



## **Public Opinion on the Palestinian Question is more Decisive than Ever**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Palestinian question is long-lasting. While Israel's constant violations of international law exacerbate the Palestinians' emergency call, public opinion has remained strong. This paper aims to assess the impact of civil society on the conflict-resolution. Existing research on the subject has usually focused on the reasons for the conflict or the importance of international initiatives. This report is based on an interpretative methodology that compares quantitative evidence on public opinion in Palestine and Israel, as well as qualitative information on observations, perceptions, and viewpoints in conflict resolution. The author argues that Palestinian public opinion can be both support and an obstacle in the conflict. This study allows obtaining information for a more balanced and, ultimately, more relevant approach to assessing public opinion and responding accordingly.*

**Keywords:** Palestine, Israel, Public Opinion, Palestinian Question.

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## Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest in the world. Therefore, the complex identities, beliefs, and socialization of the parties involved make it imperative to study and consider the past and current perspectives of both groups and how they react according to their visions. The author Thomas L. McPhail, in his theory of Global Communication, describes public opinion as “the relationship between the state and civil society, which is the cornerstone of understanding and dispute resolution.” It is common knowledge that conflicts lead to a policy-making process that governments undertake to address such events. From this process, in turn, derive the decisions that people make on the issues that affect their daily lives, from communications and discussions that occur in the widely known civic domain.

The massacres in Gaza in 2014 and 2021 demonstrate an attempt to project an identity that has been forged among the Palestinians. People’s claims for autonomy change the form of identities of opposition and politics of cultural identification when they view their state and culture becoming progressively disconnected from the mechanics of political decision-making in a globalized and transnational network. It is precisely in this framework that public opinion can most influence social movements. However, altering a worldview is still heavily dependent on one’s capacity to sway public discourse. In the Israeli-Palestinian situation, this debate arises -usually- after a confrontation on a large scale, and with wide and diverse media coverage.

Without a doubt, the contemporary public sphere depends proportionally on the global or local media system. Overseas activists incite discussion regarding the how, what, and why of a certain issue by working in the media environment, notably by organizing events that deliver compelling pictures and statements. This set of actions is articulated in public diplomacy, which is the prognosis in the international sphere of the standards and ideals of the community.

This report will analyze the variation in the public assessment of the main actors in the confrontations between Gaza and Israel in 2014 and 2021, emphasizing their influence on the current diplomacy of both States, and the reception given to the third-party actors.

Quantitative evidence is collected by an independent Palestinian non-profit institution, the Israeli policy analysis study center, and the media coverage provided on both occasions.

The information presented is obtained, to a large extent, from empirical surveys and public opinion polls among Palestinians and Israelis.

## **Operation Protective Edge Analysis (2014): The Beginning of Hamas's Popularity**

The armed confrontation between Gaza and Israel in 2014 caused devastating consequences for Palestine, considering that the year was the one that left the largest number of Palestinians dead since 1967. According to OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, around 1,500 lives were lost, of which 550 were children, only during the 50 days of Israel's military incursions into Gaza; in addition, the operation left some 100,000 people homeless. On the Israeli side, six civilians, including a minor, lost their lives.

On the part of the media coverage, conflict communications specialist Paul Bell described the situation on July 25, 2014, as “(...) *a flash of rationalism and impartiality in the public evaluation and the commentators' columns*”. However, the media quickly fell into their traditional narrative patterns: Israel's right to defend itself, using overwhelming armed power and technology; facing justice for the Palestinians, whose defense includes unarmed civilians and their historical case of injustice in the face of the alienation of the land, economic hunger and the term that in recent years has been gaining strength: the crime of ‘apartheid.’

From the public's perspective, Al Jazeera reported that the hashtag #GazaUnderAttack was used in more than 4 million posts on Twitter, compared to almost 200,000 on #IsraelUnderFire, a powerful index of how this conflict is perceived.

In addition, Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) published the monthly Peace Index survey in August<sup>1</sup>, which covered Israeli people's view on Operation Protective Edge and the conflict between Gaza and Israel, giving the following results:

- Over the duration of the surveys, Israeli Jewish popular sentiment has been nearly united in its assessment of Operation Protective Edge's justification: a mean of 95% (96%, 92%, and 97% among the results of three polls).

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<sup>1</sup> This survey was conducted in three stages: July 14, 2014 (246 adults), July 16-17, 2014 (185 adults), and July 23, 2014 (216 adults).

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- Only 3 percent of Israeli Jews think the IDF employed unreasonable force in Gaza (3.1%, 3.8%, and 3.7%, respectively).

These results indicate that Jewish public opinion gave support and legitimacy to the attack led by Israel. This ultimately shows that in 2014, the mentality of this sector of the population was -for the most part- aligned with the actions taken by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Similarly, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) conducted a public opinion poll on Operation Protective Edge and rising tensions in Jerusalem (see Table 1), where interviewees answered the following question: Do you think Israelis and Palestinians will return to the round of negotiations?

