



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

The United States Institute of Peace's Project on Arab-Israeli Futures is a research effort designed to anticipate and assess obstacles and opportunities facing the peace process in the years ahead. Stepping back from the day-to-day ebb and flow of events on the ground, this project examines deeper, over-the-horizon trends that could foreclose future options or offer new openings for peace.

The effort brings together American, Israeli, and Arab researchers and is directed by Scott Lasensky, a senior research associate at the Institute.

In this report, Khalil Shikaki analyzes survey data gathered from dozens of polls conducted over the past decade and identifies long-term trends in Palestinian public opinion and related policy implications. Shikaki's study is essential reading for policy planners on all sides. The first study in the series, *The Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Critical Trends Affecting Israel*, by Yossi Alpher, was published in September 2005.

Khalil Shikaki is one of the foremost authorities on Palestinian public opinion and Palestinian national politics. The director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah, Shikaki holds a PhD from Columbia University. He has served as senior consultant to the Independent Task Force on Strengthening Palestinian Public Institutions and has written numerous essays in leading publications around the world.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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Khalil Shikaki

Willing to Compromise

Palestinian Public Opinion and the Peace Process

Summary

- Palestinian public opinion is not an impediment to progress in the peace process; to the contrary, over time the Palestinian public has become more moderate. Palestinian willingness to compromise is greater than it has been at any time since the start of the peace process. This increased willingness to compromise provides policymakers with greater room to maneuver.
- For the first time since the start of the peace process, a majority of Palestinians support a compromise settlement that is acceptable to a majority of Israelis. Therefore, the time is ripe to deal with permanent-status issues. In order to frame such a process more positively for Palestinians, any vision of a final settlement needs to have an Arab, as well as an international, stamp of approval.
- Palestinian opposition to violence increases when diplomacy proves effective. Public support for violence increases in an environment of greater pain and suffering and decreases when threat perception is reduced.
- Palestinian misperception of Israeli public attitudes is evident even when it comes to one of the core elements of the peace process: the two-state solution. Lack of normal personal interaction, because the only Israelis most Palestinians encounter are soldiers or armed settlers, encourages misperception and the desire to portray the other side negatively.
- All major transformations in Palestinian politics were preceded or accompanied by changes in public attitudes. The 1993 Oslo accords led to greater public willingness to oppose violence and support peace, negotiations, and reconciliation with Israel. Islamists lost much of their public support during this period.
- With the collapse of Oslo in 2000, Hamas reemerged as a credible alternative to the nationalist Fateh movement and the peace process. Recent years have also witnessed a significant decline in public support for the nationalist old guard, and the ascendance of a new young guard.

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- By reducing threat perception, political and security stability has the advantage of reducing the appeal of violence and improving the prospects for Palestinian democracy. But only progress in the peace process can sustain such stability.
- In the absence of progress toward sustained stability, it is highly unlikely that Palestinians will find their way to democracy and good governance. If they do manage to produce a democracy under such adverse conditions, it will be one dominated by the rise of Hamas and a declining prospect for peace with Israel.
- The post-Arafat era shows more public optimism about the peace process and more willingness to compromise. Support for violence against Israelis, while still high, is declining. This period is also characterized by tougher competition between Fateh and Hamas, with the latter benefiting from weaker Palestinian Authority legitimacy at the local level, while corruption emerges as a weakness for Fateh and traditional nationalists.

Introduction

All major transformations in modern Palestinian politics were preceded or accompanied by changes in public attitudes. In the 1970s, universities, schools, and Israeli economic and security policies helped to shift power from the traditional commercial and feudal classes to the nationalists. By 1976, when the first Palestinian local elections took place in the West Bank, the nationalists were already in control of the Palestinian masses; the election outcome only confirmed that. The first Palestinian intifada, in the late 1980s, brought about a second transformation, leading to the emergence of political Islam as a mobilizing force, and the parallel emergence of nationalist young guards who gradually came to pose a challenge to the dominance of the PLO's old guard in exile. As the first intifada was winding down, almost one-third of the public favored Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The third transformation reflected the impact of the 1993 Oslo peace process and the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), leading to greater public willingness to oppose violence and support peace, negotiations, and reconciliation with the state of Israel. In the midst of this phase, the Islamists lost much of their public support. The fourth transformation began with the eruption of the second intifada, in September 2000, and led to the reemergence of Hamas, this time as a credible political and security challenge to the dominance of the nationalist Fateh and to the peace process. The second intifada also brought about a significant decline in the influence of the nationalist old guard, and the ascendance of the young guard.

Findings throughout 2005 show that the post-Arafat environment is already shaping the formation of Palestinian public attitudes, which in turn are likely to influence the outcome of the next transformation in Palestinian political life. The post-Arafat era is characterized by a much tougher competition between Fateh and Hamas, with the latter benefiting from weaker PA legitimacy at the local level, with corruption emerging as a major weakness for the nationalists. Moreover, the post-Arafat era shows more public optimism about the peace process and more willingness to compromise. Support for violence against Israelis, while still high, is declining.

This report examines major trends in Palestinian public opinion during the past two transformations: the one heralded by the Oslo peace process and the one brought about by the second intifada. It also examines the immediate effects of the death of Arafat, and the future trajectory this major event is likely to generate in public attitudes. The study first describes the basic process and turning points during the past decade and then outlines the basic trends in attitudes related to state building and peacemaking. It concludes with an assessment of the role of Palestinian public opinion in the peace process, and an examination of the policy implications that can be inferred from reviewing the basic trends in Palestinian attitudes. The study is based on more than one hundred polls

conducted during the past eleven years by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, under the author's supervision, among Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.¹

Two basic trends in state building are clear: the PA has gradually lost much of its popular legitimacy, and the competition between the nationalists and the Islamists has become fierce, with the dominance of Fateh becoming a thing of the past. Peacemaking trends have been mixed: over time, confidence in diplomacy dropped and support for violence increased, but surprisingly, willingness to compromise and support reconciliation continued to increase over time. In fact, Palestinian willingness to accept a two-state solution along with territorial and other compromises has never been as great as it is today.

One should not underestimate the role of public opinion. Despite a narrow tolerance of dissent during the past decade, Palestinian public opinion played a significant role in empowering and constraining leaders. It gave or deprived them of legitimacy to act in ways that significantly affected the prospects for peacemaking and state building. But public opinion has also been subject to manipulation and framing and has fallen victim at times to misperception and ignorance. The realities on the ground constrained its ability to play a more positive role in the peace process. Heightened threat perception increased public support for violence, while progress in the peace process and state building generated optimism, leading to greater moderation.

