

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

OCTOBER 25, 2023

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## What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas

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Unpopular—but an Israeli Crackdown Could  
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Since Hamas's atrocious attacks on October 7 left more than 1,400 Israelis dead in a single day, Israel's response has exacted a heavy toll on the population of Gaza. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, so far more than 6,000 Gazans have been killed and more than 17,000 injured in Israel's aerial bombardment. The casualties could quickly climb much higher if Israel goes ahead with its expected ground invasion. Israeli President Isaac Herzog, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Knesset member Ariel Kallner, and other prominent officials have called for a military campaign that covers the entire territory of Gaza. Israeli missiles have already destroyed around five percent of all buildings in Gaza, including in areas where Palestinians sought shelter after heeding Israeli calls to evacuate their homes. Some of Israel's top officials, invoking Hamas's success in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, have in effect declared that all Gazans are part of Hamas's

terrorist infrastructure and complicit in the group's atrocities—and are therefore legitimate targets of Israeli retaliation.

The argument that the entire population of Gaza can be held responsible for Hamas's actions is quickly discredited when one looks at the facts. Arab Barometer, a research network where we serve as co-principal investigators, conducted a survey in Gaza and the West Bank days before the Israel-Hamas war broke out. The findings, published here for the first time, reveal that rather than supporting Hamas, the vast majority of Gazans have been frustrated with the armed group's ineffective governance as they endure extreme economic hardship. Most Gazans do not align themselves with Hamas's ideology, either. Unlike Hamas, whose goal is to destroy the Israeli state, the majority of survey respondents favored a two-state solution with an independent Palestine and Israel existing side by side.

Continued violence will not bring the future most Gazans hope for any closer. Instead of stamping out sympathy for terrorism, past Israeli crackdowns that make life more difficult for ordinary Gazans have increased support for Hamas. If the current military campaign in Gaza has a similar effect on Palestinian public opinion, it will further set back the cause of long-term peace.

#### MOUNTING FRUSTRATION

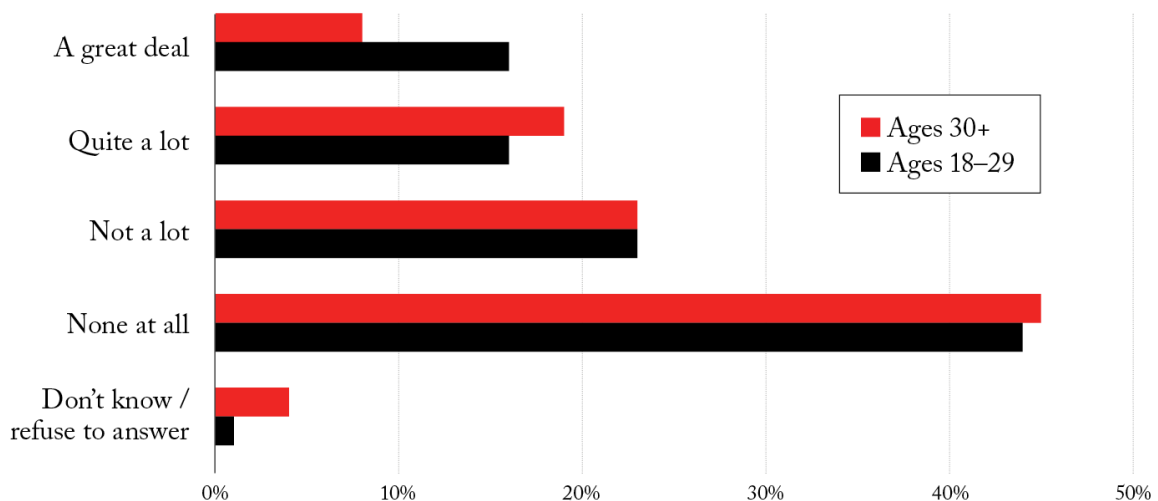
Arab Barometer's survey of the West Bank and Gaza, conducted in partnership with the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, provides a snapshot of the views of ordinary citizens on the eve of the latest conflict. The longest-running and most comprehensive public opinion project in the region, Arab Barometer has run eight waves of surveys covering 16 countries in the Middle East and North Africa since 2006. All surveys are designed to be nationally representative, most of them (including the latest survey in the West Bank and Gaza) are conducted in face-to-face interviews in the respondents' places of residence, and the collected data is made publicly available. In each

country, survey questions aim to measure respondents' attitudes and values about a variety of economic, political, and international issues.

