



THE SABAN CENTER
for MIDDLE EAST POLICY
at THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ANALYSIS PAPER

Number 17, June 2008

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ANALYZING ARAB PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

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A SABAN CENTER AT THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION REPORT

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DOES THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT STILL MATTER?

ANALYZING ARAB PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

In the past five years, news in the Arab world has been dominated by mostly painful stories from Iraq. In the Gulf region, many Arabs are caught between a crumbling Iraq and the rising influence of Iran and have focused on Shiite-Sunni sectarianism—while at the same time enjoying economic vibrancy driven by high oil prices and domestic investments. The Lebanese have suffered from the 2006 war with Israel and the ensuing domestic crisis. Egyptians and other Arabs are hurting from rising food prices, and the tragedy in Darfur continues to grab attention. Has all this eclipsed concern about the Palestinians? To what extent do Arabs still care about the Arab-Israeli conflict?

In this paper, I will analyze some of the emerging trends in public attitudes and whether there has been a change over time in the degree to which Arabs assign importance to this issue. The aim is not only to analyze how the ranking of the Palestinian issue has changed in Arab public opinion but also to study the ramifications for Arab perceptions of the divide between Hamas and Fatah, between the government appointed by President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah and the Hamas-appointed government in Gaza. In addition, I will analyze Arab public attitudes toward Israel, Israeli power, and the prospect of Middle East peace. The analysis in this paper is primarily based on six public opinion surveys I completed (with Zogby Internation-

al). They were conducted face to face in six countries: Egypt, Saudi Arabia (KSA), Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Six annual surveys were conducted in 2002-2008, ranging in size from 3300 to 4046 participants, representing a sample of urban, educated populations in each country.¹ Additional surveys are planned for the next two years.

ANALYZING OPINION TRENDS

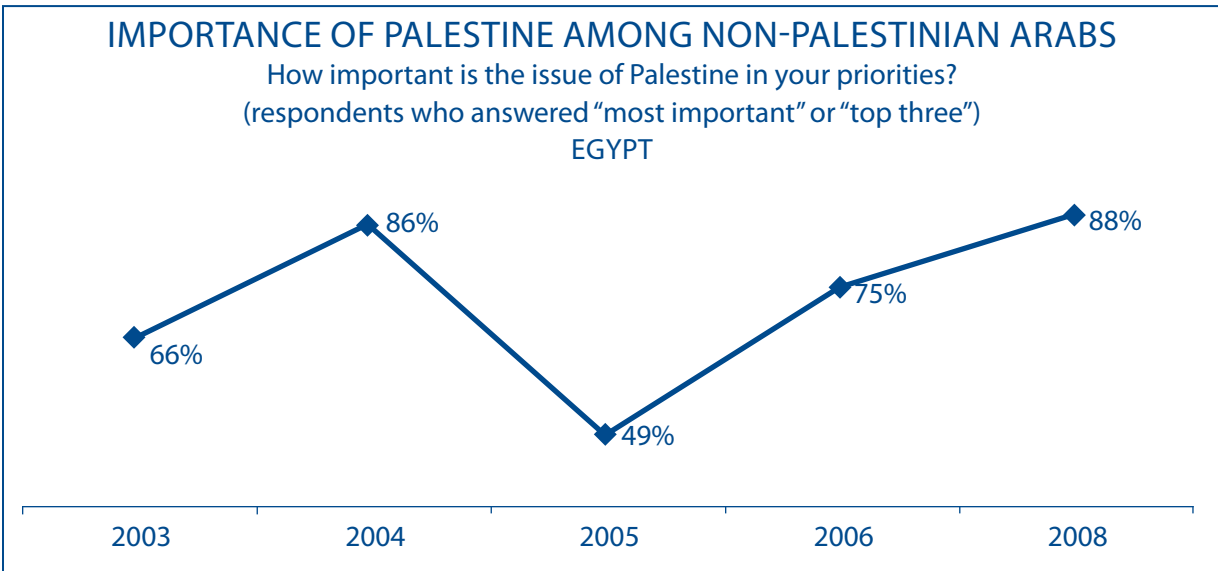
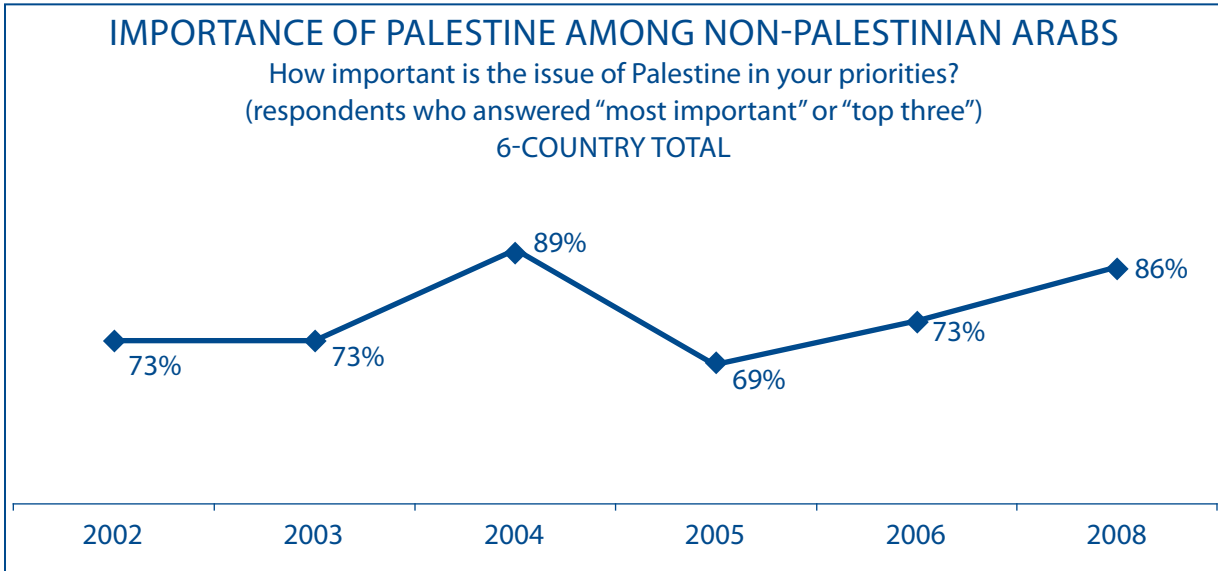
Although a sustained Hamas-Fatah division without a major peace breakthrough will inevitably impact Arab perceptions of the Palestinian issue, an analysis of the trends in the past six years, as well as demographic analysis of the 2006 poll, indicates that the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a central issue for most Arabs. Despite Iraq and increasing Sunni-Shiite tensions, the Arab-Israeli issue remains the prism through which most Arabs view the world.

Following the rise of the second Intifada in the fall of 2000 and the debate about the extent to which the Arab public cared about the Palestine issue, I began asking a number of questions to test possible change and variation in Arab attitudes. Some of these were direct questions, others were indirect measures. One of the questions asked the participants directly to rank the Palestine issue in their priorities. This question followed a method

¹ For information on these polls, please visit www.sadat.umd.edu.

