

PART 4: ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Egypt's Stance

The security coordination between Israel and Egypt is a central component of Israel's defense policy in the Gaza Strip and along the border with the Sinai Peninsula. This coordination is necessary for implementing any of the alternatives, as Egypt is a central mediator between Israel and Hamas, serves as a channel for reducing pressure from Gaza, and is Gaza's gateway to the world. Cooperation with Egypt is essential for advancing humanitarian projects, enabling the passage of workers and students from Gaza to other countries, and enlisting the Arab world to aid in improving the situation in Gaza. Egypt's strategy toward Hamas in the Gaza Strip is based on accommodation in the short-to-medium term and the desire to gradually weaken the organization on all levels—militarily, politically, and ideologically. Egypt is not interested in having an organization identified with the Muslim Brotherhood that rules along its border; thus, Egypt aspires to return the Gaza Strip to the control of the PA. In addition, Egypt seeks the existence of a single legitimate and functioning PA because of considerations that relate to the prospects of negotiations. However, Egypt is obliged to recognize Hamas's de facto control of the Gaza Strip and to recognize it as a fact due to the lack of motivation and ability of the PA under Abbas to return to ruling over the territory. Since 2017, Egypt-Hamas relations have improved, particularly when the two sides agreed to cooperate in eradicating the infrastructure of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula and following Hamas's decision to downplay its identification with the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, Egypt seeks maximum stability in the Gaza Strip as it would lead to increased security in the Sinai Peninsula, the restoration of tourism in the region, and the encouragement of foreign investment.

These are Egypt's expected positions and actions regarding the alternatives presented above:

- A. Egypt does not want Hamas to be part of the permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue; thus, it is working to mediate a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah. Consequently, of all the alternatives examined, the optimal one from Egypt's perspective is advancing intra-Palestinian reconciliation, in which the PA would return to be the sovereign on the ground, thus eroding Hamas's political and ideological influence. After achieving this reconciliation, Egypt would pursue Gaza's rehabilitation and would even help recruit an international aid package, including an inter-Arab aid package.

Figure 15. Egypt's preferences regarding the different alternatives



- B. While the alternative of militarily defeating Hamas would lead to public criticism by Egypt, it would be unlikely to suspend military relations between Egypt and Israel. Although Egypt is committed to the Palestinian issue both publicly and politically, its military and political leadership would welcome the defeat of Hamas's military wing and of the PIJ as a positive strategic development; thus, Egypt would be unlikely to impede Israel from fulfilling its military mission, but it would express serious apprehension at the situation that would develop in Gaza following a military operation. Egypt is especially concerned about creating a governmental vacuum and of the subsequent chaos that could drag it into having additional involvement and responsibility in Gaza.
- C. Egypt would likely reject outright a complete Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip, as this would solidify and even strengthen Hamas's standing in the region. Furthermore, the separation would place additional responsibility on Egypt, which is not interested in ruling the Gaza Strip but rather only in influencing it. One of the byproducts of this alternative could be strengthening Hamas's relations with extremist elements in northern Sinai and with Egypt's adversaries—Qatar, Iran, and Turkey—who would offer aid in order to expand their influence in the region, and Egypt clearly has no interest in this.

- D. The alternative of a long-term ceasefire arrangement would be welcomed in Egypt on the one hand, as it would contribute to the region's long-term calm and stability; however, on the other hand, it would also be met with concern, as it would maintain the division in the Palestinian arena and reduce the chances of creating a single Palestinian state under the control of the PA. Therefore, Cairo would likely utilize the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation that would enable the reconstruction of Gaza and the return of the PA to managing it.