Our most recent interviews were carried out between September 28 and October 8, surveying 790 respondents in the West Bank and 399 in Gaza. (Interviews in Gaza were completed on October 6.) The survey's findings reveal that Gazans had very little confidence in their Hamas-led government. Asked to identify the amount of trust they had in the Hamas authorities, a plurality of respondents (44 percent) said they had no trust at all; "not a lot of trust" was the second most common response, at 23 percent. Only 29 percent of Gazans expressed either "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in their government. Furthermore, 72 percent said there was a large (34 percent) or medium (38 percent) amount of corruption in government institutions, and a minority thought the government was taking meaningful steps to address the problem.

## LITTLE TRUST IN HAMAS

How much trust do you have in the Hamas-led government?



*Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Gaza (2023).*

When asked how they would vote if presidential elections were held in Gaza and the ballot featured Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas,

Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, and Marwan Barghouti, an imprisoned member of the central committee of Fatah, the party led by Abbas, only 24 percent of respondents said they would vote for Haniyeh. Barghouti received the largest share of support at 32 percent and Abbas received 12 percent. Thirty percent of respondents said they would not participate. Gazans' opinions of the PA, which governs the West Bank, are not much better. A slight majority (52 percent) believe the PA is a burden on the Palestinian people, and 67 percent would like to see Abbas resign. The people of Gaza are disillusioned not only with Hamas but with the entire Palestinian leadership.

The salience of Gaza's economic troubles also came through clearly in the survey results. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate in Gaza rose from 39 percent in 2011 to 59 percent in 2021. Many Gazans have struggled to secure basic necessities because of both scarcity and cost. Among survey respondents, 78 percent said that the availability of food was a moderate or severe problem in Gaza, whereas just five percent said it was not a problem at all. A similar proportion (75 percent) reported moderate to severe difficulty affording food even when it was available; only six percent said food affordability was not a problem.

Gazan households have felt the impact of food shortages keenly. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that they had run out of food and lacked the money to buy more at some point during the previous 30 days. By comparison, in a 2021 Arab Barometer survey, only 51 percent said the same. This change over just two years is alarming. Gazans have been forced to adjust their habits to try to make ends meet, with 75 percent saying they had started buying less preferred or less expensive food and 69 percent saying they had reduced the size of their meals.

Most Gazans attributed the lack of food to internal problems rather than to external sanctions. Israel and Egypt have imposed a blockade on Gaza since 2005, limiting the flow of people and goods into and out of the territory. The strength of the blockade has varied, but it grew notably stricter after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007. Nevertheless, a plurality of survey respondents (31 percent) identified government mismanagement as the primary cause of food insecurity in Gaza and 26

