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Role of Palestinian Public Opinion in the Making of PA Policy

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Mr. Ladadweh published various research papers including one on "Religion in Palestinian Society and Politics" presented at the a conference on Growing Popular Participation in Decision Making in the Arab World which was held in Qatar University in March 2013. He also contributed two papers to *The Second Palestinian Elections*, co-edited by Khalil Shikaki and Jihad Harb, one on "Methodology of Exit Polling," and the other on "Demographic Characteristics of Palestinian Voters: 2005-06." He has also contributed to the *Palestinian Democracy Index* in the years 2005-08.

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Role of public opinion in policy making

Professionally prepared public opinion polls represent one of most penetrating means of measuring the attitudes of the public on various socio-political issues. Proficient polls rely on scientifically tried and tested methodology that includes sample selection and design of the questions, among others. By examining its methodology, one can easily ascertain the validity and reliability of polls. As democracy gained ground, survey research became essential because it provided the means to explore public positions and demands in the various aspects of political life, including electoral behavior. As a result, survey research gained significant attention in democratic countries while attracting little attention in countries in their early stages of transition to democracy and no interest at all in authoritarian and totalitarian countries.

Public opinion research allows policy makers to uncover public needs and positions toward important policy questions thereby allowing them to take effective measures consistent with public requirements. It allows decision making to become more evidence-based and more responsive to the most urgent societal priorities while helping policy makers to avoid confrontation with the public. In doing so, it contributes to the formation of trust and harmony between the public and the political regime which helps to consolidate stability.

In the Palestinian case, a need exists to pay attention to public opinion polls due to the considerable complexity of the socio-political conditions and the rate of change in these conditions and the need to make carefully studied decisions that help avoid direct conflict with the public. There are considerable differences among Palestinians on some of the most vital political issues and survey research can easily demonstrate the gap between the public and the policy makers. Yet, it is evident that Palestinian policy makers pay little attention to survey research and show little interest in finding out what Palestinians think. One can hypothesize that the leaders of the Palestinian Authority (PA) do not care about public views and demands. Such a conclusion might lead one to anticipate the likelihood of internal confrontations: the PA against the people.

This critical policy brief sheds light on the issue by exploring the seriousness with which PA policy makers view Palestinian public opinion and proposes ways of probing the reasons for this PA behavior.

Does the PA take the Palestinian public seriously?

To answer this question, we will review the manner in which PA policy makers addressed public response to two recent policy issues. It is evident that for most of the time, policy makers showed little or no attention to public needs in two occasions: when addressing the case of public opposition to the proposed social security system and the case of security coordination with the Israeli security sector.

The PA issued a **social security** law around the end of 2018 with the intention of implementing the law by applying it on those who work in the private and non-governmental sectors. The law was met by a fierce opposition among the public that soon developed into a popular movement determined to derail its implementation. The movement expanded to all cities in a relatively short period of time. Public opinion surveys showed very early on that the overwhelming majority of the public rejected the law. Indeed, by mid-December 2018 a poll¹ conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) showed that 65% of the public in the West Bank opposed the implementation of the law and that this opposition rises to 84% among those who would be directly affected by it. These findings were widely published in the local media. But it seemed that policy makers were oblivious of the findings. Indeed, policy makers continued to demonstrate total ignorance of public mood. On 19 January 2019, the minister of local government publicly stated² that the “leader of the anti-social security law movement in Hebron lives in the settlement of Kiryat Arba and that the city just follows him.” The minister’s statement fueled public anger and consolidated the prevailing public perception of the huge gap between the public and the policy makers and the extent to which policy makers are willing to turn a blind eye to vital public needs. One Facebook comment argued that the episode reveals “a whole context of supremacy and invincibility over citizens exhibited by policy makers who rule out public needs as irrelevant.”

In an interview with the author³, deputy minister of labor, Mr. Samir Salamah, stated that throughout the period in which the issue of the implementation of the social security law was being debated, he himself was not aware of any trusted findings on public views regarding the issue despite the fact that he, as one of the relevant policy makers, surely needed one and that he was not made aware of the results of PSR poll mentioned above. Salamah added that there is no department at the ministry, or at the entire PA, whose task was to ascertain public views on such matters.

