

# Palestinian Public Opinion and the al Aqsa Intifada

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**T**he second Intifada affected Palestinian politics and public perception of Palestinian-Israeli relations in profound ways. It reduced support for Arafat, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the mainstream national movement, and increased support for Hamas and other Islamist groups. It also reduced confidence in the peace process and increased support for violence against Israelis. Nonetheless, support for reconciliation, based on a two-state solution, remained high and unchanged despite the siege and bloodshed. These conclusions are based on three surveys conducted among Palestinians during July 2000, July 2001, and December 2001. These surveys were conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research among Palestinians 18 years and older in the West Bank (including Arab East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The total sample size in each poll averaged more than 1300, the margin of error  $\pm 3\%$ , and the non-response rate 3%. Other data cited in this article are taken from similar surveys conducted by the author between 1993 and 2000.

## Palestinian Politics

The al-Aqsa Intifada intensified three domestic dynamics. It changed the domestic balance of power, weakening Arafat and Fatah and strengthening Hamas and other Islamists. It also increased the level of public disappointment with the PA's performance in areas of efficiency, democratization, and clean government. Finally, it crystallized a split within the Palestinian national movement, leading to the emergence of a rebellious young guard at the expense of the old guard of the PLO. The net effect of all three developments, as well as the perceived failure of the peace process, may have been the diminishing of PA legitimacy in the eyes of the public and an increased support for alternative sources of legitimacy. By contrast, groups and activities relying on "revolutionary" or Islamist legitimacy gained public support.

## *Shift in the balance of power*

Arafat lost significant support in the first year of the Intifada. In July 2000, upon returning from Camp David, his popularity, which had been dropping steadily since 1996, fell to 47% (see Table 1). In 1996, Arafat's popularity stood at 71%. Ten months into the second Intifada, Arafat's popularity stood at 33%, a drop of 30% from July, and his greatest loss in eight years. His popularity rebounded slightly to 36% in December 2001, despite his decision to declare a cease-fire and the subsequent arrest of Islamists and other militants during that month. Arafat may have gained some sympathy during December in response to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's decision to prevent him from visiting Bethlehem during Christmas. That is, the Palestinian public may have responded negatively to Sharon's attempts to delegitimize the Palestinian president.

**Table 1. Arafat's Popularity**

Nov 1994	Jan 1996	July 2000	July 2001	Dec 2001
44%	71%	47%	33%	36%

**Table 2. Support for Mainstream Nationalists (Fatah) and the Islamists ( Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others)**

	Dec 1993	Jan 1996	July 2000	July 2001	Dec 2001
Nationalists (Fatah)	45%	55%	37%	29%	28%
Islamists ( Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others)	25%	15%	17%	27%	25%

Similarly, support for Fatah, which stood at 55% in 1996, dropped to 37% in July 2000, a drop of about 33% in four years (see Table 2). One year later, in July 2001, Fatah lost an additional 22% of its support, dropping to 29%. Surprisingly, the Islamists did not gain much support in the four years after 1996: in 1996, their support stood at 15%, while in 2000 it stood at 17%. In other words, those who deserted the nationalists did not shift their loyalty to the Islamists, choosing instead to remain on the sidelines.

However, the Intifada changed this: by July 2001, the Islamists had increased their support by 60%, rising to 27%. Indeed, in July 2001, and for the first time ever, support for Islamist and nationalist opposition groups ( Hamas, Islamic Jihad, other Islamist factions, the PFLP and the DFLP), stood together at 31%, surpassing that of the mainstream Fatah and its allies, standing at 30%. (see Figure 1 below)

By December 2001, support for Fatah remained essentially unchanged at 28%, while the popularity of the Islamist groups dropped slightly to 25%. Some Palestinians may have blamed the Islamists for the loss of international support in the aftermath of the suicide attacks in Haifa and

Jerusalem three weeks before the December poll was taken. Others may have blamed the Islamists for the bloodshed in Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp, which resulted from internal infighting during the period in which the poll was conducted.

Despite more than a year of confrontations and street mobilization, close to 40% of respondents remain unaffiliated; i.e., the internal competition has just begun. Yet continuation of the current dynamics – with further erosion in the ability of the PA to deliver services and address governance-related deficiencies – is likely to persuade the majority of the non-affiliated to shift loyalty to the Islamists.

