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Positive and Negative Developments in Palestinian Thinking

Key findings from a survey in the West Bank and Gaza

This project was sponsored by The Israel Project (TIP), a non-profit educational organization that gets facts about Israel and the Middle East to press, public officials and the public. This work was led by Stanley Greenberg PhD of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR) as a part of TIP's Arabic Media Program for people-to-people peace. The report for The Israel Project by Stan Greenberg and Kate Monninger of GQRR.

The survey we recently concluded in the West Bank and Gaza (854 respondents, including 538 residents of the West Bank and 316 from Gaza with interviews conducted face-to-face and in Arabic between October 4 through 15, 2010; margin of error of +/- 3%) provides a special window into Palestinian thinking at this critical juncture. The results offer many positive findings, but also key, more troubling insights into the current Palestinian mindset.

- **Hostility toward Hamas and Iran.** Palestinians increasingly disapprove of Hamas and blame it for the Gaza situation; they harbor even more negative views of Iran and Ahmedinejad, which they believe are responsible for the impasse and conditions in Gaza.
- **Diverse social focus and normal demands on PA.** Palestinians look toward improving the standard of living; priorities spread over economy, healthcare, education, and institution building.
- **Positive ratings for leadership and governance.** Abbas and Fayyad get high approval ratings, and Fatah's vote share is up. Fatah is in a position to win elections.
- **Open to new actions that help peace.** Majorities support teaching coexistence, not naming streets after some martyrs, and putting pressure on Hamas to end the firing of rockets from Gaza.
- **Supportive of current negotiations.** Palestinians support current negotiations and are surprisingly optimistic that a peace agreement is possible.

Though these findings have a positive tone, some more negative results cast a cautionary tone.

- **Desire for Sharia Law rather than Civil Law.** A large majority supports a Palestinian state governed by Sharia – rather than Civil – Law.
- **Armed struggle not yet abandoned or transcended.** A large majority continues to support “armed struggle” – either now or in the future – and declines to say that violence is no longer an option because it only harms Palestinians. While the mood in the focus groups did not favor a return to the intifada, it is clearly not ruled out.
- **Support for two-state solution is highly qualified.** While 60 percent support a two-state solution – only half as many support it as the final arrangement. For many, support for two-state is a stage in the process to one Palestinian state.
- **Support for an actual agreement modest.** Less than 30 percent support an agreement like the Clinton parameters, once you give it a fuller description, including dividing Jerusalem and land swaps. There is work to do.

These issues have long-standing implications that Palestinians and their leaders will want to address moving forward. However, there is a messaging framework that we believe works to move respondents in a positive direction toward acceptance of a true two-state solution.

Positive Developments in Palestinian Thinking

There are important positive developments in Palestinian thinking that has implications for life in the Palestinian areas, the peace process, and security issues.

Hostility to Hamas and Iran

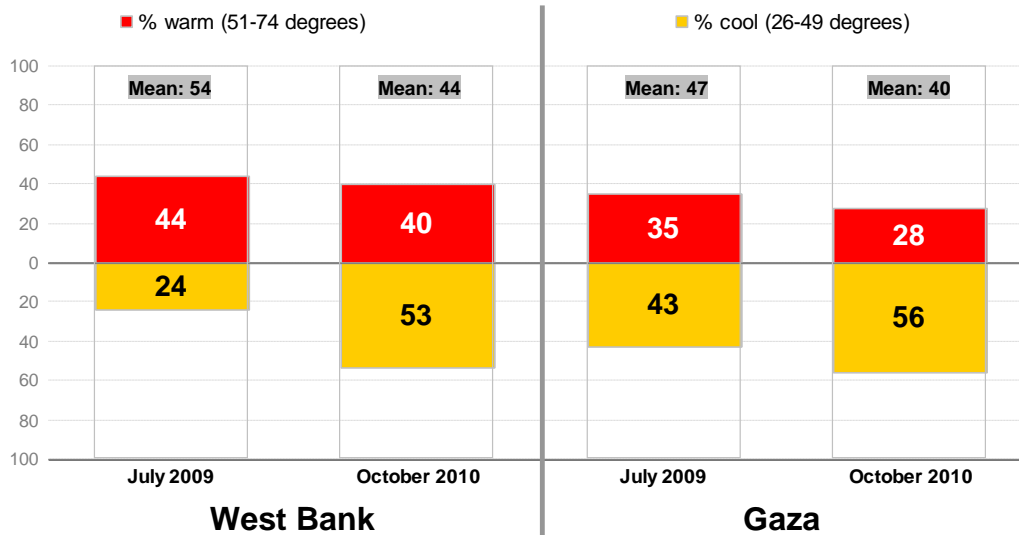
Despite the situation in Gaza and the flotilla incident, views of Hamas and Iran have fallen sharply. Neither is being romanticized. About half the Palestinians in Gaza see Hamas as holding shared responsibility with Israel for the situation there – and both Hamas and Iran’s thermometer ratings have fallen sharply.

