



The Middle East Peace Process: Silver Linings Remain Results of a Comprehensive Survey

Arab World for Research & Development (AWRAD)

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BACKGROUND

The Arab World for Research and Development completed a comprehensive survey among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The survey gauged the opinions of 3000 adult Palestinians on issues related to the peace process and political trends. The margin of error was $\pm 3\%$ and data was collected between 8-14 August 2010.

The survey comes at a critical juncture, as the Palestinian and Israeli governments prepare to resume direct talks for the first time in almost two years. Negotiations are occurring at the same time as the Israeli government's settlement moratorium comes to a close, and will face significant challenges on longstanding and sensitive issues such as the status of Jerusalem and refugees.

OVERVIEW

- Palestinians remain profoundly skeptical of American and Israeli intentions, showing deep pessimism about opportunities for a negotiated settlement.
- Understandably, considering progress since Oslo, most Palestinians believe that the next ten years will see no change or a worsening of key issues.
- The survey shows areas of compromise available to negotiators that would have the support of most Palestinians (or at least not overwhelming opposition).
- The results also show that extraordinary efforts will need to be made to convince Palestinians about the need for compromise on the most sensitive issues.
- Hamas continues to lose public support because of their failures in Gaza, while Fatah is maintaining strong support.
- No single Palestinian leader is dominating the political field.

PEACE PROCESS

Allowable responses to all of the following peace process questions were “essential, desirable, acceptable, tolerable or unacceptable.” Obviously, any response that is at least “tolerable” (i.e. covers any response other than “unacceptable”) shows a potentially supportable solution.

Most Palestinians put more blame on the United States and the Israeli and Palestinian public than the Israeli government for a lack of progress in the peace process. However, the data also suggests that the blame may be nuanced by perceptions of strength and weakness. Palestinians see their government as weak and thus incapable of compromising; while the Israeli government is seen as strong, and thus also not willing to compromise.

All of the major issues in the dispute—Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, etc—are seen as “very significant” or “of some significance”, with only “peace between Israel and the Arab world” dropping below 90% support for “very significant” or “of some significance” (62.3%). It is interesting to note that 19% of Palestinians believe that peace between Israel and the Arab world is of no significance. For this group of Palestinians, their dispute is far more important than any regional issues.

Final Status

For those interested in a peace agreement, there is conflicting news on final status issues. A full 78% of Palestinians believe it is essential that a future national homeland for Palestinians be set up “from the Jordan River to the sea.”

- In addition, significant majorities find “one bi-national federal state” or a “confederation between WB/Jordan and Gaza/Egypt” as unacceptable (56% and 64% respectively).
- The “two state solution for two peoples” or “one state in which Israelis and Palestinians are equal citizens” each has majority support. (That is, 62% and 53% respectively find these ideas at least “tolerable”; while 38% and 47% respectively find these solutions “unacceptable.”)
- This suggests that regional and international leaders still have a great distance to travel, if they expect Palestinians to lessen opposition to the most likely outcome, a two state solution, and no longer entertain notions about what their state might actually look like.
- In relation to that, however, a full 65% believe that there will be no change in the next ten years or the situation will only change for the worse. Since pessimism about a solution remains relatively high, it probably pushes Palestinians to the (in their view) most desirable (if unattainable) solution (i.e. river to the sea). Should a solution be imminent, there might be a shift in attitudes towards a more pragmatic and realistic solution.

Refugees

As with other major issues, any resolution to the refugee challenge will face a highly skeptical and idealistic Palestinian public.

- When asked about various options for resolving the refugee problem, 88% of Palestinians said that both the right of return and compensation were “essential” (8% said “desirable”).
- A majority of Palestinians found unacceptable the following options: “compensation without right of return” (68%); “returning refugees limited to family members and numbers agreed” to between parties (60%); and “UN should close camps and resettle outside of Israel” (51%).
- Interestingly, 49% of respondents found this last option at least “tolerable” and 13% found it “essential,” suggesting this could become a majority-supported option if effectively sold to the public.
- Three responses had majorities that found them at least “tolerable”: “Refugees deciding not to return should be offered compensation and resettlement in WB/G or another Arab country of their choice” (71.4%); “right of return without compensation” (66%); and “return to WB/G within agreed borders (64%).
- Once again, pessimism is the dominant sense of Palestinians. Notwithstanding the potential of the more positive responses above, a full 68% of Palestinians believe that either no change in the status of refugees will take place or the situation will only change for the worse over the next ten years.

