



The Peace Process and Political Violence

By Khalil Shikaki*

The Palestine Center for Research Studies has conducted about 30 surveys of Palestinian public opinion since the beginning of the current peace process in 1993, and has been tracing the shifts in the mood of Palestinians regarding the peace process, especially the level of support for the negotiations and attitudes toward violence.

This research provides a basis for discussing the impact of violence in the peace process, the impact of the peace process on violence, and Palestinian public opinion on such matters.

Since security in this process has been of paramount importance to the Israeli side, Palestinians have also focused on security. Most of the attention of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been, in fact, on trying to maintain security for the Israelis since the beginning of the peace process. But because of the eruption of violence from time to time, the Israelis delayed implementation of the agreement signed with the Palestinians.

First, if there been no violence on the Palestinian side -- particularly the suicide attacks -- which affected Israeli public attitudes, the PA would have gained control of most of the West Bank -- instead of only one-third of it -- by 1997.

A second impact violence had on the peace process has been its affect on Israeli public opinion. Violence prevented, in my view, shifts from taking place in Israeli public attitudes regarding peace with the Palestinians. Eventually, this led to the change in the mood of the country on the eve of the 1996 elections -- particularly the suicide attacks of February-March 1996 -- which led to the election of a right-wing Israeli government under Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. I don't think this is the only reason you ended up with a right-wing government but Palestinian violence had a large affect on that.

The third impact of violence has been to prevent the Palestinian economy from taking off. As a result of violence and Israeli retaliation to violence, by 1997 there was a decline in the Palestinian Gross National Product and per capita income by something like 25% from their levels 4 years earlier when the peace process began.

The fourth impact has been on the Palestinian nation-building process, process of national reconstruction. Because the focus of security has intensified due to violence against Israelis, the security services have become huge, including over 30,000 Palestinians. These services serve to maintain security for Israelis and also for the PA, though the PA is not under serious threat domestically. The situation regarding violence gave the security services a mandate to do whatever was needed to maintain security. In my view, this led to a great deal of corruption, violation of basic democratic values, and violation of human rights. So, violence, to a large extent, is also responsible for the deterioration of the process of national reconstruction leading to the consolidation of an authoritarian rule in the Palestinian areas.

Finally, these four outcomes were primarily results that took place particularly under the Labor government. Under the Netanyahu government violence played a different role, at least the violence of September 1996. This violence, I think, played a role in accelerating the peace process, in making it possible for the two sides to come together and reach the January 1997 Hebron agreement. So while all the other factors resulting from violence were on the negative side, the violence of September may not had all that negative consequences as far as the peace process has been concerned.

We can talk with a lot more authority about the impact of the peace process on violence, based on survey research. There is no doubt that the peace process led to a dramatic decline in the frequency of violent incidents. Compared to the pre-October 1993 era, the number of incidents of violent attacks have been reduced by almost 85 to 90%. We have, however, seen an increasing intensity of attacks in the number of casualties per attack, as the result of the suicide attacks, starting in 1994.

The most significant effect of the peace process on Palestinian public opinion was a psychological transformation, whereby support for the peace process went up dramatically from a low of 37% in the aftermath of the 1994 Baruch Goldstein massacre in Hebron to a peak of 82% in early 1997.

Support of violence and suicide attacks dropped dramatically from something like 56% to 57% in 1993 to 20% in the aftermath of the February-March 1996 suicide attacks. We saw a reversal in the process in the first half of 1997. The attacks in Tel Aviv received 40% support among Palestinians. That is a dramatic increase from the earlier 20% level.

For the most part, support for violence has come from the young, educated, and opponents of the peace

process. This has been a trend we have been able to document throughout the period. During 1997, we began to see a shift in which the more educated were less supportive of violence. For example, the suicide attack in Tel Aviv received the lowest support from the most educated. This is a dramatic change which, if it holds in the future, would be a possible realignment and change in attitude which can be explained by the other factors.

In general, we find that those with more education -- which also usually means more income -- are moderate in their thinking, liberal in their views, more supportive of democratic values. But this group also in the past tended to oppose the peace process and to support violence. If the changes we are witnessing now are true, this would mean that Palestinians who are liberal and supportive of democratic values would now also be opposed to violence and more supportive of the peace process. This political pattern would be more parallel to the situation in Israel.

The reason that I think most Palestinians began to drop their opposition to the peace process and their support of violence was because as the peace process progressed over several years, most Palestinians began to see it as something here to stay, real, irreversible and that the negotiating process would indeed lead to the achievement of vital Palestinian goals. I think to a large extent the reason support for violence began to rise again in 1997 is because some Palestinians reached the conclusion that the new Israeli government was changing the agenda and that negotiations were not the only viable option to achieve Palestinian goals.