Hamas’s favorability declined significantly in the last year – more dramatically in the West Bank but also in Gaza. There, negative feelings climbed 13 points to 56 percent. In the West Bank, negative judgments doubled to 53 percent. A large majority

in Gaza still disapprove of the Hamas government. Hamas is increasingly on the defensive with the Palestinian public.

Hamas favorability

"Now, I'd like you to rate your feelings toward some people, organizations, and countries, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that person, country, or organization... Hamas."



Iran’s image also suffers, especially in Gaza where 27 percent are willing to point to the country as contributing to the problems that Palestinians face. Iran receives quite negative ratings, 55 percent “cool” overall with 39 percent giving it a “very cold” rating, and its president, Ahmadinejad, receives nearly identical marks.

In addition, a plurality of Palestinians (47 percent overall) say that Iran and its president “care about themselves and their own agenda” rather than “are friends of the Palestinian people.” The difference is more stark in Gaza, where they agree more with Iran’s self-interest by a 10-point margin.

Gaza difficulties and some normalcy in West Bank

From the situation in Gaza emerges the story of two different worlds: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. While one has a dramatically more positive population enjoying an increase in standard of living over the past year, the other continues to struggle, and the pessimistic population has seen little relief in recent months.

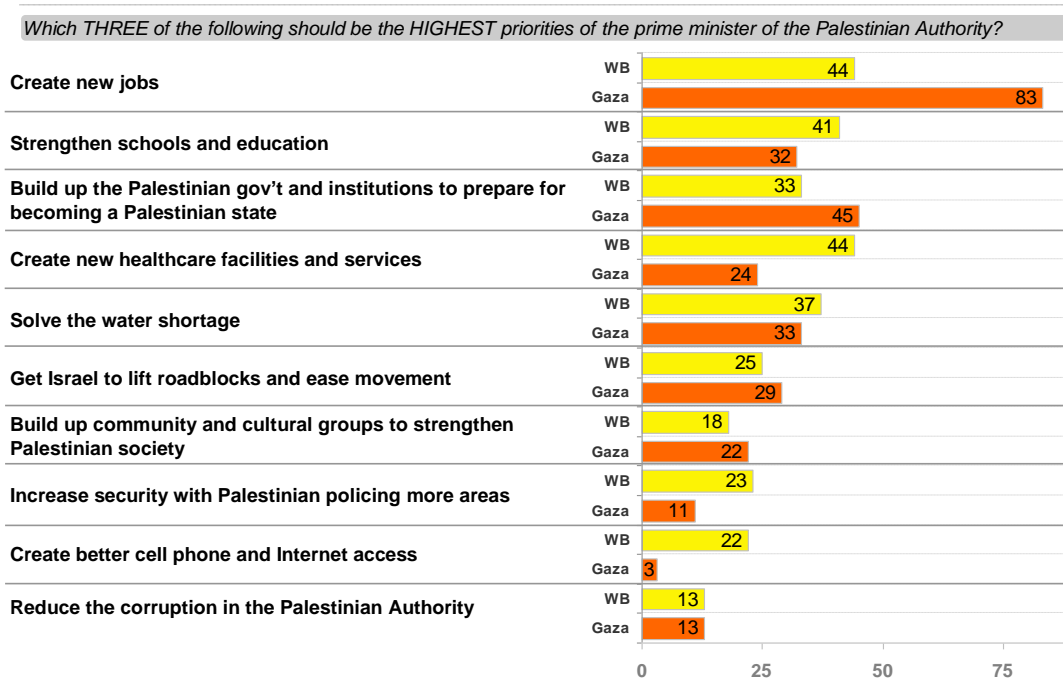
West Bank respondents are positive about their economic direction, with six-in-ten saying that things are going well for their families. Additionally, they are nearly split on the West Bank’s direction overall (46 percent say the West Bank is headed in the right direction). They note improvements in the availability of jobs, in quality of hous-

ing and education, and the ability to access electricity, and similar themes emerged from our qualitative studies in Ramallah as well. The West Bank also has a diverse focus on improving the quality of life. When asked the three most desirable priorities, healthcare and jobs tie for first (at 44 percent each), with improving education coming in a close second (41 percent) and solving the water shortage at third (37 percent) – with other factors coming in after.

Gaza is different. The family situation numbers are dire, with 57 percent saying things are *not* going well for their families – a shift from last year, when the numbers between the West Bank and Gaza were a nearly identical positive. Those in Gaza believe that Gaza is dramatically on the wrong track – 65 percent versus the 27 percent who say it is going in the right direction.

While West Bank respondents can point to some improvements over the last year, those in Gaza only see things getting worse – the availability of jobs, access to water and electricity, the cost of food and other necessities, all are pointed to as having gotten worse by more than 70 percent of Gaza respondents. Similarly, they focus on the pure economy of jobs – any kind of job. Over four-fifths (83 percent) of Gaza respondents point to jobs as a top priority; building government institutions for statehood preparation is a distant second (45 percent) and solving the water shortage and strengthening education place well below that at 33 and 32 percent respectively.

