

Armed Resistance versus Nonviolent Strategies: An Analysis of Palestinian Public Opinion

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This brief reviews Palestinian public opinion on preferences for non-violent strategies versus violent strategies, and examines what variables impact this dynamic. Particularly, I focus on the effect of social cohesion on people's preferences. I argue that preferences for armed strategies following institutional collapse are not always determined by social cohesion, or lack thereof; taking up arms may in fact be a legitimate strategy preference, not an anarchic reaction that societies "default" to when there are no other options.

Armed Resistance

Nonviolent Resistance

Palestine

Palestinian Public Opinion

The Palestinian Authority today is facing enormous pressure. Lack of international and regional political support, coupled with declining economic support and internal legitimacy, has led to a situation in which the PA's days may be numbered. This is especially true given Israel's seeming commitment to eminent annexation of much of the PA's promised territory. But Palestinian society today has undergone immense transformation since 1994; Palestinians are more fragmented, demobilized, and politically stagnant than ever before.⁽²⁾ If the Palestinian Authority collapses, and its formalized institutions which have overtaken Palestinian society for the past two decades disappear, how will Palestinians respond?

Will the territories degenerate into violence, or will Palestinians coordinate to undertake strategies to organize a Palestinian response?

This brief reviews Palestinian public opinion on preferences for non-violent strategies versus violent strategies, and examines what variables impact this dynamic. Particularly, I focus on the effect of social cohesion on people's preferences. I argue that preferences for armed strategies following institutional collapse are not always determined by social cohesion, or lack thereof; taking up arms may in fact be a legitimate strategy preference, not an anarchic reaction that societies "default" to when there are no other options.

Previous Literature and Theoretical Expectations

Studies of civil wars and conflict have put forth a number of explanations as to why people choose to engage in violence during critical junctures, such as civil conflict, uprising, or institutional/state collapse. Specifically, there has been a push to recognize

the importance of social dynamics in determining violent versus nonviolent, or armed versus unarmed, strategies. As one scholar notes, the "motivation to act...is not formed in isolation; instead it is the product of myriad social interactions."⁽³⁾ Thus it is

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² Dana El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³ Hahrie Han, "The Organizational Roots of Political Activism: Field Experiments on Creating a Relational Context," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 02 (May 2016): 299.

See also Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Risks: Participation in an Ethnic Rebellion," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 02 (May 2016): 247.

important to consider in what ways social dynamics specifically impact these motivations.

Some scholars point to the social ties of opposition organizations, i.e. the “direct interpersonal connections that link challenger groups to the broader population,” as a major determinant of violent versus nonviolent strategies.⁽⁴⁾ According to this research, the less insular or isolated a “challenger” group is, with greater ties to the civilian population, the more likely they will be able to commit to and sustain nonviolent campaigns of civil resistance.⁽⁵⁾ On a similar note, scholars such as Parkinson have pointed out that ties which motivate political action need not be only a function of shared ideology, but may rely more on “quotidian” social connections that facilitate direct and regular contact and therefore foster a sense of shared interest.⁽⁶⁾ Across a variety of contexts, the “weakening of social structures” has been linked to a rise in violence.⁽⁷⁾

Other researchers look at the relationship *between* challenger groups and find that group fragmentation leads to more violent outcomes.⁽⁸⁾ If not all groups can commit to nonviolence, then it becomes difficult to sustain such a strategy. Cunningham similarly emphasizes that “internal divisions in opposition movements increase chance of conflict with the state,” in the context of civil conflict.⁽⁹⁾ Finally, research on “spoilers” within conflict shows how extremist groups may undermine ongoing negotiations by fragmenting moderates.⁽¹⁰⁾

Finally, in my own research, I have attempted to expand the concept of social ties or group fragmentation to look at “social cohesion” more broadly, defining social cohesion as a sense of “collective purpose” in a given community.⁽¹¹⁾ I disaggregate that concept to

mean the capacity for collective action and intergroup cooperation between different segments of society, fueled by shared preferences. Much of this literature agrees that increased social ties/cohesion results in the adoption of nonviolent strategies over violent ones, generally speaking, given the higher cost of maintaining non-violent resistance in the face of state repression. This higher cost necessitates societal buy-in, via a number of mechanisms, in order for a nonviolent strategy to succeed. Moreover, as Cunningham notes, successful nonviolence requires simply a greater number of participants than violent strategies. This again corroborates the idea that social buy-in is key; high participation rates and extensive coordination is impossible to achieve without social cohesion.

