

The Potential for a Nonviolent Intifada

Overview

To determine the attitudes of the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish publics on the potential for nonviolent methods in the Intifada, Search for Common Ground, an American and Belgian NGO, commissioned the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) of the University of Maryland to conduct a study that included focus groups and polls with randomly selected samples. A Palestinian polling organization, the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, carried out the poll of 600 Palestinians through face-to-face interviews from August 12-19. An Israeli polling organization, the B.L. and Lucille Cohen Institute for Public Opinion Research of Tel Aviv University, carried out the poll of 504 Israeli Jews by telephone interviews from August 12-14.

Dr. Steven Kull, Director of PIPA, is author of the report that follows.

A strong majority (62%) of Palestinians thinks that a new approach is needed in the Intifada and overwhelming majorities (73-92%) approve of Palestinians using various methods of nonviolent action. Pluralities to majorities of Palestinians express willingness to participate in various specific nonviolent actions, including boycotts and forms of mass civil disobedience—numbers that, if actually mobilized, would amount to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. If a Palestinian were killed in the course of committing nonviolent resistance, a near unanimous 88% would regard that person as a martyr—in most cases, no less than a suicide bomber. However, concurrent with their strong support for nonviolent methods, Palestinians show equal levels of support for violent methods.

On the Israeli side, an overwhelming 78% of Israeli Jews questioned believe that the Palestinians have a legitimate right to seek a Palestinian state, provided that they use nonviolent means. Likewise 56% feel this way about the Palestinians' right to oppose the expansion of the settlements. If the Palestinians were to move from violent to nonviolent forms of protest, a majority of Israeli Jews would favor making concessions to the Palestinians, including phasing out the checkpoints between Palestinian towns (70%) and being more flexible in negotiations about the borders of a future Palestinian state—as high as 60%.

Eight out of ten Palestinians said they would approve of a large-scale Palestinian movement based on nonviolent action against Israeli occupation using such methods as demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience, and more than half (56%) said they would be willing to participate in it. A majority of Israeli Jews (56%) said they would approve of such a movement. About two-thirds said the Israeli government should not try to stop Palestinians from organizing large nonviolent demonstrations.

An overwhelming majority of Palestinians favors the idea of all Palestinians refusing to work in the construction of settlements, or for businesses located in the settlements. Among Israeli Jews, a strong majority believes that the Israeli government should not crack down harshly on efforts to organize strikes and work stoppages of Palestinian workers in the settlements, but a majority says that the Israeli government should crack down if large groups block construction activity in the settlements or block access to the settlements.

Both Palestinians and Israeli Jews are unsure about the feasibility of a large-scale nonviolent movement. While Palestinian support for mass nonviolent action is strong, majorities have doubts about whether it would be effective. Among Israeli Jews, an overwhelming majority thinks it unlikely that a nonviolent movement will emerge.

Palestinian Findings

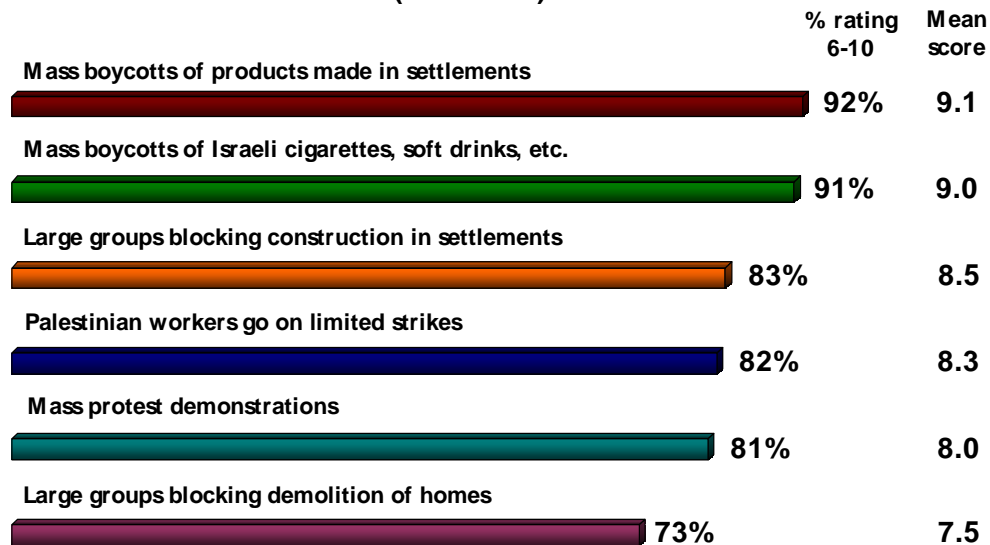
- 1. A strong majority of Palestinians thinks that a new approach is needed in the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation and overwhelming majorities are supportive of using methods of nonviolent action.**

