

Palestinians on the United Nations

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UNRWA Elementary Co-Educational School in Khan Younis, Gaza February 2003 (S. Matz/UN)

The international community—spurred by renewed US interest—is gearing up for another major push for peace in the Middle East: President Bush recently dispatched Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to garner support for an international conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Tony Blair is leading the latest attempt of the Quartet—which includes the UN, the US, the EU and Russia—to salvage its “road map” for peace.

But polling data suggests that the Palestinians themselves may be wary of such multilateral efforts. Though the Palestinian public strongly supports multilateralism in principle, they show reluctance to submit to multilateral decision making. This appears to be derived from their fear that such decisions would inevitably be controlled by the United States, a country they greatly mistrust.

Out of 16 publics included in a recent WPO/Chicago Council poll, only the Palestinians rejected the idea that governments should be “more willing to make decisions within the United Nations” if this means going “along with a policy that is not its first choice. An overwhelming 81 percent of Palestinians think their leaders should not be more open to such concessions.

These results reflect the widespread view among Palestinians that the United Nations is largely an instrument of US policy, says Dr. Nabil Kukali, an expert on public opinion in the territories.

“Palestinians think that the UN, at least in the last few decades, is to a great extent dominated by the United States of America,” said Kukali, founder and director of the [Palestinian Center for Public Opinion](#), which conducted the survey in the Palestinian territories as part of a [worldwide study](#) by WorldPublicOpinion.org and [The Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#).

Thus it appears that securing Palestinian cooperation with multilateral efforts to resolve the Middle East conflict will be difficult unless they are convinced that the process is not simply being driven by the United States.

In principle Palestinians support a robust United Nations. Palestinians are among the publics most supportive of UN military action to stop genocide. Four out of five (78%) say the UN Security Council has the right to authorize the use of military force to prevent severe human rights abuses such as genocide. Only in France (85%), the United States (83%) and Israel (83%) do larger majorities favor such a right out of 12 publics polled.

Palestinians also show overwhelming support for the idea that the UN Security Council has the “responsibility” to authorize the use of force to stop genocide “even against the will of their own government.” Again Palestinians are among those most in favor of this idea out of the 12 publics asked. Seven out of ten Palestinians (69%) think the United Nations has a responsibility to authorize force in such cases. Only the Chinese (76%), Americans (74%) and the Armenians (66%) and Israelis (64%) show similarly high levels of support.

In fact, Palestinians show unusually high levels of support for allowing the UN Security Council to approve military action to: “defend a country that has been attacked” (81%) and “restore by force a democratic government that has been overthrown” (67%). They even agree that the UN Security Council can authorize the use of force to “stop a country from supporting terrorist groups” (61%).

But a majority of Palestinians express reservations about using UN power to address an issue that has recently been the focus of US efforts at the United Nations: Majorities do not think the Security Council should be able to approve force to prevent countries from either acquiring nuclear weapons (59%) or producing the fuel that could be used to make such weapons (57%).

Such opinions diverge from those held by most of the other countries surveyed. The most common answer in seven of the 10 publics polled is that the Security Council should have the right to use force to stop countries from getting nuclear weapons (average 53%) and in 12 out of 13 publics polled the most common view is that the council should be able to authorize military action to stop countries from producing nuclear fuel (average 50%).

Only in the Palestinian territories and South Korea do majorities think the UN Security Council should not be able to use force to halt nuclear proliferation (the French are divided) and only among the Palestinians does a majority believe it should not be able to authorize such action to restrict access to nuclear fuel.

Questions about nuclear proliferation, Kukali explained, raise the issue of the international community’s treatment of Iran, which Palestinians see as hypocritical. He says they compare the UN Security Council’s treatment of Iran to the treatment of Israel,

which, as a non-signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, was not punished with sanctions despite being widely assumed to possess a nuclear arsenal.

“The UN tolerates that Israel comes in possession of many hundreds of nuclear heads, which might be carried to and dropped on any Arab capital or on Teheran by the Israeli air force,” Kukali said. “On the other hand, the UN, under the US pressure, denies this right of possessing WMD to Iran. Why? The reason, [Palestinians] argue, is simple: Israel is a strategic ally to the United States in the Middle East.”

Palestinians also contrast Iran’s treatment with that of India and Pakistan, Kukali said. The international community did little to stop the two Asian powers from developing their nuclear capabilities, though the UN Security Council did condemn both of them after their tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998.

Negative Views of the US

Palestinians stand out—even compared to other Muslim publics—for their overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward the United States. The most recent [Pew Global Attitudes Project](#) survey finds that 70 percent of Palestinians have a “very unfavorable” view of the United States. And that’s an improvement from May 2003—just after the United States invaded Iraq—when a nearly unanimous 98 percent of Palestinians expressed unfavorable views of the United States, including 85 percent very unfavorable.

Among the eight Middle Eastern publics polled in 2007 by Pew, Palestinians were the most negative. The Turkish public was next with 83 percent saying they held an unfavorable opinion (75% very unfavorable).

Palestinians not only reject the idea that the United States should remain the “preeminent world power” but also that it should “do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries,” the WPO/Chicago Council poll shows. Instead Palestinians were one of only two countries out of 15 surveyed with a majority (55%) saying that the “US should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems.”

The survey by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion for WPO and the Chicago Council was conducted Oct. 8-15, 2006. The center interviewed 1,056 Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza.

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