



Action, Not Words: Principal Trends in Palestinian Public Opinion of 2007

Amir Kulick

In any type of regime, public opinion is a factor in forging the nature of the government and its domestic and foreign policies. The more democratic the system and the more that freedom of expression is considered a primary value, the more important the role of public opinion – both in politics and in national life in general. Public opinion increases the need of the national leadership to attain public legitimacy for its actions, and to incorporate “street level” opinions in its deliberations.

This principle is largely applicable to the post-Arafat Palestinian political arena. Clearly public opinion played a role in the way Arafat reached decisions; however the introduction of a democratic process for presidential and parliamentary elections enhanced the importance of public opinion in Palestinian politics. Moreover, Fatah and Hamas, the two leading movements in the territories, draw most of their support from a cross-section of the general Palestinian population. As such, they too are sensitive to public opinion.

Public opinion surveys are generally considered the best means of analyzing the opinions of the general public, although they are primarily relevant in democratic societies. In Palestinian society, where democracy is in its early stages and freedom of expression is not automatically assured, the results of such surveys should be treated with the utmost caution. Differences of political culture, differences among society, and the vicissitudes of daily life in the territories may well limit the reliability of public opinion surveys. Nonetheless, even in a society such as this, public opinion surveys remain the principal scientific tool, and while they may not supply precise measurements of public sentiment, they offer insights into general trends. There are a number of research institutes in the territories that have conducted periodic surveys on various subjects in recent years.¹ The goal of this essay is to examine the principal trends in Palestinian public opinion over the past year and try to assess their significance. The analysis below is based primarily on surveys conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy Survey and Research (PCPSR),² headed by Khalil Shikaki, and is supplemented with data from other research institutes, particularly the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre (JMCC).

Amir Kulick, junior
research associate at
INSS

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Background

2007 was a tumultuous year in Palestinian politics. It began with a wave of strikes in the Palestinian public sector due to the Hamas government's inability to pay salaries, largely as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on the Palestinian Authority (PA). The difficult economic situation exacerbated the struggle between Fatah and Hamas, and resulted in violent clashes between the two movements. Following an escalation in tension and in an attempt to prevent civil war, Fatah and Hamas leaders agreed in March 2007 on a national unity government. The

unity government survived three months, until Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, whereupon Abu Mazen disbanded the government and appointed a new emergency government under Salam Fayyad in its place. Consequently, the PA split into the region controlled by Hamas – the Gaza Strip – and the area controlled by Fatah and the national camp – the West Bank. This situation

had several implications: on the domestic Palestinian front tension between the two movements rose and reached new heights, and on the economic level, the situation in Gaza worsened due to the restrictions placed by Israel on the entry of goods. In contrast, the economic situation in the West Bank began to improve following the influx of outside financial aid to the Fayyad government. In November 2007 a regional summit was held in Annapolis in the United States, designed to revive the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians; talks between the

negotiating teams began shortly thereafter. All these events impacted on and formulated Palestinian public opinion.

This is the background to the five surveys conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy Survey and Research over the year,³ which reveal several principal trends in Palestinian public opinion.

Theory vs. Practice: Gradual Erosion of Hamas's Public Standing

In the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) held in January 2006, Hamas's public standing was at an all-time high, and it earned 44 percent of the votes.⁴ Over the course of 2007 there was a gradual decline in support for the movement, and by December support had dropped to 31 percent (figure 1). The number of undecided stood at 11 percent, so even if these votes had gone to Hamas, the movement would still not have regained its public stature of 2006.

There appear to be several factors that contributed to Hamas's decline, some of which are reflected in the surveys. First and foremost, it seems that part of the Palestinian public has sobered vis-à-vis the great hopes it attached to the Hamas government. Hamas won the PLC elections based primarily on promises of marked improvements in the territories (imposing law and order, improving the financial situation, and combating corruption), but most of the public's expectations were left unmet. The economic sanctions imposed by Israel and the international community made it hard for the government to function, led to a deterioration in the economic situation, and impinged on the government's ability to pay salaries to the large public sector. Hamas's standing subsequently dropped among various sectors of the population, especially public sector em-

ployees.⁵ The movement had no success with combating corruption either, and the longer the government was in power, the less the public believed that Hamas would achieve significant progress in this area.⁶ One figure that reflects the widespread disappointment with the Hamas government is the public's assessment of the government's performance. In December 2006 public dissatisfaction with the Hamas government dropped to a new low (about 62 percent of respondents said they were either not satisfied or not satisfied at all with the performance of the Hamas government).⁷