Palestinian respondents were asked: “Thinking about the current methods of the Intifada, do you think there is a need to try some new approaches, or don’t you think so?” A strong majority—62%—said new approaches are needed, while only 29% disagreed.

Respondents were then offered “a list of different methods for resisting the Israeli occupation” and asked to rate them on a 0-to-10 scale, with 0 meaning “you strongly feel it is not a good idea”; 10 meaning “you strongly feel it is a good idea”; and 5 meaning “you are neutral.” Nonviolent methods were strongly endorsed. In the box below is the percentage with a positive score (6-10) and the mean (average) score.

Poll of Palestinians

Ratings of Nonviolent Methods (0-10 scale)*



* 0 means strongly feel it is not a good idea, 10 - strongly feel it is a good idea, 5 - neutral.

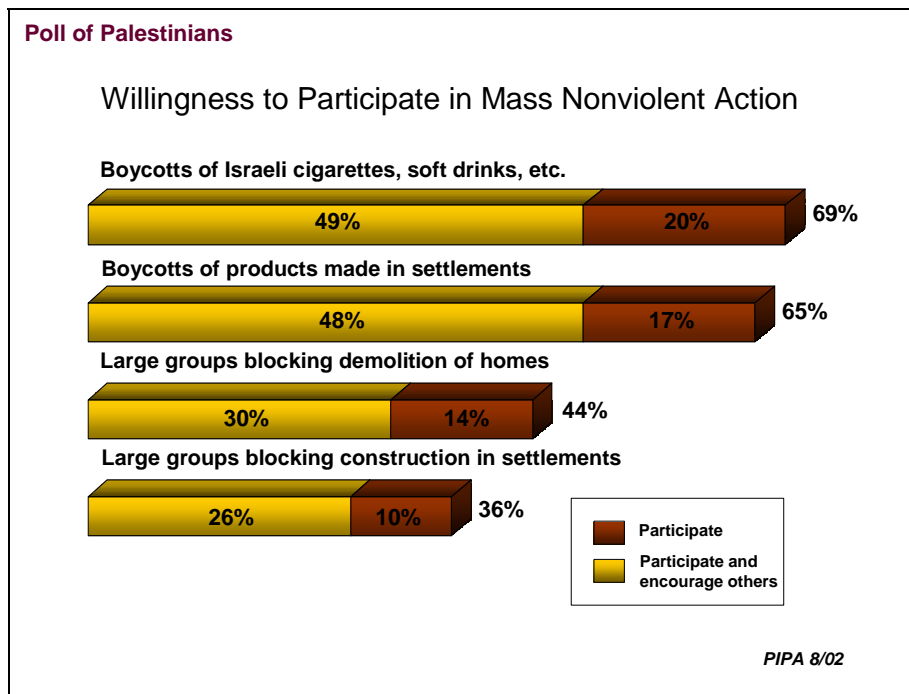
PIPA, 8/02

At the same time it is clear that Palestinians continue to support violent forms of resistance, though the level of support is no higher than for nonviolent methods. Ninety-one percent supported “Armed attacks on Israeli soldiers” (mean score 9.0), while 73% supported “suicide bombing of Israeli civilians” (mean score 7.5).