Settlements

Palestinians show themselves to be relatively open-minded and potentially persuadable on a few issues related to settlements.

- Ninety-seven percent of respondents said that it is “desirable” or “essential” that “all the settlers leave the OT and close the settlements” (91% said this is essential).
- Relatively slim majorities found “unacceptable” the proposal to “dismantle most of the settlements, move settlers to large blocks and exchange lands” (54%) and the proposal “settlers can stay in WB if they become citizens of Palestine” (55%). It is possible that with effective persuasion and as part of a larger package, these issues could have a majority claiming they are at least “tolerable.”
- Once again, we see a large majority (71%) say that either no change in settlements will take place or that things will only get worse in the next ten years.

Borders

The issue of borders seems to have the most potential for finding majority support for a compromise solution.

- A significant 66% of those polled said that “the 1967 border should be adjusted through agreement of equivalent exchange of land” was at least tolerable (50% said at least “acceptable”).
- Sixty-eight percent said that “Israel should withdraw to the 1967 border between Israel and Palestine.”
- When asked to respond to the proposal “border established by the security wall,” 68% said that this would be “unacceptable.”
- Sixty-seven percent said that there would be “no change” or “only change for the worse” in the next ten years on the issue of borders.

Jerusalem

Resolving the dispute over Jerusalem remains one of the thorniest issues for any Palestinian negotiator to address.

- Of those polled, 84% said that “all of Jerusalem (East and West) should remain in Palestine (94% if you include “desirable”).
- Sixty percent said it was at least “tolerable” that “Jerusalem be internationalized as a city of peace under the authority of a multi-faith municipal covenant” (29% said that this option was “essential” or “desirable”).
- Very slim majorities found unacceptable the statements “Jerusalem should be divided into East and West along the pre-1967 border” (50%) and “Jerusalem should be internationalized as a city of peace under the authority of the UN” (51%). Obversely, just under a majority found these two statements to be at least tolerable.
- Surprisingly, only 54% found unacceptable the proposal “to divide the city according to current Palestinian and Israeli neighborhoods.”
- As above, 71% do not believe there will be a change or things will get worse on this issue over the next ten years.

Tactics

Considering the pessimism evident on previous questions, it is somewhat surprising that when asked directly whether negotiations will lead to a Palestinian state with full sovereignty, 65% said “yes” or “maybe” (only 32% believe negotiations will never lead to a Palestinian state).

- Seventy-seven percent of those polled thought that the proximity talks have had “no progress” or have actually caused a “regression.”
- When asked about President Abbas engaging in direct negotiations, 65% said that he should, with various limitations and conditions (8% said yes, without conditions). One can assume that this 73% could be persuaded to support direct negotiations, if presented properly and explained with adequate nuance.
- When asked to provide what they believe to be the best means for ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state, there is a stark division. Almost 20% support a non-violent popular uprising, 35% support negotiations until reaching agreement, and 39% support some form of violence (of this, 7% support violence against civilians in Israel).

POLITICAL VIEWS

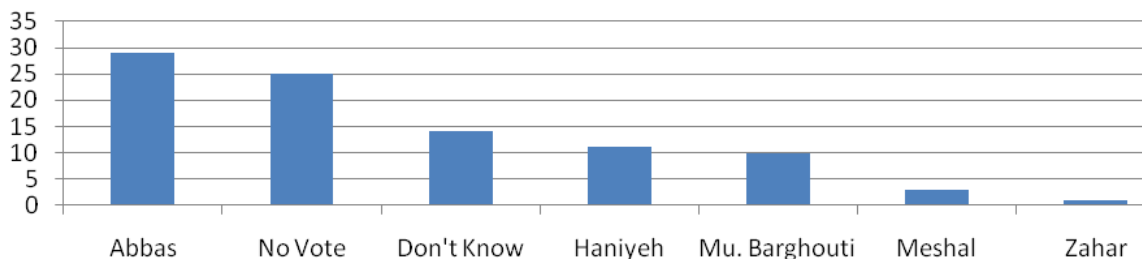
Presidential Elections

President Abbas remains a relatively popular elected official. However, when asked for whom they would vote, respondents give Abbas less of a percent than Fatah in a similar PLC ballot test question.

