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# Popular Political Opinions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 2011

Insights from the Arab Opinion Index

## الرأي العام السياسي في الضفة الغربية وقطاع غزة منذ عام 2011 قراءة في نتائج المؤشر العربي

**Abstract:** Alongside a volatile security situation in the West Bank, humanitarian circumstances in the Gaza Strip continue to deteriorate. In both territories, these dire conditions are driven by an ongoing political reality imposed by Israeli settler colonialism. This brief analysis examines popular opinions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip toward certain political issues in order to highlight major differences of opinion between people in both territories. This analysis utilizes data provided by the Arab Opinion Index (AOI), an annual survey conducted since 2011 by the Public Opinion Polling Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, where a total of 13,400 respondents in Palestine have been surveyed.

**Keywords:** Palestine; West Bank; Gaza Strip; Arab Opinion Index; Political Opinions.

**ملخص:** يعيش الناس في الضفة الغربية في ظلّ وضعٍ أمني غير مستقر، بينما يستمر الوضع الإنساني في قطاع غزة بالتدهور. إنّ هذه الأوضاع الحرجة في كلا المنطقتين مدفوعة بواقعٍ سياسي مفروض على الفلسطينيين بسبب الاستعمار الاستيطاني الإسرائيلي. تسعى هذه الورقة الموجزة إلى تحليل الرأي العام في الضفة الغربية وقطاع غزة تجاه بعض الأحوال السياسية بغرض اكتشاف نقاط الاختلاف الرئيسة بين الناس في المنطقتين. ويستخدم هذا التحليل البيانات التي يقدّمها استطلاع المؤشر العربي الذي تُجرّيه سنوياً وحدة استطلاعات الرأي العام في المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات منذ عام 2011 في عدد من البلدان العربية منها فلسطين، حيث استُطلعت آراء ما مجموعه 13400 متجاوب.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** فلسطين؛ الضفة الغربية؛ قطاع غزة؛ استطلاع المؤشر العربي؛ الآراء السياسية.

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## Introduction

The first two months of 2023 have been the bloodiest for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2000,<sup>1</sup> with confrontations breaking out in response to escalating violence committed by Israeli forces that resulted in the killing of 65 Palestinians, 13 of them children. Occupation forces also attacked Palestinian cities in what may be considered the deadliest series of raids since the 2000 *Intifada*.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were subjected to three days of Israeli aggression that caused the deaths of 49 people, 17 of whom were children, and wounded another 360.<sup>3</sup> Amid a 15 year-long siege by Israel, the economic and social situation in the Gaza Strip is further exacerbated by Egypt's border restrictions, thereby depriving Gazans of basic necessities such as electricity, healthcare, and water and leaving around 80% of the Strip's 2.1 million inhabitants dependent on humanitarian aid.<sup>4</sup>

The security situation in the West Bank is thus highly volatile, and humanitarian circumstances in Gaza continue to deteriorate.<sup>5</sup> Yet in both territories, these precarious conditions are driven by an ongoing political reality imposed on Palestinians by Israeli settler colonialism. The geographic separation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, especially given the Israeli siege on Gaza since the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) seized control of the Strip in June 2007, has further separated the two areas from each other, including their populations' political needs and aspirations. Therefore, there is a need to explore how people in each territory perceive their political conditions, and where they converge or diverge in their perception of politics.

This analysis uses data provided by the Arab Opinion Index (AOI),<sup>6</sup> an annual survey conducted by the Public Opinion Polling Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies since 2011 in selected Arab countries to gauge public opinion around political, cultural, and social issues. In Palestine, a total of 13,400 respondents have been surveyed since 2011: 1,200 in 2011; 1,400 in 2012-13; 1,500 in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017-18; and 2,400 in 2019-20 and 2022.

## General Opinions

In 2022, 88.4% of Palestinians in the West Bank reported that the situation in Palestine is headed in the wrong direction, compared to 8.6% who thought the situation is going in the right direction. For Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, a majority of 74.4% believed that the situation is headed in the wrong direction, versus 22.4% who reported the opposite.<sup>7</sup> According to respondents, the main reason why things are headed in the wrong direction is the poor economic situation, with 41.3% believing so in the Gaza Strip in contrast to 30.9% in the West Bank. The second and third reasons that people in Gaza identified are the unstable political situation (18.3%) and the occupation (13.9%) respectively, while West Bankers identified the bad security situation (15.2%) and the unstable political situation (11.1%).

<sup>1</sup> "Israeli forces kill Palestinian, thousands protest violent raids," *Al Jazeera*, 24/2/2023, accessed on 26/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3XWgK7C>

<sup>2</sup> "'Catastrophic': Palestinians recount fatal Israeli raid on Nablus," *Al Jazeera*, 23/2/2023, accessed on 26/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3kBDlxc>

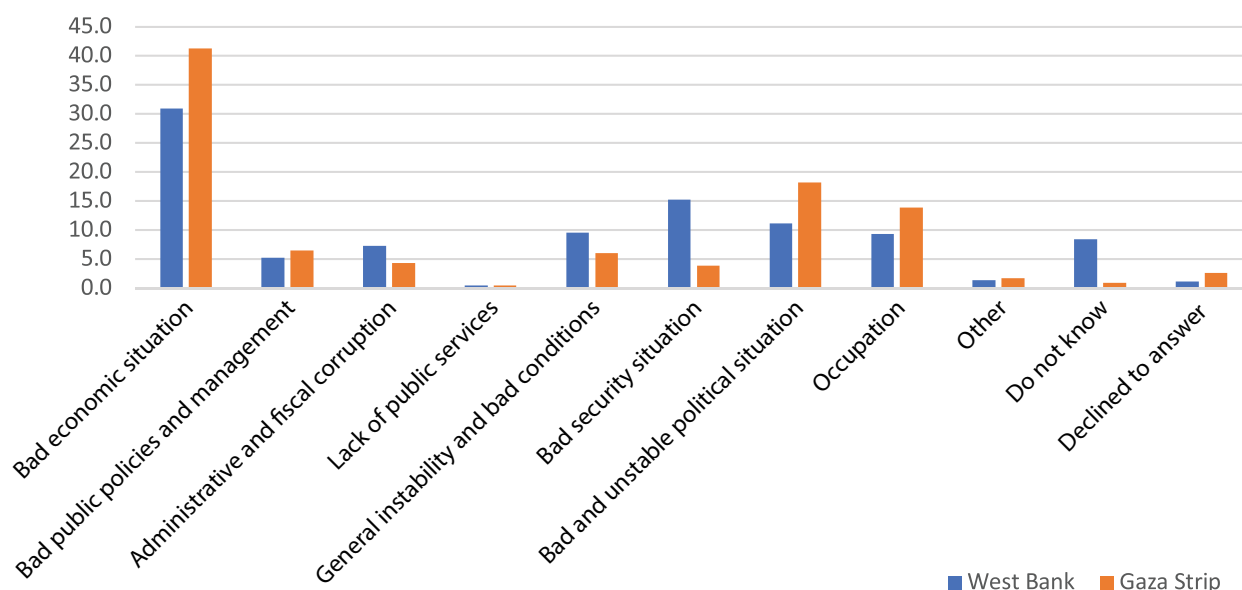
<sup>3</sup> "Gaza: The names and faces of the 17 Palestinian children killed in Israel's onslaught," *Middle East Eye*, 8/8/2022, accessed on 26/2/2022, at: <http://bit.ly/3m9DybC>

<sup>4</sup> "Palestine Factsheet," *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*, accessed on 26/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3Z0n83V>

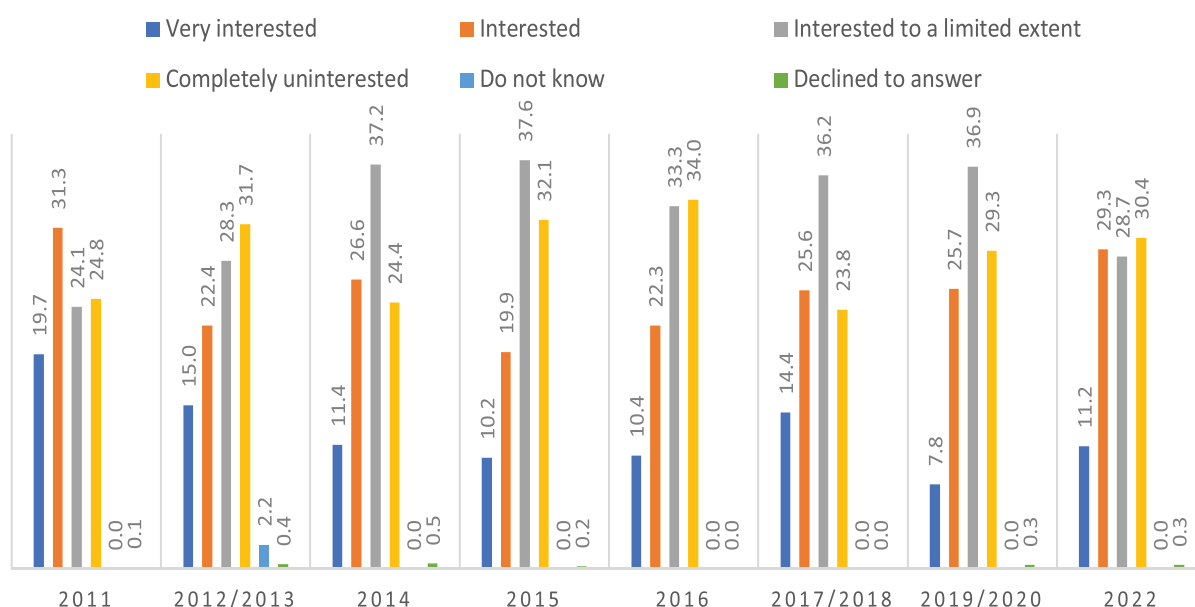
<sup>5</sup> "Israel and Palestine: Events of 2022," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed on 26/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3kuG8sc>