The Perspective of the Palestinian Public in Gaza

The Gazan population supports any alternative that ends the closure and challenges the status quo. After more than a decade of existential distress, the residents have lost hope that their situation will improve without any substantial change between Gaza and its neighbors. The poor conditions in Gaza have not translated into large-scale ongoing protests against Hamas, which so far has succeeded in quickly suppressing any “bottom-up” organizing and has taken a hard line against those who try to undermine the stability of Gaza from within. The possibility of a regime change in Gaza is very slim, as the Gazan public is exhausted and depressed and would have difficulty producing new leadership. The slogan “Gaza is choking” is heard repeatedly. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the population of Gaza would support any alternative that ends the closure and leads to economic-infrastructure change in the territory.

Public opinion polls conducted in the Palestinian arena show that the opinions of Gazans regarding relations with Israel are more moderate than those of West Bank residents. A poll conducted in June 2019 by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion reveals broad support for maintaining the ceasefire with Israel and even a willingness to work for Israeli companies within Gazan territory or in the West Bank. Of the residents surveyed, 61 percent agreed with the statement that “Hamas should stop calling for Israel’s destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.” In addition, Gaza’s population is focused on domestic problems and on the need to improve life in Gaza and not on advancing political solutions or pointing the blame at Israel. Of those surveyed, 89 percent agreed with the statement that “internal political and economic reform is more important for us than any foreign policy issue.” These findings strengthen the assessment that the Gazan population is indifferent to the identity of the governing entity—Hamas, the PA, even Israel—as long as their lives improve and there is a glimmer of hope that they will be able to live with dignity and escape from the sense of being imprisoned.

Figure 16. Palestinian opinions regarding domestic issues

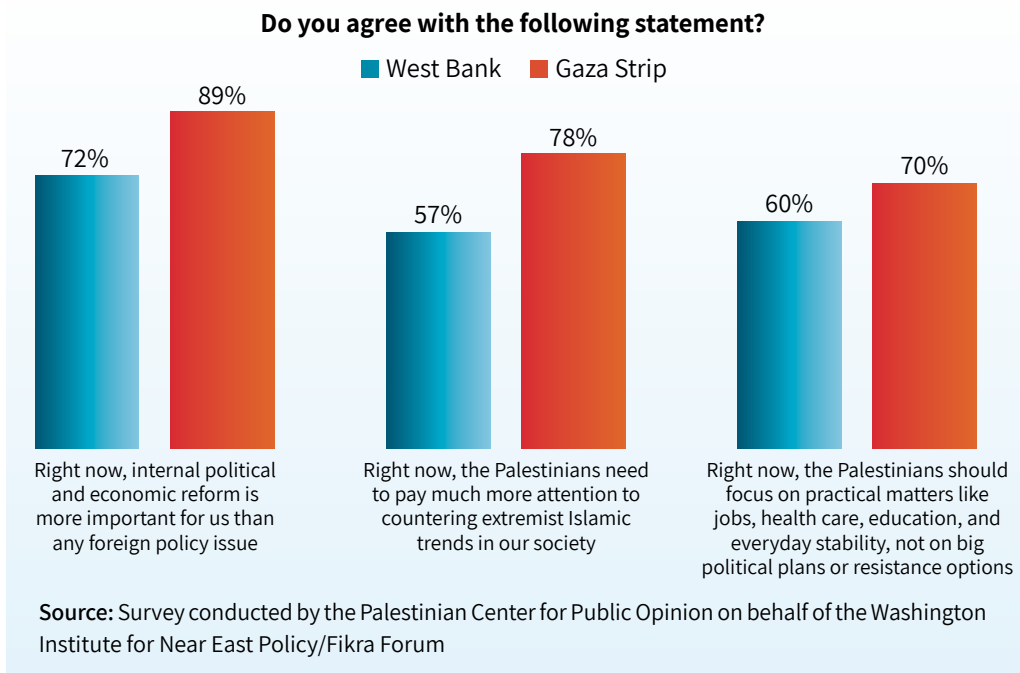
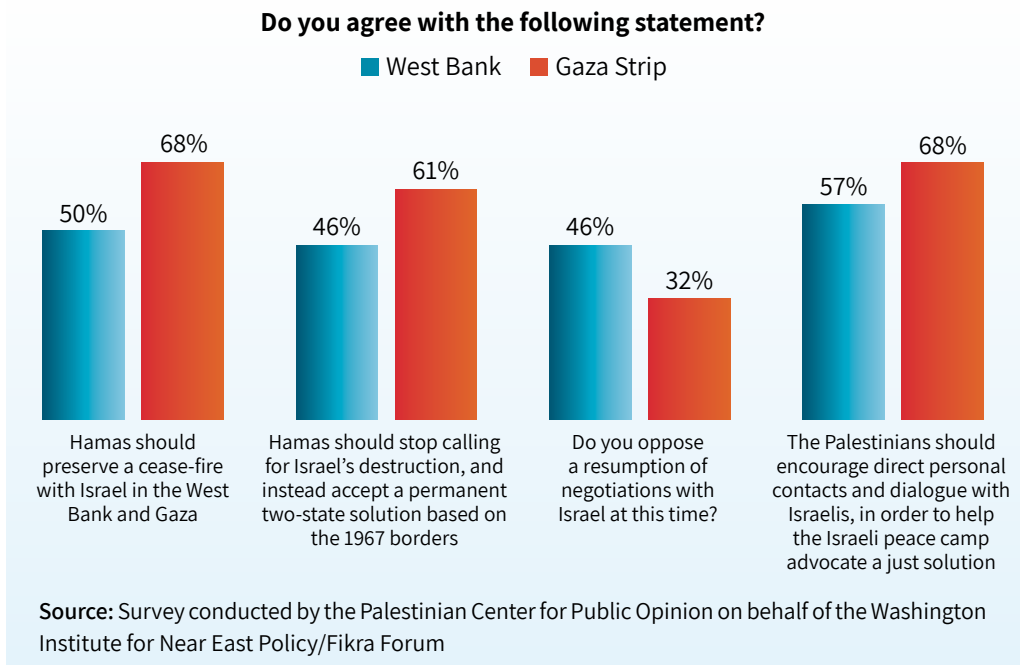