The second example is an ongoing one involving PA **security coordination** with the Israeli security sector. The aim is not to discuss the policy itself; rather, we want to examine how policy makers viewed public attitudes regarding this and other similar critical issues in PA policy. It is evident from polling results that a clear majority of Palestinians are opposed to continued Palestinian coordination with Israel regarding security matters. This issues has the potential of damaging trust between the Palestinian public and the PA. Yet, policy makers seem uninterested in addressing the matter in a serious manner, a fact that is not hidden from the Palestinian public. Palestinian polls⁴ have shown strong public demand for the termination of security coordination. The same polls have also shown that the public does not expect the PA to take its views on this matter seriously. On its part, the PA has done little to provide the public with a convincing argument in favor of continuing its current policy. Nor has the PA explained the types of coordination involved, the expected benefits of such a policy, and the difficulties involved in terminating it. The question one needs to address is why the PA makes no effort to seriously consider public opinion when reviewing its policy.

Dr. Ammar Duwaik, director general of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights has stated in an article on the subject⁵ that this is “one of the most sensitive and controversial issues in Palestinian politics,” and that despite a great deal of public interest on the subject, “details on the nature and types of this coordination, the extent to which civilians are in control of this policy, and the how and what kind of intelligence information is shared or passed on remain hidden from the public.” He adds that “there has not been any quiet and objective dialogue at the national level regarding this matter.” Instead, the debate has been overwhelmed by mud-slinging and mutual accusations of treason. This environment only contributes to public distrust of the policy and the PA disregard of public opinion.

¹ <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/740>

² <https://www.arab48.com/ميديا/ميديا/19/01/2019/حسين-الأعرج-يهاجم-حراك-الضمان-ويعتذر-بعد-الضغط>

³ Interview conducted on 19 August 2019.

⁴ See for example a March 2019 PSR poll: <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/752>

⁵ See Ammar’s piece: <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/65917/التسويق-الأمني-من-منظور-حقوق-بقل-د-عمار-الدويك>

It is worth noting in this regard that public opinion firms have developed a negative impression of the extent to which the PA cares about their poll findings. Nadir Said⁶, director of AWRAD, center for public opinion polling located in the West Bank, notices that the current PA regime shows less and less interest in polls and public opinion in general and he attributes that to what he sees as a tendency in the regime to become more centralized and under the control of a single individual. He senses that the PA policy makers see no point in a dialogue with civil society or research centers. He thinks that the PA has not developed an interest in studying or addressing public opinion needs and that no policy maker is willing to pay attention to polling research in any systemic way; thereby the PA finds itself lacking any readiness to develop preemptive or counter strategies to win hearts and minds. Said come to these conclusions based on his own experience in polling research. He concludes that there is lack of awareness on the part of the PA of the importance of public opinion research and a readiness to dismiss it as unimportant and irrelevant and that policy makers tend to think that they know more about the society than revealed by the polls.

Mr. Salamah agrees in part with this assessment. While he personally expresses interest in public opinion research, views it as important, and believes that it is critical that on-going research must be maintained, he nonetheless think that some policy makers treat opinion research with disdain, mere ink on paper. He adds that the trust of policy makers in polling is very limited and that they do not appreciate its importance. He explains that his ministry has no body whose responsibility is to gather updated information of public sentiments and that if some individuals show such an interest, it is usually a personal initiative.⁷

Understanding PA's lack of interest in public opinion research:

One or more of the following factors are responsible for the lack of PA interest in public opinion research: distrust in poll findings, disregard of public opinion, institutional weakness within the PA that hinders its ability to ascertain public preferences.

- 1) **Distrust in public opinion research:** Among all factors, this might be the most critical in pushing policy makers away from public opinion. For example, Mr. Salama was quick to point out that polling results failed in 2006 to predict Hamas's electoral victory when all polling centers predicted a victory for Fateh only to see Hamas winning a sweeping victory on the day of elections. This might have led to a great suspicion among policy makers and the public at large of the credibility of polling centers. Indeed, Salamah indicates that when the subject of polling is opened for discussion, the reaction is usually negative and distrustful.

If this is the only reason to disregard public opinion, it is certainly unwarranted. Skepticism about survey research must be based on methodological and scientific bases and a follow up to the progress made in state of the art of this research. It should be based on an examination of the methods currently employed in the polling centers at all levels, sample selection, design of questions, and statement of findings. This is not a difficult task at all; yet, the PA shows no interest in exploring it. As Salamah indicates, "despite the skeptical reception of polling, there is no interest in examining its deficiencies or in exploring research methodology."⁸ The author of this brief has been working for the past 15 years as a head of the polling unit at PSR, a survey research center that has been conducting quarterly surveys among the Palestinian public since 2000. Only in rare occasions did I receive requests for a description of our research methodology from PA officials despite the fact that we receive plenty of enquiries from international students and diplomats. This lack of interest in methodology on the part of the PA clearly indicates either a skepticism about the poll findings based on non-scientific analysis or that the PA has no interest in public opinion in general.