Abbas has failed to consolidate the Fatah base and with decisions such as the cancellation of local elections undermining his leadership, he would need a dramatic breakthrough to see his numbers increase.

Having said that, no one else on the horizon seems capable of challenging Abbas if he chose to run for President again. The other potential candidates on the question would have difficulty challenging Abbas, with his three-to-one advantage.

If elections held today, for whom would you vote?

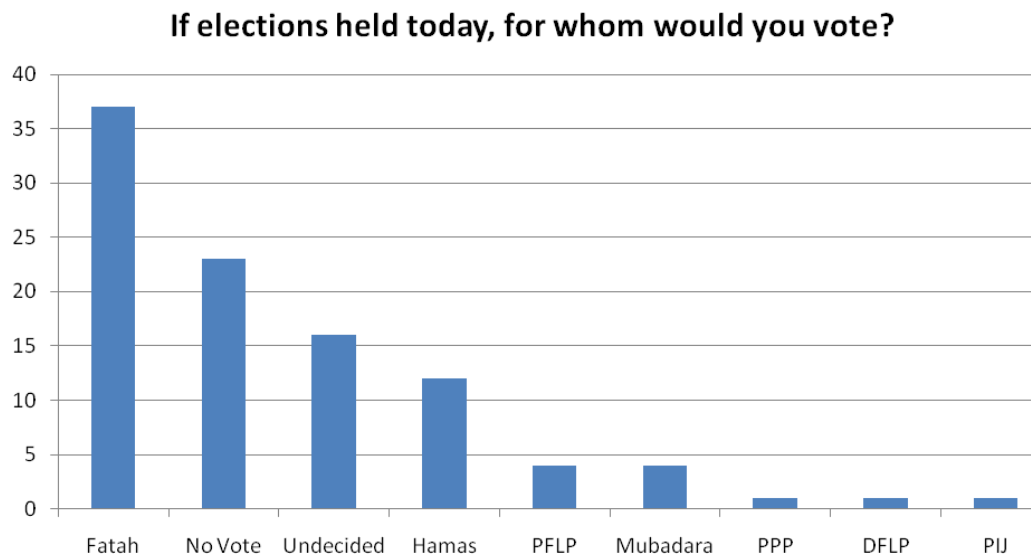


PLC Elections

Fatah once again dominates the political party landscape, comfortably enjoying a three-to-one advantage to their closest competitor. Hamas has lost a significant level of support since 2006 and have fallen back to historic levels of support.

Sixteen percent said that they were undecided. A united independent list or Hamas could be instantly competitive if they were able to tap into this group of voters. Most likely, though, these voters are less likely to swing to either Fatah or Hamas because those parties are known quantities. It is more likely that they would either break toward an independent grouping or sit out PLC elections, if they perceive no credible option to either Fatah corruption or Hamas incompetence.

It is not clear what the effect would be if Salaam Fayyad ran a list alone or in conjunction with Fatah or other independents. Clearly, his time as Prime Minister has not driven his numbers very high in other areas, such as the Presidential race.



As the previous chart illustrates, a full quarter of the Palestinian public is effectively non-partisan. This argues for an effective grassroots outreach effort for any party or grouping interesting in drawing in these voters.

Should the independents and leftists join their political efforts, most likely drawing in non-partisan voters in the process, they would be almost competitive with Fatah and soundly defeat the Islamist block.

CONCLUSIONS

Palestinians remain deeply pessimistic about their future and do not see any realistic hope for the peace process to deliver their dreams of statehood. However, when given a range of choices, they are willing to tolerate proposals that fall within the likely range of pragmatic resolutions.

Most importantly, key leaders in the Palestinian community will need to begin preparing the public for compromise. If an agreement is reached, attention will need to be paid to the roll out of the agreement and a sophisticated advocacy campaign will need to be launched to blunt the rejectionists.

With an entire package, one can infer that there will be opposition to specific issues but one might find majority tolerance for the totality with fundamental support for the overarching and historic achievement of statehood.