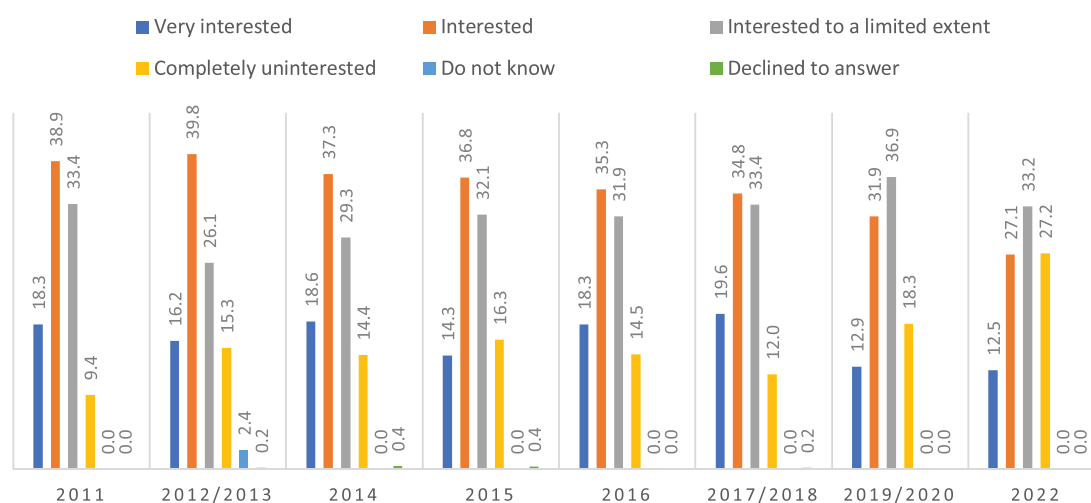
<sup>6</sup> "Arab Opinion Index," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, accessed on 20/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/31BfeXw>; For more AOI analysis on Palestine, see: "Arab Public Opinion on the Palestinian Issue," in: Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London: Hurst, 2022), pp. 289-303; Mohammad AlMasri, "Assessing Arab Public Opinion toward the Palestinian Issue," *Almuntaqa*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 99-107; Dana El Kurd, "Armed Resistance versus Nonviolent Strategies: An Analysis of Palestinian Public Opinion," *Almuntaqa*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2020), pp. 80-86.

<sup>7</sup> Another survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey during 7-10 December 2022 indicated that 6% of the Gazans evaluate positively the situation in the Gaza Strip in contrast to 22% in the West Bank. See: "Public Opinion Poll No. 86," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey*, 13/12/2022, accessed on 26/2/2022, at: <http://bit.ly/41Fk9j9>

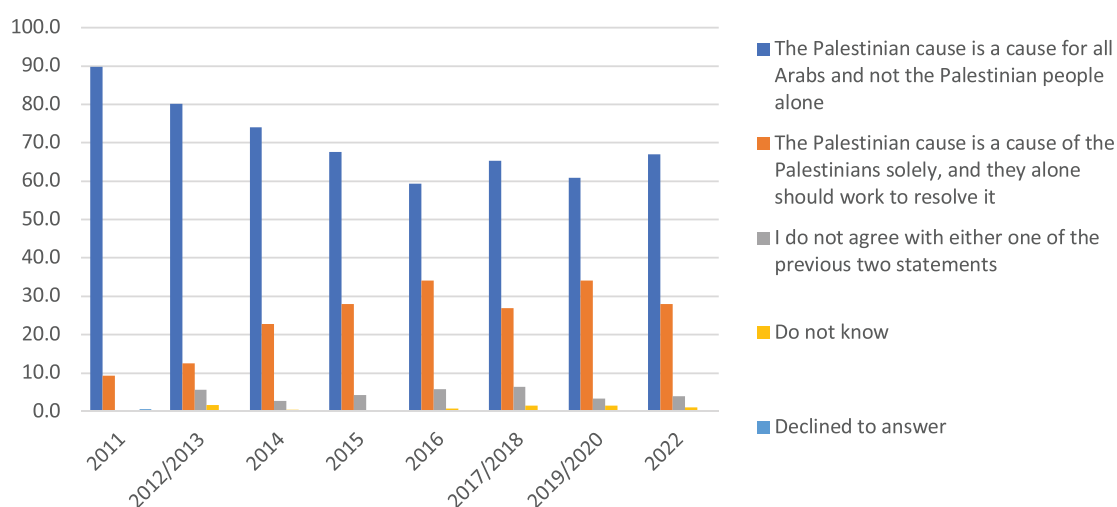
**Figure (1): Reasons why things are heading in the wrong direction in 2022**

It is somewhat paradoxical that in a conflict zone like Palestine, where the vast majority of people are inundated by political conflicts and beset by the consequences of war and settler colonialism, AOI responses from Palestine reveal widespread political apathy. Almost every year since 2014, a higher percentage of the population is very uninterested in political affairs in the West Bank than in Gaza, with 37.2% interested only to a limited extent in 2014, 37.6% in 2015, 33.3% in 2016, 36.2% in 2017-18, 36.9% in 2019-20, and 28.7% in 2022. In the Gaza Strip, as Figure (3) shows, people have grown less interested in political affairs over time: a total of 57.2% were very interested or interested in 2011, followed by 56% in 2012-13, 55.9% in 2014, 51.2% in 2015, 53.6% in 2016, 54.4% in 2017-18, 44.8% in 2019-20, and 39.6% in 2022. The rest were either interested to a limited extent or completely uninterested.

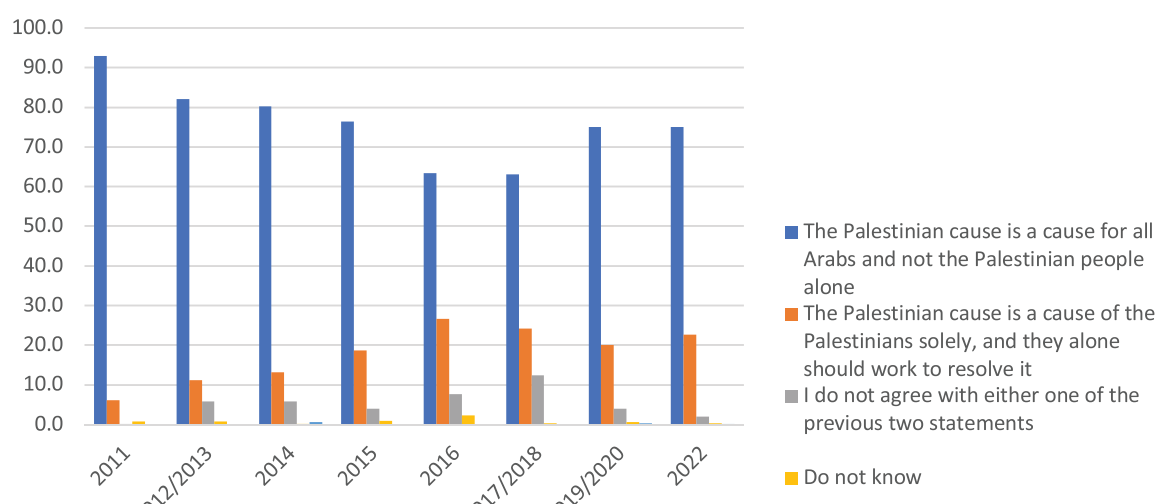
**Figure (2): Interest in Palestinian politics in the West Bank**

**Figure (3): Interest in Palestinian politics in the Gaza Strip**

In 2011, Palestinians perceived their cause as an Arab cause and not one of the Palestinian people alone. Though this perception is still true in 2022 in both territories, it has been in decline; this percentage in the West Bank, which stood at 89.7% in 2011, has now declined to just 67% in 2022. This corresponds with the growing number of Palestinians who consider the Palestinian cause the cause of the Palestinians solely and believe they alone should work to resolve it, increasing from 9.3% in 2011 to 27.9% in 2022. In the Gaza Strip, as many as 92.9% of respondents in 2011 believed that the Palestinian cause is the cause of all Arabs, not the Palestinian people alone, as opposed to only 6.2% who saw it as solely the cause of the Palestinians which they alone should work to resolve. These results must be placed within the context of the Arab uprisings, during which slogans and chants calling for the freedom of Palestine and the Palestinians were widespread. Yet both percentages had changed drastically by 2022; now, 75% of Gazans think that the Palestinian cause is the cause of all Arabs while 22.6% see the opposite. These figures may be influenced by the normalization agreements some Arab countries signed with Israel in 2020, namely the United Arab Emirates in August, Bahrain in September, Sudan in October, and Morocco in December.<sup>8</sup>

