

Most Palestinians Believe Hamas Should Change its Position on Eliminating Israel

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Contrary to Hamas Position, Majority Supports Two-State Solution

Hamas Victory Driven By Desire To End Corruption

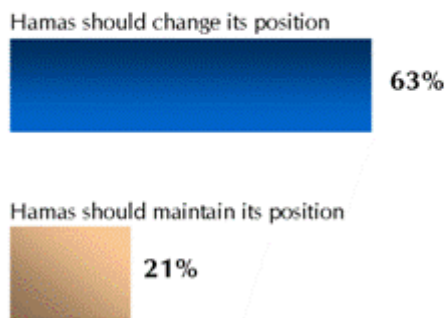
By Angela Stephens

The decisive victory of the militant Islamic group Hamas in last month's Palestinian legislative elections (winning 74 of 132 parliamentary seats) has raised the question of whether the Palestinian public has become aligned with Hamas' rejection of Israel's right to exist and its stated goal of creating an Islamic state covering all of historic Palestine, including what is now Israel. Hamas has come under increasing pressure to renounce its goal of eliminating Israel, but Hamas leaders have refused.

However, new polling following the election indicates that two-thirds of Palestinians believe Hamas should change its policy of rejecting Israel's right to exist. Most also support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Post-election polls indicate that Hamas' victory is due largely to Palestinians' desire to end corruption in government rather than support for the organization's political platform.

Palestinians: Hamas Position on Israel

Should Hamas maintain its position on the elimination of Israel?



NEC 1/2006 Most Palestinians agree that Hamas should recognize Israel's right to exist. Two-thirds (63 percent) of those polled Jan. 27-29 by Near East Consulting said Hamas should change its position calling for the elimination of Israel. Even among those who voted for Hamas, only 37 percent support Hamas' position that Israel does not have the right to exist.

A majority of Palestinians also supports the two-state solution. In a Feb. 8-12 poll by the Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC), 58 percent of Palestinians said they favor the two-state solution, while 22 percent favor "a bi-national state on all of historic Palestine." Three percent said they want an Islamic state (a volunteered response, not

included in the list of choices given to respondents).

Apparently the vast majority of Palestinians did not vote for Hamas because of its political goals but because of their desire to rid the Palestinian Authority of corruption, a theme Hamas campaigned on. Among those polled by JMCC who said they voted for Hamas, only 12 percent said they did so because of Hamas' political agenda. A plurality of 43 percent said they voted for Hamas because they hoped it would end corruption.

Fighting corruption was cited as the most important priority for the new government by 30 percent of respondents in the Near East Consulting poll—more than any other priority. The extent of the problem was highlighted earlier this month when the Palestinian Authority attorney general announced that some \$700 million has been stolen from the authority's coffers. Two-thirds (65 percent) in the Near East Consulting poll said they believe corruption will decrease under a Hamas-led government.

After fighting corruption, internal security and unemployment/poverty are the top priorities, cited by 13 percent and 12 percent, respectively, of those polled by Near East Consulting. Only 7 percent cited a peace settlement with Israel as the top priority.

Thus, Hamas' success is largely a rejection of prior governments, rather than an affirmation of Hamas' approach to dealing with Israel. Three out of four Palestinians (72 percent) said in the JMCC poll that they consider the performance of the previous Palestinian Legislative Council "bad" or "very bad." Expectations are high that the new council will do better—77 percent expect its performance will be "good" or "very good."

Furthermore it should be noted that Hamas did not receive the majority of the popular vote. With the Palestinians' mixed system of proportional representation according to party support for half the seats and district seats based on population for the other half, Hamas was able to take 58 percent of all seats with only 45 percent of the overall popular vote (the 58 percent includes three independents who campaigned with Hamas).

It is common after elections for some people to shift their views to align with the winning party. But in the JMCC poll, only 41 percent said they would vote for Hamas if the election were held again—down from the 45 percent who voted for Hamas. This suggests that rather than consolidating their position with the Palestinian electorate, some may now be feeling uneasy about the outcome, suggesting that some may have voted for Hamas as a kind of protest vote rather than out of a desire or expectation that Hamas would win. Indeed, the JMCC survey found that 74 percent of those polled did not expect Hamas' overwhelming victory.

Though other priorities are at the forefront for most Palestinians, a strong majority supports a peace agreement with Israel in principle and majorities want the new government to continue political negotiations with Israel and to honor the Oslo Accords signed with Israel in 1993, which included Palestinian self-government and mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization as the representative of the Palestinian people. The Near East Consulting poll found that 80 percent support a

peace agreement. The JMCC poll found that two-thirds (66 percent) want the new government to continue political negotiations with Israel, and 52 percent said that Hamas “has to go on with” the Oslo Accords, while 42 percent said it does not. Palestinians were divided in that poll on whether peace negotiations will improve under a Hamas-led government (41 percent no, 36 percent yes, 22 percent did not answer yes or no).

While Hamas has rejected negotiations with Israel, claiming that armed struggle is the only way to achieve Palestinian aspirations, most Palestinians do not support this position. Only 18 percent said in the JMCC poll that armed struggle is the best way to achieve Palestinian national goals, while 39 percent said the best way is “through negotiations” and 40 percent said “through negotiations and armed struggle.” Thus, while 58 percent do support armed struggle as part of the approach to Israel, only 18 percent support Hamas’ position of rejecting negotiation.

Though a majority of Palestinians support armed struggle, a modest majority feels that Hamas, in its new position leading the government, should refrain from engaging in it. The JMCC poll found 52 percent saying “Hamas has to stop its operations” in Israel and the occupied territories.

The high level of support for a national coalition government and for President Mahmoud Abbas remaining in power also indicate that most Palestinians do not offer blanket support for Hamas’ goals. Fifty-eight percent of those polled by JMCC said they hope to see a national coalition government established, while 24 percent prefer a Hamas government and 14 percent want a “technocrat government.” The long-ruling Fatah party, which won the next largest bloc of parliamentary seats (45) after Hamas, announced days after the election that it is not willing to join Hamas in a coalition government. Two-thirds of Palestinians (64 percent) oppose this decision, Near East Consulting found. That poll also found that 73 percent do not want Abbas, a Fatah leader, to resign from the presidency.

Polls:

Near East Consulting <http://www.neareastconsulting.com/plc2006/results/index.html>

JMCC <http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2006/no57.pdf>