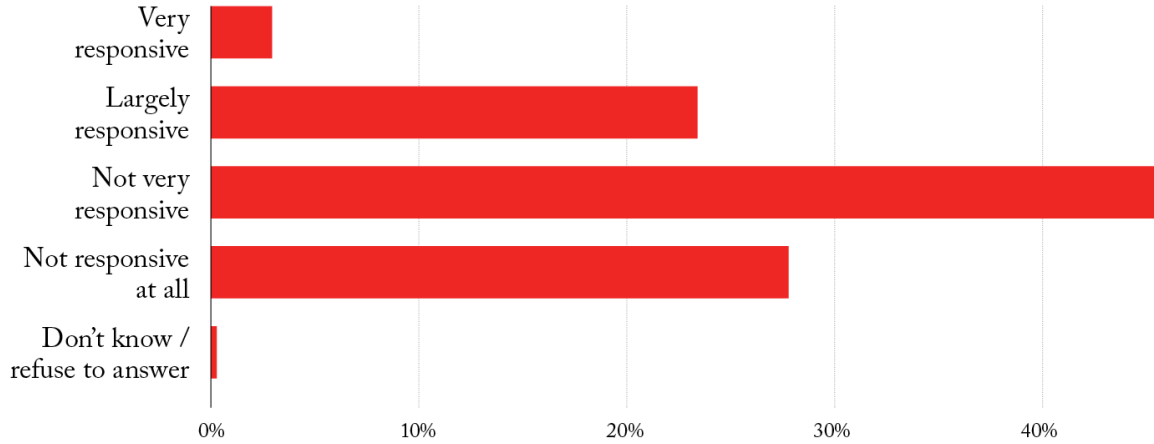
percent blamed inflation. Only 16 percent blamed externally imposed economic sanctions. In short, Gazans were more likely to blame their material predicament on Hamas's leadership than on Israel's economic blockade. Since the time of the survey, however, this perception may have changed. Israel cut off water, food, fuel, and electricity supplies to Gaza following the October 7 attacks, plunging the territory into a deep humanitarian crisis. Some international aid has entered Gaza since, but the suffering the Palestinians have experienced has likely hardened their attitudes in ways that could undermine long-term peace and stability.

NO MORE POLITICS AS USUAL

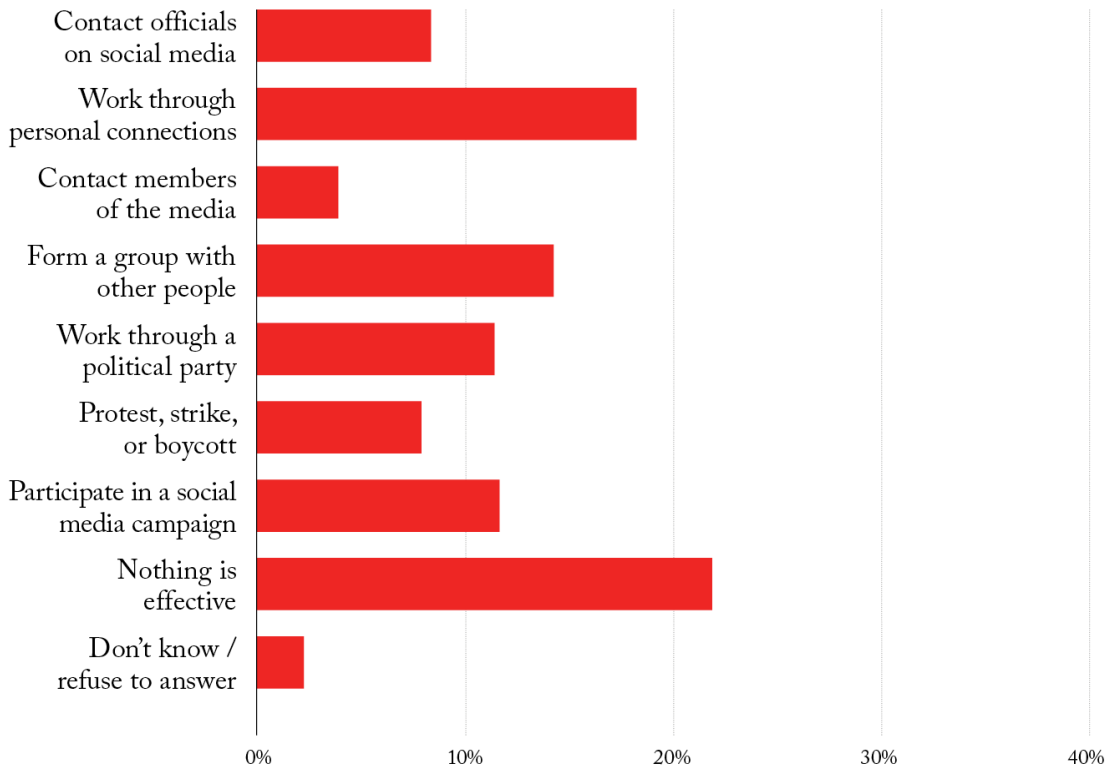
Overall, the survey responses indicate that Gazans desire political change. In an eight-point decline since 2021, just 26 percent said the government was very (three percent) or largely (23 percent) responsive to the needs of the people. When asked what is the most effective way for ordinary people to influence the government, a plurality said "nothing is effective." The next most popular answer was to use personal connections to reach a government official. Most Gazans saw no avenue for publicly expressing their grievances with the Hamas-led government. Only 40 percent said that freedom of expression was guaranteed to a great or moderate extent, and 68 percent believed that the right to participate in a peaceful protest was not protected or was protected only to a limited extent under Hamas rule.

