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Press release

Failed aid policy?

A majority of Palestinians believe international donor aid to the PA is contributing to the political paralysis. A new Fafo survey says Palestinians believe Hamas should negotiate with Israel.

A majority of Palestinians think Western financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA) is doing more harm than good; two thirds (69 %) of those polled in February and March by Fafo, a Norwegian research institute, believe that aid to the PA contributes to widening the rift between Fatah and Hamas. A similar proportion (63 %) thinks that aid to the PA promotes corruption, and the same number believes it has very little to no effect on poverty alleviation. Only a third of those polled felt aid to the PA had a positive impact on services.

At the same time, Palestinians report steadily declining economic situations at home. As might be expected, the socio-economic picture is worst in Gaza. Overall, Fafo's studies over the last year point to a constant decline in household economies, painting a picture of coping systems being pushed to the limits.

The Oslo-based Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies conducted a survey measuring living conditions and opinions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip between 22 February and 4th March 2008.

The survey showed a clear preference among Palestinians for direct negotiations between Hamas and Israel, as well as between Hamas and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. A clear majority of Palestinians, including many Hamas voters, supports direct negotiations between Hamas and Israel. The support is strongest for Hamas-Israel negotiations on release of prisoners (84 %), but there is also considerable support for negotiations on lifting the siege of Gaza (66 %), for a long-term truce (64 %) and for peace negotiations (54 %).

A large majority of the respondents is of the opinion that Hamas and Fatah should initiate negotiations and reconcile: 60 % believe that they should negotiate without any preconditions. There are no regional differences regarding this question, but a majority of Hamas voters think that negotiations should take

place without preconditions, while Fatah’s supporters in general think that it should be conditional. However, people are pessimistic in regard to reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas under present circumstances: 70 % of the respondents fear that the West Bank and Gaza will remain separated for years.

Table 1. Support for negotiations between Hamas and Israel on four issues (in percent)

	Yes	No	Total		Yes	No	Total
Lifting the siege of Gaza	66	34	100	Release of prisoners	84	16	100
West Bank	70	30	100	West Bank	85	15	100
Gaza	58	42	100	Gaza	84	16	100
Fatah	67	33	100	Fatah	81	19	100
Hamas	57	43	100	Hamas	84	16	100
Peace	54	46	100	Long term truce (<i>hudna</i>)	64	36	100
West Bank	56	44	100	West Bank	66	34	100
Gaza	51	49	100	Gaza	62	38	100
Fatah	59	41	100	Fatah	59	41	100
Hamas	39	61	100	Hamas	39	61	100

Socio-economic conditions

The Palestinian economy was badly hit as a consequence of the boycott of Hamas’ election victory. Previous polls have pointed to weakened household economies even after salaries in the public sector were reinstated in April 2007. 55 % of the respondents in our survey claim that their economic situation has deteriorated during the past six months. The situation is most severe in Gaza where 62 % of all households report to have experienced a drop in their total income compared to 52 % in the West Bank. The economy has improved for 6 % of the population.

In Fafo’s previous poll from July 2007, 62 % reported a worsening private economy. The two polls combined show that the situation is even more severe now than last year and that it has been deteriorating steadily.

9 % of the surveyed households reported zero income for the month preceding the interview (West Bank 8 %; Gaza 10 %), while 23 % had a total household income under 1000 NIS (290 USD) in the same period. In Gaza, 48 % of all households had to manage with less than 290 USD a month, compared to 21 % of West Bank households.

The proportion of the population that considers itself rich is reduced from 24 % to 4 % in Gaza and from 8 % to 2 % in the West Bank, compared to the July poll. Conversely, the share that perceives itself poor increased from 14 % to 26 % in Gaza and remained at 17 % in the West Bank. About half the Palestinian population characterizes itself as neither rich nor poor (52 % for both the West Bank and Gaza).

34 % claim that they will be unable to cover basic consumption needs the coming three months (West Bank 27 %; Gaza 48 %). Notwithstanding regular food support from UNRWA, the situation is hardest for the camp refugees.

As concluded in Fafo's recent report, *Against the Odds. How Palestinians cope through fiscal crisis, closures and boycott*¹, Palestinians are enduring the crisis and have adapted to long-term conflict. The report depicts how families have marginal resources at hand and have adopted a modest lifestyle.

Last week's violent incidents in the Gaza Strip have again put the spotlight on the devastating conditions under which Palestinians live in that area. Fafo's latest poll reflects that living conditions have deteriorated gradually over the past two years.

People have become less hopeful. While 55 % of the population in July 2007 expected life to improve during the coming year, this fraction has now dropped to 44 % (West Bank 40 %; Gaza 50 %). One third (33 %) now believes that things will further deteriorate while 23 % expect that the situation will remain as it is.

As a result of deteriorating living conditions, low trust in political institutions and leaders (see below) and a widespread feeling of insecurity, one out of five households (18%) contains members who are considering leaving their place of residence. 20 % of them would like to move to a Western country while a majority want to migrate to another Arab country or move within the Palestinian areas. Less than half (42 %) of those who wish to leave actually think they will be able to do so.

A majority states that their motive for moving is to improve their living standards (56 %) or to get a job (26 %). 22 % want to move out of security concerns.

The political fallout

Steady impoverishment and continuing political deadlock has not altered the balance of popular support for the various Palestinian factions significantly, which remains similar to previous polls in recent years.

