

**Paths to Democratic Party Development:
Findings from Focus Groups in the West Bank and Gaza**

Prepared for the
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
by Paul Adams
in Collaboration with Alpha International, Ramallah

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The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive, independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law, political parties that are open and accountable, and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

Build Political and Civic Organizations: NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of a strong civic culture. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions—the voice of an informed citizenry, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

Safeguard Elections: NDI promotes open and democratic elections. Political parties and governments have asked NDI to study electoral codes and to recommend improvements. The Institute also provides technical assistance for political parties and civic groups to conduct voter education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. NDI is a world leader in election monitoring, having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

Promote Openness and Accountability: NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to the balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in every region of the world, NDI complements the skills of its staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the world, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.

Preface

Purpose. NDI's Palestinian focus group project was conducted as part of its political party program in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. NDI is working closely with several Palestinian parties, factions, groupings and individuals who are committed to a democratic future for Palestinians and who renounce violence as an instrument of political change.

This report was prepared by Paul Adams, NDI's resident senior program director for the West Bank/Gaza program. NDI would like to acknowledge the National Endowment for Democracy whose financial support made this program possible.

Because of limited experience with democratic processes, including elections, NDI's Palestinian partners have requested assistance in acquiring many capabilities, including: democratic consultation with membership, the development of platforms and political messages, raising funds and public opinion research.

By conducting a series of focus groups, NDI hoped to deepen the understanding of public opinion among its Palestinian partners and reinforce the usefulness of public opinion research. The research results can assist the efforts of NDI's partners in developing policy and in framing approaches to voters, as well as building a basis for future research.

Although there has been extensive polling of Palestinians in recent years, most of it has been conducted by international organizations, academic institutions and NGOs. It has tended to concentrate on testing attitudes towards issues narrowly related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the use of violence or the possibility of renewed negotiations with Israel. Virtually no polling or other public opinion research has been undertaken from the perspective of political parties hoping one day to compete in Palestinian elections and other political processes.

Method. In considering the results of focus groups, it is important to understand what they are, what information they can yield and what their limitations are. Focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that are conducted by a moderator according to a set of prepared guidelines. Typically eight to twelve people participate. Each group is recruited to match previously determined social characteristics. Ideally, they produce vigorous, free-flowing discussions that can provide researchers with some of the texture and nuance of public discourse that is difficult to capture in any other way.

Focus groups do not and cannot pretend to provide a scientific sample of public opinion. Focus groups are not a substitute for scientific polling, but a complement to it. While focus groups do not produce a statistical sample of the population, they can, because of their open-ended nature, reveal a richness of opinion that polls cannot relate. In particular, they often unearth views and sentiments completely unanticipated by the researchers, and that was the case here.

Despite the inevitable limitations, attempts were made to sample as wide a cross-section of Palestinian opinion as possible. The focus groups were held in a variety of locations across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, namely: Nablus, Ramallah, East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jabaliya (North Gaza), Gaza City and Khan Younis (South Gaza). Half the groups consisted solely of women, and half solely of men. Otherwise the participants were recruited to represent a range of social groups from the locality in which a focus group met. They included people from both urban and rural areas, from refugee camps as well as neighboring municipalities, and people from various income levels and professional groups. The participants were recruited by the Ramallah-based polling and research company, Alpha International.

NDI drafted the guidelines for the focus group discussions after consultations with its Palestinian party partners to determine what information would be useful to them. The focus groups themselves were led by a moderator from Alpha International.

The focus groups were originally planned for the early part of May. In a number of cases, however, particularly in the Gaza Strip, they had to be re-scheduled because of Israeli military activity. Nonetheless, all the groups met successfully within a three week period in May.

In every case, the discussions were lively. In several instances, they went much longer than the allocated time because of the intense interest of the participants in expressing their opinions.

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Executive Summary

A set of eight focus groups convey important insights into the challenges and opportunities that face Palestinian reformers in winning support if and when they are able to compete for office. The main findings of the research include the following:

The Palestinian Context. Palestinians view the current situation in negative terms. Issues of serious concern include: the economy, unemployment, family breakdown and violence, Palestinian “collaborators,” checkpoints, “The Wall”, home demolitions and military incursions.

Even among the vast majority who blamed the occupation for their plight, many believed that the Palestinian Authority (PA) had a large share of the responsibility for improving matters – a responsibility in which it was widely held to have failed. There was also an adamant minority, most notable among Islamists, who blamed Palestinians themselves for the current situation.

Broad Support for Democracy and Elections. The research demonstrated that there is a large reservoir of positive feeling towards democracy as a concept. For the most part participants in the focus groups defined democracy in ways familiar to outsiders: in terms of free speech and press, the rule of law, and most particularly elections. Indeed, elections were overwhelmingly popular among focus group participants, even among those who seemed to have little attraction to democratic values more generally.

Enthusiasm for and Cynicism about Reform. The idea of reform is also popular, and for many, is closely associated with a desire for elections. “Reform” has come to signify an end to the corruption and favouritism that is widely seen to characterize not only the PA, but also many other institutions operating in the territories, including domestic and international NGOs.