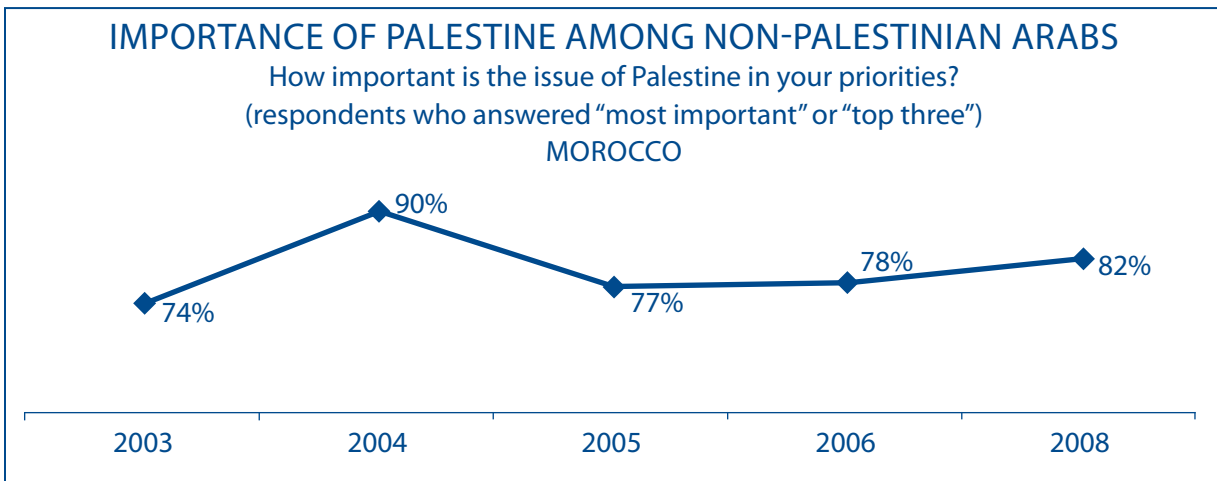
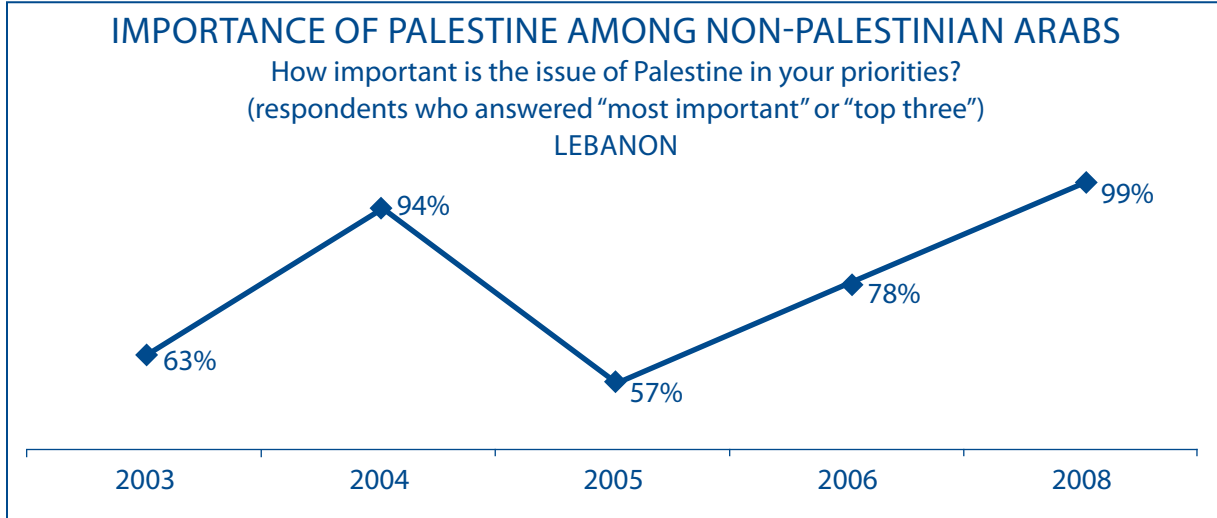
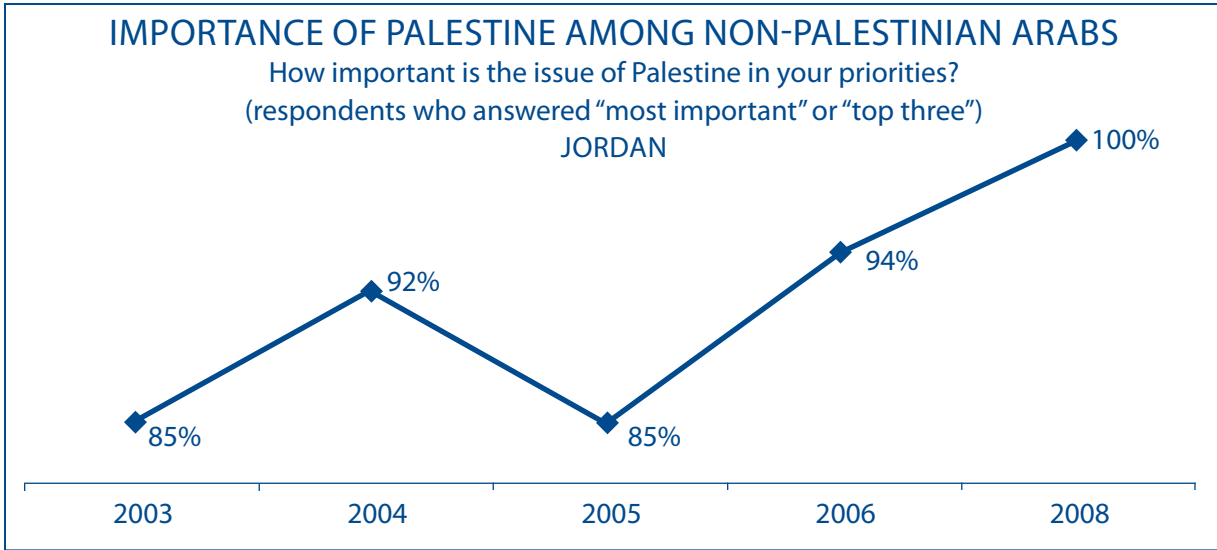
I had used (with Jon Krosnick) in 1995² to study public opinion in the United States, with the strong belief that how people rank an issue in their priorities is central to knowing whether or not their opinion matters much in politics. Although it is clear that one cannot always accept these subjective answers at face value, they provide

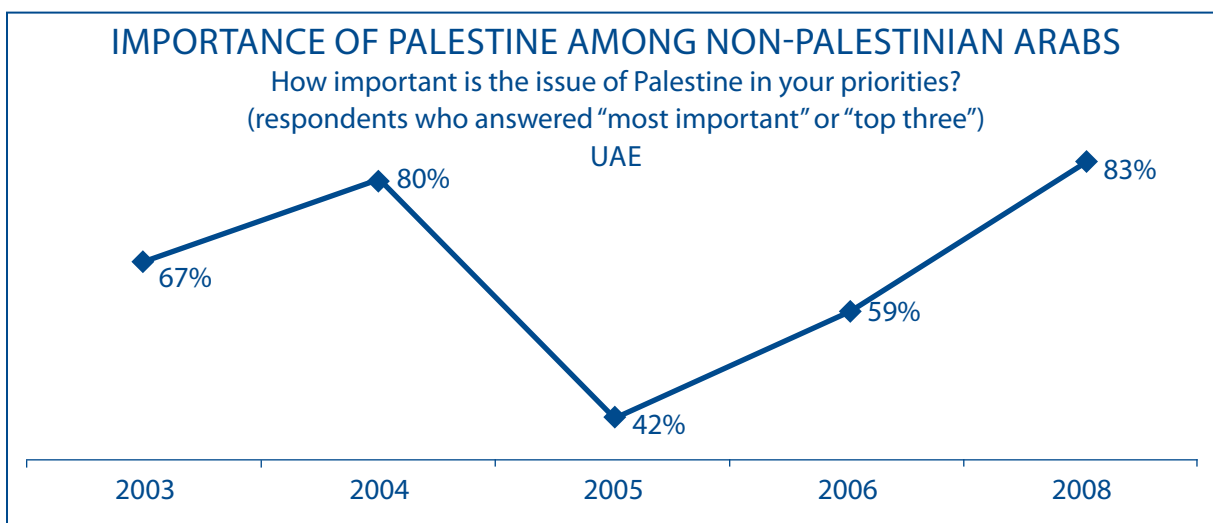
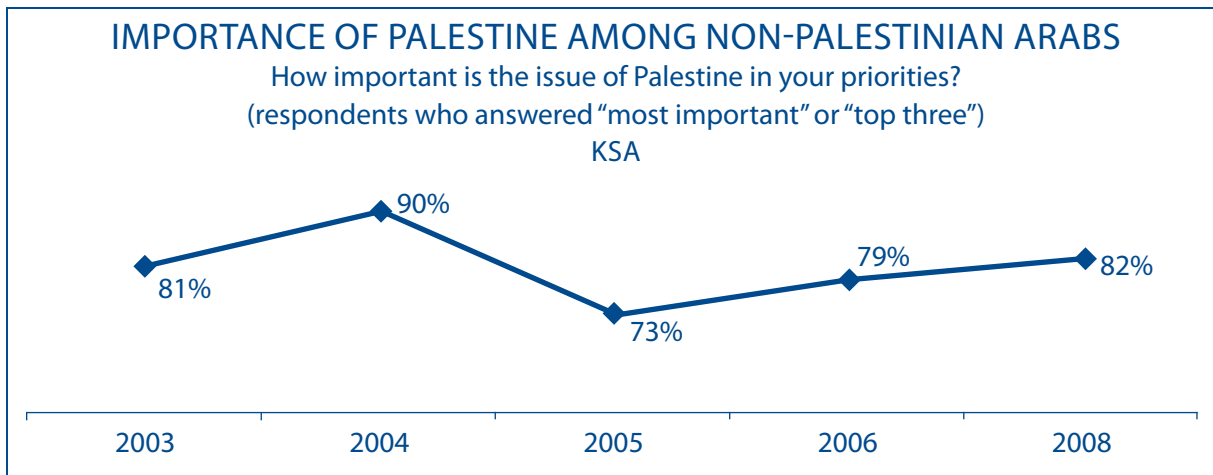
important markers for testing variation and change. We now have data from six years, and therefore an ability to analyze change and variation with reference to events of the day.³ The following graphs indicate the trends among those who answered that the issue was the top priority or in the top three.



² "U.S. Public Attitudes Toward Israel: A Study of the Attentive and Issue Publics," *International Studies Quarterly*, winter 1995-1996 (by Jon Krosnick and Shibley Telhami).

³ Please note that the question in 2002 was asked slightly differently and thus the comparison should be assessed cautiously. The other five years, the question was repeated exactly the same way. In 2002, the participants were asked to rank the issue in their priorities on a scale from 1 to 5. Since then, the question has been consistently: How important is the Palestinian issue in your priorities? (The top priority, in the top three issues, in the top five issues, or not in the top five issues?) Also, in 2002, the poll didn't include Morocco and Jordan. Since then the poll was conducted every year in the same six countries. Note that there was no 2007 poll as the 2006 poll took place in the fall and the 2008 poll early in the year.





The remarkable thing to observe is that, consistently, two-thirds to three fourths of respondents say this issue remains among the three most important issues in their priorities. Although there was a slight decline in 2005, there was an increase again in the number of people ranking the issue high in their priorities in 2006. This trend generally held across countries with Morocco and the United Arab Emirates experiencing the lowest drop in 2005, but again rebounding in 2006, and even more in 2008. These trends were also similar to those who felt that the Palestine issue is the *single most important* issue to them overall: 43% in 2003, 56% in 2004, 24% in 2005, and 43% in 2006, and 56% in 2008.

In reviewing events around the time of the polls in each year, it is clear that there is a correlation in the rise and decline of the importance of the issue on two things: the degree of Israeli-Palestinian violence and the nature of the relationship between the Palestinians and the United States. In 2002, 73 percent of respondents rated the issue 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. This poll was conducted in the shadow of the Israeli operations in Jenin that played center stage on Arab and international media, the arrest of Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti, and the siege against Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in his compound in Ramallah. The relations between U.S. President George W. Bush and Arafat worsened, especially after Israel captured the

Karine—a ship carrying a load of arms bound for the Palestinians. These events generated much sympathy for the Palestinians and great anger with both Israel and the United States.

In 2003, the poll was taken just before the Iraq war began, with much of the international and regional focus on Iraq. But the Palestinian issue remained high in the news. Ariel Sharon had been elected Prime Minister of Israel a few weeks before, and there was international and regional focus on the barrier which Israel was building in the West Bank (with the International Court of Justice taking up the issue just before the poll was taken). In 2004, the year that the largest number of people ranked the issue among the top three, *despite the Iraq war distraction*, the poll followed the assassinations of Hamas founder Ahmad Yassin and then his successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi. President Bush met with Sharon in the White House and supported his “disengagement plan.” Just as the poll was going to the field, six Israeli soldiers were killed in Gaza followed by a major Israeli operation which demolished many homes and killed over 40 Palestinians. These events took place while Arafat remained besieged in his compound in Ramallah.