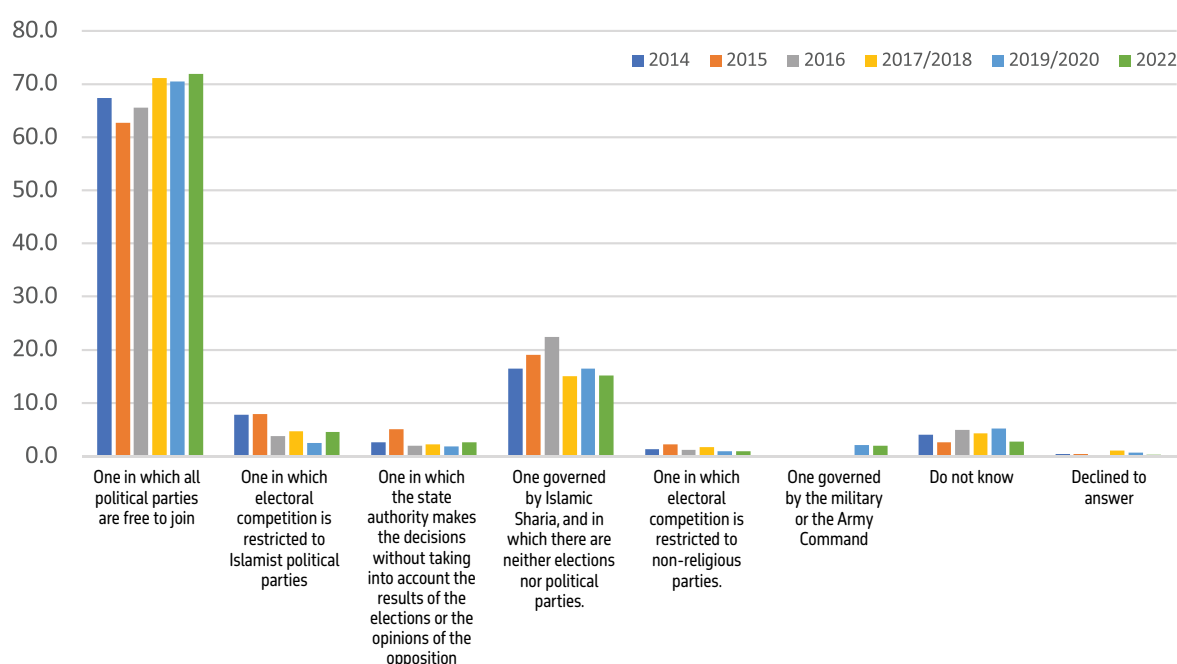
**Figure (4): West Bank on the Palestinian cause**

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that in a survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey in the period 7-10 December 2022, 66% of Palestinians regained a lot of trust in Arab nations following their disappointments with the several Arab normalization treaties signed with Israel. This renewed trust came after the huge support to Palestine showcased by football fans during the 2022 Qatar World Cup. 21% of the Palestinians said that they regained some trust, 5% said that their trust remained insignificant, and 4% said that they do not have any trust in the Arab world at all. See: "Public Opinion Poll No. 86."

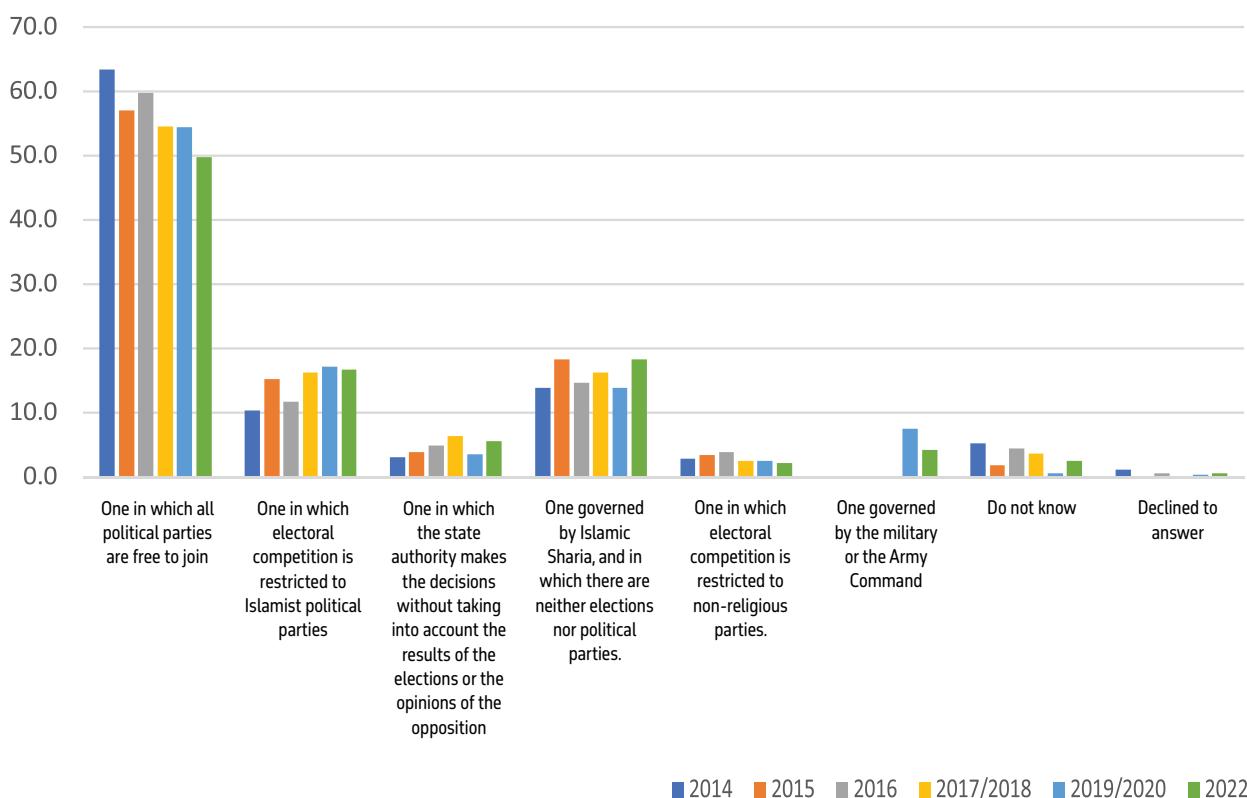
**Figure (5): Gaza Strip on the Palestinian cause**

## Suitable Political Systems to Palestinians

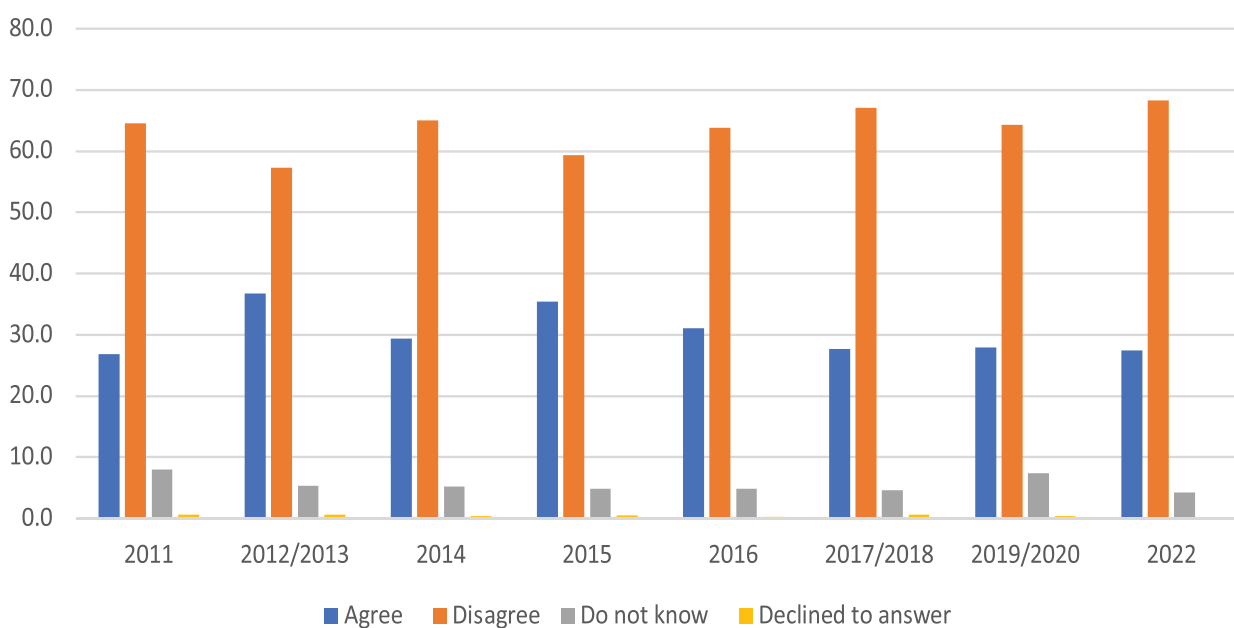
People in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip identified a political system where all political parties are free to join as the most suitable for Palestine, as shown in Figures (6) and (7). However, the second and third choices in both territories were a system governed by Islamic Sharia and a system where electoral competition is restricted to Islamist political parties, respectively. The aggregate percentages of the second and third choices in the West Bank amounted to 24.2% in 2014, 27% in 2015, 26.2% in 2016, 19.7% in 2017-18, 18.9% in 2019-20, and 19.8% in 2022. In the Gaza Strip, the aggregate percentages were 24.2% in 2014, 33.5% in 2015, 26.3% in 2016, 32.6% in 2017-18, 31.1% in 2019-20, and 35.1% in 2022. The explanatory factor here may be the commitment of Islamist movements to resistance against Israel over the past two decades, granting these movements a greater degree of legitimacy compared to other groups or parties described as "secularist". Another factor may be the conservative public mood in Palestine generally.<sup>9</sup>