Palestinian Authority’s priorities



Judgments on governance

With both the hostility toward Hamas and the socio-economic advances in the West Bank, it is not surprising that non-Hamas leaders in the Palestinian Authority enjoy strong positioning with high favorability and approval ratings in both geographies.

Overall, Mahmoud Abbas has a 61 percent approval rating as president of the Palestinian Authority – 60 percent in the West Bank and 63 percent in Gaza, despite challenges of his legitimacy from Hamas. Salam Fayyad sees a similar divide, enjoying a 65 percent approval rating overall for his job as prime minister, with 62 percent in the West Bank and 68 percent in Gaza. This does not necessarily translate into favorability – while both do possess a warm rating, Abbas is more favorable than Fayyad. Meanwhile, although Gaza respondents give similar favorability ratings to the leadership and the Palestinian Authority overall, they are cold toward Hamas and Haniyeh, which hold power in the Gaza Strip.

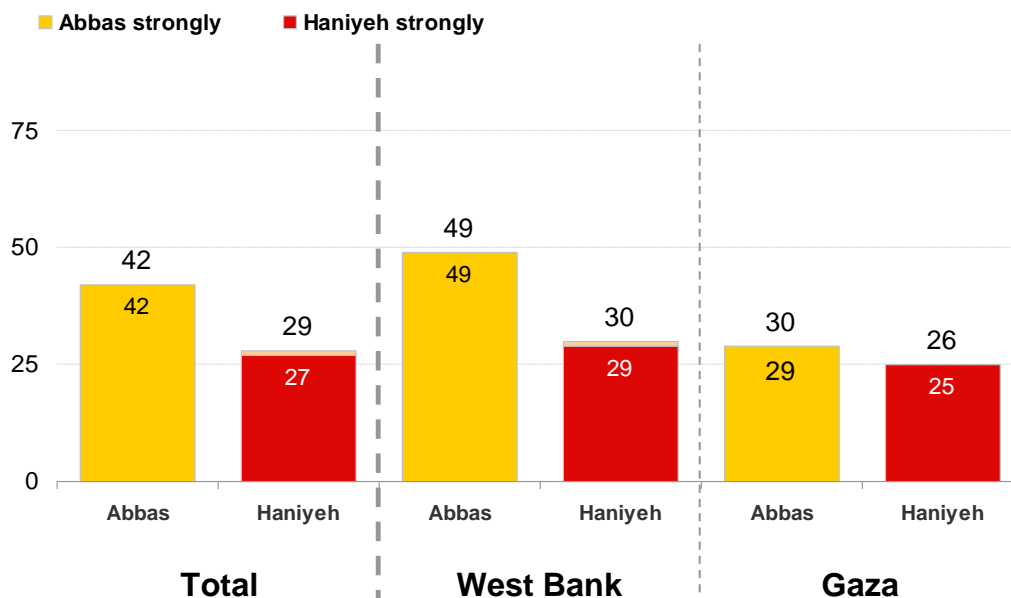
A significant amount of the openness to Fatah can be attributed to the desire to end the divisions between Palestinian factions. Overall, 91 percent of Palestinians believe that “reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah” is very or somewhat important to achieving peace – and in fact, this is the highest ranking action. This number is stronger in Gaza, where nearly three-quarters (72 percent) consider this reconciliation to be “very important” (versus 54 percent in the West Bank).

This context, along with the favorability, approval, and blame numbers, point to Fatah as the emerging power in Palestinian politics. Fatah is up considerably against Hamas in a theoretical vote, garnering 44 percent in Gaza and 50 percent in the West Bank (48 percent overall).

But while the parliamentary elections are in Fatah’s favor, the presidential contest is less clear. In a two-way contest that repeats the ticket of the last election (Abbas versus Haniyeh), Abbas is well below 50 percent – 42 percent vote share overall, with 49 percent in the West Bank and 30 percent in Gaza. Here, Gaza voters lean dramatically toward “someone else”, with 41 percent favoring the unnamed alternative.

Two-way Presidential

I know the election is a long way away, but if presidential elections were held today, for whom would you vote if the candidates were --



Introducing a range of other candidates, including Fayyad and Marwan and Mustafa Barghouti damages Abbas's percentage, while Haniyeh's share remains virtually unchanged by comparison. Abbas's vote share drops from 42 percent in a two-way race to just 28 percent overall. While Haniyeh and the Hamas positions with which he is associated are well defined and have core support, Abbas does not have the same. This is something that we have also seen in our focus groups – while they are generally favorable toward Abbas, he does not leave much of a definable impression.

Palestinian public open to actions to improve chances for peace

Further speaking to the clear movement away from Hamas, Palestinians recognize that some actions would be important toward making peace – and many of the highest-rated measures deal directly with Hamas and their endorsed actions.