A policy aimed at articulating and promoting a permanent-status vision, reducing threat perception, and encouraging democratic norms and practices in the PA creates an environment conducive to progress in Palestinian state building and Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking. This conclusion is based on the following lessons, drawn from a review of past trends:

- By reducing threat perception, political and security stability has the advantage of reducing the appeal of violence and improving the prospects for Palestinian democracy. But only progress in the peace process can sustain such stability.
- Palestinian public opinion is not an impediment to progress in the peace process; to the contrary, its increased willingness to compromise provides policymakers with greater room to maneuver. When progress is attained, it is likely to further reduce the appeal of violence, weaken radical groups, and consolidate Palestinian democratic tendencies.
- A Palestinian transition to democracy is likely to increase tolerance for dissent, reduce misperception, and thereby positively contribute to the goal of peacebuilding.
- Yet, in the absence of progress toward sustained stability, it is highly unlikely that Palestinians will find their way to democracy and good governance.
- And if they do manage to produce a democracy under such adverse conditions, it will be one dominated by the rise of Hamas and a declining prospect for peace with Israel.

The Political Context: Processes, Turning Points, and Trends

Two interacting processes have dominated Palestinian public life during the past decade: state building and peacemaking. The two processes have proved to be wholly interdependent—simply put, one could not succeed without the other. The dynamics of state building have affected two major issues: perception of PA legitimacy, and the domestic balance of power between nationalists and Islamists. Two major issues have been affected by the dynamics of peacemaking: perception of the role of violence, and the public's willingness to support compromise in permanent-status issues such as borders, refugees, and Jerusalem.

Two basic trends in state building are clear: the PA has gradually lost much of its popular legitimacy, and the competition between the nationalists and the Islamists has become fierce, with the dominance of Fateh becoming a thing of the past.

Palestinian public opinion is not an impediment to progress in the peace process; to the contrary.

The United States Institute of Peace and Arab-Israeli Relations

The Institute is a leader among non-governmental organizations working toward a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It has supported the work of more than two dozen resident scholars and fellows, provided more than 150 grants in this area totaling over five million dollars, published dozens of books and reports, and facilitated high-level dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian political and religious figures. The Institute also serves as a forum for promoting new thinking about U.S. policy and operates a variety of educational and professional training programs in the region.

The failure of the PA to build strong public institutions, combat corruption, respect human rights, and deliver good governance was responsible in part for its loss of legitimacy.

The threat Hamas poses to the dominance of the nationalists provides a significant impetus to Palestinian democracy.

The *state-building trends*, over the past decade but especially during the five years of the second intifada, have been negative on two counts: the PA has lost much of its popular legitimacy, and the domestic balance of power has shifted in favor of the Islamists. The turn to nationalism, which began in the 1970s and was first threatened during the first intifada, is now threatened much more forcefully; the primacy of nationalism can no longer be taken for granted.

Three dynamics dominated state building during the second intifada: the empowerment of the Islamists, the fragmentation of the nationalist Fateh, and the gradual disintegration of the PA. The failure of the PA to build strong public institutions, combat corruption, respect human rights, and deliver good governance was responsible in part for its loss of legitimacy. But other factors also contributed to this outcome. The old guard of the Palestinian national movement failed to integrate the young guard nationalists into the political process, leading to rising internal dissent and fragmentation within Fateh. The inability of the nationalists to deliver an end to occupation at the end of the interim period led the public to shift loyalty to the Islamists, who opposed the peace process and believed in armed struggle. The Israeli restrictions and retaliatory measures against the PA security services and institutions during the second intifada further weakened the PA's ability to deliver services at a time of extreme need. The Islamists proved more effective in providing various types of social services. By mid-2004, the combined Islamist strength of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and independent Islamists in the combined West Bank and Gaza Strip was greater than that of Fateh. For the first time since its establishment in 1987, Hamas became the largest political faction in the Gaza Strip, gaining the support of 29 percent of Gazans, compared with 27 percent for Fateh.

The rise of Hamas, an organization opposed both to a Palestinian-Israeli peace based on a two-state solution and to a nationalist-secularist Palestinian state, represented a threat to the two processes of state building and peacemaking. While Hamas's integration into the Palestinian political process during the past few years has driven the movement toward adopting a more moderate view regarding these two processes, its views on the substantive nature of a peace agreement with Israel and its sociopolitical agenda remain highly problematic to most Palestinians. Nonetheless, the threat Hamas poses to the dominance of the nationalists provides a significant impetus to Palestinian democracy because it provides the political system with a serious political opposition for the first time since the creation of the PA.

The death of Yasir Arafat in November 2004 gave the PA and the national movement the opportunity to reassess their performance and recapture some of the lost public confidence. But in the absence of Arafat, the Islamists were emboldened to challenge the dominance of Fateh at all levels, local and national. The competition between the two factions gained added momentum. The smooth transition of power in the PLO and PA hierarchies, despite gloomy expectations, created a more positive environment for the nationalists to take the lead and hold national elections, leading to the election of Mahmud Abbas by a large margin. Hamas's decision to boycott the elections helped to weaken its standing among Palestinians. Meanwhile, however, public concern about PA corruption remained high, with the death of Arafat making the public even more doubtful of the nationalists' capacity to deliver clean governance. PSR exit polls have shown that in local elections in December 2004 and in January and May 2005, in about 120 localities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, voters rewarded Hamas candidates, perceived as uncorrupt, and punished those of Fateh, perceived as part of PA corruption. While at the national level voters' considerations were similar to those of Fateh (focusing on revival of the peace process, improvement of the economy, and restoration of law and order), at the local level voters' considerations tended to favor the Islamists (with a focus on clean government and efficient delivery of services).

The *peacemaking trends* over the past decade have indicated both progress and reversals. While the first half of the decade witnessed progress toward peace and reconciliation, the second half saw a dramatic increase in the level of support for violence. Nonetheless,

the trends during the whole decade continued to be positive regarding public willingness to compromise. It is worth noting that despite the rise of the Islamists, the unprecedented levels of support for violence, and the increased public perception during the second intifada that violence pays, willingness to compromise, and support for reconciliation, have not been negatively affected. Indeed, over time the public has become more moderate. The death of Arafat has positively affected these trends. The post-Arafat changes are still fragile, but they point to a more optimistic outlook, more support for the peace process, and more willingness to compromise. Public perception of the role of violence, however, has been slow in changing. While 63 percent of voters elected Mahmud Abbas as the new president, only half supported his call to put an end to the “militarization” of the intifada. Indeed, most Palestinians continued to view the armed confrontations of the intifada as serving Palestinian national interests in ways that negotiations could not. Nonetheless, with a cease-fire in place in early 2005, public support for suicide attacks against Israelis dropped to less than half what it was six months before.

