



NEC's monthly bulletin on Palestinian perceptions towards politics and economics

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NEC Monthly Bulletin

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a new Palestinian Authority Unity Government was sworn in this March, Near East Consulting (NEC) surveyed 802 randomly selected Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem for their reactions to this and other recent political and economic developments in the Occupied Territories. The following Bulletin summarizes and discusses the major findings of this poll.

The poll is part of a running series of General Perception Surveys conducted regularly by the NEC since January 2006. Inter alia, these surveys seek to document and analyze Palestinian perceptions of the political, economic, social, and security-related issues that frame daily life in the West Bank and Gaza. Targeted at regional and international media practitioners, development professionals and policy stakeholders, results from the NEC's General Perception Survey are provided freely to the general public, complementing our on-going research and assessment work in Palestine and the wider region.

This latest survey was conducted by telephone over the period 15-17 March, 2007 and has a margin of error of +/- 3.46%, with a 95% confidence level. Underlying data from this and earlier polls, along with accompanying bulletins, is available online from the NEC's web site. Visit us at www.neareastconsulting.com.

About the Near East Consulting (NEC)

NEC is a survey and research firm based in Ramallah, Palestine. Drawing on extensive, inter-disciplinary experience in the Near East region and beyond, we work in a range of fields, including but not limited to such areas as: democracy and democratization, food security, health and education, women and children, poverty and the labor market, peace and conflict resolution, arms control and disarmament, electoral processes, Palestinian refugees, demography, legal and judicial systems, and the impact of aid and assistance.



II. SUMMARY

The NEC's latest General Perception Survey registers new optimism among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, following the formation of a new Palestinian Authority (PA) unity government, and the February 2007 conclusion of a power-sharing agreement between Hamas and Fateh, also known as the Mecca Accords. However, this optimism is proscribed by enduring, and in some instances newly voiced concerns about underlying political and economic difficulties, coupled with significant, long-standing political disaffection. Accordingly, while there is strong popular and cross-party agreement that restoring internal security should be a priority of the new government, political horizons have otherwise narrowed.

Following a winter marred by bloody factional infighting, 80% of Palestinians feel that chances of a civil war have receded since the Mecca Accords. 69% are also optimistic that the new unity government will succeed in lifting international donor sanctions on the PA, imposed after Hamas came to power in January 2006. A 53% majority of respondents give credit to Hamas for moderating their political stance since this time, but this has not prevented PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) from enjoying a slight rise in favour compared to Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Hanieh, with 54% of respondents now evincing more trust in the former.

Nevertheless, over 70% of respondents remain skeptical that recent developments herald a long-term resolution of internal Hamas-Fateh differences. Accordingly, though 49% respondents expect the new government to survive more than a year, a significant number of respondents - approximately one third - expect it to last less than 6 months. Generally speaking, between one-third to one quarter of Palestinians continue to express no trust in any of the major political parties, reflecting widespread disenchantment with the existing political system.

Such cautionary sentiments are framed by enduring insecurities both economic and physical. While internal Palestinian power struggles were much less prominent as a main concern after recent developments - falling from 42% to 20% since January - respondents were not short of other worries. Fears of economic hardship - which rose 10 points to 29% - and feelings of insecurity for family - which increased slightly to 28% - preoccupied a combined two-thirds of those interviewed. Notably, these numbers are in line with earlier, NEC winter polls, underscoring the deep-seated nature of the current crisis in the Occupied Territories.

Though these concerns translate into wide agreement on the priorities of the new government, they also mark a narrowing of public expectations. As a large majority of respondents feel that restoring security (59%) and enforcing the law (18%) should be a focus of the new government, similar numbers (48% and 12% respectively) believe that this is also all that it will be capable of achieving. Despite widespread poverty and unemployment, and notwithstanding optimism about the lifting of international sanctions on the PA, only 12% and 15% of those polled feel that economic revival should be the government's priority, or is its most realistic objective. Most strikingly, only 4% see peace with Israel as being in either the realm of highest priority or possibility, though overall



support for peace remains, high at 68%, and a majority of respondents evince a growing willingness to make various concessions to Israel, though not at any price.

In conclusion, the poll results demonstrate the manner in which the internal crisis of 2006 has focused popular concerns on issues of public security. This has created, by the hardest means possible, a firm but also very limited rule-of-law mandate for the new government, while narrowing the broader political horizons and expectations of most Palestinians. Though this population remains vexed by an array of overarching external issues, all but the most pressing, internal problems are likely to languish on the political drawing board for the immediate future.





III. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A. *New optimism follows internal accords, unity government*

In early February, Saudi authorities brokered a power-sharing agreement between Hamas and Fateh aimed at ending several months of bloody street battles between the two parties. The fighting, which was concentrated in the Gaza Strip, sparked growing fears of a Palestinian civil war. In the NEC's monthly December poll, 41% of respondents thought a civil war likely or very likely; in January the number was 44%. Following the conclusion of the so-called Mecca Agreement, however, 80% of respondents believe that the chances of civil war have decreased. It is notable that this belief is shared by high numbers of both Hamas and Fateh supporters.

Figure 1: How has the likelihood of a civil war changed since the Mecca Agreement?