**Table 1.** Trading possibilities after Operation Protective Edge.

Answers	Israelis	Palestinians
They will return to negotiations soon	7%	24%
They will not negotiate again	<b>47%</b>	36%
They will return to negotiations soon and armed attacks will continue	32%	<b>37%</b>
They will not return to negotiations and armed attacks will continue	39%	26%
They will not return to negotiations but there will be no more attacks	8%	10%

*Source: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2014)<sup>2</sup>*

The figures indicate that the Israeli perspective on the 2014 conflict was characterized by support for government decisions. As can be seen in Table 1, almost 50% of Israelis did not see a possibility of returning to negotiations with the Palestinian State.

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<sup>2</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Surveys (PSR). (2014). *Special Gaza War Poll*. <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/492>

In contrast, due to the conditions to which the Palestinians are exposed, as well as the human damage caused as a result of this confrontation, Palestinian public opinion revolved around the reality they have lived since the beginning of the occupation as in the response majority leaves the door open to the continuation of armed conflicts in the future.

### **Analysis of the case Gaza - Israel 2021: The digital battle of the Palestinians**

The violence unleashed in May due to the decision to evict Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, the riots in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the attacks between the Palestinian and Israeli armed movements filled international coverage with multiple videos showing the suffering of civilians.

It was difficult for the United Nations to intervene in the conflict since no decisive action was taken by the UN Security Council. However, UNRWA - a United Nations body tasked with providing aid and safety to the nearly six million Palestinian refugees - spoke out against the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah and the violence.

As a result, the statements of both Governments diverged in substance and form. While Palestinian officials spoke out clearly against the attacks carried out by the government of Israel in Gaza and the disproportionate utilization of force in the Al-Aqsa Mosque; Prime Minister Netanyahu claimed the motive for the attacks was to exterminate the top leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Likewise, the media with the most presence in the Middle East, such as Al Jazeera or TRT, covered the events from the beginning of the demonstrations. Multiple videos were published on their social networks showing police brutality or testimonies from relatives of the victims.

Public participation also plays a significant role in knowledge distribution. As per the New York Times, infographics and rapid commentaries on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok received numerous likes, with the goal of interpreting the vocabulary and history of occupation, settler colonialism, apartheid, and forced displacement in Israel. Similarly, Snapchat users all across the world could see for themselves through the app's geolocation feature how Israelis in Tel Aviv lived a distinct life than Palestinians in Gaza.

The pressure on Israel was such that Defense Minister Benny Gantz spoke with executives at Facebook and TikTok, urging them to take a more proactive stance in removing content that incites violence and "terrorism." As a result, the Arab Center for Social Media

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Development published a new report entitled “Attacks on Palestinian Digital Rights.” The study was conducted on complaints of infringement of digital rights received between 6 and 19 May and the responses received from social networking platforms. The research exposes abuses on numerous technological and social media platforms, such as the proliferation of inciting hatred and instigation against Arabs and Palestinians in the Hebrew language, and it demonstrates an upsurge in assaults on Palestinians’ digital rights.

Some of the most outstanding details of the report were:

- The investigation claims that hashtags were concealed, historical information was deleted, and content and usernames were reduced, filtered, and deleted.
- The reported occurrences span a number of social networking sites, with 50 percent of the 500 reported cases on Instagram, 35% on Facebook, 11% on Twitter, and 1% on TikTok.
- Although pro-Palestinian groups concur that something appears unexpected at this stage, the increase of support has not yet resulted in the changes in policy they are hoping for.

Although it can be seen that international society assumed a significant role in the dissemination of information and awareness of the Palestinian cause, the public opinion of the Palestinians on the development of the actors during the confrontation had strong consequences on the legitimacy of their representatives.

Consequently, Table 2 shows the perspectives of the Palestinians in both clashes, 2014 and 2021, as well as the decrease in support for some actors and the increase in other causes.

**Table 2.** The difference in Palestinian prospects in 2014 and 2021.

Opinion Area	2014	2021	Percentage difference
Hamas Victory	79%	77%	-2.53%

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Support for rocket fire from the Gaza Strip

86%<sup>3</sup>      68%<sup>4</sup>      -20.93%

Approval of Gaza's performance against  
Israel

94%      94%      Not recorded

Approval of the ceasefire

63%      65%      3.17%

Satisfaction with the performance of  
Palestinian actors during the confrontation

<b>Hamas:</b>	<b>Hamas:</b>	<b>Hamas: -17.27%</b>
<b>88%</b>	<b>72.8%</b> <sup>6</sup>	AP: -69.44%
AP: 36%	AP: 11%	<b>Abbas: -79.49%</b>
<b>Abbas:</b>	<b>Abbas: 8%</b>	
<b>39%</b> <sup>5</sup>		

*Source: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2021)<sup>7</sup>*

According to the evidence presented, certain trends can be pinpointed. First of all, after the clashes between Israel and Hamas of 2014 and 2021, the confidence of the

<sup>3</sup> Condition: Supports the firing of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel if the siege and blockade are not ended.