However, to a significant extent, the idea of reform has been tainted by its association with the European Union and the United States, which have been active in advocating a broad reform agenda for the PA in the last two years. While some of the Palestinians welcomed that advocacy, many more were wary of outside pressure and supported a more indigenous process.

Secularism: an Obscure and Unappealing Concept. Although the word “secular” [*elmanieh* in Arabic] is not commonly used in everyday speech, it is often employed by democratic leaders to describe their own views, and may be included in literature or speeches designed to promote their cause. It would not be too strong to say that many, possibly most of the Palestinians in the focus groups, reacted to the word with repugnance. Secularism was associated with an opposition to Islam, atheism, unwelcome

Westernization, a breakdown in family values and even sexual deviancy. Asked to choose between a secular and an Islamic state, only a tiny minority among the participants chose the former. This was true even among those who believed that democracy is compatible with Islam.

Education: Top Priority. Many Palestinians cited the increasing value being placed on education as one of the few positive outcomes of the current situation. Education was viewed by many as a means of rising above the current Palestinian morass. To an extent this can be seen as an alternative to the violent *intifada* – an individual and family response to the current Palestinian situation – though some Islamists in Gaza seemed to view education as a tool for preparing youth for confrontation with Israel rather than as a means of personal advancement.

The Role of Islam in Palestinian Life: Increasing Religiosity. The focus groups research confirmed the trend to greater religious faith among Palestinians. Gazans, more than West Bankers, tended to view virtually every other issue – be it education, corruption, the rule of law or the conflict with Israel – through a religious prism.

Law and Order: Perceived Decline. Most Palestinians perceived there to be a decline in law and order in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in recent years due to a host of factors, including: the inability of the Palestinian security forces to effectively administer the areas under their control, the Israeli occupation and a decline in moral or religious values in Palestinian society.

Corruption: Everywhere. Corruption is widely regarded as rife in virtually all Palestinian institutions. The so-called system of *wasta* (“connections”) is perceived to determine entrance into political office. Many international organizations working with Palestinians were seen as operating primarily for the personal benefit of their members.

“The Wall” and Gaza Withdrawal. Almost all focus group participants in the West Bank expressed psychological and emotional stress as a result of “The Wall.” Most people felt that neither the PA nor the political factions had done anything to impede the progress of “The Wall” – a source of considerable frustration.

The research revealed an interesting, and potentially serious cleavage between Gazans and West Bankers on the issue of a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Gazans tended to be much more hopeful about their prospects if a withdrawal does occur than their counterparts in the West Bank. Many spoke of peace, security and new elections. The West Bank participants, meanwhile, were deeply concerned that an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza might make it more difficult to secure their own territory.

Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza are deeply suspicious of Israeli motives, and remain sceptical about whether the withdrawal will happen. There is also a

general concern about factional strife within the Palestinian community if there were to be a withdrawal.

Yasser Arafat: Unifier and Polarizer. Yasser Arafat retains a wide popular following that stretches well beyond support for his Fateh faction, or even for the Palestinian Authority. Many supporters of Hamas or other factions in the focus groups continue to regard him as an important symbol of national unity. Many people predicted chaos, political collapse or even civil war among Palestinians were he to be removed from the scene for some reason. Some of the participants found the idea of life-after-Arafat so unthinkable that they were unable to answer a question about it.

Paradoxically, even among those who were adamant in their support of Arafat as president, most predicted that the situation of Palestinians would not improve during what remains of his tenure.

Hamas: Growing Appeal. The focus groups confirmed the evidence available from opinion polls that Hamas and other Islamic groups are growing in support. Hamas' supporters tended to define its appeal in terms of its "resistance" to Israeli occupation, or its supposed incorruptibility in contrast with Fateh and the Palestinian Authority. Hamas' specifically Islamic character was mentioned less often, though it was obviously very important to a minority that had its strongest representation in the Gaza Strip. Virtually all participants agreed that the recent Israeli campaign of assassinations against the leaders of Hamas had evoked their sympathy, and many said that it had led them to support Hamas.

Prospects for a Democratic Alternative to the Status Quo. In some quarters – though not in all – there was a yearning for, or at least an openness towards, a democratic "Third Way" in politics, between the existing Palestinian regime and the mainly Islamist opposition groups. Many focus group participants expressed a desire to see leaders independent of the existing parties play a greater role in their political life. When prompted, these people had little difficulty in defining what attributes they would like to see in a third option, notably: integrity, commitment to democratic values, inclusiveness, and a clear vision for the Palestinian future.

Conclusion. At present, the disparate array of small non-violent democratic parties barely registers in public opinion polls, though some leaders, such as Mustafa Barghouti, Yasser Abed Rabbo, and Hanan Ashrawi, do enjoy widespread recognition and prominence. A Palestinian Democratic Coalition was recently formed with the intention of bringing together many of these parties, factions, and individuals under a single political umbrella. However, its existence is virtually unknown to the public.