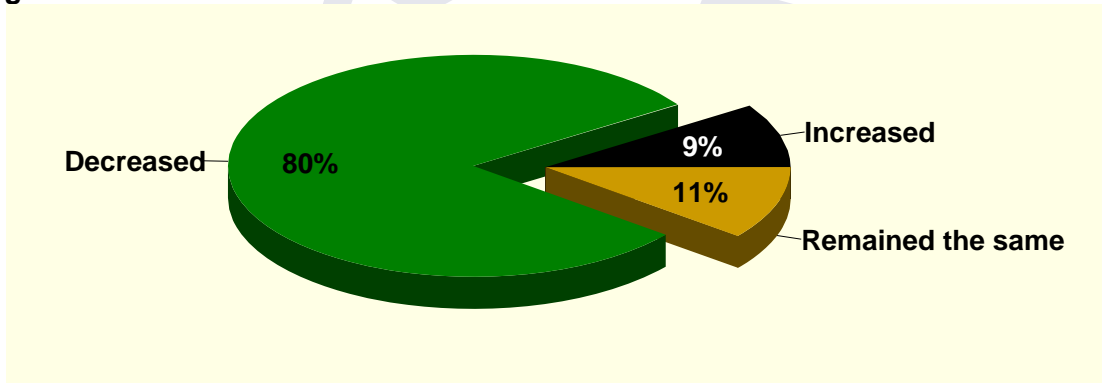


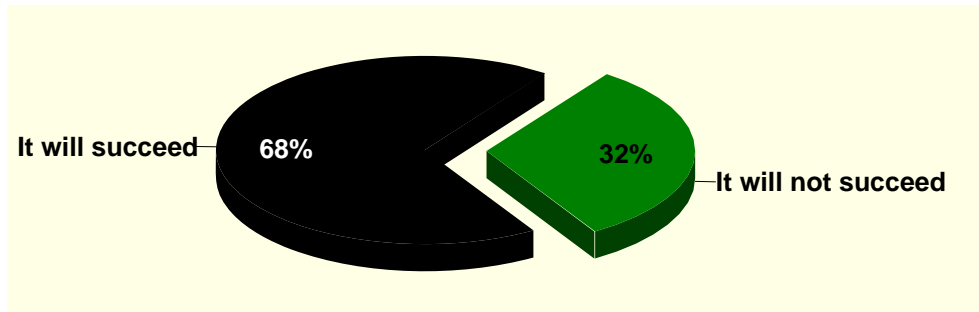
Table 1: "Since the Mecca Agreement, the likelihood of a civil war has..?" by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Increased	5%	8%	13%	13%
Decreased	89%	81%	64%	77%
Remained the same	6%	12%	23%	10%



Also, 68% of respondents believe that a new, multi-party Palestinian Authority unity government formed pursuant to the Mecca Accords will be successful in lifting internal donor sanctions on the PA, imposed since Hamas came to power in early 2006. The new government was sworn in as this poll was conducted.

Figure 2: Will new government succeed to lift sanctions on the PA?



B. Both Hamas and Fateh garner political credit

In the context of these new, conciliatory developments, a 53% majority of respondents give credit to Hamas for adopting a more reasonable political strategy since it was elected to power, though respondents were not asked what particular aspects of this strategy they referred to. As expected, respondents who tended to support Hamas expressed this sentiment most widely. In light of the winter's violence, it is also not surprising that a significant 40% share of Fateh supporters disagreed, feeling that Hamas' strategy had veered to the more extreme. Yet 45% of Fateh supporters, and a majority of respondents who tend to neither of the two main parties also felt that Hamas' strategy had indeed become more reasonable.

Figure 3: Has Hamas changes its pre-election strategy?

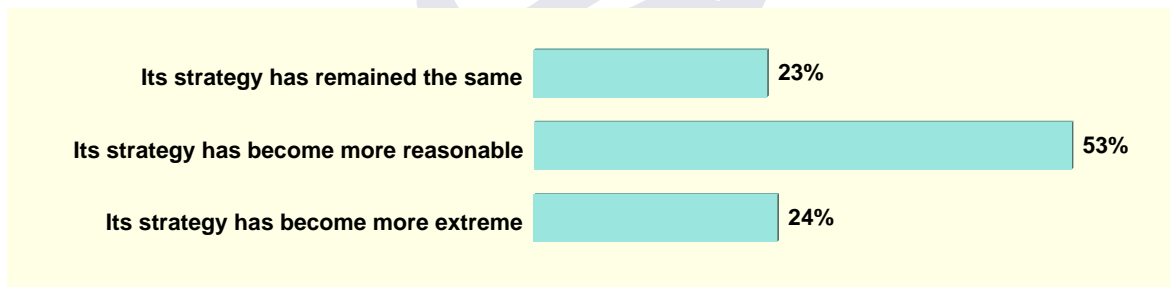


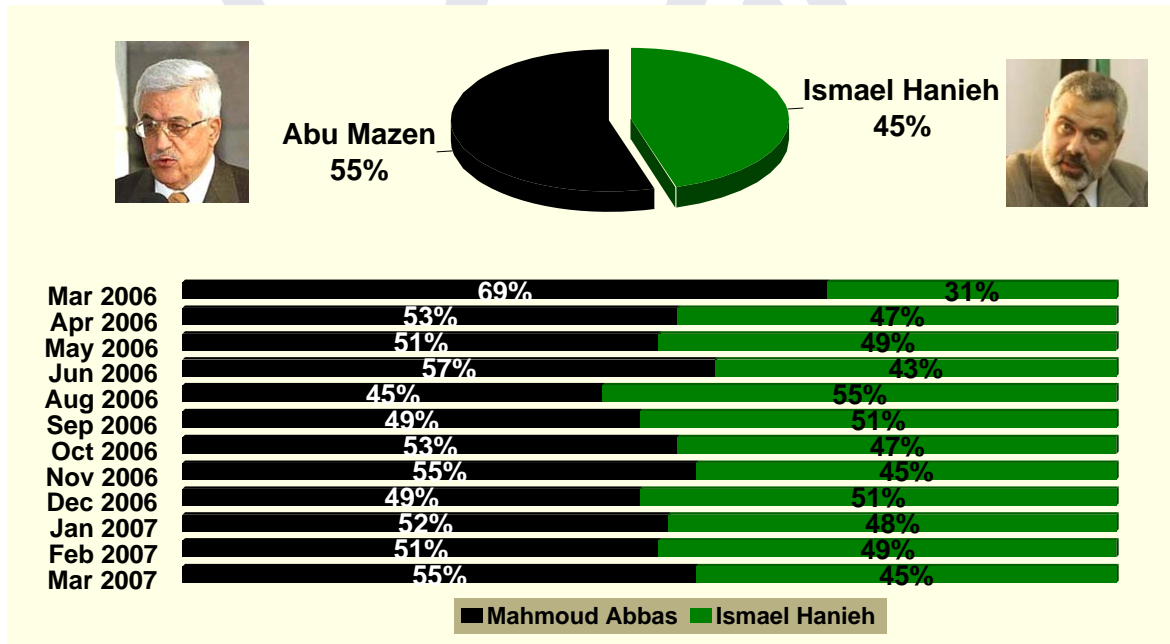


Table 2: “Has Hamas maintained its pre-election strategy...” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamis	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Its strategy has remained the same	33%	15%	18%	25%
Its strategy became more reasonable	60%	45%	64%	51%
Its strategy became more extreme	7%	40%	18%	24%

Notwithstanding such sentiments, Fateh Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who is also credited with having shepherded the Mecca Accords to a conclusion, registered a slight upturn in his public standing vis-à-vis Hamas Prime Minister Ismael Hanieh. Though the difference between the two remains slim, Abbas is now trusted by 10% more Palestinians than Hanieh.

Figure 4: Who do you trust more: Abu Mazen or Ismail Hanieh?





C. But skepticism proscribes new hopefulness

Respondents were evenly split on whether they thought the new unity government would survive for more than one year, with a significant, 31% share of them being skeptical that it would last beyond six months. It was notable that respondents tending to Hamas were considerably more optimistic than those who supported Fateh.

Figure 5: How long will the National Unity Government last?