<sup>4</sup> Condition: If Israel evicts or expels Palestinian families in Shaikh Jarrah.

<sup>5</sup> Abbas's approval rating rises to 49% in the Gaza Strip and falls to 33% in the West Bank.

<sup>6</sup> The belief that Hamas performance was "excellent" is higher in the West Bank (80%) compared to the Gaza Strip (67%), in villages / towns (85%) compared to cities and fields of refugees (74% and 71%) respectively), among holders of a Bachelor's degree (69%) compared with illiterates (56%), among those working in the private and non-governmental sector (78%) compared with working in the public sector (67%), and among Hamas sympathizers and third parties (88% and 75% respectively) compared to Fatah supporters (64%). 72.8% results from the average of public opinion.

<sup>7</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Surveys (2021). *Public Opinion Poll No (80)*. <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/845>

Palestinians in the victory of Hamas - in both contests - decreased by -2.53%, which is not as drastic a decrease as with public opinion regarding support for the launch of rockets from the Gaza Strip, which presents a difference of -20.93% compared to the popular support that the launch of rockets received in 2014. However, satisfaction with the military performance of Gaza continues to remain at 94% and has not registered changes since 2014. Likewise, the ceasefire on both occasions was seen as something necessary for the security - especially - of the Palestinians, since there is an increase of 3.17% in support of this decision.

Finally, the most radical changes in public opinion are definitely demonstrated in the satisfaction of citizens with the Palestinian actors, who had the task of representing them, militarily and diplomatically, on both occasions. On the part of Hamas, the group registered greater popular support in 2014 (88%), compared to 2021 (72.8%), so - perhaps unexpectedly - a drop of -17.27% is obtained. In contrast, both the Palestinian Authority and President Mahmoud Abbas, from the public perspective, may have reduced their acceptance in the decision-making process, evidenced in the reduction of -69.44% (PA) and -79.49% (Abbas), respectively.

### **Prospective Vision**

As has been demonstrated throughout this analysis based on quantitative information, the new public sphere encompasses a diversity of opinions and trends of Palestinians and Israelis, as well as global citizens.

These trends have emerged, under our object of investigation, after a direct confrontation. In this sense, the formalization of social movements in a permanent network of initiatives is aimed at altering decision-making processes that are redefining the socio-political landscape of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These social movements are often covered by media, especially social media. Technological advances related to the dissemination of information are considerably improving global access to communication. Communication through social networks has allowed us to increase both our knowledge, as well as our capacity for critical judgment and debate in the face of the multiple perspectives that are manifested through the opinion of users. However, these new technologies are vulnerable to electronic surveillance, interception, and suppression, so while social movements can help amplify the coverage of



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the situation in Palestine, the findings of the Arab Center for the Development of Social Networks demonstrate that they are exposed to constant censorship.

On the other hand, the results presented in this analysis show a really worrying trend. To a large extent, while the Palestinians have lowered their trust in the actors who represent them, Israeli Jews tend to take a favorable stance on their government and its actions. This is primarily one of the disadvantages of the Palestinian cause.

It is in this panorama where public opinion functions both as a support and as an obstacle to the Palestinian question. Hence, it is essential to build acceptance and validation of the citizens themselves towards their leaders and institutions, who are in charge of directing the possibilities of negotiation for the Palestinian people. The more acceptance spreads in the governance process, the more hope for the Palestinians in the fight for their independence.

The resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli depends largely on the opinions of its protagonists. How they think, why and in what context. International public opinion must be attentive to each demonstration, face-to-face or virtual. It has become clear that social networks move the orientation of political discourse. The little international coercion in the face of Israel's flagrant violations of international law makes the opinions of its nationals more important than ever. Without legitimacy, the actions of its rulers will not be supported. With legitimacy, they will not only be supported but even celebrated.

Hence, the actions of the Palestinian rulers must always take into account the reactions of their citizens to them. Political discourse must not be convincing to Israel. It must be convincing to its own citizens. Firmly, this is the only solution to increase the capacity of citizens' representation and carry it as the flag of their political actions.

Social movements have defended and achieved the resolution of multiple causes. The maximization of the impact of these turns out to be a fundamental point. The new public sphere, from which the relationship between the Palestinians and their state derives, is the cornerstone for understanding and strengthening their common goal. The Palestinian cause is essentially a democratic movement that demands new forms of political representation of the will and interests of the people in the governance process of its leaders and the international community.