With more and more Palestinians reaching this conclusion that negotiations are futile, more and more of them would support violence. Palestinians do not want to be left with no options. Therefore public opinion starts looking for other alternatives

to negotiations, when and if they feel that negotiations are going nowhere.

The second change brought about by the peace process was in Hamas, the most powerful opposition force in Palestinian politics. The unfolding reality of the peace process began to bring changes within Hamas, created by the PA's policies and actions. These include changes of public opinion reducing support for Hamas. Between 1993 and 1997, Hamas lost something like 40% of its support. Not surprisingly, Hamas did make some gains in mid-1997. These seem to a large extent to reflect changes in public opinion regarding the question of violence.

The economic costs of the violence also had an impact on the debate within Hamas on the role of violence, particularly because Hamas was partly blamed in the Palestinian community for the deterioration in economic conditions following suicide attacks. Hamas also lost some of its capability to conduct violent attacks against Israelis as a result of the creation of the PA and the determination of the Palestinian authorities to combat Hamas's violent activities.

The political dynamic between the inside (in the West Bank and Gaze) and outside leaderships of Hamas may have also had an impact on the changes within the organization. To a large extent, most of Hamas's inside leadership today is opposed to violence. While this conclusion has been difficult to reach, I think it has finally become the mainstream thinking within Hamas leadership in the inside.

In the outside, a large constituency and a good part of the leadership is still very much supportive of violence. To some extent, this reflects the fact that they are on the outside. Those on the inside, taking into consideration all the other facts on the ground, have found that if they were to drop a support for violence they can become a part of the political process. And if they can

become a part of the political process, they can consolidate their leadership over the organization on the inside.

Those on these outside can consolidate their leadership over Hamas only if Hamas continues to resort to violence. If Hamas becomes a political organization, those on the inside can therefore be elected, mobilize support for their leadership, and marginalize the outside leadership. The reason there has been so split despite this clear-cut change is because, to a large extent, the leadership on the outside still controls Hamas's financial resources and logistics, making it very difficult for the leadership on the inside to have a clear break from the leadership in the outside.

Now, if and when the process becomes uncertain, then that might also have an impact on the inside leadership. One reason the leadership on the inside, for example, in Gaza began to change its position first is because the PA was established first in Gaza. Those who lived through the period of transfer for authority to the PA in the Gaza strip began to see and to feel the PA's impact. It took the Hamas leadership in the West Bank another year and a half before it too began to change its position.

To a large extent, I think, those who lived in Gaza began to see the process as irreversible, that the PA was there for good. Those in the West Bank were not yet sure that the PA would, indeed, be able to extend its rule throughout the West Bank. As long as the Hamas leadership believed the process is uncertain that opens the door for the possibility of returning to support for violence.

When the peace process stalled in 1997, it seems very difficult for the Hamas leadership on the inside to press the leadership on the outside on the need to stop violence because the leadership on the outside can ask them: Are you sure there is a

peace process any more? And if there is no peace process, on what basis are we to become part of the political process? Won't we look like fools if we were to be part of the political process when we know the peace process has collapsed and is going nowhere? While people are reaching the conclusion the peace process is dead, we are supposed to stop violence?

As a result, a balance developed between these two camps. They will both insist on their points of view until the process were to reach a point where even those on the outside had to conclude that the process is irreversible and therefore they must become a part of the political process.

The third impact the political process had on violence was on the security cooperation between the PA's and Israeli security agencies. Having as their main mission -- not the only one, but the main mission -- to maintain Israeli security put the Palestinian security services on the defensive. They definitely do not want to be seen by their own public as agents of Israel. You can only have respectability and credibility at home if the trend is leading toward creation of political institutions so those who oppose the security agencies are widely seen as anti-state, like the situation in other countries like Jordan, Egypt, or Israel.

As long as the political process is moving forward, cooperation can be expected to intensify. If the political process is not moving forward, the security services will conclude that it would undermine their credibility and respectability among the Palestinian masses if they continue cooperation with the Israelis.

These are the main results, I think, of an advancing peace process in terms of violence: cooperation between security services, the declining frequency of attacks, the changes within Hamas and its declining support, growing Palestinian support for the peace process and growing public opposition to violence. If this happens -- if

the peace process continues -- the question of political violence would become irrelevant to the Palestinian-Israeli relationship. But these outcomes, again, are all contingent on the process continuing to progress. If this were not to happen, we will clearly see reversals in all these results and trends.

**Professor Khalil Shikaki is Director of Projects for the Center for Palestinian Studies and Research. He is a respected pollster and public opinion expert.*