

Why Is Hamas' Popularity Soaring Among Palestinians in the West Bank?

by [Moran Stern \(/experts/moran-stern\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Moran Stern \(/experts/moran-stern\)](#)

Moran Stern is an Associate Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Center for Jewish Civilization in Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service.



Articles & Testimony

The numbers reflect backlash against the Palestinian Authority, which many see as corrupt, illegitimate, and unable to provide a path toward independence —though the alternative would be worse.

The Hamas-led assault on Israel October 7, in which 1,200 people were massacred and over 200 taken hostage, prompted Israel to launch a massive invasion of the Gaza Strip, unleashing a brutal, ongoing war and unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe for its residents, including mass displacement, hunger and death. Nevertheless, consecutive [surveys \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-06-13/ty-article/.premium/eight-months-into-the-war-support-for-hamas-oct-7-declines-among-gazans-survey-finds/00000190-11bd-d621-abfa-5bbd83c00000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-06-13/ty-article/.premium/eight-months-into-the-war-support-for-hamas-oct-7-declines-among-gazans-survey-finds/00000190-11bd-d621-abfa-5bbd83c00000) by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Research Survey indicate support for Hamas continues to rise in the West Bank, even as it dips in Gaza. Earlier this month, some **41 percent (http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980)** of West Bankers said they support Hamas, compared to 35 percent in March and 12 percent in September. Support for Fatah, Hamas's nemesis and the dominant power in the Palestinian Authority (PA), has **decreased (http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980)** since the beginning of the war, dropping to just 17 percent, compared to 26 percent in September.

Given the calamitous impact of the attack on Palestinians, why does Hamas's popularity increase in the relatively restive West Bank while the PA only diminishes? A significant part of the answer can be found within the PA itself.

Its leadership grapples with a profound crisis of legitimacy. Since coming to power in 2005, President Mahmoud Abbas has systematically marginalized democratically elected institutions, packed his inner circle with loyalists, expelled rivals from Fatah, and founded alternative institutions with **himself (https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/israelpalestine/238-managing-palestines-looming-leadership-**

transition) in a leadership position. Abbas has consolidated all key leadership positions, serving simultaneously as PA president and PLO and Fatah chairman.

The last parliamentary elections were held in 2006. In 2009—when Abbas’s term was supposed to end—the PLO executive committee extended his term indefinitely. In 2019, Abbas dissolved the parliament and now, at 88, is currently serving in his 19th year of what was intended to be a four-year presidency.

The concentration of power in the hands of Fatah’s aging old guard has created a centralized, quasi-authoritarian PA, tainted by corruption and lacking clear political direction. Many Palestinians see its leadership as illegitimate, disconnected, and not dedicated to improving their personal and economic circumstances. Exacerbating the backlash is the **increasing violence in the West Bank** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-03-30/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/while-war-rages-in-gaza-the-west-bank-has-undergone-a-metamorphosis/0000018e-8d23-d9a4-a7bf-cd7b2c270000>), both from extremist settler attacks and Israeli raids searching for Hamas and other militants.

Recently, Fatah lists suffered setbacks in municipal and university student council elections, illustrating its weakening grassroots support. Satisfaction with Fatah and Abbas is virtually nonexistent, with **94 percent** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>) of West Bankers demanding the president’s resignation and **80 percent** (<https://pcpsr.org/en/node/944>) who view the PA as corrupt. Support for dissolving the PA stands at nearly **60 percent** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>).

But perhaps most significantly, thirty years since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PA has failed to provide Palestinians with a sense of political and personal security. The ideas promoted under the leadership of Abbas—a two-state solution, nonviolent resistance, and diplomacy—have become an anathema to many Palestinians who believe Abbas’s adherence to nonviolent resistance has failed to improve their personal circumstances, let alone establish an independent Palestinian state. They view the PA as collaborating with Israel instead of protecting them from it.

Indeed, a hallmark of Abbas’s presidency is the security coordination between the PA and Israel, which includes intelligence sharing and counterterrorism. This coordination helps the PA maintain a certain level of law and order and combat opposition groups like Hamas.

For most ordinary Palestinians, however, it has not provided security. Instead, they see the PA as collaborating with Israel to suppress Palestinian resistance, facilitating Israeli occupation over advancing statehood.

