



Grassroots Radicalism is Clouding Gaza's Future

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Israel's military campaign against the Hamas terrorist organization may still be underway, but international attention is already focused on the "day after" in the Gaza Strip. The vast majority of those conversations are predicated upon the idea that Hamas is deeply unpopular and would quickly be rejected by the Palestinian street if a viable alternative were presented.

Indeed, there's considerable evidence on that score, including testimonies of egregious Hamas excesses relayed by displaced Gazans and growing public condemnations of the group from those caught in its crossfire with Israel. Even so, there's ample reason to suspect that the situation on the ground is considerably more complicated than Western pundits and policymakers are inclined to believe.

Just how much was underscored last month in a new poll carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), widely regarded as the preeminent public opinion institute in the Palestinian Territories. The survey, carried out among more than 1,200 Palestinian adults in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, found that, in the aftermath of Hamas's Oct. 7 massacre, support for the militant group has surged in the West Bank and risen modestly in the Gaza Strip as well.

The study, moreover, found broad public support for Hamas's offensive, which resulted in the single largest slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. Nearly three-quarters of respondents in the PCPSR poll expressed approval of the terror group's actions, terming them justified. (Notably, many of those polled seemed either not to know or not to believe the extent of the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas, which included horrific incidents of rape and sexual violence as well as the summary execution of children and elderly civilians.)

That backing reflects a larger and deeply troubling trend. The survey results show that overall [s]upport for armed struggle" against Israel has risen "ten percentage points compared to three months ago" across the Palestinian Territories, "with more than 60 percent saying it is the best means of ending the Israeli occupation." In the West Bank, meanwhile, the results were even more pronounced, with support for violence rising "to close to 70 percent."

These sentiments have enormous significance for any discussion of what happens in Gaza after Hamas is defeated. Some have suggested that the Palestinian Authority of Chairman Mahmoud Abbas can simply swoop in and assume control, administering Gaza in addition to the West bank. Yet, as the results of the PCPSR poll make clear, the Palestinian Authority lacks credibility among ordinary Palestinians and simply isn't a viable option. Indeed, the survey found that backing for Abbas and his Fatah faction has declined significantly, with about two-thirds of those polled now calling for the PA's outright "dissolution."

Israel is aware of these harsh realities. In late December, Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi penned an op-ed in the Saudi newspaper *Elaph* laying out his government's thinking regarding what comes next after the Israel-Hamas war.

Israel, Hanegbi made clear, is seeking to prop up a "moderate Palestinian entity" to govern Gaza in lieu of Hamas, and emphasized that the Palestinian Authority, at least as currently constituted, isn't it. "Israel is aware of the desire of the international community to integrate the Palestinian Authority into the Gaza Strip the day after the fall of Hamas," he wrote. "We make it clear that for this to happen, the PA will have to undergo a fundamental reform."

Hanegbi's stance reflects a sober reading of the current state of play in the Palestinian Territories. Years of corruption and misrule have profoundly discredited Abbas and his cronies among the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, international support (including from the U.S.) has perpetuated a malignant status quo and laid the groundwork for the profound polarization, and radicalization, of Palestinian politics.

Now, Israel and the international community need to contend with the fact that, far from being captives of Hamas, the plurality of Palestinians have come to see the group as their standard-bearer. Changing those perceptions will arguably be the most challenging part of building a new, qualitatively different Palestinian polity in the years ahead.