2. Pluralities to majorities express willingness to participate in specific nonviolent actions, including boycotts and mass civil disobedience—numbers which, if actually mobilized, would amount to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. If a Palestinian were killed in the course of committing nonviolent resistance, an overwhelming majority would regard that person as a martyr--in most cases, no less than a suicide bomber.

Palestinians were asked about their willingness to participate in each of four nonviolent actions. Very strong majorities (65-69%) expressed a willingness to participate in boycotts, with nearly half of respondents (48-49%) saying that they would also encourage others to do so. If such numbers were actually mobilized, this would presumably mean a boycott in which over a million adults were participating.

Lesser, but still quite substantial, numbers were willing to participate in the riskier activities involving mass civil disobedience. More than a third (36-44%) were ready to participate in large-scale blockages of the demolishing of Palestinians houses or construction activity in the settlements. Were such numbers mobilized, this would mean hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would participate in these nonviolent forms of resistance.



In all cases only small minorities said they did not support such activities (2-4% for the boycotts, 4-11% for the large-scale blockages).

Perception as Martyrs

To see whether there was a mystique around violent action that made it inherently more prestigious than nonviolent action, the poll asked:

Suppose that a Palestinian is killed while engaging in nonviolent action, such as blocking an Israeli bulldozer trying to demolish a Palestinian home. Would you regard this person as a martyr, or not?

A near-unanimous 88% said they would regard a Palestinian who had died in this way as a martyr. This group was then asked, “Would that be more, less, or the same as a suicide bomber?” Forty-seven percent of the full sample—said “the same,” and a further 7% said “more” while just 32% said less. Thus 54% of the full sample put a Palestinian who had died in a nonviolent action on the same plane as one who had died conducting a suicide attack.

3. An overwhelming majority favors the idea of all Palestinians refusing to work in the construction of settlements, or for businesses located in the settlements.

As mentioned, the idea of “Palestinians who work in settlements going on strike for limited periods” was supported by 82%, and an overall mean score of 8.3 on a scale of 0-

10. With options for earning a livelihood in the Palestinian territories sparse, the idea of limited work stoppages may have seemed feasible.

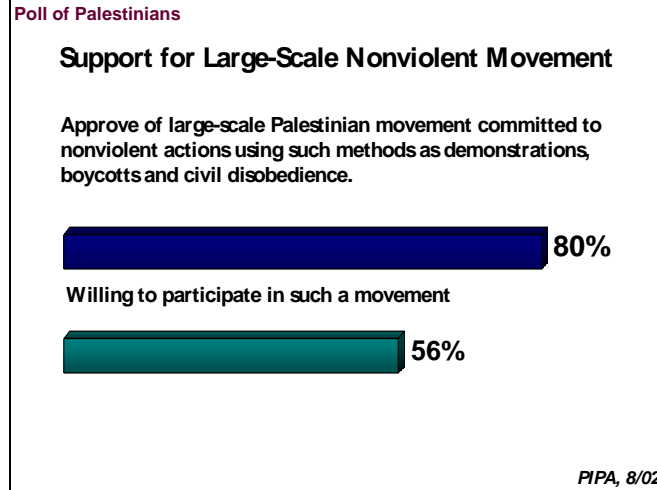
To pose a stronger challenge, the poll asked about a more comprehensive refusal to work in the settlements. Approximately three out of four favored it. This went up to 9 in ten “if those who lost their job as a result were compensated for the period of their unemployment out of an international fund”



4. Overwhelming majorities say they would approve of a large-scale Palestinian movement based on nonviolent action against Israeli occupation using such methods as demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience, and more than half say they would be willing to participate in it.