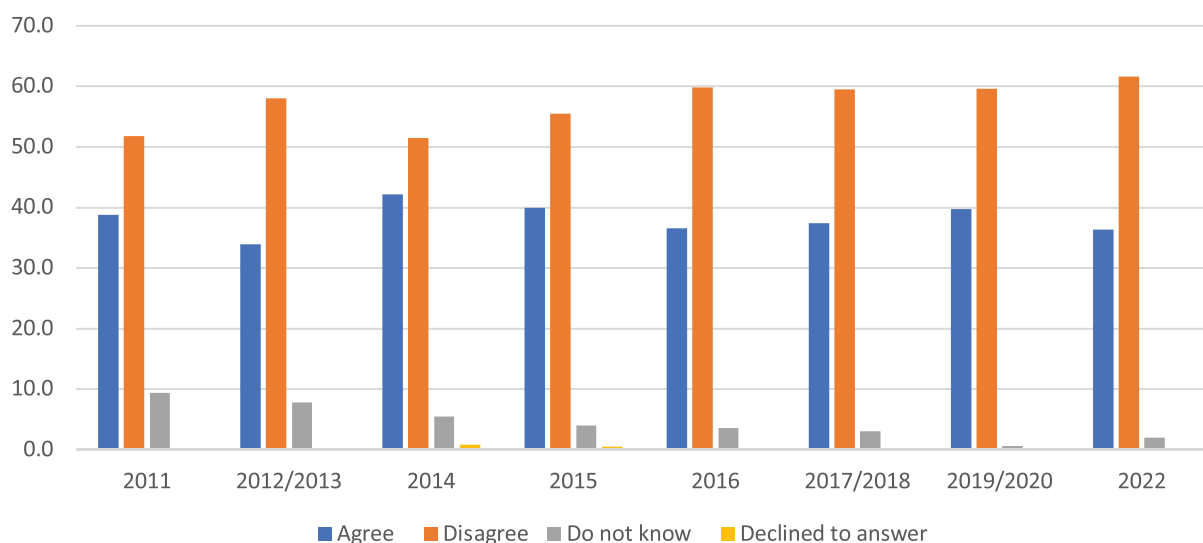
**Figure (6): West Bank on the most appropriate political system**

<sup>9</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the public movement that rejected the implementation of CEDAW agreement as a way of preserving the identity. "Palestinian clans reject CEDAW and call for the closure of feminist institutions," *Alaraby Aljadeed*, 22/12/2019, accessed on 26/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3EEtOfV>

**Figure (7): Gaza Strip on the most appropriate political system**

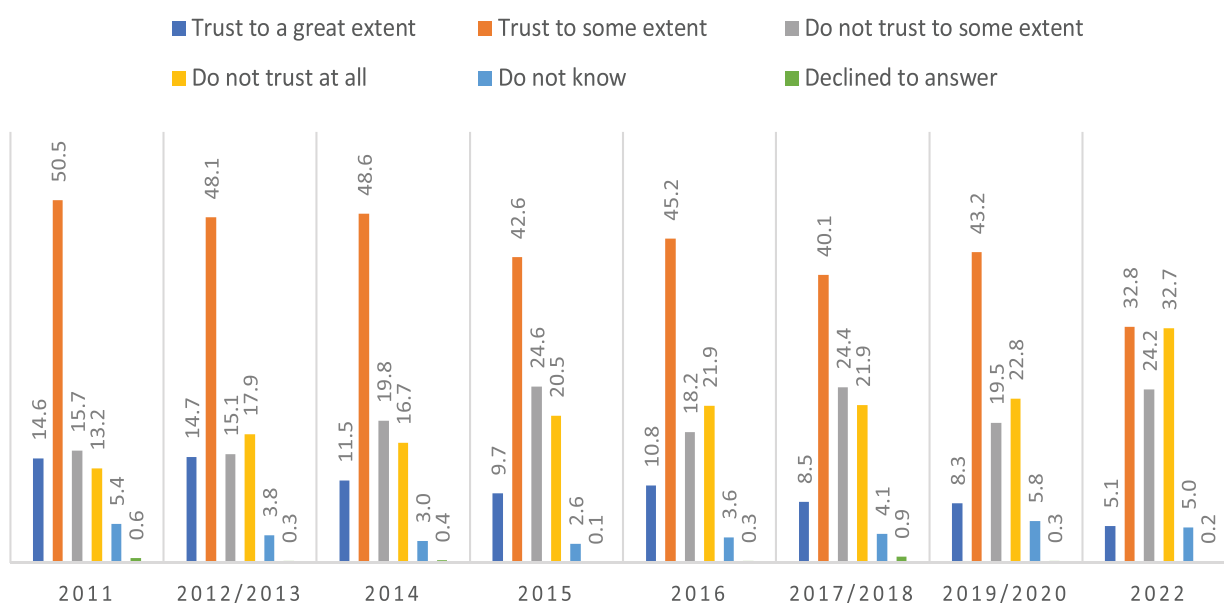
These figures are supported by responses as to whether religion should be separated from politics. In both territories, people who disagreed with separating religion from politics constituted a stable majority throughout the years, with similar figures reported in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

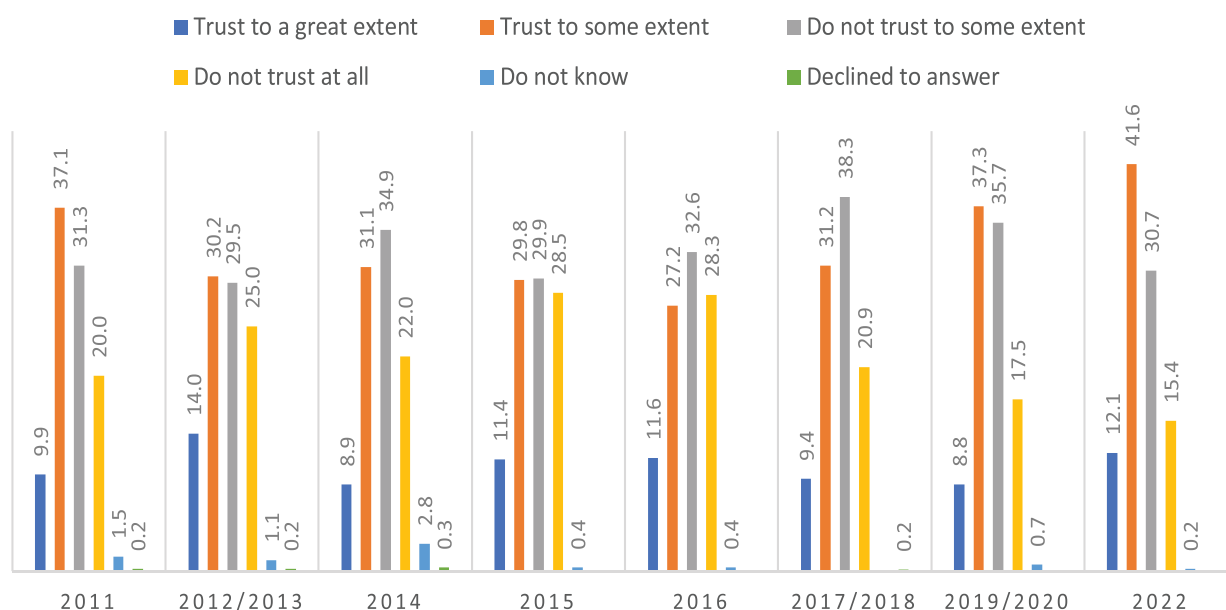
**Figure (8): West Bank on the separation of religion and politics**

**Figure (9): Gaza Strip on the separation of religion and politics**

## Trust in Politics Among Palestinians

Figure (10) portrays how responses from the West Bank reflect a significant decrease in trust in the government and a correspondingly sharp increase in distrust. The aggregate percentage of those who trust the government versus those who do not varied from 2011 (65.1% and 28.9% respectively) to 2022 (37.9% and 56.9% respectively); people in the West Bank reliably tended to trust the government to some extent over the years until 2022, when this trust decreased sharply. A different pattern of trust and distrust is prevalent in the Gaza Strip, as shown in Figure (11). While in 2011 the aggregate percentage of those who trust the government versus those who do not was 47% versus 51.2% respectively, the former percentage declined sharply and reached the peak of its decline in 2016 (38.8%), only to begin rising again and reaching 53.7% in 2022. The percentage of those who distrust the government rose to 60% in 2016, then declined to 46.1% in 2022.