Another factor that appears to have damaged Hamas's public standing is the dismantling of the unity government – despite the disappointment in the performance of the unity government – and the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The Palestinian street welcomed the establishment of the unity government and expected it to yield fundamental changes, particularly in its ability to pay salaries, improve public safety, and even negotiate with Israel.⁸ In view of the high expectations, Hamas's military takeover in the Gaza Strip and the dissolution of the unity government was seen by much of the public as a mistake. In a December 2007 survey, Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip won little support (22 percent) and considerable public opposition (73 percent). While among members of the movement the move won widespread support (72 percent), Hamas, as a movement aiming to lead the Palestinian people, is looking to win support from large sectors of the public beyond its hard core supporters.

Hamas's difficulties were exacerbated by the difficult straits of recent months in the Gaza Strip, following the Israeli embargo and the IDF's military operations. While much

of the Palestinian public places the blame on Israel,⁹ around one third of the public in Gaza views Hamas as the main culprit. Perhaps even more important is the lack of hope among Gazans. In a survey conducted in March 2007, most of the inhabitants there (72 percent) expected their lives to improve in the future. Six months later, in September 2007, only a minority of Gazans (21 percent) held that view. This large discrepancy (51 percent) may also explain the decline in support for Hamas on its home court.¹⁰ All these seem to have also impacted on the Palestinian street's willingness to support a Hamas candidate for the presidency. For example, in December 2006, 45 percent stated they would vote for Ismail Haniyeh if he challenged Mahmoud Abbas for the presidency, while one year later, in December 2007, Haniyeh's popularity had dropped to 37 percent (figure 2).

Action, Not Words: Fayyad's Government and Rehabilitation of the Nationalist Camp

Despite the drop in Hamas's popularity in 2007, Fatah was hard-pressed to exploit this trend to rehabilitate its public standing as a leading nationalist movement. Between December 2006 and June 2007, support for Fatah increased by just 1 percent.¹¹ At the same time, support for Hamas declined by 5 percent. Why, then, did Fatah not succeed in winning over the Hamas disillusioned? Of the several factors associated with Fatah's political stasis, the principal one is almost certainly the ongoing organizational stagnation that generated the movement's profound

In early 2007 public support was split almost equally between Abu Mazen and Ismail Haniyeh. By September, there was a 23 percent gap in favor of Abu Mazen.