In contrast, there was a slight but noticeable drop in the importance of the issue in 2005. The most significant events again related to the level of violence, the nature of the Palestinian-U.S. relationship, and the prospects of Palestinian-Israeli peace. Between the 2004 and the 2005 polls, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat died and Mahmoud Abbas succeeded him. U.S.-Palestinian relations warmed up with President Bush receiving Abbas in the White House; Israel also withdrew its forces from Gaza. Violence continued but at a significantly reduced level from the previous year.

In 2006, the election of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, the lack of progress in the peace process, and the sanctions against the Hamas-led gov-

ernment once again raised the profile of the issue. The Lebanese-Israeli war further added to this environment. The most notable difference from the year before is the nature of the U.S.-Palestinian relationship. If in the year before Arabs saw the U.S.-Palestinian relationship largely through the prism of Abbas’s government, the split between Hamas and Fatah, and the sympathy with Hamas among many Arabs led to a different picture in 2006. In 2008, the poll was taken in March, immediately after intense Israeli-Palestinian fighting in Gaza which resulted in the death of more than 140 Palestinians and three Israelis, which took place in an environment of disappointment over the lack of progress in the Annapolis peace process initiated in November 2007.

THE HAMAS–FATAH DIVIDE

The conflict between Hamas and Fatah after Hamas’s victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections affected the way Arabs perceived the Palestinian issue. When the (November-December) 2006 poll was taken, the focus was on mediating efforts to bring about a Palestinian “national unity government” which included Hamas and Fatah. It is clear that Palestinian divisions impacted the way Arabs interpreted Palestinian interests. Historically, Arabs looked largely at the position of the PLO and its chairman, (and later also to the position of the elected President of the Palestinian Authority who was typically the same person. After Hamas’s election, the position of president Mahmoud Abbas was no longer the sole measure for evaluating what was in the best interests of the Palestinians in Arab public opinion. Even before the election of Hamas, Abbas faced a problem with Arab public opinion. As Arab perceptions of the Bush Administration reached historic lows⁴, Mr. Abbas was appearing as one of President Bush’s best friends in the Arab world. But the election of Hamas, and widespread Arab sympathy with its fight against international sanctions, put Abbas in an even weaker position in his appeal to Arab

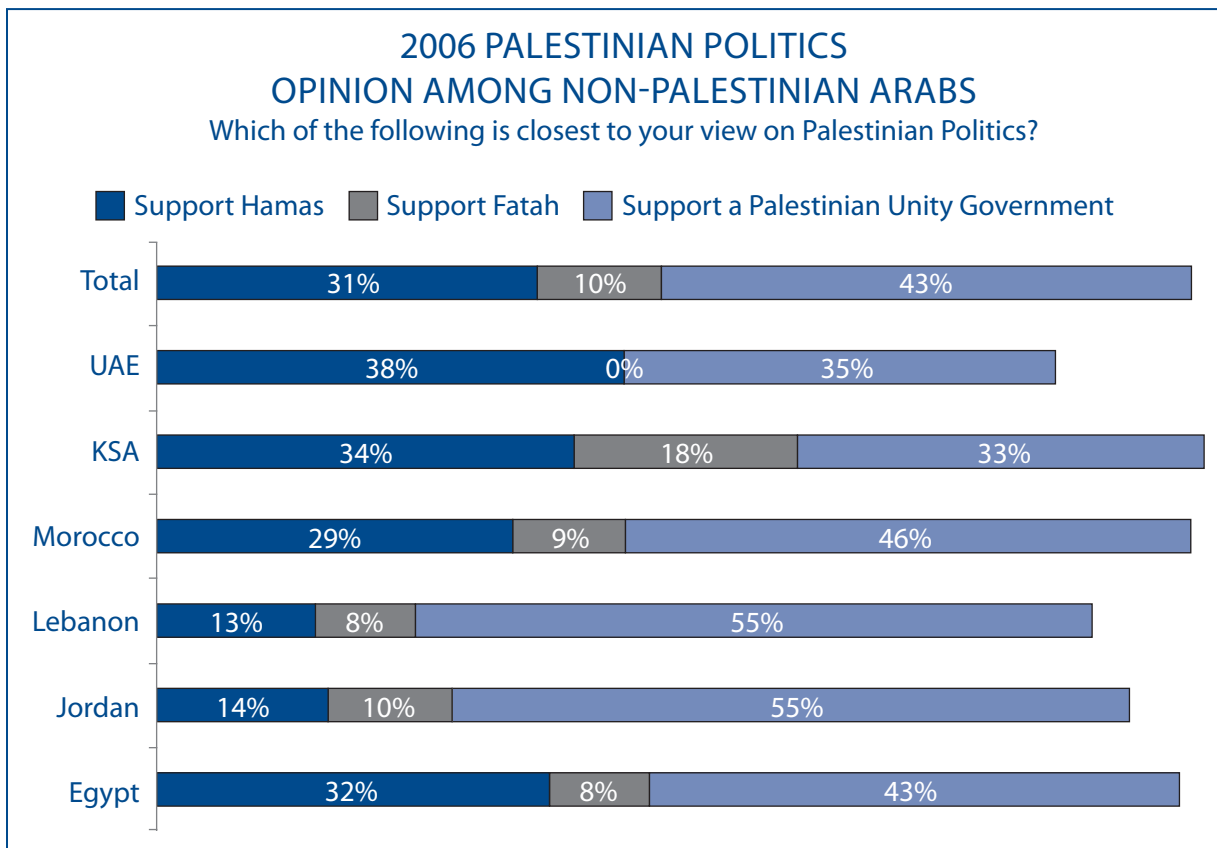
⁴ In the 2006 poll, Arabs identified President Bush as the single most disliked leader, even more than any Israeli leader, and over eighty percent of Arabs identified the United States as one of two countries that threatened them most.

public opinion. Sympathy was further fueled by the Arab public's sense of "double-standards" in the Bush Administration's advocacy of democracy: seemingly promoting free and fair elections only when the results brought pro-American governments to power.

The graph below describes Arab attitudes toward Fatah, Hamas, and a Palestinian national unity government as of December 2006. In most countries a majority or a plurality of Arabs supported a Palestinian national unity government which included Hamas and Fatah, but it is noteworthy that in two countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, a plurality favored Hamas over a unity government. In all countries, Arabs favored Hamas over Fatah. Demographically, men (34%) tended to support Hamas more than women (28%) and were also more likely to support a national unity government (46%) than women (41%). Those with an income above 1000 EGP were slightly less likely to support Hamas (25%) than those with

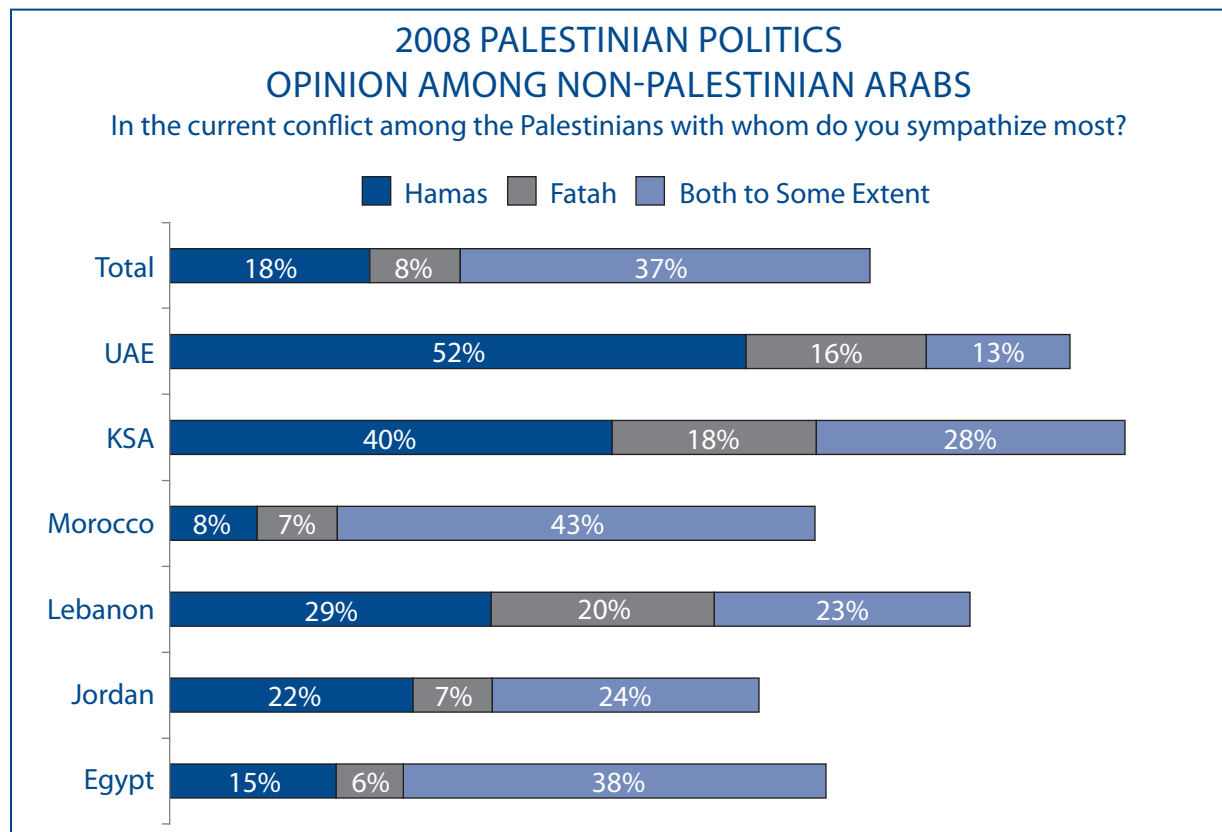
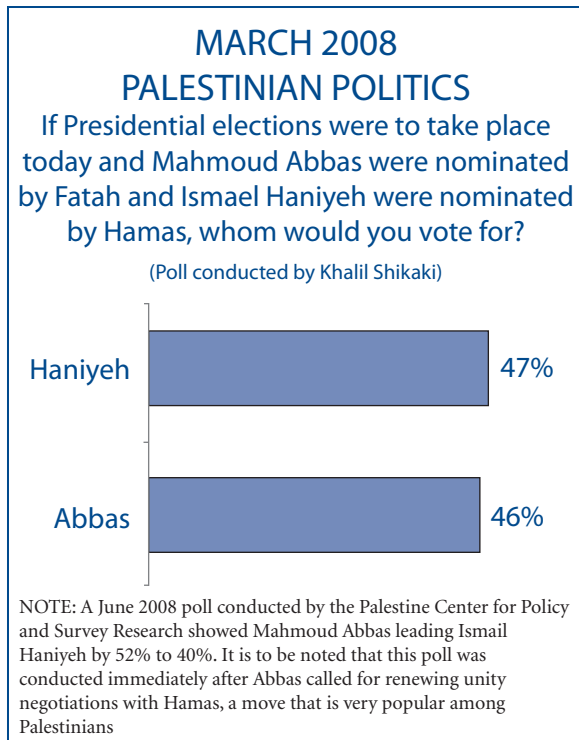
lower incomes (30%), and more likely to support a unity government (48%) than those with lower incomes (41%). In terms of identity politics, those who identified themselves as Muslim first were more likely to support Hamas (40%) in comparison to those who identified themselves as Arab first (21%).