Yet the relative weakness of the democratic center does not necessarily imply an automatic rejection of many of the ideas that underlie democratic thinking. Indeed, the strong and apparently growing religious sentiment among Palestinians coupled with a

continued support for many core democratic values might suggest an opening for a Turkish model of Islamic-inspired democratic pluralism.

The idea of a democratic alternative to the existing regime and Islamist groups did have considerable appeal, though more in the West Bank than in Gaza, and more among secular and moderate voters than among Islamists. Roughly half of the focus group participants said they would like to see a democratic third way emerge. In part, this seemed to be an expression of a desire for more political choices.

The focus groups suggested three realistic avenues to democratic party development in the Palestinian community:

- An emergent “third way” providing a democratic alternative to Hamas and Fateh.
- A democratic, nationalist movement based on reformist elements of the existing Fateh faction.
- A “Turkish model” party influenced by Islamist principles, but operating in a democratic, pluralist fashion.

Principal Findings

I. The Palestinian Context

Palestinians view their current situation in negative terms - almost everywhere in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, people described the situation as “extremely bad”.

The public’s concerns ranged from the economy, unemployment and family breakdown to checkpoints, “The Wall”, home demolitions and military incursions. There was also deep concern about growing violence, including family violence, within the Palestinian population. In Gaza, many people cited the problem of “collaborators” as the worst feature of the current situation. This is presumably an expression of the widespread belief that the Israelis have been assisted in the recent spate of assassinations and incursions by Palestinian “collaborators”. Women in the Jabaliya focus group (northern Gaza) linked the problem of collaborators to the current high unemployment rate in the territory.

Almost every issue of concern, including for example, family breakdown and violence within the Palestinian community was blamed directly or indirectly on the Israeli occupation. A man in Gaza City explained, *“The presence of the occupation is the cause of all bad political, economic and social conditions, even in the family between a man and his wife. It affects the children.”*

However, many were inclined to assign a significant share of the responsibility for improving matters to the Palestinian Authority – a responsibility in which they believe the PA has conspicuously failed. This was particularly apparent, for example, with regard to the breakdown of law and order in many Palestinian communities.

An adamant minority, most notable among Islamists, placed blame for the current situation on Palestinians themselves. As a man in Khan Younis said, *“The responsibility falls fully on the [Palestinian] people, on the Palestinian Authority and its leader. The occupation has nothing to do with it.”*

Asked to compare the situation in their communities with that of other Palestinian areas, there was substantial and sometimes surprising variation. Not unexpectedly, the group in Nablus, which has been cut off from the rest of the West Bank by a tight Israeli military cordon, and where there has been a breakdown in law and order, judged that conditions there were worse there than elsewhere. However, among the Khan Younis focus group, in the south of the Gaza Strip, which has seen extensive Israeli military

activity in recent months, many insisted that they were better off than elsewhere, if not economically, then socially, due to their strong Islamic faith and family ties.

Generally speaking, Gazans were more likely than West Bankers to say they were better off than other Palestinians. This may reflect psychological, cultural or ideological differences, since by most material measures, the West Bank is better off than Gaza. Jerusalem is a particular case in point. Although Jerusalemites are by and large wealthier and better serviced by government than other Palestinians, most judged themselves to be worse off than other Palestinians, saying that they were more “exposed” to Israeli actions.

Despite the general gloom, most participants had no problem answering when asked what the best feature of the current Palestinian situation is. The most frequent answers referred to the way in which Palestinians, individually and collectively, had reacted to the Israeli occupation in recent years. Principally, those included a spirit of resistance, national unity, and a growing religiosity. Education was also mentioned often, usually in connection with the growth of national or religious feeling, or as a form of resistance. A woman in Jabaliya said, *“As long as there is religion there is love of God and love for God creates resistance, and as long as there is resistance there is education.”* A man in Nablus explained, *“Resistance to occupation is one of the main reasons that we live for. Resistance is a form of expression of Palestinian dignity, the feeling of hope for a free life, the protection of oneself and the community.”*

The Gazan focus group participants generally put more emphasis on the growing religiosity of their communities than West Bankers, though the theme was evident in most of the focus groups. West Bankers were more likely to emphasize the national unity that had emerged from the current confrontation with Israel.

II. Broad Support for Democracy and Elections

Democracy as a “brand”. It may seem to trivialize democracy to consider it as a “brand”. However, since the term “democracy” is used extensively, sometimes in the names and certainly in the slogans of democratic organizations, it is important to know what thoughts, ideas, sentiments and emotions it summons up in those who hear it. While democracy may seem self-evidently good to those in the West, and sometimes also to its proponents in the Arab and Muslim world, the word triggered quite complex associations among some focus group participants.

Most of those associations were positive. “Freedom”, “choice”, “good government”, “rule of the people”, “security” and “respect” were some of the terms most frequently conjured up by the word “democracy.” In addition, the participants in the focus groups by and large defined democracy in a way that would be familiar to outsiders, citing features such as elections and the rule of law.