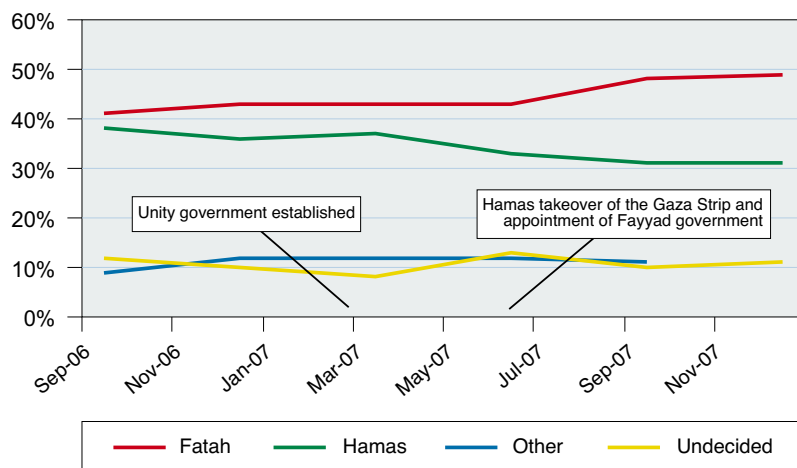


Figure 1. Public Support for Other Political Parties

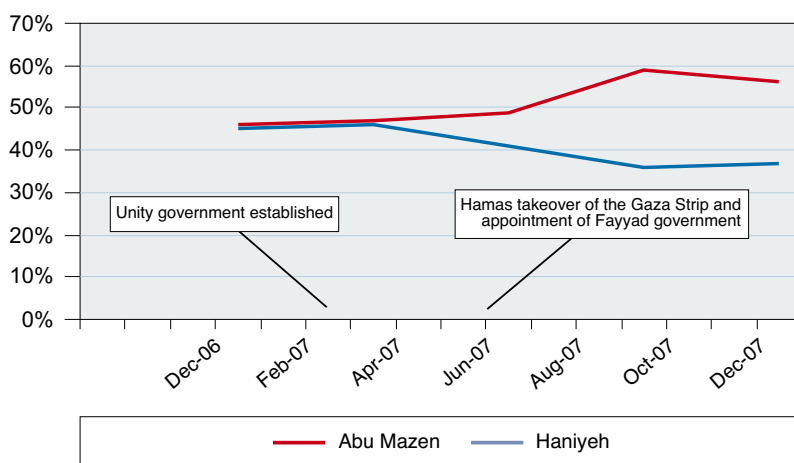


Figure 2. Public Support for Abu Mazen and Haniyeh

detachment from the public. For example, Fatah's principal decision making forum, the General Assembly, has not convened since 1988. The organization's leadership comprises the older generation, those who spent time in Tunis, who are not popular on the Palestinian street. The movement's younger generation is viewed in part as a group of outlaws and one of the main reasons for the security anarchy. It is therefore not surprising that a survey conducted by JMCC in November 2007 showed that a large number of

respondents (39 percent) preferred that the government be occupied by independent candidates rather than Fatah members.¹²

Nevertheless, in contrast with the movement's sluggish performance in the first half of 2007, support for Fatah increased steadily in the second half of the year. Between June and December support for the movement rose 5 percent (from 43 percent in June to 48 percent in December). It appears that the underlying factor is the government of Salam Fayyad, which is viewed by the public as enjoying greater legitimacy than Haniyeh's government.¹³ Even more important, it is considered to function more efficiently¹⁴ – and this complements its relatively uncorrupted image (only a minority of the ministers are Fatah members). Despite the fact that Fayyad is not a Fatah politician, it seems that his government is generally viewed as a Fatah government and thus its achievements are also attributed to the movement.

The ability of Fayyad's government to earn public confidence quickly was initially based on the low level of public expectation of the PA government in general. In June, prior to Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, most of the Palestinian public (81 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of the unity government. It seems that for the public, expectations could not drop any further. On the other hand, some kind of tangible proof, i.e., more than low level expectations of a previous government, is needed to regain the public's confidence. And in fact, at the end of 2007 greater segments of the public defined life on the West Bank as good or very good,¹⁵ and viewed the economic situation in Judea and Samaria as good (47 percent). This is undoubtedly in part a result of the influx of funds to the PA and the ability of the Fayyad government to pay salaries to

Levels of Support for Fatah, Hamas, Abu Mazen, and Ismail Haniyeh

	Fatah support	Hamas support	Support for other parties	Un-decided	Abu Mazen		Haniyeh
					Satisfaction	Support	Support
September 2006	41%	38%	9%	12%	55%		
December 2006	43% (West Bank – 43%, Gaza Strip – 43%)	36% (West Bank – 32%, Gaza Strip – 41%)	12%	10%	40% (West Bank – 38%, Gaza Strip – 42%)	46% (West Bank – 47%, Gaza Strip – 43%)	45% (West Bank – 42%, Gaza Strip – 49%)
March 2007	43% (West Bank – 41%, Gaza Strip – 46%)	37% (West Bank – 35%, Gaza Strip – 46%)	12%	8%	53% (West Bank – 47%, Gaza Strip – 55%)	47% (West Bank – 47%, Gaza Strip – 46%)	46% (West Bank – 46%, Gaza Strip – 45%)
June 2007	43% (West Bank – 43%, Gaza Strip – 42%)	33% (West Bank – 27%, Gaza Strip – 42%)	12%	13%	33% (West Bank – 32%, Gaza Strip – 42%)	49% (West Bank – 51%, Gaza Strip – 46%)	41% (West Bank – 38%, Gaza Strip – 45%)
September 2007	48% (West Bank – 47%, Gaza Strip – 51%)	31% (West Bank – 28%, Gaza Strip – 36%)	11%	10%	45% (West Bank – 41%, Gaza Strip – 49%)	59% (West Bank – 60%, Gaza Strip – 56%)	36% (West Bank – 33%, Gaza Strip – 39%)
December 2007	49%	31%		11%	50%	56%	37%

Source: The data was taken from the website of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, <http://www.pcpsr.org/.index.html>.

public sector employees. In the area of personal security as well, Fayyad's government made impressive public gains: in December, 44 percent of West Bank inhabitants said they felt they enjoyed personal and public security (compared with only 18 percent in June and 35 percent in September).¹⁶