In our case, Palestinians have undertaken major shifts in both social cohesion and capacity for mobilization. During periods such as the first intifada, or uprising, social cohesion was high. As a result, a unified leadership was able to emerge, and Palestinian resistance factions were overall able to adhere to a shared strategy of nonviolence. At other times, such as during the second intifada, there were instead a number of competing fronts. Palestinian political parties were unable to arrive at a unified strategy, with resistance against Israeli crackdown quickly turning violent and groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad pursuing extreme tactics such as suicide bombing. At times, there was such a lack of cohesion that Palestinians even turned the violence against each other. It is important thus to understand: Why did Palestinian society sustain nonviolence in some campaigns and not in others?

To answer this question, it is important to reassess our understanding of why people engage in violence.

4 Ches Thurber, “Social Ties and the Strategy of Civil Resistance,” *International Studies Quarterly* 63 (2019): pp. 974-986, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz049>.

5 Ibid.

6 Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (2013): pp. 418-432, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055413000208>.

7 Robert D Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, February 1, 1994), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

8 Wendy Pearlman, *Fragmentation and Violence: Internal Influences on Tactics in the Case of the Palestinian National Movement, 1918-2006* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

9 Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): pp. 660, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12003>.

10 Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence,” *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (2002): pp. 263-296, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081802320005487>.

11 Wendy Pearlman, “Precluding Nonviolence, Propelling Violence: The Effect of Internal Fragmentation on Movement Protest,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 47 (2012): 28.

Violence is not just the absence of a nonviolent option, but also a strategy in and of itself. As Humphreys & Weinstein note, social ties can actually spur membership in violent groups.⁽¹²⁾ And violence sometimes works, depending on how one gauges success. For instance, in the Palestine case specifically, some scholars point out that Hamas's engagement in violent tactics such as suicide bombing was actually effective in gaining concessions from Israel.⁽¹³⁾ If taken in isolation, that could be read as a

success by those who study these dynamics, and by the participants in violence themselves.

In the next section, we examine public opinion data on preferences for violent versus non-violent strategies across two main groups: those who perceive society as cohesive, and those who do not. In this way, we can see if, in a preliminary sense, whether social cohesion has an impact on people's preferences. Furthermore, this will help us come to some conclusions as to what we can expect from Palestinians in the event of the PA's collapse.

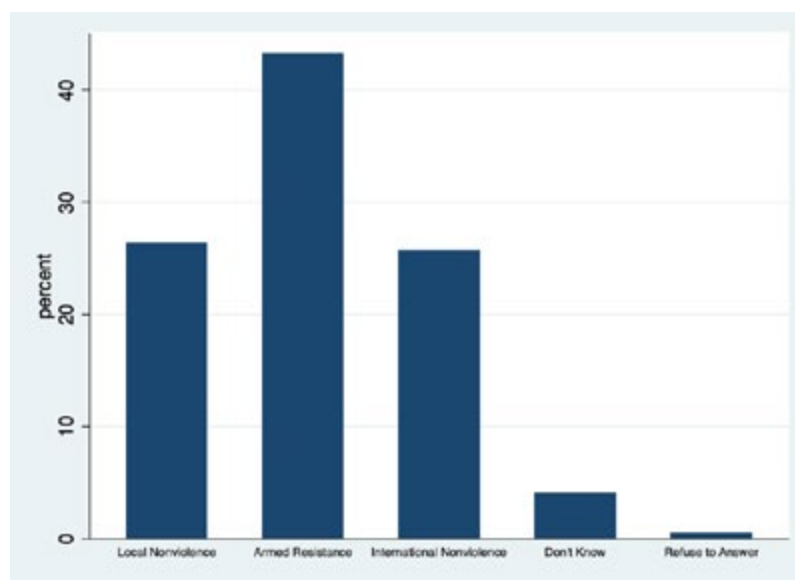
Analysis⁽¹⁴⁾

Respondents were given the following question: what should the Palestinian factions do in the event of the PA's collapse? The options were:

1. Palestinian factions must organize local nonviolent resistance campaigns.
2. They must return to armed resistance.
3. They must work through international organizations to pressure the international community.