If elections were held today, 36 % would have voted for Fatah, 15 % for Hamas and 11 % for other parties or independents, while 31 % claim they would not cast their vote. In addition, 7 % have not decided who to vote for. Disregarding those who would not participate in the election, the results would be as shown in the table 2. Fatah would have been able to claim a large victory. In spite of the fact that the relative size of Hamas' electorate in Gaza is twice as large as in the West Bank, Fatah is by a clear margin the largest party in both regions. Compared to the July 2007 poll, Fatah has gained 7 points (up from 45 %) while support for Hamas remains unchanged at 22 %.

Table 2. Who would you vote for if there were PLC elections today? (in percent)

	Fatah	Hamas	Others	Don't know	Total
Total	52	22	15	10	100
West Bank	53	16	16	14	100
Gaza	51	32	14	3	100

N=All that would have cast a vote if elections were held now.

¹ See <http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/20041/index.html>.

About half of the population is of the opinion that the political leaders perform poorly. While Fatah supporters tend to back President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, it is mainly the adherents of Hamas that feel Haniyeh, the head of the dismissed Hamas government, is doing a decent job. There are small differences between residents in the West Bank and Gaza. See Table 3.

Table 3. Satisfaction with the performance of the main political figures (in percent)

		Very good	Good	Poor	Very poor	Total	
President Abbas	Total	13	40	21	26	100	
	Region	West Bank	11	43	22	24	100
		Gaza	15	35	19	31	100
	Vote	Fatah	26	53	11	10	100
		Hamas	3	12	22	63	100
Prime minister Fayyad	Total	12	40	20	28	100	
	Region	West Bank	10	43	21	25	100
		Gaza	16	35	17	33	100
	Vote	Fatah	22	54	13	11	100
		Hamas	3	14	20	64	100
Haniyeh	Total	17	32	21	29	100	
	Region	West Bank	12	33	25	31	100
		Gaza	25	32	16	27	100
	Vote	Fatah	4	20	28	48	100
		Hamas	53	39	4	3	100

One third of the respondents (33 %) thinks that Hamas has improved the security situation in the Gaza Strip. A majority of the Hamas voters holds this opinion (72 %) while this is the case for only 14 % of Fatah sympathizers. Just a minority of both parties' supporters (10 %) thinks, however, that Hamas has managed to improve the economic situation. Such results do not give much credit to the performance of Hamas. Yet, a vast majority attributes the main responsibility for continued insecurity in Palestinian society to Israel and the international community (93 and 89 % respectively). On the other hand, four out of five also put blame on the national executive powers.

The polarization between Fatah and Hamas supporters is reflected in all political aspects covered by the poll and does not help to break the political deadlock. 31 % of the respondents are of the opinion that the Fayyad government is the legitimate one, while 25 % think the same about Haniyeh's government in Gaza. 14 % of the respondents consider both governments as legitimate –a majority is Fatah voters. Nearly a third (31 %) says that none of the governments are legitimate and as many as 52 % of those who would abstain from voting share this view. In Gaza, a larger proportion recognizes both governments than in the West Bank.

Table 4. Which is the legitimate government? (in percent)

		Haniyeh	Fayyad	Both	None of them	Total
Total		25	31	14	31	100
Region	West Bank	21	30	15	34	100
	Gaza	30	32	13	25	100
Vote	Fatah	4	64	12	20	100
	Hamas	79	3	7	11	100

Improving the economy is the most important issue to address in Palestinian politics according to a majority of those polled. Second ranks reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails is judged as the third most important issue to address, while the peace process is the fourth most important issue on the list.

Peace negotiations

Support for the US-led peace process has dropped ten points since last summer: 47 % support a continuation of the peace talks between Abbas and Olmert that started in Annapolis. In a July 2007 poll conducted by Fafo, 58 % were in favour of initiating peace negotiations. Far more Fatah-followers support the talks than Hamas-voters (71 % vs 16 %). However, across party lines, there are few (12 %) who believe a peace agreement will be achieved before the end of the year, although it is President Bush's stated objective.

Any such talks will however have to deal with an unwavering Palestinian popular opinion. Only 7 % accept the idea of land-swaps along the border between Israel and a future Palestinian state as part of a peace process. On the issue of refugees, only 3 % of those polled indicated that they would be willing to compromise on the right of return (as embodied in UN resolution 194), even if Israel accepted responsibility for the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948 (*al-nakba*). In negotiating a peace agreement, most Palestinians (91 %) are unwilling to accept international (UN) sovereignty of the old city of Jerusalem. The resistance is most vocal in Gaza (93 %) and among Hamas-voters (97 %) but also considerable in the West Bank and among Fatah-supporters (89 % and 88 % respectively).

58 % in both Gaza and the West Bank oppose a cessation of the rocket attacks against Israel (84 % of the Hamas voters and 41 % of the Fatah voters).

Survey information

Fafo conducted face-to-face interviews between 22 February and 4 March. The period was marked by heavy Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip, resulting in 120 casualties in five days. At the same time Palestinian militants bombarded the Israeli city of Sderot with rockets from Gaza killing one person. Two Israeli soldiers died in the Gaza Strip.

The random, national sample contained 4416 households (West Bank 2304; Gaza Strip 2112). 92 % of the interviews were fully completed, and 4 % were partly completed. The refusal rate was 1 %, while non-contact, vacant dwellings or non-existent houses represent 3 % of the sample. The sample was prepared by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) in Ramallah. For information about the

household and each of its members the household head or another responsible adults was interviewed. For attitudinal questions an adult household member aged 18 or older was randomly selected.

The survey was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A tabulation report will be published on Fafo's web page 27 March 2008.

<http://www.fafo.no/indexenglish.htm>

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