



PolicyWatch 2237

Palestinian Public Opinion Offers Abbas Much Room for Maneuver

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A closer look at Palestinian views on prisoner releases, the Jewish state question, economic needs, and other issues suggests diplomatic openings are far from exhausted.

On April 4, 2014, David Pollock, Dennis Ross, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The following article is based on Pollock's remarks; Ross's remarks appeared as [PolicyWatch 2235](#), and Satloff's as [PolicyWatch 2238](#).

As the United States works to salvage the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza is more prepared to accept various diplomatic compromises than official positions or elite attitudes would suggest. A number of new polls by different Palestinian pollsters, and in-depth discussions with Palestinian scholars and others in late March, indicate that Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas has greater latitude to make a deal than is often supposed. The polls cited here are from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) and Arab World for Research

and Development (AWRAD), both based in Ramallah, and the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion (PCPO), based in Bethlehem.

Palestinian "Street" More Flexible than Its Elite

In private meetings among Palestinian politicians and experts in Ramallah in late March, discussion of unpublished but credible new polls demonstrated that the West Bank and Gaza general public is often somewhat more inclined to compromise than are its leading political, media, professional, and academic figures. For example, a comparison of two AWRAD polls from February and March shows 49 percent of the public, but just 39 percent of the elite, supporting "the ongoing negotiations between the PA and Israel." Similarly, 44 percent of the public, but only 31 percent of the elite, said they "might" accept a temporary Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley.

On a few issues, the discrepancy points in the opposite direction; a demilitarized Palestinian state, for instance, gets a "maybe" from half the elite, but a mere one fifth of the Palestinian street. Nevertheless, asked about an overall package of these and other compromises, 48 percent of the street would accept it, as compared with just 41 percent of the Palestinian elite. A separate PSR poll taken March 20-22 supports this analysis of a more flexible general public. Among college graduates, 72 percent were opposed to extending the peace talks; but among those who are illiterate, that proportion was significantly lower, at 54 percent.

Jewish State Issue Is Especially Divisive, but General Public Is Less Opposed

The disparity between elite and general public attitudes is particularly pronounced on the question of recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. In one pair of recent polls, only 15 percent of the elite say they "might" accept this suggestion -- but 40 percent of the overall West Bank and Gaza population voice that view. A separate survey found that while two thirds of college graduates would reject a deal including recognition of the Jewish state, only 43 percent of illiterates hold that view. Other polls since 2006 have shown that as much as two thirds of the West Bank and Gaza public accepted recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, but the figure has since fallen to the 40 percent range.

This decline is probably caused by several factors: the Israeli government's recent insistence on this condition; the Palestinian government's recent adamant rejection of it; and the overall downturn in popular confidence in the peace process. Despite all these negative new signals, it remains noteworthy that such a large minority of the Palestinian public continues to accept the controversial concept of recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. Moreover, surprisingly, the strongest opposition appears concentrated not in the masses, but in the upper classes.

Internal Issues, Not Israel, Take Top Priority

Among the most striking findings buried in these latest survey reports is that none of the previously noted issues tops local priorities. Rather, Palestinians, like most people in most places, are more interested in domestic than in foreign affairs. Asked to pick "the most

serious problem confronting Palestinian society today," around two thirds select internal matters: poverty and unemployment (27 percent); lack of national unity (21 percent); or "corruption in some public institutions" (10 percent). Just one fourth pick "the continuation of occupation and settlement activities" as their most serious problem, while 10 percent cite "the siege and closure of the Gaza border crossings."

Prisoners More at Issue than Settlements

Interestingly, the latest PSR poll also suggests that the prisoner issue is more salient, and perhaps more relevant to efforts to revive the peace talks, than are Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Views on extending those talks would shift from 55 percent negative to 51 percent positive if Israel agrees to a partial settlement freeze; but support for continuing negotiations would jump to 65 percent if Israel frees more prisoners. And even more (68 percent) would agree to delay accession to additional international bodies in exchange for new prisoner releases. Along the same lines, a March PCPO poll found three quarters of Palestinians saying prisoner release is a pivotal issue for keeping the peace talks alive. In response to an open-ended question, prisoners slightly outranked settlements (35 percent vs. 33 percent) as a condition for continued negotiations.

Wide Support for UN Alternative; One Fourth Would Opt for "One-State Solution"

One recent survey found overwhelming popular backing (86 percent) for a unilateral PA move to join international organizations. More to the point, other surveys indicate that this support would drop dramatically, to around 60 percent, if U.S. economic sanctions resulted from this decision.

An alternative or longer-term possibility, working for one state combining Palestinians and Israelis with equal rights, currently attracts support from approximately one quarter of the public, including nearly 30 percent of West Bankers. While this remains a minority view, it represents a substantial increase over past years. The reasons are most likely a combination of growing popular disillusionment about the prospects for a two-state solution, revived perceptions of an eventual Palestinian demographic challenge to Israel, and a gradually increasing awareness of a movement to delegitimize Israel as an "apartheid state."

Armed Intifada Would Have Only Minority Support

Asked if they would personally support armed resistance to Israel, around one third of Palestinians (somewhat higher in Gaza) answer in the affirmative. But probably more telling, because less politically charged, is another statistic. Asked "if the current round of negotiations were to fail, what do you believe will most likely happen," a mere 25 percent say "another intifada." An equal proportion say "President Abbas will return to the UN"; and 11 percent predict that the PA will simply collapse. The most common (34 percent) response about what will happen, however, is "nothing."

Nearly Half of West Bankers Accept Practical

Contacts with Israel

Among the most interesting findings from these recent polls are responses on various forms of pragmatic cooperation with Israelis. Despite the semiofficial Fatah campaign against "normalization," West Bankers are in fact quite closely divided on many kinds of contact with Israelis. Between 43 and 49 percent say it is acceptable to welcome visiting Israelis, have political discussions with them, talk to Israeli journalists, improve trade relations with Israel, and cooperate on scientific, environmental, or health projects. Only when it comes to sports or cultural events does a large majority (66 percent) reject such contacts. Popular opposition to all these options is somewhat higher in Gaza, but security restrictions make such contacts almost impossible there anyway.

Policy Implications

The main conclusion from this analysis is that, contrary to common misconceptions, Palestinian public opinion offers openings for U.S. officials as they seek to shape policy on key issues. A focus on prisoner releases, more than on settlement freezes, actually responds better both to Palestinian popular demands and to Israeli government preferences. Further, preparing U.S. sanctions against additional unilateral PA moves is likely to decrease Palestinian popular support for such steps. And prodding the PA to compromise on the Jewish state issue, as part of a peace package, would probably face surprisingly little grassroots resistance. In the meantime, U.S. support for Palestinian economic development -- and even for mutually beneficial Israeli-Palestinian interaction, as a more popular alternative than violent confrontation -- would find unexpectedly wide resonance in Palestinian society.

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