Following reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah (and an end to the internal conflict), the highest-rated measures toward peace include:

- Hamas renouncing terrorism (68 percent important);
- Ending the call for the killing of civilians (67 percent);
- Hamas agreeing to disarm (66 percent);

- Pressuring Hamas to end the rocket fire from Gaza (62 percent);
- Official curriculum teaching children the benefits of peace and coexistence (59 percent);
- Ending the naming of streets and squares after martyrs who killed civilians (57 percent).

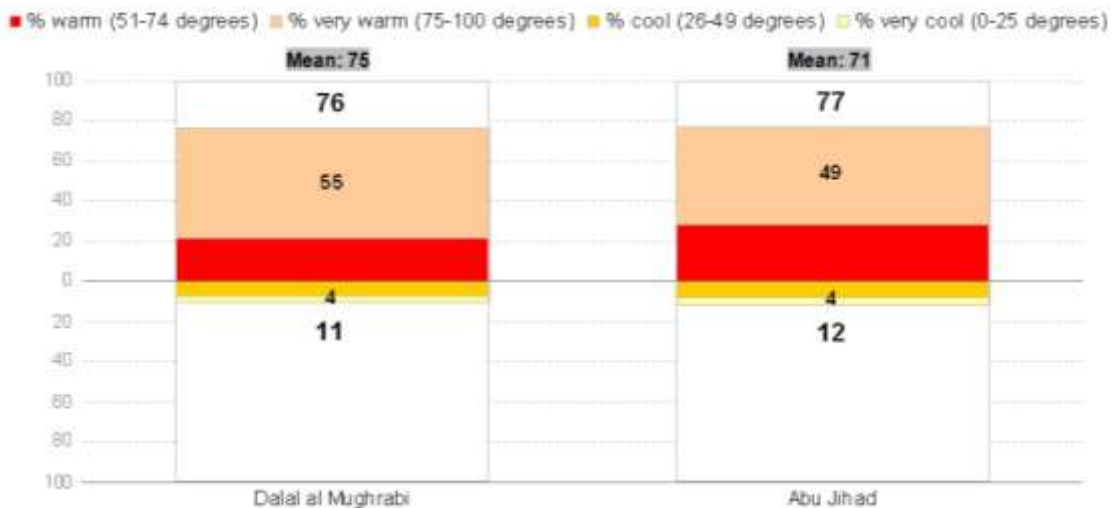
These actions are key elements to what The Israel Project has long discussed as part of the “Culture of Hate” and have strong majorities recognizing their importance.

However, practices like the naming of streets and squares after “martyrs” who killed civilians have become highly politicized, a fact bolstered by the high popularity these individuals have among the Palestinian population overall. Dalal Mughrabi, who directed the 1978 attack that resulted in the death of 37 Israelis and one American, received extremely high favorability rating – a mean score of 74.5, with 76 percent of Palestinian giving her a warm, favorable rating. Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), who planned attacks on Israelis as commander of the armed organization al-Assifa in the 1980s, had similar ratings – a mean score of 71.2 with 77 percent of Palestinian giving him a warm, favorable rating.

This tells us that while these findings are encouraging, there are some obstacles to overcome.

Controversial figures | Total

“Now, I’d like you to rate your feelings toward some people, organizations, and countries, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling, zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that person, country, or organization.”



Some of the importance value is less about dismissing hate and more about perceivable and direct benefit to Palestinians – less about peace and more about unification. Those actions that focus specifically on Hamas (the first four items), particularly relating to outward violent action, rank the highest and boast the strongest intensity – roughly 38 percent saying each of these actions would be “very” important. Again, this correlates with the desire for reconciliation and the movement away from Hamas’ poorly perceived leadership.

We see this in the fact that other key actions that are more explicitly tied to the peace process continue to gain very low marks. These include:

- Depicting Israel on a map and in official documents (39 percent important overall, though this does receive 51 percent majority in the West Bank);
- Agreeing to let Israel continue to govern Jerusalem so long as Muslims can continue to live and pray there (30 percent);
- Agreeing to land swaps for Israel to keep major settlement blocks in exchange for other land (30 percent);
- Recognizing Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people (29 percent).