## DIM VIEWS OF HOW HAMAS GOVERNS

How responsive is the Hamas-led government to what people want?



What is the most effective way to influence a Hamas-led government decision?



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Gaza (2023).

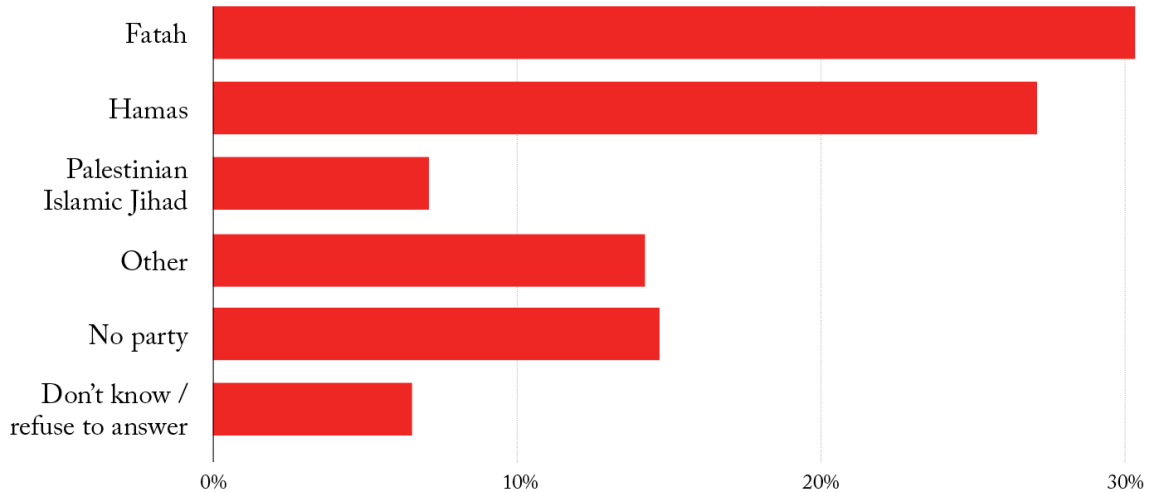
About half of Gazans expressed support for democracy: 48 percent affirmed that “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.” A smaller proportion of respondents (23 percent) indicated a lack of faith in any type of regime, agreeing with the statement, “For people like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.” Only 26 percent agreed that “under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.” (This last finding is similar to poll results in the United States, where in a 2022 survey, one in five adults aged 41 or younger agreed with the statement, “Dictatorship could be good in certain circumstances.”)

Given the low opinion most Gazans hold of their government, it is unsurprising that their disapproval extends to Hamas as a political party. Just 27 percent of respondents selected Hamas as their preferred party, slightly less than the proportion who favored Fatah (30 percent), the party that is led by Abbas and that governs the West Bank. Hamas’s popularity in Gaza has slipped as well, falling from 34 percent support in the 2021 survey. There is notable demographic variation in the recent responses, too. Thirty-three percent of adults under 30 expressed support for Hamas, compared with 23 percent of those 30 and older. And poorer Gazans were less likely than their wealthier counterparts to support Hamas. Among those who cannot cover their basic expenses, just 25 percent favored the party in power. Among those who can, the figure rose to 33 percent. The fact that the people most affected by dire economic conditions and those who remember life before Hamas rule were more likely to reject the party underlines the limits of Gazans’ support for Hamas’s movement.