In the 2008 survey, we had a chance to test if the policy of the Bush Administration was paying off especially in the wake of the November, 2007 Annapolis Conference. In particular, one of the stated aims of Administration policy was to demonstrate that militancy does not work, while moderation can pay. Thus, the imposition of sanctions on Hamas and Gaza while negotiating improvement on the ground for the West Bank was a policy intended to weaken support for militancy and empower moderates, both regionally and among Palestinians. The results, as shown below in the 2008 graphs, indicate that the outcome is closer to the opposite of what was intended.



In particular, when asked which Palestinian faction they sympathize with most, 37% of Arabs polled said they sympathize with both to some extent while 18% said they sympathize with Hamas. Only 8% said they sympathize with Fatah. Similarly, when asked which Palestinian government they blamed more for the situation in Gaza, 39% blamed both, 23% blamed the government appointed by President Mahmoud Abbas and 15% blamed Hamas.⁵

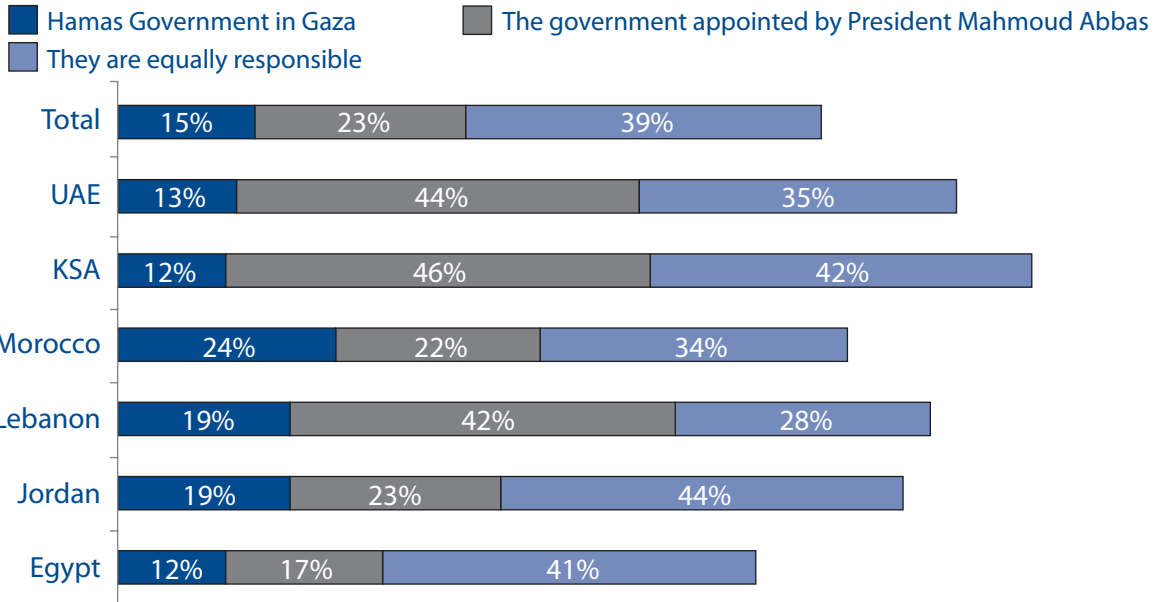
It is important to note that these results are among non-Palestinian Arabs and that Palestinian public opinion may be somewhat different in this regard. Palestinian pollsters have not asked the question in the same way that our own poll asked it. In general, Palestinian polls continue to show slight advantages for Fatah. Nonetheless, even recent trends in Palestinian polling show a shift in popularity toward Hamas. See graph below from polls conducted by Palestinian political scientist, Khalil Shikaki.



⁵ Note that the respondents were not asked about Israeli, American, or Arab responsibility for the Gaza situation but only about Palestinian responsibility.

2008 PALESTINIAN POLITICS OPINION AMONG NON-PALESTINIAN ARABS

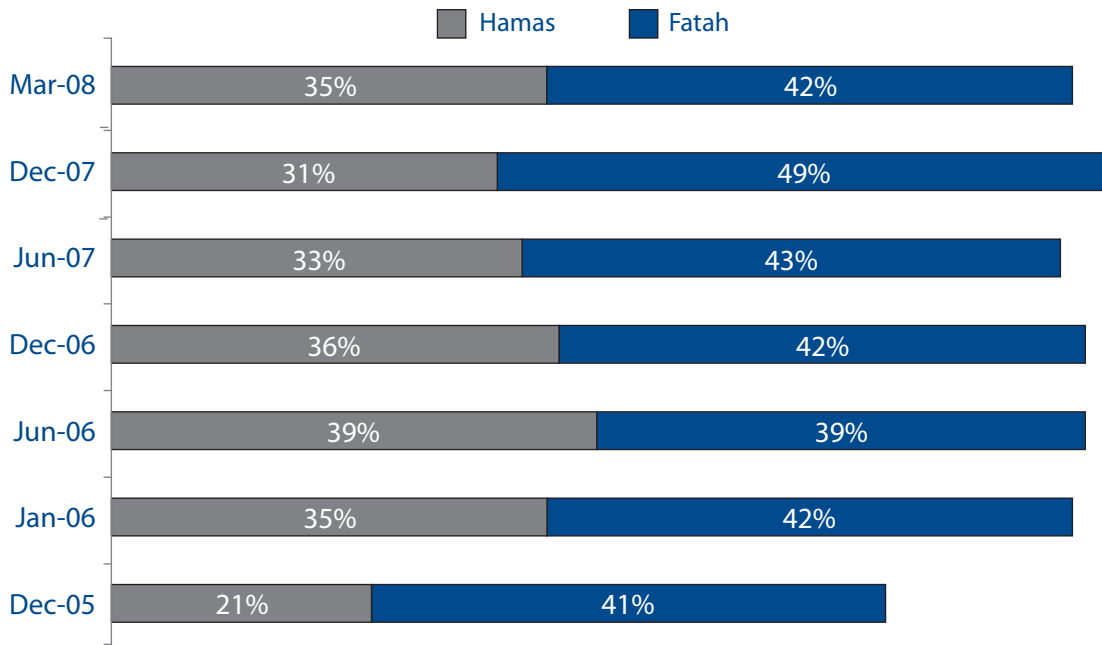
When you observe the current state of affairs in Gaza, which of the Palestinian parties do you believe is most responsible for it?

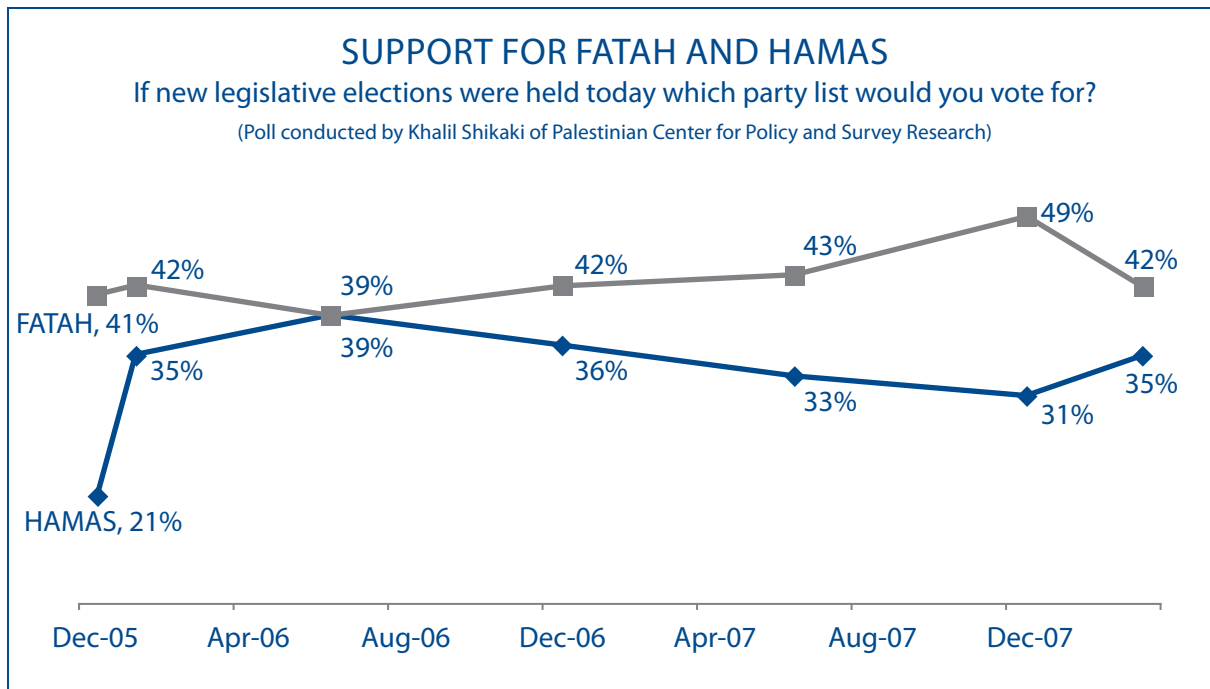


SUPPORT FOR FATAH AND HAMAS

If new legislative elections were held today which party list would you vote for?