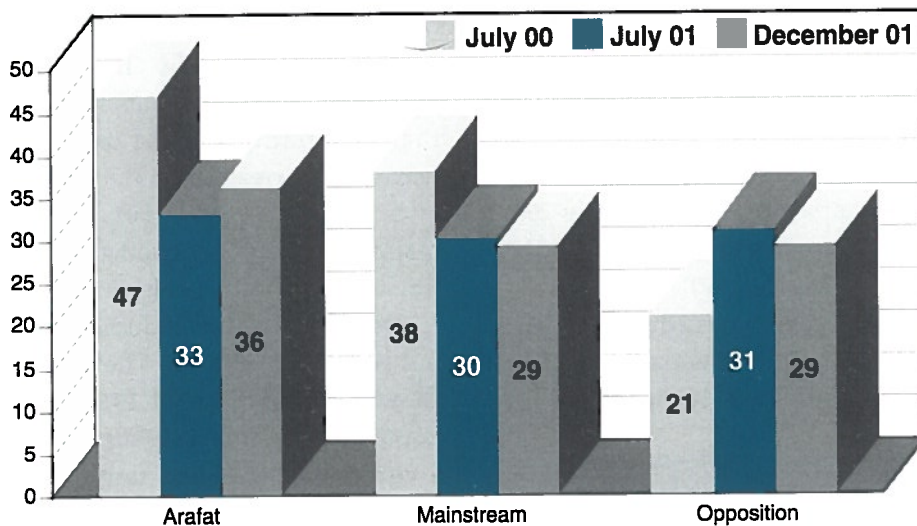
### ***Negative Perception of Governance***

The diminishing support for Arafat and Fatah has been caused by other

factors, in addition to a collapsing peace process and deteriorating economic and living conditions. The street has been highly disappointed and disillusioned by the perceived failure of the process of national reconstruction and good governance (see Table 3). The Palestinian street's evaluation of the status of democracy, PA performance, and levels of corruption have moved from bad to worse during the past six years. In 1996, 43% positively evaluated the status of Palestinian democracy and human rights. By 2000-01, that percentage dropped by more than 50% to about 21%. Similarly, positive evaluation of the performance of PA institutions dropped from 64% in 1996 to 44% in 2000 and to 40% in 2001. Worse yet, while in 1996 only 49% believed that there was corruption in the institutions of the PA, that percentage increased to 76% in 2000

**Table 3. Erosion in Public Confidence in Governance Issues**

	1996	2000	2001
Positive evaluation of Palestinian democracy	43%	21%	21%
Positive evaluation of PA performance	64%	44%	40%
Perception of corruption	49%	40%	83%



**Figure 1. Support for Arafat, Fatah, and the Opposition before and after the Intifada**

and to 83% in 2001.

The results of the December 2001 poll indicate a persistent negative public perception of governance in Palestine, despite a drop in the perception of PA corruption from 83% in July to 74% in December. An increase occurred in the percentage of those who believed that corruption would increase or remain the same in the future, from 57% to 60% during the same period. Positive evaluation of Palestinian democracy remained low, at 23%, while the percentage of those who believed that people cannot criticize the PA without fear decreased slightly from 51% in July 2001 to 49% in December.

### *Emergence of a Young Guard*

The combination of a perceived failure of the old guard of the PLO to deliver an end to the occupation, combined with a highly negative assessment of all issues related to PA governance; the

continued inability of the PA to deliver services during the Intifada to the bulk of the population at a time of extreme economic and social hardships; and worst of all, a prevailing perception of Arafat's inability to project leadership in the face of an uncertain future, combined to damage the PA's legitimacy significantly. This allowed other sources of legitimacy to emerge and assert themselves in the face of a weakened PA.

The findings indicate that well-known Palestinian figures of the old guard, like Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin) and Ahmad Quari (Abu Ala'), may have lost much of their popularity, each dropping to less than 2% by December 2001. By contrast, the

rising figure seems to be Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti, one of the prominent leaders of the young guard, who received 11%. Prior to the start of the Intifada in September 2000, his name had not shown up at all.

## **Violence and the Peace Process**

When the Oslo accords were signed in 1993, two-thirds of Palestinians supported it (see Table 4). But Palestinian expectations from, and confidence in, the peace process began to erode as a result of the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's Prime Minister and the continued building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Never too high to begin with, Palestinian expectations that the peace process would soon bring to an end the limited self-rule arrangement and would lead to a permanent settlement and independent statehood, dropped from 44% in 1996, when Shimon Peres led Israel, to 30%, in the same year under Netanyahu. Four years later, with Ehud Barak leading Israel and Jewish settlement expansion continuing, expectations of a permanent settlement were still very low at 24%. Upon the election of Ariel Sharon as Israel's Prime Minister, that expectation dropped a further 55%, to a mere 11%.