An overwhelming 80% said they would approve of “a large-scale Palestinian movement committed to nonviolent action against Israeli occupation using such methods as demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience” with 36% feeling that way strongly and 44% somewhat. Only 13% said they would disapprove.

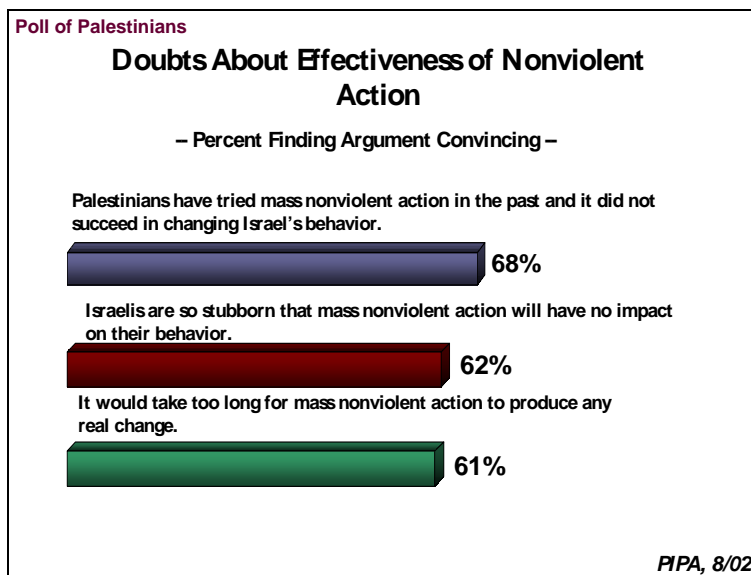
Perhaps more significant a majority—56%—said they would be willing to participate. If such numbers were really mobilized, this would mean a nonviolent movement of hundreds of thousands Palestinians.



5. While support for mass nonviolent action is strong, majorities of Palestinians have doubts about whether it would be effective.

While most findings in this study point to a strong majority willingness to try nonviolent methods of resistance, paradoxically, this willingness is not accompanied by high confidence in their success.

When presented pro and con arguments on the question of “whether using mass nonviolent action would be effective for the Palestinian cause,” majorities found con arguments questioning their effectiveness convincing. See Box below.



The arguments presented in favor of nonviolent action’s effectiveness were all found unconvincing by majorities. The statement “Mass nonviolent action can help direct international attention to unjust Israeli behavior and repression” was found convincing by 41% and unconvincing by 52%. Another argument related to world opinion went:

“When Palestinians use nonviolent forms of resistance this improves the image of Palestinians in the eyes of the world.” Only 38% found this convincing, while 57% did not—quite possibly because it implies that violent resistance worsens the Palestinians’ image, something a majority does not believe (as discussed further below). A third argument asserted that nonviolent action had the capacity to put Israeli policy in a bind: “Mass nonviolent action puts pressure on Israel while also undermining its excuse that it cannot negotiate as long as there is violence.” Only 36% found this convincing; 58% found it unconvincing.

It is probable that this study simply did not succeed in eliciting from Palestinians the arguments that they themselves would use in favor of nonviolent methods. Given the clear enthusiasm (both in this poll and the preceding focus groups) for trying nonviolent methods, presumably such arguments exist.

6. A majority of Palestinians does not show a willingness to renounce violence. They express a desire for retribution, and reject the idea that Palestinian violence is harming their cause internationally. A majority also expresses the belief that Palestinian violence is making Israelis more ready to compromise--though they believe that Israeli violence makes Palestinians less willing to compromise.

The clear interest in nonviolent methods felt by most Palestinians exists side by side with a majority refusal to renounce violence. As mentioned strong majorities support “Armed attacks on Israeli soldiers” and to a lesser extent, “suicide bombing of Israeli civilians.”