(Poll conducted by Khalil Shikaki of Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research)





DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

In examining the 2006 data for demographic variation among those who rate the Palestinian issue high in their priorities, there appear to be only small differences overall. There is little variation, overall, in the views of men and women, and education level appears to make only a small difference. Those with university education were slightly less likely to report Palestine as the top issue (41% compared to 43% for those without university education), and slightly more likely to report Palestine as one of their top three issues (37% instead of 32%). Those with higher income were less likely to report it as most important (36%, instead of 44%) and more likely to report it as one of their top five issues (15%, instead of 9%).

Those who identify primarily as citizens of their own state rather than Muslim or Arab were less likely to identify Palestine as the single most important issue (32%) compared with 45-48% for other identity groups. Those identifying themselves as Muslims first were least likely to say that the issue is not among their top five priorities (3%) compared with 10% for those who identify as citizens of their own state.

PALESTINE AND PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA

In 2006, for the first time since we began polling, Arabs were asked what step taken by Washington would most improve their views of the United States. They were asked to choose two steps among the following: Pushing for the spread of democracy in the Middle East even more; providing more economic assistance to the region, stopping economic and military aid to Israel; withdrawing American forces from Iraq; withdrawing American forces from the Arabian peninsula; and brokering comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. More than 60% of respondents chose brokering Arab-Israeli peace as the number one answer, followed by withdrawal from Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. It is notable however, that the number one answer in Saudi Arabia specifically was withdrawal from Iraq, followed by withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula and stopping aid to Israel; brokering peace was the fourth choice. This seems consistent with the results on the Saudi public's readiness for peace analyzed in the next section.

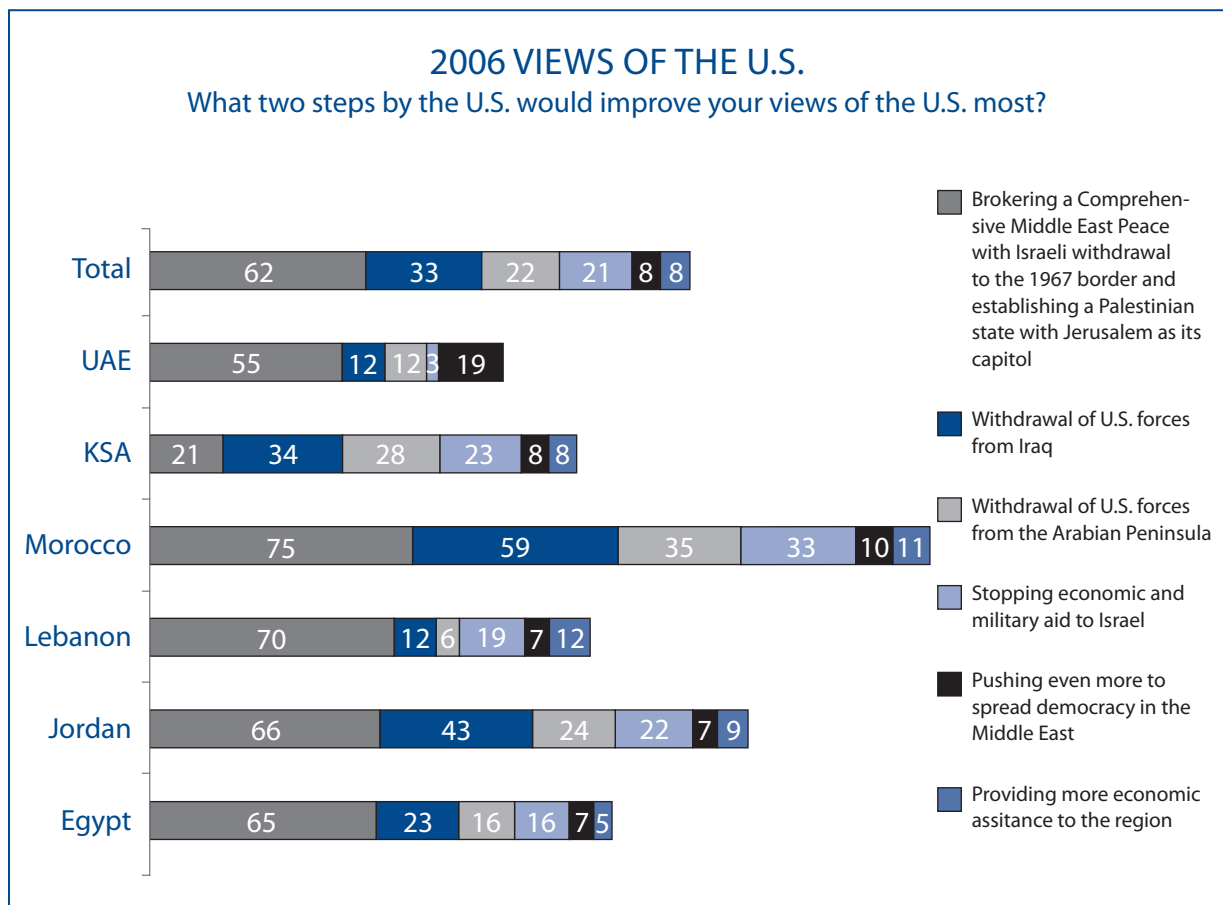
In 2008, 50% of the public identified brokering Arab-Israeli peace based on the 1967 border as the single

most important step to improving their views of the United States--still the number one issue. Notable was the increase in the number of people who want to see an American withdrawal from Iraq (from 33% in 2006 to 44% in 2008) and the Arabian Peninsula (from 22% in 2006 to 46% in 2008), as more people were expressing less confidence in America's ability to broker peace.⁶

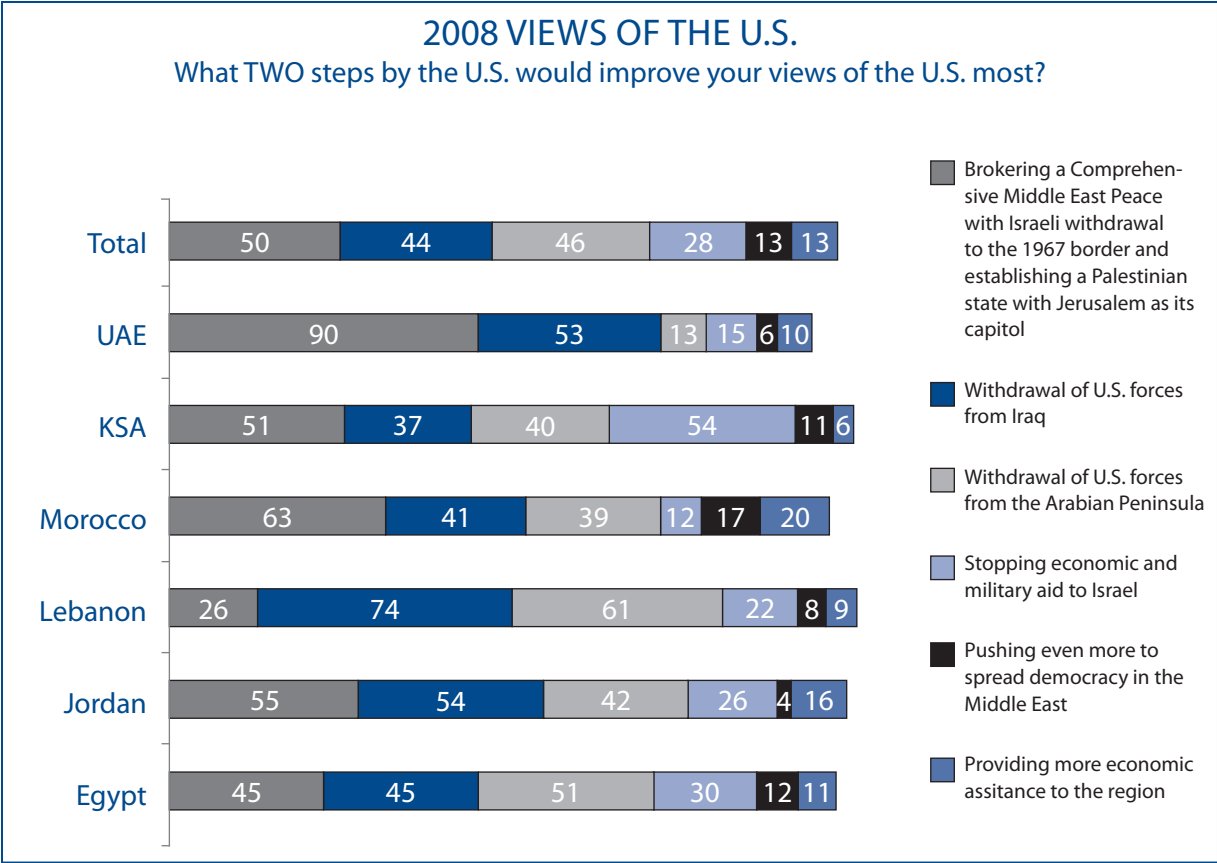
Although the above question was asked only in 2006 and 2008, there were other questions asked that revealed perceptions of the role of the Arab-Israeli issue in public attitudes that were asked over time. First, the Arab public consistently and overwhelmingly expresses the view that attitudes toward the United States are

shaped by American policies, not by American values. When asked to assess the role of the Arab-Israeli issue in forming their opinion of the United States, more than three quarters say it is at least somewhat important, and half or more consistently say it is "extremely important."

