

Support for Mass Protest on the Rise in Gaza and the West Bank

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Sep 11, 2023

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Brief Analysis

As rival Palestinian factions clash in Lebanon's Ain al-Hilweh camp and Hamas-backed militants capture UNRWA schools, new polls indicate that public frustration in Gaza and the West Bank has grown to the point where many would back popular protests.

According to new TWI polling, conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion from July 8-27, Gazans and West Bankers are split as to whether “It’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now, like they have had in some other Arab countries.” While just 32% of Gazans and 38% of West Bank respondents disagreed with this sentiment in June 2022, rejection of this statement has increased to 46% in both locales.

Gazans Turn to PA, External Powers for Support

These views manifested when Gazans across the strip protested in a rare public display of anger against Hamas’s governance. While the impetus included soaring summer temperatures and an energy crisis that limits the summer electricity supply to six hours a day, protesters and statements issued blamed Hamas governance directly. As with previous protests in 2019, Hamas reportedly shut down the protests swiftly and jailed a number of involved protesters, but polling demonstrates that a significant proportion of Gazans share in this frustration.

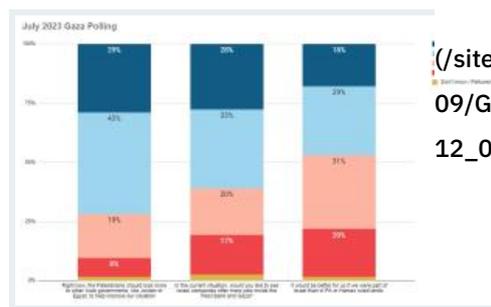
Only about half of Gazans express a positive opinion of Hamas (58%). In fact, 72% of Gazans agree that “Hamas has been unable to improve the lives of Palestinians in Gaza”—a much higher proportion than those in the West Bank who say the same of the PA (46%). Gazans are strongly supportive of allowing “free and fair elections”—and a majority again (70%) supports the proposal that the “PA send officials and security officers to Gaza to take over the administration there, with Hamas giving up its separate armed units.”

Much of this frustration can be traced to the dire economic situation in the Gaza strip. The income disparity of Gazans when compared to Palestinians living in the West Bank or East Jerusalem is particularly stark—Three quarters of Gazan

respondents reported a total household income of 1500 shekels or less, whereas just 1-2% of West Bank or East Jerusalem respondents report the same.

Such circumstances lead two thirds of Gazans (versus half of West Bankers) to agree that “Right now, the Palestinians should focus on practical matters like jobs, health care, education, and everyday stability, not on big political plans or resistance options.” Such views do not mean that when asked about a new intifada or other armed resistance options, most Gazans will fail to express support. But they do emphasize the weight of Gazans’ economic concerns, and the strong openness of Gazans to economic opportunity and relief outside of what Hamas can provide.

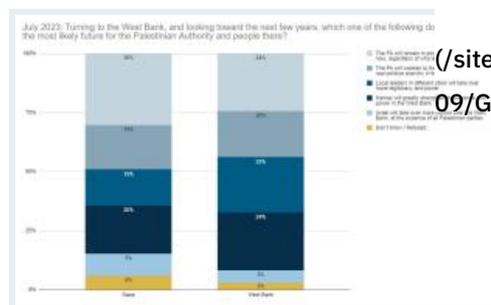
Specifically, over two thirds of Gazans agree that Palestinians should look to Arab governments—with Egypt and Jordan given as examples--to “help improve our situation.” Likewise, the majority of Gazans would like to see more Israeli jobs offered in Gaza and the West Bank. And perhaps most striking, about half of Gazans (47%) agree with the statement that “it would be better for us if we were part of Israel than in PA or Hamas ruled lands.”



(/sites/default/files/2023-09/Gazan%20Polling%20Graph%2009-12_0.jpg)

West Bankers Predict the Collapse of the PA

In the West Bank, there is less broad-based support for change at whatever the cost. But most West Bankers have little faith in the stability of the Palestinian Authority over the next several years. Only 24% believe that the PA will exist more or less in its current form—other predictions are split between the rise of anarchy, the local leadership, or a Hamas takeover as the future of the West Bank.



(/sites/default/files/2023-09/Gaza_West%20Bank%20PA%20Future_0.jpg)

Yet there appears to be a growing ambivalence about the potential alternatives in the West Bank. For example, while about half of West Bankers (54%) still believe that the PA should allow Hamas to operate freely inside the West Bank, this represents a decline since 2017, when 68% of West Bank Palestinians agreed with this proposal. Likewise, majority support for the PA and Hamas allowing free and fair elections—currently at 61%--has slowly declined by ten percentage points since 2020. And in contrast with Gazans, residents of the West Bank are likewise split as to whether the PA has been unable to improve the lives of Palestinians there—46% agree that they have not, while 54% disagree.

Where both West Bank and Gazan Palestinians agree is that “Palestinians should push harder to replace their own political leaders with more effective and less corrupt ones.” Just 34% of West Bank and 17% of Gazans disagree.

Views on Neighboring Israeli Protest Movement

In contrast to the rapid shut-down of protests in Gaza, Palestinians are also observing the historic protest movement has roiled Israel for a number of months over governance issues. While the majority of Gazans and West Bankers (57% and 61%) believe that the protests will have a positive impact on the region, few believe that the Netanyahu government will

fall in the coming year.

And when it comes to how these internal issues impact Palestinian public opinion on the conflict with Israel, approximately half of Gazans (47%) and 41% of West Bankers believe that Palestinians should “escalate the resistance against Israel, even if that makes life harder right now.” However, the rest are split between “negotiating the best political deal they can now” (26% and 24%), focusing on practical issues of daily life under Israeli control (13% and 18%) or preferring the current situation over other alternatives (10% and 16%).

Methodology

This analysis is based on a face-to-face survey conducted July 8-27, 2023, with a true random geographical probability sample of 1,572 Palestinian adult (age 18+) residents of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. The authors personally reviewed the questionnaire’s translation, sampling procedures, quality controls, assurances of confidentiality, and other fieldwork protocols with the entire Palestinian professional team based in Beit Sahour in the West Bank. The statistical margin of error for a sample of this size and nature is approximately 4% per area sub-sample, at the 95% confidence level. ❖

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