⁶ Interview conducted by the author on 12 August 2019.

⁷ See footnote #3 above.

⁸ Ibid.

- 2) **Lack of interest in the opinion of the Palestinian public:** Some policy makers might subscribe to the notion that leaders' job is to lead the public rather than being led by it; that instead of following a swinging public mood, leaders' job is to do what they think is in the best interest of the country regardless of the prevailing public opinion at any given moment. Needless to say, this is a valid position in many cases. In some cases, policy makers face problems that require expert, not public, opinion. Moreover, leaders often have to make swift policy decisions long before public opinion is known. Still, complete disregard to public opinion is not only unwise, but also risky. Ultimately, leaders' job is to strike a balance between leadership and representation of the views of the public that elected them. When a need arises to disregard public opinion, leaders must provide clarification and seek to persuade the public that their own unpopular policies are worth testing. The risks involved in disregarding the views of the majority of the Palestinian public are evident in the scenes of confrontations between the public and the masses in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria and before that in those countries of the first wave of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the findings of the latest wave of the Arab Barometer⁹, a survey of public opinion conducted regularly in most Arab countries since 2006, including Palestine, provides valuable indicators of trends in the Arab world. For example, the 2018-19 indicators highlight the extent of extreme discontent in countries like Algeria, Sudan and Lebanon thereby providing an early warning sign for policy makers, but only to those who do care about their own publics. These indicators of discontent include areas such as room for free speech, perception of prevailing and future economic conditions, perceptions of corruption, and so on. PA policy makers follow the steps of their counterparts in the Arab countries in disregarding and underestimating the level of discontent among the Palestinian public. It should be clear to those policy makers that the public is fully aware of this fact. The result is a huge loss of trust. It is of course possible that the fact that Palestine has not witnessed any general elections since 2006 and the fact that elections might not take place any time in the near future might inevitably lead to authoritarianism and with it a total disregard to public opinion. Indeed, leaders will ignore their public as long as the public is not a threat to their place of power through the voting booths.
- 3) **Institutional weaknesses in the PA:** Individual PA policy makers might have an interest in public opinion but the lack of institutional support forces them to rely on their own initiative making it difficult to regularly incorporate public attitudes in their own policy input. As both Mr. Salamah and Mr. Said indicated, PA public institutions lack a systemic follow up or a regular review of existing public opinion research and the PA itself does not invest in building its own capacity to assess public opinion. This lack of readily available data on public positions from trusted sources forces senior policy makers to rely on instinct or guesses of their own and those of their close advisors that might not be informed by any kind of evidence.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is evident that the problem involved in the lack of attention to public opinion involves not only the policy making circles, but also the polling centers. Therefore, our recommendations address both sides. On the one hand, the PA must reassess its position regarding public opinion research not only to ensure that its policies are consistent with public needs and demands, but also to avoid conflict and the potential for violent confrontations with the public that placed them in their positions. On the other hand, polling centers share a responsibility that requires them to make an effort to regain public and PA trust in their research and in restoring the credibility of scientific research and methods.

The PA should do the following:

⁹ <https://www.arabbarometer.org/waves/arab-barometer-wave-v/>

- It should educate its own staff and policy makers on the importance of public opinion and the need to carefully monitor it and find ways to measure public response to PA-initiated policies.
- The PA should establish a unit in the office of the president and/or the prime minister whose job is to monitor public attitudes. This unit should seek to inform policy making by routinely imbedding public opinion research in policy analysis. In doing so, it should also work closely with polling centers, examine their methods, and provide advice when necessary while showing willingness to consult.

Many Palestinian polling centers suffer from two major impediments to trusted public opinion research: political bias and cheap data. They must be aware of these impediments and find ways to overcome them.

- First, they should keep in mind that they are not political parties or advocacy groups and that the first enemy of good and reliable research is a conflict of interest that might inadvertently cloud minds of researchers and methods of research. Objective research, not tainted by political biases, is the most difficult problem to address. Researchers must be fully aware of it and must take deliberate precautionary measures to neutralize their biases.
- Second, polling centers, particularly the commercial ones, should not allow lack of funding to sacrifice rigorous and verifiable research methods. Polling centers who have to compete for funding or take part in biddings to secure badly needed funds tend to reduce costs embodied in fully trained manpower or utilization of advanced equipment. This is a highly problematic practice that must be stopped before polling can regain public and PA trust. In this regard, a certain responsibility lies with the funders themselves, particularly those who place a great focus of bids assessment on cost. It is their responsibility to insure full commitment to sound research methods, not only on paper, but also on the field.

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