## HAMAS'S MODEST BASE OF SUPPORT

Which party, if any, do you feel closest to?



*Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Gaza (2023).*

### VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Leadership style is not the only thing Gazans find objectionable about Hamas. By and large, Gazans do not share Hamas's goal of eliminating the state of Israel. When presented with three possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (as well as an option to choose "other"), the majority of survey respondents (54 percent) favored the two-state solution outlined in the 1993 Oslo accords. In this scenario, the state of Palestine would sit alongside the state of Israel, their borders based on the de facto boundary that existed before the 1967 Six-Day War. The level of support for this resolution has not changed much since 2021; in that survey, 58 percent of respondents in Gaza selected the two-state solution.

It is somewhat surprising how little traction alternative political arrangements had gained among Gazans before the onset of recent hostilities, given how implausible a two-state solution now seems. The survey presented two other options: an Israeli-Palestinian confederation—in which both states are independent but remain deeply linked and permit

the free movement of citizens—and a single state for both Jews and Arabs. These garnered 10 percent and nine percent support, respectively.

Overall, 73 percent of Gazans favored a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the eve of Hamas's October 7 attack, just 20 percent of Gazans favored a military solution that could result in the destruction of the state of Israel. A clear majority (77 percent) of those who provided this response were also supporters of Hamas, amounting to around 15 percent of the adult population. Among the remaining respondents who favored armed action, 13 percent reported no political affiliation.

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Gazans' views on the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, meanwhile, have been consistently negative. Only 10 percent expressed approval of this initiative in the most recent survey—the same percentage as in 2021. Many Gazans likely recognize that Arab solidarity is key to securing a political arrangement that includes an independent Palestinian state. If Arab countries were to settle their differences with Israel without making the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a precondition for normalization, any lingering hopes for a two-state solution would evaporate.

Before Hamas's attack on Israel, Gazans' foreign policy views suggested both alignment with certain U.S. policy priorities and mistrust of the United States. Seventy-one percent opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thirty-seven percent expressed a wish for Gaza to develop stronger economic ties to the United States—higher than the proportion that wanted to deepen economic relations with Iran or Russia (32 percent in both cases). Only 15 percent of Gazans, however, believed that U.S. President Joe Biden's policies had been good or very good for the Arab world. And in the past few weeks, approval of both Biden and the United States has certainly declined, given the broad perception in Gaza, the West Bank, and in the region's Arab countries that Washington has come to the aid of Israel at the expense of Gaza.

A final finding—now backed by countless media reports of Gazans’ anguish as escalating violence forces them to flee their homes—is the strength of people’s connection to the land on which they live. The vast majority of Gazans surveyed—69 percent—said they have never considered leaving their homeland. This is a higher proportion than residents of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia who were asked the same question. (For all of these countries, the most recent available data comes from Arab Barometer’s 2021–22 survey wave.) Gazans face a series of challenges, from a worsening economic crisis to an unresponsive government and a seemingly impossible path to independent statehood, but they are steadfast in their desire to remain in Gaza.

#### BREAK THE CYCLE

The results of the Arab Barometer survey paint a bleak picture of Gaza in the days before the October 7 attacks. The Hamas government, unable to address citizens’ vital concerns, had lost the public’s confidence. Few Gazans supported Hamas’s goal of destroying the state of Israel, which left Gaza’s leaders and its population divided over the future direction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The vast majority of Gazans strongly favored a peaceful solution, and they yearned for leaders who could both deliver such a solution and improve Gazans’ overall quality of life. So far, however, the policies of their own government and of the Israeli government have prevented progress on both fronts.