It adds **to the perception that the PA functions as Israel’s subcontractor**, (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/youth-frustrations-pa-legitimacy-crisis-are-amplifying-west-bank-violence>) extraditing Palestinians to Israel instead of protecting them. Others maintain security coordination ultimately revolves around granting senior officials and their cronies privileged access to Israel’s airports, beaches, and healthcare system which are off-limits to ordinary Palestinians.

Meanwhile the killing of Palestinians by either the Israeli army or Jewish settlers is often met with threats and condemnations by the PA, but ultimately it maintains the security coordination. Conversely, Hamas’s ability to extract **concessions** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-qatar-money-prop-up-hamas.html>) from Israel through armed confrontations and, in the wake of October 7, to make the Palestinian cause one of the most talked-about issues in the world, has boosted its credibility among Palestinians.

Moreover, it’s important to remember that besides Fatah and Hamas, Palestinians have no other political alternatives to choose from. Palestinians who are fed up with either organization remain politically “homeless.” Indeed, over half of West Bankers **reported** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>) that they will not vote for either party in future parliamentary elections.

However, support for Hamas’s extreme violence and support for Hamas rule are not necessarily interchangeable.

Support for Hamas rule can be interpreted as a protest vote against the PA, rather than an endorsement of Hamas's fundamentalist Islamist ideology and the implications of living under its repressive rule.

Moreover, while support for a return to armed confrontation among West Bankers continues to rise and now stands at more than **60 percent** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>), about a **third** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>) continue to believe that the foremost priority for the Palestinian people should be the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

One way to explain this apparent contradiction is that while many West Bankers **endorse** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/980>) the two-state idea they don't believe it can be accomplished through negotiations with Israel, as advocated by Fatah, but through armed resistance, as promoted by Hamas.

Indeed, support for Hamas typically increases during confrontations with Israel but wanes when it fails to deliver tangible improvements. Before the current war, support for Hamas in the West Bank was relatively low. At least in this regard, this war is not that different from previous Israel-Hamas conflicts.

But even if Hamas's surge is temporary, its implications are immediate. Ongoing public estrangement from its leadership is reducing the PA's grip over parts of the territory under its formal control, especially in the northern part of the West Bank. As areas become increasingly autonomous, Hamas expands its reach, flooding the area with weapons, while recruiting activists.

Research **shows** (<https://reader.foreignaffairs.com/2024/06/03/how-hamas-ends/content.html>) most terrorist organizations decline due to popular backlash. For Hamas to lose support among Palestinians, they must perceive that an alternative exists promising a better, achievable future. Considering the current political landscape, the PA is the natural candidate—but only a PA perceived as legitimate by Palestinians.

If legitimacy cannot be achieved through elections (which are currently unfeasible), it must be earned through effective performance. The war has opened a unique opportunity to do exactly that.

The PA must seize on U.S. President Joe Biden's **initiative to revitalize it** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-11-20/ty-article/.premium/bidens-vision-of-a-revitalized-pa-isnt-enough-to-secure-gazas-future/0000018b-ebdc-d6b8-a5ab-effe47300000>). That means boldly taking on major security, institutional, and economic reforms that will enhance its governance capabilities, promote deradicalization in Palestinian society and the education system, and lay the groundwork for a future Palestinian state.

Reforms must also combat corruption and bolster democracy by forging a younger, more representative leadership. That creates political opportunities for young Palestinians, ensuring their representation including at the municipal level, where grassroots support is often concentrated.

An efficient, functioning PA is crucial for preserving Israel's security as well. A reformed PA will be able to take responsibility for the three million Palestinians living in the West Bank, and lay the foundation for a sustainable settlement with Israel.

Should the PA fail, the political vacuum would be filled by Hamas, local armed factions, and tens of thousands of armed PA security officials who might join an armed uprising against Israel, as was the case during the Second Intifada. In the short term, Israel would quickly find itself entangled and overstretched on a third front, in addition to the war in Gaza and the escalation with Hezbollah in the north.

Even if Israel could restore order in the West Bank, without the PA, it would find itself directly responsible for every aspect of Palestinian daily life, from healthcare to garbage collection. For Israelis and Palestinians, the alternative to a failed PA is far worse than a revitalized one.

Moran Stern is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute and a nonresident fellow at Georgetown University's

Center for Jewish Civilization. This article was originally published *on the Haaretz website*

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-06-24/ty-article-opinion/.premium/why-is-hamas-popularity-soaring-among-palestinians-in-the-west-bank/00000190-49a7-da42-a1ba-7fefeb060000?lts=1719415012317>. ❖

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