As table 1 indicates, of the major turning points under consideration, the initial successes of the Oslo process have been the most effective in influencing state building and peacemaking throughout the past decade. Oslo positively affected the psychological environment of the Palestinians, encouraging moderation and reducing the appeal of violence. The PA quickly gained public legitimacy, the Islamists who boycotted the first Palestinian elections in 1996 suffered the consequences in public rejection, and the nationalists gained the lion's share of public sympathy. The collapse of the Camp David II negotiations and the eruption of the second intifada have been highly negative in all aspects of state building. These setbacks also negatively affected peacemaking by making violence legitimate and popular. The Israeli unilateral disengagement policy—building a separation wall and withdrawing from Gaza without negotiations—only confirmed in the public mind the belief that violence pays, and, in doing so, rewarded the Islamists while making the PA more irrelevant than ever. Initial findings in the aftermath of Arafat's death show changes in all aspects of the processes under discussion: some restoration of PA legitimacy; a tougher competition between Fateh and Hamas, with the nationalists regaining some of their lost support; an increase in support for the peace process and the willingness to compromise; and a decrease in the level of support for violence.

Despite the rise of the Islamists, the unprecedented levels of support for violence, and the increased public perception during the second intifada that violence pays, willingness to compromise, and support for reconciliation, have not been negatively affected.

The Israeli unilateral disengagement policy only confirmed in the public mind the belief that violence pays.

Table 1. Impact of Turning Points on the Processes of State Building and Peacemaking (1993–2005)

Turning Points	State-Building Process		Peacemaking Process	
	PA Legitimacy	Balance of Power	Support for Violence	Willingness to Compromise
Oslo 1993–2000	Increased	Nationalists gain and Islamists lose in early period; later, nationalists lose, Islamists remain stable	Decreased	Increased
Camp David II and Intifada: July 2000–2004	Decreased	Nationalists lose; Islamists win	Increased	Increased
Post-Arafat: November 2004–December 2005	Increased	Nationalists win; Islamists lose some support	Decreased	Increased

To understand the apparent contradictions in the trends that point to higher support for Islamists and increased appreciation for violence at a time when willingness to compromise is on the rise, it helps to examine public motivation. Analysis of polling findings

The increase in the level of support for violence and for the Islamists is correlated with the heightened threat perception.

shows that the increase in support for the Islamists and violence does not necessarily reflect an ideological transformation—toward radical positions—that would be difficult to reverse. Rather, it demonstrates an angry response to the pain and suffering inflicted by Israeli occupation policies and retaliatory measures since the start of the second intifada. The anger led people to demand revenge and to support all types of violence against Israelis, including suicide attacks against civilians inside Israel. In other words, the increase in the level of support for violence and for the Islamists is correlated with the heightened threat perception.

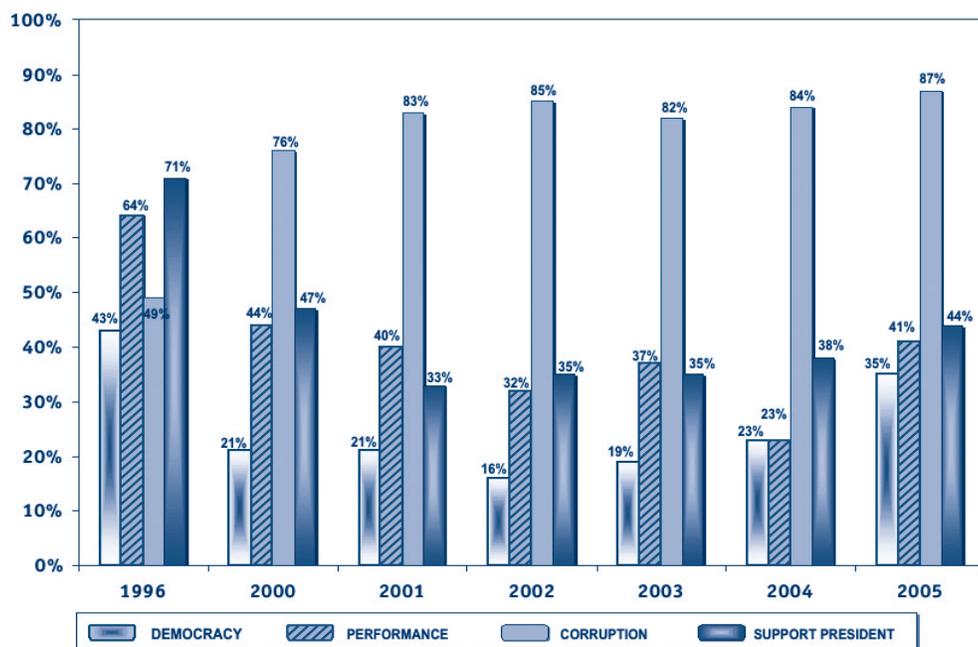
State Building

As indicated earlier, the dynamics of state building affected perception of PA legitimacy and the domestic balance of power. The trend over the past decade, but especially during the past five years, has been negative on both counts. Legitimacy has been measured by observing public responses since 1996 to four issues: status of PA democracy, measured by the level of positive public evaluation; PA performance, measured by the level of positive evaluation of overall performance by the PA's various branches; existence of corruption in the PA, measured by public perception of corruption in PA institutions; and the popularity of the PA president. The domestic balance of power has been measured by tapping public support since 1993 for the different Palestinian factions and political parties. While not always occurring in parallel, shifts in the domestic balance of power showing disapproval of nationalists was associated with depreciation of PA legitimacy.

As figure 1 shows, the year 1996, which witnessed the first Palestinian national elections, was the best year for PA legitimacy. However, by 2000, just before the eruption of the second intifada, all indicators were negative, with the PA losing much of its popular legitimacy. One year after the eruption of the intifada, further erosion in PA legitimacy could be detected. Legitimacy stabilized after the first year of the intifada, even though the perception of corruption continued to worsen. The post-Arafat era witnessed significant changes, restoring some elements of PA legitimacy. Positive evaluation of Palestinian democracy and PA performance increased considerably in less than a year. In his first year in office, Mahmud Abbas enjoyed greater popularity than Arafat did during his last four years. Perception of corruption, however, seems to be the PA's Achilles heel,

Perception of corruption seems to be the PA's Achilles heel.

Figure 1. Governance and Legitimacy (1996–2005)



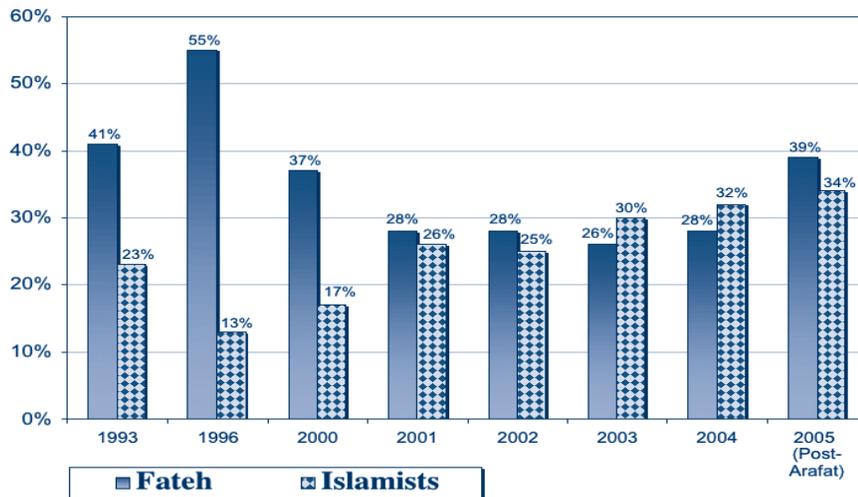
with the overwhelming majority of Palestinians believing in the existence of corruption in the PA. Similar majorities of voters in each of the rounds of local elections in December 2004, January 2005, and May 2005 have indicated that the incorruptibility of candidates has been the most important consideration, with candidates' political affiliation coming fifth, after education, religiosity, and position on the peace process. Voters in these elections elected more Hamas than Fateh candidates in the Gaza Strip, and slightly fewer in the West Bank.