**Figure (10): Trust in the government in the West Bank**

**Figure (11): Trust in the government in the Gaza Strip**

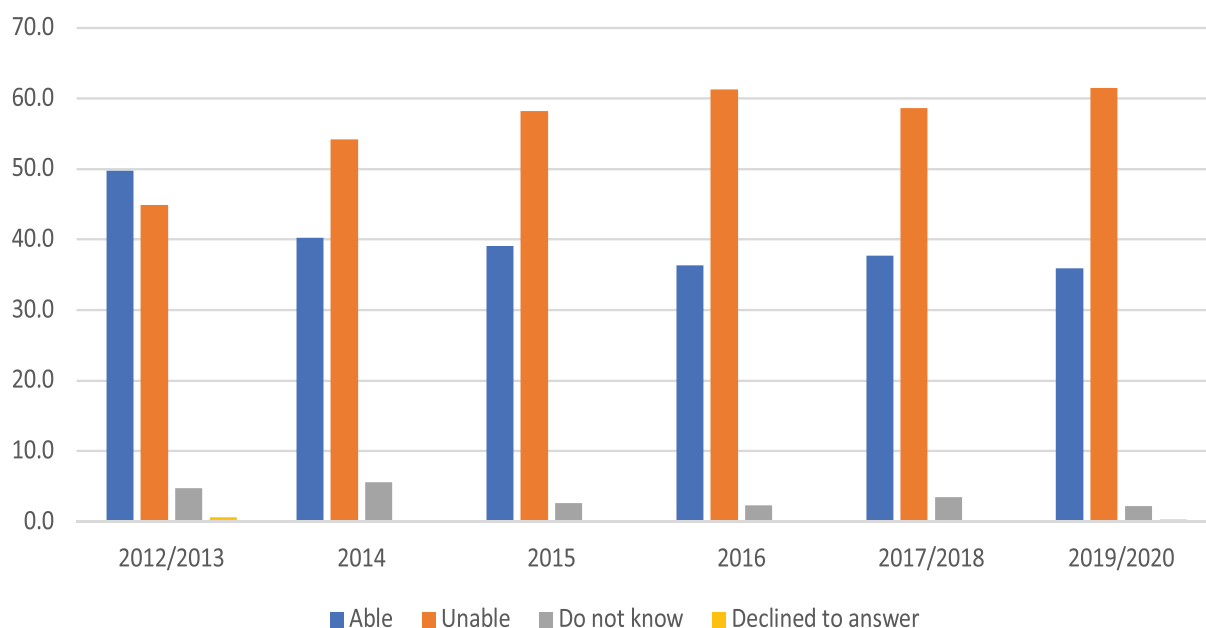
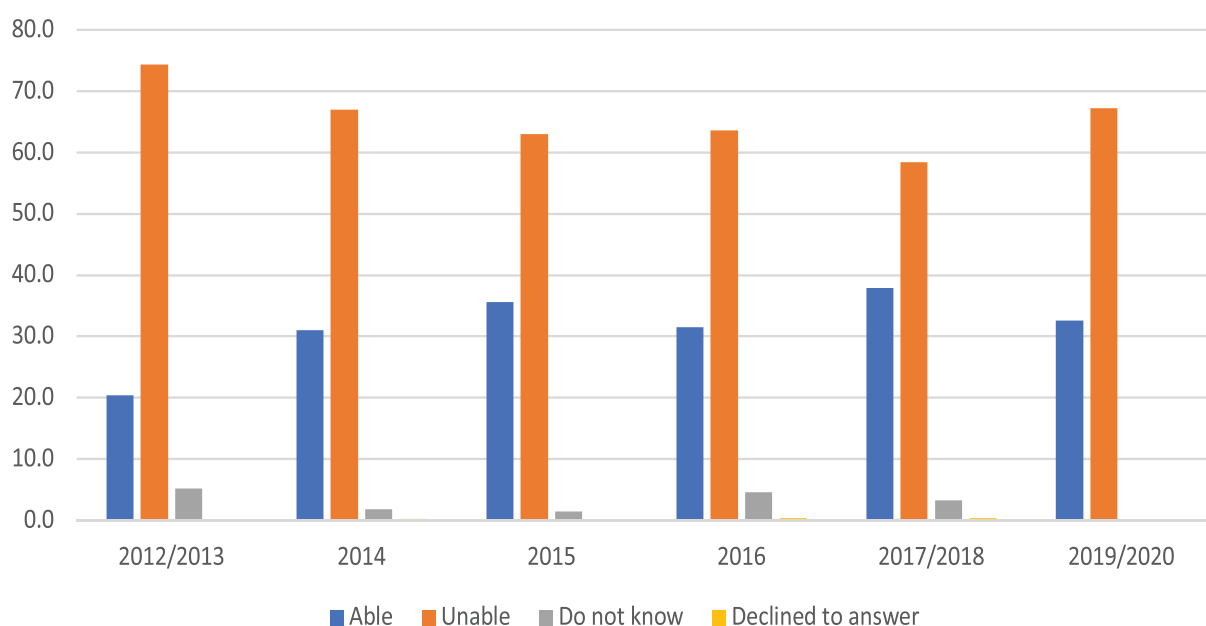
While many reasons underpin these responses, including the social and economic situation, another explanation may lie in corruption. While more than half of the respondents throughout the years said that corruption is very or somewhat widespread in the West Bank, with the same percentage recorded in the Gaza Strip, the majority of West Bankers viewed the government as not serious or only somewhat serious about fighting corruption.

Asking Palestinians about their government is not entirely straightforward considering the various complications associated with who exactly they are referring to. In the Gaza Strip, Hamas seized control and established its own government separate from the Palestinian Authority that rules the West Bank; however, many people in Gaza still work for the Palestinian Authority. In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is seen as a mechanism installed to maintain the status quo and as a safety valve to prevent a complete meltdown in the occupied Palestinian territories, in light of its so-called "coordination" with Israel following the Oslo Accords. At the same time, both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority oppress their own populations.

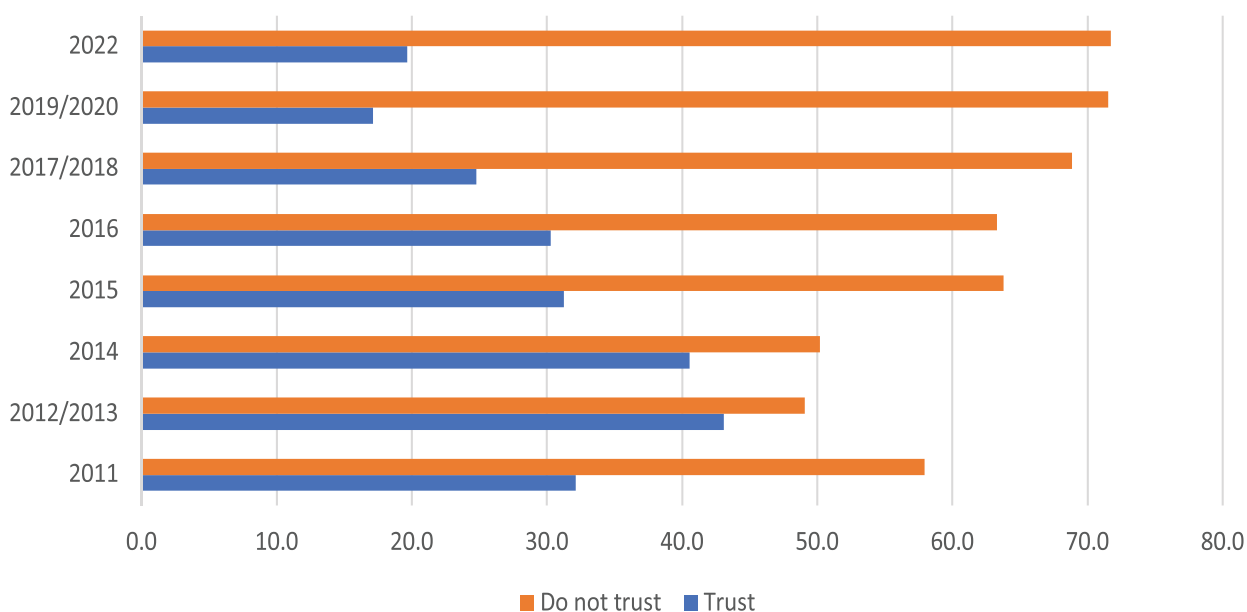
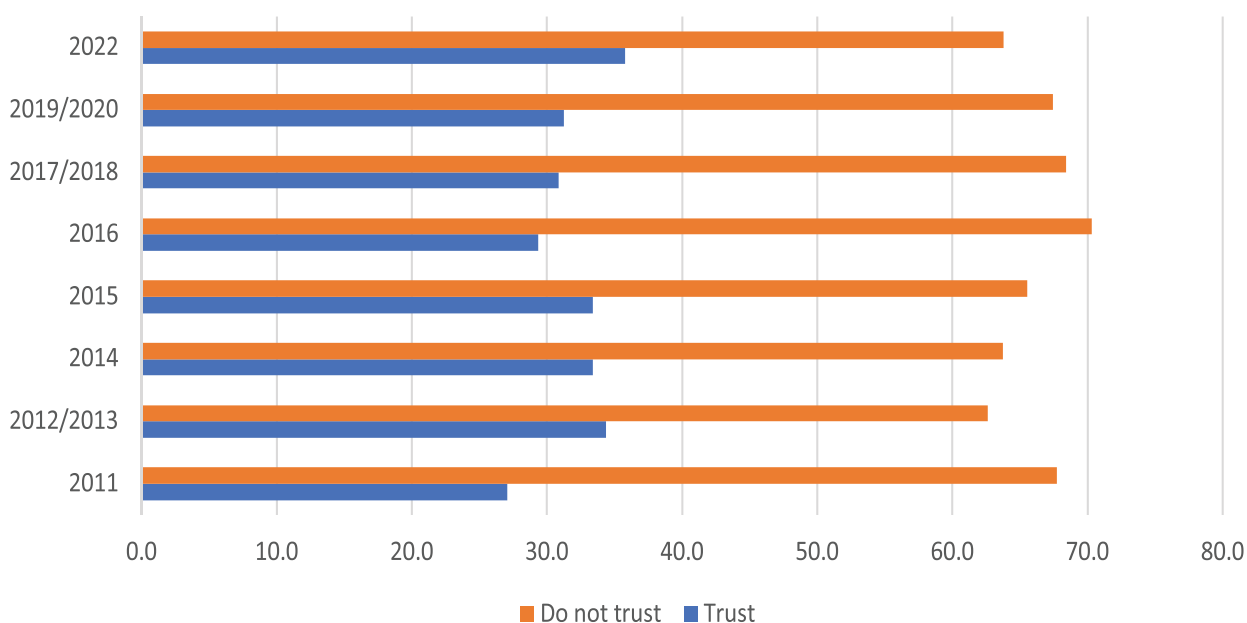
When asked about their ability to criticize their government, almost half of respondents in the West Bank in 2012-13 said that they are able to criticize the government without fear. Yet figures began to decline in 2014, when 54.2% said that they are unable to do so, followed by 58.2% in 2015, 61.3% in 2016, 58.7% in 2017-18, and 61.5% in 2019-20. Numbers from the Gaza Strip indicate that criticizing the government has been consistently regarded as unfeasible, at least since 2012-13 (Figure 13). More than half (and nearly two-thirds some years) responded that they are unable to criticize the government without fear. A more recent survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research on 7-10 December 2022 indicates that 46% of Palestinians in the West Bank feel they are able to criticize the Palestinian Authority without fear, as opposed to 51% who said that they are unable to do so. In the Gaza Strip, 48% of respondents claimed that they cannot criticize the Hamas government without fear, while 51% indicated the opposite.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See: "Public Opinion Poll No. 86."