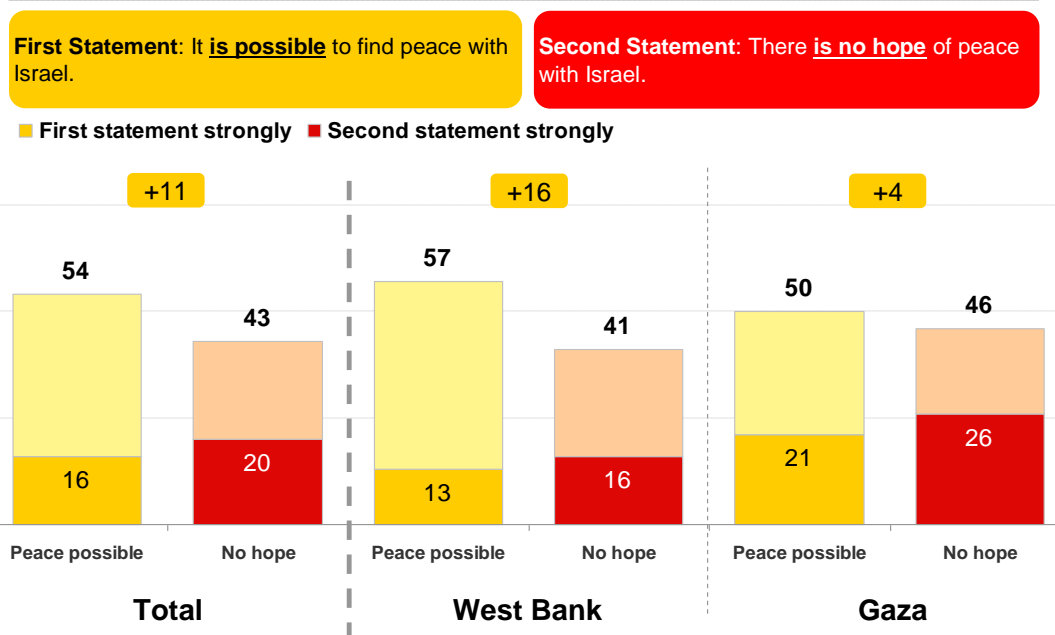
The lower ranked items are all parts to the most common demands of a two-state solution and represent the most constant holdbacks. They are also extremely important to note and keep in mind, especially as we examine the real numbers behind support for a two-state solution later in the memo.

Support for current direct negotiations

While there are clearly holdbacks to the details of a two-state solution – here and in other points of the survey – direct negotiations with Israel find significant favor among these Palestinians, even during the settlement freeze hiatus.

Going into the field on the heels of the decision to try to restart talks, primarily conducted during a stall, 61 percent said they favored Abbas and Netanyahu engaging in direct negotiations and 54 percent said that they believe peace is possible with Israel (versus 43 percent who say that there is “no hope” of peace).

Possibility of peace



Palestinians use guarded language when considering the process – the top three adjectives most pointed to are “skeptical,” “enthusiastic,” and “uncertain.” The more guarded of these selections points to disbelief that the Israelis are going into this with the goal of achieving peace (only 36 percent believe the Israeli people want peace, and only 30 percent believe the Israeli government does).

However, we do need to be mindful of very real concerns, especially when considering actual support for a two-state solution, which we will discuss shortly.

Negative Developments in Palestinian thinking

While many of these developments are genuinely positive and have important implications, there are other developments that raise concerns. Recognizing the benefits to disarming Hamas and favoring direct negotiations are promising developments – but this will not build confidence if the future has greater space for religious extremism, the potential for violence and the desire for a *two-stage* solution rather than a true *two-state* solution.

Preference for Sharia law

One of the more concerning findings speaks to religious extremism in the Palestinian territories. When provided with a forced choice statement pair, “A Palestinian state

should be run by Sharia law” versus “A Palestinian state should be run by Civil law,” a clear majority chooses the former.

The preference for Sharia law, expressed by 55 percent of the Palestinian population, traverses the two territories. Gaza shows a slightly stronger preference – with 59 percent favoring overall and 33 percent saying they favor Sharia law “strongly,” but the West Bank expresses the preference as well, and to only a slightly lesser degree – with 52 percent overall and 26 percent “strongly” favoring Sharia law.

Men, those over 30 and the less educated are slightly more likely to favor Sharia law – but the differences are miniscule and majorities of women, those under 30 and the more educated, still express this preference.

Even the largely non-religious (those who report attending services only on holidays), are equally divided at 48 percent. Fatah and Abbas voters are the only sizable groups that show a mere plurality of favor for Sharia law – 46 percent favor over the 43 percent who prefer civil law.