There was some variation across countries in the percentage of people who ranked the issue of policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict as being "extremely important" in developing their views of the United States. In the 2006 survey, for example, 65% of Moroccans, 76% of Jordanians, and 54% of Saudis ranked it as "extremely" important, whereas only 43% of Egyptians identified it this way. There were no



⁶ In my visit to the region during the March 2008 poll, one Arab official, who typically called for more active American diplomacy to resolve the Arab-Israeli issue said "My advice to you at this time is leave us alone."



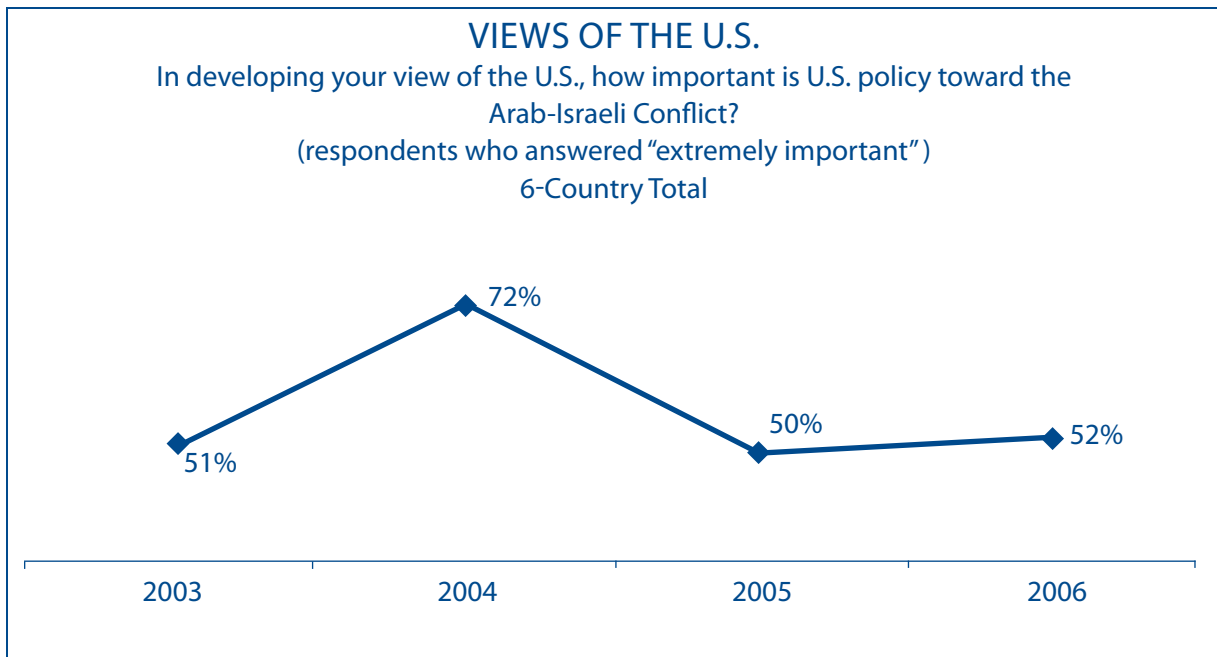
major differences between males and females and little difference between university graduates and the rest. Income also accounted for only minor differences. Among those who identified themselves as Muslim first, 76% identified the issue as extremely important compared with 67% among those who identified themselves as Arab first.

ATTITUDES TOWARD ISRAEL AND PEACE

Poll questions about the acceptance of an Israeli state in the Arab world are scarce. A number of specific questions were asked for the first time in 2006 and again in 2008. The most direct question asked participants which statements they agreed with most: that they will accept peace with Israel if Israel completely withdraws from the territories occupied in 1967 and a Palestinian state is established and that Arab governments should do more to achieve that; that they accept such peace

but they don't believe the Israelis will ever accept such an outcome peacefully; or that Arabs should continue to fight Israel no matter what.

It should first be noted that the question was not intended to test the specific details of a peace agreement with Israel acceptable to Arabs but to test if in principle they are opposed to one. There was also no previous reference point to this question so it is hard to know how Arab public opinion changed since the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in 2000, although conventional wisdom is that Arab views have hardened since. Still, the 2006 poll, coming after Israel's war with Hezbollah, is revealing. Those who are in principle opposed to an agreement with Israel are a minority in every country, with a majority stating that they would accept a peace agreement based on the 1967 borders. But the other side of the coin is a result that explains how people who support peace



can also support militancy: a plurality of Arabs overall support peace, but do not believe that Israelis will ever accept such peace. When one combines this group with those who are in principle opposed to peace with Israel, there is an even bigger majority who are in practice not working for peace. This is especially so in Saudi Arabia where a plurality (42%) does not accept an agreement in principle and an additional 34% does not believe that Israel will accept an agreement peacefully.

This general attitude was even starker in the 2008 poll when only 19% (vs. 29% in 2006) said that they are in principle opposed to a two-state solution. On the other side, a majority of Arabs expressed the view that Israel would never accept such a deal peacefully. In a new 2008 question to measure attitudes towards the prospect of peace, 55% expressed the view that it will never happen, while only 13% stated that they believe it is achievable in the next five years.

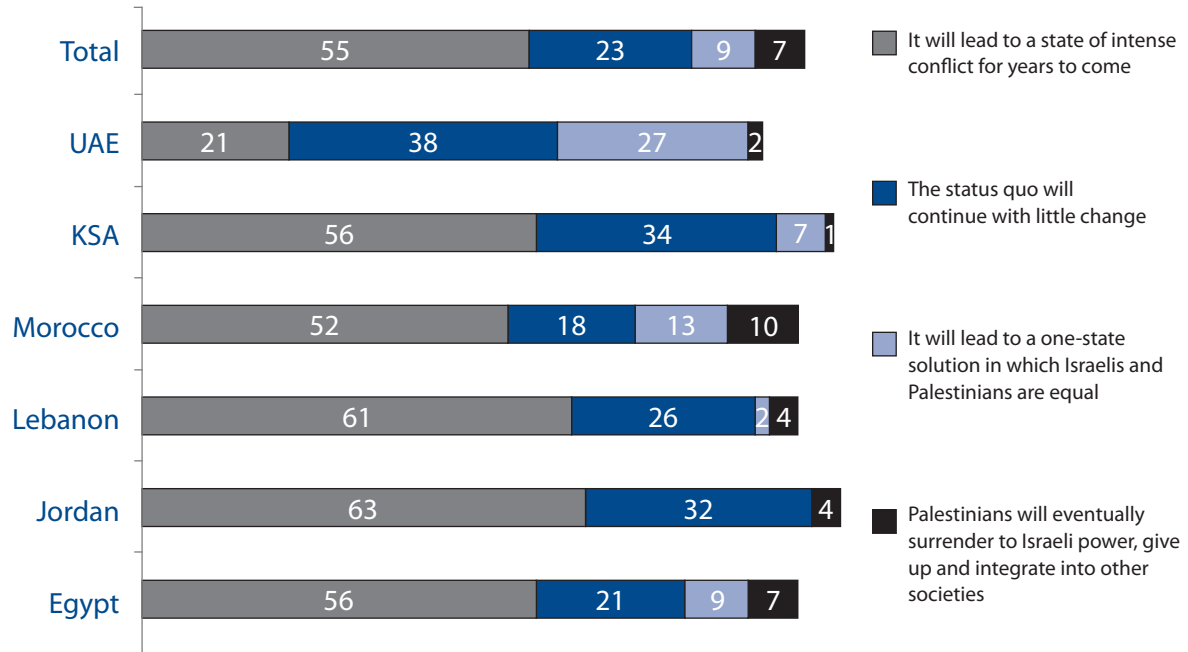
This feature of public opinion is telling and echoes findings among Israelis and Palestinians, where ma-

majorities of both sides support a two-state solution, but majorities also believe that the other side will not accept such a solution. This helps explain how Palestinians supporting peace can vote for Hamas, while Israelis supporting peace voted for Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister. The polls indicate a similar trend in non-Palestinian Arab public opinion, although there is also some variation from state to state.

It is also worth noting that Arab attitudes of accepting the principle of an agreement with Israel while not believing it will give up territories do not appear to be a function of their assessment of Israeli power. In the shadow of the 2006 Lebanon war, participants were asked about Israeli power specifically. Overall, a significant plurality (46%) believe that Israel is now weaker and it is only a matter of time before it is defeated, and only 13% say Israel remains strong and will continue to use its power to consolidate its position. In 2008, there was some change in attitudes as the 2006 Lebanon war became more distant: 35% believed Israel was weaker, while 16% said Israel remained strong. (See graph on the following page).

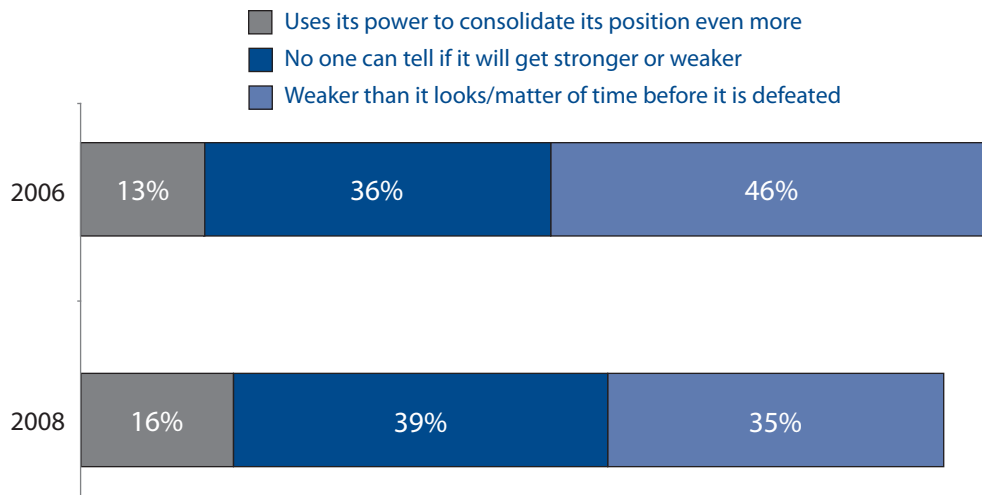
2008 PALESTINIAN POLITICS

What do you believe is the likely outcome if the prospects for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict collapse?