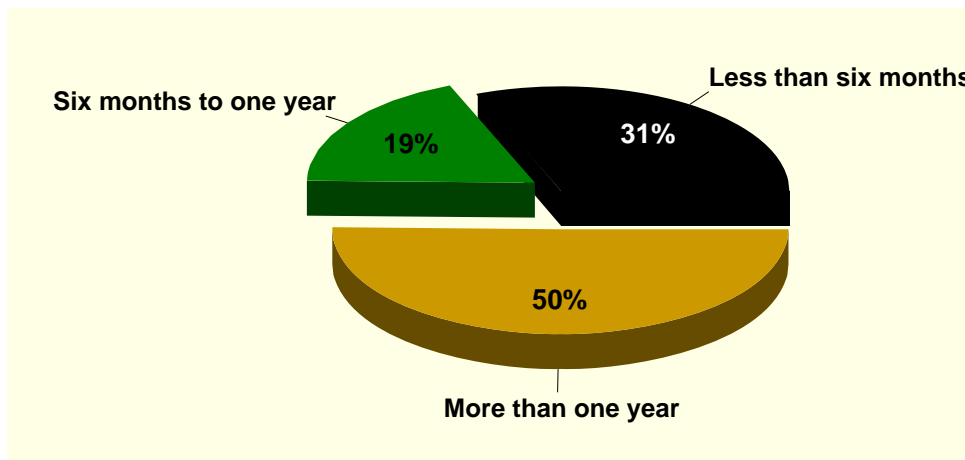


Table 3: “How long will the National Unity Government last?” by Factional Trust

	Factional Trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Less than six months	20%	38%	42%	31%
Six months to one year	17%	20%	13%	22%
More than one year	64%	42%	45%	47%

In light of the fact that a full 69% of respondents do not expect an end to the crisis between Fateh and Hamas, it is understandable that the public remain split over the chances of the new government, with Hamas supporters again somewhat less skeptical than Fateh supporters. Notably, this sentiment marks a sharp deterioration on a poll conducted by the NEC in January. 76% then believed the crisis would end. One explanation is a minor resurgence of inter-factional violence in the intervening period, coupled with the fact that the new unity government has yet to agree on a common political platform.



Figure 6: Will the crisis between Fateh and Hamas end?

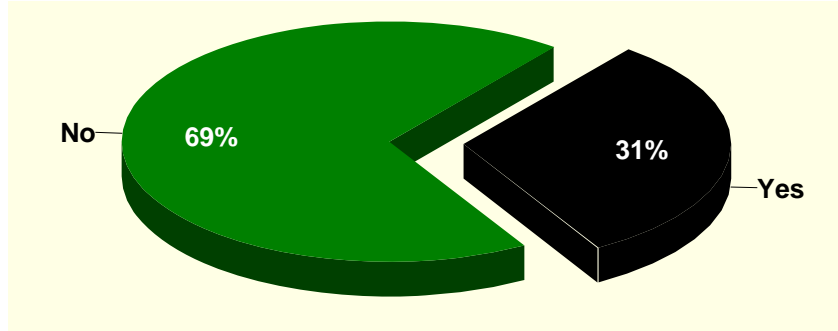


Table 4: “Will the crisis between Fateh and Hamas end?,” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust (Recoded)			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Yes	34%	22%	26%	34%
No	66%	78%	74%	66%

Overall, there is popular sense of diminished security, sparked by Hamas’ election and mounting post-election friction between Hamas and Fateh. As tracked by NEC polls, this feeling of insecurity is only slightly down from its all-year high, registered in February 2007. Though respondents who support Hamas are predictably less inclined to be worried, and the opposite holds true for Fateh supporters, a majority of Palestinians who trust no political party, and a significant number of those who tend neither to Hamas or Fateh, also express feelings of greater insecurity.

Figure 7: How has your feeling of security changed after the election of Hamas?

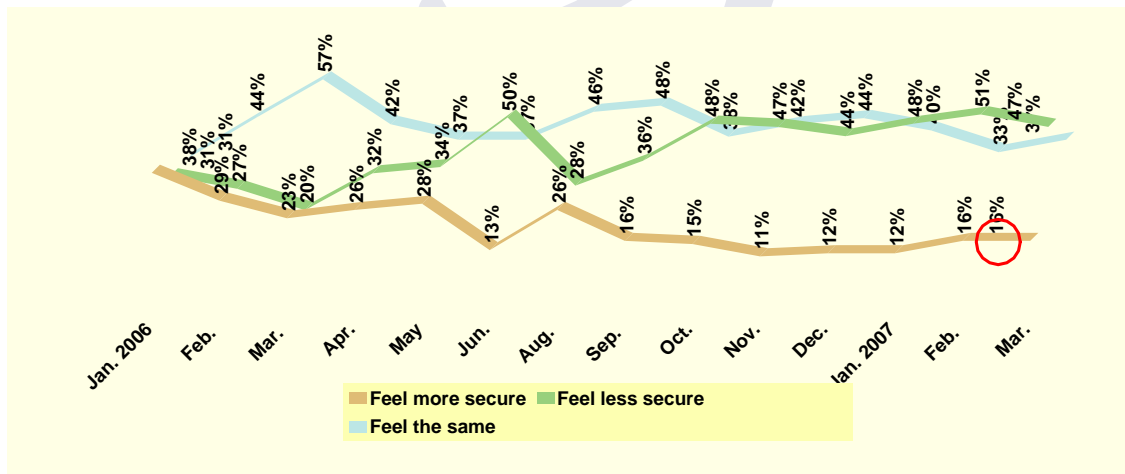




Table 5: “How has your feeling of security changed, one year after the election of Hamas?,” by Region of Residence and Factional Trust

	Region of residence		Factional trust			
	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
I feel more secure	11%	22%	37%	8%	5%	10%
I feel less secure	46%	50%	25%	68%	51%	42%
My feeling of security remained the same	43%	28%	38%	25%	44%	47%

D. Significant political disaffection remains

Skepticism about the long-term prospects of reconciliation between the biggest Palestinian parties is accompanied by deep political disaffection among nearly one third of all Palestinians. While Fateh and Hamas continue to command sizeable blocs of public trust, a full 28% of all respondents indicate that they trust no political faction. Tellingly, this figure has more than doubled since the January 2006 elections and the political infighting and violence that resulted from them.

Figure 8: What factions do you believe the people of your neighbourhood trust?