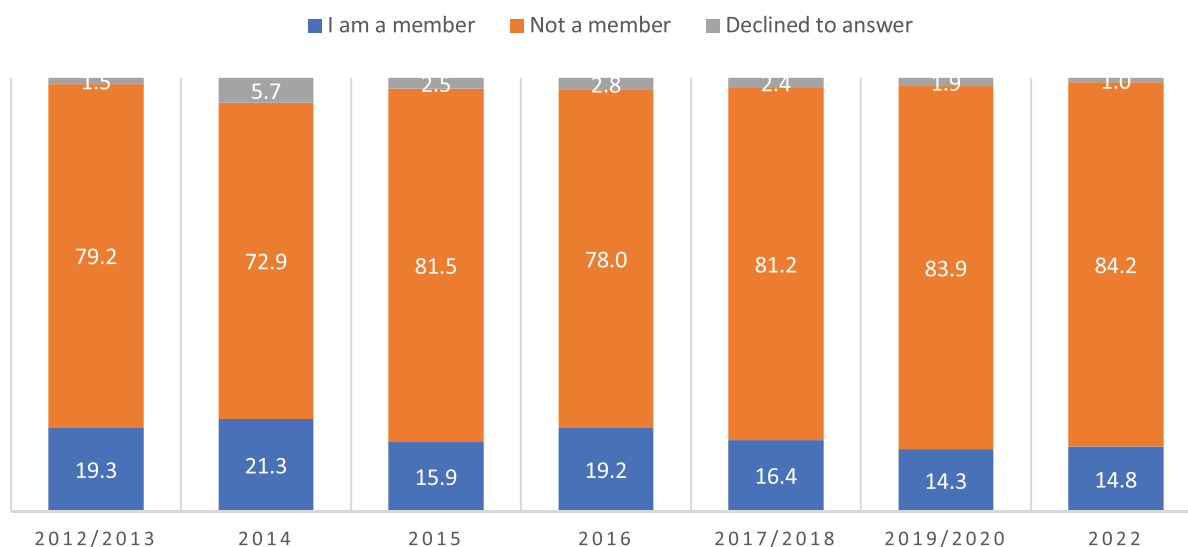
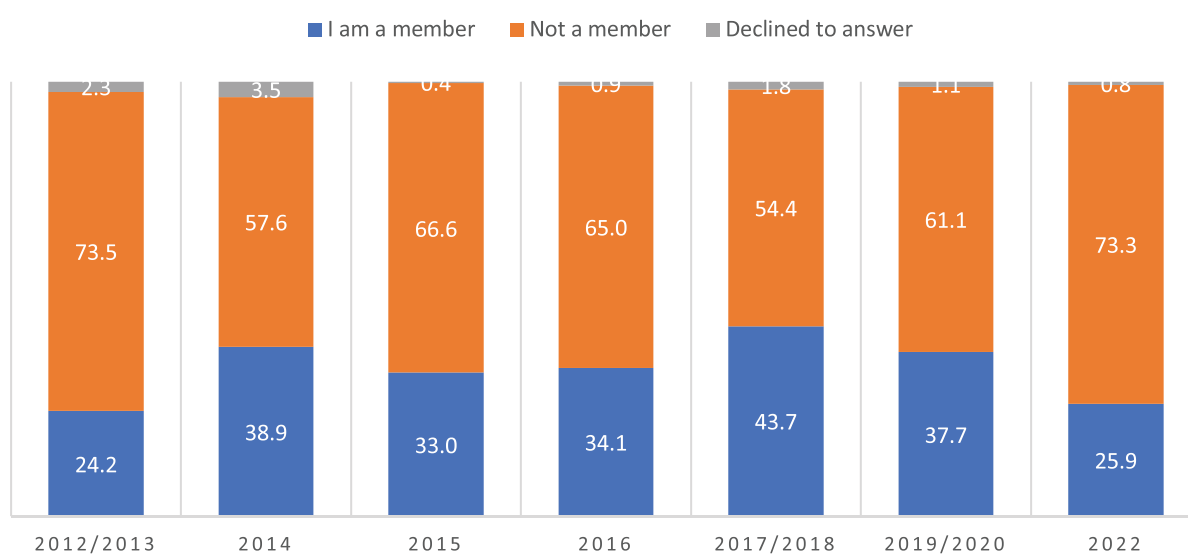


**Figure (12): West Bank on the ability to criticize the government without fear****Figure (13): Gaza Strip on the ability to criticize the government without fear**

Regarding political parties, people in the West Bank (Figure 14) expressed declining trust over time, except for the years 2012-13 and 2014 when serious talks about a reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah were conducted, beginning with the February 2012 Doha Agreement and the May 2012 Cairo Agreement and culminating in the formation of a Palestinian national unity government in June 2014. But distrust has increased sharply, growing from 50.2% in 2014 to 71.7% in 2022. In the Gaza Strip, rates of trust in political parties were nearly constant throughout the years, as evident in Figure (15), with trust in the range of 27.1% to 35.8% and distrust from 62.6% to 70.3%.

**Figure (14): Trust in political parties in the West Bank****Figure (15): Trust in political parties in the Gaza Strip**

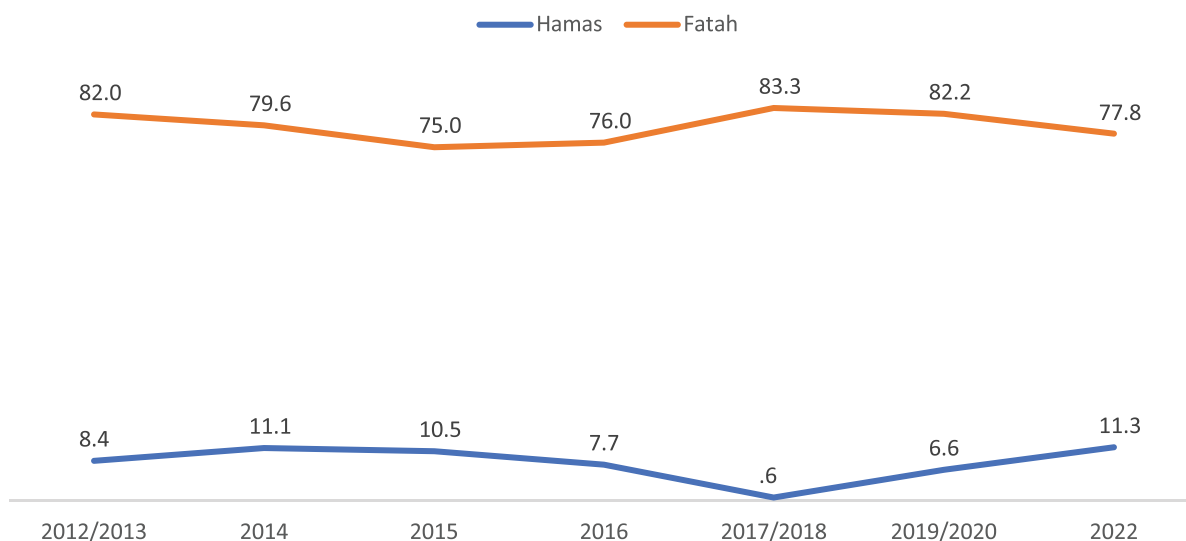
The high distrust of political parties is also reflected in the rates of membership in political groups or parties, which remained consistent with very slight variation over time since 2012-13. In the West Bank, 79.2% confirmed that they are not affiliated with any group or party, followed by 72.9% in 2014, 81.5% in 2015, 78% in 2016, 81.2% in 2017-18, 83.9% in 2019-20, and 84.2% in 2022. Rates of political membership have been lower in the West Bank than in Gaza, where 73.5% indicated they do not belong to any group or party in 2012-13, 57.6% in 2014, 66.5% in 2015, 65% in 2016, 54.4% in 2017-18, 61.1% in 2019-20, and 73.3% in 2022.

**Figure (16): Membership to political groups in the West Bank****Figure (17): Membership to political groups in the Gaza Strip**

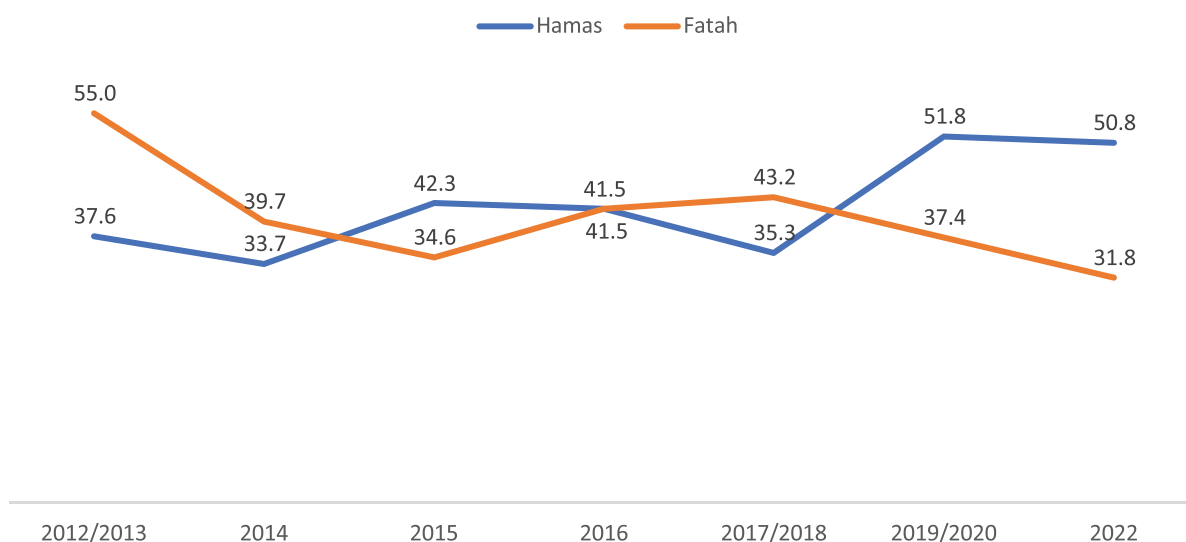
At the same time, 19.3% in the West Bank reported that they are members of a political group or party in 2012-13, then 21.3% in 2014, 15.9% in 2015, 19.2% in 2016, 16.4% in 2017-18, 14.3% in 2019-20, and 14.8% in 2022. Membership rates were slightly higher in the Gaza Strip, with 24.2% in 2012-13, 38.9% in 2014, 33% in 2015, 34.1% in 2016, 43.7% in 2017-18, 37.7% in 2019-20, and 25.9% in 2022.