In all likelihood the improvement in the government's performance was a major if not exclusive contribution to Abu Mazen's improved public standing. Other factors include disappointment on the Palestinian street with Hamas's conduct and the deteriorating conditions in the Gaza Strip. At the start of 2007 public support was split almost equally between Abu Mazen and Ismail Haniyeh.¹⁷ The balance began to tip in favor of Abu Mazen after the Hamas takeover in

the Gaza Strip,¹⁸ and in September 2007 the gap between the two peaked at 23 percent.¹⁹ The improvement in Abu Mazen's standing was also reflected in an increase in satisfaction with his performance, which rose by 10 percent in 2007.²⁰

Two States for Two Peoples: Public Opinion on the Peace Process

According to public opinion surveys, it appears that renewing the peace process with Israel does not top of the Palestinian public's priorities. Throughout most of 2007 the Palestinian public was most concerned with three issues: the security anarchy, the state of the economy, and corruption in the PA institutions. For most of the year the public primarily wanted to see the Palestinian government

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impose law and order on the streets.²¹

Hamas's victory in the January 2006 elections was viewed by some in Israel and the West as something akin to a fatal blow to the chances of Palestinian support of a compromise solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nevertheless, public opinion surveys conducted in 2007 show that at least at the popular level, large sections of the Palestinian public still supported a solution based on two states, with Israel recognized as the state

of the Jewish people and Palestine as the state of the Palestinian people. Support for such a resolution during the year hovered around the 60 percent mark. On the other hand, most of the public remained pessimistic about the chances of reaching a settlement in the near future, and the Annapolis summit did not impact significantly on the level of optimism in the territories.²²

Conclusion

A number of main conclusions emerge from this review. Most important, public support for Fatah or Hamas principally depends on its respective ability to provide a solution for the basic needs of the Palestinian public in the territories: improve the state of the economy, impose law and order, and ensure correct administration of official business. Hamas learned a painful lesson that street level support, as large as it may be, is not guaranteed without “delivering the goods.” Moreover, acting against the wishes of its voters, e.g., dissolving the unity government and waging a civil war even further depreciated its standing. At the same time, Fatah has seen that disappointment with Hamas does not automatically guarantee public support

for Fatah candidates. Without revitalizing the organization, renewing contact with the street, and providing a solution for the needs of the citizens the movement will struggle to regain its dominance. Another conclusion offered by the public opinion surveys is that Abu Mazen is still an important factor in Palestinian politics and enjoys public prestige. This is significant both for the next presidential election campaign and for Abu Mazen's potential ability to garner public support for a future settlement with Israel.

What is Israel's role in all of this? Israel is viewed at times – and perhaps most frequently by itself – as the main influence on developments in the Palestinian arena. In some cases this is true; in others Israel plays only a marginal role. The economic embargo imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip and the decline in the quality of life there undoubtedly impacted on street level support for Hamas, at least among those who do not number among the hard core of the movement's supporters. On the other hand, as indicated by public opinion surveys, the weakening of Hamas alone is not sufficient to strengthen the position of the moderate forces in the PA. This depends, at least in terms of the Palestinian public and as indicated by the public opinion surveys, on achieving tangible results. In this regard Israel can certainly help. First and foremost, Israel has to avoid intervening in the Palestinian government and the president's administration. Israel can also help the Palestinian government appreciably improve the quality of life in the territories by removing roadblocks and enabling traffic to move more freely; allowing Palestinian security forces to deploy in the city centers and impose law and order; and taking measures that will facilitate the recovery of the Palestinian economy. All these might

not only help enhance the public standing of the national camp in the territories, but also possibly encourage wider legitimacy among the Palestinian public for a future political compromise.

