

The polls are clear: While at war with Israel, Hamas defeated Abbas and Fatah

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Fewer things are more certain to drive the news cycle in Brussels, Washington DC or Jerusalem than a new poll, yet not enough attention has been given to Israeli and Palestinian polling since the 7 October Hamas massacre in Israel.

Policymakers need to understand what the public thinks "beyond the beltway" or "outside the Tel Aviv bubble".

In developing foreign policy goals for the day after the Israel-Hamas war, the US and European allies simply can't ignore what Israelis and Palestinians really think.

Recent polling shows that Palestinians are long done with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and are now ready for Hamas leadership in both Gaza and the West Bank, while Israelis are certain of the need to eliminate the Hamas terrorist organisation once and for all — militarily and politically.

Toppling Hamas priority number one, Israelis say

The million-dollar question for policymakers about the Israel-Hamas war is: who will govern Gaza at the end of it?

Israeli and Palestinian public opinion couldn't be more divergent, and this chasm in public opinion reveals a deeper challenge for the future of the region.

A survey of the Israeli public (including Jews and Arabs) conducted between 19-20 November by the independent Israel Democracy Institute asked: "On a scale from 1=not at all important to 5=very important, how would you grade the importance of [...] toppling the Hamas regime in Gaza and destroying its political and military infrastructures?"

The vast majority of the Israeli public (75%) said it was "very important" to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza, including a near-universal 87% of Israeli Jews.



Israeli troops are seen near the Gaza Strip border, December 2023 - AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg

This is understandable not only because of the 7 October massacre but also based on Hamas' founding charter, which calls for the death of Jews (Article 7) and jihad as the solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Article 13).

Yet for Hamas, support from Palestinians has only risen since the 7 October massacre. In fact, Hamas is now perceived as the most deserving group to lead Palestinians.

Among Palestinians, Hamas' popularity skyrockets

The independent Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) conducted a survey of Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza from 6-9 September and again from 22 November through 2 December.

When asked in September “who was most deserving to represent and lead the Palestinian people,” just 27% said Hamas, 24% said Abbas’ party Fatah, and 44% said neither.

As of this month, a majority (54%) say Hamas, with 13% saying Fatah, and 26% saying neither.



Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas walks towards the podium to address the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 2023 - AP Photo/Craig Ruttle

Hamas' support isn't exclusively due to the war it launched against Israel. The sheer hatred of President Abbas amongst Palestinians can't be ignored.

Between 76% and 80% of Palestinians consistently said they were "dissatisfied" with Abbas' performance as PA President in polls conducted in March, June, and September of this year. The number of Palestinians dissatisfied with Abbas rose to 85% this month.

Similarly, between 77% and 80% of Palestinians said Abbas should resign from office in March, June and September of this year. Today, 88% of Palestinians demand his resignation while 12% say he should remain in office.

Fatah no more

Which leads to the most alarming and obvious finding. The Palestinian Authority is the internationally recognised organisation that represents the Palestinian people and serves as the governing authority of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Prior to the 7 October massacre, in a hypothetical election for president of the Palestinian Authority between incumbent Abbas and Hamas Chairman Ismail Haniyeh, Abbas would have lost to Haniyeh, 37% to 58%.

Now, polling released this month shows a landslide victory for Hamas Chairman Ismail Haniyeh, earning 78% of the vote to Abbas' 16%.

Thus the challenge to Gaza's future governance is clear: Israelis are set on destroying Hamas militarily and politically while Palestinians are set on elevating it.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed earlier this week to block Abbas from gaining control of Gaza after the war, he was repeating what the Palestinian public already believes: Mahmoud Abbas is not the answer to Gaza's future.

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