Among those who indicated party membership in the West Bank, the data reveals that the overwhelming majority, perhaps unsurprisingly, belonged to Fatah, with 82% in 2012-13, 79.6% in 2014, 75% in 2015, 76% in 2016, 83.3% in 2017-18, 82.2% in 2019-20, and 77.8% in 2022. Hamas came in second place, with 8.4% in 2012-13 and 11.3% in 2022.

The high rates of affiliation with Fatah may owe to the fact that Hamas members in the West Bank are reluctant to reveal their affiliation, for fear of prosecution by Israel on the one hand and by the Palestinian Authority on the other. Another explanation is that Fatah is not a monolith and is rather split into many wings.

**Figure (18): Membership in Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank**

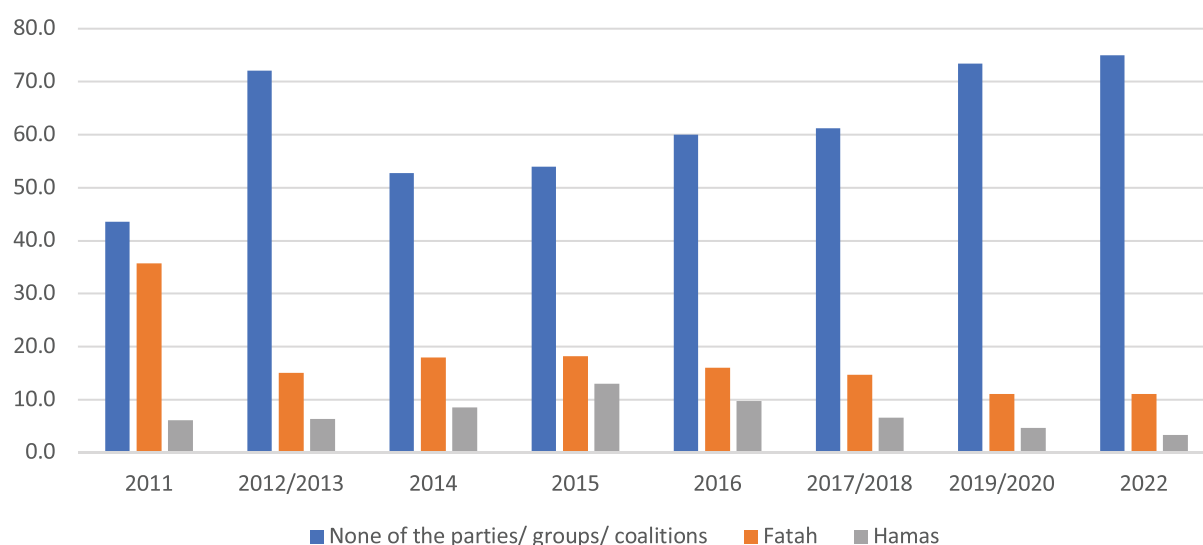
Numbers varied in the Gaza Strip; not only were those who belonged to a political group or party split almost equally over the years, but also the number of Fatah members decreased in favour of Hamas. In 2012-13, 55% and 37.6% were affiliated with Fatah and Hamas respectively, 39.7% and 33.7% in 2014, 34.6% and 42.3% in 2015, 41.5% for both in 2016, 43.2% and 35.3% in 2017-18, 37.4% and 51.8% in 2019-20, and 31.8% and 50.8% in 2022. These results make sense in light of Fatah's minimal activity in the Gaza Strip and the restrictions Hamas imposes on Fatah student activism.

**Figure (19): Membership in Fatah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip**

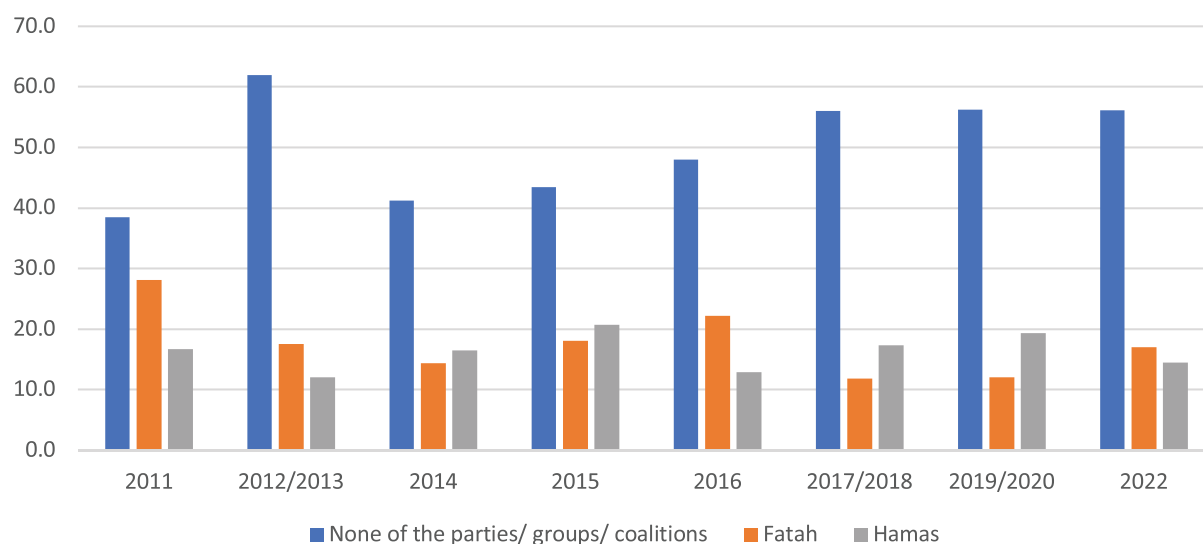
The enquiry about which political group better expresses the people's thoughts and attitudes again reflects a distrust of parties. Almost half of Palestinians in the West Bank from 2011 to 2015 reported that no groups or parties express their thoughts and attitudes (except for the year 2012-13 with over 70%), and these numbers increased to 60.1% in 2016, 61.3% in 2017/2018, strikingly reaching 73.5% in 2019-20 and 75% in 2022. Fatah was ranked second and Hamas third, as shown in Figure (20). The same pattern of responses was observed in the Gaza Strip, with the majority saying that no political group expresses

their thoughts and attitudes, except that second and third place fluctuated between Fatah (2011, 2012-13, 2016, and 2022) and Hamas (2014, 2015, 2017-18, and 2019-20). Interestingly, while some would argue that support for each rival faction tends to be higher in the territory that is not under its control, Fatah still enjoys greater popularity than its counterparts in the territory it controls (West Bank). Meanwhile, it still competes with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, where these figures are subject to greater fluctuations.