When presented arguments for and against operations against Israeli civilians, arguments in favor were found convincing by a strong majority. The argument found convincing by an overwhelming 85% was based on retribution: “Since Palestinian civilians suffer at the hands of Israelis, then Israeli civilians should suffer at the hands of Palestinians.” Sixty-one percent found convincing the argument that “Using violence against Israeli civilians increases the likelihood that Israel will make compromises,” while 34% found this unconvincing.

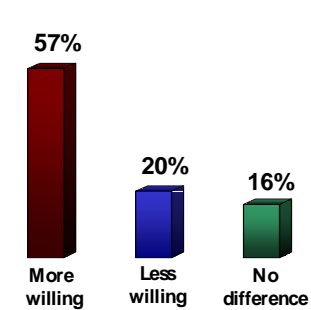
Finally, a majority of Palestinians does not think that Palestinian violence is harming their cause internationally. Offered the argument: “When Palestinians use violence against civilians, this undermines international support for the Palestinian cause” 59% found it unconvincing, while just 36% found it convincing.

Interestingly, a majority of Palestinians believes that violence against Israelis makes them more ready to compromise but that Israeli violence does not have this effect on Palestinians. See box below.

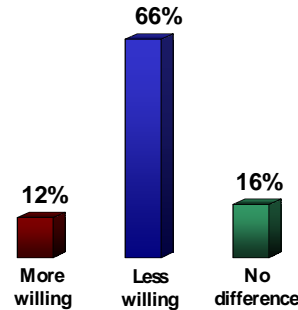
Poll of Palestinians

Inconsistent Beliefs About Effectiveness of Violence

Do you think that when Palestinians use armed force against Israelis, this makes the Israeli people more willing or less willing to make compromises with the Palestinians?



Do you think that when Israel uses armed force against Palestinians, this makes Palestinian people more willing or less willing to make compromises with Israel?



PIPA 8/02

- 7. Palestinians do show signs of discomfort with violence. They show doubts and divisions when asked about conditions under which they would favor stopping violence and about rhetoric calling for the destruction of Israel. A majority says that violence that hurts women and children is inconsistent with the character of the Palestinian people.**

When Palestinians were asked to consider specific conditions under which they would favor stopping violence, the outcome was divided. Asked, “If Israel would take conciliatory steps, like stopping the military incursions and ending the checkpoints, should the Palestinians respond by suspending violence for a limited period, or not?” Forty-seven percent said the Palestinians should not suspend violence for a limited period, while 43% said that they should.

In another question, PIPA asked respondents to imagine the outlines of a final agreement: “Suppose that, in the future, Israeli and Palestinian leaders agree that Israel will withdraw to the 1967 borders and recognize a Palestinian state, and that the Palestinian state will then renounce the use of violence against Israel and imprison Palestinians who do attempt such violence. If they made such an agreement, would you approve or disapprove of Palestinian leaders?”

Fifty percent said they would disapprove of Palestinian leaders who struck such a deal, while 44% said they would approve of them.

The poll also asked Palestinians to focus on the value of extremist Palestinian rhetoric. Reminding respondents that “as you may know, over the years various Palestinians have made statements saying that Palestinians should use violence to seek the complete destruction of the state of Israel,” PIPA asked, “Do you think that such statements have helped or hurt the Palestinian cause in general?” The response was very mixed, with

35% saying these statements had helped the Palestinian cause, 36% saying they had hurt the cause, and a large 20% volunteered that they had made no difference. Then asked, “Do you think that such statements have made Israel more or less willing to negotiate?” 34% said the statements had made Israel more willing, 35% that they had made Israel less willing, and 20% volunteered that they had made no difference.