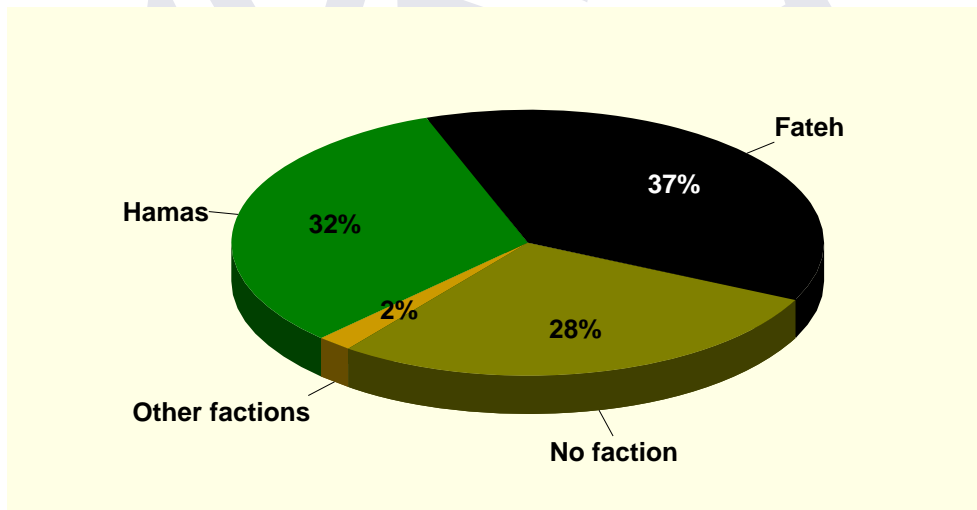
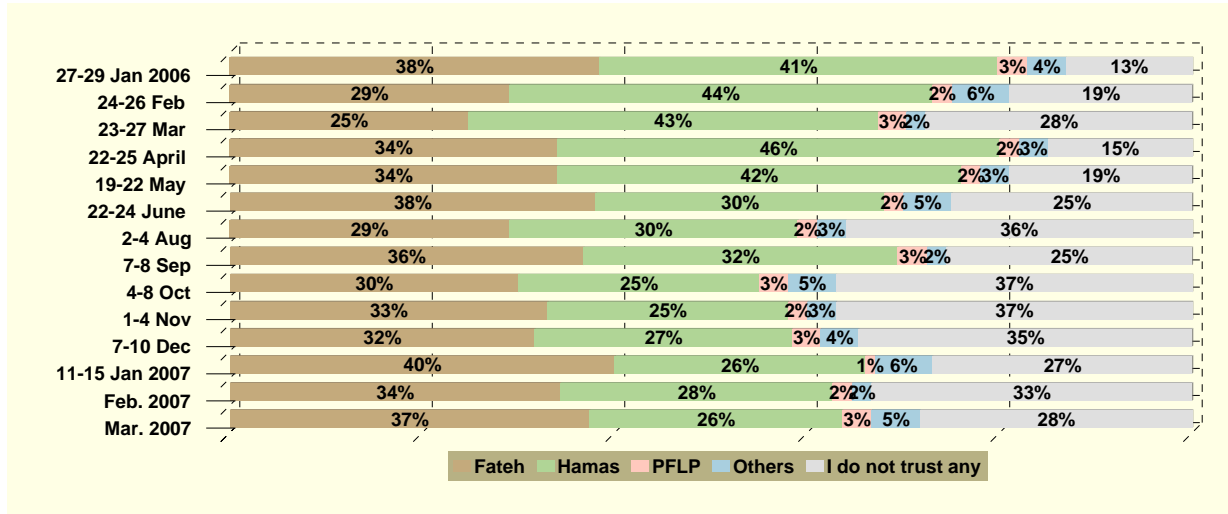


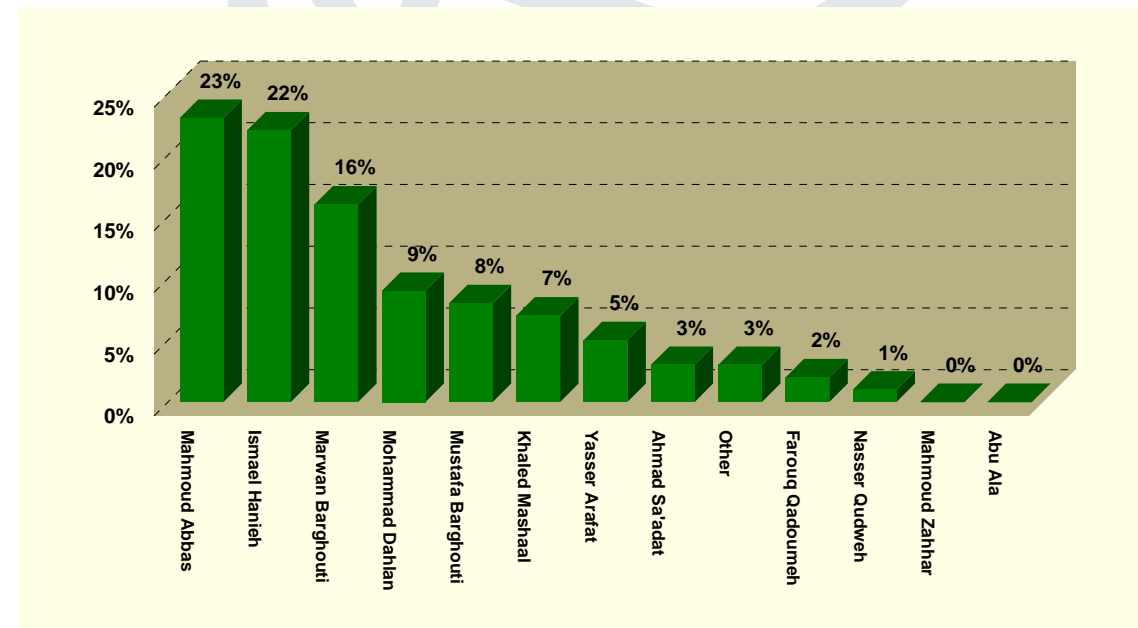


Figure 9: What faction do you trust the most?



Notably, neither Abbas nor Hanieh command trust among more than one quarter of respondents. Though Abbas leads Hanieh in a head-to-head confidence vote by 10%, both register nearly similar, low 20's rates of approval if the menu is broadened. Within the Fateh party, which at 37% enjoys the highest level of public confidence, several leadership figures continue to vie with Abbas for the public trust.

Figure 10: Which Palestinian leadership figure do you trust the most?





In terms of public trust, imprisoned Fateh leader Marwan Barghouti comes a close third, at 16%, followed by Fateh strongman Mohammad Dahlan, and Mustafa Barghouti, who heads the independent left -wing National Initiative Party – or Mubadara. It seems likely that Marwan Barghouti draws some support away from Mahmoud Abbas among Fateh supporters. It is also clear that both Dahlan and Mustafa Barghouti rely on heavily region-specific support, with Dahlan enjoying very little trust outside Gaza, and Barghouti garnering correspondingly little support outside the West Bank.

Table 6: “Which Palestinian leadership figure do you trust the most?,” for top 4 contenders, by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Mahmoud Abbas	3%	38%	11%	19%
Ismael Hanieh	62%	3%	17%	11%
Marwan Barghouti	8%	20%	8%	20%
Mohammad Dahlan	0%	21%	0%	2%
Mustafa Barghouti	3%	6%	11%	17%

Table 7: “Which Palestinian leadership figure do you trust the most?,” for 3 secondary contenders, by Region of Residence

	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
Marwan Barghouti	18%	13%
Mohammad Dahlan	3%	16%
Mustafa Barghouti	10%	5%

E. Physical, economic insecurities frame public outlook

The combination of domestic political skepticism and disaffection expressed by large numbers of respondents is framed by widespread concern about the current situation. This concern has been somewhat dented by recent developments, with those who feel extreme concern falling by 12%. Yet overall, 86 % of respondents remain extremely concerned or to some extent concerned, a decrease of only 5% on the previous month’s poll. It is worth noting that while the worst inter-factional violence has played itself out in



the Gaza Strip, respondents in the West Bank express near equal or higher levels of concern.

Figure 11: How do you feel about the current situation?

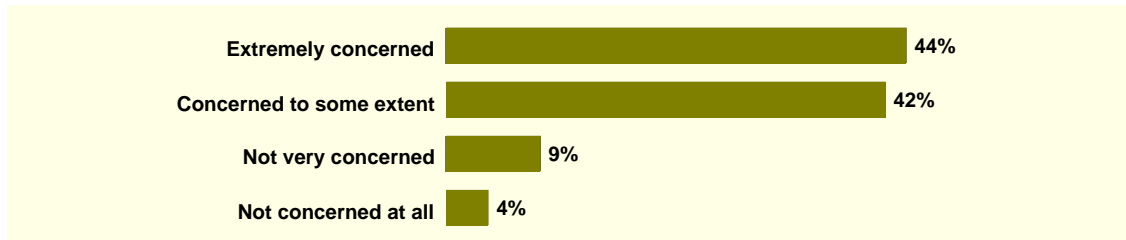


Table 8: “How do you feel about the current situation?,” by Region of Residence

	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
Extremely concerned	45%	43%
Concerned to some extent	44%	40%
Not very concerned	7%	13%
Not concerned at all	4%	5%

Similar responses were obtained when respondents were asked directly about their feeling of security. While there was a slight 4% improvement compared to the previous month, 70% remain insecure. Again, answers did not vary greatly depending on whether respondents were from the West Bank or Gaza. However, it is notable that respondents who tend politically towards Fateh were more likely to feel insecure than those who support Hamas, and that most worried were those who support neither of the two main parties, or no parties at all.

Figure 12: Do you feel secure, with respect to yourself, your family, and property?

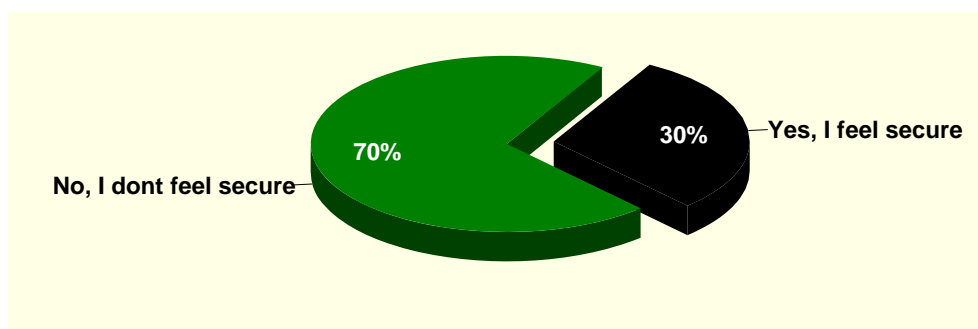




Table 9: “Do you feel secure...?” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Yes, I feel secure	45%	23%	8%	29%
No, I do not feel secure	55%	77%	92%	71%

Table 10: “Do you feel secure...?” by Region of Residence

Feeling of security with respect to yourself, family, and property.	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
Yes, I feel secure	29%	32%
No, I do not feel secure	71%	68%

The reasons for these high levels of insecurity are clear. Though concern about the internal power struggle decreased sharply since January, from 42% to 21%, this improvement was offset by resurgent worries about economic hardship, which rose by 10%; and absence of security for family, which rose by 3%. In other words, Palestinians still have a lot to worry about. Notably, current results are more or less in line with feelings in December, underscoring the deep-seated and long-running nature of the crisis besetting the Occupied Territories. It is notable that though the Gaza Strip suffers deeper and broader poverty than the West Bank, Gaza respondents were less likely to be concerned with economic hardship, and more with the internal power struggle and absence of security, which has taken a particularly high toll on the streets of Gaza.

Figure 13: What is the main issue that makes you feel concerned?

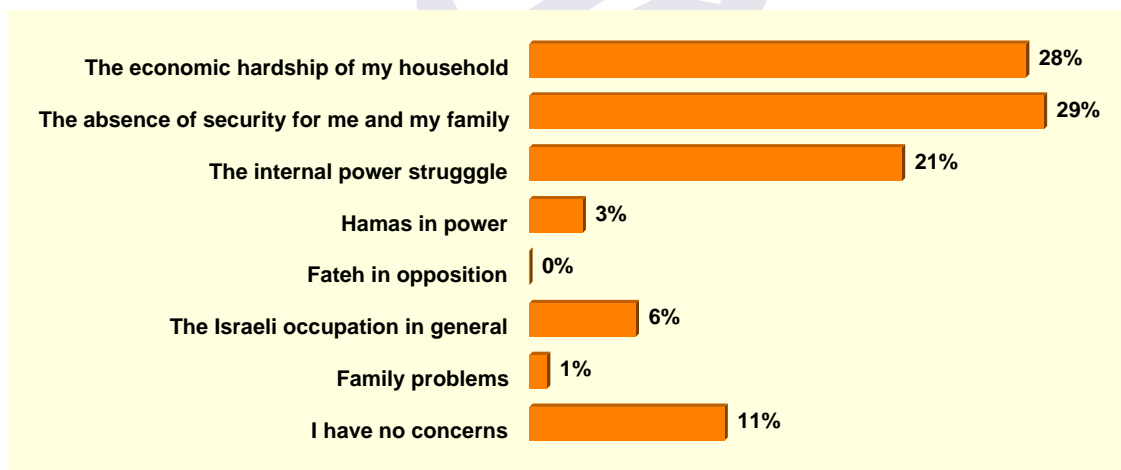




Table 11: “What is the main issue that makes you feel concerned?” by Region of Residence

	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
The economic hardship of my household	31%	22%
The absence of security for me and my family	29%	28%
The internal power struggle	19%	24%

F. New government faces clear priorities, but limited horizons

The broadly felt nature of these worries translates into a clear but limited mandate for the new government. Though its members have no common political platform, a combined 77% of respondents agree that the government’s most important priority is to either restore security, or enforce the law. Only 12% believe that reviving the economic situation should be the highest priority, and, most strikingly, only 4 % of Palestinians feel that the priority should be to make peace with Israel. Though Gaza respondents are somewhat more likely to insist on improvements in security, there are otherwise no large differences among respondents on the basis on factional or regional considerations.

Figure 14: What is the most important priority for the next government?

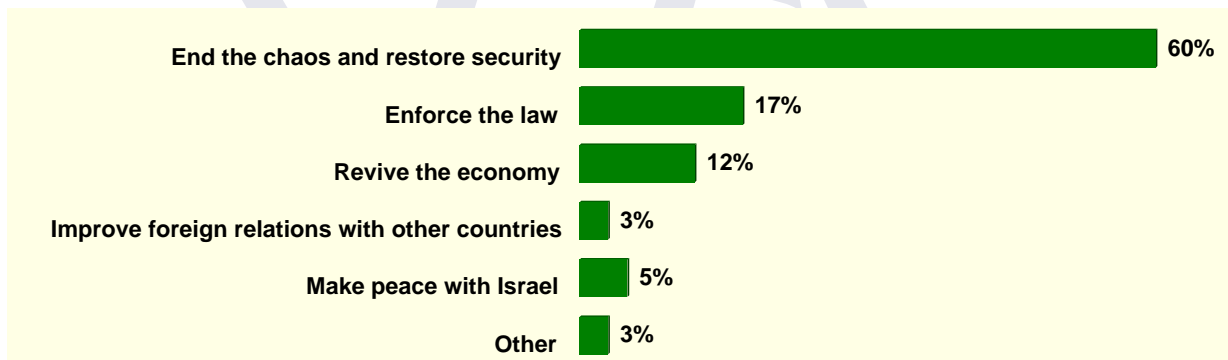


Table 12: “The most important priority for the next government is to...?” by Region of Residence

	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
End the chaos and restore security	58%	64%
Enforce the law	16%	17%
Revive the economy	13%	11%



As for what the government actually can achieve, the expectations of most respondents are similarly proscribed, if not despairing. Only 7% believe that it will “achieve nothing,” with a combined 64% believing that it will succeed in either ending the chaos and restoring security, or enforcing the law. Again however, only a very small number feel that making peace with Israel is a likely achievement.

Figure 15: What do you think this next government can achieve?

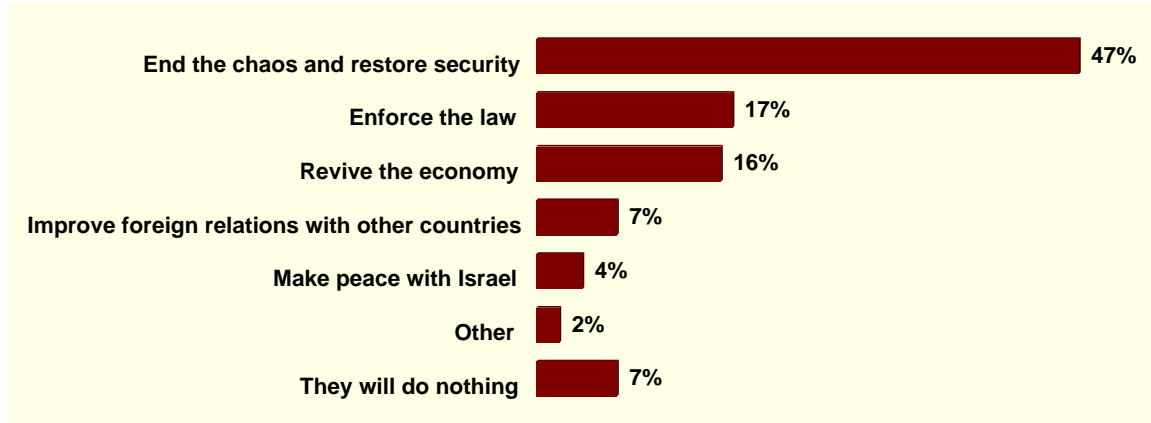


Table 13: “What do you think this next government can achieve?” by Region of Residence

	Region of residence.	
	West Bank	Gaza Strip
End the chaos and restore security	43%	53%
Enforce the law	17%	18%
Revive the economy	15%	18%

Notably, though a strong majority of Palestinians believe that the government will succeed in lifting international donor sanctions, as recorded earlier, only 16% believe that it is most likely to revive the economy. Possibly, this reflects a feeling that underlying conflict-related constraints, such as Israeli closures, are too great to be sufficiently mitigated by international assistance. Going by the record of the Oslo period, as well as that of the Intifada, this would be a realistic assessment. As many PA-employed respondents would also be aware, international donors have in fact continued to contribute substantial direct budget support to the Palestinian Authority during the period of the ‘boycott.’ Channeled via the PA President’s office, this continued assistance has nevertheless failed to offset the loss of \$60 million in monthly VAT clearances withheld by the government of Israel. As of the date of this poll, the Israeli government has indicated that it will refuse to recognize the new Palestinian unity government.



G. General support for peace holds strong

A large majority of respondents continue to support a peace settlement with Israel, of some form. As such, skepticism about the new government’s ability to secure a peace agreement with Israel, likely reflects the feeling that Palestinians do not yet have a peace partner in Israel, as recorded in earlier NEC polls. Over the period covered by the NEC’s monthly polls, support for peace has however been sensitive to current events, with respondents becoming much less forthcoming at times when Israeli military operations have resulted in spectacular killings of Palestinians, as was the case during the early summer of 2006. Notably, “support for peace,” also remains sensitive to Factional Trust, with Hamas supporters being much less supportive than any other category of respondents. Nevertheless, this position is far from unassailable, even among Hamas supporters.

Figure 16: Do you support of oppose a peace settlement with Israel? (Comparison between Jan 2006- Mar 2007)

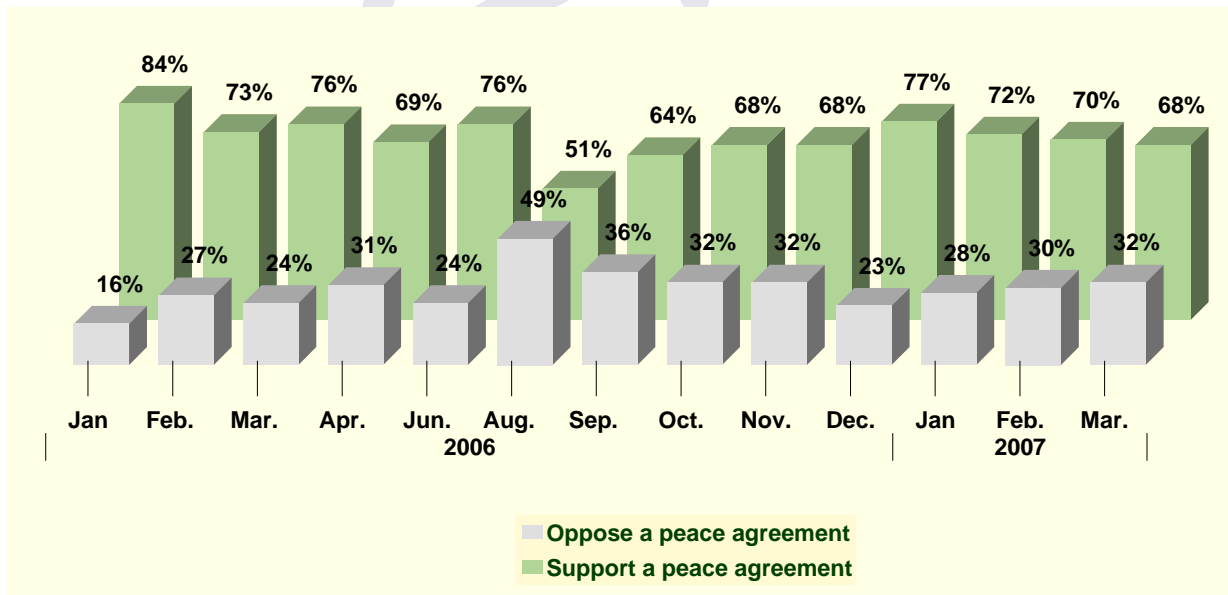


Table 14: “Do you support of oppose a peace settlement with Israel?,” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust (Recoded)			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
I support a peace settlement with Israel	49%	80%	62%	67%
I oppose a peace settlement with Israel	51%	20%	38%	33%



In general, a majority of respondents, irrespective of their factional leanings, currently support limiting violence against Israel, particularly in so far as the alternative has already been deemed by many as counterproductive.

Figure 17: Do you support or oppose broadening the temporary cessation of attacks inside Israel’s border, to other geographic areas?

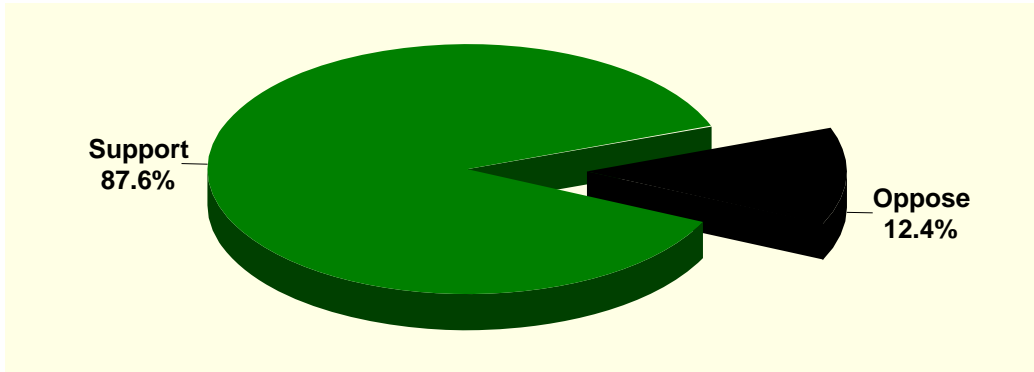


Table 15: “Do you support or oppose broadening the temporary cessation of attacks...” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Support	82%	94%	85%	87%
Oppose	18%	6%	15%	13%

H. Political demands endure, but are not immutable

In this context is interesting to note how respondents feel about Israeli and international demands that Hamas formally recognize Israel’s right to exist. Over the course of the Intifada, Hamas spokespeople have been drawn into various public formulations to the effect that the movement would implicitly recognize Israel as a partner in a long-term cease fire, should it meet certain minimal conditions corresponding to basic PLO negotiating positions. The Hamas government installed in 2006 has reiterated this position to the international community, while domestically seeking to avoid the impression that it has been irresolute. It is not difficult to see why the movement might be caught in two minds. Among Hamas supporters, two thirds believe that it should hold forth on refusing to recognize Israel. Yet even among that one-third of public opinion that is neither in the Hamas or Fateh camp, nearly half of respondents feel similarly. It is only among Fateh supporters that one observes a plurality of support for recognition of Israel.



Figure 18: Should Hamas maintain a position on the elimination of Israel?

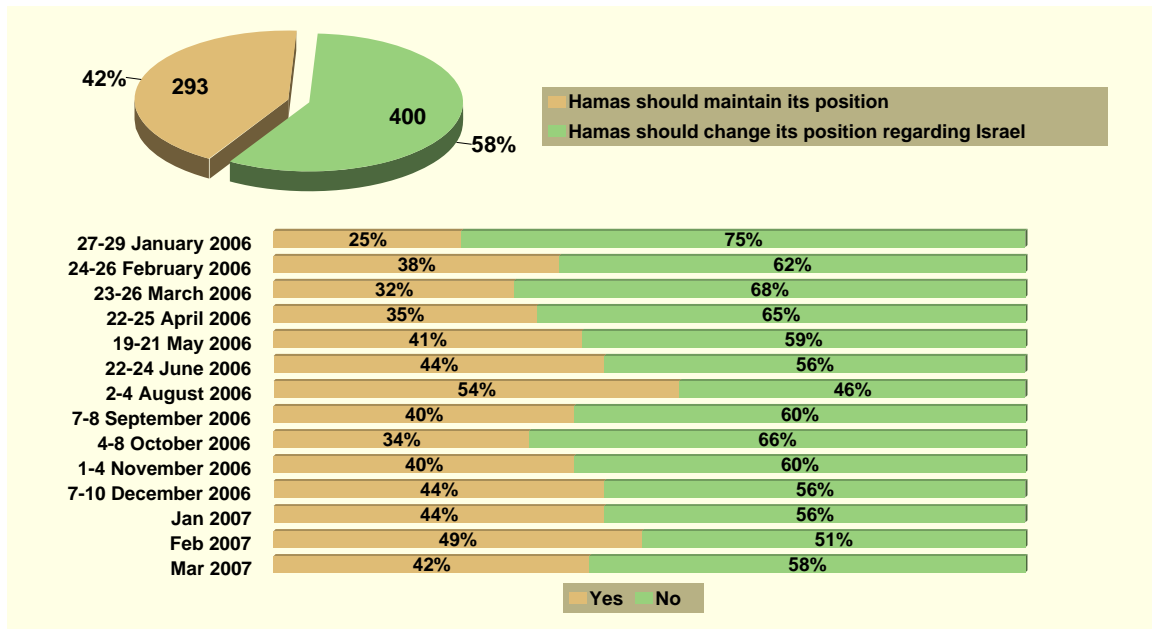


Table 16: “Should Hamas maintain a position on the elimination of Israel,” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust (Recoded)			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Hamas should maintain its position	64%	30%	46%	41%
Hamas should change its position	36%	70%	54%	59%

Parsing the issue further, and drawing on earlier NEC polls, it seems likely that a large number of those who hold forth on refusal do so for tactical reasons, arguing that the Palestinians should not recognize Israel until it has reciprocated with recognition of a Palestinian state, and or/acceptance of other Palestinian national aspirations, notably the right of return of Palestinian refugees to towns and cities in what is today Israel. Responses recorded in Figure 19, below, likely proxy the existence of some of those ‘red lines.’ Yet as also evidenced by this figure, such red lines do not seem to constrain a majority of respondents. Generally speaking, a majority of Palestinians seem to hold a dual position, being reluctant to accept the right of Israel to exist at the expense of their own rights, yet remaining willing to contemplate a permanent peace settlement, as evidenced by polls gauging overall support for peace. From the perspective of reaching such a settlement therefore, attaching a high symbolic importance to this condition may be missing a larger opportunity.



Figure 19: Should Hamas take all measures possible to reach a peace agreement with Israel?

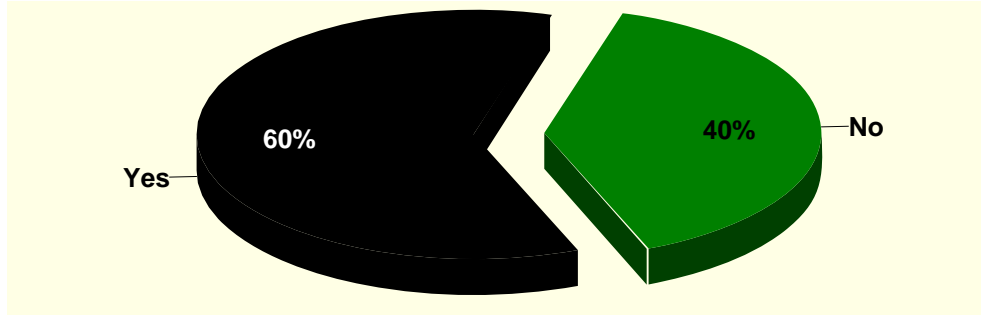


Table 17: "Should Hamas take all measures possible to reach a peace agreement with Israel?," by Factional Trust

	Factional trust (Recoded)			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
Yes	44%	70%	63%	61%
No	56%	30%	37%	39%

It is also notable that despite the high price exacted from the general Palestinian population by Israel counterinsurgency operations - for instance in response to the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit - a majority of respondents feel that Palestinians should trade their 'sacrifices' only for minimal concessions from Israel. With respect to the case of Shalit, a strong majority of respondents across the political spectrum condition his release on obtaining better terms from the Israeli government. The only exception to this are respondents from Fateh, yet even amongst this category, a very large number fell in with the general popular sentiment. Note also that respondents from the Gaza Strip, which has born the brunt of Israeli retaliations following Shalit's capture, maintain a high-demand position on this issue. Clearly, in this and other matters, physical pressure can backfire.

Figure 20: Should Hamas release Gilad Shalit in exchange for possible recognition by Israel?

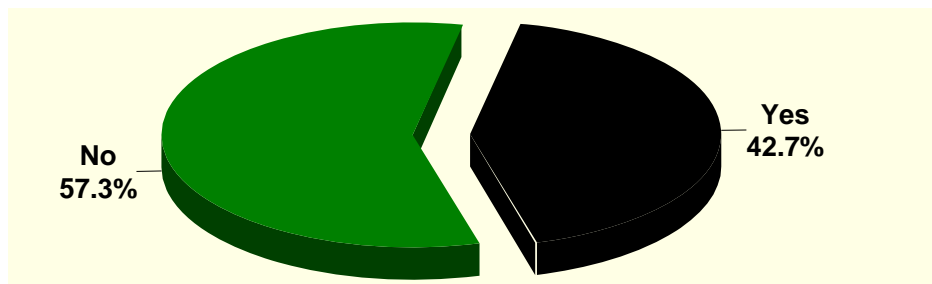




Table 18: “Should Hamas release Gilad Shalit in exchange for possible recognition by Israel?” by Region of Residence, and Factional Trust

	Region of Residence.			Factional Trust			
	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one	
Yes	47%	36%	28%	57%	29%	38%	
No	53%	64%	72%	43%	71%	62%	

I. PLO remains address for negotiations

Lastly, notwithstanding ongoing contests over control of the Palestinian Authority, and debates over what should be the public positions of this government, a strong majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza continue to believe that the PLO, not the PA, remains the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and would as such be the entity responsible for negotiating a peace settlement with Israel. As expected, this belief is sensitive to factional leanings. Supporters of Hamas, which is not part of the PLO, are much less clear on this matter. Nevertheless, a majority of Hamas supporters do continue to agree with the broad plurality of Palestinian opinion.

Figure 21: Who represents the Palestinian people?

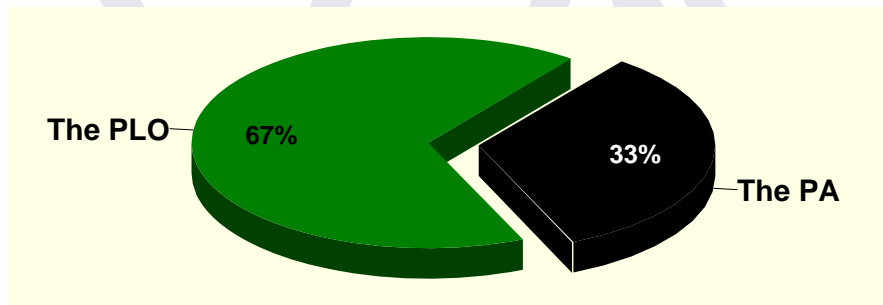


Table 19: “Who represents the Palestinian people?,” by Factional Trust

	Factional trust			
	Hamas	Fateh	Others	Trusts no one
The PLO	52%	74%	76%	69%
The Palestinian Authority	48%	26%	24%	31%



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