**Figure (20): West Bank on the political group that best expresses thoughts or attitudes**



**Figure (21): Gaza Strip on the political group that best expresses thoughts or attitudes**

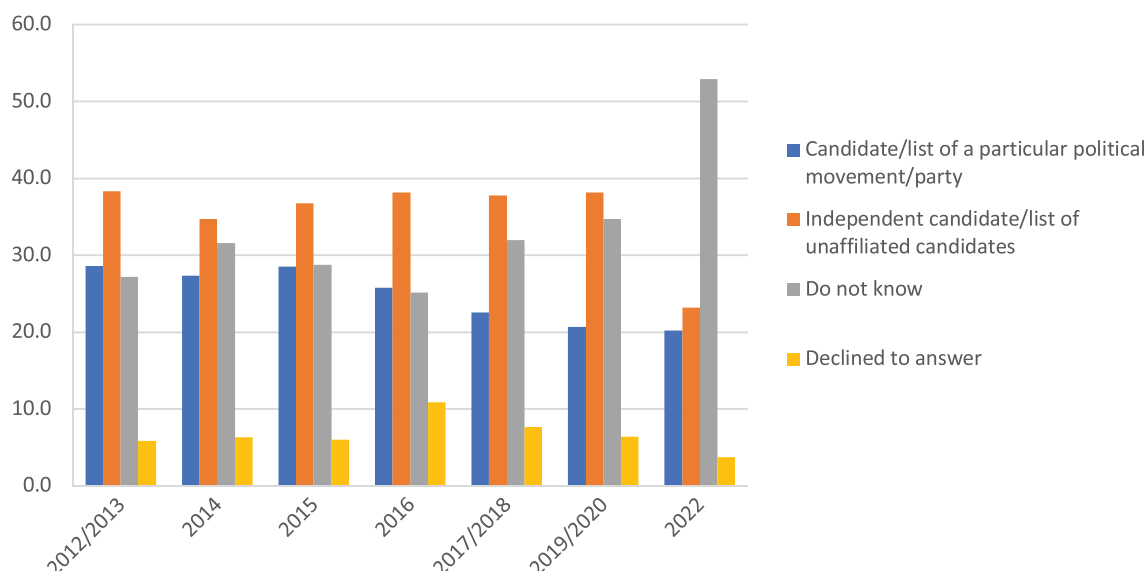


## Voting Patterns in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

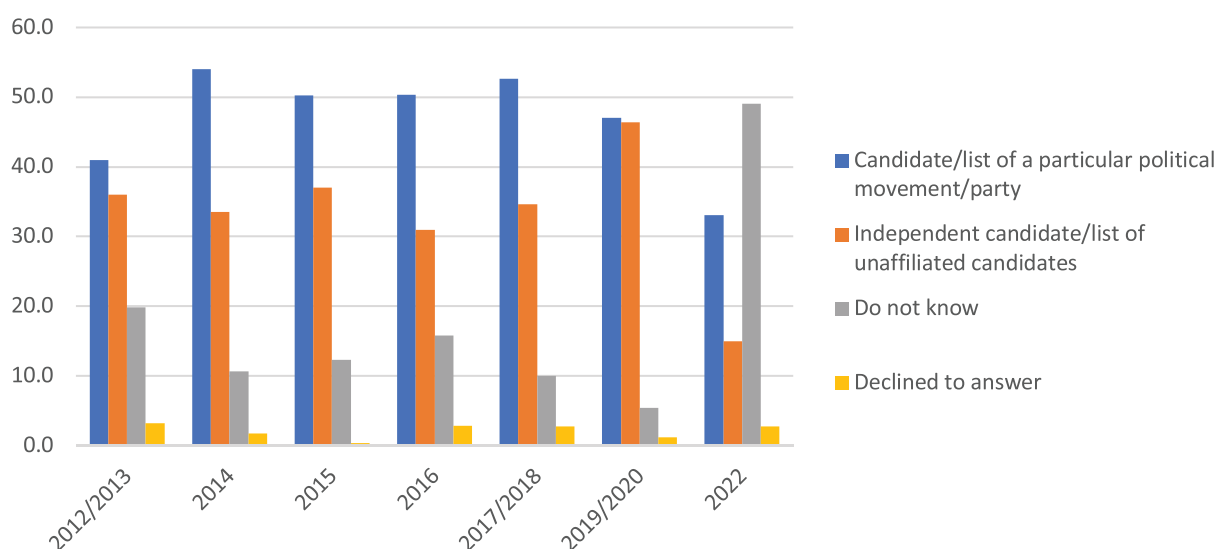
When it comes to voting patterns, people in the Gaza Strip still favour a candidate or list from a particular political movement or party. In contrast, respondents in the West Bank expressed a desire for an independent candidate or a list of unaffiliated candidates. Interestingly, many people in both territories (though to a larger extent in the West Bank) felt unsure as to how they would vote. 27.2% in the West Bank reported that they do not know who to vote for in 2012-13, 31.6% in 2014, 28.8% in 2015, 25.2% in 2016, 32% in

2017-18, and 34.7% in 2019-20. 19.9% in the Gaza Strip had the same response in 2012-13, then 10.7% in 2014, 12.3% in 2015, 15.8% in 2016, 10% in 2017-18, and 5.4% in 2019-20. Contrary to previous years, the percentage of Gazans who confessed that they do not know for whom they would vote if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow was as high as 49.1% in 2022. A slightly higher percentage was observed in the West Bank (52.9%), yet this figure is less surprising relative to previous years.

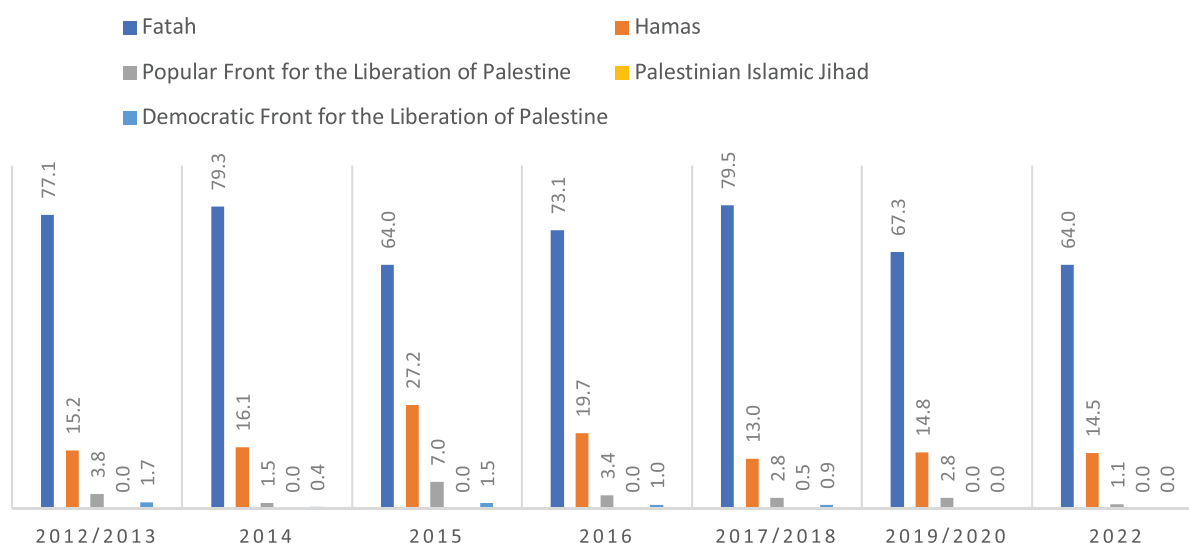
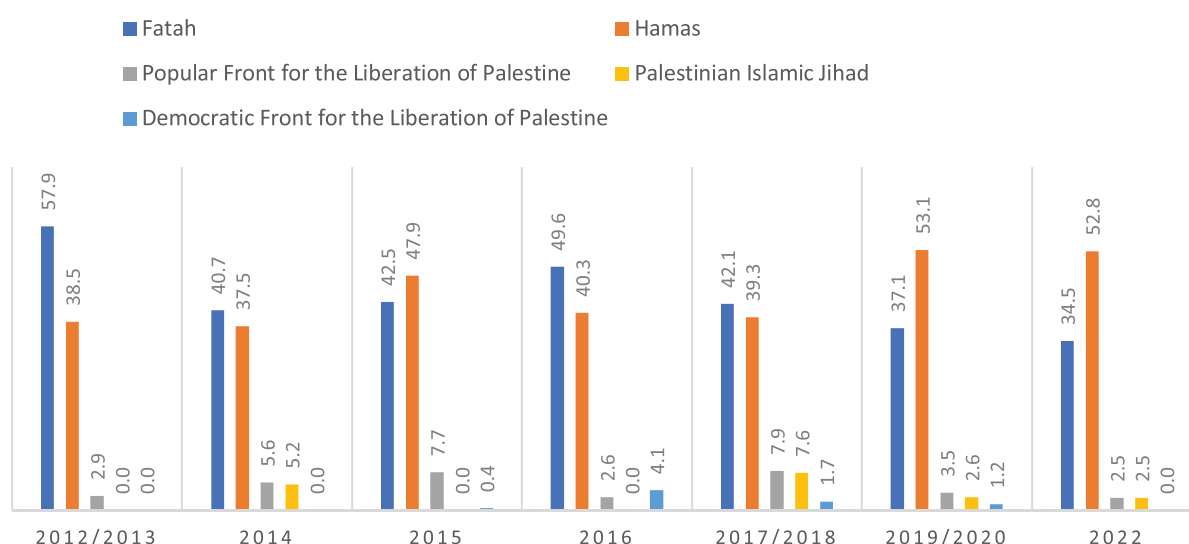
**Figure (22): West Bank voting preferences in the parliamentary elections**



**Figure (23): Gaza Strip voting preferences in the parliamentary elections**



For those who chose to vote for a particular political group or party in the West Bank, Fatah was the first choice and Hamas a distant second from 2012-13 to 2022, as shown in Figure (24). Respondents in the Gaza Strip fluctuated between Fatah and Hamas, with the majority voting for Fatah in 2012-13, 2014, 2016, and 2017-18 and for Hamas in 2015, 2019-20, and 2022. There is a general perception among Palestinians that, given the existing political structure, it is impossible for any political group or party to win elections beyond Fatah or Hamas. It is also important to note that both Fatah and Hamas fund candidates that run in the elections as independents yet could still be attributed to either party.

**Figure (24): Voting patterns for major parties at parliamentary elections in the West Bank****Figure (25) Voting patterns for major parties at parliamentary elections in the Gaza Strip**

## Conclusion

Generally, the underlying popular political opinions in Palestine are much the same as they always have been. Palestinians continue to blame the poor economic conditions for things are heading in the wrong direction. Further, the people's interest in politics seems to be in decline, and religion continues to play a role in Palestinian politics. While trust in government is lower generally in the Gaza Strip compared to the West Bank, trust in political parties tends to be more stable in the former than the latter. Both territories reported high rates of a perceived inability to criticize the government, and the majority of Palestinians refrain from joining any political groups. Despite that, Fatah still enjoys high membership rates among the population of the West Bank in contrast with the fluctuations Fatah and Hamas membership in the Gaza Strip. This observation is further supported by voting patterns in both areas.

Meanwhile, whether the recent events in the West Bank will in any way affect the opinion of Palestinians regarding the general situation or their perception of local politics remains to be seen.

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