Figure 17. Palestinian opinions regarding the future of the conflict

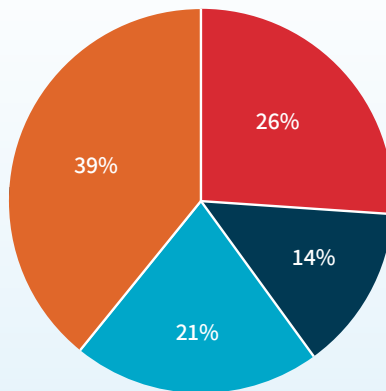


The Position of the Israeli Public

A poll on the position of the Israeli public—as reflected in traditional media and social media— shows that aside from the demand for calm in the south, the public does not demonstrate considerable interest in Gaza. Since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, and despite learning that the differentiation between Hamas and the PA is problematic, the Israeli public still does not support taking steps that would help promote some kind of agreement with the Palestinians. Public opinion polls (“The National Security Index”) conducted in recent years by INSS on the issue of Gaza show that the majority of the public supports maintaining and consolidating Hamas’s deterrence through large-scale military action; a third of the public supports the dismantling of Gaza’s military capabilities, and a negligible portion supports recognizing Hamas’s rule in Gaza and direct dialogue with it. In 2018, the Israeli public’s support for the possibility of overthrowing Hamas’s rule at the cost of occupying Gaza declined significantly: from 34 percent in 2015 to only 18 percent in 2018. It is evident that, as a rule, the Israeli public’s support echoes the government’s policy, which works to contain the situation, manage the conflict, and refrain—as much as possible—from large-scale escalation.