Living conditions for Palestinians are better in the West Bank than they are in Gaza, but the economic and political situation is still grim. Nearly half of survey respondents in the West Bank (47 percent) reported going hungry in the last month, and just 19 percent trusted the West Bank government led by Fatah—an even lower percentage than that of Gazans who trusted Hamas’s government. Yet governance failures have not driven West Bank Palestinians to back Hamas. When asked which party they feel closest to, just 17 percent of respondents in the West Bank reported support for Hamas. The amount of support for Fatah was the same as in Gaza (30 percent). With regard to individual leaders, however, the responses of West Bank residents reflected widespread disaffection—and

particular dissatisfaction with Abbas. In a hypothetical presidential election, Barghouti was their top choice, as he was in Gaza, at 35 percent, while only 11 percent picked Haniyeh, the Hamas leader, and six percent chose Abbas, the incumbent leader in the West Bank. Nearly half of respondents—47 percent—said they would not participate.

In terms of attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, support for the two-state solution in the West Bank was slightly lower than in Gaza (49 percent versus 54 percent), and opposition to Arab-Israeli normalization was slightly higher. Only five percent of respondents in the West Bank approved of the regional rapprochement, compared with 10 percent of Gazans. Although the differences were small, these relatively hardened attitudes in the West Bank were likely a result of tensions between Palestinians and Israeli settlers and soldiers in recent months. The survey's finding that roughly half of Palestinians still support the two-state solution may offer some hope for peace in the long term, but the results do not inspire much confidence in short-term stability. The deep unpopularity of Palestinian leadership, in the West Bank in particular, calls into question the feasibility of reestablishing the Palestinian Authority's control over Gaza, which some media outlets have suggested as the next step in reconstruction after Israel's military campaign against Hamas is complete.

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The Israeli government must now exercise restraint.

As Israel's operations in Gaza escalate, the war will take an unfathomable toll on civilians. But even if Israel were to "level Gaza," as some hawkish politicians in the United States have called for, it would fail in its mission to wipe out Hamas. Our research has shown that Israeli crackdowns in Gaza most often lead to increasing support and sympathy for Hamas among ordinary Gazans. Hamas won 44.5 percent of the Palestinian vote in parliamentary elections in 2006, but support for the group plummeted after a military conflict between Hamas and Fatah in June 2007 ended in Hamas's takeover of Gaza. In a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in December 2007, just 24 percent of Gazans expressed favorable attitudes toward Hamas. Over

the next few years, as Israel tightened its blockade of Gaza and ordinary Gazans felt the effects, approval of Hamas increased, reaching about 40 percent in 2010. Israel partially eased the blockade the same year, and Hamas's support in Gaza leveled off before declining to 35 percent in 2014. In periods when Israel cracks down on Gaza, Hamas's hardline ideology seems to hold greater appeal for Gazans. Thus, rather than moving the Israelis and Palestinians toward a peaceful solution, Israeli policies that inflict pain on Gaza in the name of rooting out Hamas are likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence.

To break the cycle, the Israeli government must now exercise restraint. The Hamas-led government may be uninterested in peace, but it is empirically wrong for Israeli political leaders to accuse all Gazans of the same. In fact, most Gazans are open to a permanent, peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet the views of the people who live in Gaza are still often misrepresented in public discourse, even as surveys such as Arab Barometer consistently show how different these narratives are from reality.

In the immediate term, Israeli and especially U.S. leaders need to secure the safety of Gazan civilians, 1.4 million of whom have already been displaced. The United States should partner with the United Nations to create clear humanitarian corridors and protected zones, and Washington should contribute to the UN's appeal for \$300 million in aid to protect Palestinian civilians—a step dozens of U.S. senators have said they will support. Finally, Israel and the United States must recognize that the Palestinian people are essential partners in finding a lasting political settlement, not an obstacle in the way of that worthy goal. If the two countries seek only military solutions, they will likely drive Gazans into the arms of Hamas, guaranteeing renewed violence in the years ahead.