

Trends in Palestinian Public Discourse—500 Days of War

Orit Perlov | No. 1957 | March 11, 2025

While mainstream Israeli media has presented Hamas’s propaganda—which highlights the triumph of jihadist ideology, Israel’s humiliation, the release of Palestinian prisoners, the disruption of normalization with Saudi Arabia, and the group’s military and civilian resilience in Gaza—Palestinian social media in Gaza and the West Bank tells a different, more complex story. This discourse includes harsh criticism of Hamas, fears that Gaza’s devastation could extend to the West Bank, and even calls for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to reclaim control of Gaza.

A Wave of Anger and Criticism

Despite Hamas’s portrayal of a “victory,” widely echoed in Israeli media, internal Palestinian discourse is characterized by widespread criticism and intense anger toward Hamas.

Turning the Narrative of October 7 Upside Down: On October 7, the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank celebrated what they saw as Hamas’s “defeat” of Israel. Many believed Hamas had accomplished what Arab states had failed to do. However, more than 500 days of intense war have dramatically shifted this perception. Today, few in Gaza describe the events of October 7 as a victory. The prevailing sentiment is that Hamas brought an unprecedented catastrophe upon Gaza and its people, the worst disaster in Palestinian history. Some even curse the day Hamas launched its attack. Instead of a “war of independence,” the social media discourse now frequently uses terms like “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing.”

Perceptions and Deterrence—The Link Between Jenin and Jabalia: Images of destruction, displacement, and death, broadcast globally by the Qatari TV channel Al Jazeera, have left a deep impression on Palestinians and the broader Arab world. The devastation in Jabalia in northern Gaza has profoundly affected West Bank Palestinians, many of whom fear a similar fate. This has led to two major effects. First, the vast majority of Jenin and Tulkarm refugee camp residents fled as soon as Israeli forces entered, fearing they would be buried under rubble. Second, the traditional core Palestinian ideology of *sumud* (steadfastness) has weakened significantly, and public pressure has mounted on the militant groups to halt the fighting.

“We Are Not Human Shields”: The social media discourse in Gaza reveals a growing realization: The blood of Mohammed Deif and Yahya Sinwar, Hamas leaders who led the October 7 massacre, is not worth more than that of ordinary civilians. The group has faced severe criticism for hiding in populated areas and using displaced civilians as cover, leading to mass casualties, including women and children. Many Gazans now see Hamas’s use of civilians as

“human shields” as illegitimate. Notably, there was almost no public mourning or demonstrations when Deif, Sinwar, and other Hamas leaders were killed.

A Desire to Return to Pre-2007 Reality: The social media discourse in Gaza suggests a widespread preference for the return of the PA’s rule. However, this does not indicate support for PA leader Mahmoud Abbas, who is widely viewed as a traitor. Instead, it reflects a desperate longing for stability—a return to a livable reality where people do not have to beg for food and water.

The Issue of Palestinian Prisoners: The perceived value of securing prisoner releases has diminished. Many in Gaza no longer believe that the heavy price of war is worth it. There is cynicism about the fact that while Israel held 5,000 Palestinian prisoners before October 7, the war has since doubled that number.

Authentic anger toward Hamas is also evident in reactions to the group’s military parades during hostage-release ceremonies. Many argue that Hamas should focus on securing food, water, clothing, and shelter for displaced civilians instead of wasting resources on performative displays. Rather than boosting morale, these events exacerbate frustration and criticism.

The Nakba and the Right of Return: One of the most repeated sentiments in the Gazan discourse is: “We wanted to return to Haifa and Acre, and now we are begging to return to Beit Hanoun and Jabalia.” Many see their displacement as the ultimate proof of Hamas’s failure. Some note, for example, that the Europeans now control the Rafah border crossing, Egyptian intelligence officers control the Netzarim Corridor, and the Americans provide their food supply.

The Arab World’s Disengagement: “The Arabs don’t want us.” There is a growing realization among Palestinians that Arab states no longer wish to involve themselves in their cause. No Arab country is willing to accept released Palestinian prisoners or refugees. Some even believe that Arab leaders would prefer to see Hamas eliminated rather than take in displaced Gazans.

Declining Support for Hamas

Despite the widespread criticism, about 20%–30% of Gaza’s population remains steadfast in its support for Hamas and its ideology, regardless of the devastation and the reality on the ground. Even what many Palestinians describe as “genocide” and mass displacement has not changed their position.

In the West Bank, the shift in support for Hamas is more profound. Public discourse indicates a sharp decline in support for Hamas and other militant factions. Many fear that Gaza’s fate—blockade, starvation, mass displacement, and widespread destruction—could befall them as well. This explains the absence of pro-Hamas demonstrations or social media campaigns calling for a new intifada, unlike in the early days of the war. Calls from mosques urge people to avoid joining militant groups or participating in protests. There has also been a marked decline in public opposition to the PA, in stark contrast to the situation at the war’s outset. When Hamas recently called on West Bank Palestinians to remain in the refugee camps and resist Israeli forces, many instead chose to evacuate and avoid confrontation.

Despite the devastation, the discourse in Gaza does not yet reflect widespread feelings of “defeat.” Such sentiments would likely emerge only if three conditions are met: Hamas leadership is expelled from Gaza, the group is disarmed, and a new Nakba (mass displacement) occurs—such as the implementation of Trump’s plan for Gazans to emigrate to Arab countries.

The war has not yet ended, and the future of Gaza remains uncertain. It is difficult to predict whether the trends outlined in this article will maintain or if Hamas’s popularity will reemerge in Gaza and the West Bank. One major factor that could significantly shape support for Hamas, as well as for other “resistance” organizations—and at the expense of support for Fatah and the PA—is the trajectory and outcome of the ongoing conflict with Israel, which is currently escalating in the West Bank.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg