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**Willing to Compromise: Palestinian Public Opinion and the Peace Process**

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**Summary**

- Palestinian public opinion is not an impediment to progress in the peace process; to the contrary, over time the Palestinian public has become more moderate. Palestinian willingness to compromise is greater than it has been at any time since the start of the peace process. This increased willingness to compromise provides policymakers with greater room to maneuver.
- For the first time since the start of the peace process, a majority of Palestinians support a compromise settlement that is acceptable to a majority of Israelis. Therefore, the time is ripe to deal with permanent-status issues. In order to frame such a process more positively for Palestinians, any vision of a final settlement needs to have an Arab, as well as an international, stamp of approval.
- Palestinian opposition to violence increases when diplomacy proves effective. Public support for violence increases in an environment of greater pain and suffering and decreases when threat perception is reduced.
- Palestinian misperception of Israeli public attitudes is evident even when it comes to one of the core elements of the peace process: the two-state solution. Lack of normal personal interaction, because the only Israelis most Palestinians encounter are soldiers or armed settlers, encourages misperception and the desire to portray the other side negatively.
- All major transformations in Palestinian politics were preceded or accompanied by changes in public attitudes. The 1993 Oslo accords led to greater public willingness to oppose violence and support peace, negotiations, and reconciliation with Israel. Islamists lost much of their public support during this period.
- With the collapse of Oslo in 2000, Hamas reemerged as a credible alternative to the nationalist Fateh movement and the peace process. Recent years have also witnessed a significant decline in public support for the nationalist old guard, and the ascendance of a new young guard.
- By reducing threat perception, political and security stability has the advantage of reducing the appeal of violence and improving the prospects for Palestinian democracy. But only progress in the peace process can sustain such stability.
- In the absence of progress toward sustained stability, it is highly unlikely that Palestinians will find their way to democracy and good governance. If they do manage to produce a democracy under such adverse conditions, it will be one dominated by the rise of Hamas and a declining prospect for peace with Israel.
- The post-Arafat era shows more public optimism about the peace process and more willingness to compromise. Support for violence against Israelis, while still high, is declining. This period is also characterized by tougher competition between Fateh and Hamas, with the latter benefiting from weaker Palestinian Authority legitimacy at the local level, while corruption emerges as a weakness for Fateh and traditional nationalists.

**About the Report**

The United States Institute of Peace's Project on Arab-Israeli Futures is a research effort designed to anticipate and assess obstacles and opportunities facing the peace process in the years ahead. Stepping back from the day-to-day ebb and flow of events on the ground, this project examines deeper, over-the-horizon trends that could foreclose future options or offer new openings for peace. The effort brings together American, Israeli, and Arab researchers and is directed by Scott Lasensky, a senior research associate at the Institute.

In this report, Khalil Shikaki analyzes survey data gathered from dozens of polls conducted over the past decade and identifies long-term trends in Palestinian public opinion and related policy implications. Shikaki's study is essential reading for policy planners on all sides. The first study in the series, *The Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Critical Trends Affecting Israel*, by Yossi Alpher, was published in September 2005.

Khalil Shikaki is one of the foremost authorities on Palestinian public opinion and Palestinian national politics. The director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah, Shikaki holds a PhD from Columbia University. He has served as senior consultant to the Independent Task Force on Strengthening Palestinian Public Institutions and has written numerous essays in leading publications around the world.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.