Islam and Democracy. When asked whether democracy was compatible with Islam, most participants said that it was. However, many seemed slightly discomfited by the question, and struggled to justify their view. In addition there was a significant minority that dissented, particularly noticeable in Gaza, flatly rejecting democracy on Islamic grounds.

Among the majority who did not see a conflict, many argued that democracy is in fact an Islamic concept, rooted in scripture and ancient practice. One woman in Bethlehem noted, *“It was mentioned in the old times and also in the Koran.”* Another woman in Bethlehem explained, *“Islam was the one that called for democracy.”*

A group of women in Ramallah – the most secular group NDI encountered – was less inclined to trace democracy’s roots to Islam. However, most felt that the two were compatible, at least to a degree, or that there were “points of intersection”.

The minority who argued that Islam and democracy are incompatible seemed more adamant, and less torn in expressing their views. A man in Hebron said, *“Democracy is a way of living while Islam is a holistic religious system...that cannot be combined together because they conflict.”* While a man in Khan Younis held that, *“It [democracy] is an imported idea.”*

In Khan Younis, in the south of the Gaza Strip, where one of the most Islamist groups was encountered, a majority said that democracy and Islam are incompatible. Many expressed strong negative associations with democracy, with men in Khan Younis characterizing it as *“The exploitation of women and taking them around to be harassed by men in the streets,”* in one instance; and, *“The imposition of someone’s opinions and unfair laws”* in another instance.

Despite these dissenting views, “democracy” was a powerful and positive concept for many, probably most of the Palestinian focus group participants. Interestingly, even among those who rejected democracy as a system incompatible with Islam, there were many who enthusiastically embraced elements of democratic practice, such as the rule of law and, more specifically, elections.

Wide Demand for Elections. Elections are by far the most popular element of the democratic canon for Palestinians, winning enthusiastic support even from the minority who reject democracy in principle and out of hand. To a degree this enthusiasm is pragmatic rather than ideological. Elections are seen by some as the handiest way to change an ossified leadership rather than as an enduring principle of social organization.

It is not only that Palestinians have not had presidential or parliamentary elections since 1996. Many other organizations, including municipal councils, party executives, high organs of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and even the leadership of professional organizations have also been frozen in time, leading to accumulated frustration among the public. Moreover, Hamas did not formally participate in the 1996

elections, meaning that representative institutions exclude a large (and growing) element of the population.

It would seem that elections would be at the very center of the democratic program given their popularity, the fact that Islamist groups such as Hamas refused to participate in past polls, and that the governing Fateh leadership has failed to call new ones. Unfortunately, some democratic factions, especially those closest to the PA and PLO have at times appeared to accept the argument that holding elections is impossible under the conditions of occupation, or even that elections might be counter-productive by giving the outside world the illusion of normalcy.

The focus group respondents were split when asked why elections had not been held since 1996. Many accepted the PA's claims that they have been impossible to organize. One man in Gaza City said, "*The time is not appropriate with occupation present.*"

Much more common, however, was the consensus expressed by the Nablus group that the current leadership of the PA is reluctant to face elections for fear of losing its grip on power.

Whatever the reasons for not holding elections in the past, participants were very strongly in favor of holding them now. Nearly four-fifths agreed with the statement that "despite the Israeli occupation, it would be possible to have more democracy in Palestinian society." Almost as many said that the Palestinian Authority should now hold presidential and parliamentary elections despite the Israeli occupation.

III. Enthusiasm for and Cynicism about reform

The notion of reform was also seen in extremely positive terms among the Palestinians who participated in the focus groups. This was clearly a reaction to the widespread belief, also frequently expressed, that most of the institutions with which they have regular contact are corrupt – most notably the Palestinian Authority.

By and large, the Palestinians NDI spoke to were enthusiastic about reform, not only in the PA, but in a range of Palestinian institutions. The word "reform" had universally positive connotations. "Accountability", "fighting corruption", "advancement", and "change in government", were commonly the first thoughts that came to mind. At its core, the term conjured up the idea of institutions that operated efficiently, without graft or personal favoritism. However, some people attributed even broader meanings to it, e.g., "progress", "education" and even "peace". Many linked reform closely to elections, believing them to be either a necessary precursor to, or at least, a necessary element in reform.

A small minority of focus group participants welcomed outside pressure for reform, feeling that the indigenous forces were too weak to accomplish much. However, most were extremely suspicious, even resentful of that pressure, often fearing that it would distort the process, perhaps to the benefit of Israel or the United States. For example one man in Khan Younis said, *"It [outside pressure for reform] will harm the Palestinian people because it serves outside interests."*

Important elements in the international community - including not only the European Union and the United States, but also the government of Israel - have pressed for the reform of Palestinian political, financial and security institutions. Often these calls for reform have been coupled with attacks on Yasser Arafat and on the PA. This has produced a "rally round the flag" effect, even among Palestinians who share the specific concerns raised by outsiders.