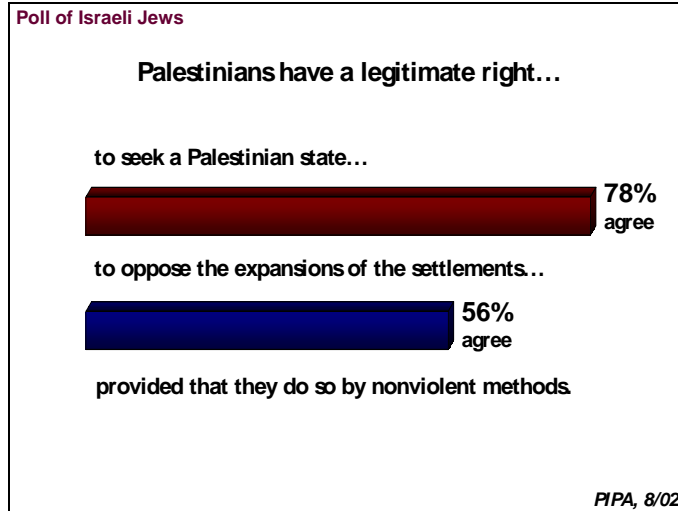
An underlying discomfort with violence is also suggested by the response to the following argument: “Violence that hurts women and children is inconsistent with the true moral character of the Palestinian people.” A majority—56%—found this statement convincing; 39% found it unconvincing.

Israeli Findings

- 1. An overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews believes that the Palestinians have a legitimate right to seek a Palestinian state, and a clear majority of Israeli Jews believes that Palestinians have a legitimate right to oppose the expansion of the settlements, provided that the Palestinians seek these goals by nonviolent methods.**

When asked to choose among three statements, an overwhelming 78% agreed that “The Palestinians have a legitimate right to seek a Palestinian state, provided that they do so using nonviolent means.” Only 19% thought that “No matter whether they use violent or nonviolent methods, the Palestinians do not have a legitimate right to seek a Palestinian state.” (Just 1% thought the Palestinians had a legitimate right to pursue a state by any means necessary).

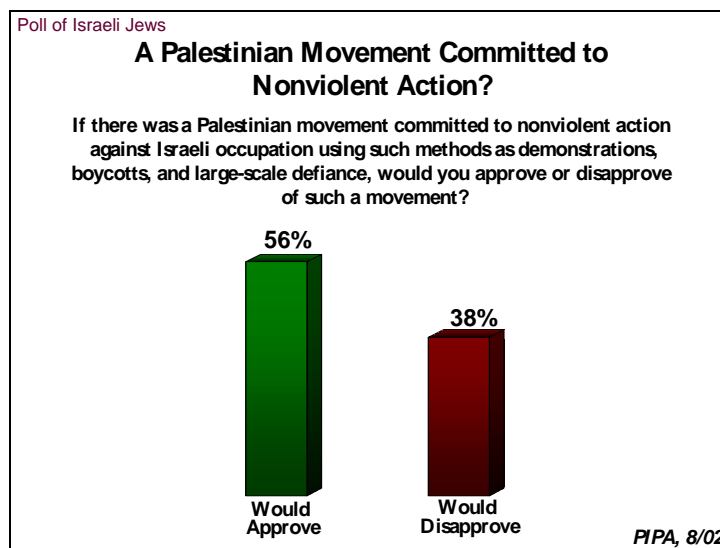
In a similar question, Israeli Jews were asked about Palestinian resistance to expansion of the settlements. A clear majority—56%—thought Palestinians “have a legitimate right to oppose the expansion of the settlements, provided that they do so by nonviolent methods.” Thirty-nine percent thought the Palestinians had no such right, no matter what means they employed to oppose expansion. (Three percent thought they had a legitimate right to oppose expansion by any means necessary.)



This overwhelming majority that says Palestinians have a legitimate right to seek a state, as long as nonviolent means are employed, is consistent with majority acceptance, in principle, of a future Palestinian state. A strong majority of 61% thought that Israel should agree to “the establishment of a Palestinian state within the framework of a permanent peace agreement with the Palestinians”; 35% were opposed.

2. If there were a Palestinian movement committed to nonviolent action, a majority of Israeli Jews says they would approve of such a movement. A strong majority thinks the Israeli government should not try to stop Palestinians from organizing large nonviolent demonstrations. However, an overwhelming majority thinks it is unlikely that a nonviolent movement will emerge.