The disappointment of the Palestinians affected their psycho-

**Table 4. Palestinian Support for Oslo**

1993	1994	1995	2000	2001
65%	39%	72%	70%	63%



logical environment, including the way they viewed the prospects for peace and future relations with Israel, and the role of violence in achieving Palestinian objectives. Moreover, once the Intifada erupted in September 2000, the Israeli army managed to bring practically all civil, social and economic life in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to a halt. By doing so, it heightened perceptions of threat and coercion that bred pessimism and blind hatred, thus reversing many of the short-lived gains of the peace process.

The loss of confidence in the peace process pushed more Palestinians to support violent attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians, believing that violence would help them end the occupation in a way that negotiations could not (see Table 5). While in 1996, when the peace process seemed promising, only 22% supported such attacks; in July 2000, after the Camp David failure, the figure rose to 52%. Once the Intifada erupted, support for violence peaked to 86%. Little change was recorded in December 2001.

Throughout most of the past eight years, the vast majority of Palestinians viewed negotiations as the most effective means of achieving their vital national goals. However, in July 2000, immediately after the failure of the

Second Camp David Summit, 57% of the Palestinians believed that violent confrontations, if and when they were to take place, would achieve Palestinian vital goals in a way that negotiations could not. In July 2001, that percentage has jumped to 71%. (see Figure 2 below)

In the aftermath of the failed Camp David Summit, the expectation that there would be no violence and that

**The fact that a majority of Palestinians continued to view armed attacks positively does not contradict the significant public support for a cease-fire.**

negotiation would soon resume gave way to much deeper pessimism ten months into the Intifada. Rates of respondents expressing such expectations dropped from 44% to 17%. While in July 2000 only 23% saw the failure at Camp David as indicating an end to the peace process, the percentage doubled in July 2001. Correspondingly, while in July 2000

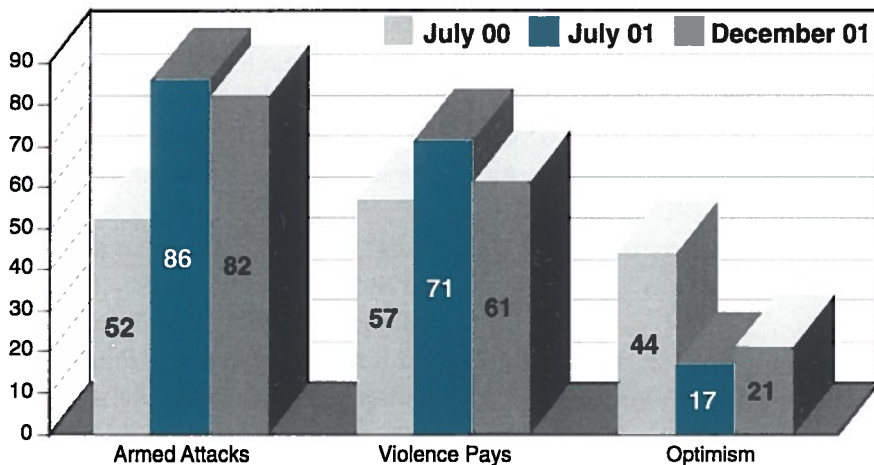
only 31% believed that violence, if resorted to, would help the Palestinians achieve goals in ways that negotiations could not, that percentage increased to 59% one year later. Indeed, in July 2001, a clear majority of 71% believed that the Intifada has already achieved that.

December 2001 introduced some, but not much change. The results showed a shift of about 10% of the population towards more support for a comprehensive and immediate cease-fire, and more support for an immediate return to negotiations compared to the situation that prevailed in July 2001 in the aftermath of the release of the Mitchell report. This development may have been caused by four factors: first, the statement by US Secretary of State Colin Powell in November provided some political horizon. Second, the increase in international pressure on Arafat and the Islamists after the November-December Haifa-Jerusalem suicide attacks. Third, the decline in confidence in the Intifada's ability to continue to serve the national interest. And finally, the fear of internal infighting, such as was taking place in Jabalia in the Gaza Strip during the period in which the December poll was being conducted.

The December survey showed that

**Table 5. Support for Violence against Israelis**

	Nov 1994	June 1996	July 2000	July 2001	Dec 2001
Support	57%	21%	52%	86%	82%
Opposition	33%	70%	43%	12%	16%



**Figure 2. Support for Violence, Belief that Violence Pays, and Optimism about Peace Chances**

60% of the street, compared to 50% in July, supported the comprehensive and immediate cease-fire declared by Yasir Arafat. Moreover, 71% (compared to 63% in July) supported an immediate return to negotiations. There has been a drop in the percentage of those who believed that armed confrontations have helped achieve national objectives that negotiations failed to achieve, from 70% in July to 61% in the December poll.