The basic results of this question can be found below in Figure 1. Armed resistance is the most preferred option, followed by local nonviolent campaigns and finally, by a close margin, the international nonviolent strategy last. This corroborated polling done by other organizations, such as the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research; in their latest poll, they also found that most Palestinians prefer armed resistance, given what they see as the futility of the ongoing process and the impending annexation threat.⁽¹⁵⁾ It is nevertheless important to

Figure 1: Palestinian Preferences for Violent versus Nonviolent Strategies



¹² Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil Wars." *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): pp. 436–455.

¹³ Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 03 (August 2003): pp. 343-361, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305540300073x>.

¹⁴ This was conducted through the Arab Public Opinion Index, a project of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

¹⁵ June 2020 Poll, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

note here that the absolute majority of respondents prefer some form of nonviolent strategy, in spite of increased repression, land theft, and a peace process designed to keep them without a state or right to self-determination. This challenges the notion of grievance theory, i.e. that grievances as a result of repression or resource deprivation spurs violent rebellion.⁽¹⁶⁾

There are also statistically significant differences between respondents from Gaza and respondents from the West Bank (Table 1). Understandably, those in Gaza are more likely to support armed struggle, given the ongoing blockade, severe repression and war, as well as the ineffectiveness of negotiations between Hamas and the state of Israel. Conversely, they are also slightly less likely to support local nonviolent campaigns, again given their limited impact on the blockading power.

Table 1: Overall Results

Preference	West Bank	Gaza
Local Nonviolence	26.4%	25.1%
Armed Resistance	43.3%	45.7%
International Nonviolence	25.7%	26.9%
Don't Know	4%	2.2%
Refuse to Answer	0.5%	0.2%

Pearson chi2(4) = 11.807

P value = 0.019**

To determine whether perceptions of social cohesion have an impact on preferences for future strategies, we also directly asked respondents whether or not they perceived society as being cohesive, or divided and polarized. If social cohesion has an impact on preferences, we should see a statistically significant difference between those who perceive society as

cohesive versus those who do not. What we find using a chi-square test is that the two groups are different at a statistically significant level. The raw numbers show most Palestinians do not believe that society is cohesive; this is in line with studies on the erosion of social cohesion in the Palestinian territories following the creation of the Palestinian Authority. But, between the two groups, those who perceive society as being cohesive are less likely to support violent action. This comports with the literature on this subject as well. Interestingly, those who perceive society as cohesive are also more likely to support international non-violence.

Table 2: Results by Perception of Social Cohesion

Preference	Society is Cohesive	Society is Polarized and Divided
Local Nonviolence	25.8%	26.8%
Armed Resistance	40.7%	44.8%
International Nonviolence	31.2%	24.6%
Don't Know	2.1%	3.3%
Refuse to Answer	0.3%	0.4%

Pearson chi2(12) = 39.575

P value = 0.000***

Finally, there are a number of variables which could possibly impact preferences for nonviolent versus violent strategy. These include: income, education level, involvement with a political party, and political grievance.⁽¹⁷⁾ We include these variables in a multinomial regression analysis, in addition to a dummy variable capturing territory (1 for West Bank, 2 for Gaza), with future preferences being the main dependent variable.⁽¹⁸⁾ Results can be found below:

16 Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

17 Wording of these questions can be found in the appendix.

18 A multinomial regression analysis is suitable when the dependent variable (in this case, the question on preferences) is a nominal variable, meaning there is no intrinsic ordering to the answer choices. Regression analysis can include multiple variables at one time, and helps to assess whether there are statistically significant relationships between each variable and the main dependent variable. It also allows us to determine the direction of the relationship between each variable and the dependent variable, by looking at whether the coefficient is positive or negative, as well as the size of the impact of each variable on the outcome.