A majority of Israeli Jews said they would approve of a Palestinian movement committed to nonviolent action—see box below.



Similarly a strong majority felt the government should take a tolerant stance toward large nonviolent Palestinian demonstrations. Almost two-thirds—63%—said that “as a general rule...the Israeli government... should not try to stop Palestinians from carrying out large nonviolent demonstrations,” while 35% thought the Israeli government should try to stop them.

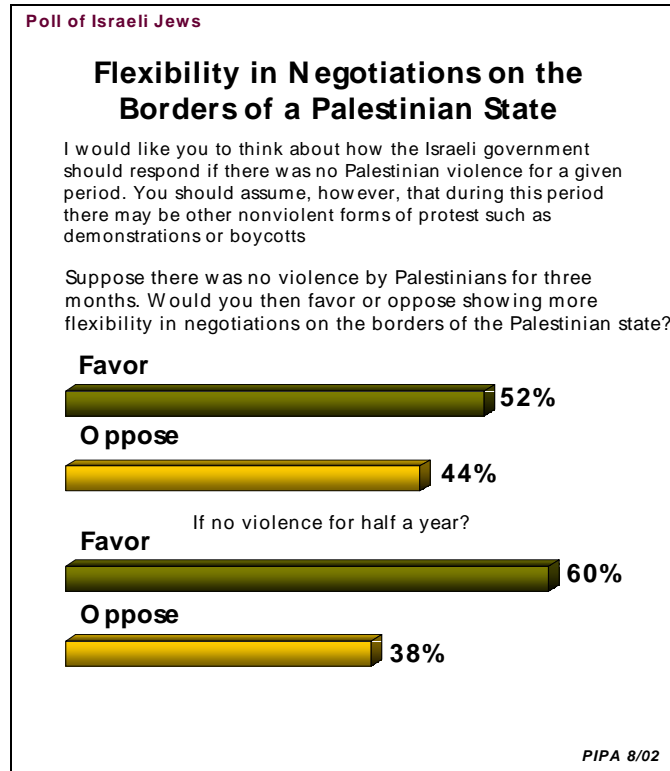
It is important to note, however, that most respondents felt they were answering questions about distant possibilities. Asked “How likely do you think it is that a significant Palestinian movement committed to nonviolent action will emerge?” 86% thought it was not very likely (42%) or not at all likely (44%).

3. If the Palestinians move from violent to nonviolent forms of protest, a majority would favor making concessions to the Palestinians, including phasing out the checkpoints between Palestinian towns and being more flexible in negotiations about the borders of a future Palestinian state.

Many Israeli Jews concur with the idea that if Palestinians move from violent to nonviolent forms of protest the Israeli government should effectively reward this behavior by making concessions.

One such concession would be to phase out the checkpoints between Palestinian towns. Initially, a very strong 70% initially opposed “phasing out the checkpoints between Palestinian towns inside the Palestinian territories,” with only 25% in favor. All those who opposed this or did not answer were then asked, “What if the Palestinians were clearly shifting away from violent methods and were instead using nonviolent methods of protest such as demonstrations, boycotts and mass blockages?” In this case 36% of the full sample changed their position, bringing the total ready to phase out the checkpoints up to 61% in favor and leaving only 33% still opposed.