Notes

- 1 The longest established of these is the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre (JMCC), which was created in 1988 by a group of journalists and researchers and headed by Assan al-Hatib. The institute began conducting surveys in 1993. It works in cooperation with various research institutes in Israel and is considered professional and reliable. In addition to this institute there are a number of other public opinion survey institutes, principally the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), headed by Khalil Shikaki, and the Near East Consulting institute composed of a group of independent consultants. The latter two institutes are located in Ramallah. There is also the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion (PCPO) based in Bethlehem and run by Nabil Kukali, and there are two smaller survey institutes, at Bir Zeit University and el-Nagakh University in Nablus. In 2001, Hamas established al-Mustaqbal Research Center in Gaza, which includes a survey unit whose output appears to be of limited reliability and professionalism.
- 2 Shikaki's institute operates according to clear and professional criteria and cooperates with the Truman Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on joint Israeli-Palestinian surveys. The institute conducts public opinion surveys at regular intervals, approximately once every three months. The surveys examine the positions of the Palestinian public on recurring issues, such as support for the peace process, and occasional issues, as per developments in the Palestinian arena. Most sample groups incorporate 1270 people who are interviewed face to face by survey professionals. The sample margin of error, as cited by the institute, is $\pm 3\%$.
- 3 In December 2006, March, June, September, and December 2007. Survey data is available on the institute's web site: <http://www.pcpsr.org/.index.html>.
- 4 See Central Palestinian Elections Committee figures at: http://www.elections.ps/pdf/Final_Result_distribution_of_PLC_seats-EN2.pdf.
- 5 In December 2006, for example, support for Hamas among public sector employees fell to 24 percent, compared with 55 percent support for Fatah.
- 6 In March 2006, on the eve of the establishment of the Hamas government, two thirds of the public (65 percent) believed corruption in the PA would decrease. In contrast, in March 2007 far less of the public (42 percent) held this view.
- 7 Only a third of respondents (33 percent) said they were satisfied with its performance. This dissatisfaction was relevant to all areas of the government's operations, although after Hamas's rise to power in the Gaza Strip there was some improvement in the sense of individual security among Gaza residents (in March 2007, 27 percent claimed they felt safe, compared with 52 percent who claimed in December that they felt safe). Nevertheless, it seems that in comparison with the high expectations from the Hamas government this figure alone was not sufficient to stop the ongoing decline in the movement's standing.
- 8 For example, a public opinion survey conducted immediately following the creation of the unity government in March 2007 indicated that large segments of the public had high hopes of the move. A public opinion survey by the PCPSR also conducted in March 2007 showed that the Palestinian public hoped for an improvement in the government's performance (71 percent), greater ability to pay salaries (69 percent), and an improvement in personal security and public order (65 percent). A significant part of the public was even looking for a renewal of talks with Israel in the near future (65 percent).
- 9 In a December 2007 survey about 40 percent of respondents said Israel was mainly to blame for the situation.
- 10 Between March 2007 and September 2007, Hamas lost 10 percent of its support in the

Gaza Strip (46 percent in March compared with 36 percent in September).

- 11 Forty-two percent in December 2006, compared with 43 percent in June 2007.
- 12 See November 2007 survey - <http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2007/no63.pdf>.
- 13 In December 2007, 27 percent claimed that Haniyeh's government was legitimate and 37 percent argued that Fayyad's government was legitimate.
- 14 In a JMCC survey from August 2007, for example, a large part of the public (46 percent) felt that Fayyad's government functioned better than the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip (23 percent noted that it performed more poorly than Haniyeh's government and 23 percent said there was no difference between the performances of the two governments). A similar picture also emerged a month later in a PCPSR survey – 43 percent of the respondents felt that Fayyad's government performed better.
- 15 In a survey from December 2007, 31 percent of respondents labeled life on the West Bank as good or very good, compared with 27 percent in the survey three months earlier.
- 16 See the November 2007 survey – <http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2007/no63.pdf>.
- 17 In December 2006, 46 percent of the public declared that if elections had been held that month they would have voted for Abu Mazen, compared with 45 percent for Haniyeh. The two leaders' public standing remained balanced three months later: in March, Abu Mazen had 47 percent of the public's support, compared with 46 percent for Haniyeh.
- 18 In the PCPSR June survey, Abu Mazen had 49 percent support, compared with Haniyeh's 41 percent.
- 19 In the PCPSR September survey, 59 percent declared they would vote for Abu Mazen for president, compared with 36 percent who said they would vote for Haniyeh.
- 20 In December 2007, 50 percent of the public expressed satisfaction with Abu Mazen's performance, compared with 40 percent the previous December.
- 21 In September 2007, for example, a PCPSR survey indicated that around one third of the public felt that the Fayyad government's top priority must be enforcing law and order and putting an end to anarchy, which should be supported by political reforms and fighting corruption (22 percent). Third and fourth in the public's order of priority were ending the international sanctions and renewing the peace process (18 percent, respectively).
- 22 In September approximately 70 percent of the Palestinian public said the chance of establishing a Palestinian state was low or nonexistent. Renewed political contacts between Israel and the PA after the Annapolis summit had little impact. In a December survey 65 percent said the chance of establishing a Palestinian state was low or nonexistent.