Although most respondents were generally hopeful that a degree of reform would ultimately be possible, there was a sizeable minority that took a deeply pessimistic view. For example, a man in Gaza City said, *"Reform is possible by an earthquake destroying all of the Gaza Strip."*

IV. Secularism: an Obscure and Unappealing Concept

The principle of the separation of religion and state is so well-established in Western democracies that debate is largely confined to its application. Not so in the Arab and Muslim world, where democrats need to define the system they advocate in contrast to theocratic or sectarian regimes such as Iran or Saudi Arabia.

As is common across the Arab world, Palestinian democratic leaders use the term "secular" [Arabic: *elmanieh*] to describe their belief in the separation of religion and state. Unlike "democracy" and "reform," this is not a term in everyday use among ordinary people. Nonetheless, it is commonly employed by democrats in their literature and speeches to contrast their ideals with those of Islamist parties and movements.

The term "secular" has negative connotations to many Palestinians. Common associations were "atheism", "anti-Islam" and "decline of morals." Some saw secularism as a source of moral license, leading to the degradation of women, the breakdown of the family and even sexual deviancy. When asked to suggest something positive about the idea, a common response was "nothing." A man in Khan Younis explained, *"A secular state means the spreading of corruption and forgetting about religion."* A woman in Bethlehem said, *"It shows corruption and decay."*

When asked whether they would prefer an Islamic government or a secular one, participants in every group but one were unanimous or near-unanimous in favor of an Islamic government. This view was widely shared even among those who appeared

supportive of other beliefs and procedures common to democratic life, such as elections, party competition, and the rule of law.

The only group that did show a majority for secular government – women in Ramallah – did so despite expressing some distress about that option. Several conceded that in their view secularism and Islam were incompatible, but nonetheless viewed separation of religion and the state as essential to democratic reform.

V. Education: Top Priority

Education was mentioned as an important issue by some people in almost all of the groups. When asked to rank a list of social and political issues, more participants put education at the top than any other issue. In Bethlehem a group of women placed education, and specifically women's education, at the top of their list of positive aspects of the current situation. A woman in Jerusalem called education *"the tool of the people to rise out of their situations, instead of early marriages."*

This may reflect the deep-seated tradition in Palestinian society, certainly predating the current *intifada*, which sees education as an individual, and to a degree a collective, route out of the political impasse. Palestinians viewed the increasing value being placed on education as one of the few positive outcomes of the current situation.

Several women in the Bethlehem focus group said the high level of unemployment among men had led more people to educate themselves. One woman explained, *"An increasing number of people want to get an education and a higher degree so as to find better jobs to maintain a stable income, especially because men can't go to work in Israel any more."* Another observed, *"[We need to] work on special awareness in teaching the women because the intifada left many widows without a main supporter, whether a husband or a brother."*

Learning as "Resistance." In both territories, a number of respondents referred to education as a form of Palestinian "resistance". *"The younger generation has chosen to resist with their pens,"* as one man in the Khan Younis group put it.

Although this theme of education-as-resistance was raised again and again, those who raised it seemed to have several different preoccupations in mind. The most basic was that the conditions of the occupation and the *intifada* are making it difficult for children to complete their education. A man in Hebron concluded, *"The decline of education leads to a change [for the worse] in the way of life."*

In Bethlehem, female participants emphasized that education could lead women and children out of the current Palestinian morass, by giving them better job opportunities. A woman in Bethlehem said, *"Learning is the only weapon to face Israel."* A woman in Jerusalem explained, *"Education is the means to resistance."*

These people seemed to be talking primarily about a secular education aimed at improving individual skills, particularly those relevant to work and generating income. To an extent this can be seen as an alternative to the violent *intifada* – an individual and family response to the current Palestinian situation. It is a form of resistance to the Israeli occupation in the sense that it represents perseverance in the face of the many obstacles created by it.

Many participants in Gaza, however, appeared to be talking about specifically religious education. A man in Gaza City said, “*Education and Islam are the most important issues and as long as the person is educated and religious he will differentiate between right and wrong.*” A man in Khan Younis explained, “*Islam is a complete curriculum for all aspects whether they are political, economic or social. The responsible people are educated and Muslim.*” Another man in Khan Younis said, “*We should work on spreading religion through the medium of the schools.*”

In this context, perhaps not surprisingly, the notion of education-as-resistance had a more explicitly militant sense. A woman in Jabaliya said, “*Education is important because it spreads Jihad.*” Another woman in Jabaliya explained, “*Education [is] about religion and Jihad is the resistance.*”

VI. The Role of Islam in Palestinian Life: Growing Religiosity

The trend to greater religious faith was evident in all but one of the focus groups (Ramallah). When asked to prioritize a list of social and political issues, focus group participants ranked the role of Islam in Palestinian life second. However, Gazans were much more likely than West Bankers to identify the role of Islam in Palestinian life as their priority. According to a woman in Jabaliya, “*The role of Islam [is of great importance] because as long as the human has religion and love for God, he won’t get upset by anything.*” A man in Khan Younis said, “*The group of people who are not religious should return to religion.*”

It was striking that the religious sentiments of the Gaza groups tended to be much more all-embracing than those in the West Bank. Among West Bankers, even Hamas supporters were inclined to put social or political issues at the top of their priority list, and to discuss those concerns in largely secular language. In Gaza, two focus groups – in Jabaliya and Khan Younis – identified the role of Islam in Palestinian life as their priority. They also tended to view virtually every other issue – be it education, corruption, the rule of law or the conflict with Israel – through a religious prism. Among them, it was much more common to use explicitly religious language in expressing their thoughts. In discussing corruption one man in Gaza City found that, “*The role of Islam is the most important issue because through Islam corruption is stopped.*” A woman in Jabaliya explained, “*We emphasize religion because through the Koran and Sunna we learn love for our people and country, and love for your country creates resistance.*” Another woman in Jabilya stressed that, “*Religion has*

taught us everything and it is the foundation of life because without religion we would have no life. When a person follows religion, he or she will be successful in everything.”

