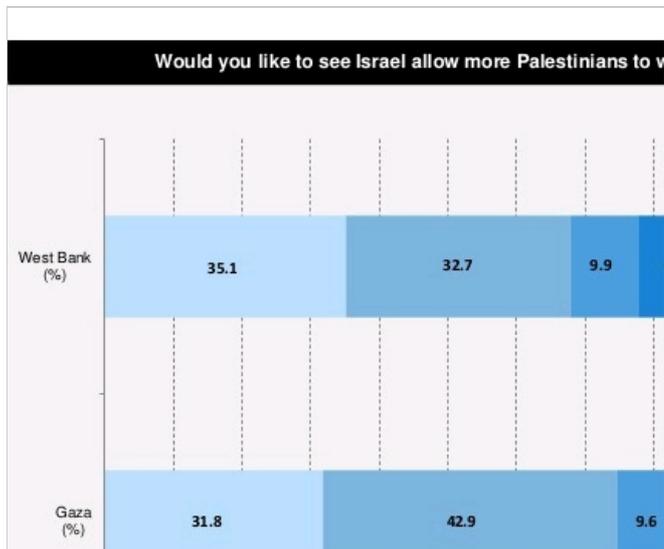
To help ensure the survey's technical quality, I traveled to the West Bank to consult at length with the polling firm's director and his entire staff, including all of the dozen West Bank field supervisors (plus the Gaza supervisory team, who phoned in). Together, in Arabic, we reviewed the sampling frames, initial respondent feedback on the questionnaire, quality control mechanisms, and all other relevant survey parameters. I was very favorably impressed by the competence, candor, and dedication of this highly professional research team. So I have very high confidence in the credibility of these findings, even when they may seem counterintuitive at first glance.



Since most Mideast polls ask mostly about politics or religion, the first surprise is that neither politics nor religion is a top priority for most West Bankers or Gazans. In the West Bank, most people say their top priority is either "making enough money to live comfortably" (44 percent) or "having a good family life" (34 percent). In Gaza, the results are similar though skewed a bit in the other direction: 31 percent pick money; and 34 percent pick family. By contrast, just 14 percent of West Bankers, and 24 percent of Gazans, select "working to establish a Palestinian state" as their top priority. And a mere 12 percent of West Bankers say that "being a good Muslim (or Christian)" is

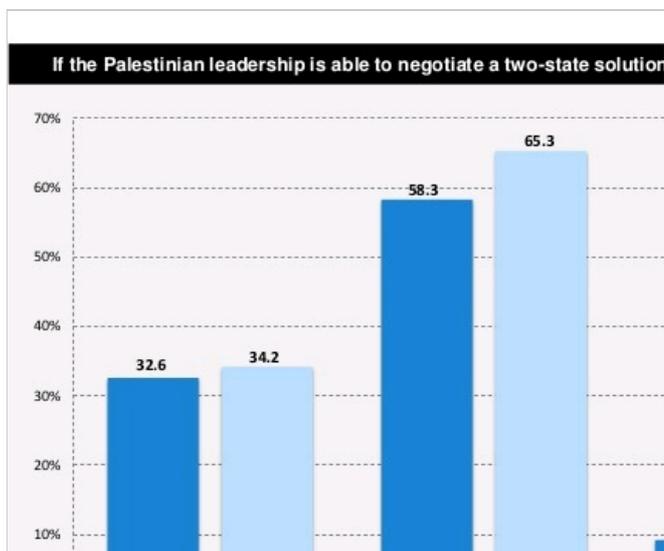
either their first or even their second priority. In Gaza, that figure is somewhat higher but still unexpectedly low, at 19 percent.

A second surprise, linked to the first one, is that most Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza -- despite widespread theoretical support for boycotts against Israel -- actually want economic cooperation with Israel. Two-thirds of West Bankers, and three-quarters of Gazans, say they "would like to see Israel allow more Palestinians to work inside Israel." Moreover, a majority (55 percent) in the West Bank, and nearly as many in Gaza (48 percent), also say they would "like to see Israeli companies offer more jobs inside" those areas. And when asked about such practical possibilities even "after the Israeli election and the formation of their new government," over one-third of Palestinians in each territory still see at least some chance of progress.



A key related question -- though one of sharp divergence between West Bank and Gazan opinion -- concerns "responsibility for the slow pace of reconstruction in Gaza." In the West Bank, a large plurality (40 percent) put the heaviest blame on Israel. A mere seven percent single out Hamas for blame. But in Gaza itself, this order is dramatically reversed: a plurality (40 percent) blames Hamas the most; Israel comes in second, at 29 percent. By comparison, only small minorities -- 10 percent of West Bankers and 20 percent of Gazans -- place the primary onus for Gaza's plight on the Palestinian Authority. That helps explain why Gazans overwhelmingly (88 percent) say "the PA should send officials and security officers to Gaza to take over the administration there." Among West Bankers, that proportion is nearly as high, at 81 percent.

On broader questions of relations with Israel and the peace process, West Bank and Gaza Palestinians have very mixed views. On the one hand, there is majority support for the long-term goal of reclaiming all of Palestine, and for armed struggle as a means toward that end. Fifty-eight percent of West Bankers and 65 percent of Gazans say that even if a "two-state solution" is negotiated, "the struggle is not over and resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated." In the West Bank, 56 percent support "armed struggle and car attacks against the occupation" -- though just 23 percent feel "strongly" that way. And in Gaza, an astonishing 84 percent back such violent tactics, including 53 percent who voice strong support.



On the other hand, there is also surprisingly widespread support for certain key compromises with Israel. At the tactical level, perhaps the most stunning statistic in this whole survey is this: 74 percent of West Bankers, and fully 83 percent of Gazans, say that "Hamas should maintain a ceasefire with Israel" in both areas. Furthermore, at the strategic level, half or more of West Bankers would "probably" accept compromises on two major issues. On the

definition of statehood, 56 percent would agree to "the principle of two states for two peoples, the Palestinian people and the Jewish people," if that "might help to end the occupation." Similarly, 51 percent would "accept that the right of return will apply to the West Bank and Gaza but not to Israel." Among Gazans, those figures are a bit lower, but still substantial: 43-44 percent would "probably" accept both a "two states for two peoples" formula and "right of return" only outside Israel, if either concession were required for the sake of Palestinian independence.

Altogether, the evidence is clear: today, at least, most Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza want a ceasefire and economic cooperation with Israel -- and many would also compromise on certain tough core issues for the sake of ending the occupation. In this case, as in so many others, it is outside advocates and some political figures who hew to a harder line. They would do better to follow the relatively pragmatic lead of the Palestinian people themselves.

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