The loss of PA legitimacy, the failure of the PA old guard to integrate the young guard nationalists into the political process, leading

to rising internal dissent and fragmentation within Fateh, and the failure of the PA to deliver an end to occupation at the end of the interim period or to deliver needed services during the second intifada led the public to abandon the nationalists and gradually shift loyalty to the Islamists. The Islamists, who opposed the peace process and advocated armed struggle against the Israeli occupation, proved uncorrupt and more effective in providing various types of social services. As figure 2 indicates, the Islamists, who suffered a severe blow when the peace process first started, regained the initiative with the eruption of the second intifada. Just before Arafat's death, the Islamists became more popular than Fateh for the first time in Palestinian history. Only the death of Arafat reversed the trend, with the nationalists regaining much of their lost support.

The competition over local elections became fierce throughout 2005, leading to the emergence of a two-party system dominated by Hamas on the Islamist side and Fateh on the nationalist. Hamas, which has been the largest Islamist faction throughout the period under review, became even stronger within the Islamist camp, mainly because of electoral politics. Small Islamist groups, such as Islamic Jihad, were exposed as ineffective when competing against Fateh in elections. Fateh and Hamas won more than 90 percent of local council seats.

Figure 2. Support for Fateh versus the Islamists in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip: 1993–2005



2000: Poll taken in July 2000, before eruption of the second intifada

2001–2005: Support averages for each year

Islamists include three groups: Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and independent Islamists

The dramatic decline in support for Fateh between 1996 and 2000 was accompanied by a significant decrease in public approval of Palestinian democracy and PA performance. Support for Arafat dropped by one-third while perception of PA corruption increased by 55 percent. The significant shift in the balance of power favoring the Islamists one year after the eruption of the second intifada was accompanied by continuation of the same pre-intifada trends.²

Peacemaking

Of the two major issues of peacemaking, one, perception of the role of violence, has seen significant fluctuations while the other, willingness to compromise, has seen steady progress toward moderation. Public support for violence and the belief that violence pays declined during the first few years of the peace process. The stagnation in the political

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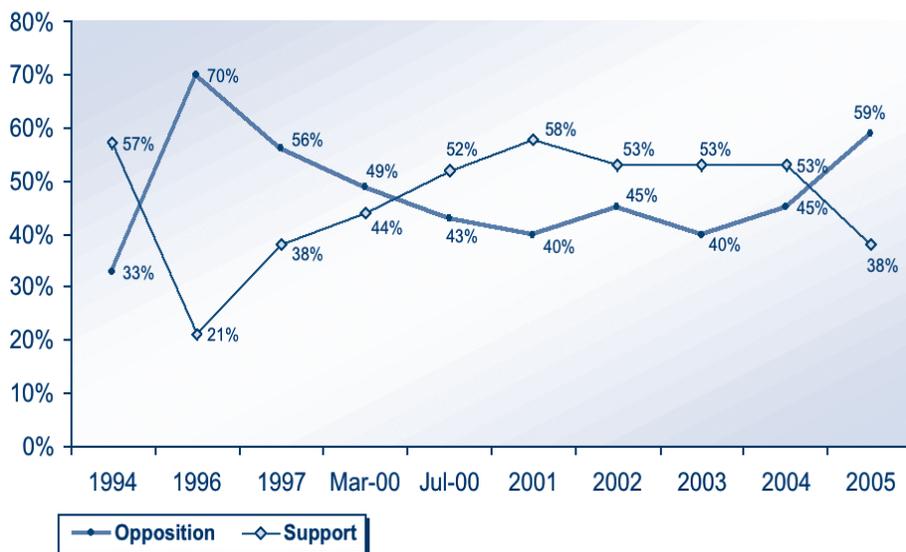
Of the two major issues of peacemaking, one, perception of the role of violence, has seen significant fluctuations while the other; willingness to compromise, has seen steady progress toward moderation.

process under the Israeli government of Netanyahu (1996–99) led to a gradual increase in support for violence. The eruption of the second intifada prompted a further increase. During 2003 and 2004, calls for a mutual cessation of violence increased significantly, accompanied by a slight drop in support for violence, but the belief that the armed intifada has helped Palestinians achieve national rights remained very strong. Once a cease-fire was in place in early 2005, support for suicide attacks against Israelis dropped significantly. The second issue of the peace process, willingness to compromise, was clearly evident in issues of borders and settlements, Jerusalem, and security. Moreover, Palestinians have gradually shown significant willingness to recognize the Jewish nature of the Israeli state and to accept an end to the conflict. Support for reconciliation based on a two-state solution remained solid despite the past five years of armed confrontations.

In the mid-1990s the Oslo process helped change the psychological environment of the Palestinians, creating confidence in diplomacy and reducing the appeal of violence.

In the mid-1990s the Oslo process helped change the psychological environment of the Palestinians, creating confidence in diplomacy and reducing the appeal of violence and of the militant groups that continued to employ it. As figure 3 indicates, support for armed attacks on Israeli civilians, such as the suicide attacks of February and March 1996, did not exceed 20 percent. The Netanyahu period witnessed serious deterioration in the peace process, with little implementation of existing agreements on Israeli redeployment of forces out of Palestinian territories. The opening in September 1996 of a tunnel along parts of the Western Wall of al-Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), which was followed by several days of Palestinian-Israeli armed confrontations, heightened threat perceptions, raised questions about the value of diplomacy, and increased Palestinian support for violence. The failure of the Camp David summit and the eruption of the second intifada were followed by an increase in support for violence. This increase is correlated with greater threat perception on the part of Palestinians. The Israeli use of military force, including tanks, helicopter gunships, and F-16 bombers, against Palestinians inside populated areas, the Israeli imposition of collective punishment measures (such as closures, checkpoints, and restrictions on movement), the continued buildup of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the building of the separation barrier of concrete walls and barbed-wire fences inside the West Bank are examples of threats the Palestinians had to endure during the years of the second intifada. The anger generated by these measures led people to demand revenge and to support all types of violence against Israelis, including suicide attacks against civilians inside Israel.