The fact that such a majority continued to view armed attacks so positively does not contradict the significant public support for the cease-fire. It seemed to reflect street thinking that the Palestinians had more than one set of options in the effort to achieve their vital interests. Cease-fire and negotiations was one such set; armed confrontation was another. It also reflected the belief among the majority of Palestinians

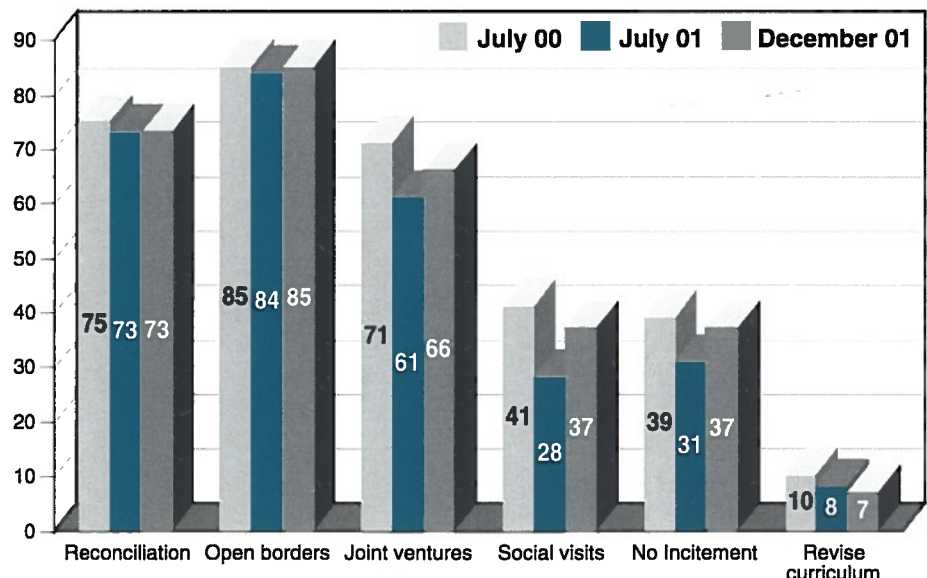
that the cease-fire would not last – only 21% expected to see continued cease-fire and a return to negotiations. This may explain the high level of support for armed attacks against soldiers and settlers (92% for each) and the relatively high level of

support for attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel (58%) that was found in December.

## Palestinian-Israeli Reconciliation

Surprisingly, however, in this sea of turmoil, one thing remained unchanged: about three-quarters of the respondents continued to support reconciliation between the States of Palestine and Israel in the context of a two-state solution and a peace agreement between the two sides. It seems that for short-term needs, high threat perception among the Palestinians elicits a highly emotional and hard-line response. However, when dealing with long-term issues, rational thinking prevails among Palestinians, even in the midst of their pain and suffering.

Respondents in the December survey were asked for the third time



**Figure 3. Support for Reconciliation before and after the Intifada**

since July 2000 to speculate about the chances for reconciliation between the two peoples, and to express support or opposition for such reconciliation, were successful negotiations to lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state recognized by Israel. The results show consistent and overwhelming support for reconciliation, but a split in confidence regarding its feasibility. They also show that the overwhelming Palestinian support for reconciliation in principle drops significantly when threatening the Palestinian historical narrative (see below).

A majority of 73% said in December that they would support or strongly support the process of reconciliation, just as in July 2001 and about the same as in July 2000 (see Figure 3). However, only 46%

believed that reconciliation was possible, and 41% believed that it was "not possible ever." When asked to speculate about the views of the majority of Israelis regarding the prospects for reconciliation, 54% expressed the belief that Israelis think that reconciliation was "not possible ever."

In December, as in the previous two surveys, an overwhelming majority (85%) of the Palestinians supported or strongly supported open borders to free movement of people and goods in the context of a peace agreement. Similarly, a majority of 66% supported the creation of joint economic institutions and ventures. However, even in the context of a peace agreement, a majority of Palestinians opposes or strongly

opposes other forms of cooperation and reconciliation. For example, only 36% supported "taking legal measures against incitement against Israel;" only 37% would invite an Israeli colleague home for a visit; and only 35% would accept an invitation to the home of an Israeli colleague. More significantly, only 7% supported adopting a "school curriculum in the Palestinian State that would recognize Israel and teach schoolchildren not to demand the return of all Palestine to the Palestinians." Perhaps it is difficult for people, while still under occupation, to show willingness to revise their historical narrative, a narrative that is part and parcel of the prolonged conflict.