Among focus group participants there was some correlation between this all-embracing view of Islam and support for Hamas. However, it would be a mistake to exaggerate this. Many Hamas supporters, especially in the West Bank, did not routinely express themselves in religious language. On the other hand, there were supporters of other factions, including Fatch, who did seem to have adopted the full cloak of Islam, such as this man in Gaza City: *“One item we are missing is that we lack love for one another and [should] return to our religion. That is how God will bless us in everything.”*

VII. Law and Order: Perceived Decline

There was a near-universal agreement among participants that Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence had increased in recent years. This takes several forms:

- Family violence, which many feel has increased due to unemployment, lack of mobility and other stresses arising from the generally poor conditions of life.
- Clashes between factions, particularly rife in areas such as Nablus in the West Bank and much of Gaza, where the Palestinian security forces have been unable to establish a monopoly of force, and to some degree operate as little more than armed factions themselves.
- Violence between clans or families, as traditional systems of honor fills the vacuum created by the lack of an effective system of policing and law.

The focus group participants gave a long list of causes for the increase in violence including the Israeli occupation, the failure of the PA, and a loss of moral or religious values. They also tended to distribute responsibility for improving the situation fairly widely, including the occupying Israeli forces, the Palestinian security forces, the political factions, families and individuals.

VIII. Corruption: Everywhere

The issue of corruption is pervasive in Palestinian society. The outside world has tended to focus on the Palestinian Authority – a concern certainly shared by many, likely most, Palestinians. The PA is widely regarded as rife with favoritism and as a convenient perch for plunder by those holding both high and not-so-high office. The focus groups confirmed those sentiments.

For Palestinians, however, corruption is a much more widespread phenomenon than just in the PA. They tend to perceive it as having infected every institution with which they have regular contact. Indeed, it seemed that the more regular the contact, the

deeper the perception of corruption. The focus group of women in Ramallah, for example, cited “women’s groups” as among the most corrupt institutions in Palestinian society. In Gaza, many people mentioned the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which administers many governmental services in the refugee camps.

Many participants reserved special venom for the United Nations itself. One woman in Jabaliya said, *“The UN works for its own interests, not the interests of the Palestinian people. They opened the door for collaborators who helped in the assassinations of Hamas leaders.”* A man in Khan Younis argued that, *“The UN is submissive to the Zionist lobby.”* A woman in Jabaliya explained, *“The UN and America, America and Israel, work together like a mother and daughter and they are all in agreement to...prevent progress.”*

Almost no significant group was immune from charges of corruption, including the media as well as foreign and domestic NGOs, such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross.

IX. “The Wall” and Gaza Withdrawal

In addressing the conflict with Israel, participants were invited to discuss two recent Israeli initiatives that could transform the lives of many Palestinians, and in some cases already have: the “security barrier” being erected in the West Bank – more commonly called “The Wall” by Palestinians – and the proposed Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

“The Wall.” Many West Bankers said they had not been personally affected by the erection of “The Wall”. In some cases, this was because the participants lived some distance away. But more frequently, it was because their lives had already been greatly constricted by the system of checkpoints, barriers and travel restrictions that was well entrenched prior to the commencement of construction of “The Wall.”

The degree of dislocation West Bankers expressed specifically in regard to “The Wall” varied greatly from place to place. In Nablus, for example, which is some distance from the current route, and which is already isolated by a local system of deep trenches, fences and checkpoints, most people said it had not affected them personally. In Hebron, on the other hand, participants spoke of a variety of difficulties they had encountered or expected to encounter as a result of “The Wall”, including: restrictions on travel, the loss of agricultural land and a rise in food prices attributed to that loss.

Several participants complained about the effect “The Wall” was having on their family lives. In Bethlehem one woman complained that she was now able to see her sister and brother in Jerusalem only every few months. Many of the West Bankers we spoke with also anticipated future problems, including the loss of land and mobility. A woman in Ramallah explained:

Personally, I have not been affected, but it is adding to the sufferings that we already endure. In the future, as they complete the barrier they [the Israelis] will confiscate 30% of my village lands, and it will run less than 500 meters from my family house, which will restrict our movement and double traveling times.