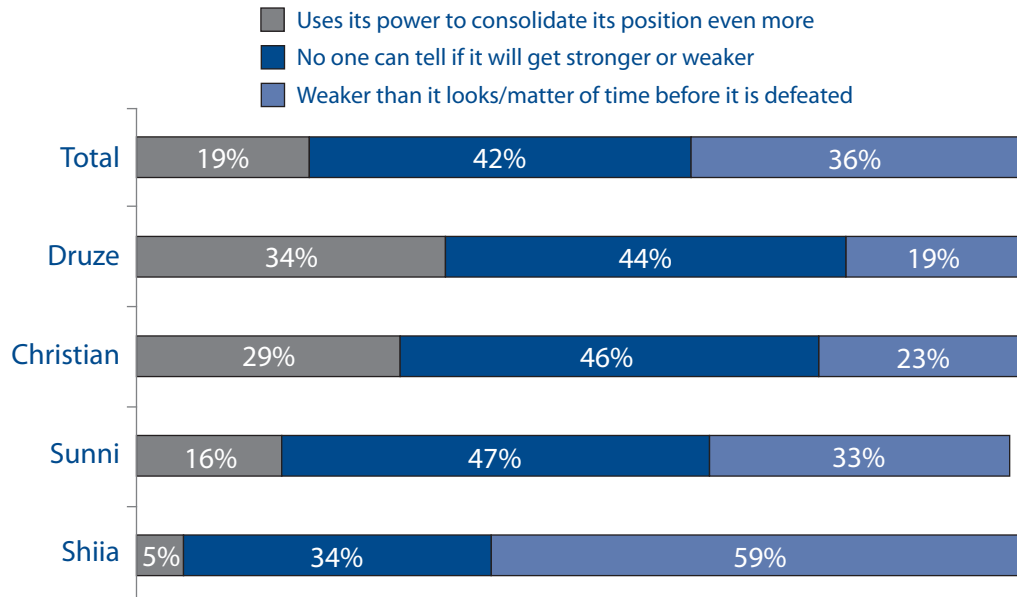


VIEWS OF ISRAEL

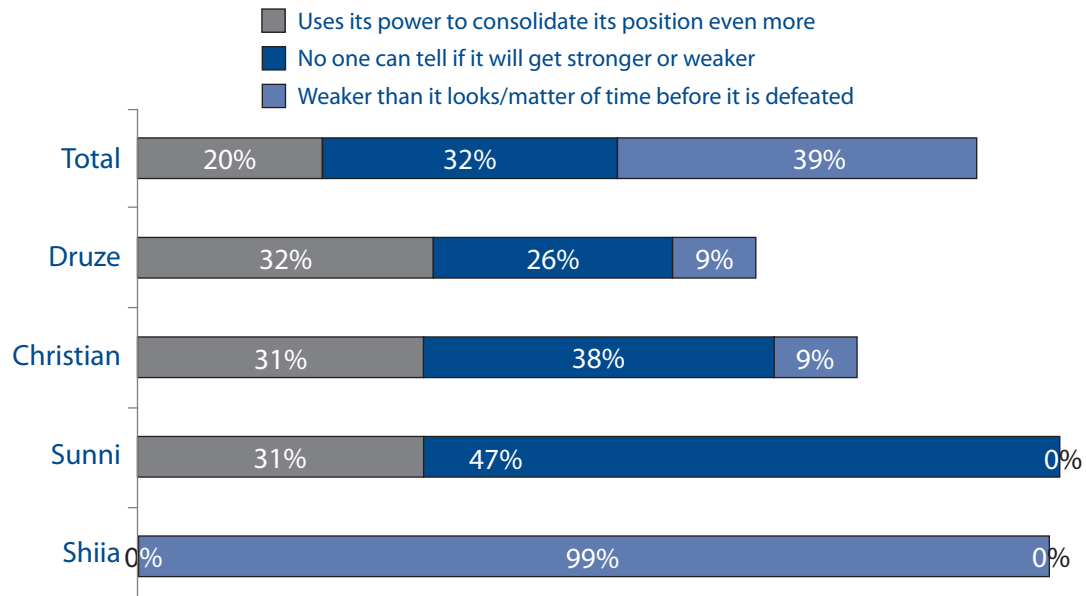
Looking at the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza, describe your attitudes toward Israel's power:



2006 VIEWS OF ISRAEL
LEBANON BY CONFESSIONAL GROUP
 Looking at the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza
 Describe your attitude toward Israel's power

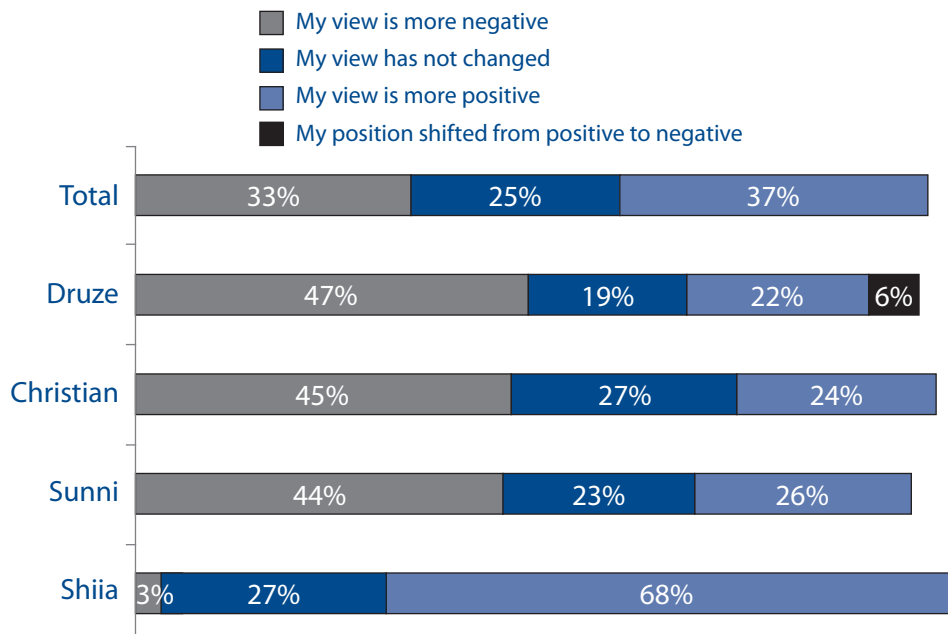


2008 VIEWS OF ISRAEL
LEBANON BY CONFESSIONAL GROUP
 Looking at the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza
 Describe your attitude toward Israel's power



2006 VIEWS OF HEZBOLLAH LEBANON BY CONFESSIONAL GROUP

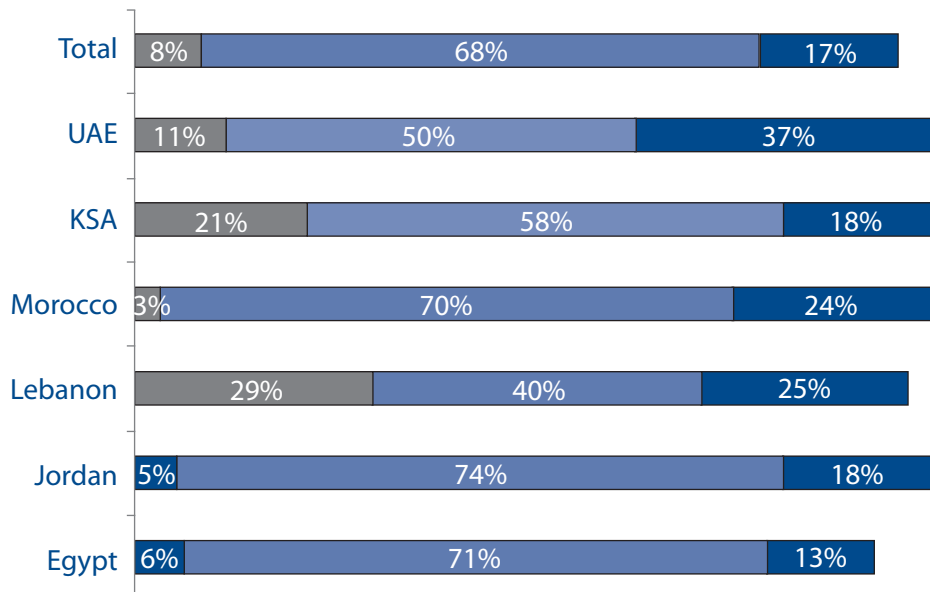
After the Lebanon War, describe your attitude towards Hezbollah



2006 VIEWS OF HEZBOLLAH

After the Lebanon War, describe your attitude towards Hezbollah

My view is more negative
 My view is more positive
 My view has not changed



Egyptians (50%) and Moroccans (44%) were more likely than Lebanese (38%) and Saudis (37%) to believe that Israel is now weaker. Gender again appears to make little difference. Those with University education (39%) were more likely to say that “no one can tell if Israel will be stronger” than those without university education (34%).

IRAQ, IRAN, LEBANON, AND THE PALESTINE PRISM

Iraq has undoubtedly created another reference point for much of the Arab public in evaluating the United States and world politics more broadly. How this issue will play out in the long term is difficult to assess, although it is clear enough that the view of American policy will remain largely negative in the foreseeable future. It is also difficult to completely divorce the Iraq issue from the Arab-Israeli issue in public perceptions—even separate from the cumulative impact of two issues that generate much anger.

To begin with, most of the Arab public believes that the United States waged the Iraq war in large part in order to help strengthen Israel; the top two motives that more than three quarters of Arabs ascribe to the United States for the Iraq war are “controlling oil” and helping Israel (with “spreading of democracy” consistently identified by less than 10% of respondents). This connectedness is also seen in much of the Arab public discourse, especially on the issue of “dividing Iraq” which a large segment views as intended to serve the motives they identify. So while Iraq has become something of a new prism through which Arabs look at the world, this does not appear to have come at the expense of the Arab-Israeli conflict in public perceptions.