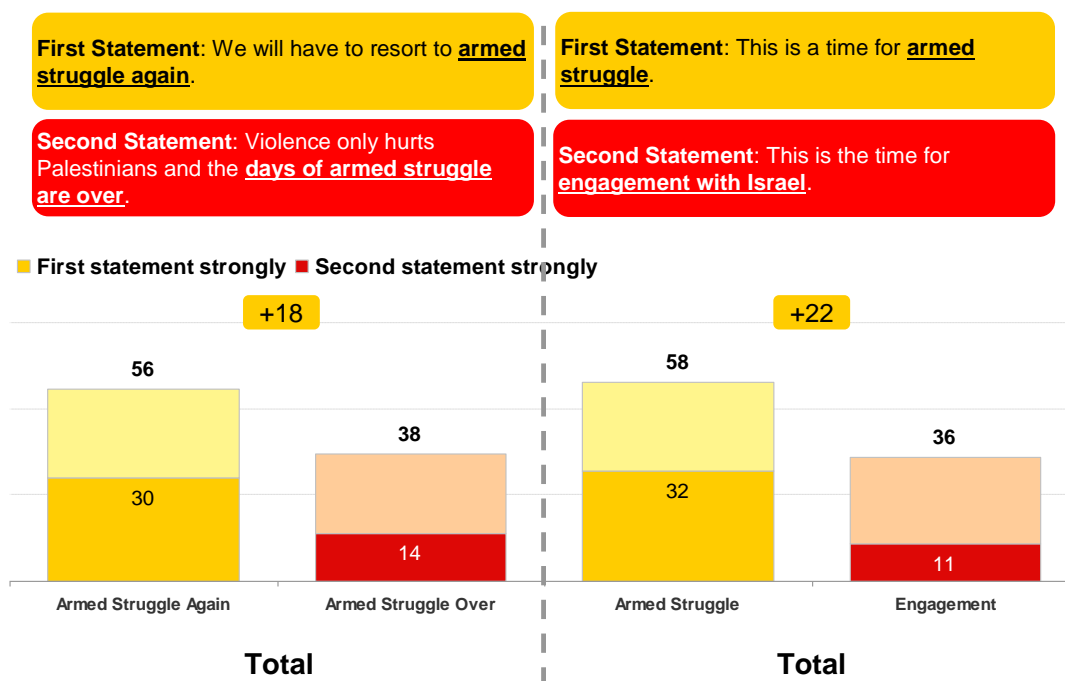
In future surveys, we will want to explore further the meaning of these responses in areas of family, social and political life.

Palestinians have not yet abandoned or transcended ‘armed struggle’

Another concerning pattern is the willingness to return to violence – or at least, a strong reluctance to renounce it. To gauge this, we split the sample with half of respondents receiving a forward looking pair – “we will have to resort to armed struggle again” versus “violence only hurts Palestinians and the days of armed struggle are over” – and half of respondents receiving a more immediate version – “This is a time for armed struggle” rather than “this is a time for engagement with Israel.”

Between the two versions, there is little difference in breakdown. Majorities side with armed struggle – 56 percent in the forward-looking version, dismissing hurt caused to Palestinians, and 58 percent toward the immediate version.

Preference for armed struggle



As with Sharia law, there are few discernable demographic differences overall – those with high income are more likely to agree that “this is a time for armed struggle” rather than engagement, but when examining gender, age and education, the differences are minimal at best – within the margins of error. Fatah voters here, too, express only plurality preferences for armed struggle, but this does not translate into much stronger performance for engagement nor a greater affect of harm.

However, unlike with question of Sharia versus civil law, there are double-digit differences between the West Bank and Gaza, with the former more likely to look toward violence. In the West Bank, the “this is the time” phrasing garners 62 percent support for armed struggle, versus 35 percent for engagement with Israel. Gaza, on the other hand, sees 51 percent (a bare majority) and 38 percent for engagement (with a high, 9-point preference for “neither”).

The forward-looking phrasing has an even clearer divergence – 62 percent on the West Bank agree that “we will have to resort to armed struggle again” versus the only 48 percent in Gaza; of Gaza respondents, 42 percent agree that “violence only hurts Palestinians and the days of armed struggle are over.”

Clearly, the normalization of demands on the Palestinian Authority and the high approval rating for the prime minister do not translate into a transcending of ‘armed struggle’ into a new phase. For the Palestinian citizenry, armed struggle remains integral, even if they do not relish a return to violence in practice.

“Armed struggle,” however, is highly emotive language that connotes nationalistic struggle and unity, and it is likely that the results are partially a response to that – it does not fully explain the strong numbers, but must be considered as part of the story. We also do believe that Palestinians want a sense of normalcy, a theme that continuously arose in our Ramallah focus group discussions. When we brought up the possibility of violence, respondents expressed a reluctance to consider it a real possibility; these focus group sessions instead focused on economic improvements and institution building.