Almost all focus group participants in the West Bank, however, expressed psychological and emotional stress as a result of “The Wall.” A woman in Ramallah said, “*I have not been affected, but The Wall makes me feel like I am living in a large prison.*” Another woman in Ramallah expressed similar sentiments: “*Personally, I have not been affected, but I feel humiliated and insulted by it.*”

Most people felt that neither the PA nor the political factions had done anything to impede the progress of “The Wall” – a source of considerable frustration. Many said that its continued construction would further weaken or even destroy the PA, and some were quite sarcastic about the implications. “*The authority has given up Palestinian land before, so it can give up land again,*” one man in Nablus said. “*The authority cannot perform its role as a ruler of this territory,*” said another man in Hebron.

Many West Bank participants were particularly concerned about the political implications of “The Wall” in the context of the proposed Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (see below).

Gaza Withdrawal. A large number of the participants in both the West Bank and Gaza were skeptical about the Israeli proposal to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, believing that it would not occur, or that if it did, it would not be a genuine end to occupation of the Gaza Strip. A man in Gaza City said, “*I think there will be no withdrawal, just a redeployment.*” A woman in Bethlehem predicted, “*There will be no withdrawal anyway.*”

There was a striking division between Gazans and West Bankers in their perception of the consequences of a Gaza withdrawal were it to occur. In general, Gazans were very hopeful about the prospects. “*The Palestinian people will be very happy for any withdrawal from any part of Gaza because it will lead to better living,*” one man in Gaza City said. Another said, “*I am optimistic about withdrawal because it will lead to freedom and we will have a state.*” A man in Khan Younis predicted: “*We will live in peace if the Israelis withdraw from Gaza.*”

Gazans identified specific benefits to an Israeli withdrawal, such as getting rid of checkpoints or ending the Israeli campaign of assassinations and military incursions. Others imagined less concrete, but equally important, outcomes: e.g., “a psychological break”, “the return of values and ethics” and “God willing there will be peace.”

At the same time, many felt some foreboding about the immediate consequences of an Israeli withdrawal, fearing a breakdown in law and order and a struggle among the

armed factions for control. A man in Gaza City predicted, *“There will be an internal struggle on the land that Israel will withdraw from.”* A woman in Jabaliya said, *“I expect a breakdown in law.”*

There was a widely shared view among Gazans about how the political transition should be managed in the case of an Israeli withdrawal. In the first instance, there was a general consensus that there should be an agreement among the factions, including Fateh, Hamas and the other armed groups, to ensure a peaceful transition. This should be followed by elections to determine the future government of the Gaza Strip – a key point of difference with many West Bankers. As one woman in Jabaliya said, *“There should be an agreement first and then party elections.”*

There was no consensus on how to dispose of the lands freed up by the evacuation of Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip. Some thought that the lands should be returned to their original, Palestinian, owners. A larger number said that the settlement lands should be taken over by the PA to be used in the public interest, perhaps with some compensation to the original owners.

Many West Bankers, in contrast, were deeply fearful of what would become of them, particularly when withdrawal was considered in the context of the continuing construction of “The Wall.” While Gazans looked forward to Israeli withdrawal with excitement tempered by trepidation, many West Bank participants were gripped by deep anxieties about the prospect. Some predicted that the settlers from Gaza would be relocated to the West Bank, for example. Many shared the Gazans’ concerns of a factional struggle among Palestinians. But they were also concerned that a withdrawal from Gaza would divide the Palestinian people. With the West Bank carved up by “The Wall” and so-called “settler roads”, some feared the complete collapse of the PA in the aftermath of Gaza withdrawal. Several people even predicted the return of Jordanian administration of the West Bank (as prior to 1967).

Only a small minority of West Bankers said there should be elections in Gaza so long as the Israeli occupation made them difficult or impossible in the West Bank. A woman in Bethlehem said, *“There is no legality for elections unless the occupation withdraws from [all] the Palestinian areas.”*

X. Yasser Arafat: Unifier and Polarizer

Most recent public opinion polls have suggested that Yasser Arafat would win re-election if a presidential vote were held now. The focus groups illustrated the deep psychological grip he has on a large segment of the Palestinian population. His personal support stretches well beyond that of his Fateh faction or of the Palestinian Authority. A woman in Bethlehem said, *“The wind will not move the mountain. God be with him.”* A man in

Gaza City explained, *“He is the legitimate representative and the only one for Palestinians.”* A man in Khan Younis said, *“He is a symbol to his people, and his absence will inflict instability...when there is no other figure to take over that all parties can accept.”*

When asked to consider what would happen were he to disappear from the scene for some reason, many predicted fighting among the Palestinian factions, disorder, and even civil war. In the Bethlehem group, some participants seemed dumbfounded by the very idea of life without him. A woman in Bethlehem said, *“There is no need to change him.”* Another said, *“I don’t know, but what he did cannot be done by another.”* A third woman in Bethlehem concluded, *“President Arafat is better than the others.”*

Paradoxically, even among his supporters, many believe that the situation of Palestinians will not improve in what remains of Arafat’s tenure. A woman in Bethlehem predicted, *“What happened in the past I think will turn out to be better than what will happen in the future.”*

While Arafat remains a unifying national symbol for many, perhaps most Palestinians, he has also become a polarizing figure. A substantial minority, most of them either highly secular or highly Islamist in their views, is dismissive, even contemptuous, of Arafat’s role. One of the most common answers when asked what his significance was to Palestinians was, “nothing”. Some predicted that conditions would improve if he were removed from the political scene.