Table 3: Regression Results

		Model 1 Multinomial logit model
Nonviolent Resistance	(Base outcome)	
Armed Resistance	Income	-0.135* (0.082)
	Gaza	0.249** (0.139)
	Political Affiliation	0.104 (0.085)
	Education Level	-0.033 (0.042)
	Political Grievance	0.001 (0.005)
International Nonviolence	Income	-0.098 (0.092)
	Gaza	0.249 (0.155)
	Political Affiliation	0.174** (0.089)
	Education Level	-0.043 (0.047)
	Political Grievance	-0.003 (0.006)
	N (total)	1504 LR chi2(20) = 51.46 Prob > chi2 = 0.0001

Income is significant at the $p < 0.1$ level, and has a negative impact on people’s preferences for violent resistance versus nonviolent. This means the wealthier a respondent is, the less likely they prefer armed resistance. Secondly, the territory variable continues to be statistically significant. Being in Gaza makes respondents more likely to support armed resistance, as the basic analysis also showed. And finally, affiliation with a political party has a positive impact on the likelihood of preferring international nonviolent strategy to local strategy. This is an interesting result, as one would presume those who are more politically active in local politics would believe more in the efficacy of local action, but perhaps this speaks to the internationalization of the Palestinian issue, and the position of the largest Palestinian political party – Fatah – which continues to engage in negotiations and various international campaigns. However, this is only one hypothesis and more research is needed to determine the source of variation we see on this issue.

Implications and Conclusion

The legacy of the Oslo Accords and the creation of the PA has clearly fragmented Palestinian society and impacted social cohesion within the territories. This is demonstrated via public opinion polls, such as the one above, and through existing research on this subject. As a result, Palestinians have lost faith in the efficacy of nonviolent protest as well as the international community. A return to armed resistance is the most popular preference among Palestinian

respondents, both in our polling as well as previous polling by other institutions.

But, even if the PA were to collapse tomorrow, the legacy of demobilization and fragmentation that it leaves behind bodes poorly for Palestinian resistance, armed or not. The current state of fragmentation among Palestinian society means that different political factions are less effective at coordinating with each other on common strategies and objectives.⁽¹⁹⁾ If the PA is unable to serve as the representative of the

Palestinian people in the territories vis a vis Israel, and is unable to quell Israeli aggression, we can expect some level of chaos within the territories as a result. When the second intifada erupted, Palestinian factions were divided on how to proceed, with some taking up arms and some not. This led to a less than optimal outcome in terms of their ability to face Israeli aggression, and at times it even led to intra-Palestinian armed conflict. Today, those dynamics threaten to repeat themselves. The clear lack of leadership facing Palestinians, and the deeply divided populace the PA leaves behind, means Palestinian factions face a unique challenge if/once the PA is no more.

It is clear that Palestinians find business as usual when facing the Israeli occupation no longer acceptable, and that they find the status quo untenable. These grievances can be harnessed to demand concessions from the Israeli side, if Palestinian political elites can effectively unite around a common strategy. Their track record bodes poorly as of late, but it may still be possible. The cessation of security coordination between the PA and Israel is a good first step. This may also especially be the case if Palestinian political elites are able to recognize where Palestinian organizing is most successful, and where new leadership has the potential to emerge. Examples of mobilization which has occurred, despite steep odds, include how Palestinians have attempted to revive the popular committees in particular towns and neighborhoods,⁽²⁰⁾ as well as the mutual aid societies in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic.⁽²¹⁾ Youth leaders and their new repertoires of contention are key here. The most impactful organizing in recent years has emerged in untraditional spaces – on the margins of the territories such as in the villages, and in areas with few of the traditional institutions in play such as in Jerusalem. It is to these spaces that Palestinian political elites should look in order to harness the popular will. Only in this way can Palestinians emerge from the chaos with an effective, targeted campaign against the Israeli occupation, armed or not.

20 El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized*, Chapter 4.

21 Zaha Hassan and Nathan Brown, “Could the Pandemic Jump-Start National Reconciliation in Palestine?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 20, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/20/could-pandemic-jump-start-national-reconciliation-in-palestine-pub-81833>.

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