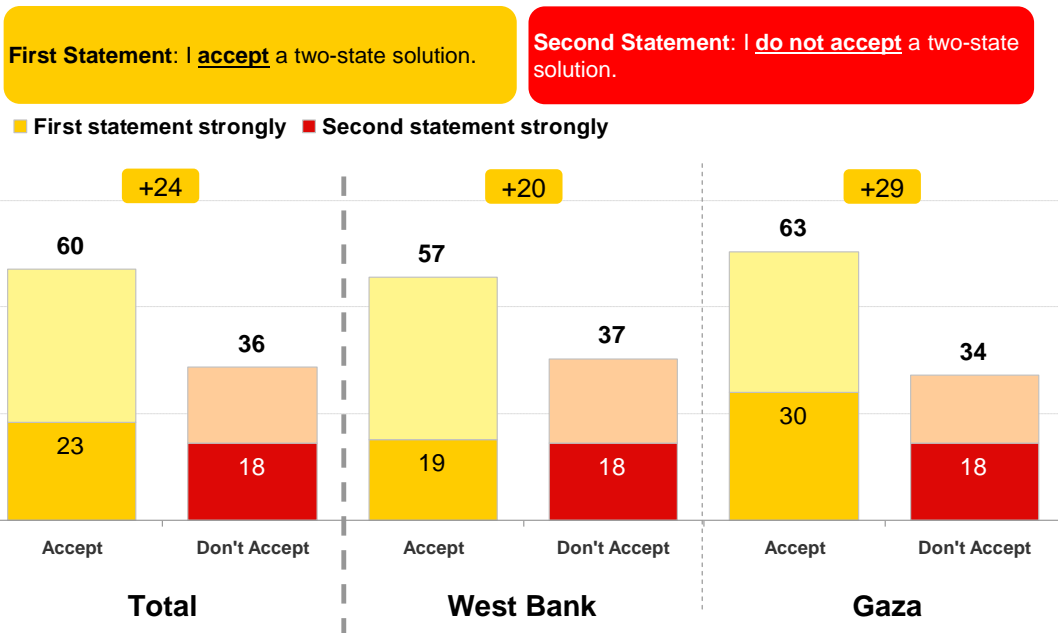
Again, this should not and does not impugn the concerns this mindset solicits. What it does do is show that a direct connection does not yet exist between the current period of peace, however tenuous, and the prosperity and progress that the West Bank, particularly, has seen in the last year. The practical experience of improved conditions and institution building has yet to translate into real, conscious ideological shifts – but this may be the result of the newness. Through our qualitative research we have heard the cautious optimism with which West Bank Palestinians consider these improvements; they are waiting to see if the improvements are real. Once there is a sense of stabilization and consistency, the ideological shifts may follow.

Support for a two-state solution is highly qualified

In light of these concerns, we need to consider the general topline support for a two-state solution with caution and awareness of the undercurrents.

The two-state solution garners 60 percent acceptance when framed as a basic statement pair (“I accept a two-state solution” versus “I do not accept a two-state solution”), with support slightly higher in Gaza than the West Bank. But that is immediately qualified by virtually every other result in the survey. Through that lens, real support is probably nearer 30 percent as many view this “solution” as a stage in a process that will result in the emergence of one Palestinian state (a two-stage solution rather than a two-state solution).

Two-state solution acceptance



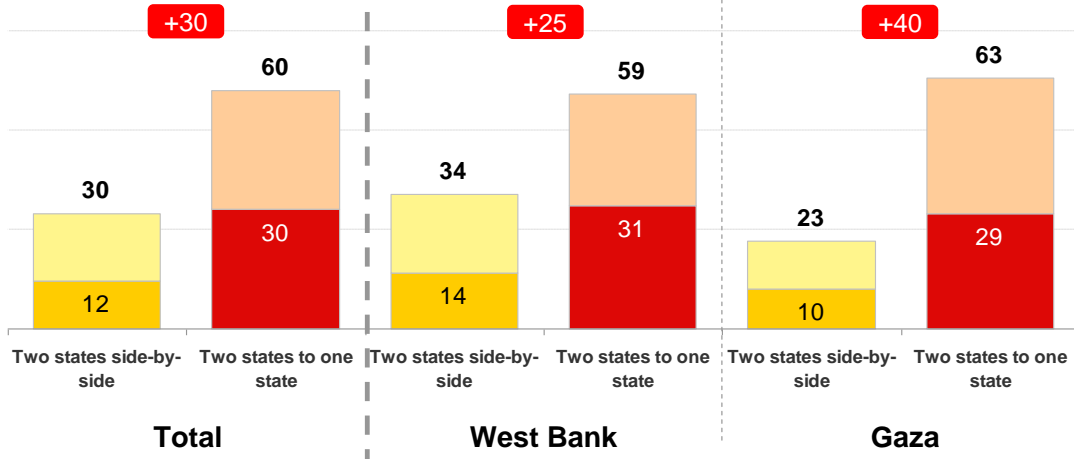
Support for a two-state solution drops almost immediately – from the initial 60 percent down to 38 percent – the number who simply believe Israel will exist 25 years from now as a Jewish state with Jewish majority. Just roughly 40 percent in the West Bank have reached this pragmatic conclusion. But support drops further to 30 percent when one adds, “The real goal should be to start with two states but then move to it all being one Palestinian state.” Only a fifth accept the current Israeli government’s strictest formulation of its goal, “a permanent right to exist as a homeland for the Jewish people.”

Two-state solution – a path to one Palestinian state

First Statement: The best goal is for a two state solution that keeps two states living side by side.

Second Statement: The real goal should be to start with two states but then move to it all being one Palestinian state.