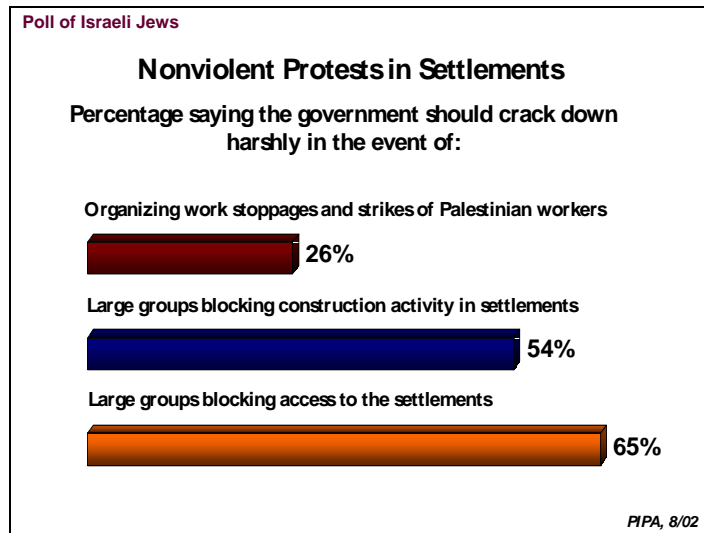
If there were no Palestinian violence for a significant period, while nonviolent protest persisted, a majority would even favor the Israeli government showing greater flexibility in negotiations over the borders of a Palestinian state. Respondents were presented such a scenario—see box below.



Interestingly, the majority willing to make such concessions was greater than the percentage ready to endorse the principle of doing so, suggesting that some may do so grudgingly. Presented a question on how the Israeli government should respond, “If Palestinians were to limit themselves to nonviolent forms of protest for a significant period of time,” 52% chose the option that, “the Israeli government should respond by making some concession, because reinforcing a trend toward nonviolence is in the Israeli national interest.” Forty-three percent chose the statement that, “the Israeli government should not respond by making some concession, because it should not have to reward Palestinians just for acting in a civilized manner.”

4. A strong majority believes that the Israeli government should not crack down harshly on efforts to organize strikes and work stoppages of Palestinian workers in the settlements, but a majority says that the Israeli government should crack down if large groups block construction activity in the settlements or block access to the settlements.

The poll further tested the reactions of Israeli Jews to nonviolent resistance by presenting the scenario of a nonviolent movement directed against Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. Respondents were asked to choose whether the Israeli government should crack down harshly, “for example, jailing protestors and organizers for extended periods” or simply enforce the law without attacking the movement itself. Responses varied according to the form of protest, with small percentage favoring doing so in the event of Palestinians “organizing work stoppages and strikes of Palestinian workers in the settlements,” but majorities favoring doing so in the event of large groups blocking construction activity or access to the settlements—see below.



Also, in a separate question, a bare majority of 51% said that if “there were strikes of Palestinian workers in the settlements and international organizations were providing money to the striking workers,” the Israeli government should “try to prevent those international organizations from providing money.” Forty-three percent thought the government should not interfere.

5. A majority of Israeli Jews fear that a Palestinian boycott of Israeli-made products could be damaging to the Israeli economy, and think Israel should try to stop Palestinians from organizing a boycott. However, a strong majority thinks that the government should not try to stop a boycott by preventing Palestinians from purchasing products from another country.

Interestingly, one of the forms of nonviolent resistance to which the Israelis showed the most resistance was an arguably benign form—boycotts of Israeli-made products. A fairly strong 60% majority said the Israeli government should try to stop such boycotts.

Judging from the response to arguments for and against such action, it appears that Israelis have some concern that such boycotts would damage the Israeli economy. Fifty-five percent found convincing the argument that, “The Israeli government should try to stop Palestinians from organizing a boycott because if it grew, it could hurt our economy.” The argument a boycott would be “a challenge to Israeli authority” did not do as well; only 39% found it convincing.

Both arguments in favor of tolerating a boycott did rather poorly. Only 39% found convincing the statement that “Because organizing boycotts can substitute for violent methods of protest, it is a constructive development for Israeli interests and should be tolerated.” Similarly, the argument that “Israel is a democracy, therefore it would be contrary to its principles to prevent Palestinians from peacefully expressing their views by doing things like organizing boycotts” was found convincing by only 41%.

However when asked whether “the Israeli government should...try to stop Palestinians from carrying out a boycott by preventing them from purchasing those products from another country,” a strong majority, 63%, said the government should *not* do this.