



PROJECT
on Middle East
Democracy

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The Saban Center for Middle East Policy
at The Brookings Institution

“Does the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Still Matter?”

1775 Massachusetts Ave, N.W., Falk Auditorium
Tuesday, July 01, 2008 10am

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy invited **Shibley Telhami**, a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center and **Steven Kull**, Director of WorldPublicOpinion.org to discuss polls from the Arab world and beyond on attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. **Martin S. Indyk**, Senior Fellow and Director of The Saban Center, introduced the speakers and moderated the event.

Martin Indyk began the event noting that the question of whether the Palestinian-Israeli conflict matters is still in contention in Washington, and that the next President will consider public opinion when deciding whether a peaceful resolution will be a foreign policy priority.

Shibley Telhami discussed the trends in public opinion in six Arab countries from 2002 to 2008. Across all countries, from 2002 to 2008, the issue ranked as an extremely important issue. Slight variations can be explained by 2 variables: **as violence levels increased in Palestine and as confrontation between the U.S. and Palestine increased, it was more likely that Arabs would rank the issue as important to them personally.**

A majority prefer a unity government over either Hamas or Fatah controlling unilaterally. Between the two parties, more preferred Hamas over Fatah. Telhami explained that **the trend towards militancy can be seen as a backlash against moderates for failing to deliver or for being seen as too closely aligned with the U.S.** Arab public opinion sees the world through a “prism of defiance” of both the U.S. and Israel.

The best ways for the U.S. to improve its image are to make an evenhanded attempt to broker peace with Israel and to withdraw from Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula.

Steven Kull stated that worldwide, **the public does not want to take sides on the issue, prefers a more even-handed approach to resolving the conflict, and sees every party as failing to do their part. Significant majorities want to see more action by the U.N.**

Overall, 54% of those polled preferred their country to refrain from taking sides, including 71% of the American public. When asked whether various parties were doing their part to resolve the conflict, public opinion held that Israel (54% compared to 22%), Palestinians (47% to 28%), the U.S. (59% to 20%), and other Arab countries (48% to 23%) were all not doing their part.

In regard to U.N. action, 67% would support an offer by the U.N. to send peace keeping forces to enforce any peace agreement made between Israel and Palestinians.

During the Q&A, Telhami noted that the next President faces an Arab world with no confidence in the U.S. **Telhami recommends that the next President see the resolution of this conflict as key to U.S. interests.**

When one audience member expressed surprise that polls indicate European disapproval of Palestinians, both speakers agreed that criticism of Israel is often interpreted by the U.S. as support for Palestinians, but should be seen as frustration at both sides and **a desire for even-handedness.**