■ First statement strongly ■ Second statement strongly



Support for actual agreement, like Clinton parameters, also gets weak support

Only 24 percent support an agreement set in the context of the Clinton parameters. This is lower than our last poll, but is probably due to explicit provisions about land swaps and a divided Jerusalem. However low though this may be, the number is not insignificant; it represents nearly twice the support the Clinton Plan received at the time of Camp David.

So, while support for the peace process and a two-state solution appears to be high, there is a great deal of educative and political work to do to build majority support for an agreement.

The way to build majority support for recognizing Israel as Jewish state

The survey, however, does show that there is a way to get majority support for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state within a two-state framework, but that requires a concrete message framework that addresses key needs.

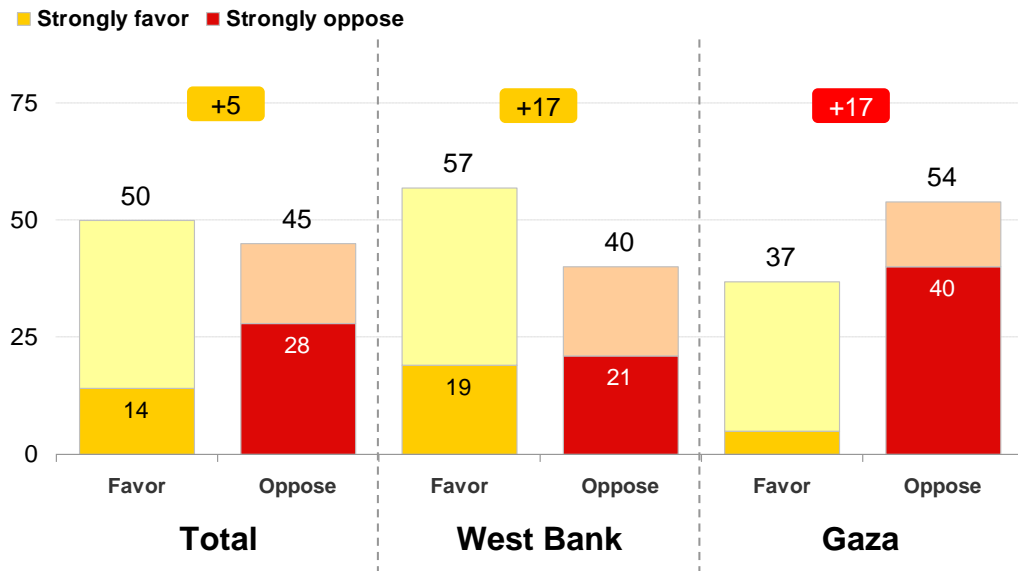
This quantitative research, and the qualitative focus groups that preceded it, indicate that gaining majority support for recognizing Israel as a Jewish state is possible – when it is combined with two other conditions and developments. First, movement toward building an independent Palestinian state, and second, there must be concrete discussion of borders. While that may seem intuitive, the public discussion

from both sides is murky on these issues at best – starting at the end and then trying to communicate the pieces from there.

What we see in this survey is that when a Palestinian leader is clear on those conditions, as in the graph below, he gets a basic majority support for the Palestinian Authority officially recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. The 30 percent who said “the best goal is for a two-state solution that keeps two states living side by side” (thereby indirectly recognizing a state of Israel) rises to 50 percent – with 57 percent support in the West Bank.

Two-state explained, with recognition of Israel

Imagine we built up Palestinian institutions preparing to become an independent state and moved to an agreement on borders between Palestine and Israel based on 1967 with adjustments. Would you favor or oppose the Palestinian Authority officially recognizing Israel as a Jewish state as part of a two-state solution?



From the total sample, 28 percent can be considered “positive shifters” – they moved from seeing two states as staging for one Palestinian state to saying they would favor the Palestinian Authority recognizing Israel as part of a two-state solution that includes preparing an independent Palestinian state and moving toward a defined border.

More than three-fourths (77 percent) of these shifters come from the West Bank. Additionally, more than two-thirds (70 percent) associated themselves most closely with Fatah, and 67 percent said they would vote for Fatah in an upcoming parliamentary elections (12 percent said they would vote for Hamas).

They are somewhat less likely to have reliable access to the internet (only 54 percent say they do compared with 63 percent overall), and only a quarter use social net-

working sites like Facebook. Generally, they use the same newspapers that the population as a whole – al-Quds and Al-Ayyam rank the highest. They are also slightly more likely to turn to the radio (41 percent) for news in a crisis than they are to the television (38 percent).

Unlike much of the other measures, there are clear demographic differences among the shifters, most notably income, education and religiosity. Shifters are dramatically lower income – 61 percent make less than 1800 – and have lower educational attainment (72 percent have preparatory education or less). Shifters are also substantially less religious, with 71 percent attending service once a year to hardly ever, and only 15 percent “moderately” religious – attending services at least during holidays but less than weekly.

Opinions are dynamic, especially in this ever-changing situation, and this is an important opportunity – if leaders will create the right framework.