XI. Hamas: Growing Appeal

The relationship between Arafat’s popularity and the rise of Hamas is a complex one. Two of the focus groups that were strongly supportive of Hamas, in Khan Younis and Bethlehem, were also outspoken in their support for Arafat. For some people, it seems, Hamas and Arafat are each in their way repositories of resistance and national spirit.

In the focus groups, Hamas supporters were much more likely than others to use religious language to express themselves on a range of social and political subjects. However, it would also be a mistake to define Hamas’ appeal in narrowly religious terms. When asked what drew them to Hamas, many participants answered more in nationalist than religious terms. A woman in Jabilya said she would vote for Hamas *“because they have the strength to free Palestine....”* A woman in Jerusalem emphasized, *“[Hamas represents] resistance – they have on the-ground results.”* A woman in Jabaliya said, *“Most of the suicide operations against the occupation are from Hamas.”*

Even those who were adamantly opposed to Hamas politically said that they felt sympathy towards the families of those Hamas-members who had been assassinated by

Israel recently. Many said that the killings had drawn them toward Hamas as a movement.

One indisputable asset Hamas has in cultivating public support is its reputation for incorruptibility – a reputation that few other Palestinian institutions share. When asked to rate various organizations on a scale of 1 to 10 for corruption, fewer than one-in five rated Hamas in the top half of the scale, compared with nearly three-quarters for Fateh.

XII. Prospects for a Democratic Alternative to the Status Quo

The focus groups underlined the challenges faced by the disparate parties, factions and individuals that make up the democratic movement trying to establish itself in the limited political space between the Fateh-dominated PA and the Islamists of Hamas.

Nonetheless, there was considerable evidence from the focus groups of dissatisfaction with the political alternatives currently available. When asked whether they would like to see the emergence of a new Palestinian political force, representing a *secular, democratic* alternative, half said yes. This is particularly interesting given the widespread objection to the word “secular” in other contexts. In Jerusalem, participants listed “better administration”, “fighting corruption” and “including the ‘clean’ people” as some of the reasons for wanting a new democratic party.

Those who supported a democratic alternative had no trouble identifying its critical elements. They were: democracy, the rule of law, opposition to corruption, independent candidates, inclusiveness towards women, the poor and the neglected and a “clear vision for Palestine.” These respondents could have been speaking about the as-yet obscure Palestinian Democratic Coalition.

The desire for more electoral alternatives does not automatically translate into support, of course. The focus group in Khan Younis, one of the most Islamist encountered in its general orientation, welcomed the emergence of a democratic alternative, though it seemed unlikely that it would draw much support from among their numbers. Nor was support for a democratic alternative universal. Some of the participants were concerned about the shallow roots such an organization would have or about further splitting the Palestinian people. A man in Gaza City noted, “*Fateh and Hamas are known; we will not know the concepts of this alternative.*” Another man in Gaza City said he “*Who does not have a past does not have a future.*”

APPENDIX A

Background Characteristics of Focus Group Participants:

District	Count
Nablus	9
Ramallah	9
Jerusalem	7
Bethlehem	10
Hebron	13
Jabaliya	12
Gaza	11
Khan Younis	10
Total	81

Region	Count
West Bank	48
Gaza Strip	33
Total	81

Age	Count
20 – 30 years	42
31 – 40 years	26
More than 40 years	13
Total	81

Sex	Count
Male	43
Female	38
Total	81

APPENDIX B

About the Author

Paul Adams is NDI's resident senior program director for NDI's West Bank/Gaza program. He joined NDI after 18 years as a journalist in television, radio and print media in Canada. Most recently he served as the *Globe and Mail's* Middle East correspondent and earlier, he was senior political correspondent and an occasional columnist for the *Globe and Mail's* parliamentary bureau. Most of his career was spent in broadcast journalism; he was stationed in Winnipeg, Toronto and Ottawa for CBC National Television News. Later, he became senior parliamentary correspondent and Ottawa bureau chief for CBC Radio News. During his time in the media, he also gained extensive public opinion research experience. Before pursuing his journalism career, Mr. Adams taught political studies at the University of Manitoba, worked with the Chief Electoral Office of Manitoba and was employed as a political assistant at both the provincial and federal levels. In 2003, he published a book, *Summer of the Heart; Saving Alexandre*, an account of his son's struggle with heart disease. It was nominated as a finalist for the Writers' Trust Award, which celebrates and rewards the talents and achievements of Canada's novelists, short story writers, poets, biographers, and other non-fiction writers. Mr. Adams earned two masters degrees, one in journalism from Columbia University and another in modern history from Oxford. He has an honors B.A. in history and political studies from the University of Manitoba. His wife, Suzanne Szukits, is a Canadian diplomat. They have two children: Alexandre and Sophia.