Figure 18. Israel should attempt to return control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority

■ Completely support ■ Somewhat support ■ Somewhat oppose ■ Completely oppose

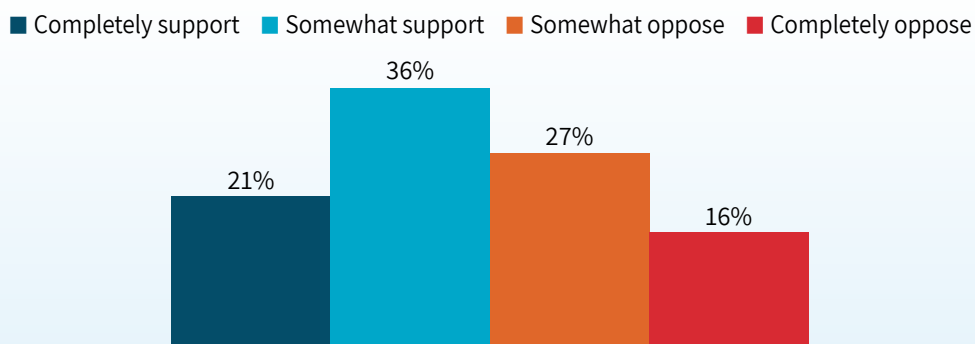


Source: The poll was conducted by Public Opinion Research of Israel (PORI) for INSS

The polls therefore show that the majority of the Israeli public prefers continuing the policy of managing the conflict and that it would support an extended ceasefire until the conditions between the two Palestinian subsystems become clear and transparent or change. If these two preferred options fail, the likelihood of the Israeli public’s

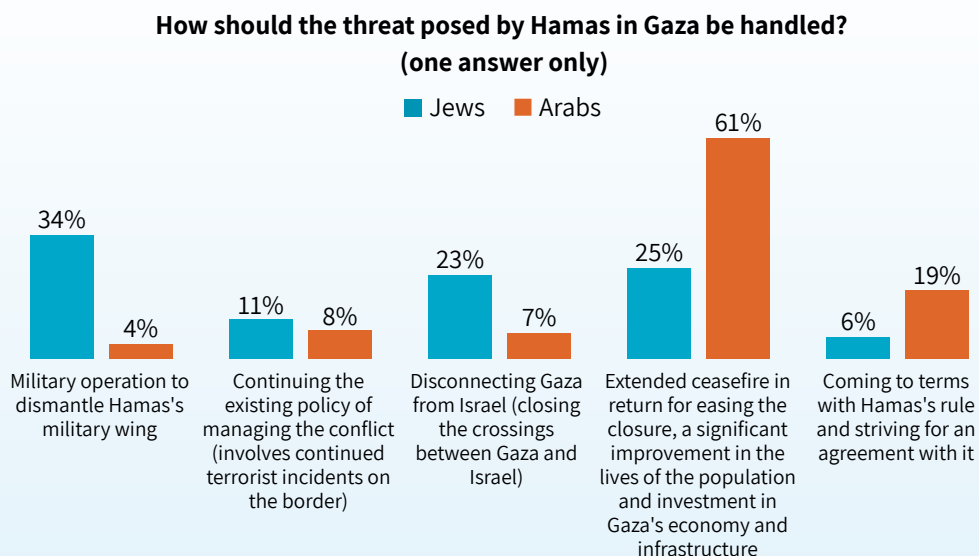
support for defeating Hamas's military wing is expected to increase. The alternative of cutting off all connections with the Gaza Strip apparently would be considered a second disengagement—after the first one developed a negative image—and would be seen as recognizing Hamas's rule and giving up on Israel's ability to control events in Gaza. Therefore, such a decision would likely arouse public controversy. Notably, if the Israeli political and military leadership were to support this alternative and conduct an extensive public relations campaign in favor of it, this could greatly influence the public's level of support for it.

Figure 19. It is impossible to advance agreements in Judea and Samaria without solving the problem of Gaza



Source: The poll was conducted by PORI for INSS

Figure 20. How the threat posed by Hamas in Gaza should be handled



Source: The poll was conducted by PORI for INSS