It is also clear that the Iraqi sectarian conflict, the rise of Hezbollah as a militant Shiite group, and the increasing influence of Iran in the shadow of Iraqi devastation have highlighted the Sunni-Shiite divide. This divide entered the discourse in the Arab world in ways that have not been seen in decades. It is also true that some Arab governments have specifically made reference to this divide, notably in Jordan and Egypt, as a way of garnering Sunni Arab public support for their positions toward Iran and Hezbollah. The ugly way in which Saddam Hussein was executed also fueled more divisiveness, especially in the Jordanian discourse. The Lebanese crisis that followed the Lebanese-Israeli war of 2006 had a decidedly sectarian character—although the divisions were not entirely along sectarian lines. But is this divide the new lens through which the Arab public views the world?

The poll results from November/December, 2006, as well as the March 2008 poll, suggest a different story, although this continues to unfold. First, while a number of Arab governments took an anti-Hezbollah position (even publicly) their public had significantly improved its views of Shiite Hezbollah, even as some of the discourse continued to be sectarian. Surprisingly, this was even more so in the 2008 poll. When asked to identify the leader they admire most (in an open-ended question), the number one answer overall, (and especially in predominantly Sunni countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan) was Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader.

In fact, the leadership question is revealing in other ways. The top four leaders in 2006 (by relatively small margins) were all non-Sunni, with three being non-Arab: Nasrallah, Jacques Chirac, Hugo Chavez, and

⁷ In 2006, Chirac and Nasrallah received far more significant support than Chavez and Ahmadinajad. Chirac had been the number one leader in the three previous polls most likely owing to being seen as the key world leader to stand up to President George W. Bush. His numbers remained relatively strong, despite issues, such as the limits on the wearing of veils in French school and policies toward Muslim immigrants. He dropped out of the first-choice list in the 2008 poll after leaving office. Also, it is important to note that respondents are asked to name their most admired leader *outside their own countries*.

Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.⁷ And while the 2008 poll had an Arab leader in the top three (Bashar Assad), none was Sunni Arab. These results indicate that most people are answering this question through the prism of their anger with Israel and the United States—not through the Shiite-Sunni divide or through the lens of Muslim vs. non-Muslim divide. While the public may not know much about these leaders and may not be embracing what they stand for in their own countries, their answers give clues about their sense of what is important to them at the time of the poll.

The same attitudes hold toward Iran which is genuinely seen as a threat by many Arab governments, especially in the Gulf. The Arab public is not predisposed to have a favorable view of Iran and most Arabs supported Arab Iraq in its war with Tehran. Many still see Iran as something of a threat and many are concerned about the rise of its power in the shadow of a weak and divided Iraq. But polls also indicate that their view of Iran is not the one that shapes their position on the central issues of the day. Asked in the 2006 survey to identify the two states that pose the biggest threats to them (in an open-ended question) the vast majority identified Israel first, followed by the United States, with 11% identifying Iran. Strikingly, in the 2008 poll, only 7% identified Iran as one of their two biggest threats. While a majority of Arabs believe that Iran's nuclear program is intended to develop nuclear weapons, in 2006, an even larger majority believed that the international community should not stop their efforts. This even held in Jordan, which would stand to be devastated in the case of an Israeli-Iranian nuclear war. In 2008, only a minority believed that Iran was trying to develop nuclear weapons, but a full two-thirds did not want the international community to pressure them to curtail their nuclear program. Even more surprisingly, a plurality of respondents (44%) believed that if Iran were

to acquire nuclear weapons, the result would be more positive for the region.

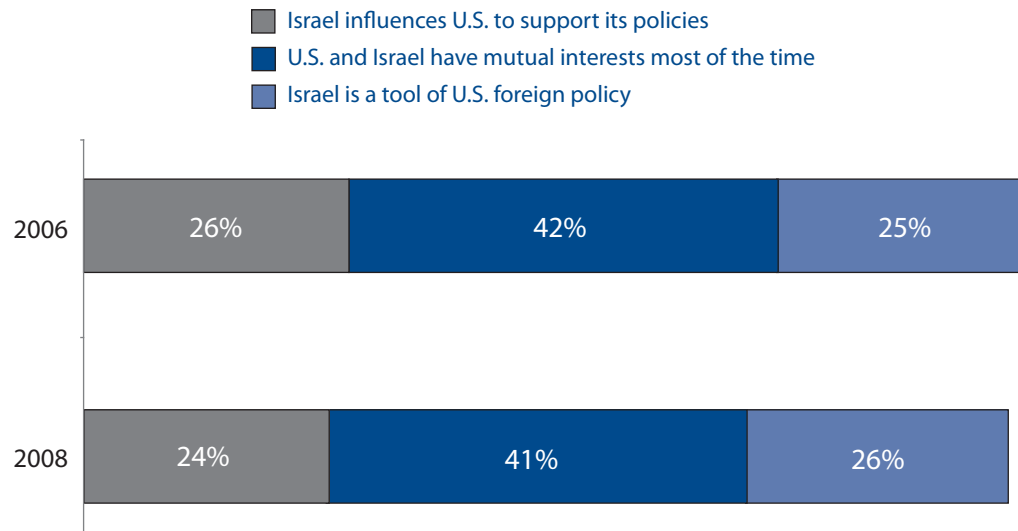
These findings suggest that while there is a Sunni-Shiite divide and many in the Arab world may be concerned about Iran, these issues are subordinated in their perceptions to their anger with Israel and the United States. In the absence of a breakthrough in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and with the continued crisis between Hamas and Fatah, the Arab public may not be able to determine “what's good for the Palestinians,” but this will not necessarily reduce the centrality of the issue in public perceptions. For now, the trend is toward slightly more sympathy with Hamas, pessimism about the prospects for peace, and increased anger with the United States and Israel.

PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN AND ISRAELI INTERESTS

This latter point needs some elaboration. Historically, Arabs had a divided view of the United States and its relationship with Israel. Is Israel a tool of American foreign policy or is American policy a reflection of Israeli interests and the influence of the Israel Lobby? This is an old argument dating back to the period of Arab nationalism when theories of “American imperialism” were popular not only in the Middle East but in much of the world. Many Arabs had little information about domestic American politics and the complexity of decision making. The environment changed especially after the diplomacy that led to the Egyptian-Israeli treaty and created a new window into American politics. Since then, the public discourse at least (as we have not had polls measuring attitudes on these issues) reflected a focus on the role of the Israeli Lobby in driving American politics. For the first time, we asked a question in 2006 about the relationship as Arabs perceived it and repeated it in 2008. The results in both years were very similar. (See graph on the following page).

VIEWS OF U.S. AND ISRAEL

What do you believe motivates Israeli policies in the region and the U.S. support for these policies?



Overall, 42% in 2006 and 41% in 2008 of all respondents believe that Israel and United States have mutual interests, while 26% in 2006, and 24% in 2008 believe that Israel influences American foreign policy through domestic politics while another 25% in 2006 and 26% in 2008 feel that Israel is a tool of American foreign policy. The most important exception to this trend is Saudi Arabia in 2006 where a plurality (41%) feels that Israel influences the US to support its policies. But even here, 38% believe that Israeli and American interests are mutual. Demographics, such as gender, education, and income made little difference in the way respondents perceived the Israeli-US relationship, and identity appeared to make only a small difference.

It is difficult to draw long-term conclusions from this, since this question was asked for the first time in 2006. But initial reflections suggest ambiguity in the public's mind about the causality of American foreign policy. It should be noted however that the thesis that Israel is a tool of American policy had received some airing in the months before the 2006 war with the work of the American scholar Noam Chomsky in particu-

lar receiving attention in the Arab media, especially as he visited the region. More importantly, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, made the case, while Arab eyes were focused on him during the 2006 war, that Israel wanted to stop the war earlier, but the Bush Administration pressed it to continue. It is likely that this had some impact, given the timing of the poll, on public attitudes; in this regard, it is possible that the Arab media coverage of the debate about the article and book by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt about the role of the Israeli Lobby in American foreign policy will have some impact on opinion, but that remains to be tested. Second, since 9/11, "the war on terrorism," and the Iraq war, many Arabs have come to conflate American and Israeli interests, as reflected in many of the poll answers (the leaders who are disliked most; the states that pose the greatest threat to them). Third, most Arabs have always believed that American policy was partly driven by the aim of controlling oil, even separate from support for Israel—although many connected the issues in their minds. Repetition of this question in future polls should give a better picture of Arab public perceptions, but for now, it is clear that Is-

rael and the United States are connected in Arab public minds in a way which makes anger with one hard to separate from the other.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I sought to describe Arab public attitudes especially as reflected in opinion polls—not the way these attitudes are likely to affect the actual behavior of the Arab public. Nor should one equate these public attitudes with the positions of Arab governments, whose behavior remains central for regional politics. While the relationship between public attitudes and behavior is debatable, it is in my view nonetheless highly consequential.⁸ In particular, public attitudes affect the degree to which governments expend resources on internal security, the extent to which they feel secure enough to allow more domestic freedoms, the degree to which non-state militant actors are able to draw public support, and the extent to which governments can fully rely on segments of society and on

governmental bureaucracies in implementing their policies.

The trends in Arab public attitudes are telling. Despite the Iraq war and the increasing focus on a Sunni-Shiite divide, the Palestinian question remains a central prism through which Arabs view the world. Palestinian divisions make it harder for the public to decide “what’s good for the Palestinians” but this has so far translated into a trend toward sympathy with militants, pessimism about the prospects of Arab-Israeli peace, and anger with Israel and the United States. Given that most Arabs in principle still support the two-state solution, this trend is not irreversible, especially if a Palestinian-Israeli agreement is concluded. But until then, the trend is likely to continue and affect not only support for Hamas and Hezbollah in the Arab-Israeli arena, but also translate into more resentment of Arab governments and more support for militant opposition even away from this arena.

⁸ For articulation of the consequences of public opinion, See Shibley Telhami, “Arab Public Opinion and the Gulf War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 1993, “Power and Legitimacy in Arab Alliances: The New Arabism,” in Leonard Binder, editor, *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (University Press of Florida, 1999), and “Does Public Opinion in the Middle East Matter?” in Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America in the Middle East*, Westview Press, 2004.

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