



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

Palestinian Attitudes Toward Israel

By Michael Sharnoff

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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As the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East enter into their second year, how have these unprecedented events impacted Palestinian attitudes toward Israel? Will Palestinians be emboldened to mimic these revolts and collectively decide to embark on another intifada? Will they continue to pursue unilateral efforts to declare statehood in the United Nations? Or will they use a diplomatic approach and reach a negotiated settlement with Israel?

A survey of attitudes from secularists, Hamas, Fatah and the general public suggests that Palestinians will continue to embrace what they describe as “popular, nonviolent resistance” to gain concessions. These tactics include seeking unilateral recognition at the UN, staging small protests in Arab villages near the controversial security barrier, organizing demonstrations like the Global March to Jerusalem, and utilizing boycotts, sanctions and divesture programs as well as hunger strikes by prisoners.¹

These actions could continue until a permanent agreement is reached with Israel. If no agreement is reached, all of these protests could trigger wide-scale uprisings, although most Palestinian leaders downplay this possibility and insist that future resistance would be peaceful and nonviolent.

SECULARIST ATTITUDES

In an interview with al-Quds newspaper in January 2012, Munib al-Masri, an influential Palestinian billionaire who enjoys close ties with both Fatah and Hamas, asserted that ending Palestinian divisions and achieving national reconciliation remained a top priority. “The success of Palestinian unity,” he said, “depends on all of us, not only on Fatah and Hamas.” The next stage would be the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, which “is in the interest of Israel and the Palestinians” and a historic opportunity which should not be missed.²

Al-Masri supports nonviolence but declares Palestinians have “the right to pursue any form of resistance enshrined in international law.” Like other Palestinian leaders, he maintains that violence has harmed their cause and that peaceful protests, much like those in neighboring Arab countries, have the potential to generate greater international sympathy.

While al-Masri recognizes that negotiating with Israel is necessary to achieve a state, he believes Israel is unwilling to reach an agreement. To bypass this deadlock, he advocates the Arab Peace Initiative, a pan-Arab proposal proffered in 2002 and relaunched in 2007, which calls on the Arab world to end its state of war with Israel and normalize relations in exchange for a state in Gaza and the West Bank with East Jerusalem as its capital.

¹ Arie O'Sullivan, “Palestinian Non-Violent Resistance Catching On,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 15, 2012. <http://www.jpost.com/Features/InTheSpotlight/Article.aspx?id=257932>.

² Mohammed Abu Khadair, “Munib al-Masri: We Need a Ministry for Jerusalem Affairs to Achieve our Objectives in the Next Stages of Safeguarding Jerusalem and Ending the Occupation,” *al-Quds* (Arabic), January 16, 2012.

During my interview with Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, professor at al-Quds University and founder of *Wasatia* (moderation), an Islamist movement which seeks peaceful coexistence with Israel, he said that Arab uprisings have emboldened Islamists and that the United States has missed an opportunity to promote moderate Islamists which could undermine the spread of radicalism among Muslim youth. Moreover, Dajani notes that Israel's unilateral withdraw from Gaza, the Gilad Shalit prisoner deal, and the rejection of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as a partner for peace has strengthened Hamas and weakened Fatah.³

In spite of corruption and growing authoritarianism within both Hamas and Fatah, Dajani argues that if Palestinians decide to revolt, they would not direct their rage against their leaders but against Israel and the United States.

HAMAS

The expulsion of Hamas's political base in Damascus for not publicly defending Bashar Assad's brutal crackdown has prompted the search for a new sanctuary. Relations with its erstwhile ally, Iran, have also been strained.⁴ Therefore, any possible choice for relocation—whether in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia or Qatar—will not provide the Islamist movement with the previous degree of funding, training, and support offered by Syria. All of these countries either enjoy diplomatic relations with Israel or low-level ties.

Hamas's awareness of its vulnerability has also been made manifest through its announcement in December 2011 that it would join the PLO.⁵ Since its inception in 1987, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have remained outside the PLO, which serves as an umbrella for Palestinian factions, and have deployed suicide bombers and rocket attacks to thwart Israel-PLO negotiations. The unprecedented decision to join the PLO would require Hamas to recognize Israel, renounce terror, and abide by previous Israel-PLO agreements.

Moreover, Hamas's defeat by Israel during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09, the Palestinian public's growing frustration over the inability of Hamas-Fatah to produce a durable reconciliation, and the possibility that the Arab Spring could embolden Gazans to turn against their leaders, has forced Hamas to focus more on internal affairs and less on terror attacks against Israel. According to Fathi Hammad, Hamas Interior Minister, Hamas forces during the past several months have proactively prevented rocket attacks "day and night, 24 hours, everywhere in the Strip, particularly near the borders with Israel."⁶

However, Hamas's refusal to engage in military confrontation with Israel does not necessarily mean it is prepared to end its conflict with the Jewish state. In May 2011, Hamas Politburo leader Khaled Meshal said he could accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, while insisting that refugees could "return to Israel." Meshal did not promise to renounce violence or recognize in Israel in exchange for these territorial concessions.⁷ In April 2012, senior Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook told the American newspaper, *The Forward*, that Hamas would not be required to respect any agreement between Israel and the PLO and that any such settlement would be viewed as a "hudna" or truce, not permanent peace.⁸

FATAH/PLO

After failing to reach an agreement with Israel during a series of talks in Jordan in January 2012, the Fatah-led PLO has refused to resume negotiations unless Israel halted West Bank settlements and agreed that the 1967 boundaries would constitute the framework for peace. Israel has insisted negotiations will continue only if there are no preconditions.⁹

³ Author's interview with Professor Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, February 12, 2012.