Figure 3. Public Support for Violence against Israeli Civilians inside Israel (before and after the Second Intifada)



In fact, the level of support for the specific suicide attacks that took place in October 2003 and September 2004 (75 percent and 77 percent, respectively) was much greater

than the level of support for the general idea of attacking civilians, measured at exactly the same periods (54 percent and 50 percent, respectively). The post-Arafat environment witnessed a gradual decrease in the level of violence and in Israeli collective punishment measures, as well as agreement on a cease-fire, which in turn significantly altered the prevailing trend, with a majority of Palestinians expressing opposition to attacks against Israeli civilians, including suicide attacks. Support for the Tel Aviv suicide attack that took place in March 2005 received the support of 29 percent and the opposition of 67 percent. It is clear that once a *mutual* cease-fire was instituted, Palestinian threat perception diminished, and so did the level of support for violence and suicide attacks. In June 2005, in the wake of Israeli official announcement of plans to build thousands of housing units in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, support for violence against Israeli civilians increased again, reflecting increased Palestinian threat perception. Indeed, the June survey found a significant negative correlation between the belief that more Israeli settlements would be built in the West Bank in the future and a willingness to support collection of arms from armed Palestinian factions: 59 percent of those respondents who believed most settlements would be evacuated supported collection of arms, compared with only 28 percent of those who believed that many settlements would be added.

Palestinian attitudes regarding the role of violence have been measured not only by gauging support for attacks against Israeli civilians but also by determining how widespread are (1) the belief that armed confrontations have helped achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not, and (2) the perception of disengagement as a victory for armed struggle. A majority of Palestinians, responding to the July 2000 failure of the Camp David summit, believed that if Palestinians resorted to “confrontations” with the Israelis, such confrontations would help them achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not.³ During the same period, the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, seen by the public as an Israeli retreat under Hezbollah fire, provided the public with an alternative model to end the Israeli occupation. The public viewed positively the idea of emulating Hezbollah’s methods.⁴ Throughout the five years of intifada, a majority continued to view armed confrontations as helping Palestinians achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not. The post-Arafat period saw no change in public perception on this matter.

When the Israeli unilateral disengagement plan was first presented by Prime Minister Sharon, two-thirds of Palestinians viewed it as a victory for armed resistance. This perception was further consolidated throughout 2004 and 2005. Remarkably, respondents’ attitudes are almost identical with respondents’ perception of the prevailing public mood. In other words, the view that disengagement is a Palestinian victory is not only the attitude of respondents as individuals but also the normative attitude of society.⁵ It should be pointed out, however, that the belief that disengagement is victory is not leading more Palestinians to support violence against Israelis. Disengagement has helped change the order of priorities, with economic well-being, instead of ending occupation, gaining the top position. The changing perception of priorities has decreased the appeal of violence even as disengagement confirmed its value.

Despite the increased support for violence during the second intifada and the increased belief among the majority in the positive utility of violence, support for the peace process among Palestinians has remained strong. Moreover, the increased public support for the Islamists has not diminished the public’s willingness to support compromise. The change in views regarding violence and the Islamists does not reflect an ideological transformation toward radical positions. Rather, it demonstrates an angry response to the pain and suffering inflicted by Israeli occupation policies and retaliatory measures, particularly since the start of the second intifada. Indeed, an examination of the views of Hamas supporters during 2003–2004 shows them divided on fundamental issues such as acceptance of the two-state solution (including the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state), the Road Map, the Geneva initiative, and reconciliation with the Israeli people. In other words, once the level of Hamas support increased, the group was no longer homogenous, because many of the new converts maintained their moderate views on the peace process.

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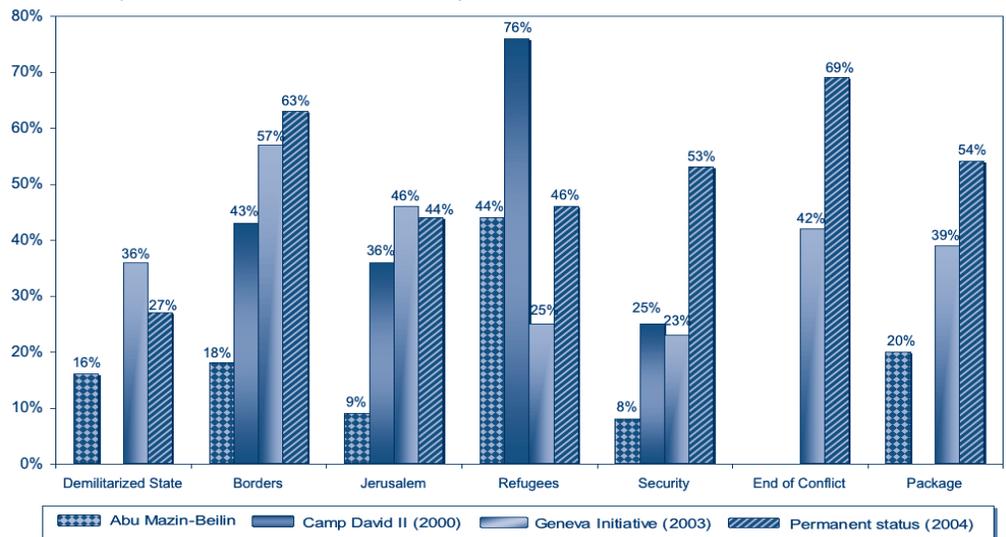
A majority of Palestinians are willing to accept the two-state solution, even when this entails a formula whereby Palestinians recognize Israel “as the state of the Jewish people” and Palestine “as the state of the Palestinian people.”

Moderation, particularly willingness to support compromise, can be seen in the consistent support for reconciliation based on a two-state solution and in the moderation of views on the core issues of the permanent-status agreement. When Palestinian respondents assumed the existence of a Palestinian state—recognized by the state of Israel and emerging as an outcome of a peace agreement between Palestine and Israel—support for reconciliation, between July 2000 and September 2005, ranged between two-thirds and three-quarters. In December, one month after Arafat’s death, support for reconciliation jumped to 81 percent.⁶

Indeed, a majority of Palestinians are willing to accept the two-state solution, even when this entails a formula whereby Palestinians recognize Israel “as the state of the Jewish people” and Palestine “as the state of the Palestinian people.” In June 2003, 52 percent supported and 46 percent opposed this formula, and by September 2005 support rose to 63 percent and opposition dropped to 35 percent.

Support for the different compromises of the permanent-status settlement has steadily increased since the start of the peace process. A further significant increase in willingness to support these compromises has been reported in the post-Arafat era. Figure 4 shows the change in attitudes during the past nine years on six issues: a demilitarized Palestinian state, final borders with territorial exchange, Jerusalem, refugees, security arrangements, and end of conflict. Compromises on each of these issues were presented to the Palestinian public as part of different packages. The first package was that of the Abu Mazin–Beilin, presented to the public in 1996. The second package was first discussed after the end of the Camp David summit in July 2000. The third was presented in December 2003 as the Geneva Initiative, a package arrived at through nonofficial negotiations involving Palestinian and Israeli politicians and former negotiators. The fourth package contained the same compromises as those in the Geneva Initiative but was presented unlabeled, defined simply as a permanent-status package. Figure 4 shows that while the first package received the support of a small minority of 20 percent, the third received the support of 39 percent, while the fourth received a majority support of 54 percent. No data is available on the second package, the Palestinian Camp David offer, but the levels of support for its components indicate that only a minority would have supported it.

Figure 4. Support for the Compromises of the Core Elements of the Permanent Settlements as Outlined in the Abu Mazin–Beilin Plan in 1996, the Reported Palestinian Offer at Camp David in 2000, the Geneva Initiative in 2003, and a Proposed Permanent Settlement (Identical to the Geneva Initiative) in 2004



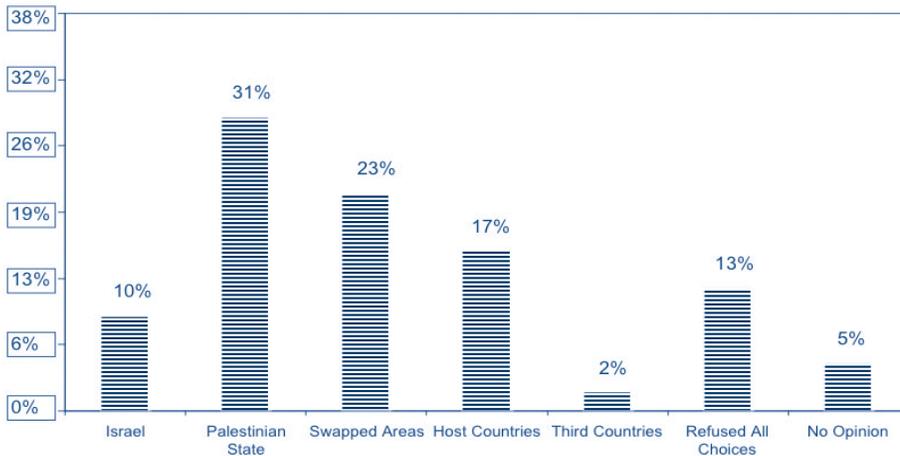
Although the compromises in the first three packages were not identical, most were similar. The essential compromises included a Palestinian state without an army; final

borders along the 1967 lines, with a small area of settlements annexed to Israel in return for an equal area of Israel proper annexed to the Palestinian state; a division in Jerusalem whereby Palestinian neighborhoods and al-Haram al-Sharif (or Temple Mount) come under Palestinian sovereignty and the Jewish neighborhoods and the Wailing Wall come under Israeli sovereignty; a solution to the refugee problem based on UN resolution 194, whereby refugees are settled into the Palestinian state; security arrangements allowing a temporary Israeli military presence along the Jordan Valley; early-warning stations on mountaintops; and use of Palestinian airspace for training purposes. The security arrangements also called for the deployment of international forces in specific areas in the Palestinian state, particularly in the Jordan Valley.⁷

While surveys have consistently shown an overwhelming demand for an Israeli recognition of the refugees' right of return, surveys among refugees have shown that only a small minority are interested in exercising that right by returning to the state of Israel. PSR surveys, conducted in 2003 among 4,500 refugee families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon, found that only 10 percent of all refugees wanted to return to Israel and only 1 percent wanted Israeli citizenship. As figure 5 shows, the rest of the refugees preferred to exercise the right of return in the Palestinian state (31 percent) or in "swapped" areas, that is, areas now in Israel that would be transferred to Palestinian sovereignty in a permanent settlement (23 percent), for a total of 54 percent of refugees preferring to live in a Palestinian state. Only 17 percent of all refugees preferred to remain in a host country, almost all of them in Jordan, and 2 percent preferred to go to a third country such as Canada, a European country, the United States, or Australia. The surveys found that 13 percent of the refugees in all three locations polled refused any of these choices. Most of those wanted to go back to their homes but refused to do so as long as it meant having to live in Israel. While these surveys alone are not sufficient to make far-reaching conclusions about future refugee behavior, they clearly indicate that refugees' strong attachment to Palestinian national identity greatly reduces their motivation to live in a Jewish state or elsewhere outside a Palestinian state.

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Figure 5. Refugees' First Choice (Total Refugees in WBGs, Jordan, and Lebanon), January–June 2003



The post-Arafat period witnessed additional changes to those already described above. The most interesting change is the rise in optimism among Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This optimism may have been generated by public expectations that the man who replaced Arafat, Mahmud Abbas, is a moderate leader opposed to the violence of the intifada and is perceived positively by Israel, the United States, and the international community. Public perception of Arafat has probably been partly colored by Israeli and American portrayal of him as a hard-liner who was committed to violence. Optimism is best illustrated by public expectations regarding (1) the possibility of reaching a peace agreement with the current Israeli leadership, (2) the continuation

The most interesting change is the rise in optimism among Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

of violence and the return to negotiations, and (3) the chances of achieving reconciliation between the Israeli and Palestinian people.

On the first issue, the public was asked to express its views about four questions: (1) the way Arafat's death would affect the chances for a peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis; (2) the possibility of reaching a compromise with the current Israeli leadership of Ariel Sharon; (3) if a compromise is reached, the capacity of the current Israeli leadership to convince the majority of Israelis to support it; and finally, (4) the ability of the current Palestinian leadership (after Arafat) to convince the Palestinians to accept a compromise. A majority responded that Arafat's death would lead to a greater chance for a peace agreement. Similarly, a majority responded affirmatively to the other three questions. For example, 53 percent believed that compromise with the current Israeli leadership is indeed possible, and only 34 percent believed that it is impossible. It is worth noting that in July 2001, ten months after the start of the second intifada, 46 percent said the peace process had come to its end.

Optimism is also evident in the change, after Arafat's death, in public expectations and attitudes on (1) a return to negotiations and an end to violence, (2) the chances of reconciliation between the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples, and (3) the chances for implementation of the Road Map. Expectations that the two sides will soon return to negotiations almost doubled to 30 percent between September and December 2004. The expectations that the two sides will not return to negotiations and that violence will increase dropped dramatically to 12 percent. The percentage of those believing that reconciliation is not possible ever dropped from about half to one-third, and the percentage of those believing that reconciliation can be achieved in anywhere from a few years to one generation increased by a third to 39 percent. The belief that the Road Map can still be implemented increased by almost two-thirds to 46 percent.⁸

Most of these changes, however, did not last long. By mid-June 2005 optimism began to give way to a more somber assessment: expectations regarding a return to negotiations with no violence dropped to 23 percent, and belief that reconciliation between the two peoples will never be possible rose again to 46 percent. The perceived lack of progress in the peace process in the first half of 2005 (with Israeli army deployment in Palestinian areas hardly changed, settlement construction in the West Bank accelerating, closure and checkpoints remaining in place, and the separation barrier continuing to be built) damaged public optimism by lowering expectations. Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in September 2005 restored some of the lost optimism, but not to levels seen nine months earlier.

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The Role of Public Opinion in the Peace Process

Palestinian public opinion has at times been a driving force influencing policy changes in the PA as well as in the different Palestinian factions. At other times, however, it was shaped by events and fell victim to the harsh reality on the ground or to the deliberate framing of interest groups. Looking back at the record of the past decade, it is evident that Palestinian public opinion has been effective in several ways. It has given legitimacy to leaders and institutions and provided them with the political will to crack down on those who commit violence. In the second intifada, it deterred Palestinian leaders from cracking down on violence and gave political and social support and comfort to those who resorted to violence, and indeed voted them into office. The first Palestinian elections in January 1996 created a new political system just two months before the eruption of a series of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians inside Israel. Armed with new legitimacy, the new PA was able to crack down forcibly on the Islamists who organized the violence. The PA was further comforted by the fact that most Palestinians supported its crackdown. But during the second intifada the opposite was true. Lacking political

legitimacy and confronted by a strong popular opposition committed to violence against Israelis, the PA found it hard to resort to the same methods it had used in 1996. The rise of Hamas during the second intifada, and its electoral victories in local Palestinian elections in 2004–05, are examples of the efficacy of public opinion. In the near future, public opinion may be called on to play an even more important role. Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 are likely to introduce Hamas as a major parliamentary bloc.

Palestinian public opinion can play a more direct role in peacemaking. We have seen in the previous sections that despite the rising militancy and the increased support for Islamists, Palestinians remained nonetheless supportive of a two-state solution; indeed, public willingness to compromise increased significantly. If the Palestinian leadership does hold a referendum on a permanent-status agreement, as Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas told a meeting of the Fateh Revolutionary Council in November 2004 he would, the public will most likely support it.

But public opinion is not always in the driver's seat. At times it is subject to influences it has little control over. Any attempt to focus on the role of public opinion as a main driver to promote peace and reconciliation will have to contend with four constraints/opportunities that influence that role.

First, peacemaking and peacebuilding remain essentially a state-to-state and elite/leadership business. The reasons for this are obvious. For one, the ability of public opinion to change the course of events (for example, to stop the cycle of violence and push toward moderation) is constrained by existing perceptions that the threats and stakes are high and existential (reducing motivation and willingness to challenge existing policies) and by mass pain and suffering and exposure to violence (eliciting emotional rather than rational responses, thus creating demands for revenge rather than forgiveness, which in turn increase the popularity of militant groups that are able to meet those demands by supplying the violence). Second, the Palestinian public has shown a willingness to defer to leaders of historical stature and to the collective wisdom of the state, believing that leaders, particularly those enjoying legitimacy derived from the legacy of the national movement, know best. Such beliefs reduce trust in private and civil society initiatives, particularly when leaders refuse to embrace them. The third factor making peacebuilding essentially a state-to-state and elite/leadership enterprise is that although Palestinians now exhibit greater political pluralism, tolerance of dissent, particularly as it relates to the prolonged and indeed historic conflict with Israel, is limited. Failure by the PA to create a democratic political system during the nineties, and its inability to enforce law and order, further inhibited free and honest debate on sensitive subjects such as the refugee problem and the resort to violence against Israeli civilians.

Second, misperceiving the views of the other side as hard-line reduces the motivation to moderate one's views. Similarly, ignorance of the moderate views of one's own side reduces the expectation that peace is possible.⁹ For most Palestinians, their only interaction with Israelis is the one imposed at gunpoint by soldiers and armed settlers. Lack of normal personal interaction feeds misperceptions and the desire to portray the other side negatively. Palestinian misperception of Israeli public attitudes is evident even when it comes to one of the core elements of the peace process: the two-state solution. Palestinians tend to perceive Israelis as having a hard-line position and being reluctant to embrace the peace process. When Palestinians were asked in June 2003 what they believe the majority of Israelis think about a two-state solution, whereby Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people and Israel recognizes Palestine as the state for the Palestinian people, only 37 percent believed that most Israelis support such a solution. (See figure 6 below.) In fact, a survey conducted among Israelis simultaneously with the Palestinian survey showed 65 percent of Israelis supporting the two-state solution. Misperceiving the views of the Israelis as hard-line relieves the Palestinians of having to press their own leadership for peace and makes them more disposed to blame the other side for failure to reach a peace agreement.

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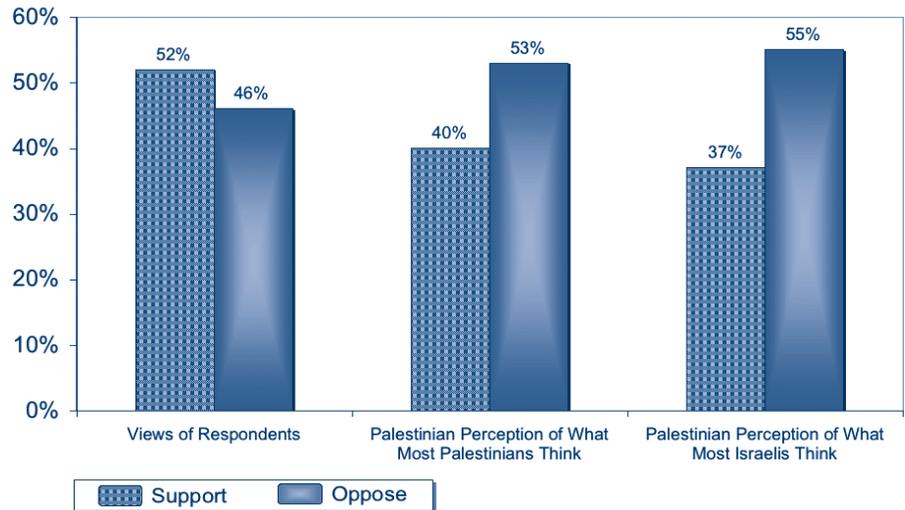
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Ignorance of the moderate views of one's own majority prevents such views from becoming normative and thus reduces one's hopes for peace, leading to more pessimistic expectations for the future. Such ignorance impedes efforts of leaders to capitalize on existing public moderation. When asked what they think the majority of Palestinians think about the two-state solution described above, a majority of Palestinians thought that most would reject it, and only 40 percent thought most would accept it. In fact, as figure 6 below indicates, a majority of 52 percent supported the two-state solution.

Figure 6. Support and Opposition to a Two-State Solution, Based on Israel as the State for the Jewish People and Palestine as the State for the Palestinian People (Palestinian respondents, June 2003)



Third, the Palestinian public is vulnerable to efforts by leaders and groups to shape its preferences by framing the debate on specific issues in the public domain.¹⁰ This framing can be most effective when it comes from individuals and groups enjoying legitimacy in the eyes of the public. One example of the impact of framing is the change in the Palestinian public response to a similar or identical refugee compromise. In April 2003, a majority of 52 percent supported a solution to the refugee problem presented to the public as one that was discussed at the Israeli-Palestinian Taba negotiations in January 2001. In December 2003, a similar compromise, presented to the public as part of the larger Geneva Initiative, received the support of only 25 percent. While some of the disparity is due to the minor differences between the two solutions, the big difference was probably caused by the negative framing that met the release of the Geneva Initiative by refugee groups and several senior Palestinian leaders. One year later, when Palestinians were presented with the same compromise as that of December 2003, support increased to 46 percent. The December 2004 survey presented the compromise as part of a possible proposal for a permanent-status solution; no mention was made of the Geneva Initiative. It is clear that omitting the reference to the Geneva Initiative has been in part responsible for the change in public attitude. Moreover, it is possible that one year later the framing effect may have become much less potent.

Finally, optimism and pessimism play a role in shaping Palestinian public attitudes. PSR surveys have shown that the more optimistic the Palestinian public is, the more willing it is to accept compromise. Optimism and pessimism in this case have been measured by responses to questions regarding expectations of "what will happen now?" Optimists are those who expect Palestinian-Israeli negotiations to resume and violence to stop, and pessimists are those who expect violence to continue and believe the two sides will not return to negotiations. A sizable group falls in the middle, between the optimists and the pessimists. Optimism creates hope, which can in turn motivate the public to better articulate, aggregate, and promote its more moderate views. Pessimism darkens one's horizon, reduces the willingness to take risks, and pulls the public to the sideline.

Policy Implications

Three trends of long-term significance and three related policy implications emerge from this study. First, Palestinians are becoming more willing to compromise. Today, willingness to compromise is greater than it has been at any time since the start of the peace process. That this trend persisted even during the worst days of the second intifada attests to its depth. Second, public demand for violence is not stable; it responds to threat perception, to the level of pain and suffering imposed by the policies and actions of Israel. Positive stimuli that take measures to end the Israeli occupation produce greater rejection of violence, while steps that seek to inflict punishment increase support for violence. Third, processes of state building and peacemaking are highly interdependent. Therefore, any attempt at understanding the failures and successes of peacemaking in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict requires full awareness of the interplay between the two processes: state legitimacy and democracy facilitate peacebuilding and must not be sacrificed for the sake of short-term security gains.

The first policy implication should be obvious: the time is ripe for a permanent-status agreement. For the first time since the start of the peace process, a majority of Palestinians support a compromise settlement that is acceptable to a majority of Israelis. Leadership is needed to articulate a clear permanent-status vision, educate the public, and positively influence the framing process. The Bush administration can take the lead in this regard by articulating its own vision for permanent peace, perhaps by announcing “the Bush parameters.” Giving the permanent-status vision an Arab, as well as a general international, stamp of approval can help frame it in a positive light for the Palestinians. A greater involvement of the Quartet (the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia) in formulating that vision could also reduce negative framing effects. Greater communication among Palestinians, obtainable through greater democracy and greater tolerance for dissent, would reduce collective ignorance. In other words, success in producing greater Palestinian democracy can facilitate peacemaking and peacebuilding. Greater exchange between Palestinians and Israelis is likely to reduce misperceptions and increase each side’s willingness to compromise and take risks. Projects aiming at promoting free exchange between Palestinians and Israelis, people-to-people, can help reduce the negative effects of misperceptions.

The second policy implication relates to the role of violence. Public support for violence increases in an environment of greater pain and suffering and decreases when threat perception is reduced. Moreover, opposition to violence increases when diplomacy proves effective. In other words, measures of collective punishment and humiliation, such as those used by the Israelis during the past five years, are counterproductive. The United States and the international community can help change Palestinian public perceptions regarding the role of violence by advising Israel to put an end to its closure regime, stop the humiliation at checkpoints, freeze settlement construction, and cease land confiscation and house demolitions. Termination of negotiations when violence erupts leaves the public dependent on violence as the only means to address grievances and deliver gains. Unilateral steps, when taken in the middle of the violence, as was the Israeli disengagement plan, strengthen public confidence in violence. The United States and the international community can reduce the negative consequences of Israeli unilateral steps by pressing Israel to negotiate future disengagement plans with the Palestinian Authority. This can be done by embedding such disengagement plans into the Quartet Road Map.

The third policy implication focuses on the link between democracy and the peace process. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians embrace both democratic political values and the peace process. Moreover, it has become evident over the past decade that lack of good governance has led to weak political institutions, widespread corruption, and the exclusion of the Islamists and young guard nationalists from the political process. As a result, weak PA institutions have failed to deliver on Palestinian peace commitments, just as they have failed to deliver vital services to the Palestinian public. Gradually the PA lost

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The time is ripe for a permanent-status agreement.

Success in producing greater Palestinian democracy can facilitate peacemaking and peacebuilding.

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much of its legitimacy, which in turn emboldened its opposition to challenge its authority, leading to the creation of a state within a state. Perceiving a diminishing legitimacy, the PA leadership has lost the political will to enforce law and order or bring to account those who refuse to respect its security obligations. Moreover, the Islamists, who are perceived by the Palestinian public as uncorrupt, have managed to gain greater public credibility and respect, leading to a significant change in the domestic balance of power, which weakened the nationalists, who remain the backbone of the peace process.

It is clear today that only by creating a more open and inclusive political system, one that fights corruption while integrating Islamists and young guard nationalists into itself, can the Palestinians finally deal effectively with violence and empower their leadership to enforce its security commitments in the peace process. As the Palestinians examine their security commitments under the Road Map, it is clear that the quickest and most effective security reforms are those that seek to provide the Islamists the means to influence public policy from within, rather than from outside, the political institutions. Any attempt to forcibly disarm the Islamists and dissolve their militias is likely to fail the test of public support. Only by fighting corruption, including the removal of many of the top security officials, can the nationalist PA regain the support of the majority of the Palestinian public. Concerns about the impact of anticorruption steps on the PA's ability to deliver short-term security should not be allowed to paralyze the PA, since that might lead to greater insecurity in the mid and long term.

Notes

1. Data used in this study are taken from polls by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). These surveys were conducted among Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Average sample size in each survey is about 1,300, and the margin of error is 3 percent. The questionnaires for some of the surveys used in this piece were designed by Yaacov Shamir, professor of communication and journalism at Hebrew University and formerly at the United States Institute of Peace, and Khalil Shikaki. The surveys were conducted jointly with the Truman Institute at Hebrew University. All surveys used in this study can be found at the PSR Web site: <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/index.html>.

2. See figure A1 at <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr158/appendix.html>.
3. See figure A2 at *ibid*.
4. In July 2000, 63 percent of Palestinians believed that the Hezbollah model should be emulated.
5. See figure A3 at <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr158/appendix.html>.
6. See figure A4 at *ibid*.
7. See table A1 at *ibid*.
8. See table A2 at *ibid*.
9. See Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, "Public Opinion in the Israeli-Palestinian Two-Level Game," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 3 (May 2005): 311–28).
10. *Ibid*.



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