⁴ "Haniyeh Officially Announces the Departure of Hamas Leaders from the Syrian Capital Damascus," *alsharq.net.sa* (Arabic), February 12, 2012. <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2012/02/12/121138>.

⁵ Muhammad Yunus, "Fatah and Hamas Delegations Go to Cairo Again Amid Modest Expectations about Achieving Reconciliation," *Dar al-Hayat* (Arabic), December 17, 2011.

⁶ Avi Issacharoff, "New Hamas Force in Gaza is Foiling Rocket Attacks against Israel," *Haaretz*, May 10, 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/new-hamas-force-in-gaza-is-foiling-rocket-attacks-against-israel-1.429297>.

⁷ Ethan Bronner, "Hamas Leader Calls for Two-State Solution, but Refuses to Renounce Violence," *New York Times*, May 5, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/06/world/middleeast/06palestinians.html?_r=1.

⁸ Larry Cohler-Esses, "Hamas Wouldn't Honor a Treaty, Top Leader Says," *The Forward*, April 19, 2012. http://forward.com/articles/155054/hamas-wouldn-t-honor-a-treaty-top-leader-says/?picks_feed=true.

⁹ "Jordan Pushing for Fresh Israeli-Palestinian Talks," *France 24*, March 7, 2012. http://www.france24.com/en/20120307-jordan-pushing-fresh-israeli-palestinian-talks?ns_campaign=editorial&ns_source=RSS_public&ns_mchannel=RSS&ns_fee=0&ns_linkname=20120307_jordan_pushing_fresh_israeli_palestinian_talks.

In April, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad boycotted a scheduled meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu, which would have been their most significant meeting in two years. Nonetheless, chief negotiator Saeb Erekat took Fayyad's place and issued a vague statement that "Israel and the Palestinian Authority are committed to achieving peace."¹⁰

Internal Palestinian divisions and the diplomatic deadlock have contributed to increasingly dictatorial practices by Mahmoud Abbas, who has waged a low profile war against Palestinian media critical of his rule.

In March, a Palestinian journalist and two bloggers were arrested for criticizing Abbas and for claiming corruption existed in the PLO. In an excessive case of internet censorship in April, the Palestinian Authority restricted eight websites linked to a Fatah rival of Abbas who had criticized his policies.¹¹ Abbas eventually lifted the internet ban, but only after facing intense pressure from his constituency.¹²

THE PALESTINIAN STREET

Ibrahim Shikaki, lecturer of economics at al-Quds University, posits that it is ultimately the Palestinian masses—and not the leadership—who will influence policy and decide their own fate.¹³

A joint Palestinian-Israeli poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in September 2011 found that the overwhelming majority (80 percent) of Palestinians supported unilateral efforts to obtain statehood recognition at the UN.¹⁴ The latest polls surveyed in March 2012 reveal a lack of confidence and pessimistic outlook toward peace with Israel. More than half of Palestinians polled (58 percent) opposed resuming negotiations with Israel unless Israel enacted a total settlement freeze in the West Bank and accepted returning to the 1967 boundaries.¹⁵

IMPLICATIONS

These findings provide a pessimistic outlook for the future prospects of peace. While Palestinian leaders refuse to negotiate unconditionally with Israel, they may feel compelled to seek further unilateral gains. Consequently, both Hamas and Fatah remain in a position of weakness and are struggling to sustain their power. They do not appear willing to directly challenge Israel, although they may change this tactic to deflect domestic criticism.

A third intifada could have disastrous consequences for all parties involved. Yet it remains unclear if a new uprising would be directed against Palestinian leaders for failing to deliver realistic change and reform, against Israel—or both.

On the positive side, on May 8, Netanyahu brought Kadima, the centrist opposition party, into his coalition in a national unity government. Netanyahu's government now contains the largest parliamentary majority in Israeli history, which may empower Netanyahu—and persuade the Palestinians—to make progress toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

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¹⁰ "False Start: Israeli-Palestinian Talks Collapse," *RT*, April 18, 2012. <http://rt.com/news/israeli-palestinian-talks-collapsed-334/>.

¹¹ George Hale, "Palestinian Media Clampdown Spreads to the Web," *Ma'an News Agency*, April 23, 2012. <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=478726>.

¹² Hillary Zaken, "Abbas Reverses Censorship of Anti-Regime Websites," *The Times of Israel*, May 6, 2012. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-reverses-censorship-of-anti-regime-web-sites/>.

¹³ Ibrahim Shikaki, "Is There No Arab Spring in Palestine?" *The Daily Star*, November 11, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2011/Nov-11/153683-is-there-no-arab-spring-in-palestine.ashx#axzz1u3IcFt3f>.

¹⁴ "Over 80% of the Palestinians Support Turning to the UN to Obtain Recognition of a Palestinian State," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, PSR Poll No. 41, September 21, 2011. <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2011/p41ejoint.html>.

¹⁵ "In the Aftermath of the Exploratory Talks in Amman, Israelis Reject Palestinians' Conditions for Returning to Negotiations, and Palestinians Oppose Returning to Negotiations Unconditionally," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, PSR Poll No. 43, March 28, 2012. <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2012/p43ejoint.html>.